Stuck On Repeat

by katnissdoesnotfollowback

Summary

The jukebox will need to be replaced. It's cracked in three places and stuck on "What’s New Pussycat," a fact that took them about twenty minutes to realize before Thresh tried smacking the thing around to get it to shut up -- with no luck. He had to unplug it. The tinkling of broken glass being swept up provides a fitting accompaniment to the questioning as Darius flips open his tablet and levels Katniss with a serious look.

“Can you tell me how the fight started, Miss Everdeen?” She scowls at his use of a formal name for her, like he doesn’t spend every other Saturday in here, knocking back beers with his cop buddies, flirting shamelessly with her, and avoiding whatever fight he just had with Glimmer, his girlfriend.

Notes

Yet another piece that I wrote last year (2017) and am just now getting around to posting here. Inspired by the prompt: we meet because this fight broke out in the bar and we’re both hiding behind the bar. I deviated from the prompt a little, as usual.
Chapter 1

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“One bourbon on the rocks,” Katniss says and drops the drink in front of Peeta. He sets aside his phone to murmur his thanks. Her smile fades at the strained look in his blue eyes. “You alright?” She thinks she knows the answer, since they've been talking almost nonstop since he got here tonight. He’s had a rough week at work and his parents still don’t approve of his choices in life. But to her, he’s the best part of Friday night, ever since he first came in, close to four months ago, Friday of the week before the school year started. With his navy blazer over a green and white checked shirt, dove gray pants, and worn brown leather shoes, he already stood out, but the second he opened his mouth and a smooth Southern rolled off his tongue, she knew he wasn’t from around here. She liked his voice and the way he softened his consonants in comparison to her mountain twang. It only took one night for her to realize that he was as easy to talk to as his voice was to listen to. Under the soothing cadences, years of her built up reputation as the scowling bartender you didn’t hit on or pour your life story out to, but could expect quick and efficient service from, melted away. His sky blue eyes on top of his whiskey smooth voice made him hard to forget or brush off as just another guy in a bar, and their nights talking left her wondering if he had an unexpected heat hiding beneath his polite surface, just like his beverage of choice.

“Other than the humiliation of losing while in enemy territory?” he asks with a wry quirk of his smile. She laughs a little and leans over the bar, giving him a tempting view of the swells of her breasts on display beneath her loose and low-cut, v-neck shirt. She tried on five shirts and every last one of her bras tonight before settling on this getup, hoping her out of the norm attire would boost her confidence and send the appropriate message to him.

Goosebumps pebble her skin as his gaze dips for just a second before returning to her eyes. He licks his lips then takes a quick drink while she thinks of the heat of his tongue warming her skin. Shivers dance down her spine and she shifts her legs to ease the ache between her thighs that took residence maybe two months ago and hasn’t left, only growing in heat and voracity with each of his visits.

“You know, we’re not all hostile to Panem State fans around here,” she says, hoping Johanna’s wrong every time she berates Katniss for her ineptitude at flirting.

“Stop flattering. You already know I leave decent tips, and I know you hate flirting with customers,” he teases, crossing his arms on the bar and leaning closer to her. She can hear Johanna’s voice in her head, urging her to say it, but before she can tell him that she’s looking for a different kind of tip from him tonight --

“Touchdown! Woohoo!”
Loud shouts, laughter and the smack of high fives and grunts ring out across the bar and she loses his attention as he turns to check the score and groans. His team is getting creamed and he’s surrounded by fans of the rival school. He tugs his blazer closer as the rowdy group tosses trash talk at an absent opponent. Clearly, Peeta’s the only Panem State fan in a hundred foot radius and also the only one reckless enough to wear a t-shirt proclaiming it in a bar full of drunken Capitol U fans.

“So it was over a football game?”

“Pretty much. You know how Cato and his boys get when Cap U football is involved,” Katniss says and Darius laughs. Right on cue, Cato starts yelling.

“This is bullshit! Where’s that punk? Douchebag in the blazer! I’ll kick his ass and fuck his girlfriend. Marv! Back me up here! That shithead sucker punched me! Why aren’t you arresting him? Darius! Dude! We got poker tomorrow night!”

“Shut up, man. You did some serious fucking damage to the place. You’ll be lucky if Haymitch doesn’t take your sorry ass to the cleaners over this,” Purnia snarls as she twists Cato’s arm to subdue him and he yelps but cooperates and they get him out the door to the squad car.

Darius watches them drag Cato from the bar, hands restrained in cuffs behind his back, before returning his attention to Katniss.

“What’s he talking about, Kat? Are we missing one of the troublemakers?”

“Nope. He’s just flat ass drunk,” Katniss drawls. The heat of guilt and lies courses through her and Darius nods, not even looking up at her as he writes in his notepad.

“We’ll check his BAC, but you’re probably right.”

It begins with an insult disguised as a joke. Then a laugh that turns to a scowl. The world falls still and silent for just a moment before the glass of a pleasant Friday night of drinking and watching football shatters to reveal the ugly currents beneath the entire facade.

Johanna shouts and grabs the baseball bat she keeps beneath the bar before vaulting over the sticky surface and racing into the fray. Katniss yells for Thresh, their in-house bouncer and security guard. Peeta ducks to avoid a flying beer bottle, the remnants of someone’s drink streaming out of the neck and dousing him. She looks at him in expectation, certain that his stocky build and quiet demeanor hides someone who knows exactly how to handle himself in a fight.

“You gonna do something?” She shouts over the ruckus as one of the brawlers howls in pain and Johanna’s cursing soars over all of the noise. Thresh yanks two of them apart enough to smash their skulls together and throw them to the ground before moving on.

“Teaching licenses and jail time don’t mix!” he yells back at her. An awful feeling swamps her as she realizes that this fight might cost him his job, even though he’s not one of the instigators. She grabs his shoulders before hauling him over the bar. His blue eyes widen for a second and his legs kick until he realizes what she’s doing. Then he helps her. Together, they drop behind the protection of the bar.

When she thought about private moments with Peeta while she prepped for her shift tonight, this is not what she had in mind. Katniss stifles a curse as the fight smashes all her plans for the night.
"You come here often?" Peeta whispers to her, his warm breath tickling down her shoulder, and she laughs. What else can she do? The whole situation is ridiculous.

"Only on special occasions," she returns as she shifts her head so their mouths are close enough for her to feel his breaths on her lips. The noise of the fight fades away as she watches the sweep of his lashes as he blinks, his eyes on her mouth when he opens them again. Fuck, she wants him to kiss her. "We should sneak out the back door."

Before Peeta can answer, one of the patrons rolls over the bar and lands with a thud. He quickly regains his feet and picks up the tip jar. Fury grips Katniss as he smashes it over someone's head and a good portion of her earnings flutter in the air in a suspended nightmare. Katniss grabs the second bat from its hiding place. She really thought Jo was joking when she showed Katniss the bats during her training and told her they were there "in case a fight breaks out."

"What are you doing?" Peeta asks and grabs her wrist as she moves to stand.

"They touched my tips! Now it's personal," she says. Before she can break his hold on her, a hand clamps on her hair and yanks. She swings wildly with the bat and then it's pulled from her grip.

"Thanks goodness for Thresh, huh?" Darius asks as Katniss toys with the end of her braid and tries not to shift too much on her feet. She tells herself that the lies will be easy to brush off as confusion in the midst of a fight. She hates to draw Thresh into her lies, but if it becomes an issue, she'll take the heat. "If you think of anything else, let me know. We'll do this down at the station next time, yeah?"

"Yeah, sure," she says, waving her hand nonchalantly.

"And uh, off the record, are you doing anything next Friday?"

"Sorry, Darius. You know I can’t piss off our one decent music act. Go grovel to Glimmer already."

"We’re taking a break," he mutters and she tilts her head in skepticism. "What? We are!"

"Good night, Darius," she says as he heads towards the door with the cop who was taking Jo’s statement.

"You’re gonna take me up on that offer one of these days, Kat. I’m irresistible."

"Keep dreaming," she shouts after him and he laughs. As soon as the door shuts, Jo smacks Katniss on the ass and she jumps in shock. "You wanna explain to me why Blondie’s hiding in the broom closet in back?"

She catches a glimpse of Cato’s snarling face, lost in the rage of a fight. Then a fist connects with the back of his neck. He collapses to his knees and releases her. As soon as she can, she regains her feet and stares in astonishment as Peeta climbs back over the bar and lands another two hits then shoves Cato on the floor where he writhes in pain. Marvel jumps in and decks Peeta. She manages to find the bat and swings, smacking Marvel on the shoulder. He yells in pain. Someone must have called the cops because sirens cut through the ruckus. Katniss grabs Peeta’s hand before Marvel can recover and leads him towards the back room.
“Hey,” Peeta says, jumping in surprise as she opens the door. Katniss crosses her arms and scowls. Between the fight and the questions from the police, she’s tired and annoyed. The night started out so promising, so full of hope and plans. All of it destroyed with a few flying fists and a broken jukebox.

“Cops are gone now,” she tells him and he stands carefully, dusting off the back of his pants.

“I, uh...guess I’ll head on out then.”

“Let’s get you patched up first,” she suggests, waving towards the cut near his eye, probably caused by the massive class ring Marvel always wears. Katniss rummages on the shelf and pulls down the first aid kid, motioning for him to follow her to the small employee bathroom. As she digs through the kit for supplies, she curses under her breath.

“What’s wrong?” he murmurs.

“We’re out of anything I can use to clean that cut.”

“It’s no big deal, Katniss. I’ll just take care of it when I get home.”

“No. I don’t live that far away and I know I’ve got some,” she insists when he protests, “It’s the least I can do after what you did when Cato attacked me.”

He hesitates, but eventually nods in agreement. They’re silent as she grabs her jacket and her bag then walk the three blocks to her apartment. As she unlocks the door, he keeps a polite distance. She’s struck with the reminder that this is not at all how she’d planned for them to be entering her apartment. They should be smashed together, maybe with her back against the wall, his tongue down her throat, his hands shoved down her panties, his cock hard and teasing her clit as she grinds on him.

Ugh. Stupid macho football fans. At least she knows her place is immaculate and won't embarrass her since she’d been planning on, hoping to bring Peeta back with her tonight, although not to clean wounds from a bar fight.

“First aid kit is in the kitchen,” she tells him and locks the door behind them before tossing her keys on the small table by the door and leading him to the kitchen. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thank you.” She nods and digs out the kit. “Katniss, you really didn't have to do this.”

“It's fine, Peeta. I don't mind.”

He grips the counter as he leans back against it and she wipes the dried blood from the cut. Once it's clean, she dabs on some medicine. His rapid breaths sound harsh in the quiet between them.

“Does this hurt?” she asks, annoyed that he seems unable to look at her.

“No,” he whispers. “I'm just sorry for all the trouble I caused you tonight.”

“What trouble? You didn't start the fight.”

“You didn't have to lie for me or hide me in the back. I don't want that to cause a problem for you.”

She shrugs and carefully bandages the cut. “All in the night of a bartender.”
“I mean it, Katniss,” he stops her hand as she pulls it away from him, finished taking care of him. His fingers curl around hers, warm and soothing as his thumb rubs over her palm for a second before he brings her hand up to his lips. Peeta brushes a soft kiss across the backs of her knuckles and in a flash, her entire body is back on high alert. He's found a nerve straight to her clit and each pass of his thumb echoes in the reawakened nub of sensation.

“I promise you'll get back all the trouble I caused you.”

“All of it?” she whispers, hoping the hoarse timbre of her voice sounds smoky and sexy and not at all as scared as she feels in recognition of the threshold they linger on in this moment. Finally, he lifts his eyes to meet hers, a question in their blue depths. Her pulse stutters for a second.

Katniss tugs her hand free and cups it over his cheek, mimicking the caress he just gave her as her throat tightens and her pulse pounds back to life. Peeta's lips part and she knows she can't wait a second longer to find out what they taste like. To have them all over her body, quenching the insatiable thirst she's felt for him for weeks now.

Before he can say anything to stop the tension building between them, she steps between his feet and folds his bottom lip between hers. He inhales sharply and his frame goes rigid. Katniss freezes with his lip still caught between hers, wondering if she read him all wrong. When he doesn't shove her away, she sinks her teeth into the soft flesh and then sucks on it.

Peeta groans. His hands dive into her hair, tugging on the roots as his thick fingers part the strands. God she wants those fingers in her pussy. Her body and mind are already ten steps ahead of the action so she molds her frame to his, forcing herself to slow down as his thumbs caress her cheeks and ears and she wraps an arm around his neck and one around his torso to hold them as close together as possible. She wants to get her fill of kissing him before she moves on, all those nights of learning everything she could about his mouth and lips culminating in learning the taste and feel of him. But the kisses fail to satisfy her the way she expects. Each one only makes her thirst for another. For more.

She shifts her hands to grip his jacket lapels, moving them towards the hallway that leads to her bedroom. Peeta makes a muffled noise in his throat and grabs at her hands, tearing them free of his clothes and separating their mouths. She sways in confusion and annoyance.

“Wait. Wait, Katniss,” he says, his breathing scattered and irregular. “We should – we should slow down a little.”

“Why?” she asks.

“Because I like you.”

“I kinda figured that from the way you were kissing me, Peeta,” she teases and moves to kiss him once more, but he stops her with a shake of his head.

“No, I really like you. A lot. And could I maybe take you on a date or something first?”

“Take me on a date after, Peeta,” she agrees without thinking too hard about it, need and lust a powerful combination. “Right now, I want you to fuck me.”

“Shit,” he hisses right before she fuses their mouths together again, but he must not be too put off by her coarse language because his tongue sweeps through her open mouth and she manages to get him at least to the hallway and backed against her bookshelf where she tears his blazer down his arms and flings it aside.
“Wait!” he says again and she groans at the repeated interruptions.

“Are you trying to change my mind about this?” she snarls and he blinks before shaking his head.

“I have a prosthetic leg. Thought I should tell you. Before…you know.”

“Oh okay,” she shrugs and weaves her fingers through his hair. But before she can kiss him again, she pauses, taking a deep look at the expression of fear in his eyes. Uncertain what to do, she tries to flip the scenario in her head. If she’d just confessed to missing a limb to him, how would she want him to respond?

Katniss toys with his hair for a moment and instead of kissing his lips, she paints his jaw with soft caresses. His hands cup her elbows and he sucks in a sharp breath as she moves to his ear and digs deep for some courage. She’s never been good with words but she wants him to know that she won’t care about his leg.

“I like you too, Peeta,” she whispers and nibbles on his ear. “I like your voice and how it matches your drink order. Smooth and hot underneath, easy to get drunk on.”

Peeta groans and grips her hips, pulling her close enough to feel the bulge forming in his pants. She smiles and drags her palms down to his neck. He pushes off the shelf and they stagger down the hall with lips joined and sliding together in hot kisses that feed her need but don’t douse it. She guides him through the turn and their bodies jolt as his back smacks into the wall right outside her door. His hands tear at her jacket and she helps him remove it. As soon as it falls away, his hands grasp her waist, hot palms on her sides, then they vanish and move to her cheeks as they keep kissing.

His lips drag across her cheek and down to suck on her neck. She bites her lip and pushes into him, moaning softly as the heat rises inside her until even just the shirt she’s wearing is too much. She tangles a hand in his hair and her hips pick up the rhythm of his lips on her.

“Hot,” she whines as his teeth scrape over a particularly sensitive spot. “Too hot.”

Peeta sets her away from him and she whimpers, about to protest again when he grasps the hem of her shirt and pulls it up over her head, flings it aside then cups his hands over her bra for a second before releasing them, as though he’s not sure how long he should linger in one spot, then pulling her back to him and kissing her again.

“Your mouth is divine,” he whispers as he unclasps her bra. His lips claim any response she might have given him.

Then his thumbs are on her nipples, caressing them into taut peaks. And here she thought all that crap about breasts straining for someone’s touch in erotic fiction was just a bunch of malarkey. She pushes herself into his palms, her skin alive and buzzing with the need for his touch. He seems to know what she wants because his lips leave hers and scorch their way down to her breast, pulling a half scream from her throat as her eyes roll back in her head and she lifts on her toes, arching into the heat of his mouth on her. She’s so turned on right now she worries she might come just from this.

“Oh fuck, Peeta,” she gasps to slow down the need stampeding through her. “And your mouth is wicked.”

Katniss manages to let go of him long enough to get her hands between them and her shorts undone. She’ll fuck him right here in the hallway; she doesn’t care anymore. As he shifts his
attention to the other breast, her hands shake and tear at his belt, the button and then his zipper. She
shoves her way beneath his clothes and grips his cock.

“Fuck,” he mutters and his hips thrust into her touch. She grins and strokes him, her touch rough on
his burning hot skin. The noises he makes spur her on until he begs her to stop or he’ll come in his
pants, and the desperate look in his eyes confirms it so she lets him go to shove his shirt over his
head and his pants down to his thighs while he pushes her shorts and panties to the ground.

Katniss kicks them aside along with her shoes then follows them, holding his eyes with hers as she
palms his pecs and abs then his cock once she’s on her knees in front of him. She kisses his tip and
he wraps her braid around his fist, eyes riveted to hers as she licks his slit then swirls her tongue
around his head, savoring his choked moan. He’s thick and rigid and tempting, and arousal seeps
from her, dripping down her thighs as she thinks longingly of having him inside her. But first she
wants to fulfill this one fantasy of having him at her mercy and begging to come in her mouth.

Each lick and suck tightens his hold on her hair, darkens his eyes as they watch her. By the time
she swallows his length and sucks with vigor, he’s using his hands and hips to guide her
movements and pace. Scattered moans fall ragged from Peeta’s lips, straight to her core.

He tears her off of him and hoists her into the air. Stunned, she wraps her legs and arms around him
as their lips crash together and he sucks on her tongue. She writhes against him as he starts walking
with her in his arms.

“This better be your bedroom,” Peeta says as his hand searches the wall for a light switch. He finds
it; the lamp beside her bed illuminates the room and he groans in relief before depositing her on top
of her quilt. As she watches, he sits on the edge of the bed and removes his shoes then finishes
stripping his pants. Then he stands stock still at the foot of her bed as her eyes roam over him.

He’s perfect, she thinks as she reaches for his hand and pulls him down on top of her. They scoot
up the bed as their mouths and tongues dance, his erection brushing her thigh and his hands
cressing over her hips then down between her legs. She lifts her hips into his touch, nipping at his
lower lip when his fingers slide easily through her folds. She’s swollen enough to physically ache,
his touch bringing much needed relief.

Katniss tries rolling them over, but his lips contort against hers and his fingers jerk, making her
freeze at the pinch.

“How?” she asks and Peeta shakes his head.

“My leg. I moved a little awkward. It’s –”

“Would it be better if you were on your back?”

“You still want this?” he asks, surprise in his voice. She lifts her hips into his hand and his fingers
automatically resume driving her straight for the edge.

“Yes,” she gasps then pushes on his shoulders. He curses and rolls to the side, shifting his position
to get comfortable on his back while she swings her leg over him and opens her nightstand drawer.
She rifles through her stash of condoms, distracted by his lips on her arm, her shoulder, then her
breast. His hands caressing over her hips and her ass. She wracks her brain for the research she did
on condom sizes and dick measurements and comes up completely blank.
“Something wrong?” he asks and shifts to look at what she’s doing. He plucks the few condoms she’s got in her hand and his brow furrows in confusion while she tries to think of a plausible reason for her to have so many in such a wide variety.

“I didn’t know what size you were. I was trying to be prepared,” she stutters through the explanation. Peeta’s confusion clears and he laughs.

“It’s not funny,” she mutters indignantly and tries to climb off of him.

“Stop, Katniss. You don’t have to justify everything you want or feel with practical reasons.”

“I do, though. Otherwise it’s just selfish. It makes no sense to want something if you don’t get anything out of it.”

“Doesn’t it? I guess that depends on what it is you want.” He shuffles through the condoms for a second, selects the right size and hands it to her before dropping the rest on the floor. “And for future reference, I had one in my wallet, although it might be expired.”

He cringes at his own admission then he unwinds her braid, pausing every few inches to run his fingers through the unbound strands to remove any remaining tangles. As he works her hair loose, he pulls her down close to his lips so he can whisper to her.

“Ever since I walked into your bar months ago, I’ve wanted this. You were in black shorts and a red plaid shirt. Your hair in a braid tied with a red ribbon and I wanted to know if you’d wear red lace panties underneath that or if you’d prefer cotton boy shorts. Either way, I wanted to peel them from your body and lick your clit till you begged for my cock.”

Each word he utters strokes the desire for him back to life until she’s close to the begging he’s describing.

“And now that I’ve got you naked, I want my cock deep inside you so I can feel you get wetter with each stroke. I want you to scrape your nails down my chest and scream my name while your walls squeeze me.” Her hands clench in response to his words, one of them digging her nails into him and the other crinkling the foil wrapped condoms in her palm. She can feel his lips curve in a smile against her ear as he keeps talking. “I want to learn the rhythm of your pussy clenching in orgasm. Not because it’ll keep me alive or give me anything practical. Just the selfish satisfaction of knowing that I made you come as hard as I could.”

Somewhere in the middle of his words, she loses track of what he’s saying or why, obsessed instead with giving him exactly what he wants because she wants that too. For the life of her, though, she can’t come up with one practical reason other than the burning want in her core. It borders on a need, so she doesn’t examine it, instead tearing open the foil packet and sitting up to roll the condom over him.

His hands rest on her ribs as she sinks onto him slowly, eyes closed to enjoy the feel of him stretching her, filling her. She takes a moment to adjust once she’s taken all of him, opens her eyes and reaches behind her to rest one hand on his right knee, the warmth of his flesh beneath her palm reassuring her that she’s not putting undue pressure on his prosthetic.

“Okay?” he asks and she rolls her hips in answer.

Their eyes lock as she moves over him, his hands loose on her ribs, allowing her freedom of movement while caressing her skin, his forearms brushing her thighs with each stroke. And it feels good. So good with him deep inside her. She thought she’d want hard and fast, to finish quick and
be done with it, but each small shift in her movements brings new sensations that invite her to linger and discover. Peeta’s hips shift to move in sync with hers, his hands echoing the feel of their motions. Rolling waves with his hands kneading her ass, gentle rocking with swipes of his thumb on her clit and one hand palming her breast. Choppy thrusts with palms skimming over her back and teeth digging into his bottom lip, hard bounces with tugs on her hips and a loud smack on her ass that makes her shout as the pain settles pleasurably between her legs and spurs her to move faster.

As her legs tire and Peeta’s moans dissolve from words about how incredible she feels and how beautiful she looks on top of him into indecipherable sounds of pure pleasure, she fixes on something between a thrust and rock, making the bed bounce beneath them as she screws her eyes shut and focuses on the bursts of pleasure emanating from her clit down her limbs. She vaguely hears Peeta begging her to come, his hands palming her ass and his thighs lifting into her.

“Fuck, Katniss! I can’t –” his words spiral into a feral shout as his fingers dig into her flesh and her focus shatters into frantic beats, her body lost to the rhythm of ecstasy, her thrusts chaotic in her release.

Her core still throbs and clenches as the haze finally lifts. Every muscle in her body aches and she collapses on top of him, uncaring about her hair as it covers his face or the sticky hot liquid between them. Or even the sounds she makes as she struggles to catch her breath.

When her pulse finally slows and her mind registers that she landed almost on top of his face in a way that his exhales puff over her shoulder, she tries to lift herself off him so he can breathe. His tongue drags up her throat as she moves, slow and torturous. Then they’re kissing again, his tongue stirring desire back to life, making her wonder what it would be capable of between her legs, even as her body screams for sleep.

Katniss hovers on the edges of consciousness and they kiss until he softens and slips from her body. Then she manages to roll off of him and hide the wide smile on her face. Peeta leaves the bed and she turns her head to watch him as he walks. She could get used to the view.

The thought startles her a little. She’d started this expecting nothing more than a quick release. Now she’s seriously thinking of giving him that date he mentioned. Especially if it means she gets another round with him in bed.

He returns from the bathroom cleaned up a little and with a warm washcloth for her. She lifts up on her elbows and squirms as he cleans her, surprised by his thoughtfulness. He takes the dirty cloth back to the bathroom and then retrieves a few articles of clothes from the hallway. Once he has his t-shirt and briefs back on, he picks up his pants and hesitates at the foot of her bed.

“Stay,” she offers and moves to slide beneath the covers, lifting them for him to join her. She should kick him out, but she’s not yet ready to let him go.

“You’re sure?” he asks, and she’s certain that she’s not imagining the thread of anxiety in his voice.

“Bring me a pair of clean underwear from the top drawer and buy me breakfast in the morning and you can stay as long as you like,” she says and he grins, dropping his pants before retrieving a pair of green cotton boy shorts for her then sitting on the edge of the bed and removing his prosthesis. She watches curiously and as soon as he lays back, she tucks herself into his side. He’s warm and the room is cold. And that’s all it is, she tells herself as his fingers trace patterns over her arm and she slips easily into sleep.
“You get the assholes tonight,” Johanna mutters as she walks behind Katniss towards the back room. Probably to smoke three cigarettes in quick succession. Katniss let’s her go without a fight because getting between Jo and her nicotine is risky on a good day. Suicidal on a Friday night after the rush has already started.

She flips the bird and scowls at Jo’s back before heading over towards the end of the bar where half a dozen burly dude-bros in tight polo shirts and their sunglasses backwards on their heads -- ugh what is with that?! -- await her. Tension creeps up her spine to her shoulders and she fixes her face with her best “Fuck with me and I’ll fuck up your world” bored stare.

They give her the same tired lines and the same tired leers that seem to just be one of the unfortunate sides served up with a job as a bartender, but she ignores them and fixes their drinks as quickly as possible. They probably won't tip her well, but she still can't quite bring herself to be the flirty bartender with any of her customers, let alone with douchebags like this.

While she’s pouring the last beer for them, the door opens and her eyes automatically jump up in hope. She suppresses the telltale flutter in her middle and the rush of warmth as the best part of her Friday nights walks through the door and waves at her. Medium height, broad shouldered, with ashy blond hair that falls over his forehead in waves and crystal blue eyes that remind her of the time her father took them to vacation deep in the mountains of Wyoming.

Somewhere between midnight and dreaming, Katniss wakes with a groan. She throbs with the ache of bone deep satisfaction. But her arm is twisted at an odd angle and something hot and heavy pins her leg to the bed. She kicks at it and the body beside her shifts. Lifting her head, she registers that it’s Peeta sprawled out beside her, but that’s all the time she gets before she has to zip into the bathroom. When she’s done, she slides back beneath the sheets and takes a moment to let her gaze wander over him.

The sheets have tangled around his right leg, his left is completely uncovered, truncated close to what would have been his knee. His arm is flung up over his head and his face is turned into it. As she lays there, she thinks about biting the muscles she can just make out in his relaxed state. It never occurred to her that she might be one of those girls, the ones who go all cross eyed over a muscle-bound guy. Peeta’s not exactly burly, but there’s no denying the underlying power in his quiet strength. Maybe it’s just the way he leaped to her defense last night. Or maybe it’s just him. Either way, by the time her perusal reaches his hips, her muscles magically feel a thousand times better, soreness replaced with a different kind of ache. One that only Peeta can appease. She feels a sharp tug in her middle aimed in his general direction. And she gives in to it.

While she delivers the drinks to dickbag and brothers in dickbaggery, her favorite customer slides into his usual seat at the far end of the bar.

“Here you go,” she says to the lead dickbag and rattles off their drink order to confirm with him that she didn't forget anything, leaving the tray for them to unload it themselves before hurrying back to serve the new arrival. “Hey. The usual?”

“Yeah,” he says with a smile that sends a swooping sensation through her.
“How was your week?” She asks as she reaches for the top shelf bourbon.

“Same old song and dance,” he says with a shrug. “Students trying to avoid homework, parents riding my ass over a well deserved C.”

“Hmm,” she hums as she adds the ice to his glass then pours his drink before sliding it across the bar in front of him. “Sounds like you need to unwind a little.”

“I’ll drink to that,” he toasts her and takes a first sip, smiling in appreciation.

“Hey, sweetheart!” Someone at the other end of the bar shouts. Katniss rolls her eyes and Peeta laughs behind his drink.

“I’ll be back,” she reassures him as she moves to help the shouter.

To save time, she finds another condom in his size and sets it on the nightstand. Rolling over, she sprawls on top of him, running her hands over his arms to his wrists then back to massage his earlobes. It isn’t until she lowers her head to bathe his throat with kisses that he begins to stir. His leg shifts beneath her and as she works her way lower, his cock hardens. She grinds down into him and Peeta releases a sleepy groan.

The sound cuts short as his entire frame stiffens, and then with a whoosh , she’s on her back, staring at the ceiling. Heart pounding in shock, her wrists trapped in Peeta’s unforgiving grip on either side of her head. His knee pins her left thigh on the mattress, but the pressure he exerts isn’t gentle or kind. She can’t stop the soft cry of pain that escapes her lips.

“Shit! Katniss!” He gasps and releases her, shoving himself off her to sit up in the bed and rake his hands through his hair. “I could’ve hurt you. I didn’t – I’m…sorry.”

His voice shrinks as he speaks until the last is just a whisper. Once she has her bearings again, Katniss pulls the sheet up to cover her chest and sits up beside him. He seems calm now, but she still reaches out to him slowly, as she would with a wounded animal before finishing the hunt. Only she has no intention of delivering a death blow to Peeta. Instead, she finds a curl and plucks at it, winds it around her finger, then brushes it behind his ear. When he doesn’t pull away from her, she shifts into his field of view and brushes his bangs to the side. The disobedient strands fall right back where they were, so she repeats the caress until Peeta stops staring at his lap and stares at her instead.

As the night progresses, the crowd thickens and grows more intoxicated. She manages to get back to check on Peeta a few more times and refill his drink, although they don’t get to talk as much as they usually do. Her mood worsens with the amount of time she has to spend away from him. She’s never been good at making friends and usually eschews any real contact with the patrons, but something about Peeta took root under her skin and refused to let go. Once they’d started opening up to one another a little more, Katniss got the distinct impression that despite his sweetness and perpetual likability, he was about as lonely as her. Curse of being the new guy in town. Still, Katniss had expected his weekly drinks in Abernathy’s to stop as soon as he got settled and made friends, found a girlfriend. He’s just too nice to not make friends easily. And too handsome to not have girls flocking to him.
And yet here he is, three months later, for another week of drinking bourbon and talking to her, the grouchy bartender.

Ever since Gale left to work the offshore oil rigs, she's basically lived as a hermit with her three jobs her only form of interaction with human beings. Work, sleep, repeat. Lonely days and lonelier nights. She's bored with her vibrator and her own hands, although things in that department briefly looked up when Peeta entered her life, providing her with new material to work with. Not that she'd ever hook up with a customer, but his sweetness and humor sparked something inside her. Now she fantasizes about things she'd never really taken pleasure in before. Still, she never made a move because he didn't seem interested in her that way and well...it's just not her style to go for random sex with a customer.

When she walks towards the back to tell Dalton that they need more of the High Life, Jo leans against the doorframe and blocks her way, eyes focused on the end of the bar.

"Blondie on the end there needs a refill on his drink and a blow job."

“What?” Katniss asks in astonishment. Her cheeks burn as she worries that maybe Johanna is clairvoyant.

"He's been staring at your ass and legs every time you turn your back to him. He bothering you?”

“No! He's a perfect gentleman,” she insists, trying to sound indignant and instead sounding like she's complaining. Johanna rolls her eyes and snorts.

"He's a guy. Twenty bucks says he forgets his manners and lets you ride him like a bucking bronc at the first hint you're interested.” She snaps her fingers to indicate the speed at which she believes Peeta's polite demeanor would vanish at the offer of sex.

Thankfully, she doesn't get the opportunity to push the issue. They're both kept too busy. But Katniss does feel his eyes on her when she has to stretch for the top shelf when someone orders Gentleman Jack. Or maybe it's her wishful thinking.

“What happened?” she murmurs the question. It takes him a minute or so to answer.

“Two tours in Iraq happened,” he says and she nods before climbing into his lap, her bedsheets a tangled cocoon around their legs and hips. He can tell her the rest when he’s ready. Right now, all she wants to do is kiss away the fear and self-loathing she sees in his eyes.

“I usually sleep with a window open and I didn’t recognize the room or—” she stops his words with a soft kiss. His eyes drift shut with the second. On the third, his arms wrap around her and pull her flush against his chest, dragging her core across his still half-hard cock. The ache returns, ebbing and flowing with each gentle caress of their lips.

His fingers clench and relax on her back and ass, teasing her with the restraint he's still showing. Until she tips her head back, making his lips glide in a long, wet stroke down her neck. A paintbrush of desire that draws his name from deep inside her chest.

Then she’s flung to her back for a second time in minutes, breathless and stunned. Peeta’s lips and hands on her dispel the surprise, fermenting it into delight as he kisses his way down her body, pausing in dips and hollows to nuzzle and kiss. His hand curves over her hip then between her legs where he massages her through her panties until she can feel the arousal pooling there. Katniss
hooks her leg over his as his hand slides up her belly, curling over her convulsing muscles as she tries to hold back, to let him touch her the way she thinks he needs to, instead of grasping back control. Fingers slip beneath the cotton and into her folds. She grips his forearm to hold him in place as he works her over. Hands and lips fuel an already insatiable need, blinding her as he crooks his fingers inside her and his mouth latches onto one nipple, sucking the already taut bud through his teeth. Her body snaps tight, quaking with the fingers of release that fan out through her body.

The tremors have barely passed when he pushes her hips into the mattress and nibbles on her thighs as he peels off her panties. She gasps a plea and smiles with relief at the first touch of his tongue to her folds. She’d be lying if she said she hadn’t thought about this too during the past month. That his words last night didn’t thrill her.

Then the smile vanishes as he drinks her and yet she’s the one intoxicated, turning her head from one side to the other and crying out for release. She rubs her hands over her thighs as their eyes meet, his illuminated in the small stripe of light from the streetlamps that’s crept through a crack in her curtains. The promise in his irises beckons to her as he moans into her and his tongue flicks over her clit while his fingers return to the foray. Katniss grips the sheets beneath her as Peeta’s touches pour pleasure headier that bourbon through her limbs, drawing her body into an arch as she strains for it. Her moans rage out of control and so do her walls as she drinks courses through her, curling in hot waves that intensify when he doesn’t stop. Katniss grips a fistful of his hair and pushes his face deeper, her feet thrust against the mattress, shoving her hips up and claiming more, even as he drinks it all for himself.

When she finally falls back to the bed, gasping and satisfied, Peeta’s fingers still caress over her thighs. She manages a few stray nonsensical phrases as she gestures towards the nightstand. Peeta seems to understand, removing his briefs then snatching the condom and rolling it on himself while Katniss watches, useless to help. She mindlessly pets his abs, tracing and memorizing each ridge and twitch beneath her fingertips as he lines himself up and sinks inside her, meeting no resistance.

Peeta grabs her ankles, one at a time, wrapping her legs around him until she hooks her feet together just above his ass. Unconcerned with her own pleasure now, she watches him as he starts to move, witness to every flicker of feeling and pleasure that dances across his face. She feels that sharp tug again, low in her belly and almost primal in nature. One of the oldest songs in the world.

“Come here,” she whispers, tugging on his shirt to bring him closer. Their chests press together as he thrusts, deep and slow, his hands tangle in her hair. He pours his moans straight into her ear as she grips his wrist and his neck, closing her eyes to savor the feel.

“You taste so fucking good,” he tells her. “I could drink you the rest of my life and never want another drop of alcohol. I’ll just get drunk off making you come.”

Katniss toys with his hair as his words caress down her spine and join with the strokes of his hips. While she doesn’t think she’ll come again, just being joined with him feels incredible.

“So. Fucking. Delic—ous,” he barely manages two syllables per thrust but she thinks she loves it more that way, the heat and desperation behind his words and touch.

His left leg slides and his hips slam into hers as his torso stutters and rolls over hers, sending him deeper. Both of them shout and Katniss grips his shoulders for something steady to hold onto as the world shimmers for just a moment. She begs him to do it again. He shifts his stance and does, rocking her deep. But it’s not enough. His shirt is too much of a barricade between the heat of his skin and the flush spreading across hers. She grips at the fabric and pulls upwards, tries to vocalize what she wants. She’s got the shirt up to his shoulder blades and pecs when it gets caught with his
arms in the way.

“Peeta!” she demands. “Naked. Now!”

He blinks at her but his hips rest on top of hers as he reaches behind his neck with one hand and yanks the shirt over his head. One arm pulls free as she wriggles beneath him, impatient to get him moving again, tearing at the fabric as he shifts his weight to the bare arm and pulls back the other. She throws the useless shirt aside and claws at his shoulders so she can feel his naked skin on hers.

As soon as he starts moving again, the rolling thrusts turn wild. Wanton hands explore, grip, scrape, and finally smack as he whispers broken phrases of profanity and filth. Obscene poetry as she keens and her thighs clench and her feet curl in the foreshocks of release.


“Come for me, Katniss,” he begs. “Ah, fuck! Oh fuck!” His hand caresses over her hair and his lips brush her skin as his teeth sink slightly into her neck and their hips slam together. The gentle touches coupled with the frantic sex are her undoing. She writhes beneath him, both of them grasping for each tendril of ecstasy. Their stuttering, drawn out sounds of release wind together in the steamy air surrounding them.

After, her legs and arms flop comically on the bed as he rolls away, both of them covered in perspiration, remnants of kisses and bite marks, and the sticky fluid of satisfaction. Too hot and spent to even touch as they lay there recovering.


“Then stay right there,” she suggests as she stumbles from the bed to the bathroom. When she collapses back into bed, Peeta shoves himself up, hovering over her to kiss her, his fingers ghosting over her forehead and his thumb on her cheeks. She doesn’t want him to stop, and he’s still caressing her as sleeps drags her into satiated oblivion.

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*That night, alone in her bed, nothing works. She needs something more, the touch of another human. She huffs in frustration and flings aside the covers to go clean her vibrator, body still strung tight with need. Johanna’s words roll over and over in her mind until Katniss’ eyes snap up to look at herself in the mirror.*

*That’s it. She’ll just have a one night stand with Peeta to get over this stupid hump. In, done, and out. One slight slip in her rule against hooking up with a customer won’t hurt. Besides, it’s only a matter of time before he finds a real girlfriend and stops coming to her bar.*

*Once she’s made the decision, Katniss spends the next month carefully plotting. She approaches it the same way she’d stalk prey when she’s hunting in the woods, attending to every detail. Grooming, selecting the right outfit, cleaning her apartment, learning as many tiny details about Peeta and his life as she can squeeze out of him in the noisy environment of the bar. Devising a series of tests to determine if Peeta’s as willing as Jo believes, acquiring condoms in several sizes since she has no idea how big he is and the last thing she wants is to need to stop to rush to a drug store just when they get started. Not to mention, she’s heard a dozen too many of Johanna’s stories about condoms breaking or even sliding off and getting stuck in places that require trips to the ER, and that is not something Katniss ever wants to experience. She’d rather be over prepared.*
In the morning, she’s still sore. Especially between her legs, but she stretches languidly, with a grin on her face. All she wanted was a one-night stand to scratch a natural itch and instead she got the best sex of her life.

*Dry spell broken with flair,* she thinks with a self-satisfied chuckle. When she rolls over to check on Peeta, though, she finds the other side of the bed rumpled yet empty.

“Peeta?” she calls out, and when there’s no answer, she pokes her head in the bathroom. There’s no sign of him there so she does what she needs to then finds an overlarge shirt in her drawers and pulls it on. Maybe he’s one of those people who checks the news first thing in the morning, she tells herself as she pads out to her living room. She huffs in disappointment when she finds her living room empty. And then the humiliation strikes.

Jo was right. He used her for sex. Polite demeanor gone. Katniss ignores the annoying reminder that she used him, too and stomps into her kitchen to fix herself breakfast. Sun shines in through the window in the small nook she uses as an eating area and she considers flipping it off until she spots something out of place.

Peeta’s navy blazer draped neatly over the back of one of the chairs. She cants her head to the side as she remembers tearing it off of him in the hallway right after she patched his cut, and she wracks her brain to recall if he came back in here afterwards, when he was tidying up their mess of clothing.

Keys scrape in the door and she hurries back towards the living room in time to watch Peeta set a tray with cups from the coffee shop just a block up the street on her hall table so he can pull her keys from her door. His other hand carries a white bakery box with a silver ribbon holding it shut.

“Good morning,” he says as he spots her. She fiddles with the hem of her shirt and chastises herself for jumping to conclusions. “I wasn’t sure what you’d drink, so I brought options. Tea or coffee?”

He pauses to kiss her cheek and warmth flutters through her veins at the smile he bestows on her before he heads into the kitchen with his load.

“Um, tea,” she says as she follows him. He looks around her kitchen for a moment and then turns to her.

“Plates?”

“Right there,” she tells him and he smiles again as he opens the cabinet she indicated to pull out two plates. He sets them on the counter next to the bakery box then unties the ribbon and flips the lid open. Her mouth starts to water at the aroma and she moves to stand next to him.

“Which one do you want?” he asks and she swears he says it like he’s asking her which way she wants him to make her come. *All of them.*

She shakes her mind to free it of the dirty fantasy that involves countertops and pastries and probably a serious shower afterwards. Katniss manages to point out two of the treats and Peeta arranges them on her plate then loads his before carrying them both to the table. Once he’s got everything arranged, he pulls out a chair for her and waits with an expectant look on his face. Her quick fix for her dry spell is turning into something much more involved and she’s not sure if she likes it or is annoyed by it.

“You already got laid, you know. Twice in one night. You don’t have to try this hard,” she says as
she sits down in the offered chair. He pushes it back in just as she sits, so that she doesn’t even have to adjust the chair to eat comfortably. Peeta leans over and nuzzles her ear, making her shiver.

“What if I told you I’m not done with you yet?” he whispers then presses a long, hot kiss right behind her ear. She melts in the chair and tilts her head, inviting him to keep kissing her there. He flattens his hands on the table, effectively surrounding her as he takes the invitation and makes her wish she’d woken up before he went for breakfast because now she’s facing a crisis.

Pastries or Peeta?

She whimpers and Peeta gently bites her earlobe, following it with a sensual suck. “Eat up, Katniss. I’m famished and plan on eating you out again before the day’s over.”

“Oh my god, where’ve you been hiding all this dirty talk all these months?” she gasps. Peeta smiles as he settles in the chair across from her and plucks a pastry off his plate.

“I’ve been storing it up, waiting for my chance to unleash it on a particular unsuspecting bartender,” he says and takes a bite of his breakfast. It flakes and leaves a few crumbs on his lip. She resists the urge to crawl across the table and lick them off, instead squeezing one hand between her thighs in the hopes it will relieve some tension. He eats with a sensual relish, somehow turning their meal into foreplay. By the time he’s finished, she’s salivating and still starving, even though she went back for a third pastry.

Since two can play this game, she focuses on cleaning up their mess, bending over as she loads their dirty plates in the dishwasher, gifting him with a glimpse of her panties as her shirt rides up. She shivers as his hands slide up her legs to bracket her waist and turn her to face him. Just as he’s lowering his head to kiss her, though, he pauses. And smirks.

“You know, I should be offended that you took advantage of my weakness for you last night,” he whispers.

“You weren’t complaining,” she says as her spine stiffens.

“No, and I’m ashamed of myself for it. Isn’t there some rule about dating that makes me loose for putting out before the third date?”

“I don’t really know,” she says testily, uncertain where he’s going with this. “I’m a bit rusty on the rules.”

“Hmmm, well in that case. I’ll need three dates with you before I can give myself to you again. To make up for my lapse in decorum.”

“No one actually cares about that, Peeta,” she argues. “Besides, I work three jobs. I rarely get a day off.”

“We’ll figure something out,” he promises, kissing the end of her nose and letting go of her to retrieve his blazer. “I don’t have your number, though…”

She glares at him but takes his offered phone to add herself as a contact. He looks it over for a second and smiles. “Katniss Everdeen.”

It’s then that she realizes she never told him her last name. And the only reason she knows his is from running his credit card. He gives her one last kiss that’s over before she can even think about it and then he’s gone.
“What the hell?” she practically screeches when she manages to collect her thoughts enough to wonder where she went wrong. No, she didn’t go wrong. She wanted a one-night stand.

She got that.

She didn’t want emotional attachments.

He left, curtailing that from happening.

And yet, she’s angry and frustrated as she showers and throws on some clothes. When she’s done, she has a message from Haymitch, telling her that the damage from the fight was bad enough that they’ll be closed tonight. She calls her job at the Fish Market to see if they need another server, but Mags sounds busy and Katniss asks her to check and then call back. She tries the library next. Madge tells her that the place is dead thanks to some event the local zoo has going today. So Katniss paces her room, ripping her sheets from the bed with the intention of washing Peeta’s scent from them when her phone rings. She answers before looking, assuming that it’s Mags getting back to her.

“I hear that Abernathy’s is closed because some jerks couldn’t control their egos and their testosterone. So does that mean you have no plans tonight?”

And there’s that stupid tug in her gut as Peeta’s voice rolls through the airwaves, hotter than a night toddy and smoother than cream. She refuses to give into his charms so easily, still peeved at the way he left her this morning.

“I’m waiting to see if my one of my other jobs needs someone tonight,” she says and a chime sounds in her ear. “Hold on.”

Sorry, hon. All I’ve got is a 6-10.

I’ll take it, she sends back before putting the phone to her ear with a sigh. They’re both silent for a moment as Katniss weighs her options.

“Your silence says annoyance and speaks of the lack of any more excuses,” he murmurs.

“I have to be at work at six tonight,” she tells him.

“How about lunch, then? No pressure to impress, it’ll be shorter than dinner, you won’t be late for work, and you need to eat anyways, right?”

“Who says you don’t need to impress me?” she asks automatically before thinking better of it.

“No one. I meant that you don’t need to impress me. You could show up in a trash bag and stuff it with packets of condiments before you leave and I’d still think you’re amazing.”

“That’s a very vague compliment for a literature teacher. ‘Amazing?’ I’m not impressed so far.”

The teasing words slip out and Peeta laughs.

Intelligent, witty but not in a cloying way. I like the way you bite. Dedicated, loyal, radiant,” he switches to a raspy whisper then. “Hot as hell and tempting as sin. I’m already a goner.”

His words overwhelm her a little, but as she toys with one of the chords to her blinds, she makes up her mind. She’d rather spend lunch with Peeta than sitting around the apartment, mindlessly channel or internet surfing.
“Fine. One lunch date.”

“Great. Can you be ready in three minutes?”

“No!” she gasps as she spots him on the street below her apartment. But she’s also laughing inside, a little giddy over his eagerness to see her again so soon, and not for sex. At least not yet. She bites her thumb nail as she watches him turn his back to one of the storefront windows and look skyward, the phone held to his ear, and she can sense his mounting uncertainty.

“Five minutes. Don’t be late,” she tells him and then hangs up.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

My apologies for all the rapid posting. Trying to make sure all of my writing is backed up in a few places in case tumblr is a butt with this whole purge thing. Thank you for your patience, comments welcome! <3 KDNFB

Precise laughter floats on the air in a frighteningly hushed dining room. No clanking of fine porcelain dishes or scraping of silver forks here. No boisterous comments or smashing of empty glass beer bottles as they land in 15 gallon recycle bins. Maybe the odd ring of crystal as someone calls for or finishes a toast. No loud rock and roll or Tom Jones stuck on repeat, just the grating softness of some classic piano concerto that makes her want to scratch out her ear drums right now.

Capitol Country Club is so different from what she’s used to that Katniss keeps shifting in her seat and can’t stop thinking about the sweat stains that are probably now marring the armpits of her bargain rack dress that must be at least five seasons old and came from a one-off designer brand store. Thankfully, Johanna has a secret passion for fashion and was able to magically work the dress into something that looked custom rather than clearance. Then she called in her girlfriend, Madge, to work miracles with Katniss’ hair and even some minor makeup. By the time they were done, Katniss felt confident and gorgeous.

Until she met the discerning, glacial blue eyes of Peeta’s mother, that is…

“Give that back,” Katniss laughs as she spears the fried green tomato Peeta just stole from her plate. In the tussle, the poor thing is ripped in half and Peeta clucks his tongue at her.

“Now you’ve committed tomato murder,” he says and she gasps in mock outrage.

“You’re an accessory. Besides, I’m pretty sure the cook murdered it when he sliced it and smothered it in lard,” she retorts as Peeta gathers up half the pilfered fruit on his fork and with a grin, offers it to her. Not to feed her like a baby, but actually hands her the fork.

“Truce?” She eyes his extended hand for a moment before nodding and taking the fork from him and eating the morsel. She can’t remember the last time she had this much fun with anyone. Even without the influence of alcohol and the bar, Peeta’s easy to talk to. She feels like she’s spilled her entire life story already and it’s still only their first date.

As she swallows, she hands the fork back to him with a smile, but they both fumble and the utensil clatters noisily to the floor.

“Five second rule?” she asks guilty as he retrieves it and holds it between two fingers while glancing around at the lively, hole in the wall restaurant he picked, swearing that the food was worth the questionable sanitary conditions.

“Not here,” he says and sets the fork aside. Katniss shrugs and with lightning speed, snatches the other half of the tomato with her own still clean fork and eats it with relish while Peeta gapes comically at her. “Why you common tomato thief. I’ll have to punish you for that.”
“What did you have in mind?” she asks and Peeta’s eyes darken for a moment but then he picks up the laminated menu and skims the options before nodding and smiling.

“Fried okra,” he decides and she groans.

“No more fried produce! How have you not died of a heart attack yet?”

“Well there have been a few close calls, but…”

Katniss giggles and looks away from the teasing smile on his face, but she lets him order another appetizer and another, drawing their date out as long as she can, because while there’s a part of her that wants to drag him right back to bed, she’s enjoying herself a little too much to end it just yet.

“Now darling, how did you say you and Peeta started dating?” Mrs. Mellark asks and Katniss tucks back a strand of hair behind her ear that’s already there and behaving just fine, if only to have something to do with her hands.

“Peeta already told us this story on the phone, my dear,” Mr. Mellark interjects without looking up from the phone in his lap.

“Yes, and now I want to hear it from Katniss.” Peeta’s hand slides up her knee beneath the table and untangles her fingers from strangling each other, lacing their fingers together instead. He gives her a reassuring squeeze and she gives one back as his mother continues. “How a couple meets and begins their romance says a lot about their chances of survival. This world is filled with temptations and is cruel to matrimony unless you have a solid foundation on which to build.”

Like how you and your husband met? Katniss wants to ask. Instead of destroying whatever shred of decent relations Peeta has left with his parents, though, Katniss plasters a smile on her face and repeats the story, deliberately leaving out the better parts of it.

“We met through my work,” at a total dive bar where you and your string of pearls would never be caught dead. “Peeta was a regular, and well he was always just so sweet and charming, I couldn’t help but notice him.” And want to fuck his brains out. “Of course, he was a perfect gentleman, even helping deal with a few disgruntled customers.” By punching them repeatedly and throwing them on the floor. “And when he asked me out, I just knew I couldn’t let him get away.” So I dragged him to my apartment and sucked his dick, then rode him until neither of us could move.

Mentally adding the truth helps her smile sweetly at Mrs. Mellark, who still doesn’t look convinced. Her nose wrinkles slightly before she speaks. “And where did you say you work, again?”

“Mom,” Peeta tries to intervene, but his mother glares him into silence. Resisting the urge to stab her with the dinner knife, Katniss smiles until her cheeks hurt with the fakeness of it.

“I work in hospitality,” she says.

“Doesn’t that usually mean that she works for a hotel or a spa?” Mr. Mellark asks, still looking at his phone, working, Peeta had told her. Always working. Mrs. Mellark makes a face as though she has something distasteful in her mouth.

“Something like that, yes,” Katniss says, justifying it in her mind with the fact that most swanky hotels like the ones Mr. Mellark is probably thinking of usually have bars and restaurants in them. Classy bars, but still bars. She’s grateful when the waiter arrives with the first course because at
least she can’t talk with her mouth full. It would be rude. As she picks up her salad fork, Peeta leans over to whisper in her ear.

“You look a bit uncomfortable. Only four more courses and then I can take you home and peel you out of that awful dress.” The way he stresses the word awful sounds more like he thinks it’s sexy. She shivers as the faint tingling of arousal teases her. She refuses to be alone in discomfort, so she ducks her head enough to whisper back.

“Eat fast,” she says and he chuckles.

“You know I like to savor my meals.”

Then he presses a soft kiss to her ear, with just the smallest flick of his tongue on her skin, and sits up to dig into his salad. Her fingers are clenched tightly on her fork and as she stabs at one of the grape tomatoes, it flies across the room and rolls beneath the neighboring table. Her face burns and Peeta stifles his laugh. His parents remain oblivious as they seem to be bickering in whispers over something.

“The classic tale of Romeo and Juliet, this afternoon at two o’clock in the park!” a man dressed in renaissance fashion declares in a stout voice, passing out flyers. Peeta takes one as they walk past and Katniss shuffles her feet. She’s still not ready to go home yet, but given Peeta’s declaration that he plans on taking her out for three dates before they can have sex again, she’s not quite sure how else to prolong their time together. She’s never been good at this whole dating thing. And he keeps walking as though he doesn’t mind taking her home already. Maybe the date didn’t go as well as she thought.

At her door, she fiddles with her keys, hoping maybe he’ll change his mind about the three dates. He did tell her at breakfast that he planned on eating her out by the end of the day. But he lifts her hands in his, kissing one and then the other before running his thumbs over her knuckles.

“I had a really great time, Katniss. Can I see you again?” he asks.

“I’m working tonight,” she reminds him and he smiles.

“When’s your shift?”

“Six to ten at the Fish Market,” she says and tugs on her hands in an attempt to free them as disappointment creeps through her.

“Maybe I’ll see you then?” he asks hopefully, and she nods reluctantly. She’d rather see him away from her jobs. Now that she knows what that’s like, she’s not ready to let go of it.

He seems to have no trouble with letting go, unfortunately. So she unlocks her door and he waits until she shuts it. With her head leaning against the door, she listens to his retreating footsteps and berates herself. What did she expect? A first date has to end at some point, doesn’t it? Otherwise there’d never be a second date.

She kicks off her shoes and calls her sister, hoping that maybe chatting with Prim will help cheer her up and not get all worked up over some boy. She has three jobs, her sister’s tuition and her mother’s medical bills to pay. She doesn’t have time to worry about kissing boys or dates and things like that.

“Hey, sis!” Prim greets cheerfully and within minutes, Katniss feels better. Only more so when her phone pings, notifying her of another call. Peeta’s name on her screen makes her heart skip a few
beats, but she ignores him, telling herself to play it cool and finish her conversation with Prim. When they hang up, she calls Peeta.

“Hi there,” he says.

“Hey. Sorry, I was on the phone with my sister,” she says.

“Don’t apologize for that,” he says and asks how Prim’s doing. A little flutter brushes her insides when he not only remembers Prim’s name but all the important details Katniss told him today. Of course he remembers, she chides herself. It was an hour ago.

“So I was wondering,” he says when there’s a lull in the conversation. “How do you feel about theater in the park?”

She flashes back to the man in hose and puffy pants with flyers and smiles foolishly, even as she starts tearing through her closet looking for her favorite sundress. The green one with spaghetti straps and swishy skirt. “I love it.”

“Could you please put that thing down for one minute? We are meeting your son’s fiancée,” Mrs. Mellark hisses at her husband, patting her hair as he does so and she turns back to her inquisition of Katniss. Soup…not very helpful in avoiding conversation, she thinks as she swirls her spoon through the creamy confection dotted with rose petals. Only two more courses. “Now then, you were saying lunch and then a theater date. What play?”

“Romeo and Juliet,” Katniss and Peeta answer at the same time and Mrs. Mellark tilts her head.

“How sweet. A pair of fools who followed their lust and caused the deaths of five people, if you ask me.”

Anger flares in Katniss’ chest, uncertain if Mrs. Mellark is talking about Romeo and Juliet or her and Peeta. She feels a ridiculous protectiveness over the fictional pairing, even though she would normally agree with Mrs. Mellark on this one.

She’s grateful that she had the foresight to pack a bag with her work clothes and sneakers because she’s not ready to head in to work just yet or waste time going home to change and miss out on spending it with Peeta. The clock’s ticking against her and eventually, she’ll have to walk to the Fish Market from the park. Around them, the crowd filters from the amphitheater, but Katniss is entranced, listening to Peeta talk about his life in ways he hasn’t before now. Usually he sticks to stories about his students or something else fairly neutral.

“I wanted to make my own way, you know? Not rely on my parents, be my own person,” he tells her.

“What are they, rich or something?” she jokes, sobering slightly when he blushes and can’t quite meet her eyes. “Wait…Mellark.”

“Knew you were smart,” he says and she wants to smack herself for not making the connection sooner between his last name and the multi-million dollar company that started as a family bakery in the early 1900’s and now includes not only worldwide branches but also a bevy of five star restaurants and culinary schools. She might be addicted to their cheese buns, although she can rarely afford to splurge on them.

“So you joined the army?” she asks incredulously and he shrugs.
“Paycheck, promise of tuition money eventually, got me away from home. Drove my mother ape shit crazy that I wasn’t doing something with a real future like my brothers did. I mean, I didn’t even have the decency to become an officer and make it less embarrassing for her,” he says. “But mostly, I knew I wasn’t…smart enough to hold onto a scholarship to Dad’s alma mater like they expected me to do, not for the degrees they wanted me to get. I would’ve been coasting on his name. And I wasn’t about to risk the fight and the disappointment that would’ve come if I’d asked them to fund a much less expensive education to a smaller school for a degree that I wanted. Anyways. Afterwards, the army paid to send me to school and being a teacher seemed like something I could enjoy and maybe even be good at, as long as it involved books and stories rather than math. So I applied for their Troops to Teachers program.”

Afterwards…he means after he lost the leg, she thinks. She already knows his parents disapproved of his choice to make a living teaching, but still doesn’t know how he lost the leg.

“Tell me a funny story,” she asks, unsure that she’s ready to hear it, or that he’s ready to tell it. “You have to have some. Aren’t soldiers just like guys in bars? Always getting into trouble?”

He smiles, bringing relief that she hasn’t destroyed his good mood with the talk about his parents. Peeta looks around them at the now empty amphitheater. “I’ll talk while we walk. I don’t want to make you late for work.”

Their hands brush as they make their way out of the park and he shares one story and then another until her sides hurt with laughter and she can’t remember when their fingers laced together, but she doesn’t want him to let go of her hand.

“When do I get to meet these guys?” she asks when she can control her voice again. A dark shadow passes over his eyes and his fingers clench around hers. She’s suddenly back in her bed, staring at the ceiling with Peeta frightened and lashing out against a threat that isn’t there, and regret hits her that she might never meet his friends. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” he says. But then he points out that they’re close to the Fish Market and changes the topic. When they reach the restaurant hanging off the edge of a dock on the river, they stall for a minute longer until she tells him that she needs to get inside and change for her shift.

He leans in and then pauses, his nose and his breath caressing over her cheek. She’s thinking about turning her head to kiss him when he finally presses his lips to her skin. He lingers there in a chaste kiss that feels more like a promise as warmth fills her to the tips of her fingers and toes.

“Have a good night, Katniss,” he says and smiles as he walks away, leaving her wanting more than the lingering heat on her cheek. So much more.

“I did try my best, but Peeta was always stubborn about the oddest things. Of course, the fact that he hasn’t contributed to the family business means that he won’t be getting anything out of it either,” Mrs. Mellark says as though it’s the most normal thing in the world to inform her son’s fiancée that he’s already been removed from the will.

“Mom,” Peeta tries again, a sharp edge to his voice. “What’s that rule about it being rude to discuss money at the dinner table?”

“Who said anything about money?” Mrs. Mellark gasps and Katniss stabs at her beef burgundy with a vengeance. One more course, unless they skip out before dessert. As much as she wants to try a $30 slice of cake, she’s not sure it’s worth it if it means putting up with his mother for one second more than she has to. The army’s a fucking welcome committee compared to this witch, she
thinks. No wonder Peeta ran as fast and far away as he could get.

“I was talking about hard work. You can’t get something from nothing,” Mrs. Mellark continues while Katniss stifles a snort. She married into money. Where’s the hard work in that?

“Katniss worked three jobs to put her sister through medical school and support her mother,” Peeta announces with clear pride in his voice. “I think she’s familiar with the concept of hard work.”

For a moment, Mrs. Mellark’s eyes widen slightly in surprise, but then narrow back down to slits. “Do you still hold these three jobs?”

Peeta curses under his breath and Katniss doesn’t understand why. “I’m at a point now where I can let one of them go.”

Before she can explain her plans to put herself through school now that Prim’s almost done, Mrs. Mellark nods and elbows her husband. “I had my suspicions. Katniss, dear. The only precious metal Peeta comes with is his right leg and that scrap of bronze the army gave him for some foolish incident that cost him his real leg. If you’re planning on living the life of the rich and famous, you won’t find it here. I suggest you find some other sap to bamboozle.”

Rage practically blinds her as Peeta seems to shrink away from her. His Bronze Star, Katniss realizes. The one that makes him crack poorly timed jokes and change the conversation on a good day. And on a bad day, that scrap of metal makes him grip the back of the nearest chair and hold on until the flashbacks stop. The scrap of metal that’s shoved in the back of his closet and gathering dust because he never wanted it and yet can’t bring himself to throw it away. The last piece he has of his friends. Two that he saved and three that he couldn’t. He’d rather have them back than have that scrap of bronze.

“Left leg,” Katniss corrects through her teeth.

“Whatever,” Mrs. Mellark dismisses.

Manners and family relations be damned. Katniss just might start a bar brawl in the middle of the country club if this bitch doesn’t shut up soon.

“Someone here to see you,” Finnick says as he saunters by. “I told him that the kitchen is closed, but he insists he’s not here for the food. I gotta know, Kat…how’d he wander into your clutches?”

Finnick waggles his brows and Katniss lashes out with the black leather folio holding her last customer’s check. “Go wash the dishes so we can get out of here.”

Even though she’s pretty sure who it is, Katniss still peeks around the corner before she heads back into the dining room. Sure enough, Peeta sits at a table with a soda in front of him and a smile on his face as he chats with Jackie. She flips her red ponytail over her shoulder and Katniss sees red for a moment. Until Peeta spots her and his smile changes, becomes nearly blinding in its brightness.

She deals with her customer and then walks over to his table where Jackie still lingers for some reason. Peeta stands, a greeting on his lips that’s cut short when Katniss wraps her arms around his waist and brings their bodies close together. Jackie gets the hint and excuses herself.

“Hey. How was your shift?” he asks when she finally releases him.

“Not bad,” she says and toys with a curl that’s decided to go rogue on his forehead.
“Have you eaten dinner?” His voice is practically brimming with hope and she hates to destroy it.

“I scarfed something down part way through my shift,” she admits. To her surprise, his smile widens.

“Then let me buy you dessert.” Yes please with cherries on top, she thinks but shrugs as though she couldn’t care one way or another.

“Okay. I’ll allow it.” He waits for her to finish clean up, and even though Finnick teases her mercilessly for finally digging up a social life, he works just as fast as her, cutting the time they usually spend on this in half.

For the next hour, she can’t stop touching Peeta. They link arms as they walk to an ice cream place just up the river walk. They hold hands while they stroll through the night and lick at their cones. They don’t let go while he walks her home, not even when they reach her door and he leans down to press a gentle kiss to her lips. Not until she realizes that this should count as date number three, even if they were all in one day, and she lets go of his hand to shove hers in his hair and curve her body into his, opening her mouth in an unmistakable invitation.

Peeta’s hand smacks into her door behind her as they sway and get lost in the kiss, drown in the feelings that haven’t faded one bit since last night, only gotten stronger. All she wants is to invite him in and let him keep his promise from breakfast, to see where else this will lead them.

But that’s when she pulls back slightly. They stand there, panting and waiting for something to break. His hand on her door still keeps them from crashing back into it while the other hand is hot on her back, his thumb swiping back and forth. A smile curves over her lips as she steps out of his embrace and Peeta makes a sound of protest, but he doesn’t pull her back to him.

“I’ve been thinking about those rules we’re both a little rusty on,” she murmurs and digs her keys from her bag. It’ll be torture, but she’s already decided this isn’t something she wants to ruin. Like a fine wine or a well-aged Scotch, whatever this is brewing between them should be given time to sweeten and space to intensify in flavor. “Since we did take advantage of each other twice in one night, I’m thinking you owe me three more dates before I invite you in.”

Peeta licks his lips and they turn up into a slow, seductive smile.

“If you think you can wait,” he murmurs and she wavers for a second at the dark promise in his voice.

“Can you?” she asks instead.

“When’s your next free night? I’ll cook dinner for you, at my place.”

“Wednesday,” she tells him and unlocks her door.

“It’s a date?” he asks uncertainly as she steps through, prompting her to turn back and kiss him one last time.

“It’s a date, Peeta,” she promises.

The pull on her hand as Peeta tries to disentangle their fingers snaps her from her rage. She clings tighter to him and brings their joined hands up on top of the table in plain view. For good measure, she twists in her chair and smashes her mouth to his. He jerks back slightly, although not enough to separate their lips. She cups her palm over the back of his head and holds him to her, caressing her
thumps through his hair and over the hand joined to hers. When she ends the kiss with a soft smack of their lips, the stunned silence at the table is perfect.

“Wanna skip dessert?” she asks him and he nods. “Then let’s get out of here.”

She only makes it to date number five, although she insists as he teases her about it while she tears at his clothes that it’s his fault for claiming that the two dozen or so nights that they’ve spent together don’t count as real dates. They’ve spent hours, weeks, what feels like an eternity and yet not long enough to her, relaxing on their couches, sleeping in one another’s beds, without going any further than some groping, heated kisses, and that one time she dry humped him over his jeans.

“So impatient,” he says with a grin, even while he tugs her hips into place and kisses over her body, down between her legs. “So wet.”

His words turn to moans as he drapes her leg over the back of the couch, leaving her completely open to him and his tongue as he licks and sucks. Gentle then not. Gentle again until she’s arched over the arm of the couch with her hands shoving his mouth roughly over her clit and her folds, her mouth open in a silent scream. All the pent up pressure of the past few weeks released in a torrent of ecstasy, seizing her entire body in its depths.

She waits in the car, angrily bouncing her knee while Peeta removes his jacket and tie, lays them across the back seat and rolls up the sleeves of his dress shirt before he gets in the driver’s seat. All he needs is one glance to see that she’s furious, but she can’t even tell him yet that it’s not him she’s angry with, too afraid that she’ll do nothing but spew forth disparaging and unhelpful complaints about his parents.

He tries to apologize for his parents on the drive back to his place, dredging up all the reasons they agreed to this dinner in the first place. When she can’t stand another second of hearing him doubt himself or them because of the things his witch of a mother said, Katniss leans across the seat and cups her hand over his crotch. Peeta jumps in the driver seat and jerks the steering wheel for a second before regaining control.

“Drive, Peeta,” she orders. “I don’t give a rat’s ass about your parents or what they say about you or what they think about me. They’re wrong anyways and we both know it. Drive and don’t get pulled over.”

He nods and she unbuckles his belt, slowly drags down his zipper and pulls his still soft cock through the opening in front of his boxer briefs. She strokes him for just a moment, feels the blood pulsing beneath his skin and listens to his harsh breaths. Unclipping her seatbelt, she shifts and Peeta protests but the words die on a moan as she licks around his head, focusing just beneath the ridge and then licking up his precum, teasing the small opening to bring forth more.

“Katniss,” he whispers and then curses when she skips gentle and goes straight for hard sucks on him, using her fist to get what she can’t swallow.

She sits up, abruptly releasing him with a loud pop, to fix him with an intense stare. “Don’t come yet.”

“Fuck,” he says as she goes back to sucking him.

She tries to get away from his insistent mouth, crawling back over the couch arm and whimpering, but he grabs her ankles and yanks her towards him, pinning her thighs open and latching his mouth
to her clit while she writhes and begs him. For what, she has no idea, incapable of thought as she convulses and cramps as pleasure overloads her nerves. She’s inebriated with it as Peeta wrings one release from her then another until she’s sure he’s wrung her dry. Tapped her out.

Only then does he give her any kind of reprieve, in the form of slow kisses up her body, deep sucks of fevered skin until he reaches her breasts and she begs him again as she hears the tearing of foil and feels his cock brushing against her folds. She might go insane if he keeps going.

“Gonna come if you keep doing that,” Peeta gasps when she hollows her cheeks and sucks him deep in her throat. He reaches across the car and yanks her dress up, revealing the lace thong she’s wearing. Peeta groans but his fingers blaze a path straight to her folds.

“You’re fucking soaked, Katniss,” he whispers in awe. “You like sucking my cock this much?”

She moans and his fingers plunge inside her, distracting her from what she’s doing. Katniss tries to focus on him, on teasing him to the brink and getting him to fill her mouth, but his fingers and his filthy words take precedence, making her blow job turn sloppy and uncoordinated until she has to stop.

“Ah fuck, yeah,” Peeta groans as he slides into her, his head falling back for a moment, his abs contracting with effort. His leg falters and she waits for him to get his foot situated on the floor. Then he wraps an arm around her, lifting her into an arch again, her head still languishing on the couch arm as he starts rocking his hips into her.

“Talk to me, Peeta,” she whispers, gripping his arms for some kind of support.

He whispers in short bursts, heady shots of liquor that shock and please at the same time. They come faster and louder with the pace of his hips until he stops talking in favor of biting down on her nipple and groaning around his teeth. She begs him to come and smiles as his hips lose their rhythm and his groans turn desperate, his fingers digging into her side where he holds her hips suspended over the couch. When he’s finished and she lays there savoring the last shudders of his orgasm, his lips soothe the bite marks on her body.

“So do I owe you three more dates now?” he asks and she laughs through her gasping breaths. And she knows that somehow, they would’ve wound up here anyways.

Her release drips down her thighs as they stumble from the garage into their house, not even bothering to put themselves back together for the walk. No one can see with the garage door already shut, anyways. Katniss isn’t sure she’d care if they could. She works on shirt buttons, he pulls the zipper down her back. She tries to do something about his pants but he tears her dress up over her head, and cupping his hands just below her ass, lifts her into the air. Their mouths crash together as he walks and she loses track of where they are until he sinks down onto the couch with Katniss straddling him. Gripping his wrists, she tears his hands off her and shoves them into the cushions, growling a warning to keep them there.

She strokes his cock, thrilled with the feel of him, throbbing in her hand. His pulse hard against her palm. His head falls back as he moans and she knows he’s on the brink of exploding. A few kisses to his neck and then his parted lips. Peeta whimpers when she stands, his cock lurching as her touch leaves him. Again while she strips off her bra, her stockings, and the panties she soaked with her release while he fingered her in the car and she failed at blowing his mind.
He reaches for her, and she swats his hands away with a smirk. Slowly pulls his pants down his legs and tosses them aside. She leaves his dress shirt as it is, unbuttoned with the sleeves rolled up, the deep blue matching his eyes when he’s aroused. Turning her back to him, she wriggles her hips and stands between his knees. Smiles when he gets the hint and grips himself to hold his cock straight so she can lower herself onto him.

“So eager,” she teases and has to bite her lip to contain her moan as he fills her. “Oh god, so thick, Peeta.”

“Fuck I love watching your pussy take my cock,” he groans. His hands skim over her hips as she starts to move, her motions restricted cradled like this between his outstretched knees. Then his fingers glide over her clit and she bends back, needing to feel more of him. Her arm wraps around his neck. Peeta turns to kiss hers and groan into it.

“I want it, Katniss. I want your hot juices covering my cock, dripping down my balls. I want you screaming and begging me to stop because you can’t stand the pleasure then begging me to keep going because you can’t stand not to have it.”

Eventually, the small motions of their hips aren’t enough and she spreads her knees, resting her legs right on top of his as she whimpers and his hips bounce beneath hers, his finger still stroking. She rests her hand on top of his to guide him and he kisses her neck.

“Yeah, like that, Katniss. Show me how you want me to touch you. Show me how to make you come.”

“Peeta, you already know,” she moans. She feels his lips curling into a smile on the back of her neck before he presses another hot kiss there.

“Open your legs wider,” he growls. She does and her toes brush the floor as he slides down the couch, planting his feet firmly before he thrusts up into her. Now she’s the one cursing and screaming as his fingers burn her clit. He holds her in place with one hand flat on her ribs, his thumb between her breasts. She tries to clamp her legs shut as she gets closer, but Peeta bites her shoulder and she forces herself to stay open.

It takes a few more thrusts to get her back to where she was. Lost momentum regained, Katniss closes her eyes to focus on the feel of him moving inside her, beneath her, around her. A spark then another and she’s powerless to stop it this time, her entire body shaking with the force of it. Light refracts behind her eyelids like it does when filtered through a rich, dark drink. She gets a little lost in the colors as she rides out her release.

When she’s aware once more of her surroundings, her knees and forehead drag across the carpet. Uncertain when they moved to the floor, or when he managed to remove his prosthetic and cast it aside, she calls out Peeta’s name, only then noticing his hands caressing down her back and over her ass. She reaches back and finds his chest, covered in a light sheen of sweat, as he pushes down on her hips. He groans and she’s glad he can feel something because she’s all out of sensations right now.

She kneels there and listens to the erotic noises he makes while his hips smack into her ass. God, she loves his sex noises. They’re intoxicating, mesmerizing. It isn’t long before she hears the hitch in his voice and feels the bite of his fingers clenching her ass that means he’s about to come. Katniss pushes her palms on the floor and stretches her back. His pace breaks as he groans her name and his hips slow to a last few deep thrusts before he stops and lays his chest on top of her, his hand sliding up her body to grasp her breast, his lips covering her ear in warmth as he tries to catch his breath.
They sprawl on the floor, and when their bodies finally cool enough, Peeta pulls her on top of him. They adjust limbs and hair and end up with her ear right over his heart, listening to the steady drumming, and his hands skimming lightly over her back and arms, sending shivers of delight through her.

“I’m sorry about tonight. I’d hoped that…well I guess I was hoping for something different after I’d been away from them for so long. Not that they’d be different per se, but that maybe they’d see me different.” Katniss blinks her eyes open and stares at his wall, waiting for him to continue. She wants to tell him that his parents are idiots for not seeing him for what he really is, but the words get tangled on her tongue. “Nothing’s changed, though.”

“No offense, Peeta, but your parents are dumb.” Katniss combs back her hair as she lifts herself up to stare down at him. Peeta laughs, although the sound isn’t one of real humor.

She thinks about all the times he’s bolstered her confidence when she didn’t think she could do something. When Haymitch made her bar manager. When Prim brought home a bunch of brochures for online colleges and dumped them in Katniss’ lap declaring, “Your turn!” All the times he’s been there for her, to help deal with her Mom. To hold her or give her space—whichever she needed—every year on the day her dad died. To listen when she sobbed over Prim growing up and graduating and no longer needing her and helping her work through the confusing blend of sorrow and relief Katniss felt that entire month. With those memories at the front of her mind, the words begin to untangle.

“I mean it, Peeta. Your dad is…”

“Oblivious?”

“And distant. And your mom is…”

“Overbearing?”

“I was going to say a witch. Now I know why you were trying to get away from them.” He’s still not looking convinced, though, so she shifts her body to drop kisses over his chest and up his neck.

“You’re kind.” Kiss. “And generous.” Kiss. “Charming.” Kiss. “And you kiss like the devil.” Two kisses, one for each cheek. “And even though I think you’re crazy for it, I know you love me as much as I love you.”

“Well look at you,” he teases with a real smile. “Being engaged has made you a poet.”

“Can I put cayenne pepper in her wine at the wedding?” Katniss asks and now Peeta does laugh for real. He pulls her down for a sweet kiss. One on her lips and one on her nose. “Is that a yes?”

“We’re eloping,” he says and even though she knows he’s half joking, she smiles and stretches contentedly at that idea. More time and money for honeymoon that way. Also less chance of the reception turning into fisticuffs.
Chapter 4

Her boots make no noise as they slide across the wood floors, freshly sanded just a few days ago and ready to be refinished. Katniss knows her way through the place even in the dark, after years of working here in one capacity or another. Despite the fact that she knows Haymitch wouldn’t have wanted her to, she closed the doors and paused the renovations until the will could be read, never expecting the generous gift her boss and mentor would leave her. Never once guessing that Abernathy’s would become hers.

It’s a shithole, but it makes good money. Use it to send the ankle biters to college or to take that honeymoon you and the boy never got around to taking.

She smiles as she reaches the bar and runs her hand along it as she works around to the back and finally flips the lights. They’re dim and in desperate need of a good cleaning. Two are missing bulbs. While she never loved working here, she can’t deny that this dump holds all kinds of wonderful memories for her, and Haymitch is a large part of that.

When the fourth Elvis song in a row comes on the jukebox, Haymitch glares out over the gathered patrons, absorbed with their drinks and their conversations.

“Alright, whoever picked Burning Love… hand over all your quarters. Your jukebox privileges have been revoked,” Haymitch shouts. A few people laugh, but most of them duck their heads and keep drinking. His eyes narrow and he grunts before his gaze lands on Katniss, leaning over the bar and shaking her head before turning to resume her conversation with Peeta.

“And you,” Haymitch snaps as he points a finger at her, bringing her attention back to him. “Get back to work. I’m not paying you to give that boy blue balls.”

Her cheeks burn and Peeta chokes on his laugh, hiding it behind his half-finished drink. As she walks past Haymitch, she bites back a retort that Peeta certainly doesn’t suffer from blue balls. But they’re still new in her eyes, only together for six months, and the last thing she wants is Haymitch’s acerbic comments in her head over her relationship with Peeta.

“You…” Haymitch says harshly and she turns back to ask him what complaint he’s got about her now. Only he’s smiling, sly and with a gleam in his eyes she’s never seen before. “Whatever you did to untwist her panties, keep it up. Usually she’s got all the charm of a dead slug.”

She can’t hear Peeta’s reply and fumes while she serves the next few customers. But Peeta’s eyes follow her through it all, warming and softening her. Making Haymitch’s insult barely sting at all.

With her hands braced on the scarred wood bartop, Katniss can’t bring herself to go, even though she knows Peeta waits for her in the car outside. She asked him to give her a few minutes alone,
kissing him sweetly when he agreed automatically, even though tonight was supposed to be their
date night, penciled onto their full calendars for weeks now. Technically, she supposes the date is
mostly over since they were on their way home from dinner when she asked him to stop here.
Peeta seemed to understand that she couldn’t stand the thought of going home without seeing the
place.

She spots a dingy quarter wedged between two floor boards and finds one of the old ice picks
Haymitch kept around because he could never bring himself to get rid of anything. Never know
when I’m gonna need it again, Sweetheart.

Armed with the ice pick, she frees the quarter and heads to the juke box. It’s not the one that was
broken in the fight that brought her and Peeta together, but Haymitch bought it used and sometimes
it sticks. The quarter clanks its way into the bowels of the machine and it hums awake while
Katniss makes her selection. As the bass beats of Another One Bites the Dust fill the bar, Katniss
smiles through the tears gathering on the rims of her eyes.

“For you, old man,” she says to the ceiling. Haymitch used to joke that he didn’t want anyone
crying or making a fuss at his funeral. That it had better be a party with inappropriate or irreverent
songs, free-flowing alcohol, and maybe even a brawl, if possible. Because Haymitch Abernathy
would never leave this world without one helluva fight.

Behind her, the door creaks and then slams shut, alerting her to Peeta’s presence. She swipes the
tears from beneath her eyes and turns to smile at him. Her heart flutters with the stirrings she
associates with him walking through that door. Exciting as new love and as comforting as old love.
She takes in his concerned expression that melts away to a grin as he recognizes the song.

“I’ll pour,” he offers but she shakes her head.

“He’d never allow it. I’ll pour.”

“What is this shit you’re serving, sweetheart? Vermouth? No. No. Haymitch! Your girl is trying to
poison me!”

“She’s trying to teach you some class,” Haymitch grumbles at his oldest friend. “Key word is
trying.” Peeta lifts his glass and hides his smile behind it, turning his head a little as Chaff fumes
and shakes his head emphatically.

“Do you want to make a good impression at your daughter’s wedding or not?” Katniss asks with a
hand on her hip and a scowl on her face. She knows that Chaff only gets to see his daughter three
times a year since the divorce. Now that she’s getting married to a wealthy and well-known
thoroughbred breeder in Kentucky, Chaff is eager to make sure that he doesn’t embarrass her on
her wedding day. “They don’t drink that shit IPA beer at classy weddings.”

“As if you know the first thing about class,” Chaff mutters. Haymitch scoffs.

“Peeta, help me out here,” Katniss urges and Peeta lifts his hands in surrender.

“I don’t think so. Last time you dragged the boy behind my bar, the cops were involved.”
Katniss glares at Haymitch, but he doesn’t waver in the slightest. “Give the man a bourbon. Any
decent Kentucky wedding will at least have good bourbon, even if it is at some fancy pants horse
brothel.”

Chaff guffaws at this and Katniss rolls her eyes, but she pours the drink and slides it across the
wood to Chaff. He lifts it and offers a toast to Peeta. “May the devil not find out where we are until we’ve had at least five minutes in heaven.”

Haymitch motions for Katniss to join him in the back, and since Chaff and Peeta are now engrossed in their conversation, she wipes her hands on her short apron and follows him. A little apprehensive when he ushers her into his messy office. “Have a seat.”

She stares at the pile of papers on the chair in front of his desk and then at Haymitch. He grunts and swipes them all to the floor with his hand. “Great filing system,” Katniss says.

“That’s actually why you’re back here, Sweetheart,” Haymitch tells her. “I need an office manager who can actually deal with this mess. Comes with a good raise and dental. You’d be salary instead of wage. It won’t be fun and the hours will be long, but you’ll be able to pick ‘em. So I guess that makes it a little easier with the other jobs you’ve got. Just don’t slack off because I ain’t afraid to slap your ass back to behind the bar schlepping drinks.”

“I don’t un—”

“I’m offering you a promotion,” Haymitch says. “You want it or not?”

“Well, yeah,” Katniss answers with hesitation in her voice.

“Don’t jump for joy or anything,” Haymitch mutters, and the apprehension and confusion flower into hope. She could maybe start saving if she got a raise. If it’s enough, she could even entertain the idea of quitting the Fish Market. Not wanting to get ahead of herself, she nods.

“Can I have twenty-four hours to decide?” she keeps her voice as calm and professional as possible, but Haymitch nods and scribbles something on a piece of paper.

“Here, to help you decide.”

Her hands shake a little as she accepts the paper, stuffing it into her pocket, half afraid that it might combust. If he’s serious about the salary he just wrote down, then she can’t come up with a single reason to not take it and dance all the way to the bank.

“Let’s get back out there before Chaff drinks me dry,” Haymitch says and Katniss follows him back out front. “Sonuvabitch, get back on your stool!”

Peeta startles and sets down the bottle of bourbon he was using to refill their drinks before he scurries back around the bar and Chaff guffaws loudly. “Johanna was busy and Chaff—”

“Deal with your boy, Katniss. Or I will,” Haymitch growls and then wags a finger at his oldest friend to lecture him. But Katniss feels lighter than air and hardly even scolds Peeta for daring to step behind the bar, even if he is a regular.

She’s getting a raise.

The gurgling of the bourbon as it fills the glass is soothing. Pausing as she shifts to the second glass. Again as she fills the third. When she sets the bottle down, she looks up at Peeta and smiles weakly. He lifts his glass and examines the burning liquid within.

“To Haymitch. He went out with his boots on,” Peeta says and Katniss nods.

“To Haymitch.”
Their glasses clink and Katniss takes a deep breath before tossing back as much as she can without choking. The alcohol burns down her throat but then settles pleasantly low in her belly. They remain silent for a moment, each lost in thought or memory. When the song ends and shifts to a crooning Patsy Cline ballad, Katniss risks a glance at Peeta. He’s staring into the depths of his glass and turning it on the bar top.

“What are you thinking?” she asks him and he sets the glass aside, gazing up at her with a depth of love that still takes her breath away, even after being married as many years as they have been.

“Just wondering what he’d say if he were here now.”

“Probably tell us to stop moping and find a spot to christen with a naked ass,” she says and laughter bursts from Peeta’s chest.

“Okay, I think I’ve got it,” Prim says and Katniss winces as the last pin holding her short veil in place scrapes her scalp.

“White?” Haymitch asks as he ambles into the room and Katniss scowls at him. But she can’t be too mad at him. He actually cleaned up nicely for the occasion. “You sure that’s appropriate?”

“Don’t be an ass, Haymitch,” Katniss says as she turns to the mirror, flicking away an imaginary speck of lint from her dress. Prim smiles and hurries over to the tray on the vanity table, plucking up one of the soft yellow peonies and shuffling back to Haymitch.

“What’s this?” he asks as Prim adjusts his lapel and then pins the boutonniere to it. He glares at her little sister, but there’s no malice behind it. Haymitch, like almost everyone she knows, has a soft spot for Prim. It’s just more pronounced in her rough and tumble boss since she’s not sure he even has another soft spot.

“You gonna give me away or what?” Katniss asks and whirls to face him, knowing that this is the only way to get him to accept. By ambushing him and being sarcastic about it. “I can’t have you look like a slob when you walk me down the aisle.”

Haymitch sighs as though he’s being inconvenienced. “You couldn’t find anyone else? That overzealous redhead down front? Finnick was it? The boy’s father? Hell, you coulda paid someone to give you away. Bet your garbage guy wouldn’t have said ‘no’ to twenty bucks and a free meal.”

Katniss tilts her head to scowl at him, but he’s buttoning his jacket and then offering his arm to her. She bites back a smile and loops her arm through his. Prim hands Katniss her bouquet and then bustles out of the room to lead the march down the short aisle.

The crowd is small, but she knows them all by name, their faces comforting and familiar in the instant she lets her gaze sweep over them before settling on Peeta, waiting for her at the front. She’s grateful for Haymitch beside her because her legs tremble a little. Not in fear or uncertainty but in near disbelief that this is actually about to happen.

Then Haymitch unloops her arm and places her hand in Peeta’s outstretched one. The rest of the world disappears, turning steadily on its axis as she stares into Peeta’s blue eyes. Words float up to her consciousness and Peeta smiles brightly as the preacher asks that all important question.

“If there is anyone with reason why these two should not—”

“Yeah I got reason!” Haymitch bellows and Katniss whips her head around to glare at him. “They shoulda done this two years ago! What took you so long?”
The small audience laughs and Katniss fumes, but Peeta tugs on her hands to draw her attention back to him.

“Okay, I’m good. Sorry for the interruption, Father,” Haymitch declares.

And as they say their vows, they’re both fighting back laughter.

Tears cloud her vision as she clutches her belly, the laughter causing cramps. Peeta actually snorts with his laughter, the bourbon of his second drink shuddering in his glass. They’ve spent the past thirty minutes or so, as the jukebox continues to cycle through its repertoire, swapping stories and favorite memories of Haymitch. How he “accidentally” broke Peeta’s brother’s nose at their wedding when the douchebag got drunk and wouldn’t stop making derogatory comments about both her and Peeta. The time Peeta had to bail him and Chaff out of jail over a “misunderstanding” that somehow involved a skunk and Peeta still assures her that she doesn’t want the details for. A hundred snarky comments shouted over the heads of the patrons in his bar. How overprotective he is of their children and how he insists it’s because “someone has to make sure these half pints don’t turn into complete saps.”

She hasn’t laughed this much since she got the phone call from the hospital and learned that he’d been slowly dying for years, and she imagines that the old codger would glare at her for finding his life so amusing. But there’d be no real threat behind the glare. Because she knows she was right earlier. Haymitch may have been a prickly bastard with an acid tongue and a habit of insulting everyone he cared about, but he always encouraged her in his rough way to live her life. To leave no room for regrets because he had more than enough of those in his own life.

She sobers as her eyes fall on the third glass, still full and waiting for the drinker who will never join them again.

“What the hell am I supposed to do with this?” Haymitch asks, holding her daughter beneath her armpits, his arms extended to maximize the distance between them. Willow wriggles and coos at him, reaching her pudgy hands out towards him and grasping at thin air.

“Well for starters, don’t swear in front of her,” Katniss says and shifts aside a folder to search for the paperwork she needs. “Just hold her for a second so she doesn’t eat the paperwork I need before I can find it.”

She can’t believe she almost let this slip. Their liquor license and one of their permits, of all things. She’s just lucky Haymitch remembered and hasn’t fired her yet. But things have been crazy the past seven months with Willow’s birth and Peeta’s father dying, adjusting to Katniss working mostly from home and the start of the new school year with Peeta taking on the added job of wrestling coach.

“Okay, here it is. All I need is your signature here and here, and then you take it to...what?” she asks when she catches Haymitch scowling at the paperwork and then at her.

“You take it. You know what you’re doing. And it’ll get taken care of right if you go. Rooba likes you better.”

“Maybe if you hadn’t called her son a floozy,” Katniss mutters and Haymitch shrugs, jostling Willow enough to make the baby giggle.

“If the boot fits,” he says nonchalantly.
“Fine, I’ll take care of it,” she grumbles and reaches for her daughter. Peeta will be at the school until four and that’s too close to the time the county offices will shut down for Katniss to entertain the idea of him watching Willow while she runs this errand, so she’ll just have to go with her daughter now. But Haymitch pulls the baby closer to his chest. Willow gurgles happily and grips his shirt. “Haymitch, you can hand me my daughter back now.”

“Tell you what, I’ll watch the rugrat while you take care of that. You look like you could use a few minutes of peace.” She tries to argue, but in the end, Haymitch scowls her. And she’s too stunned by the sudden switch in his demeanor and how he now expertly holds Willow. Besides, she thinks as she drives with the windows down and the fresh air rejuvenates her. She does need a break.

When she makes it back home, she’s prepared for a disaster. Screeching and a complete mess. What she’s not expecting is the stack of neatly washed and folded onesies and Haymitch Abernathy with the goofiest smile on his face, singing to her daughter as he spins them gently around the living room in a dance and Willow giggles in his arms, her hands on his jaw as she scratches to feel his three-day old stubble.

“Care to dance?”

Peeta holds his hand out to her when the jukebox starts playing another slow song. It’s in French and Katniss has no idea what the lyrics mean, but as Peeta leads her out from behind the bar and onto the only stretch of floor not occupied with pool tables or assorted other seats, she lets the mood of it carry her. Longing and a profound love.

She sighs as she rests her head on Peeta’s shoulder and his hands soothe over her back. They sway slightly and forget the rest of the world. Their kids are probably tucked in and fast asleep, but she clings to this night with Peeta. Not because she needs or even wants time away from their family, but because he’ll be grieving Haymitch the same way she is. As a stand-in father and a voice of reason, sometimes the voice that provided affirmation for their gut feelings.

As the song ends and the jukebox falls silent, so do their movements, although Peeta continues to hold her. She tilts her head back to look up at him, unsurprised when he lowers his head to kiss her. They stand there for what feels like hours, leisurely kissing in a way they haven’t been able to for a few months. Life crowding in and leaving little room for romance.

Katniss clings to his lapel and leans into the feelings, into him. Kissing him now, in the place where they first met, feels natural and right. Like turning over a leaf and discovering that it’s as beautiful as the one you already have. She wouldn’t trade their life together to step back in time to that first night he entered the bar. The future holds too much possibility to dwell on the past that way.

Peeta lifts his head and drops one last soft kiss on the tip of her nose, his smile soft as he whispers to her. “We should probably head back home.”

She nods, but neither one of them moves to end the embrace. Searching eyes look for a familiar spark. She can almost hear Haymitch grumbling from the corner as he lobs darts at the freckled board on the wall. You call that a kiss, Sweetheart?

The jukebox clicks and then powers itself down and light flares in Peeta’s eyes at the same instant. She pulls him back in for another kiss. Only this one turns sloppy and flares with immediate, scorching heat. Their teeth knock together in their haste to let their tongues tangle. He grabs her skirt to yank it up before sinking his fingers into her ass.
Then there’s just them staggering towards the nearest flat surface as her need builds. Jammed tight behind a cork and fizzing bright as Peeta curses and lifts her onto the one side section of the bar that sits a little lower. His fingers trace up her thighs as he grabs the back of her head and pushes her back to suckle on her neck.

“Peeta,” she gasps and shifts her hips to the edge of the bar so she can grind against him. He tugs the neckline of her dress down and kisses across her clavicle, little nips only making her squirm with the moisture soaking her panties. He kisses the swells of her breasts but the dress won’t give him anymore than that without him ripping or unzipping it. His mouth trails back up to her jaw.

“We should go,” he says again with a pained moan as she rubs herself all over his cock where it strains against his dress pants. “Finish this at home.”

But the moment is right and there’s nothing that will convince her not to follow through with it.

“No. Not waiting,” she pants and shoves his jacket off his shoulders. It falls to the sticky floor, but she’s got his tongue in her mouth and his erection pressed deliciously against her center. “Now, Peeta. I need you right now.”

“Yes, your boots,” he pants into the crook of her neck. Sitting back, Katniss glares at the things and their ridiculous number of laces and clasps. Normally she loves these boots, right now they’re a problem. Her hand mindlessly claws at her pantyhose, an unwanted barrier between her and Peeta.

“Fuck it,” Peeta says, his hands batting hers away as he grips nylon and rips. She gasps and tears at his pants until she has him, hard and burning hot in her hand. And when he shoves her panties aside to slam into her, they both cry out in relief. Lips clashing as they shift and move until he’s got her teetering on the edge of the bar, hands kneading her ass as she clings to his shoulder and uses the other hand behind her to leverage herself to meet his thrusts. He barely leaves her with each one, then plunges deep with a sharp snap of his hips. A quick twist that rubs their pubic bones together and only whips the need she feels into a frenzy.

Everything about it is dirty and hot, from the beads of sweat clinging to his temples and forming in the creases of her thighs to the loud sounds of their bodies sliding and colliding, the grasping and smacking of hands as they shift positions or knock each other off balance with the force of their movements. Fistfuls of shirt and hair and ass as they build and build until they’re close to exploding. The moans that rise from their chests and echo through the empty room.

Her lips ache around him, engorged and needing release as she begs him in a soft whine and Peeta’s hand tangles in her hair to slam their mouths together, swallowing the sounds as she breaks free with a quick scream that’s muffled in his throat. Pulsing in waves that sparkle and fizz behind her eyelids. Gentle rivulets as Peeta’s thrusts slow but retain their strength. Then he grunts and stills between her legs as they kiss, lips shaking and limp, gasping for air. She feels them mingled together dripping out of her and onto him, only then noticing that at some point, he lifted her completely off the bar, leaving only her hand on the surface and her weight held in his sturdy arms.

Peeta sets her back on the edge and grabs a few napkins from the nearby stack to help her clean up their mess. She glances down at the new set of scratches furrowed into the finish of the wood behind her. For some reason, it makes her laugh, defiling this surface and claiming the bar as theirs. She makes a mental note to scrub the surface at least three times before they reopen. She briefly thinks about having the bar refinished along with the floors, but she decides she wants those claw marks to remain. At least for awhile.

Lifting her down, Peeta holds her steady while she adjusts her dress to cover the tears in her pantyhose. They hold hands as they leave and lock the place back up. At home, she checks on their
daughter then watches from the doorway as Peeta leans over their son to kiss his forehead in his sleep and make sure he has his favorite teddy bear tucked in his arm.

It’s when they’re in their bed, sighing in contentment as he wraps an arm around her and pulls her back into his chest that they finally speak again. Peeta bites down on her ear and rocks his hips into her so she can feel him hard and ready for her again.

“Oh, hey bartender,” he whispers with heat and promise. “How about another round?”