Beast and His Belle

by Falafel Waffel

Summary

His whole life was a masquerade. It wasn't until he met the outspoken Katniss Everdeen that Peter "Peeta" Mellark really began living. Modern AU set in New York City.

Notes

Welcome! Welcome! Welcome! This story is somewhat inspired by Fifty Shades of Grey but I tried to keep the characters as in character as possible which means the kinky fuckery is toned down some… But we haven't gotten there yet! Or have we?

A few things in this story violate the laws of cannon… I'll let you find them out the fun way! I'm writing this mostly for fun. Also I'm rambling.

The first few chapters aren't beta'ed but... After I think 6 the lovely Apecanin began helping me.

The song for this chapter is Enchanted by Taylor Swift. Actually a reviewer told me about the song and I reread the first chapter and that was the song that made me decide to name every chapter after a song. I forget who you are but if you find this, a million thank you's.
"This… Is…" Madge puts her foot on my rump and pulls the corset I'm being imprisoned in even tighter, "Ridiculous!" my back gives a sickening crack as the pressure aligns my spine, "Damn that felt good..." I purr.

"Please, we should be honored to be invited to the Benefactors Masquerade Ball..." she grumbles as I step into my gown. It looked much like Belle's from Beauty and the Beast of which I had the lead role in NYU's production this year... Definitely not the reason I'm wearing this dress, it's the only thing Madge owns that's large enough to fit me though our crappy eating in the last few weeks earned a few extra pounds around my stomach and unfortunately none in the breast area.

Mayor Undersee, Madge's father, was invited to this thing... But is "occupied" so he gave the tickets to Madge along with a generous donation to the school. Perpetually single Madge refused to invite anyone BUT me and guilt tripped me until I agreed. I was going to regret this night in a stuffy dress, choking corset and pinchy shoes in a confined space with big money.

"Should I put my hair up, or down Sleeping Beauty?" she spun around in her sleek off the shoulder pink gown.

"Leave it down, it's curly today, very sexy and fierce..." her hair was up in a very tight bun that must have given her a face lift though I couldn't tell.

I thumbed the mask on her dresser, lovely and silver with intricate glitter designs around the eyes and a black silk strap. Mine was a little fancier pale blue with gold lace patterns around the eyes and a gold feather to the side.

"The limo's here, ready Belle?" she holds out her arm and I pick up my "fancy night" purse, enough room for the ID, cell phone, a few bucks, my metro card, and lip gloss... and a condom. Who knows?

"Why of course Aurora, ready to find our Prince Charming's?" I joke lifting my skirt so as we walk out of her SoHo apartment, Madge came from money, old old money, another reason I was willing to go with her, she knew how to behave in fancy places and would definitely not let me act like an ass. I'm from the backwoods of Upstate New York at NYU on about ten different scholarships, and paying for my shitty Greenwich Village efficiency by tending bar and tutoring freshmen English students and some prissy high school Upper East Side brats.

"Mademoiselle's," our driver opened the door to the limo and bowed as we slid in, me stuffing the poufy yellow skirt as I tugged at the black silk profile choker I always wore. There's a hint of sarcasm or amusement in his voice... I like him, "There is a bottle of Champagne courtesy of Mayor Undersee on ice. Shall I open it for you?"

And here we were, the Mayor of New York's daughter and a urchin from a trailer park in the woods sipping fine champagne on our way to a masquerade ball in honor of the Mellark Family donating more cash than I could ever dream of making to New York University's School of Arts...

"I feel like I haven't seen you in ages," Madge sips at her bubbly.
I cock an eyebrow, "Oh Miss Undersee we simply must change that," I wave my gloved hand dismissively and we chuckle, "So where is this party?" I ask finishing off my glass.

"Mister Mellark's penthouse, it's on the Upper East side near my folks if you want to crash there as well..." she waggles her eyebrows as she goes to tie her mask.

Madge Undersee is like the Barbie I could never afford, blonde and perfect with a million fancy toys and accessories, I was doll with the sewn on clothes that was passed down from older to younger sister, "We'll see, I have work in the morning. I have to go interview the stuffy host of this shindig." I look out the window as drab apartments give way to beautiful homes and then even larger buildings with spacious apartments and luxurious penthouses.

The car slows outside of a tall white building, very old, very rich right across from Central Park. Prime NYC real estate.

A man waited outside and opened the door for us, "Evening sweetheart," I bristled as he called me sweetheart but took his hand, stepping out of the car in my ridiculous dress. I was more of a jeans and boots kind of gal.

"Hey Mister Abernathy," Madge smiled and the man kissed first my hand then her's.

I rocked on my heels, spun around and managed to put a good chunk of my hair up in a bun so I actually looked like Belle the rest spilled behind me, hanging in loose curls, "Well, they can't forget why you're here," Madge smiled, primping me as the smooth elevator lifted us to the top floor of this gorgeous old building looking over Central Park. Rent must be in the billions a month... Ok, major over exaggeration.

Mister Abernathy was our guide upstairs, not letting us out of his sight and helping me tie my mask so it was snug, "There you go sweetheart," he punched in a code and the gold elevator doors opened.

To say there were a lot of people in "Mister Mellark's Penthouse" was an understatement. The one great room was packed with ball gown clad tuxedo wearing New Yorkers whose identity was masked by rich silk and leather masquerade masks.

"Is your dad here?" I whisper loudly over the music, beautiful classical music perfect for a lovely waltz.

She shakes her head, "My mom may..." she gets on her heels, "I don't hear her annoying laughter, coast is clear," I wanted a drink but she took my hand and lead me to a crowded dance floor, "Come on Beauty!"

I loved dancing, absolutely LOVED feeling music flowing through me, the eyes were on Madge and I waltzing around giggling like fiends until a bubbly blonde came up to us, "Excuse me, they're setting up the dance auction," I eyed up the girl, no older than eighteen she had a mane of blonde hair and gorgeous blue eyes. Prim Mellark I knew her from the Times, her budding relationship with Rory Hawthorne was local gossip, which in NYC means in the paper, the local news. Poor thing.

Madge gave me the 'look' the I-signed-you-up-for-something-without-your-knowledge look, "Come on Katniss! It'll be fun!" she pouts, "It's for charity, for the scholarship and the school!"

I sigh and am led away from the dance floor, "S-sorry," I stammer bumping into a blonde with curious and soft blue eyes.
"Please, it's my fault," he grins, his strong hand lingering on my shoulder. I want to introduce myself but the words don't come out. I don't say anything, just stammer incoherently before Madge, my saving grace pulls me to where Prim waits.

I take one last look at the silver mask and blue eyes watching my capture and forced servitude.

This is so degrading… I think over and over, but it's for NYU… Which doesn't need the money, but more importantly it goes for the scholarship that pays for most of my schooling, or paid. Sometimes I forget I graduate in two weeks.

"And next we have our lovely Evening Primrose. Just eighteen she will be attending NYU in the fall, she's fluent in French, Mandarin, and is an exceptional artist, as many of you have already bid on her artwork," she giggles curtsies.

There isn't much of a bidding war on Prim, even she's too young for some of these business men who definitely have wives just a year her senior.

"Next we have the exquisite Margaret," and this is where the auction gets creepier, "She's a wonderful at the waltz as you have all seen with her partner. No two for one deals here though," my cheeks redden, "And the daughter of the Mayor of New York."

Thirty grande… a dance with Madge Undersee, the mayor's daughter, goes for more than I will make this year, and next year… Tips included.

"Last but not least we have the exquisite Katniss, as you can see still in character form her performance of Beauty and the Beast at New York University," there's an applause and I freeze, wanting to dash but instead I grab my skirt and curtsied deep, "A journalism major so watch what you say with this one in the room," there's a chuckle.

He doesn't even finish, "Fifteen thousand!" a burly man with dark hair starts.

"Twenty!" a voice in the back challenges.

What I could do with that money… I could move it of that shitty apartment… I zone out and when Madge elbow's me we're at fifty thousand.

I freeze for real this time. That would put a good chunk in my student loans…

"Sixty thousand, going once! Going twice! Sold to the man in the silver mask!" he steps forward and I gulp.

The man I bumped into, the one I couldn't find my wits around.

Shit! Shit!

"Thank you everyone! Checks can be made out to myself!" I hurry off the makeshift stage to meet my 'prince charming' the chauvinistic ass who bid to probably keep his hand on my ass while we dance for a photo op.

I can't really fault him, if he participated during the last four years he's definitely paid for my schooling in some way, "Not feeling like running me down are you?" he smirks his thin lips turning up just barely.

"Perhaps," I cross my arms over my chest, trying to cover my obvious cleavage, "Do you have a
name, sir?"

His finger traced the bottom of his lower lip, "For now, you can just call me sir, I don't like laying down all my cards so soon… We've only just met," he reaches over and pulls two glasses of champagne, "Here m'lady. Have you found your Beast?"

I reach up and touch one of his blonde curls, "A little shaggy…" I murmur as his blue eyes follow my every move, scrutinizing my actions, "Perhaps," I take a sip of champagne, "I haven't had enough to drink to decide…" I look over to Madge who has on that stars truck dumbfounded look she gets around hot guys.

"If I offend you, I won't see this in the Times will I?" my Beast asks studying me, I tug up my dress and fumble with my collar chewing on my thumb all in a few seconds.

"Why would you? I'm a student and the New York Times is a little out of my league… They want people with experience," I nudge the ground with my silver heel. Ugh could this get any awkward? I don't even know his name.

God he is gorgeous, broad shoulders, light blonde stubble around his chin… I can even forgive his scruffy blonde hair for those sea blue eyes.

"Miss?"

"Wha?" I jump out of my staring at him and shift awkwardly feeling the heat between my legs… Would it be sleazy to try and jump his bones? He did just pay a year's tuition to dance with me… Definitely prostitution.

"I asked if I was boring you Belle," he takes my gloved hand and kisses it, "I can leave you be if you wish."

"N-no!" I gasp, the stuttering coming back, I kick myself, "This isn't really…" I think I don't want to insult him, "my scene."

"What is your scene Belle?" he leans back resting on the wall as I sip champagne wishing it was Vodka or Beer and like that a waitress comes by with real cocktails on her tray.

"Do you know what a honkytonk is?" I ask quickly, maybe I could drum up conversation about that, teach him something… Seem interesting.

*Take me out of this dress and ravage me.* I tell my brain to shut up, shifting a little as I dampen between my legs.

His eyes light up with curiosity, "I've heard the song…"

I wave, "No, no, nothing like that. Just basically… a bar with country music and southern rock, cheap booze, great dancing…" I move in a little, "Not your scene?" I ask quietly, smirking wanting to pull of his mask, lay eyes on my buyer…

"Not at all, maybe you could show me one day," he murmurs and I freeze.

"Oh my Beast… You're going to have to try harder than that…" he takes my hand and leads me to the dance floor.

He takes my right hand in his left and rests his hand on my waist, not my back, not my ass, my waist. I shiver at his touch, though it's through layers of silk and the corset and whatever else
dresses are made of I want to groan… It ignites my fire in ways I never thought possible.

*Take me here… Please for the love of god…* I try to kick my horny subconscious, so it's been a while?

I barely listen to the music, he's such a fluid dancer moving like water where as I clumsily step on his feet once or twice adjusting my grip on my poufy skirt.

"You're a lovely dancer," he murmurs his lips dangerously close to mine.

*Just kiss me you daft man!* I tell my subconscious to shut up again, I've only just met the guy…

"Please, I've scuffed your thousand dollar shoes at least four times already," he smirks and squeezes my waist just a little, the pressure earning a deep groan from within me. I look up at his shocked expression.

"Four hundred Belle, how much did this dress cost you?" he quips.

"Free, Miss Undersee couldn't let me come to this function dressed in anything less than the best."

"But of course," he squeezes my waist again, getting the same response, "Belle you have the most graceful step, though you're not used to someone being in front or in charge… Where did you learn?"

I realize that the main point of his statement is the 'in charge' and I stiffen… Learn?

"I… I hunted back home, before I came to the City. To help feed my mom before she…" I look away, no. *No Katniss, don't tell this man anything, you don't even know his name*, I cough and force a smile, "Before I came to New York. You learn to tread lightly pretty quick."

The dance ends, he can tell I'm bothered, "Please, Belle, come," he offers his hand, "Let's get away from the crowd I can tell you're upset and perhaps you should lay off the drinks," he scolds as I sip at the cocktail I was given it hits me even harder since I haven't eaten yet today, "And never accept a drink from a stranger Belle," his words are full of concern and caution and… Possession? Pretty sure I spoke to my cat like this once about not eating out of his own cat box.

"Thank you, Beast…" I take his hand, *Ravish me you confusing ass.*

He leads me past where Madge and her prince still dance and she gives me a happy grin. She knows how to behave at places like this, I'm being led away by a man who paid a small fortune to get one dance with me. He leads me through a door and flicks a switch.

Five glasses of champagne, and a cocktail and a half and I was woozy, not drunk, merely buzzed, "Where are we?" I ask my heels clicking on the deep wood floor.

"The one place that's off limits to guests," he smirks.

"…and that is?"

"The owner of this fine apartment's bedroom."

I gasp ready to turn heel and leave, this is disgustingly inappropriate, "We should leave, I don't want to upset the person signing away his fortune to my school," I blush and my thumbnail goes to my mouth.

"Please, he's a close personal friend of mine…" my beast comes to me and takes my gloved hand,
kissing the knuckles as I sway a little from the drink, "My dear sweet Belle, sit," the first part of the room is a sitting area, a large black leather couch seated in front of a flat screen. Instead I make my move.

I stand on my toes and catch his lips, they're unresponsive at first before his hands find the side of my face, I expect him to remove the mask but he doesn't.

He doesn't want to know who you are idiot. What are you doing? A one night stand! My subconscious scolds me. I tilt my head as he deepens the kiss and lowers me to the couch. The leather is soft and supple and refreshing on my heated skin. He pulls away and kneels in front of me to take off my shoes.

"Better?" I nod, giggling as his thumbs rub my sweaty foot, "You have a beautiful laugh, princess."

"Oh kind Beast, I'm not a princess, merely a poor girl with Stockholm Syndrome…"

His blue eyes light up, "That isn't all there is to the story, is there?"

I blush, Beauty and the Beast was always one of my favorite movies, "No, I'm a little too harsh on the story… It's a beautiful tale of a common woman falling for her Prince though he looks nothing like the beautiful man he is inside," I pull at the fingers of my gloves, trying to stop them but my Beast stops me, "She falls for him for what's in his heart," I cover my own heart with my hands, "But forgive me… I'm getting sentimental," I smirk.

He takes my hand and kisses the knuckles, "What do you want, Belle?"

The word slips from my lips without thinking. The one word that could change my life forever.

"You..." I whisper ignoring my subconscious asking me who I was... What kind of woman I was, I didn't know this man, I didn't know if he was diseased. I knew I couldn't get pregnant, a little device I had inserted in me three months ago kept that from happening.

His hands mine, our fingers lacing as he pulls me from the couch into the bedroom, "Are you sure this is ok?" I ask nervously, he just chuckles.

"Please, the owner of this Penthouse finds himself very well occupied this evening Belle, he won't even notice..." sex with a stranger on another stranger's bed.

At some point he had lost his suit coat and my sloppy fingers go for his buttons on his dark blue waistcoat but he pushes my hands aside and takes off the waist coat, his dark blue tie, and shirt in one shot. He's so yummy, sculpted abdominals, just enough chest hair... I want to run my fingers through it. Soft and dark blonde, darker than the hair on his head. I reach for his mask, wanting to look upon his face but he pulls back.

"Ah my sweet Belle, patients..." and he pulls met to him, sliding the sipper of my gown down, his index finger tracing the ties of my corset and the exposed bit before my garter belt, "Can you breathe in this?" he asks licking his top lip as the yellow fabric pools on the ground, I step away and look down at the corset.

"Yes," I hesitate wondering what I should call him, "...Sir..." I smirk, unable to call him Beast again without laughing.

I scratch at my calf with my toe, wanting to get out of the panty hose, "This is going to be very difficult with my pants on," I jump a little, his tone undecipherable before going for the supple leather belt and his button. I hesitate at his fly, his erection already making his pants taught.
You did this to him. Go girl! My less horrified subconscious tells me as the zipper slides all the way down. He helps himself from his socks and four hundred dollar dress shoes before his arm wraps around my waist pulling me to him. My skin puckers to gooseflesh as his skillful fingers trace the gap between my corset and underwear, "Are you attached to these?" he asks pulling at the elastic on the white lace thong I wore.

"N-no..." I stammer.

His eyes light up and he slides his fingers down, getting dangerously close to my very damp and very ready sex before his other hand frees my waist and joins the other, tearing them apart. I gasp and look up at his amused smirk, "You told me you weren't attached to them," he slides a fingers through the wetness that has been gathering since I first bumped into him. My head rocks back and a throaty moan escapes from deep within me. No one's ever touched me like this before…

I get adventurous, reaching forward to stroke his erection through his dark boxers, his movement halts when I reach in and pull him free, "What are you doing?" he asks as I sink down, my grey eyes never leaving his deep blue ones, much deeper than when we first met.

I flick the tip with my tongue cautiously having only done this once or twice, there's a small drip at the end. He's the perfect mix of salty and sweet and I throw caution to the wind. Who cares if we're in his friend's bedroom? Who cares if he or she could barge in at any second?

I slowly take him in my mouth, my tongue running along his length, "Belle..." he groans, this is getting annoying… But if he won't tell me his name, why should he call me mine? I move back and forth along his length, "Sweet Belle, please..." he pushes me off him, and pulls me to my feet, kissing me deeply.

I moan into his mouth as his fingers slip into me and he walks us to the bed. The back of my legs hit the soft as satin sheets and I fall back expecting him to join me, but he doesn't. Instead he spreads my legs and pulls me to the very edge of the bed.

I close my eyes in anticipation but his nails dig into my flesh, "Vous êtes si belle..." he murmurs in perfect French, "Open your eyes..." I look up at him, the only thing he wears the beautiful silver mask where as I'm still in the tight corset, stockings and garter belt.

"Tell me your name," I purr up at him.

He just smirks and eases inside me, my hands grabbing for the dark sheets beneath us, "All in good time, my sweet Belle..." he halts once fully sheathed inside me allowing me to adjust, maybe he sees the discomfort in my face. It HAD been a while… Like two years.

"Just move," I pant trying to wrap my legs around him but his firm hands keep them spread wide leaving me very exposed. I try and ignore the patch of hair I left unattended for a few weeks.

His thrusts are cautious and forceful, enough that they would force me to the center of the bed if it weren't for strong hands holding me in place, "Touch yourself," he purrs blue eyes studying me, enjoying my shock but not missing a beat with his delicious thrusts, "Come on Belle... I can't hold out much longer and I want you to sing for me," cautiously I release my ironclad grip on the sheets and move one hand down to my heated sex. My eyes lock with his as I slowly rub my index and middle finger around my clitoris in slow circles before my movements get hungrier. The beautiful classical music keeps the sound of our fucking from the rest of the room but surely someone knows what shameful acts we're doing. Two strangers dirtying some poor guy's bed...

"Mmm..." I feel the hot coil deep within me tighten even more.
"That's it babe..." he purrs, slamming into me, "Sing for me..."

His words are enough, the coil springs through and my back lifts from the bed and I cry as my orgasm ripples through me, the relief and pleasure spreading from the epicenter to my scalp.

"There we go..." he coo's after his own orgasm. My mind glazes over, the alcohol, the AMAZING sex, the earth shattering orgasm... I'm spent.

My Beast pulls me to the pillows at the top of the bed, his skilled fingers untying the strap on my mask and pulling it from my face, "Perfect..." he murmurs.

"Wait... Madge!" I fight to keep my eyes open as he pulls the covers up to my chin.

"I'll tell your friend you're staying the night, Abernathy will take you home in the morning, sleep... My sweet Belle..." there's a sorrow in his voice I ignore, his back is to me as the mask comes off. 

Stay awake... See his face...

But my eyes won't listen, "By the way... My name is..."

"...Cato". Bleh could you imagine? More to come! More familiar faces, more smut, more drama llamas.
"Mmmmm…” I stretch paw for my buzzing alarm clock but instead of the usual location I find air. My eyes shoot open, "Where am I?" the bedroom is spacious, a deep grey blue with dark furniture and impeccably clean.

The previous night's events rush back and I feel the blood run from my cheeks, "Oh god…” I scramble to find my purse, my phone… Madge? Did she know? Did she get home ok?

Some friend I am. I rush from the bedroom, my corset and garter belt gone and replaced by only a baggy t-shirt, "Ah Miss, good morning!” an older woman smiles, "Would you care for some breakfast?" I scratch at the back of my head, the bun I had tied the night before gone and my hair braided. The only thing that I still had on from the night before was the choker.

"No thank you… I… um…” I need to run, get out of here before the owner of this lovely place emerges from whatever hole he's in to bitch me out. I'd throw his friend under the bus in a heartbeat. It was his idea!

"What time is it?" I finally ask.

"Quarter till eleven miss," she goes back to her work, cleaning the granite counter top.

My heart stops, "Where are my shoes, I need to get home?" I asked panicked, the only pair I had here are my heels form last night, "Wait where's my dress?"

The woman smiles, "Why mister Mellark sent it out for cleaning."

I blush and grab at my dark braid, "Where is Mister Mellark?" I ask curiously.

"At the office, Abernathy can take you home if you wish. Or you could stay Mister Mellark asked us to make you feel at home."

I bit my thumb nail, "No, I have…” crap. I had that stupid interview today, "Business downtown. I need to get back to my apartment."

"Haymitch!" the woman yells, "Little miss needs a ride!"

I pale, "No! I have my metro card, I can take the subway!" my hands go to my mouth fingers curled into my palm, knuckles on my lips. I don't want to be a bother.

"Miss, you don't have shoes," she chuckles.

I look down at my naked feet, "I have heels! It wouldn't be the weirdest thing on the subway," I remind them as I'm now joined by the waiting driver of the limo yesterday, Mister Abernathy.
"Come on sweetheart…" Ugh, this is so embarrassing… This whole situation! First the ball, then the auction, now my one night stand who didn't kick me out.

"Please, I could just take the train. It's fine," I show them my metro card, "I promise!"

"Mister Mellark would be displeased…"

"This is a dangerous part of town Sweetheart," Abernathy lectures from the front seat.

I cross my arms, "It's what I can afford, sure your boss never has to deal with that," I hop out of the car, "Please send your boss my apologies for taking up his bed last night, really, I was told it was ok," he seems amused, "And I'll return the clothes, he can send the dress and… everything else to Mayor Undersee's daughter. She'll get better use out of it."

"Sure thing sweetheart," he nods, "Don't forget your shoes," he holds them by the thin silver straps. I grab them from the open door, "Thanks…"

The sleek black SUV drives off into the busy New York street as I climb the stairs to my building.

I live in an old row home that was turned into four apartments, mine being on the bottom where I can hear everything everyone does around me but it was cheap, really cheap.

"Home sweet home…” I mumble remembering the smell of the beautiful apartment, and of the man I just spent the night with… or did I? Did he abandon me in that bed and I was so gone the owner of the place couldn't wake me?

I take out my cell phone and call Madge.

"Hey…" she seems guilty.

"Did you get home safe?" I ask opening my empty fridge. I'd have to remember to buy food, I laugh a little, if I had the money.

"Yeah… Can I call you back later? I'm kind of…" she giggles, "Indisposed…"

"Have fun Margaret…” I tease stripping off the t-shirt and now shorts I had stolen from this mystery man. I take a deep whiff of the shirt, sweet vanilla and cinnamon mixed with… just general man smell.

"Mmm…”

My phone vibrates.

Belle,

Abernathy told me you arrived home safe… Or as safe as someone can in your neighborhood. I'll have the dress sent to Miss Undersee as you requested, please keep the shirt and shorts as long as you wish.

'Beast'

The man I screwed has my phone number.

I toss the phone onto the couch and duck back in the bathroom to wash the night away… and this weird morning…
"Coy little bastard…" I grumble filling a chipped glass with tepid water chugging it and some advil, "Please, he's a close personal friend," I mimic the Beast's words from last night. I pull on the nicest clothes I own, a pencil skirt, white blouse and matching black jacket. I was interviewing Mister Mellark, Head of Mellark Enterprises about his donation to NYU.

My phone began ringing, Cray. Good not my one night stand.

"Yes boss?" I ask checking my reflection, I'd need to get to the tube ASAP if I'd make it in time.

"How's my favorite little kitten?" my skin crawled, I must have been the one waitress Cray hasn't nailed.

"Busy not being yours," I snap.

"We could always change that…" I slip into my heels and grab my real purse and keys before heading onto the busy New York streets.

"I'd rather not…” I tell him, closing my building's door.

"Me either, it's more fun to watch you squirm," I squeeze my eyes shut reminding myself over and over again how much I need this job, "Besides, I can't wait to see you tonight, we really need you, Yankees or Met's game, you know I don't pay attention to that shit, but we had a few call outs."

"Fine, sure, I've got something down town for school then I'll be over once I change. I can stay until close." I offer, that was two am. The train I usually take would be shut down by the time I got out which would be well past three but tomorrow was Sunday, my one day off so I didn't mind going out of my way and walking ten city blocks.

The receptionist is a well-dressed redhead, looking unhappy to be here on a Saturday but I guess Mister Mellark believes in a six day work week? I hated being in lower Manhattan Monday through Friday it was full of stuffy businessmen, Saturday and Sunday? Tourists to gawk at the World Trade Center site.

"Hi, I'm Katniss Everdeen, I'm here to see Mister Mellark?"

She smiles sweetly, "Ah yes, he's waiting." I swallow, great first impression. My finger found my profile choker, the black silk that always caresses my skin… My safety net, "Follow me miss Everdeen."

The woman knocks on the door, "Sir, Miss Everdeen is here to see you," she cracks the door and instead of an old voice, I'm greeted by a very familiar, very young voice.

"Well let her in," he's at his desk, a deep dark rich wood similar to the one at his home and as before my tongue goes dry, "Miss Trinket?" his tone is dismissive, wanting her gone. She nods and closes the door behind me.

Does he recognize me? Do I say anything?

"I was expecting to be interviewing your father mister…"

"Peter Mellark," I nod, "Sit," his tone is kind but as always it seems to have a commanding tone, he's not one to cross, "My brothers call me Peeta but that's due to a rather annoying lisp Primrose had when she was a child…"
I sink down into a soft leather chair, my fingers finding my necklace again before I go to my second coping mechanism, chewing on my thumb.

Do I say something? Thank him for the sex?

Way to go Everdeen, got yourself in a real pickle here.

"Listen about last night, I didn't mean to. I'm sorry I had a lot to drink and-" Shut up mouth, brain please tell mouth to listen for real this time.

He smirks, his fingers folding together, elbow's resting on the table his chin cradled in the next woven by his fingers, fingers that skimmed my heated flesh.

"I trust you slept well… Belle?"

"Katniss," I correct, "My name is Katniss."

"Oh, that was a real name? I thought they were going with the flower theme," I don't wish to delve into the meaning behind my name.

I take out my notebook, questions suggested by the NYU magazine written down. I was only here because I was the editor and I now had to remind myself this over and over again.

"So you were expecting my father?" he asks, "Clearly Miss Everdeen you haven't done any research," he's smirking. Cocky little fuck!

"Forgive me, my only concern is your donation to my school."

He nods a little, finger rubbing at his lower lip, a lip that I tasted last night, "Are you hungry?" he asks suddenly.

Starved… I haven't eaten in a day or so, not like you'd know what hunger was like…

"I haven't had lunch, if you're asking."

He gets up from his desk picking up his suit coat, "Good, I hate being in this damned office especially on a Saturday, we'll do the interview at lunch," he almost has a childlike amusement about him.

"I can't afford lunch," I murmur accidently.

"Please, my treat."

I narrow my eyes as he tells his driver we're ready, "People don't buy me things," I snap.

"It's just lunch, and after everything you drank last night I'm sure you need something in your system, besides, I could see your ribs last night, why you wore that painful corset is beyond me…" he cocks an eyebrow at my blush, "Though it was nice to look at," the fact of the matter was I was putting on weight. He holds out his hand, "Now, stop complaining and let me buy you lunch," I go to argue but just then my stomach rumbles earning a disapproving glare from Peter, or Peeta, or whatever his name is.

"And you started your own company… why?"

Peeta shrugged and brought the cloth napkin to his mouth, "I didn't like how they were running
things, thought they could go about the whole 'green' thing better," I nod picking at the remnants of my pasta.

He brought me to a strange restaurant in the Upper East named Serendipity 3. The store front was a retro oddity shop that seemed to spill into the eating area, which was decorated with vintage clocks, stained glass lamps and tarnished mirrors giving it a strange 'fairy' vibe to it. Mister Mellark seemed almost out of place here but I wouldn't question a free meal… Especially going into a probably ten hour shift during some form of baseball game.

"I bought them a year or so back, got them on track," he grinned, "But money doesn't impress you, does it Miss Everdeen?"

"Money confuses me," I answer honestly, "Such a simple human construct and people walk over each other, kill each other, and suck up to each other over it," I shrug twirling pasta around my fork.

"But you're going to NYU, surely you aspire to make a decent living."

I chuckle, "Mister Mellark, I'm a journalism major. I'm going to hopefully get an internship at some newspaper who will eventually hire me so I can quit my crappy job at the sports bar I work at," he crosses his arms over his chest and nods.

"Journalism is boring, you're an intelligent, beautiful young woman, you should do something that can change the world, something you can have fun at."

Stab at my food, going for my tea nervously, "I like writing…” I answer honestly, "Like factual writing, not who which local celebrity or rich asshole is screwing," I snap my jaw closed and feel the blood rush to my cheeks, "N-no offence Mister Mellark, sir…” I look away but he chuckles.

"I've seen your play, have you ever thought of Broadway?"

Again I go for my drink, a nervous habit, I'm long since out of tea and settle for chewing ice, "You don't just walk onto Broadway and get a part, it would be nice but I'm not nearly good enough."

He seems unconvinced, "But we're not here to discuss my future, why did you donate fifteen million to the school?"

"For the same reason I spent sixty thousand dollars to dance with you, the same reason we're sitting here at lunch, because I can," I shudder a little, my eyes narrowing.

"Would you like me to put that in the article?"

"Do as you wish," he waves dismissively, "you journalists are all the same, turning words until they say just what you want."

"I'm not like that, are you calling me a liar, Mister Mellark?"

He leans in, eyes narrow, have I made him mad?

"No, Miss Everdeen, I'm calling you a reporter, and giving you the same treatment as you've been giving me. When I was twenty-one I saw an opportunity and I took hold of it, now eight years later I'm CEO of the company I started… And it sure as hell was never handed to me. It was earned, by sixty hour work weeks and sacrifices."

I slink back, well played.
"Ok…" I clear my throat, "Maybe then, I should learn who Peter Mellark is?"

"Please, Belle, call me Peeta, only the newspapers and business partners call me Peter," I nod and rest my elbow on the table, my knuckles supporting my head, "But you can find out anything you want about me on the internet, it's called Wikipedia and Google, I've put my name in and for the most part the facts are accurate. Let me ask you a few questions."

I stiffen, "What could someone like you possibly want to know about someone like me?"

"Belle…"

"Katniss," I interrupt, "Why do you call me Belle? That's just a role in a play."

"It means pretty, attractive, shapely in French."

I blush and look away at a tarnished mirror, "I'm none of those things, but suit yourself."

"Sure, Miss Everdeen," he says evading my first name yet again, "Where are you from?"

"A small town on the border, Clayton? It's kind of a tourist trap in the summer, really shuts down in the winter," he nods soaking in my words.

"My parents have a house on one of the islands up there, beautiful area… What brings you to New York City though?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Miss Everdeen, I'm a busy man. I wouldn't have asked if I wasn't curious."

"New York was always like this beacon of hope, this gilded city where I could find my dreams. My mom married her second husband and moved across the country and I found scholarships, and grants, and loans. I'm not sure how I got into NYU, maybe my essay?" I ask myself, "I managed to get on campus housing which is where I met Madge… Erm Mayor Undersee's daughter."

He nods again, "And now you find yourself in a dangerous neighborhood half way across town… Why?"

"In case you didn't know, there's not a lot of room for student housing on campus, plus, I like it here… Never a dull moment."

Dessert we never ordered came, a massive sundae with all the trimmings, "Can I tell you something honestly, Miss Everdeen?"

"Please, you want me to call you Peeta, call me Katniss," I plead.

"Fine… Katniss," I smile a little, my name so beautiful on his tongue, "I'm glad it was you at the ball last night and not Mister and Misses Undersee. Besides, your friend seems to have caught the attention of my business partner, Gale Hawthorne."

I bite my lip, "The one she was dancing with?" I slide the spoon and gather a fair amount of hot fudge before putting the spoon in my mouth upside down.

"Yes," he watches my moves intently, "Should I have ordered chocolate?"

"I haven't had it in months, too expensive, as well as meat. You'd be surprised how fast you stop eating it once you have to pay for it yourself," I bite my tongue.
I blush, "Sorry, that was out of line..." my phone begins going off in my pocket reminding me I promised to go to work tonight.

"No, it wasn't, are you having issues feeding yourself?" I look away, my gaze enough, I see his face soften in the mirror, "Please, let me take you shopping. I can't." he balls his fist on the table, "I don't like the thought of you hungry."

"No," I shake my head, anger filling every inch of me, "I'm not some charity case, you're not going to go and _buy_ me food. That's my job."

"And you're struggling at it, please, accept a gift."

"No, Mister Mellark, it would be a hand out. And that would be insulting to my ego, now... I have to get to work there's a Yankee's game and I have to make sure the good people of New York stay as inebriated as possible," I want to run but I realize we're on the other side of town and I only have enough on my meto card to get me to and from Cray's.

I hate hand-outs, but I'm forced to accept an awkward ride back to my shit-hole, "This is where you live?" Mister Mellark asks horrified.

"Sorry, not all of us can afford Penthouses in the Upper East Side," I jingle my keys, "Thanks for lunch, Mister Mellark," I look down, his hand has moved to my knee.

"Belle..." he makes a face, "Forgive me, Katniss, if you need anything, and I mean _anything_ do not hesitate to ask."

His hand finds my cheek and I lean in instinctively, our lips just barely brushing before I pull away as if his lips were fire, "I'm sorry, that was inappropriate! Thank you," I scramble out of the car, "Thank you Mister Abernathy, for both rides, and thanks for lunch."

Peeta looks at me confused by my reaction, hell, I'd be confused too.

The truth of the matter was I felt something very strange when I kissed him, a pull in my heart I'd never felt before... A pull I could never feel again. We were from two different worlds and they never should collide.

_Last night was a mistake, he could have anyone what would he want with you?_ I tell myself, _And what would you want with him? A spoiled rich kid..._
Calling Cray's a sports bar was kind of like calling a heifer a bull. It was a borderline Go-go bar where the waitress and bartender uniform was a black t-shirt cut so low it showed cleavage, black hot pants that barely covered my ass and fishnets… though the outfit was made complete by the heeled boots that went to my knee.

I was never good at walking in heels but I had become a pro since I took the job at Cray's. I pulled my trench coat around me tight as I reached my stop. I looked like a prostitute, I knew this… In fact I had learned to exploit this fact to get better tips.

Push-up bras were the first addition to my wardrobe as well as a dangerous red lipstick I had borrowed from Madge and never returned.

"You're looking mighty fine," Darius, Cray's right hand, teased as I punched in, hanging my coat up on the employee coat rack.

My phone buzzed.

I'm sure you didn't get enough for your article. Perhaps we should continue the interview at a later date. How's Friday at eight?

I bite my lip, Mister Mellark, are you asking me out on a date? I text shoving the phone in my black half apron, he gets back to me almost immediately. Businessmen and their cells…

I don't do the whole "date" thing. But perhaps.

I roll my eyes, choosing not to answer this one.

Whorish waitress uniforms aside, seeing as Cray's was just off the main drag (The Times Square and Broadway area), it was a pretty nice bar. Pretty chic, everything dark and streamline or made of stainless steel. If I didn't know how much of a sleaze the owner was I'd drink here.

The Yankees game was blasted around, the announcer's voice like a numbing drone. I loved baseball, Just not the Yankees… Unfortunately I lived in New York City, "Katniss, just filled table five. Four Blue Moon's."

"You know that part in Grease?"

I roll my eyes pouring the beer and placing an orange slice in each, "Bristel, if you pull down your pants, I'm leaving…"

She shrugs and takes a shot, Cray doesn't mind us drinking on the job, says we become more personable, "Whoo!" she shakes her hair out, attracting the eyes of every male at the bar, "Who
needs a drink!" Bristel was always better at the sex appeal than I was.

I put the bill in the computer leaving the name on the tab open carrying the tray skillfully through the crowd of people yelling and screaming like rowdy drunk New Yorkers.

Two blondes, one rusty haired man, and a dark haired man. Blackberry's and iPhones on the table… Business men, "Alright I have four-" I stop mid-sentence setting the tray down, blushing furiously, "Blue Moon's…"

"It's ok, I'm used to that reaction," the red head tells me, his green eyes finding my cleavage, "But I'm sorry, I'm taken."

Peeta elbows the man, "Would you not harass her, you're getting married in three weeks."

I hold the tray to my stomach, trying to cover my impossibly short shorts from their view, "What are you doing here?" I ask bitterly, did he follow me here?

"Woah now," the other blonde starts but Peeta waves him off.

"Finnick, Gale, Andrew, this is Katniss, the girl from last night," he gives me the 'we need to talk' look and I scowl at him, he still hasn't answered my question.

"Ah, the sixty thousand dollar girl…" the redhead smirks. I want to smack him, but that would put me out of the job.

Peeta stiffens, "Don't put it like that," he cautions.

"Kitty Cat…" Cray has managed to sneak up behind me, his lips dangerously close to my ear. I cringe and move away but his firm hand grasps my arm, fingers digging in, "I pay you to work, not flirt," he coo's as I shudder, "Get laid on your own time…"

*Fuck you in the most metaphorical sense possible!* I want to yell.

"What do you think I'm doing Cray, they were asking me about what was on tap…" I spit, he gives my arm one good squeeze and is gone.

I flush, embarrassed, "I'll be back to check on you in a few minutes," I stammer rushing to the back, I needed fresh air and to organize my thoughts.

"Bristel, I'm taking fifteen, please keep an eye on five, it's my only table…" and there's a big tip hopefully coming my way. She nods and gives me the thumbs up.

I dig through my trench coat pulling out my crutch, my saving grace, a sweet delicious Camel. Outside tucked under the delivery stairs is a bic, I hid it there two years ago and somehow the thing was still going strong.

With each drag the creeps seemed to flush from my system, "You shouldn't smoke, it's bad for your health…" I choke on my mouthful of smoke and nearly fall off the stoop.

I look up to see Peeta, standing with his hands in his pockets, watching my every move. I flick ash to the ground, "You shouldn't be out here, mister Mellark…" I mumble, taking another drag, rubbing at my red arm.

He sits down next to me and I blow my smoke away from him, the wind catching it and pulling it away, "And your boss shouldn't be man handling you like that… Or making you dress like that," he
studies me, "And before you ask, no I didn't know you worked here."

"He shouldn't but he does…” I mumble, going for another drag, I pull my phone out of my apron.

*Call me ASAP* Madge writes, I scowl at Peeta, "Did your friend hurt my friend?"

He shrugs, "Not that I know of, we just dropped her off and she looked happy, so I guess not?” he sighs, looking troubled, upset, older…

"I don't like the idea of you working here…” he finally admits as I flick my butt to the ground.


"What does it matter? I'm just some chick you banged at a party, my occupation doesn't affect you what so ever."

He narrows his eyes, "I'm concerned for your safety, Miss Everdeen."

"Mister Mellark, I'm twenty-one, almost twenty-two, I can handle myself!" I snap, "I appreciate you concern but without this job I'd starve."

His brow furrows as he weighs my words and stands up, "What if you didn't need this job?"

"I won't know until I graduate if I have a job in my field… Besides, an internship doesn't exactly pay the bills…"

He nods, finger stroking his lower lip his eyes not on me but to the side as if contemplating something, "If I could put in a good word for you with someone… So you could leave this place, make more money and not have to worry about that scumbag you work for… Would you throw it back in my face?"

"I don't need your hand-outs!" I hiss, "How many times-"

His finger comes to my lips to silence me, "My god, have they taught you nothing about networking in NYU? I'd put in a good word, not ensure you got the job."

I open my mouth to argue but the door opens, Darius…

"Kat, no customers back here…” he cautions, trying to save me from Cray's wrath.

"Sorry sir, I just had to make sure my girlfriend was ok. We had an argument earlier…”

I gawk as the door closes, "I don't do the whole dating thing…” I taunt.

"Miss Everdeen, I couldn't have that sorry excuse for a boss basically forcing himself on you…”

I want to go for another cigarette, but I can't leave Bristel in the bar alone with my tables on Yankee's night, "Mister Mellark?” he looks up from digging in his wallet, "I don't know why you're so nice to me, or why you'd even take a second glance at me… But thank you…”

He hands me a business card, "I'll make a few phone calls, this guy is an old friend of mine…”

I flip over the card, a thin see through plastic with a cellphone and office number on the front in a simple elegant script reads *Cinna*, "I'll call him, tomorrow."

"Mister Mellark, it's Sunday."
"And Cinna is flying into New York for something with Primrose or my mother, hell it could be one of my brothers, I stay out of fashion just let my buyer Portia stock my closet," I roll my eyes, I own a sparse closet full of mostly dark colors so I don't have to worry about matching. Most of my days are spent in jeans and black t-shirts, simple and cheap.

He tilts my chin up, "You have that look on your face…"

"That look?" I ask curiously tucking the card in my apron.

He grins, I love his grin… Wait, love? "That look you give me when I say something you don't understand or find shocking…" the door opens again.

Cray, "Katniss, you have five seconds to get inside," according to my watch I still had five minutes but I wasn't going to evoke the wrath of Cray.

Mister Mellark and his entourage ran up a $200 tab which softened my boss up like nothing else, on top of the general increase in sales a baseball game brings to a sports bar. I ran a black American Express card.

"Damn, I thought those things only came in Gold and Platinum," Bristel remarked pouring her last beer of the night.

I smirk and rip the receipt putting my pen in the folder with the bill, "Here you go, have a nice night," I nervously tuck some hair behind my ear, my hair still in the braid I woke up in. By this point the dark haired man and the cheeky one are arguing about something leaving Peeta and his brother to spectate and referee.

"Thanks," Peeta handed me back the black leather book, "We'll get these two out of your hair before you have to call the cops."

I wave, "Please, the cops are here at least three times a week," I flex my arm, "You think these muscles are from pouring beers and carrying trays?"

The two "arguing" men and the Mellark's vacate their booth. He's dangerously close to me, our chests inches from each other. He's not much taller than I, especially with these wicked heels, "Hey…" I breathe, biting at my lip. Peeta just smirks and shrugs on his coat leaving me gawking.

"We'll be in touch," he tells me simply before he and his friends leave Cray's. My bill folder is still in my hands, it's fat… Like, really fat.

The door closes and I open it up, "Holy shit…" Twenties, lots and lots of twenties, more money than I've held in my hands in months. Holy crap fifties.

My phone vibrates, Enjoy –Peeta. I fan myself with the bill folder and cluck my tongue before clearing the table all the while wondering what is up with this guy.

"So… Darius says you have a boyfriend," Bristel teased as we stripped off our boots in the dirty bathroom. At five pm in New York City thousands upon thousands of Manhattan women shed their heels for sneakers, flats or flip-flops for the commute home. Three AM at Cray's Bristel and I do the same, shedding the pinchy patent leather pumps for converse.

I scowl at her through the mirror examining my ridiculous outfit, tight black top, short shorts, fishnets and black chucks, "Should I tease my hair, I'd look like some scene girl. Maybe add a tutu and some cheetah spots," I try and divert the conversation. Peeta was the strange man who I spent last night with then gave me over one hundred dollars as a tip. Oh! But we can't forget the whole
him hopefully helping me get a less degrading job. Definitely not my boyfriend…

Though… Could I even trust him?

At ten am the buzzing of my phone ripped me from my uneasy sleep. The Li's upstairs got into an argument around six am in their native tongue, I knew just enough to tell them to shut up or I was calling NYPD. There was a pause in the yelling then silence… Someday hopefully I'll be out and away from them.

I didn't recognize the number but answered anyway, "Good morning," I yawned.

"Hello, is this Katniss Everdeen?" I nod then realize through my sleepy head they couldn't see.

"This is she," I sit up, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

"Good morning, hope I didn't wake you. I'm calling on behalf of Cinna and Peter Mellark," holy shit, he wasn't lying, "Cinna would like to set up an interview with you as soon as possible. Are you free tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yeah, I'm free all day…" I stifle another yawn, wait… Interview?

"How is one PM. We're on the corner of Madison and 79th top floor. Cinna asks you dress as plainly as possible."

"Sounds great, thank you…" we say our goodbyes and I hang up, staring at my phone for a second before asking the dead line, "What is this interview for!"

I know if I go to bed I'll never wake up in time, and I can't spit in Mister Mellark's face especially after he set this whatever it is up for me. I decide to get an early start first and foremost count my tips from last night.

I pull the white envelope I keep in my half apron out, fuller than usual from Peeta's generous donation to the 'feed Katniss' fund.

Most of the tips are singles since it's common for people to tip a dollar a drink, I get a few fives and a ten or two then I get to the twenties, ten in all, then six fifties. I expect to start seeing singles again but finally I see Ben Franklin's face.

That asshole tipped me $1000 last night. I push the money to the center of my hide-away bed pulling out my phone.

*I must be the most expensive whore this side of the East River.*

I toss the phone to the end of the bed and go to shower, rinsing the cigarette smoke and sweat from my skin and finally unbraiding my hair. The first thing I do when I get out of the shower is check my phone.

Two missed calls, one voicemail.

"Belle, how could you for a second consider yourself a whore?" I don't listen to the rest of his message, instead I opt to call him.

"Hey big spender," I greet shoving the thousand in my wallet.

He chuckles, "Good morning Miss Everdeen, I trust you're well?"
"Very," I drop my towel and shake out my hair some, "So, what exactly am I interviewing for?"

"Right down to business… I like that…" but he doesn't answer my question.

"Mister Mellark," I pull on my underwear, "I need to know what I'm getting myself into."

His deep laughter warms me to my core, "Miss Everdeen, I'm not sure you've been aware of what you have gotten yourself into since you nearly ran me down Friday night."

I sat down on the bed, wasn't this the question running through my head since we first kissed? What have I gotten myself into?

"Excuse me, Mister Mellark, I was in canary yellow. Maybe you should get your eyes checked," I begin sorting my laundry.

"Please, my vision is perfect… When I'm wearing my glasses or contacts…"

I throw my small pile of light colored clothes back in the hamper as I pull apart my jeans and my dark colored clothes, "Is this what I have to look forward to when I get to your age?" I wince and put the back of my hand to my forehead, why did I just say this?

"What? Sorry, I can't hear you," he joked. God talking with this man was so easy, even when we were making fun of each other… Or I was poking fun at him, "Have you eaten yet, Belle?"

"You're not buying me another meal Mister Mellark don't even try," no more charity from him, "And if you come to the bar I work at again I'm giving you and your friends to another waitress. A grand is a little excessive."

"Please, Miss Everdeen, I've made that back and even what I spent on that lovely dance since this phone call started."

I nearly dropped the phone, my jaw going slack, "You're joking right?"

"Mostly… What are you wearing?" I look down at my socks and boy shorts, I hadn't gotten to a bra yet.

"Do you really want to know?"

"Miss Everdeen, I'm a busy man, I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know…"

I bite my lip, do I tell him the truth? Do I continue or sort of flirty conversation or do I tell him jeans and a t-shirt?

"Just my underwear…" I squeeze my eyes shut listening to his sigh.

"I'll be right over…" he murmurs.

My eyes snap open, did he just say that!

"Mister Mellark, I'm a very classy lady, not a booty call."

"You called me, wouldn't that make me the booty call?" I took the phone from my ear staring at it, a billionaire booty call? That was way out of my league, "What is your plan for today?"

I shrug though he can't see me, "Not sure, I put forth the effort to do my laundry but don't feel like carrying it…" I kick at the pile of darks, "Maybe go shopping, my fridge is empty… and there is a
Fossil bag I've had my eye on…"

"Need a ride, Miss Everdeen?" my phone pings loudly in my ear telling me I have a text.

_Madge: Yoga, Shopping and Cocktails?_

I quickly sent a yes back before putting the phone back to my ear, "No, mister Mellark, I have the subway. But thank you," I can almost see him making a disgusted face, "When was the last time you were on a subway mister Mellark?"

"I think I was six."

"So, since you're a busy man, why have you wasted so long on the phone with me?" I ask twirling some hair around my finger and biting my nail after it was good and wound.

"Who says it's a waste?"

I roll my eyes and choose to skirt around his question, "Are you going to let me get dressed?"

"Why?" he asks, "So I can just take you out of it again?"

I cock an eyebrow, "Mister Mellark, if you want to ask me out, you should do so. I don't play games."

He sighs, I've definitely taken him out of his element, "Miss Everdeen, would you care to join me for dinner tonight?"

"Tonight isn't a good night for me Mister Mellark, I have yoga and shopping and cocktails with the girls. I'll be in the Upper East tomorrow to visit your dear friend Cinna. Does tomorrow work for you?"

"Tomorrow sounds perfect. When is your interview?"

"One," there box by my door buzzes, "One second…" I press the call button, "Yeah?"

"Is that how you greet your two best friends?" I press the button to buzz them in.

"Come on up!" I open my door and decide to finally throw on a bra, "Still with me, Prince Charming?" I tease.

"Trying to keep up, Belle. Now, I'll let you go have your girls day. Work hard on your downward dog."

I pull on my yoga pants, "Please, you're going to have to try a lot harder next time."

"Whatever you say Miss Everdeen, be safe."

"I'll try…" I click off my phone.

"Wait, you slept with him?" Madge gasped assuming the tree pose.

"Wouldn't you? The man just spent sixty thousand dollars to dance with her. I'm surprised she even made it to the bedroom… When was the last time you got any? Cato?"

I shudder, "Johanna, maybe now isn't the time?" I ask, blushing as every single person in the room
has their attention on us.

"Please," we drop into downward dog and I sigh as my muscles sing in sweet agony. Every inch of my body extending, "This is a cause for celebration…"

An hour of yoga and twenty minutes on the subway later the girls and I met our soon to be unsingle friend, Annie for some retail therapy.

"I can't believe you're getting married, and Madge and I are just getting out of college…" I sigh examining the soft leather of a purse that looks like a saddle bag, "When am I going to get to meet the lucky bastard?" I ask opening the flap to examine the lining.

"Please, Annie Cresta is twenty-five-years-old… When you get to be my age and you're not married, then you can talk," if my life was Sex and the City Johanna Mason would be my Samantha Jones. She oozed confidence and sexuality. She hasn't had the desire to settle down in all twenty-eight years of her life and she was planning on keeping it that way.

She came up to me and flipped the price tag over, "And how are you going to afford a hundred dollar bag?"

I blush a little, "I got a big tip last night…"

"Big tip? How much?"

"Like… A grand?" I blush again, "My… Prince Charming and his friends came into Cray's last night…"

"The guy you slept with?"

"Yeah and his three friends…"

"What did you do?" she asks, "Let him fuck you in the-" Madge covers her mouth.

She looks horrified, "Jo, I want to be able to show my face around here in the future, god, discuss this over cocktails!"

I decided to stop flirting with fate and purchased the bag, stuffing my beaten up wallet and random necessitates in it, including my cellphone which didn't have a new text. I bit my lip, trying to hide my frown. I wanted to talk to Peeta more, but I couldn't seem needy.

"So, I never did get a real answer, when are we meeting the future Mister Annie Cresta?" I ask dipping a piece of my spicy tuna roll into soy sauce and then wasabi. Since I could actually afford a meal, cocktails turned into a dinner date at Morimoto which is hands down the best place to get raw fish this side of the Mississippi.

She chews methodically, "Well, I was going to have him come to cocktail hour but he got held up at the office," she shrugs, "Then we got sushi and forget Finnick," she pops an eel roll in her mouth and smiles, "We haven't had girls night in weeks."

We look up as a waiter comes by with a tray of four beers and four shots, "We didn't order any," Madge starts as he sets down the glasses in front of each of us.

"These are courtesy of Mister Odair," he places two fresh chopsticks on the top of each glass and on top of the little bridge they made, "He apologizes for not sending champagne, but he didn't want
to make girls night stuffy," Annie giggles like a love struck school girl.

"Oh Sake bombs…" We all go for our chopsticks, maki completely forgotten while delicious alcohol was in front of us, "Ready? One, two… Go!" we pull the chopsticks bridge out from under the glass and the shot sinks clinking the whole way down.

To me sake tastes just like chugging soy sauce, but the beer is exquisite, just malty enough to make my blood sing. The shot glass clinks against my teeth as I near the end, having no buffer to keep it from trying to take out a tooth.

"Delicious, and my thanks to Finnick Odair," I smile as Johanna says this, going back to my sushi.

Wait… I think of the coppery haired man at my table last night, "Annie, do you have a picture of Finnick?"

She rolls her eyes, "Katniss, this is 2011, of course I have a picture of him." She pulls out her iPhone, the background image being her and the same copper haired man from last night.

"I waited on him last night," I tell her, chewing on a large piece of pickled ginger, "Nice man, one of the first words out of his mouth were, 'I'm taken'. So he's ok in my book."

"Who says that?" Johanna asks, Annie rolls her eyes, "I mean, how wonderful."

I pull my cellphone out, I didn't have a date for the wedding and I knew one hot blonde who would probably go with me.

*Your friend Finnick is marrying my friend Annie, small world. Go with me to the wedding?* I press send and shove the phone back in my new Fossil bag.

"No texting at the dinner table," Madge scolds, poking at me with a chopstick.

"Sorry," I squirm away from the assault, "I was asking Prince Charming to go with me to the wedding."

The three girls gawk at me, never once had I asked a man on a date, what made Mister Mellark so different?

Was it the fact that I knew he could woo any girl in Manhattan and knew I had to strike now?

"What? He's a good dancer…"

Did I even want to strike?
Into the Wild

Chapter Notes

Into The Wild by LP is the song for this chapter. When ever I write Katniss, I always like to think of her as inexperienced, and with her budding relationship with Mr. Mellark it's very like venturing into the wild.

Nothing says bad time like an eight am Monday morning, especially when your friend's fiancé sent over more than one round of sake bombs. Four to be exact, and he paid our bill as an 'I'm sorry I couldn't come out with you guys tonight'.

I threw my backpack over my shoulder still not ready but I only had forty five minutes to get to class. The subway Monday morning was hell on earth. Sleepy moody New Yorkers all jamming into cans on our way to school, and work, it was always a tense place.

I still hadn't heard back from Peeta, maybe our date was off? Or maybe he was just busy…

Class from eight am to noon, four hours of being told what was going to be on my final exams. My final, final exams…

"Remember, your articles are twenty percent of your grade, they're due Wednesday at eleven PM."

Crap, the article I was writing on Peeta was going to be what I was submitting, but every time we talk it turns to flirty banter and bullshit. My subconscious kicks me, tonight I was getting that interview…

At precisely 12:15 my phone rang, "Hello?"

"Hey girl, lunch?"

Madge… God I was starving, but I couldn't, I had to get to that interview for a still unknown job.

"I can't Madge, I have a job interview in one hour across town…"

"Ooo for what?"

"No idea I-" I go to cross the busy street to catch the 6 and a hand pulls me back to the sidewalk just as a taxi speeds by.

"Woah there…" I know that voice anywhere.

"Madge… I'll call you back." I disconnect and spin around, "Mister Mellark, what are you doing here?" I ask with my hands on my hips.

"Keeping you from getting hit by a taxi, but I had lunch with the director of the Arts Department here. I wish you could have joined me."

I checked my watch, I was going to be late at this rate, "Some of us had to attend class. Speaking of which, that interview, I'm finishing it tonight."
He nodded and checked his watch, "I'm going to be late…" I grumble.

To be a New Yorker you needed to develop one skill. Hand in the air, and shout from deep down in your core, "Taxi!"

"I can drive you, Miss Everdeen." A yellow cab pulled up in front of me.

"Mister Mellark, you're a busy man, I'm a busy woman," I get on my toes and kiss his cheek, "I'll see you after my interview…"

He rolls his eyes and opens the door for me, "I'll send Abernathy to fetch you from Cinna's," I didn't argue, I had no idea where he lived to be honest. Just that he was on the Upper East Side.

I slide in, "Tell him I'll be the one looking confused and out of place on Madison," he kisses my forehead, lips so soft and gentle… I blush deeply, "Madison and 79th please."

The driver chuckles and we're off.

My phone buzzes, *I think the song goes, 'Hate to see her go, but oh to watch her leave.' Good luck.*

At this point, I didn't really care. I was bound to find out in a few minutes anyway.

I really did look out of place in the Upper East side in my black t-shirt, ripped jeans and converse, so much so that the doorman in Cinna's building nearly turned me away… or called the cops.

With my torn backpack, raccoon eyes from partial hangover and run mascara and general disheveled appearance I definitely looked like I was ready to rob the place.

He told me to dress simply, so that's what I did. *Oh god, how could I dress like this to an interview?* I ask myself over and over as the elevator takes me to the 20th floor.

There's a small lobby with marble floors, clean and chic and two doors, one most likely being a supply closet or something for maintenance.

I knock on the door and wait, using my toe to scrape some dirt off the front of my Chuck Taylors. I can hear heels clicking from afar and the door opens, "Oh hello! You must be Miss Everdeen! Come come!"

I gawk at the woman's dark hair, which would be normal if it wasn't for the bright green underneath, "I'm Octavia, we spoke on the phone?"

I nod marveling at the beautiful apartment, three of mine could fit in just this one open space. The walls were pure white but covered in abstract and modern art. The floor was a pale wood which made the clean white furniture stand out even more, "Can I take your bag?" I hand her my backpack, she makes a disgusted face looking at the strap held together with duct tape.

"Careful, my laptop is in there," she nods and hangs it on the coat rack.

"You have such lovely skin," Octavia chirps, "Care for something to drink?"

"I'm fine…"

"Oh good, have you showered?" I gulp.

"Yeah, this morning…" I lied, "Why?"
"Just in case Cinna wants a closer look," I bite my lip, *holy fuck*… *What am I getting myself into."

"Venia, Flavius!" she calls, "Here, sit sit!"

"I'm not taking my clothes off," I blurt, I thought this was supposed to keep me from my degrading job.

Octavia laughs, "Of course not, though we may need to get your measurements," I nod as an aqua blue haired woman wearing gold lipstick and a man with curly carrot colored hair saunter in from another room holding tightly onto glasses of wine.

"This is Venia and Flavius, Cinna's other assistants," she takes the glass of red wine from the redhead who gets in my face and examines me with a scrutinizing eye.

"Her eyebrow's need a bit of work, but other than that…" his soft thumb rubs under my eye, "Hmmm, you should try cold cream to get off the mascara."

"Thanks," I mumble, "Could you guys tell me what exactly I'm here for?" I looked between the three, they all basically oozed haute couture.

"You mean Mister Mellark didn't tell you?" a voice asked, smooth and deep and oh so French, "Come," I stand immediately following him into another room, the Couture Creatures choosing to stay behind, "Miss Everdeen is it?"

"Katniss, and I take it you're Cinna?" he nods, for the reception I got Cinna looks so… Normal. His skin is the color of the hot chocolate I used to drink as a child, his dark hair buzzed very short and the only color he chose to wear was a navy blue button up with his black pants.

Compared to the haute couture in the other room he was oddly tame, "Please make yourself at home. I'll just be a minute," he leaves me to my own devices, and naturally I have to examine everything. Photographs, plaques on his office walls,  

*Cinna LeBeau February 2011 Fashion Week, Paris*

He's pictured with a small dark haired woman who resembles me slightly, very slightly. Actually the only thing we have in common is that we both have black hair and look really out of place with the mannequin like models.

"That was Genevieve, lovely girl."

"What happened to her?" I ask idly, she's dressed like Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany's, and she's gorgeous.

"She had children…" he sighs glumly, "I don't design clothes for pregnant women so her agent and I worked to get her at a more family friendly designer."

"So, I'm here for a modeling job."

He nods and with his gentle hand on my back directs me to the chair seated before his desk, "Yes, I know these things are usually done with agents and what not, but they send me twiggy things," he sighs exasperated by the thought, possibly recalling a bad experience.

"But, I don't know anything about this. Clearly there's someone better."

He folds his hands and rests his chin in the cradle his woven fingers form, "More disciplined yes,
but I don't want that. The women I go for my models need to be relatable. They need to be clean, in good health. Mister Mellark says you seem to be a little…" he hesitates, "…underweight, which I can see," I shift uneasily and pull at my shirt, "A good diet can't fix. How are you in heels?"

"I spend most nights in four inch heels waiting tables… Also I've run four city blocks in them because I was about to miss the last train of the night," his bright green eyes smile at me.

"I can't say I can relate…" he somehow talks me into letting him measure me, every single result being written down on a spread sheet with my name at the top.

"Why do you need all these?" I ask as he measures my inseam.

He chews on the pencil, "If you take my offer, everything will be custom to you to look its best."

"Wait… So you want to make me pretty?" I ask.

"I want to use you to get me noticed. I'm still small, personal clients, I have a shop down with the other designers… But in September Fashion week starts and I have something big planned."

I drop down to the chair whether or not he's done I can't stand. Me, a model? Fashion week?

"You're in shock?"

"A little," I admit.

"If you agree, I'll need you for most of September…" he looks through his schedule, flipping through the pages.

"But, it's Fashion Week not Fashion month."

He smiles and sits across from me, crossing is legs from his desktop perch, "But, I'll need you in London, and Paris, and Milan," he smiles as my jaw drops, "I was told you were graduating soon?"

I nod, "Two weeks…” could I do this?

"For your training I'd only need to see you a few afternoons a week, though I'll be heading back to Paris in three weeks so most of your sessions will be with my assistants," I nod, soaking this in, I thought this was a job interview, not a job offer, "Paid of course," he reaches back for a folder, handing it to me, "This would be your contract, it is negotiable."

I bite my lip looking down at the contract, "The Model will be paid a wage of $65 an hour during training and a negotiable pay during show's and appearance" I make $2.25 plus tips at Cray's and $100 for tutoring sessions which will be ending as soon as school lets out.

"I… I'll do it," I look up at Cinna.

He grins, "Good, you're usually the type of girl I'm going for. Though you're shy, you lack… Confidence, and since getting here you've looked at your watch fifteen times."

I blush, "Sorry… I have a date with Mister Mellark, I think."

He nods, "Understandable, but you're really going dressed like that?" yet again my jaw drops, but he picks up his phone, "Flavius, bring in what we've just finished…” he hangs up, "It should fit," he shrugs as the redhead sets down two garments, "I'll leave you be, tuck the shirt in the skirt and I'll find suitable shoes."
I gulp, "What the fuck is going on?" I ask myself before taking off my shirt. The new one is soft, really soft and cut so it just show's my collar bones. The black material goes down to my elbow's and lays flat against my waist where the skirt lays. It's a lush swing skirt that poofs out when I twirl.

A swing skirt I think they're calls but I've never been 'fashionable'.

"You said your shoe size was forty one?" he slaps his forehead, "Forgive me, Americans and their strange measuring system... Eight?"

I nod as he sets down a pair of black flats with a very modest kitten heel, "Mister Mellark's driver will be here to retrieve you shortly."

"I look like a pink lady," I spin around on the heels much to Cinna's amusement, "Or at least a red lady."

"Hmmm, I would use better terminology... Someone may think you're a prostitute..." he hands me the contract and a pen, "This good through the end of the year. If you still want to be the face of my company, well, one of them, we'll need another one for February."

Katniss Everdeen I sign before handing him back the paper. This was it, I was free of Cray's, and if I play my cards right, I could actually move in with Madge, foot half the rent if she'll let me. Pay for food.

I tried to be poised and calm, but couldn't stop the dumb grin from spreading across my face, "When do I start?" I ask.

"Tomorrow evening?" he hugs me, "Thank you, Katniss. We're going to do big things, you and I," I nod and smile, I could trust this man.

He flicks at my choker, "I like this..."

"Thank you, it's my mother's..." I murmur.

When I come downstairs Abernathy is leaning on the hood of a sleek black SUV, the same that took me home the night of Peeta's and my sleeping together, "Long time no see sweetheart. I see Madison Avenue is treating you right."

I curtsy, "I'm a model now sir," he snorts and opens the door for me.

"Fancy clothes don't make the person..." he closes the door leaving me to feel that he's not just talking about me, but about his boss, about Peeta.

"I know that, sir."

He snorts again, "Just keep that in mind."

He helps me out of the car in front of the beautiful white building atop which Peeta lives. The doorman of this building doesn't look at me nearly as strangely as Cinna's even with my duct tape bound backpack, "Here you go sweetheart," he hands me a slip of paper.

Elevator: 343689

Garage: 2108
"What is this?" I ask with a frown.

"The passcodes to the penthouse and the parking garage, if you have a car."

I smirk, "Mister Abernathy, I live in New York, I only have a drivers license to get into bars."

He rolls his eyes as the elevator lurches upwards, "We figured as much, can you even drive?"

"I haven't driven since I moved here, but I used to know how. I'm sure I could figure it out eventually," I smirk as the door opens.

My heels echo off the walls of the white lobby into Peeta's home, "Look what I found wandering the streets of Manhattan. I know you don't like us bringing home stray's..." a door opens and out pours the sweet hymn of classical music, "But this one looked clean, or at least not... Snappy," I roll my eyes as Peeta comes from a back hallway into the main room.

He's still in the same suit as before, though his tie's loosened, "You changed."

What a greeting, "Thanks, I thought I looked nice too," I spin around as the music changes from the nice sweet classical to <i>Bad Things</i> by Jace Everett.

He takes my hand and guides me to his office, "Don't mind the song. It's on random I promise."

I tuck some loose hair behind my ear, "So... Friday was a onetime thing?"

He doesn't miss a beat, falter, or pause... He just chuckles and closes the door behind us, "So what would you like to do tonight? You're dressed up so the sky's the limit."

With him, maybe it was the limit.

I took in a second to take in his study. It was so plain though it didn't need to be decorated. I kick off my heels and toe over to the massive window overlooking Central Park. The white walls and black furniture take nothing away from the beautiful view.

"Do you like it?" he asks, watching me from the door.

"I have a view of an ally... This is... This is amazing..."

He rests his hand on the small of my back awkwardly. He's nothing like the confident man at the party, he's more cautious, "You see that building right there?" he asks pointing to a tall tower under construction on the corner of the park, I nod, "I just signed the lease on the penthouse on top."

I crane my neck, he'll be much higher in the gilded tower, "How much did that run you?" I ask not thinking.

"Only a... few million," he doesn't wait for me to be shocked, or even react, "But, it's real estate, so it's an investment," he shrugs.

"I've never been in Central Park," I admit, no longer impressed by his new home, well... I'm still impressed, only I've moved on.

"You're something Miss Everdeen."

"Oh please, Peeta, call me Katniss..."

"First name basis with the CEO of one of the largest companies in the United States, well,
privately owned that is. How does that make you feel?" he asks after spinning me around to face him.

"How should it? The clothes don't make the man Peeta," he kisses my nose.

"I knew there was a reason I couldn't stop thinking about you since the moment I heard you sing…" he admits.

My face falls, "Wait… what?"
We Owned the Night

Chapter Notes

To me We Owned the Night by Lady Antebellum was the only choice for this chapter. It's such a cute date song.

From the moment I met him Peeta's shell has only seemed to crack once or twice. He's always so calm and collected, now as I gawk and panic at his admission he joins me, shifting uneasily from foot to foot, stroking his lower lip with his finger and staring out the window.

"When?" I ask, I've done my fair share of drunk karaoke. If that was his first time seeing me I would never live it down!

"Opening night of your play. You were so graceful on your feet and I was immediately enchanted, but when you opened your mouth… I swear if we weren't inside and it wasn't night the birds would have stopped to listen. You sang with such conviction, such passion."

I smile faintly and rock on my toes with my hands behind my back, "You came to my play?" I ask innocently.

He flushes a little, the suave confident Peeta that lead me to his bedroom on Friday replaced by a more cautious and shy one, "Prim wanted to see it. She loves Disney movies."

I roll my eyes and look out the window again at the tiny people roaming the park, "What child doesn't? Beauty and the Beast was my favorite, followed by The Nightmare Before Christmas."

Cautiously he steps behind me, his hands on my hips, "You have a beautiful voice…" he murmurs, "Sing for me…" the confidence is back.

"Mister Mellark…" I flush, focusing at a child bouncing a ball down the street while a heavily pregnant woman follows him.

"Please?" he asks, kissing the back of my head.

I sigh and take a breath, "Oh, isn't this amazing? It's my favorite part because you'll see. Here's where she meets Prince Charming, but she won't discover that it's him 'til chapter three…" I go in to imitating rather comically the other parts, the townsfolk, Gaston, LeFou, finally I get to my last line of the song, "There must be more than this provincial life!"

"Look there she goes a girl who's strange but special. A most peculiar mademoiselle. It's a pity and a sin, she doesn't quite fit in. Because she really is a funny girl. A beauty but a funny girl. She really is a funny girl. That Belle," he continues in a spoken word before spinning me around.

"I'm starting to think that it was you watching all the Disney movies and Prim was just there as a decoy," he rolls my eyes as I study his face, the blonde lashes that outline his bright blue eyes, the tight smirk and slight five o'clock shadow. He's not much taller than I but solidly built. Stocky but fit I'm sure if he wanted he could pitch me half way across the room.

"See something you like?" he asks with a cocky smirk.
I nod and press my lips to his, he doesn't expect my actions, perhaps still worried about me being weirded out? Who cares, within seconds his hands find the side of my face and he deepens the kiss.

Then it hits me, I remember him. From the first night. The director told me over and over again to get over my nervousness pick a non-threatening person in the audience (someone I trusted basically) since none of my friends could make it I picked someone in the front. A blonde man with a small blonde woman, the entire time I watched them. So pretty and perfect, his kind eyes always watching me.

"You… You sat in the front row, center section two seats from the middle. When I got back to my dressing room there was a single daffodil waiting for me but I the card wasn't signed it just said…"

"When you sing the birds stop to listen," I nod, my jaw going slack once more, "I thought that small token of my admiration would be sufficient, but I couldn't get you out of my head," his thumbs massage the bottom of my ribcage, I shudder at his touch, but in a good way. The slight movement of his thumb warming my skin at first but then the warmth sinks down into my core. It's not the primal lust I felt at the Masquerade, but something so strange and foreign I back away.

"I'm sorry," I mumble at his shocked look, Quick, think of something quick.

But he does it for me, "Want to go down to the park?" I look down at my bare feet, my kitten heels still in the middle of the room, "I love watching the sunset in here, and someday I hope to show you it, but for now, I can think of a much better spot…"

We stand in the marble lobby and Peeta fixes my hair, tucking it behind my ear some, "Does Abernathy need to come with us?" I ask motioning to the gruff man behind us.

Peeta shrugs, "He'll get distracted and keep his distance. I like having him around, I've had a gun pulled on me once or twice," the elevator door opens and the two men head in but I stay put, "Katniss, you don't get to the top without hurting some people's feelings. Unfortunately two of them were a little less stable than I previously thought," he holds out his hand, "Come," I lace my fingers in his before letting our palm's touch and head in the gold elevator.

What am I getting myself into?

Abernathy does do a good job keeping his distance, in fact he seems pretty keen on keeping to himself but I can't help but feel like I'm being constantly watched. Maybe it's because I've coaxed the Beast out of the West Wing into the evening light shining through the pale pink branches of Cherry trees.

Peeta and his endless bachelorhood have made it to the papers quiet regularly, even tabloids like TMZ questioned. The Mellark's were the twenty-first century Kennedy family. The oldest brother, Ryan Mellark, was a senator, the middle was the black sheep, his partying and sexual conquests hitting page six regularly.

I chuckle a little, "What's so funny?" Peeta asks as a gust of wind peppers us with pale pink petals.

"Please don't be mad… But I was thinking, at least what I've heard about your older brother, Andrew… He should meet my friend Johanna…" I look up at the late afternoon light shining through the petals.

Peeta squeezes my hand, "Miss Everdeen, why would you ever say that?"

"Because your brother and my friend seem to have the same thoughts on romantic liaisons. Wham,
bam, thank you ma'am."

He chuckles and pulls me to him, so his arm is around my waist. It's strange, being this close to someone, but still so nice. A siren in the distance breaks us from our trance, not a foreign sound at all, but still just piercing enough, "So…" I start.

"So," he echoes.

"Is the big rich CEO alright with being seen with the common riffraff like me?" I ask as we approach Bethesda Fountain. We sit in an open spot in the grass where whatever pesticide they use seemed to fail because in about ten square feet bright yellow dandelions which I immediately sink my fingers into, picking a bunch and popping their heads off like a child.

"Why wouldn't I be?" he asks lying down in the grass, there's a carefree air about him. I'm shocked when he closes his eyes and lets me cover him in dandelion heads. Secretly I'm still four years old most of the time, "What are you doing?"

I shrug, though he can't see me and sit on my knees, smoothing out my skirt, "Your black suit makes you look like a secret agent. I'm… brightening it up some," he cracks an eye open when I speak but rolls both eyes when I'm done before pulling me to him.

"Come here…" he grumbles, his hand on the back of my head. I don't need to be directed, my lips gently brush his before I shift so I'm lying next to him, "So…" he yawns, "Is Central Park everything you dreamed of?" he asks with a playful smirk. I rest my head on his chest.

I sigh deeply, "Nah…. It's more…" I tilt my head up and pick a cherry blossom from his hair, "I met the most fascinating man there. Then I covered him in flowers," he lifted his head up to examine himself.

"So you-"

"Shame you were busy!" I tease sitting up, he just rolls his eyes before reaching for his pocket and pulling out his phone.

"Yeah?" he asks, the carefree joy gone from his face, "Don't tell me that Effie," he grumbles before his hand finds my back, finger tips tracing my spine through the high-waisted skirt and black top. I shiver as he pinches the bridge of his nose, his forehead creasing, "It's only the most important meeting this month, and you've double booked me. How can I be in two places at once tomorrow?" he's stern, "See if you can push my nine o'clock to eight then one of them to nine," he pauses, "Just email or text me. I'll be away from my phone for the rest of the night," he presses end and shoves it back in his pocket.

"Everything ok?" I ask sitting on my knees again as he rubs my lower back, his fingers dancing over my spine.

He bites his lip, still looking stern and businessmen like, "My assistant scheduled two big meetings at the same time. If the people can be flexible and someone shows up an hour early everything will be ok. Unfortunately I have to be at the office at seven thirty… Ish."

"Ish… If I was late for a shift at Cray's he'd probably take me out back and spank me," I say without thinking.

Peeta sits straight up, the businessman replaced by something angry and fierce, "He what!" he snaps.
"Peeta, no he-"

"Did he ever lay a hand on you?" he demands in a hard voice, gripping my arm firmly as if afraid I was going to run from the question.

"No, Peeta, I was just joking!" I jerk away, "Please… Don't be angry…" I whisper, picking at the grass.

He takes a deep breath and shudders, "Have you quit yet?"

I shake my head no, "I didn't know if I'd have a new job… Plus, I figured I should finish out the week…" that wasn't the whole reason. I didn't even know if I could support myself on Cinna's pay. Who knows how long "training sessions" would be or if he would keep me on. I had signed a contract…

"Something's bothering you…" he murmurs, moving his hand from my back and heading to my cheek. Something catches his eye, "We have to move," he finally brushes off the flowers before taking one with the stem still on and tucking it behind my ear. I look in the direction the distraction came from.

One lone cameraman aiming in our direction, this was something I didn't think of, ending up on page six right next to a socialite's splayed cooch. It was only Monday though, maybe something else will catch their attention.

"Please forgive me," Peeta squeezes my hand lightly, "The thought of that man touching you…" he squeezes his eyes shut, "Katniss, when I saw him at your work. It took everything I had in me not to leap across the table and strangle him.

I nod before pulling my phone out of my bag giving him the 'one minute' sign. I dial my work number and wait two rings before a disgruntled Cray answers, "What is it Kitty cat?"

"I was just calling to let you know I quit," I hang up without waiting for a response, I get on my toes and kiss Peeta's cheek, "There…" I slide the phone back in my purse, "I'm not entirely sure I can survive on what Cinna will be paying me… but…"

I've never been a fan of PDA, but when he loops his arm around my waist and dips me down for a passionate kiss all sailor and nurse style I have to sway a little on my stance. The jolt of electricity his eyes bring me melt my core.

He pulls back, "What are you doing to me…" I whisper, "because whatever it is… don't stop…"

I'm no longer the stressed waitress from Greenwich Village, he's no longer the twenty-nine year old CEO who's probably spent more nights hidden away in an office than tossing back a Cucumber Martini at a bar near his home called the Rogue Tomate while I nursed a Rhubarb Martini.

I had convinced him to dismiss Mister Abernathy, we were relatively safe. The NYPD was around, "Let's go to Times Square," I suggest after we finished our drinks and bar food. Everything on this side of town was all clean and organic. He dined on an octopus salad while I dared to try squid ink pasta.

"It's full of tourists," he grumbles as I stand going for my wallet, "No…" he pulls me to him, "Belle, a gentleman pays for his lady's dinner," I stick my tongue out and he chuckles, "Your tongue… It's all black," I get on my toes and bite his lip gently.

"Let me pay, some big spender gave me a grand the other night…" I murmur, trying to pretend to
be sexy and make him lower his guard.

"Remind me to thank him, maybe now you'll buy groceries..." he kisses me lightly, ignoring the other restaurant patrons that have to see our buzzed displays of lust... or affection. Either or, poor them.

I pull back and giggle, "You taste like octopus!" he rolls his eyes and slaps down a black credit card, "Hey..." I dig in my purse and pull out a stick of gum, sneaking one into his mouth which shocks him as he signs the bill.

"I'll call Haymitch..." he starts for his phone but I stop him, shoving my metro card in his face.

"God damnit Peeta, you're in New York, you're going to act like a New Yorker. Designer suit aside... Actually..." I straighten his tie as I lead him down 60th and to the N towards Cony Island. He's confused as we descend into the underground of NYC. The dingy white tile walls echo the sound of my heels and the sweet crooning of a perfectly tuned guitar. I dig in my purse and give the man a twenty.

"Thank you miss, sir, God bless!" the man tells us, continuing to play.

Peeta seems shocked by this, not by my tip, but the fact that someone is making their living do this. I slid my card through the turnstiles, unlocking it before passing it back to Peeta.

"Is it always this hot down here?" he asks, loosening his tie.

"You should feel in in August. I swear you sweat off ten pounds if the train is late," the echo whooshing and rattling gets louder as the train pulls in. I get lost often in the city, but can say with pride I can find my way home and to Times Square without issue.

When we reach street level I'm as always in awe at the bustle and bright lights, "Someday..." he wraps his arms around my waist, "Your face will be up on one of these billboards..." he kisses the back of my head and I melt into him.

What was this man doing to me?

We walk down the blue paved street, attracting onlookers, a few who recognize Peeta snap a photograph of the two of us hand in hand, "What's the appeal of this place?" he asks idly as I sip on a decaf iced coffee and smoke my first cigarette of the day.

It felt so good, kind of like sex.

I flick the ash away, "I think it's the fact that there's two Lids within two city blocks of each other?" I ask poking at ice with my straw, "That and... I mean it's Times Square. This is like the cultural hub of the United States!" another drag and a frown from Peeta.

"Here I thought Kim Kardashian's twitter feed was the hub of American culture..." he sighs.

I shrug and open the lid, proceeding to eat the ice, "You should get home soon... You have work in the morning..." I grumble, not wanting this night to end. It was still early but that's the price you pay for going on a date on a Monday.

He just shrugged, "You should come back with me. I don't normally sleep with another person in my bed... In fact Friday was the first time since I moved into that Penthouse."

I shake my head no, "I have studying to do..." it's late, well kind of, just past eleven. I want to call
Madge and gush like a school girl about this evening but she has an eight am tomorrow and I can't be that person.

"I'll have Abernathy pick me up from your apartment…"

When we exit the subway closest to my place blinding red and white lights greet us, "Ugh… It's only May, too soon for people to be lighting their houses on fire…" I know the month of the year means nothing, but since moving to the city I've noticed house fires happen more often than not in the hot months.

We cross 7th and head to my street when I stop dead in my tracks, the lights are coming Jones Street where a pillar of black smoke rises to the sky. I take off into a run, "Katniss!" Peeta yells chasing after me as I bolt to my street.

No… No… No!

"Katniss!" I push through the gathered crowd to the front of the police barricade in just enough time to watch the row home next to my building collapse.

"No!" I shout trying to cross the barricade but Peeta's arms and the NYPD stop me.

"Miss!" an officer shouts.

"That's my home!" I point to my building, there are no fancy fire retardant walls there, it's an old home set up to be four shitty apartments that whistle in the winter and bake in the summer, but it's my home.

And barefoot on Bleaker Street I watch it go up in flames, clinging to Peeta as I watch four years of my life be licked away by deadly orange flames.

Chapter 6: Fallen Interlude

Welcome back everyone! Hope you had a wonderful weekend. I know I did.

I would like to first thank my new Beta Apecanin1 who will hopefully be making this story more readable for many many chapters. :D

I keep forgetting a disclaimer, and since I will be referencing a lot of music in future chapters I'd like to just say that I don't own any of it!

"Katniss, calm down, I can't understand you!"

I wipe the tears and Peeta hands me a tissue. Deep breaths, Everdeen. In, out…

"Half of my block is up in flames. My building is basically gone. I don't have a home!" My voice cracks awkwardly as I choke on the words.

I'm homeless. I'm homeless…

I have to tell myself this over and over. They managed to save part of the building and it looks like a good portion of my apartment wasn't destroyed, but I can't go inside. Instead, I have to sit there
and watch them gut my home with pike poles and crow bars.

"Yes you do! You know I have a spare room waiting for you. It figures it takes your building burning down to get you to move in with someone…" I wipe the tears from my eyes with the side of my index finger and chuckle, "Come over now," she yawns. "I'll set everything up…"

I shake my head, "No, it's late and you have to be up early." I rub at my brow with the back of my hand. "I'm with Peeta. I'll crash at his and be over tomorrow afternoon. I still have your key on my key ring…"

"Ok, and wear anything you want out of my closet since I'm sure you're not getting your clothes back…"

I chuckle again, "Remember a year ago when you yelled at me to get renter's insurance?"

"Duh…"

"Thank you, Madge. I owe you big time…"

"Anytime Katniss, I'll see you tomorrow…" Tomorrow, we'd negotiate how much of the bills I'll be paying. She's offered me free room and board… but I can't accept that!

A firefighter comes out of the front door carrying a tarnished gold picture frame. "Wait… That's mine!" I call, shoving my phone at Peeta and, for the second time tonight, crossing the barricade. He hands me the frame and I hug it tightly to my chest. This was the last piece of my father. It was of him, my mother and me fishing when I was about four, right before he died.

"Thank you…" he nods and I rush back to Peeta before NYPD actually arrest me instead of just threatening to do so.

I stare out the massive window, my brain trying to make sense of this day… In less than twelve hours my whole life changed… I got a new job… I'm homeless –ish.

I still need to get that damned interview… When I came home, Peeta hid immediately in his office. He seemed confused by my presence on his couch the few times he emerged. Once to give me a change of clothes, another to ask me if I needed anything, and finally a third to ask the sleeping arrangements.

"I have a lot of studying to do… I think I'm just going to pull an all-nighter. But you should get to bed, you have an empire to run tomorrow…"

"Are you sure?" he asks, his hands in his pockets.

"Positive… Do you have any free time tomorrow? I can email you the interview questions and… I just need to get this project done or I'll fail."

"Sure, my email is in your phone. Though, I'm not sure what good it is in there."

I smile faintly and pull the dark green throw tighter around my shoulders, "Yeah, once I get my finances more straightened out I'll maybe invest in a real phone and stop using these burners…"

Burner noun – A prepaid cellphone typically used by drug dealers that are thrown away when minutes run out to prevent the cops from tracking or tapping.

"Someday, I'll get you in the twenty first century…" he grumbles heading into his room.
"Goodnight, Miss Everdeen."

"Goodnight, Mister Mellark…" I frown a little when the door closes, half expecting a goodnight kiss.

I open up gmail and start the frustrating task of actually writing a long winded email.

TO: pmellark

SUBJECT: Questions.

First and foremost I'd like to thank you for your hospitality last night… And Friday. And for everything. I hate to rush you but I have a deadline… and it's close. Please get these back to me ASAP:

1) What made you decide to get into business?

2) What college did you go to?

3) What made you decide to donate to NYU?

4) Why the Arts?

I flipped through the questions the rest of the staff wanted answered.

I'm sorry, I didn't write a few of these (Almost all)

5) Do you have a girlfriend?

6) What are you doing to make your company more eco-friendly?

7) Roughly how many people do you employ?

8) Where were you born?

I'm now positive the staff at the NYU paper don't have a coherent thought between them. These questions are so scattered…

9) At what age were you adopted?

Adopted? I didn't know that… Ugh, I should have researched more!

Sorry if any of these are too personal, my staff wrote most of them and I'm pretty sure they were hitting the Everclear pretty hard, as always.

Thanks again, for everything, I owe you big time…

Katniss Everdeen

Editor, Washington Square News, NYU

I try to study for my exams, I really do. I go over my statistics notes again and again, as always getting frustrated with ANOVA's, until I think I finally get it before the day hits me.

I got a new job.

I quit my old job.
I went on an actual date, an actually *amazing* date.

I just watched my house burn down.

Instead of lying with my aforementioned date, I'm hiding under a blanket.

His apartment feels so cold as I hunt for a guest room to shower in. I was disgusting. Sweat, tears and soot were invading every inch of my flesh. The room next to his is a bedroom with a very clean and streamline in-suite bathroom.

I have to search for the showerhead at first before deciding to turn on the water and spoil the surprise. A stream of warm water falls from the ceiling, lit by pale blue light. As I move the spigot from cold to hot the water goes from a deep blue to pale purple and finally red when the water is steaming. I test it and wince… Much too hot.

I settle somewhere in the lavender zone before stripping out of my red skirt and black top and letting the water rain down on me, beating away the stress of the day. I back up out of the stream and bump into something that makes a jet of water shoot out of the wall straight into my back.

I try to hold it in but the shock makes me yelp loudly. "This shower is booby trapped…," I grumble. What happened to a single head a few feet above mine that I could detach to rinse hard to reach areas?

I move again and bump into just what I was looking for.

If this is what his guest shower is like, I'm terrified of the master bath.

I towel dry my hair and pull on the t-shirt and shorts he gave me, taking a moment to take in his delicious aroma.

I squeeze my legs together, feeling the heat build as I remember his touch. If I go to him, what does that make me? Would he send me away?

I quietly open his door and stumble through the sitting area which is only lit by the silvery moonlight. He doesn't snore so it's difficult to tell whether or not he's asleep. Instead, I stand at the foot of his bed and watch him.

What was I thinking, wanting to pounce on him for sex? I could kick myself.

"Mmm…" he's lying on his stomach, one arm under his pillow, the other clutching one to his side. The sheet is already tangled in his legs, and I carefully free it from his long muscular legs. I crawl up like a cat from the foot of his bed, lay about a foot from him and gently work the pillow from his grasp.

He groaned and opened his eyes as the absence of his second pillow becomes known. "Hey…," I whisper resting my head on the soft dark pillow.

"Hey…" he loops his arm around my waist and pulls me to him, upgrading me from bedmate to replacement cuddle pillow in a matter of seconds.

I can immediately tell something's different when I wake up. For starters, the dusty smell of my apartment is missing and replaced by the warm rich smell of fresh body wash. I crack an eye open. It's early…way too early for me to be existing on a Tuesday.
"What are you doing?" I ask when my eyes meet Peeta's.

"Nothing…" he smirks. "Go back to sleep. I'm going to work, stay as long as you like."

I yawn and nod as he pulls the blankets up around my chin again. "Remember to respond to my email…" I grumble half asleep before he kisses me lightly on the lips even though I'm sure they're covered in dry drool and I can already taste my terrible morning breath.

"I already did," he pulls the blinds making it nice and dark. "What would my mother think, me sleeping with the press…?"

Though my eyes are closed, I point in his general direction. "Hey… That's almost press to you, mister…"

It's a much more agreeable time when I wake next. The green numbers on Peeta's clock radio tell me it's just past noon. "Shit!" I throw the covers off me and rush to the sitting room where my laptop and cellphone rest.

A woman just dropped off boxes for you, from Madge.

Please come any time after 4, from Cinna.

Wait… Boxes?

Did you open them? I send while walking back into Peeta's room. I need to wash my face and brush my teeth so I can head over there ASAP.

I dig through his cabinets to maybe find a spare. He gave me the code to get into the place, left me alone, and let me sleep in his bed. Clearly I was welcome here, maybe not at my leisure… But I was welcome… I think. I definitely needed a toothbrush.

When I came up empty, I shrugged and decided his was good enough.

I see you haven't seen fit to get me a toothbrush. I've slept here twice. I hit send and push my hair back so I can splash water on my face to get rid of the sleep.

My phone vibrates. I'll have Sae pick one up for you. Anything in particular?

Definitely welcome. Iunno, I kind of like yours.

The clothes I wore to Cinna's yesterday sit on the dresser clean and folded neatly. Another toiletry borrowed, I used Peeta's deodorant before putting my bra back on and slipping the black t-shirt over my head. I couldn't wear these panties again so I shoved them in my pocket once my jeans were on.

The penthouse appears to be empty when I emerge and head into Peeta's office.

Call me whenever. I think at this point you owe me breakfast.

Katniss

PS: 4892 Thompson Street

I tape the note to his computer and after packing my bag, and head to the subway to move myself into Madge's apartment.
She lived right across the street from a playground and near an Art Therapy center which naturally lead to some interesting sights out her third floor window. It took two keys to get to my new home. Two keys and what felt like a literal fuck ton of stairs.

When I pushed the door open there were three large boxes in the entryway with my name on it. "What did you do… Mister Mellark…” I slide the boxes into the guest room before throwing my bag onto the clean bed.

I open the boxes. The first one was full of toiletries…expensive face wash, shampoo with French labels, a conditioner that smells just like lavender, and finally a toothbrush and toothpaste.

*Guess he did buy me one…*

I'm going to have to kick this man and hard.

The next two boxes are full of both fine silks and jeans. I rub the fabric between my fingers before noticing a note lost in a shirt.

*Mister Mellark told me you lost everything, so here's a little something to get you back on your feet.*

-Portia

I laid the black silk across my chest, the shirt had no sleeves and silky ruffles in the front, but it was awkwardly long.

*Holy shit, this is a dress. Portia… I'm not a whore!* I hang the clothes in the closet, the ruffly black piece one of several very short pieces, very not me. They were beautiful, too beautiful for me, a jeans and t-shirt girl.

Life is all about picking and choosing battles and this was one I let go, for now.

I opened my laptop to check whether or not Peeta answered my email.

*From: Peter Mellark*

*Subject: Re: Questions.*

1) **What made you decide to get into business?**

*I always wanted to make something of myself, and it seemed like the easiest path. As it turns out being successful comes at a great sacrifice.*

2) **What college did you go to?**

*The University of Pennsylvania.*

3) **What made you decide to donate to NYU?**

*I liked what I saw.*

4) **Why the Arts?**

*Without the Arts, what are we? Primates who happen to occasionally form a coherent sentence and kill each other over the most foolish of reasons. Art is civilization, it's culture, it's life.*
5) Do you have a girlfriend?

I would like to think I do, but she hasn’t said yes yet.

6) What are you doing to make your company more eco-friendly?

We're almost entirely paper-free and working on making our buildings run on solar power. Besides that the obvious elimination of incandescent bulbs, if we need paper have it come from recycled paper, and we encourage our employees to carpool or use public transportation.

7) Roughly how many people do you employ?

Somewhere between 15,000 and 17,000 between the businesses I own. Though that number is growing due to the fact that we are one of the only companies who continued hiring during the recession.

8) Where were you born?

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

9) At what age were you adopted?

8

Anything else? I would like to know more about you, Miss Everdeen. Please answer these questions to the best of your knowledge. I don't have a deadline; I'm just sure I'll be bored at work.

1) Have you lived anywhere outside of New York state?

2) Where are your parents?

3) Why did you decide to go to NYU?

4) Why journalism.

5) You should be on Broadway, not behind a desk.

6) Ok, so number five isn't a question, it's a suggestion. This isn't a question either.

7) Have you been in any other plays before?

8) I have an event this Friday, will you go with me?

9) If yes, will you allow me to introduce you as my girlfriend or shall you be my 'friend’?

Good luck with your move, and don't argue about the packages waiting for you at your new home, they're a gift.

Peter Mellark

CEO Mellark Enterprises

Ps: Try and avoid making me look like a pompous jerk.

I sprawled out on the full sized bed and began typing away at the article.

When I was guided up to office of Peter 'Peeta' Mellark the day after the NYU Charity Masquerade
I was expecting to see a stuffy, old, serious businessman. Never did I expect to meet with the twenty-nine year old CEO of one of the largest privately owned companies in the world. After I embarrassed myself by admitting I was expecting someone older Mister Mellark decided it was inappropriate to conduct our Saturday interview trapped in his top floor office. After a short ride to the famous Serendipity 3, Mr. Mellark and I got down to business.

During the course of the previous week the staff at the Washington Square News bounced questions off each other they wanted answered. Naturally these questions had to be thoughtful, but seeing as I was now seated across from one of the richest men in the country at an elegant wrought iron table, an old tarnished mirror to my side and a general whimsy about the Alice and Wonderland style restaurant, discussing business plans and hostile takeovers was off the table.

We get the most obvious question out first. Why did you get into business? He smiles faintly, telling me about how he's always wanted to make something of himself. After college at the University of Pennsylvania he was hired at an unnamed company, but soon decided that there were major improvements that could be made and started his own company at the age of Twenty-one. Now eight years later it's obvious that, besides the sacrifices he's had to make over the years and the sixty hour work weeks, he made the right choice.

He freely admits he like what he's seeing coming out of NYU especially art wise, and can be quoted saying, "Without the Arts, what are we? Primates who happen to occasionally form a coherent sentence and kill each other over the most foolish of reasons, that's what. Art is civilization, it's culture, it's life."

Moving onto less deep topics I ask him how such a large company tries to reduce its impact on the ecosystem. The company, that employs over fifteen thousand, is proud to say it's almost paperless, using environmentally friendly, recycled paper. Mellark Enterprises is on its way to running on solar energy because the elimination of incandescent bulbs was only a step in the right direction.

Finally, the most important question.

The one the women at the Washington Square News were most avid about me getting answered.

Was Mister Peter Mellark single?

Sorry ladies, he's happy to say he's off the market.

I continue chewing on my nail, reading over and over again, tweaking it slightly to not make it seem like I was gloating about going out to lunch with Peeta, and that I didn't make him sound like a stuck up ass.

I send the article to the senior editor, the one actually in charge of the paper, my professor, and another to Peeta, with the subject: I thought you might want to read this over. I'll get to your questions after work.

"Ugh… Work…” Fortunately, I don't need to shower. What does one wear to my 'job'? Is there a dress code for Model Training?

I swap shirts and run out the door, needing to catch my train in the next five minutes in order to not be late.

I send a quick text to Madge telling her if I got out early enough I'd buy a bottle of wine or a twelve pack for my housewarming before descending into the underground of NYC.

The second I get off at Madison, my phone begins vibrating.
Leave it to a journalist to twist words to her liking. Guess I have to change my Facebook relationship status?, Peeta sends. I roll my eyes.

I didn't need them knowing all the gory details and that it took my home burning to the ground for you to answer my questions. Now, have a nice night. I'm off to work. I shove my phone in my bag and enter the building, judgmental doorman and all.

"Ouch…" I wince as a wax strip is pulled from my eyebrow.

"Sorry! You've just let them go for so long!" I didn't want to tell Venia… or was it Octavia… that I had plucked my eyebrows just last week, "I hate to see what you have growing between your legs!"

I squeeze my legs shut. "Oh Octavia, have you no shame?" Flavius groans while filing my nails.

Day one of my training? Make me look 'human' as they told me while brushing the hair on my head, and ripping out the hairs on my face.

"Should we exfoliate?" the other woman asks, stroking my cheek with her thumb. "Nope, baby soft!" she giggles before going to work on my toes. "Oh my! Katniss your heels! They're like sandpaper…"

I roll my eyes before closing them again, trying to black out the three little birds pecking at my flesh to make me 'human'.

$65 an hour to do this… You're making a week's pay pre-tip in one hour. I wince again as above my lip is waxed, I never even noticed hair up there.

"Do you want us to take care of your bikini area?" Octavia asks, making me squeeze my legs tighter.

"N-no thank you," I stutter at the thought.

"Ok! Now…" they stand me up and hand me a mirror. "You're really not too bad looking," Octavia smiles.

"Thanks… I think…" I run my index fingers along my now thin eyebrows.

Flavius pulls out his phone. "Tell me what else we have for this evening?" he asks the phone.

The phone pings twice and a female voice responds, "Ok, here is your meeting."

"Looks like Cinna has nothing else planned for tonight. He wants us to pay her through ten o'clock, but you'll get your check on Friday. Oh!" He slaps his forehead. "Siri, remind me tomorrow at nine to print out the schedule"

"Here is your reminder," the phone says in that sweet computer voice that sounds almost too polite.

"You know, since you insist on using that ancient thing," he points to my charging cellphone.

"I'll get a new one…" I grumble. I still have plenty of money from Peeta's exorbitant tip. "I'm sick of loading this one with minutes anyway."

Flavius makes a face, "I thought only drug dealers used those things."
I pick up a bottle of Yellow Tail Moscato and to keep it classy two six packs of PBR pounders before heading back to Madge's.

"Honey I'm home!" I shout closing the door with my foot.

"Oh good!" she chirps. "I ordered Chinese take-out. Veggie fried rice and sweet and sour chicken?"

"With some PBR pounders?" I open a can and hand it to her. "Cheers, to partying like we're freshmen again!" We clink cans.

"Oh you got Moscato! But we should save this for after the beer is gone. You know, keeping it classy."

I chuckle as she heads to let the delivery man in. "Hey honey, do you have that straw fedora? I want to jam with my inner hipster," I ask as I find the hat discarded on a coffee table. "Perfect!" I tell her as I roll up my pant legs and keep my converse on.

"I don't drink PBR, it's too mainstream," she chuckles as she unpacks the take-out.

"Margaret Undersee, no dinner until you finish your beer!"

She makes an 'o' with her mouth before sitting down, "Yes mommy."

"Ew, Madge, watch your language. That's a vile word…” I shudder. My five, ten and fifteen year plans didn't include children. Hell, they barely included another human being. "Mister Mellark and I have only been a couple for a few hours. We haven't even discussed breeding."

She chokes on her rice, "Katniss Everdeen, in a relationship. Like… dating?" I nod, blushing a little. "I figured you swore off men after well… Cato."

I flick at the pull tab on the can and finish it off, "Well… I can't dwell on that asshole for the rest of my life can I?" I tell her glumly while wrestling with a piece of chicken. "I'm moving in the right direction. I'm out of that shitty apartment, that shitty job," I hold up another beer. "Watch out New York, Katniss Everdeen is finally finding her footing."

Madge rolls her eyes, "Please, the only time I've ever seen you stumble was when you ran down Peeta on Friday."

I groan and put my head down on the table, "I will never live this down…"

I tease Madge about Gale, she picks for information about Peeta and before long one six pack is gone and we've moved onto the wine. "You know, beer before liquor you'll never be sicker? They never said anything about wine…"

There's a knocking at the door. "The Anderson's down stairs have been told five times to not prop the door open!" Madge hisses.

"It's fine, an honest mistake."

I open the door, the slide lock only letting me peak at the person outside: Flavius.

"Flavius!" I close the door and throw it open once the lock is undone. "What are you doing here?"

"Cinna sent me with this!" He hands me a small white box, "It's for work, and personal things. Basically…” He steps inside and opens the box. "I saw you gawking at my iPhone and Cinna thought you'd need one for work. Especially since he would like you to accompany him to Paris in
three weeks," He lets the shock sink in…me? Paris?

"There are a ton of apps that will translate for you, of you can just try and learn some key phrases like, 'thank you', 'hello', and 'Where's the bathroom?'"

*What am I getting myself into?*

"My phrase of choice is always 'Would you like to see my room?" he winks.

"No thank you, I'm taken…" I unlock my new work phone, and personal phone, and apparently personal assistant since when I hold down the one button on the thing Siri comes to life.

"Well, good, now, I have to get going! See you tomorrow!" he kisses both my cheeks and like a haute couture tornado is gone.

"Who was that?" Madge asked, "He looked like Fashion week on steroids!"

I chuckle and put the slide lock back in the door and transferring some key numbers Cinna didn't have. My mother, Madge, Johanna, Annie, and finally Peeta.

*I would like to inform you that this is my new number. Cinna got me a 'work phone'.*

-Belle (Aka Katniss)

Typing on a touch screen is hard.

"That's Flavius, my bosses assistant. He wanted to let me know I'd need this when I go to Paris in three weeks."

"Oh, Paris, I love that city!" she puts her hands over her heart and practically swoons.

My new phone pings.

*Finally.* Peeta replies.

"I know we still have beer… But I'm opening the wine to celebrate!" Madge vacations in Paris at least once a year, "Ah! Mon Paris! Tu me manques!"

It's amazing how it only took one night for Madge and I to slip back into our old habits, Chinese take-out, nursing cheap beer and chasing it with delicious wine, and staying up until three am gushing about boys and panicking about our futures.

Tomorrow was the first day of reading 'week', five days where we have no classes and are supposed to study. My first semester I discovered quickly it meant wild parties and students sleeping on campus furniture, and little to no studying was done until twelve hours before finals.

"Shit…" I grumble at around two when the wine is gone and we're watching re-runs of Jerry Springer, "I have to be at work at three and I have the play!" though NYU's production of *Beauty and the Beast* has run its course we're bringing it back for one afternoon for the children at a few schools.

"Just text your boss, or call like really early. Not Katniss early, but *human* early."

Sleeping until two pm was not one of my finest traits.

"Hey phone, can you remind me to call Cinna tomorrow at nine?"
She pings twice, "Here is the reminder I made for you."

"This thing is going to take away my ability to think… Though if she can find me a good Indian Buffet I'll forgive her."

Madge giggles, already three sheets to the wind, "It's like two am!"

I roll my eyes, "Alright, kiddo, time for bed," I try and haul her up but she makes her body like Jell-o, "Or sleep here!"

She flops down and gives me the thumbs up, "Love you Katniss!" she giggles.

I roll my eyes, *Oh Madge…*
"Katniss, calm down, I can't understand you!"

I wipe the tears and Peeta hands me a tissue. Deep breaths, Everdeen. In, out...

"Half of my block is up in flames. My building is basically gone. I don't have a home!" My voice cracks awkwardly as I choke on the words.

I'm homeless. I'm homeless...

I have to tell myself this over and over. They managed to save part of the building and it looks like a good portion of my apartment wasn't destroyed, but I can't go inside. Instead, I have to sit there and watch them gut my home with pike poles and crow bars.

"Yes you do! You know I have a spare room waiting for you. It figures it takes your building burning down to get you to move in with someone..." I wipe the tears from my eyes with the side of my index finger and chuckle, "Come over now," she yawns. "I'll set everything up..."

I shake my head, "No, it's late and you have to be up early." I rub at my brow with the back of my hand. "I'm with Peeta. I'll crash at his and be over tomorrow afternoon. I still have your key on my key ring..."

"Ok, and wear anything you want out of my closet since I'm sure you're not getting your clothes back..."

I chuckle again, "Remember a year ago when you yelled at me to get renter's insurance?"

"Duh..."

"Thank you, Madge. I owe you big time..."

"Anytime Katniss, I'll see you tomorrow..." Tomorrow, we'd negotiate how much of the bills I'll be paying. She's offered me free room and board... but I can't accept that!

A firefighter comes out of the front door carrying a tarnished gold picture frame. "Wait... That's mine!" I call, shoving my phone at Peeta and, for the second time tonight, crossing the barricade. He hands me the frame and I hug it tightly to my chest. This was the last piece of my father. It was of him, my mother and me fishing when I was about four, right before he died.

"Thank you..." he nods and I rush back to Peeta before NYPD actually arrest me instead of just threatening to do so.
I stare out the massive window, my brain trying to make sense of this day… In less than twelve hours my whole life changed… I got a new job… I'm homeless –ish.

I still need to get that damned interview… When I came home, Peeta hid immediately in his office. He seemed confused by my presence on his couch the few times he emerged. Once to give me a change of clothes, another to ask me if I needed anything, and finally a third to ask the sleeping arrangements.

"I have a lot of studying to do… I think I'm just going to pull an all-nighter. But you should get to bed, you have an empire to run tomorrow…"

"Are you sure?" he asks, his hands in his pockets.

"Positive… Do you have any free time tomorrow? I can email you the interview questions and… I just need to get this project done or I'll fail."

"Sure, my email is in your phone. Though, I'm not sure what good it is in there."

I smile faintly and pull the dark green throw tighter around my shoulders, "Yeah, once I get my finances more straightened out I'll maybe invest in a real phone and stop using these burners…"

Burner noun – A prepaid cellphone typically used by drug dealers that are thrown away when minutes run out to prevent the cops from tracking or tapping.

"Someday, I'll get you in the twenty first century…" he grumbles heading into his room.
"Goodnight, Miss Everdeen."

"Goodnight, Mister Mellark…" I frown a little when the door closes, half expecting a goodnight kiss.

I open up gmail and start the frustrating task of actually writing a long winded email.

TO: pmellark

SUBJECT: Questions.

First and foremost I'd like to thank you for your hospitality last night... And Friday. And for everything. I hate to rush you but I have a deadline... and it's close. Please get these back to me ASAP:

1) What made you decide to get into business?

2) What college did you go to?

3) What made you decide to donate to NYU?

4) Why the Arts?

I flipped through the questions the rest of the staff wanted answered.

I'm sorry, I didn't write a few of these (Almost all)

5) Do you have a girlfriend?

6) What are you doing to make your company more eco-friendly?
7) Roughly how many people do you employ?

8) Where were you born?

I'm now positive the staff at the NYU paper don't have a coherent thought between them. These questions are so scattered…

9) At what age were you adopted?

Adopted? I didn't know that… Ugh, I should have researched more!

Sorry if any of these are too personal, my staff wrote most of them and I'm pretty sure they were hitting the Everclear pretty hard, as always.

Thanks again, for everything, I owe you big time…

Katniss Everdeen

Editor, Washington Square News, NYU

I try to study for my exams, I really do. I go over my statistics notes again and again, as always getting frustrated with ANOVA's, until I think I finally get it before the day hits me.

I got a new job.

I quit my old job.

I went on an actual date, an actually amazing date.

I just watched my house burn down.

Instead of lying with my aforementioned date, I'm hiding under a blanket.

His apartment feels so cold as I hunt for a guest room to shower in. I was disgusting. Sweat, tears and soot were invading every inch of my flesh. The room next to his is a bedroom with a very clean and streamline in-suite bathroom.

I have to search for the showerhead at first before deciding to turn on the water and spoil the surprise. A stream of warm water falls from the ceiling, lit by pale blue light. As I move the spigot from cold to hot the water goes from a deep blue to pale purple and finally red when the water is steaming. I test it and wince… Much too hot.

I settle somewhere in the lavender zone before stripping out of my red skirt and black top and letting the water rain down on me, beating away the stress of the day. I back up out of the stream and bump into something that makes a jet of water shoot out of the wall straight into my back.

I try to hold it in but the shock makes me yelp loudly. "This shower is booby trapped…," I grumble. What happened to a single head a few feet above mine that I could detach to rinse hard to reach areas?

I move again and bump into just what I was looking for.

If this is what his guest shower is like, I'm terrified of the master bath.

I towel dry my hair and pull on the t-shirt and shorts he gave me, taking a moment to take in his delicious aroma.
I squeeze my legs together, feeling the heat build as I remember his touch. If I go to him, what does that make me? Would he send me away?

I quietly open his door and stumble through the sitting area which is only lit by the silvery moonlight. He doesn't snore so it's difficult to tell whether or not he's asleep. Instead, I stand at the foot of his bed and watch him.

What was I thinking, wanting to pounce on him for sex? I could kick myself.

"Mmm…" he's lying on his stomach, one arm under his pillow, the other clutching one to his side. The sheet is already tangled in his legs, and I carefully free it from his long muscular legs. I crawl up like a cat from the foot of his bed, lay about a foot from him and gently work the pillow from his grasp.

He groaned and opened his eyes as the absence of his second pillow becomes known. "Hey…," I whisper resting my head on the soft dark pillow.

"Hey…" he loops his arm around my waist and pulls me to him, upgrading me from bedmate to replacement cuddle pillow in a matter of seconds.

I can immediately tell something's different when I wake up. For starters, the dusty smell of my apartment is missing and replaced by the warm rich smell of fresh body wash. I crack an eye open. It's early…way too early for me to be existing on a Tuesday.

"What are you doing?" I ask when my eyes meet Peeta's.

"Nothing…" he smirks. "Go back to sleep. I'm going to work, stay as long as you like."

I yawn and nod as he pulls the blankets up around my chin again. "Remember to respond to my email…," I grumble half asleep before he kisses me lightly on the lips even though I'm sure they're covered in dry drool and I can already taste my terrible morning breath.

"I already did," he pulls the blinds making it nice and dark. "What would my mother think, me sleeping with the press…?"

Though my eyes are closed, I point in his general direction. "Hey… That's almost press to you, mister…"

It's a much more agreeable time when I wake next. The green numbers on Peeta's clock radio tell me it's just past noon. "Shit!" I throw the covers off me and rush to the sitting room where my laptop and cellphone rest.

A woman just dropped off boxes for you, from Madge.

Please come any time after 4, from Cinna.

Wait… Boxes?

Did you open them? I send while walking back into Peeta's room. I need to wash my face and brush my teeth so I can head over there ASAP.

I dig through his cabinets to maybe find a spare. He gave me the code to get into the place, left me alone, and let me sleep in his bed. Clearly I was welcome here, maybe not at my leisure… But I
was welcome…I think. I definitely needed a toothbrush.

When I came up empty, I shrugged and decided his was good enough.

*I see you haven't seen fit to get me a toothbrush. I've slept here twice.* I hit send and push my hair back so I can splash water on my face to get rid of the sleep.

My phone vibrates. *I'll have Sae pick one up for you. Anything in particular?*

Definitely welcome. *Iunno, I kind of like yours.*

The clothes I wore to Cinna's yesterday sit on the dresser clean and folded neatly. Another toiletry borrowed, I used Peeta's deodorant before putting my bra back on and slipping the black t-shirt over my head. I couldn't wear these panties again so I shoved them in my pocket once my jeans were on.

The penthouse appears to be empty when I emerge and head into Peeta's office.

*Call me whenever. I think at this point you owe me breakfast.*

*Katniss*

*PS: 4892 Thompson Street*

I tape the note to his computer and after packing my bag, and head to the subway to move myself into Madge's apartment.

She lived right across the street from a playground and near an Art Therapy center which naturally lead to some interesting sights out her third floor window. It took two keys to get to my new home. Two keys and what felt like a literal fuck ton of stairs.

When I pushed the door open there were three large boxes in the entryway with my name on it. "What did you do… Mister Mellark…" I slide the boxes into the guest room before throwing my bag onto the clean bed.

I open the boxes. The first one was full of toiletries…expensive face wash, shampoo with French labels, a conditioner that smells just like lavender, and finally a toothbrush and toothpaste.

*Guess he did buy me one…*

I'm going to have to kick this man and hard.

The next two boxes are full of both fine silks and jeans. I rub the fabric between my fingers before noticing a note lost in a shirt.

*Mister Mellark told me you lost everything, so here's a little something to get you back on your feet.*

-*Portia*

I laid the black silk across my chest, the shirt had no sleeves and silky ruffles in the front, but it was awkwardly long.

*Holy shit, this is a dress. Portia… I'm not a whore!* I hang the clothes in the closet, the ruffly black piece one of several very short pieces, very not me. They were beautiful, too beautiful for me, a jeans and t-shirt girl.
Life is all about picking and choosing battles and this was one I let go, for now.

I opened my laptop to check whether or not Peeta answered my email.

From: Peter Mellark
Subject: Re: Questions.

1) What made you decide to get into business?

I always wanted to make something of myself, and it seemed like the easiest path. As it turns out being successful comes at a great sacrifice.

2) What college did you go to?

The University of Pennsylvania.

3) What made you decide to donate to NYU?

I liked what I saw.

4) Why the Arts?

Without the Arts, what are we? Primates who happen to occasionally form a coherent sentence and kill each other over the most foolish of reasons. Art is civilization, it's culture, it's life.

5) Do you have a girlfriend?

I would like to think I do, but she hasn’t said yes yet.

6) What are you doing to make your company more eco-friendly?

We’re almost entirely paper-free and working on making our buildings run on solar power. Besides that the obvious elimination of incandescent bulbs, if we need paper have it come from recycled paper, and we encourage our employees to carpool or use public transportation.

7) Roughly how many people do you employ?

Somewhere between 15,000 and 17,000 between the businesses I own. Though that number is growing due to the fact that we are one of the only companies who continued hiring during the recession.

8) Where were you born?

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

9) At what age were you adopted?

8

Anything else? I would like to know more about you, Miss Everdeen. Please answer these questions to the best of your knowledge. I don’t have a deadline; I’m just sure I’ll be bored at work.

1) Have you lived anywhere outside of New York state?

2) Where are your parents?
3) Why did you decide to go to NYU?

4) Why journalism.

5) You should be on Broadway, not behind a desk.

6) Ok, so number five isn't a question, it's a suggestion. This isn't a question either.

7) Have you been in any other plays before?

8) I have an event this Friday, will you go with me?

9) If yes, will you allow me to introduce you as my girlfriend or shall you be my 'friend'?

Good luck with your move, and don't argue about the packages waiting for you at your new home, they're a gift.

Peter Mellark

CEO Mellark Enterprises

Ps: Try and avoid making me look like a pompous jerk.

I sprawled out on the full sized bed and began typing away at the article.

When I was guided up to office of Peter 'Peeta' Mellark the day after the NYU Charity Masquerade I was expecting to see a stuffy, old, serious businessman. Never did I expect to meet with the twenty-nine year old CEO of one of the largest privately owned companies in the world. After I embarrassed myself by admitting I was expecting someone older Mister Mellark decided it was inappropriate to conduct our Saturday interview trapped in his top floor office. After a short ride to the famous Serendipity 3, Mr. Mellark and I got down to business.

During the course of the previous week the staff at the Washington Square News bounced questions off each other they wanted answered. Naturally these questions had to be thoughtful, but seeing as I was now seated across from one of the richest men in the country at an elegant wrought iron table, an old tarnished mirror to my side and a general whimsy about the Alice and Wonderland style restaurant, discussing business plans and hostile takeovers was off the table.

We get the most obvious question out first. Why did you get into business? He smiles faintly, telling me about how he's always wanted to make something of himself. After college at the University of Pennsylvania he was hired at an unnamed company, but soon decided that there were major improvements that could be made and started his own company at the age of Twenty-one. Now eight years later it's obvious that, besides the sacrifices he's had to make over the years and the sixty hour work weeks, he made the right choice.

He freely admits he like what he's seeing coming out of NYU especially art wise, and can be quoted saying, "Without the Arts, what are we? Primates who happen to occasionally form a coherent sentence and kill each other over the most foolish of reasons, that's what. Art is civilization, it's culture, it's life."

Moving onto less deep topics I ask him how such a large company tries to reduce its impact on the ecosystem. The company, that employs over fifteen thousand, is proud to say it's almost paperless, using environmentally friendly, recycled paper. Mellark Enterprises is on its way to running on solar energy because the elimination of incandescent bulbs was only a step in the right direction.
Finally, the most important question.

The one the women at the Washington Square News were most avid about me getting answered.

Was Mister Peter Mellark single?

Sorry ladies, he's happy to say he's off the market.

I continue chewing on my nail, reading over and over again, tweaking it slightly to not make it seem like I was gloating about going out to lunch with Peeta, and that I didn't make him sound like a stuck up ass.

I send the article to the senior editor, the one actually in charge of the paper, my professor, and another to Peeta, with the subject: I thought you might want to read this over. I'll get to your questions after work.

"Ugh… Work…" Fortunately, I don't need to shower. What does one wear to my 'job'? Is there a dress code for Model Training?

I swap shirts and run out the door, needing to catch my train in the next five minutes in order to not be late.

I send a quick text to Madge telling her if I got out early enough I'd buy a bottle of wine or a twelve pack for my housewarming before descending into the underground of NYC.

The second I get off at Madison, my phone begins vibrating.

Leave it to a journalist to twist words to her liking. Guess I have to change my Facebook relationship status?, Peeta sends. I roll my eyes.

I didn't need them knowing all the gory details and that it took my home burning to the ground for you to answer my questions. Now, have a nice night. I'm off to work.

I shove my phone in my bag and enter the building, judgmental doorman and all.

"Ouch…," I wince as a wax strip is pulled from my eyebrow.

"Sorry! You've just let them go for so long!" I didn't want to tell Venia… or was it Octavia… that I had plucked my eyebrows just last week, "I hate to see what you have growing between your legs!"

I squeeze my legs shut. "Oh Octavia, have you no shame?" Flavius groans while filing my nails.

Day one of my training? Make me look 'human' as they told me while brushing the hair on my head, and ripping out the hairs on my face.

"Should we exfoliate?" the other woman asks, stroking my cheek with her thumb. "Nope, baby soft!" she giggles before going to work on my toes. "Oh my! Katniss your heels! They're like sandpaper…"

I roll my eyes before closing them again, trying to black out the three little birds pecking at my flesh to make me 'human'.

$65 an hour to do this… You're making a week's pay pre-tip in one hour. I wince again as above my lip is waxed, I never even noticed hair up there.

"Do you want us to take care of your bikini area?" Octavia asks, making me squeeze my legs
"N-no thank you," I stutter at the thought.

"Ok! Now…" they stand me up and hand me a mirror. "You're really not too bad looking," Octavia smiles.

"Thanks… I think…" I run my index fingers along my now thin eyebrows.

Flavius pulls out his phone. "Tell me what else we have for this evening?" he asks the phone.

The phone pings twice and a female voice responds, "Ok, here is your meeting."

"Looks like Cinna has nothing else planned for tonight. He wants us to pay her through ten o'clock, but you'll get your check on Friday. Oh!" He slaps his forehead. "Siri, remind me tomorrow at nine to print out the schedule"

"Here is your reminder," the phone says in that sweet computer voice that sounds almost too polite.

"You know, since you insist on using that ancient thing," he points to my charging cellphone.

"I'll get a new one..." I grumble. I still have plenty of money from Peeta's exorbitant tip. "I'm sick of loading this one with minutes anyway."

Flavius makes a face, "I thought only drug dealers used those things."

I pick up a bottle of Yellow Tail Moscato and to keep it classy two six packs of PBR pounders before heading back to Madge's.

"Honey I'm home!" I shout closing the door with my foot.

"Oh good!" she chirps. "I ordered Chinese take-out. Veggie fried rice and sweet and sour chicken?"

"With some PBR pounders?" I open a can and hand it to her. "Cheers, to partying like we're freshmen again!" We clink cans.

"Oh you got Moscato! But we should save this for after the beer is gone. You know, keeping it classy."

I chuckle as she heads to let the delivery man in. "Hey honey, do you have that straw fedora? I want to jam with my inner hipster," I ask as I find the hat discarded on a coffee table. "Perfect!" I tell her as I roll up my pant legs and keep my converse on.

"I don't drink PBR, it's too mainstream," she chuckles as she unpacks the take-out.

"Margaret Undersee, no dinner until you finish your beer!"

She makes an 'o' with her mouth before sitting down, "Yes mommy."

"Ew, Madge, watch your language. That's a vile word..." I shudder. My five, ten and fifteen year plans didn't include children. Hell, they barely included another human being. "Mister Mellark and I have only been a couple for a few hours. We haven't even discussed breeding."

She chokes on her rice, "Katniss Everdeen, in a relationship. Like... dating?" I nod, blushing a little. "I figured you swore off men after well... Cato."
I flick at the pull tab on the can and finish it off, "Well... I can't dwell on that asshole for the rest of my life can I?" I tell her glumly while wrestling with a piece of chicken. "I'm moving in the right direction. I'm out of that shitty apartment, that shitty job," I hold up another beer. "Watch out New York, Katniss Everdeen is finally finding her footing."

Madge rolls her eyes, "Please, the only time I've ever seen you stumble was when you ran down Peeta on Friday."

I groan and put my head down on the table, "I will never live this down..."

I tease Madge about Gale, she picks for information about Peeta and before long one six pack is gone and we've moved onto the wine. "You know, beer before liquor you'll never be sicker? They never said anything about wine..."

There's a knocking at the door. "The Anderson's down stares have been told five times to not prop the door open!" Madge hisses.

"It's fine, an honest mistake."

I open the door, the slide lock only letting me peak at the person outside: Flavius.

"Flavius!" I close the door and throw it open once the lock is undone. "What are you doing here?"

"Cinna sent me with this!" He hands me a small white box, "It's for work, and personal things. Basically..." He steps inside and opens the box. "I saw you gawking at my iPhone and Cinna thought you'd need one for work. Especially since he would like you to accompany him to Paris in three weeks," He lets the shock sink in... me? Paris?

"There are a ton of apps that will translate for you, of you can just try and learn some key phrases like, 'thank you', 'hello', and 'Where's the bathroom?'

What am I getting myself into?

"My phrase of choice is always 'Would you like to see my room?" he winks.

"No thank you, I'm taken..." I unlock my new work phone, and personal phone, and apparently personal assistant since when I hold down the one button on the thing Siri comes to life.

"Well, good, now, I have to get going! See you tomorrow!" he kisses both my cheeks and like a haute couture tornado is gone.

"Who was that?" Madge asked, "He looked like Fashion week on steroids!"

I chuckle and put the slide lock back in the door and transferring some key numbers Cinna didn't have. My mother, Madge, Johanna, Annie, and finally Peeta.

I would like to inform you that this is my new number. Cinna got me a 'work phone'.

-Belle (Aka Katniss)

Typing on a touch screen is hard.

"That's Flavius, my bosses assistant. He wanted to let me know I'd need this when I go to Paris in three weeks."

"Oh, Paris, I love that city!" she puts her hands over her heart and practically swoons.
My new phone pings.

*Finally.* Peeta replies.

"I know we still have beer… But I'm opening the wine to celebrate!" Madge vacations in Paris at least once a year, "Ah! Mon Paris! Tu me manques!"

It's amazing how it only took one night for Madge and I to slip back into our old habits, Chinese take-out, nursing cheap beer and chasing it with delicious wine, and staying up until three am gushing about boys and panicking about our futures.

Tomorrow was the first day of reading 'week', five days where we have no classes and are supposed to study. My first semester I discovered quickly it meant wild parties and students sleeping on campus furniture, and little to no studying was done until twelve hours before finals.

"Shit…" I grumble at around two when the wine is gone and we're watching re-runs of Jerry Springer, "I have to be at work at three and I have the play!" though NYU's production of *Beauty and the Beast* has run its course we're bringing it back for one afternoon for the children at a few schools.

"Just text your boss, or call like really early. Not Katniss early, but *human* early."

Sleeping until two pm was not one of my finest traits.

"Hey phone, can you remind me to call Cinna tomorrow at nine?"

She pings twice, "Here is the reminder I made for you."

"This thing is going to take away my ability to think… Though if she can find me a good Indian Buffet I'll forgive her."

Madge giggles, already three sheets to the wind, "It's like two am!"

I roll my eyes, "Alright, kiddo, time for bed," I try and haul her up but she makes her body like Jell-o, "Or sleep here!"

She flops down and gives me the thumbs up, "Love you Katniss!" she giggles.

I roll my eyes, *Oh Madge*…
Today's song is Love the Way You Lie by Eminem feat Rihanna, the reason why will be at the end of this chapter.

Where am I? Light poured through the open blinds. I licked my lips, which were dry as a bone.

Freshman night had freshman consequences, which right now was a very mild hangover that would probably be cured through a glass of water and some Motrin, which I'd need to entertain children.

Two bottles of water and four Motrin…add that to a hot shower and I was a functional human being again.

"Did you call Cinna?" Madge yawned from the couch.

I sucked in air and ran for my phone. "Way to go!" she shouted from the other room as I paced around, trying to call him. It was eight… Wait, I wanted to call at nine.

Was eight too early?

"Hello Katniss," he greeted cheerfully. Oh thank god… it was like a weight is lifted off my shoulders.

"Good morning Cinna. Thanks for the phone; it may take me a while to figure out how to use it though…"

He chuckled, "Take your time Mademoiselle Everdeen."

"I will… Listen, I have a presentation of my play today until about four thirty… I'll be a little late." I squeezed my eyes shut.

"Do not fret! I'll have dinner waiting when you get here!"

Cray would have chewed me out about how I shouldn't be worrying about my name up in lights because I had no talent. Cinna, on the other hand, was feeding me dinner for my tardiness.

I took my armful of toiletries, lining them up on the bottom of Madge's stall shower…My stall shower.

Our stall shower?

This one was far less complicated…only one shower head.

"You're running late, as always!" Madge teased as I devoured an orange.

"I'll sit on you…" She hasn't moved from the couch since reminding me to call my boss. Now, her face was nestled between the cushion and the back of the couch. "Did you drink more after I went to bed?"
"No… Yes… Wait… I think I called Gale!" she flailed wildly while rolling over, her bare foot meeting my chest.

"Watch it!" I jumped up and handed her what she's looking for, her cellphone.

"Nope… Just…" her brow furrowed, "Wait… Yeah… Didn't dream that, forty minutes."

I slapped my forehead. Madge was famous for drunk dialing. "At least you didn't call anyone you'd regret talking to."

She was blushing, "I may have told him it was the best sex of my life? Oh god, I have a date with him tomorrow!" She scrolled through more of her calls, "And I took a call from a… 310 number?"

"Where's that? Oh! I can ask my phone…" I pressed the button in, "Phone, where's the 310 area code?" She let me know that she was searching in her proper, kind voice.

"Know anyone in LA?" I asked, showing her the map Siri has brought up for me.

"Isn't that where…" she bit her lip as the realization hit me like a train.

There's one person who would call Madge Undersee at two forty five in the morning because he was so inconsiderate he didn't realize the change in time zone.

Cato Snow.

"If he calls again, don't answer," I got up and grabbed my purse.

"And if he shows up here again?" I slipped my feet into my converse. They go perfectly with my jean shorts and black shirt.

"Then we call the cops as he enrages down at street level. You should tell the Andersons to not prop the door open. You know Cato has a 'Katniss is happy' sense…" I grumbled. "I'll be back late or… I think I'm going to stop by Peeta's after work. Have a good day!"

"Sing pretty!"

I knew I wasn't being watched, but I sure as hell felt paranoid about it. Yeah, we haven't confirmed Madge's mystery drunk pick-up, but who else in LA would be calling her?

"The girl who played Belle, why did you want to act?" I sat on the stage on my knees, my yellow ball gown hiding my legs. The fifty or so children were allotted a short question and answer session.

I bit my lip. I've always wanted to sing, but I wasn't allowed to for the last few years because of Cato. "To be honest, I didn't. I just wanted to sing. When I found out they were doing my favorite movie I tried out… It took hours and hours to make me a believable actress. Poor Cressida, our director. I think three weeks into rehearsal wanted to fire me because I was so stiff and awkward."

The kids asked if the Beast's costume was itchy, if the choreography during *Be Our Guest* was hard to learn. Our Gaston talked about one night how he watched Lumiere and someone dressed like a fork ran into each other and almost ruined the whole number. We chuckled at the good memory. This was the last time the cast would be assembled.

"Are you going to do another play next year?" a little girl with blonde hair and bright green eyes asked us.
Cressida choose to answer this one. "Unfortunately not with this group, most of our cast including Belle, Gaston and Misses Potts are graduating next Wednesday. They actually should get going to study for finals."

We lined up in full costume with the kids to get a picture. "You look like the lady from the paper!" one of the girls told me.

We posed for the picture. "The play's been in the paper before," I said idly.

"No! From this morning. Mommy left it open while I was eating breakfast!" the little girl told me before running to her friends.

_Maybe from the party Friday?_ I shrugged it off.

I rushed back to the dressing rooms to get stripped from my lace up gown. "Holy crap it's good to breathe…," I chuckled, standing in my underwear as the Belle gown was put on the hanger for another woman to wear in the future. I pulld on my bra and jeans, my phone pinging to let me know I have a message…

Five of them, all from Madge.

**What did I say to him?**

**Why didn't you take my phone away?**

**I would have found the landline and called him anyway.**

_Remember that time we hid all the phones in Throm's apartment and he was so angry he ripped his shirt… Then returned it the next day?_

One of our friends who has long since graduated tended to get drunk and call his exes, we had to protect him. He got so angry at us that he tore his wife beater, then the next morning folded it back up and shoved it between the two other in the packaging and returned it. Then, instead of being smart and leaving as soon as possible, he walked around the store for another half hour, buying the same item.

_Crisis averted, we had a heart to heart last night. We're going to dinner tonight. Wish me luck!_

I rolled my eyes. God damn it, Madge…

I sent a text to Peeta. _I'll be in your neck of the woods… Can I come over? I miss your smug face._

I shoved my phone in my pocket, rushing out of the theater and bidding everyone a fond farewell. We had already had our closing night dinner, our goodbyes were said but I could say a few more.

I basically ran back home, throwing the door open as I huffed to my room to change and make myself presentable.

_I'll be counting the minutes._ Peeta sent as my hand found the little black maybe shirt maybe dress item.

It was going to be one of those nights, but I decided to keep it classy and pull on a strapless bustier dress which ties in the back. The bright floral pattern stood out against the white background and I slipped on a pair of white heels.

"Do I look like a model?" I asked the mirror as I mussed up my hair. "Do I look like a millionaire's
girlfriend?"

I flicked at the choker around my neck and slapped on a leather cuff that was in the box. "Who cares?" I finally chuckled before heading outside.

On the way to the subway I saw a newsstand and bought the only paper that would answer my questions - the New York Post.

"Thank you," I purchased a water bottle and descended into the Underground. I had five minutes until my train came so I turned to Page Six, New York's source for both country wide, but a fair amount of local celebrity gossip.

Sightings, I read about celebrities at clubs before I saw it at the bottom of the page. Peeta and I in the park, me covering him in dandelions, then another of us kissing. Shit...

Local billionaire, Peter Mellark was seen cozying up with this unknown woman. The pair shared a romantic evening in Central Park, then at the Upper East Side restaurant the Rogue Tomate...

I gagged a little and shoved the paper in my purse. Was this what I was going to have to deal with? I refuse to read any more about my date with Peeta. Did he know about this? Did he deal with this crap every time he went out?

"You have the worst posture," Venia groaned, positioning my body for the umpteenth time. "Clasp your hands behind your back." I did so. "Push out your chest. You don't have much, so flaunt it!" I rolled my eyes and pushed out my bosom, "There... Now, walk, one foot in front of the other, not parallel."

I took a deep breath. Step one of the 'Model Walk', good posture. We were stuck at one. I had a tendency to slouch - I was slightly pigeon toed. Also, my head bobbed too much when I walked, whatever that meant.

I found it easier at this time to keep my pinkies clasped together to make sure my posture was perfect. One foot literally in front of the other my heels clicked on the pale wood floor as Cinna and Viena watched my every move. "Bravo!" Cinna sipped on his tea. "Now, let go of your hands, and walk to the door."

I groaned. We had been at this four two hours. I was making over $120 to walk across the room, I really couldn't complain.

I did what he asked. Head still, arms at my side, one foot literally in front of the other.

I walked from the back of the main room to the front door and when I reached the end I dramatically stepped one foot forward, pushing my hip out and placing my hands on my hips. "Magnifique!" Cinna applauded and for the first time tonight, I felt like I could do this.

"Now, turn and walk back." Learning how to walk was supposed to happen before you were one year old, not twenty one!

I pivoted awkwardly and Cinna cringed, "We'll work on that tomorrow... Then you'll have the weekend off." I sat down at my vacant spot on the couch. "Now, we discuss Paris."

"Yeah... About that... I don't think I'm ready for the catwalk..."

Cinna chuckled, "Oh, my no, but, there's a small show. You can bring someone if you like... We'll
be there for a few days though I'll have to get back to work preparing for September, then and you will be returning alone since I don't think I can be away from Paris much longer. New York is… Different."

I chuckled and nodded, "It is, but it's home."

"We leave two Thursday's from now. We'll meet here of course." I nodded. "Don't worry about anything, I will prepare everything. You just worry about enjoying Paris!"

I felt better about everything after leaving Cinna's. The doorman, who finally didn't think I was some common riffraff tipped his hat to me as I walked into the humid May air.

I was distracted by my phone, the little pinging alerting me that I had an email. Like an idiot, I began walking. It was from Flavius about my Parisian Itinerary, a long schedule that he said he added to my Google Calendar which put it on my phone. "Oof!" I blushed as I ploughed straight into the back of a poor pedestrian, "Sorry… I-

The man turned around slowly, his fists balled, ready to strike, "Watch where you're-" He stopped, his cold, dark brown, almost black eyes widening.

"Cato…" I gasped turning on my heels knowing he could strike at any moment.

"Katniss Everdeen, you get back here!" he spat, grabbing for my wrist but yet again I slipped through his grasp.

"Go to hell!" I shouted over my shoulder.

It was nighttime. Madison Ave was disserted and here I was, being followed by a guy I wasted a few years of my life on, while he used me as a punching bag.

"Taxi!" I shouted, seeing a yellow cab turn onto the street. "Taxi!" The man slowed and I got in, Cato on my heels as I locked both doors.

"Sixty-ninth and Fifth!" I panted.

"Are you kidding? That's like less than 10 blocks!" the driver grumbled.

"I will give you a hundred dollars if you leave right now!" Cato ripped on the door.

"Now you're talking… Who's he?"

Cato slammed his palm on the window, "Baby, get out of the fucking cab and let's talk!"

"Drive, now!"

I caught my breath on the short drive, and handed the cabby my fare plus a hundred dollars. I didn't care what he did with it - he got me away from Cato.

"You look like you've seen a ghost Sweetheart." Abernathy smirked as I straightened out my dress.

"That bad huh? Cinna worked me good tonight," I replied casually. I didn't need Peeta's bodyguard hearing about my mishap. Cato would get the picture eventually. Though, how many hundred dollar cab drives could I afford?

He took a drag from his cigarette, offering me his lighter. I calmed myself with a sweet drag from a Marlboro. *Could he have followed me here?* I thought in a panic. I could have lead Cato to Peeta.
"Haymitch?" I asked quietly. "I have a problem and I need your advice…"

He snorted, "Listen sweetheart, I'm not much for girl problems… But I'm sure it'll be entertaining."

"Ass…" I grumbled. "Listen, say hypothetically I have a friend who was with a guy for like two years who liked to hit her," he nodded and scratched at the stubble on his chin. "And say this person moved away, but is now back calling my friend's friends and just ran into her on say… Madison and 79th, and got really pissed off when she ran away and called cab."

"I'm picking you up from work from now on. Come on, we have to tell Mister Mellark."

He went to head in and I grabbed his hand, "No! Haymitch please! I'll tell him myself, but I don't want to ruin this night. Please?"

"Fine… But I'm still getting you from work," Why did he care?

"Sure…"

"And home, I've seen enough young girls end up in allies because of abusive boyfriends, or ex-boyfriends." I took another drag.

"Why do you care?" I asked, flicking away my ash. "I'm just some other girl…"

"Well, I was told today to protect you by Mister Mellark. I've grown quite fond of the kid, and you make him happy. He actually leaves his office now."

I nodded and put my butt in the smoker's tree. "Thank you, I'll see you inside."

"Probably not, but have fun."

I hurried to the elevator, imputing the code from memory. As always, Peeta left the door after the elevator unlocked. "Honey I'm home!" I shouted, but I heard giggling - women giggling.

"Peeta?" I asked, nervous. Did he have women over? Was that allowed?

"Not quite!" a British woman chirped from the living room. "Thought you'd never arrive!"

I set my bag down. A blonde with wavy hair and blue eyes and a curly haired African woman sipped on cocktails while watching what I think was the latest Twilight movie.

"I'm sorry, we've met before but I had a mask on. I'm Primrose. This is Rue my friend from London."

London. Primrose Mellark had friends from London.

"A pleasure. We go to school together, or went."

Prim chuckled, "Definitely went!"

"Nice to meet you," I shook both their hands. "Where's Peeta?"

Prim sighed and flopped back down on the couch. "In his office. Peeta's always in his office…," she grumbled. "He said we'd go out tonight too…” she huffed like a spoiled child.
I bit my lip, "I should go then, I don't want to take your time away from your brother…"

"No! I bugged him to let me meet you!" she grabbed my hand. "You should go in a coax him out with your feminine whiles…" she wiggled her eyebrows as I bit my lip again.

"Fine… I do owe him a-"

"EWWWW!" Prim put her hands over her ears. "Too much information!"

I knocked lightly on the office door, "Peeta?" I opened the door slowly and poked my head in, "What are you doing in here?" I closed it behind me.

He seemed uncomfortable by my presence, stiffening as I crossed the room to the giant window. This was a perfect time to tell him about Cato, he was already put off by me invading his space. "Reading a business report," he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Is it night already?" he asked in a dreary voice.

"Prim and her friend Rue are waiting for you," I held out my hand. "Come on, I didn't wear this dress and these heels so you could hide in your office all night."

He groaned, but didn't budge, so I swiveled his chair and climbed into his lap. "They told me to use my feminine wiles on you," I ground my groin into his. "I'm not wearing any underwear…" I whispered.

"In this short dress?"

I shook my head no. "They were all dark and I could see them, so I went without." He lifted the hem of my dress and cocked an eyebrow. "Well, I lied…" I climbed off him and hooked my hands in my panties, tugging them down.

"Oops…" I bit on my index finger. "Do you want me, Mister Mellark?"

I backed up a little as he got out of his chair, picking up my underwear and shoving them in his pocket. "You're staying the night…" he said finally. "Now, come."

We settled for second dinner at a quiet Thai restaurant. Rue and Prim were speaking endlessly about their adventures clubbing in London as Peeta's hand rests on my thigh. I shifted uneasily; knowing how little separated his fingers from where I wanted them the most.

"Are you ok, Katniss?" Rue asked, noting my flushed face.

"Y-yeah," Peeta's hand crept higher under the table cloth. "Just spicy."

His hand went higher and I leaned into him, having moved our chairs close enough that they were almost touching. "So what's London like? I'm going there in September. It'll be the only city on my trip where I actually speak the language."

I listened to them gush but couldn't pay attention. Peeta's finger traced up and down the moisture between my legs. Going without underwear was a terrible idea! I should have tackled him and stolen them back.

What was I thinking!

The finger slipped inside me and I stifled a groan. The restaurant was basically empty and the two girls were discussing the fanfare of the Royal Wedding last year.
He didn't move his hand, but just sit there, torturing me. I went for my water, shooting Peeta a dirty look while sipping on the cool liquid. When the girls were fully engrossed in their conversation, he bent his finger up, putting pressure right on my sweet spot.

I gasped into my water, nearly choking.

*Please draw the blinds, everyone leave, I need my brains fucked out... Now!* The finger retreated and I shuddered, missing the torturous sensation.

"So what are you wearing?" Prim leaned in to the table, her chin nestled in her palm.

"A dress?" I asked, confused about what she's talking about.

"No silly! To the Met Gala this Friday!"

"Katniss and I haven't exactly discussed that, Prim." Her mouth formed an 'o' and Peeta shot me an apologetic look, "Katniss hasn't seen her dress yet, but it's one of Cinna's. This will be our first event together." He squeezed my knee, "You're going to stop hearts."

I had reported on the Met Gala for the last four years... never in my life did I think I would be going. "You don't want to bring me to something like that... There are famous people there. I shook hands with Beyoncé last year when I reported on it for the school paper."

"Of course your brother would date a reporter..."

"Reporter, singer, actress, model," I drank the broth of my coconut chicken soup.

"Katniss plays Belle at NYU. She's an amazing singer," Prim gushed to Rue, I blushed and looked up at Peeta.

For someone who's attracting the spotlight as I am, it sure makes me uncomfortable, "I'm not that good... Our dress rehearsal is on YouTube if you want to basically see the play. Even our gift to the director where we swapped parts for *Be Our Guest*, she was Belle, I was Lumiere, our Gaston was I think Misses Potts," I bit my lip, trying to stifle a laugh as I remembered poor Cressida's face as we performed an almost perfectly executed cast swap.

"Oh my god, show us, now!" I shook my head no.

"No phones at the dinner table," I scolded. "Just search for it later."

Rue pouted, but went back to her fish. "We could always make you do karaoke. Prim here gets really pitchy after she's had a few drinks in her." Prim blushed.

"Aren't you two only eighteen?"

"The drinking age in the United Kingdom is eighteen, which is the only reason those two were allowed to be drinking in my apartment. Don't let mom and dad see that when you're up in the Hamptons this weekend."

"But, you'll be there! And Katniss, mom and dad would love her... Well..." I was busy twirling noodles around my fork. "Mom will do what she does when any of us bring home someone."

"What does she do?" Rue asked as I twirled my noodles around my fork.

"Watches them like a hawk, calling them 'gold digger' under her breath until they prove otherwise."
Rue looked shocked. "It's understandable," I started. "She's trying to protect her children… But I'm not going to the Hamptons this weekend."

"Please?" Prim whined. "Peeta will be off with our brothers. We could have girl's nights!"

"I have finals to not study for and…" Prim and Rue began a synchronized pout that could probably render Superman useless. "Fine… But I'm bringing my textbooks- that probably burned up when my apartment…" I crossed my arms. "You guys win."

Peeta reached for his pocket. "One minute, it's Effie…" He excused himself from the table and I was left with two eighteen year olds who could probably pout me into robbing a bank.

"I like you Katniss," Prim said once Peeta was out of ear shot. "Peeta's last love interest was well… Only in it for the money… I think you see past it, or at least you're good at pretending."

"I made Peeta ride the subway and go to Times Square. If I was pretending I wouldn't have made him send Haymitch home."

It was Prim's turn to choke. "You did not…," she gasped. "First you get him out of his Ivory Tower, then you get him in the subway. Please, work on his cellphone habit and his office addiction…"

I chuckled as Peeta joined us again. "My one appointment tomorrow canceled, so I have tomorrow afternoon off," he smiled, his eyes lighting up like a child's. "Do you have work tomorrow night?"

I shook my head no. Cinna and I had agreed to a three day schedule and I would be off until Wednesday. "But I have to go to my place and see what's salvageable, if anything…” the only thing I really needed from there was my passport, which was with my birth certificate in a fire proof box under my old bed.

We bid Prim and Rue goodnight. They were staying with one of their brothers, leaving the penthouse empty for Peeta and me to keep the neighbors up.

"I have Friday off too…" I mentioned as we enjoy the evening air. "Since you have me going to the Met Gala… Should I stay the night?" I asked awkwardly. If he bit the hook I'd get to spend Thursday through Sunday with my Prince Charming.

"That saves time. Cinna's trio is showing up at noon to help you get ready. Apparently, they think it'll take most of the day…"

I chuckled, "You should have seen them fussing about my hair and my eyebrows, it's like I was a yeti." I took his hand and leaned into him. "But, I need to go to my apartment and get clothes."

"I bought you a toothbrush," he told me proudly.

I pouted, "But I liked yours…" we were half way across town. A cab drove by, bringing me back to Cato. I have to tell him. If he were to find out from a third party, all hell will break loose.

"Subway or taxi?"

"Taxi, the subway was too hot." I rolled my eyes. Priss.

"Then get us one big spender," he looked confused. "My god, and you call yourself a New Yorker! Here, hold out your hand." He followed me and almost immediately, a car pulled up. "Sometimes you have to yell." He held the door open for me and I slid in.
"Where to?" my breath caught. It was the same cabby as earlier. My eyes will him to not say anything.

"SoHo… Erm, Spring and Thompson."

"In less of a rush this time, eh little miss?" I looked up at Peeta who had his eyebrow cocked. "Not being chased?"

I stopped myself from beating my head against the glass. "What?" Peeta asked shortly, squeezing my hand, trying to get me to look at him but I couldn't.

"Can we talk about this when we get back to my place? It's a long story…” the warm lustful air between us had turned arctic cold.

*I want my hundred bucks back!*

Peeta barely waited for me to close the door behind us. "What was he talking about? Who was chasing you?"

I swallowed hard and walked farther into the apartment, "Want a drink?"

"Damn it, Katniss!" he snapped. "Stop avoiding the question…"

I opened the fridge and pulled out a coke, peaking over the half wall. He still hasn't moved. "Peeta, sit down. Now," I snapped. If I was going to divulge my past, he was going to actually move from the door.

He sighed and flopped down on the couch. He was so out of place here. Yeah, the apartment was nice, but it was *my* home now. I could only cringe, thinking of him in my old place.

"When I came to New York I didn't know anyone. I mean, besides Madge, she was my roommate for my first year at NYU. We went to a party one night and I met…" I gulped and join him on the couch. I needed him for this, even if he was pissed at me.

He shifted away from me – bad sign. "I met a man named Cato Snow, he was a spoiled, snob, but I was dumb and young, I was in an unfamiliar city, and I was inexperienced in the romance department… I still am," I bit my lip, "Everything was fine for the first few months, then I realized Cato was basically riding on the coat-tails of his uncle…" I sat on my knees.

Deep breath Everdeen, you can do this. I felt the tears come to my eyes. "November of my freshman year I decided I wanted to go out for the play. I always loved singing and I thought I could get a small part for fun. I told him and he…" My voice caught. "Smacked me… So I hit back, which made it worse. He grabbed me by the hair and told him that I was his and he wasn't going to let me do anything that could put me on a pedestal for the world to see. After he hit me again for arguing I ran from his apartment…"

"Oh god, Katniss…" Peeta took my hand but I pulled away.

"I- I'm not done… The next morning there were white roses waiting outside my dorm, two dozen with an apology," I bit my lip, "I was so young and so fucking stupid… I believed him… But he got worse, every time he'd hit I would fight back, and he'd hit harder, until I learned. Every time I left he'd just get angrier and he'd hit harder. One time he…" I looked away from Peeta's stupid gawking face.

"Don't look at me god damn it!" I hissed and he looked away. I rubbed the back of my scalp. "One
night when I was leaving him he grabbed my hair and slammed me into the coffee table. I woke up two days later to a hospital room full of roses…"

I gulped. "Finally, he graduated and was moving to LA to work for his uncle. He told me to come with him and I… I refused…" I looked down at my hands. "I threw every single gift he ever gave me at him. Every ring, every necklace, every little trinket… I was free… I had a black eye, a bruised rib, and a sprained wrist from it… But I was free."

I bit my lip. "Now… now he's back. I saw him when I was leaving Cinna's and… and I ran and he followed until I hailed a cab."

"I'll kill him… Katniss, I'll kill him for what he did to you!" he hissed, pulling me into his chest.

"No, please, Peeta… See this is why when I told Haymitch I made him let me tell you. Please don't ruin this night, and don't go thermonuclear on poor Abernathy for not rushing with Katniss's dirty little secret," I got up and head for my room. This was the past, it was ugly, but it was over. I was ready to move on and forget. "Are you going to help me pick out my clothes for the next… like four days or will you trust me?"

He looked at me shocked, but got up, "Lead the way, Madame."

I curtsied, the anger and awkwardness forgotten for now. "Oh you have an iHome. Here I thought you were living in squalor," Peeta flopped down on my bed without even asking and docked his phone.

I rolled my eyes and pulled out my backpack, "I have to get a duffle from Madge's room…" Kings of Leon started streaming from the speakers as Peeta went through my limited wardrobe.

When I reached Madge's dark room, I sat on her bed. I had just told Peeta my deepest darkest secret… And instead of looking at me like I was damaged, like I had expected him to… He basically wanted to protect me, in his own savage way.

I took the grey duffle from Madge's closet and returned, only to have my underwear from earlier hit me in the face, "Peeta!" I threw the bag at him. "Ass…"

I moved to my dresser, pulling out the essentials - underwear, bra's, socks… Check.

Two hands found my hips and I gasped. "Ready to finish what we started?"

I bit my lip. "Are you going to try and embarrass me again?"

He lifted up my skirt and spanked me lightly, "Not tonight. Instead, I'll watch you find a way to do it yourself." I stuck out my tongue. He already knew how bad I was at social events! Great!

Why was he taking me to the Met!

I was pulled away from my inner raging when a finger slipped inside me. "A quickie here, then back to my place?"

He arched his finger again, hitting me in another sweet spot. "Oh god, yes, please…," I panted as I heard his belt clink as it hit the ground, followed by his pants.

"Hold onto the dresser and spread your legs a little more…" I did so, as his finger straightened and bent. Subconsciously, I ground my hips against his hand. "There we go…" he didn't go for the zipper of my dress. Instead, he folded the skirt over my torso so it didn't get ruined.
"Ready?" he asked after withdrawing his hand. I groaned loudly, missing the sensation, but soon it was replaced by the tip of his erection rubbing up and down.

"Please…" I heard myself whimper, but I was too distracted by the look in his eyes through the mirror in front of us.

I felt the familiar stretching and pressure as he entered me, "Mmmm…" I groaned. He went slowly, torturously, letting that underused area of my body adjust to the very welcome intruder. "Stop torturing me…" My nails dug into the light wood of the dresser.

"As you wish…" he withdrew almost completely before slamming into me.

"Shit!" I gasped as I was pushed forward.

"Lock your elbows," he pulled me back and I did as he commanded.

I blushed a little, hearing the song. "You planned this didn't you?" he thrust into me again and didn't answer for a second. "Playing Sex on Fire? Real cheesy…" I watched him loosen his tie and bring it in front of my face.

The silk covered my lips. "Open up." I don't know why, but I listened and let the silk strap invade my mouth before he tied it behind my head. "There we go…"

What is this…? I didn't have time to wonder. Besides, I've never felt more turned on in my life. He was back to thrusting. The silk of the tie wasn't a very effective gag, but it's the thought that counts, right?

Each thrust sent fire through my nerves. His hands ran through my hair and I moved away. The gesture was making my scalp ache, as I remembered being dragged down a hall by my hair. His hands settled on my shoulders then ran down my back until they settled on my hips.

I felt my orgasm build slowly with each thrust. Soon enough, I wasn't just moaning his name, but nearly screaming though the silk at my mouth. My muscles were tense and my arms almost gave away as the tidal wave of released pressure ran through every inch of my body.

Peeta pulled out of me. "I don't want to make a mess of you…"

I nodded a little, only half understanding. My mind was still catching up to me.

I sunk to my knees in front of him. He reached behind to untie my gag, letting the chewed up silk fall to the ground. I took him in my hand, flicking my tongue across the head of his member.

He tasted like me and I groaned, feeling the force of his thrusts again in my mind as I took him in my mouth inch by inch. I dug my nails into his backside as payback for the tie as I licked my juices off him. It didn't take long before I tasted the warm, salty liquid on my tongue.

I pulled off him and looked up into his eyes, swallowing.

Before, if a man asked me to do that I would have laughed in their face. "Here…" he stood me up and kissed me lightly. "You're amazing…" he murmured as I fixed my skirt.

"You taste delicious," I told him, attempting to weird him out a little, but I was unsuccessful.

I packed my backpack and duffel full of clothes as Peeta made himself presentable once more. As I folded up a sundress he came behind me and braided my hair for me. At first I thought it was odd,
then I felt his fingers through my hair and I almost melted again.

"Ready?" I asked, slipping my heels back on.

"I was waiting on you…" I rolled my eyes and flicked the light off. "I think I chewed a hole through your tie…" I held the dark green fabric in my hand. The edges were now frayed where my teeth bit into it, but it would be covered by his collar.

"I'm sorry, but you were ruining the moment…"

"So you gag me with a two hundred dollar tie?"

"Ahem…" I stopped dead in my tracks, my eyes meeting a very amused Madge and an embarrassed looking Gale, who were sitting on the couch half way through a bottle of wine.

"Well…" I started, popping my lips. "I'm going to go throw myself in front of a bus."

Chapter End Notes

I chose this song because of the off screen relationship between Katniss and Cato. It was one she couldn't escape because at the time she was afraid or even justifying his actions.
This has to be one of the most awkward moments of my life, and yet everyone else is so calm and casual.

Gale and Peeta are chummy, discussing something business related. I don't pretend to understand. I pick up a glass of clear liquid and lean into Peeta.

"That's not..." but Madge's warning is too late. The burning vodka is already in my mouth. Not trying to make myself look like a fool, I swallow hard.

"Water?" I choke out. She grins and nods.

"So where are you two off to?" Gale asks.

"My place," Peeta says as I lean farther into him.


I feel the deep blush come to my cheeks. Sex, especially the sex I'm having, isn't a topic I'm ok with discussing.

"I have work in the morning... Want to come?" Peeta asks. I'm busy running my finger around the rim of the glass, trying to disappear. "Katniss?" he nudges me.

"Wha?"

"I'm only at the office until about noon..."

"Katniss? Awake before noon?" Madge says. I stick my tongue out.

"You don't want me there, remember last time? I made an ass of myself."

"Like that's something new," Madge teases.

It was Gale's turn to scold Madge.

"But really, I think I'll just study... and go to my apartment and see if I can salvage anything. If I can't, I need to see if I can expedite a passport..." I groan and lean my head back and onto Peeta's shoulder. "That's going to suck..."

"Not if you have connections," Gale shrugs. I tilt my head to look at him.
"I'm not going to pull the strings on the system. That's not fair to the rest of the people. But… I'm going to go outside." Peeta doesn't immediately let go of my hand and brings it to his lips.

"Be safe…" he murmurs. I just nod but Gale offers to go with me.

"You didn't have to do that…" I tell him, offering my lighter.

"Perhaps…" he hesitates. We smoke in silence for a few minutes...him not wanting to discuss what he had just overheard, me unwilling to discuss him and Madge.

"She's very protective over you," he finally says.

My heart skips a beat. What did she tell him?

"What did you hear?" I ask shamefully.

"Just that someone from your past called Madge and she was nervous being here by herself…"

I take a deep long drag as the guilt monster take over. "Please…" is all I manage to choke out before clearing my throat. "He doesn't have the balls to come after me here."

"She seemed really worried, even today." So telling her about me running into him outside of Cinna's was definitely out of the question.

"And sober thoughts are drunken truths…" I flick my ash and look across the street.

Even at this hour the occasional pedestrian passes by. "Besides…" the door behind us opens. "He's half way across the damn country." I flick my butt into the storm drain. "Where he can rot in hell…"

I look up and smile faintly at Peeta.

"Ready?" he asks. My bags in hand, I just nod and shift uneasily.

Would he ask questions?

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I let my dress fall to the ground and step out of my heels. "What?" I ask, watching Peeta unbutton his shirt.

"Just, you…" I look down, realizing I'm standing in his bedroom completely naked.

I flush and cover myself with my arms as he moves to me. His finger leaves a burning hot trail along my ribs and I flush even deeper, embarrassed by my underfed body.

"I'll get you healthy…" he tells me softly. "You'll never have another hungry day…"

I fidget away, but miss his touch, so I lean my naked body against his. "Thank you…" I whisper.

"For what? It's the right thing to do…"

But that's not what I'm really thanking him for. "No, for earlier. You didn't… Coddle me or baby me. I needed it."

'I needed to lose myself in you.' I want to say.
He wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head, "When bad things happen to us, there's a certain point where the time for empathy is past and you just need to accept it. It... it makes me livid to think that someone has hurt you before, but... I've been in your position before. I know that being babied just makes you feel worse."

I want to press the topic but he kisses my head again and moves to the bathroom without another word.

His bathroom is so neat, so absolutely perfectly put together, nothing out of place.

"How can you live like this?" I ask, tilting up a bottle so I can read the label better.

"Like what?" he asks with his toothbrush in his mouth. I mirror his movements.

"Impeccably!" the word comes out like a garbled mess and he chuckles. A spray of toothpaste foam hits the mirror.

I watch as his brow furrows, this innocent little mishap distorting the perfection of the room. He spits into the sink and again I mirror, feeling awkward not doing the same.

He just stares at the spray on the mirror. "It's ok, Peeta..." he looks confused and I rinse out my mouth, using my arm to dry my mouth.

"Dear sweet Beast, you're king of your castle. If something gets messy... No one's there to reprimand you," his eyes go dark as I grab a wad of toilet paper and wet it to get rid of the mess.

"Peeta?" I ask, his eyes so vacant and dark. "Peeta!" I call just a little louder, my hand resting on his breast bone.

He looks so sad, so lost, my poor Beast...

I take his hands and get on my toes to kiss his lips softly. That does the trick, I smirk and get back down.

"What's that face for?" he asks after a second.

"A kiss, my lord, the most powerful thing known to man..." he lifts my hands up a little and I twirl so when my back hits his my arms are crossed over my chest, our fingers laced so tightly together, resting at my collar bones.

"Ah my sweet naive Belle, a kiss is nothing more than lips brushing up against another. It's true love's kiss that holds all the power..."

I swallow hard. Love?

"Love isn't an emotion I feel," I pull away, just wanting to be in bed. I crawl up from the foot of the bed and go to hide under the covers.

"Love isn't an emotion you feel, it's something you experience, and some day you'll know..." he pulls the covers down from my face.

"Have you ever..." I bite my lip. Why was teenage Katniss coming out to play? Where was the calm, collected and confident woman go?

"Have I ever?"
"Have you ever been in love?" I watch him think for a second.

"I don't think I have, closest would be Prim..." he flops down on his back and stares at the ceiling fan. "It's not a romantic love, but between my parents, and my brothers... I'd do anything for that kid..."

"She's not a kid anymore. She's eighteen, going to college..." he just sighs when I finish. I roll out of bed to fetch my phone from my purse.

The folded newspaper from earlier falls out, with all the aggravation earlier I had completely forgotten, "Peeta?"

He's still staring at the fan. "Yes, Belle?" Back with the nickname, but I was more ok with it now... In fact I was starting to like it.

I fold the paper over so our picture is the focus as I hand him the item. "Oh..." is all he says. "You're so beautiful when you smile..."

"Peeta," I whine. "They're... I... Ugh! It's our relationship, I don't want it to be public!" I huff.

He tosses the paper away, "Katniss, unfortunately I live in the public eye. Considering I'm twenty-nine, unmarried... I'm a very eligible bachelor,"

I climb on top of him and pin his arms above his head. "You're not a bachelor, you're in a relationship with me. Not some glamorous starlet. I don't do public. I'm a private lady."

I'm amusing him. "You are so frustrating!"

I scowl down at him, "I don't know how to do the public thing, Peeta. I know how to blend into the background and be invisible at social functions... Or say something crass that makes rich people uncomfortable and-"

"You've never been invisible..."

"Peeta... now isn't the time to charm me... I this is about you and I... The world shouldn't know."

"Why? I want them to know how perfect you are, how talented, how amazing... Katniss, I want to show you the world, and unfortunately at times the world will be watching. But that doesn't affect what we have. We're not bringing cameras into our bedroom..." He pauses and dons a cheeky grin. "Unless you want to."

I throw myself off him. "I'm not going to be your masturbatory aid, Mr. Mellark." I roll onto my stomach.

"Then get over here..."

"No, I'm frustrated," I grumble into my pillow.

He spanks me.

Not hard. Not like Cato.

In fact I enjoy it...the little singe of pain that radiates through my legs, lighting my fire.

"You're so mean to me..." I whine, rubbing my thighs together, praying the need would just go away. We needed to get to bed.
"I'll make it up to you… Tomorrow."

Sleeping is awkward with Peeta when not drunk or exhausted. We're both stomach sleepers but both need to be up against the other simply because there's a foreign body in the bed.

"Sleeping on your stomach ages your face," he grumbles in the dark. "And in your line of work your face could be everything. Roll over." His arm is slung over my back, leg over mine.

"You have press photos to take, Mr. Mellark."

I lift up a little so his arm slips from mine. I can only just barely see his face through the inky darkness of the room. His blue eyes watch me intently.

I feel his hand locking his fingers in mine and scoot as close to him as possible. It's not the spooning that's stereotypical with couples sleeping in the same bed, but we were both too stubborn to adjust our sleeping habits.

Unfortunately, our unconscious minds shift our bodies so I'm nestled safety in his curled body. My backside against his groin, his legs tight against mine. He holds me so close to him, so firm and tight I'm sure I could never slip from his arms.

The sun is just coming up, the bedroom a cold looking grey. The only imperfections in this space are ones I've caused. My purse haphazardly thrown onto the floor with my duffle, which is erupting with clothing. My dress still lays in a heap, with my heels discarded next to it.

I was the flaw in Peeta's perfect castle. The invader.

Everything was so neat and organized, so absolutely perfect, straight and centered…

I was like a tornado came through here… How long could he stand this?

I roll over to watch him sleep, but I'm met with his clear blue eyes. "You caved…" he yawns.

"Bullshit..." I kiss his nose. "Are you ok with this?" I ask idly.

"With what?" he begins playing with my hair.

"My… My invasion, my sloppiness..."

He smiles, "If I remember correctly, Belle invaded the Beast's castle."

I nod, "To find her missing father… Then he held her captive…"

"You're not captive, my sweet Belle, you may come and go as you please."

I smile, "Does it bother you? You're so… so… neat."

He pulls me tight to him so I can't see his face, maybe it's going darker again, like in the bathroom, "It's a behavior that was learned through years of conditioning by my birth parents…"

'I've been in your position before' echoes in my mind.

"Negative reinforcement?" I ask quietly, already knowing the answer.

He stiffens. "You could say that…" he says after a minute or so. I tilt my head a little and kiss at his neck.
"I'll teach you how to be a slob, and how to be a proper New Yorker."

He groans, "And I'll teach you how to ignore cameras, and not let them affect our relationship. Because after Friday…"

Friday… Friday… Oh yeah… 'The Met'.

"You'll be radiant as the sun. I'd like it to be a night between the two of us, but Prim and Rue are going."

I exhale, realizing I had been holding my breath in the whole time. "Good, maybe they can teach me how to behave in front of a camera…"

I had less than thirty-six hours to be Katniss Everdeen. After Friday, I'd be Katniss Everdeen, arm candy to Peter Mellark.

I could remember about two years back...his brief, really brief relationship with Delia Cartwright, Oscar winning actress, philanthropist, all around good person. I'm not exactly sure what broke them up, in fact I don't care… much. She was used to press, the attention. Maybe it was all the pregnancy rumors whenever she put on five pounds, or engagement rumors every time she wore a different ring… Though rumor has it she is married now.

"Katniss?"

I snap back to reality. "Yes?"

"Go back to sleep, I don't have to be up for two more hours and you don't have to be up until I get home… Unless you've changed your mind and want to come entertain me…"

"If I go with you, I'll find a corner in your office and study statistics until I'm sobbing about variances and chi squared tests…"

He just shrugs and kisses the top of my head. I drape my leg across his thighs and nuzzle into him. Both stomach sleepers caved and now we cuddled like a proper couple.

The sound of crickets chirping jerks me from a sound sleep. "Pick up your phone…” Peeta groans into my ear, his hot breath on my cheek.

"That's not my phone… Those are crickets. Have you ever heard them before?"

"Yes, but that's your phone…” it keeps going and I roll over, taking it from the night stand.

Johanna Mason.

"Just this once Mellark..." I accept the call on the billionth chirp. "What…” I groan, drawing the word out unnecessarily.

"Good morning to you too princess. Want to come to kickboxing with me?"

I think about the warm bed with my warm muscular boyfriend then when he leaves the warm spot where he slept, "How about…"

"Please?"

"I can't… it's take your half-awake girlfriend to work day." I feel a warm hand slip up between my legs from my knee. Gladly, I spread my legs for him.
"That is absolute bullshit. Where does he live? I'll be there in fifteen."

There was no swaying Johanna.

A finger slips inside me and I'm too out of it to suppress the moan.

"Make it an hour…" I moan.

"Oh god… where does he live?"

I groan again. The finger has left my inside and begins to play with whatever it can reach. "Sixty-ninth and fifth, big white building. Just…"

"I'll knock on the door…"

I smirk a little and sit up, pulling away from Peeta's hand. "Good luck with that. Just call… I have to go," I look down at an adorably pouting Peeta.

"You get 'em tiger, but don't do anything I wouldn't do…"

I don't even indulge her, there is NOTHING Johanna Mason wouldn't at least try. I toss the phone to the edge of the bed and pounce on him. "You're very mean, Mr. Mellark…" I scold as he lets me straddle him.

"What are you going to do about it?" I reach for the hem of his shirt, lifting it up and tucking it over his head.

"It's a surprise," I purr, trying to channel my inner-Johanna, though by now she'd probably have the handcuffs out, among other things. "You can stop me from talking…"

I kiss right between his pectorals and he shudders, pulling the shirt down.

I pout, "You're no fun…"

He sticks his tongue out, "I don't have time for your games… Some of us have work in an hour and a half…"

I settle for inching down his boxers, ever so slowly. "You mean I can't… " I take his semi-hard shaft in my hand and lick up the length, "Tease you?"

He groans, his skilled fingers tangling in my hair, but he doesn't pull. He knows better than to pull.

I freeze, almost to shocked to continue. All I needed to do was move away once and he'd learn.

"Are you ok?" he whispers.

I smile and nod, giving him no warning as I wrap my mouth around him finishing up the job of both lubricating him and making him hard enough.

Him moaning my name and taking fistfuls of sheets made me wet enough for the both of us. Something about the way he says my name.

"Enough…" he groans and I indulge him, slowly at first but mostly for my sake. It still hurts at first, but the sensation of being stretched and filled takes over.

I've never been particularly good at being on top, but instead of griping until I cried, he helped me.
His strong hands at my hips helping me move up and down, then back and forth so he could rub against all the right spots.

"You're amazing..." he groans, slamming into me, knocking me forward so I'm on his chest.

"I'm sorry!" I gasp, fearing I hurt him. Instead, he digs his fingers in my backside with enough force that each of his thrusts earn an unrestrained moan from me. I intertwine my fingers in his soft blonde curls, kissing each and every inch of exposed flesh with a fervor completely foreign to me.

I bury my face in the crook of his neck and ride out the sweet release he's given me. When my mind returns to me, after my nerves stop singing with delicious pleasure, I pick my head out of the crook of his neck and roll off Peeta, our chests heaving. "Go get ready..." I pant.

He looks defeated, post coital cuddle taking a back seat to adult responsibilities... or King of the World responsibilities which include running a company and quenching my new found thirst for sex.

He sits up and takes off his sweaty night shirt, letting it fall on my face, before leaving me to get out of my sex induced high.

I get out of bed after Peeta leaves the bathroom and get 'ready'. Use the toilet, wash my face, brush my teeth with my toothbrush. I'm half tempted to use his just to taunt him.

"So, after your 'kickboxing' and my half day... What would you like to do?" he asks and my eyes find the bed. I know what I want to do, but the truth of the matter is I'd actually like to spend more clothed time with my boyfriend.

He watches me shove my shampoo, conditioner and body wash in the bag as he ties his tie. "I've never seen you in casual clothes, do you own a pair of jeans?"

"I do..." he wears a dark grey suit, the shade lighter than charcoal but only just. "Can you go into the black box on my dresser and pick out a pair of cufflinks?"

I roll my eyes and, still naked, open his black box of shiny gold, silver and platinum. I dig through, disliking most of them. "You know, a ten cent button could do the job of- " my fingers touch a somewhat pointy groove. "Holy crap..." I lift the set out, a gold pair made out of a watch back with exposed gears.

"Forget the buttons, I'd wear a suit to wear these," I hold them out before returning to the box, rooting through it like a child through her mother's jewelry box.

"I could arrange to have a tailored suit made for you in time for Paris..." I bite my lip knowing if I say no, he's bound to do it anyway.

"You mean, 'Katniss, now that you've said this, I'll make a call the second you're not paying attention,' right?" I look up and he has his Blackberry in hand.

"You mean, while you're standing here I'm sending an email."

I roll my eyes.

"Do you want it a pant suit or a skirt?" he shakes his head as if he said something humorous.

"How about both, depending on the weather," I just sigh and actually put clothes on. I'm thankful I made the decision to bring a set of the exercise clothes Portia bought for me. Or Peeta bought for
I was going to be in debt to this man for a long time, "I'm going to pay you back for the clothes, and the suits, and… any more debt I accrue during our relationship."

Wrong thing to say. As he buttons his coat, he rolls his eyes, "Katniss, I want to give you the world, shower you in gifts. Let me treat you like a princess…"

I bite my lip, "I'm not a princess."

His eyes soften as he straightens his tie. "To me you are…" he says sadly.

With a chaste kiss on the lips he leaves to get breakfast for us and I pack, already formulating a plan.

I know Peeta is disappointed I won't come 'entertain' him today, but that doesn't mean I can't pop in.

I pack a black lace number which looked like a sleeveless black dress with a high necked, long sleeved dress thrown on top of it made of a delicate lace. It only goes about mid-thigh and I'd probably pair something this length with jeans or even leggings… but who cares?

'Try to live in heels, it will make it easier in September' echoes in my head.

I throw in a regular bra, a pair of 'date night' panties and my plain black heels before leaving the room.

'Leaving now, Annie can't come, 'wedding business'. ' Jo sends.

Wedding rings, 'the world's smallest handcuffs' as Jo told Annie when she announced her engagement.

"Everything ok?"

I sit at the breakfast bar and dig into a piece of toast.

"Annie, my friend, she's getting married next Saturday…" I smile a little. "I'm just amazed how fast everything changes."

I take a strawberry and bite into it, "Mmmm…” I feel the juice run down my chin, but I can't care. I haven't had a fresh strawberry in over a year.

I'm so wrapped up in my strawberry that I don't notice Peeta approach me, his strong finger tilts my chin up and he leans in.

"What are you…” his tongue drags from the bottom of my chin to my lips, tracing my bottom lip before our lips only barely touch.

"Tease…” I whisper when he backs away.

He shrugs and removes the hairband from my wrist before braiding my hair perfectly. My scalp tingles as his fingers work my hair. "Where did you learn to do this?” I ask, going for another strawberry.

"I have a little sister, you know. She used to wear her hair in two braids, and then she was 'too old'.”
I smile. "You can braid my hair any time. I love when people play with my hair," I admit with a
blush.

The crickets begin chirping again, "That's Jo… You get off around noon right?" I ask, slipping
from the barstool.

"Probably closer to one."

Perfect.

I get on my toes and kiss him on the forehead before wiggling my socked feet into my converse,
"Play nice, do whatever it is you do at work."

"Remember not to tuck your thumb while punching dear. That's how you'll break it."

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"You're glowing…" Johanna huffs as we work on our high kicks. "Where can I find one?" she asks.

I follow the woman robotically, kicking, punching, lifting my knee, all when the class did.

Soon a thick coat of sweat covered my body and our hour of cardio was done for the day.

Unfortunately, we aren't the only women in the group showers this morning. I had to reluctantly
drop my towel with a judgmental blonde and brunette staring at my small chest and boyish figure.

"I swear, the seventy year old widow next to me gets more action than I do. Whatever possessed
me to take this promotion…"

"Why do you care?" I ask idly, shampooing my hair. "I thought you got a rabbit?"

"Please, that thing may be my new god. But there's nothing like the weight of a man on top of you.
Or woman. Please, by now I'd take anything."

The blonde and brunette snicker a little.

"What are you looking at, tooth picks?" Johanna snaps. "When you're making six figures and
working fifty hours a week then you can talk to me."

They slink back.

"I thought you were into seven figures, Jo." I say.

She puts her hand over her heart and fans herself. "Oh silly me," she sighs in an exaggerated
southern accent. "How could I forget!"

"Come on Clove, the boys are waiting." The blonde sneers at me, sashaying out of the shower as if
flaunting her womanly curves.

"Ugh, I hate pretty little twenty something's… I mean, besides you guys."

"Thanks Jo, I find most almost thirty something's to be intolerable. Then I see you."

She dries herself off and examines her body in a full length mirror at the end of a row of lockers.
"It's thirsty Thursday. I'm getting laid. Care to be my wing woman?"
"No, I have to get my beauty sleep, I'm being taken to the Met Gala tomorrow by Prince Charming." I use the provided blow dryer to dry my hair into a flat sheet of dark straight hair.

Johanna and I go our separate ways, me to Peeta's office, her to head on the prowl for human flesh.

I earn plenty of strange looks on the subway in my lacy mini dress and heels, though this is New York. Give them all five minutes and something more interesting will catch their eyes.

I have to send a personal thank-you to Portia, these heels look uncomfortable but they're padded just enough to keep me comfortable during the three block walk from the subway to the office building.

11:45. Hopefully I wasn't catching him at a bad time.

"Hello Miss, can I help you?" the very blonde receptionist asks. This isn't Effie, her suit is black, not some pastel or vibrant painful color.

"I'm here to see Mr. Mellark."

She huffs, "Do you have an appointment?"

"No…"

"Katniss! Darling!" I remember her from the day of the interview, Effie Trinket, personal assistant to Peter Mellark. Her color today is a pale green, almost the color of mint chocolate chip ice cream. "How are you?"

I smile...my savior. "I'm well Miss Trinket. Is Mr. Mellark in his office?"

"He is not, though he should be back any minute if you'd like to wait inside," she doesn't wait for an answer. Instead, she pulls me back to my boyfriend's office.

"Don't tell him I'm here, or that anyone's here… I want it to be a surprise…"

She grins and leaves me alone in the large office of my Beast… or was he my Prince Charming?

I take a seat in his chair, propping my feet up on the desk so the first thing he sees when he enters is my muscular legs in these killer heels.

I check my email and text Madge and Johanna about planning Annie's Last Single Supper.

I hear his laughter first, a man telling him a somewhat crude joke. That's not Peeta's real laughter but a forced chuckle to humor the man.

"Care to prove it on the golf course? I'd go eighteen holes with you any day if it gets you to shut up."

I set my phone down on top of his mouse pad. It jostles the computer to life, revealing Peeta's background, a candid shot of him and I dancing at the party.

"From what I've heard, there's only one hole you're going to… Well…" I feel my anger surge.

"Maybe three but…"

"Watch your ass. I get word of you talking like that again your ass will be on the street before noon…"
The doorknob turns and the door opens silently. "Welcome to my office," I purr, tapping my foot to an imaginary beat.

He doesn't miss a beat, slipping in even though my voice was definitely heard beyond this small space. He closes the door before anyone can approach and locks it. "How did you get in here?"

I swivel a little on his comfortable chair, "Same way as you, Mr. Mellark. I walked. And Effie escorted me. Not sure I could find this place without her."

"Not sure I could find my head sometimes without her. She may be a barrage of pastel and obnoxious colors… but damn…"

"You should unlock the door, they might think we're doing something in here…" I bite on my thumbnail a little.

"So… you come to my office dressed like that… What do you want them to think?"

"That your moderately attractive girlfriend came to visit her rather dashing boyfriend so they could get lunch when he gets off work," I smile a little. "Now, come give me a kiss, but that's it… For now."

He pouts but finally crosses the room. "I like your computer background," I say, and he cocks an eyebrow. "No I wasn't snooping, I just bumped your mouse."

He kisses my forehead, between my eyes, my nose, and finally my lips, as his hand is resting on my thigh. "Spread your legs… I want to reward you for this surprise…"

I look up into his smoldering eyes, I have no choice but to comply. Not that he's forcing me, but I crave his touch. I could never pass it up.

"Actually wearing panties…" his hand slides up, one finger dragging along the moist folds between my legs.

"Please…" I whisper before a gasp escapes as two fingers slip inside me.

"Are you sore?" he asks. His free is hand smoothing down my hair as I bury my face in his chest to drown out my soft moans.

I shake my head no into his suit jacket as he bends his finger up.

"Shhh…" he coo's. "I'm going to have to stop if you can't be quiet… And you can't bite through another of my ties…"

"Easy for you to say!" I hiss before he catches me off guard, pumping his fingers.

He presses my head to his abdomen again, letting me bury my face in his firm muscles covered by a designer suit. "Let it go baby."

His fingers are thrusting in and out of me, the heel of his hand rubs my sensitive clit every so often. It's awkward, the fact that we're in his office.

But I lose myself in his touch which wasn't a difficult task, though the constant reminding myself to be quiet made it harder and harder to actually climax.

When it finally hits me, my body jerks away from his, though his hand is there to silence me, my almost primal moan muffled by the palm of his hand.
"There we go..." he says, and I laze on his chair, my right leg finally falling to the ground limply.

"I should visit your office more often..." I grin from my less than distinguished position.

"You'll be hard to explain to my associates. If you come around too often I'd have to hire you, then there's the whole 'pay for sex' thing, and no offense, but I wouldn't hire a journalism major." I frown. "If I were to rate your talents on a scale I'd put singing at ten and business smarts at like... a two."

I smirk, "Business smarts? Really Peeta?" He childishly sticks his tongue out. "That's fine, I'd never work for a company this large anyway. I'd feel like a number."

"You'd never be a number in my eyes..." he says sadly.

"Then there's the whole 'fucking the boss thing, big no in my book."

Peeta leans across me and shuts down his computer, he sets an external hard drive in his briefcase as well as a folder full of papers.

"Please don't be upset with me, but I'm going to have to work for a few hours tonight. With us going away and the wedding I can't get behind."

I nod, "That's ok, I have to study tonight or I might fail my stat final Monday morning..."

He snaps his briefcase closed and helps me from my puddle like state up on my feet.

As we near the door I notice something. The gentile look on Peeta's face has grown stony, almost emotionless as he fiddles with his phone. Every step towards the door the playful man gives way to the stiff CEO.

I frown a little, unable to decide which one is the real Peeta, and which one is the mask.
This place was never the same again
After you came and went
How can you say you meant anything different
To anyone standing alone
On the street with a cigarette
On the first night we met

Look to the past
And remember her smile
And maybe tonight
I can breathe for awhile
I'm not in the seat
I think I'm fallin' asleep
But then all that it means is
I'll always be dreaming of you

Fate fell short this time
Your smile fades in the summer
Place your hand in mine "Are you sure it's safe?"

I shrug and tie my converse tight on my feet, not wanting to ruin my heels. "Who knows? I just need what's in my fireproof box…" I'm clear to enter.

My door was torn down by firefighters. Since the fire came from the other side, most of my items survived. My bed was not one of them.

I hear a ringing and look back at Peeta.

"I'm sorry, it's Effie…" he says. I nod and hear him head off and the car door slam. Here I am, alone in the charred remains of my apartment.

I don't need a lot of time. I just need the box and that's it.

I hear footsteps behind me as I sift through the ashes of what was my limited wardrobe.

"Remind me to thank Portia…" I mumble, picking up half of a shoe.

"Who the fuck is Portia?" A chill runs down my skin. "And why would you leave the house like that?"

Every nerve is frozen and I try to not vomit.

"I did, Cato…" I find the box in the back of my melted shoe pile and stand up with the rough tan
fireproof box. "Now, leave me alone."

He grabs my arm as I push past him, "Where do you think you're going?"

I swing all that I feel like salvaging from this place at him.

"Home, Cato. To my home."

I've given him too much time and he smacks me. "Shit!" I hiss and grab my face, rushing out the door.

"Katniss, baby, I'm sorry! I'm just upset! You said you'd wait for me to get back!"

I spin around. "Don't you Katniss baby me!" I hiss. "I'm not your baby!" My cheek stings.

"You are mine, Katniss. Don't you ever fucking forget it!"

"No!" I throw the box to the ground. "You forget it! Forget my number, forget Madge's number, forget you even know my name! And you can prowl around here all you want because I don't live here anymore!" I shout.

I've made my second mistake of the night, I square myself off to him. He shoves me to the ground.

"Katniss!" Peeta shouts as Cato's foot knocks the wind from my stomach. He then gives me another kick for good measure before he's tackled to the ground.

"Come on, sweetheart." I'm scooped off the ground while gasping for breath and laid across the back seat of Peeta's car. Before long, my box is set on the floor and my head is scooped up and rested in Peeta's lap.

My breath is still returning to me as his fingers find my hair, "He can't hurt you… I shouldn't have let you out of my sight… Please forgive me, Katniss…"

I force myself to roll over and hold his waist tightly. I can't speak yet, my words are evading me.

"We should go to the police station, press charges."

I can find one word. "NO!" I choke out. "Just please, back to your place…"

Peeta's angry with me, mostly about the refusal to press charges. I also demanded to make dinner to distract myself.

"It shouldn't bruise…" Sae holds a cold compress to my face. "Shameful man, to strike such a little thing."

I look over at Peeta, who has remained wordless this entire time. His jaw is tight, arms over his chest.

"Well… That's Cato Snow for you…" I smile faintly at Peeta before the pain in my abdomen nearly doubles me over. Peeta is neither smiling or frowning, his lips are in a tight, perfectly straight line flirting between rage and sorrow.

On top of refusing to go to the police, I had also refused to go to the hospital.

Sae has my attention once more when she jabs my painful stomach. "You should lay down," she
"Katniss," Peeta snaps. Before he can continue, the door opens.

"What was so important that you called me here on my evening off?" Heels click rapidly from the door to the kitchen. Effie's pissed.

I hold the compress to my face and swing my legs on the counter like a child. I feel like a child. "Call Snow's assistant. All our negotiations are off the table until further notice."

I had written a piece on this merger between Peeta's company and Cato's uncle's company. If they struck a deal it would mean the creation of thousands of jobs and that many people could actually keep their jobs.

And he was willing to throw all of it away because of me?

"No!" I jump off the counter, wincing as my feet hit the hardwood. I dash after Peeta, who's making his way to his office, "Peeta!"

"Go lay down, Katniss!" he snaps. His shoulders are tense. Every ounce of anger and anguish from the day is held in his muscles.

"No! Peeta!" I growl as he slams the door in my face. Immediately, I start jerking on the handle.

"Miss Everdeen!" Effie snaps, grabbing my arm. I jerk away and pound on the door.

"Peter Mellark, you get out here this minute!" I shout slamming my fist on the rich dark wood.

"Miss Everdeen, mind your manners!" Effie snaps. I jiggle the knob once more just to see if maybe it unlocked and I tumble through the door.

"Much better…" I close the door behind me, locking Effie out. "Peeta, you can't do this…"

He looks at me with his angry, confused eyes. Here I was, almost eight years younger than him, telling him how to run his company.

*Because he's ruining people's lives over nothing!* I remind myself.

"Why, Miss Everdeen?" I cringe a little. We're back to being formal, I guess. "Tell me why I should associate with someone who's family member finds it acceptable to abuse women? To control them?"

"Because!" I bite my lip, trying to compose myself. "Because if you do this, jobs will be created and families will keep their source of income. I read up on this merger, Peeta. I'm not clueless!" I snap.

I'm not sure where his rage comes from, but with a swing of his arm, most the items on his desk are sent flying.

"Then what will you have me do!" he roars. "I look away for two minutes and you're on the ground getting kicked! Then you refuse to press charges and when even now you can barely breathe without wincing, you won't get looked at!"

"I- I'm sorry…" I mumble, hugging myself.

"You're sorry?" he asks in disbelief. "You have no reason to be sorry. It's that bastard who should
"And taking it out on his uncle and innocent people is going to do nothing!" I shout. "You can't play games with people's lives, Mr. Mellark!"

"Get out of my sight, Katniss," he growls.

"Fine!" I shout. "I'm going back to my apartment. Call me when you're done with your temper tantrum."

"Katniss… Wait…" I slam the office door behind me and head for the bedroom. He doesn't approach me as I pack my dirty clothes in the duffle. No one says a word as I pack my computer and books in my bag.

Abernathy does though offer me a ride home, which I refuse.

"Let's at least grab a smoke outside to calm your nerves."

I kick at the clean sidewalk idly. "So, you heard all that?"

"All of Manhattan heard that, sweetheart… And you're right, but Peeta will never admit it."

My phone begins buzzing. I want to ignore it, thinking it's Peeta.

I check who it is. Madge Undersee.

"Hey…" I grumble.

"Everything ok?"

I take a very long drag and close my eyes as my lungs burn. "No… Can you gather the troops and meet me somewhere? I need a girls night…"

"Yikes! Actually, that's why I called. We're going to Iggy's to slum it some."

Iggy's isn't 'slumming it'. Not by far. It's an upscale dive bar that actually made karaoke seem cool. Unfortunately, Katniss Everdeen doesn't sing freely without a few beers in her.

"I'm actually in the Upper East Side. When do you need me to show up?"

"Whenever, we're almost there. You should bring your Prince Charming."

I groan. "You mean my Beast? He's too busy playing chess with people's lives."

"Oh… Gale and Finnick are here."

"I'll be there in like ten minutes."

Haymitch grabs my bags when I hang up. "I'll drop these off at your place, sweetheart. Give Peet some time."

I clutch my bag tight to my chest. Every few seconds, I check my phone for a message from the Beast. When I get to Iggy's with no text message, I give up.

Trying to push the day out of my mind, I flop down in the spacious booth next to my other dateless friend: Johanna.
"Hey Belle darling," she kisses my cheek. "We're surrounded by happy couples. Ready to lez it up?"

I roll my eyes, but drape my arm around her shoulders, "Sure thing babycakes!"

I rest my head on her shoulder and order a gin and tonic to drown my day away.

"What's wrong with your cheek...?" Madge reaches over the table and nearly gives me fish lips.

"I got hit, and kicked... It was a weird day." Everyone's jaw drops. They think Peeta did this to me!

My drink is set before me. "It was Cato. He found me at my old place when I went back for my..." I squeeze my lime into the pine flavored drink. "Shit... I left it at Peeta's..." I chug the gin and tonic.

"What happened between you two?" Finnick asks as I finish a healthy helping of alcohol.

"Well, after Cato Snow shoved me to the ground and kicked the air out of me... Peeta was pissed that I didn't want to press charges or go to the hospital to get looked at. So he took his frustration out on Cato's uncle and is thinking of canceling their merger, or whatever it is. So I yelled at him, saying that it would ruin more than just Snow's life, and that he couldn't play games with people's lives."

"And?" Gale asks, running his finger around the rim of his glass.

"He told me to get out of his sight, and I told him to call me when he was done with his temper tantrum. Now I'm here!"

Annie sucks air in through her teeth. "Damn..." she sighed.

"And, to be honest? It's nice to have a healthy argument with someone where furniture doesn't get thrown at me, or..."

I snap my jaw shut. "Johanna, wanna sing? I feel like Iggy's hasn't heard our rendition of... well, anything in far too long."

She beams, "But miss Everdeen, you're far too sober!"

I roll my eyes and drag her to the stage. It's still early in the night, so we know we're free to make asses of ourselves on this stage.

I manage to pump another drink into my system. It's been affectively buzzing me to perfection.

In every aspect of her life, Johanna Mason is dominant, except for when she's singing on the stage with me. Maybe it's because she's not confident on it. Our rendition of Cowboy Cassanova, though, earns a standing ovation from the crowding bar. Though, it might be mostly because of our short skirts on the elevated stage and the fact that half way through the song, Jo decided to grind up against me.

"You two are still insane." Annie declares. Another round of drinks comes by and I hold mine up.

"Cheers to never changing, Annie..." I say. She sips at her drink and rolls her eyes.

Gale and Finnick are both on their phones, brows furrowed.

"Business men, you see me fucking around with my cellphone? I'm Editor of the New York
fucking Times," Johanna says.

"Is that the official title now?" Annie asks, chewing on her lime.

"Might as well be, I'm nailing the guy that writes the commitments." 'Nailing' was a Johanna-ism for sleeping with more someone than once. A rare thing for Miss Mason. "And the one that was following you and Peter around, Kat. I told him I'd fulfill one of his fantasies if he would find some other couple to hound."

"We might not even be a couple…" I shrug. Could I do that? After everything Peeta did for me, just walk out like that? Walk away? "Wait, what did you have to do?"

"Listen, sister. Don't ask, but it was good," she purrs.

Maybe someday, I would be as confident as Johanna. Until then, I would live in my own little bubble.

I look to Gale for some insight, but he's too busy typing at his phone.

"Ugh…" I grumble, nursing my fourth drink. I'm already tipsy. Drunk is next, followed by black out smashed. "How do you deal with this Madge? Annie?"

"What? Being drunk?" Madge asks innocently as we watch Jo put her moves on a well-dressed man.

"No, the phones."

"You mean Peeta wasn't on his all the time?" Gale asks, setting his upside-down phone on the table.

"No, and when he had to be on it, he either excused himself or gave me this puppy dog look…"

I sigh. "Listen, I don't want to sit here and talk about Peeta all night. I think I'm going to go home…" I set down enough money for my drinks.

"Wait! Kat!" Madge grabs my wrist. "Maybe you should sing one more song?" she smiles.

She's trying to cheer me up, but images of Peeta's anger and the bite of Cato's slap they invade my mind.

"Please?" she asks. "Gale and Finnick have barely heard you sing and we've been bragging about you all day."

She's up to something. Madge is a terrible schemer but I indulge her. "Fine, Margaret…"

I'm not exactly sober as I take the stage. I know what song I want to sing. The bar is busier now. Every seat taken, even though it's a Thursday. The overhead lights had been shut off earlier and bright ill placed spotlights shine in my eyes. NYU has me spoiled, I guess.

Awake My Soul by Mumford and Sons may have not been the most appropriate song given my glum mood, but I sure knew how to silence the whole bar and hold all of their attention.

I finish with a thunderous applause and pretend to courtesy deeply as I had on the stage the night I met Peeta. My heart stung just at the thought of him. What was he doing now?

I hop off the stage, "Alright, I'm not a trick pony. I'm going to…" my voice disappears from me
when I see an actually casually dressed Peeta Mellark in my seat. "...head home."

I try not to acknowledge him. Was this being childish? Was he still angry? Was I?

Ugh! Relationships!

"Katniss, what are you doing?" Peeta calls as I walk out of the bar.

"Getting a cab, so I can get out of your sight as you requested," I snap. Yep, I was definitely still angry.

"Belle..." he murmurs. My heart stings from the sorrow in his voice. "Please, can we talk?"

A yellow cab pulls up in front of me. "Fine, get in."

Silently, we make our way into my apartment.

"You're drunk..." he sighs as I stumble to get my converse off. Wait...glass table, tile floor? This is Peeta's, I huff in my head. God damnit, I told the cabby the wrong address. I fight as Peeta scoops me up in his arms.

"You were bugging Gale and Finnick all night, weren't you?" I ask, poking his face.

"Ever since you walked out..." the jostling makes me queasy. The gin in my stomach is threatening to make a second appearance.

I feel it, the chill takes over my body as I shove myself out of Peeta's arms and run for his bathroom. I don't bother closing the doors as my food for the day and about four gin and tonics rushes from my system.

"Shhh..." Peeta says lovingly, as he rubs my back.

"Why are you doing this?" I ask in my drunken haze.

"Because I care about you Katniss. So much. I just want to protect you..."

I wipe my face on my delicate lace sleeve as Peeta unzips me. "How's your stomach?"

"Empty..." I pant, laying down on the stark white tile. My hot cheek feels great against the cold tile. "Sore..."

I inch out of the dress like a worm and examine my abdomen.

"Bruised," I conclude before lying flat on my stomach, trying to soak up as much of the cool tile as possible.

He sits next to my head, "You were right..." he admits. "I was playing chess with people's lives. But, Belle...my sweet Belle, don't you see you are my queen?"

He sighs and strokes my sweaty hair as I basically cool myself off on his bathroom floor in my underwear. "I will continue negotiations with Snow as you asked. But I want to up security around you."

I just nod, not bothering to make sense of his words before climbing back up to the toilet.

Now I remember why I don't drink gin.
The Met Gala is the Oscars for fashion... Or at least that's what Cinna tells me when I'm pulled from bed at two in the afternoon. Peeta forces lunch into my face before my shower.

"You don't have to do this," I yawn, picking apart my sandwich. "I've been hung over before. This isn't even a hangover, it's more like a lean over."

Peeta rolls his eyes.

"I spoke to Gale. Madge was worried when she came home and you weren't there..." he says.

I nod and bite into the bread, choosing to eat my food layer by layer. First bread, then fixings, then cheese and meat. Peeta makes yet another face.

"So what am I wearing? Or is it a big secret?" Cinna and the 'prep team' as he calls them have bogarted the bedroom. Every few minutes, someone pokes their head out to ask if I'm done stuffing my face.

"Big secret. Even I don't know... But you should get ready. Prim and Rue will be here in a few to get ready and I'm sure you don't want to be naked..." he states. I cross my legs and pull the t-shirt down to actually cover my bottom half.

I wobble a little on my heels, almost knocking poor Venia to the ground twice as I'm zipped into my gown. It is gorgeous. It's cut to show my collar bones and tight down to my thighs, where the brilliant gold bodice gave way to a creamy tulle.

I have watched enough 'Say Yes to the Dress' to know this was a Mermaid style gown. Right along the hem, intricate gold designs climbed up the tulle. They look like small gold flames licking at my feet when I walk.

"Beautiful..." Cinna helps me spin.

"Well... That'll only get me so far. I've seen what press does to people at these things. I have to get people to like me... How do I get people to like me?"

Cinna chuckles and touches up my gold eye shadow, "Well, I like you, and you were yourself when you met me, no?"

"I was..." I look at myself in the mirror. I look like I'm draped in gold. Is that too pretentious?

Was I basically saying was 'Hello world! I'm dating one of the richest men in the country!'. My stomach turned. I'm definitely not drinking tonight.

Cinna escorts me to the door as I take my phone and ID off of the dresser. Peeta would be carrying them. "I present to you, Mademoiselle Katniss Everdeen..." he says once we were out of the room.

Rue and Prim had been finished ages ago, not needing the coercion that I did to get fake eyelashes put on. I attempt to courtesy, but stick with a modest stage bow.

Peeta approaches me slowly, pulling a delicate gold bracelet from his pocket. "For you..."

I offer my left hand and he slips it on. It was a chain of gold clasped together with a tiny heart-shaped padlock. Tiffany and Co. was etched into the face of it. "You're stunning, Belle," he says.

I don't have to get on my toes to kiss him. His lips are so sweet and tender as he pulls me to him. I
love the way his body fits so perfectly around mine.

"Ew…” Rue starts. "Guys seriously, save it for tonight when Prim and I are long gone in the Hamptons…”

"Please, Peeta's taking Katniss out there to woo her," Prim fake swoons.

"Primrose," Peeta scolds. "We're past the wooing."

I look at the bracelet. "No, I'm pretty sure you're still trying to woo me."

I fidget through the whole limo ride to the Met.

"You can do this…” Peeta whispers as I play with the bracelet he gave me.

"Once they know my name I won't be a nobody. I'll be your girlfriend."

He nods, "Many women will be jealous…” He rests his head on my shoulder. Cocky bastard…

Rue and Prim are the first out of the limo, leaving me time to prep myself for this.

Don't fall... Whatever you do, don't fall... Peeta slides out and offers me his hand.

"You can do this, Belle. I'll keep you safe…” I take his hand, instilling my trust in Peeta Mellark.

I wince at first at the flashes, but soon they're nothing more than stage lights to me.

"Look just over them, you will look confident and it will save your eyes," Cinna whispers. Him and Peeta's personal shopper, Portia are quick behind us.

"Miss! Miss!" reporters shout, trying to get my attention. "What is your name?"


We pose for pictures, both as a couple and individually. By the time we're half way down the carpet, people are shouting my name. They want my attention. Just my smile is all they need.

I try to remain calm as Jessica Alba saunters by, no more than three feet from me.

Holy fuck!

I don't ask Peeta the price for the tickets to this event. Prim, Rue, him and I are seated with Cinna and Portia who gush in French with some designer I have never heard of.

I sip at my pink champagne, nodding and smiling when social cues deem it appropriate.

"Everything ok?" Peeta asks quietly, probably noting my robotic responses.

"I don't speak French…” I blush a little.

He tilts my chin up, our lips finding one another. "I will teach you," he whispers.

"Go to Paris with me…” I whisper as our dinner is set in front of us.

"Of course…” he smiles, kissing me lightly.
I'm told that when Peeta twirled me on the dance floor, it looked like my skirt was on fire.

"It's Cinna, he's a genius," I gush before Peeta pulls me back. A few notes from a piano over the speaker and I place the song immediately.

"We're going to go," Prim and Rue tell us. "Abernathy will drive us out to mom and dads, see you in the morning!"

What a fitting song to leave to. Heartbeat by Childish Gambino. The first line saying, 'I wanted you to know that I am ready to go.'

I have been so stiff the whole night, so out of place. I decide to let myself go.

My is back pressed against my boyfriend and I let the music flow through me. His hands travel from my shoulders down to my hips where they rest as I tastefully grind my backside against him.

I turn around toward the end of the song, "Ayo, fuck this. Are we dating? Are we fucking?" I ask. "Are we best friends, are we something in between that?"

He looks at me curiously as I sing along to the end of the song. "I wish we never fucking and I mean that," I grasp his tie and pull him in. "But not really, because you say the nastiest shit in bed. And that's fucking awesome." The song ends and I pull his lips to mine.

"Oh Miss Everdeen, what am I to do with you?" he asks. I can think of a few things. "But we should head out, we have to drive two hours after this."

I say good bye to Cinna and Portia, who were still wrapped up in their conversation with others. Cinna, though, stops and pulls me to him when we pass by. "And this lovely lady is the face of my brand, Katniss Everdeen. She will be in Paris with me when I return for a few days…"

An older woman with a high hairline sighs contently, "You will love Paris! The men… Gorgeous!"

I scramble to find Peeta's hand, "I think he might get jealous…"

When we arrive back at the penthouse, the silky fabric of my gown falls to the ground like a puddle of melted gold.

"How sober are you?" Peeta asks idly as he changes from his tux to a dark pair of jeans and a black t-shirt.

"Very, I had that one glass of champagne… Why?" I pull on the clothes left out on the bed for me. "Wait, where are my bags?" I ask frantically.

"Haymitch is bringing them to my place up in the Hampton's. We won't be able to carry them," he tosses a well-fitting leather jacket at me as I tie my converse.

"Wait… What?"

We ride the elevator down past the lobby into the garage. Parked next to a very fun looking Audi is a sleek black motorcycle.

"This is what you mean by not being able to bring our own bags…" I zip my coat up and gulp. I've never been on one of these before. "Can you even drive this?"

He grins and hands me a black helmet, "Very well, Miss Everdeen. Now, you're going to have to hold on."
I'm awkward for a second on the bike as it roars to life, my feet perched on the steel posts. I hold onto Peeta loosely but the second he moves, I'm tight on him.

There's something oddly sexual about this and I can't help but feel like this is his plan.

"You ok back there?" He asks at a red light, just before the Queens Midtown Tunnel.

"Yeah…" I rest my head against the leather of his jacket as a Camaro pulls up next to us.

The two men in it hoot and holler, challenging Peeta to a race. "Peeta…" I caution.

"End of the tunnel!" Peeta shouts back at them. "Hold on, babe, and put your thighs into it."

I do as I'm told, holding on for dear life as he takes off, rounding the corner and descending underground. The black car is not far behind.

Over the echo of the engine, I hear his laughter. Pure joy practically falls from the stuffy business man. The angry master of puppets I saw yesterday is completely gone.

Though it's a no passing zone, the Camaro takes advantage of the empty tunnel and flies past, killing Peeta's buzz only for a second before we go faster.

It's a rush I've never felt before. My body is pressed against Peeta as we speed under the East River. He isn't about to surrender now.

The left lane is vacant as far as I can see over his shoulder, but the right is plugged up by one slow moving car. Somehow, by the grace of some deity, we sneak in front of the Camaro just as the tunnel ends and we're off into the open highway, the loser left in our dust cloud.

The house is dark when we get there, a beautiful French style Chateau backing up to the beach.

"How was that?" he asks, taking off his dark helmet and running his hand through his sweaty hair as the garage door closes behind us.

The lights turned on the second the door opened. It's less of a garage I know, full of lawn mowers and yard tools, and more of a stark white work room.

"Fuck me…" I pant as I climb off. "Now," I unzip my leather coat and it falls to the ground.

"Your wish is my command…" he lifts off my t-shirt and throws it to the ground with our jackets.

When I finally have his shirt off, I run my hands over his muscles, down from his pecs to his abs before undoing the button and zipper of his jeans.

"Come here…" he lifts me off the ground when we're both nude and seats me on the cool surface of the workbench.

"What are you… Oh god-" with one leg over his shoulder, the other foot on the edge of the bench, I almost melt as his tongue laps at my arousal. "Fuck…" I moan, feeling one finger enter me as his tongue teases my sensitive clit.

Rapidly, I climb closer and closer to my orgasm. When I think I can't last any longer, he pulls completely out.

"Wait… wha…" Peeta chuckles at my confusion before helping me to the ground and turning me around.
"I like teasing you..." he coos, running a gentle hand down my spine before crashing into me. "You're so tight..." he moans, while pounding into me.

I feel my inner Johanna bubble to the surface, "You like?"

He spanks me lightly, rubbing the spot before doing it again, "Babe, I fucking love it."

The sound of our slapping skin and moans echo through the garage as we reach our climaxes, his hand reaching around to play with me as his thrusts become more savage.

"Oh... Fuck Peeta!" I moan just as my mind erupts.

He cleans himself off with my shirt then uses the fabric to wipe my thighs clean of our sex while I pull his dark t-shirt over my head.

We walk to the house barefoot, him in his jeans, me in his shirt carrying our underwear and jackets.

He takes my hand and leads me upstairs, just as a door opens and two eighteen year olds with a 'We caught you' look on their faces scrutinize us.

We run for the master bedroom, laughing like fiends.

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*I'll leave when I wanna* This place was never the same again

After you came and went

How can you say you meant anything different

To anyone standing alone

On the street with a cigarette

On the first night we met

Look to the past

And remember her smile

And maybe tonight

I can breathe for awhile

I'm not in the seat

I think I'm fallin' asleep

But then all that it means is

I'll always be dreaming of you

Fate fell short this time

Your smile fades in the summer
Place your hand in mine

I'll leave when I wanna

Chapter End Notes

The first sign their relationship isn't flawless, Katniss' abusive ex who likes to pop up inconstantly. :D
The Golden Age

Chapter Notes

The Golden Age by The Asteroids Galaxy Tour. It was just so peppy.

Peeta

She was strange, Katniss Everdeen… Everything about her drew me to her. Though normally, I wouldn't give someone like her a second glance… She barely fit in inside my world full of golden colored blondes with blue eyes with her storm grey eyes and black hair.

Maybe that's what drew me to her, a change from the human Barbies my mother liked to throw at me. But she was so much more…

Her voice, oh God her voice… Even when she wasn't singing, it was like music… and her laughter. Beautiful and sweet, like a songbird. My songbird.

Even when I saw her that night on stage, I knew I had to… Know her.

Though it was next to impossible, Katniss Everdeen knew how to not leave much of a paper trail. Her school tuition was paid for on several scholarships and what wasn't went to an address down in Florida. Everything else was all cash.

This seemed absurd until I saw what she did to earn money.

I knew I had to get her out of that position, away from that sorry excuse of a person Cray. But nothing has been simple since we ran into each other at the benefit.

Everything I have done since that point has been for this damned girl. This awkward and outspoken little thing I feel charged with protecting.

And I failed, but she refused to press charges so when I retaliated the only way I knew how… she yelled.

Oh did she yell! Her! Eight years my junior, telling me how to run MY company? No one yells at Peter Mellark, except, apparently, for Katniss Everdeen… So I listened to her.

She bends over to pick up her bag, each limb moving as a unit, perfect and graceful. "Are you watching me?" she teases while dressing. This girl had little to no fashion sense, it was almost a gift that her apartment burned to the ground along with her, as she said, limited wardrobe of dark t-shirts and jeans. Not only that, but she was out of that terrible neighborhood.

She was so strange, so out of place in my house… Those stormy grey eyes studying everything just as they had at the Masquerade, just as they had in my office. Each step she took deeper into my world, those more those stormy eyes darted, taking everything in. Each step she took further into my world, though, the more she drew me out of it.

"Of course… You have lovely legs. Maybe some weekend you could stay over, I'll dismiss the
housekeeper and Abernathy for the weekend and you could just walk around my place naked."

She scowls. It's so natural for her, it seems. I have to wonder if she even knows she's doing it. "Perhaps, but only if you join me."

Katniss Everdeen was about the most absurd and unpredictable creatures I have ever met, and I was drawn to her like a moth to a flame.

00

Katniss

"So how fast were we going last night?" I ask, trying to drum up conversation.

Peeta and I got a late start and now had the house to ourselves, though apparently we were expecting his mother. I'm meeting the boyfriend's parents after not even a week of dating. With Cato, I've never even met his family. Though, to be fair, he's never met mine.

Ugh, mom… I should call her; at least pretend we're a functional family…

I stab at another berry. Peeta, or the housekeeper…definitely the housekeeper, had a pound waiting on the counter when we woke up and I was already almost finished with it. "Do you really want to know?"

I pop the berry in my mouth and slide the fork out, the prongs sliding between my teeth loudly. "Mister Mellark," I coo after swallowing. "I am a very busy woman," I tell him in an exaggerated voice. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know…"

My near exact quotation of what Peeta had said to me on our lunch 'date' only earned a cocked eyebrow as the security system dinged, letting us know someone had entered the house. "About one twenty… I could have gotten her to about one sixty, Ducati's are…"

"Peter Mellark, you did not!" I look up from my bowl of berry stems. A tall, slender blond with a gaunt face that was most likely altered by at least Botox or maybe some fillers had walked in.

"I thought that was Prim…" Peeta's gone from being loose and relaxed to stiff just like he had in his office.

Stiff and uncomfortable… Hmm…

"Katniss, this is my mother…"

The woman pushes Peeta closer to the table to shake my hand. "Abigail Mellark, my daughter has told me so much about you… My son on the other hand…"

"It's quite alright, it's a pleasure," I smiled.

"Are you two coming to the garden party tonight? Everyone's coming," she sits next to me and delicately bites into a berry.

Peeta looks at me for an answer before sighing, "We'll be there, seven?"

The security system pings again. A voice followed. "No, I'm telling you, biggest cans I've ever seen; she had a body that was fiiiine."

"Do all the ladies fancy your brother?" I ask Peeta.
"Nah. He's just, well… Andrew," he sighed.

"Ah, there are your siblings! We're in the kitchen!" Peeta's mother calls.

"I swear, your bullshit is going to cost me an election someday," his brother says, while walking into the kitchen.

I sip at my coffee, "When he turns up missing we'll know who to ask first." I set the mug down immediately, regretting opening my mouth. I clear my throat, "I'm Katniss by the way."

One awkward brunch later and I was ready to get on the beach, or attempt to. I had a lot of studying to do, or at least I told myself that.

Somehow, I was coerced into donning a black bikini and pulled from the now quiet house into the noise of the Mellark family.

Abigail had left about an hour ago to prepare for whatever a garden party was, which was a relief. I was so afraid of her bad side.

Walking down the wooden stairs to the beach, all I could see was dark blue water and a very long but well-kept dock where a very large boat and a few jet-skis sit tied off.

"How deep is the water at the end?" I ask, digging my bare feet into the white sand.

"Twenty or so feet… why?" Peeta says. I grin and pull off my tank top running down to the dock.

So much for studying.

When I get to the end I launch off, diving into the deep blue water. I love swimming, swimming was freedom.

I don't know how deep I let myself sink before I rose to the surface, "How was that?" The water is still cool, my skin turning to gooseflesh the second I hit the water.

"A little cold…" I take in a deep breath and let my air filled lungs tip me on my back. "Can I take a jet ski out?"

"Do you know how to drive one?" Peeta sits on the edge of the dock, his feet barely hitting the water.

"Is it anything like a snowmobile? We used those to cross to the islands up where I'm from in the winter," I swim over to the edge of the dock. "Can you swim?" He just nods before I take his arm and pull him in with me.

The water overtakes me as I let myself sink. Down, down, down until my lungs burn and I float up.

"Oh you're in so much trouble Miss Everdeen," he lunges for me but I dive under again, swimming back to the shore. I've always been more comfortable swimming under the water, deep down right above the sandy bottom until the waves lap at my back, pushing sand in my bathing suit. I surface, running from the firm wet sand and somehow tripping on my own feet.

"Gotcha!" I'm flipped onto my back and Peeta crawls up me, even though his siblings and Rue's watchful eyes are on us. He kisses me deeply, his hands on either side of me so his weight isn't on me. We never do get on the jet-ski's.

I was told while getting ready that a Garden Party was casual but still very stuffy. Very not me.
"Is this appropriate?" I ask, emerging from the bathroom in a very plain white dress with a crochet pattern at the bottom. I strapped a thick brown leather belt around my waist and spun around slowly.

"Perfect," Peeta says. I smile and drink him in. We were a matching set. Me in my white crochet dress, him in a white button up with the top two buttons undone and the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. For the first time since meeting Peeta Mellark, his shirt wasn't tucked in.

"You're not half bad yourself," I tell him while slipping the gold bracelet on my wrist and putting my choker in place.

I imagined when Mrs. Mellark said everyone was coming I would be rubbing elbows with the Hampton's finest. For once in my life, my assumption was right.

Seated in her beautiful fairy garden at tables covered in perfect white linen were millionaires, politicians, even an actor or two.

"Is your dad here?" I ask, clinging to my boyfriend's hand as he helped navigate me through the sea of rich strangers.

Peeta chuckles, "No, my dad doesn't come to mother's parties. He's up at the house though…"

I nod, "So he's like the Great Gatsby? Lavish parties at his house and he just sits up at home enjoying some scotch?"

"Actually yes, Miss Everdeen."

People kiss my cheeks left and right, telling me they loved my gown the night before. Every person who asked who designed it was shocked that I would wear such an unknown designer, but promised to check his work out after seeing what he put me in.

I'm the face of his business… I remind myself throughout the night.

Peeta's distracted by some business partner when I walk off to explore the garden more. I'm surrounded by bushes and trees lit by white Christmas lights which only make Mrs. Mellark's colorful garden shine. I give into one of my many weaknesses - the sweet, grounding bite of a cigarette.

I face away, studying the statue before me…a beautiful angel, her arms open, palms facing out.

"So…" my blood runs cold when I hear his voice. A hand snakes around my waist, another covers my mouth, "You won't make a scene will you?"

I shake my head no and when Cato shoves me from him, I stumble on my heels, catching myself on the tall statue. "Why are you here?" I ask.

When we were dating, I wasn't allowed to look him in the eye. Today, I chose to let his dark brown eyes meet my grey ones. It was a sign of defiance before, but now a sign of my freedom. "Uncle has a house here; everyone who is anyone is here, Katniss."

I snort and cross my arms over my chest, still refusing to break eye contact with him. "You didn't answer my question."

"Defiant little bitch… I should put you in your place right here, but I don't want to make a scene…" he picks a bud, a tight pink peony which he tucks in my loose hair. "It would be a shame…"
I cringe away from his touch, unable to move, "What would be?"

"If something was to happen to your little beau, or maybe even his little sister. She's so innocent really..." he pats my cheek twice before walking away. I can't move for a good minute or so before a bit of hot ash falls on my hand.

"There you are!" Peeta... Oh shit! I try to compose myself, what would Cato do to him? To Prim?

I force a smile. Could he see through me?

"Sorry, I was admiring your mother's garden," I take a drag. "And polluting it..."

He rolls his eyes and kisses me on the forehead. Cato couldn't hurt him? Could he? No... I refuse to believe it!

"You bolted from the party the first chance you could," he chuckles. "I like the flower...

My hand shoots up to my hair and I rip the tainted bud from my hair and throw it to the ground stomping both it and my cigarette.

"Woah... You ok?" he asks.

"I'm fine Peeta, it's nothing... Just, can we go? This isn't really my scene..."

Do I tell him about Cato's threat?

"Then let's go find your scene, Belle," he takes my hand and instead of leading me back to the party we head straight across the way to his home.

I don't know how it happened. It would be a victory if I had coerced Peeta into a place like this but here we were, inside of a dive bar still dressed in Garden Party Chic which was making it really difficult to play pool.

"Should I break?"

Peeta doesn't respond at first, he kept racking the balls as I, not so like a lady, chugged a Budweiser. I had a few glasses of champagne earlier so it was taking a while for the buzz to hit me; instead I just enjoyed the questionable music.

"Peeta?" I chalk my cue. "What will you do for me when I win? I'm thinking I'll bring out the handcuffs..." This gets his attention, just as I blow excess chalk from my cue as I begin humming Made in America by Toby Keith.

"And if I win, I'm going to tie you down to the bed until you beg for me to let you cum," he removes the rack and coolly walks around to the side of the table I'm at. "Besides, you don't have handcuffs," he bends over and effortlessly breaks, sinking a solid. His second shot, though, is not so lucky. "Your shot Belle."

I'm still gawking at him, but make quick work of not one but two stripes.

"I'm not going to go easy on you..." I take another sip and wait for him to go. The bar is definitely the local drinking hole and in our pretty white clothing, we stand out like a sore thumb. Nervously, I tug my skirt down a little and pull up the top of my dress, accomplishing nothing but keeping my hands busy.
I watch him sink another solid and move the eight ball to block a pocket where three easy shots of mine could be sunk. "You're an evil man Peter Mellark..." When I walk to take my shot, I run my fingers along his chest as I sit up on the table to shoot behind my back. I cross my legs to protect my underwear from view and arch my back. I bite my lip and try to line up my shot, tapping the cue ball, sinking the nine.

"And you're putting on a show..." he grumbles as I hop off the table backing up a little to bend over, my backside rubbing against his groin. Public displays of affection weren't my forte, but toying with Peeta was quickly becoming my specialty. "Katniss..." he scolds.

"Oh shut up Peeta, you're distracting me..." I bring my cue back and unfortunately miss.

We play like this - not so innocent brushes of the hand, hooded gazes and even stolen kisses until we're both down to the eight ball.

"This is so mine..." I tease, lining up my shot. It's easy. "Eight ball, corner pocket."

I bring back the cue and tap the ball. "Too hard..." I stick out my tongue and watch the eight ball sink into the pocket, followed by the cue. I had just lost on a technicality.

"Oh fuck me..." I grumble as Peeta wanders off. After I put our cues back, he hands me his coat.

"Tabs settled, let's go."

My jaw drops. He was serious! Somehow, I prologue my tying up and convince him to not wake up poor Abernathy and walk the half mile back to his house. Our fingers lace together as we walk, his eyes fixated on our target, mine on the twinkling of lightning bugs up in the leaves of the trees.

"It looks like stars..." I look up at my boyfriend and pull him into what looks like a small path cutting into the tree line. The sound of waves crashing echoes through the small patch of forest. For a town full of yuppies and fishermen, this spot is gorgeous under the light of a full moon.

We never do make it to the tying up part of Peeta's winnings. I shrug off the jacket and lay it down in a clearing surrounded by the twinkling fireflies as confident fingers slide down the zipper of my dress and I let the leather belt fall. When the white fabric is at my feet, the next thing to go is my bra.

"You have too many clothes on," I tease as I pop the buttons of his shirt torturously slow while he hurries to get his pants down.

It's beautiful, very hurried and completely without foreplay but as our sweaty bodies collide under the full moon and tiny green stars of fireflies searching for their own mate, I feel compelled to cry at the perfection of this moment. I hold in my tears though, not willing to ruin it.

We're chest to chest, tongues intertwining and wrestling for dominance. My nails scrape down his back. He supports his weight on his elbows, his free hands stroking my cheek as I feel my climax build. It's rapid, like a coil springing free. We've remained quiet until that point, our mouths muffling the moans. But soon my head jerks back and freely, for all of the Hamptons to hear I moan his name just as I fall apart at the seams.
First new chapter from me since my break-up with FF.net.

I hope my email list worked!

Today's song is Better Man by Pearl Jam

“No, I don’t care what you think you’re doing, but you’ll be out millions…”

I flip the page over in the book I’m reading. Though it was Sunday, Peeta had received a very troubling email and for the last two hours, he’s been going back and forth on the phone between Effie and someone else.

It goes quiet for only a second. Then, “Listen Snow, you were all for it last night. Why the change of heart?”

I close my book and move from the sitting room to the kitchen where Peeta was pacing.

“Oh, your new VP? And what did he say?”

I sit down at the breakfast bar and watch my boyfriend play chess with the world. It looks like he’s losing.

“Oh, he’s trying to sue me? For what?” Another pause. “Listen, Snow, you’re a smart man. That boy is nothing more than a greedy pissed off child who is sore that I’m dating his ex…”

Peeta chuckles, “Listen I’m heading back from my house out in the Hamptons. How about we do drinks tomorrow night and get this on paper… Say noon?”

Another laugh, “Yeah, it might have been…” He finally looks at me, “Listen, I have a very beautiful woman here. I’m going to let you go…”

He clicks his phone.

“You… you’re being sued?”

He just shrugs, “Won’t be the first time…” He closes the distance between us, his chest on my back as his arms wrap around me, “Won’t be the last. It won’t go anywhere. Though could be bad for PR…” He kisses the side of my head, “Though, if your ex is smart, he’ll just drop it…”

I bite my lip and look down at my lap, “Cato is suing you?”

Peeta doesn’t seem bothered by this at all as he busies himself with my hair, French braiding it.

“Apparently, I have some of the best lawyers in the country in my corner. So, it won’t get far, plus not while I have you…”

“What?” my voice is a small squeak.
“Katniss, this man used you as a punching bag. It most likely won’t make it to my attorneys, but if it did, even a statement from you would:“

“No!” I snap, interrupting him. “I can’t… I… I’ll support whatever you do… But no.”

He hugs me close to him, “Katniss…” I feel his lips on the top of my head and his breath through my hair soon after.

On the way home, I hold tightly onto Peeta. We drop all lawsuit and Cato talk like it was on fire.

--

I had been out of my last final for only five minutes before my phone began ringing. Johanna Mason.

“Oh what now…” I put the phone to my ear, “Hello?”

“You got a lot of nerve.” She wasn’t using her ‘angry’ voice, only her ‘What the hell are you thinking Katniss’ voice.

“Hi Johanna, how are you? How was your weekend?”

“Not as good as yours. But still, what the hell are you thinking sending your resume to and applying for a job at my paper?”

I stop on the busy street. A woman, child in tow nearly knocked me to the ground, so I move to lean against a building. “I didn’t hand my resume anywhere… Wait, what article did they send and what job?”

“Ugh, a column in our life section. Want to interview over cocktails tonight?”

“I work until nine, so yes. Will you be on the Upper East?”

“No, we’re going to Karma with Madge and Annie to plan our last supper.” Karma was a Hookah lounge that had some of the best cocktails and allowed cigarette smoking. Another plus was they’d put liquor in the water bowl of the hookah which doesn’t get you fully buzzed, but adds to it.

On the edge of Bowery and East Village, Karma is about as far away from the Upper East side as I can get without having to leave Manhattan… Bad for my commute, good for avoiding Peeta, who was once again upset at me for not wanting to step in with the whole lawsuit thing.

I slept at his place last night only because I had passed out at about nine on his floor in the child’s pose. Studying was hard work.

--

I was off model walk duty for the night. Instead, we’re sitting, watching a replay of ‘Fashion Police’. Well, Cinna is.

I was busying myself with picking out an outfit for tonight. Cinna’s office was my closet, apparently. “Are you sure you don’t mind? It’s going to smell like smoke…”

“Ah, Katniss, wait until you see Paris. You will understand why I don’t mind. Now, come sit!”

When I wasn’t getting my hair ripped out of my face, this job didn’t really feel like work. We drank wine, joked around, I pranced around in pretty clothes that made me feel like someone else. I was
“And now, the moment you all have been waiting for. We all spent a week trying to figure out who this girl is,” I watch the flat screen as Peeta helps me out of the limo. “She’s been the talk of our office, the girl who finally claimed the self-proclaimed eternal bachelor’s heart. Miss Katniss Everdeen.”

A man begins talking, “Now, normally I wouldn’t condone draping yourself in gold. I’ve seen Goldfinger, but it really works for her. This is a risky move, an unknown wearing an unknown designer.”

A woman starts speaking, “But, it’s working for her. I love the bottom, the light and the flashes shining off the gold, it looks like she’s on fire. Beautiful work out of an amazing designer who I hope to see more of.”

“Beautiful or not, she’s been the buzz of the office all weekend. Everyone wants to know... Who is the Girl on Fire?” I bite my lip and pull on the black jeans and soft yellow top I had picked out.

“Don’t get any ideas…” I slip my feet into my heels. “Lighting me on fire is a breach of contract. I’ll hire my boyfriend’s lawyers.”

Cinna chuckles while I fidget with the tight fitting top, adjusting the one shoulder over and over again until it laid right. I feel a hand on my ribcage, a thumb running up and down and Cinna nods. He’s checking my ribs. “Are you excited for Paris?”

“Yeah… I’ve never really left New York, another country… It’s a big step.”

All around me, my life was changing. Ever since the moment I bumped into Peeta at the party, nothing has been the same. Maybe nothing ever will.

“Peeta’s coming to make sure I don’t make a fool of myself or get lost in Paris or… have you ever seen Taken?”

Cinna shakes his head.

“Good, hopefully Peeta hasn’t either. I don’t need to get smothered or have a secret service squad following me.”

Cinna pulls his phone out of his pocket, “So I shouldn’t tell him about that movie?” I shake my head no.

“Ah, hello Mister Mellark, how are you?” He pauses. “Good, good, I’m wonderful, thank you for asking!” Another pause. “No, she hasn’t left yet… Oh.”

He presses the bottom of his phone to his neck, “He’s asking that you stop ignoring his calls, and have fun tonight,”

I hold out my hand for the phone and press it against my ear.

“Katniss…” he breathes. His voice so sad, almost lost. “Are you alright? I’ve been worried all day.”

“Peeta, I’m fine. I’m a big girl…” I murmur.

“Please don’t be mad at me… I just thought-“
“Stop, please. Begging for my forgiveness is something Cato did,” I regret the words the second they come out of my mouth. “Working through our issues, and talking is what we’re going to do…”

“Come over tonight…” he pleads.

“Peeta, you’ve seen me practically all week. I just need to sleep in my own bed tonight…” he sighs. “Maybe tomorrow,” Keyword being maybe. I was preparing to say goodbye to Annie’s single self, and that kind of scared the shit out of me.

When I get to Karma, my usual is waiting for me - three half-drunk women gossiping. Cinna had pulled my hair into a tight bun high on my head.

“Look what the cat dragged in!” I wasn’t even at the table for five seconds before paperwork was slapped down in front of me.

“Hi, Johanna… I’ll deal with this later. We’re counting down the last one hundred and fifty hours until Annie Cresta is no more…” Annie sips on her drink.

“Annie will always be here to roll her eyes at your antics. I’ll just be legally bound to one man for the rest of my life.”

On cue, Johanna groans.

“I saw you on E!” Madge starts. “That dress… How was the Met?”

“The food was amazing but everyone spoke French. I mean not the whole time, but the people I was around. I was too afraid to leave Peeta and Cinna. Plus, there were celebrities there and knowing me, I’d make an ass of myself.”

Everyone exchanged a look as I took a hit off the hookah. “Mango melon rum again?” I start flipping through the paperwork.

“It’s the best,” a waiter comes by with four shots.

“From the table over there,” I look up, half expecting to see Peeta, but it’s four well-dressed bachelors.

We each take a shot. “Cheers, to the future Annie Odair,” Johanna starts.

“And whatever Katniss and Peeta are up to!” I blush a little and roll my eyes at Madge.

“And Gale and Madge!” she just waves when Annie says this.

“And Johanna… Keep doing what you’re doing!”

We clink our shot glasses and the Jager and grenadine slid down my throat. “Should we be concerned that we were just given red-headed sluts?” Madge asks, going back to her beer as I lite up a cigarette.

“Well, we need to get a ginger in the group…”

“Wait.. Wait…” I look up. “A weekly column?”

Johanna shrugs, “I’d rather hear you talk about fun things, like the failing economy, how the Democrats and Republicans keep playing chicken with our lives, or how we’re really quickly
becoming second class citizens again… But they liked your piece on Mister Mellark, especially with your very public relationship…” I usually ignore all forms of pop culture. I wasn’t entirely sure how ‘public’ we were. “I mean look…” she pulls out another paper from her purse.

“Johanna, you didn’t bring work here…” Madge sighs.

“Sorry, some of us have full time jobs… Now. It wasn’t number one, but on Saturday, ‘Who is the girl on fire?’ was trending on twitter. To be fair, ‘What really turns me on’ and…” Her eyebrows raise, ‘Robot pick up lines’ were as well.”

She fans herself with the papers and takes a long hit off the hookah, “I hate the twenty first century some times.”

I snort and begin chugging my long island iced tea. “Johanna, I don’t want you to hand me a job…” I grumble.

“Well, I would say my people would talk to your people…” she shrugs. “Basically, they think a girl like you, writing a column about being from out of the city, learning how to well… Be a New Yorker…would be good.”

I nod and look between Annie and Madge.

Madge had already gotten into grad school, one of the benefits of being the Mayor’s daughter. They didn’t care about lack of experience; they saw her GPA and her last name and snatched her up.

Annie was living her dream actually, putting her art degree to work, organizing exhibits. She usually loved her work until her gallery wanted to run a ‘nude art’ exhibit. Annie, being the well-mannered and well behaved southern girl that she is, almost quit her job.

Johanna talked her out of it, well… she came to her apartment and told her to get the stick out of her ass, but it worked.

“I can’t write a column. There are better writers out there, with more exciting lives. I’d just complain about the tube being perpetually two minutes late. How I can’t smoke anywhere, and how I can’t get a refill…” I shake my booze free glass. “People don’t want to read that… Besides, it’s not fair, you’re one of my best friends.”

“Katniss, I’m going to give you some advice. It’s called networking. Take the job. You know what people would do for a job like this? You’ll have a desk at the office, but you don’t need to show up. This is 2011. Everything’s electronic!”

“When’s my first deadline?” I ask, folding up her papers.

“Well, Friday. Write something about graduating, and leaving college life behind… Finding your feet, or your introduction, but don’t sound like a snooty bitch.” She quickly downs the rest of her martini. The hookah was apparently getting harsher, meaning our tobacco was getting burned and old. Though, as my fourth cigarette butt gets stamped out in the ash tray, I’m barely noticing it.

When we go home, I spread out in the center of my bed and try to get comfortable. I toss, I turn, until I pick up my phone.

Wish you were here… I send to Peeta before squeezing my eyes shut, willing my mind to let me sleep.
About a half hour later, I give up and decide getting out of bed to get water is the best ‘get me to sleep’ plan. I keep my phone in my hand waiting for his response, which is probably the reason I couldn’t sleep. It’s one am. How could I think to text him? He’s been working all day; and he works in the morning…

The bell buzzes.

Madge’s soft snoring comes through her half opened door. I press the call button, “Do you have any idea what time it is?” I ask bitterly.

“About ten after one… You going to let me up?” My heart skips a beat and I throw the apartment door open, hurrying down the stairs. I slip on the last stair and end up on my butt before throwing the building door open.

“What are you-“ Two hands find the side of my face. Soft, warm lips meet mine and he pushes me into the building. The door slams shut and I wince, “Shhh!” I press my finger to my lips and lace my fingers with his, leading him upstairs and past Madge’s room like a teenager sneaking her boyfriend in.

I close my bedroom door, “Why are you here? You have work in the morning…” I look down at my feet, crossing my toes of my right foot over my left nervously.

“Your wish is my command, Belle. That and you seemed so… Sad on the phone earlier.” I hear his soft footsteps before he takes my face in his hands, shifting my gaze. His thumbs brush my cheeks. “And I wanted to apologize. It was… Immature of me to ask so much of you…” I look up into his eyes, so sad and stormy blue.

“I’m sorry I compared you to Cato…” he kisses my nose and I go back to lying down. Now aware that I’m only in a t-shirt and definitely flashed him as I slipped down the stairs.

“You’re blushing…” His jeans and t-shirt join my top and pants from my night out and he slips into bed with me.

“When I fell down the stairs, did you see anything?”

“Yeah…” he pulls me to him, my back against his chest. “You…” he kisses the back of my head, “Once again looking like a fool.”

I elbow him lightly, “Ass…”

--

When I woke up, I was too warm. Peeta’s arm was thrown over me, his leg in-between mine. “What time is it?” he yawns, somehow knowing I was awake.

I pull my phone off my face. Somehow, I slept with it on my pillow, pressed right up against my cheek. I press the center button.

“9:30…” I yawn. I tried to open my email but none of it made sense. “Did you fall asleep with your phone in my hand?”

“Maybe… Why?”

“Because I have no reason to have an email about quarterly reports from someone whose name I can’t pronounce…” I exit the application, not wanting to snoop. On his home screen, there we are.
Me about to shove a strawberry in my mouth, our cheeks pressed together as he snapped the picture on Sunday morning.

We look normal, not like the fashion forward, almost stiff couple from Friday.

“Wait, Peeta, it’s Tuesday and it’s almost ten…” Instead of jumping out of bed like I would if I had realized I was hours late for work, he takes his phone from my hand and tosses it to the floor before pulling me to him.

“I called them at seven, told them I’d be working from home today…”

I yawn and nod, “Must be nice…”

He snorts and goes for my sides, my weakness. The bottom of my ribcage, he squeezes it lightly and I flail. “You don’t have to go to work until two in the afternoon, where you try on sexy clothes and drink wine…” he tells me while I flail in the bed, nearly screaming.

“Peeta!” I gasp for air, he doesn’t give up. “I’m going to pee the bed!” I manage to wriggle from his grasp and run from the bedroom to the bathroom slipping again on the hardwood and slamming the door behind me. He’s after me, his footsteps heavy, Madge must already be gone for her last exams.

*Holy shit, I walk at graduation tomorrow!* I feel that familiar pang of guilt. I hadn’t even called my mother yet to tell her my new number, I was so wrapped up in my new life.

After I’m ‘presentable’ I open the bathroom door. “Well… Don’t you think you’re all sexy and cool, leaning up against the wall in your Calvin Klein boxers?” Only, my toothbrush was in my mouth already so not only did I spew on the ground, he couldn’t understand anything I said.

“Care to translate?” he asks as I spit into the sink and rinse my toothbrush, which he steals.

“I said…” I wipe my mouth clean and turn on the shower. “Don’t you think you’re all sexy and cool? Up against the wall…” I hook my thumbs in the waistband of his underwear and tug them down, “Well… Now you’re all naked in my bathroom.” I watch as he eyes me in the mirror while my t-shirt lands somewhere near the door. He wipes his mouth and turns around.

“You’re always getting me naked, Miss Everdeen.”

I take a step forward, not responding verbally. I can’t find words. Here’s this man, this so out of place man in what is now my home. The man who drove half way across town because I texted him saying that I wished he was with me. I rest my hand on his chest again.

“Katniss…?” His finger trails my cheek, gathering a tear. “You’re crying? Is everything ok?”

I nod and bite my lip, willing my tears back in my eyes. The words have barely even crossed my lips when his lips find mine. His arms wrap around me and he lifts me onto the counter, bottles and tubes getting pushed aside by my body and my arms as I brace myself.

“Why do I feel like you’re more surprised that I’m with you, not that I’m here?” His hands run from my shoulders, down my breasts, my stomach until he’s spread my legs. “You’re infuriating some times, Katniss…”

“Have you seen me?” he brings his index finger to my mouth and stops me from putting myself...
even more down by shoving his finger into my mouth.

“Suck.” I listen, and after a few seconds he pulls the finger away, only to bury it deep within me, moving it in a ‘come here’ motion. “Shhhh…” He silences me with his lips after I yelped one too many times for his liking. I feel myself nearing climax with each move of his finger, each rub of his palm against my clit.

Then it all stops. “Wha…” He chuckles at my confusion, my absolute sex-disorientation. “What did you… Why?”

The finger is back in my mouth. I don’t really know how I taste, there’s a bite to it but I can’t focus on that. There’s another sensation down there. I look down as he enters me torturously slow. I don’t have the patience for this. He just deprived me of an orgasm. I wrap my legs around his hips and grip onto the counter as I pull my legs to my center, forcing him in.

“Don’t play games with me, Peeta,” I snap.

He leans in and kisses me, “I would never…” He doesn’t thrust. So much for no games.

I can barely focus. Just move already. Please? Do I have to beg? He unfolds my legs from around him and I’m tilted back so the back of my head and most of my back rest against the mirror. The counter is a mess. The well-organized cosmetic products and brushes were strewn about the counter, some rolling to the floor or to the shower that’s still on.

I look down; try to see where our bodies meet, but his lips catch mine, distracting me. When I climax, my nails dig into the toned flesh of his back. He doesn’t seem to mind, actually jerking up a little in to my scratches.

When we finally get to the shower, the hot water is almost out. He washes my hair, I wash his back. My scratches draw blood. “I’m sorry…” I mumble as I trace them with the pads of my finger. Only one spot or two oozes blood but it’s still enough to send me into a guilt spiral… For about a second. Peter ‘Peeta’ Mellark likes to appear perfect, from what I could gather. And here I was distorting perfection.

I hug him around his middle, my breasts pressing into his back. The water beats down on our heads, growing colder ever second. “Don’t worry, Belle, nothing that is worth having comes without some sacrifice or pain…” I smile.

Perfection…
Hey Pretty

Chapter Notes

There are two versions to Hey Pretty by Poe, the one I'm liking for this chapter is the Drive By Mix that can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LgSwRIZmBag

The other, original version can be heard here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hvkc2yd1YSU&feature=results_video&playnext=1&list=PL3D8B31A56ADEF486

“Are you still not coming to my graduation?”

Most people ask their mothers if they are coming to graduation. My mother, who is now living in Key West with her, I think third husband, I knew had no intention of showing up.

“You could probably make it still if you catch a plane. Peeta’s driver could come get you and…” She tells me it’s not possible. “But…” I sigh. “Fine. I figured. I’ll call you… Whenever.”

I didn’t want to tell her about everything that was changing in my life. I didn’t want to tell her about Peeta, about my new job(s), any of it. I was done with her.

“Sure… Katniss. Take care, and we’re sorry about missing your graduation…”

“No you’re not, don’t lie to me again mom, you barely made it to my high school graduation.” I hear the buzzer. “Listen, I have to go. Peeta’s here…” I go to hang up but she catches my attention again.

“Wait… Who’s Peeta?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Google Peter Mellark. I have to go. Don’t party too hard; remember you’re skipping your oldest daughter’s graduation.”

I hit the end button on my screen and then slide my phone into my pocket and hurry to the door as quickly as my heels can take me. The door buzzes again and I hit the call button, “You have a key…”

I head downstairs and, without slipping, open the door.

“Surprise!” My heart stops. I nearly faint.

“Mom!” She pulls me into a tight hug. I haven’t seen this woman in… well, years. “But… How?”

A car door closes a few doors down and I see Peeta talking to my stepfather. “Well… a few days ago we got a call and well…”

I cross my arms as Peeta and I think maybe Ray? Yeah… That was number three’s name, walk up to my apartment. Ray Donald - he wasn’t a dick like number two but he was no number one, my biological father.

“Emergency at the office huh?” I ask Peeta.
He loops his arm around my waist and kisses the corner of my mouth. “It’s one of my graduation presents to you, Belle…”

His forehead rests against mine when I hear it, the shouting and general nastiness of my step-siblings - Leslie who is eighteen and from my mother’s second marriage and Parker, Ray’s boy.

“No! I’m telling you there is no Spiderman…” The fourteen year old’s face fell.

Ray sighs, “It’s been like this since we got on the plane…”

I smirk, “Then maybe we should avoid Times Square. There’s a guy that’s been walking around dressed like Spiderman since they decided to reboot the franchise.”

Peeta squeezed me a little and kissed the top of my head. I knew I’d be wearing a mortarboard for the next few hours so I decided to keep my hair in a braid, something his pesky mouth couldn’t ruin.

“Though, from what I’ve heard, you can see things like that every day,” Ray says.

I smirk. One of my first weeks in New York, I saw Alice from Alice in Wonderland and a man with backless chaps and his dom. Eighteen year old me was kind of scared. Twenty one year old me was so desensitized to the weirdness that is New York that if I saw the same thing, I’d probably ask for the Dom’s whip.

“Let’s not stand on the stoop, come inside and have a drink. I don’t have to leave for an hour to get lined up.”

I suddenly feel strange, tugging at my almost too short dress. I was planning on, after the ceremony, finding Madge who would be graduating with the rest of the Behavioral Science majors in another part of the city. We’d double for cocktails and dinner before finding Annie and Johanna for bachelorette party part one. My night would naturally end in Peeta’s bed where I’d sleep off whatever hangover I could before going out again for the real party.

“Is this your room?” My mother’s voice breaks me from my trance.

“Yeah… Madge’s is in the front.” My mother goes for the door. “No!” I rush from the kitchen, stumbling on my heels before pulling the door closed. “It’s such a mess in there; I’ve been staying with Peeta and my laundry… Just everywhere!”

I hope she believes me. The real reason she can’t go in is because attached to the slats in the headboard and footboard are handcuffs.

“You sure you don’t want to come out with us? We passed our finals, you have a new job. Come on! We’re celebrating!” Madge and Gale had been trying to get me to leave for about a half hour but I was in sweat shorts I stole from Peeta and a camisole.

“I’m just going to sleep. Maybe try and make my first deadline? You kids have fun. Have her back by midnight!”

Gale waved me off and after the door closed, I was left watching re-runs of Sex and the City and blowing through a pint of Phish Food. Cinna had given me the whole week off but told me it was PTO, though he wasn’t docking it from my sick days. Apparently, leaving the country with him covered it.

About a half hour later, I heard the door opening.
“That was fast…” I don’t look up. Madge forgets her phone or her wallet or something constantly.

I jump when I hear his chuckle, “Oh, my dear sweet Belle… There is nothing that’s going to be fast about tonight…” I didn’t hear him approach but a silk band covered my eyes. “If at any point you get uncomfortable just tell me and I’ll stop,” he told me as he tied the blindfold tightly.

“What are you doing?” he takes my ice cream and spoon from me. A few seconds later I hear the freezer open and the spoon hit the sink but I’m too afraid to move. There’s a coffee table right in front of me and I’m sure I can’t navigate around the L shaped couch without tripping. Instead, I decide to relax and let Peeta take over.

“Remember in the Hamptons? When I said ‘if I win this game of pool I’m going to handcuff you?’” I gulp. “Well…” I hear something jingle. “You’re bed is perfect. Hold out your hands.” I do so and expect to be cuffed but instead his fingers wrap around my wrists and help me to my feet.

He guides me to my room and closes the door, “Consider this… Graduation present number one…” One? What are the rest?

“Actually…” I listen to the sound of my pillows hitting the ground and the sheets being drawn back. “I said something about the handcuffs you said…” It hits me. He told me he’d tie me down and make me beg for release. “Shit…”

I don’t hear his approach, but soon feel his warm fingers under the hem of my cami and lift it over my head. “Do you ever wear a bra at home?” he asks once the garment is off my head. I shake my head no. “Good, I like it,” he kisses me forcefully, his tongue sneaking into my mouth to run along my teeth before withdrawing.

“Take off your shorts and touch yourself for me,” I hear him back away and I just stand there. “Belle… If you don’t I may have to spank you…” my breath catches in my throat at the sound of his voice. I know he’s not kidding so I start at my collar bones and slowly rub my palms along the rise of my breast. “Stop…” he purrs. “Enjoy yourself a little… Feel how beautiful you are…”

I feel the blush creep to my cheeks as I give my breasts a light squeeze before moving the tips of my fingers to my erect nipples. I moan; my area already oversensitive. I move my hands down my soft, but still flat, stomach and wiggle out of my shorts. I had taken a shower not even an hour before and didn’t even bother to put on underwear.

Peeta’s moan at my nude form told me he didn’t mind. “Come here…” he takes my hands and guides me to the bed. All I can hear is the sound of my breathing and rustling sheets, all I can smell is his cologne and soap. I lay down on the bed. “Spread your legs.” Nervously, I do so and a second later I hear the jingling of handcuffs. “Don’t be nervous, if at any point you’re uncomfortable we’ll stop.”

“I’m not nervous…” He spreads my legs almost as far as they’ll go before the cold metal hits my ankle, covering my heated body in gooseflesh.

“Touch yourself.” My hands go up to my breasts but he grabs one and brings it down to my groin where I can almost smell my arousal.

“But you’re… I- um…”

“How do you expect to write a column if you can’t even speak? Belle, touch yourself.” I bite my lip but comply. I’m not foreign to this, but exploring down there is like if I wanted to find a place in the Upper West Side that I’ve only been to once or twice. Nervously, I sneak my index finger inside me,
trying to make the ‘Come here’ motion Peeta does but my fingers are too short to hit the right spot. I bring my moist finger out to rub at my swollen clit. Just a little pressure and I’m whimpering, the noise coming from me making it impossible to hear what Peeta’s doing.

“Don’t be so scared…” He’s at my head and with my free hand I reach out to touch him, my hand brushing against his erection, something I actually know what I’m doing with.

“May I?” I ask.

“No, but…” He grabs my wrists and cuffs them above my head so I can’t touch them. “I told you I was going to make you beg…” I feel the bed move and he’s between my legs.

“I’ll beg now…”

He chuckles, his breath hitting the heat between my legs and I squirm. “No… I’ll know when you’re really begging…” He kisses the bundle of nerves and my hips buck against my will, the whole area so sensitive.

He seems so cocky, so sure of himself. It’s now my goal to not beg, to make him give in. I can do it…

He laps at the moisture, along my folds until sucking gently on my nub, I cry out. I can’t do it… his finger slips into me and he makes the ‘come here’ motion and I almost fall apart, just a little more…

Between the licks and pumping of his finger I’m just about there. Then, he withdraws and sits up. “What the fuck!” I groan.

“Are you ready to beg?” I bite my lip. “I can do this all night…” I say nothing and he goes back after a minute or so, when my mind is distraction and my building orgasm has gone back into hiding.

Four more times he does this to me, brings me right to the edge then stops, each time getting more and more intense. “Please...” I break. “Fuck... Please just let me...” I whimper.

“Let you what?” I scowl, wishing I can see the happy look on his face, him knowing he’s won this round.

“Cum...” I whisper.

He strokes my cheek with his thumb, I can smell my arousal on his fingers. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you...”

“Please let me cum!” I nearly shout, blushing when I realize we have neighbors.

“As you wish...” the bed shifts again, and my ankles are freed. Peeta positions my legs so they’re over his shoulder and crashes into me.

I don’t stifle my moan, fuck the neighbors! I want to touch him, to run my fingers along the contours of his chest and abdomen but they’re tied above my head. His finger goes to work my clit. Within a minute, I’m screaming his name loud enough that he puts his hand over my mouth. He thrusts through my first and second climax and goes until I can barely think. In between each one, his hand leaves my clit, giving it a break before he continues the assault.

I know he’s close when his thrusts become more and more hasty. Three very deep thrusts that
move me across the bed and he lets my legs fall from his shoulders. The silk is moved from my face and he smiles shyly at me. “I can’t believe you begged…” he whispers, un-cuffing my hands.

I only nod and mutter something incoherently, my mind still in a haze. He lies down next to me and rests his head on my chest. I fade out and when I wake up he’s dressed and on his laptop laughing about how he can sex me into a coma.

I blush at the memory and my mother gives up, “So what do you do for a living Peter?” Much better…let Peeta talk about himself. Let them feel the shock that a multi-millionaire is dating me.

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I scrunch up the fake diploma in my hand. My real one will come in the mail in a few weeks so as I listen to the rest of my classmates get theirs, I zone out.

“I present to you New York University School of Arts class of 2011. Graduates you may now move your tassel from right to left.”

All at once, everyone takes off their hat and throws it in the air. I look up and watch them fall, the little purple squares raining from the sky. I reach out and catch the one I assume is mine and push through the crowd to find my mother, her replacement family and my boyfriend.

Where are you? Mom and dad want to come and I guess meet Gale… Since your family is in town want to make an awkward night of it?

“Peeta, the Undersee’s want to torture Gale and Madge…”

“We already have reservations for a private room at Locanda Verde,” I stop and grab his arm. “My third graduation present.” I narrow my eyes and unzip my robe, shoving it at him.

“How many do I have coming to me?” We step into the May heat. “Also, seriously you need to stop wearing your ‘I’m the ruler of the world’ costume,” I tug at his suit coat. “If you pass out in August from heat stroke I’d probably panic and start screaming in your ear.” I look around for my family, they said they’d be outside. I pull my pack out of the pocket of my dress and Peeta makes his usual face.

“Listen, I want to spoil you. If I could pluck the moon from the night sky so I could give it to you… I would.”

I smirk and shield my cigarette from the wind. “Why not the sun?” I ask, while trying to light. He gives me a confused look, “The sun is a miasma if incandescent plasma.” I nearly choke.

“They Might Be Giants?” I ask. He nods. “Nice…” I hook my arm in his seeing my family in the crowd. My mom hugs me tightly, Ray hugs me awkwardly. The sun is still pretty high in the sky, it’s only about five thirty.

“Haymitch will drive the four of you to the restaurant…” my phone buzzes again and I let Peeta deal with the game plan for the night. I open the message from Madge, a picture of her with her hand in the cuffs still attatched to my bed. Get here. Now. Madge is stuck.

“Oh my fuck!” I gasp, grabbing Peeta by his arm. “

My place, now. Madge is… Ugh!” My family gives me an awkward look and Peeta looks at my phone. He just nods.
“You’d think at twenty-one she’d learn to not go in your closet…” he grumbles. “We won’t be long, it’s on the way.” I rush away from Peeta.

“Taxi!” immediately a yellow cab pulls up. I can’t even look at Peeta, I’m not angry, just abso-fucking-lutely embarrassed. I rush upstairs and hear Gale and Madge laughing.

“What the hell do you two do in here?” she asks as Peeta pulls the small silver key out of his wallet.

“Sorry, one of us lost a bet.” I cover my face with my hands.

“Peeta!” I whine as Gale nudges me with his elbows. “But what were you doing in my room?”

“I was looking for your black flats, you know the ones that you broke in to the point where their slippers?” I make an ‘O’ with my mouth and nod. “And I saw this and I thought they were the fake ones… God damnit you guys…”

I’m glad that the awkwardness disappears as soon as we’re at Locanda Verde. We’re lead through the quaint Italian restaurant to a back room meant for larger parties. There’s a full bar (which I need) and a long table.

“Congratulations!” Annie squeals running from her fiancé. She pulls Madge and I into a bone crushing hug.

“Thanks… Now get me a booze…”

Dinner is surprisingly tame considering Johanna is here, and on her third drink. My family seems so out of place here, though everyone engages in conversation with them. I have to say I’m glad since I don’t really have much to tell them.

“So… Tonight?” Johanna asks. “We’re clubbing. Tomorrow?”

“No strippers!” Finnick points his fork in her direction.

Johanna and I just look at each other. The truth of the matter was Annie Cresta was getting a lap dance tomorrow night. “Fine, then the lap dance is mine!” I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Johanna Mason… The… The god damned mayor! Right there!” Annie scolds. “And you can have it… I’ll just get one out of Finnick Friday night.”

“That’s not all you’ll get,” he winks.

“You should have seen what we found back at the apartment… Katniss and Peter…” Madge covers Gale’s hand with her mouth.

“Gale Hawthorne shut up… Now!” she hisses under her breath.

Thank you. I mouth she gives me a knowing nod. My sex life is between me and my partner.

Johanna scrunches her face, “Page six…” is all she needs to say, I cross my eyes and stick my tongue out at her. “Ooo… Cover!” everyone chuckles, though we’re a diverse group it almost seems normal. “Leslie, are you eighteen?” my step-sister nods. I want to tell Johanna to stop, to not invite her out. Leslie and I do not get along, “Good, you’re coming clubbing with us.”

“Good!” Ray starts. “She’s been complaining about a wanting to see a good time in New York. Don’t let her out of your sight like Disney World,” when we were younger I told Ray and Mom I
was going to take Leslie to see Belle in Epcot, then ditched her somewhere near Norway.

I sink into my chair as everyone’s eyes fall on me. “I said I was sorry…” I grumble, downing my drink quickly.

We walk from the restaurant to Peeta’s where Prim and Rue wait to join us, “That outfit is not acceptable!” Rue takes my sister’s arm and pulls her away.

“Definitely…” Leslie’s eyes widen.

“Just trust them…” Johanna, Madge, and Annie flop down on the couch like it’s their home.

“So do you have handcuffs attached to your bed too?” Madge blurs out. We couldn’t ditch the men and I heard Finnick first chuckle, then burst out laughing.

My cheeks grow hot and I hurry to Peeta’s room, closing the door behind me. I hurry into his closet and pull a few ties off the hanger covered in them, five and all, and I shove them into the bedside table.

I’d have my revenge…

Leslie tugs at the aqua sequin dress Prim and Rue have her in as the bouncer unhooks the velvet rope for us. Cameras catch Peeta and I walking hand in hand and he pulls me to him. “I’m sorry…” he whispers in my ear, kissing my temple.

I can feel the bass rattle my bones as we enter M1-5. “I can’t believe they’re playing Ke$ha!” Madge yells in my ear taking my hands, “Dance with me, you’re still the best dance partner in NYC!”

“You two can Waltz with the best of them…” Gale grumbles. There were two ways to dance in a club. The girl dances around the guy while he drinks his drink, or you pull him out of his shell. Prim and Rue had no problem getting Leslie out of her’s, and somewhere between my hundredth grind against Peeta he was out of his.

“If you keep doing that I’m taking you to the bathroom…” he tells me.

I turn to face him arching my back so my body presses against his, groin first then stomach and finally breasts, “You take me to the bathroom, and I’ll never let you cum.”

I kiss his open mouth and go to where Johanna and Madge are dancing with the underaged girls just as LMFAO’s Party Rock Anthem comes on.

I don’t know the name of the next song, but when Annie comes back her hair is a mess. “You fucking slut!” Johanna laughs.

“Oh! Like you haven’t done it before!” there’s two ways to dance single in a club. With or without drink. With drink usually one arm ends up in the air, probably to call over someone to re-booze you since it takes forever to get a drink. Madge hands me her tall glass of whatever and I down it, handing her the empty.

“Well… Not here!” I close my eyes and let the bass run through me. I feel hands on my waist and lean my back into the body, but I don’t fit as nicely in it.

My eyes shoot open and I spin around, “No thank you,” I tell the man politely. “I’m here with my boyfriend!”
“Then why isn’t he dancing with a fine thing like you?” he leans in and plants a kiss on my gaping mouth. He tastes like old alcohol and faintly like vomit, but I don’t have time to think about that, as he’s pulled from me.

“Katniss! Are you ok?” Peeta asks, his fist full of the man’s collar.

“Your boyfriend?” he asks, I just nod. “Your girlfriend’s a slut man, she came onto—“ he doesn’t finish, Peeta did something that shut him up.

“I don’t take kindly to the word slut. It’s vile and misogynistic, and really pisses me off after I watch you force yourself on my girlfriend. Now you’ll apologize to her and get as far away from us as possible.”

He rolls his eyes, “Sorry…” he grumbles and Peeta lets him go, pulling me to him.

“Are you ok?” I nod just as No Stress by Laurent Wolf comes on. “I love this song…” I smile into his chest and take his hands, trying to push away the skeevie feeling and let the music take over again.

“This should be your anthem!” he smiles and rolls his eyes.

“If I text you to tell you to ‘Get your sexy body home’ what would you say?” I lift up his arms and spin on my heels, now facing our stunned friends. He pulls me to him.

“I’m not your booty call, Mister Mellark!”

“Yeah… I guess… You’re still one hell of a lay!” I roll my eyes.

“Ass…”

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I close the door behind Peeta and I. We’re both hazy from alcohol and I wobble on my heels as we both strip, but I’m determined to keep them on. I nearly fall over and decide it’s in my best interests to ditch them.

“Lay down on the bed,” I tell my now naked boyfriend. “It’s revenge time!” I spank him, trying to channel my inner Johanna. I’d need her tonight.

He looks confused but lays on his side. “No, Mr. Mellark, in the center…” I open the drawer and pull out the five ties.

“Katniss…” he cautions.

“If you keep talking, you’re never going to cum,” I tell him cooly as I straddle him. “But I think you’ve seen enough,” I lean down and kiss him before blindfolding him. “Don’t make me gag you, I’ll use your socks from today.”

He groans as I tie his hands up, then his legs, “This is completely unfair, I won at pool…”

“And you left your handcuffs in my bedroom attached to my bed and embarrassed me, and for that you’ll be punished…”

Even I doubted myself, though I’m not sure I’ve ever felt Peeta get this hard. I sit on his chest again and lean down to whisper in his ear, “I’m going to make you, Mister Mellark, beg…”
He smirks and I grab his cheeks. “Stop that,” I scold before reaching back to grasp him. He gasps. “You like this?” I ask giving him only one stroke. He squirms and my confidence is boosted.

“Oh course, miss Everdeen…” I get off him and let go, earning a disgruntled grunt before I kiss the tip ever so lightly before taking him in my mouth inch by inch. His moans are music to my ears, the sound of my name blended perfectly with his pleasure. I use my hand to work the length that doesn’t fit in my mouth, knowing the effect this has on him. I get him to the edge fast but pull away. His hands are balled up into fists. “Fuck… I need you…” he grumbles.

“What until you beg…” I purr, moving to straddle him. I decide it would be more evil if I pull off the blindfold, letting him watch as I rub the tip of his shaft against my wet folds.

“Belle, if you want me to last at all you’ll stop this game!” he hisses, frusturated that I won’t give him release. I stick the tip in and his whole body relaxes some before I withdraw.

“Not until you beg… Beg for it!” I kiss him quickly. “Beg for me to fuck you…” I don’t know where this is coming from, most likely the alcohol.

He narrows his eyes. This is way out of both our comfort zones. “Belle, for fucks sake. If you don’t-“ I grab his cheeks.

“If you don’t learn some manners I’ll go sleep on the couch!” I threaten before kissing him again.

“Beg. Me!” he moans. “Please… please Katniss. I need you, I need you so bad just thinking about how close you are to me right now… I want to throw you onto the bed and fuck you so hard I push you half way up the headboard.” I blush. “Please… Just let me feel you…”

I, Katniss Everdeen, have just made one of the richest men in New York City beg for sex. I cheer inside as I untie first his legs then his hands and he’s on me, my legs over his shoulders. He crashes into me and I feel my back slide against the soft sheets. My torture means he doesn’t have it in him to last until I can climax.

“Did you…” I shake my head no and he props two pillows against the headboard and sits against one, patting the space between him. I crawl between his legs and press my back against his sweaty chest, watching as he spreads my legs before reaching into the bedside table. I hear it close then he leans back again and I adjust myself.

His hands travel from my knees to the apex of my thighs before one finger sinks in me. When he pulls it out he puts it in my mouth just as I hear a buzzing start.

“This is brand new, it was going to be graduation present number… I think we’re up to four?” I lick his finger clean. “What does it taste like?” he asks idly, rubbing the small vibrator in the same path as his hands before.

“Us…” I whisper right before he covers my mouth and presses the device against my clit. I’m confused at first then it hits me and I nearly scream. It’s almost too intense but oh so good.
My body tries to squirm away but he holds me in place as very quickly my orgasm hits me and I scream into his hand. I expect the device to leave as soon as I’m writhing against him, but he holds it there through my climax and to the point where my orgasm sends my mind far far away.

When he finally lets me go I flop down next to him as if my body was made of Jell-O.

“Have I sexed you into a coma again?” he asks casually. I just nod and let my fatigue take over while he wraps his sweaty arms around me.
Miss You Being Gone

Chapter Notes

The song for this chapter is Miss You Being Gone by the Band Perry.

Wish I would have noticed sooner
All that crazy in your eyes
Do you practice in the mirror
On that tempting crooked smile

Like that serpent in the garden
You came crawling back to me
Twice I ate that poisoned apple
Made me sick of being evil

I'll admit that I was wrong
You said I miss you
Oh yes I do
Hunny I miss you being gone.

As always, thank you Apecanin for betaing, even while on your epic vacation!

“Why did you buy me a vibrator?” I ask while getting ready.

Apparently, we’re having breakfast with my family. I had no idea how we got roped into this. Apparently Peeta had decided this while I was minding my own damned business. The question rolled off my tongue naturally, though that particular string of words was foreign to me.

“You know how NYU has a campus in Abu Dhabi?” he asks. I nod, watching him pull on a very very tight black t-shirt. “Well one of the reasons it’s there is through donations from myself and my parents…and I think one of my brothers, though that doesn’t matter. There’s a benefit, and meetings, and boring shit.” I sit down on the bed and tie my yellow halter top. “I would like to take you, but the whole week is just going to be meetings and I don’t want to bore you…”

I smirk. “So you think I can’t go a week without sex?”

He’s in front of me, one hand on my shoulder. He pushes me back lightly into the soft bed. “Whenever we’re together you hardly go five hours without sex. I’m not sure we’ve gone a day without seeing each other…” He slips his hand up my thighs and kisses me lightly. “I’m just making sure you’re happy…”
And like that he gets up, leaving me shocked.

“That wasn’t fair!”

He smirks, “My point exactly Miss Everdeen…”

“At least you’re done with gifts…” I slip my converse back on. He just smirks. “You’re done with gifts… Right?”

“I have… One or two more.”

My smile falls from my face. “Peter Mellark, what am I going to do for your birthday, or Christmas?”

His face lights up, “That’s so cute, you’re planning ahead! But for both those occasions you’ll wear whatever lingerie I buy for you and let me worship every inch of you.”

I just roll my eyes, “So what are my other gifts?”

He thinks for a second. “Fine, I can tell you about one, but only one… Actually…” He opens his sock drawer and pulls out a small wrapped box.

I shake it lightly when he places it in the palm of my hand, before tearing into the paper. “Keys?”

“One to the garage, and one to the house in the Hamptons, whenever you want. Even if I’m not there…”

“Wild parties?” I spin the key ring around my finger.

“Whatever you want.” He takes my hands and pulls me off the bed, our lips brushing for only a brief second. “Now, I can’t give you your other gifts yet. You still have to pick them out. One being a vacation, where ever you want.”
“Where ever I want?” He just nods when I ask. “Ok… Antarctica.”

“I should get this in writing. Not Antarctica, anywhere where there is civil unrest, or an exorbitant amount of children.”

“Not Antarctica…”

He rolls his eyes and leads me to the elevator. It’s barely eight. Why am I up before the sun is high in the sky?

“Haymitch isn’t driving us?”

“He’s out of town something with his kid. And by out of town, I mean Brooklyn.”

I cringe. I never thought I would be able to say this, but I was definitely a Manhattan girl. “We should take your motorcycle.”

“Don’t you want something with air conditioning?” he asks while heading over to a locker where the helmets are. I follow him and when he opens the door, I snake my arms around his waist and press my body to him.

“Nah, this is better.” I bury my face in his back and take in his scent.

He groans, “Maybe I should send you out to the Hamptons while I’m gone. Then I know you won’t get into trouble…”

I squeeze him. “I’ll find trouble no matter where I go. Also, you’re not my keeper.”

I let go of him and take the smaller black helmet from him. Instead of the one from our first ride, this one has a black visor.
The sun is hot on my back, but I don’t mind. I just wrap my arms around Peeta’s waist, my groin pressed into his backside while we ride through the already busy streets. People are going to and from work, though the streets never really clear the closer you get to Times Square. “Hold on!” I hear him caution right before he cuts up between two lanes of traffic.

It’s only my mother and stepfather at breakfast with us. The kids were unable to pull themselves out of bed. I understand. I would still be in Peeta’s bed with the sheets pulled up to my neck if I wasn’t ripped from it.

“So what are your plans tonight?” I pick apart a piece of melon, ripping the slightly under ripe flesh from the rind.

“Remember the short brunette and the loud ginger kid?”

“Finnick isn’t ginger…” Peeta grumbles.

“Yeah, whatever. Well, they’re getting married so after the rehearsal dinner we’re going to get Annie really really really drunk, and take her to a strip club, and a few other things I can’t share because Peeta’s here and he’s going to Finnick’s bachelor party. You know, sworn to secrecy?”

Ray choked a little on his coffee, “Isn’t that what the groom is supposed to do?”

I shrug.

“So how did you two meet?” my mother asks just as I shove a large chunk of omelet.

I look over to Peeta, his face alight. “You could say we just kind of ran into each other at a party. Well, she kind of plowed me down.”

My mother’s face goes from curious to appalled in a fraction of a second.

“Oh I did not,” I say. He nudges me a little. “Ok, fine, but you definitely stood in my way. I had to get across the room and the fastest way was through you…”
He grins, “Maybe I did stand in your way. How else was I going to get the attention of the belle of the ball?”

I roll my eyes, “Your puns are so not funny…”

He goes to defend himself but his phone starts ringing. “Sorry, it’s Effie…” He excuses himself and my mother is on me.

“Katniss, what do you think you’re doing?”

I chew my breakfast methodically, “Well… Right now eating breakfast.”

“No, not that! With him!”

I narrow my eyes, “What about him?”

“He’s almost ten years older than you!” Ray remains characteristically silent through the exchange.

“So?” I stab at my food trying to let my posture.

“Is it about the money?” My skin grows cold. How could my own mother think that? I sit silently and let her talk.

“What happens when in a year or so he wants children? Clearly you’re not even close to ready for that, with you going out to clubs every night, and to strip clubs. Have you even considered how that makes him feel that his girlfriend is going off to a strip club?”

“I’m not going to screw one of them… Listen, it’s my friend’s bachelorette party, and I’m going to make it rain.”
Breakfast was slightly awkward at that point. The rest of the day got better, despite the cameras that seemed to find us no matter where we went. Did the whole world honestly think I was a gold digger? Seriously, he’s only twenty-nine. If I was going to dig for gold, it would be with someone nice and old. I shake my head, trying to get rid of those thoughts. I have a much more pressing matter to deal with.

My dress for Annie’s wedding burned up with all my other clothes. She and Finnick weren’t having a bridal party. Instead, she wanted Johanna, Madge and I to wear black.

Who the fuck wears black to a wedding? Then I realized, we were having a wedding and a funeral. Well, a metaphorical funeral. Finnick was lucky she kind of kept him from us until now. One; we’re judgmental bitches, and two; the four of us are certifiably insane when together. Alone we can be dealt with quietly, just hand us something with booze.

“Does Cinna have anything you can wear?”

I shake my head, “I already asked. The black dress he has, he’s having someone wear on the runway in France. Also, it’s in France so I couldn’t even beg for it…”

“You don’t need to be here, you know right?” I remind Peeta as we enter our third boutique on Maddison Ave. “Seriously, though…” I kind of wanted him to leave so he didn’t try and buy something for me.

“Are you trying to get rid of me? I’m sorry, but how else are you supposed to pick out a dress? Usually women go in herds. Should I tell you how nice your backside looks in them?” I blush and occupy myself with the silk skirt of a black dress. It would be tight on me, mid-thigh and a high neckline.

His phone rings. “Ugh, one minute…”

The saleswoman eyes me apprehensively. I guess a halter top and duct-tape converse is enough to get the stink-eye. “Can I help you?” she asks in a tone that translates to ‘get the fuck out of my store’.

“I need a dress for a wedding.” I don’t even look at her. After my check from Cinna and what little savings I had, I’m good for the dress. Cinna saw to it that I was paid for several eight hour shifts. I nearly died when I saw my check.
“Black is a little… *drab* for a wedding don’t you think?”

I shrug and flip the tag over. “The bride said to wear black, and I’m not going to make Annie Cresta turn into a bridezilla because I wore the wrong color.”

I hear Peeta talking quietly on his phone. He’s been out of the office because of me far too much and after this, he had to head back unfortunately with me in tow. For the dress adventure, we had swapped out the Ducati for Peeta’s other favorite plaything (besides me): a black Bentley convertible I mistook for a Mercedes but was corrected almost immediately.

He comes over almost immediately. “Any luck, Belle?” He asks, kissing my temple.

“Not sure…” I pull the dress off the rack as the saleswoman, thanks to Peeta’s presence, leaves us alone. “Is this appropriate?” I ask. “It’s black tie… But…”

“Well… *I* like it.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re supposed to talk me out of it. Tell me it won’t make my butt look awesome, or something.”

His eyes light up, “Your ass would look *amazing* in that dress.” Worst. Boyfriend. Ever. Never taking this one shopping again. “Can she try this on?”

The snooty saleswoman leads us to a fitting room, large enough for both of us. The bell rings again and she excuses herself. Peeta follows me into the large fitting room.

“Seriously? Are we trying bra’s on togeth-“ His lips are on mine, fierce and hungry. Without hesitation, he locks the fitting room and goes for the button at the top of my jean shorts. “What are you-“ His lips trail from my jaw to my ear, and finally to my neck where he bites lightly.

“Be quiet. I’ll stuff one of your socks in your mouth if you keep talking.”
The shorts fall to the ground and I step out of them. Lightly, one finger traces along my underwear until he rips the thin string at my hip. Over the music, I can hear the saleswoman helping someone. Her tone is friendlier with that woman. They laugh. We don’t have long.

“Hold your hands together, insides of your wrists touching.” He backs away and I do so, watching as he binds my wrists together with the now ruined thong. He positions me. When he’s satisfied, I can’t use my hands, with my arms bent above my hands, my wrists on one of the wrought iron hooks in the dressing room. I fidget a little as he goes for his own pants.

So this is the game we were playing. Peeta brings the leather ottoman closer so I can prop my leg up. “So now that you have me where you want me, what are you going to do?”

He stares at me for just long enough I want to cover myself, hide the dampness between my legs. I struggled against the binding on my hands as his finger ran up and down my thigh. "I thought we had to hurry..." I grumble. It’s not that I wanted to stop, but I didn't want to add 'getting caught fucking in a dressing room’ to my list of firsts. Slowly, so damn slowly, he rubs himself between my legs.

I know when it’s coming because he covers my mouth with his hand. It takes us a few times to get the rhythm just right so we’re not making noise and actually doing something. “I’m going to have to finish you off later…” he whispers in my ear. I just nod. His large hand is still covering my mouth. “Maybe if you’re good I’ll give you a treat at the office…”

He buries his face in the crook of my neck, teeth sinking in to stifle his moan. He helps free my arms and stuffs the ruined thong in his pocket before helping me into the dress. How convenient, it fits perfectly. It hides the budding hickey on my neck, and is in my price range.

“Here, hold this; I’m going to get dressed.” I hand the garment to Peeta and he makes his way out of the fitting room while I pull on my uncomfortable jean shorts and halter top. No use hiding the bite marks.

I examine the forming bruise in the mirror. “I feel like I’m in junior high…” I grumble, straightening my top out one more time before leaving.

Peeta has a bag in his hand.

“Are you kidding me?” I whine. “Ugh, never mind; let’s go so you can continue to rule the world.”
I’m barely out the door before lighting up. Was I allowed to buy myself anything?

Peeta’s important meeting that he had to come in for was between Snow and Cato about their merger. While he busied himself with that I sat in the reception area trying to figure out what to write about. My deadline was tomorrow and I was drawing a blank.

Instead I call Johanna. “So, did you get the goods?”

“Of course I did. I can smell it from my desk. When was the last time you had chronic?”

I had to think for a minute. When was the last time I got even half loaded? “Remember the time I broke up with Cato?”

“Which time, the actual time when he left you on the streets of Hell’s Kitchen in the rain?”

I nod, “Yeah, that’ll be the one. Speaking of him, guess who is in my boyfriend’s office?”

“No shit… I wonder if they look at each other and know they both nailed the same girl?”

I chuckle. If only it was that simple. “More like one’s a cocky jerk and the other is Cato.”

She inhales sharply. “Damn, what did he do?”

“Wouldn’t let me by my own damned dress. I’ll guilt him a little more then-“

“Break out the handcuffs!” she squealed.

“No… His ties worked last night. But that’s beside the point…”

“The point is… be at your apartment in an hour. We have some baking to do. Does Madge still have the bowl I got you two for Christmas?”
I scratched at my head. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what you mean by that… She has something—” I stop myself because the couch shifts. “I’ll call you back… Actually, I’ll be home.”

A warm hand squeezes my thigh. At first, I think it’s Peeta. But when I look up, it’s Cato’s eyes I see.

“Get off me,” I snap. “Or I’ll have security escort you out.”

He smiles, “Now, you don’t you think that’ll cause unneeded problems?” His nails dig into the flesh of my thing.

“Let go,” my voice wavers and he digs in deeper.

Cato grins, “Have you thought about what I said?”

“About you threatening innocent people?”

“No.” I wince as his grip tightens. “Punishing the people who stole from me.”

“No one stole me, I walked away.” I try to move away, but his grip is too tight.

“You. Are. Mine,” he says through his teeth. “Don’t ever forget that.” And just like that he’s gone, strolling coolly to the elevator. “We’ll be in touch, Katniss.”

I don’t breathe, I don’t even move. I watch the needle on the elevator dip down to the ground floor before getting up. I rush out of the office without a word. I don’t try the elevator. I know chances of him still being in there are slim, so I follow the signs to the stairs and rush down them. I need to get home; I need to get behind my door with the deadbolt locked.

I’m half tempted to walk back to SoHo but instead I nearly run to catch the A which will take me close to home, or as close as I’m going to get.

Johanna needed me. See you at the reception. My stomach twists with guilt as I half lie to Peeta.
He couldn’t know. Cato’s threats were idle, he’d never act on them.

My phone goes insane the second I’m out in the open air, the brief loss of signal only holds off Peeta’s panic.

*What did he do.*

*Are you ok?*

*Did he hurt you?*

I look at my leg. A hand shaped bruise was forming, no denying that. I stumble home navigating through teary eyes. I barely get my key in the door and stumble up the stairs before watery eyes become tears.

I flop down on the couch and pull out my phone to call Peeta. “Shit, Katniss, you gave me a heart attack. What happened?”

I can’t speak for a second. “I’m fine… I just had to let Johanna in,” I half-lie. “How did the meeting go?”

“Katniss, are you crying?”

I sniff, “No, Peeta, I’m fine.” I look up a little at the small bruises from Cato’s fingers.

“I’m coming over. Please don’t lie to me…”

“Peeta, please, I’m going to take a nap, I’ll see you at the dinner. I’ll be the one looking confused and out of place…”

He sighs, “Ok, but please… Promise me you would tell me if something was wrong?”

“I promise. Drive safe Peeta, and remember, you still owe a me a ‘finish’.”
“At the dinner. Take care, Belle.”

I gulp and want to respond, but the line is dead. Instead, I pull myself off the couch and head to Madge’s room to get our rather phallic looking bowl named ‘The Shlong’.

Her room is dark, the blinds pulled for whatever reason. I flick on the light.

“Oh shit!” Sound asleep, well not anymore, on top of the sheets in a tangle of naked limbs lay Gale and Madge.

“Katniss!” I narrowly dodge a throw pillow.

“I’m sorry!” I cover my eyes with my arm. “Johanna is coming over and well… We need the-“ we must have picked the name for this moment. “The Shlong, do you still have it?”

“Top drawer in the back!”

“This is revenge for you handcuffing yourself to my bed!” I quickly find the velvet bag and run out of the room. Having seen more Gale Hawthorne and Madge Undersee than I ever wanted to.

--

“You know…” I lick the spoon, the illicit oil thick in the batter. “Does this mean he has to see me naked?”

Johanna pulls the spoon from me and hands me the offending piece and my lighter, “No, this isn’t a sit-com. Does Madge mind?”

I just shrug, “I told her I needed this.” I hold the glass to my lips. “and that you were coming over,” I twiddle with the lighter for a few seconds getting it right in my hand so I don’t burn myself.
“Now, my guy said that was one hit and done. So if we’re not ‘your apartment last winter’ high I’m going to strangle him.”

I roll my eyes. It goes in rough but I hold it in as my lungs burn before watching the smoke billow to the sky.

It wasn’t one and done, though I’m already so keyed up, “You should put on some music. I want to feel the music.”

We’ve made our way from sitting on the counters to lounging on the kitchen floor. “Feel the music?”

My cheeks tighten into a painful Cheshire grin, “Yeah… Oh!” My legs are Jell-O as I stumble to get my computer. “I have the perfect song…”

I hear Madge’s door creek open. “Madge! Gale! Come to join us!”

My mind is too gone to feel awkward. In fact, I’m ok with this after all. He did see the aftermath of my bedroom adventures, so what if I saw his dick?

“Yeah! We still have half a bowl left. Lightweight here is-“

“Shut up!” I hold my hand out, “Shut up! And feel the music.”

Madge is covering her face with her palm as Gale just smirks at me. Madge decides to join me in my horrible rendition of ‘Rock Show’ by Lady Gaga. When the song ends I’m back on the counter.

“What is that,” Madge’s hand is on my knee. “Katniss, what is this?”

I flinch away, “It’s nothing… I’m going to get a shower, I don’t want to smell gross for Annie’s… Yeah…”

I lock myself in the bathroom and strip off my clothes, staring at myself in the mirror. I have two
claims of ownership on me. A small barely noticeable bruise on my neck from Peeta’s lips, and four very noticeable bruises right above my knee.

I stand under the torrent of water letting everything run off me. I don’t know how long I’m in there before the door opens. I just ignore it. It’s probably Madge.

The curtain is drawn and I try to cover myself. “Peeta…”

His eyes are on my leg. I can’t tell the look on his face. Hurt? Confusion.

“He… He touched me…” I hear myself say before reaching out to grab his shirt. I needed him. Not sexually, but I needed the feeling of being in his arms. He didn’t resist as I pulled him into the shower with me.

“I’m going to kill him, Katniss. He was right there… This is all my fault…”

I cling to his wet shirt. “No, this is his fault…” I choose to not tell him about Cato’s idle threats. That’ll create more drama on a night that isn’t ours.

This is Annie and Finnick’s night, and it was going to be one they would never forget.
Short Skirt/ Long Jacket

Chapter Summary

I chose Short Skirt/ Long Jacket by Cake, not because it's about a guy following around a power plant worker, but well.. Maybe you'll understand after reading it. :D

I change POV's mostly because I wanted to. It doesn't do a whole lot plot wise. I'm just having fun.

Thank you Apecanin for betaing and helping me pick the song. :D <3

Peeta

“Shit! Fuck!”

I hear a thump and a smash. I roll over. It’s three am. The other side of the bed is empty. Oh yeah, Katniss was going to sleep at her place tonight. I should just man up and ask her to move in with me. It’s not like she spends any time at her and Madge’s apartment anyway. Besides, Mayor Undersee is selling the place when Madge goes off to grad school since she won’t be in New York for most of the year.

Another crash and a giggle and I almost have to get out of bed, “Katniss… Baby, what are you doing here?”

She’s a mess. One heel is dangling from her finger by the thin black strap, the other actually strapped to the strap of her black sequin dress. Her bright red lipstick is smudged, smeared from her lips to her jaw. She reeks of weed, alcohol and cigarette smoke.

“Why are you in my apartment?” she slurs. “Seriously, I know you have a key but…”

She bends over and picks up the broken vase that she just knocked over. I liked that one. My mother gave it to me when I bought the place. Oh well.

“Katniss, you’re in my apartment. How did you get here?”

She looks around, ignoring my question and nods knowingly, as if her location finally clicked. “Ah… You’re not getting sex tonight.” She unbuckles her shoe from her dress and lets it fall before shimmying out of her outfit. No underwear…not a good sign. She left with a black lace thong that I was looking forward to taking off her at some point. She walks to the bedroom and pops the hooks of her bra. The black lace falls to the ground along with her underwear.

What the hell happens at Bachelorette parties that my girlfriend ended up with a bra full of lace thong? I pick up her trail of clothing and the rest of the vase before she comes out of my room in the button up I wore tonight.

When I get into the room, I expect to see her face down in the bed or the couch or even the floor knowing Katniss. Instead I hear water running.

“Katniss?” She jumps like a child caught messing around in her parents’ room.
Music starts playing through the speakers. “Hmmm… Sinatra.” She offers me her hand and as the bath fills, we dance to Blue Skies. She’s not light on her feet this far gone. Her eyes are so far away, I’m positive she won’t remember any of this in the morning. The song finishes and for fun I dip her low though she thinks she’s falling and gets a panicked look on her face.

Katniss flails and falls on the ground confused. I can’t help but roll my eyes at her in this state, so childlike. “You dropped me!” she snaps.

“No, you flopped around like a fish,” I scoop her up and help her into the tub. At least the stink of the night will get off her.

“Get in with me.” The only thing keeping her head up is the side of the tub. I probably should…the last thing I need is her drowning. I take her brush off of the counter and throw my clothes about where she had landed moments before. She’s so small against my chest, singing quietly to Frank Sinatra.

“You give me your arms and your arms are like angel wings.” She leans farther back into my chest as I try and brush out the knots in her hair. “Sweet to my ears is the song every bluebird sings. Each rosebud kissed by the dew… All this is mine and heaven too…”

I hate taking care of drunks, but she’s kind of adorable.

“I think I might be falling in love with you, Mister Mellark.”

I drop the brush and she looks up after a few seconds realizing I had stopped. “I thought love was an emotion you didn’t feel?” Or at least that’s what she said earlier today.

“Drunken truths, my dear, are sober thoughts.”

I want to ask her who hurt her, who broke her heart and left her so damaged, so jaded and cynical about something like love, and marriage. Unfortunately I know exactly who, and I let him hurt her again.

“You infuriate me…” I mumble, helping her out of the tub. She’s asleep before her head hits the pillow.

She’s so small and light it takes next to no effort to get her on her stomach so I can braid her hair just in case it needs to be kept away from her mouth. When I climb into bed she curls up against me, her skin cool and smooth like porcelain.

When Prim was first adopted, mom and dad bought her a doll. I was so used to being the youngest in my jealousy I smashed that creepy doll with its ridiculous curls. Mom was furious, Prim cried for hours and I was handed a bottle of glue and was tasked with fixing “Celeste’s” vacant eyes and painted on lips.

In his anger, Cato had done just that to Katniss. Broken her though she refuses to show it, made her feel like she can’t love and be loved in return.

She starts to snore softly and I kiss the back of her head. “I’ll glue you back together Belle, one piece at a time…”

--

Katniss
I panic when I wake up. “This isn’t my apartment.” I throw my sheets off and rush to the bathroom to vomit.

*I’m never drinking again,* I tell myself, knowing it’s a lie.

The first thing I do after brushing my teeth is to stumble back to the bedroom knowing very well I’m indeed still a little drunk and have no recollection of last night. I check my phone.

*No one’s missing. Unfortunately, we couldn’t have Hangover style antics finding poor Annie. Unless you’re missing, then… Yay? Don’t forget that column. –J*

I don’t feel like putting my own clothes on so I settle for a discarded dress shirt of Peeta’s and button up before trying to find something I could stomach. All I can find that doesn’t need to be cooked is a pound of strawberries.

“I really need to get on that stupid column. Why did I agree to this again?” I ask the empty apartment. Haymitch was still off on private matters and Sae was… Well who knows?

My computer is still at Madge’s and my dress for the wedding is here. Spending the two bucks to get there and back would be idiotic so I’ll just have to use Peeta’s.

His desk chair sucks me in, the leather cold against my bare backside. I bite into a strawberry and tap the spacebar.

*Password… God damnit.*

Peeta has one of those office phones on his desk, the kind that you can place calls from multiple lines on hold.

The top button on his speed dial list says *Work*. At least I don’t have to get up and get my phone. I press the button and it rings twice. “Mellark Enterprises, this is Donna speaking. How may I help you?”

“I need to speak with Mr. Mellark.”

The woman on the other end snorts, “May I ask who’s calling?”

Do these people have caller ID?

“Katniss Everdeen? I should be on his ‘send straight to office phone’ list.”

“Please hold!”

I’m barely on hold for a minute, giving me precious seconds to rummage through Peeta’s desk.

“Do you know what a cell phone is?”

“For taking naked pictures of myself and sending them to you after a long day at work?” I slide a drawer closed. “What’s the password to your computer?”

“I’m going to take you off speaker phone…”

I know he’s kidding, or at least I hope he is. “Seriously, your password. I have money to make and my laptop is all the way in SoHo.”

“It’s zero, six, two, one, one, nine, nine, one.” I put the numbers in and the computer unlocks.
“What date is that?” I ask while opening up word.

“The date I was adopted. Is there anything else you need, dear? How’s your head?”

“Well, I’m pretty sure I’m still a little drunk. So good? When are you coming home?”

“Well, we don’t have to be at the church until five, so probably three? Can I expect supper on the table and you in nothing but an apron?”

“Nope, but you should definitely bring home some take-out so we’re not hungry. I’m thinking Indian.”

He chuckles, “I’ll see what I can do. You get some work done.”

--

Peeta

“Going for the Audrey Hepburn look?”

She’s fidgeting with her hair when I open the door to our bedroom. Our? My bedroom. Her dress still fits her like a glove and goes down to her knees covering the dark bruises on her leg. Somehow I startle her and she spins around, holding the brush like a weapon.

“Damnit Peeta!” Half of her hair was held up by pins, where the other half was waiting to be tucked into the tight bun slides in front of her face. She swats it away. “Where do you get of sneaking up on me?”

“Where do you get of coming to my house uninvited and drunk?” I don’t want to pick a fight; in fact I feel better knowing she came here where I know she’s safe.

“Well, I can’t remember anything past like… When did we leave here?”

After the rehearsal dinner everyone came back here before splitting into the bachelor party and the bachelorette party. The girls played a round of Chandeliers throwing solo cups all over the kitchen while the rest of us only had to wonder how these women’s livers still functioned.

We left shortly after the women at nine.

“Nine?”

“Yeah, I think I’ll say ten was when black out Katniss came out… You’re not mad are you?”

I shake my head and help her pin her hair back. “Of course not. You’re a grown woman. I really wish you came home and managed to keep your thong on though.”

She blushes and bites her lip, “I’m sorry?”

When her hair is finally neat and in place I wrap my arms around her waist and rest my chin on her shoulder. She smells like my body wash. I really need to get her toiletries of her own so she doesn’t need to walk around smelling like me. I enjoyed it; it was almost like her marking herself as my territory. Walking around with my smell on her.

“What?” she asks, pulling me out of my own mind.

“I have something I’d like you to wear.” I kiss her temple and leave her there in the mirror to finish
putting on her make-up. I pull out my suit for the night. The only good thing about wearing a
tuxedo is feeling like James Bond for about ten minutes then you realize you’re in a monkey suit. I
pull out a jewelry box from the top shelf of my closet and tap the long box against my palm a few
times before heading out.

She’s still trying to get her make-up right, complaining about how her right eye always looks better
than her left. I come up behind her and unclasp the choker she always wears. I let my fingers linger
on her exposed collarbones, the skin puckering to gooseflesh. She stops moving and I can feel her
watching me as I kiss her neck lightly. She stops breathing and leans back into me before I pull
away and clasp my mother’s pearl necklace. It’s old, the clasp a little tarnished but it sits perfectly
on her, resting just above her collarbones.

“They were my mother’s, my birth mother’s…”

She rests her back against my chest, “It’s beautiful…”

The wedding is at the Plaza, a few short blocks from my home so we decide to walk.

“Did you get any work done?” I ask as we cross the street to walk along Central Park.

“Yeah, sent and done. I wrote about how when I came to New York it seemed like every door was
closed, now one by one they’re opening and that people shouldn’t lose faith. You never know what
opportunity you’re going to run into…”

The wedding is beautiful, very tasteful. Finnick and Annie chose to not have a bridal party. It was
completely about them. I’m not sure what to do. If I hold onto Katniss will she be put off? She
seems pretty against marriage for whatever reason. She makes the choice for me and when they
say their vow’s she leans into me and I wrap my arm around her waist. She sniffles some and I’m
not sure whether it’s the ceremony or what she thinks is the loss of her friend. I pull her close,
pushing thoughts out of my mind that someday we’ll be standing at a wedding alter, our friends and
family watching as we vow to love and cherish each other until the day we die.

She manages to catch the bouquet, but passes it to her right. Johanna, who’s been eying my brother,
passes it to Madge who just keeps the flowers.

“Why didn’t you keep the bouquet?” I ask pulling her back to my chest.

“Marriage isn’t really my thing,” she confesses. “They tend to fail.”

“Amen sister,” Johanna sighs as Finnick takes the garter off Annie’s leg. “They day I get married
is the day you quit smoking.”

Katniss holds out her hand, “Pinkie promise?”

They wrap pinkies and kiss the knuckle on their thumbs. “The contract is sealed,” Andrew teases.
He gets a good laugh, good for him. He hasn’t slaved away for almost eight years to make
something of himself. Someday I want to pass on my company to a son or a daughter not some
jackass board member.

I hold onto Katniss and sigh, hoping that someday she’ll change her mind. I guess this is what I get
messing with a twenty-one year old. Though who knows, it’s still too soon to pass judgment.

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Katniss
Somewhere between our third slow dance and me rubbing my backside against his groin Peeta grabs hold of my wrist and pulls me off the dance floor and out of the reception hall.

I’ve been in this position before. Taken away from the crowd, we duck into the unused coat check. No one brings a coat to a summer wedding. I don’t even breathe as Peeta locks the door. This is it. He’ll show his true colors and hit me. What did I do wrong? Did I go too far?

“Katniss?” I wince waiting for the first blow to come. Instead, a warm, loving hand caresses my cheek. “Baby what’s wrong?”

“Kiss me,” I tell him and his lips meet mine. Unbeknownst to him it’s a promise that he’ll never lay a hand on me in anger. He doesn’t even need to be asked. I just know he won’t. Cato is all anger, a hot raging fire that consumes and destroys everything in its path. Peeta’s more like the new growth after the fire has razed the forest. The life that emerges after everything is lost.

He unzips my dress and it falls from me leaving me in only my heels and his mother’s pearls, “Should I be surprised at this point that you’re not even wearing a bra?”

I roll my eyes, “Open back,” I try for his bow tie. I watched him tie it, and now I get to untie it. Though, that’s easier said than done. He brings his hands up and guides my fingers through the simple knot. “Is the door locked?” he leans forward and bites my lower lip gently and letting go only to kiss me softly. Pleasure with a little bit of pain, something I could get used to. Before, it was pain with a lot more pain.

“Of course,” I shiver a little has his warm hands try to heat up my breasts. “Though, we don’t have much time.”

He nods and get down on my knees. He moans when I grip his shaft around the base between my thumb and index finger, the two appendages making a tight circle around him. I kiss the tip lightly, the drop of moisture that has already collected coating my lower lip. I take him into my mouth without warning. I don’t go an inch at a time; instead I take as much as I can into my mouth coating him with saliva. I sit there for a second, running my tongue over as much as I can while humming. Johanna gave me this tip.

“Oh, fuck. Katniss!” Yes please. I suck until my lips meet the tip and stand up.

We don’t need a lot of foreplay, a playful grab here, a rub there, a bite on the neck here. The last hour or so on the dance floor was enough. I hold onto the back of the chair the attendant would use if there were actually coats in this dark room and his hands grip my hips. “Later,” I feel him enter me slowly. “I’m going to fuck that pretty little face of yours.”

“Yes please,” I whimper as he buries himself inside me. I let go of everything. All the tension I had been feeling throughout the day gone. I am nothing but feeling because that’s what this is. A beautiful, almost magical sensation where two body parts that are small and almost in significant in comparison to other appendages but filled with many oh so sensitive nerve endings and when they combine, or when his skilled fingers tease them it’s like Peeta has flicked a switch in my mind, turning off all the stress, and anger, and anxiety of the day and bring into the light only bliss.

I’m so wrapped up in the here and now I forget we’re in a public place, that we have to be quiet, so as I climax I let out one of the loudest moans that has ever escaped my mouth. His own orgasm soon follows and less than a minute later, while we’re still lost in the afterglow there’s a knock on the door.

“Hey man, that’s my job!” Finnick yells from the other side of the door.
I rush to get the dress back on, never feeling more embarrassed in my life though part of me was still jelly legged from sex.
Today's song is Sex Type Thing by Stone Temple Pilots.

Thanks a zillion Apecanin!

"Tilt your head just a little." I lift my chin as per the photographer's orders. "No, no too far."

Cinna walks up to me and positions me as he wants. He straightens out the white lace gloves and bends my arms. They're in front of my face, bent up with a long string of pearls laced between my fingers and falling down into a pile on the floor. I've been on my knees for about an hour in nothing but a white trench coat, fishnets and pattern leather heels against a black background. Cinna called my hair and make-up 'Old Hollywood'. It looked good for my first set of pictures where I wore a very classy white gown.

"Has she had any actual training?"

"No, fresh meat. Don't you like a challenge?" Cinna dares before bending my back. I'm a piece of art to them. Well, not yet. Right now I'm moldable clay. Not perfect, not even close.

The photographer grumbles about how I'm not a challenge, I'm the Everest climb to someone wheelchair bound. I can't help but agree but Cinna sees something in me and he knows best.

"I'm going to mess up your hair a little bit dear."

It's not a warning because Cinna's fingers are already intertwined in my hair, breaking up cans and cans of hairspray, giving me just fucked hair. Oh if only. We're leaving for France tomorrow morning and Peeta's retreated to his office and work. So he doesn't get tired of me, I've been actually living in my apartment catching up on some reading and working on this week's column. Apparently I'm going to be one of those 'write in and this bitch will answer your questions' columnists. I've gotten a few interesting ones that I actually answered, not needing to write an entire piece on it.

"Lose the pearls. Katniss, I'm going to have you untie the sash on the jacket then go as if you're going to flash me, or at least slowly open it. Think fierce and sexy."

Two things I'm not. It takes a few goes, a few where I'm so stiff and awkward - I'm sure they're about to fire me - and a few where I actually flash showing Cinna and the photographer my black lace bra and thong combo and the garter belt which held my fishnets up. I didn't even know you could find these things when it wasn't Halloween.

"You should keep the coat, and the shoes," Cinna tells me as we go through the pictures and pick out ones we like. They give me an idea. A very evil idea.

--

Haymitch is waiting for me downstairs when I leave my photo shoot. "How much?" I look down at my outfit. Fishnets and high heels. Yeah I looked like a streetwalker.
I pull a cigarette out of my purse. "More than you can afford, can I get a light?" He tosses me his Zippo. "So where is Mr. Mellark?" I ask about halfway through.

"Business District," Haymitch answers simply.

"Good, take me there."

He doesn't need to be told twice, but unfortunately can't drive fast enough from the Upper East Side to the Business District. We pull up outside of Mellark Enterprises and I straighten out my jacket, and sling my duffel bag with the clothes I wore to work over my shoulder. Effie, Peeta's overworked assistant, exits the building and Haymitch straightens out his posture.

"You should go ask Miss Trinket for some drinks." I pinch his cheek and head inside telling Effie the same. My nerves hit me as the elevator climbed to the top floor. I fixed my hair and tried to fix my eyeliner in the metal walls of the elevator.

It pings and the door slides open. Besides the overhead lights that stay on twenty-four seven for safety, the only light comes from the half open door to my boyfriend's office.

I set my bag down outside the door and take a deep breath. Fierce and sexy, I remind myself before slipping inside. He's at his desk, brow furrowed so completely focused on his computer he doesn't hear me enter. I close the door behind me and lock it just in case before clearing my throat.

His eyes widen when he sees me, "I thought you would wait for me at home?"

"If you want that, Mr. Mellark, I suggest you find yourself a wife."

He smirks, "Isn't it a little hot for a trench coat?"

I try to not roll my eyes as Peeta makes this very 'cheesy porno' so I roll with it. "As a matter of fact..." I untie the sash and unfasten the two large silver buttons. "It is."

I let the coat fall to the ground and his Adams Apple bobs with his hard swallow.

I close the distance between myself and his desk and push aside his papers and keyboards. I jump up onto the dark wood surface and crawl to him. "You like?" My voice doesn't even sound like my own. It comes out as a husky, seductive purr that even takes Peeta by surprise. I don't wait for him to respond; I reach for the black silk of his tie and pull him to me. Instead of kissing his lips I go for his cheek, leaving an imperfect red lip print.

He doesn't let me back away, his large hand gripping the back of my head gently, pulling my lips to his. I guess he likes it. There's nothing chaste or tender with this kiss. My tongue pushes past his lips, running along his teeth before I back away, leaving his mouth open.

"Let's get rid of this..." I loosen up his tie and slip it over his head, clumsily catching it on his ears before slipping the loop over my own head and tightening it, letting it hang between the valley of my breasts. Well... the gully, or ditch.

Peeta grabs my leash. "I thought we were going to get rid of this?" he asks pulling me to him. "Doesn't matter." His hands come forward and pull me off the table onto his lap. His erection presses at my thigh. "Aren't you going to get enough of me this weekend?" he asks as I quickly undo all the buttons of his dress shirt. I run my fingers along his pectorals, my fingers smoothing down the light blonde hair.

"I'll never get enough of you..." I tell him honestly right before we lose the shirt.
It doesn't take him long to get me on my back, laying across his desk as his tongue and fingers bring me over the edge. I scream his name as my body fights to stay flat on the desk. My back arches but my hips are held in place as he brings me over the edge and keeps me there until my vision goes white and I can barely breathe.

As I catch my breath and gather my wits I hear his belt come undone and his pants fall to the floor, "Come here..." I hold my hands up so he can drag me from the desk. "Bend over and put your hands on the window." The 'window' is basically a glass wall. "It won't break, I promise." When I get into position I feel him get close to me, "I'll be gentle..."

He doesn't lie, well at first. He's slow to enter me letting me adjust to his girth before he grips my hips and quickens his pace. Each thrust deeper than the last until the room is filled with the sounds of our moans and our skin slapping together. I'm almost completely pressed up against the glass, the New York skyline glowing only separated from me by a thick pane of glass.

"I could give it to you..." he pants. "Anything you wanted in this city..." His hands come forward, gripping my shoulders and pulling me off the window. He begins rubbing me at a different angle, threatening to bring me over the edge once more, "Anything in the world."

And I believe him, short of plucking the moon from the stars the sky is the limit with this guy, but that's not what I want. "All I want is you baby..." I know it's cheesy but it's the truth. I've honestly never felt so addicted to one human being. He's my first thought when I wake up and my last before I go to bed. I interrupted Annie's honeymoon to ask her about this and she told me it sounded a lot like love.

"So what brought about this?" Peeta asks, spinning one of my pattern leather heels around on his index finger.

"I was told to act 'sexy and fierce' at my shoot today," I shrug, running my fingers through my hair to break up any knots. I give up quickly and poke my head out of his office just to be sure the coast is clear before grabbing my bag. I pull on my sweats and tank top, not bothering with underwear. "Well... Don't we look like quite a pair? You in your 'I rule the world from my Blackberry' uniform and me in 'I don't give half a fuck'."

He just smiles and rolls his eyes.

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"Babe, wake up..." If I've ignored the LMFAO coming from the radio, I can ignore Peeta Mellark.

"No..." He pulls the blankets from me, the only thing protecting my nude body from the air-conditioning. "The god damned sun isn't even up yet. Go back to bed like a normal human!"

"Katniss, we have to leave in an hour for the airport, you can sleep in the terminal and on the flight over to Paris."

"Aren't you rich enough to have your own plane? Make it wait for us..."

"I am, but it's on loan to Mr. and Mrs. Odair."

"Fucking Annie Cresta! I'm going to strangle her!" I throw the pillow to the ground and stumble into the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later with no make-up, my hair in the messiest bun of my life and only wearing grey sweats and a white camisole we head off to the airport. I'm a shining example of a billionaire's
girlfriend and the paparazzi at JFK catch every minute of it.

"Seven thirty in the morning. Ask me if I give a fuck..." I tell Peeta when we get inside, safe from the cameras.

"You're gorgeous." I make it through check in and security before we head to the lounge. I'm back out before my butt hits the seat and out again before takeoff.

I speak no French. Not like 'oh I can ask where the bathroom is or can I have water but that's it.' No, not even that. I'm stuck relying on Peeta and Cinna to make sure I don't get lost in Paris. The last thing I need is to end up like the girl from Taken. Apparently, they're making a Taken two. How does the same girl get kidnapped twice?

"You're laughing..." Peeta asks as a limo takes us to our hotel where we'll meet up with Cinna who took an earlier flight over here.

"Have you seen the movie Taken?" I ask, checking my reflection in the window. Dark circles and flat hair as expected.

"I have."

"Well, the bitch gets taken again, or at least I assume she does. They're making a sequel." Peeta just grunts, clearly not as amused by this as I am.

I stand back like the dumb little child as Peeta talks to everyone. Why did I not learn a language in high school or college?

Cinna is waiting for us at the hotel. He won't be staying with us though; he has his own apartment here in the city of lights... or is it of love? Whatever it is, the food smells amazing. It's about to be the city of Katniss putting on ten pounds.

The first thing I do when we get to the suite is flop down on the first plush surface I see, a pristine white couch.

"Done already?" Cinna asks as I bury my face in the crease of the sofa. It's night time now. Perfect time to sleep again, but Peeta has other plans. Almost nine years my senior, this man is a ball of energy.

"I've got sleep to catch up on, and designs to finish, you kids have fun. Bright and early tomorrow Katniss, we have a big day!"

I just grunt and a few seconds later the door to the hotel room closes, "Come on dear. I want to show you something..."

It's a warm night so I settle on a floral print skirt and the white camisole I wore over here. We walk for what seems like an eternity, though it might just have been my mind being overloaded by Paris at night.

"Take my hand and close your eyes." Reluctantly, I close them and grip Peeta's hand tightly. He leads me around a turn then straight for long enough that I get restless, "Look up, but don't open your eyes just yet..." I tilt my head up slightly. "A little more... There. Open your eyes..."

Peeta was showing me the Eiffel Tower lit up at night. "I can't... I..." The beauty takes my breath away.
"It's better at night, less tourists."

We sit down on the grass in front of the tower and sit in silence for a few minutes before I start humming 'Paris Holds the Key to Her Heart' from Anastasia.

"Does it?" Peeta asks. "Does Paris hold the key to your heart?"

I look up at him and smile. "No, but you do..."

He leans down to kiss me softly before pulling away and looking at me. His eyes are so warm, but so conflicted. Finally, he speaks. "Katniss... I love you."

I stop breathing. How am I supposed to react to that? I'm twenty-one, I'm not sure I know what love is! Then I think of what Annie told me. How my feelings didn't sound like an obsession, or an addiction, they sounded like love. The flutter of my heart when I saw him. The butterflies in my stomach. Emotions are confusing, but if this warmth in my heart isn't love than I don't know what love is.

"I love you too..." I finally tell him. His lips are on mine as soon as the words leave my mouth.

---

They don't even have the decency to speak in English at this meeting though they're looking at pictures of me and dresses Cinna has designed for me to wear at photo shoots and on runways. He looks bothered.

"It will have to be let out some in the waist and taken in some in the bust, but we can do it."

"Do what?" I ask, thankful they're finally speaking a language I understand.

"For you to wear on the runway tomorrow."

"Wait... What? Cinna, I'm not ready! I'll fall on my ass!"

He pats my shoulder, "It's at the very end. You'll be walking with me, I won't let you fall. I promise!"

I air my grief to Peeta in the shower back at the hotel. To be honest, I'm terrified. Pictures in pretty clothes are one thing. A runway is a horse of an entirely different color. He bites down gently at the crook of my neck, "I'm going to trip and fall, I know I am!" I'm too distracted to get turned on. My stomach is doing flips and not even his talented hands over every inch of my body could get me going.

"Belle," he pulls my head to his chest, the water beating down on my back, loosening up the tense muscles. "Did you work at that disgusting bar when the Yankees destroyed the Phillies in the World Series?"

I groaned. My birth father was from Philadelphia. Phillies fan born and raised. According to him, in the spring and summer he bled red, fall he bled green, winter it was orange. Yeah the NFL season went on until winter, but come on. If you're an Eagles fan you understand there's a certain point you just turn your head and go 'We showed up!' and try to not let anyone remember that we threw snow balls at Santa and now have to have the Linc completely cleared of snow before even one fan is allowed inside.

"We don't like to talk about that. It was a dark, dark time. But yeah..."
He squeezes me, "And you stayed up on those heels right? Through the pushy New York crowd and you're worried about walking a straight line with Cinna holding your hand?" he was right. I spent eight hours a night usually with a heavy tray of beer bottles and the occasional 'bitch drink' as we called them.

"Don't you trick me with your god damned logic Mr. Mellark!" I turn off the shower head. My skin is already pruned.

After I dry off, I flop down on the satin sheets, pulling them up to my neck before turning on the TV. Peeta followed me out a few minutes later, his towel hanging low on his waist. "So what do you want to do tonight?" he asks shaking his hair out.

"Either lay here with the sheets pulled up to my neck watching French television or maybe even order some cheep ass champagne and down the bottle. Ooo... Or we could go out? I could get as absolutely trashed as possible so that I'm way too sick to go on tomorrow?"

He rolls his eyes, "That last one sounds like a terrible plan."

I throw the blankets over my head and push myself to the foot of the bed, "You sound like a terrible plan!" I counter.

"Belle, that wasn't even..." he stops before his fingers attack just under my ribs.

I flail around as he tickles me, "I'm going to pee the bed!" I shout, trying to escape.

"Well, then who will look like an idiot?"

"You because you'd have to strip the bed while I cleaned off!" the assault stops and the sheets are ripped off me. Peeta's strong hands take me by the waist but instead of tickling he lifts me up and tosses me to the top of the bed. I try to sit up but he's on me, or so I think. I feel his body heat, his hot breath near my ear but he's not touching me. Peeta sits up, straddling me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He just grins, "Nothing, now..." He flops off me, laying at my side but still not touching me. His hands return to me. Or just above me. They're still so warm from the shower. His hand blocks my vision, travelling from my face, down my neck, only his finger tips tracing along my carotid artery, along my collar bones. The tips of his fingers trace the slight curve of my breast before they reach my stomach. Instinctively I spread my legs; his hands hover over my heated core but never touch.

"P-please..." his little exploration has left me about ready to jump him.

And like that his hands and body heat are gone, leaving me wanting him, "You should get dressed. I'll take you out to dinner at this beautiful restaurant. Then when we get home, I'm going to make love to you."

I'm almost shocked at how direct he is, like he has every bit of our night scheduled, "And by what time can I expect to orgasm?"

"Depending on how... Complacent you decide to be and whether or not you resist me, maybe midnight?"

I roll away from him and grab my phone and hold in the one button on the front, "Siri, remind me to orgasm at midnight?"
Peeta rolls his eyes as Siri confirms the reminder. I hop off the bed with a spring in my step. "What should I wear?" I ask. We have a walk in closet. Some day I'd like to have one of these. It has one of those massive marble topped islands full of drawers. I'm sure this room is for people living in this hotel, not just for a long weekend/ business trip in France.

---

Dinner was fantastic. Candlelight on the street. Peeta held my hand the entire time, our fingers laced tightly together. I ordered some form of poultry, either the dark meat of a chicken or duck, "You wear the bracelet I got for you every day, even when you wear silver."

I nod and pull my hand away, straightening out the gold chain and positioning the Tiffany and Co charm on the end so it would lay flat. "I love it..." I answer him honestly before my hands travel up to my choker.

"Why do you wear that? Even in sweatpants that's always around your neck."

I trace the profile, the indentation of the woman's face pressing into the pad of my thumb, "My father gave it to my mother when they were younger. She wore it every day until," I swallowed hard so I could tell him. "He died. Then she got married to an asshole and I started wearing it trying to remember what a good man my father was."

I rest my hand in Peeta's and his fingers wrap around my small hand, the only thing keeping me away from that day. The cold water. "Belle?"

He pulls me back into reality. "Sorry," I smile faintly though my ears still remember my screams.

---

Two bottles of pink champagne on the terrace of our hotel suite later, I was relaxed. In nothing but a silk robe, I sip at my last glass, "I thought champagne was for celebration?"

"I'm fulfilling your one wish, well part of it."

"How much did the champagne cost?"

Peeta shrugs, "A few hundred euro's. I have a bottle from the year I was born," his voice is distracted.

"What are you waiting for? You should crack it open on your thirtieth birthday!" I go for another sip.

Peeta snorts, "I was thinking my wedding night," I swallow my mouthful hard. Would he want that with me? A marriage? An heir? A pretty little wife who wears designer clothes to polo matches in the Hamptons?

I could feel the stone of my guilt sink to the pit of my stomach, "I sorry..." I tell him.

"What?" I look up from my glass as he questions me. He looks shocked, confused.

"You want... A wife, kids... Someone to come home to. I'm just a stupid college graduate who looks at a wedding like a funeral..."

"Belle... Belle, Belle, Belle," he stands up and takes my empty glass from my hand. He sets it on the table before helping me up, "You're young. Barely an adult," he holds onto my hands. "I love
you, with all my heart. I want to give you the world, well the good parts. And I want to protect you from the bad. Let me show you the world though before I give it to you..." he kisses my nose. "You need some real world experience before I make an honest woman out of you..."

I try to smile, but the stone is still in my stomach, reminding me that this can only last for so long. Sooner or later he'd want more.

"You love me right?" he asks, our admission under the Eiffel Tower still in our recent memory. I still wasn't sure about it but so far, I was trusting my guts and my friends.

"I do... I do love you, Peeta," his lips are on mine. I never knew so much could be poured into one kiss. It wasn't as simple as an 'I love you' kiss, it was a promise that he was going to give me the world, and to wait until I was ready to receive it.

He scoops me up and carries me through the French door, closing it with his foot. I drape my arms over his shoulders, holding on tightly as if I'd slip through his arms. He sits me down on the bed and tugs at the silk sash of my robe while I go for his. The silk falls from our shoulders and we move onto the bed, never breaking eye contact.

I prop myself up against the pillows as Peeta crawls up the length of my body. His hand slips between my legs spreading them so he could trace my slit. Our eyes break from each other when his lips meet mine, our tongues rubbing together as his fingers work me until I'm soaked. When he's satisfied with his work he pulls away, giving me one more kiss before linking his hands with mine.

The two faces of Peeta Mellark, the ruler of the world, and the playful man only close friends and family get to see would have to make room for another. His eyes were tender, yet still so intense and raw. He knelt between my legs and entered slowly. Everything was so slow and tender. With each thrust a little bit of the protective layer we both donned when we were in the public eye was chipped away until it was just him and I at our most vulnerable.

As we made love it all became clear to me. Love was beautiful, love was fierce, and love was absolutely terrifying.
We had the curtains drawn on our bed. I thought they were decoration. If I knew, I would have pulled them tight hoping they were enough to trap us here. We had the blankets pulled up to our necks and just stared at each other. We had two more days in Paris and I never wanted to leave; or did I never want to leave him? He leans in and kisses me lightly before backing away.

“What time is it?” he asks, twirling some of my hair around his finger.

“What does it matter?” I move over to curl up against his chest.

“Because some of us have places to be…”

I bury my face in his chest, the hair tickling my cheeks. “Right here?” The tips of his fingers run from my shoulder blades, down my spine before he cups my backside.

“Not quite,” he gives the mounds of flesh a gentle squeeze. I back away from him, but don’t go far. Barely six inches separate us, enough to make sure we’re not sweating. “Where do you want to travel?”

“What?”

He takes my left hand, “I told you I wanted to show you the world before I gave it to you…” He kisses the ring finger on my left hand. “I’m not sure how patient of a man I can be.”

“This is the farthest off the East Coast I’ve ever traveled. I’ve only been to New York, Florida and now France…” I think about places I’ve seen on TV…places I’ve read about. “I wouldn’t mind seeing Monte Carlo, or Ireland, oh, and London… Though I’m going there in September with Cinna, and here again, and Milan, and… I think he said Tokyo?”

“Well, I already have to go to London at the end of July. Opening Ceremonies for the Olympics and what not. I think Effie went insane with reserving seats at the events though.”

I pull the sheet up to my nose, “What does that mean?”

“It means you’re going to have to pick which events you want to see, if you even want to actually stay for the games. I only need to be there for the opening night then I can head back to the states.”

My phone begins ringing. Crazy Bitch by Buckcherry. There’s only one person this could be. I fight with the curtains around the bed, eventually pushing through and taking the sheet with me even though it’s only Peeta and I in this suite. “Morning princess.”

“What do you wear to a lunch date?”
“A lunch date?” I ask Johanna skeptically.

“Yes, breakfast was good. We were both still naked.”

“Wait, you’re having lunch with the same person you ate breakfast with?” Johanna didn’t repeat, only if she could get something out of it. “This guy must be the best lay you’ve ever had.”

She groans, “He is. I think we’re entering the ‘relationship’ stage. How do I do that?”

“You promise to only fuck him and only him besides your hand and that big purple jackrabbit you have in your goody drawer on off nights.”

“Is that really it?” I pull the sheet tighter around me. Peeta’s already on his Blackberry. Our morning in bed is now over, real life was starting again.

“I assume?”

“Now, back to what I should wear? It’s too early to bring out the ‘fuck me now’ pumps, right?”

I feel the bed shift. At first I don’t feel anything other than the brief tickle of chest hair on my back then one arm around my waist as Peeta’s free hand brushes hair over my shoulder. He places a tender kiss on the back of my neck, then a small bite. “I think it’s…” another bite and I groan, “Very late for the,” he begins kissing from my hairline down to the juncture of my neck and shoulder. “Fuck me now-“

Peeta grabs my phone out of my hand. “Sorry Johanna, I have to indulge my insatiable girlfriend.”

He hits end and tosses the phone to the floor. “Now. Cinna will be here to get you in two hours. That leaves an hour for me to make you scream here…” he pulls me down dragging me to the center of our massive bed. The curtains pull again trapping us in our own little world.

“And what about the other hour?”

“I’ll find a way to leave you very distracted for your big debut.”

I like the sound of that, “So what are you going to do?”

He settles between my legs picking up my foot and kissing the instep, “I don’t know…” he moves up to kiss my toes. I wiggle away but he’s holding on too strongly, “Let’s not focus so much on the future Miss Everdeen when there is so much to do in the here and now.”

His kisses move to each of my toes then to the ball of my foot. He moves down to the bone of my ankle and down my leg. His lips get closer and closer to my sex… Then the suite phone rings.

“Oh my god, fuck are you serious?” Peeta doesn’t let it bother him as much as it’s bothering me. He’s now crouching between my legs taking one long lap.

Over my own panting and the silence of the suite I hear a knocking at the door, “Babe…”

Peeta takes his tongue off me for one second, placing one tender kiss on my clit, “They can wait. We’re not to be disturbed here.”

The pounding on the door continues until I squirm reluctantly from Peeta’s tongue. Like I could have an orgasm with someone at the door? They were as much physical as they were mental.

“Where are you going?” he asks as I pull on my silk robe, tying it tightly.
“To answer the door. You should put some pants on,” I cross the suite and look through the peephole. A curvaceous blonde, with sun kissed skin.

I open the door, “Um, hello?”

She sashays into the suite, “Bonjour! Êtes-vous bien?”

“Um… Si?” I watch this invader put her hands on her curvy hips, hips that I don’t have with my boyish figure. “Can I help you?”

“I heard Peeta was in town, I had to pay him a visit. I didn’t realize he still had… company,” I clutched my robe as her tone and words bitch slapped me. I was accused of being a whore.

“And you are?”

“Delilah Cartwright.” The ex-girlfriend. Normally, if I was going to meet the ex I would want to look my best. Instead I have sex hair, haven’t brushed my teeth and I’m only in a silk robe.

“Delly! We were supposed to meet for lunch,” Peeta crosses the room, his hair still a mess but at least he has pants on. He shakes her hand and wraps his arm around my waist. “This is Katniss.” No… ‘this is Katniss my girlfriend’ or anything that got rid of her previous assumption that I was a lady of the night would be better.

“I’m going to go get in the shower. Cinna will be here shortly,” I wouldn’t be getting in the shower right away. I had a call to make.

I dialed Madge first, “Katniss! How’s Paris? Fantastic right?”

“It was, until a Miss Delilah Cartwright sashayed into the suite unannounced,” she groans, I can almost see her running her hands through her hair. “But it gets better. She interrupted what might have been the hottest oral that would have ever been performed on me. Then when I came to the door in nothing but a robe and my sex hair she basically accused me of being a prostitute.”

Madge makes a noise of such revulsion, “Well… You need a first meeting do-over.”

“Yeah, too bad Peeta also royally fucked up my introduction. I just got, This is Katniss. And they’re having lunch? Why wasn’t I told about this?”

“Who knows? Need me to key his Audi, or BMW or whatever he drives?”

“No, no… I’m going to get in the shower, wash off the awkward meeting. I’ll call Cinna to pick me up earlier than we planned to make me beautiful. Maybe she’ll come to the fashion show and I be absolutely fabulous.”

“Good luck, and trust me. He cares about you, not her.”

“Care? We’re at the ‘I love you’ stage,” Madge squeals high enough I’m sure she broke all the windows in the apartment, “Now, I have to go, I’ll see you Monday if I’m not being held by the French police for assault.”

After my shower I wasn’t allowed to do anything to myself besides get dressed and dry my hair. No make-up, no styling, and while my boyfriend showered I had to entertain his ex. I knew someone who wasn’t going to have sex for some time.

“So you’re from New York?” she asks in her flawless British accent.
“Yeah…” as our awkward conversation went on I learned that Miss Delilah Cartwright was not only my better when it came to looks, but was my better as a human. She had spent the last year or so in Haiti doing god knows what, my instant hate for her blocked that out.

At noon my savior came. Cinna was quick to make conversation with the curvy blonde so I could slip into the bedroom, “So… When did lunch with your ex slip your mind?”

Peeta frowns while buttoning up his shirt, “I didn’t tell you? I could have sworn-”

“No, you didn’t, so I got ambushed,” I slip into my black heels. “I hope you have fun with your ex. You don’t have to come this afternoon, you’ll be far too busy with plans you neglected to tell me about… After all, I’m just the company.” I sneer.

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“He’d be insane if he didn’t show up,” Octavia tells me while doing my mascara, the back ‘stage’ was full of teeny tiny women with the bodies of prepubescent boys, and this was our ideal of beauty. When each one passed me they’d give me a smile or a short nod then headed off to get changed into their next outfit. I was on last, led down the runway by Cinna. “But that is a classic ambush.”

“She called me company, like I was some cheap whore from the red-light district. Her father is a Duke… A Duke! How do I compare to the Humanitarian British sort of Royal?”

Octavia gives a skeptical snort, “American Royalty doing British Royalty. I don’t like it. We had a revolution so our royalty could do the cocktail waitress turned supermodel.”

“Yes, that’s exactly what they were thinking about at Bunker Hill.”

Within a few hours I went from the tragic current girlfriend answering the door in a wrinkled silk robe and bedhead to supermodel.

My hair was held up with clips and pins and fell down my back in loose curls. Yet again the only thing I was in was a silk robe, and yet I still never felt more fabulous.

“Underwear?” I asked looking at the hanging garment bag and nude heels.

“Not today, we don’t want any straps or strings showing.” Octavia helps me out of the chair and leads me to the dressing room which was nothing more than a corner hidden by a blind. “Alright, robe off.”

By this point, I was almost as comfortable being naked in front of Octavia as I was with Peeta. “Close your eyes.” I do as I’m told, hearing a zipper and rustling, “Alright, one foot.”

I step into the dress. “Alright now the other and hold your hands a little down and in front of you,” I feel delicate fabric slide up my body and arms until I was being zipped in.

I still don’t have my heels on so when Octavia guides me over to a full length mirror the skirt makes it difficult to even walk, “Alright, open your eyes.”

The body of the dress is made of a color mesh that blends perfectly with my skin. From afar it looks like the hand-sewn crystals and falling petals of the bodice are glued onto my skin. Cinna had a thing for mermaid dresses, the flesh colored fabric fanning out and pooling at the ground. I run my fingers over the more covered areas, my breasts, groin and backside.
“Wow…” is all I can say, twirling around a little before stepping into the nude heels. Even in the strange lighting of back stage, the lighted frames and hot overhead lights the bodice twinkled.

“Two minutes,” I still haven’t seen Cinna for more than five minutes since getting here. All around me people buzzed between makeup and hair stations speaking only in French, my only salvation was Octavia. Finally he appears at my side flawless in his dark shirt and pants.

“You’re on.” I had been so focused on my Ex ambush to be nervous. “Remember,” he tells me while offering me his arm. “Head high.” I give myself one last look. My eyes black and smoky, my lips red as blood matching my nails.

He leads me onto the platform stage protected from the lights and pounding music, “Alright, at the end take three steps ahead of me, hands on your hips. Push them out and blow a kiss, they’ll love it,” Cinna tells me. I just nod, my mind already numb from the music, “And go,” I hold onto him tightly, our arms looped together, my free hand resting on his forearm. I have to take one and a half careful steps for his every one. I didn’t even have to look down at myself to know I was shining like the lights of Paris. I couldn’t care about my boyfriend’s ex ambush me, or any of that. Here in this dress, on this stage I was bulletproof.

At the end of the catwalk Cinna let me go, I was on my own though I was only three steps ahead of him, one hand on my hip, the other blowing a kiss. And he was right; the crowd loved it, especially the one sitting front and center.

He was waiting for me backstage.

“Go get your man…” Cinna tells me. I approach him cautiously, waiting for the Ex to pop up somewhere.

“You’re radiant,” he kisses me lightly, my red lipstick giving his lips a dark red tint. I don’t kiss back, I’m happy to see him but that doesn’t mean I’m ready to make-out. I’m allowed to be mad. “You’re still upset…” he sighs, his thumb stroking my cheek.

“You think?” I snap, “Peeta you…”

“Not here, Katniss. Let’s go back to the hotel…”

“I have to change and-“

“The dress is yours. Come.” I take his hand and he takes my bag of clothes I wore here. We look like quite the couple. The Billionaire and the cocktail waitress turned model, the image of the American dream. We ride in the back of a limo to the hotel in silence and don’t say a word in the elevator or until the door to our suite closes.

“Peeta, you went behind my back to meet up with your ex, how was I supposed react?”

“I-I didn’t know it mattered,” he looks down at the ground.

I rest my hands on my hips, “If it didn’t matter you would have told me.”

He sighs, “I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you to get upset, or jealous. I told her to wait downstairs until you left, but she came up.” I turn on my heels and walk into our bedroom, taking off jewelry, throwing earrings and bracelets to the floor. “Katniss.”

“Don’t talk to me Peter!” I hiss, for once using his real name. “I can’t even look at you!”
I just want to be alone. The good thing about the suite is there are so many rooms and lounges after I wrestle my way out of the dress and I pull on grey sweats and a hoodie, the only way I can tell that he’s still here is the classical music coming from the office.

I flip through the stations until something familiar comes on. In all French, though I knew every word in English, on our big screen was Disney’s Beauty and the Beast.

I hug my legs to my chest and start checking my phone for new calls and emails, one call from Johanna, two texts from Madge, nothing fun. I feel the couch sink next to me just as Belle offers to take her father’s place in Beast’s castle. It’s still early, barely nine, if we wanted we could go out for another fancy dinner. I could get dolled up again.

“Are we still not talking?” I look as far away from him as possible. “Katniss, I’m sorry. I’ll tell you it every day until you believe me. It was just lunch. I didn’t want you to know because I didn’t want anything to distract you, I knew how nervous you were about today,” I hug my knees as close to me as possible. “It was a colossal mistake… Just please, please…” There’s an almost pathetic edge of need and begging in his voice, “Please look at me…” I give him just that, I stare at his knees instead of looking at his face. “Say something, please.”

“Peeta. I know you’re sorry, but I’m still upset that you felt the need to go behind my back to see your ex…”

“She’s a close friend she was helping me with…” he hesitates. “Something.”

I get off the couch and head back into the bedroom, “When you’re ready to tell me what something is I’ll be getting ready.”

“Ready for what?”

“Once in a life time trip? A night in Paris? I’m going to have fun in the City of Lights like a New Yorker,” I close the bedroom door. My hair was still done and my make-up is still fabulous. I shimmy into a black one shoulder mini dress before putting on my choker. The last touch is my black Louboutin’s and I head out of the bedroom.

“Ready to go?” I ask, he’s still in a dark shirt and dress pants. Good enough. “I’m in Paris and I’m not going to let anything ruin my time.”

Reluctantly he follows, taking me to a high end night club. It was nothing like clubs in America, instead of the same thumping rap music there was a live DJ. I could get used to this. “Dance with me,” I grab his hand and pull him to the crowded dance floor.

“So we’re speaking?” he asks, yelling over the music.

I just shake my head and dance near him but never touching him, “I couldn’t have gotten in here without you; I’m a nobody.” I let the music flow through me, feeling the bass rattle my bones.

“Fine, then I’m going to sit down,” As if that would get me off the dance floor. I have a lot of pissed off energy I’d rather fuck out of me, but not likely Beast.

A brave tall dark and handsome comes close and starts dancing with me, “I hate when I see such a lovely lady bothered by a bloke in a club.”

I roll my eyes, “Yeah.” I try and keep my tone as detached as possible. Last time a stranger tried dancing with me I ended up with a strange tongue in my mouth. I look over to my boyfriend who is being flirted with by yet another curvy blonde. God, do they all flock together? The lovely
blondes? I look back at the guy trying to dance with me. I could give Peeta a taste of his own medicine. I move closer to him but don’t touch him. I let him put his hands on my hips but still keep my distance.

“I’m Logan,” he tells me.

“Katniss,” Peeta’s eyes are on us.

Logan leans in, “You should let me buy you a drink. I hate to see a thirsty lady.” I can feel his breath on my ear. He backs away and smiles shyly. If I wasn’t taken I might be interested.

“Sorry, I’m not much of a drinker. I’m just here to dance.”

He frowns and pulls me closer when my guard is down, but I let him. I don’t know why I’m playing with fire like this. It’s childish, it’s manipulative, it’s-

“Come here,” Peeta’s firm hand is on my arm.

Logan lets go of me, “Excuse me, but the lady was dancing.”

I wince when his hands grab my face, pulling me too him. His lips are on mine, fiery with need. He steps forward until my back is against the wall. If this was Peeta’s anger, we should fight more often. His open hand grabs my thigh running up roughly hiking up my skirt. “What were you thinking out there?”

He grabs my waist lifting me up on the counter. “What you did to me today…” He silences me with another long kiss. “To unintentionally make you jealous…”

He reaches up my skirt and pulls down my underwear, stuffing them in his pocket instead of letting them hit the floor. “You knew exactly what you were doing,” he grunts going for his belt. I beat him to it, quickly letting his pants fall to the ground with his boxers. I reach forward, gently running the tips of my fingers down his velvety shaft before gripping firmly.

“And you’re just as guilty as I am Mr. Mellark,” he moans as I run my hands from base to tip over and over until he takes charge again. Digging his fingers into my hips he pulls me to the edge of the counter.

He says nothing before crashing into me. This isn’t the gentile lovemaking from last night, this is raw angry sex. He holds me in place while pounding into me, at first it’s painful with little to no foreplay but soon the pain gives way to pleasure and all I can do is hold onto him as tightly as possible. He leans down to kiss my neck, instead biting, hard.

I gasp as he slams deep into me, circling his hips hitting every right spot. Angry sex was amazing. I decide to stop sitting there taking it and instead start going on the offensive. I run my hands through his hair before pulling his lips to mine. It’s an awkward position for him at first but I lean back making it easier before pulling on his blonde hair. He moans into my mouth. I pull his head back, exposing his neck to me, then I let go.

With the fervor of his thrusts our less than subtitle rendezvous in the club bathroom doesn’t last
much longer. I go first, feeling my orgasm build until I spill over, screaming his name. I’m thankful for the thumping club music right down the hall, covering up our escapade. When Peeta finally recovers from his own climax he picks his head up from the crook of my neck, his breaths coming out as short pants. I offer a sheepish smile before he kisses me tenderly.

Someone tries the knob then knocks.

“One minute!” we both answer.

Two minutes, and one awkward walk of shame later we’re on our way back to the hotel, “So… What was that something you needed help with?”

“I was picking out a piece of jewelry, and I needed the opinion of someone who actually knew what they were looking at,” we don’t walk hand in hand, satisfied with only holding onto each other by our pinkies.

“Oh… Is it a ring?” I ask, leaning into him.

“It might…” he smiles.

“Is it a diamond ring?”

“There might be diamonds on the ring, there might be other stones, it might not even be a ring, and it might not even be for you so what do you care?”

I sigh, “Oh Mr. Mellark…” we push through the revolving doors into our hotel but I stop when were completely encased in glass and spin around on my heels. I grab onto his shirt and kiss him fiercely, “I’m the only woman you should be buying a diamond ring for.” It comes out without me thinking, word vomit that basically told Peeta I’d not only accept extravagant gifts, but a diamond ring, and those mean one thing.

He smiles, “Good to know… Now come on, you’re holding up traffic…”

We shower the day off together, the drama from earlier today dead and gone and soon we’re back to where we started, blankets up to our necks, curtains drawn around the bed, “So…” he takes my hand and kisses it.

“So…”

“You’ll be homeless again come August.”

I groan and nod, “Yeah… Well, you know what they say, in New York you’re either looking for a job or an apartment…”

“Mylease is up at the end of August,” I narrow my eyes.

“What does that have to do with me?”

“I’m kind of over the place. It’s too… Contemporary. We’ll be homeless at the same time so…”

“So…”

“I love you Katniss, and I want a place that’s not just yours, or just mine, where one of us feels like a guest, or an invader. I want to get a place that’s ours. I know it’s soon, I know we’ve barely been together for a month but what’s the difference between now and six months from now? Or six years from now?”
I’m mostly shocked by the fact that he could tolerate me for six years, then it hits me, Peeta’s asking me to move in with him. Sure we sleep together five to seven nights a week, we hump like rabbits and it’s rare that we’re not texting back and forth from the second we wake up to when we pass out.

“What are our geographical limitations? Which neighborhoods are we talking about?”

“I’ll call a realtor…”

“Peeta, this is insane…”

He leans forward and kisses me lightly, “I love you, I want a place that’s ours and only ours. No roommates…”

“You have a housekeeper, and a live in driver slash security guy.”

“I’ve had someone come into a board meeting with a gun, kidnapping and death threats… And you have an abusive ex you won’t even get a restraining order against.”

“It won’t do any good. It’s a piece of paper that says he can’t touch me.”

Peeta sighs, “I’m not even going to start this argument again Katniss… So are we going to do this?”

“You’re going to have to pay like… Ninety percent of the rent. I have nothing, all my money is going to student loans.”

He kisses my forehead, “I’ll pay for all of it,” this makes me uneasy. If something happens and we break-up I’ll be homeless.

It seems logical, I’ll at least save money on cab fare. So in one day we fought, we had makeup/angry sex in the bathroom of a club, I had told him basically he should buy me a diamond ring, and that I would move in with him.

I’m going to do the easy thing and blame being in the most romantic city on earth, even I can let myself get caught up in things every once in a while.
Paris was amazing; returning home alone was not. Peeta had to head to Abu Dhabi straight from Paris leaving me to sleep on the plane alone. Cinna and I had made a big splash at the fashion show and anyone who was anyone wanted something from my poor boss.

Haymitch pulls me in for an awkward hug. “Welcome back to the states, sweetheart.”

Naturally, the traffic back into the city is horrible and I’m not exactly sure what time my brain thinks it is. “So what did I miss? I see the sky’s still up.”

Haymitch looks bothered by something. “Well, since the boy is half way around the world doing god knows what… Yesterday morning they found some kind of worm on all the computers at Mellark Enterprises. They think they caught it before it could get any sensitive information…” he shrugs from the front seat.

“Does Peeta know?”

“Yeah, but there wasn’t much he could do from the U.A.E. so…”

“Want to get a drink?” I ask as we pass through the Queens Midtown Tunnel.

“It’s eleven.”

“It feels like nighttime…” I pull out my phone. Annie came back from her honeymoon yesterday, and I’m pretty sure Johanna and Madge weren’t doing anything useful on a Monday that couldn’t be interrupted for brunch.

The apartment was empty when I got home. I threw a weekend’s worth of clothes in the washer and changed out of sweats into something presentable – my usual jean shorts and a grey t-shirt. Slipping on my Converse has never felt so nice. The fancy clothes, cars and hotels were amazing, but I would always take no make-up and my duct-taped sneakers over Louboutin’s and runways.

If I move in with Peeta would all of that go away?

I hurry out of the apartment. God, sometimes it sucks living off the main drag. Come afternoon, all the taxis are around Times Square adding to the gridlock that is NYC. I put my headphones in, and play ‘Some Nights’ by Fun. The worst part about using the subway in summer was the fact that
the air was basically made of human sweat.

If I were smart I would have told Haymitch to wait. Peeta’s big on the ‘what’s mine is yours’ mentality. Gotta wonder if he’d be pissed if I used his apartment and awesome sound system for a girls’ night. *If only I wasn’t about to lose signal in 5... 4... 3... 2... 1...* I step through the turnstiles, scanning my Metro Card and watch my bars go from full to no signal.

I get off in Chelsea and dial Peeta’s number. He picks up after two rings, “Miss me already?”

“Nah. You can stay in Abu Dhabi forever as long the girls and I can use your apartment and its rooftop terrace for a girls’ night?”

“And if I say I don’t want you at my place without me there?”

“Too bad you gave me the code to not only the elevator but the garage. Also, Haymitch will let me in. I’ll buy him a bottle of vodka. Wait, am I keeping you from something important?”

“No, do me a favor. You can use my place if you take your one graduation gift. The one that I got for this occasion, go to my apartment, and call me around five your time.”

I come to a dead stop out front of Blossom, a vegetarian restaurant where hopefully my friends are waiting. “Wait... Why?”

Someone runs into my back. Don’t ever stop on a busy sidewalk, “I miss hearing you moan. Now enjoy the rest of your day. I love you.”

“I love you too. Play nice.”

“Wait, Katniss. I’ll be home tomorrow night. I’m sure Haymitch told you what happened…” he seems distracted.

“He said it was no big deal. That it didn’t get any sensitive information…”

“I’ll tell you when I get home. Don’t worry about it. Just remember to call at five.”

“I will, I promise…” the line goes dead and I push inside. I’m met by a shrill scream.

Annie pulls me into a bear hug, “I should be screaming and death hugging you... How was your honeymoon?”

“Amazing, Bora Bora,” she gives a dreamy sigh.

“We’re here too ya know!” Johanna calls from the table.

“Sorry! Sorry!” Annie and I take our seats. “It’s not every day Katniss leaves the country or…” she nods at Madge.

“Well, here you go…” Madge hands me an open New York Post. Page six, where New Yorkers gossiped about other New Yorkers.

*Billionaire Peter Mellark’s girlfriend wow’s Paris wearing nothing but rhinestones while- “Wow. I don’t even get a name…”*

“Shut up and read on.”

...while he finds himself browsing jewelry stores with ex-girlfriend Delilah Cartwright. Under the
little blurb about our private lives is a picture of him and Delilah holding hands around Paris and one really good one of me in the flesh colored dress shining like the stars.

I sip at the glass of chardonnay poured for me, “What?”

“Want to explain why…?”

“He’s getting jewelry made and wanted her opinion while I was getting gorgeous. I hate her though, called me ‘company’ like I was some cheap harlot…”

The waitress comes by just in time to hear me, “I’ll have the rigatoni and a side of sautéed kale,” I tell her taking another sip before flipping through the paper, I get to the business section, “Holy shit…”

‘Forty million reportedly stolen from Mellark Enterprises’

“Is forty million a lot?”

Johanna snorts, “It’s more than I’ll ever make.”

I furrow my brow. It isn’t my place to worry about Peeta’s business, but he was trying to play it off like it wasn’t much. Maybe it wasn’t for him. “Well, that’s not my business. What did I miss?”

“I’ve been sleeping with your boyfriend’s brother regularly.” Madge chokes on her wine.

“Bullshit!”

Johanna nods, “I have two drawers and closet space. Girls, what do I do?” good to know I’m not the only one in an awkward point in my relationship.

“You continue to sleep with him and don’t screw anyone else. Josie, it’s easy.”

She snorts, “Easy for you to say, jetting off to Paris while I’m here editing your tense issue! English major my ass!”

“I have to keep you busy somehow!” the table goes quiet for a second before Annie details her honeymoon, leaving out the steamy parts for the sake of our appetite.

“I’m moving in with Peeta,” I blurt out just as our entrees come.

“Oh… Darling. Why?”

I shrug, “I’m at his place five nights a week, sometimes more. I’ll be homeless in like two months, and his lease is up soon.”

“You’re not just moving in with him. You’re getting a place together. This is like…”

I sink down in my chair and stuff my mouth with pasta. “Absolutely batshit cray cray?” I ask with a mouthful. I chew my food and swallow, “Then, I guess now isn’t the time to say we had a moment and I told him if he was going to buy a diamond ring it better be for me?” Annie and Madge’s jaw’s drop as Johanna slaps her forehead, “I’m sorry! It was Paris, and the lights, and the food, and the wine. I got caught up in it all, and we were fighting…” I shrug. “It doesn’t seem half bad. I’m just worried that if I move in with him, and we get engaged I’ll have to be some frilly New York housewife.”

“I can test the waters for you? Finnick doesn’t want me to resign from the gallery but…”
Johanna is the first to open her mouth, “All in favor for Annie keeping her job?” we all raise our hands, including Annie.

“Ok, now that’s settled. More wine!”

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I’m nervous heading over to Peeta’s. I packed a weekend bag and a vibrator wrapped in an NYU sweatshirt just in case it decides to go off. When I walk into the apartment, Haymitch and Sae look confused. “Um… Hello?” It’s 4:45, I have to get somewhere alone like ASAP.

“You were supposed to call if you needed a ride, sweetheart.”

I wave dismissively and hug my bag to myself, “You didn’t have to drive all the way to SoHo just for me…”

“Mister Mellark said-“

I rush to the bedroom, “Mr. Mellark is in the United Arab Emirates he won’t care if I took a taxi.”

I close the bedroom door behind me and lock it before pulling out my phone.

“You’re early…” Peeta tells me.

“Sorry? You said around five.” I start unpacking, “And it’s like five of…”

“Are your pants off?” he asks boldly. “Because if not, take them off.”

“Yes sir…” I pop the button on my shorts and unzip them, pulling down my underwear as well.

“Ok?”

“I miss you so much…” he tells me, “the other side of my bed is so cold without you there. I barely know what to do without you stealing the sheets.”

“I do not…”

“Yes, you do. Now, did you bring your present?”

I turn the vibrator on and hold it to the microphone, “Unless you were talking about the keys.”

“I was not… now, take your shirt and bra off. If you’re wearing one.” I turn the phone on speaker and take off my black t-shirt and bra, throwing them on the floor, “Lay down on the bed.”

I follow his every order and lay on the center of the bed. It’s so lonely feeling, the big empty king. How did he sleep on this thing every night?

“Is the vibrator still on?”

“Yes…”

“Press the tip against your right nipple,” I listen to him and it sends a jolt through my body.

“I wish you were here…”

He snorts, “And you said I could stay in Abu Dhabi forever…” I keep the vibrator pressed to my breast. It’s not as strong as when he used it down south but it’s enough to get me whimpering.
“Please come home… now…” I whisper.

“Go to the left breast...” he leaves me there for a minute or so before ordering me to trail the toy down my body. “Now, don’t touch your clit with it. I’m not nearly done with you yet… Stick it in your mouth for a second before putting it in you.”

It feels strange against my tongue and I can’t help but touch it against my teeth, immediately regretting it. It’s an entirely new sensation when I push the vibrator in me. I can’t tell immediately if I like it or not. “I wish that was me…” he tells me from half way across the world.

“It feels weird…” I try to squirm away from the toy inside me. “Can I take it out now?”

“It might feel better if you weren’t tensing up. Relax, Belle…” I roll my eyes and exhale. God I hate when he’s right.

I shift slightly and the tip hits me in just the right spot, I don’t even try to hold back my moan, “That’s a good girl… Now, bring your hand down and hold it so it keeps touching that spot.”

It barely takes a minute for my legs to start kicking out, trying to get away from the overpowering sensation inside me. I wanted to pull it out, make myself cum and just get it over with, but a small part of me was curious to see where this was going.

Unfortunately Peeta must have read my mind, “Alright. Now, touch the tip to your clit… But just barely…”

I’m barely touching myself with the thing and my back arches off the bed as every nerve in my body starts firing. My vision goes white and I have no idea how much noise I’m making until I throw the toy to the other side of the bed, “God, you’re so beautiful… I can’t wait to just hold you again…”

I snort, “Peeta…”

“You should marry me,” I slap my forehead.

“Peeta, how much have you had to drink?”

“I… Uh… A little? But seriously.”

“I’m not accepting a phone proposal from a drunk man,” I tell him.

He sighs heavily, “First thing when I get home?”

“No, I’m not. Peeta, you’re drunk. Actually think about what you’re saying… Now get some sleep ok? I’m going to sleep here until you get home.”

“Someone stole a lot of money from my company…” he grumbles. Jesus fucking Christ, how can he keep his shit together when he’s listening to me literally fuck myself…

“You’ll get it back, right? And you’ll catch the person who did it… Right?”

He exhales like a horse, “I don’t know? What’s does matter if I’m out forty mil? I thought money
didn’t matter to you?” he snaps.

_Fuck this._ “Listen Peeta, don’t you snap at me. Your money doesn’t matter to you, it’s the fact that someone _stole_ from you.”

“That’s what you say now… What if it was more? What if I lost everything?”

“Then we’d be on level ground Mr. Mellark,” I snap. If he goes off on me one more time…

“We’ll be on level ground the second what’s mine is yours. Then… Then you’ll run away with it all!” I hang up on him.

**Where the fuck did that come from?** I know the best course of action is to just let him sleep the alcohol off. He’s under a lot of stress and a little behind on the sleeping. My phone starts ringing again and I silence it so I don’t have to hear it. I start getting dressed again and after the third call and a trip to the bathroom for me the landline starts ringing.

Sae knocks at the door, “Katniss? It’s Mr. Mellark.”

“I’m not here right now, just tell him to go to bed,” she relays the message.

“He says he can hear your voice through the door,” I open the door and grab the receiver from her.

“Yes, Mr. Mellark. What could you _possibly_ want?”

“I tell you that I want to marry you, and you hang up on me?”

“I told you to think about what you were saying and you said I was going to run off with your money. So excuse me.”

“Well, that’s what they all say… Look at you. You have a perfectly good place with your friend and you’d rather stay at my place even though I’m not there… What does that say?”

“That you told me to go to your place and call you at four. I can go home if it bothers you,” I grumble. Shit I don’t want to fight.

“And now you’re moving in with me… What does that say?”

“That you asked me to!” I tell him exasperated. Holy shit this boy should never drink. It destroys his memory and turns him into a jerk.

“Don’t leave me…” he whines.

_Please kill me now_ , “Listen, if you keep acting like a little bitch to me you’re going to push me away. Accusing me of wanting to take your money is going to push me away. Now go to bed, sober up and just get some sleep. You can call me when you get back to the states.”

“You said you’d be waiting for me-“

“Peeta, I’ve already had one guy controlling my every move… I refuse to have another even try. Goodnight. I love you…” I tell him.

“I love you too…” I hang up without another word and just stare, half tempted to pour out all the liquor from his penthouse so I never have to deal with moody drunk Peeta again. Of course Peeta has controlling tendencies. How could he not? He built a company up from the ground, too bad I’m so over that.
My mood is lifted when the girls come over for drinks from Peeta’s fully stocked liquor cabinet. We sit huddled together and watch Paranormal Activity while eating Chinese takeout. Not the best movie to watch when I’m sleeping in this huge empty apartment alone tonight. I’m half tempted to ask Madge to sleep here with me, but she has to get to Gale’s. Johanna has to be up early, and Annie has Finnick. What was happening to us?

They leave around midnight and I stand in the middle of the vacant apartment memorizing where everything is just in case a ghost attacks. New York City’s huge and this building’s old… ish. I’m sure someone died here and was pissed off. I climb into the bed and sleep on Peeta’s side. I could be irked by him and still be comforted by his smell. There were no law’s against that.

At four am I’m jerked awake by a thump in the main room. I scan the darkness for anything I could use as a weapon. Well, Haymitch for one, but who knows if he’s even here. He left before the girls got here and I went to bed before he even got back. I grab my tall bottle of aerosol hairspray. Useful for bludgeoning someone or spraying in their face. I hold it as one might hold a baseball bat before realizing hairspray wouldn’t do shit to a ghost.

Nothing bad happens in a horror movie when the lights are on… I paw for the light switch and wince at the bright white light. When my eyes adjust I see the source of the thump, Peeta tossing his shoe across the room. His back is to me, head resting on the back of the couch. He looks exhausted.

I tip-toe to him, not sure which Peeta I’m getting - my boyfriend or the jerk. His eyes are closed and I think he might be sleeping so I set he hairspray down and he jumps, “Katniss…” he murmurs exhaustedly before grabbing at me. I take a step back and he frowns. “Katniss I’m so sorry…”

“I thought you weren’t going to be home until tomorrow night…” What did he get on a plane the second I got off the phone with him.

“You’re angry… Please… just come here…”

I shake my head no, “You can’t control me, Peeta.”

“I know… I just, I just want to hold you. I upset you and I’m sorry… I’m just so tired…” he looks it, the dark circles under his eyes, his slumped shoulders. “I wasn’t even thinking and I hurt you… I flew straight home, I didn’t know if you’d be here but I needed to just see you, and tell you I’m sorry…”

“Peeta…” I take a step towards him and he pulls me close. He reeks of alcohol, but only his clothes. His breath is still minty from him brushing his teeth on the plane back home.

He buries his face in my shoulder, “Don’t think I want to control you…” he tells me, his voice muffled by my skin and loose hair. “That’s the last thing I ever want Belle…”

I smile a little, “The Beast in the fairy tale had to learn the same lesson… Now come to bed. I kept your side warm…”

“I was going to head to the office…”

“It’s four in the morning, you’re coming to bed.”

“Katniss!” he snaps, “In case you didn’t realize-“

I jump out of his lap, “You’re a snappy asshole when you’re tired, come to bed now.”
Peeta sits there and just stares at me for a minute, “No one… No one’s sent me to bed since I was twelve.”

“Well, if you’re going to act like an ass get used to it,” he finds some reserve of energy and scoops me up, throwing me over his shoulder.

“I should spank you.”

“You’ll do no such thing mister!” I beat on his back with my fists, “Or you’ll be grounded!”

“Oh baby, will you use the whips and chains?”

“I’ll use the handcuffs and shove your graduation present places on you that you wouldn’t want it!”

He tosses me on the bed and strips out of his clothes, “Take off your pants,” he tells me. I sit up and cross my arms, narrowing my eyes, “Katniss, would you please take off your pants for me?”

I slowly do so, flinging them with my foot into his face. I go for my shirt as well this time throwing it behind me as he climbs onto the bed. His lips are on mine again while his hand starts working on getting me wet. This isn’t what I had in mind when I said go to bed, but I won’t complain.

I trail my fingers down his torso before gripping him. I’m not surprised at all to feel that he’s already hard.

We go for straight vanilla sex. Me on my back, my legs wrapping around his hips as he thrusts into me slowly. I watch him, his eyes quickly leaving mine to study the place where we’re joined. I lick my middle and ring finger before bringing my hand down to assist in my orgasm.

“Mmmm… Fuck! Yes!” I gasp just as my body finds release. Yep, definitely better with him here, even if he’s a colossal jerk when he’s drunk and tired.

We both pass out right after he climaxes, his head resting on my chest, my things holding onto his leg.

Peeta sleeps through his morning alarm, and me shaking him awake. I tell him the time around ten and he just pulls me to him, “I’m the CEO, and they don’t know I’m home yet.”

I just sigh and fall back to sleep. We wake up some time after two, “I haven’t slept that late since… Well ever.” He whispers, his head again on my chest, “What are you doing to me Miss Everdeen?”

“What are you doing to me?” the spot between my breasts where his head rests is sweaty. “You’re so… warm,” I go to move but he holds me still.

“Shhhh I’m listening to your heart…” I roll my eyes as his fingertips run along my side, “Oh! That made it speed up.”

“Well… yeah, it tickles…”

“Hmm…” he fingertips head lower and lower until my legs are being spread for me. Even I can feel my heart speeding up, “Let’s try…” he sinks two fingers inside me, “This.”

“What are you…” he pulls his fingers out and at first I think he’s satisfied but he moves his fingers to my clit rubbing in small circles, still listening to my heart. I close my eyes, trying to just relax and feel as the pressure builds inside me. He toys with me through my orgasm and finally brings his hand up and licks his fingers clean. I see the muscles in his shoulders tense.
“I can still taste me on you…”

“Delicious, dead semen for breakfast…”

He snorts, “Technically it’s a late lunch, but by the time you get ready, early dinner,” he makes another face, the taste clearly still with him.

“You know, there’s a dead civilization in me, all of them little clones of you.”

“You are…” he thinks for a second, “Odd.”

“Is that the best you can come up with?”

“For now. While you were wasting your day away I called a realtor.”

“Today? Listen, you were snoring like ten minutes ago.”

“No, yesterday. She has a few places to show us. Is tomorrow good for you?”

“Peeta, my boss is in Paris and I only have to go in to work when his little drones summon me. I also work wherever my laptop is, and where Wi-Fi is, so all of New York. Can you miss another day of work?”

He shrugs, “I should really go in…” I nod in agreement, “Come with me to keep me sane?”

“Only if I can keep my clothes on.”

He looks up at me and grins, “That second time was all you.”

We’ve developed a rhythm while getting ready to insure we’re not bumping into each other. Shower quickly together, me paying his orgasm debt by getting down on my knees in the shower for him, then he gets ready in like two minutes while I mess with my hair and make-up for a half hour. It’s a flawless system since he’s out watching TV before I can even get dressed.

“Peeta, it’s summer, how are you wearing a suit?” I now I didn’t feel overdressed in my red pencil skirt and tucked in tank top. The high waist of this thing was going to drive me insane. I slip my feet into my go-to heels and check my very sloppy bun before putting on my sunglasses.

“Underground garage here, underground garage at work, oh and air conditioning. I’ll never see the sun.”

He offers me his arm and I take it eagerly, “Actually… I lied, Haymitch is waiting for us out front.”

“I’m offended,” I joke, listening to the click of my heels on the marble floor leading to the elevator. Here I thought I had to prepare for the blazing hot sun and stagnant air. Instead we were met with cameras. Thankfully I was ignored; everyone wanted to know about the hacking, or the worm, or whatever it was. I pull at the strap to my backpack. If I was getting dragged to Peeta’s work I was going to make use of the time and work on my next column.

Peeta and Haymitch discuss the issue at hand while I play on my phone. Apparently I could expect some attention when the theft drama blows over. Cinna was all anyone in the fashion world was talking about apparently, and with his name came mine.

I groan out loud as I read through my email. Most of my ‘questions’ related to something I knew nothing about, or something I already answered.
Finally I found the one, ‘My boyfriend and I are constantly arguing. Is this a sign that I should break up with him?’ –Lindsay from West Village

As Peeta goes to rule his world I lock myself in a conference room.

I listen to more Fun. and start trying to rule my own world.

Lindsay, I hate to tell you this but arguments are natural in a relationship, especially a serious one. Not saying that your relationship is only healthy if you’re at each other’s throat 24/7, but a little squabble here and there is normal. Now if it’s a full screaming match or a fist fight you should probably consider backing out. But if it’s just a little disagreement that can be solved with healthy discussion and just a tiny bit of angry loud voices you should be good. Also, the make-up sex is amazing. Sometimes I think it’s why men piss us off in the first place.

Beautiful use of my degree.

Everyone always seems to want the lover, not the fighter. Why can’t we have both? Also, where do we draw the line on healthy fighting? I think we can all agree the better deal would be to have our partners do their arguing elsewhere and come home to us for the make-up sex. Unfortunately, at least from my experience it can’t work like that. I cannot tell you whether or not you should break up, as long as you two are having healthy discussions to solve your disagreements you’re in a much better spot than some women.

I realize this took no time at all and close my computer after shooting the tiny paragraph to Johanna. I hear heavy footsteps down the hall coming towards me and close my computer. The door swings open and instead of Peeta I see two uniformed police officers, “Um… You can have this room if you-“

“Ma’am, please put your hands behind your head and stand up slowly.”


“Ma’am, this is your last warning, hands behind your head,” I don’t want to know what kind of force he’s willing to use and stand as a third officer comes into the room and bags my laptop and even my phone.

“What are you…”

“Turn away from me, hands behind your back palms facing up,” I do as I’m told and the second the metal touches my skin I panic.

“Peeta!” I scream as I’m cuffed, “Peeta help!”

“What are you… Un-cuff her!”

I can’t breathe as I’m tilted off balance so I can’t resist. Like I could in these heels anyway. Tears well up in my eyes, “What’s happening?”

The officers ignore both Peeta and myself and start dragging me from the conference room, “Un-cuff her now!” he roars. “Or I’ll see to it that you’re both fired!”

I can’t think, I can’t breathe, “Peeta! I’m ok!” I tell him, confused, and a little pissed off, but ok.

One officer lets go of me while the other tries to calm down my boyfriend, “We have a warrant for her arrest.”
“Show it to me. Now!” he spits, I can’t even look at him, I don’t want him to see me crying, “This is impossible. She was with me the whole weekend!”

“The money was traced to her personal bank account.”

“Katniss…” Well, I was a millionaire, unfortunately I had no idea how I got the money. Peeta looked confused.

“Peeta, it wasn’t me. I don’t even know how to use online banking. I failed computer class three different times before getting the credit,” the one officer twists my arm and I cry out in pain.

“You’re hurting her! Let her go!” Did he believe me?

Handcuffs are a lot nicer when Peeta’s using them with me, the metal digs into my wrist, “We have to take her in for questioning.”

My legs tremble. How was this even happening? And were handcuffs really necessary? The officers escort me into the elevator while Peeta’s entire workforce watches the spectacle. He must be mortified, I know I am.

I’ve never been more thankful for underground garages, when I’m loaded into the back of a squad car I press my head against the back of the passenger seat, trying to hide my face. Apparently after bouncing between three out of country bank accounts, all in my name, the money landed in my Wells Fargo account.

“Where were you between six and seven pm on Sunday?”

I knew better than to talk even if I was innocent, “I want a lawyer.” I knew it looked suspicious, but I was already pretty much framed for grand theft a zillion dollars.

I sit alone in a cold dark room after a very short conversation with Peeta. Apparently his legal team was my legal team, protecting me against charges of stealing from his company. I rock back on my chair and drop down to all fours when the door opens. Two men in suits and the detective.

“Her alibi checks out, you found nothing on her hard drive, or her cellphone, nothing back at her apartment. The only thing you guys have is what was stolen, which is being returned as we speak. You’re holding my client against her will.”

I twist at the handcuffs on my wrist, “Yes, because it’s so hard to cover your tracks.”

“My client is being framed. Mr. Mellark isn’t pressing charges on her, and why is she still in handcuffs?”

I just stayed silent, trying to take in the discussion between the lawyers and the detective. Apparently I was being held illegally, all charges against me were dropped after my computer and cellphone were searched inside and out. Unfortunately, I was still a suspect.

I’m escorted out of the room and un-cuffed before being released. Peeta’s waiting for me in a sort of dingy waiting area, “Katniss…” I run into his arms.

“It wasn’t me! Peeta, I swear, it wasn’t… I couldn’t have…”

“Katniss, I know. Trust me. I know…” I bury my face in his chest, “We track everything the employees do on the computers. The only unregistered users in the last month were you and…”
I look up, “And…”

“Cato…”

Peeta calls Madge, Johanna, Annie, and my mother to tell them I’m fine and not under arrest, and again quite poor and we eat whatever delicious stew Sae has cooking. At some point Peeta leaves me alone and heads into his office.

I was getting to the bottom of this one way or another. I dial Cato and head for the terrace, “Miss me?” he asks.

“Meet me tomorrow at my apartment, around noon.”

“A booty call? Bored of your beau already?”

I snort, “Do we have a deal?”

“More like a date.” The line goes dead and I hug myself.

“Please let this be the right decision…”

I hear the door slide open and close softly, “Cold?” Peeta asks, sitting next to me on the chaise. I nod and he wraps the blanket he brought out around us both before pulling me back so we’re laying down, “I’m sorry, about all of that today…”

“Did you even think it was me?”

“Not for a second. I see how you stare at your phone sometimes. Cluelessness like that can’t be faked.”

I elbow him, “Ass…”

“I was going to wait to give this to you… But…” he shifts a little and pulls something out of his pocket. He sets a velvet box in my hands.

“I’m not proposing,” he clarifies, “it’s for your right hand,” in the dim light of the penthouse I can see the large emerald surrounded by small diamonds. It’s gorgeous.

“This is what I was scheming with Delly. I was thinking a sapphire, but she thought an emerald would go better with your skin and eyes.”

He slips the ring on my right ring finger, a near perfect fit, “Green is my favorite color… Peeta I love it, you really shouldn’t have…”

He nuzzles into me, pulling me as close as possible, “Katniss, I love you. I’d give you the world… Even if someone else is trying to give it to you.”

“Peeta, too soon.”

He kisses the side of my head, “Oh, my dear, it’s never too soon…”

He’s so cheerful that I decide not to tell him about my meeting with Cato. What Peeta didn’t know couldn’t hurt him.
Chapter Summary

The song for tonight’s chapter is Hurt by Johnny Cash.

Thank you dearly Apecanin. Even after I sent you the wrong chapter (I’ll get it right next chapter).

I’m going to be safe and put a trigger warning. This chapter eludes to sexual assault, domestic violence, psychological trauma… and things that aren’t fun. I’m sorry in advance.

There were a few things I needed before my meeting with Cato. First things first, I needed to head to my bank. The word had gotten out about my arrest. I slipped out of Peeta’s and was hidden by the tinted windows of one of his cars. Haymitch drove me to Chelsea so I could get into my safe deposit box.

Johanna was the only one who knew what was in here. In fact, she was the one who pushed me to get it.

“Can I help you?” a teller asks me. I didn’t go to a big name bank for this. In fact, I’m surprised that the NYPD didn’t seize this thing as well.

I take off my sunglasses, “I need to access my safe deposit box.”

The woman smiles at me, “I’ll just need to see some ID.”

I watch her eyes follow the rock on my finger. Peeta’s I love you gift was probably going to cause trouble, especially since it was on my left hand.

I slide my driver’s license over to her. It was expiring soon. I’d need to get my photo taken before July ends. My license was from when I was eighteen, just around when I started dating Cato, where one of the first bruises was hidden by layers and layers of foundation and powder. I give the stupid girl in the picture one last look before tucking her away.

“Very good, follow me!”

The woman leads me into the safe and leaves me be. After Cato and I split, she told me to buy a gun. I wasn’t old enough to get the permit to carry and too poor to buy a gun so Johanna gave me hers. A .357 magnum revolver that I tucked away in my purse before I started thumbing through the rest of the box - scores of DVD’s in sleeves all dated. The contents of this deposit box were enough to shame me straight to Antarctica. Cato liked taping us. When I finally had the courage to leave him I shoved all the DVD’s into my backpack and threw his computer across the room, the resulting beating nearly landed me in a hospital. Instead, I spent five days on Johanna’s couch occasionally spitting up blood for the first day, the other four I was basically unconscious.

Not all of these were him and I having sex. Actually, Cato and I weren’t very intimate. Most of the time I’d say no and he’d hit me until I submitted or sat still.
I tuck one away with the gun and leave after locking my safe deposit box. I put my sunglasses on and leave the bank. I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. Mom.

“Hello?” I ask when I answer.

“Katniss? Oh my God, are you ok?”

“I’m forty million dollars poorer, but I never even knew I had the money.” I walk into the summer heat and hold my hand in the air. “Taxi!” A yellow cab pulls up and I slide in, giving the driver the address. “Yeah, they let me go after his lawyers yelled some.”

“You should come home for the week. Spend some time with your family.” I thought about home, the river, and the old homes dotting the riverbank. The islands with cliff faces, I missed the clean smell and the occasional whiff of exhaust. The Keys, where my mother currently called home, was not my home.

“I’ll be fine. If I ignore cameras I can wait for this scandal to blow over. More importantly, Peeta and I are getting a place together.”

My mother secretly hoped I would come home from Manhattan after college, but I hated the three hundred and sixty five days of constant oppressive heat much more than I hated being in a concrete jungle. If I was going to escape to home it would be Upstate. “Are you sure? We haven’t touched your room.”

“Yeah, mom… I’m sure. This is my home, besides, we meet with a realtor this afternoon,” I peak over the passenger seat of the taxi and check the clock. I had ten minutes until Cato would show up.

I rushed into the apartment, checking to be sure it was empty. I changed out of my skirt and tank top into a baggy pair of shorts and a t-shirt. With the revolver tucked into my waistband I gave myself one last look in the mirror. “You can do this. Be as assertive as Johanna, as stubborn as Madge, and smart as Annie, and you can do this…” I tell myself just as the buzzer goes off.


“This is one hell of a date…” he smirks, sitting at the kitchen table.

I sit across from him and keep one hand on the concealed gun. With my free hand I pull out the DVD. “Remember these?”

“I was wondering where you put them.”

“I don’t know how you did it, but I know you’re responsible for the little surprise the cops traced to my bank account yesterday.”

“And what makes you say that?”

I smirk, “Who else would it be? Who else would target me like that? Want to destroy my name, my relationship… Cato, I only have one enemy, and you’re right here.”

“Katniss, give me that disc,” he commands. I’m not his little bitch anymore.

“No,” I answer simply.
“Katniss, now, we’re all alone here. What are you going to do? Give me the disc and the rest and I’ll leave your face out of it.”

I pull the revolver out of my waistband and pull the hammer back. The dangerous thing about revolvers is that they don’t have safeties. “Threaten me again and I won’t leave your face out of it.”

“You won’t shoot,” he snorts.

I laugh, “Says the guy with the gun in his face. If you come near me again, if you hurt me, try to damage my reputation, if you hurt anyone I care about, in any way I’m sending every single one of the DVD’s to the cops. Try anything funny and they’re there.” He narrows his eyes at me, “Funny, you made these so I would never leave you without worrying that you’ll shame me into some hole. Leave. Now.” I go to stand up, “I have to be somewhere in an hour and I’d like to look nice.”

He doesn’t move at first, “Cato, I’m serious. Get out of my apartment, get out of my life, they’re going to track this whole thing back to you anyway. Get a running start and get the fuck away from me.”

He actually listens and leaves without question. I close the door behind him and wait for the main door to slam shut. The buzzer goes off and I grab my cell phone. He was pissed and this was it. I open up the recorder on my phone and press call.

“Katniss, I had someone open three different Swiss bank accounts in your name, then another person create a virus that would transfer the money to one of the accounts where we transferred it to the other two before yours. Trust me; it’s going to get a lot worse for you. You’re still mine and I will punish you. Keep the DVDs; they’ll remind you what’s to come.”

“Actually no. Thanks for the confession.” I stop the recording. “I can barely program a digital watch, but apple makes a really good instruction manual. Goodbye Cato. If you’re not off my stoop in a minute I’m calling the cops and turning over every single DVD.”

I walk away from the callbox and it buzzes a few more times before going silent. I check the outside world from Madge’s window. He’s gone. I send the sound file to my email just in time for Cato to start up the stairs. I don’t think I ever dialed 911 faster.

How did he get in!? Who let him in!?

I run for my bedroom and lock the door just as he re-enters the apartment, “911, do you need fire, police, or medical?”

“Police, my ex-boyfriend is breaking into my apartment,” I give her the address and hear him stomp to my bedroom door.

“Police, my ex-boyfriend is breaking into my apartment,” I give her the address and hear him stomp to my bedroom door.

Shit, the gun! I left it on the dining room table. I’m going to die here. I’m going to become one of those statistics.

“He’s going to kill me.” I tell the dispatcher.

“Katniss! Get out here!” he roars as I climb under the bed, hiding like a child. There weren’t real locks on the doors. In fact, they could be forced if you shook the handle enough. The banging on the door stops for a minute before I hear the handle break. This is it. I’m going to die, he’s going to finally kill me. I hold my breath as he slides the closet open, checking for me there. I should have escaped on the fire escape. My purse is here and I could have gotten to Peeta’s before he realized what I had done.

A firm hand grips my ankle and rips me from under the bed, “No!” I scream. Will it hurt? Will he
I’m too wrapped up in wondering how quickly I’ll be dead I can barely fight when he throws me into my dresser. My back hits the mirror and I hear a crack, I slide a little and feel the broken glass cut into my shoulder, “Please… You don’t have to…” I slide off the low dresser top taking lotions and decorations with me. He has one of my belts in his hand - a thick strap of leather with metal rivets in a wave pattern. The leather bites my skin again and again and then it’s gone. Cato grabs my hair and hauls me to my feet while I scream from the pain, every inch of me aches from the welts forming.

“Do you see what you make me do to you?” he forces me to look at the bloody mirror. All I can see is a madman and a crying girl who can barely stand. He throws me to the ground and I curl up trying to protect myself from the kicks I know are coming. I cover my face and try to make myself as small as possible when the first kick comes. I lose count of the blows. The pain in my arms is too great. Something cracks and I know he broke something. His leg must get tired because he goes back to the belt. I just curl up even tighter, ignoring the screaming pain in my arm. I put my mind as far away from here as possible until the blows stop or my death comes.

Paris was nice… I want to go back there some day. Maybe I’ll save up the money and move there.

When he knows I’ve been beaten into submission I hear the click of the gun, “Tell me why I shouldn’t paint the wall with your brain!” he screams.

“Because…” I gasp. “Because jail time for murder is a lot longer than assault.”

“I’ll be long gone before the cops get here,” I crack an eye open, the barrel is pointed right for my head. He crouches down next to me and rubs the cold metal against my cheek. Please no, please just end it now. He rubs it against my nose and finally traces it along my lips. My arms go limp and he kneels down on my arm. I scream from the pain and feel the cold metal enter my mouth. He pushes it in as deep as possible, I can’t even scream, just gag on the revolver.

I’m sorry, Peeta. I was doing it for you, I should have told you. I should have had you here or listened to you and went to the cops.

The gun is gone from my mouth and I feel the now warm barrel trace down my neck until he presses it hard into my heart.

“Police!” The gun moves from my heart and I look up to see two of New York’s finest pulling Cato from me. In the struggle the gun goes off and I feel nothing. No pain, no cold.

It missed, oh thank God it missed.

Then I feel a sharp pain in the side of my head and everything goes dizzy before darkness takes over.

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Peeta

I’m not sure I’ve ever wanted out of a meeting more than now. After the theft over the weekend and Katniss’s framing I just needed a night off with her. The table by my elbow starts vibrating and when I look down, I see it’s Gale.

“One minute,” not like I’ve been listening to this meeting at all. “Hello?”

Instead of Gale, Madge is on the other end, “Peeta, Cato got into the apartment. He had a gun, and Katniss-“
“Where is she?” I stand and grab my suit jacket off the back of my chair.

“They’re taking her to Mount Sinai,” that was all the way across town. “Just please, hurry.”

I hang up, “I have to go.”

“Girlfriend in prison again?” someone snorts.

“If I hear anyone mention that they’re fired.”

I can hardly breathe on the cab ride to the hospital. Cato was in her apartment, with a gun. Why didn’t she listen to me? She should have just listened to me…

“Can I help you?”

“Which room is Katniss Everdeen in?”

“She’s in room 303a. Head up the elevator and down the hall, second door on your left,” Gale and Madge are sitting outside of her door.

Gale holds onto her hand as she blots her eyes with a tissue. He nods and opens his mouth to speak but the doctor comes out of her room, “Well, we reset her arm, but I’m ordering a CT scan.”

It feels like someone grabs my heart and squeezes, “What? Why? Can I see her?”

“It’ll be about fifteen minutes until we can take her down,” the doctor walks away before I can ask his name.

“Peet,” Gale lets go of Madge for one second. “It’s… It’s not pretty.”

I just nod, I don’t know what to expect.

Dead. Katniss looks completely lifeless. Her left arm is splinted and elevated, her fingers hang limp from the bandages. Her body isn’t covered in a blanket so I can see each and every welt he put on her. Some the skin was broken, some were bandaged. Her legs and arms are littered with them, thick rectangles of raised skin, some look like bike tire marks, thin with a wavy pattern. Where her skin isn’t tracked with welts there are bruises, wide and dark purple. He didn’t hold back at all.

Bile rises up my throat and I don’t stop it. I get sick in the red biohazard bin, and again when I see all the bloody gauze and cloth in the bin. I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and look up. Madge just stands dumbfounded. “I- I’m so sorry. The neighbors… they’ll buzz anyone in,” her words get harder and harder to understand. I just listen while pulling a seat next to the hospital bed. Katniss’s hand is cold and unresponsive, but I can’t let go. “She’s just so stubborn. So god damned stubborn…”

“She’ll be fine…” I mumble. She has to be. I don’t know if I can live without her at this point. I want to sit by her side until she wakes but nurses wheel her out and away from me.

“I’m her next of kin…” she whispers. “Because her family lives down in Florida. If something happens to her… I have to call…” she walks out of the room, “I have to call…”

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Katniss

Thirsty, so thirsty… I feel something cold at the back of my throat, cold and metallic, Gun…
Everything hurts. I try to roll over and get comfortable. I’m dead, why do I hurt? I force my eyes open, the only light in the room the dim emergency lights that will probably never go off giving the room a yellowish glow. I take an inventory of my injuries. Heavy arm, I lift my right arm and see the white plaster from my hand to my elbow. My shoulder had a dull ache which was easy to ignore. I shift again and I could feel them, whip marks all over me.

At least he kept his promise. He left my face out of it for the most part. When I’m idle I remember the cold caress of the revolver. I can feel it in my mouth, taste the sharp metal and oils. He could have killed me.

I could have died, if the cops didn’t come I would have died.

“Oh! You’re awake!” a chipper nurse strolls in. I just stare as she takes my blood pressure, checks my IV and tries for my temperature with an oral thermometer. “Open up!” I almost do, but then I remember what almost happened last time someone tricked me into opening my mouth. It all rushes back to me and the tears start flowing freely.

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Peeta

“Well, she’s awake, but she refuses to talk, or open her mouth…” Gale had to be up early in the morning so it was only Madge and I at the hospital. Johanna and Annie wanted to be called the second Katniss woke up.

Madge just nods and looks up at me. She shouldn’t be dealing with this. When they told us Katniss started seizing before her CT scan, she burst into tears. They said it was from the trauma caused by several blunt blows to her head though she had no breaks in the skull or swelling of the brain so it was most likely a one-time occurrence. “Peeta, go in there and see if you can… Something. I’ll call Josie and Annie…”

Katniss doesn’t even look at me when I come into the room. She just stares at the wall, bunching the sheet in her good hand. Every few seconds her jaw twitches and she swallows hard, “Katniss? Love?”

She just stares, what did he do to her? From what I overheard when they did a rape kit on her they found evidence of consensual sexual intercourse, which was her and I, “Katniss, please. It’s me. Just say something…”

The only evidence I get that she has heard me is a slight shake of her head. She closes her eyes and sighs through her nose before finally looking my way, the one long whip mark swelling her cheek. She slowly rotates her right arm and pretends to write in wither left. “Do you want paper?” she nods. “One second…” I lean in and kiss her forehead, “I have a pad in my briefcase in the waiting room…”

When I come back she’s back to staring. It takes another few seconds to get her back to me. She takes the pen and paper in shaky arms, trying to grip the pen with her cast. She gives up and switches to her left.

Johanna? She writes.

“She’s coming, Madge was calling her…”

Her writing was never neat, but now in her non-dominate hand it’s like chicken scratch, Time?
“It’s eleven at night… Why can’t you talk?”

She doesn’t write, words aren’t enough. She takes my hand in hers and folds in my middle, ring and pinkie, making a gun with my hand before bringing the tip of my index finger to her lips. They part slightly but her jaw remains clenched. She presses my finger to her teeth. It takes a minute before it clicks.

I pull my hand from hers, “Oh Belle… How… no…”

She breaks my fantasy of every horrible way Cato could be killed by nudging another note my way,

_Johanna,_

_**Go to the bank and take what’s in my box to the police. He doesn’t own me anymore. Go into my email, he confessed to organizing the theft.**_  

_-Katniss_

She tears the paper and folds it before handing it to me, “Katniss? What does this mean?”

She gives me the one minute sign as the strange swallowing starts again, and then it hits me. She’s fighting the need to throw up. There’s a plastic bowl on the nightstand, “Katniss, please. It’s ok. Only I’m in here, no one can hurt you here. What he did to you was horrible, and he’ll rot in jail for it.”

She grabs the bowl from my hands and gets sick while I hold her hair away from the mess. I rub her back but feel a large bandage and try to avoid it. The movements get awkward so I stop.

Johanna, Madge and Annie burst through the door while Katniss rinses the sick from her mouth, “I’ll leave you four alone.” I slip the note to Johanna and head to the waiting room where Finnick is thumbing through the latest Vogue.

He looks up when I approach, “You look about fifty… How is she?”

“Broken arm, she had a seizure earlier and is covered in welts from what they can only assume was a studded belt. She’s great,” I snap.

“Listen, don’t get bitchy with me!”

I take a deep breath. He’s right, “Sorry, it’s just… I told her to go to the police about him.” I run my hands through my hair. “He shoved a gun in her mouth. She won’t speak, she won’t open her mouth. If this was any other asshole he’d be behind bars before he knew it, but no! His damn uncle will bail him out the second they post bond. Hell he’s probably already free as a bird.”

“Hire a damn good lawyer…” he grumbles.

This brings a small smile to my face, “I have a whole team of them. They got her out of a holding cell just last night even though she’s still technically a suspect.”

We sit in an uneasy silence for a few minutes, “How was your honeymoon?”

“Great! Annie wants to live in Bora Bora.”

I just shake my head. “Anything good in Vogue?”
“Rompers, though… I’m not sure if they’re good or just bad nineties flashbacks.”

Before she leaves Johanna pulls me aside, “What’s in her safe deposit box?”

“Cato had a thing for video cameras,” she crosses her arms. “We’re putting that bastard behind bars. I’ll run his name through the mud so fast for what he did to her. VP of his Uncle’s company? When I’m through with him he won’t be able to get a job at Jamba Juice!” It’s the first good news I’ve gotten all day.

In the morning they try and get Katniss to eat but she still won’t open her mouth, the same with lunch, and finally dinner. A therapist comes through twice during the day. Both hours he leaves saying that she just sat and stared.

I haven’t changed or showered since yesterday morning. Now that she was awake and in stable condition physically, I would be kicked out shortly. At some point I overhear her doctor and nurse talking about a feeding tube for Katniss.

*Could you drink through a straw? You could bite down on it and everything?*

She thinks for a second, *I don’t want another tube in me. If you have an idea I’ll try it. You know you can talk. I’m not offended.*

There are a few moments when our passing notes get playful. Katniss won’t laugh but sometimes she’ll smile and it’s more than I can expect, *Madge and I wanted to know how you felt about me moving your things to my place. We have a good case against him, but he posted bond.*

She studies me for a few seconds before taking the pad from me. She brings her knees up and twists so I can’t see what she’s writing. She scribbles for a few minutes before passing me the pad.

*If you still want me there after I tell you this. I invited Cato to the apartment. I thought I could scare him into leaving me alone, because of what I have of his. I had a gun and everything. Then he left and I got the confession. He confessed to organizing everything and I told him I was calling the cops because I recorded it. Someone let him in, someone had to because I saw him on the stoop and I heard the door slam. I forgot to lock the apartment door and he broke in. I just wanted him to confess to stealing from you. Please don’t hate me. I love you. Please don’t hate me. I love you. Please don’t hate me. I love you. Please don’t hate me. I love you. Please don’t hate me. I love you.*

When I look up she’s crying. I honestly want to be mad at her, I should be livid. She put herself directly into harm’s way. She went behind my back to meet him and could have gotten herself killed. I try and get angry… But she thought she was doing the right thing.

“You did that… For me? Katniss…” I pull her into a loose hug; she can’t stand much pressure on any part of her. She sniffs and nods. “Katniss… We’re in this together… You don’t have to fight your battles without me anymore but I can’t help you if you keep secrets from me…”

--

*Katniss*

*Ugly, ugly, ugly… I’m well enough to shower on my own though it’s an adventure. I have to keep my cast above my head even though there’s a small biohazard bag on it. Before I get in and when I get out I stare at my reflection. I’m more purple than flesh every single welt and kick getting black and blue and green. My stomach growls; it never shuts up. I try to feed it, but living off powdered protein shakes only fills me so much.*
I stare at my reflection and try to stop criticizing my body…it’ll heal. There will be scars, but it will heal. I lock the door and open my mouth. *Say something… Anything.* When nothing comes I smash my good hand against the counter, *What’s wrong with you? Just say something!*

The therapist says my voice will come back when I least expect it. I’ll be thinking something and the words will just tumble out. I hope he’s right because it’s really hard to write and text with one hand in plaster.

*You deserve this…* I tell myself, *How stupid can you be? You knew what he would do, what he would do… And you invited him into your home. He could have killed you. He should have killed you.* I run my fingertips along a particularly bad welt. Where most of them have flattened this one remains swollen and raised and disgusting, *You deserved all of it…*
The Hang Up

Chapter Summary

This week has been absolutely batshit insane, and I know I’m not the only one! Thank you Apecanin for getting this back to me even though you were busy!

This is a looooong chapter with a lot happening. Some you might not like but it will all pay off in the end. You just have to trust me.

The song for this chapter is The Hang Up by Elizabeth & the Catapult. There are some lyrics at the bottom but they spoil the chapter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Peeta

Katniss spends five days in the hospital. They wait for her to start eating solid food and want to wait for her to talk again but according to the overnight nurses, the only noises Katniss ever makes are blood curdling screams while she’s asleep. Doctor Aurelius says this is a good sign, since some unconscious part of her mind are remembering how to at least make a noise.

When I go to pick her up she’s already dressed in the sweatpants and t-shirt I packed for her, except she’s panicking, “Katniss, what’s going on?” I ask as she rips open another drawer full of medical supplies. Her bed is stripped; the bible from her bedside table has been thrown across the room. Didn’t anyone realize she was having a panic attack of sorts?

She brings her good hand to her throat and pretends to choke herself, “Are you having a hard time breathing?” I ask dumbly. She narrows her eyes and turns a little so I can only really see the side of her face, she traces down the middle of her forehead then makes the choking motion again, “You can’t find your necklace?”

She nods and looks like she’s on the verge of tears. The necklace precious to her, since it’s the only bit of her father she has left. “Katniss, baby, I have everything you had on you when you were brought here. I have everything that was in your apartment…” She just stares, waiting for me to tell her I have it, “It wasn’t with your things…”

Whatever Johanna did to drag Cato through the mud also drew attention to Katniss. When we left the hospital, she just stared blankly as cameras bombarded her. She only wore a tank top and shorts so the cameras got every welt, every bruise. She didn’t try to hide her face. In fact, she just held her head high.

We unpack and get Katniss settled in quickly before she climbs into bed. It’s only midday but if it’s what she needs, I’m willing to give it to her. Unfortunately she doesn’t get out of bed except to use the toilet for three days. Sometimes she sleeps, sometimes she stare. I can tell when she’s asleep because after an hour or two she’ll start screaming. It’s the most heartbreaking noise ever hearing my apartment - her terrified screams to make whatever she’s dreaming about stop. On the third day though I get a text from her.
Can you bring me my laptop?

She sits up stiffly, her body not used to much movement. Her greasy hair hangs limp over her puffy red eyes. She stares at Word for a few minutes before frantically typing.

She finally showers and on her fourth day home, she sits with me in my office while I work. We develop simple ways to communicate, she’s mostly independent of me but for actual conversations when we’re at the dinner table we’ll write between each other. When we’re in separate room’s we’ll text, when we’re in the office though we email back and forth.

Every day she looks healthier, though the bruises refuse to fade. Regardless, she looks better. Unfortunately some wounds are so deep they can take years to heal. The NYPD comes by several times trying to get a statement.

It takes Dr. Aurelius telling them she’s not well enough to talk yet. He deserves a fucking medal. Immediately they stop calling and knocking on the door, though every time the bell rings Katniss will run and hide in the pantry or a closet and not come out for hours.

Madge comes over almost every day which livens her up. When I come into the living room they’re lying on the floor with their heads on the same pillow, “Remember DDR in our dorm Freshman year?”

Katniss starts writing and passes Madge the pad, “Oh god… Great high kick or greatest? Though your shoe did go straight the fuck out the window…”

Katniss spots me and raises her hands in the air, making grabbing motions like a toddler. Her psychologist says she may regress to a younger mentality. I help her off the ground and she kisses my cheek before pressing two fingers to her lips, I need to smoke, she’s telling me.

“Well I have to go. The girls and I are going out for cocktails… Want to come?” Katniss shakes her head, her eyes wide like someone has asked her to walk into a burning building. “Maybe next time! Or we could have cocktail hour…” Katniss retreats to the terrace, her safe haven. “… Here…”

“She doesn’t like big crowds… Or being in a room with more than two people… Or being near people… How’s the place?”

“Well… We’re replacing all the furniture and trying to fix the bullet hole in the floor. We have to repaint the wall because her blood stained it. It’s going on the market in a week and a half…” she just sighs. “Thank you… For being here for her… I’m not sure what I would do in your position. Probably just sit in a corner and cry.”

“It’s hard, but she only wakes up screaming once or twice a night now…”

Madge makes a face, “Just… Text or call me when she starts talking again. It’s weird how much you can miss someone’s laugh or how her voice gets when she’s being sarcastic.”

“Trust me… I know. She’s here but this place is so empty without her walking around singing.”

“--

“No laptops at the dinner table,” I tell her jokingly. I’ve made a point to eat dinner with her every night to give her some sense of normalcy.

She closes it quietly and bow’s her head before pulling the note pad we keep sitting between us. She’s gotten used to writing with her hand in a cast, it’s almost frightening how fast she adapted.
I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad, please forgive me. I was just trying to finish up what I’m working on…

I frown, “Oh, Belle, I was just kidding. Can I read what you’re working on?”

She pulls the paper from me. Not yet. Also, wouldn’t that be stealing?

“It’s for the paper?” I ask.

She just nods, I’m done being quiet. She smiles faintly and goes back to typing. Katniss doesn’t come to bed that night, I wake up and search for her. Every closet, under every bed, finally I check the terrace.

She’s sitting on one of the chase lounges looking over Central Park, “Hey… You coming to bed?” I ask, she scoots over and pats the space next to her. I pull her close and try to ignore the smoke that blows in my face. It’s an ugly habit that I wish she would just drop but if it keeps her calm who am I to complain?

I say nothing for a few seconds. I watch as Katniss opens her mouth to talk but nothing comes. The doctor says she’ll find her voice again someday when she least expects it. When her anxiety levels go down the words might just spill out. Until then we’ll just manage, sometimes the silence is nice.

We sit and listen to the sounds of the city, an ambulance in the distance, honking no matter what the hour and the sound of traffic. When I first moved here after the Mellark’s adopted me I was shocked by how much noise was in this damned city. Now I can barely sleep without it.

“I… love you…” My head snaps in the direction of the noise, surely I’m imagining it. She’s almost as shocked as I am by the hoarse noise coming from her, “I did it!” I hug her to me, trying to avoid the stitches on her back.

“I knew you could baby…”

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Katniss

I’m so giddy I can hardly sleep. You don’t realize how hard it is to communicate until you can’t speak. It was like my brain wouldn’t give me my speech back until I spoke up about my past. I email Johanna my dirty laundry and boom, and my brain remembers.

Johanna comes over right after work, “Here, it’s a very advanced copy.” I sent it to her at two in the morning. I have no idea how long she had been working on it.

Still on crisp white printer paper my column stares up at me, my quiet victory. I had to talk to the police the day before. Cato wasn’t pressing charges for me pointing a gun in his face, but Peeta and I were. I had to tell them everything, the videos, the gun, the recording, why he was in my apartment. Fortunately I had Peeta by my side the entire time.

When Is Enough, Enough?

By: Katniss Everdeen

Abuse comes in many forms and many colors. Black, blue, purple, red… Looking in the mirror you become so accustomed to seeing bruises on your body when you’re a clean slate it’s foreign. We’re told that if our significant other starts showing abusive tendencies we should pack our bags and
get out. Unfortunately for me and hundreds and thousands of other young people, we ignore that little fact. We make excuses like ‘he or she was having a bad day’ or ‘oh it was just this once’ until we’re blaming ourselves. After two years of beatings and being told that I was worthless, that I was lucky my ex even loved me enough to put me in my place I escaped. The only thing I owned at that point was the last scrap of my dignity, hundreds of hours of blackmail DVD’s and a battered body that needed to be carried to my friend’s apartment. To this day I’m shocked she took me in after I told her to go off herself for telling me to leave the man who hit me if I even looked at him in the eyes.

My warning to the young men and women out there is that it starts slowly. For me it was being guilt tripped into not spending time with my friends. Then he would tug on my braid if I looked at another man in public or even in the same direction. When I told him to stop he threw me into a wall and smacked me. I sat on the ground in his apartment stunned as I told myself it was only one time. ‘You’re a worthless piece of trailer park trash and you’re lucky I even look at you’ he told me over and over until I believed it. I made excuses for him when my friends asked me why I was losing so much weight. He called me a fat cow every time I ate in front of him until I would only eat while he was in the shower or at work.

My first ‘enough is enough’ moment was when he told me to drop out of NYU and move to California with him because he couldn’t live without me. At that point he held all the power until one day while he was in the shower I took every blackmail DVD and shoved it in a duffel bag which I threw out the window into the alley below his apartment, next I put his laptop in the dishwasher and turned it on. Unfortunately he caught me. I told him I was leaving. He couldn’t make me move across the country because I was going to make something of myself. This was the right and wrong thing to say. As he kicked the air out of me he vowed that in two years I would be nothing and I would come crawling back to him. He not only dragged me out of the apartment by my hair but left me on the side of the street physically and mentally broken in Hell’s Kitchen one rainy January evening.

If someone in New York drops something as trivial as a quarter they’ll just walk by. Fortunately enough for me I found enough to use the last working payphone in NYC and call the woman who wouldn’t coddle me, judge me, or treat me like I was porcelain. We went back for my bag and I spent the next few days in too much pain to move. Looking back I should have gone to the hospital the first or second time I threw up blood, but I’m still here today.

My ex was true to his word. Two years after we parted ways he came back. I still never went to the cops. I probably would have never made my abuse public until he wronged one of my loved ones. In the past fights for your honor were extravagant duels at high noon. Today my battle is being fought between lawyers. Looking back I realize how lucky I am to be alive. I urge people to use my story as a cautionary tale. Get out while you can! The people you pushed away and told they didn’t know anything, if they really care they will let you back in. There are places to go that will keep you safe you just have to stand up. Say that enough is enough, you deserve so much better, and the only person who can give you that is yourself. The only person who can give you freedom is you.

“Are you sure you want to do this? Once this goes out the cat is out of the bag…”

I look up at Johanna, “You wanted me to write about life in New York, about relationships and life lessons…” I snort. “I’ll be a revolutionary,” I joke. “But in all seriousness… I just want to get this all off my chest…” I sigh, “You know get my story out there so someone can learn from my mistakes…”

“Are you going to show it to your beau? Speaking of which… Where is Flynn Rider?” seeing as I haven’t left the penthouse since coming home from the hospital, there was now a running joke that
I am Rapunzel, and seeing as I forced everyone to see Tangled with me about twenty times it was only natural that Peeta was Flynn.

“I think you mean Eugene Fitzherbert. He had to go to the office today. Something… Political or some bullshit,” she just shrugs while digging through her purse.

“Well… It is election year… Ah!” she pulls out a sharpie and grabs my cast.

“Jo! No, I don’t… I’m too old for that!”

It’s too painful to resist, I just let her graffiti my cast, “I was going to write, ‘they had to take the hand-job hand’ but I think you might get embarrassed. Are you coming out for cocktails with us later?”

I had completely forgotten. “It’s my ‘welcome back to the world’ cocktail hour slash stuff my face look absofuckinglutely fabulous so some photographer catches it and it gets back to Cato and he can see you can’t knock Katniss-‘ the echo of the belt beating against my skin fills my head. I can only shake it off, “You can’t knock Katniss Everdeen down.”

“Wear that big rock… Oh, and we’re having a staff meeting. You have to come. It’s Monday, come in PJ’s I don’t care.”

I smile, “I’ll set up my desk. I need to have a work space that isn’t here. Before I could work here because I didn’t live here. Now if I wake up and walk around in nothing but a t-shirt before writing on the terrace I feel lazy. Not ‘my boyfriend is still at work and I’m waiting for him to come home so I can pounce!’”

Johanna rolls her eyes, “I don’t understand relationships. I mean they’re nice… but I like to try new flavors…”

“The thing about relationships is you don’t have to play the field to get laid,” I start just as Sae walks through with groceries, “And if you want to experiment you just have to politely say ‘can we try this’ or ‘I’m going to do this to you, if you don’t like it tell me’. Easy peasy.”

“Would you two like something to eat?” Sae asks us.

“Oh god yes. I need to hire a cook.”

I nod and smile, “She made me soup while I was… sick.”

“It was fish curry one day, but someone drank the sauce like broth then complained her mouth was on fire.”

“It was delicious, and it was on fire.” Johanna leaves shortly after destroying the rest of the fish curry but only a few minutes go by and Peeta comes up the elevator. I no longer fear the door opening. The only people with the code are people I trust because Peeta trusts.

“Baby, I need a shower…” I tell him following him into the office. He throws his suit coat onto his desk and smiles, but there’s something behind it. Fatigue? Anger? I wrap my arms around his waist, “What’s wrong?”

He shrugs, “Just… tired…”

“You should come shower with me…” I say into his back. His white shirt is a little damp from sweat, “You’re all stinky and I need someone to help wash while I keep my hand out of the
“Water…”

“Sounds good… Then we should nap…” I take his hand and lead him into the bedroom.

“Am I keeping you up at night? I’ve been having bad dreams…”

“Not really…” he lies, “It’s just…” he rips off his tie, “Election year, the trial, everything with Snow is getting dodgy.” he pulls off his shirt hastily. I turn on the shower and listen to him complain, mostly because ninety percent of his stress is all me, “The board is pushing for a hostile takeover. It’s a gamble but it’ll get that fucking snake out of my office, and away from my company…” he just sighs and shakes his head, “I’m sorry, I’m just complaining… How was your day?”

“Johanna brought over an advanced copy of my column… It’s running on Sunday then the cookies are out of the jar…”

“Can I read it?”

“When we get out of the shower… Ok?”

He nods, “Wait, what does your cast say?”

I realize I haven’t even looked at it, Sometimes I wonder how someone so brainless can still function. Love you, Johanna.

“She’s a sweetheart,” he jokes, “Does this mean I can sign it?”

I roll my eyes, “Take off your pants Mellark. I need you to wash me… And yeah, I guess.”

Most of our time in the shower is spent just pressed up against each other. I keep my cast behind his back as the water beats down on us. Every once in a while we’ll kiss, deep and loving dotted with an innocent peck on the lips. Every movement is tender and loving. I know he wants sex, he can’t hide the obvious physical signs like I can, but he says nothing. Peeta resigns to tenderly scrubbing my back, avoiding my stitches at all cost. I lean into him as the washcloth inches closer to my backside, my shoulders resting against his chest. It’s an adventure keeping my cast out of the stream of water but soon enough we’re toweling off and sitting on our bed.

Peeta reads with a blank expression on his face. Not particularly good, but not bad either, “Are you sure this is what you want?” he asks after about ten minute. I just nod, “You know that the second this goes into print the world will know…”

“Peeta, last week I was taken out of your office in handcuffs, the next day I was hauled away in an ambulance. People are already watching… I have to use this attention to do some good in the world.”

He pulls me to him and we lay down, “I’m so proud of you…” he whispers into my damp hair.

We wake up around eight. “Hun, get up… Nothing fun starts until nine but we’ll be unfashionably late if you don’t get up now…” he moved onto his stomach midway through our nap and lost the towel a long time ago which makes waking him up by spanking very easy. I’m already dressed in a navy blue sheath dress with a ruffled collar. I’ve been fidgeting with the yellow sash around the waist trying to get the bow just right.

“Come lay with me…” he whines.
“What do you want to wear tonight prince Charming?” I ask ignoring his request. It was so easy for men to look nice.

In New York City women fork over their paychecks for the newest shoes, the fanciest handbag, and that dress you just want to rip off a mannequin. Men could wear a nice button up they got at Gap and a pair of jean’s they’ve had forever and pass for fabulous.

I lay a black button up and dark jeans on the bed where Peeta refuses to wake up, “Peter Mellark if you don’t get your ass out of bed by the time I count to five…” I caution dropping his Italian leather shoes on the floor.

“I’m tired…” he whines.

“Are you going to make me venture into Manhattan dressed like this scared and alone?” I tease, “Really I think Portia mixed up dress and lingerie because this dress is all see through and lace…” that gets his attention.

His blue eyes snap to me and he frowns, “You lied to me…” he sighs.

“I got you to wake up... Now get dressed…”

--

I start getting antsy in the elevator downstairs. I fidget around and lose my lemon yellow heels like six times, “Is that skirt going to ride up?” he asks.

The dress has a long skirt, “It shouldn’t show much… I mean…” I tug it at mid-thigh where the skirt ends, “It’s long… Isn’t Haymitch driving?”

Peeta shakes his head, “Nah, him and Effie are going out…” the elevator doors open and he walks out. I just stand dumbfounded.

“Wait, what?”

“Haymitch and Effie are out on a date,” he walks up to his motorcycle, “Can you hold on with your arm in a cast?”

I’m not sure if the vibration is good for my arm, but as we cruise down Fifth Avenue I don’t care. I press my body against his and let the feeling wash my anxiety away.

Peeta parks about a block away from Smalls in West Village, a nice little Jazz Club that I’ve never been to, “If at any point tonight you want to go home, just tell me,” I nod and hold his hand tight. His thumb brushes the emerald on my ring finger. I feel him jump a little, “You’re wearing that on the wrong hand. What are people going to say?”

I look down then up at him, he’s smiling, “How does she lift her hand with that rock? I didn’t want it bumping my glass,” I lie. The emerald would make an amazing engagement ring, classic but still innovative, kind of like Peeta. If I was seen with this thing on my hand maybe Cato would think Peeta proposed. I just wanted to cement in his mind that he doesn’t own me, control me, and he can’t knock me down anymore.

I’m faster than Peeta who’s fidgeting with how he folded his sleeves up so I beat him to the punch with paying our cover charge, “You shouldn’t have done that…” they slap wristbands on our wrists.
I just smile and grab his cheek with my left hand and kiss him lightly, “I do what I want,” I whisper against his lips.

My big “welcome back to the world” quickly turns into “how fast can Katniss down shots so she doesn’t dream tonight”.

I lose track of the world just as someone covering Elizabeth and the Catapult takes the stage.

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Peeta

“Oh no! When the world is dragging me down again!” Katniss sings leaning into me. Everyone else is barely into their third drink, I’ve remained sober except for one beer which hardly counts and Katniss can barely sit up straight.

“I think we have a light weight over here,” my brother jokes, she just stares blankly several martini glasses in front of her. Her lips begin moving, but no sound comes out.

“I have to get her home… Andrew give me your keys, keep my bike.”

My brother catches the keys, “What? Dude, no that thing is…”

Johanna shifts and drapes her legs over his, he looks at her and she waggles her eyebrows, “Fine… Just… Don’t let her puke on the leather…”

I look to Katniss again, she’s completely gone back in on herself. I should have stopped her, I should have kept her from getting that drunk. Instead I watched her plough through drinks, “It’s down a block, just don’t get pulled over. I’ve had the NYPD at my door a little too much for my liking,” I grumble before hauling my drunk girlfriend to her feet.

I guide Katniss outside, thankfully there are no cameras and she’s still pliable and agreeable. Well, she’s more like a zombie but she hasn’t tried to argue, fight me, and she hasn’t gone rigid.

Half way home she starts mumbling to herself, “Katniss get out here…” she whispers, “No… Please… you don’t have to…” I turn off the radio and the air-conditioning so I could hear her, “Do you see what you make me do to you?” and she slaps herself with her good hand, “Paris was nice… maybe I’ll move there… Maybe I’ll save the money, maybe I’ll move there…” she mumbles as she rocks back and forth. She slaps herself again.

I try and grab for her hand but she’s slick with sweat and slips right through my fingers, “Katniss!” I try and snap her out of it but it only makes her jump.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t paint the wall with your brain!” she screams at the top of the lungs before putting her fingers in her mouth in the shape of a gun, “Please just end it now…” she sobs but it’s garbled by the hand in her mouth, “Please just kill me, end it now…” she cries, “I’m sorry, Peeta. I was doing it for you, I should have told you. I should have had you here or listened to you and went to the cops…” I descend into the parking lot and unbuckle her as quickly as possible. I scoop her up in my arms while she just mumbles, “I deserved it…” over and over, each word breaking my heart a little more.

How could anyone think that?

When we’re finally home she starts getting more and more coherent, “Don’t let him hurt me… He wants to kill me…” she sobs, “I made him angry and he wants to kill me. But I didn’t mean to!” she
screams.

My ears ring, her lips couldn’t be much closer, “Katniss, can you hear me?”

“Please don’t let him kill me…”

“He can’t hurt you here… I won’t let him…”

“I can walk…” she finally says. I set her down on the ground just in time for her to run to the kitchen sink and vomit out all the alcohol.

I can’t help but sigh, our relationship is a string of Katniss getting drunk, and me taking care of her over and over again until the end of time… I mean there was that one time but she’s on her like… fifth.

She rinses her mouth out, “Let’s get you to bed…” I sigh. I get her tucked in and on her left side and my phone rings.

“This better not be ‘I crashed the Ducati’.” I grumble into the phone.

“More like someone slashed the tires….”

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Katniss

As it turns out some medications you shouldn’t mix with alcohol. Apparently whatever I was on for my anxiety was one of them because when I woke up I had the worst hangover in the history of hangovers. Peeta doesn’t talk to me all day, in fact he spends the entire day locked in his office. Not just hulled up, but he’s locked the door.

We eat dinner together in awkward silence. The note pad is gone so I can’t even try and get to him. I can’t find my voice and he’s on his phone, staring at the screen typing away.

“Peeta?” I ask quietly, I reach for his hand but he pulls it away.

“Not now, Katniss. I’m busy…” tears well up in my eyes.

“I love you…” I whisper just as his phone starts ringing. He presses it to his ear.

The same goes for Sunday and by Monday I’m out the door before he even gets up hailing a cab to get me to the office I’ve never been to.

What did I do? What did I do to him?

Johanna was nice enough to get me a photo ID made giving me access to the building. My desk is the only empty one in a bland grey cubicle. There’s no light on the desk, no computer, no pictures. Just one phone with a blinking red light.

I had my own extension I guess… And someone left me a message.

I pick up the receiver and play the message, my heart stopping when I hear the voice, “I get one phone call and I’m using it on you. I don’t care what restraining order, or security features, or body guards he gets you… I still own you Katniss. No matter where you go, no matter what you do… As long as you’re with him…” Cato chuckles, “I have eyes all over this city. How else would I have known about this little meeting you have today?” lucky guess? “Walk away, Katniss. Leave
him and make sure it hurts, and soon... Tonight, soon. Or bad things will happen to the people he
cares about...” the message ends and I delete it.

I barely pay attention during the meeting. Apparently my column was a success. Peeta doesn’t
come home from work until after I’m already asleep. I wake up some time after two and he’s
holding me to him. His face is buried in my back, the spot wet, “Peeta?” I ask, “Are you awake?”

I get no response so I fall back asleep. We continue like this for days. All I can think every waking
minute is ‘what did I do when I blacked out’ what did I do to hurt him so deeply? Maybe not hurt
but cause him to put up a wall. I spend more time at the Times working at my column until they
can finally take off my cast. Peeta and I still function as a couple. We go on dates, act affectionate
in public but there are some nights I’m sure he’s slept at the office and there are some that I have.

Strange thing, romance. It’s like a fire, some burn hot and bright at the beginning but use up all
their fuel and the smallest thing like a little breeze will blow them out... Others, lit on a solid
foundation with plenty of kindling will smolder for an eternity.

I try to talk to the one person that understands Peeta more than anyone in the world, Primrose.

“I don’t get it...” I tell her over an early dinner, “When we were in Paris we were talking about the
future. Getting a place to start a life together... Now...” I just shake my head and spin the ring on
my finger. Never mind the threat of whoever Cato wanted to send my way, “But it’s like he’s still
trying to buy my favor. He bought me a car. A fucking Porsche Cayenne. I drove it out to the
Hamptons last weekend with the girls just because I couldn’t take how tense the apartment is!”

Prim looks down at her hands, “I thought he changed...” She grumbles, “He was... he is married
to his work...” Is that the distance? He was spending a lot of off time to be with me, “I’m sure it’s
nothing... He loves you, Katniss. I hear it whenever he talks about you. A lot has happened, maybe
he’s just tired. My brother isn’t as young as he used to be!”

We sit in silence as I foot the bill for our dinner. Since May I’ve had to spend next to no money,
which means the money I get from modeling and my column just goes straight into my bank
account. I was independently stable for the first time in my life.

Which was good. I was going to need it soon. This was a perfect time for me to cut ties with Peeta.
I would do it tonight... He would be safe, his family would be safe and I could go on with my life.
Hey I did have this money burning a hole in my pocket. Who knows, maybe I could move to
France. I’m sure Cinna would put me up for a few months. I could work more there...

I shook the idea out of my head. No Cato could do nothing. It was all just hot air. Peeta and I just
needed to get to the root of our problems. Unfortunately I know what our problems are. I came into
this relationship with a ton of baggage, too much for our weak foundation to support.

We sit and talk about everything and nothing at all until dark. Prim needs to catch a train out of
town to the Hamptons so I offer to walk her to the station needing the air. We reach a darker road,
the street lamps either out or not on yet when a hand grabs my braid, “You were warned...”

“Katniss!” Prim screams.

One by one the stored up solar energy in the lamps give the road an eerie glow as they hum on, “P-
Prim!” I call, as someone holds me tight. He smells of old cigarette smoke and bad whiskey,
“Don’t! Please!” I cry. I don’t get a good look at them but her attackers are nicely dressed.
Definitely not the average street thug. Prim is so little, so young and innocent, she doesn’t even
brace herself for the first punch or try and defend herself.
“Please! Stop! I’ll do anything!” I scream, “Hit me instead! Do whatever just leave her out of this!”

The man rips on my braid and something thin and cold presses against my neck, “Speak again and we’ll make her watch as I slit your throat.”

“I’m not afraid!” I hiss, “Kill me you pussy!”

“We were paid in advanced…” he starts, “What difference will it make if I get one whore off the streets. One gold digging little slut. Boss just said to make sure you watched…” The blade presses into my neck but doesn’t break the skin, “We can have an accident…”

Instead he makes me watch as Prim, poor sweet innocent Prim is kicked into submission, “Prim! Just hold on! Listen to my voice!” I scream, “Prim I’m so sorry!” I finally sob as I see the blank look in her eyes. I know where she is, a quiet corner of her mind where this isn’t happening, “I’m so… so sorry…”

I did this, I did this to her. I’m thrown to the ground where Prim lay bloodied and unconscious. Just then a horrible bang goes off and I’m back on the apartment floor.

It missed… Oh thank god it missed… I open my eyes but wish I didn’t. Prim is out cold, her white eyelet dress already bloody.

The bullet wasn’t meant for me.

“Prim!” I scream pulling out my phone, “Prim listen to me!” I don’t know if she can hear me but I take off my shirt and press it to her stomach. Who gives a fuck about modesty? “Just stay with me!”

Her eyes flutter open and she reaches a weak hand up to my cheek, “You’re both pieces of work, you know? Promise me you’ll fight though…” black and blue and bleeding out all this girl wants is for me to fight for my relationship with her brother. She keeps whispering promise me over and over until the ambulance arrives.

If only she knew this has cemented our break-up.

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I paced, and paced, and paced. I wandered to the nursery then back to the waiting room. Finally Peeta arrives, “She-“ he grabs my arm and drags me to the side, “You’re hurting me!” I snap.


“We… we were walking to the train station and- and they grabbed me and started hitting her… Then the gun went off. I tried, there was nothing I could do. I told them to hit me instead, but they didn’t listen…”

He lets go of me roughly, making me stumble. He runs his hands through his hair, every bit of his age showing, “Ever since you came into my life everything has gotten so fucked up!” he shouts. “I’ve had a large sum of money stolen from my company, had a virus attack all the computers in my office stealing blueprints, and files, and personal information, my house in the Hamptons was broken into, as well as my mother’s, oh and the tires on my bike were slashed. And it’s all one person Katniss, just one!” he snaps, “Your fucking ex. And now my sister is practically on her deathbed. All. Because. Of. you”
“Wait, your house?”

He shoots me an angry look, “Yeah, the fucking HILARIOUS thing is that he had a key!”

My key…

“Peeta, don’t yell… Please…” I say, trying to calm him down, “Why didn’t you tell me? And I told you I was missing my keys…”

“You were too busy moping around the apartment like a hurt puppy too scared to fucking talk! What was I supposed to do? Watch you break down again? Watch you mumble in a corner the shit he said to you while you hit yourself?! I don’t remember that but it’s too specific to be made up. There it is, the thing I did to ruin this… but I guess it’s a good thing. Looks like I don’t need to break this up consciously, I already did.

Peeta takes a deep breath, “Just… Get out, leave. I need… I need to be away from you. You just bring so much bad into my life.”

I look down and nod. I spin the emerald around my finger before taking it off as well as the gold bracelet he gave me, “Here, I don’t- I-I can’t.” he looks up dumbfounded, “Oh, you thought you could talk to me like that and everything would be ok?” Here we go… Goodbye Peeta...

I step away from him, “Goodbye Peeta. My stuff will be out of the apartment before you get home.”

I grab my bag, ignoring the blood on it and my clothes before I rush out of the hospital first dialing Johanna, “Meet me at the penthouse, get Annie and Madge.”

“Wait… What? Katniss you sound like you’re crying,” I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand, make-up and tears smear onto the skin.

“Peeta and I are splitting. I told him I’d be out by the morning.”

“I… I’ll be there soon as I can.”

Peeta follows me outside, “Katniss!” I see a flash. Fuck… No cameras please no cameras.

“Go away Peeta! Just go inside! Prim needs you and I need you to just leave me alone! You wanted me to leave! I’m fucking leaving!” I scream, my voice gets shrill trying to hide the tears.

He grabs my wrist, “Katniss, don’t leave… I didn’t mean it. I didn’t-“

“The first time Cato hit me he told me that he didn’t mean it,” I tell him in a hushed voice, “I’m done with this Peeta.” Make sure it hurts. Echoes in my head.

“Katniss, just take the ring, your car, everything I ever bought for you. I’m sorry… I’m so sorry,” he pulls me in for one last kiss. A short goodbye that feels so empty it’s my undoing. I shove him away and slap him.

“Don’t do that to me! Push me away and pull me back in! I’ve been hurt Peeta, physically and emotionally… You were supposed to be different!” I turn from him and walk into the road, “Taxi!” I scream, “Taxi!” a yellow cab pulls up to me and I slide in. I don’t look back, I just have to hope he doesn’t follow me.
Like a preacher who lost his faith
I just can't find the heart to say
I'd rather be anywhere, anyway
Than to give up another day puttin’ up with you (you)
At this moment (you)

I’d rather be hearin’ just about anything
Than what you are feeling at this moment
I’d rather be thinkin’ just about anything
Than how to be leaving you at this moment

Out with the girls on first avenue
Drinkin’ away our imaginary blues
I’d rather be anywhere, anyway
Than to give up another day puttin’ up with you
Chapter Summary

This chapter has two songs because I honestly couldn't decide. If you look them up or know them already you'll notice how different the two are. Now You're Gone by Basshunter is a more fast paced song where Take It All by Adele is slower.

Peeta

She kept her promise; after Prim woke up from surgery, they kicked me out of the hospital until visiting hours started again.

Everything that screamed Katniss was gone, her duct tape covered converse that she always left by the door, her ashtray on the terrace, she didn’t just take her stuff, she left a void. I sit in the living room and just listen to the silence. Katniss always listened to music, and hummed and sang. I couldn’t take it, I almost considered getting a dog just for the company. Sure there was Sae and Haymitch but at the end of the night, they went home.

Katniss did leave one thing behind. A short goodbye letter.

Dear Peter,

In your room you’ll find the ring you gave me and the bracelet. I can’t keep them because if I look at them I will always see you. If I keep them I will always remember what we had and someday let my guard down again. I didn’t know I could love, honestly and truly love until I met you. You stripped my shell from me piece by piece, then lit my pyre and fed me to the dogs.

Goodbye, Peter. Just remember that I will always love you. I’ll just have to try and forget and move on. Replace the good we had with our anger tonight so I never make this mistake again. You said I can keep the car. You had me sign the title so technically it’s mine though you paid. I gave someone a check for five grand and will be making payments like this until I pay you back for the car, the dress you bought me for Finnick and Annie’s wedding, and the tip you gave me that night at the bar. This person agreed to deposit the checks for me until my debt is repaid.

If I leave anything behind give it to your brother to give to Johanna.

I will always love you, but I will never forget this,

Katniss

I can see where she almost pressed through the paper and where tears smeared the pen. This note is poison, this note is the last thing I have of hers. She even picked up every last hair tie she always left in the apartment. I locked it away with her ring, and her bracelet. What’s this? I move the box holding my mother’s pearls and see two Passports. Fuck...

My ears start ringing, the silence of the apartment getting to me. I pull my phone out of my pocket searching for a text, an email, a missed call, anything from Katniss.

Instead I text her one word, Always.
Two Weeks Later

“You stay out of trouble now, ok?” Prim gets out of the wheelchair with the help of my newly tanned mother who shoots the attendant a dirty look. She and father had to cancel their trip to Monaco, though now that Prim was out of the hospital they would be jetting off in a matter of hours. An in-home nurse would be coming daily to care for Prim though all she wanted to do was sleep.

“Hmm…” Mother starts looking at a black and white picture hanging on the wall of my living room, “She really is lovely… Have you spoken to her?”

“What do you think?” I snap as I flop down on the couch and peak around forgetting just what picture she’s looking at. Katniss and I the first night we were together. Part of me wishes our paths never crossed, that she remained an innocent songbird in my mind. Katniss was so much more than that. She is perfection and imperfection wrapped together in a somehow functional body. She is cathartic and corrupting yet somehow pure. She’s the embodiment of life, beautiful and broken, dramatic and unpredictable.

I want her, I want her in my arms again. I know she’s still hurting, not just from Cato, but from me now. I hurt her. I made her love me then I hurt her. In one blinding fit of rage I piled everything that was out of her control onto her and began loathing her, “I’m a monster…” I mumble, “You should leave, mother. Go on vacation and forget about everything. It’s what you’re good at.”

“Excuse me?” she gasps, “Is… is that what you think of me?”

“I’m sorry? I seem to remember you and dad being gone… quite a lot!”

“Yes! When you and the boys were older and could take care of yourselves! I was twenty-two when I married into your father’s family, it’s a lot of responsibility. Then in two months his sister died and we got custody of Ryan…” my mother looks away, “You were young when you went from nothing to everything,” I just sigh and shake my head, “Your father and I never left you four until we knew you three could take care of Primrose and yourselves. I raised smart children that take care of each other.”

“Yeah, like I took care of Prim as she’s out cold in the guest room with a bullet hole in her abdomen.”

My mother sighs, “Sometimes bad things happen to good people…” I shake my head and roll my eyes.

“And sometimes stupid selfish naïve people almost get your daughter killed.” I regret the words but still I’m seeing red. Katniss and Prim don’t coexist in my mind peacefully.

“Stupid boy, you talk about her like she asked for all of this. Like she pulled the trigger,” she shakes her head and stands, “Just remember, you were the victim once too…”

Mother checks on Prim before leaving me just as dumbfounded as when the words slip from her mouth. I just kind of exist as the sun starts going down, then Prim calling for me pulls me back to reality

I was different… just a kid. She was an adult, she could have walked away… She could have gone to the cops and had him locked up long before it got to this point.

“Where’s Katniss?” she whispers still pretty high on painkillers.
“I don’t know… I haven’t talked to her in two weeks…”

Prim tries to sit up, I help her with some extra throw pillows, “What? Why?”

“She put you here Prim…” I grumble.

“No… She didn’t!” she’s raising her voice or trying to, “Katniss tried to fight they put a knife to her throat she tried to help!”

“Prim, get some sleep. Katniss is gone. Please don’t say her name…” I’ve never wanted something so much in my life, even if it’s a brief whiff of her perfume. Hearing her name just reinforces the fact that she’s gone forever.

Two days later there’s a knock at the door, and two seconds later I hear heels. My heart swells. Katniss?

“Hey, asshole! I know you’re here,” my heart sinks. It’s Johanna.

“Get out. How did you get in?”

She dangles the key and shakes it, “I’m sleeping with your brother, or did you forget? I’m here to see Katniss,” she places her hands on her hips, “I trust she’s decent?”

I snort, “Good luck. The only thing here is the latest victim in the saga that was Katniss and Cato.”

I expect Johanna to smack me, yell at me, anything. She just freezes, “She told me two weeks ago that she was going home. She packed her suitcase, got in the car and said she was going where she belonged…”

“Well, obviously that’s not here.”

Johanna doesn’t move, “No one’s heard from her. She left twelve days ago to give her statement to the NYPD before going home. I wanted to give her the good news in person.”

My ears perk up at this, “Good news?”

“Cato plea bargained for well… Everything…”

Plea bargain, another term for ‘I’ll confess if you get me out of jail sooner’, “What did he confess to?”

I had flipped Johanna’s switch, “Why the fuck do you care? Read it in the god damned paper like the rest of New York,” she digs through her massive black purse and tosses a copy of the Times. “Did you file a missing person’s report?”

“I didn’t think to because I figured you two were having sweet touching make-up sex and getting your shit together. Also since the one person in the world that wants her harmed is behind bars I wasn’t too concerned!”

I walk to the kitchen and pour myself a glass of water, “Yeah, finally it only took her how many years?”

Johanna is fiercely protective of Katniss, she may call her brainless but from what I’ve seen Jo is the older sister Katniss never had, “You stupid fucking asshole!” I jump as she charges me, “You pushed her, and pushed her! She was afraid to trust, afraid to love, afraid to retaliate! And guess
what! You won! The first time she tried to fight against Cato she was almost killed, so she blocked herself off. Then you stroll into her life, tear down her walls and she goes against Cato! Well he’s behind bars now and still went after her! Then you threw her out into the cold! Now she ran away because you broke her! I hope you’re happy with yourself!” She backs away, “Goodbye, asshole. If you hear anything tell your brother. I don’t like knowing that someone I love is out there cold and alone isolating herself from the world!” just then her phone starts ringing ‘Crazy Bitch’ by Buckcherry, their ringtones for each other.

Johanna’s entire body relaxes, “Holy fuck, Katniss… Are you ok?” she asks after putting the phone on speaker, probably just to hurt me.

“Yeah… Yeah, I’m fine…” her voice is so hollow, it’s worse than after Cato made her afraid to open her mouth, “Hey, I’m sorry I haven’t submitted anything. I don’t have wifi…”

“That’s fine, honey, where are you?”

“Home…”

“Katniss, dear I was just at Peeta’s and you’re not there…”

The line goes silent, “Oh… Prim?”

“She came home a few days ago.”

Katniss lets out a long sigh, like tension was leaving her body, “Good… Good… Listen, I need you to go back. I left my passport in his safe,” Johanna waved as if to urge me on. Begrudgingly I followed her as Johanna and the shell of my ex-girlfriend talk.

“Going on vacation?” she asks.

“No… Fashion week…”

“When are you coming back to the city?”

I can hear Katniss shift the phone, “I’m already here…”

“Katniss Everdeen,” Johanna turns the phone off speaker, “I have been worried sick I think you’re giving me greys!” she pauses, “Fine… Just give me the address. I’ll be over tonight with the Calvary.” She leaves without another word.

I don’t know how long I stand there staring at the door, “Peeta?” my head snaps in the direction of Prim’s voice, “I heard Katniss…” she leans against the door frame.

“Prim, you’re not supposed to be up,” I scold gently, “How am I supposed to explain to your nurse torn stitches.”

“I miss her, why hasn’t she visited me?” Prim’s eyes are glassy, she’s absolutely high on her pain killers, “Is she mad at me? It was my idea to walk down that dark street. She was going to get a cab. I wanted to walk…”

I guide her back into bed, “No Prim, Katniss still loves you…”

She just smiles and is back to sleep before her head hits the pillow.
I stare at the screen of my phone, one little word still shaking my foundation, Always. What did he mean? He’d always hate me? That he would always blame me for almost getting Prim killed? I had my phone off the entire time I was away, not wanting to accidentally call Peeta and pathetically sob, no I needed a clean break.

“That’s the last of it!” Octavia chirped. Since May I’ve gone from a dirt poor waitress, to billionaire’s girlfriend, to somehow comfortable in a Manhattan apartment.

My three little chicks did all the work while I was coasting through the emotions of my break-up last week in a small bed and breakfast near where I grew up. Cinna advanced some of my Fashion Week (Month) money and now it was all coming together.

I’ve gone from Greenwich Village, to SoHo, to the Upper East, now East Village, “Look what I have!” Flavius sets a vase full of daffodils on the kitchen counter while I sort out dishes.

“Who are they from?” I ask idly.

“The card says, ‘To brighten up your day. You should call me to brighten up mine, Prim.’” The plate slips from my hand, my wrist still weak. It shatters but that’s bound to happen, things like plates break. You just pick up the pieces and throw them in the garbage. I rush to look at the card. It was her brother I broke up with, not Prim. How could she want to talk to me?

“Katniss, where would you like the sweaters?” It was still summer but Cinna sent me boxes and boxes of fall clothing.

“Um… Just put them in the oven,” Venia just stares, “Venia, I cook like a college Freshmen. If it can’t be done in the microwave or with boiling water I’m calling for take-out.” While she shoves the garments in the oven I pick up the pieces of the plate and toss it in the garbage. I could feasible glue it back together, it’s really only in five or six big pieces… But what’s one less plate in a kitchen that will never see cooking?

I just had to keep moving, never stopping because when I stopped I thought of Peeta, I thought of what we lost and I get depressed. Aurelius told me to keep moving, to keep active, so naturally I spent a week hulled up in a dark room with nothing but a handle of whiskey and my thoughts.

“Is there anything else you need from us? Venia asks. I look around my sparse apartment, sure it was furnished but it lacked the little curios and odds and ends that made a home.

“No, I think you’re good to go. Thank you, for all of this it’s perfect. I owe you guys the biggest thank you!”

A few ours latter the buzzer goes off letting me know my safety net is here. Three bottles of wine in hand these women weren’t too fond of me.

“You just left?” Madge asks.

I nod slowly, “I slept on Johanna’s couch enough to last a life time. I needed to escape.”

“Where did you go? And why didn’t you let us know…” Annie had her sad puppy dog eyes on.

“Well… Basically get on I-81 drive through Pennsylvania coal country until you hit New York again and drive north until you hit water, or the border. Speaking of borders… Do you have my passport?” Johanna pitches it at me, “I basically found the first inn with a vacancy bought myself
the basics to survive, rice cakes and whiskey, and cried for a week,” Annie’s puppy dog eyes soften so I’m now the injured puppy. “Sorry I didn’t call but whenever I actually got signal I was afraid Peeta would try and contact me so I turned off my phone. No one has wifi there so…”

Johanna slaps her forehead, “They don’t have a Starbucks or a fucking Panera Bread up in chuggafuck?”

I choke on my wine, “Excuse me… What?”

“Chuggafuck, the Podunk little town you grew up in,” I just groan.

“What…” I grumble, we sit in awkward silence as I drain my wine.

“I like the place!” Madge tells me excitedly, “I mean it’s a little bare but you’ll fix it…”

It’s amazing how quickly post break up I returned to my pre-relationship habits. Staying up until two in the morning eating take out in nothing but a tank-top and underwear, waking up at noon. Instead of going to class I spend more and more time at the Times.

“I’m thinking about getting a cat…” I tell Johanna over lunch. I shove a piece of lettuce in my mouth.

It takes a few minutes for Johanna to respond, “How about no? You get a cat, then next time I come over you have a copy of Cat Fancy on your coffee table and like six of them in matching hand knit sweaters…”

“Yeah, and there’s a no pets rule in my building… That and Fashion Week starts in three days. Cinna is freaking the actual fuck out. I leave for London then I’m basically on the move until I come home from Milan at the end of September…”

Johanna snorts, “Bang a bloke in every city. Do it for me!” she goes through periods of feeling smothered being in a committed relationship, “Are you sure you don’t want me to end things with the beau?”

I shake my head ‘no’, “Please don’t! You’re happy, plus you two going out with him and his new girlfriend gives me a chance to visit Prim.”

“He changed the codes.”

I shrug, “Prim’s letting me in, we have it all planned out.”

“The code to his elevator is your birthday.”

I don’t know why she tells me this, I just shrug and continue eating my salad, “This could have used more dressing…”

Johanna slaps her forehead, “Can you be normal for two minutes? He’s dating his ex-girlfriend and-“

“Johanna, stop mentioning him. If you don’t recall he dumped me because I brought all this bad into his life. He can date who ever, or fuck whoever, or do whatever he wants. I just want to forget…” I close the lid to my salad and get up.

“Where are you-“

“My desk, I have something I need to get done before I sneak into Mr. Mellark’s home…” I didn’t
really need to do anything, except for get away from Johanna. Peeta was a sore subject for me and would probably remain so for quite some time.

At five Prim gives me the all clear. Peeta and Delly have left the penthouse.

_The code is 080590._

Clearly August, not May, good game Johanna.

I couldn’t sit still in the elevator. I was finally bullied into buying new Converse when the duct tape fell off and the sole tried to abandon ship. They squeak loudly but I ignore it. The doors slide open and I rush to the door, Prim’s left it unlocked.

“Prim?” I ask, nothing, maybe she fell asleep again? Apparently they have her hopped up on a lot of shit. My heartstrings tug, I grip my shirt and somehow find myself in Peeta’s closet. He hadn’t filled in the gaps I left. My shelves in his closet, the spot on the floor where my shoes went, even my drawers, all still empty. Even the voids in the bathroom haven’t been filled. It’s like he’s expecting someone to fill the void.

_Maybe he’s waiting for me to come back…_ I shake away this thought. Of course he’s not, he’s been with Delilah. My side of the bed hasn’t even had a chance to get cold yet…

“Katniss!” my head snaps to the direction of Prim’s voice. She’s slow on her feet now and pale as the white down comforter on my ex’s bed.

“Prim! You shouldn’t be on your feet,” deep down hidden by my logic gene my mom gene goes live when I see her wobble. I rush to her, put my hand on her lower back, and guide her to the sofa, “If you get hurt again in my car I think your brother will kill me.”

“No he wouldn’t… He loves you…” she smiles. I just roll my eyes, I had no idea what love really was. How did an eighteen year old know? “It’s true, he calls for you in his sleep, and the other night when I was getting something to eat I woke him up and he came out thinking it was you…”

I have to get away from this conversation as quickly as possible, while he and I are broken up his family is safe, plus that argument was real. The blame, the hate, the anger, all real. Though maybe it was just a fight, maybe we could have talked and moved past it.

_No, just look at Prim…_

We sit and watch a marathon of Disney movies and before I know it footsteps echo through the penthouse.

_Shit…_

“Katniss?” I sink down, I should have left before he got home. Instead I look over my shoulder at Peeta and Delilah hand in hand.

“I should… I should go…” she pulls her hand from his and takes a step back. I don’t move at first, I can’t.

_What’s he going to do? Is he going to come after me? He won’t hit me in front of Prim._

Finally I gather my bearings, “No, stay… Delilah… I don’t belong here,” I slip my shoes back on, “Take care Prim. I’ll talk to you later…” I walk by Peeta with my head down, tears burn in my eyes. He’s already replaced me. My confused and hurt mind imagines him reaching for me as I
Maybe I didn’t imagine it because he’s followed me to the elevator, “Katniss…”

I keep pressing the down button willing the elevator to just get here faster, he grabs my wrist, and when I tug away I wince. My broken arm is healed but not good as new and his grip was firm, “I’m leaving, ok? You didn’t have to see me out…”

He doesn’t say anything, so I do, “Just go back to Delilah, ok? I just wanted to make sure Prim was ok…”

“Are you doing ok?” he asks.

“What do you care? I’m the embodiment of bad in your life,” the door slides open, “Goodbye…”

I hit the metal button for floor one only to literally punch the stop button between floors. I back into the wall and the dam breaks. Hot tears burn down my face, I keep my meltdown private and by the time the elevator lurches back to life I’m sane again. I check my face in the reflective walls of the elevator, wiping the ran mascara from under my eyes.

I keep quiet over the weekend. The only person who tried to even talk to me was Cinna. Next week started my personal hell, fittings for dresses and everything, trying to fix what I refused to maintain, my eyebrows, my skin, my hair.

Sunday night I climb into bed and pull the covers to my chin.

Peeta comes to me in my dreams. His hands are warm, fingertips trailing along my sides as he lifts my shirt over my head. I still don’t bother to wear a bra. It seems like a waste to cover my petite breasts. His lips are on mine. Hot and full of need they trail from my lips down my neck onto my breasts, “I missed you…” I whisper.

“I can tell…” he chuckles as my body shakes and quivers under his touch, “You left me…” he whispers as he stands up straight, his fingers dig into my breasts.

“You told me to leave…”

He bites down on my collar bone as he palms my breasts. Then I’m shoved onto the bed and he straddles me, “You lied to me…”

I look up and smile, “So did you…”

We’re both naked, nothing stopping us from getting as close as possible, “You kept secrets from me…” he shifts so he can lift one of my legs up. He leans back and kisses my foot, I squirm.

“So did you…” he says nothing else as he crouches between my legs. It hurts at first, like the first time, the very first time.

His fingernails dig into my hips, he’s never been this rough with me. It’s painful and I love it. It feels like he’s going to tear me in half but for the first time since Cato put me in the hospital I actually feel alive.

And I never came harder.

I wake up in a tangle of sheets with my hand buried in my underwear, I still have forty-five minutes until my alarm will be going off. I begrudgingly get out of bed and shower. The water washes away
the sweat and memory of Peeta’s touch, I turn the water hotter and hotter until it stings my skin.

*Forget… Forget… he’s gone, he’s not yours anymore… Just forget.*
Chapter Summary

The songs for this chapter are Misery Business by Paramore and Bonfire by Childish Gambino. Yay. :)

For the most part you were all lovely and kind with how long it’s been since my update. Some of you pestered me and that made me sad. It’s going to be some time until I update again. You might want to kill me at the end of this chapter.

Thank you Apecanin for getting this back to me even though you’re busy. :)

Peeta

I smeared pencil lines with the tips of my finger. I rarely drew people anymore but I couldn’t draw anything but her. Long black hair spilling down her bare back, the fresh Y shaped scar on her shoulder, two entities meeting up and traveling together. It was oddly poetic though, in our case, it was two bodies walking as one before traveling on their own. She watches me from over her shoulder, a sly smile play on her lips. She covers her modestly with a white sheet.

Though it was just a drawing, the lively eyes, sexy lips, the point of her nose, even the scar on her back… They would never be mine again, because as always I just let my anger get the best of me. I didn’t try and listen to her, I just yelled.

But to be fair she pushed me pretty far, so I pushed her out of my life in one sentence.

“Are we going to go out?”

I look up from my sketch book. For all the good she did in the world, Delly’s being here ruined my chances of mending things with Katniss. No matter how juvenile it sounds, Finnick told me that Annie heard from Madge that Katniss said I could ‘fuck who ever I wanted and kindly burn in hell’.

“Maybe…” I tell her simply. “I was thinking of spending some time with Prim tonight.”

Rue was back in town now that the Olympics were over. Since she got to show her national pride, Rue was basically living here.

Delly isn’t deterred by this, “What are you drawing?”

I close my sketch book, showing my current girlfriend a half-naked picture of my ex. “Nothing, just something from when I was younger…”

“Oh…” she smiles, “I got tickets for Fashion Week. Two, one for you one for me. We’re going, you’re getting out of this stuffy office.” Katniss never thought this office was stuffy. In fact, she loved how the large windows in the back made the office seem open, and how she could see over Central Park. She loved watching the sunsets with me. Delly didn’t see things like that, she liked the public life. She assumed that inside was inside no matter what.
“Maybe,” I tell her. She crosses the room and sits in my lap. “We’ll see. I might be busy. Hostile take-over and what not.”

Actually that was all up to my lawyers at this point. The fact of the matter was that I didn’t want to go see Katniss on display, but there was no way around it. Cinna was the talk of fashion week, Delly wouldn’t miss it for the world.

Katniss

“ID, and who are you seeing?”

I slide my license under the glass window, “Cato Snow…” I whisper quietly. Because he was rich, Cato was serving his sentences concurrently. My various assaults, the theft, he couldn’t be traced back to Prim’s shooting but hopefully someday. He would be out in fifteen to twenty, and was being moved to a minimum security facility somewhere in Bumblefuck New York because he was rich and his uncle flexed his wallet.

A guard searches me and my purse before letting me go through, escorted of course. I’m seated in what looks like a library cubby only with a pane of glass between a matching one across from me. My heart clenches when he sits down across from me, but I refuse to show any fear. He didn’t own me anymore.

I pick up the phone and he follows suit, “Well, look at you all done up like a pig at the state fair,” he sneers.

“Look at you… Prison orange is really your color, and those shackles really suit you.”

“Fuck you… Why are you here?”

I dig through my purse and pull out the folded letter I received in the mail two days ago. I press it to the glass, “Remember this? You have something of mine. What is it?”

“They’ll have it for you at the front desk of this lovely little hotel you put me in when you check out.” He hisses.

“Excuse me, you put yourself here. I just provided the evidence, and even if you didn’t end up here, the world knows what you are. God, life on the outside is going to be fun for you, I mean inside as well. I hear they treat the ones who hit women real well…” I can see the anger on his face, “Oh? What? You’re afraid you’ll find someone in there who treats you like you treated me?” he narrows his eyes, “Good luck Cato. I hope you have a good stay, and don’t come out in fifteen to twenty telling me you found God and all your anger problems are fixed. Ugh! When I hear people say that…” I stand up, “Anyways, I guess this is goodbye. Remember to not drop the soap and what not,” I hang up the phone and he snaps bashing the receiver on the glass before guards haul him away.

Oh well.

When I sign out I’m handed a white envelope. Inside is my mother’s necklace and a key, the key to Peeta’s home in the Hamptons. I stuff both in my pocket, the necklace is ripped, the key honestly not mine to have. I just smile and leave the prison, rushing to my car to get away from the barbed wire fences and orange jumpsuits.

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“Alright, one foot…” all this week I was dressed in the finest clothes. Rich silks, soft cashmere,
lots and lots of blacks and neutrals which suits me, monochromatic Katniss Everdeen.

I objected vehemently when Cinna told me I would be in a wedding dress, “We’re showing four, all relate to the city. In New York you will be very modern and chic, in London more regal and elegant. Paris, romantic and dramatic…” he stops talking there, but he left out Milan.

“What about Milan?”

Cinna just waves, “Oh Milan is Milan. I had fun with that one. You’ll wear it when you walk down the aisle!”

I roll my eyes, “I’m not getting married Cinna, you and I are going to grow old together like a slightly less awkward Will and Grace.”

Cinna just snorts, “That woman had the biggest nose I have ever seen,” I slap my forehead as he binds me into the dress. Modern and chic was right. Cinna said it was a ‘structured wedding dress’ with an oriental collar and plunging neckline with lace accent to protect my modesty’ I just ran my fingers along the rich silver beadwork around my waist. It was fitted down to my mid-thigh and flared out some but most of the flair was in the back. I think it was called a mermaid.

“You’re beautiful,” Cinna tells me as he straightens out my necklace. The ruined black silk strap was replaced by a white one for the day.

“Thank you…” I whisper, knowing there was a wreath necklace discarded in a jewelry box, or maybe on another model, but Cinna knew I needed this.

“Every straight man’s heart is going to stop when they see you. Even Mr. Mellark’s…” It was no big secret that Delilah swooped in the second I walked out. She was there to comfort Peeta while his sister was in the hospital, and to help with the rollercoaster of break-up emotions. She was his bottle of whiskey. It was also no secret that the two have been to every single ‘show’ since New York Fashion Week started Monday.

“Thirty seconds!”

Cinna helped me to the stairs that lead up to the catwalk. My heels were high, almost too high, the train awkwardly long.

It was a slow steady stream of women and a few men walking out one side and coming back from the other only to have to quickly get changed and get sent out again. I would be one of them if it wasn’t for the fact that it took nearly thirty minutes to get me into this damned dress, twenty five of those minutes were hooking about two million hook and eye fasteners and not skipping an eye (Which Cinna did about ten times, not realizing until we got to the top).

“Alright, walk to the end and pose, don’t move until I come out,” I just nod, my body is shaking, sure I had gone on the catwalk once before, but this was different. I was supposed to look poised, not sexy, the dress was heavy and awkward to walk in so I wasn’t sure how poise was going to happen.

Fastest thirty seconds of my life. I try not to search for Peeta and Delilah and focus on a spot in the back of the room. The end comes too soon, the heavy dress pressing down on me. I place a hand on my hip and angle my body, I arch my back to push out what little breast I have and do as I’m told.

Cinna is too slow, I start to feel ridiculous before he grabs my hand, “Twirl for them,” he whispers. I do so and the dress doesn’t just get the quiet, reverent clapping. The room is full of the thunderous applause. Cinna was the most talked about designer this week, and as his personal
Barbie Doll I can’t help but feel proud of him.

I stand perfectly still, like a mannequin as he bow’s, taking my hand in his and guiding me back to the protection of back stage. “That was beautiful, perfect even,” he kisses my cheek and takes the veil out of my bun.

“Flavius, Venia, get this woman some champagne!”

Octavia comes out of nowhere and starts taking down my hair while Cinna gets me out of the dress. Just as it falls to the floor I’m handed a glass of champagne. I sip it as the air-conditioning hits my naked skin. I step over the dress while it gets put in a garment bag never to be worn again. I’m in nothing but a white lace bra, lace panties and a white garter belt, still with my way too high heels.

I’m so used to being undressed around these people that walking half naked around them is nothing, now when Johanna, Annie and Madge come rushing into the back I freak. They sneak up on me, I’m zoned out, sipping on champagne when I hear the snap of a camera, “Katniss Everdeen, sexy model,” Octavia hands me my dress for tonight, my last night in the states for three weeks. Sexy was right, Johanna helped me zip into the one shoulder long sleeve white dress that fit me like a glove. Octavia unclips my exposed bra strap.

“Hmm…” she circles me, “I think we need to lose the stockings…” without missing a beat she lifts up the hem of my dress and pulls down my underwear.

“Hi, I’m Katniss, I’m a human Barbie doll!” I’m handed back my underwear minus the garter belt and my white pumps are exchanged for a pair of white high heeled booties. Cinna is long since gone, off to hopefully sleep, inside the shoe is a note.

Katniss, you’ve been too quiet, too reserved. Show New York my girl on fire is still in there.

See you tomorrow afternoon. Venia is delivering your outfit to your apartment.

Cinna

I zip up the back of the studded booties, “How do I look?”

“Like a Manhattan sex goddess, if you don’t get laid tonight there’s something wrong with the water in New York,” Johanna tells me. I link arms with Annie and Madge. One week done, I’ve posed in nothing but high wasted shorts and my bra, a very a strange halter vest like thing, beautiful sweaters but the worst is yet to come. Fortunately, I’m off the hook for the first few days in London giving me a chance to enjoy myself and just relax. It was a mini vacation.

“Where are we going?” I ask as we pile into a cab, flashbulbs going off as photographers try to get pictures of celebrities at the shows, instead they get me, “Because it has to be something special if we’re all dressed to the nines and you all ditched your mates.”

“Well, we’re starting our night off at the Met. They have a wonderful open air bar surrounded by sculptures and hot guys,” then we’re taking you to dinner, and the club,” I didn’t know which club, just the club.

The sun was still out so over cosmopolitans, the girls and I watched the sunset over the Manhattan skyline, “You guys are taking me here so I remember how gorgeous the city is, right?”

“Well, we can’t have you falling in love with London, or Paris, or Milan and leaving us here!” Annie tells me.
But, we encourage you to test the waters in each city,” Madge smiles.

I set my glass down, “Guys, stop trying to get me laid, or encourage me to bone the first hot guy that walks by.”

Johanna downs her drink, “Hot guy? Listen, grab the first guy with a big cock and fuck him until he can’t walk straight,” she tells us as the waiter comes back with our second round of drinks. His face is priceless, shock and disbelief all wrapped up in one.

“How will I know how big is dick is? That isn’t something you just ask… ‘Hi, I’m Katniss Everdeen, how large is your penis, and don’t chub it up first.’ Yeah, Josie, perfect ice breaker. No wonder my track record is so good.”

“Well, you grind him, of course,” I roll my eyes dinner was more tame, sake and sushi at Morimoto.

These girls really didn’t want me fleeing to another city.

Much to their dismay, I don’t get laid tonight. We dance together at the club and I even have a few guys trying to dance with me, but they back off. I’m here with my friends, and want to go home alone.

I barely sleep that night, choosing to pass out on the plane over my own bed, “Now, your suite will have two other women. They aren’t mine but you’ll be with them for the rest of the month. We had to use an agency to get them.”

“Can’t I just sleep in your suite?” I ask pulling my bag off the conveyer belt in Heathrow.

Cinna smiles, “If they get intolerable.”

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Peeta

I can’t get the image out of my head, the way the white fabric made her olive skin glow, the veil billowing after her. The dress was much too modern. She should be in a classic dress… I shake away the thoughts. She was everywhere I seemed to look, but now she was in London. The pictures of her dancing with other men in a club just old memories. I shouldn’t even be jealous, she’s not mine. I threw her away, unfortunately not like a piece of garbage, more like accidently throwing away a cellphone or credit card. I would search forever until I found her again if I could.

I was with Delilah now anyway, not that it was a chore. She’s sweet, and nice, but far too agreeable. Rarely will she argue with me, question what I’m doing or give me suggestions, Katniss on the other hand was here for two days and already re-arranging the furniture, and that wasn’t even when she lived here those few short weeks.

I honestly do have feelings for Delly, I’m not sure I ever lost them after our break-up, plus she was still excellent at giving head, but she liked things too gentle, Katniss let me handcuff her no questions asked. I could pull her hair, spank her, dig my fingers into her and it just turned her on more.

I can’t keep compare the two… it’s not fair. I fix the cuffs of my sleeve and leave my bedroom finally, “Are you ready?”

Rue and Prim barely associate with Delly, even though they both basically live here. Prim is on the
mend and is even hoping to get to Milan for the end of Fashion Week, but first the doctor has to clear her. Whenever I have her over they both hull up in Prim’s bedroom.

Delly kisses my cheek, “You take longer than me to get ready,” we head into the garage and I look at my retired motorcycle. It didn’t feel right riding it anymore.

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Katniss

I’m so used to living alone, or living with someone who locked the bathroom door that my new roommates for the month, a blonde named Glimmer and brunette named Clove who I had actually run into a few months ago at kickboxing with Johanna, leaving it unlocked at all times was absurd to me. It was clear though why they did this when I walked in on Glimmer flushing her dinner down the toilet, her toothbrush on the back of the toilet.

The model diet, staring at the mirror and vomiting.

I back out of the bathroom and head out of the suite and down the hall. I knock on Cinna’s door, it was around two am and I just wanted to be near someone I felt comfortable with.

“They’re being loud,” I tell him meekly, it’s not my business to discuss Glimmer’s ‘diet’ with him, that’s her life choice. I just need real sleep.

He has a whole two bedroom suite to his lonesome though it’s already a cluttered mess with every type of garment strewn about, “Alterations?”

He nods and together we clear off the open bed, I don’t realize how exhausted I am until I practically face plant in the bed and pass out. In my mind it’s seven in the morning, perfectly appropriate time to fall asleep.

I’m not exactly sure what memory comes to me tonight, it’s too dark to tell, but I know I’m running. I can taste the sharp metal and tangy oil of the handgun and I vomit. Then he catches me, ripping me off my hands and knees, “Face me,” the voice tells me, smacking me in the back of the head with something hard. I see stars, “I said face me! I don’t want this to look like an execution…”

I squeeze my eyes shut, maybe I won’t see it coming, maybe I’d only hear a loud bang then nothing. The cold metal presses against my forehead, “Open your eyes,” I don’t and the metal presses deeper into the flesh of my forehead.

“Please, you don’t have to. Just let me go,” I beg.

“No... Belle,” my eyes snap open, “You need to be punished for all the pain you’ve caused me.”

“Peeta no!” I scream.

“Katniss!” Cinna rips me from the nightmare, my head in his lap.

My skull feels like it’s being ripped apart, a nightmare induced migraine, “It was just a dream,” I pant as he starts stroking my hair.

“Want to talk about it?” not particularly, but I do anyway. I tell Cinna everything. He assures me that Peeta doesn’t want to put a bullet in my brain, that it was just a horrible nightmare. I know this is true, just the taste, and the smell, and the feeling of the gun against my forehead, it was all too real.
We have four days in London, and then we’re off to Milan before finishing the month off in Paris. Our first day I’m on the runway again, but then I have two days off until the last day when I’ll have to model yet another wedding dress.

Dressed in a simple white halter top and dark blue skirt, Glimmer and Clove coerce me into an after party.

At first I’m glad I’m went, dancing and a little liquor is hopefully enough to chase away the nightmares.

Then I meet a guy. He tells me his name is Daniel. I tell him my name but he already knows… He’s seen my pictures. I don’t question which pictures, I don’t care enough. He’s everything I never go for, shaggy black hair and bright green eyes. Even in my white peep-toe Louboutin’s he’s still taller than I am.

“Can I kiss you?” he asks timidly, I just nod and he grabs my hand, kissing my knuckles before pulling me in to kiss my lips. His kiss has a bite to it, sharp from his beer, but I don’t want it to stop. Daniel leads me to a booth and sits next to me, never letting go of my hand. I missed this, the closeness of another human. I have to take a quick second to curse Peeta for making me crave physical affection like this.

Daniel orders us tequila shots. I lick a little bit of salt from my wrist before downing the shot. He goes for the more bold approach licking the salt off where my neck meets my shoulder. It’s like he flipped a switch, “Let’s go back to my hotel,” I say without thinking.

We settle our tabs and head outside, his hands find my waist while I smoke, ever so often his lips brushing against my neck. When I’m at the last few puffs he gets us a cab.

I lock the door to my bedroom when we get there and jump right into things. I’m easy to get undressed, kick the shoes off, pull down the skirt and pull the top over my head. He has me naked in barely a minute while I still fiddle with the buttons on his shirt. I don’t think about what I’m about to do. I’ve done this before haven’t I?

Gotten drunk and had sex with a stranger? Look how that turned out. No, this wasn’t a long term thing. This was a one night thing. When I get the shirt off I run my fingers through the dark hair on his chest and sink to my knees as I undo his belt and zipper. I pull his boxers down with his pants. I take him into my mouth and he tries to say something, a compliment I think but I don’t want that. I don’t need that. I just need him to shut up and let me get lost in this. I need him to be my decoy.

He’s a little bigger than what my body is used to, and with little to no foreplay coming my way it hurts when he enters me but I stifle my groan. He rests too much weight on me during and when he’s finished he rolls off me and tosses the condom in the trashcan perfectly content but leaving me unsatisfied.

After a few minutes when I’m sure he’s done I pull the sheet up to cover my breasts, “Ok, I think it’s time for you to leave.” I tell him.

“What?” he asks shocked.

I pull on my underwear and robe, “You, out of my suite now or I’ll call security, or the cops, or the bobby’s whatever you call them here,” I was done with him, he tried his best to get me lost in him but it was just not happening, an orgasm on my part might have helped.
“Out. Now.” I snap when he still doesn’t move. Finally he gets dressed and leaves me. I treat myself with Peeta’s graduation gift.

There are pictures of me and Daniel together at the club, on the street and entering the hotel. I flip through the various snippets of my rumored personal business, “My legs look good in this one…” I say while finishing my coffee.

Cinna just smiles, “Back in the saddle?”

I groan, “No, well, maybe. It was kind of bad. Hurt and he put his weight on me during, then was done before I came,” I shrug. “Whatever, I don’t need to see him ever again.”

I actually get to watch some of the fashion shows this week. Cinna and I go to watch Alexander McQueen and all I can say is the man is a genius, until he sends a woman out with clear antlers on her head, a few yards of see-through gold fabric wrapped around them and veiling her face. I grab Cinna’s hand and lean into him, “Thank you…” I whisper.

He smiles and kisses my cheek before the model heads into the back and we chuckle together.

Cinna didn’t lie when he said London would be more regal. My dress on the final night has a high neck line but no sleeves. It was plain but that’s what made it beautiful. Cinna still let me wear my own necklace. My hair is left loose in waves of layered black curls, a birdcage veil clipped in.

“Stunning,” Cinna says after brushing a layer of blood red lipstick on me. It’s the only make-up he’s put on me today besides a little foundation and mascara, “Nervous?”

My heels are short but the train on this dress is bound to fuck something up. Apparently at a Chanel show earlier today a model fell through the cat walk and broke her ankle. How could I not be nervous?

“I just don’t want to fall through the stage. I’ve broken enough bones for this life time,” he smiles and pats my cheek.

“You’ll be perfect…” I’m just the model, it’s his dress that gets the applause, first in New York, then London, and even Milan where I’m in the wildest wedding dress yet. Strapless with white flowers falling across my chest and down to the bunched up skirt, I have no make-up on and my hair is teased to the point of no return.

Before going on the runway I tug at the flowered mesh arm warmers he has me in. It’s too wild for me, but beautiful, the embodiment of Cinna’s very own brand of Couture.

I call my mother from the hotel phone our last night in Milan, “Hello?” she asks, not recognizing the number.

“Hey mom.”

She sighs, relieved to finally be hearing from me, so much has changed since last we talked, “Katniss, how are you? How’s Europe?”

“Europe is fun, I kind of miss New York. I haven’t seen a passible sushi place since leaving JFK,” though I haven’t really been looking. “So I was thinking of coming home for Christmas,” all of my friends were in relationships, they’d be spending the holiday with their partners while I had the honor of being the seventh wheel. No thanks, plus Florida might be tolerable in December.

“Really? You haven’t been to the house in the Keys… Well ever.”
“I know… But I’ll be there. I’ll probably stay through New Years because,” I groan, “Times Square.”

“Or we could come up there. Your brother and sister have always wanted to see New York during Christmas,” that wouldn’t be so bad. Then I don’t have to get on another plane or pack anything, and Manhattan was magical during Christmas. Between the tree in Rockefeller square and just the atmosphere it was amazing.

“That would work. I even have a kitchen now though I’ll have to get my sweaters out of the oven.”

“Wait… What?”

“Nothing,” I tell her, “Just don’t ask… Listen, I have to go, I’ll call you when I get back into the states. I have to pack for Paris. I don’t even know why I unpack my things… All I wear is leggings and t-shirts,” not world appropriate but ask me if I give a fuck.

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Peeta

“Oh my god, no. Look at that one!” I hear Rue gasp as I leave my office, her and Prim are huddled around the computer ready to leave for Paris. I’m worried about her going alone, though when she was fourteen we shipped her off to England. Well, Prim begged but it was basically the same thing. The doctor cleared her to go and she’s nineteen now so there’s no arguing or talking her out of it, “Look at him.”

“What are you two looking at?” I ask.

“Just pictures from some Fashion Week after parties,” Prim tells me, “She looks so different in pictures…”

“Taller too…” Rue takes the mouse and scrolls down, I look over her shoulder as they scroll through pictures of my ex-girlfriend and two beyond skinny girls. Then there’s one of her with a guy but she looks so bored and detached, I can’t help but smirk. Katniss never had that look with me.

“She took him to her hotel then like two hours later he left,” Prim realizes I’m looking over her shoulder, “Peeta! Go away! If you want to know what Katniss is doing with her life, just call her, or email her, or send her a letter, whatever old people do!”

“I’m not old,” I ruffle her hair.

“Ha!” Prim starts, “Is it going to be your thirtieth this year or your twenty-nine again party?”

“I hate you Prim,” I sigh.

She giggles, “Love you too big brother!” her chair scrapes across the floor and she runs up behind me, digging through my pants pocket before taking out my cellphone.

“What are you…” she unlocks it and when I try to grab it she lets out a fake yelp of pain so I back off.

“I don’t have her number anymore, and I am seeing her,” I should have just deleted her number from my phone, but I can’t. That final nail in the ‘get Katniss out of my life’ coffin just… just no.
Even if I took it off my phone I had the number memorized, so it’s not like it matters.

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_Katniss_

“No,” I slap his hands from me. _Derek_? Was that his name? I didn’t really care, he just wouldn’t keep his hands away from my breasts. I didn’t want to be touched, I just wanted to feel and not be felt if that made any sense. I told my therapist about my revelation, I could handle meaningless sex, but the second I was shown any affection it was like having acid thrown in my face.

He says it’s because I haven’t had a stable male in my life ever. My father died when I was young then my mother married an abusive douche who liked to lock me in the shed no matter the weather. He would beat my mother and ignored his daughter, but he’s in prison on an unrelated charge and buy the time husband three came into the picture apparently I was too fucked up which drove me to Cato. Then I found Peeta, who was almost as messed up as me though I couldn’t figure out why. It was subtle, how he would occasionally stare off, how when we slept in the same bed sometimes he would grip me so tight the air was forced from my lungs. He told me once that he knew what it was like to be hit, I never got any more information than that. I never will.

Dr. Aurelius says I should take this time and figure myself out. What I like in a man, what I want in a life partner, what I want with my life most importantly, but I have all I want. Ever since I was young I just wanted to be able to put food in my belly. I never wanted the cute suburban life. I never wanted children, or a husband, or riches. I just wanted to not go hungry.

I was in a place now where I could eat at the nicer places in New York though I was always hungry, not for food, no that would be a simple fix.

I was hungry to _feel_. The warmth of another human body, unfortunately now if the guy touched me I would remember all the horrible ways I’ve been touched before, the hits, the hair pulling, the strangling. I was walking a dangerous line. Every one of my liaisons was compared to one of the sources of my pain, when they tried to please _me_ the one luring them up to my hotel room they’d remind me of the other.

I got what’s his face off, he barely spoke English, and I spoke no French, but he sure as hell knew what ‘get the fuck out’ meant. I don’t mean to be so… well mean, but I can’t. I want to attach to someone, to love and be loved in return but I. Just. Can’t.

Glimmer and Clove, my roommates for three more days called me the succubus. If the boot fits.

I’m woken up at eight by Prim calling me, “Yeah?” is all I can manage at first.

“You should get dressed,” Rue tells me on Prim’s phone, “Like five minutes ago.”

“No. I don’t have to be anywhere today.”

“Yes you do!” Prim shouts in the background, “Breakfast with us! We’re outside your room”

I fling the sheets off myself and run for the door in nothing but a t-shirt. Sure enough there they are, “Hi!” Prim death grips me, “Bonjour! J’ai faim de sorte que vous devriez vous habiller pour que nous puissions prendre le petit déjeuner!”

“Um… I need a shower?”

Prim groans, “You’re fine, fuck you can go like that just put a belt on and make it a trend!”
“Primrose! Watch your tongue! I need to get the man filth off me,” I sigh.

Prim says nothing to me but Rue asks if it was nice, “Ha! It was passable,” I shower quickly, not bothering to wash my hair and dressing quickly. It’s cold enough to warrant a jacket over my cream colored sweater and jeans. I don’t know where we’re going so I go for my new converse, still not broken in enough to wear them without socks.

“Ready?”

Prim’s uncharacteristically quiet over breakfast. They’re both the legal drinking age here so three mimosa’s a piece into breakfast she finally speaks, “So you’re really just… Guys? Just random guys?”

I wipe my lips on the white cloth napkin before taking another sip, “Yeah… I mean, he’s with his ex, I can’t really go fuck my ex so…”

“But, just… Random guys?”

I look away, not wanting to touch this subject, it’s my life, “Random guys aren’t there long enough to hurt you,” I down my drink, “But that’s beside the point. How have you been?”

It’s easy to tell that Prim wants her brother and I to get back together, but he’s moved on. I’m just trying to make it through the day. Work is a good distractor but there are just so many voids. My life is a lot like Peeta’s closet. He took his things and left little voids that mentally I’m not prepared to fill. The void in my heart is the most cliché one, but it goes so deeper. My life revolved around that man. My existence was tied to his. No, never again. That wasn’t me, that isn’t me.

“Pretty good, want to see my scar?” I don’t have a chance to say no, she’s already lifting up her shirt and showing me the lower part of her waist, dead center, “They said I was lucky, a few inches over and I would be infertile, or paralyzed.”

She drops her shirt and sits back down, “I’m sorry, again.”

Prim is so… accepting of getting shot. So absolutely ok that I put her in danger just by being with her brother, “Why? Because I begged you to walk to the station with me? Because I begged you to walk down that dark street?” She rolls her eyes, “It sucks Katniss, and it hurt, but I lived. That’s all that matters.”

I nod. Since I don’t have to be on the runway until tomorrow we go to The Louvre but I’m not much for art. They see priceless paintings, I see naked women. I think they get upset when Johanna starts texting me about her mental break down about getting into a ‘serious relationship’.

“Sorry,” I mumble, “Your brother used the toilet while Johanna was brushing her teeth… She doesn’t know what to do with herself…”

“Tell her to lock the door duh. When we were grow up the boys all used the same bathroom because it was right outside where their rooms were. I didn’t need an alarm, right at seven ‘damn it I’m taking a piss can’t you knock!’” Prim giggles, “I got my own bathroom.”

We look at the Venus de Milo, I love how she has a little fat on her stomach. If a sex goddess could have some so could everyone else. When we leave Rue goes to make a call and I pull Prim aside, “What’s up?” she asks.

“I really need you to stop mentioning your brother around me…” her head tilts to the side, “Don’t play cute with me Prim. I light a cigarette, taking a long drag, “I know what you want Prim, I really
do. But you didn’t hear what we said to each other. What we did… What I did to you…” I look away, What I could still do…” It’s done, ok? I’m trying to be happy. I’m trying to get on with my life…”

“Well…” she quips, “Sleeping with random guys who don’t even stay the night isn’t going to make you happy in the long run.”

I flick away my ash, “They would stay the night. It just feels wrong to have a different man in my bed…” I whisper.

Prim is notably kinder for the rest of the day, less judgmental and more like the friend I really need while I’m out here. To be honest I just want to go home, by the time Cinna is lacing me into my final wedding dress, and by final I mean final, I’m ready to run out onto the runway turn around and head straight to the airport. Paris brings back so many bad memories.

It’s where Peeta and I first said that we loved each other.

I pace back and forth tugging at the three quarter lace sleeves of my fourth and final dress. It’s beautiful, my favorite so far. Off the shoulder with layers and layers of cream colored tulle giving it a sort of ballerina look. Cinna was even letting me wear ballet flats.

“I moved your flight back to America to tonight, you’ll be on the red eye but you need to go back. It’s not healthy for you here right now…” Cinna tells me, fixing one of my ringlet curls that got tangled in my chandelier earrings.

“I’m fine…” I mumble as I get more blush brushed onto my cheeks.

He sighs, “Just listen to me, ok? Octavia is back at your hotel packing your bag. You will come visit when you’re healthier. You’ve dropped ten pounds since getting here and I don’t like it. Go home and eat like an American.”

“French fries until three am in my bed? Sounds good…”

Home sounds nice, I sleep the entire flight back to JFK and don’t even make it to my bed. After my body gets back on New York time I meet the girls for lunch, late as always. They scream when they see me, still buffed to perfection from Fashion Week, I haven’t had a chance to let my hair get shaggy, or my eyebrows to grow, I even find the energy to do my make-up.

“God I missed sushi…” I moan while dipping a California Roll into soy sauce.

“They don’t have Sushi in London, Milan, or Paris?” Madge asks watching me pile wasabi on the piece.

I shrug, “I’m sure they do but I was so scared to go past the hotel when I wasn’t with a native speaker. And in London I was so jetlagged,” I don’t tell them about how every single night I was plagued by nightmares, how most nights the only thing that quelled my heart stopping fear was Cinna. They don’t need to know how he would stroke my hair like my father would when I had a nightmare as a child.

Annie rips me from my daze, “Finnick and I have been trying to get pregnant.”

“You mean he’s trying to knock you up,” Johanna corrects.

Annie shakes her head and sips on her green tea, “No, we’re trying to get pregnant.”
“No, *you’re* trying to get pregnant. Annie, that whole ‘we’re pregnant’ thing is absolute bullshit and when you finally do put a bun in the oven if I hear it out of you, pregnant or not, I will slap you.”

Annie sighs, “Well, here’s the thing. We’ve been using ovulation tests, and just everything. And still no baby.”

“Maybe you’re not having sex enough…” Madge suggests while taking a bite of her seaweed salad.

“Is every night, sometimes two times a day, not enough? I think my vagina will walk away if I keep that up…” I find myself tearing up, “Oh my god, Katniss are you?”

My head shoots up, “What? Oh god no! I just missed this. Talking like this with people… Seeing the world was lovely, but lonely…”

The girls make more and more time for just the four of us. October comes and goes, as does November. I fly down to Florida to spend Thanksgiving since my family will be up for Christmas.

It’s warm, too warm, but I missed my mother’s cooking, how my half-brother and half-sister and I bicker like nothing else. There are millions of people in Manhattan but it’s truly a lonely city sometimes. At least I’m no longer exciting enough to have people want to take my picture, except for the photo shoots. Cinna has my life booked to keep me active. He’s a lifesaver, letting me talk to him about everything and anything even if it’s four in the morning his time.

Christmas comes closer and closer, creeping up on me like a fog. Prim drags me out of my apartment to watch the lighting of the tree in Rockefeller Square, her right hand is back in London with her family for the holidays, as is Peeta’s, though there’s rumors that they’re on the rocks. That makes me feel a little happy. According to Johanna break-ups aren’t about ‘who’s happier faster’ it’s ‘who dies the most miserable’. I think I’m winning, or losing… I don’t think this a contest I want to win.

On one of the coldest, most miserable days in December my bell rings, “Hello?” I ask pressing the call button.

“I know I’m the last person you want to see… But please, let me up? I need to talk to you.”

*Peeta...*
Yay! I know what you think it is, but it’s not what it is! Also in case you don’t know after this I’ll be taking a brief hiatus for personal reasons. I still plan on writing but you probably won’t be hearing from me until the end of October or early November. My plan is to work more on Mutt this month and maybe finish it then get back into writing Beast and SempFi with full force. I really should use this time to focus on school so I can rush the honors frat in the Spring but this isn’t ‘Cole, get your shit together month’ it’s Hawktober. Enjoy! The song for this chapter is One More Time by Maroon 5.

Vanity was never my thing, but I still checked my reflection. How bad is it? I ask myself. Hair piled on top of my head, check. Ratty t-shirt and leggings, check. Neon yellow fuzzy slippers, double check. I hit the buzzer to unlock the door to the outside world and slide my chain lock out, leaving the door slightly ajar.

He’s up here before I can ready myself, swinging the door and almost hitting me. I jump back trying not to breathe just in case he strikes me.

No, don’t be stupid. Peeta won’t hit you… He looks about five years older. The creases on his forehead that he would get when he was worried or tired look almost permanent, poor thing… I finally exhale, realizing my arms were up to defend my face from any blows.

I sigh heavily, as if him being here is the biggest burden he could have placed on my shoulders. “Come on… Close the door…”

I move around him like he’s a cobra, ready to strike. I don’t even care that I’m only in a t-shirt and leggings. I wasn’t expecting company and I don’t care if he doesn’t see me at my most fabulous. He just studies the near squalor I live in, clothes strewn about the place, dishes in the sink, my pillow on the couch where I was planning on watching old Christmas movies and drink tonight. Even my whiskey bottle is readied on the coffee table.

“Why are you here?” I ask, sitting across from him at the kitchen table and passing him a mug of tea, “After all this time, almost five months, why now?”

“I just…” he sighs, “I miss you.”

He reaches across the table to hold my hand. For a brief second, our fingers intertwine and I feel calm, alive even. Then I pull my hand away and he stares at me curiously.

“Don’t touch me. In case you don’t remember you broke up with me.”

He sighs, “No, I was the one who started running his stupid mouth. You were the one who walked away.”

I look away, “You gave me no choice.” Cato gave me no choice. “I-I had no choice.”
I rest my hands on the table again. This time when his fingers knot with mine, I don’t pull away. Even for a brief moment I wanted to feel alive. God, how stupid I feel being this dependent on another human for happiness, but when I left Peeta I left a huge part of me behind, the part that was so tightly bound to him. I know he feels it too, the way his fingers tighten around my hand. We only let go to sip at our tea sitting in a comfortable silence.

“Delly and I are done…” he tells me. “Well, I think. She left for London.”


He sighs, “I was… I don’t think I deserve happiness after what happened between you and I to be perfectly honest.”

“Well that’s idiotic,” I tell him, pulling my hands away. His brow furrows and he looks about ten years older than he really is. “Let yourself be fucking happy you dumb fucking asshole!” I yell “For god’s sake!”

I get up from the kitchen table needing to keep myself busy, slamming dishes as I load them into the dishwasher, stomping my feet as I throw my clothes into the hamper not even checking if they’re clean or dirty. “You know! At least you can stand to be near someone intimately! At least someone kissing or touching you doesn’t make you panic because you don’t know whether or not he’s going to choke you with a gun or leave you after stripping you emotionally bare!” I yell.

Peeta doesn’t say anything, he just lets me rant. “You think you don’t deserve to be happy! At least you have the option to be happy with someone!” I slam my bedroom door and flop down on my bed. One painful sob rips through my body.

I hear the door open and a few cautious steps to my bed, which shifts under his weight. Peeta rests his hand on my lower back and runs his palm up and down. It feels nice, too nice, nicer than it should, “Belle…”

“Don’t call me that!” I scream, “I’m not your Belle! I’m not your anything! Why are you here? Why do you have to torture me like this?!”

He says one word, only one is needed to basically strip me to my core, “Always…”

I roll so I’m looking at him, I must look like a mad woman, puffy eyes from crying, wild mess of hair, make-up from yesterday’s photo-shoot running down my face, “What did you say?”

“Always. You underlined it quite a lot in your goodbye letter. You said you would always love me…”

“So you think in your moment of weakness you can come to me? That I would be here with open arms because you’re feeling sad?” I sneer.

“No… I don’t know why I came here ok? I just got in my car and came here. I got the address from Prim’s phone and drove. Ok? I miss you Katniss. Your mess, how noisy you are. Things that drove me nuts when we were living together, I just…” his voice trails off, “Never mind…” he moves his hand from my back and I feel cold and empty again.

I don’t let him speak again. I wipe my eyes with the back of my hand. I move too fast, he isn’t expecting me to grab him by the shoulders and force him onto his back, “What are you-“ if I let him initiate it would be loving, sweet. No, I wanted rough, angry, the kind of sex I dream about.
In the morning I would kick him out, send him to go find Delly because it’s safer for him. I love him, and would always love him. I could give him this, this chance to be happy. I was going to have some fun first though.

“I will always have a place for you in my heart,” I tell him before taking off my t-shirt, he moves to cup my breasts but I slap his hand away, “Don’t touch me!” I cry, “I can’t stand it when people touch me, I get so scared!” Now I sound clinically insane. I go quiet and hug my body, making myself as still as deer in headlights.

Peeta freezes, “You don’t have to be afraid. Katniss, no one will ever hit you again…”

“But they’ll leave…” Men in my life leave, it’s what they do.

“Only if you let them…” he grabs my hands. “Trust me, ok?” I don’t want to. I just want to lose myself in him, to spend some time with him and send him on my way then move on with my life. One last fuck.

I look into his eyes, the hurt that comes with Peeta isn’t physical, it come with knowing I can never have him to myself again, at least not without putting him in some kind of danger. The pain with Peeta is grief, “Trust me…” he begs, “I won’t hurt you… I’ll never leave you again.”

“Yes, you will. You have to. You have to go to Delilah and fix things to make yourself happy. You should be happy…” he pulls me down, his hand finds the end of my braid. He pulls the hair tie out of it and runs his fingers through my long black hair while we kiss. When I pull back my hair frames our faces from the outside world.

“Why are we doing this?” he whispers.

“Because we’re both every color and shade of fucked up known to man.”

Suddenly I’m on my back and he’s pulling off my leggings, “Do you ever wear underwear?”

“Not when I’m expecting my ex to come over and fuck me.”

He cocks an eyebrow, “You were?”

“Peeta, I’m wearing leggings with a hole in the crotch and an NYU shirt covered in bleach stains. Do I look like someone who was expecting sex?”

He runs his finger along my slit, “Yes.”

I shudder as he slips a finger inside me, it feels so right. He adds another and makes me sing when he moves to kiss my clit. It’s the first touch that I don’t find revolting. This realization chills me to the core, this can’t feel right. I can’t feel good, no. I dig my foot into the bed and push myself away from Peeta. He grabs my wrist and pulls me to him.

“Shhh…” he coos in my ear. “I will never hurt you again,” I know this is a lie, the second he walks out the door my heartbreak will start all over again, but for now I will choose to believe it. Maybe he means physically, that he won’t be rough with me. I want rough, I want him to be rough with me and to make me hurt because then I’ll feel and maybe it will stick with me.

“Don’t go easy on me…” he doesn’t. This isn’t tender love making, or even make-up sex. This is ‘we hurt each other but we still want each other’ sex. It’s pure, simple, angry fucking. He takes a break to get my feet over his shoulders and digs his nails into my hips, surely breaking the skin but I don’t care. Every so often he has to drag me back closer to him, his thrusts pushing me to the top
of the bed, the slapping of our skin echoing through the room.

“Harder!” I shout, I want the pain. He listens, drilling into me with little to no empathy. Then he pulls out and sits on his legs. I don’t need to be told what he expects, and climb onto his lap. He guides himself into me, it’s my turn to control the pace, the depth, how hard. I’m noticeably slower, but I come down much harder because I have gravity working with me.

He bites my neck, sucking on the flesh while I grind into him. He does this in several places, definitely leaving bruises marking me as his own though that couldn’t be farther from the truth, “You’re too slow,” he growls, grabbing me by the waist and throwing me to the bed. He rolls me onto my stomach and jerks me so I’m on my hands and knees. He crashes into me and grabs onto my hair, using it to lift me off the bed so my shoulders are against his chest. I have to spread my legs so he can be productive with his thrusting. Slow and hard he hits me at just the right spot and I scream his name when I come. I’m pushed into the bed again, Peeta not wanting any accidents. I scramble onto my hands and knees and move to him, taking him into my mouth. I can taste me on him. He’s closer than I thought, spilling hot seed into my mouth with no warning. I pull away and swallow, using my finger to collect the last drop with my finger, licking it off. I want to remember how he tastes. We fall to my bed in a heap of sweaty limbs, trying to catch our breath. I curiously bring my hand down, touching my opening. I wince, I would definitely be sore in the morning.

For a ‘have a nice life’ fuck it was pretty good. I pull the sheet up to cover my breasts and reach in my bedside drawer and pull out my pack of cigarettes. I never thought I would become one of those people who smoked in bed. It was rare, but relaxing. I light my post-coital cig and bring an empty take out container to use as an ashtray, “We should try again, you and me…” I let the statement hang in the air for half the cigarette. He doesn’t press me.

“You should go to her…” I whisper

“What?”

I look up at him, “Delly…” I rest my hand on his chest, only taking it away to take drags from my cigarette, “You should go to her. She can make you happy…” I rest my head on his shoulder, taking in his smell, trying to remember, “She can give you what you want.”

“What I… Want?”

“She’s safe… I come with risks, baggage with violent tendencies, I don’t want kids…” I look out the window, “Peeta…”

He interrupts me, “You didn’t call me my real name…” he smiles that dopey smile.

“Stop… Just… I want you to be happy Peeta. She can give that to you…”

“Give me what?” he asks.

“Everything…”

We sit in silence as the sun sets. What else was there to say?

Eventually he dozes off. I pull on his button up shirt and a pair of underwear, content with going back to my other nighttime plan. I pull my blanket up to my neck and catch The Nightmare Before Christmas before it gets too far in, taking careful sips of my own special eggnog, whiskey and ice.

“You left…” he whispers, coming up behind me, wrapping his arms around my shoulders and kissing my neck. I move away.
“You fell asleep. I didn’t want you to get too comfortable or to find any reason to stay…” I say bitterly. The fact of the matter is, I never want him to leave but he has to. I’ve already hurt him too much, I have caused him nothing but trouble. I’ve seen how he looks at her, and how his eyes light up when her name is mentioned.

I take another drink, “I’m going to go…” he mumbles, kissing my temple. “I’m going to set things right in the world…”

It isn’t until my movie is over that I realize I’m still wearing his shirt. I bring the sleeve up to sniff it, it still smells like him…

Page Six the next morning has a picture of Peeta allegedly heading for London. He’s getting his life in order which should make me happy, instead I’m filled with this emptiness. It’s different from the break-up where there was nothing but rage, now it was loss.

A few days later I actually have to leave the apartment. “I slept with Peeta,” I tell the girls over cocktails just as Annie finishes telling us about how she and Finnick still aren’t pregnant, but to be fair I let idle chatter take over for a minute so. “Um, one more for me,” I tell the waiter as he walks by.

“For the rest of the table, too. We’re going to need it.” Johanna’s eyes are on me like a hawk ready to swoop in for the kill, “Katniss, are you shitting me?”

I twist my cocktail napkin until it’s no longer usable for its intended purpose, “He came over… and we talked and I-”

“T ook his dick in your snatch…”

“I think snatch is a more offensive term than cunt…” Madge tells us vaguely. “I mean…” she catches herself in her half daydreaming state, “Seriously?”

“Yeah!” Johanna grins, “There are so many ways to use it… But back to Katniss. What?”

I sigh and our round of drinks comes. I squeeze my lime in my Captain and coke, “He came over, and I yelled a lot, then I might have had the roughest, greatest sex I’ve ever had.” I look down at my drink in shame, “And well… I’m officially done with men…”

I stir my drink with the back straw, before looking up, “Katniss… Is that healthy?” I cock an eyebrow at Madge. “Katniss, over the summer you almost died, you were beat within a few inches of your life and when you woke up you couldn’t talk. Then you watched someone get shot and had the rug ripped out from under your feet,” Madge starts.

Annie speaks up next, “Then you spent a month in Europe. No offense, but screwing anything with a dick…”

“Katniss, you’ve been depressed. Now you’re sleeping with your ex?”

“It was a one-time thing and don’t you even dare lecture me.” I dig through my purse and pull out some money. “I have to go home, I didn’t realize I was on trial and I’m overdressed.” I slam the money down and stand to leave, “You know, all three of you. I’ve sat through your break-ups, your get back togethers, your pity fucks, your one night stands… But god forbid I do it.” I untie my scarf, revealing the physical proof that Peeta and I were intimate before tying it just so the winter air would keep off my skin, “Have a merry fucking Christmas.”
By the time Christmas comes, I’m excited to see my family. Leslie and Parker are the obnoxious little shits they always are, but there’s enough to do around New York to keep them occupied.

“Are you ok?” my stepfather asks while my sister pulls our mom into Sephora in Times Square.

We’d end up in there soon, but there is a Disney store not too far away, “Yeah… Come on. Make-up is not my thing.”

I push through the crowd, pulling my scarf tighter around my neck to hide the trail of hickies Peeta left on me. No…Mr. Mellark. It was my new strategy to detach myself from him. Soon I’d see in the paper that he was with Delilah again.

The store is crowded. Because my life is some kind of sick joke, the Disney Store has to be playing Something There from Beauty and the Beast. Fortunately, the store is loud enough that I don’t have to hear it for long.

“You always had a soft spot for these two,” Dad tells me, holding up a plush Belle and Beast.

“Yeah…” I sigh, taking them from him. “The love story of the messed up one and the bookish outcast. Or a tragic tale of Stockholm Syndrome…” I give the toys a little squeeze.

Belle… I hear Peeta say, but I wasn’t Belle. No, in our relationship I was the Beast. I was the damaged one who only trusted the people who were around her for years. I just wanted love but I didn’t know how to be in love. I lied, I snuck behind his back…

And I set him free.

I went to put them back but my stepfather was having none of that, and forks out the forty dollars for two stuffed toys, “Are you upset over a boy?” he asks.

I just shrugged, upset was one thing, this was more like ‘I have no idea what I’m doing with myself’. One second I wanted to cry, the next I was ok with this. God would it have been the same if I didn’t let him go? If I held onto him and agreed to try again would I have panicky moments where I wondered whether or not I made the right choice? Then he would have been trapped, or I would be. Either way it could have been bad. Would it have been worse than this?

I have to hope that it would. Either way Peeta and I weren’t an option unless he wanted more bullet holes in his family members. Though maybe Cato would never know. I couldn’t keep going through the what if’s.

—

Mom made me get a Christmas tree. I didn’t understand why I needed one until on Christmas Eve when mom and Ray left the presents for the kids, including me. I spent the night sorting them and stacking them before falling asleep on my couch in the same shirt I had been sleeping in almost every night since Peeta left to go patch things up with Delly. I would need to wash it soon, but then it would lose the smell.

I made coffee and helped mom make breakfast while the younger two tore into their presents and watched the parade, “You should go open up your gifts. I have this…” she goes to preheat the oven and I run to intercept her.

“Hold your horses!” the door creaks open and I pull out the sweaters I forgot about, “Keeps the moths out.”
I open my gifts, knitted mittens, a few pairs of jeans and some CDs I was looking for. My favorite present though was a pack of black and grey v-necks. I used to live in these until I became a mannequin for designer fashion, uncomfortable clothes and pinchy shoes.

The day is quiet. Normally on Christmas I have dinner with Johanna, but she hasn’t even tried to call since I stormed out of dinner the other night. My buzzer goes off during dinner, “One minute…”

“Hello?” I ask pressing the call button.

“I have a package for a Miss Everdeen…”

I groan, it was cold out, I didn’t want to go all the way down stairs, “Who the hell is making you work on Christmas?” I ask I try to curl my toes away from the cold.

The courier shrugs, “It’s not my holiday…” He hands me a long white box and is off into the night. It’s wrapped in a silky red ribbon that slides off effortlessly. I pull the top off, inside is a single red rose, sitting on top of a program for my play last year.

I open the pamphlet, Katniss Everdeen as Belle is circled. I put the program back and pull out the rose. A tag attached to a leaf reads: One for the night you enchanted me. –Peeta
I get nothing else from Peeta. No more flowers, just the one for the night I ‘enchanted him’.

I guess that’s what ‘we’ meant to him. One rose.

I kind of want my parents to stay for New Year. They have to go back to their lives, though. That and New York on New Year’s was a mess of bodies in Times Square. The real party was off the beaten path, the farther north the better the party. Less tourists, ‘cheaper drinks’.

Unfortunately I still wasn’t talking to my three leading ladies. I got the standard “Merry Christmas” on my Facebook Wall from the three of them but that’s it.

Tuesday, as if the holidays didn’t happen, I go into the office wearing the mittens my mother knit for me, and a plain black t-shirt under my coat. Unfortunately, I had to trade my converse for a real pair of shoes to combat frostbite.

“Can’t you read? Business casual for all full time employees,” I look up from my computer.

I’m usually here about forty hours a week using the slightly faster internet here to look at pictures of cats. It wasn’t hourly, I got a check every week for barely a page of work. It was nickels and dimes compared to what Cinna was paying me. Now I just kind of sat at the Times and looked at pictures of cats.

“This is as fancy as I get,” I tell her as I google myself. “Here to criticize me on my love life or shall I dissect late two thousand and nine for you?” I ask while scrolling through pictures of myself. One of the more annoying requirements of being the face of Cinna’s line is public appearances. I’m almost always exclusively with him, and he keeps me sane.

“I don’t want to criticize you, honey. Never, because let’s face it. I’ve screwed the worst New York has to offer… Well, the Upper East and Upper West, but I want you to really think what you’re getting yourself into again.

I snort and pull up my seldom used Facebook. When I first became unnecessarily recognizable I got a slew of friend requests from people I had never met. Not just Facebook never met, but properly on the other side of the country, zero mutual friends never met.

The most recent pictures are from Fashion Week, then a few post break-up, then post-beating. I get to the happy parts of our relationship. The way he would take my breath away with his stare.

“Doesn’t matter. Peeta went to London to be with Delly, and all I got was a single rose.”

“Which is why I had Christmas dinner with only one half of that pair. He wanted me to give you something, follow me,” reluctantly I get up from my desk and follow her into her office. Sure
enough on her desk was a long white box. Inside, a single rose. Attached to its leaf was a white card, 'One for the guilty look you gave me when you ran me down'.

“Ok, two roses… Can I go back to work?”

“If that’s what you call it…”

The rest of the day is uneventful. Take-out from a Vegan restaurant down the road, more cat pictures. I get no writing done and my deadline is tomorrow. Oh well. The only exciting part of my day is more roses from Peeta.

'Six for the dance I bought with you'.

'One for our first kiss'.

'One for our first time together'.

Every hour another messenger comes to my desk, hands me a package and leaves.

I pull up my email.

Dear Mr. Mellark,

Please stop wasting your employees time. If there’s something you need to say to me you know my address or we can meet somewhere in public to talk.

-Katniss Everdeen

I hit send but it gets bounced back, “What the fuck Peeta…” I groan, I try to text him the same message but it gets bounced back.

I tap my phone against my forehead and instead text Prim, 'Please tell your brother to stop wasting his employees time. He know how to contact me if he wants to talk like a civilized human being. Also how are you doing? We should do lunch sometime.’ I don’t hear back from Prim.

I get more and more over the next few days leading up to New Years, single roses, small bouquets, all with white cards telling the story of our failed relationship, the good parts, the ugly parts. Our arguments, each and every way we made love. I stuff them in empty cigarette packs.

Finally, I give up. Prim isn’t texting me, but the messages to her aren’t getting bounced back so they’re getting through.

The day before New Year’s I drive to Peeta’s office. I’m going to stop this once and for all. I park in the garage across the street and pace in front taking slow drags of my cigarette.

When I can no longer stand the bitter cold I toss the butt into a smoker pole and rush into the building taking off my gloves.

“Can I help you?” the receptionist asks, she’s new. Bright red ringlets, horn rimmed glasses. She looks like she was plucked out of Mad Men.

“I need to see Mr. Mellark.”

She snorts, “Do you have an appointment?”

“Don’t need one. He’s in right?”
“He’s in Aspen with his family. He’ll be back next week. Can I make you an appointment?”

“Yeah…” then I hear his laughter.

“Aspen you say… His new girlfriend?”

I move past the receptionist desk, she yells for me but I don't stop.

There he is. He can still take my breath away even though he shouldn’t. I was dangerous for him.

He wears a dark blue suit that strains against the muscles of his arms. His eyes widen when he sees me. I just stick my nose in the air and push my way into his office. He follows me wordlessly.

"Mr. Mellark, I am so sorry she-"

“It’s alright, I’ve been waiting for her to show up.”

I sit down in his leather chair, the only picture frame on the desk is empty, “You need to stop.”

He closes the door and locks it when the receptionist leaves, “Stop what?”

“The roses, fucking stop. We’re done, we can’t be together. Get it through your thick head, I am dangerous.”

He smirks and sits across from me, “A little rambunctious, ambitious, and a quite a drinking habit, but you’re mostly benign.”

“Not me personally, my baggage is a time bomb.”

“Cato?” he asks, I nod slowly and watch his curious face grow hard, “Is he threatening you?”

“Not me personally. But you, your family, the people we’re close to…” I decide it’s best to lay it all out on the table, then he’ll know and he’ll stop, “He told me before that if I didn’t end things with you that people you cared about would pay. Then well… Prim but a few hours later we were going our separate ways… How is she?”

“Good, she’s starting at NYU next fall, took a year off after everything.”

I nod, not wanting him to question me, “And Delly?”

“I don’t know. We haven’t talked since her assistant packed her things and moved them from my apartment.”

“Why? She’s good for you. She’ll-”

“Katniss, shut the fuck up. Don’t tell me what’s good for me, don’t tell me what I need. I’m a grown ass man. You tell me she’ll make me happy but it’s just like… being with a friend with her. It was nice of her to come help after… everything, but I never loved her as much as-”

I look away. “Peeta, don’t do this to me,” tears prick at my eyes. “I can’t hurt you, after everything. Just stop with the flowers, they’re killing me.”

He moves suddenly, with a great purpose, kneeling in front of me, “I’m sorry, but since you left you’ve been on my mind every second of every day. I worry about you. If you’re eating, if you’re happy, if you’re safe…” he sighs. “Cato was traced back to Prim’s shooter. He was moved to a maximum security facility out in the woods and couldn’t plea bargain his way out of it,” he laughs,
“Prim wanted to throw a party but it seemed a little… Tasteless,” I nod, “All of his communication in and out of that prison is monitored including letters… Katniss, he can’t threaten you anymore,” he takes my hands but pulls them away.

“Stop…” I caution, “Stop making us seem like a possibility.”

“Ugh!” he groans, standing up and running his hands through his blonde hair, “Stop living in fear! You survived! You got out of an abusive relationship! Act like it!” he shouts.

I move without thinking, springing to my feet and tackling him. We both fall to the ground, “Shut up!” I scream, “Just shut up! You don’t know me! You don’t know what it was like!”

He pushes me off and sits up, “Yes, I do…” I lay on the carpet, remembering what he said months ago, “It was after my parents died, my birth parents. I have no aunts or uncles, my grandparents died before I was born… I was five years old and placed in a foster home outside of Pittsburgh.” I listen as he tells me about the nameless man and woman he lived with as a child, “It was nice at first, then like a switch they changed. First it was tugs on the hair, whacks across the wrist… Then if I didn’t get chores done I wasn’t fed. I remember one night I was washing dishes, the bitch insisted I used water hot enough to melt someone’s face. My hands went numb and the soap was so slippery.

"I broke her serving platter from a meal I wasn’t allowed to eat until it got cold. I think I kind of did it on purpose, but the plate fell onto the ground into a hundred pieces. Fat bitch thundered across the house, grabbed me by the neck and locked me in the trunk of her Toyota for I think three days. The only reason I got out was because the school notified my social worker that I was absent for three days with no call and showed up because she was ‘in the neighborhood’. I was so malnourished and filthy from soiling myself and pathetic she took me away without a second thought. The bruises around my neck helped some too. Three years I dealt with them… Then a family friend of my mom and dad, the ones whose name I have, pulled a few strings and placed me with them. I remember the flight there,” he chuckles nervously as tears run down his cheeks. I want to hold him, tell him that his pain is in the past and I’m here for him.

“I was so afraid. We got to New York and I assumed everyone was my new mom and dad who wasn’t in a suit. Then they came up to me with my brothers and they were so friendly. I didn’t warm up to them for months, Andrew and Ryan were rambunctious but I always held back. Then they said we were getting a sister, I didn’t trust my mom and dad even after a year with them. I was waiting for them to start hitting me again. Primrose was so tiny when she came it became my purpose to protect her from them. I saw therapist after therapist and just waited for them to return me, but they signed the adoption papers right before I turned nine. I never saw the bitch and the bastard again, they never hurt another kid and eventually I moved past it.”

“I’m sorry…” I whisper, still flat on my back. He lays down next to me and pulls me close. I let him, enjoying the way our bodies fit together.

“What about you, any skeletons in your closet?”

“Nothing too big…”

“What happened to your father? Is he who you went to see over the summer?”

I shake my head and look up at him. His eyes are still red around the edges, “My father died in a boating accident when I was young. In between husband two and husband three,” I remember the chill like it was yesterday. Water in my nose and gasoline thick in the air, “But can we not talk about that?”
“Of course,” he rolls on his side and I shift so we’re facing though he presses my face to his chest. Stroking my hair, “Katniss, you’re what I need. You’re what makes me happy. You make me feel alive and give me a reason to get up in the morning,” his fingers run through my hair, “You say I want kids, married life, but it’s meaningless if it’s not with you. It could take years, or it could never happen… But I don’t want to settle for someone who isn’t you.”

I stop breathing. I can’t do this, I can’t put his safety at risk like that, “I have to go,” I sniffle, slipping out of his grasp.

“Katniss…” he stands up, reaching for me, “Please don’t go…”

I stay silent and grab my keys off his desk, I just shake my head holding back the tears. All I need is to get away from him, and a cigarette.

I sling my purse over my shoulder and run from his office on my heels. He follows me, because that’s what he does. The elevator isn’t quick enough so I hurry down the stairs, “Katniss!” he shouts after me. I’m out of breath by the last flight of steps and my come out from under me, sending me sliding down the last four steps on my backside. I stand up, ignoring the throbbing pain in my ankle.

He’s on my heels still calling after me but the godsend that is Effie Trinket stops him and I escape, ducking into an alley to smoke but I’m met with a wicked blast of frigid cold air, “Come on!” I sniffle, “Just work with me!” I hiss, a large hand blocks the wind and I light my Camel, “Thanks…” I mumble.

“You’re welcome,” Peeta tells me.

My shoulders slump defeated, “Peeta, just let me go…” I tell him.

“I can’t,” he tells me, “I tried, trust me I did Katniss,” I take a drag and watch him. He’s in a long black coat made of dark wool, a grey scarf around his neck.

Rage swells in me, “Just try for five seconds to be logical Peeta!” I hiss, “Your sister almost died because of me! I’m poison to you!”

“You’re not poison! Your ex is the poison! Your ex behind bars, people watching his every move, listening to his every phone call reading every letter he writes and looking at everything he does on a computer! You aren’t his puppet stop living like it!” he shouts, “I fucking love you Katniss!”

“How!? I’m fucked up! I’m damaged goods! I’m the trash other men have thrown out!” I scream. People are staring but we don’t care. This is Manhattan and they can all fuck off.

His face softens, “You’re not… Don’t ever say that about yourself!” he pulls me to him and I yelp from the added pressure. I definitely sprained something when I slid down the stairs. I already feel my ankle swelling against my boot.

He notices immediately that something’s wrong, there’s no way he missed my fall. Peeta plucks the half a cigarette from my fingers and tosses it away, “What are you… Oh god!” he scoops me up.

“Where is your car?” he asks.

“Across the street, first level.”
Peeta sets me down on my good foot, and I hand him my keys before he helps me in the passenger seat, “You don’t think I’m damaged goods?” I ask, pulling off my boot, I can already see from the stretched fibers of my overworked sock that my ankle is swollen.

“I think you’ve been hurt, but you’re stronger than anyone I’ve ever met. You’ll preserve no matter how much ground is pulled form under your feet. I think you’re afraid though, to open up again. Cato can’t hurt you and if he tries ever again I will break his neck.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about… It’s you and your family…”

“Please…” he whispers, throwing the car in park in the hospital’s garage, “Just trust that I made sure that man can’t scratch his own ass without someone watching…” I stay silent as Peeta insists on carrying me into the hospital.

They slap a plastic bracelet on my wrist and one x-ray and a lot of poking and prodding they tell me I sprained my ankle and have a small fracture as well as some complex medical jargon I ignore, I don’t even catch the doctor’s name.

I don’t know what to say to Peeta, he makes getting back together so logical. Cato’s behind bars and constantly monitored, he can’t get a message in or out without someone else seeing it. I’m safe. For the first time since we met I’m safe from Cato. Peeta still loves me enough to practically carry me to a Mount Sinai, the hospital where we broke up. It was half way across town but they knew what they were doing.

“Our break-up was real…” I tell him when the doctor goes to get one of those hideous black boots for me to wear over the next week or so, “Cato’s threat over my head or not. That fight, what we said… It was all real.”

“I know…” he takes my hands in his, “I blamed you for someone else’s wrongs in a moment of weakness…and I’m sorry. Prim never even blamed you but I hated you… Then I started missing you and I felt empty.”

“Peeta, stop…” I take a deep breath, this is it, “You can’t guilt me into being with you, and don’t say you aren’t because it’s what it looks like. We can take things slow. I’m not moving back in with you. I won’t be spending the night, you’re not buying me shit. You want to give me the world, but for the first time I can give it to myself. Let me enjoy that for a few years!”

He grins, “Fine, sure, anything… But, I’m giving you back the jewelry I bought you. They’re gifts, don’t insult me.”

“Peeta,” I caution.

“Katniss…” he teases, “Also, I have one more thing for you then I’m done,” I glare at him, “I planned this last thing just go with it.”

I sigh defeated and he kisses my knuckles. Inside I hope that I’m making the right choice but I’m happy, and that’s all I can ask for.

I can’t wear my heels out of the hospital without putting stress on my knees and good ankle. Luckily a pair of flats is in every Manhattan girl’s survival kit.

I slip my plain black flats on and limp slowly out of the hospital, “I need to call Cinna, I was supposed to be going to Tokyo but someone had to chase me down what is it, twelve flights of stairs?”
“Sorry, you’re a pro in heels,” he throws my car in drive and we grin at each other. I feel giddy because I know I made the right choice.

The phone rings twice. I’m glad Cinna is back in the states for a few months. He’s quickly becoming a father to me, “Hello gorgeous,” he greets.

“Cinna, I have a problem. If you need me on a runway at all in Tokyo you need to find another girl.”

My contract with Cinna was technically up at midnight tomorrow and I haven’t given him a straight yes or no whether or not I’m signing on so I quickly add, “Peeta broke my foot and they slapped on a gaudy boot. Seriously you should see this thing it’s like a peep toe astronaut boot.”

“You gave me a heart attack! What happened? Are you ok?”

Peeta takes the phone from my hand, “We were discussing the possibility of her and I getting back together when I pushed her too far and she decided to run down the stairs instead of taking the elevator. The doctor said she should be fine in about a month,” he pauses, “I know… Yes I know… I plan to,” he looks over at me and smiles, “Like the sun shines out her ass Cinna. Sure thing, I’ll tell her,” another pause then he tells Cinna to take care and hands me my phone. The screen is black and the call is over.

“Your new contract will be brought to your apartment on the second if you want to sign, if not he understands.”

Peeta helps me up the stairs to my apartment, “Ok, close your eyes.”

“How did you get someone into my apartment?”

“Johanna, she had the keys.”

He guides me inside, covering my eyes with his cold hand, “Alright,” the smell hits me, the sweet silky perfume of roses. His hand drops from my face as he tells me to open my eyes.

I gasp at the dark red roses all with long stems laid perfectly across every table, every counter, some even rest on my chairs, “One for every time I thought of you in the last few months, one for every year I want you in my life from this moment on, and a few because they needed a round number.”

“Oh my god… Peeta! What am I going to do with all of these?” I look over my shoulder and he shrugs.

“Put them in a vase and throw them out when they die?”

He helps me gather the buds, “I don’t have enough vases for these,” I groan. There aren’t as many as I thought but we’re still stuffing stems in wine bottles, cans and the milk carton I needed to throw out but rinsed and left on the counter.

“I feel bad, I didn’t get you anything for Christmas… You got me all the roses in Manhattan.”

“You smiled, that’s all I wanted…”

I let Peeta stay the night, only because the pain medication they gave me wore off at around eight and I was a miserable bitch but he ran out and filled my prescription and even broke the pill in half so I didn’t end up high as a kite.
He even offered to sleep on the couch but fell asleep talking to me on my bed. I didn’t make him move but didn’t move closer to him. I pulled the quilt over him and laid flat on my back.

In the morning he was out on the couch like a gentleman but already awake on his cellphone, “Johanna called, and Madge, and Annie.”

I thump over to the couch and he sits upright making space for me. Peeta’s opened my laptop but only so it would charge my phone.

“Thanks,” he kisses my cheek.

“Anything, but do you have a spare toothbrush?”

“Closet outside of the bathroom, basket on the top shelf. Take whatever you need.”

I call Madge first, she’s the kind hearted gentle one, “Are we talking again?”

Since freshman year this was the longest Madge and I have gone without talking. Even when her and her family visited Egypt right before the revolution she got a hold of me, “Hopefully because,” I lift my injured foot off the ground, “I have a tale for you.”

I want to invite her out for cocktails tonight, but then I remembered that it was New Year’s Eve. One of the few mandatory couples nights including Valentine’s Day and Halloween.

We decide to meet for lunch seeing as me pretending to be an adult has led to me waking up before noon. Peeta has to go home anyway to shower.

He waits though, for me to get showered to make sure I don’t slip and fall and end up like one of those old ladies on the Life Alert commercials.

I can’t drive with my right foot in bondage gear so I opt for taking the subway, naturally it bothers Peeta since I have to walk three whole blocks in my clearly disabled state. Actually it doesn’t take much longer than normal to reach the N.

Unfortunately after months of driving in the city (crazy, I know), my Metro Card expired.

“Fuck…” I grumble feeding the machine money to get another flimsy card. I have no idea how much was left on my old card it could be anywhere from two to twenty bucks.

I reach Topaz, a Thai restaurant just south of Central Park my usual ten minutes late. I walk right past the hostess where I hear familiar voices, “Brainless!” Johanna greets first, my quiet lunch with Madge has turned into a full forgiveness feast.

I take a seat next to Annie who sits still for half a second before throwing her arms around me, “I hate your new fashion statement!”

“Me too!”

“What happened?” Madge asked, “I talked to Peeta and he said it was his fault.”

“Well, long story short, I was told to split from Peeta or his family was going to get hurt. Peeta beat me to the punch, fast forward to Christmas and roses start popping up at my doorstep, and at work… thanks Johanna… Peeta’s been sending me them since Christmas with these cards and they were just bits from our relationship. I went to his office to tell him to fuck off. We talked, he weighed our options I told him no. Then I ran and fell down like five steps. Peeta carried me to the
hospital basically and I think we’re back together.”

“You think?”

“We haven’t worked out the fine details or set it in stone, but so far no sleepovers, no crazy gifts. I am a, for the first time in my life, independently well off. I’m going to enjoy it and treat myself. All I know is Cato’s behind bars being watched twenty-four seven. He can’t so much as google himself without someone knowing. Girls for the first time in years I am free of my ex.”

We toast to my freedom, just the start to a night of drinking. No New Year’s in New York City is complete without enough alcohol to make New Year’s day painful.

We finally paid our bill and headed in our own directions by two, and by nine o’clock Peeta and I were enjoying our first dinner together as a couple (part two).

“I missed Sae’s cooking,” I confess, “That woman knows how to cook a steak,” Peeta hadn’t let go of my hand since Haymitch brought me here.

We had the option to go out tonight but chose to stay in and ring in the New Year with a bottle of champagne and New Year’s Rocking Eve, “Have you ever gone out there and stood in that crowd?” he asks, his fingers playing with the spaghetti strap of my bustier dress.

“Nah, you?”

“Too many people…” We had a minute left of this horrible year. Sure it had some good points, I graduated college, got two amazing jobs, I’ve seen the world, but at what cost? There was the physical and emotional damage of my violent relationship with Cato, though he was now behind bars.

2011 is the year I met Peeta, the year I found that I could be more than just the overworked student and cocktail waitress I had been for four years. I finally found that I could shine, that I had things people wanted to hear, ideas they would pay to read.

The crowd starts counting down from fifteen and the champagne flute is taken from my hand. When the clock strikes midnight his lips are on mine. The kiss is confusing at first, a blend of hello and goodbye. It’s our first real kiss since getting back together and it takes us both a second to remember how to kiss one another.

“Happy New Year…” I whisper when we part.

He smiles and hands me back my champagne flute, “And what a New Year it will be. To a year of health and prosperity… And many more to follow it.”

“And to me getting this ugly boot off,” we tap our glasses together and down the champagne. When he goes to pour me another glass I see the year on the bottle. 1981, the year Peeta was born. My stomach sinks as I watch him waste the bottle he was planning on drinking when he got married on New Year’s.

“I thought you were saving this for when you got married…” I sniff at my drink.

Peeta smiles and kisses my cheek, “A wedding is just a piece of paper, some old vow’s read by a stuffy preacher and an overpriced party… This though, is something really worth celebrating.”
Leather and Lace

Chapter Summary

Thank you Apecanin for polishing this up!

The song for this chapter is Leather and Lace by Stevie Nicks

Lovers forever
Face to face
My city or mountains
Stay with me stay
I need you to love me
I need you today
Give to me your leather
Take from me
My lace

Peeta

“But… It’s only eleven! You can’t leave!” Prim groans.

With an hour until Valentine’s day, I wanted out of this place. My girlfriend was in Tokyo, then Prague with barely a breather to adjust to her current time zone. Her foot healed enough that she could take off the boot, though heels were still painful to her. She wasn't complaining, though.

“You have a good time, I’m going to go to bed.”

Katniss’ plane lands at 8am tomorrow and I had to pick her up. We have been a very chaste couple since New Year’s, showering separately, getting dressed away from each other, and not once having sex. The two or three times we’ve slept in the same bed together we slept fully clothed and kept our hand in very benign areas.

I grab Prim’s date’s arm, “You so much as think about looking at her the wrong way and I will break your hand…”

Rory just gulps and nods, he’s Gale’s brother but she’s my sister.

I work my way out of my own function and into the February air. 'Oh come on…’ I groan to myself as I’m hit with flurries. I pull out my cellphone to call Haymitch.

“Ahem…” someone clears his or her throat, “Your car, sir…” I turn so fast I nearly slip on a patch of ice.

Katniss…

She doesn’t look like an angel, or some snowy vision… Her dark hair is tossed, lips red as blood, matching the scarf around her neck.
She nervously pulls at the neck of her black pea coat, smiling as she crosses her thigh high leather boots, only an inch or so of stocking peaks out the top as she pushes herself off the side of the black car.

She’s no angel. The innocent waitress I met last May was replaced by smoldering sex goddess.

“I was supposed to pick you up at the airport at nine, this is a surprise.”

She pulls a single rose out from behind her back, “I wanted to surprise you… One for our first Valentine’s Day together… and…” She opens her coat, revealing a dark red corset with a very short lace fringe at the bottom that would barely cover her backside.

“Holy…”

I can’t tell if she’s blushing or just cold, but she steps forward, her face level with mine in those heels. She just barely touches my chest with the tips of her fingers. I lean in and our noses brush, hers is like ice.

She chuckles nervously, “S-sorry… I didn’t know you’d be so long…” her lips are just as cold but still soft and inviting, “I was going to come inside… But if someone took my coat I’d have a lot of explaining to do…” She takes my hand, “But come…”

“Where are we going?” I ask as we get into the back of the car.

Katniss just smiles, “Well, I don’t like sleepovers right now… So I booked us a room at the Plaza.”

I don’t know how much money over the last few months Katniss has saved up. She lives modestly, avoiding the designer shops and luxurious temptations New York City offers, “I don’t have an overnight bag.”

“Overnight? We have all tomorrow and Wednesday until two. I packed your bag. Nice trick with your security code, switching the month and the day for my birthday? Clever boy. Oh the rest of the world, when will you stop surprising me…”

The Katniss I met in May was unsure of where she fit in this world. The woman who walks ahead of me skipping the front desk and heading straight to the elevator possesses completely the space she occupies. Her smoldering dark looks attract everyone’s attention mostly because it’s very obvious she isn’t wearing any bottoms. She looks over her shoulder once as I follow her, tucking some of her loose black hair behind her ear. The dim lighting of the hotel lobby shines off the emerald ring on her finger.

When the gold colored elevator doors close she presses the button for the top floor and I go on the offensive. The old elevator is slow and by the time it lurches to the second floor I have Katniss pressed up against the reflective wall of the elevator.

I pull the tie of her coat and unbutton it so I can get a good look at what she’s calling an outfit.

“You’re perfect,” I tell her before kissing her forcefully. My tongue sneaks by her lips as I rub between her legs roughly through her lacy thong. Her moan vibrates in my mouth as the elevator pings.

I pull away from her and she scrambles to make herself decent. Her lipstick is smudged across my face, somehow my tie was loosened and any attempts to hide my erection would be futile. The elderly couple waiting to board the elevator on the top floor got quite the show.
There’s butler service in the hotel room but Katniss dismisses the man promising we’ll call if we need anything.

It’s a beautiful room, much more than we actually need. There are marble floors leading to a terrace, plush furniture that remind me of Versailles. When we’re alone Katniss shrugs off her jacket and tosses it to the couch. She’s perfect, skin glowing in the dim light of the fire burning in the living room’s fireplace, her hair wild from the wind.

I excuse myself to go to the bathroom, mostly to psych myself up. This is the first time we’re even attempting to be intimate since getting back together. I wipe the residue of her blood red lipstick off my lips and cheeks. It gave me a joker like smile I’m glad to get rid of.

It’s so pathetic, I have to psych myself up to sleep with my girlfriend. I’m filled with a nervousness I’ve never felt with her before. The want and need to make this night absolutely perfect makes my skin clammy.

I want to show her just how much I still care for her, how much I still want her, how much I need her. I’ve been dreaming about this moment for what feels like an eternity, the day when Katniss and I are ready to be intimate again, when we trust each other enough to stick around that we’ll climb into bed together.

I leave the bathroom just when it feels like I’ve been there for too long. She’s still in that damned lingerie that accentuates her curves and push up her breasts which swell over the top. She’s filling out again, still thin but now healthy looking.

She looks up and smiles when she hears me and all my worries are gone. This is the woman I love, the woman I dream about.

I sit down on the couch next to her. There’s an awkward second where neither of us moves until I pull her small frame to me and she straddles my lap, “I won’t hurt you…” I promise. It’s just something she needs to hear. I’ll never do anything to her that she doesn’t want, I’ll never strike her in anger, I’ll never force myself on her.

She slumps limply into my chest and I squeeze her before pulling at the silky black ribbon synching her corset closed. I loosen up the silky black fabric as her fingers dig into my shoulders. Our lips barely touch as our tongues wrestle for dominance. I push her back only far enough that I can free her from the corset which has pressed long red indentations in her ribs.

“Maybe we should move to the bedroom…” she whispers against my lips.

I’m perfectly content with laying her down on the rug in front of the fire or even the coffee table I keep kicking with my foot but she’s already standing. I reach forward and unclip her stockings from her garter belt which makes it possible to tug down her undergarments.

“Perfect…” I whisper.

With spring coming so is swimsuit season. Katniss’ bikini waxer left only a small strip of dark hair. “Thanks?” she asks, “I’ll be sure to tell Dominic you appreciate his work.”

“His?” I immediately feel possessive knowing another man has his hands on her in such a private way. “Can’t you go to a woman?”

I lean in and kiss the border of her pubic hair and clean flesh. It’s perfectly smooth. “Never mind,”
I say as I keep kissing, digging my fingers into her firm backside. Her skin still tastes perfect, sweet and delicate, fresh and innocent. Each taste makes me hungry for more.

Katniss groans as I my nails drag across her ass while my kisses travel everywhere from just above her clit to her belly button but never between her legs.

“Still want to go to bed?” I ask while standing, licking from where her left leg meets her hip up between her breasts and ending just below her ear.

“N-no…” her voice cracks and she clears her throat, “No,” she tells me in a clearer voice. I help her with my jacket and shirt. She immediately gets distracted after my dress shirt is discarded, running her hands over my chest. I unbuckle my belt and move away to take off my shoes and pants. She doesn’t like the lack of contact one bit and teases me by running her palms over her breasts.

This was no longer the woman I met in May who was secretly afraid of her own shadow, this woman would never let a man striker her and live to tell the tale. She wouldn’t be caught dead letting someone steer her in the direction they wanted her to follow. No, this woman knows exactly what she wants. She’s perfect, flawed with some wounds still healing.

She would though, still yield to a dominating presence when it came to intimacy. I knew this the second she hesitated after we were both naked. I jump up and hold her head in my hands before pressing my lips against hers.

I direct her to the cream colored rug in front of the fire and she sinks down to her knees before stumbling on her heels and ending up on her back practically spread eagle, “Feeling very brave?” I ask picking up her foot and straightening her leg in the air so I can peel off those lethal looking boots. The last thing I needed was a heel through my skin. They land on the hardwood floors with a thud. I press her feet together, the fishnet stockings still encasing her legs and feet. I kiss the soles and she groans.

God it’s beautiful, I yearn to hear it again, like a song I catch on the radio just as it’s ending. I kiss from her foot up her leg before ripping off those damned stockings with my teeth. She watches everything I do, her silver eyes curious. Her cheeks are already rosy either from what I’m doing or the fire. When there’s absolutely nothing separating us I sit up on my knees. This is it, now or never.

“Ahh,” her nails dig into the rug as I bury myself deep inside her. When I can’t push in anymore I have to sit still, not for her but for me. The feeling of being inside her once again bringing about an instantaneous euphoria. When I know I can handle it I start thrusting in and out, the both of us quickly finding a suitable rhythm before I lift one of her legs, placing her bare foot over my shoulder.

When she’s close Katniss looks me dead in the eye, a small smile playing at her lips. The static from the carpet has made her long dark hair frizzy and a layer of sweat makes her skin glow in the dim light of the fire, “I still love you…” she moans before her back arches off the carpet and the next word out of her mouth is my name.

I could get used to that sound… again.

I come soon after her and when I can see straight let myself fall beside her. She rolls onto her stomach, the orange glow of the fire lighting up the silvery scar on her shoulder blade from the day I almost lost her, when she snuck around behind my back. A day she’s apologized for hundreds of times in addition to her vagueness in regards to Cato and blatant lying. It’s the shape of a ‘Y’ or a wishbone. Two paths coming together to travel as one.
I trace the scar with my fingers, watching the skin of her back raise to gooseflesh, “What are you doing?”

I shrug and continue running my fingers up and down her back, leaving the scar.

She rolls back onto her back, my hand never leaving her body but finding a new home on her stomach, “Happy Valentine’s day…” she mumbles.

“Happy Valentine’s day. I feel bad because I didn’t get you anything.”

“Good!” she grins before peeling herself off the ground and holding out her hand, “We still have the bedroom upstairs and the terrace to see.”

The sky is grey when we finally pull on the thick white robes laid out for us. Katniss’ make up is smeared, sweat taking away her mascara, my lips stole the red off her lips. In nothing but a robe and socks, her hair tangled and clumped together from my own eager misfiring when she insisted on getting me off and not letting me touch her to ‘make up for lost time’.

“Where are you going?” I ask as she pulls the robe on tighter.

“Going outside for a few minutes?” I only sigh. I hate her smoking but know just how agitating quitting can be.

Instead of fixating on that I run the tub, there is no way we’re getting into bed the way we are.

“It’s cold…” she sniffs as the tub finishes filling. Katniss drops her robe and shuffles into my open arms.

“Maybe you should quit?” I suggest.

“The day Johanna gets married.”

I don’t argue and help her in the bath, keeping my arms tight around her waist as the night slowly rinses from our bodies.

She starts humming quietly, her toes bouncing out of the water as ‘It Had To Be You’ by Betty Hutton vibrates from within her. I watch her chipped French manicure bob in and out of the water before fatigue starts to hit me. The bath has as shower head resting just to the right of the gold plated spigot.

“What are you doing?” she yawns as I warm up the water. Even though the water’s warm, Katniss shivers when I tilt her head back and run the water through her hair.

“Cold?”

She shrugs a little, “Just tired…” she slides down a little and I brush her hair over her shoulder. She uses her legs to keep her head above the water, keeping them spread and I get an idea.

She doesn’t notice when I switch the shower head to massage and dip it under the water, she does though notice when I aim the torrent so it pulses against her clit.

She squirms and digs her nails into my flesh. I don’t mind. In fact, her uninhibited moans start to get me going. I hold her tightly so she doesn’t slip under the water when she comes, every inch of her body shaking.

After we wash and get out she seems to not notice my own arousal until we hit the bed and she
climbs onto me needing no warm-up.

She laces her fingers with mine and supports herself on my bent arms as she slowly rides me. It doesn’t take long for me to finish and she tumbles off me, “Happy Valentine’s day…” I mumble into her hair.

When I open my eyes next I can’t tell what time of day it is. The curtains are drawn and Katniss is sleeping soundly in my arms, every so often twitching. I support my weight on my elbow and pull the blanket down some. Her fingers are bending and flexing slowly as if she’s in pain.

Every few seconds she groans quietly, “No…” she breathes, “No…” a pause, “Stop…” I contemplate waking her up, but the she gets quiet and I assume the nightmare is over. Then every inch of her body goes stiff. Half a second later she screams as if fire is running through her veins.

“Katniss!” I shake her, “Whatever you’re seeing it’s not real. You’re safe!”

I roll her onto her back. Her eyes are open but vacant for the first few seconds as her torso seesaws with her strained uneasy breathing, “You’re ok, you’re safe…” I promise.

I can give her any material item she could ever desire, any car, any house, any article of clothing… But Katniss isn’t like that, all she wants from this world is safety.

It takes Katniss a few minutes for her breathing to even out and her eyes to focus completely. “Hey…” I whisper, brushing some of her damp hair off her sweaty brow, “You still here?”

She nods slowly, rolling onto her side so she’s facing me. She’s embarrassed, but her need for comfort and reassurance that no one can hurt her here, “Did I wake you up?” she whispers into my chest, as I drape my leg over her hips and tuck my foot between her legs. Was this why she didn’t like spending the night with me anymore?

“Nah… I think I heard my phone or something,” I’m not sure what woke me up, maybe my subconscious knew she was in pain, or was going to be in pain, “Want to go to the bathroom, get washed up and I’ll get our computers, maybe call for some room service?”

Somehow the woman always seems to end up in the man’s shirt. Katniss pulls me into the bathroom with her. Because we’ve only slept in the same bed a handful of times since getting back together, we’re completely out of sync.

“Why in the movies do women look so cute while brushing their teeth? I look like a rabid walrus…” she shrugs after spitting out a mouthful of blue foam, “You didn’t have any appointments today… Did you?”

“Nah, tomorrow though,” she splashes water on her face. “I have an eleven o’clock, noon, and four o’clock… Speaking of which, since you’re going to be in the country,” she gives me a dirty look in the mirror.

“You got me the job. Sorry if my travel schedule doesn’t blend very well with your libido.”

I scoff, “Who said anything about sex, was seeing if you want to do lunch.”

“Oh. Well, you know how I feel about food.”

When we get back in bed it’s close to two in the afternoon but have to pretend to go back to the real world, “Oh my god… I missed sushi. Sorry Prague, you had lovely…Architecture, however.”
I pluck a roll of her plate, “What’s this called?” I ask with a mouthful.

“Tuna two way…” she says checking her Blackberry.

“Since when do you have one of those?”

She sighs, “Since I signed with a real modeling agency. I’m still Cinna’s ‘it girl’ but now I’ll be doing more show’s for more companies. This fucking thing is going off every few minutes. Send us your head shots, do this, be here… I need a damned assistant.”

I slide down in bed and keep scrolling through my email, “I should give you Effie. Hell, she’d probably enjoy keeping your head screwed on more than mine.”

“Get up Katniss, we have to get downtown! It’s a big big big day! No thank you.”

We sit in silence as she writes and I continue to be one of the most hands off CEO’s in history, though with everything going so well my company seems to run itself, “We’re being honest with each other, right?” I start, not thinking.

“Mhm.”

“Do you not like me spending the night or spending the night at my place because you’re having nightmares?”

She goes stiff again, guess I’m right, “I don’t want you losing sleep just because of me.”

“Katniss…” I plead. Instead of moving away from me like I expect she rests her head on my shoulder, “Have you tried a sleeping pill?”

“Yeah, it was like being trapped in hell for eight hours. It made the nightmares real because no matter how many times I told myself I was only dreaming it just kept going.”

“You should have told me,” I reach across my chest and stroke her cheek with my thumb, “I want to know when you’re hurting.”

Katniss chuckles, “So three am, you’ll get a phone call?”

“And I’d tell you I love you and that the nightmares aren’t real. That you’re safe and I’d stay on the phone until you fell asleep again.”

She furrows her brow then goes back to her work, “Do you ever have nightmares about your childhood, about your foster parents?” she asks after a minute or so.

I finish emailing Effie before I answer her question, “I used to, throughout my teens and early 20’s.”

“What made it stop?”

“I found a new fear, greater than what happened to me as a child. Sure, I still dream about it sometimes, but those people can never hurt me again.”

She nods, “What’s your new fear?”

I can’t answer her at first for fear of scaring her even more. Losing you, I think over and over. Instead I just smile at her, “That’s not important now, some day… Ok?” she nods and rests her plate on the end table before closing her laptop.
“So what are we doing tonight?” she asks pulling my laptop from me, “I mean first thing’s first,” she pulls off my pants and climbs into my lap, “We’re too young to be sitting in bed doing work all day.”

“Doing work? You’ve been playing Spider Solitaire,” she runs her fingers through my hair while rolling her eyes at me.

“Mr. Mellark, my job is to look good.”

“Getting a little full of yourself. Though you do look good in my shirt… All though,” I sneak my fingers between the buttons and yank, the thin threads holding the opalescent buttons on giving under the pressure sending the little circles flying. I had plenty of white shirts. I help her take it off and throw it to the ground, “It looks much better on the floor.”

Her hands return to my hair and her eyes find mine. She doesn’t look away as we make love for about the hundredth time since getting into this hotel room.

We don’t leave the bed except to use the bathroom for the rest of the day. At six in the morning on the fifteenth my alarm goes off, it doesn’t wake Katniss up right away. Instead she just holds on like I’m going to slip away or we’re going to be separated again. I know it’s residual damage from the abuse she endured while she was with Cato, an assumption that she’s not worth people’s love or time so subconsciously she’ll cling. It’s heartbreaking but I’ll show her she’s wrong. She’s worth more than my own life.
Ho Hey

Chapter Summary

A huge thank you to Apecanin for being amazing. I’m so glad you PMed me all those months ago. You’ve been amazing. I know you were busy this school year but like I said, you’re amazing, and a thousand thank yous!
To my readers holy crap. Thank you for sticking with me through my bitching, and ups and downs and my hiatus.
Like I said before (But you may have missed the tumblr post) there will (eventually) be some smutty one shots in the near future but I’ll focus on my two fics until the end of Semper Fidelis or I decide to start my other fic.
The song for the epilogue is Ho Hey by the Lumineers.

When Peeta turned thirty, I was expecting him to be disgruntled. He was getting up there in years, no children, I didn’t even have an engagement ring on my finger. I’ve actually never seen him happier. We danced the night away in the Hamptons surrounded by his friends and family.

“I love you more than my own life,” he whispers in my ear. I try to focus on him but the bodice of my floor length dress is itching. “Well, say something,” he says after a while.

“My boobs are itchy my love…” we sneak away half way through the party down to the beach where he pushes up my skirt as I lean against a rock. I knew the night would come to this so I left my underwear in the bedroom.

Peeta thrusts into me slowly and teasingly before helping me take down my hair to hide the remarks from the stone on my back and shoulders.

My twenty-third birthday comes and goes, Peeta and I spend the balmy night on a white sand beach in Monaco.

Peeta made me make a list after that of the places in the world I wanted to see, the food I wanted to eat, and the things I wanted to do. It wasn’t long seeing as I wasn’t very inventive but he would only consider proposing to me after the list is complete.

Hand in hand we tour the beautiful old castles of Ireland and the United Kingdom under the summer heat.

It is on this trip that I stop being afraid to sleep next to him, knowing that he keeps the monsters in my mind at bay.

He’s by my side as I return to London, Paris, and Milan dressed in lavish clothes. We stay in Southern Italy an extra week or so I can work on my tan and he can work on a business venture.

Peeta and I hold on to each other in fear as wind whips through Manhattan, hurricane Sandy recklessly beating on everything in her path. When we finally climb down the stairs after two days without power we’re greeted with a changed city, it looks almost post-apocalyptic but New York never loses that attitude. As a city we climb back on top.
Weeks go by. We watch America choose its leader once more. Those weeks turn into months which turn into years. Together we travel all across the United States, gone for months at a time.

I never hear from Cato again, Peeta made good on his word that I’m safe but I want to make other women, men and children in similar situations safe. On our second anniversary, I propose ‘Out of the Darkness’ to Peeta, with the hopes of giving women, men and children in abusive situations a safe place to live and the resources to make sure they are never hurt again.

It soon becomes too much for me to handle and Effie Trinket, Peeta’s eager assistant helps keep my monster under control, but it works. We fix up apartments, furnish them, help women find and fund lawyers.

I have a hard time finding modeling contracts away from Cinna. I’m in a position where I can say no seeing as I live with my boyfriend, write for a living and basically use the modeling as a way to keep my head far above water.

When I go to model for an unnamed designer label, I’m told I’ll need to lose at least five pounds to be even remotely marketable. I laugh and walk out of the office. It isn’t the only label that tells me this and it’s not the only one I walk away from. Sure enough, I’m on a billboard in Times Square in nothing but Diesel Jeans and fuck me pumps.

 Marketable my ass. That billboard redid Peeta’s and my kitchen.

Finnick and Annie still can’t conceive a child naturally but at her birthday lunch she has exciting news, “I’m having a baby!” she squeals, sipping on her Cosmo.

“Woah fertile myrtle! Then give me that!” Madge pulls her drink away.

Annie snatches it back, not spilling a drop, “Finnick and I found a surrogate. I wanted to tell you guys but it’s a gamble. We had the egg implanted in May and…” she digs in her purse to pull out a folded up ultrasound printout, “There’s my baby! Finnick thinks it’s a boy because of this smudge but it’s too soon to tell.”

Annie is holding her baby boy, Finnick Anthony Odair the third when Gale and Madge tie the knot on the beach in Hawaii which checks another destination off my list.

When the lease on Peeta’s place is almost up we search for a place to start our lives. Peeta and I find a lavish Park Avenue penthouse not far from his old one. It’s flawless, big open windows to look over the park, a terrace in the center lined with lush green plants.

After we settle we welcome our newest addition to our small family into the mix, a little Pomeranian accidentally named Biscuit after I asked Peeta for the plastic jar of Biscotti on the counter.

One afternoon when I’m twenty five, Johanna invites herself into the apartment with a box of nicotine patches and an engagement ring on her finger. I enjoy my last cigarette with her on the terrace with Biscuit on my lap, “I always thought you were going to go first. You talk a big game but…”

Soon I’m the only unmarried one in my group of four friends, and it actually starts bothering me. What was holding Peeta back? There were two more stops on my world travels list and we banged out the food one quickly. I was forbidden to skydive so half of my ‘things to do’ list.

My twenty-sixth birthday comes and goes, my friends are having babies and I’m lying on fur throws in designer underwear. We celebrate New Year’s on a small island in the Mediterranean
called Ibiza and it’s there we conceive our first child.

I’ve become a big name and rumors about my life spin around from time to time. A paparazzi or whatever the fuck they’re called catches me at CVS buying well, five different pregnancy tests after my second week of constant nausea. Luckily none of them spoil the surprise. I spend the entire day chugging water and peeing on sticks, all of them are positive. Two come in a box. Ten out of ten pee sticks surveyed say I’m with child.

To say Peeta is excited is the understatement of the year, he baby proofs our apartment before I’m even showing. I half expect a proposal but on our last childless vacation together, this time to Bora Bora when I’m seven months along, we agree that it’s not necessary right now.

I go into labor on September 18th while in an interview, it wasn’t the ‘my contractions are close together and very regular’ labor but the ‘I just ruined my boyfriend’s couch’ labor. At three am, with Peeta by my side I give birth to Isabelle Grace Mellark, also known as the light of our lives.

On my own volition I stop working completely, Peeta offers to hire me a nanny but my mother didn’t need one so neither do I. Peeta works home more and more after her birth neither one of us wanting to miss a minute of her growth from helpless infant to toddler.

She plays with Annie, and Madge, and Johanna’s kids, a whole horde of lucky kids that will want for nothing. The second Mellark baby comes when Izzy is three. Our tiny terror Jayden Ezra Mellark came to us right before Peeta’s birthday, two hours to be exact. He’s colicky early on and spends most of his toddler life fighting off ear infections but Izzy adores him as do we.

Peeta’s mother and I are very close. The woman was suspicious of me at first but as the years went on and I still worked my ass off and refused to live with him she welcomed me with open arms. The kids are spoiled by all four of their grandparents in their own ways. His parents like to buy the kids designer clothes and the newest toys, my mother and step-father on the other hand shower them in cookies and everything else Peeta and I try to avoid.

Our children play in the beautiful golden light of Paris not very far from where Peeta and I first said that we loved each other ten years ago. Isabelle is a good big sister, mindful of her brother’s slower pace and more protective than a lioness. I’m thirty-two and living a life I never imagined. My boyfriend has given me two gorgeous babies, he’s been dragged along as I saw the world. I’ve changed people’s lives through my own pain and suffering. When I was eighteen and left for New York City all I wanted to do was write. Fourteen years later I’ve done that, and more. I still write editorials every so often for Johanna but never more than once a month.

Two-year-old Jayden finds something on the ground and picks it up, “So I was thinking…” Peeta starts while Biscuit tugs after the kids, choking himself.

I nod and smile, watching our children like a hawk, “Sometimes a dangerous thing…”

I look up into his clear blue eyes, “Shut up you… Now, you’ve been a constant in my life for a decade. I fall asleep next to you every night and wake up with our two beautiful children between us every morning. I don’t know how to do this romantically, or how to say anything I haven’t already told you. I want you buy my side every day for the rest of my life. We’ve seen much of the world together and honestly there aren’t many other places I really want to visit. Katniss I’m ready to continue our life, day in and day out. Missing the kids and you every second while I’m at work only to rush home to be with them until it’s time for bed, then you and I practice on the third. My life at least is perfect so maybe what I’m about to ask you is for bragging rights. So I can tell the world that you’re mine and only mine,” A small weight attaches to my leg and a larger one, our kids preventing me from running. I look down and Izzy is holding a black velvet box.
“For you mommy,” she says with her jack-o-lantern smile.

The lid creaks open, my engagement ring is simple, white gold with a single solitaire diamond. It’s the one I picked out six years ago, and I still love it.

“This might be the worst proposal ever, but Katniss Everdeen, will you marry me?”

I don’t have to think about my answer, “Yes, Peeta Mellark, I will marry you.”

When we get back to America, Peeta, the kids and I head straight for the courthouse. Our ceremony isn’t a lavish affair that one would expect, it’s completely about the four of us and the flimsy piece of paper that makes me a Mellark. Basically our wedding is flawless. We would plan a reception type party later where I’d wear a white dress Jay would spill juice on and Peeta would dust off his tux in the future but for now we were happy just being a family in our castle like apartment.

The beast and the belle… and their two tiny terrors.

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