Love Is...

by annieoakley1

Summary

The story of how Peeta Mellark became Peeta Everdeen, spanning fifteen years of partnership, friendship, and love.

Everlark, modern day AU. Complete.

Notes

Many thanks to loving-mellark for the banner and peetasbunnyoven for prereading. I love you both!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Love is patient...

Peeta had used up the last of his art supplies making a wetlands diorama a couple weeks ago for the science block, and there just wasn’t any money for more, not since his parents were forced to close the bakery. As Sister Trinket trilled on about an exciting new project for their 6th grade reading comprehension course, he worried about what he’d be forced to ask his mother to buy. She already complained constantly about the cost of the Catholic school’s tuition and uniform expenses, so the last thing he wanted to do was beg her for styrofoam balls and paint.

“Manners!” Sister Trinket admonished, tapping her ruler against Jason Marvel’s desk to quiet him.

She continued to march between the rows of students, glaring at anyone who seemed remotely distracted. “As I was saying, your next assignment is a special project for which I’ll allow you to work in pairs. I’ll choose your partner.”

A soft groan of dissent rolled throughout the class, but Sister Trinket continued undeterred. While she explained the guidelines, Peeta’s eyes wandered to the back of Katniss Everdeen’s head. She recently started wearing her hair in a single braid plaited neatly down her back, and the raven strands against the stark white of her polo shirt was like a flashing arrow demanding his full attention.
He was still focused on Katniss when Sister Trinket repeated his name. He blinked, his eyes moving from the girl’s braid to the nun’s habit. “Let’s see who you’ll be working with, Peeta,” she said, not unkindly. His mother always talked about Effie Trinket, saying she couldn’t believe the woman entered the church when she used to wear pounds of makeup as a teenager. Peeta didn’t understand what eyeshadow had to do with faith, but his mother didn’t think Effie was fit to serve God.

Peeta liked her, though, and Sister Trinket seemed to have a soft spot where he was concerned, never rolling her eyes or acting impatient like some of the other nuns when he failed to answer a question correctly or follow along in class.

He waited as the nun dipped her hand in a glass bowl filled with slips of paper. Each one held the name of someone on the other side of the classroom, and Peeta was hoping he’d be paired up with either Marvel or Cato.

Sister Trinket unfolded the paper and smiled. “Katniss Everdeen.”

Katniss Everdeen.

His stomach lurched, eyes wide as saucers. No, no, no. Anyone but her.

Peeta had a massive crush on Katniss since kindergarten, but he’d gotten through the years without ever having to actually talk to her. That was fine by him until he could gather up the courage to tell her something worth saying. In the mean time, he was content to just smile shyly at her if their eyes happened to meet. She never smiled back. It hurt, but he figured that was why they called them crushes.

He fidgeted uneasily for the rest of the lecture, refusing to look over at her seat again. After class, he met up with his friends and listened as they grumbled about the project. He sneaked a glance toward Katniss’s direction and saw that she was taking her time gathering her things, and then she turned towards them. He wasn’t paying much attention to what the other guys were saying now as he watched her walking his way.

“I have to go,” he told the other boys as she approached. He met her halfway, right in front of Sister Trinket’s desk. Steeling himself for their first real interaction, he tried to smile as she clutched her books to her chest, but his heart was pounding too hard for him to manage one. “Would you like to get started on the project today?” she asked, her eyes locked on his.

The project was to pick a few verses from the Bible and interpret the meaning and significance. He’d just been happy that it wouldn’t cost anything, reading in front of the class, but that was before he realized he’d have to read with her.

“Yes,” he said, proud of himself for how easily that word passed his lips despite her intimidating presence before him. He was glad it was a Thursday, which meant he didn’t have to be at Crane’s to unload trucks. “Wanna meet at the library?”

“I have to watch my little sister after school,” she said with a head shake. “You can come to my house. My mom will drive us.”

He gaped at her in amazement, loving that she didn’t really ask him. It was just how he always imagined her, this quiet but commanding presence.

“Yeah! That sounds good.”

“I’ll meet you on the front steps after school,” she told him before leaving the classroom. He stood in
a stupor until he realized he’d have to call home and tell his mother about this change of plans. That was enough to bring him back down.

Since he had lunch the next period, he decided to head down to the office to borrow the phone. The school secretary, Ms. Sae, liked him well enough, so she probably wouldn’t mind. He smiled big when he saw her at her desk. “Can I use- I mean, **may** I use the phone?” he asked, correcting himself when he remembered how she chided him before for using the wrong word.

A pair of eyeglasses dangled around her neck by a strand of pearls, and she slipped them on, perching them on the tip of her nose. “Yes you may, Peeta.”

He dialed his parents’ phone number and listened anxiously as it rang, and when his mother answered with a brusque hello, he launched into an immediate explanation of why he called. He held the receiver tightly against his ear, flashing a plastered on smile to Ms. Sae and hoping she couldn’t hear his mother yelling at him on the other end of the line.

Her permission was a hard win, but after he got it, he thanked the secretary again and headed off to his next class. Minutes ticked by tortuously slow, and it was harder than ever to pay attention to the lessons as he waited for the end of the day.

Then it was almost time, finally, to meet her. He stood in front of the full-length mirror in the boys’ restroom and carefully combed his hair. Once he was satisfied with his appearance, he rolled up the sleeves of his oxford shirt and hitched his bookbag over his shoulder before heading out. Nervous was about the only word he could think of to describe how he felt, but it wasn’t good enough. He was nervous and scared, but excited. He was looking forward to it more than anything, but dreading it just as much. It was a confusing mix of emotions and he didn’t know what to do with them.

She was already waiting outside by the time he made it to the front entrance, and he immediately recognized little Primrose Everdeen standing next to Katniss. Back before the bakery went out of business, Prim used to come in occasionally with Mr. Everdeen, and she’d stare in awe at the cake displays while Peeta stayed back behind the counter with his father.

He said hello to get their attention, and Katniss quickly introduced Prim, who ducked her head shyly and stayed glued to her sister’s side. They waited in silence for Mrs. Everdeen, and Peeta kept thinking about things to say, but he always decided against actually saying them.

A white Toyota pulled alongside the curb a few minutes later, and Katniss guided Prim toward it as she called over her shoulder that this was their ride. A pretty blonde woman in light pink scrubs was behind the wheel, and Peeta hesitated at the car door, not sure if he was supposed to sit in the back with Katniss and Prim, or take the vacated front seat.

“Mom, this is Peeta,” Katniss said as she slid over to make room for him. “We’re working on a school project together.”

“Hi, Peeta,” she called as he climbed inside, and then they were off to the Everdeens’ house on the other side of town.

His mother used to mock these developments when they were being built, but Peeta couldn’t understand why. The neighborhood looked nice, with perfect rows of modestly sized homes and manicured lawns. Mrs. Everdeen parked in front of a large ranch at the end of the cul-de-sac to drop them off, the car’s engine was still running as she went over instructions with Katniss.

“Your dad will be home in about 45 minutes,” she said. “Chaff and the guys are working in the basement, so let them know if you need anything. I put some snacks in the fridge if you get hungry.”
“Got it,” Katniss said before shutting the car door. Mrs. Everdeen waved goodbye as she turned around and drove off, and Peeta waited awkwardly for the Everdeen girls to lead him inside.

“We can work in the kitchen,” Katniss announced as she charged toward the front door with her little sister in tow. “Do you have any homework, Prim?”

Prim smiled widely and described her workbook assignments, and Katniss listened to every word as she hung her bookbag on one of the wall hooks in the entryway. As they talked, Peeta stepped further into the house, peering into the living room and taking it all in. He wasn’t sure what his mother was talking about, because the Everdeen home was very nice and comfortable. There was even a fireplace with a big wooden mantel, and a small family photo was centered as the focal point. He inched closer for a better look. It was only a 4x6, and he guessed—based on the quality—that it was taken with the family’s camera and not a professional’s. But everyone looked so happy. Two proud parents with their daughters, all smiles as they stood in front of a beautiful backdrop featuring a lake and small cabin.

Peeta didn’t have very many family photos hanging up in his house. As Katniss showed him to the kitchen, he realized that he was a little jealous of how peaceful and perfect everything here appeared to be.

“What do you have a favorite verse?” Katniss asked as she spread some folders out on the table.

He took a seat across from her and next to Prim, who now smiled shyly at him before ducking her head again and getting back to work. Prim was adorable, probably no older than 6 or 7. He wished he had a little sister.

“Uh, not really,” he answered, scratching at his head and unknowingly ruining his carefully styled part. “Do you?”

She shook her head as she leafed through her study Bible. “We could pick one of the more well known, longer ones,” she said. “It’d probably make it easier.”

His face was growing warm, and he hoped it wasn’t turning red in embarrassment. Katniss was a star student, but Peeta most definitely was not. Of course she’d know she had to make things “easier” just so he could keep up.

But the verses she picked, famous or not, were far from easy. At least for him. He stumbled over the sentences when it was his turn to read, and he scratched at his head again as he felt Katniss watching him.

*Righteous.* The rest of the verse was hard enough, but this word tripped him up the most.

“It’s okay,” she told him. “Just sound them out.”

He tried to take his time doing as she said, but knowing she was right across from him and listening intently made it more difficult. He was always embarrassed by his reading ability and grades, but this was a hot shame that was catching in his throat and choking him as the words jumped around on the page, and he knew he was twisting them more as he spoke.

“I’m sorry,” he finally said, forcing a shy smile when what he really wanted to do was cry. “I can be real stupid sometimes.”

Her eyes narrowed as she studied him. “Don’t say that,” she said softly. “You’re not stupid.”
It was quiet until a booming voice rang out from the hallway, and then a large black man appeared in the kitchen a few seconds later. He had a big, kind smile, his bright white teeth a stark contrast to his dark skin. He was carrying a large toolbox under one arm, and Peeta noticed immediately that the man’s other hand was missing. He tried to not be impolite and stare but he was doing a lousy job of it.

“I didn’t know you two were here yet, you’re so damn quiet,” he laughed. “Look at you, sittin’ down and doing your homework without me having to tell you. You’re a couple of troublemakers for sure,” he teased. Then he turned his attention to Peeta, who was still gawking at the stump where the man’s hand should be. “Who’s this? A new member of your gang?”

“I’m Peeta Mellark, sir,” he answered before Katniss had the chance, and he reflexively extended his arm to shake the man’s hand before he realized what he was doing.

“I’m Chaff,” he said, laughing and offering his stump, which Peeta shook after a moment of confused hesitation. He apologized, but the man told him he had nothing to be sorry about.

“So, is he your new boyfriend?” he asked Katniss, playfully nudging her with his elbow.

Peeta froze up as Katniss scowled back at the man without a response. Chaff just barked in laughter as he placed the toolbox on the table. “What’re you working on?”

“A project for school,” she answered. “Hey Chaff, what’s your favorite bible verse?”


“Oh, mom’s got a cross-stitch of that one!”

“Your momma’s got fine taste,” he replied.

Katniss turned her attention to Peeta, smiling now. “I think that’d be a good one. It’s long enough to be the only one we’d have to recite, and it’s pretty easy to read.”

He rubbed his chin, trying to cover his embarrassment. “Yeah, that does sound good.”

“It’s a real good verse,” Chaff said. “You two can read it together at your wedding.”

Katniss pulled another face, but Peeta was laughing, too. Chaff seemed to enjoy teasing her, and it was fun watching her get all riled up. Besides, anything was better than feeling bad and embarrassed. Chaff was a welcome distraction.

“You kids want anything to eat or drink?” he asked.

Both Katniss and Prim shook their heads, but Peeta responded with a polite, “No thank you, sir.” His father always told him to call adults sir or ma’am, and to shake hands with a firm grip while looking them right in the eye.

“Sir again. Oh, I like this one, Katniss. You best keep him around.”

He headed back the way he came, leaving Katniss with another scowl on her face. “Don’t mind him. He’s always like that.”

“He’s real nice,” Peeta said.
“Yeah, he’s like an uncle to us. He’s helping my dad finish the basement.”

She got right back to business after that, finding the Corinthians verse and dividing it up. He didn’t miss that she was giving him the easiest lines to read, and he ran his hands through his hair, tugging gently in frustration. “I’m sorry you got stuck with me, Katniss,” he sighed. “I promise I’ll work hard so I don’t bring down your grade.” Katniss was a straight-A student, after all, and she didn’t deserve to be saddled with the kid who barely read better than a 7-year-old.

“You won’t bring down my grade,” she said with knitted brows. “You’re just good at different things, like art. I’m not any good at that kind of stuff.”

He looked down at his paper then, fighting a smile because she knew he was a good artist. He didn’t think she knew anything about him.

They worked for a solid hour, Katniss showing him the best way to break up the few bigger words he had to recite. She had to move her chair beside his to see his notebook, and when she was right next to him, he ended up studying her instead of following along with the pencil as she wrote. He felt a pair of eyes on him and looked up to see Prim watching them, a knowing smirk on her face.

Mr. Everdeen arrived home from the mines not too long after that, and both of the girls greeted him with a hug. His clothes and skin were covered in soot, but they didn’t seem to mind.

Katniss explained what they were working on and introduced him to Peeta, who extended his hand just like his father always told him. Mr. Everdeen seemed a bit surprised by the gesture, but he smiled as they shook. “You want to stay for dinner, Peeta?” he asked. “I’m ordering pizza.”

“Thanks, sir, but I better get going. My mom will be picking me up soon.” Truth was, his mother told him he could find his own damn ride home, so that meant he had quite a trek to the other side of town. He wasn’t about to admit that, though.

“Why don’t you wait in here until she comes,” Mr. Everdeen said when Peeta started gathering his things. “The weather’s starting to turn, so it’s getting chilly.”

“Oh. Well, she’s gonna meet me at the end of the block, since I didn’t know your exact address.” Peeta was a far better liar than reader, thinking quickly and never tripping up over the untruthful words.

“How about I drive you home and save her the trouble? You can call her now if she hasn’t left yet.”

That was a nice offer, one that hurt to refuse, but he couldn’t call home. “She probably left already, but thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome back here any time, Peeta,” he said.

Katniss made arrangements to meet him at the library another day, and he said goodbye to the family before heading out. He could still see them through the kitchen window once he was outside, and he watched them for a moment, envying the way they all smiled and laughed together, and then he started the long walk home.
Peeta felt good about their presentation. Both he and Katniss put a lot of time into it, and he was up late every night practicing his parts until he was sure he had it all memorized correctly. The day before it was due, they agreed to meet outside the classroom during lunch to go over it again.

Sister Trinket let them in so they could try it at the front of the classroom, one final practice in the real setting. Peeta went first, saying his lines about love, patience and kindness, and what exactly they thought that meant. He finished smoothly and waited for Katniss to pick up the next part, but she was staring out at the empty desks and tightly clutching her paper.

“Katniss?”

“Sorry,” she said before starting. Her beautiful voice, usually so strong and melodic, was quivering now as she spoke, and she stopped midsentence to take a deep breath. “I’m really nervous,” she admitted. “I hate talking in front of people.”

“It’s okay,” he told her. He’d been nervous too, knowing he couldn’t really rely much on notes. “I’ll be right beside you. Just look at me when you have to and we’ll get through it.”

She tried again, but her hands were visibly shaking as she gripped her notes. She stopped halfway through a sentence and dropped her head in shame, and he frowned as he watched her struggling.

“I can do all the talking,” he told her, confident he’d find a way to do it just so she wouldn’t have to.

“You think Sister Trinket would allow it?” she asked with wide, hopeful eyes.

“Absolutely not,” she said a few moments later when they asked. “Each of you have to speak in front of the class. It’s part of your grade. But you can help one another.” She walked with them, one hand on each of their shoulders. “You know, I thought you two would make great partners. Your individual strengths and weaknesses complement each other perfectly, so I have absolute faith this will work out.”

They practiced again, and Katniss was still having difficulty with the public speaking portion. “Remember, look at me any time you get too nervous,” he reminded her. When the room was filled with students and they were presenting for real, she did just that, stopping when she felt too flustered and turning to Peeta, who gave her an encouraging smile while she gathered her composure.

It was quick, over before they knew it, and then the next pair were up. He whispered that she did great as they made their way back to their seat, and she thanked him, sighing with relief.

“Peeta,” she called after the bell rang. He stopped at the door and waited for her.

“Thanks for all your help,” she told him, and he shrugged.

“You helped me out way more,” he said. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“We really do make a good team.”

He grinned back at her, because they did make a good team.
“Maybe you can come over again sometime next week and we can do our homework together?” she asked.

He blinked in surprise, amazed by the offer. Maybe they really could be friends.

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

*Love is kind...*

Now that they were in junior high, they had completely different class schedules, with Katniss on the advanced track and Peeta in the remedial courses. But Peeta met her at her locker between bells and always walked her to her classes, and they usually sat together at lunch. That day, she wasn’t at her locker in the afternoon, and he waited for her at their table but she never showed. Peeta worriedly asked Madge Undersee, Katniss’s other friend who she sat with when she wasn’t with him, if he knew where she went.

“She wasn’t feeling good,” Madge told him as she picked the crust off her sandwich. “She went to the nurse’s office after math.”

“Oh,” he said dejectedly, setting his tray down across from the other girl. Peeta liked Madge just fine, but she wasn’t his best friend.

“She’ll be okay, Peeta,” Madge added kindly to ease his mind. He managed a smile in thanks, and then they ate their lunches in complete silence.

It didn’t bode well that she was sick when it was only the second week of 7th grade. He didn’t think Katniss ever missed school; she definitely didn’t miss a day in the last year or he would have known. Now she was probably worrying about falling behind in her classes, even though she was the smartest person he ever knew.

He had to be at Crane’s after school to unload trucks, but he went to the hallway pay phone after lunch to call the office and let them know he’d be an hour late. When the last bell rang for the day, he went to each of Katniss’s afternoon classes to ask for the assignments, then he got on his bike and raced to her house.

He didn’t beat the bus, so Prim was already home by the time he rode to the end of the cul-de-sac. She was reading the newest Harry Potter book on the front steps, and she flashed him a grin as he approached. “Hi, Peeta!”

“Hey you. How’s the book?”

“It’s good. Hey, wanna race down the street? I bet you a quarter I can beat you.” Any of Prim’s shyness melted away a long time ago, and now she was as exuberant and happy around Peeta as she was with anyone else. Last summer, she finally mastered riding her bicycle without training wheels. Coupling that with this newfound fascination with betting meant that Peeta lost lots of spare change to her, since he couldn’t bring himself to ever let her lose.

“Sorry, can’t today. Maybe some other time. Is Katniss here?”
“Yeah, she’s in her room.”

“Is she okay?”

Prim shrugged, going back to her book. “Dunno. She wouldn’t let me in.”

Now that was worrisome. Katniss adored Prim and never shut her out. “I’m gonna go check on her,” he said. “Maybe she’ll see me. I got her homework here.”

She flipped the page with a sigh. “Good luck.”

Peeta once told Katniss that he was glad the family had a one-story home, because it was a best friend tradition to crawl into one another’s room through the window-something they’ve seen in countless movies and television shows-and he was lousy at climbing trees. Katniss wasn’t, and she managed to get into his room twice by scaling the old hickory in his family’s backyard. He got her to stop by pretending to be terrified she’d fall, but the truth was he was more scared that his mother would find out.

He went around to bedroom, tapping twice against the glass. He could see her lying on her side in bed, and she got up slowly, one arm folded against her belly as she moved. She made her way to the window with an unmistakable expression of annoyance, so Peeta held up the assignments, hoping it’d persuade her to forgive him.

“Thanks,” she said after opening the window. She moved to push it back down, but he stuck his hand in to stop her.

“Hey, wait! I’m worried about you. What’s wrong?”

She spun around and flopped back down on her bed, and he climbed through the window to follow her. “Katniss?” he probed, taking a seat on the flat footboard. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Is it your stomach?” he asked.

“Go away, Peeta.”

“C’mon,” he said, trying to cover his hurt. “You know you can tell me anything.”

“Well I can’t tell you about this,” she snapped. She rolled away from him, bringing her knees up to curl into the fetal position.

“Is it bad?” He didn’t care how hard he pressed, now he was scared out of his mind. If anything ever happened to her, he didn’t know what he’d do.

She buried her face with her pillow. ”I got my period.” He barely heard her, and it took a minute to figure out what she meant.

“Oh.”

She was quiet again, so he moved to sit next to her. “Does it really hurt that much?” he asked softly. They had a class about this kind of stuff the last week of 6th grade. He was no expert, but from what
he remembered, it sounded awful.

“Yes,” she said through gritted teeth, tears shimmering in her eyes.

“What’d your mom say? Can’t she give you something?” She was a nurse, after all.

Her eyes widened in horror. “I can’t tell my mom!”

“Why not?”

“Because. I just can’t. I already told her it was a stomach ache anyway. She gave me some pink stuff before she left for work.”

“It’s not helping any?” he asked helplessly.

She shook her head as she continued to clutch her stomach, and Peeta frowned before springing up into action. “Hold tight,” he told her, reaching to grab his bag off the floor near her nightstand. “I’m gonna go to Abernathy’s to get something.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “You’ll be late to Crane’s.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back soon,” He didn’t listen to her protests as he climbed back out the window. Then he waved goodbye to Prim as he hopped back on his bike and pedaled quickly toward the town square.

Haymitch Abernathy was a crotchety old pharmacist who ran the town’s only drugstore before Walgreens moved in. Peeta felt bad for him, knowing firsthand how hard it was for a small business to go up against the big chains. He still missed his family’s bakery, and it’d been well over a year since they closed. Now his mom was a cashier at the very supercenter that put them out business while his dad worked at the same plastics factory where Peeta unloaded trucks. His parents were both miserable now, so he hoped Haymitch would be able to pull through and avoid their fate.

“Good afternoon, sir,” he greeted him happily once inside. The man nodded hello as Peeta propped his elbow on the counter and leaned in conspiringly. “What do you have for…girl pains?” he whispered.

“Vodka. But you’re too young for that.”

“No,” Peeta said with a confused head shake. “I mean, you know, menstrual pains.”

“Boy, if you’ve got menstrual pains, I’m calling the newspapers.”

“Not for me,” he huffed. “They’re for a friend.”

“Ah,” Haymitch said with a knowing smile. “That little dark-haired girl you’re always running around with? Check aisle three, near the Tylenol. There’s some Pamprin and Midol around there.”

He thanked the man and then went in search of the medicine. There were multiple pain relievers, and it took a few minutes to find the shelf he needed. He looked back and forth between the two Haymitch mentioned, not sure which one would be best. He picked the Midol because it cost 30 cents more, then took it back to the checkout lane. Haymitch was waiting for him with a package of maxi pads and a chocolate bar. “Give these to her, too,” Haymitch said, taking the ten from Peeta for
the medicine. “On the house.”

“Wow, thanks.”

“You know, it takes a real man to come out here to get things like this for his girl. Some guys two or three times your age won’t do it.”

Peeta pocketed the change and took the bag from him. “She’s not really my girl, sir.”

“Ah, I see. Well, have a good one, Peeta.”

“Thanks, Mr. Abernathy. You too.”

He had to be at the factory soon, so he hurried back over to her house to drop everything off, pedaling hard to make it there in record time. The ride left him winded, and he rolled his shoulders in exhaustion as he knocked his kickstand down to park his bike in their front yard. Prim must’ve been inside, and Mr. Everdeen wasn’t back from work yet, so he went back around to Katniss’s window, which was open in waiting. He crawled through and sat down next to her on the bed, gently jostling her shoulder so she’d roll over to face him.

“Thanks,” she said, taking the bag and diverting her eyes. She burrowed her head under her pillow with a groan, and he wasn’t sure if it was from pain or embarrassment or both.

He got back up to leave, telling her he’d see her later. He hated that she was so miserable, and he hoped the pills worked so she didn’t have to feel like this every month from now on.

“Peeta?” she called out as he had one leg thrown over the ledge. She spilled the bag out on her bedspread and picked up the chocolate bar. “Thanks for everything,” she said sincerely.

“Any time,” he told her.

Her face twisted in displeasure. “Yeah right,” she scoffed.

He pulled his leg back in and brought both feet to the ground. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh c’mon Peeta, everything’s going to be different now and you know it.”

“What’s got to be different?” he asked with confusion.

She shook her head. “We’re not going to be friends anymore.”

He scrutinized her for a long moment, wondering where she got a crazy idea like that. “We’ll always be friends. As long as you want me to be your friend, I will be.” Katniss would have to be the one to walk away, probably when she realized how much better she was than him. He’d never be the one to stop being her friend first.

“You’ll start hanging out with the guys more and pretty soon you’ll forget about me. We’re getting older, Peeta. That’s how it goes.”

“You think I could forget about you?”

“Things change,” she shrugged. “It already started. Summer’s over and we’re at a new school…”

The clock was ticking, and he really had to be at the factory soon. As much as he’d like to indulge
her here, he had to go. “We will always be friends and I’ll never forget you. I promise.” He turned back toward the window, but she grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around to face her again. “I’m sorry, but I really gotta lea-“

Her mouth was pressed against his, his eyes wide open and hers tightly screwed shut. Her lips were warm but dry, and that’s the only conscious thought he had before she pulled back and it was over.

“Maybe you won’t forget that, at least.” He stared back at her in stunned silence until she scurried to her bed, where she curled up on her side, facing away from him.

‘Hormones,’ he thought to himself, nearly stumbling out of the window in his daze. But he was grinning by the time he was back on his bike, and he felt like a bird in flight the whole ride to Crane’s. Every heavy box he lifted there was light as a feather.

Yes, he was definitely never going to forget that.

It does not envy...

“Gale Hawthorne is definitely the cutest,” Delly Cartwright said with a giggle, and the other girls standing around her locker agreed.

“He’s so tall and handsome,” one sighed.

“I can’t believe he’s only sixteen,” another added. “He should be a movie star.”

Peeta didn’t want to hear any of this, but his locker was right next to Delly’s and he had to get the books for his afternoon classes. He couldn’t remember which short novel they were starting today in English, and as he debated between three on the top shelf, the girls droned on and on about Gale the Great.

Gale Hawthorne, the best looking guy in the school. Gale Hawthorne, star student who favored academic clubs over athletics.

Gale Hawthorne, Katniss’s other best friend.

Their fathers worked together in the mines, and apparently they met at a Christmas party when she was 12. Katniss never mentioned him before because he was two years older and they never saw each other. But now they were all at the same high school, and Gale Hawthorne, most awesome guy in the world, always made it a point to acknowledge Katniss whenever he noticed her. And he seemed to notice her a lot.

The bell was about to ring, so Peeta grabbed all three of the paperbacks and slammed his locker shut. The girls were still deep in conversation as he started toward the stairwell, and he spun away from the Unofficial Gale Hawthorne Fanclub with an annoyed eye roll.

On his way to class, he just happened to look up right as Katniss was walking into her advanced level pre-calc course. He raised his hand to wave, but her head was turned the other way. Walking in the opposite direction and already garnering her full attention was none other than Gale Hawthorne.
Peeta had a rocky start to his high school career. He passed the placement tests to get on the normal track for mathematics, but he struggled with the other subjects, and it was embarrassing to be in the ‘slow’ English class or to get extra time for tests in Physical Science.

He didn’t make varsity as a freshman on the wrestling team, either, and that was something both his brothers managed. His mother laughed when she found out. “Can’t say I’m surprised,” she told him. He hadn’t cared much before that comment, but now he wished he made it just so she wouldn’t have another example to use against him.

Sometimes when things were really getting him down, he’d ride his bike to the Everdeens and ask Katniss if she wanted to do their homework together. They weren’t seeing each other as much these days—more his doing than hers—but there were times when he couldn’t stay away.

Working on their homework meant Katniss breezing through her complicated problem sets while Peeta struggled with basic questions about American history. She told him once that he should go to the guidance counselor about his reading level. “You’re really smart,” she insisted. “If you got some extra help, you’d catch right up.” He wasn’t so sure about that, and he knew Katniss wouldn’t understand what was so hard for him. She didn’t have any struggles in school, and she was even on the engineering track with her course load.

Gale Hawthorne was, too.

They studied at the kitchen table, Prim beside them, until Mr. Everdeen was home from work. Mr. Everdeen was one of Peeta’s favorite people in the world. Covered in coal dust and dead tired after his shift, he still managed to be in a fantastic mood when he walked in the house and saw his girls.

“Peeta!” he exclaimed, like he just won the lottery. “Long time, no see. Where’ve you been, buddy?”

“Around,” he replied with a stupid grin, since no one ever seemed this happy to see him.

“You need to stop by more,” he said. “Help me in my battle against a houseful of women.”

There was no battle here, Peeta knew. Mr. Everdeen adored his wife and daughters, but everyone seemed conditioned to make old jokes like that, as if the world was as simple as X and Y.

Peeta also knew he wouldn’t be dropping in anymore than he normally did. It was his belief that it was better to stay away and be missed than to stick around and become a burden. It’d just about kill him if Mr. Everdeen ever walked in and sighed something along the lines of, “Oh, you’re here again?”

After homework was done and put away, Mr. Everdeen put dinner on and insisted Peeta stay. They all sat around the table, eating salad and discussing their day as lasagna cooked in the oven. Mr. Everdeen brought up an upcoming hunting trip he’d be taking with Katniss. “You should come too, Peeta,” he said.

Katniss never mentioned it to him before, probably knowing it wasn’t really his thing. “Thanks, Mr. Everdeen, but I’m not very outdoorsy.”

“It’ll be fun,” he insisted. “We’re going with my friend David and his son Gale.”

Oh.
“Come with us,” Katniss said. “You can make s’mores for everyone.” She flashed a rare smile, one that reminded him that she really was quite fond of him, even if she never admitted it out loud.

“Okay,” he agreed.

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He was not a hunter. Nothing about it appealed to him. Yes, he liked to admire the majestic animals in their natural habitat. Large stags grazing, small does tracking behind them. It was a picture to paint, not a scene to disrupt by shooting an arrow in their hearts.

Mr. Everdeen and Mr. Hawthorne grew up having to hunt, but they developed a love for it, something each passed on to their oldest child. But Peeta wasn’t really interested in participating, and even if he wanted to, he’d be a lousy shot. He could barely make it through the woods without alerting every ear within a mile of his presence. As he stepped on another branch, snapping it with a loud crack, four heads turned in his direction to glare at him. He shrugged helplessly, promising to be quieter so as not to scare off all the game.

Before the sun set, they found a clearing and set up camp. They hadn’t gotten any deer yet, so they went fishing at a lake Mr. Everdeen discovered, where they caught several trout to lug back. Mr. Everdeen and Mr. Hawthorne cleaned the fish while the kids were in charge of building a fire. Gale’s matches were wet from fishing, so Peeta offered him his flint that he’d brought along. Peeta had a short but successful career as a boy scout back in early elementary school, and flint helped him earn his first badge.

“I wanted to join the Army since 9/11, but my parents talked me out of it. Now think I’m going to go into petroleum engineering,” Gale said as he worked, directing his words toward Katniss.

“Why?”

Gale shrugged as he struck the flint against the metal. “Money’s really good, and there’s a lot of prospects.”

“I guess,” she said, and Peeta recognized that as her default disinterested response.

Gale was getting nowhere, and it’s because he was getting impatient. Peeta asked to take over, and he earned a dirty look before the older boy acquiesced and returned the flint.

The trick was that there was no trick, it just couldn’t be rushed. It took time to find just the right angle with just the right amount of force to strike the stone against the steel, and the sparks would come eventually. He had a nice nest of tinder waiting once it was ignited, and that was another trick that wasn’t really a trick at all. If there wasn’t a proper foundation to retain a captured spark, it’d fizzle out quickly.

“Nice job,” Gale said after Peeta coaxed a small flame into a blaze. “Guess you’re not so useless after all.”

His light-hearted tone took a lot of the sting out of those words. Peeta even cracked a smile, joking, “Yeah, if I weren’t here, you’d be eating redneck sushi for sure.”

Gale laughed as Katniss studied their interaction, her expression changing from curiosity to annoyance, which struck him as odd since he thought she’d be happy they got along.

“He’s not useless,” she corrected with a glare. But Peeta hadn’t been offended; he was a pretty good
judge of when people were trying to be mean and when they were really just playing around. Gale didn’t seem like a bad guy.

“I know that, Catnip. Calm down.”

“I’m going for a walk,” she announced, standing up. “Cook your own damn fish.”

“What’s your problem now?” Gale called out as she walked away. She never answered before disappearing somewhere into the forest. Peeta frowned as he searched for some sign of her throughout the network of trees, but she was quick and light on her feet and he found none.

He dusted off his dirty palms against the top of his jean-clad thighs. “I’m gonna go check up on her.”

“Don’t go getting lost now,” Gale said, and that one was a slight dig at his camping skills.

“Don’t worry about me,” Peeta replied. “Can you keep the fire going?” He could do this, too.

Gale nodded as he threw another small log in, and Peeta took off in the direction he last saw Katniss. He figured she was going back to the lake, and when he finally cleared the woods and spotted the old dock, he saw she was right.

She was staring out over the water, her back toward him and her legs dangling over the side. “You okay?” he asked as he sat next to her.

Her answer was a clipped, “I’m fine,” which triggered a loud sigh on his part.

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she insisted as she inched further away from him.

“Katniss, if something’s bothering you, just tell me so we can fix it. I don’t like playing these games.”

“It’s not a game.”

“Okay, well, you don’t seem fine. So when you’re acting not fine but you say you’re fine, I don’t know what to believe.”

Her jaw was clenched tight, a sure sign of mounting agitation. “I’m fine. Just a little annoyed.”

“Why’re you annoyed?”

“Because you and Gale are annoying. Can you leave me alone now?”

She turned away from him and back toward the water, and his eyes narrowed as he tried to figure out what it was about them that got her in such a bad mood. Then it dawned on him, and he hated the answer. Jealousy. She was jealous that he and Gale were getting along. She probably wanted the older boy all to herself without Peeta hanging around.

“Can I remind you that you invited me here?” he snapped back. “If you wanted to be alone with Gale, you coulda just told me that.”

“Alone with Gale?” she parroted back, eyeing him like he was crazy. “I invited you because I never see you anymore. The days you could stop by after school, you stay late in the art studio with Portia, and on weekends you’re with the guys. Now you’re here and you’d rather spend the time with Gale even though he insulted you and-”
“Wait, what?” he cut her off. “That’s what you think?”

“What else am I supposed to think?”

He shook his head. “Katniss, if I was around all the time, you’d just realize you don’t want me around all the time.”

“Stop that! Stop talking about yourself like that. And stop laughing when someone else does it, too. It’s not funny and it’s not true.”

She always said stuff like this. The girl regularly referred to his mother as a witch and was forever trying to get him to stand up for himself. But it was easier to say it than to do it.

“I miss you,” she confessed with a shrug. “And you don’t miss me at all.”

“Of course I do,” he said softly. He could spend every moment of the rest of his life right next to her and never get tired of it, but it didn’t once occur to him that she might want time with him, too. It always felt like too much to hope for. “You really want me to start coming around more?” he asked.

“Not if you really don’t want to,” she told him.

“I want to,” he said quickly. Her features were finally starting to relax, and she kicked her feet in the water as she looked out over the lake again. He bumped his shoulder roughly with hers, and she bumped back, harder. “Hey!” he laughed. “Don’t knock me into the water. I can’t swim.”

“You can’t swim?”

He grinned. “Don’t tell Gale.”

“Don’t worry about Gale,” she said, standing and offering her hand to help him up. A part of him didn’t want to let go of it as they walked back to the camp, but she disengaged first, hooking her thumbs into the front pockets of her jeans.

He wondered what Gale would think if he saw them hand-in-hand. The trip made Peeta realize there wasn’t anything but friendship between the two now. While Katniss’s feelings were always a murky read, it seemed pretty obvious that Gale still thought of her as a kid, though he cared a great deal for her. Peeta wondered when those feelings would evolve into something else. It felt like it was only a matter of time.

“Maybe next summer, we can come back here with my dad,” she said on the way back. “We can teach you how to swim.”

“Okay,” he agreed.

“But we’re not going to wait until next summer to hang out again, right?”

He smiled as she darted ahead of him. “You’re subtle.”

She spun around, coming to rest against the side of a thick tree trunk. “You’re not,” she said with a put-upon sigh. “Everyone knows why you spend so much time with Ms. Portia.”

“Everyone knows I like to paint?” he replied with faux shock.

She rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows you’ve got a crush on her.”
Now the shock wasn’t so fake. “Wh-what?”

“You do, don’t you?”

She was staring him down so hard that he was sure she could see every errant, deviant thought he ever had about any other girl or woman he ever saw. If he hadn’t been so intensely embarrassed in that moment, he would have stopped to wonder why she seemed to care so much.

“She’s Portia is nearly 30-years-old. And married. A crush is irrelevant.”

“So the answer’s yes.”

“I didn’t say that. But it doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Well don’t come around on my account,” she replied haughtily. “Wouldn’t want to stand in the way of true love.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t either,” he said, deciding to turn the tables. “I’ll make sure to leave you alone with Gale later.”

It was said partly to shut her up and partly to gauge her reaction. But she only scowled in response, which was so typical that he didn’t know what to make of it. “You know we’re not like that.”

“I do?”

“Don’t be a jerk, Peeta.”

“I’m not. The idea of me and Ms. Portia is crazy. The idea of you and Gale isn’t.” He really did know there wasn’t anything more than friendship between them. Yet. But they were so incredibly similar to each other, right down to their dark good looks, that the possibility was far from far-fetched.

“What do you care?” she asked softly.

His eyes roamed her face, not sure what he was searching for. It’d been nearly two years since that first kiss by her bedroom window, and there hadn’t been any more since.

She initiated that one. This time, it felt like his turn.

She opened her mouth to say something, probably to ask why he was looking at her that way, but he stopped the words with a kiss, gently cradling her head in his hands as he pressed her back against the tree. This was softer than that first one, but it happened just as quickly, his mouth melding with hers in a way that felt innately right. He held his breath; hers was a hot tickle against the Cupid’s bow of his lip. Her skin was incredibly soft against his fingertips, and he could feel her racing pulse against the palm of his hand. He released her as he pulled away and slowly opened his eyes, and hers were still shut, her lips slightly puckered.

Maybe he did have a silly crush on Ms. Portia, but Katniss would always be the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen.

“I care,” he whispered.
She didn’t really respond, and after a beat of silence, she turned back in the direction of the camp and waited for him to follow alongside her. They were quiet for the rest of the short walk, and when they returned, the fish were all cleaned and cooked and ready to be eaten. After dinner, Peeta got started on toasting marshmallows for the s’mores.

Katniss sat next to him, closer than she normally did, and claimed the first one. The gooey marshmallow was all over her face after the first bite. “You look like a rabid dog,” he teased, tugging her braid.

He glanced up to find Gale studying them, something unmistakable in his expression.

So it was already starting…

*It does not boast…*

“And her tits? Man, you think they look good under her clothes, but you have no idea. They’re huge. They fill up my whole hand.”

As usual, Peeta was only half-listening to whatever Cato was going on about in the locker room. He was more focused on the laces of his wrestling shoes, hunching over to finish up the runner’s knot with a double loop. Cato hated to be ignored, so he kicked out Peeta’s propped up foot and then snapped back a strap on his singlet. He laughed loudly as Peeta glared at him before bringing his foot back up.

Unlike his lackey Marvel, Peeta didn’t ask for more details or express his envy over Cato’s prowess. That seemed to only make Cato try harder. The stories were always a little more explicit- and that much less believable- whenever Peeta was around.

Cato continued to wax poetic about Glimmer Roberts’ nipples while Peeta tried to get into the wrestling mindset. “Nervous about going up against Bruno?” Thresh asked him as they walked out to the gym a few minutes later.

“But really,” Peeta shrugged. He didn’t usually get nervous, especially about wrestling. Sure it was the first meet of the season, and yes he was constantly being compared to his brother- a senior this year and a state champion the year before- but this was supposed to be fun and he was determined to keep it that way.

But he faltered the moment he stepped out into the gymnasium and onto the mat. While Bruno looked massive, despite being in Peeta’s weight class, it wasn’t the size of his opponent that intimidated him. It was the sight of Katniss in the stands, her long hair loose, wearing a pair of reading glasses that always drove him crazy. She had a book in hand as she looked down across the floor, searching for Peeta among the large group of wrestlers waiting along the bleachers.

It was only a couple months into their junior year but she was so busy with her AP classes he was sure she wouldn’t have time to come to any of his meets. Yet there she was, waving shyly as soon as she spotted him in the crowd.
He waved back as his stomach bottomed out. Bruno was watching him now, too, and Peeta’s eyes darted anxiously from one to the other while everyone lined up.

Katniss shut her book and crossed her arms over her knees, a sure sign that he had her full attention now. He drew a deep breath as their names were called, and then he shook Bruno’s hand with as much force as he could manage before the first whistle.

Bruno was the top ranked wrestler in the county, known best for his killer single leg takedown. That meant Peeta had to play defense immediately, but he also knew exactly what was coming, so he drove his legs back as far as possible, landing on top of Bruno with an early opportunity to flatten him out. His go-to move was the half nelson, and as soon as he had Bruno in the correct position to maneuver him the way he needed to, he slipped his arm under Bruno’s armpit to wrap his hand around the back of his neck.

It was all happening fast, but the need to impress Katniss with a quick win made him formidable. He went for the pin as soon as he grabbed Bruno’s wrist. The boy bucked back with all his strength, desperate to break the hold, but he wasn’t getting out of Peeta’s grasp. He was laid out in seconds, the victory whistle blown shortly after.

Usually wrestling wasn’t a sport that garnered much attention in their small West Virginian town, where the large crowds and loud cheers were reserved for the basketball and football games. But the whoops and applause at Peeta’s flawless takedown made him feel like the star quarterback. He helped Bruno back up as Cato bounded over to him, his hand poised for a high-five. “That,” he said with a feral grin, “was awesome. You killed him.”

Bruno stalked off, and Peeta knew he’d pay if they ever met on the mat again. He ignored Cato’s outstretched hand and kept his eyes on Katniss until he had to turn around to sit on the bleachers. Would she stay to talk to him after? he wondered. Was she proud of him?

The rest of the competition was a sufficient distraction, with the other wrestlers battling it out for multiple periods, with a lot of gritty slams and hits passing the time. Bruno was sitting on the opposite side of the gym, his head down through every match.

It was turning out to be a crazy day. Bruno’s head was so messed up by his quick loss to Peeta that he flubbed his other matches. Peeta wrestled two more opponents, both in lighter weight classes, and they seemed as small as kindergartners as he brought them down.

He never looked back up into the stands because he didn’t know if it would be better or worse if he saw that Katniss left after his first match with Bruno. He powered through the rest of the meet by convincing himself she was there and paying close attention to him. If that wasn’t the case, he’d deal with those feelings later. Until then, he watched his teammates in their matches. His brother, the team captain, was also undefeated.

At the end, their high school was the winner in both varsity and JV, and Cato was still acting bloodthirsty as he went around congratulating or chiding the other wrestlers. Peeta finally turned around, and an uncontrollable smile spread across his face at the sight of Katniss.

He waved her over, and she grabbed up her stuff and met him by the steps. “You stayed the whole time?” he asked in awe.

“It wasn’t all that bad.”

“You didn’t have to stay. I mean, thank you. I’m glad you did. But you didn’t have to-"
“Peeta!” Cato called. He was heading in their direction, one arm draped over Glimmer’s shoulders while the other was up in the air again. He was damn insistent on a high-five, so Peeta slapped his palm half-heartedly to shut him up. Glimmer was looking particularly bored that evening and she didn’t return his hello.

“I’m going to go wait in the car,” she said. She turned to Cato and sneered at the sweat dripping down his brow. “Hurry up in the shower, k?”

Ignoring Katniss completely, Cato leered as Glimmer walked away. “She likes it when I’m squeaky clean,” Cato said to Peeta when she was out of hearing distance. He raised his hand to his mouth, his tongue pressed into his cheek to mime an act Peeta had to hear about every time they were in the locker room.

Katniss saw it, too, and to Peeta’s complete surprise, seemed to know what he was referring to. Her look transformed into disgust, and she crossed her arms in front of her chest as she stared him down. “Cato, there isn’t enough soap in the world for you.”

They shared a look of mutual hate as Cato backed away. “If you want to come out tonight to celebrate, Glim’s got some hot friends,” he said to Peeta.

“I’ll pass.”

“It’s your limp dick,” he said with a shrug. He met up with Marvel and immediately forgot about them, much to Peeta’s relief.

“How can you hang out with morons like that?”

“They’re on the team,” he answered simply. “If you joined, I could drop them completely and only hang out with you.”

“Yeah, that’ll happen.”

“I could teach you all my moves.”

“Tempting, but I don’t think I’d get very far.”

“I don’t know,” Peeta said slowly, considering it. “I’m sure you could flatten a few guys with your scowl alone. Yes, that one right there. That’s a surefire takedown. Thank you for demonstrating.”

She was fighting it, but her mouth quirked up into a smile. “Peeta?” she asked, averting her gaze. “If you’re sure you don’t want to hang out with Cato and Glimmer’s hot friends...want to come over tonight?”

“Yeah, definitely. You sure you don’t have too much work to do?”

She slung her bag over her shoulder and hopped off the bleacher. “I’m sure.”

As she was walking away, she called out to him to stop by after 9, which seemed late, and to use the window, which seemed odd.

He showered and changed in record time, then he met up with his brother outside the school to drive home, where he raced to finish any chore imaginable to appease his parents. They went to bed at quarter to nine, and he caught a ride to Katniss’s from Rye, who was on his way out to see his girlfriend.
The house looked dark when he was dropped off at the curb, and he went straight to her bedroom window, just like she asked. He tapped against the pane of glass three times and waited. It was a cool night in early October, and he was glad he wore a button up over his t-shirt. Scattered leaves rolled through the back yard with the gusts of wind, and he watched them race as he waited patiently for her to answer. Her bedroom was pitch black, and he wondered what was going on, if she was even home. He knocked again more incessantly, and then he nearly fell backwards as the window was pushed up with an unmistakable force.

She saved him by grabbing the front of his shirt and hauling him inside, but before he could express his gratitude, her lips were on his in a feverish kiss. He stumbled back against the wall, his hands gripping the tops of her arms as he tried to gain his footing. Her bare skin felt like silk against his palms, which he slid down to the small of her back. It was a mixture of disappointment and relief to feel the soft cotton of her tank top bunched in his fists.

“Katniss,” he said, breaking the kiss and struggling to see her in the darkened room. The only hint of light was from the streetlamp outside, so his sight was limited to the curved shadows against her face as she stepped away from him. “What’s going on?”

“You don’t want to?” she panted.

He reached for her to pull her into another kiss, because of course he wanted to.

They didn’t do this near often enough, in his opinion. The last time they were pressed up against each other like this was more than a year ago, when he insisted they watch the series premiere of *Lost* together in her finished basement. She had no interest in it and kept wandering in and out of the room. Then something caught her attention and she sat next to him on the overstuffed couch, just as riveted as he was but even more confused since she missed half of the show. He teased her about it, refusing to answer her millions of questions, and then the playful pushing turned into a hot makeout session as soon as she straddled him. The only thing that stopped them was Prim jogging down the stairs with another bowl of popcorn.

They hadn’t been quite that intimate since. They kissed sometimes and then that was it. They never talked about why they did it or what it meant. There was never a guarantee they would or would not do it again.

He always hoped they do it again, though. Again and again, if he had his way. Tonight, she seemed more pliable than in the past, though she usually initiated those kisses, too. But there was a different urgency this time, and it didn’t really hit him that she was super into it until he realized she was literally attempting to climb him.

He effortlessly lifted her up to speed it along, and they both made the same kind of strangled sound at the same time, but for different reasons. She was content to finally be where she wanted, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. He was trying to process that she was in her underwear. No shorts, no pajama bottoms, just a thin pair of underwear. He leaned his back against the wall, still holding her up and never breaking the kiss.

“Katniss?” he asked tentatively when they finally came up for air. “This doesn’t have anything to do with what Cato said earlier, right?” He set her back down, his arm still wrapped around her waist.

“Why’d you have to bring him up?” she asked.

She led him to the bed, and he brushed her hair off her shoulder and dropped several soft kisses along her clavicle as they sat down. If he stretched out now and brought his feet up, it’d be the first time they made out on her bed.
He did just that, and when they were fully horizontal, he rephrased the question. “Is this because of what Cato said?” Her hair tickled against his chin as she shook her head, and she closed in to capture another kiss. “What’s going on then?” If she wasn’t trying to prove something, or maybe even a little jealous of the idea of Peeta with any of those hot friends, then he didn’t understand why she was so aggressive tonight.

“I just liked watching you wrestle,” she quietly admitted. “It made me want to do this.” She kissed him again, and he sighed happily against her mouth as his head dropped onto her pillow.

“Feel free to do that any time you want,” he said. “You’ve got a lifelong pass.”

“Maybe I should join wrestling,” she said, climbing on top of him. She took his hands and lifted them above his head, holding them there. “See, I’ve already got you pinned.”

“Joke’s on you, I want to be pinned.” He flipped them over, smiling down at her as she struggled to get out from underneath him. “On second thought, you should leave the wrestling to me. You’re not very big.”

She was still trying to break his hold on her without any luck. “But I’m scary.”

“No doubt about that,” he laughed, rolling them over.

She stretched out alongside him, running her hands over the front of his shirt as her mouth found his again in the dark. She urged him to sit up, slipping the button up off his shoulders and throwing it somewhere on the floor. He was content to stay like that forever until she asked a few minutes later for him to take off the t-shirt, too.

This was uncharted territory, her unabashed exploration of his bare skin. As her fingertips gently trailed along his rib cage, he tried to enjoy it, but all he could wonder about was his turn. When would he be able to peel off her clothes and feel her skin? How would he be able to see all of her in the dark?

He asked for her to turn on her bedside lamp, and it took several sweet kisses to get her to agree. The vision of her bathed in the soft glow of light, with her mussed hair and swollen lips, was beyond anything his active imagination could ever conjure. It was a moment he wanted to remember forever.

Her parents and Prim were out of town, she mumbled against his mouth. They wouldn’t be home for a few hours. Did he want to? You know.

He reached up to gently cup her through her shirt, and there wasn’t enough blood around his brain to think about much beyond how desperate her was to see her naked. But she wasn’t as eager when it came to removing her own clothes. He hesitated in slipping the straps off her shoulders, and when she didn’t protest, he inched the tank top down until the neckline skimmed her nipples to dip right below her breasts.

He’d only seen one other girl topless before: Johanna Mason, during an end-of-year summer party at one of his friend’s house. She had decided to skinny dip, and after a few laps in the pool, emerged from the water and sauntered over to them to carry on an entire conversation with Peeta while he tried very hard to maintain eye contact. He thought he’d done a pretty good job of it, his eyes darting down only a few dozen times, but Katniss fumed next to him.

“You’re not saying anything,” she complained, hurrying to pull the straps back up.

“Wh-what?” he stuttered. How did she expect him to form sentences now? He wondered if a part of her worried he was comparing her to Johanna. He hadn’t been. Well, not really. When it came to
Katniss, there were never any comparisons.

The bright fluorescent light he was so thankful for a few minutes ago was now giving him a headache. This was all happening too quickly, he realized. He didn’t want this to be a quickie on her twin-sized bed while her family was at the movies. Peeta was a romantic. He wanted to take her out on dates. He wanted things to be “official”– whatever that meant. He wanted to be able to tell her he loved her first without worrying that she’d wonder why he said it and then ignore him for weeks at a time.

He wanted to wait, and nothing he ever heard in the locker room made him feel like that was normal.

“Can we slow down?” he asked, and to his relief, she agreed. She settled next to him, her nipples hard beneath the thin cotton. They brushed against his chest as she curled around him, and he stifled a groan.

“You can touch me, if you want,” she said, and he could tell she was losing a lot of her courage with every second of hesitancy.

The absence of pressure worked to their benefit, though. It felt better now, less hurried, when he touched her. He slipped the straps off her shoulders and explored her with featherlight caresses, his eyes drifting from her flushed skin to her face. He tried to gauge her reaction with every move. As his thumb brushed over her nipple, she moaned so softly that he wasn’t sure if he imagined it or not.

He was gaining back some confidence just as her outstretched hand settled over the front of his jeans. She was rubbing the heel of her palm back and forth over him, and he didn’t understand how it could feel so incredibly good, other than to attribute it all to her. Katniss was touching him, and unless she sprouted wings and mandibles like a praying mantis, literally anything she did to him would feel incredible. He’d probably have to fumble for hours between her legs before earning so much as a sigh. It wasn’t really fair to her.

The rhythmic movements stopped, and he opened his eyes to find her worrying her bottom lip. “You’re not going to tell anyone, right?”

“About this? Us?”

“Yeah,” she clarified. “I mean, you won’t brag about this to Cato and the others.”

“You really think I’d do that?”

“No,” she said seriously. “I don’t know, I just wanted to hear you promise you won’t.”

“I won’t. I promise,” he said, pulling her down for another soft kiss. “What happens between us...that’s ours.”

Their noses bumped as she rested her forehead against his, and then her hand was snaking back down his body to stop at his zipper.

“You know, it’s okay if you want to see me naked,” he said teasingly as she hesitated. “I don’t mind.”

She laughed, her hand drifting closer to the button of his jeans. “Yeah, I bet you don’t.”

They were kissing again, getting slightly lost in the perfect way their mouths fit together, when the soft hum of an engine filled the otherwise quiet room. There was a flash from the headlights outside as the car pulled into the driveway, and they both froze, panicked.
“You have to go!” she said, jumping off the bed and grabbing up her pajamas. She threw his shirts at him before tugging on her sweatpants. “Peeta! Hurry up!”

She was pushing him toward the window, muttering apologies and obscenities as he pulled the t-shirt over his head. He was in a complete stupor as he slipped outside, and she planted a quick kiss on his cheek before closing the window. What was even happening? he wondered. He was in her warm bed only seconds ago. He waited along the side of the house for the other Everdeens to get into their home, then he darted out front and jogged all the way back to the other side of town, terrified but still turned-on.

Yes, it was definitely a day of mixed emotions.

xxXxx

A couple months later, in the locker room before another match, Cato was uncharacteristically quiet. Peeta was enjoying the silence for once, but Marvel was unnerved by it, and seemed to be baiting him into saying anything just for the sake of talking.

“Glimmer’s pregnant.”

Every guy on the team seemed to freeze when he said. Marvel leaned against his locker, slack-jawed in shock. “Are you serious?”

“Why the fuck would I joke about something like this?” Cato yelled.

Their parents were making them keep it, he said. She was already telling her friends, so the whole town would know by the end of the day, he said. The baby was due in September, right at the start of senior year, he said.

His life was over, he said.

The whole room was silent as he talked, with some of the other guys shuffling out awkwardly to avoid his breakdown. Marvel tried to cheer him up by saying that at least now he had absolute proof he and Glimmer did it, and Peeta had to intervene before Cato decked him.

“Hey, if you need anything, let me know,” he offered before making his own escape. In the gym, Peeta pulled aside the coach to explain what was happening. He thought for sure Cato would have to forfeit, but the guy was out on the floor for weigh-ins, insisting he needed to compete that day.

Just before the first whistle, he found Katniss in the stands, there to support him again. He waved hello before lining up, and her returning wave was just as glum, so he was pretty sure she’d heard the news already, too.

Since it happened, hardly a moment went by without him thinking about that night in her room. But now, instead of a potpourri of feelings, he could only manage one.

Relief.

It is not proud...
He wasn’t sure how he got there, outside her bedroom window. Blood was smeared across his entire face, and a thick stream of it seeped from a cut near his ear and another under his eye. His head ached, his arm throbbed. The pain, at times, felt unbearable. But he still made it to her.

He had to see her one final time, he decided. It was stupid and it was selfish, but it was the only gift he’d allow himself. With $500 in his pocket and a plan that didn’t amount to much besides escape, he should have gone in the other direction. But he couldn’t leave without saying goodbye to her first.

He bumped against the window, clumsily trying to raise it with one hand. Peeta didn’t know what he’d say when he saw her, but he hoped he would finally find the courage to tell her that he loved her. That he always had, and that he always would.

He leaned against the ledge, panting in exertion as he cradled his arm gently against his chest. It was late and she was asleep inside. He could see her, just barely, as she lay curled in her bed. If he was a better man, he’d leave now instead of ruining her night. He never belonged here in this picturesque home filled with love and happiness. Drops of his blood fell onto the windowsill, staining it, and he pressed his forehead against the glass before pushing off and stumbling backwards.

He slumped against the siding, trying so hard not to get blood on that, too. It felt like he couldn’t catch his breath, like he just ran for miles. He didn’t remember how he got here, and he couldn’t remember what he did to set off his mother tonight.

He never saw her like that before. Completely unhinged. Filled with so much hatred that he was surprised she didn’t manage to kill him. What had she hit him with? He couldn’t remember that, either.

“Peeta?”

Katniss must have heard him lumbering outside her window like a zombie. She was holding her hand out, asking him what he was doing. Her words were getting louder, more frantic. “Peeta? What’s wrong? Peeta?”

He inched close enough to her to grab her hand, and she helped him climb into her room. He could barely decipher all of her questions, but she got him on the bed and flipped on one of her lights. Katniss was crying. It sobered him up immediately, the sight of her in distress. “Did she do this to you?” she asked.

“It’s not as bad as it looks.”

“Oh my god, Peeta, what did she do?”

“Hey, hey,” he said, his eyes drifting shut as he reached for her. “I’ll be okay. I just wanted to see you.” His mind tried to formulate some kind of grand goodbye speech, but there weren’t any words in any language to adequately convey what she meant to him. Her friendship sustained him through the years. She was his whole world.

“I’m going to clean you up,” she told him, ignoring whatever he was incoherently rambling about. She brushed a bloodied lock of hair off his forehead and trailed her fingers down the side of his face. “It’s going to be okay. Everything will be okay.”

He wrapped himself up in those words, allowing himself to believe it. She left and he closed his eyes
again.

He didn’t hear her parents rushing into the room, but he saw the overhead light turn on, and there they were, crouching in front of him, just as frantic as Katniss had been. She was standing in the doorway, looking small and meek as she let her parents take over. He reared back like a frightened horse, the sting of her betrayal the worst pain of all.

“Peeta. Look at me. Can you see me?” Mrs. Everdeen was treating him like one of her patients, and he half-heartedly pushed her hands away. He was so embarrassed. He shouldn’t have come here.

“It’s gonna be okay, Peeta,” Mr. Everdeen was saying. He was clapping him on the shoulder, probably just trying to keep him upright. “Can you tell us what happened?”

Now he was crying in front of them. He tried so hard not to cry, but it broke out as a sob, and then he doubled over in pain. He was mortified. For the Everdeens to see him like this was one of his worst nightmares.

Katniss was still standing next to the door, her arms wrapped around herself as she cried, too. But her parents were staying calm as they continued to ask questions he couldn’t answer.

Mrs. Everdeen’s light touch as she traced the injuries on his face felt cool and soothing, despite how much he resisted them. “We’re going to go to the hospital now, Peeta,” she said, and his eyes popped back open.

“I’m okay,” he insisted. “Really, it’s okay. Please don’t take me to the hospital.”

“We have to, Peeta,” she told him softly. “I need to make sure you’re okay.”

“I am,” he swore. “Please. I’m just tired, is all. I’m so tired.”

The fact that he had nowhere to go now hit him, and he had to fight off another round of tears. He didn’t want to go to the hospital, but if they tried to take him back to his parents’ right now, he wasn’t sure what would happen.

“You’re not going back, Peeta,” her father promised, and it made him realize he was muttering it over and over again. Please don’t take me back there. Please don’t take me back there.

“Shh, John, not now,” his wife said as she probed Peeta’s arm. He winced, pulling it away, and she released him.

“Well, he’s not,” Mr. Everdeen snapped. “You’re going to stay here with us.”

“I don’t think anything’s broken,” Mrs. Everdeen announced. “We can go to the hospital in the morning, if you’d rather do that.”

Other than the searing pain from his injuries, he felt completely numb. “Okay.”

“I’m going to clean some of your cuts while John makes up the bed for you downstairs. Now, this is going to sting some,” she warned, coating iodine onto a cotton ball. He winced as she dabbed at a jagged cut near his hairline, and then she cleaned the larger slash near his right ear. There was another cut underneath his eye, which was starting to swell shut. Peeta kept his head down, refusing to look at Katniss.

After he was cleaned up, he allowed Mrs. Everdeen to lead him into the kitchen. She gave him two red pills and a glass of water, and he chugged them down without question. Katniss stayed near by,
never letting him far out of her sight.

The hallway light came on, and he heard Prim call out for them. As if the night couldn’t get any worse.

“Everything’s okay, sweetie. Go back to bed,” Mrs. Everdeen told her.

It was a small comfort when she did as she was told. Mr. Everdeen came upstairs a few minutes later, announcing that the room was ready. “Just get some sleep tonight,” he told him as he helped him down the steps.

The finished basement was Mr. Everdeen’s pride and joy. He had a large family room down there with a big screen tv and surround sound, and in the back was a guest bedroom with adjoining bath, which is where Peeta guessed he’d be spending the night.

“We’ll go to the hospital in the morning, all right? I want to get everything checked out, just in case.”

Peeta agreed with a nod as Mrs. Everdeen pulled back the covers and tucked him in.

“Can I stay with him?” Katniss said. “Please, just for tonight?”

Mrs. Everdeen looked skeptical, but Mr. Everdeen nodded his permission. “Just for tonight. Get some sleep, because you’re still going to school in the morning.”

Katniss climbed into the full size bed, and Peeta rolled further away from her, careful not to put any weight on his arm. Her parents whispered good night, and then shut out the lights on their way out.

“Peeta?” she called out gently once they were alone. “Please don’t hate me.”

He held back a sniffle, raising his good hand to swipe at a wayward tear.

“Never,” he admitted after a few minutes of silence.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

He didn’t know how to respond, so he didn’t. As terrible as it felt for her to go to her parents, he couldn’t hold her responsible for everything. He shouldn’t have come here in the first place, just as he shouldn’t have done whatever he did to set off his mother.

She scooted closer to him in bed, lightly draping her arm over him. “Peeta?” she said again.

He waited for her to continue, but she seemed to be struggling with her words, and finally she sighed softly. “Peeta, I...I lo-”

“Please don’t,” he begged. “Please don’t say that because you feel sorry for me.”

She gasped, swearing that had nothing to do with it, but he didn’t believe that. She quieted down, and he hoped she would fall asleep soon and the pills would kick in so he could, too.

“I’ll never let anyone hurt you again,” she promised quietly as she held him.

The pills were melting his pain into a dull ache, so he repositioned himself, holding open his good arm to invite her to lie with him. She took it as a gesture of forgiveness, and seemed relieved as she settled against his chest, her ear resting right over his heart.

This was what they always wanted, a chance to spend the night together. It didn’t have to be about
sex or anything, just the simple luxury of sleeping in each other’s arms. The feel of her next to him was wonderful, doing more for his pain than the drugs, and that was what he decided to focus on as he drifted off.

He didn’t think about what would happen in the morning. He didn’t worry about his parents or her parents. He didn’t even dwell on Katniss’s promise, which he knew would be impossible to keep.

He closed his uninjured eye and let the medicine and exhaustion carry him into unconsciousness, and Katniss was beside him as he floated into tomorrow without any idea as to what it would bring.

xxXXxx

She was gone when he woke up, and he felt like he’d been hit by a truck as he tried to sit on the edge of the bed. He was dizzy, and his left arm hurt so badly that he didn’t try to dissuade Mrs. Everdeen from taking that trip to the hospital.

“It looks worse than I thought,” she said as she reexamined it in the kitchen. “We’ll get an x-ray. Maybe it is broken.” He apologized, because she looked so exhausted and this shouldn’t have to be her problem. He wasn’t her child.

“Peeta,” she said with a head shake. “Please don’t say you’re sorry again. You have nothing to be sorry for.”

“I’m sorry.” It was completely reflexive, and she managed a sad smile as she grabbed her purse and keys.

Mr. Everdeen called her into the other room for a minute, and Peeta froze up at the sound of his voice, because Mr. Everdeen should’ve been at work. He was messing up their entire schedule and lives with his presence, and now he wasn’t even allowed to apologize for it.

He followed her back into the kitchen, and Peeta watched as he helped her put on her light jacket. “How are you feeling?” he asked him.

He was feeling lots of things. Hurt. Humiliated. Tired. Terrified. He couldn’t say that, though. “I’ll be okay,” was all he managed.

“The most important thing right now is to get you checked out at the hospital. Then we’ll talk when you get back home.”

“My parents-”

“I’ll take care of everything, Peeta. Don’t worry about it.”

That was impossible, but he nodded before following Mrs. Everdeen out to her car. They didn’t say anything on the way to the hospital, but she patted his hand as they pulled into the parking lot. “Let’s go, sweetie.”

She seemed to know everyone at the hospital because she worked there, and he wondered if she was embarrassed to be seen with a battered boy. They bypassed registration and she led him straight to an exam room in the emergency room. “Sue, can you let Dr. Aurelius know we’re here?” she asked another nurse.
A tall, thin man with wire-rimmed glasses appeared a few minutes later. “So this is Peeta,” he said, entering the room with a cautious smile. “How are you feeling now?”

“I’m okay, sir.”

Mrs. Everdeen took his good hand as Dr. Aurelius examined him. He checked his eyes first, one of which was now completely swollen shut; Peeta winced at the harsh light, but he tried to stay still and not cause any trouble. He answered all of the doctor’s questions about his physical condition, what hurt and what didn’t, but he clammed up when the real inquisition started. “How did this happen, Peeta?” And, “Did this happen before?”

“I’m the only one at home right now,” he admitted. “I think my mom’s just under a lot of stress with everything. But I’m okay. Really. It looks a lot worse than it is.”

“Peeta, I think we should call the police about this.”

He’d have hopped off the exam table if he was able, fully prepared to walk out and to…wherever, but Mrs. Everdeen stopped his feeble attempt. “No,” he told them. “I don’t want to get anyone else involved. Please just let me go.”

“Peeta, you require medical treatment. And I’m bound by law to report all cases of suspected child abuse. I know this is upsetting right now but I promise you it’s for the best. It always is.”

The idea terrified him. He could already imagine it all playing out—his mother’s arrest, his father being questioned. He was sure they’d question the Everdeens, too. Katniss would have to be involved, and then everyone would know how long it went on for. Would his mother go to jail? Would he be placed in foster care? Every possibility seemed worse than the last. He couldn’t imagine any scenario where a police investigation would be “for the best.”

“Please,” he begged again. “Like I said, I’m the last one at home. I turn 18 in a few months and I’ll graduate in May. Do we really have to bring the police into this?”

“You don’t want to press charges?”

“No, sir.”

Dr. Aurelius slipped off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Peeta, I can’t let you go back there knowing what happened last night.”

“He won’t,” Mrs. Everdeen said. “My husband’s making the arrangements now, but Peeta will be staying with us.”

“For how long?” Dr. Aurelius asked, and Peeta was pretty eager to hear that answer, too. No one discussed this with him.

“For as long as he wants to,” she said. “I hope it’s until he’s ready to move out on his own someday.” She turned to him, taking his hand. “Peeta, we talked to your father last night, and we all agreed that you need to be somewhere else right now. We’d really like it if that somewhere else was with us.”

“You don’t have to do this,” he said quietly.

“We want you with us. All of us do.”
“It’s a good offer, Peeta,” Dr. Aurelius said with a smile. “I don’t think anyone could do much better than the Everdeen bunch.”

Peeta already knew that. The problem was that he didn’t belong with them.

“Let’s go to radiology to get that arm checked out,” the doctor said. “Everything else can be discussed later.”

The x-rays revealed a broken ulna, but it was a stable fracture that only required a cast. Mrs. Everdeen explained all this to him in non-technical terms, and she seemed pretty shaken up that she missed the injury the night before. She told him she was sorry, that she would have brought him to the hospital sooner if she knew.

“You must have a pretty high pain tolerance, Peeta,” Dr. Aurelius said.

That felt like an understatement.

xxXxxx

He was exhausted by the time they returned to the Everdeens’ house (Mrs. Everdeen kept referring to it as “home” but Peeta couldn’t think of as that yet). The pain pills should have helped knock him out, but sleep eluded him.

He politely declined lunch, choosing instead to hide out in the basement’s guest bedroom. It was his room now, they told him. Mr. Everdeen said they could repaint the light blue walls, if he’d like. Mrs. Everdeen wanted to take him shopping for new bedding and anything else he needed. He rebuffed those offers with the same ducked-head timidity.

Most of his clothes were already there, packed neatly into boxes by his father’s hand and picked up by Mr. Everdeen while Peeta was at the hospital. Seeing them in the corner upset him more than he expected, and he was crying again as he climbed into bed. He kept thinking about his parents, wondering if they were upset he was gone or simply relieved. It seemed like they let go of him without much of a fight, and that hurt a hell of a lot more than the black eye and broken arm did.

Unable to fall asleep, he decided to go back upstairs for a glass of water. He heard Mrs. Everdeen crying when he hit the top step, so pressed his ear against the cracked door to make out what she was saying to Mr. Everdeen.

“I just don’t understand how someone could do that to their own child.”

He went back down the steps and drank from the tap in the bathroom, and he caught just a glimpse of himself in the mirror over the sink, but he avoided a closer a look. It was nearly 2 o’clock now. The girls would be home from school within an hour.

He stared up at the ceiling in a daze, listening to every creak in the house, every conversation. Just before three, the front door opened, and Katniss’s otherwise soundless footsteps traced her path from the entryway to the stairwell.

He could hear her at his door. There was a small thud as she dropped her bookbag at the foot of his bed, and then she was crawling in it to lie with him. He lifted his unbroken arm to welcome her
against his side, and she curled up next to him.

He was asleep within minutes.

*It does not dishonor others...*

“We’re gonna go see Cato’s fuck trophy after school, you comin’?” Marvel asked.

“Don’t call a baby that,” Peeta said.

“You coming or not?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Anything that got him out of the Everdeen house for awhile would be good for him. It was crazy to admit but he felt totally uncomfortable there— in a house where everyone was welcoming and loving— and yearned for home, the most unhappy and sterile environment he knew.

He rode with Marvel to Glimmer’s house, starring out the passenger window while Marvel asked questions about his cast and the upcoming wrestling season. To their credit, his friends hadn’t really brought up the situation with his parents, which was a surprise since they weren’t exactly known for their sensitivity. Marvel just asked if it was weird to live with Katniss now. Peeta told him yeah. It was weird.

If things hadn’t changed the way they did, Peeta would be chauffeuring Marvel around, driving the decade-old car both his older brothers had before him. He’d be in charge of the radio, and Marvel would gripe nonstop because Peeta insisted on listening to the Motown he grew up with in his family’s old bakery.

He wondered what else would be different for him. They drove past a sign advertising an upcoming sale at Michael’s, and he realized he’d want to hit it up to replenish his art supplies, since he’d still feel like painting. Also his arm wouldn’t be broken, so he’d be unloading trucks at Crane’s, getting through his evenings there by convincing himself the lifting got him into shape for wrestling.

Between all this, he and Katniss would carve out some time for each other, making their moments together all the more special.

It wasn’t a perfect life, but it was his. Now Peeta was just going through the motions.

Marvel flipped through some stations, and “I Heard It Through The Grapevine” was playing on the oldies channel Peeta favored. He left it on for him, and Peeta wondered if maybe he wasn’t quite the asshole he always seemed.

*xxXxx*

According to the stylish birth announcements mailed out by Glimmer’s parents, Caz Michael Roberts
was born two weeks after his due date, weighing 9 and a half pounds and measuring 20 inches long. The “proud parents” used their full names to sign off. Cato Winston Hadley the third and Gwendolyn Mae Roberts. “Gwendolyn?” Marvel questioned when he read it aloud. Peeta cracked his first smile in weeks when he saw his confusion. “So why the fuck do we call her Glimmer?”

The Hadley and Roberts clans were probably two of the wealthiest families this side of the county, and Glimmer’s house was the largest in town. They had a regular living room and a formal living room, and when all the teenage friends were visiting the baby in the weeks after his birth, they were ushered right out of the fancy one.

In the other living room, Glimmer was curled up on a corner chair, a bassinet next to her. She was swimming in an oversized hoodie and sweats, her hair barely brushed, not a stitch of makeup on. She stared off into space while a couple of her friends cooed over the baby and the teenage boys stood around like bumps on a log.

Cato was in a good mood, though. He was relaxed and laughing, and Peeta imagined a cigar in his hand would complete the picture. Cato was always big on appearances, like his parents.

“Can I hold him?” Peeta asked Glimmer, motioning to the cradle. She shrugged, so Peeta reached inside, not quite sure how to lift him properly, cast or no cast.

He never held a baby before, and Caz was a chubby bundle of new pink skin and soft wisps of blond hair, just like his parents’. Peeta tucked him into the crook of his arm, careful to support his head. The baby’s eyes fluttered open as Peeta gently swayed back and forth. “Hi there, buddy,” he said, smiling.

No one else seemed interested in holding him, so he kept him in his arms for the majority of the visit. “How are you doing, Glimmer?” he asked, standing next to her chair. Her response was another wordless shrug.

When it was time to leave, Peeta carefully placed him back in the cradle. “Bye, Caz,” he said, running his index finger over the baby’s clenched fist. His tiny hand opened, latching onto him and gripping it with a surprising amount of strength.

Peeta didn’t want to let go, but the guys were calling for him. “I’ll see you later,” he promised.

xxXXxx

Peeta always insisted he clear the table and load the dishwasher. Everyone told him he didn’t have to, but he wouldn’t hear it. It felt like one small way to help earn his keep.

He made his bed every morning and kept his room immaculate. He did all of his own laundry, and he’d probably do theirs too, if they allowed it. He offered to do the grocery shopping, the cooking. One night, he sat down with Mr. and Mrs. Everdeen and seriously asked for a bill to pay.

“Absolutely not,” Mr. Everdeen told him. “You don’t owe us anything.”

But he did owe them, and he’d never be able to repay the debt. But he still tried in any little way he could. When his cast came off, he found an after-school job at a new coffee shop the next town over, and he commuted every day with fellow barista Delly Cartwright. Mrs. Everdeen loved coffee, so he’d bring home different blends for her to try. And when Prim had a bake sale for the freshmen
band booster club, Peeta helped her make everything from scratch, promising the cookies would be best sellers. He bet her that they’d break the fundraising record. That was a bet he won.

He couldn’t do enough for the Everdeens. Now Christmas was only a few months away, and he wanted to give them a really special gift. Since his inspiration to paint returned after he started acclimating to all the changes, he knew immediately what he was going to do.

The small family photo on the mantle was still there, years later, holding its spot as the centerpiece. Each week when Mrs. Everdeen dusted, she stopped to admire it before carefully putting it back in its place. She even bought a new frame for it recently, so there was no doubt it meant something special to her.

He decided he would try his hand at painting it as a large portrait, one they could hang on their wall for all to see (if it turned out okay). Between school, work and wrestling, he didn’t have much free time, so he needed to start right away. He bought the supplies first, including 24x36 canvases and a quality frame. The money spent on that alone could have purchased a nice, store-bought gift of some kind, and at the checkout, he wondered if that was what he should do instead. But he stuck to his plan, determined to not mess it up.

The next step was stealing away the photo so he could make a copy to work from. It took careful planning and plenty of sweat, but he did it without anyone noticing and safely returned the original without a single smudge or wrinkle.

Then he started on the portrait.

He began with their outlines, painstakingly drawing the details in charcoal before he worked on the beautiful background. It took 5 nights until he was satisfied with the lake’s appearance, until he had the colors blended just right to capture the sun’s reflection off the water. The cabin took longer to replicate. Every night he went to bed with a dull ache behind his eyes because he stared at that small photograph so much.

He could have told Katniss what he was doing, but he wanted it to be a surprise for everyone. That meant a drastic cut in their time together; he rushed through their study sessions, he ate a lot of meals in his room (a sandwich in one hand and the paintbrush in another), and he even told her he lost interest in *Lost*.

One evening when he was putting finishing touches on the roof’s shingles, she knocked on his door. “Peeta?”

If it had been another Everdeen, he would’ve sucked it up, switched out the canvas on his easel, and politely invited them in. But he didn’t have to fake it with her, and interruptions made him moody. “What?” he asked tersely when he cracked open the door, blocking her from entering.

She tipped her head back defiantly, pinning him with her hard stare. “Glimmer’s on the phone.”

“What?”

“She wants to talk to you.”

Glimmer hardly ever acknowledged him, let alone sought him out. He sighed heavily as he inched past her, shutting the door behind him. She followed him back up the stairs, stomping her feet to let him know she was mad, in case he missed the million other signs she was mad.

He picked up the cordless phone from where Katniss tossed it on the kitchen counter. “Hello?”
“Hey Peeta, it’s me.”

He wouldn’t have known who me was if Katniss hadn’t already told him. “Hey. What’s up?”

Katniss was leaning against the fridge, picking at her nails and pretending she wasn’t listening in when it was completely obvious she was.

“Um, okay, so,” she began. Most of his friends had at least a hint of a West Virginian accent, but she sounded straight from the Valley. “My parents are out of town for the weekend and there’s this party.”

She was inviting him to a party when her parents were out of town? Katniss’s jaw was clenched tight. If it weren’t for the phone, he’d probably be able to hear her grinding her teeth.

“And I want to go, but I can’t, like, leave Caz alone. You want to watch him?”

“Wait, you want me to babysit?”

“Um, okay. I guess I can pay you. It’s just, I need to get out for awhile.” Her voice cracked at the end, and it made him feel kind of sorry for her. He knew Cato wasn’t helping much with the baby.

“Yeah, I can watch him, and you don’t got to pay me. What time?” Katniss stormed out of the room without another look, and he sighed inwardly. Not only was he missing out on a full night of painting, but he kept alienating his best friend.

xxXXxx

Glimmer looked more like her usual self when he showed up on her doorstep an hour later. She was wearing an outfit that probably cost hundreds at the mall, her hair was all done up, and she had a face full of makeup.

“You look nice,” he said after she let him in, because the silence got awkward.

She ignored the compliment. “Caz is in his bassinet. There’re diapers and everything underneath it. Bottles are in the fridge, and my laptop’s on the couch if you get bored.”

That was all she said to him before rushing out. He called out to her again, having questions he needed answers to, but she was a breeze of blonde hair and Prada perfume as she hopped in her sports car and buzzed away.

Peeta had no idea how to care for a baby. He didn’t know how to change a diaper, he didn’t know how to get the bottles ready when he needed to eat (and he had no idea when he would need to eat) and he wasn’t sure what to do if anything out of the ordinary happened.

Caz was wide awake in his cradle, chewing on his fist as he kicked out his chubby legs. “Hey there buddy!” Peeta said, an instant smile on his face when he saw him. “What are you doing in there?

“Oh, you’re getting so big already,” he said, lifting him out. Newborn Caz was a lot smaller and immobile than this one, and Peeta struggled with how to carry him. He held him against his chest, one arm under Caz’s bottom and the other supporting his back. Then he bounced him gently in his arms, which the baby seemed to like. Outside of that, he was clueless how to keep someone so tiny
entertained. The family had a giant grandfather clock in the corner of the room, and Peeta checked the time. It’d been approximately four minutes since he arrived.

It was going to be a long night.

Glimmer’s laptop was on the arm of the couch, so he sat down with Caz, shifting him to his lap as he opened the computer. “Let’s see what we can find to keep you happy,” he told him.

He was in luck, because the browser was open to a parenting webpage that Glimmer must have bookmarked. He read through the article, something about tummy time, and then slowly read through it again trying to understand it. The baby was getting impatient, and Peeta was feeling that way, too. But apparently it was good for the baby to spend some time on his stomach, so he picked Caz back up, then grabbed a blanket from underneath the bassinet and spread it out on the floor.

“Here you go, Caz,” he said, gently placing him belly-down on the blanket. He found a stuffed dog next to the couch, and he waved it in front of the baby. “Wanna play with the puppy?”

He made soft woof sounds as he inched it closer to Caz’s face, and the baby smiled, which amazed him. “You like puppies, huh?” he asked, gaining some confidence. “Woof, woof. Oh, he’s gonna get you!”

Nothing seemed as interesting to Caz as his hand, though. He chewed his fat little fist every chance he got, drool leaking down the front of his shirt, down his arm, and onto the blanket. Peeta thought maybe that was a sign he was hungry, so he picked him up again and set off to explore.

He could see how it’d be easy to get lost in her home, but he found the gourmet kitchen without too much trouble. “Is it time for your bottle?” he asked Caz as he grabbed one from the fridge. He used one hand to pop off the plastic cover over the nipple, then offered the bottle to the baby.

Caz cried, turning his head away as Peeta tried to feed him. Not sure if he was doing something wrong or the baby just wasn’t hungry, Peeta gave up and grabbed the phone.

“Hey, is your mom home?” he asked when Katniss answered.

“Why?”

“Just got a question about the baby. Can you put her on?”

“Fine,” she huffed, and there was a rustling sound as she handed the receiver over to Mrs. Everdeen.

“Yes?”

Peeta explained his predicament, confessing that he’d never actually taken care of a baby before and it was proving harder than he imagined. “How do I know when he’s hungry?” he asked. “What do I do?”

She patiently explained some basics, including how to warm up the bottle and test its temperature before feeding. He thanked her profusely, hung up, then tried it all again.

It took about half an hour for the baby to finish the bottle. Peeta talked to him the entire time he ate, and Caz stared back at him with wide blue eyes, fascinated by every word he said. When he was finished, Peeta held him over his shoulder and gently patted his back, just like Mrs. Everdeen told him, and then it was back on the blanket for more tummy time.
“Want to play with the puppy again?” he asked, holding up the stuffed animal. He was also on his stomach, stretched out next to him on the floor. Caz was holding his head up pretty well, and he seemed particularly determined, reaching for the corner of the blanket by stretching his arm and bunching the material in his tiny hand. The puppy no longer had his interest.

“Let’s see what other toys you have around here,” Peeta told him. He rummaged through the storage tray under the bassinet, passing over the diapers and other items in his search. There were a few soft blocks at the bottom, and he grabbed those up and returned next to the baby. But Caz didn’t care about the blocks because he was victorious in his quest to get the blanket in his mouth. He was still chewing on the cotton wrapped around his hand when he rolled over from his belly to his back, smacking his head off the hardwood floor in the process.

“Shit!” Peeta cried out, scooping him up in his arms as he let out a red-faced wail. “Oh god, Caz, I’m sorry. And I’m sorry for saying shit. Don’t ever say that.”

He held him against his chest, barely taking a breath as he waited for the baby to calm down. “I’m so sorry,” he repeated as he carried him back into the kitchen. “Shh, it’s okay. It’ll be okay.”

Katniss’s mother answered the phone this time. “I’m sure he’s fine,” she told him after he frantically explained what happened. “Babies are stronger than they look. But I’ll stop by to look him over.”

He sighed in relief as he promised Caz that help would arrive soon. The baby didn’t seem so concerned now; he had stopped crying and was back to staring curiously at Peeta as they paced the length of the entryway until the doorbell rang.

Mrs. Everdeen wasn’t alone, much to Peeta’s surprise. Katniss was quiet as she followed her mother into the the house, steadfastly ignoring Peeta as the woman took the baby from his arms.

“Aren’t you a cutie,” she cooed, running her hand over Caz’s head. “He seems fine, Peeta. There isn’t even a bump.”

“I’m sorry you had to come over.”

“Oh don’t be. You can call any time.” She asked if he needed anything else, if Caz ate and how much, if he knew what to do when he needed his diaper changed. “Do you want me to stay and help?”

“I’ll stay,” Katniss volunteered, and it was the first words she said since she arrived.

“Well, I guess that settles that,” Mrs. Everdeen said. “I’ll be home if you need anything.” She said goodbye to Caz by taking his tiny hand in hers. “I think you’re doing a pretty good job here, Peeta.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

A part of him wanted to ask her to stick around just so he didn’t have to be alone with an angry Katniss, but it was her night off and she deserved to relax. He followed her out with Caz in his arms, thanking her again at the door.

“Peeta,” she said before leaving, “I think it’ll be good for you to spend some time with Katniss tonight.”

The comment left him perplexed as he headed back to the formal living room. Katniss was looking around with her nose scrunched, probably disgusted by all the decadent white furniture and marble-topped tables. There was no sign of Caz’s existence in this space. “Looks just like I thought it would,” she said.
“Hey, you want to hold him?” Peeta asked, because he had absolutely no idea what else to say. It was awful to have things like this between them, all this awkwardness and irritability.

He expected a flat-out no, maybe with a dirty look thrown in, but she surprised him again by reaching out. “Hi, Caz,” she said softly as she took him from Peeta. It was so nice to hear her voice stripped of any malice for once, and he couldn’t help but smile while watching her with a baby in her arms. She was going to make a great mother someday.

“Well, at least he’s not crying,” she said, smiling too. “I must be doing something right.”

“He looks pretty happy to me,” he led her into the other living area, where Caz’s things were still spread out on the floor. They both settled down with him and tried to get him to play with the blocks. His interest piqued this time, and he tried to take one from Katniss but only managed to knock it out of her hand. She held it out in her palm, patiently waiting for him to try again. It became a sort of game between them, and soon he was flashing a toothless smile, captivating her the same way he had Peeta.

“I wonder why they named him Caz,” she said as they played.

“I dunno. But I figure I don’t have much room to talk with a name like mine.”

“Yeah,” she laughed. “Me either.”

It was easy to forget the tension between them when they were together like this, but it was only a reprieve. He asked her about her college applications, if she was almost done with the essays now, and she said she was. She asked him about his new job, if he liked it, and he said he did. It might’ve been the most they’d spoken since the night he showed up at her window, all bloody and bruised, but it was small talk. They never talked small before.

“So does Delly drive you crazy?” she asked. “I don’t think she ever shuts up.”

“Not really. We were neighbors when we were little, so I’m kind of used to her.”

Now she was quiet again, contemplative. He knew her well enough to know she was going to start something, that an argument was brewing, but which loose thread she’d decide to pull remained a mystery.

Her next words were the start of it, another comment about Delly, a soft muttering that belied her actual anger. Something about how it was nice he had time for old friends. He was waiting for it to trigger more, but there didn’t seem to be much fight in her. “I saw you more before you lived with us.”

“Katniss—”

“I’m sorry I told my parents,” she said. “But I didn’t know what else to do, Peeta.”

“I know. I’m not mad about that.”

“Then why are you mad?”

“It’s not about you,” he sighed. “I’m not mad at you.”

*Please don’t make me do this right now,* he thought, lifting Caz and holding him to his chest. He nuzzled his nose against the top of the baby’s head, taking comfort in the soft powdery scent.
She must’ve decided pretty quickly to stop pressing the issue, and she reached out to run her hand down Caz’s back as Peeta hugged him. “It’s nearly 10,” she told him. “Shouldn’t he be in bed?”

Peeta didn’t know when he was supposed to go to bed, or where his ‘bed’ was, or even when Glimmer would be back. “Let’s change his diaper and put him in some pajamas,” Katniss told him. “We’ll find his room.”

The second floor of the Roberts’ home was a maze, but at least there wasn’t any confusion about the nursery. Peeta carried him to the changing table on the other side of the room as Katniss dug through his dresser for a clean sleeper.

She brought over one with monkeys all over it. “I think he has more clothes than I do.”

He took the pajamas from her, examining all the complicated snaps around the bottom. “So have you ever changed a diaper before?”

“I helped my mom with Prim when she was a baby.”

“Prim’s 13 now,” he said, exasperated. They were both in way over their heads here.

“It’s not that hard, Peeta, ” she told him. She grabbed a package of baby wipes and a clean diaper from one of the fancy baskets nearby, then started to undress Caz. “Are you sleepy yet?” she asked him in a singsong voice as she gently pulled his arms out of the sleeves. “It’s bedtime.”

He handed over the clean diaper. “You do it. I’ll get the next one.”

“Fine,” she huffed. She placed Caz on his back and unfastened the velcro closures on his old diaper. “All you have to do is clean him up with one of the wipes, then put the new diaper underneath him and ahhhh!” She jumped back in surprise as a stream of urine saturated the front of her shirt.

“Whoa, you didn’t say anything about that,” he told her, earning himself another scowl.

But Caz was smiling, clearly proud of himself as he kicked out his legs. “You planned that, didn’t you?” she said to him as she held the wet shirt out to keep it from clinging to her skin. “Peeta was probably in on it, too.”

He grinned. “I had no part of it.”

“Give me your sweatshirt.”

“You don’t want to wear something of Glimmer’s?” he asked as he unzipped his hoodie. “I’m sure she has something bedazzled that you’ll just love.”

She finished changing the diaper, then left the room to change her top, all while growling some insults under her breath so the baby wouldn’t hear it. The sweatshirt fit him perfectly but dwarfed her small frame, and he admired it on her when she returned a few seconds later. “You should wear my clothes more often. Consider it a roommate perk.”

“Well you can’t wear mine.”

“It’s not my style anyway.” He held up Caz’s pajamas before dressing him. “But these are adorable. Aren’t they buddy? Yes they are. You’re too cute, you know that?”

Watching him with Caz seemed to get the smile back on her face, and she ushered them out of the
“Shouldn’t we leave him in his crib?” His look must have told her that it was the last thing he wanted to do.

“We don’t have to.” She pulled a pacifier out of the hoodie’s front pouch and placed it in the baby’s mouth. “I found this in the bathroom. Maybe it’ll help get him to sleep.”

They both settled in on the couch, Caz still in Peeta’s arms. “He doesn’t really seem tired,” he commented while the baby looked around, sucking loudly on his pacifier. “You’re not sleepy at all, are you?”

Katniss leaned in closer, resting her head on Peeta’s shoulder as she gazed down at the baby. She took hold of his little hand, and he grasped her finger, just like he did to Peeta the first time he saw him. “He really is cute,” she said, rubbing her thumb in circles on his palm. “Maybe he was switched at birth.”

She started humming, and it was so soothing that Peeta nearly fell asleep. Then, quietly, she started to sing, and it was like a catapult back in time as Peeta remembered the first time he ever heard her voice. The first day of kindergarten, when he was paying special attention to her after his father pointed her out. He was a goner then, and he was sure he would’ve still fallen for her even without his father’s words. ‘You can’t be in love,’ his oldest brother told him at the time, after he confessed his crush. ‘You’re five.’ But Peeta wouldn’t hear it. ‘I do love her. I’m gonna marry her someday.’

He was less ambitious these days. Now he just hoped to be a part of her life somehow. She’d be going off to college next year, setting out to do great things while he stayed in their one-horse town. He’d be lucky if she still thought of him as a friend in ten years time.

Caz drifted off as Katniss sang, and Peeta turned his head to watch her as she kept her focus trained on the baby. “Thanks for staying tonight,” he whispered as her voice trailed off.

“Any time,” she whispered back.

He wasn’t sure when they fell asleep, too, but he woke with a start a few hours later. Katniss was curled up against him, Caz still in his arms, when he heard someone coming through the foyer. It was after 3 a.m., according to the clock, and he nudged Katniss while trying not to disturb Caz.

“Heard someone coming through the foyer. It was after 3 a.m., according to the clock, and he nudged Katniss while trying not to disturb Caz.

“Hmm?” she asked, still confused by sleep as Glimmer stumbled into the room.

“Aww, what a pretty picture,” she said, struggling to stay upright. “Hope you two behaved yourselves tonight because I sure didn’t.” She giggled loudly, and Peeta held Caz closer as he glared at her.

“You could’ve brought anyone over here and you bring her?” she continued slurring many of her words. “Miss ‘too hot to be that cold’ Katniss Everdeen?”

He warned Cato about saying that a long time ago, so now he was really annoyed as handed the baby over to Katniss and got up off the couch. “Are you crazy coming back like this?” he whispered harshly. “You’ve got a baby to take care of!”

The smell of stagnant vomit hit him as he closed in, and he could see it covering her clothes when he reached out to steady her. He’d been to plenty of parties, and he certainly drank before, but he’d
never really been drunk. Glimmer was totally wasted. The room was dim with only a corner lamp lit, but he could see her eye makeup smeared across her face, her skin blotchy and slick. She’d been drinking and crying, and suddenly he felt more pity than anger.

“Let’s get you back to your room,” he told her. “Get you cleaned up a bit.”

Katniss placed Caz in his bassinet, then helped Peeta lead Glimmer to the bathroom she found earlier. They put her in the shower, at a loss to do anything else, and while she slumped over on the bench seat, he adjusted the water temperature and turned on the showerhead.

“It’s okay,” Katniss told him. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Thank you,” he said, sorry that he dragged her into this mess, too. While Katniss got Glimmer cleaned up and into bed, Peeta went back to tend to Caz, who was now wide awake and cooing in his bassinet, oblivious to his mother’s drunkenness. He scooped him up, patting his back as he swayed. “I’m sorry buddy,” he said. “Your mommy’s just having a rough night.”

“We’ll stay,” Katniss said when she reappeared later. “I’ll leave a message for my mom telling her what happened.”

It was a rough night, with Glimmer passed out on the second floor and Caz fighting off sleep. They were both bleary-eyed when a black Mercedes pulled into the driveway in the morning, and Peeta tried to explain the situation to Glimmer’s parents without condemning her completely.

“Thank you for staying,” her father said at the door. “She’s lucky to have friends like you.”

He knew Katniss was biting back some words, so he squeezed her hand as he told the Roberts’ goodbye, then he led her outside, waiting for her to erupt as soon as they were out of earshot. But she didn’t. They walked home together in a peaceful silence, and it was only when they separated in the kitchen that he realized he still had a hold of her hand.

Later that day, after they each had a nap, he invited her into his room and shut the door behind him. “I’ve been working on a painting,” he said. “For your parents, for Christmas.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I don’t know.”

She asked to see it, and as soon as he flipped the canvas around, she knew instantly what it was from, even though the forefront was only an outline and charcoal underdrawing. “This is extraordinary, Peeta,” she said in awe.

Things were different between them after their night with Caz. Better different. He still spent nearly every minute of his free time on the portrait, determined to get it just right, but now she was in the room with him. Usually she stretched out on his bed and studied as he painted, but when it was time to work on the oil version of herself, she insisted she be more involved.

“I’ll pose,” she said, sitting ramrod straight in the computer chair. “How’s this?” She tried to mirror the smile she had in the photograph, but it was a phoney one, not at all like the original.

“That’s very good,” he told her seriously. “Now if you could just slightly turn your head and also make yourself look about 8 years younger.”
“Maybe I’ll go to Huntington and get some fillers like Mrs. Roberts,” she said.

“You’re gonna have to hurry up on that. I got two weeks to finish this and it’s gonna take at least one for your face to settle.”

“That’s no good. Guess you’ll just have to rely on that old picture and your raw, immeasurable talent.”

“Thanks for nothing,” he said while dipping the tip of his brush in the base. Mixing colors was the most laborious part of the process, and the one thing he was most particular about. Color theory fascinated him to no end, and sometimes he’d spend an hour blending an area the size of a postage stamp to get it just right. For this project, Katniss’s eye color would be the ultimate challenge, but first he had to master the shade of her skin.

“I don’t know how you do it,” she said breathlessly after watching him for a bulk of the evening. He felt like he was making great progress, but the work was coming along slowly and he was surprised she wasn’t bored out of her mind.

As he was cleaning up for the night, he asked her if she thought they’d like it. Her response was, “I think they’ll love it.”

On Christmas morning, he felt too nervous to eat the elaborate breakfast that the Everdeens always finished before even thinking about touching the presents. Afterwards, he excused himself from cleaning duty for the first time since he moved in, and as the girls cleared the table, he went to accept the phone call from his father, a man of few words who had a particularly difficult time with telephone conversations. He wished his son a good Christmas and said he missed him. Peeta thanked him for the gifts he received the night before, but he begged off the invitation to Christmas dinner. His father said he understood.

Opening presents was an hour long event. Peeta hid the framed portrait in his room, and he snuck off to retrieve it with the excuse of putting away some of the gifts he already opened. Both Katniss and Prim seemed to enjoy the store bought items he got for them, and he liked theirs too, but he was anxious to see the reaction to the painting. He knew he’d know their true feelings about it the first moment they saw it, all from the look on their faces. When he finished it a couple evenings ago, he’d been proud. It was good, born of three months sweat and with so much love poured into it that it reflected through the work. But now as he carried it into the living room, he felt almost embarrassed that this was what he had to offer.

“Whoa now, what’s that?” Mr. Everdeen asked with a grin as Peeta leaned it against the couch. It was wrapped in an ugly red paper with cartoon reindeer all over it, which seemed cute last night but now it just looked like another bad decision.

“Peeta made it for you,” Katniss said before he had the chance. She seemed as excited as he was nervous. “Open it!”

Her parents peeled back the paper together, then carefully turned it over to see what it was. Peeta was hoping for smiles, instant, wide ones that left no doubt in his mind that they liked it. What he got was two mouths dropped open, and tears springing from Mrs. Everdeen’s eyes as she covered half her face with her hand.

“You painted this?” Mr. Everdeen asked. His wife made another noise muffled by her palm. She moved it to wipe the tears now running down her cheeks, and there was that smile Peeta was hoping to see first.
“I always wanted that picture in better quality,” she said. “I took it once to Walgreens. Someone at the hospital told me they can enlarge old photos for you, but it didn’t really work. Even the 8x10 was grainy.

“It’s been my favorite since we shot it. Do you remember that day?” she asked her husband, and he nodded. “It was a really good day.

“Thank you, Peeta,” she said. "This is the most amazing, beautiful gift I could ever ask for.”

He breathed out in relief, then made a joke about having the gift receipt from Sears if she changed her mind about it. Katniss added that it was from all of them, and Prim joined in, saying they must’ve just forgotten to sign the card.

Everyone was laughing and happy, and they all took turns to admire the portrait and compliment him. The scene was surreal; it wasn’t too often that things turned out better than he’d hoped for.

If things hadn’t changed the way they did, Peeta would be home with his parents now, listening to them arguing as they got ready for other family members to arrive. His help would be required but not appreciated; his mother would bark more orders at him and in the same breath criticize every other thing he did. He’d be counting down the minutes until the end of the day.

Now, as his eyes met Katniss’s and they shared a smile, he’d give just about anything to be able to freeze this moment and live in it forever.

*It is not self-seeking...*

Inspired by his work on the family portrait, Peeta embarked on a semester long series for Ms. Portia centered on the uniqueness of skin tone and complexion. His subjects were all around him, and he started with the opposite ends of the spectrum: Chaff, with skin the color of night and deep wrinkles around his eyes from working hard and laughing harder, and the alabaster Primrose, who reminded him of the antique porcelain dolls his mother once collected.

In early spring, he began his work on Katniss. Everything about her was equally fascinating and frustrating when it came to replicating it in paint. She was lighter than her father but darker than her mother, and there was not an adequate word in the English language to describe the color so uniquely her. “Olive-toned complexion,” she called it, but that wasn’t right, either.

Sometimes at the coffee shop, he’d stop short when he got it just right in the cup. A dark roast and a few tablespoons of steamed skim milk, and that was Katniss. But it was always a challenge to translate it into his chosen medium, no matter how many times he did it.

He’d take breaks by painting the others, hoping to perfectly capture what set them apart- the pink softness of Caz, the brown weathered features of Mr. Everdeen- while connecting them all by their one shared feature: beauty. It was something he had an eye for, something that surrounded him.

Each person he met was gorgeous, all in their own way. The lines of someone’s face, the folds of their hands...eye color, hair color, skin color...movement with corded muscles, shapes with soft curves. He could paint every second of the rest of his life and never come close to capturing all the exquisiteness in everything.
Ms. Portia was one of the most overt examples of beauty he’d ever seen. She wore her jet black hair in tight curls cropped close to her head, and she had a smile that could calm a storm, with full mauve lips that he tried very hard not to think about.

Back when Peeta was just a little boy, he used to watch the PBS show *The Joy of Painting* on an old television in the bakery’s office, and he always credited Bob Ross for his interest in art. But Portia was the person who made him an artist. He never would have thought to call himself that before, but Portia was an artist, and she taught him everything she knew and molded him into one too with her time, lessons, and feedback.

She was married to a suit from the coal mines. He met him once when he was helping her carry her things to her car after school, and the man was waiting next to her Volkswagen with a bouquet of flowers. Peeta knew she wasn’t happy in their small town and never wanted to move here, that she missed New York City every day, but there was no doubt how in love she was with her husband as she jumped into his arms. Judging by the way he swung her around and grinned, her husband loved her just as much, which was exactly how it should be.

“We’re moving back to Manhattan,” she announced one day as Peeta cleaned brushes in a small vat of mineral spirits.

“What?”

“Don’t look so despondent, you’re graduating in a few months anyway.”

“But you can’t leave,” he said pathetically. “You’re the art teacher.”

“There are a couple other ones out there,” she laughed. “Maybe you could be one of them someday.”

He must’ve made a face, which made her laugh again. “Or not. You’re too good to teach anyway. Don’t teach, just paint.”

“When are you moving?”

“The day after the ceremony.” She took the brushes from him and rinsed them in a detergent mixture. “I hope to see you in New York someday. Come visit me, meet some of my friends. They’re crazy about your work, Peeta.”

She asked him once if she could show some of his stuff to her big city art friends, but he didn’t know she did. Not knowing what to do with that compliment, he ignored it. “Are you excited to go back home?”

The answer was obvious, and should’ve been instant. Some small-minded people here treated her terribly, and she had a life in the city that sounded worlds away from this one. But she hesitated for a moment before replying. “Yes.”

“I sure am going to miss you, though,” she added as she walked away. She picked up the portrait of her that he’d painted and said she was taking it with her.

“It’s yours,” he said. “And I’m really going to miss you, too.”

xxxxxx
Mr. Everdeen bought an old full-size Ford Bronco in late November, and he spent months fixing everything on it, spending hours in the garage tinkering away. He gave it to Katniss and Peeta in late January, saying it was theirs now and completely up to them who got to drive it when.

It was due for an oil change, which thrilled Mr. Everdeen, who said he was going to switch out the fan belt and transmission fluid as well. Peeta usually left him alone while he worked, knowing how much he appreciated to be left alone while he painted, but today he loitered, leaning over the hood and waiting for the chance to say what he’d been building up the courage to ask.

“You need any help?” Peeta offered, like always, even though he had no idea what to do.

“Nah. Just need some company.”

That was good, because Peeta still needed some time. He may have lived in this man’s house, and ate dinner with him every night, and drove the car that he built up from a pile of metal, but he never actually outright asked him for anything before, and now he was about to. A real favor that would impact the rest of his life.

“So prom’s comin’ up,” Mr. Everdeen said, and that threw Peeta off a bit.

“It is?”

“Six weeks away.”

“Oh.” There was a flurry of senior activities all the time now, it seemed, and he really didn’t pay much attention.

“You going?”

He hadn’t even thought about it. He didn’t go to the one last year, even though a part of him really wanted to ask Katniss. But she made a comment one day about how stupid it all was, and he figured that was that. They went and saw Mission Impossible III instead.

“No, sir.”

“Well, why not?”

“Who would I go with?” he shrugged. Truthfully, Peeta could easily find a date if he wanted. He had quite a few female friends in his circle, and there were also a couple girls he knew who seemed to like him a little more than that, too. But there was only one person he’d want to share a night like that with.

“I happen to know a girl,” Mr. Everdeen said, glancing toward the house then back at him.

“Prim’s too young to go to the prom,” Peeta joked.

“Not her. The other one. What’s-her-name?”

“Oh, the brunette? Yeah, I don’t think she’s the prom-going type.”

“How do you know if you don’t ask?”

“Have you met her?”

“Peeta,” he sighed while releasing tension from the old serpentine belt, “sometimes women can surprise you.” He twisted it off, then braced himself for what seemed to be a harder task- getting the
new one on. “Prom's a nice sendoff. I don’t think you realize how much your life is going to change after high school.”

That seemed like the perfect segue into the discussion he wanted to have with him. “Speaking of life after high school,” he said. “There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

Mr. Everdeen moved out from under the hood. “Oh yeah?”

“Well, the mines will be recruiting soon, and I was hoping, um, I was wondering if maybe you’d put in a good word for me.”

The dark look that came over the man’s face took him completely by surprise. “No.”

Lots of men in town were employed by the mines. It wasn’t unusual for every male family member to work for the coal groups in some capacity. Mr. Everdeen got himself a job there right after high school, and Peeta knew everyone thought highly of him. A solid recommendation from him would surely get his foot through the door.

“Why?” Did he think he wasn’t a hard worker? That he couldn’t be trusted with some of the more dangerous tasks? He could hear his mother’s voice inside his head telling him that he was a screw up and everyone knew it.

“Because you’re better than that.” He tossed his wrench onto this workshop table, and it landed with a loud clang. “Listen, Miranda and I’ve been talking about this for a long time now, and we want to help you out with college. You can go off and make something of yourself, Peeta.”

“I’m not getting into college,” he said incredulously. He was barely graduating high school, and he was only doing that because Katniss helped him out so much with his work. There wasn’t a college in the country worth its salt that would admit him, and even a community college course load would be a struggle without Katniss.

_She_ was going to college. Officially decided on the University of Kentucky the week before, which was just under a two hour drive from them, meaning she’d live on campus. The Everdeens had their daughters to worry about, not him.

“What about art school?” he asked. “Peeta, what you can do is the most amazing thing I ever seen.”

“No way. I’m not gonna be one of those guys selling their paintings buy one, get one in the mall parking lot. Do you know how expensive art school even is?” He stepped closer, his hands out pleadingly. “I can make 60 grand a year at the mines, right off the bat. I could help you pay for Katniss. That’s what I really want to do.”

“We could build an art studio off the house for you, or give you money to start up another bakery.”

No, no, no, none of that would work. There was no future in art, and there were too many risks with owning your own business, which Peeta knew nothing about anyway. The coal mine was the answer. Making _money_ was the answer.

“Katniss got more scholarships than we can name,” her father said. “You don’t have to worry about any of that.”

“Then I’ll help her with other expenses. Whatever she needs. Look, I need to be able to take care of myself and the people I care about, and I can’t do that making minimum wage and tips at the coffee shop.”
Mr. Everdeen sighed loudly as he pulled a rag out of his back pocket and wiped off his hands. “You remind me of myself, you know that?”

Peeta stood up a little straighter, taking it as a compliment. “Then you’ll put in a good word for me?”

“On one condition,” he said. “You work five, ten years there, tops. That’s it. I don’t want you in the mines when you’re my age. Save up all you can and figure something else out, okay?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And Peeta? Remember what I said about prom.”

He nodded, then left through the connecting kitchen door to leave him to his work. If Katniss wanted to go to the prom with him, he’d be there in a heartbeat. But he wasn’t convinced it was something she’d ever be interested in.

A week later, he was waiting at her locker to drive her home before his shift at work. He spotted her walking down the hall, stuck behind a group of girls taking their good ol’ time walking out. She finally pushed her way through them, but they were oblivious to her as they continued to talk and laugh.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said as she put away her books, turning around to glare at them as they made their way past.

“Rough day?”

“Not really. But I don’t understand why everyone else is acting like school’s already over. We still have a whole grading period left. Hey, I found some online practice exams for you today. Maybe we can work on them when you get home.”

Katniss wasn’t happy he wanted to work at the mines, and at first she refused to help him study for the entrance exam they required of all new recruits. He wasn’t really worried about the test- there were miners who were completely illiterate but still managed to get in- but he didn’t want her upset with him. The night he talked to Mr. Everdeen about it, he snuck out of the house and walked around to her window, tapping against the glass for the first time in half a year. She let him in, and he crawled in bed beside her and explained what it would mean to him to do hard work for good money. Not a lot of people in their town thought of the mines the way her father did; there was a lot of pride associated with being a miner. “It’s my only way to make something out of myself, Katniss.”

“That’s not true,” she said. “You can do anything. It pays good because it’s such a dangerous job, Peeta. No amount of money is worth that risk.” She told him she worried about her father every day, and she couldn’t stand the idea of worrying about him, too.

She was probably the only person who could’ve changed his mind. He tried to picture a life doing anything else; he imagined still working at the coffee shop or some other dead-end job, making barely enough to feed and clothe himself. He’d end up living with the Everdeens for years, long after Katniss and Prim were out of the house. He shuddered at the thought and vowed to not let that happen.

“Try to understand,” he begged.

She scooted closer to him in the bed, resting her hand on his hip bone. “Promise you’ll get out as
soon as you can.”

“I promise.”

“Sounds good,” he said now, already looking forward to another chance to study with her. “I’ll be home early tonight.” She smiled, but it changed into a grimace as she was bumped from behind by another girl.

“Where you getting your hair done?” the girl asked her friend as she loudly smacked her gum.

“Somewhere out of town,” she answered. “Did I show you the pictures?”

The girl huddled next to the other one to look at her phone. “Ohhhh, I love that!”

They walked away together, their giggles echoing down the hall. “Youths,” Peeta said with a head shake.

“Idiots,” Katniss corrected.

“They’re just excited about prom is all.”

“That sounds exactly like something an idiot would be excited about.”

“Ah. And since you’re not an idiot, you’re not excited about it, right?”

“Why in the world would I be excited about prom?” she asked, perplexed.

“So you don’t want to go?”

She must have thought he was the craziest person in the world, based on the way she was looking at him. “Who would I go with?”

He pretended to consider it as he leaned against a locker. “I don’t know. Someone devastatingly handsome. Someone who oodles charm. Or, if you don’t mind settling, you could always go with me.”

“What?”

“Would you like to go with me?”

“Are you asking me to prom?”

He was really starting to sweat here, but he sucked it up, tilting his head toward hers and keeping their eyes locked together. “Katniss, will you please go to the prom with me?”

“What if I don’t want to go?” she asked in a whisper.

“Then we won’t go. I only want to go with you.”

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, I’ll go.”

“Really?” His smile stretched across his face as she nodded confirmation, and he couldn’t believe he almost missed out on this feeling because he thought she’d say no. “Does that mean I can carry your things for you now? Since I’m your date and all.” She stopped letting him carry her things for her
awhile ago, since it was something couples did.

She surprised him again by handing over her books. “Here, knock yourself out.”

Two out of three of the Everdeen women were thrilled about prom and everything involved with it. Katniss was the holdout, insisting that they didn’t need a limo, that she didn’t want to go to a salon for her updo, that she didn’t want flowers.

“What do you mean you don’t want flowers?” he asked her one night while they were going over homework together.

She pushed her reading glasses up as she read over a physics problem. “Waste of money.”

“You have to have flowers,” he insisted. It was tradition. Ugly, out of place wrist corsages that took up half the girl’s arm were all the rage in their school. He was excited to pick one out, determined to find something that would fit with her dress. If he knew anything about her dress.

Not long after she agreed to go with him, she went with her mother and sister to Cinna’s, a small boutique out of town. They returned later that day with a black garment bag, and when he asked to see what she picked out, she said he’d see it later.

“What color is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know, it’s hard to describe.”

Now he really wanted to see it. “Well how am I supposed to match my tie to your dress if I don’t know the color?”

“Just get a black tie,” she said.

He went with Cato, Marvel and a few other guys to the tux shop, where he picked out a notch lapel coat, vest, and solid black tie. His choices were boring compared to his friends, who all picked bright accent colors to compliment their dates. After the tuxedo was on order, he followed them to the florist. He knew she said she didn’t want anything, but he was going to get something anyway, as well as small bouquets for Prim and Mrs. Everdeen. But the corsages there, all roses and ribbon, didn’t appeal to him. He picked out some flowers but decided he’d come up with something else specifically for Katniss.

He ended up making her corsage with a pearl wristlet he found in an antique shop next to the coffee bar where he worked. Katniss wasn’t into anything loud, or something that would draw a lot of attention, so he needed it to be dainty and understated. But he had to know the coordinating colors if he was going to finish it correctly. He cornered Prim in the kitchen one day, saying she had to help him out there.

“Think autumn,” she said.

“You’re the best,” he told her. It wasn’t exactly specific, but it pointed him in the right direction.

He chose a few dime-sized silk flowers in various shades of yellow and orange, and strung them and
tiny dark green leaves together on a leather cord that reminded him of her hunting jacket. Realizing that he had the chance to really personalize it for her now, he added a small pearl to the center of each flower, and then replaced the original fastener with a gold arrow-shaped one he ordered from a jewelry store. It took hours of work to put it all together, but he was pleased with how it turned out.

He thought he had everything he needed. Tux? Check. Shoes? Check. Most beautiful date in the world? Check. He didn’t think he was forgetting anything.

“Condoms,” Marvel said one day in the gym. “Dude, stock up. Learn from our fallen friend.” He motioned toward Cato, who was lifting weights across from them.

“Yeah, I’m not going to need those.”

“You never know, man. Best to be prepared.”

It was like living in a bizarro world, not just one where Marvel was making sense, but one where there was a possibility he could actually be with Katniss that way. Prom, and the after party at the Hadley’s lake house, would be the first time they were alone together since he moved in. She’d surprised him before, what if it happened again?

So the week before, he drove past Abernathy’s and pulled into the Walgreens parking lot. He’d run in and out, he reasoned. He was 18-years-old and it was the responsible thing to do. There was absolutely no reason to be embarrassed or nervous about a simple purchase.

His hand was hovering over a box of Trojans when he heard, “Peeta Mellark!” in the most unmistakable, affected accent he’d ever known. He spun around to face her, a smile frozen on his face. “Hello, Sister Trinket.”

“How are you, Peeta? It’s been years!”

She must not have noticed what he was shopping for, so he did a quick side step to the other side of the aisle, grabbing a box of protein bars. “I’m good, thank you. How are you?”

“Very well. Now is my math correct here? Will you be graduating next month?”

He could feel the sweat dripping down his back as she continued to smile at him, and he tried to think of an answer, knowing she asked a simple question, but all he could do was stare at the thick crucifix hanging around her neck. “Um, yes?”

“Oh, Peeta, I’m so proud. I knew you could do it.” She reached up to cup his shoulder, still smiling serenely. “God bless you.”

No sooner did she round the corner when he took off in the opposite direction, tossing the protein bars at a cashier while apologizing profusely. She called out for him to have a good day as he raced to the door, looking back one last time to make sure Effie and her Bible weren’t behind him.

He was able to catch his breath when he got back behind the wheel, and that was when he decided to go to Abernathy’s after all. Haymitch was a professional, he reasoned, and this was a simple transaction between a customer and business owner.

Haymitch was in the same spot as always, right behind the counter. Consistency was nice, but he’d have given just about anything for it have been a stranger greeting him instead. He wearily approached him, his eyes on the rack of prophylactics on the back wall. Too many kids must’ve been lifting them, so Haymitch moved the condoms to a place out of reach. Just perfect. “Hello, Mr.
Abernathy.”

“Peeta. What can I do for you today?”

He walked over to one of the coolers and grabbed a cold Gatorade. This was something he did hundreds of times over the years, innocently buying a drink after practice or before work. There was nothing suspicious about it. Nothing at all.

“Anything else?” he asked gruffly.

He eyed the wall again, willing Haymitch to read his mind so he didn’t have to make a verbal request. “Oh wow, is that Chapstick?” Haymitch turned his head in that direction, then looked back at him with annoyance. “I’ll definitely take some of that.”

He tossed the cherry flavored lip balm near the register. “That all?”

There was a long pause, and Peeta came to the solid conclusion that this wasn’t going to happen now, and nothing was going to happen on prom night. If he was lucky, maybe they’d go swimming and he’d get to see her in her bathing suit. “Yes, sir,” he answered. “That’s all.”

“How stupid do you think I am?” Haymitch asked. “Just get what you came in here for. But want some advice? If you’re not man enough to buy ‘em, you sure as hell aren’t ready to use them. So…is that all?”

Peeta sighed, but there was relief in knowing this was about to be over. “No, sir. I’ll also take that Trojan three pack.”

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Peeta heard of Catholic guilt before, and he figured that must be what he was feeling. The strip of condoms were in his wallet, tucked away discreetly, but he was sure everyone knew he had them and knew what he was hoping to do with them. He nearly tossed them out not too long after purchasing them.

When Mr. Everdeen knocked on his door, he wished he had. He froze up as the man entered his room, coming up behind him as Peeta stood in front of the mirror, his shirt collar up and both ends of the unknotted necktie in his hands.

“Believe it or not, I’m actually pretty good with a half-Windsor knot. Need some help with that?”

Peeta didn’t even know what the hell a half-Windsor knot was. He held out the tie ends helplessly, allowing Mr. Everdeen to take over. “The main thing to remember,” the man said, “is that you’re always working with the widest part of the tie. It takes a few tries though to get it right.” He brought the thicker end around and behind the narrow end, then pulled it up through the hole between his collar and tie. “I can always help you until you figure it out,” he said, bringing the wide end back over the thin piece, from right to left. Peeta looked down to watch him finish it off by pulling the wide end down through the knot in front.
His mind flashed to the condoms again, and he imagined Mr. Everdeen just knowing and pulling the tie until he was red-faced and gasping for breath. Instead, he tightened it and straightened it, clapping Peeta on the shoulder before stepping back. “It looks good.”

“Thank you,” he told him. “I was just about to run out and get a clip-on.”

“Then I got here just in time. I’ll do it again when it’s time for your interview.”

“Thank you,” he repeated. While he was grateful for the help, he thought he might be in for a lecture, and his wallet felt like a hot poker against his backside as Mr. Everdeen took a seat on the edge of the bed.

“Did you know I took Miranda to her prom?” he asked. Peeta always called Katniss’s parents Mr. and Mrs. Everdeen, but they used their first names with him. They told him, time and again, that he didn’t have to refer to them so formally, but he couldn’t address them as anything else. It didn’t feel right.

“Really?”

“Yeah, a few months after we started dating. I didn’t go to mine when I was in high school, but she asked me to go with her and I knew I couldn’t say no. It was fun though. We ended up having fun. I think that’s when I learned how to tie the half-Windsor, actually.”

“Your dad showed you it?”

“No, my dad wasn’t around. And Miranda’s father couldn’t stand the sight of me, so I ended up teaching myself. It probably didn’t look very good that first time.”

“Why didn’t her father like you?” he asked, perplexed that anyone could dislike Mr. Everdeen, who was just about the nicest person he’d ever known.

“Well, they had a lot of money, and I didn’t have any money, and that was about all that mattered.”

Katniss never mentioned any of this, in all the years he knew her. “Did things get better after you got married?”

“No,” he said sadly. “They never did.”

That explained why he never heard anything about Mrs. Everdeen’s parents. Katniss talked about her grandmother before, a wonderful woman who died when Katniss was in elementary school, but that must have been Mr. Everdeen’s mother. He wondered what happened to his dad.

It was a story for another day, because Mr. Everdeen quickly excused himself so Peeta could finish getting ready. As he stood in front of the mirror and fixed his hair, he flashed back to years before, when he’d felt just as nervous doing the same thing because he was about to meet up with Katniss on the school steps.

When he looked as polished as possible, he grabbed his keys and the box with her wristlet off the dresser top and started back upstairs. Prim was sitting at the kitchen table, fawning over the flowers he’d given her and her mother earlier, and he was about to say something to her when he caught a flash of color out of the corner of his eye.
He hadn’t really given much thought to what she might look like in her dress. She knew she’d be beautiful, because she was always beautiful, but nothing could have prepared him for just how breathtaking she’d be.

She was a vision in soft orange, his favorite color. The dress was a floor-length strapless chiffon, and he imagined it billowing outwards if she twirled. “You look gorgeous,” he told her, feeling like he could barely speak. Her hair was pinned up with a fancy side braid, which showed off her long, graceful neck. The urge to kiss her there was almost overpowering.

“You look great, too,” she said. She reached out for the box he was holding, wondering what he got her when she told him she didn’t want anything.

“Do you like it?” he asked hopefully as she held up the wristlet.

She slipped it on, then held out her hand to admire it. “It’s perfect,” she grinned.

Her parents wanted photos, and they took about a million of them standing in front of the fireplace. The portrait Peeta painted hung above the mantle now, and scarcely a day went by without someone mentioning how much they loved it.

“We really have to go,” Katniss said after another set of photos outside. She took his hand and led him to the Bronco, calling out goodbye to her family over her shoulder. They each had a bag packed for the lake, neither expected home until sometime tomorrow. After prom parties were more anticipated than the prom itself; it was everyone’s first taste of freedom, a teaspoonful of something they’d have in limitless supply a few months from now.

“I hope the food’s good,” she said on the way to the banquet hall. “I’ve been poked at and prodded all day. I didn’t even get to eat lunch.”

“Beauty is pain,” he teased. He reached over the gearshift and took her hand in his. “You really do look incredible.”

“You too,” she said, squeezing his hand back.

The food was awesome, which put Katniss in a good mood. As everyone at their table sat around talking, she kept playing with her corsage, turning it over in examination and smiling as she discovered something new about it. “Where did you even find this?” she asked as her finger traced over the arrow clasp.

“I made it.”

“You made this?”

“Well yeah. I didn’t really like any of the ones at the florist. They didn’t seem right for you,” he explained.

She kept looking down at it then back up at him. She mouthed another thank you, then leaned in to
softly kiss him. They were oblivious to anyone else around them, and he wondered if it was possible to actually be this happy.

“Want to dance with me?” he asked after.

She agreed, and he took her hand to lead her out to the dance floor. A Snow Patrol song was playing, and he held her close as they swayed to the music. “Chasing Cars” melted into Rascal Flatt’s “My Wish” but she didn’t break away to go back to their table. “This isn’t so bad, huh?” he whispered in her ear, holding her hand against his chest as she laid her head on his shoulder.

“No,” she replied. “It’s not bad at all.”

The slows songs were dispersed between dance hits, and he promised not to embarrass her too much if she stayed out on the floor with him. They laughed together until the prom king and queen were announced, and Glimmer and Cato could barely look at each other as they ascended the stage.

“Ready to get out of here?” he asked at midnight. Plenty of others already left, eager to begin the fun without any adult supervision. She agreed, and he slipped his tuxedo jacket around her shoulders as they walked out to the car. “It’s probably too cold to swim.”

“Guess we’ll just have to find something else to do,” she said, throwing him an intriguing look as he helped her into the passenger seat.

From the moment she said that, his imagination opened to endless possibilities, each one filthier than the last. It was a 30 minute ride to the lake and he was painfully hard for most of it, but she was quiet and contemplative as he drove. He was dying to know what was going through her mind, if it was anything like what was going through his.

Finally the outside lights to Cato’s massive lake house came into view, and Peeta parked behind a long line of cars as they discussed where to meet up in an hour. He wanted nothing more than to whisk her away to somewhere completely private, but they had to spend at least some time with their friends first.

Cato sat on the front porch with Clove, his new girlfriend, in his lap. They said hello as they went past, leaving him to his throng of surrounders who were all vying for some attention from their high school’s king. Inside, Katniss spotted Madge and took off in her direction, and Peeta found Thresh and Marvel by the beer table. He twisted the cap off a Budweiser as he joined them, listening to the story about Glimmer’s fight with her prom date, an 11th grader. Marvel said she was losing the breakup.

Someone tapped his shoulder, and he turned around to find Katniss. She pushed up on the tips of her toes and whispered, “Don’t drink too much,” in his ear, then headed off again with Madge next to her. He lowered his beer as he watched her walk away.

“I’ll see you guys later,” he said, deciding to go after her.

He caught up with her outside of the kitchen, taking her by the hand and turning her around to face him. “Hi.”

“Hey. Having fun?”

He really wasn’t, but he told her yes. “Mind if I hang with you guys for awhile?” he asked, addressing both her and Madge.
“I’m actually on my way out,” Madge replied. “My mom needs me at home.” She hugged them both and said goodbye, leaving them alone at the door. There was loud music and all their classmates surrounding them, but neither seemed very interested in the scene.

“Has it been an hour yet?” she yelled out, trying to be heard over “SexyBack.”

It’d been about 15 minutes. “Yeah, let’s go.”

She took his hand and they snuck out through the back of the house. He just wanted to be alone with her outside somewhere, the slight chill in the air be damned, but she led him back to their car.

“Did you know there’re a bunch of cabins for rent around here?” she asked, going around to the driver’s side.

“I figured.”

She pulled out onto the main road. “Did you know they’re not as strict as, say, hotel rentals? They’ll rent a room to you for cash, even if you don’t turn 18 for another four days.”

“Katniss-”

“I just have to stop at the office and get our key.”

He looked out of window, trying to see the line of cabins in the dark as she sped past them. “Please tell me this isn’t where you stayed with your parents-”

“What? No! That was in Burnsville.”

“Good.”

She parked in front of a small brick building, turning in her seat to look at him. “Why? Having impure thoughts?”

“About you?” He smiled. “Always.”

“Good,” she said now, echoing him. “I’ll be right back.”

He wanted to see what she had planned for the night, so he waited patiently as she went inside the manager’s office. Another car pulled up next to them, and he vaguely recognized the kids as juniors from their school. The place must’ve been making a killing renting out to everyone who didn’t want to sleep on the floor at Cato’s.

Katniss returned with their key a few minutes later, telling him they were in cabin 12. Signs were posted everywhere to lead them in the right direction, and they pulled up to their destination a few short minutes later.

“Ready?” she asked him after a beat of silence.

“I think so,” he said, reaching behind him to grab their bags. “You?”

She got out of the car without answering him, and he followed her along the short path to the front door. There wasn’t much to the rental, especially compared to some of the luxury cabins along the lake. Katniss looked a little disappointed in it on closer inspection, but he was intrigued. “C’mon,” he said, taking the key from her. “Let’s go exploring.”

The one room bungalow didn’t offer a lot. There was a full-size bed, a small cart with a microwave
and mini-fridge, and another door to what he hoped was a bathroom. The few pieces of furniture were all mismatched, and there was a musty smell that their noses still hadn’t adjusted to.

“It’s perfect,” he declared, dropping their luggage to the floor.

“It doesn’t look anything like the pictures online,” she said disappointedly.

He sat down on the bed, lightly bouncing on the mattress to test its firmness. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel bad about her surprise. “The bed is great,” he told her, trying to stay positive. “Not too hard, not too soft.”

She slipped her shoes off and flopped down next to him. “Alright, Goldilocks, you can stop lying. This is kind of a dump.”

“Never would have pegged you as a snob, Katniss.”

“You don’t have to pretend to like it,” she said.

“Who’s pretending? You know what my favorite thing about it is?”

“What?”

“That I get to stay here with you,” he replied, smiling as he folded his arms behind his head.

She stretched out beside him, her smile as wide as his. “That’s my favorite thing, too.”

“You tired?”

She trailed her fingertip along the seam of his vest, stopping at the button. “No. You?”

“No. I’m up.” That was the truest thing he ever said, and he wondered if she noticed how he tried to hide it from her. He rolled onto his side, careful to keep a safe distance from her body. Now her hands had found his bare forearms, and she fiddled with the button of his dress shirt where he’d rolled it up to his elbows. He was glad she knew she had the freedom to touch him this way, but it certainly wasn’t helping the current situation.

“Peeta,” she said, sitting back up. “Will you unzip my dress?”

He never moved so fast in his life. She turned her back to him, her head dipped as she waited, and he slowly lowered it to the skirt, earning a peek at her strapless bra for his efforts. “Thank you.”

“Any time. Seriously.”

She held the loose top to her chest, probably trying to work up the nerve to slip it down. “You can take off your clothes too, you know.”

He sat up, scrambling to unbutton the vest and collared shirt. The little old lady at the tuxedo shop had asked him very sweetly to be careful with everything, so he folded each piece as he removed it, placing the clothing on top of the nightstand.

Katniss must have dropped his jacket on the floor when they came in, so he picked it up and laid it across the back of a nearby chair. “What?” he asked, noticing she was staring at him as he unbuckled his belt.

“You’re taking everything off?” She was still clutching the bodice, and he was down to his undershorts.
He stopped, scratching his bare chest in embarrassment. “I thought you wanted me to.”

“I do,” she said quickly, like she was trying to convince herself as well. She stood up and tugged down her dress, and his mouth fell open when he got a good look at her in nothing but her bra and underwear, which was the same soft sunset color and looked so good against her skin that he could barely think. She sat back down on the mattress, holding her hand out for him. “Come here.”

He nearly did a swan dive onto the mattress. The first thing he did was kiss her neck, which he’d been dying to do all night. A few loose tendrils of her hair tickled his nose, and he sighed in contentment, his tongue darting out to taste her skin.

She seemed to like it as much as he did, and he could feel her relaxing underneath him as his mouth trailed down. Her arms were around him, her hands playing at the band of his boxers, and when she slipped them underneath to clutch his backside, he groaned against the column of her throat.

Everything happened very quickly. The intense kisses, the removal of the rest of her clothes, the fumbling to make each other feel good. When he imagined this moment, and he imagined it a lot, he was much more reverent in his choices, taking time to admire every part of her body as it was revealed to him. Now all he could think about was driving into her, pinning her hips to the bed with his as he thrust inside.

“I have condoms,” he admitted as she rubbed against him.

She stopped moving, tipping her head back to look at him. His hand was between her legs, riveted by the soft curls there, and she’d been palming the front of his shorts, which were now damp from his excitement. “You do?”

“Yeah, I went and got some.” He thought she’d be relieved that he took the initiative there, but she moved her hand away and rolled over to stare up at the ceiling. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t think I’m ready.” She turned to watch him, gauging his reaction. “Are you?”

‘YES,’ he wanted to say. “I-I don’t know. I think so.” He slid his hand away to rest along her thigh.

“So you want to stop?”

“No. I mean, does it have to go that far? Can’t we just do other things?” She nestled against him and ran her hand down his hard stomach.

“Like what?” he asked hopefully.

The feel of her soft, small hand wrapped around him was unreal, and he bucked upwards as he clawed at the sheets. The only other touch he’d known was his own, and while she lacked the experience he had with his body, her ministrations were enough to get him off almost immediately. As she moved up and down, he showed her how to position her hand, guiding hers with his just the way he liked it. He tried to hold out, desperate to make it last as long as possible.

When he felt her erect nipples brush his chest, he hugged her to him, flipping them over so he could dip his head to take one into his mouth. Her squeal of surprise while she tried to keep her hand going had him smiling against her breast as he moved from one to the other, each lavished with equal attention until he couldn’t hold back anymore and he came on her stomach.

He dropped his head on her shoulder, panting until he could catch his breath as she brushed back his hair with her other hand. It was a tender, loving gesture, and he didn’t think anything could ever feel better than he did in that moment.
He planned on cleaning her up as soon as he regained his bearings, but then she was swirling the tip of her index finger in the milky pool near her belly button and raising it to her lips. It was the hottest thing he ever saw, watching her suck her finger into her mouth, knowing she was tasting him and enjoying it.

“Unreal,” he muttered as she did it again. He was not this lucky. Or maybe he was. Maybe falling in love with the most amazing, smart, and beautiful girl in the world was his gift from the universe for all its other shortcomings, and the bonus was that she loved his cum.

“You’re still hard,” she told him as she smeared the rest of it along her skin. He reasoned that he was probably going to die with an erection at this point, but she seemed determined to take care of it, moving down his body to take him into her mouth.

It was the most incredible feeling in the world as she taught herself how to pleasure him like that, and he was a helpless puddle unable to do much besides push away her hair and watch. The best part was how into it she was, how fully-committed she seemed to getting him off again. Locker-room talk had him prepared for something else entirely. Girls didn’t like it, he heard. Some flat-out refused, and others did it half-heartedly, teasing more than pleasing.

“I’m close,” he warned her later, ready to push her off so she didn’t get a mouthful. But she kept her lips wrapped around him, swallowing down the first spurt and sputtering with the consecutive ones. It trickled down her chin as she licked her glistening lips.

She climbed back up his body, and he hugged her tight as he caught his breath. “Was that okay?” she asked, and if he wasn’t so spent he probably would have broken into laughter. It was better than okay, he assured her. Much better than okay.

He said that he wanted to make her feel good too, so he positioned her above him on the bed, parting her knees to settle in between them. Peeta wanted to go down on Katniss since he found out what it meant. Guy talk made it sound like it was a chore, something to be done so you got yours, if it was done at all, but after the first swipe of his tongue, he knew it was his new favorite thing in the world. Her taste and smell were addictive, just like the feel of her silky skin against his cheeks as she kept closing her legs around his head.

It wasn’t easy to establish a rhythm or technique this way, but he needed her to enjoy tonight as much as he did. “You don’t like it?” he asked, patiently prying apart her thighs so he could breathe.

“No, I do.” Her body language told another story. She didn’t seem to know where to put her hands, which she braced against the bed as she twisted her hips away from him.

“Tell me what you like,” he panted a second later as he reemerged. “Let me know what feels good.”

“Okay.”

She didn’t say anything, though, and he obviously wasn’t doing this right. It wasn’t fair to her, not when everything she did to him felt so amazing. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled against her hipbone.

“No, I’m sorry,” she said, moving her hand to his hair, and his eyes fell shut as she lightly scratched his scalp. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“Nothing’s wrong with you.”

He crawled back on top of her, dropping light kisses on her forehead, cheeks, and nose. This seemed to relax her, and her hands started to roam the planes of his broad back until they settled on his ass again. It made him grin to know she liked parts of him because he liked every part of her.
“You tired now?” he asked. He hoped for another chance to take care of her, but he understood when she admitted she was exhausted.

After she burrowed under the scratchy and questionable sheets, he spooned behind her, holding her tightly to him. The sweet smell of her shampoo helped settle him down, while she was out almost instantly.

Pale blue moonlight illuminated the small room, allowing him to admire the contrast of their skin. He imagined the layers of colors he’d use to capture the moment, and then he was asleep.

The next morning, Katniss was especially affectionate as they showered and dressed. It was an early check out and her parents were expecting them home that afternoon, so they had to behave themselves, but that didn’t stop her from sneaking in hugs, kisses, and touches every chance she got.

“Say what you want about the room, but I slept great,” he told her as he loaded their bags into the Bronco.

“Me too,” she admitted with a smile. He mentioned her good mood, and she shrugged it off. “I just had a nice dream last night.”

“Was I in it?” he asked hopefully.

“Maybe,” she teased.

He took her hand as they turned onto the main road, and they stayed like that for the entire ride back. But as he pulled in the driveway, she pulled away her hand.

It is not easily angered
It keeps no record of wrongs…

It was probably the optimal situation in a scenario where Mr. Everdeen had to walk in on them. They were both vertical, for one thing. And the kiss- one he initiated because she said something funny while they were rummaging through the fridge- was pretty innocent as far as kisses go: it was quick, it was quiet, and their mouths were closed. He had his hands on her hips but they didn’t drop any further than that, and they both heard someone entering the room before there was any opportunity to heat things up.

Completely innocent, really.

So he wasn’t sure why he felt like they were caught doing something obscene. “C’mon you two,” Mr. Everdeen said as soon as they jumped away from each other. “Let’s have a talk.”

Her father seemed as reluctant to broach the topic as they were, but he sat down with them in the living room and did it anyway. “I can’t say I’m surprised, but I guess I figured this would happen later. Hopefully long after you were both out of the house,” he told them.

Prim, who heard them all in the kitchen, was overseeing everything from the corner of the room. “Mom warned you,” she said. “And I did, too. We even bet on it.”
“What are you talking about?” Katniss asked them. “What did you bet on?”

“That you and Peeta would end up falling in love,” she answered. “At least that was my bet. I think Mom just worried you’d start hooking up.”

Peeta could feel his face turning red as Katniss stuttered her defense that they have not hooked up. She didn’t say anything about the L-word.

“Prim, please go to your room,” her dad said in exasperation before returning his attention to them. “Okay, this is awkward for all of us. You don’t have to tell me what you are to each other. Maybe you don’t even know that yet yourselves. But we need to have some rules here.

“And the main rule should be…” he trailed off, and Peeta imagined about a million different things he could say. Nothing should happen in the house. Or the car. Or anywhere, to be exact. “Just be respectful.” It was all he said, and then he got up and headed back toward the kitchen.

Although mortifying, it seemed like a good opportunity to talk with Katniss about exactly what was going on between them. What were they to each other? What did she want to happen when she was going off to college in less than three months?

He didn’t know how to bring it up, and she was off the couch and in her room before he had the chance to say anything.

xxXXxx

May through June was a blur. Prom, Katniss’s birthday, and graduation all happened in less than a month, and it felt like a series of non stop parties and celebrations.

They never had a talk about their relationship.

The weekend following their graduation ceremony, Marvel threw yet another party, and Katniss agreed to go with him. She even held his hand as they walked in; no one else paid any attention to it, but it sent him into another tailspin of questioning.

They separated not too long after arriving, just like they had at the after-prom party, and he sat down with Thresh to talk about post-high school plans. Peeta was officially in at the mines, set to start the following week, while Thresh had joined the Air Force. As they talked about getting together again before he left for basic training, Peeta saw Gale Hawthorne pass by. Gale had been at the University of Virginia for the past two years, and he must’ve been back for his summer break. Peeta felt a twinge of satisfaction knowing Mr. Big Shot was still coming to high school parties.

After an hour or so passed, he set off in search of Katniss. She wasn’t with Madge, who was talking to another girl in the hallway, and she wasn’t anywhere outside, so he went back to check the rest of the house, sure their paths would cross at some point. He pushed open the swinging door that led into the kitchen, stopping short when he looked up. He’d found her alright, in Gale’s arms, locked in a kiss that didn’t look quite as innocent as the last one they shared.
As he burst out of the room, needing to get as far away from them as possible, he tried to process what he just saw. It didn’t make any sense to him, her kissing someone else, but it was exactly what happened.

It hurt, more than anything had ever hurt, but the anger was what surprised him the most. He was furious with her, and he wanted to make her hurt. He wanted her to feel what he was feeling, but tenfold. He wanted her to break down in tears as she realized whatever was between them was over before it even started. And more than that, she’d lost her friend. Forget anything he ever said about just wanting to be in her life. Now he’d be happy to never see her again.

He was done.

He scanned the room, eager to prove just how done he was. When he spotted Delly in the corner, laughing with a group of her friends, he charged forward in determination. She barely got out a hello before he grabbed her by the hand and led her outside. To hell with Katniss Everdeen, he thought.

“Are you okay?” Delly asked him.

He didn’t answer her, staying quiet and determined as he took her to the fire pit out back. There were a few people scattered around, but it was mostly private. Private enough anyway.

“Delly,” he said, spinning to face her. “I like you. I’ve liked you for years, and it’s probably time we did something about it.” She wasn’t the girl he was supposed to be giving a speech like this to, but life wasn’t exactly turning out how he planned.

“Peeta,” she said suspiciously, her brow scrunched. “What’s going on?”

If Katniss was making a face like that, he’d think it was adorable. He didn’t feel anything when Delly did it.

He was overthinking this, and that needed to stop. So he leaned in to kiss Delly, determined to shut up his thoughts. But she staggered backwards, pushing him away by his shoulders. “Peeta! What’s gotten into you? Where’s Katniss?” Her mouth dropped open in realization. “Are you fighting with her or something? Are you doing this to upset her?”

Any other words she said were barely discernible screeches as she tore into him, telling him she expected more from him, how terrible it was to treat Katniss that way, how disgusted she was that he’d use her to hurt someone else. Somewhere in the middle of her rant, Peeta realized she was absolutely right, and he fell down onto a nearby bench and clutched his head between his hands. He wasn’t sure when he started crying, but it shut Delly up pretty quickly. She sat next to him, gently patting his back. “What happened?”

He wiped at his eyes, holding back a sob. “Katniss. Katniss and Gale.”

“Are you sure? Katniss is crazy about you, Peeta. Anyone can see it.”

“I saw them,” he said, his voice breaking.

“Oh, Peeta. I’m so sorry.” She wrapped her arm around his back, giving him a comforting squeeze.

He was embarrassed to break down like this, and exhausted from the last ten terrible minutes. “Sorry I tried to kiss you,” he told her, brushing away more tears.
“It’s okay.”

“Peeta?” It was Katniss, her arms wrapped around herself as she stood in front of them. “Can I talk to you?”

Delly gave him a gentle nudge, silently urging him to hear her out, and he reluctantly agreed, following her to a secluded spot in the backyard.

“Gale kissed me,” she confessed once they were alone.

“So I saw.”

Her eyes widened. “You did?”

“Sorry to intrude on such an intimate moment,” he spat. “It won’t happen again.”

He tried to walk away from her, but she grabbed him back. “He kissed me,” she repeated forcefully. “We were talking one second and then he grabbed me and kissed me. Said he had to do it at least once.”

“Did you like it?” It was a pathetic question, and he sounded pathetic asking it.

The answer he hoped for, the only one that could have fixed all of this, was a firm “No.” Instead, she hugged her arms to her chest again and whispered, “I don’t know.”

And he thought seeing the kiss hurt.

“Well, let me know when you work it out,” he said, walking away.

They kept their distance until it was time to leave, and neither said a word on the drive home. It was just as well, he figured. They were on opposite paths in life, and this would have happened any way. At least now he knew where they stood.

He went straight to bed, feeling only numbness.

xxXXxx

She asked him to come to her room the next day, hurrying to shut the door behind him as he took a seat at her desk.

“I worked it out,” she said.

“What?”

“You told me to let you know when I worked it out. And I did.” She sat across from him, nervously wringing her hands. “I was thinking…you should keep the Bronco.”

“What?” he repeated. Were they dividing their assets like in a divorce? He shook his head, confused.
They already decided that she was going to take the SUV when she went off to school. It only made sense, since he’d be able to by his own car after a few months and he could ride to work with Mr. Everdeen until then.

“You should keep the Bronco, so you can visit me.” She reached out to take his hand, and he could feel her slight tremors as she rubbed their palms together. “Will you visit?”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Of course I will.”

“I don’t think you understand what I mean. I’m not talking about friends making sure they stay in touch,” she said, lacing their fingers together. “We’re more than that.”

“You’re not gonna lose me, Katniss,” he promised. He’d been up most of the night before thinking about everything, and he realized he didn’t handle things particularly well, even if he was brokenhearted. “I’ll always be your friend.” And he really would try to get over it, as hard as it’d be.

“I don’t want to just be friends,” she said, growing frustrated. “That’s what I’m saying. I don’t want to kiss anyone else, and I don’t want you kissing anyone else, either.

“That’s what I worked out. I only want to be with you.”

“You want to be with me?” Traitorous hope flared up at her words, but what could it really mean when she was leaving? “Katniss, c’mon. Do you really want to be stuck with some guy back home?”

“Some guy? What are you talking about? You’re not just some guy,” She dropped his hand and sat up, pacing along her bed. “I know it’s terrible timing, but what’s the alternative? Not being together when we finally could be? I mean, isn't it about time we had this talk?”

A talk like this was long overdue, but the timing was never right. He was living in her basement by the time he finally had enough courage to say how he felt about her, and that alone meant he couldn’t. Now she was going off to college, and what right did he have to try and tie her here? There was another factor to take into consideration, too. Gale and her muddled feelings for him.

“If we have a talk like this, I think we have to talk about last night, too,” he told her.

“But I told you already- I worked it out.”

“Katniss, you said you didn’t know how you felt about the kiss. How’d you work it out in less than 24 hours?”

“I just did, okay? I didn’t like the kiss. The only thing I feel about it is resentment. He didn’t have any right to do that.”

“But you said-“

She dropped her head in her hands, clearly growing agitated. “I don’t feel that way about Gale.”

“You think you might feel that way about me?” he asked cautiously.

“I know I feel that way about you.” She seemed to be carefully choosing what she said next, but all she released was a sigh. “I’m not any good at this.”

He took her hand back, never wanting to let it go again. “Just tell me what you want. That’s all you
have to do.”

“You. I want you.”

“Then you got me,” he said, not quite believing he could be this lucky. He wanted nothing more than to take her into his arms and kiss her, but he had to resist the urge. There was still the matter of living with her to impede their blossoming relationship, after all. “Or at least you will.”

She smiled, knowing exactly what he meant. For the family’s sake, they couldn’t start anything until one of them was out of the house. “How’s August 23rd sound?”

August 23rd, the day they would be dropping her off in Lexington. It was a day he had been dreading, but maybe it could have a whole new meaning for them. “It sounds perfect,” he said, untangling his fingers from hers so he could offer a formal handshake. “I guess this is okay until then.”

“Okay,” she said, laughing lightly as they shook on it. “So now it’s official.”

“Now it’s official,” he repeated. He held on, tenderly brushing his thumb along the back of her hand. Anyone else would probably think they were crazy, agreeing to start a relationship during a time when most people their age were parting ways. She told him once that she liked to buck tradition, and he sure hoped that was still the case. “It won’t be easy, you know.”

“Nothing worthwhile ever was,” she said.

*Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth...*

They loved him at the mines, where he worked hard to prove himself and was always willing to pick up extra hours. He ended every day covered in coal dust, absolutely filthy until he scrubbed it all off and watched the shower water run black as it circled the drain. But it made him feel a sense of accomplishment, and the fat pay checks gave him a sense of security.

Every other weekend, he happily drove two hours each way to the University of Kentucky campus in Lexington to see Katniss. The first few visits were a lot exploring the area and catching up on all the new things in their lives. And it was a lot kissing, makeouts that left them each breathless and wanting more. But as much as he loved that part, he also loved taking her out on dates. He liked picking her up and taking her to a nice restaurant. He liked paying. And she knew how much it meant to him because she allowed it.

Tonight, he planned to take her to a fancy steakhouse he’d heard rave reviews about, and he dressed up in new jeans and a button down, strategically rolling the sleeves up his forearms because he knew that was something she liked that.

He kissed her at the door, and then she led him inside her dorm. Her roommate, a quiet and bookish redhead, was notably absent. “She’s gone for the night,” Katniss told him when he asked about her. “We made a deal.”

“What kind of deal?”

“I told her I’d transfer notes for English Composition if she promised to scam for a few hours.” She sat on her twin-sized bed, patting the seat next to her.
“You’ve got something planned?” he asked, growing suspicious.

“Maybe.”

He wasn’t about to say no to a predinner grope-fest, so he cupped her face for a kiss, parting his lips over hers as he savored the moment. Privacy was rare and cherished, and now he wasn’t so excited about the restaurant. But they had reservations, he reminded himself reluctantly. They’d have to leave soon if they wanted to get there on time.

“We should stay in,” she said, lying down. She beckoned him to lie with her, and then she said what he didn’t hear months ago on prom night. “I’m ready.”

‘I’m ready.’ He was still trying to process that statement as she unbuttoned his shirt. Ready. She was ready.

Nerves kicked in with the realization of what she meant and suddenly he didn’t feel so ready. It was too soon, he decided. He was still trying to figure out how to please her, cataloging every miniscule hint she offered about what she liked and what she didn’t with all their recent over-the-clothes adventures. He had hoped to know her body better by this point so she’d enjoy it just as much as he inevitably would. There was never any doubt it’d be good for him, but he wanted it to be good for her.

She knew his reservations, and assured him she’d like it because she wanted to be with him that way. “I think about it all the time,” she confessed, yanking the bottom of his undershirt out of his pants.

“Whoa, really?”

“Yes,” she said with a laugh, still trying to divest him of his clothes. “And I know it’s going to be good no matter what because it’ll be with you.”

She rarely got so sentimental. He kissed her again, more intensely this time, and they both committed to the idea it was going to happen. “Can I undress you?” he wanted to know, and she nodded shyly as his hands slid underneath her sweater.

He peeled off each piece of her clothing with professional precision, stroking and kissing every patch of bare skin. When she was down to just her underwear, it was her turn with him, and she went for his belt buckle first in a display of impatience.

She asked if he still had the condoms, which he did, still tucked in the crevices of his wallet. When they were both naked, he moved on top of her and she hitched her legs over his hips, awkwardly positioning him against her. “Wait,” he said, feeling a need to apply the brakes again. It felt like his lower half was in a battle with his brain as he pressed closer to her. This was probably going to happen fast, no matter how much he tried to draw it out.

"What's wrong?" she panted.

"Can I go down on you first?" he asked. Not that he’d know what he was doing this time, either, but it was still his best bet to satisfy her.

She arched her back, her lock around his hips tightening, and he gritted his teeth to stop himself from pushing right into her. "Next time," she answered.

Next time. There would be a next time.

His pulled back to roll on the condom with a shaking hand, and then he entered her slowly, kissing
her to ease the pain. “I’m sorry,” he whispered when she grimaced. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she whispered back, wrapping her arms around his shoulders.

“Can you spread your legs a little more?” he asked. She was tensing up, which made it impossible to fully enter her. She took a quick, audible breath as she moved her feet further apart on the bed, and he braced himself on his forearms to rock his hips forward.

He thrust slowly and gently, watching her face for any hint of pain. She tangled her hands in his hair and told him he could go faster, encouraging him by slightly lifting her hips. “Oh god,” he muttered, dropping his head against her chest. It felt incredible, and he had to remind himself to take it easy and not move too roughly. He could feel how hot she was even through the condom, and that tight heat was better than he could have ever imagined.

“Harder,” she urged. “It’s okay, I like it.” Every twinge of pain in her expression told him that was a lie, and her discomfort was the only thing hindering his own enjoyment because it felt incredible otherwise.

He sped up, his fingers digging into the soft flesh of her thighs as he pumped into her. It was going to happen soon, he realized, feeling the intense pressure hitting its pinnacle as he clenched in anticipation. He bucked forward one last time before letting go, and he held her as he contracted inside of her. She kept her legs wrapped around him, peppering kisses in his hair as he recovered, and he’d have given just about anything to have her experience what he just did.

“Next time,” he said meaningfully, still breathless, “I promise it’ll be better.”

She lifted her head to kiss along his jaw. “I’m so glad I’m with you,” she said. “Being here and meeting other people made me realize it even more.”

Knowing how difficult it must have been for her to say these kind of things made the declarations all that more special. ‘I love you,’ he wanted to tell her, but it never seemed like the right time. He’d hate for her to think he was telling her that because of what they just did; he held off on saying it before for a similar reason, not wanting her to assume he said it to get her into bed. So he bit back the words and kissed her again, hoping to pour all the emotion he felt into it.

There was some blood on the condom when he removed it, but she said it didn’t hurt as much as she thought it would. It wasn’t fair, he thought as she left to clean up. It shouldn’t hurt at all, and she should like it just as much-if not more- than he did.

Not only did they miss their reservations, but the steakhouse was closed by the time they made it uptown. But she said there was another place she wanted to try. At the restaurant, as she slid into the seat across from him, he asked her, again, if she was okay, if this was all right, if she needed anything.

“I’m fine, Peeta,” she said from behind the menu.

He suspected as much, but there was still a part of him that just wanted to take care of her. He liked the feeling of being needed, especially by her. “So, uh, do you need any more textbooks?”

“No.”

“You don’t need anything?”

She set down the menu and reached across the table to take his hand. “Just you.”
She was on roll tonight with her feelings, and he bashfully ducked his head as he tried to hide is ridiculously goofy smile. Maybe there might never be a perfect time to tell her, and he needed to have faith that she knew him well enough to know it wasn’t just a line when it came from him. So after he composed himself, he turned his palm over to kiss her fingers. “I love you,” he said.

If she was surprised, she didn’t show it. “I love you, too.”

It was the greatest night of his life, and as he reflected on his other top moments, he realized she played a prominent role in them all. Later, back at her dorm, he kissed her goodbye and said he missed her already. “I know,” she said, tightly holding onto him, and he could hardly wait until next time. Next time. It made him realize that he still had a lot to look forward to, and if he was as lucky as he felt, she’d be right beside him for all of it.

*It always protects…*

He moved out of the Everdeen home the following spring after finding an affordable two-bedroom apartment close to the mines. Her parents, particularly her father, were insistent that he didn’t have to go. But it was time.

The day he left reminded him a lot of when they dropped Katniss off at school. Prim and Mrs. Everdeen cried as they hugged him, and Mr. Everdeen took him off to the side to impart some words of wisdom. “You’ve signed up for renters’ insurance, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good, that’s real good.” He sighed heavily as he pulled an envelope out of his back pocket. “Look, Peeta, I know you’re probably gonna put up a fight, but I want you to take this,” he said, handing over two checks. “The first one is from your parents. We told them they never had to give us anything while you stayed with us, but they insisted. So we put it all aside for you. That’s your money. It was always meant for you.

“And this is from us. Think of it as a housewarming gift.”

Peeta started to protest, but Mr. Everdeen didn’t want to hear it. “I know you’ve got your own money now, but we want you to have this. You love Katniss, right?”

“Yes,” Peeta admitted cautiously, not sure where this was going.

“And you want to help her and do things for her, whether she needs you to or not, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, now you know how we feel.” He wrapped him in a quick, one-armed hug. “You’re welcome back home anytime.”

After they were gone, it was so quiet he could hear every breath he took. He went to the spare room and unpacked his paint supplies, and then he went to the kitchen to make something for dinner. Everything he had right now- the few pots, pans and dishes, each towel- was from the Everdeens.

Katniss called while he was cooking, and after she told him about her finals, he told her all about his first evening in his new place. She couldn’t wait to see his apartment, she said, and he couldn’t wait
for her to see it, either.

He listened to the clock ticking as he lay in bed. He missed the Everdeens, definitely, but these walls were his, and he never had anything that belonged to him alone.

That night, he slept as well as he could without Katniss in his arms.

xxx

Ms. Portia insisted he see New York in the fall. “It’s about time you’ve visited me, don’t you think?”

He almost walked right past her outside of the airport. Her black hair was now a bright blonde, and she was dressed in a long skirt the color of blood, nothing like the modest ensembles she wore at school. But he’d recognize her smile anywhere, and when she greeted him with a big hug, it felt like nothing changed. “You’re going to love the city,” she said. “It’s an artist’s dream.”

She took him everywhere, leading him by the hand as he stumbled wide-eyed behind her. That first night, he ate takeout pad thai with her and her husband on their living room floor as she looked through his portfolio, which he’d put together at her urging. She said she couldn’t wait for everyone to see it.

‘Everyone’ was her core group of friends, all artists in one medium or another. They were just as eclectic as she was, and every bit as nice. They all met at a trendy restaurant that felt like the epitome of the city, and he felt completely out of place as a country boy lacking all their culture.

“This is Mitchell,” Portia said, introducing her to one of the men at the table. “He’s an associate professor of psychology at NYU.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” Peeta said, extending his hand.

“You too, Peeta. I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m actually doing some research on dyslexia and artistic ability, so I’d love to talk to you about it sometime if that’s okay with you.”

“Um, okay,” he said, surprised. It was rare for someone to bring up the D-word around him, but Mitchell was very blasé, to use one of Portia’s words.

“I was diagnosed at 16, but I’ve been drawing since I could hold a pencil. When did you start painting?” Mitchell asked. He twirled some pasta around his fork, waiting patiently for Peeta’s reply.

“I,uh, guess I was around 6 or 7 when I got my first real paint set.” He couldn’t wrap his head around having something like that in common with Mitchell. Mitchell was a professor.

“It’s hard to believe you’re only 20,” a woman told him as she flipped through his work. He thought her name was Olivia, but it was near impossible to keep track of everyone at this point. “You’ve got a great eye.”

“And great eyes,” another man said from beside him. His hand had been on Peeta’s knee for the better part of half an hour, and as it inched up his thigh, Portia laughed.
“Leave him alone, Flavius,” she said. “Peeta’s straight. And very taken.” She turned to a page in his portfolio, showing off the portrait to everyone around the table. “Here’s his girl.”

“My, my, you are in love, aren’t you,” Flavius said, admiring it.

The woman-whose name was actually Octavia-seemed particularly interested in his portfolio, and she told him about her artists’ network, an online studio exhibiting paintings that allowed clients to commission an artist of their choice based on style, price, and other factors. She said it was a great opportunity to get work from across the world, and while they’d only been up for a year, they had tremendous success. “Would you be interested in making yourself available for commissions?”

He nodded dumbly, never imagining he could get paid for his paintings. Portia squeezed his shoulder, something she’d always done to let him know she was proud of him, and he beamed back at her.

“Maybe you’ll move to the city one day,” she said when she saw him off at the airport. “I’d love that.”

“Maybe,” he laughed, but he knew it’d never happen. He already missed his small town, and he could never feel at home here. But clearly she was, and he was happy for her. “Thank you for everything, Portia,” he said, hugging her goodbye.

“You dropped the title!” she said, grinning. “Finally!”

He turned beet red, an apology already brewing, but she only laughed. “It’s okay, Peeta,” she said. “I’m not your teacher anymore. We’re friends.”

As he boarded the plane, he sent a text to Katniss promising to call when he arrived home.

She sent a reply that said, “Can’t wait.”

Neither could he.

xxXxxxx

“I’m so hungry,” she whined, and he laughed as he lightly touched the brush to the canvas. The infant’s eyelashes were long and dark, resting against her soft cheek as she slept, and he wanted to capture each one.

“If I were there, where would you want to go eat?” he asked conversationally, and she groaned.

He had his cell propped against an extra easel as he worked, and every one of her sighs crackled over the speakerphone. “I don’t know. Anywhere. Everywhere.”

She had a final exam left before she’d be done for the summer, so both agreed he should skip his regularly scheduled trip. She’d be home soon, but not soon enough.

“What about The Capital?” he asked.

“Yessss,” she said. “Definitely.”
“What would you get?”

“Mmm, I don’t even know. I’m gonna look up the menu online.” He could hear her moving around in the background, and she returned a minute later, reading descriptions from the entrée section.

“Now you’re making me hungry,” he laughed.

“Hey, I got some good news.”

“What’s that?” He finished one area on the canvas and moved to another. The portrait was a gift for a miner at work, something he’d been putting together since Thom sent him a picture of his newborn baby girl earlier in the evening.

“Well, if all goes well tomorrow- and I think it will, it’s my easiest class- I’m on track for a 4.0 this semester.”

“Are you kidding me?” He put down the paint brush and picked up the phone. “Holy hell, Katniss, I’m so proud of you. I’m gonna take you to the Capital to celebrate.” There was a beep, and he pulled the display back to see Prim’s name flashing. “Hey, just a sec, your sister’s calling.”

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, I called earlier to wish her a happy birthday. She’s probably calling me back now.” Prim was out celebrating her sweet sixteen with some friends, and he hadn’t had the chance to talk to her since he got off work. He hit the button to switch the line. “Hello birthday girl.”

“Peeta,” she sniffled. “Could you come and pick me up?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said unconvincingly. “I’m okay. But please pick me up.”

“Where are you?”

There was a long pause, which set Peeta into another panic. “Prim?”

“At the slagheap,” she said softly. “I’m at the slagheap.”

“I’m leaving right now. I’ll be there in 10 minutes.”

She hung up and he switched the call to Katniss, being careful to steady his voice. “Hey, Prim needs a ride home so I’m gonna go pick her up. Talk to you later?”

“Okay. I’ll call you tomorrow after my exam.”

“Sounds good. I’m so proud of you, Katniss. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

He jumped up to grab his keys as soon as he ended the call. Prim never called him crying before, and the sound of her small voice breaking over the phone sent chills through him. He hoped that whatever happened, she was okay.

He made it to the slagheap in record time, and pulled off the road when he saw a cluster of cars with their headlights on. Prim was sitting on top of a rock, her knees drawn to her chest as she waited for him. He put his truck in park and hopped out, leaving his own headlights on as he went around the
front, and that was when he noticed a small group of teenagers hanging out near their vehicles. He vaguely recognized some of them from the high school. Davis Hadley, Cato’s younger cousin, was a freshmen varsity wrestler during Peeta’s senior year. He always seemed like a good kid, which is why Peeta didn’t have any reservations when Prim started dating him a few months ago.

“Hey, it’s Mellark!” he called out now, and Peeta stared him down as he walked towards him. “What’s up?”

Prim was still sitting on the rock as Peeta approached the group. The sound of her voice when she called coupled with so many teenage boys around set him on edge, and he was glaring their way as he called out for Prim.

“How’ve you been, man?” Davis persisted.

He ignored their question as he shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. It was a warm night in late May, but he felt a chill in the air. “I’m here for Prim,” he said tersely.

“We in trouble or something?” Davis laughed.

“Do you want trouble?” Peeta snapped, and that sent Prim running over to him.

“Can we go? Please?”

“Yeah,” he said, still not taking his eyes off Davis. “Let’s go.” He guided her to his car, helping her into the passenger seat and then shutting the door behind her. As soon as he was in the driver’s seat and shifting into gear, he asked her if she was alright. “What happened?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing, I’m okay,” she insisted, ignoring the fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Do we need to go to the hospital? Or the police?” It scared him to death to imagine what could have happened to her out there.

“No! I promise, it’s not like that.”

He knew he wasn’t going to get any details from her, and that was okay. “I’ll take you home then,” he said.

“Can we just drive around for awhile?” she asked, rubbing her eyes. “Please?”

“Yeah, of course.”

She twisted in her seat to stare out the window, and he could hear her sniffles over the roar of his engine. He wished there was a way to give her some privacy right now. It was a terrible feeling, trying not to cry in front of someone. It was vulnerability and embarrassment mixed with the physical pain felt when holding back tears. A tight throat and stinging eyes and knowing you’re laid bare when your heart already hurts. He didn’t want her feeling any worse than she did, but he wasn’t sure how to make her feel better. But he knew who could.

“How about I call Katniss for you? I think you’ll feel better if you talk to her about it.”

“She’s busy, she’s got finals,” Prim said.

“Your sister always has time for you, kiddo. You know that.” He held up his phone to convince her further. “She can help.”

She took it reluctantly and turned away from him as the call connected. He could hear Katniss
answer with a breathy, “Hey,” thinking it was him again.

“Katniss?”

“Prim! What’s wrong?”

She started crying harder as Katniss asked frantic questions, and he had to overhear the entire conversation about Davis and a group of their friends who were celebrating her birthday. He took her to the slagheap, of all places, and invited a bunch of guys Prim barely knew. “He was acting so different,” she cried. “It’s like I didn’t even know him.”

She sobbed harder, and he could barely understand what she was saying. “He-he told everyone. He told all his friends wha-what we did. He wa-was joking about it. Said I should sh-show them-”

He couldn’t listen to any more of it, so he hit his four-way flashers and pulled off the road before reaching over to wrap her in a strong hug. She was shaking in her outburst, and his phone slipped from her hand. He picked it up and asked Katniss what she wanted him to do.

“Can you bring her here?”

“Yeah, as soon as I calm her down. I’ll call you when we’re almost there.”

Prim was crying so hard he worried she’d hyperventilate. He stroked her hair until the sobs subsided and she hiccuped. “We’re gonna go see Katniss,” he said. “How’s that sound?”

Her answer was another round of crying. He waited until she calmed down again, probably out of exhaustion. “I’m so stupid,” she said.

“No you’re not,” he said with disbelief. “You’re not stupid at all. Davis is just an awful person. I didn’t expect that from him, either. He lifted her chin up, forcing her to look at him. “I know it’s doesn’t help the pain now, but I promise it’s going to be okay. It’s hard to imagine when something hurts so much, but it will be.”

“Yeah, right,” she scoffed. “I’m gonna die alone.”

“Oh c’mon,” he said, laughing softly as he pulled back. “I bet you a million dollars you fall in love someday with someone else.”

Her voice was meek as she asked, “But what if I don’t?”

“Well, then I guess you find a beach somewhere, and you wipe your tears with hundred dollar bills.”

That made her crack a small smile, which he claimed as a victory. “You know I always pay off my lost bets. This one is a win-win.”

Her smile fell with a sigh. “What if that guy turns out like Davis?”

“The right one won’t,” he told her confidently. “The right one is going to love you with everything he is, and he’s going to know how lucky he is to be with you. He won’t hurt you the way Davis did because it’d kill him to see you in pain.

“Now I’m not saying he won’t mess up a few times. You’ll mess up sometimes, too. But you’ll work through it together. The right one won’t be the perfect one, but that won’t matter, because he’s the right one for you, and he’ll be yours.”

He gave her one more squeeze. “You’re going to be happy again, Prim. And that’s not a bet, okay?
It’s a promise.”

She fell asleep before they crossed the Kentucky line, and when she woke up a little later, groggy and still sad, he tried to cheer her up by talking about the party they were having for her Sunday. Katniss would be home for the summer, her parents had a big surprise ready, and he was going to bake the birthday cake for her. “Chocolate cake with buttercream frosting?” she asked hopefully.

“Oh, of course.”

He pulled up to Katniss’s residence hall, where she was waiting on the steps, dressed in sweats and one of his old t-shirts. Prim started crying as soon as they hugged, and Katniss mouthed, “Thank you,” to Peeta as she held her.

He cupped her face in his hand, caressing her with his thumb, and then returned to his car to head back home.

Always trusts…

Glimmer called him crying, saying that Cato bailed on his weekend with Caz, again, and that her son was heartbroken. “I’ll take him somewhere,” he promised her, hoping Katniss would understand if he rescheduled their date. “Tell him I’ll see him later.”

Peeta remembered when Cato told everyone Glimmer was pregnant. “My life is over,” he told them at the time. That turned out to be far from the truth, because Cato got to go off to college and do everything he always planned to do. Peeta was almost positive that no one on the WVU campus had any idea that Cato had a little boy back home.

“Could you take him for the night?” Glimmer asked, no hint of tears this time. “I have plans.”

“Yeah,” he said, holding his tongue. He tried to practice patience with Glimmer because he knew she had it hard, but sometimes she was so Glimmer that he wanted to scream. “No problem.”

He’d just gotten off work, so he took a shower to scrub off the coal dust before he called Katniss. Her phone went to voicemail, so he imagined she was still in her senior research symposium, probably poring over her paper on non seismic analysis procedures. He left a message, regretfully telling her he was needed at home and imploring her to return his call as soon as she could.

Caz, the happiest four-year-old in the world despite his questionable parental figures, leaped into his arms when Peeta picked him up at Glimmer’s parents’ home. “Can we go to Chuck E. Cheese’s?” he asked with a prominent lisp. “Please?”

“What’s there to do at Chuck E. Cheese?” Peeta asked, teasing him. “I thought we could do something fun, like cleaning.”

He looked horrified. “Cleaning?”

“Scrubbing the floors, washing the dishes, putting away all the toys. Hours of entertainment! But I guess we can go to Chuck E. Cheese, if you insist.”

“I insist,” he said, struggling with those S’s.
“Then I guess that’s where we’re going.” He strapped Caz into the booster seat in the back of his Santa Fe, and started for the arcade. Halfway there, he realized he left his wallet on top of his dresser. “Uh oh, we gotta make a pit stop, buddy. Unless you want to pay for this one.”

Caz unzipped his Spider-Man bookbag and pulled out his Spider-Man velcro wallet, both birthday gifts from Peeta. “I got my superhero card,” he announced, holding up the toy ID.

Peeta laughed as he made the next possible turn. “We’re all set then. I just got to run home for a second first.”

He carried Caz up the steep and narrow stairs leading to his apartment, and as they rounded the corner, he saw Katniss leaning against his door. “Hey!” he said, surprised and elated. “What are you doing here?”

Her expression relaxed, just briefly, at the sight of Caz resting his head on Peeta’s shoulder, but her eyes were hard when they met his. “Got your message.”

“What’s wrong?”

She stood up as he fumbled with the key. “Oh nothing. What could possibly be wrong?”

Great, he thought, knowing she was gunning for a fight. He should’ve seen it coming as soon as he agreed to take Caz. He put the little boy down when they were inside and told him to take a bathroom break before they left. “Yell if you need me,” he said as Caz shut the door behind him.

“Tell me you wouldn’t be upset if this situation wasn’t reversed,” she said angrily. “What if it was Gale and not Glimmer?”

“Oh my god, are you serious right now?”

“You don’t see any parallels?”

“Not really,” he said defensively. “I have zero history with Glimmer. I’ve never had any romantic interest in her, whatsoever. Never even considered it.”

“She kissed you!” Katniss hissed.

“And I stopped it the second it happened. This is never about Glimmer, Katniss. It’s about Caz. He needs someone he can rely on.”

“How naive do you have to be to not realize she’s using him to get to you?”

He wasn’t naive at all. If he had been, he snapped out of it real quick six months ago, when he dropped off Caz one night and Glimmer asked him to stick around for a minute after she put him to bed. He thought she wanted to talk to him about Marvel, who she started seeing recently. But she must have mistaken his upset over the relationship for something else, because she returned without any clothes on and practically pounced on him. “No one has to know,” she told him as tried to kiss him again, but he held her back by her shoulders. “You should be able to appreciate the saying, ‘Have your cake and eat it too.’ I can be your cake.” If she weren’t naked, and the situation wasn’t so absurd, he would have laughed at how terrible the line was.

He got her to get dressed and sat down with her to talk it out. He wasn’t jealous of Marvel, he clarified. He just wasn’t sure if Jason was the right guy to have around Caz. Peeta worried constantly about the kind of guys she brought home. The news was filled with tragic stories about mothers’ boyfriends hurting or worse their children, and he didn’t trust that she was discerning enough in
that regard. Hell, she entrusted Caz to Peeta when he was sixteen and she barely knew a thing about him.

She broke down into tears that night, and it was one of the most genuine displays of emotion he ever saw from her. He left her sleeping on the couch, and he called Katniss and told her everything that happened, feeling guilty he let it get that far. “She can be your cake?” she repeated angrily. “Doesn’t she know how good I am with a bow and arrow?”

“Even if she was, it wouldn’t work,” he told her now. “I’m with you. I’m in love with you. Nothing is going to change that.”

“Peeta,” she said, trying to sound calm, “I know you’re a good person. You’re a great person. But you’re not a saint. So I’m sorry if the idea of a beautiful blonde throwing herself at you while I’m two hours away makes me nervous. You’re a guy!”

“I’m a guy, not a cheater,” he snapped back. “And I don’t think you realize how shitty it is to imply that I have no self-control. If I wanted her, I could have had her and you wouldn’t have ever known about it.”

“So you considered it!”

He didn’t know if he was more angry or hurt. One emotion was starting to win out, but just as he was about to go off on a tirade, the bathroom door opened and Caz announced he was ready to go. “We’re not doing this now,” he said, whispering it in her ear. “He hears enough fighting from everyone else.”

Thankfully he was oblivious to any tension between them as he pulled out one of the counter stools and climbed up on it. “Katniss, you gonna go to Chuck E. Cheese’s with us?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t really invited,” she said, looking to Peeta.

“You know you’re always invited,” he said lowly.

“You should come! It’ll be lots of fun.”

“Okay. If it’s alright with you.”

“Yeah!” Caz said, holding up his fist. “We’ll win lots of tickets!”

He was right about that, because Katniss and her perfect aim dominated many of the games they played, especially skee-ball. She started to relax more throughout the evening, the fun she had with Caz helping mitigate some of tension between her and Peeta. He thought there was going to be another close call when the server mistook Caz’s ashy blond waves as a paternal link to him, but Caz was quick to correct it. “He’s not my daddy,” he said. “He’s just my Peeta.”

As he played in the sky tube above them, Katniss sidled up to Peeta and apologized. “I do trust you,” she said, watching Caz. “But I planned on surprising you tonight and when I got your call and I knew you were going to see Glimmer...it bothered me.”

“I get it. And you’re right, you know, about if it were reversed. It’d drive me crazy if I thought you were with Gale all the time when I couldn’t be around.” He knew what it was like to feel jealous. Even seeing her talking with her friend Finnick Odair, an alum from their high school who was now a graduate student at UK, sent him into a panic.

“I know you’re important to him,” she said, watching Caz. “And I understand why he’s important to
“I guess I don’t like sharing you with anyone, as ashamed as I am to admit it. But I’ll share you with him.”

“You don’t have to share me,” he said with a smile. “I’m all yours.”

“Good.” She held up her empty plastic tub. “Can I have more tokens?”

That night, they both tucked Caz into the small bed he kept in his spare room. “Will you stay with me?” Peeta asked her after they shut the door.

“Yeah,” she said, lacing their fingers together as she followed him to his bedroom.

“Remember, he’s sleeping on the other side of this wall,” he told her quietly. “So no funny business tonight. You’re gonna have to learn to control yourself around me.”

She rolled her eyes as she changed into one of his shirts. “I’ll try my best.”

She curled up next to him in bed, resting her head on his bare chest. “Peeta?” she asked after a few minutes of silence. “When do you think you’ll quit the mines?”

“I don’t know. Not for a few more years, at least. I still don’t know what else I’ll do.” He was getting a good amount of traffic on Octavia’s site, and when he offered himself for commission, he got work, but he could never make what he did at the mines doing that. He had a hefty savings now, more than he ever imagined making, and he was reluctant to give that up.

“I was thinking about it,” she said. “And you know I’m going to be working full-time, and I don’t want to give that up. So maybe...you could stay home?”

“Like a househusband?” he asked.

“Yeah, exactly. And then, when the time’s right, like a stay-at-home dad.”

Dad. Just the idea of it- having children with Katniss- was enough to make him feel like he was floating away on a cloud. “I’d love that,” he said.

“It seems like a good fit for us, right?” she asked, lifting her head to look at him. “Since we’re so nontraditional and all.”

He planted a kiss near her temple. “Right.”

“You better stop now,” she said, pulling back. “I might not be able to control myself after all.”

He heaved an exaggerated sigh and said that as long as she promised to be very, very quiet, he’d allow her to touch him.

“Touch you?” she laughed. “What about me?”

“You’re so greedy,” he grinned, sliding under the covers. He knew she wouldn’t be able to keep it down, so he covered her mouth with one hand as he parted her legs with the other, and soon her muffled protest turned into a moan.

*Always hopes...*
It was something they discussed, at length, about a million times. They were going to get married one day, and now that she was almost done with her master’s degree in structural engineering, they could solidify their plans. All he had to do was ask, and he was pretty damn sure she was going to say yes.

Confidence in her answer didn’t help his nerves any. He wanted the night to be perfect, and it was far from it. He burnt the bread he was making with dinner, he dropped food in his lap while they were eating, and he stepped on the back of her heel while following behind her to change.

“Ouch! Dammit, Peeta!”

“I am so sorry,” he said, his face turning bright red.

“What’s with you tonight?”

“N-nothing,” he stuttered unconvincingly. “I’m great.”

He should have just hired a sky-writer. Other than getting her to the window on time, his effort would’ve been minimal. He would’ve leaned up against the wall with one of those cocky smirks while she stared out in amazement. “Whaddya say, baby? Make me the happiest man in the world?”

Then this chapter could end and the next finally begin, all without making a fool of himself.

No, that would’ve been terrible. He could never do that, never say that. “Dammit, nothing ever goes as planned,” he said out loud now.

She scrunched her brow in confusion, and she was so damn cute it nearly killed him. “What?”

“You know, I’ve spent immeasurable amounts of time going over what I would say to you in this moment. Since as far back as I can remember, I’ve been in awe of you. Then I was lucky enough to fall in love with you, and even luckier that you fell in love with me, too. There was never a time when this wasn’t in my head. This moment. This question.

“And now I can’t think of a damn thing to say. There aren’t words to describe how much you mean to me, Katniss. I try to tell you it as often as I can, and I try to show you it every minute of every day, but I don’t think you could ever understand it fully. I don’t think I even fully understand it. All I know is that you’re my whole world, and being with you is like the greatest dream come true.”

He got down on one knee, reaching for the ring in his pants pocket as she covered her mouth in surprise. The ring belonged to her father’s mother, and her parents gave it to him when he went to them and Prim to tell his intentions.

“I know traditional isn’t really our thing, but it feels right to do it this way. I love you, Katniss, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

She said yes.

xxXXxx

Prim’s new boyfriend, Bryan with a Y, was a really nice kid. She met him at Penn State, where they were both pre-med, and it must have been at least semi-serious because he visited during the summer
and she brought him home for Thanksgiving.

But for reasons not obvious to either Peeta or Katniss, Mr. Everdeen couldn’t stand him. He said his name like it tasted bad, spitting it out in disgust as he grimaced. It became a running joke between the couple. If something would go wrong, they’d look at each other and say, “Bryan!” in the same revolted tone.

A few days into his first visit, Bryan pulled him aside. “You’re in, man. You gotta help me here. How do I get him to like me?”

“Well,” Peeta said, not wanting him to feel bad, “it’s a totally different situation. I met him when I was eleven, and Katniss and I were friends for years before we started dating.”

“He’s going to hate me forever, isn’t he?”

*Probably,* Peeta thought. But he said, “Nah, just give him time.”

Time didn’t seem to be helping any. At the Thanksgiving table, Mr. Everdeen openly glared at him after they said grace. “Remember, Miranda,” he said in the kitchen earlier. “You can’t put pecans in the sweet potato casserole. *Bryan* is highly allergic to all tree nuts.”

Mrs. Everdeen and Prim were too caught up in wedding planning to pay much attention to the hostility. They went on and on about catering and flowers and music and dresses as Katniss scarfed down her food. “The wedding’s nearly a year away,” she said when she finally came up for air. “We’ve got plenty of time to figure it all out.”

“The wedding is less than 11 months away, Katniss. That time is going to fly right by. We need to commit to a few things here,” Mrs. Everdeen replied.

She took another bite of mashed potatoes. “Peeta’s taking care of the cake, Cinna’s taking care of the dress, and we’ve got the church and hall reserved. We’re set.”

“Well, there is one more detail we need to discuss,” Peeta said, nudging her elbow meaningfully.

“Oh. Right. Go ahead, ask.” She speared a piece of turkey and went right back to eating with a cavalier attitude that was almost maddening.

“Mr. Everdeen. Mrs. Everdeen. Prim,” he said, addressing them each. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to change my name.”

“To...what?” Mrs. Everdeen asked, not getting it.

“Um, Everdeen? I’d be Peeta Everdeen. Only with your permission, of course.”

“You’re going to take *her* name?” Bryan laughed, only shutting up when Mr. Everdeen gave him another withering look.

“I’d like to, if the other Everdeens approve.” Peeta knew most people were going to have Bryan’s attitude about it, but he didn’t care. As long as it was okay with her family, then that’s all that mattered.”

“I’d be real proud if you took our name, Peeta,” Mr. Everdeen told him.

“I feel the same way,” Mrs. Everdeen said.

Prim nodded in agreement. “Me too.”
“Oh! We have other news!” Katniss said, dropping her fork to her plate. “This is big. Peeta, tell them about Snow.” She said the name the same way her father said Bryan, which Peeta always found hilarious and apt.

“Yeah, okay. Senator Snow, or his assistant, I guess, asked me to paint his portrait. I named a ridiculously high price and he agreed to pay it.” Portia told him it was an unheard of opportunity for an artist his age, and that it would open doors he couldn’t imagine.

“You were commissioned by Senator Snow for a portrait?” Prim asked with a grin. “That’s amazing!”

“Commissioned,” Mr. Everdeen said, testing the word before smiling proudly. “That is amazing. And if it’s good enough for Snow, it’s good enough for us. Peeta, when you’re done with that, I’d like to hire you to paint a new family portrait. One with all of us.” He looked across the table and his face fell.

“But not you, Bryan.”

*Always perseveres…*

He stayed up with Katniss until midnight going over her technical presentation, prepping her with possible questions, encouraging her when she faltered. At this point, he’d be able to give it himself, he joked.

“Would you?” she asked, only half-kidding.

He rubbed her back reassuringly. “You’re going to do great, Katniss. You’ve got this.”

It was the biggest opportunity of her young career, this bid for a local infrastructure repair. She spent months going over every finite detail, and tomorrow she would present it to the municipality at their request. “I wish you could be there,” she said, not for the first time. “Just knowing you were in the room would make me feel a million times better.”

“I’m sorry,” he sighed. “You know I have to work. But I’ll be there in spirit.”

“I know.”

He set the alarm for 5 a.m., and she apologized for keeping him up so late as they climbed into bed together. “Don’t worry about it,” he told her.

A few minutes later, or at least that was what it felt like, it went off, and he groggily hit the snooze button before dragging himself out of bed. Katniss was sprawled out on her side, the blankets twisted around her feet like they always were in the morning, so he pulled the covers up and tucked them back over her.

In the shower, he soaped up and shampooed his hair, and he heard the curtain being pulled back as he was blinded by suds. “Katniss, I really hope that’s you,” he said, ducking his head under the water to rinse off his face.

“It’s me. But don’t breathe too easy, there’s an axe murderer in here with us.”
He opened up his eyes and looked her up and down. “But what a way to go.”

“Good morning,” she said, slipping her arms around his shoulders and giving him a sweet kiss.

“Good morning to you, too. Why are you up so early?”

“Nerves, I guess.”

“Anything I can do to help?” he asked innocently.

She stood up on the tips of her toes, her nipples grazing his chest, and whispered, “Fuck me hard and fast,” in his ear. Never one to deny her request, he kissed her roughly on the mouth before spinning her around. She leaned against him, hooking her arm around the back of his neck as she put one of her feet up on side of the tub.

He wanted to take his time- even if he wasn’t supposed to have much of it- and make sure she was absolutely ready for him. Instead of entering her, he slipped his hand between her legs and lifted her clitoral hood to find the spot that always made her knees buckle, brushing it back and forth just the way she liked it.

It took a long time to get to the point where he knew her body as well as he did now. She was a tigress when it came to his pleasure, but always so shy when it came to her own, too timid to tell him what felt good and what didn’t. It took many encounters before she opened up to him, and he’d never forget the first time he made her come. He’d been on top of her, still the only real position she seemed comfortable with, and he decided to grind his hips down on hers rather than the usual thrusting. Her eyes widened as she grabbed his biceps. “Like that,” she said, which encouraged him to find a rhythm that way. He rocked in a circular motion, pinning her with his hips, and she moved her hands to his back, her short nails biting into his skin. “Yes, just like that,” she kept repeating, spurring him on until he felt her clench around him, and that was when he knew it was real. She called out his name as she climaxed, and he tried to absorb every moment of it, every spasm around his cock.

After that, she was a lot more receptive to his ideas for her pleasure. One night, several months after that first time in her dorm, she let him go down on her for over an hour. “Get comfortable,” he told her before he started, surrounding her with pillows and lazily kissing her until she relaxed. He refused to come up for air until he got it right, and that was when he finally did. She moaned softly as he ran his tongue along the inside of her thigh, inching patiently toward her clit, which he licked slowly yet firmly as he tried to read every cue she gave him. Her alternated between up and down and side-to-side until she cried out, then she bucked her hips, which nearly broke his nose. He kept going, his jaw sore, his tongue throbbing. He could taste the difference after she finished, and it gave him the energy for another round. When he finally slid inside of her, she was so slick and so ready for him that he barely lasted three minutes.

Now their sex life was just as rewarding as every other facet of their relationship. Some nights she wanted him to be gentle and tender, and they’d spend hours caressing each other and softly kissing. Other times, usually after a spat, they’d both want it quick and dirty. There wasn’t a part of her body he didn’t spill onto at one point, and she was able to say words she probably never imagined uttering. Cock. Dick. Pussy. Nothing was off limits in those moments when they needed to come. Fuck. That was probably her favorite. Fuck me seemed to be her sentence of choice.

He could be absolutely filthy, too. She loved that, she admitted once. “And you seem so sweet,” she said as he pumped into her after detailing every nasty thought he had about her that day.

“Oh, I am sweet,” he said, flipping them over so she was on top again. “You want to taste just how
sweet I am?” She nodded eagerly, climbing off him to take him into her mouth.

Maybe they should have been embarrassed after, or at least felt guilty and offered up about a hundred Hail Marys each. But they didn’t. They fell asleep tangled together and woke up happy and satisfied.

“Faster,” she said as he rubbed his thumb against her. The hot water was pelting against his back as he lightly sucked on her neck, careful to not bruise her. Finally she screamed out, arching against him as she clamped down on his hand with her thighs. She nearly lost her balance with her orgasm, but he held her up, stopping her from taking a tumble in the tub.

His favorite feeling in the world was sliding into her after she came. She turned to face him, draping her arms over his shoulders as he easily lifted her up. He entered her slowly, and her legs locked around his waist as he gripped her hips to move her up and down.

She pulled his hair and bit at his shoulder, her feet flat against the shower tile. The water was running lukewarm now, and she encouraged him to let go. “I love you,” she said, and that did it for him, just like it usually did.

He shook against her with every spasm and buried his face in her wet hair. Orgasms usually zapped him off all energy, and now he was more tempted than ever to climb back into bed. “I’ll make you breakfast,” she said, soaping up and then ducking under the chilly water to rinse off.

“You don’t have to do that. Go back to bed, it’s an important day for you.”

“I’m making breakfast. Hurry up, okay?”

By the time he was dry and in his work clothes, she had bacon and eggs waiting. “I really wish I could go with you today,” he said as they ate, making sure to lay it on real thick.

“Me too. But it’s okay. I’m probably as prepared as I can be.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” he said, earning a glare. It was very easy, especially after long hours in the mines, to slip into a heavy West Virginia twang, and it drove her up the wall.

“Ain’t isn’t a word.”

“It ain’t?” he asked, teasing her some more.

She cleared his plate and dropped a kiss on top of his head. “Have a good day at work. Be safe.”

He engulfed her in a strong hug before leaving, telling her again that she’d do great, and that he was so proud of her no matter what happened. She waved goodbye at the door, and he took his time getting to his car, knowing he had quite a few hours to kill before she left for her presentation.

He drove to nearby diner first, ordering a cup of coffee and leisurely reading the paper. Very few articles held his interest enough for him to invest the time it took to understand it, but the headline about the north end bridge restoration- the project Katniss was hoping to secure- got all of his attention.

He picked up their dry cleaning next, and then he stopped off at the florist to check in on their flower order for the wedding. They had to make a few adjustments due to availability, and Peeta approved all the changes, knowing Katniss didn’t care what their centerpieces looked like.

At around 9:30, he drove to their house. He sat in his car, taking a moment admire it and all its progress, then he stepped out to find Chaff, the leader of the remodel.
“You checkin’ in, Boss?” he said, spotting Peeta coming toward him.

“No, sir,” he replied with a wide grin. “Just killing some time. How’s it going?”

“Good, good. We finished up the stonework yesterday, and got the rest of the siding on ‘round back. It’s gonna be beautiful when it’s all done.”

“It’s beautiful now. I can’t believe how far it’s come.” Chaff never ceased to amaze him.

“Just you wait. You’re gonna want to honeymoon in your home.”

Peeta laughed as he followed him around the back to see what was done since his last visit. After he was finished there, he checked his watch and weighed his options. It was ten after, and Katniss’s presentation was at 11. He needed to get back to see if her car was gone, but he didn’t want to risk her leaving at the same time and seeing him. It’d ruin the whole surprise.

But she’d already left, so he hurried up to their apartment and changed. He put on the nicest dress pants he owned, his favorite light blue button down, and a thin navy sweater over top. He carefully straightened his tie before tucking it underneath the sweater, and then he laced up his dress shoes and fixed his hair.

He spoke to Plutarch Heavensbee about this weeks ago, asking if it was alright to sit in on the presentation. The man chuckled in response, saying he saw no harm in it. Peeta knew a lot of the city officials and he felt at ease around them, but Katniss didn’t. From the moment she told him about it, he planned on being there.

She was busy organizing her notes when he entered the room, and she never looked up from them as he took a seat near front. He sat up straight and studiously, his hands folded in front of him. She began right on time, and her beautiful voice started out shaky as she introduced herself, but when her eyes met his, they flashed with surprise before a relieved smile spread across her face.

That night, they drove all the way to Lexington to celebrate her victory at her favorite restaurant.

*Love never fails…*

“Nervous?” Everyone that approached him seemed to ask that question. Their guests were pouring into the church, always early for any event, and each one who passed wanted an update on his mental health.

He wasn’t nervous. Not one bit. This was, hands down, the happiest day of his life. It was the precursor to all the other best days of his life. Anything good that happened from now on he would link to this moment.

But was he anxious? Definitely. Because it was 35 minutes until the start of the ceremony and one very important person had yet to arrive.

“How are you feeling?” Mr. Everdeen asked, clapping him on the back.

“Good,” he smiled. “I feel great.”

“You did a nice job with the tie,” he said, motioning to Peeta’s half-Windsor.
“I learned from the best,” he told him.

The man shook his head, trying to muster a laugh but feeling too emotional to manage one. “You know, Peeta,” he began, “it’s all official today. You’re officially a part of our family after you exchange those vows and sign the paper. But I want you to know, that for me, it’s been official for a real long time.”

“Thank you, sir.” It was one of the nicest things anyone ever said to him, and Peeta hugged him in appreciation.

Mr. Everdeen excused himself to take care of some things, and Peeta thought he might be a little choked up. After he left, Peeta paced in front of the entrance again, keeping his eyes peeled for Cato’s Mustang. He checked his watch and sighed.

More people arrived, each surprised to see him up front. “Getting ready to bolt?” Haymitch asked, barking in laughter.

Chaff gave him a loud smacking kiss on the cheek. Sister Effie Trinket smiled as she passed, telling him proudly that she was taking credit for all of this. “After all,” she said coyly, “I paired you two up years ago.”

His brothers shook his hand, and his parents stood back stoically, seeming unsure of what they were allowed to do. If there was going to be any sadness this day, it was at this part, but he thanked them all for coming and initiated the hugs. They were his blood, and no matter what happened, he would love them. His father told him awhile ago that his mother was getting the help she always needed, so Peeta hoped it was a step toward repairing their relationships.

He glanced down the corridor at the bride’s suite, where Katniss was waiting, and he caught a glimpse of Prim in her pale orange dress. As nontraditional as they claimed to be, he and Katniss were having the most stereotypical wedding imaginable. They had a flower girl and ring bearer (he hoped), her father was going to walk her down the aisle, and Prim planned on reading Corinthians 13. Neither of them opposed that. It seemed fitting.

Twenty five minutes before the start of the ceremony, Cato’s black sports car pulled up in front of church, and Caz hopped out, his garment bag in one hand and a card in the other. “Peeta!” he yelled out happily as Cato waved and sped off. He declined the invitation earlier, citing other plans, and Glimmer chose not to come as well. But Caz was there—finally—and that was all that mattered.

“Hey buddy!” He led him to the small room where he could change, but Caz insisted he open the card first. “I picked it out!”

It was a birthday card, not a wedding card, and Peeta laughed as he looked it over. “Spider-Man? This is awesome. I can guarantee this is the best card we’ll get today.” He pocketed the check from Cato without looking at it. “Thank you, Caz.”

“You’re welcome! Just pretend it says ‘Happy Wedding’ instead of ‘Happy Birthday.’”

“Will do. Okay, you can go in there to change into your tux. Let me know if you need any help.”

“K!”

A minute later, Caz cracked open the door. “Hey Peeta?” He held up his tie helplessly and Peeta crouched down to assist him.

“No problem, I can definitely help with this. So, the main thing to remember with a half-Windsor is
that you’re always working with the widest part of the tie. See this?” he asked, holding up the thick end. He looped it through the gap between the collar and tie. “It takes some practice to get it right, but I can always help you out until you learn how to do it.”

“Thanks,” he said, impressed by the finished product. “How do I look?”

Peeta pretended to study him for a moment, thoughtfully cupping his chin. “Oh no, this is terrible.”

“What’s wrong?”

“You can’t look better than me, Caz. Now Katniss is going to want to marry you, and I can’t have that. Mess up your hair,” he said, gently tousling it as Caz laughed. “Make a strange face. Do something to help me out here!”

Caz batted his hand away, still laughing. “No.”

“Fine then. Ready?”

“I think so,” Caz said nervously.

“You’re gonna do great. It’s the most important job today, you know. That’s why I’m trusting you with it.” He gave him the ring box, asking him if he remembered what he had to do, and Caz nodded.

“Peeta?” he asked timidly. “What would happen if I lost the ring?”

“Oh, I’m sure we’d find it. It’d have to be around here somewhere.”

“But if we didn’t find it?”

Peeta crouched back down, coming eye-to-eye with him again. “It’d be okay,” he said with a smile. “We’d figure something out.”

This seemed to appease him, and he gave a wide smile. “I won’t lose it.”

“I know, buddy.”

Prim rounded the corner, heading straight for them. “Hey! It’s almost time!” She instructed Caz where to go, and then she grabbed Peeta’s arm. “Not to take advantage of heightened emotions on your wedding day, but just wait until you see her, Peeta. I bet a hundred dollars that you’re in tears by the time she’s at the end of the aisle.”

“Not a good bet to make, Prim. I’ve got little wings on my shoes right now. Nothing’s going to make me cry.” He couldn’t imagine anything but a wide grin on his face as he saw Katniss walking towards him. Sure he heard about tears of happiness, but he never experienced it himself.

He had too much to look forward to to shed any kind of tears. Two weeks in Hawaii awaited them in the morning, and he couldn’t wait to smell the mixture of sea salt and sunscreen on her skin. Then, when they returned, they were moving everything into their new home. His last week at the mines was a month ago, but he had about ten different portrait requests lined up to keep him occupied. He was excited to get started on them, to paint in the sunroom overlooking their backyard. Their house was beautiful, and they were going to fill it up with love and memories and children.

“Make it fifty. I’m not totally heartless. You are so going to cry.”

It was wonderful to see Prim like this, joyful and lighthearted. It was her natural state. Bryan with a
Y was long gone. A few months after last Thanksgiving, she found out he was still seeing his high school girlfriend back home. Prim took it surprisingly well. She was busy with school and her friends, she told them. And, she added, she didn’t forget her old bet with Peeta. “Who could ever be lonely with a million dollars?” she said.

“How’s she doing?” he asked her now about Katniss.

“A little nervous. I gave her some champagne to loosen her up.”

“Oh lord,” he laughed. “She’s not drunk, is she?”

“No! Just a teensy bit buzzed. And she wants to see you. Well, not see you. She’s not allowed to see you. C’mon.”

He followed her to Katniss’s door, and she inched it open. “No peeking!” she warned. “It’s bad luck and it compromises the bet.” She walked away to give them their privacy, so Peeta took a seat on the floor, leaning against the wall.

“Hey you.”

“Hi.”

“Nervous?” He blanched as soon as he said the word. Now they had him doing it.

“Yes!” she admitted freely. “What were we thinking with a big wedding like this? We should have eloped!”

Nothing scared Katniss more than a huge spectacle with her at the center of attention. “It won’t be too bad,” he promised. “I’ll be right up there with you. Just look at me, and all you have to do is repeat whatever the priest tells you to.”

"Yeah," she said softly, and he could tell she was in deep thought. "Peeta, do you regret not writing our own vows?"

"I thought you didn't want to anyway?"

"I know, but you wanted to. Are you upset we didn't?"

"No," he told her truthfully. He was a little bothered at the time, when the deacon shot down the idea as soon as it was brought up. But it was for the best, anyway. Katniss wasn't the type to put those kind of thoughts on display for everyone, and when it came down to it he didn't want to, either. Everything he wanted to say to her- all the promises he wanted to make that weren't included in the ceremony- he would tell her when they were alone. He planned to do it later that evening, after they left the reception to spend their wedding night in the new house.

"I'm sorry," she sighed.

His brow furrowed in confusion, but she couldn't see it. "For what?"

"I wanted to surprise you and write my own vows and say them now. But I kept messing them up.” Their side of the church was so quiet that he could hear paper crinkling in her hand. "I couldn't decide where to begin. I started listing things I love about you, but there're are so many, Peeta. It'd be impossible to write them all down. I stopped at seven when my hand started cramping up."

"You wrote seven things you love about me?” he laughed. "Can I hear them?"
"It's dumb," she warned.

"No it's not. I think it's sweet."

She was quiet for a moment, and he thought maybe she was trying to kill time before the ceremony to get out of it. Then he heard the rustling of paper again. "I love how nice you are to the waitstaff when we go out to dinner."

He laughed again, loving that that was the first thing she thought of when writing her list. It was so undeniably her.

"I love how loud you are even when you're trying to be quiet," she continued. "You try so hard to let me sleep in and you always wake me up."

"And you love that?"

"Yes," she said resolutely. "And number three is that I love how you always roll up your shirt sleeves just past your elbows. You do that for me, don't you?"

"Yeah," he admitted with a soft smile. "I do that for you."

"Number four: I love watching you paint. I could do it forever."

"And number five is that I love how good you are with Caz. You're going to make the best dad someday, Peeta. I'm so lucky I'll get to be the one to have children with you."

"Katniss..." He could feel his throat tightening, and he wanted to slip through the open door and wrap his arms around her.

"I love how much you love my family, and that they love you just as much. That's number six." Her voice was breaking, too. He rubbed his eyes, and he wanted to make a crack about her conspiring with Prim to win fifty bucks, but he was just trying to keep it together.

"What's number seven?" he asked when he finally regained his composure.

"Something I don't think I should say in a church." She was outright crying now, and it was only going to trigger more tears on his end if he didn't rein this in. The ceremony was going to start in less than five minutes and he should really be at the alter by now.

"Did a lot of people show up?" she asked, sounding a little more put together. He imagined she was dabbing her eyes, careful to not mess up her makeup.

"Yeah, I think everyone showed up. Two hundred of our closest family and friends."

She emitted a groan, and then her hand popped out between the door and frame, landing next to him. He realized she must have been sitting the same way he was on the other side of the wall.

"Hey, what's this?" he asked, noticing the wristlet she wore. "You kept this all these years?"

"It's my something old."

"I thought I was your something old?"

She laughed lightly now without any hint of tears. "No. You’re my something else."

He reached over to take her hand, turning it over to trace the lines on her palm. "I love you so much,
Katniss. I can’t wait to marry you.”

“I can’t wait to marry you, either.”

It was almost time, so he said he’d see her soon, dropping a quick kiss on her hand. He went through the side door to get to the front of the church, and even he startled a bit at the sight of so many people in the pews.

He took his place at the alter, eagerly waiting for the procession to begin. As the harpist and violinist began with Pachelbel’s Canon in D, the doors opened. Everyone turned in their seat to watch Mrs. Everdeen walk down the aisle first, and she wiped at her eyes and smiled at him as she took her seat. His groomsmen were next, followed by Thom, his best man who squeezed his shoulders when he took his spot behind him. The bridesmaids walked next, and as he watched them, he was sure nothing would ever top this feeling of anticipation. Elation was the only word he could think of to describe it. Pure elation.

Prim followed behind, beaming at him the whole time. Caz and the flower girl, Gale Hawthorne’s three-year-old daughter, walked together next. Her little shoe got caught on the white aisle runner, and she stumbled forward, falling on her knees. There was a chorus of ‘awws’ as Caz helped her up, handing her back the basket of petals and holding her hand to finish it together.

“You did great,” Peeta whispered as he took his spot next to him, and he smiled back proudly.

Then it was the moment they were all waiting for, Peeta especially. The music faded and there was a heart-stopping several seconds of silence before “Here Comes the Bride” began. Everyone stood up, craning their necks to catch the first glimpse as the big wooden doors opened again.

The image of Katniss in her gown was something he would never forget. She smiled at him as she held on to her father’s arm, and he smiled back, trying to soak in every detail of the moment. Her veil, her hair, her smile, the slight pink to her cheeks from the champagne. He couldn’t believe how beautiful she looked, and he could only imagine how big his grin was as he took another deep breath to brace himself.

Her father hugged her before taking his seat, and Katniss reached for Peeta’s hand, squeezing it tight. “Hi,” she whispered, reaching up to brush away one of his tears. He didn’t even realize he was crying again until she did it.

Tears of happiness, he realized. It was the best bet he ever lost.

End Notes

An update for Thicker Than Blood should be posted Thursday evening, and I hope to have chapter three of Blowout up by the second or third week of July, depending on how much writing time I get while on vacation. Thank you for your continued patience with my updates!

I’m on tumblr as everlarkeologist. Please feel free to stop by and say hello. :) 

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