"I want you to know that no matter what, you are mine and I am yours," she whispered. "A bit possessive, are we?" They swore to never abandon the other, a promise that grows challenging through the years of hunger, jealousy, and games. AU Katniss/Peeta
Chapter 1

"Siblings are the people we practice on, the people who teach us about fairness and cooperation and kindness and caring- quite often the hard way." Pamela Dugdale

Their relationship started with a scandal.

Peeta Mellark was barely two years old when his parents sat him down to tell him he was going to be a big brother soon. They explained to him how Mama was going to have a baby come spring.

"Baby?" he asked, touching Cary Mellark's stomach. She smiled and put her hand over his.

"Baby," she confirmed. "Mama's having a baby." He smiled a big toothy smile.

Bara Mellark crouched down before his wife and son and told him, "You're going to be a big brother now, Peeta." The boy nodded his head in excitement, taking his new role very seriously. "He or she is going to need you to be the best big brother in the world. Will you be the best big brother in the world?" Peeta nodded again, laughing when his father picked him up and tossed him in the air, telling him it was time for bed.

Peeta never realized how long it took for a baby to come, but he would look every morning in the cradle next to his crib for the baby and every morning the baby wouldn't be there.

"Soon," his father had told him, setting a plate of stale biscuits and water on a tray for Peeta's bedridden mother. "The baby should be here any day." And he was right.

Katniss Mellark was born two days later, and Peeta couldn't have been more thrilled. He wished his parents were as happy as he was though, because he noticed, being the perceptive child his mama claimed he was, that they fought more, and his father refused to hold baby Katniss whenever she fussed in her cradle. It confused him so much because she was the most perfect thing he had ever laid eyes on, and he wanted everyone to see that.

It occurred to him much later that his sister didn't look like him at all. She had dark tufts of hair where he had blonde like his mama and father. She had darker skin than he had, and her blue blue eyes from birth dimmed down to a steel grey. She was always so pretty, he thought, but their parents never seemed to notice.

Bara and Cary Mellark fought a lot after Katniss was born, and every night, when the yelling and the slamming of doors became too much, Peeta would climb out of his new big boy bed and slowly crawl over to her small cradle in the corner. She would always be awake, never one to cry, and she would always stare at him when he looked down upon her.

"Safe," he would whisper to her, grabbing her chubby little hand. "Nissy is safe."

It was as though she understood him because she would gurgle and smile, kicking the blankets off of her in delight.

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Their mother left for the Seam with the coal miner when Peeta was five and Katniss was three. She cried for days when their father sat them down to tell them.

"When will Mama be back?" Katniss had cried when he told them Cary Mellark had left.

It had taken three years for Bara to truly start to warm up to the girl that was the outcome of his wife's affair with Sage Everdeen, the boy who could make the birds stop and listen, the boy who had truly won Cary's heart when they were school children.

"She's not coming back, Pumpernickel." It hurt him to look at her, a reminder of why his wife had left him and their family, but she was so much like Cary that Bara couldn't help but care for her. "Mama made her choice. Now it's just us." He gave his children a sad smile before standing up and heading back into the kitchen to start the day's order of bread.

Peeta was still in shock after his father left to go bake, but he knew he had to be the big brother Katniss needed. He had to be brave for her.

"Let's go play, Nissy," he insisted, pulling on hair teasingly. "I'll even let you win at Capture Bug."

Katniss looked up solemnly at her older brother, her face still wet with tears, her nose all runny, and shook her head. She didn't want to play Capture Bug today. She wanted her mama.

Peeta chewed on his lip for a second before agreeing to a tea party. That perked her interest and with her thumb in her mouth, Katniss got up from the chair and took his hand in hers.

Together they played throughout the day, never letting the other out of their sight because what if they left the other like Mama had left? Peeta and Katniss clung to each other closer than ever now, not being able to handle the thought of being alone.
"I want you to know that no matter what, you are mine and I am yours," she whispered. "A bit possessive, are we?" They swore to never abandon the other, a promise that grows challenging through the years of hunger, jealousy, and games. AU Katniss/Peeta

"Stuck like glue/ you and me baby we're stuck like glue."

~ Sugarland's "Stuck Like Glue"

Katniss and Peeta became a source of comfort and safety for each other a source of protection that seemed to be missing in their home above the bakery.

Since the day their mother had left them, Katniss and Peeta became what many in town liked to call the Mellarkable Duo. Wherever one was the other was surely to follow. They were always together it seemed, and everyone thought it odd yet adorable how attached to the hip they were. Some even ignored the fact about Katniss' paternity because the duo was so sweet and innocent. And who could argue with sweet little Peeta who would always defend his little sister when someone said a nasty comment about how she looked or where she was "supposed to live"?

They only gossiped about the Mellarks behind closed doors out of respect for Bara and Peeta.

When Katniss first started school she threw the biggest temper tantrum many had ever seen. She kicked and screamed, pulling at her braids, crying that her little heart couldn't take it. Her teacher was baffled at the five year old's reaction because many of her students seemed to love school in these early years of academic life. She tried to console Katniss, tried to tell her that her father would be back in a few hours to pick her up, but nothing worked. The five year old continued her tantrum until she screamed, "Pee-ta!" at the top of her lungs. "I need Peeta!"

It had never occurred to Katniss that these mean people would split her up from her dear brother. It was fine when Peeta would go off to school without her because Papa would keep her company until it was time to walk to the school to pick him up. That was always her favorite time of the day because she would get to dance down the street, excited to hear the newest song her brother had learned in school and would soon teach her, and her and Papa would sing the Valley song until they saw Peeta running towards them, his arms wide open for her to run into, and she would because his arms meant safety.

Peeta was in his classroom now and Papa had left for the bakery, leaving poor Katniss alone. She didn't like to be alone, and how could Peeta just leave her like this? He was leaving her like Mama had left her and she wasn't okay with this.

Her teacher finally gave up and called for someone to go get Peeta Mellark because his sister was going to hurt herself if she continued on in her rampage.
Her tears immediately stopped when she saw those familiar blonde curls. "Peeta!" Katniss screamed in relief, hugging her brother so hard he had trouble breathing.

He rubbed her back and told her he was sorry for having to leave her like he did.

"Why can't I go with you?" she asked her brother, holding him close, making sure he wouldn't leave. "I'm smart."

"You gotta stay here and get more smarter," he laughed, pulling on her braid teasingly. He kissed her forehead before prying himself, reluctantly, away from her. "You'll like it here, Nissy. You get playtime and learn lots of more songs." She refused to let go of his hand, though. "I gotta go, but I'll see you later. I'm not leaving forever."

Katniss sucked on her thumb, a habit their father was trying desperately to break, weighing her brother's words in her mind.

"No," she told him at last, pulling him over to a lone corner where they could play by themselves, and Peeta let her pull him along because she was scared and he was her big brother. He protected her.

Katniss' teacher saw this was going to be a problem.

"This is going to be a problem," Katniss' teacher had told him when Bara had come to pick his daughter up from her first day of school. "Katniss needs to learn how to interact with other children besides her brother. She needs to learn that Peeta cannot be with her all of the time."

He looked out into the play yard at the young girl he considered his own, singing a song she had learned that day, and ignoring the fact the Mockingjays had stopped to listen to her. "They're just close," he told her. "They've always been close."

"You are only doing them harm if you encourage this, Mr. Mellark. A child should not have as big of a tantrum as Katniss had because her sibling is not in the same room with her. It's unhealthy."

Katniss smiled at the two and ran over, pulling her father's hand into hers. "I learned a new song today, Papa." She stuck her thumb into her mouth and waited for him to ask her what song.

"I've told you to keep your thumb out of your mouth, Pumpernickel," Bara sighed, pulling the thumb out of her mouth. Her teacher waited for his response to her concern. "How was your day, Katniss?"

"I liked it when Peeta came," she smiled.

"Did you make any new friends?"

"No, Peeta was there," was her only reply. She twisted the ribbon holding one of her braids together. "We played with blocks and colored and Peeta drawed a really pretty picture for me. Papa, when am I going to Peeta's class? I wanna be with Peeta."

Katniss' teacher gave him a poignant look before excusing herself.

"I'll talk with them tonight," he promised.
Growing

Chapter Summary

"I want you to know that no matter what, you are mine and I am yours," she whispered. "A bit possessive, are we?" They swore to never abandon the other, a promise that grows challenging through the years of hunger, jealousy, and games. AU Katniss/Peeta

"I would have given anything to keep her little. They outgrow us so much faster than we outgrow them."

~Jodi Picoult, My Sister's Keeper

Peeta would sneak out of his bedroom and into his sister's awaiting bed when Bara Mellark shut his door for the night. It was a ritual they had been doing for a few years now, ever since their father had told them it was time to make other friends, to branch outside of their little duo.

"You two never interact with other children," he had told them that night after Katniss' first day of school. "You need to make friends. This," he pointed between their clasped hands, "isn't healthy. We'll clear out the storage room down in the bakery, Katniss will get my room, and no more sleeping in the same bed. You're too big for that now." Katniss had started to tear up, the thought of Peeta not holding her in her sleep so frightening, and Peeta squeezed her hand in comfort. He wouldn't let anybody hurt her, not even their own father.

"Peeta, you're sleeping on the couch tonight," Bara instructed his children. "Katniss, you're sleeping in your own bed tonight. No more of this sleeping together business. It's time to be a big boy and girl." He had sent them off to bed thinking that was the last of this problem.

But it wasn't.

Katniss had a terrible nightmare that night, and Peeta had crawled into her bed, rubbing soothing circles into her back until she had calmed down, clinging to his nightshirt.

"Don't leave me, Peeta," she had whispered, fear slipping into her voice.

"I won't," he had promised, and he snuck into her room every night, keeping his promise, ever since.

She was awake when he came in, a candle lit by her nightstand so she could finish reading a chapter from her favorite book. Living in the Districts didn't provide much literature, but Katniss loved books on nature and Peeta had used half his birthday coins to buy her a fancy book on plants. It was such a nice book with its hard bound cover and fancily drawn pictures that both had wondered if it was straight from the Capital itself, a place full of mystery they used to muse over as toddlers.

"Nissy," he whined. "I don't want to read tonight." Peeta climbed into her bed and snuggled his cold feet under her covers. It was always warmer in her room than his. "Especially about boring plants."

She smiled but continued to read by the dim light. "I'm almost done with this chapter."
"We have to help Papa tomorrow. We have to be up early." He didn't say why they had to be up, and she was glad he didn't. Neither wanted to think of the dreadful Reaping anymore than they had to.

"Peeta Mellark," she snapped, using the tone that wretched Miss Brinx who helped Papa while they were at school used, "I am trying to read and you're bothering me. Don't make me kick your cold rear end out of my room."

He laughed and leaned over, giving her a kiss on the nose. "You wouldn't if you tried, dear sister," he mocked. "Who would you use as a pillow? Who would I steal the covers from? Madge Undersee?"

Katniss frowned, not liking his teasing now. "You're my brother which makes you mine." She didn't like sharing him with anyone.

He took the book from her lap and closed it, leaning over to put it on the nightstand and blow out the candle. "You need to learn how to share, Katniss. You are ten after all." She rolled her eyes and pulled him closer to cuddle under the blankets with.

They rested together- her head on his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat she found soothing, and his arms protecting her from any harm the night could bring. It was how they had always slept, how they had always protected each other from terrible dreams.

"Peeta?" Katniss whispered, surprising him for he thought she had fallen asleep.

"Yeah, Nissy?"

"Are you scared?"

He tried to figure out the best response to her question. Peeta could lie and tell her that he felt fine, maybe even throw in a joke about how he should be the one scared of the Reaping tomorrow instead of her, but that wasn't true. Peeta was petrified his name was going to be called. Every night for the past two weeks he'd woken in a puddle of sweat, paralyzed from his nightmares of being Reaped, and every morning he had to explain to his sister that everything was fine, that the sweat was from the early humidity outside, that she had nothing to worry about.

"What's there to be scared of?" Peeta scoffed, deciding to lie to her instead. The truth was too painful to talk about, especially with Katniss whose steel grey eyes bore into his soul until he would cave to her every whim. Lying about his confidence gave him false hope, which was better than nothing.

"I know you're lying," she sighed, tracing imaginary patterns on his neck with her tiny index finger. "I always know when you lie to me." As good of a liar as he was, Peeta knew his little sister was his weakness. Damn her for knowing.

Peeta sighed as well, closing his eyes and imagining the Reaping ceremony tomorrow. "Yeah, I am scared." The ceremony was always the same, and he shuddered when he thought he heard his name being called. Katniss pulled him closer, pulled him out of his nightmare.

"If I could," she whispered into his chest, "I would hide you away so the Capital couldn't take you away from me. Ever." Smiling at how naive his sister pretended to be, Peeta asked where she would hide him. "I'd hide you in the woods, of course. No one would ever think to find a baker there."

"The woods?" he asked incredulously. "We've never been in the woods," Peeta laughed. "We'd get
"eaten by a wild bear!"

"Not if we shared the honey," she laughed along.

"We would both hide," Peeta assured her after a moment of thought. "We'd hide together."

"I like that," Katniss sighed, exhaustion starting to pull her under. "I don't know what I'd do without you," she muttered, already half asleep.

"I don't know what I'd do without you either, Nissy," he whispered into her hair. He couldn't fall asleep, his nerves were kicking into gear now, making him restless. Peering down at the warm blob that was his sister on his chest, Peeta wondered if it was at all possible to hide the two of them away from the world, where no one would ever find them, not even the Capital. It was a nice, impossible thought, but the thought lulled him into a dreamless sleep.

Sleep didn't last long, though, and both had nightmares of Peeta being Reaped and killed by Trackerjackers before the sun was up and the dreaded day had to begin.

When his name wasn't picked, they celebrated by eating a slice of yummy chocolate cake Papa had saved especially for them and life continued.

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It wasn't easy being the only girl in the Mellark household.

There were things Katniss needed done that only a woman's touch could give, such as when Katniss started insisting she wanted her hair in braids like the other girls she saw in town. Bara had scratched his head, trying to evenly part his daughter's hair, and braided it into two messy braids, realizing braiding pastries was easier than hair. The first few tries were complete disasters with uneven braids, pieces of hair sticking this way and that, but he finally mastered it by the time she got to an age where she could do it herself.

Another thing was when it came to clothing. According to Peeta, their mother had always put Katniss in pretty dresses from when Cary Mellark was a girl, but when Katniss grew out of those pretty dresses, Bara Mellark had no clue what exactly to buy and what size to get. Girls had so many more options than boys and it was confusing to know what went with what.

Katniss often didn't wear clothes that fit nor matched when skipping on her way to school with Peeta.

These things weren't so bad, at least they weren't to Katniss, because she was grateful for her father's attempts, and Peeta gave her a few tips if anyone decided to make fun of her. These weren't the moments when Katniss wished that her mother was involved in her life instead of somewhere in the Seam with that coal miner, though.

No, it was when Katniss had to start acknowledging that boys and girls were different, and she was feeling things and going through things that Peeta had never had to go through.

Such as getting her period.

No one had ever explained to her the facts of life and what happened when puberty started, but one morning when she was getting dressed for her Saturday morning shift, Katniss saw red and brown drops lined in her underwear and started to panic. Blood meant pain and death, and surely it wasn't natural for this to happen, right?
She didn't know what to do.

"Katniss, are you okay in there?" Peeta asked, knocking on her bedroom door. Should she tell him? Would he know what was happening?

"Just a minute!" she shouted, shoving her ruined underwear to the bottom of her drawer. Katniss would worry about this later. Maybe she had played too roughly in a game and it was just an injury. Yes, that had to be it. Surely she wasn't dying, and this would never happen again.

But it did.

It stayed all week, and there was more blood than that morning, making Katniss want to cry, wondering if she was going to die. The thought of telling Peeta was tempting, but he would ask why she thought she was dying, and Katniss didn't know the answer to that just yet.

When the eighth day came around and she hesitantly changed into her school clothes, Katniss was pleased to see the light blue of her underwear, no stains. She wasn't dying, and that was a good thing because how would Peeta react to that news? He needed her.

When doing laundry that week, though, Peeta asked where all her underwear was. Katniss tried to lie and tell him that they were too little on her now, but he didn't believe her.

"You're still too little, Nissy," he teased, scrubbing one of Bara's shirts in the washing bin. "Come on, I have other things I need to get done after this. Give me your clothes."

She bit her lip and shook her head. "No. They're too little on me, Peeta. I need new ones."

"We can't afford new ones," her brother sighed, scrubbing harder on the grease stained shirt.

"But I'm growing," Katniss argued, already starting to feel bad about lying to her brother, and for trying to trick him into buying her new underwear so she wouldn't have to reveal her secret. "I need clothes."

Peeta sighed again, squeezing water out of the shirt and handing it to her to hang on the clothes line they had set up by the ovens. "I guess we'll have to talk to Papa about it," he muttered at last.

Smiling, Katniss leaned down on the stool she was standing on to reach the clothes line and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Thank you!"

Bara reluctantly agreed to spare a few coins to get her new underwear, and Katniss felt so guilty because those coins could have gone to something more deserving that she was extra kind to Papa for that entire month she even forbid Peeta from sleeping with her for a few nights before it became unbearable because she knew that would make Papa happy. She never enjoyed owing people, and she owed her father for buying her the underwear and because she had deceived him.

Katniss kept her secret, and Bara and Peeta remained oblivious of how she had almost died from whatever had happened to her last month.

Everything was fine again. Her life was back to how it was before this all happened.

Except it came back.

All this week Katniss had felt off. Peeta joked how she was becoming a lot more girly than she used to because the smallest things were setting her off such as Peeta's stupid teasing, and all she wanted to do was make crowns of flowers for him because the flowers were pretty and made her happy.
She also felt pain in her lower back, and wondered if she had bumped into something at all this week for this uncomfortable feeling that continued to persist until Katniss started to cry from the pain. Peeta had been so alarmed and she had been so angry because he had walked in her room when the door was closed. It made her so mad that he didn't respect her privacy.

The blood came soon after, and this time she knew she was dying.

There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Katniss Mellark was going to die from an unknown disease that caused her emotions to run crazy, her body to be in a lot of pain, and for the blood to slowly drain out of her until she was nothing more than a bag of skin and bones.

Maybe they would name the disease after her, she mused when the acceptance of her death came. The Katniss Mellark Disease had a nice sort of ring to it.

When the blood grew heavier, Katniss knew it was time to say goodbye, dig a hole in the backyard, and die.

She wrote a note to her father, telling him that she was now dead, and that she loved him and the yummy bread he made. Katniss explained that him and Peeta better be careful because she didn't know how contagious this disease was. She left him her bedroom so he wouldn't have to sleep in the bakery's storage room anymore, and told him where he could find the broken stirring bowl she had broken years ago. It was best to get all lies out of the way before she went.

Peeta's letter was harder to write because she was so bad when it came to her feelings, and the thought of him being alone made her extremely sad. She told him that she loved him, but if he wanted to die with her she had coughed on the paper so he would catch it. "I don't want you being lonely," she wrote. Katniss left him her plant book in case he did decide to live without her, though.

Later that afternoon, when Katniss was packing up her things, Peeta rushed into her room, not bothering to knock which annoyed her, and asked her what was going on.

"I'm dying," she replied simply, packing her thread bared quilt she'd had since she was an infant. Do dead people get to decide what they're buried with?

"What do you mean you're dying?" Peeta demanded. "What the hell does this stupid letter mean, anyway?" He threw the crumpled piece of paper onto the bed. What a waste, Katniss thought, frowning.

"It means I'm dying, and I want you to have my plant book if you want to live, too."

"Dying from what?" he spat. "Why is this the first I'm hearing about this?"

Looking down at her box of few belongings, Katniss chewed on her bottom lip, contemplating whether or not to show him the blood. He looked so worried, and Katniss didn't like seeing Peeta worry. She decided he deserved to see the cause of her death.

She walked over to her dresser and pulled out a pair of ruined underwear. "This is what."

He looked confused on why his sister just handed him a pair of her underwear, but closer inspection showed there was blood on it, and Peeta threw the disgusting undergarment onto her bed.

"Katniss," he bellowed, "that's disgusting! How long have those been in there?"
She was stunned. That was how he was going to handle the cause of her death? "I'm dying! Who cares how long they've been in there!"

"You ain't dying," he argued.

"Am so!"

"Are not!"

Their argument managed to grab Bara's attention from below and when the man went up to inspect on his children, he was shocked to see Katniss on top of Peeta, looking as though she was choking him. The boy grabbed both hands before she could strangle him, though, and they continued to wrestle.

"Kids," their father shouted, demanding to know what was wrong. "Have you forgotten we have customers downstairs? What are you two fighting about?"

Katniss kicked Peeta off her and stumbled over to her father.

"I'm dying, Papa," she weeped, clinging on to his apron.

"What? What's going on here?"

"Nissy found blood in her underwear," Peeta explained, pointing over to the cause of the fight. Bara peered down at his daughter's discarded underwear and a slow smile crept up on to his face before he started to laugh.

"Why are you laughing?" Katniss demanded, not liking how either boy in this house were treating her. "This isn't funny! I'm dying!"

"Oh, my little Pumpernickel," Bara laughed, picking up the eleven year old girl with ease. "You're not dying."

Katniss looked confused. "But I'm bleeding," she confessed embarrassingly.

Telling Peeta to go man the bakery, Bara sat his daughter down for a talk he had hoped would never come but now here it was. "Katniss," he started, wondering exactly what to say. "Katniss, you're a girl."

Her right eyebrow raised at that in judgment.

"What I mean is," Bara continued, wishing for the billionth time Cary had never left their family for reasons like this, "you're a girl and girls have different...ingredients than boys."

"Ingredients?"

"Yes, like how we don't add raisins to rye bread, or why we don't add chocolate chips to sugar cookies. Different ingredients." The girl still wasn't buying it. "Girls go through this thing called a...a..." For the life of him Bara couldn't remember what it was called. He patted his sweaty face with the sleeve of his shirt, feeling uncomfortable and out of place with this discussion. "Girls get a thing called a...red oven."

"What?" This conversation was making little sense to her. "A red oven?"

"Yes," her father continued with more confidence. "Now, this red oven is only ignited every month and that's why there's blood." He patted her knee, thinking he had covered everything she needed to
"But...why?" Katniss persisted, not pleased at all with her father's explanation. "Why does it come? Do all girls get this red oven? Will it come forever?" She had so many questions to ask, but Bara just flustered out of the room, telling her she needed to help him and Peeta down in the bakery.

She feared her father would never tell her, but later on after closing, while they were eating dinner, someone knocked on their door, and Bara opened it to the cruel Miss Francis Brinx. Katniss flinched out of reflex when the woman walked in, remembering when Francis had hit her after spilling the bag of flour in the bakery kitchen the other day, and Peeta whispered how she wouldn't dare hurt them with their father in the room.

"She's not going to hurt you."

"Why is that mean witch here?" Katniss snapped back when they saw their father take Francis' coat.

Peeta didn't get a chance to respond before Bara and Francis Brinx walked into the kitchen and took their seats at the table.

"So," Francis began, taking a sip of the soup they were eating, "Katniss, your father tells me something has happened."

Katniss hated the way the woman said her name, like it was something dirty and disgusting. "Something has," she muttered, squirming around in her chair.

"Speak up, girl. Can't hear a thing you're saying."

"Yes, Miss Brinx," Katniss said more clearly, through gritted teeth. "Yes, something has happened."

The woman nodded and took another sip of soup, complimenting Bara on his skills in the kitchen. The Mellark children looked at each other with unease because it was no secret Francis Brinx wanted into their family, and it was no secret she hated them both because years before they were born Francis Brinx and Cary Vincent were both sweethearts to Bara Mellark. But Cary's family had won his parents' affections with money and Francis Brinx was left for spinsterhood. The woman had it in for any of Cary Mellarks' children with a hard iron fist for she had managed to get a job at the bakery for when they were at school.

"I tried to tell her, Francis," Bara explained while they were finishing their meal. "I don't even know what it's called, and Cary would have known but-

"Don't talk about that Seam whore in front of your children!" Francis exclaimed. She lowered her voice, but the children could still hear. "Especially since one of your children is one of those Seam bastards." Katniss nor Peeta knew what bastard meant, but it didn't sound like a compliment.

Bara cleared his throat and told Peeta that Katniss and Miss Brinx needed some alone time. Peeta looked reluctant to leave his sister alone with the woman they deemed a witch, but he had no choice. Giving one last squeeze to her hand, he left Katniss alone with her.

"How old are you?" Francis asked.

"Eleven," Katniss muttered, looking down at her bowl of half eaten soup. This woman stole her appetite.

"Speak up, girl," Francis snapped. "And your eyes need to be looking at me when you answer a question." She sniffed with distaste at the girl's poor manners.
Katniss sighed, wishing Peeta were here to at least hold her hand, but he wasn't and it was time she fought her own battles. "I'm eleven, Miss Brinx," she spoke up. "I turned eleven last May."

"Ever heard of a period?"

"The dot at the end of a sentence?" Why were they talking about grammar?

Francis rolled her eyes in annoyance at how naive Katniss was being. "No, you dolt. A period as in when you bleed." It had a name?

"Papa said it was called a red oven."

"Well, he was wrong, and a man. Men know nothing about women," she told the girl. "Nothing except doing bad things to them later on."

"Peeta's a boy, and he knows me pretty good."

The scowl deepened on Francis' face, and Katniss got the feeling the woman would rather be eaten by a pack of wild dogs than to be sitting across from her. Katniss couldn't quite blame her for the desire.

"You and your brother are sickening, and it doesn't count." Katniss didn't ask why Francis Brinx thought her and her brother's relationship was sickening. She knew she'd get yelled at if she did. "Boys are only ever after one thing, Katniss. Do you know what that is?"

Katniss thought about what Peeta and some of his other friends did when at their home. They would eat any scraps of leftovers that Bara would offer, and talked a lot about how hungry they were all the time. "Food?" she guessed.

Francis rolled her eyes again and told her to stop being such a smart-aleck. "Boys are after sex. Do you know what sex is?" Katniss shook her head. "It's how babies are made, and babies are made from an egg."

"Like a bird?"

"No," Francis gritted, tired of the girl's innocence. "Women have eggs; boys have semen. Together they make a baby, but when the egg passes women bleed."

She didn't know there were eggs inside her. How little were they? Were they big?

"Do boys bleed, too?"

"No, boys do not bleed because it's a woman's burden to carry. Now, take these." She pulled out a small bag full of rags ripped up into strips from the carpet bag she had carried with her to the table. Katniss stared into the bag, confused. "It's so you don't ruin your underwear," Francis explained. She took a rag out and explained to Katniss how she was to use the rags for her monthly burden.

The whole ordeal was uncomfortable, and Katniss was relieved when her father and brother came into the room to announce it was getting late and that Francis better be on her way.

"If you need my help with the girl again, Bara," Francis told their father, "please don't hesitate to fetch me."

"Thank you so much for doing this," Bara smiled, helping Francis into her coat.

"Of course," Francis replied stiffly, shoving her hands into her woolen gloves. "Even a Seam bastard
deserves to know how her body works when her worthless mother is nowhere to be found. A girl needs a woman's guidance."

"Well, thank you," Bara said again, ignoring the insults. "I'll be sure to contact you if Katniss needs any more womanly help." She nodded her goodbyes toward the children and left.

Closing the door, Bara smiled down at his daughter. "Ah, my little Pumpernickel isn't so little anymore, now is she?" Peeta snickered at her darkened cheeks and she hit him out of embarrassment.

"I don't want to be a woman," Katniss argued, folding her arms across her chest in frustration. "I want to be a boy, like Peeta."

The boys laughed and Peeta threw his arm over her shoulders, giving them a gentle squeeze. "You're too pretty to be a boy, sis."

They didn't understand how upset this whole period thing was making her.

~*~*~*~

When Peeta came into her room for bed that night, Katniss was brushing her hair in the tiny mirror she kept by the window, thinking over everything that Miss Brinx had told her about what it meant to being a woman. It didn't sound fun at all.

"You're awfully quiet tonight," he commented, jumping onto her bed before situating himself in his normal spot against the wall. "Did Miss Brinx put a spell on you?" he teased when she didn't bite at his first comment.

Katniss stopped the comb and looked over at him in confusion. She wanted to tell him how maybe things were different now that she was considered a woman, but she didn't feel any different. Besides the uncomfortable feeling the rag was causing, Katniss felt more like herself than she had in weeks. Was she supposed to be different now? "Do you ever miss Mama?" she asked, looking back at her own reflection because this wasn't a topic they ever brought up.

There was an unspoken rule in their household that the mention of Cary Mellark was off limits. Whenever she had been brought up in past conversations, Bara would grow distant and sad, and neither Katniss nor Peeta wanted to see their father so upset. It was bad enough losing one parent; they didn't want to lose another and be sent to the Community Home. No, Cary Mellark was never discussed, but that didn't mean Katniss didn't think of her mother at times. Times when only a mother would know how to take care of her. "Do you?"

Peeta sat up, alert now, and watched her shadow from the candle light that lit her tiny room. He didn't know what to say. It was the one topic that brought him up speechless.

"Do you?" he countered, still watching as she plaited her hair.

"Sometimes."

He needed to touch her, to know she was there. "Let me do your hair, Nissy." She agreed and padded over to her bed, sitting Indian-style in front of him. Her hair was soft and it smelled like cinnamon and sugar. He loved her thick, dark locks. "When do you think about her?" he asked, brushing out a few snarls she had missed.

"I think about her when I wish I wasn't the only girl in our house." Biting her thumb nail, Katniss wondered if he would take it the wrong way. She didn't mean for it to sound ungrateful, but her house wasn't the same as Madge Undersee's or Delly Cartwright's. They had mothers who cared
about them, who would never leave them. "I think about her a lot whenever Papa has to bring that mean ol' Francis Brinx over."

Peeta sadly nodded and started to split her hair apart for two braids. The candle light flickered around the room, cascading shadows everywhere, and the winter winds blew against the brick wall to the outside world. "I think you and Mama would have gotten along if she had stayed," he said at last. "At least from what I remember."

"Was she nice?" Katniss asked, trying to remember her mother from so many years ago. The only memory she could dig up, though, was of Katniss and Peeta crying under his covers the night she had left.

"She was," he smiled, thinking back to before their mother had went off the deep end and left their family behind her. "She would always sing these songs to me, and one time," Peeta laughed, "one time Papa was so mad at Mama, and I didn't think they were ever going to make up, but she started to sing this silly song she'd made up. Papa was so shocked he started to laugh until he knocked over a bowl of flour. The entire kitchen was covered with the white stuff, but it was okay because they had kissed and had made up for the time being."

Katniss processed his story and tried to imagine a time where there was a woman who looked just like Peeta, for everyone who had ever met him told him he looked exactly like Cary, dancing around and singing in their bakery. It was hard to imagine. Besides her and Peeta's laughter the bakery was often times a quiet place to think, bake, and sell.

"Was she beautiful?" His hands froze, and he leaned down to her ear and whispered if she could keep a secret. "What kind of secret?" It was a silly question to ask because they both knew she couldn't lie if someone ever asked, but she nodded enthusiastically. "I can keep a secret."

He got up with her candle and told her to follow him to his bedroom. "It's a secret," he whispered again as they tiptoed down the hall to his room, avoiding all the creaky floorboards that would surely alert their father from below.

His room was smaller than hers, a bit bigger than a closet, but Peeta set the candle down on his nightstand, told her to stay still, as he shimmied his way under his bed for the box he was looking for.

"Papa doesn't know I have this," he whispered excitedly when he revealed to her the small wooden box. "He'd probably want me to burn it if he ever found out."

She touched the rough, wooden lid in awe. "What's in it?" It had to be something important if Papa would want to destroy it.

Peeta lifted the lid and dumped out its contents. Pieces of paper, dried out flowers, pictures, a ring, and a bracelet fell out onto the floor. "It's all of the things Mama kept in her drawer," he smiled, looking through the few photos before finding the one he was looking for. "Here," he whispered, holding out the worn out, black and white picture of a young woman sitting by a tree. "That's Mama."

Katniss carefully took the photo, afraid if she touched it it would go up in flames, and studied the photo of the woman who abandoned their family when she was only three. Peeta did look like Cary Mellark, but Katniss could also see traces of Bara in him now that she saw the picture. "I wish I looked like her," she commented, tracing the edge of the photo with her index finger.

"Why?" Peeta asked, looking at the letters their parents wrote to each other when they were younger.
"You're prettier than her."

"I look like a Seam brat," Katniss sighed, wishing for the millionth time their mother did not have that affair with the coal miner. "And everyone takes pity on us because 'poor Bara, having to take care of that child that's not even his,'" she quoted from the many rumors she'd heard throughout the years.

People in District 12 didn't have many things to do besides work grueling jobs, starve, and gossip, and they loved coming back to the age old gossip of the scandal Cary Mellark had caused by not only having an affair with a man from the Seam, but also having his child, leaving said child with her Merchant husband, and leaving her family to live her life in the Seam with her lover. It was so unheard of for a Merchant to move to the Seam, and the scandal Katniss brought along with it always kept the District 12 citizens gossiping. "People would like me better if I looked like the rest of the Merchants," she decided. People from town didn't like those from the Seam. People from the Seam didn't like those from town. Katniss didn't belong anywhere with her Seam look and Merchant lifestyle.

He grabbed her chin and made her look at him, a serious look set in his face. "Katniss Mellark," Peeta whispered harshly, making sure she understood, "don't you ever say something so stupid again. You are the prettiest girl I've ever known, and you can win at wrestling with any boy I know. If people don't like you because you look different then spit on them."

She wrinkled her nose in disgust, but pulled away from his grasp to get a better look at their mother's belongings, asking if he knew what they meant. Peeta dramatically read her the silly love notes their father had sent Cary and his super low voice made her laugh until he had to cover her mouth with his hand so they wouldn't get in trouble for staying up so late on a school night.

"Have you ever thought to go and find her?" Katniss asked, playing around with the pretty blue beads on the bracelet. "You know, in the Seam?"

"No," Peeta sighed, setting down the photo he was looking at. "She made her choice, and I guess there's no coming back once you're down there."

"Not even to just see her?" He shook his head and started to put the things back in the box, saying how it was time for bed. "Can I keep the picture?" she asked, holding the picture of their mother by the tree. "So I can talk to someone if I have girl problems?"

"Sure," Peeta smiled. "And you should keep this, too." He handed her back the bracelet she had been playing with.

"It's so pretty," Katniss murmured, running her fingers over the beads again.

"See this charm?" Peeta pointed out. She nodded, studying the golden bird under the dim light. "It's a mockingjay," he explained. "It'll keep you safe." He put it on her wrist and kissed her hand.

"How?" The bracelet felt too pretty for her, too valuable for her to wear. The blue in the beads reminded her of Peeta's eyes, though, and that was comforting.

"The mockingjays love to hear you sing," he smiled. "If you're ever lost, or in trouble, just sing, and someone will find you because of them. They'll want to sing because of you."

"Why did Mama have a mockingjay charm?" she wondered aloud, rubbing the charm between her thumb and index finger.

"I think it was from a friend of hers," Peeta said offhandedly, already putting the box underneath his
bed again. He pulled her back to her bedroom and they settled in for the night curled under the covers.

"Peeta?" Katniss breathed, tracing his face in the darkness.

"Hmm?" he muffled, half asleep already.

"I wish Mama were here."

"Mmm," he sighed, pulling her closer to him. She buried her face into his chest and tried to forget all thoughts of Cary Mellark, but it wasn't easy.

"I just wish," she sighed, "I just wish Mama cared enough to at least see us. To show that she still cares."

Peeta muttered something about being selfish under his breath, and Katniss thought about the word and how people used it. Was she being selfish for wanting her mother? No, that was ridiculous. All girls need a mother for love and protection. Even Francis Brinx had said that. No, it had to be Cary who was selfish. It was selfish to hurt such a wonderful man as Papa, Katniss thought. And it was selfish to abandon two young children for a silly man.

Yes, Katniss thought, Cary Mellark was selfish, and selfishness didn't settle well in the young girl's eyes.

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Peeta didn't like sharing Katniss' attention with another boy. Why was his sister looking at boys anyway? She was eleven far too young to like anybody, he thought.

It took him a bit to notice the changes in his sister, the subtle differences she made to make room for this boy to enter their lives.

The first was when she kindly offered to take the Thursday morning and Sunday morning shifts at the bakery. Katniss hated the mornings despite the fact they had both been working at their father's bakery since before they could see over the counter. He thought it odd, but she had laughed at him when he asked about it and told him she wanted to be nice to Papa for once.

The second was Katniss started dressing differently. She tossed aside the pretty dresses Peeta loved seeing her in, stopped wearing her hair in two braids, opting for one braid now, and told her father she was a woman now, let her buy her own clothes. Peeta barely recognized his little sister when she paraded around in cargo pants, a long cotton shirt, and hunting boots.

What in the world did she need hunting boots for? She had never stepped foot near the forest in her life.

When she started insisting she was too big for her brother to sleep in her bed, Peeta knew something was obviously off. Katniss and him had been sleeping in the same bed for most of their lives. Something was wrong and Peeta didn't like it.

He decided to wake up early on Sunday with her, just to see if she had really wanted to help Papa out. When he came down, yawning because Sunday was the only day he ever got to sleep in, Katniss jumped in surprise.

"You're supposed to be sleeping."
"I wanted to help today," he smiled, pulling his apron off the hook. "We haven't spent much time together, and I miss you, Nissy."

Her smile was sad, and she took his offered hand. "I miss you, too." She pulled him closer to hug, and he knew she'd missed him desperately. She even breathed him in.

There's a knock on the door, interrupting their embrace, and Katniss pushed Peeta away before running to answer it.

Gale Hawthorne was standing at their doorstep, and it becomes all too clear who has captured his little sister's attention.

"Oh, Gale, these rabbits look wonderful!" Katniss gushed, holding one out to inspect. "You're such a good hunter."

"Thanks," the fourteen year old muttered. She invited him in so she could get the bread to trade, dragging a stunned Peeta along with her to the kitchen.

"Don't you even think about it, Peeta Mellark!" she snapped once they were safely in the kitchen.

"Think about what?" What in the world? Gale Hawthorne? Is that who had... "Do you like Gale Hawthorne?" he finally asked incredulously. His little sister liked a boy. That wasn't supposed to happen.

"I do," she snapped, wrapping two loaves of bread. "He's handsome; and nice once you get to know him; and funny; and he's been in the woods, Peeta. He's a hunter!" Her eyes lit up describing the boy and it made Peeta want to hurl.

"How do you even know him?"

"Papa's been trading with him for awhile," she explained offhandedly. "And I just started asking questions on hunting whenever he came for a trade." So that's why she insisted on the morning shifts, Peeta begrudgingly realized. "He's a lot more open now than he was a few months ago."

"He's from the Seam," Peeta retorted bitterly, not even thinking. He was just so confused and upset and hungry. This wasn't how he wanted this to go.

"Excuse me?" Katniss asked, her voice getting low with anger. He knew he had crossed the line, and he knew he should apologize, especially since Peeta knew how terrible Katniss' anger was. He had rarely ever been on the receiving end of her anger, most times he was snickering at the poor person, safely behind her, but he knew the signs and this was the first. "What did you say?"

"He's, he's from the Seam, Katniss. And he's a boy. He'll take advantage of you." This was a losing battle.

"Who cares if he's from the Seam!" she snapped. "He's truly brave. He goes out into the woods by himself, and he takes care of his family all by himself." Her admiration for this kid made him sick and jealous. "And..." she blushed, looking down at the bread, "And he understands." Katniss thought Peeta didn't know her?

"What's that supposed to mean? What does he understand that I don't?"

"You look like you belong here," Katniss seethed, trying to keep her anger to a whisper. "You don't have anyone talking about you behind your back because Papa belongs here and my birth dad doesn't. Sometimes, sometimes I don't feel comfortable being around two-faced people." She sniffed
the air, showing she was done with this conversation, and took Gale's bread out to him.

"I'm not a two-faced person, Katniss Mellark!" he yelled, storming out to the front of the bakery. Gale looked rather uncomfortable as Katniss handed him his bread, keeping his focus on his muddy boots. "At least I don't change who I am for a boy!" His sister's face looked mortified.

"Good-bye, Gale," she squeaked out, giving the young man a tiny wave, embarrassment coursing through her veins. When the bell jingled, signaling Gale's departure, she let her fangs out. "I cannot believe you just did that!"

"I cannot believe you didn't deny it!"

"I'm growing up, Peeta," Katniss yelled back. "I am a big girl who can make her own decisions, and if I want to wear pants and hunt, then so be it!"

That threw him for a heartbreaking loop. "You hunt now?" he sneered, not believing her. "Since when?"

"Since I asked Gale three weeks ago, and it's a lot more fun than baking stupid bread all day!" She took her apron off and threw it on the ground. "And I like him better than all our Merchant friends because I know they tease me behind my back. I want to be with at least someone who gets me and doesn't treat me like a stupid doll!" She started toward the stairs to their home, but Peeta pulled her back.

"Do you like him better than me?"

Grey eyes glared into blue. "Yes," she said, her tone hard and unforgiving, yanking her arm out of his grasp. "and I don't need you anymore. So leave me alone." With that Katniss took the stairs two at a time before entering their home above the bakery.

The shock from her confession killed him. His little sister didn't need him? She didn't want him there anymore? But they were the Mellarkable Duo. They had been joined to the hip since she could walk. They needed each other.

He hated Gale Hawthorne. He made Peeta have to share the one thing that he didn't want to share, and Gale stole it from him, too.

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Katniss and Peeta didn't talk for two whole months.

The silence concerned their father at first, but he was pleased to see they were making friends outside of the other. It had taken seven whole years but both were finally making their own friends. Bara couldn't have been more pleased when he saw Katniss bringing home girls such as Madge Undersee from school, or spending time with that Gale Hawthorne kid he often traded meat with. He was thrilled when Peeta would tell him he was going to go play sports with the boys in the Meadow. This was healthy. This was what children were supposed to do.

They were finally learning to be independent after all this time.

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Katniss had told him she didn't need him anymore, and though it broke his heart, Peeta had to agree because what else could he do? He left her alone and would bite his tongue when he noticed cuts and scrapes on her from those dreaded woods. What if she got hurt and that stupid Gale Hawthorne
abandoned her? Or attacked by one of those wild animals they were always dragging back into the District? What if Katniss got lost? There were so many what-ifs he worried about when he knew she was out there, and she seemed to go out there every day. He didn't want to think about what the two of them could possibly be doing besides hunting, but Gale Hawthorne was a boy who was starting to get a reputation at school. During class, when their teacher was busy, a lot of the girls would whisper and giggle about what Gale Hawthorne had taught them at the slag heap and it was never innocent. Peeta would be forced to listen to them, looking over at the Seam boy in question who sat near the window, and wondered if he had ever dared touch Katniss like those girls had been touched.

The thought made him want to punch the boy, but he wasn't stupid. Gale would probably beat him since he had four whole inches on Peeta, and Katniss would probably hate him even more.

This sucked.

Peeta wished he was brave enough to go into the woods, but he wasn't. He wished he could tell his sister that he would go with her instead, to keep an eye on her, but he couldn't. This new Katniss was different from his little sister. She would yell at him about how he was babying her and tell him that Gale was a better person, that Gale understood her better because they looked alike. That Gale was Mr. Perfect who could do no harm.

Anything Peeta thought to argue would be turned down in a heartbeat.

He hated his sister for putting him through all this.

Sometimes he wondered what life would have been like if Mama had taken Katniss with her to the Seam, but the thought of not having his little sister by him at all broke his heart even more and he would go to sleep with tears in his eyes, feeling guilty for even thinking such things.

It was the night before the Reaping, and feeling guilty for thinking of Mama taking Katniss out of his life so he wouldn't have to feel this pain once more, Peeta tried to go to sleep. He tried not to think of how his name was now in the bowl three times, or that this was Katniss' first Reaping. In the past she would always cuddle and tell him her plans if he was ever Reaped, taking him to safety. She would kiss his nose and tell him Papa had saved a piece of yummy dessert for afterwards, and it would comfort him.

He missed that comfort.

He missed holding her at night.

He missed her.

Stupid Gale Hawthorne.

A soft knock was heard on his door, and Peeta jumped up in shock.

"Peeta?" Katniss' voice cracked, tears choking her. "Peeta, can I come in?" With no response she opened the door. "I'm scared."

Even though he was still mad at her, he didn't want her to be upset. He was still her big brother, after all, and even though she was a thorn in his side right now, she needed him. Lifting up a bit of his covers, he patted for her to join him. Bare feet smacking his wooden floor, she scampered over to his bed, climbed in, and clung to him. It all felt so natural. So right. It was if Gale Hawthorne didn't exist, and that these past two months of fighting had never happened. None of their silly arguments mattered now because they were safe in each other's arms, and that's what mattered.
"Shh," Peeta soothed, rubbing circles into her back to calm her down. "You're name's only in there once, Katniss. You have nothing to worry about."

"Josie Rander was only twelve when she got picked last year," his sister sobbed, shaking in his arms. "She only had one name in."

Trying to make light of the situation, Peeta joked, "Well Josie Rander didn't have a hiding plan like someone I know."

"Can you just hold me?"

"Of course." And he did.
"I want you to know that no matter what, you are mine and I am yours," she whispered. "A bit possessive, are we?" They swore to never abandon the other, a promise that grows challenging through the years of hunger, jealousy, and games. AU Katniss/Peeta

Chapter Notes

Friendly reminder about what I have said about Katniss and Peeta's relationship: the two are oblivious to how different their relationship is compared to other sibling relationships. With that said, please have an open mind about the first section of this chapter. It's the reason I'm going to be hiding under my bed.

Disclaimer: I don't own anything

"For the two of us, home isn't a place. It is a person. And we are finally home."

- Stephanie Perkins, Anna and the French Kiss

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She had never kissed a boy on the lips before. All the other girls at school would talk about how their first kiss had gone, but whenever she was brought into the discussion, Katniss would blush and confess she had never kissed a boy before. They thought that was silly, and it made her mad because they saw never being kissed before as childish and she wasn't.

She wanted to tell her laments to Peeta, but Peeta was a boy and this was different. She even blushed at the thought of her brother kissing girls at the slag heap. No, Peeta shouldn't be the person Katniss goes to about this problem, but who else did she have? Katniss thought about possibly going to Gale for advice on this matter, but he didn't like her that way and what if that made hunting awkward between them? She couldn't risk it. So Peeta it was. She could chance feeling uncomfortable with him because he was her brother and he was supposed to help her in anything. He had given his permission a long time ago.

So when Peeta asked if she wanted to go to their Meadow for some alone time, Katniss agreed and was determined to ask her brother if he had ever kissed a girl before. Maybe he was as inexperienced as she was, but she doubted it because all the girls loved Peeta. They walked hand in hand to their hideaway, him making small talk about how pretty she looked today and her rolling her eyes because he was being ridiculous, and when they got to their spot behind the tall grass and near the trees, she tackled him to the ground because that was her favorite thing to do when they were alone. They laughed, both breathless from their little wrestling match, and he leaned his forehead down on hers, their noses touching.

"You're getting a lot stronger," he commented. She wiggled underneath him in hopes of breaking
free, but Peeta would have none of that. "Not strong enough to beat me, though."

She stuck out her tongue at him and he smiled. "Peeta," she asked, looking at his lips now. Katniss wondered if a girl had ever touched those lips, and before she knew it, Katniss vowed to hate any girl who touched her brother's lips. "Have you ever kissed someone before?"

He sat up, freeing her from his weight, and gave her an odd look. "What?"

"Have you ever kissed someone before?" she asked again, sitting up and picking at the grass. "You know, on the lips?"

"Of course I have." She didn't like his answer and refused to look up at him. "Katniss?"

She didn't want to tell him how no one had ever bothered to kiss her, and she definitely didn't want to tell him how annoyed she was that Peeta had kissed anyone in the first place.

"Who?"

He crawled over to her and lifted her face to his. "Why do you care?" He was smiling, probably thinking this was all cute and funny, but it wasn't.

"Who did you kiss, Peeta?"

Sighing, Peeta rolled on to his back and looked up at the cloudless sky. "Hana Kip."

Katniss knew who that was. She even remembered playing with her as a little girl. She hated Hana Kip. "How old were you?"

"Mm, I think I had just turned twelve." He took her hand in his and played with her fingers, still not looking up at her. "It was at Richard Bentlee's house, you remember him, right?" She nodded. Richard used to tease her because she had scrawny legs.

"He called me Mellarluck-cluck because my legs look like chicken legs."

"Your legs look beautiful," Peeta frowned, noticing her tucking her legs underneath her, embarrassed. "Richard's an idiot." That made her smile.

"What was Hana doing at Richard's?"

"I don't remember," he confessed, "but we kissed and that was that. My first kiss."

"Your first kiss of many, I'm assuming." He laughed again at the resentment in her voice.

"Are you jealous?"

She stuck her nose up, not liking the way he was teasing her. "I've never been kissed, and I'm going on fourteen! No boy likes me."

"I like you."

"Yes," Katniss laughed, rolling her eyes, "but you're my brother. You've always liked me." Peeta sat up and moved so that he was now facing his sister.

"Do you want to be kissed?" Her face flushed and she told him she would be terrible at it. "Everyone's terrible at kissing," he laughed, easing her embarrassment.
"I'm sure you're not," Katniss muttered under her breath, not taking the chance of looking into his crystal blue eyes. "I'm sure every girl thought your kisses were perfect."

He kisses her by surprise, pressing his lips onto hers before she could say another word. "You're a really good kisser," Peeta smiled, breaking the spell she was under. Katniss blinked and her lips tingled. She wanted another one.

"It's just because I'm used to you." She shoved him away from her, and when he wasn't looking, she touched her lips and smiled.

"Did you like your first kiss?"

Katniss nodded. "I wish I was as good as you, though."

"You'll get better. Everyone does, and lucky for you, you're already amazing at it." His tone was honest with a hint of humor, and he told her he wanted to play a dancing game.

"I hate dancing," Katniss whined, refusing to move. "I'm no good at it, and you know it. Your feet especially."

Peeta laughed and gave her fist a little kiss. "Dancing is like kissing, sis. You have to practice at it until you're a master like me." He was being cocky now, and she had to bite the inside of her cheek not to smile.

Getting up, Peeta motioned for her to follow him. Katniss reluctantly got up with a sigh of regret because the look on his face made her feel guilty for denying him this one thing. He started to dance with her to no music, and she felt silly doing this. Peeta didn't care, and he continued to dance this way and that around their Meadow, ignoring her lack of gracefulness, and finally dipped her after many spins around the Meadow.

The dip knocked the breath out of her in surprise and she looked up at her brother, his eyes dancing with joy as they looked down upon her. He started to lean closer, and butterflies flew about her stomach because she wanted those lips on hers. Peeta's mouth tasted like sour bread and apples, and she giggled when they both collapsed onto the ground, continuing their kiss. She wasn't sure what to do, but that was okay. Her brother did. When they broke free for air, Katniss laughed and asked what was that for.

"I'm giving you kissing lessons," he proclaimed. He traced her plump lips and leaned down for another peck. "Is that okay with you?" he breathed onto her face. She nodded breathlessly and let him kiss her again. His lips were so soft and nice. She could spend hours kissing them.

And she did.

They didn't know how long they were out there, but it had started growing dark out and he joked how he was getting cold without his shirt on.

"I'm not finished learning!" she protested, refusing to get off him. His chest was filled with dark spots from where her lips had been, and Katniss was happy to say those were from her. Peeta had even told her he had never let a girl take off his shirt and do this before, and that made her feel special.

They were both losing firsts today.

Peeta scooted up, causing her to fall into his lap, and he gave her another kiss, this time slipping his tongue into her mouth. It was all so exciting to Katniss because Peeta was an amazing teacher, and he didn't make fun of her when she did something stupid like bite his tongue too hard or get his head
stuck when taking his shirt off. He was understanding because he was Peeta.

"I love you," he breathed, running his kisses down her neck. She hummed quietly in content, enjoying the feel of his mouth on her neck, telling him she knows. She loves him, too, but her mouth is too busy kissing him to tell him.

It was dark to the point that their father might start to worry as he traced her plump, chapped lips, smiling because Katniss looked more beautiful than ever before.

"Now you can tell those stupid girls you've been kissed, and by the master at that!" They laughed and she pushed him away, sitting up and started to look for her now missing shirt.

"I don't think I'm going to tell them," she confessed when he found her shirt thrown in the bushes. Peeta frowned and asked her wasn't that the reason for his lessons?

"It was," she nodded, "but I think I'm one of those girls who kisses and doesn't tell." He smiled and gave her a peck on the cheek before hoisting her up for a piggyback ride back home.

They enjoyed having their little secrets against the world. It made them feel powerful.

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She didn't know how to act when her mother came into the bakery one fall afternoon. Katniss didn't know whether to hug the woman she barely knew, or to throw her out for the hurt this woman had done to her family. She remained behind the counter.

"Can I help you?" Katniss asked, a bit of edge to her voice.

Peeta's blue eyes gazed back at her, causing a feeling of unsettlement deep within her stomach. "Oh, no. Thank you, though," her mother spoke, eyes casting down to the display case again. Did she not recognize her own daughter?

Cary Mellark left without purchasing anything and Katniss decided it was time to close shop early. She needed to find Peeta and talk this over with him because he always knew what to do. Always.

Peeta was coming back from making his last delivery before running into his sister. "Aren't you supposed to be working until closing?"

She smiled and laced her fingers through his empty ones and started to lead him to their hideout in the Meadow. "I closed early. So technically I worked until closing." She led him there in silence, going past the many houses that made up the merchant town before coming to the border of where the Seam began.

"Is something the matter?" he asked once she had climbed into his lap behind the tall grass. Something was off with how she was acting, and he worried.

Peeta always worried about her.

Katniss wrapped his arms around her and closed her eyes, enjoying the feeling of safety she always connected to Peeta. "Mmm," she mused, not sure whether or not to tell him. It wasn't life changing that their mother was in the bakery today, but Katniss needed his help to sort out her own feelings. "Mama was at the bakery today."

"What?"
Tracing his burn scars, Katniss told him the brief encounter she had with their mother that day. "It was so bizarre," she confessed at last. "It was like she didn't even recognize me."

"We were little when she left," he said, taking her hair out of the bun she kept it in to work. "You were barely three."

"Yeah, and now I'm fourteen, but that doesn't mean anything. She worked in that bakery. It's still the same. Papa hasn't changed a thing in it since she left." They both don't bother to mention how their father is still in love with their mother after all these years. "Any sane person would have put two and two together."

Peeta knew she would never admit it, but he knew his sister felt partially responsible for the separation of their parents and their mother's abandonment.

"Did you know she lost that man in the mining accident a few years back?" Katniss didn't say a thing, only tracing his scars with her fingers. "A lot of people said she completely lost it, and her little girl got taken to the Community Home."

"Mama had another daughter?" Katniss wondered aloud. "With that coal miner?" He nodded and kissed the crown of her head. "It serves her right," she decided. "You don't just abandon your children for a silly man."

"She was in love," he whispered into her hair. "Love makes you do silly things."

"And that's why I'm never going to fall in love."

He pretended to be insulted. "Do you not love me, Katniss Mellark? Have I not won your heart over yet?" Peeta started to tickle her, making her crawl out of his grasp and try to escape before he caught her again. Rolling her under him and pinning her to the ground, Peeta gave her a peck on the lips. "Don't you love me?"

"Of course I do," she breathed.

"Would you do anything for me?" He was curious now.

"Yes, yes I would."

"Then how is that different from how our mother loved that coal miner?"

Pursing her lips in thought, Katniss thought about this before smiling. "We're never going to have children, or get married. So our love is safer, it's better," she decided.

"What if I die?" he asked solemnly, ruining the light mood they had just established. "What if I get Reaped, or sick?"

Katniss kicked him off her and got up. "Don't you ever say something so stupid again!" She never liked when Peeta talked this way. To her, he was going to be by her side forever because he was Peeta and that's what he did.

"People die, Katniss."

"I forbid you from dying."

A small smile crept onto his face. "Are you the Grim Reaper now?"

"No," she laughed, climbing on him and pushing him to the ground. "That's Effie Trinket."
"Her terrible wigs are rather frightening." They laughed, and she held him under her for the longest time, listening to the soft thud thud of his heart beats.

"Promise you won't ever leave me, Peeta." Her voice was barely a whisper now as they watched the sun set over the trees. "Promise that we'll always be a team. No matter what happens."

"I promise," he whispered.

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"You need to behave tonight," Bara told his daughter. "Peeta is very excited about this girl."

"Yeah yeah yeah," Katniss muttered under her breath while setting the kitchen table. She was tired of her father lecturing her on how to behave around Peeta's new girlfriend, but most of all she was tired of him talking about his new girlfriend.

What was so damn special about Junni Leffer anyway? According to Peeta: everything.

"Juni is such a great poet," he would gush at dinner; "Juni is so funny!"; "You'll never believe what Junni told me today!"; "Juni is so smart."; "You'll never believe how artistic Junni is. Dad, she should join us at the bakery. You know, to help with the cakes and cookies."; "Juni is just perfect!"

Juni Juni Juni.

Katniss was sick of the stupid girl, and she was sick of her brother idolizing her. Junni didn't seem all that great, and she certainly didn't seem as talented as Peeta boasted she was. Her treats probably tasted like dirt and her poems Peeta would read were all sappy and lame.

There was nothing to like about her, Katniss decided.

"You'll love Junni," Peeta had whispered last night in her ear when they were trying to go to sleep, and she bit her tongue because he wouldn't like what she would have to say and would accuse her of being petty.

Maybe she was, but Peeta was hers. There was no sharing in this equation.

They heard the front door open to their small home and Bara motioned for her to follow him into the living room. Katniss hoped Peeta would notice she was wearing the pretty blue dress he loved her in so much.

He didn't.

All of her brother's attention was on Junni, and soon both her brother and father were under this girl's spell. She didn't get it.

Juni was a pretty blonde Merchant who laughed at practically everything they said, charming the pants off her brother and father, but to Katniss, she was dull and seemed fake. No human being laughed that much. It was unnatural to laugh and smile so much.

"It's nice to finally be introduced to the famous Katniss Mellark," Junni smiled, shaking Katniss' hand. "Peeta's told me so much about you."

Her hand was soft, worthless to actual labor. "Really?" Katniss forced out, her smile tight. "He's barely mentioned you, Janni."

"It's Junni," Junni reminds her sweetly. Even her voice was annoying.
"Right."

When Bara told them all to sit down, Katniss immediately took her rightful spot next to Peeta and linked her arm through his. She smiled kindly at Junni and suggested the seat on the opposite end of the small room.

"Well, okay..." Their guest started to walk over the seat when Bara pulled Katniss up and told Junni to sit next to Peeta.

"Katniss, why don't you go get us all some drinks? Hm?"

Her father pushed her into the kitchen and told her to behave herself. Ugh. Stupid Junni and her pretty smile.

Dinner went fine, but that was mainly because Katniss held her tongue during the whole thing, refusing to look at her stupid brother and his girlfriend sitting across from her, giving each other stupid pecks on the lips and holding hands. They were eating for god's sake, she thought as she speared her broccoli with vengeance.

Junni loved to talk, and practically ran the entire dinner table's conversation. When the table was all cleared and Peeta was walking Junni home, Katniss decided she had held her tongue long enough.

"I hate her." Bara smiled at the soapy liquid in the sink and continued washing the dishes. "She's not right for him," she continued, drying and putting away the dishes. "All she talked about was pointless stuff like...flowers. Who cares about flowers?"

"Katniss," her father smirked, "let it be. Junni is a nice girl and she makes your brother happy."

She snorted. "I give it another week." He handed her another plate.

"I don't know. She seems like someone who's going to be an important part of your brother's life."

That's what she feared. Peeta was only seventeen, and surely he would have told her if he ever planned on marrying any time soon, right?

Later that night when they were cuddled up under her covers, she couldn't resist asking. "Peeta..." Spit it out, she told herself. "Peeta, do you ever want to get married one day?" She squeezed her eyes shut, afraid to see what his eyes revealed. His eyes always told her everything she needed to know.

He twirled a piece of her hair between his fingers and chuckled, "I didn't know you were the marrying type." Katniss slapped his chest lightly. "I don't know. I really like Junni-"

"I know," she muttered darkly, pulling the covers closer to her chin. He laughed again.

"I really like Junni, but she'd never be enough." This made his sister smile a bit. "Though, it is hilarious watching you be jealous."

"I wasn't jealous!" He told her to quiet down or else they were going to wake their father. "I wasn't jealous," she told him again in a harsh whisper. "I was looking out for you because someone has to."

"You just can't stand the fact that you weren't the center of my attention tonight."

Katniss couldn't deny it. "You can't stand it when I bring Gale home, or talk about him a lot, either."

"We're both attention seekers," he laughed, kissing her head. "But just know I'm never going to leave you. I'm never going to leave you like Mama left us, okay? We're sticking together, through
thick and thin, I promise."

"Whatever happened to that little girl?" she asked, remembering him telling her about their little unknown sister ages ago.

"She probably died of starvation, Katniss." He started to doze off and held her tightly in his arms. "I remember seeing her around school, but now I don't," he yawned. "So many die of starvation. You know that."

Katniss couldn't help but mourn the little sister she never knew. What if Mama had brought her with her to the Seam? Would she be in the Community Home starving, too? She turned her head in to smell Peeta's smell of soap and flour, clearing her head of terrible thoughts.

"I know," she whispered at last.

They were hunting when Gale had the courage to finally ask her about Peeta.

"What about him?" Katniss asked, eating another berry. It was a beautiful day out, and she had managed to convince Peeta to take her morning shift for her in order to go hunting with Gale. So far they had only caught two rabbits, but the morning was young and she had found a yummy berry bush to munch from while they rested in the warm sun.

He didn't know how to phrase this without upsetting her. So he just went for it: "Are you and him a thing?"

She choked on a berry. "What? No! No!" Did he take in too much coal dust? "What kind of question is that, anyway?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "People talk, I guess."

Katniss scowled, well aware of how the citizens of District 12 loved their daily gossip. "What have people been saying?"

"That you two fuck in the Meadow." People had seen them going to the Meadow?

"People are idiots. You know that." She took another berry from her pile, popped it in her mouth, thinking the conversation was over. Conversing had never been her strong point, and the only person who could ever get her to talk was Peeta, but that was because he knew when something was off.

Gale was different. Gale liked quiet, that's why they were such good friends, but he was being awfully chatty today.

"But you two are close," Gale persisted, looking down at his game bag. "Lot closer than most siblings I know."

"We've always been close." And it was true. Katniss could only think of one time in her life when they weren't close, but that was only for a little while. "He's my brother, Gale. It's not like we're sneaking off to the slag heap after school." It was meant as a joke, but her friend seemed to think differently.

"Have you ever been to the slag heap?"

"What is this, twenty questions today? Eat your berries," she snapped in annoyance, throwing a few
berries his way. He laughed and dropped one in his mouth.

"You didn't answer my question, Mellarkable."

She hated that nickname and he knew it. "Stop calling me that. I hated that silly nickname when I was little and I hate it now."

He accused her of avoiding the question, and truth be told she was. Sexual activities wasn't something Katniss easily opened up about, and it felt weird talking about this with Gale of all people. "No, okay? I'm a sweet little angel that is too pure to even touch the slag heap." She laughed, "I'd go up in flames if I ever went there. Right on the spot. Katniss: The Girl on Fire!" Her laughter turned into muffled snorts as she tried to cover up the sound, a bit mortified at doing this in front of Gale.

"Has Peeta?"

"What's your obsession with my brother today?" Smiling, she lied down in the grass and teased, "I don't think you're much his type. He likes the pretty blonde girls like Madge Undersee or Junni Leffer. You could wear a wig like Effie Trinket, though. Maybe even slap on that silly Capital accent for the berry on top?" He threw his coat which he had taken off due to the heat at her and gave her a questionable finger gesture.

"I was just curious," he muttered, looking down at his shoes.

The woods sang its song while they finished off their bag full of berries and talked about the upcoming Reaping.

"It's almost Peeta's last year, and I'm so relieved about that," she confessed, wiping her berry juiced stained face on her arm. He nodded and picked up a dandelion, giving it to her. Katniss smiled and put it behind her ear. She didn't like to admit it, but whenever Gale would do something nice for her, something small and sweet like this, she would get a fluttering sensation in her stomach like she had eaten a hundred butterflies.

"Aren't you nervous?"

"Gale, that's such a stupid question. Everyone's nervous on Reaping."

He looked troubled, like he wanted to say something, and it frustrated her how she couldn't read him as well as she could her brother. What was he thinking about?

"Do you ever think," He paused, not sure how to phrase his thoughts. "Do you ever think of running away from here?"

"You mean take off into the woods?" She looked out into the opening with him and sadly smiled. "Every day."

"Why don't we? Why don't we just leave?"

Leave? Forever? "Wait, right now? Gale, we'd get caught."

"Not if we run fast enough," he tried to joke, but his voice was too serious to be taken lightly.

Katniss didn't find his attempt funny. What Gale was asking was a lot. It was one thing to think about, but a whole other thing to actually do it. And what about her father? Her heart started to beat faster. What about Peeta?
"Peeta isn't a very fast runner," Katniss pointed out, "and he would have to come with us because he needs me." The thought of her brother in the woods was ludicrous because he was never fascinated with nature as she was, he only put up with it because of her, and how would he be happy without making bread or drawing pretty pictures that stole her breath away? No, the woods and Peeta did not sit well in her head together.

Katniss wasn't sure, but she thought she heard him mutter "I forgot how attached you two are." She wasn't sure, though. It could have been the noises in the forest getting to her.

They resumed hunting without another mention of the Reaping or running away.
A Reaping

Chapter Summary

"I want you to know that no matter what, you are mine and I am yours," she whispered. "A bit possessive, are we?" They swore to never abandon the other, a promise that grows challenging through the years of hunger, jealousy, and games. AU Katniss/Peeta

Chapter Notes

I want to start by saying thank you so much for all the positive feedback I have gotten on this story. Every review I got for the last chapter made me want to cry with how supportive you all have been with this story. It's wonderful to know there're readers out there for a story like this.

I'm rather excited for these upcoming chapters, so I hope you enjoy!

"In increments both measurable and not, our childhood is stolen from us- not always in one momentous event but often in a series of small robberies, which add up to the same loss."- John Irving, Until I Find You

The damn button wouldn't button.

Try as he might, Peeta couldn't get the last button of his shirt to close, his fingers were shaking so much from nerves for today's Reaping. Getting frustrated, he started to pull at his father's old button-up white shirt. It was mandatory to look nice for the ceremony, the celebration of yet another terrible Hunger Games, and he looked anything but. His blond hair was disheveled from the previous night, still not combed, his normally pale skin was a sickly pasty white today with a sheen of sweat darting around his hairline, and his eyes were bloodshot red from lack of sleep. He looked like a mess.

"Come on," he muttered darkly, urging the too big button through the tiny hole. This shirt had seen many Reapings, he was sure. His hands continued to shake, and Peeta sighed in resignation. If he couldn't button up a damn shirt, what was he going to do with his life? What if he got Reaped today? Who would trust a weapon in his hands?

He gave up on the shirt and pulled his comb from his dresser through his hair. At least his long, curly blond locks would look presentable today. "You're fine," Peeta told his reflection, trying to gain some confidence he never managed to have on Reaping. Even his reflection didn't appear confident, despite his fake tone of bravery. His hair fell back into his face and he blew it back up, hoping he wouldn't have to grease it back. A haircut was much needed, but that would have to wait until after the Reaping rush the bakery was sure to have after today.

"There are so many boys in that bowl, Peeta. So many who probably have their names in there a lot more than you," Peeta continued to tell himself, averting his own reflection to believe the lie better,
but it wasn't a lie. It was true. The one advantage of living in town and working in a bakery was there was less of a need to take out tesserae. And even though Peeta did have to take out six tesserae for the past two years to help his family, the twelve slips of paper in the bowl with his name on it was next to nothing compared to some of the Seam children.

"The odds are ever in your favor." He tried pursing his lips like Effie Trinket did whenever she said this in her silly Capital accent. "Hello, Peeta Mellark," he impersonated in a high pitched Effie Trinket voice. Taking his comb, he puffed it forward so it had more volume to the front, trying to replicate the escort's infamous wigs. "It's so nice to meet you. I'm here to tell you your name and your sister's name have been taken out of the bowls for good!" His high pitch laughter startled him. "No more Reaping! Yaaaaay!"

"What are you doing?" a voice from behind asked.

He dropped his comb in surprise, startled by his sister's silent entrance. A teasing smile graced her features, with a look saying I'm-going-to-use-this-as-blackmail-later-on plastered all over her face.

"N-nothing," he stuttered, picking up the comb like nothing had happened.

"Were you talking to yourself?" she asked, amused by his embarrassment. "As Effie Trinket?" He didn't know why she always teased him about talking to himself to pump him up for a challenge. It was perfectly normal. "You were!" she laughed, clapping her hands in delight.

"I need to pump myself up," he muttered, mortified at being caught acting like the Capital ditz. "I'm nervous and thought it'd be entertaining to at least pretend our names weren't in the Reaping bowl."

Her smile dimmed to a sad, understanding smile before wrapping her arms around his waist for a hug.

"We're going to be fine," she whispered into his chest, pulling him closer to her. He wrapped his arms around her, breathing in her freshly scrubbed hair, as he tried to remember that they both would be fine. Her name was only in there four times and his only twelve. The odds were in both Mellarks' favor.

"I'm still nervous."

"Don't be," she murmured, still clutching on to him. "We'll get through this year like we have in the past. Safe and together."

He nodded, knowing there was nothing else to do except hope his sister was right. She broke the embrace and slyly smiled.

"Can you finish zippering me up?" When had he ever turned down a request by his sister?

"You look beautiful today," Peeta murmured, zippering the green dress up. "Very earthy."

"Do you like it?" She smiled in the mirror, looking at their reflection and laughing at his teased locks.

"Mmhm." He put his hands on her hips and rested his head on her shoulder. "I love you, Nissy."

Katniss patted his face affectionately. "None of that sap. You're always like this on Reaping, and it's always the same." She turned around and started to straighten his shirt. "After we're saved for another year, we'll both come home and eat that slice of berry pie Papa's been saving for us. That's how this day will go, Peeta. Trust me." He was thankful for her certainty. She always seemed to be so certain on this day, every time except for her first Reaping. That was the only time he had seen his
sister cry about the cruelty of the Capital.

"I know, but I still mean it when I say I love you."

"I love you, too," she blushed, straightening his collar. "But we'll get through this, okay?"

"Okay," he said, kissing her fingers before they left his collar. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze and kiss in return, telling him he'd better fix his hair before excusing herself to finish getting ready.

~*~*~*~

The Reaping was always hot and humid in District 12. There was never a time any citizen could remember it being a beautiful day to reap two unfortunate children to their deaths, and maybe it was better that way for it would be too cruel to have the weather be wonderful on such a dreaded day.

Katniss and Peeta walked hand in hand to the check in table, commenting on small things to preoccupy their anxious minds such as how no matter how much they clean the Justice Hall, coal dust would always be there, or wondering how silly Effie Trinket must look this year for she had green tinted skin last year and they had laughed at how sickly she had appeared during the whole thing.

"It should be that way," Katniss had said, all joking matter gone. "It's sickening what they do, watching children kill each other for sport." Peeta had just nodded in agreement over her statement and pulled her in for another kiss before she could say anymore, because they were being bad and had stolen liquor from Bara's liquor cabinet to drink in their Meadow together.

They had to separate into their designated areas after checking in, and now Katniss felt like a little five year old again, wanting to cry because her brother had to leave her. She bit her lip, refusing to let anyone see her cry, and walked over to where the other fifteen year olds stood.

The ceremony started as it always did with the mayor giving the Treaty of Treason reading, a reminder on how weak they all were, how much they owed their country's survival toward the powerful Capital, and then it was time for their District escort, Effie Trinket, to come up and pick the next two deaths of District 12.

"Welcome, welcome," Effie chirped, fixing her bright neon orange wig. "Happy Hunger Games, and may the odds be ever in your favor!" Every year Effie would wait for applause and every year the only response she received was from the wind. No one cared to pretend on this day. What was the point?

Katniss searched the boys' side for her brother. Was Peeta looking for her as well? She spotted Gale a few rows back from Peeta and he mouthed "Good luck" to her. Her smile didn't reach her eyes as she wished him the same, and for a brief second, Katniss wondered how many times Gale's name was in the Reaping bowl. Surely she should be more worried about her best friend's likelihood of being chosen over her brother's. Peeta only had his name in the bowl twelve times. His odds were better than Gale's.

"The time has come to select one courageous man and woman for the honor of representing District 12 for the Seventy-Second Annual Hunger Games!" the Capitalist persisted brightly, hoping her energy would spark something in the Coal District. A few coughs were heard throughout the crowd, and Katniss urged Effie to just pick the tributes' names. She was tired of feeling nauseous.

"Well," Effie sniffed, never pleased with how uncivilized District 12 was, "as usual; ladies first!" She shuffled over in her neon orange stilettos to where all the slips for the eligible women waited and
pulled out a slip. Katniss kept the mantra of Please not me. Please not me. Please not me going in her head until Effie Trinket called out, "Junni Leffer!"

A sigh of relief came out. It wasn't her. She was safe for one more year. Then it hit her that Junni was Peeta's girlfriend, or friend. Katniss wasn't sure what the girl was now since he hadn't brought her up in weeks. She watched as Junni took the stage, shaking like scared prey, and Katniss now felt terrible for every bad thing she had ever thought or said about Junni. It wasn't her fault she got involved with the Mellark siblings. It just happened, and now she was going to die.

A sick part of Katniss was glad it was Junni instead of her, though.

"And now, for the boys!" Effie traipsed over to the next bowl, pulled out the slip, and called out, "Peeta Mellark!"

~*~*~*~

It was as though time had stopped.

Peeta looked around in disbelief. Clearly there had to be two Peeta Mellarks in District 12. It couldn't be him. No. This was a nightmare and he was going to wake up in Katniss' bed, paralyzed to death but still safe. This was all a dream. He squeezed his eyes closed until he saw bright lights flashing and Effie Trinket repeated his name. This was real.

His name had been called.

He was a tribute to the games.

He was going to die.

A terrible and painful death on television.

He was going to die.

Trying to muster up the strength to move, Peeta sucked in as much air as his lungs allowed and slowly made his way through the crowd. This couldn't be happening, he thought in disbelief. He had one more year left of the Reaping and then he was done! That's how it was supposed to be. He only had twelve slips in that bowl. How did this happen? Why did he have to be the one who died?

So much for that piece of pie Katniss and him were going to finish, he thought bitterly, finally finding strength to move his legs.

His heart squeezed at the thought of his little sister and he straightened his shoulders, knowing all eyes were on him.

Boys moved out of his way as though if touched they would magically become the tribute instead, and Peeta wished it worked that way. It should have been one of them, he thought cruelly. They probably had more slips in than him. His name shouldn't have been chosen.

He was now in the clearing, making his way toward the stage when he heard a strangled "Peeta!" out in the audience. Turning around he saw his little sister pushing her way through the crowd of girls, crying out "Peeta!"

"Go to Dad, Nissy!" he shouted, hoping his voice didn't crack. "Go on!"

"No!" she cried, starting to head his way before two Peacekeepers took hold of her arms and Katniss
started to kick frantically. "You can't go! You promised!" Each scream felt like a punch to the gut. All those promises on always being there for her gone, had to be forgotten. All those nights huddled under the covers confessing each other's secrets, gone. Their deepest fear was becoming a reality, and his heart beat faster at the thought of him being dead and Katniss being alone. He wanted to tell her how sorry he was, but his voice wouldn't work. He was grateful when he saw Gale come out of the crowd and hoisted her thrashing body on his shoulder, motioning for Peeta to go forward.

"I've got her!" Gale shouted, motioning again for him to continue on stage.

And he did, only focusing on the stairs ahead of him and ignoring the screams from behind.

Effie Trinket smiled, ushering him onto the stage, and before he could stop himself, he looked over at the girl he had mused over marrying one day. Junni was crying, snot dripping out of her nose, eyes bloodshot red and teary, but he understood.

They were going to die. They would never get to see their homes again, their friends, their families. He looked around his District, this sad and filthy place he called home, and tried to ingrain it into his memory. Neither he nor Junni were ready to face the dreaded games and he had to bite the inside of his cheeks to urge himself not to cry. His body shook as it fought the urge, but a few tears cracked through his restraints when Effie Trinket put her hands on both their shoulders, bringing them closer together, and motioned for them to shake hands.

Her hand was slimy, coated with sweat, and Peeta wanted to pull her closer to him, to tell her everything was going to be alright, but Junni was now a potential threat to him now. He'd seen it before, the weak tributes outsmarting the strongest until they returned as Victors, and though he had doubt for his own return, Junni was now a potential threat. He'd seen it before and he refused to take that chance.

Hopefully someone else will kill them, Peeta hoped. He didn't want to imagine the thought of Junni being the one to kill him, or him killing her. It was too much to bear, they had too much of a history, but things were the way they were.

"I'm sorry," he mouthed, hoping that at least would calm her down.

She shakily nodded, trying to compose herself, and shook his hand, knowing neither would have wanted to end things this way.

Effie cooed at them both, commenting how lovely it was to have two pretty blondes as this year's tributes and announced, "Ladies and gentlemen," a big smile plastered on her face, "our tributes for the Seventy-Second Annual Hunger Games: Junni Leffer and Peeta Mellark!
"I want you to know that no matter what, you are mine and I am yours," she whispered. "A bit possessive, are we?" They swore to never abandon the other, a promise that grows challenging through the years of hunger, jealousy, and games. AU Katniss/Peeta

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"As soon as men decide that all means are permitted to fight an evil, then their good becomes indistinguishable from the evil that they set out to destroy."

- Christopher Dawson

Ten minutes was all Peeta Mellark was allowed with each visitor. Ten minutes to say goodbye to everyone he loved. Ten minutes to leave his life behind him. Ten minutes to confess anything he felt the need to confess.

Katniss was the first to enter the room the Peacekeepers had placed him in, shaking, trying so hard not to cry. She clung to him as though her life depended on it, and all Peeta could do was apologize for how things had turned out.

"You can't go," Katniss whispered, his shirt now wet with tears. She must have started to cry. "I need you."

"I need you, too," he whispered remorsefully. Peeta tried to calm her down, rub her back like he always did, but it only caused her shoulders to shake as more tears came.

Katniss wiped her tear stained face, still clinging at his waist with her right hand. Her face was blotchy now from rubbing it into his shirt, and her eyes as red as Junni's had been when they were on stage for the world to see. He wonders how she's doing, how she's holding up in her room across the hall. Is part of her breaking, too?

It doesn't matter, though.

Soon they will be dead.

Soon they will be forgotten, like all the other tributes before them.

He clings to his sister tighter, afraid of letting her go, not wanting to let her got. Afraid of forgetting.

"What about our plan?" she reminded him, her voice strained with emotions. Peeta pulled back a strand of hair that had fallen out of place from her braid, remembering their childhood plans to run. It all seemed so far away now, so long ago. "You and me," she said. "We'd hide in the woods and never return!"

"Think we could make it out the window?" It's hard to keep his tone light, joking, but he succeeds in making her crack a smile.
"Only if you aren't afraid of jumping from the third story," she laughed. It's a small, humorless laugh, but a laugh nonetheless. Her expression grew serious, somber, as she caressed his cheek, her eyes focusing on all the small details of his face. "You have to win, Peeta," his sister whispered at last, so matter-of-factly.

The suggestion is laughable at best. Win? Him? He couldn't survive an hour in that arena let alone win the thing. He wanted to argue with her, ask if she was joking, but the determination in her slate gray eyes tells him that she is one hundred percent serious on him winning the games. "You know I"

"You have to win, Peeta," Katniss stated, pressing her index finger to his lips. "I need you to win."

It wasn't fair for her to ask this of him. No one has ever made it past day one from their District, not since Haymitch Abernathy's win almost twenty-five years ago. It didn't matter if he promised her or not. They both knew it would never be fulfilled.

The words that have been stuck in his throat start to pour out in a rush. This was his last moment with her, his last moment to tell her everything he needed her to know. The clock was ticking.

"Katniss," he said in a rush, "remember that no matter what anyone says, you're strong and beautiful, okay? Strongest person I know." She shook her head, starting to cry again. "Listen, please," he begged. "Help Dad out. You know he loves you so much. Take care of each other."

"Peeta..."

"And you can always talk to me, in that picture I drew, remember?" She nodded, remembering. "And just remember that you're the most important person in my life." Running his hand over her tearstained cheek, he ruefully smiled. "I love you, Nissy. So much, and " She placed her hand over his mouth again, stopping him.

"Stop talking this way." Her voice carried more strength in it than she appeared to have, and why should he be so surprised? Katniss had always been the strong one out of the two. She refused to see him give up like this. "You will come back," she stressed, straightening the crease in his shirt. If it were on anything but his life Peeta would have found it funny how their roles had reversed. Normally he was the optimist. "You'll come back to me because I demand it. You've never broken a promise to me, Peeta Mellark, and I don't expect you to start now." She gave him a soft kiss on the lips to remind him that he was hers.

"But"

Katniss covered his mouth with her hand once more, now annoyed he wasn't listening to her. "You're mine, Peeta. Not the Capital's." And he can't argue with that. There's not a moment in her life where he didn't belong to her. Peeta can't even remember how it feels to not have her in his life, can't remember those days before she was born. All his memories are with her.

Who was going to comfort her at night, hold her after nightmares?

He may not remember a time without her, but Katniss has never known any different.

"Mine," Katniss stressed when she noticed his demeanor start to sadden again. Her hand is calloused from the years of hunting and he gave it small pecks, causing her to give him the gentle smile she reserved only for him and dropped her hand, having it graze his fingers.

"You always were the possessive type, sis." Peeta gives her a fierce hug again, not really knowing what else to say that would make this any better, and she whispers how he is hers over and over
again. Hers. Not the Capital's. He had to remember that. Nothing can change that.

She gently pushed him away after a few moments and clasped her left hand over her right. "I want to give this to you," Katniss whispered at last, pulling off their mother's blue beaded bracelet she wore every year on Reaping for luck, and let it dangle from her fingers in front of them. "I want you to take this. For luck. I'll keep you alive in the arena."

Peeta was at a loss for words.

"Take it," she insisted.

No, he can't. He can't take it from her, one of her most valued possessions. "Nissy..." He can't. "That's Mama's."

"No," she corrected, putting it in his hands and closing his fist around it. "It's mine. It's been mine for years and I want you to take it."

The beads are warm in his hands, smooth like he'd remembered when he had given the bracelet to her all those years ago. Peeta was at a loss for words.

"It's meant to protect you, Nissy." Her hands fist up stubbornly, refusing to accept the return. "The mockingjay is meant to protect you; I can't take it."

Katniss traced the vein in his hand that held her bracelet. "Bring it back to me and it will."

A Peacekeeper opened the door, signaling time was up. They clung to each other one last time and he stupidly promised her he would win the games. For her. It was always for her.

Her eyes filled with tears, but she smiled, knowing the urge to please his little sister would make him fight harder. He would do anything to please Katniss Mellark. Even if it meant killing twenty-three other children to do it.

His father was his next visitor, and when he opened his arms up to his son, Peeta felt as though he was a little boy again, needing his father's protection.

"You need to make sure she doesn't do anything stupid," he instructed, his voice finally cracking and tears starting to fall. Crying. Peeta could cry here. He didn't have to act the part of the big brother in front of Bara, and it was comforting to be the scared teenager that he was.

"I know," Bara whispered. He patted his son's head comfortingly. "I will."

"She thinks I'm coming home, but I'm not!" Taking a chance, he looked up into his father's crystal blue eyes, scared to death. "I don't want to die, Dad. I'm not ready."

"Shh," Bara comforted, holding his son tighter. "No one is ever ready for death, Peeta, but just remember who you are. Death will be a blessing if you stay who you are."

The fears Peeta has ever had since the day he'd turned twelve started to bubble up. He wasn't strong enough. He didn't know how to work weapons like the children in the other Districts. He wasn't smart enough to win these games. He was going to die.

"I promised her," he whispered to his father. "I promised her I'd try to win, Dad. I don't want to kill anyone. I can't."

They hold onto each other, Bara comforting and Peeta crying, until a Peacekeeper comes in and
announced that time is up.

"Use your brains," Bara told him urgently before the Peacekeeper ushered him out. "That's the only thing you can do!" The door closed.

Peeta stood alone in the center of the room, waiting for more people to come and wish their farewells to him. When the hour was up and it was time to go he felt different, more empty. Unclenching his fist he held out Katniss' mockingjay bracelet and let the sun shine on the pretty blue beads.

Promise me, she had begged.

His fist clenched around it again when Effie politely knocked on the door, telling him they were going.

He knew what to do.

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Katniss couldn't sleep that night, or the next night after that. Her bed was too big, too empty. Her pillows didn't keep a steady rhythm to lull her to sleep, and it smelled entirely of Peeta, making her miss her brother more than ever.

She was all alone now.

Her mother had left her.

The father she knew didn't understand.

And the one person who understood the guilt and the heartache she felt was going to die.

It rained the first night Peeta was gone. Her brother wasn't fond of thunderstorms, and each time he'd grow restless in his sleep, tossing and turning. Katniss would wrap his body in her arms, shushing him to quiet down, that it was only a storm, and sing a sweet melody about a bird finding freedom in the sky. It was his favorite melody, and she would sing it whenever it rained, but there was no Peeta to have to calm down.

Instead, Katniss was alone in her too big room, crying into her pillow until she went into a fitful sleep. Her nightmares were vivid, all involving her mother and Peeta mocking her, blaming her for making them want to leave.

"You're worthless," her mother screeched, holding a sweet and perfect child in her arms. "I don't love you as much as I do your sister. You were the mistake."

Katniss weeped, begging her mother to give her a chance, she could do better, be better, but Cary Mellark laughed and cooed at the infant, showing the child to a tall man Katniss didn't recognize. They both cooed at the infant, saying how happy they were to have a perfect daughter.

"Please, Mama!" Katniss pleaded, crawling on her hands and knees until she could grasp her mother's apron. "Why can't you love me?" Her mother ignored her, her eyes lighting up to someone behind Katniss, and she turned to see Peeta, smiling and holding his arms open for her.

Relief flooded through her and she stumbled to the one person who could make this all better, who understood, but Peeta pushed past her, smiling like he always did to her, and went to their mother's side. The two hugged, telling each other how much they love each other, missed each other, and jealousy and confusion raged through Katniss at the sight.
"Look at your little sister," Cary sing-songed, holding out the pink bundle.

"She's stunning!" Peeta gasped. Cary placed the bundle in his arms and he laughed with joy. "She'll fit in perfectly with all the Merchants."

Katniss stumbled over to her brother, crying harder now. "Peeta," she begged. "Please, Peeta..." She wanted him to admire her like he was the infant. She wanted him to hold her, to comfort her. To notice her.

No one in the room bothered to glance up. All their focus was on the pink bundle in Peeta's arms. She screamed as loud as she could.

"LOOK AT ME!"

No one did. They all admired the perfect child her parents had always wanted, and the mysterious man behind her mother morphed into Bara. He placed his big, sturdy hand on his wife's shoulder, and the image of the perfect family made her want to vomit.

"Look how happy they are," a voice from behind mocked. She turned to see Francis Brinx standing in her beige skirt and white polo, clutching a rolling pin in her hand. "They are so happy. The perfect family." She noticed Katniss and pulls her along, telling her it's rude to spy and that Seam trash must be punished for spying.

Her voice was strained when she shot up in her bed, gasping for air. The room is pitch black, and Katniss feels around her bed for Peeta. Where is Peeta?

For a millisecond she thinks he must be in the bathroom, but the memory of the Reaping reminds her that her brother is on his way to the Capital to be slaughtered. Fresh tears prick at her eyes until she is curled up in a ball, praying for the night to be over.

Peeta was gone.

And she was alone.

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Bara was concerned about his daughter's reaction to Peeta's departure, and the words of her teacher from years ago start to resurface in his mind. His children couldn't handle being separated, the signs had always been there ever since they were little, but he had thought they were doing better that they were branching out from the other.

It turns out he had been terribly wrong, and now his daughter was suffering.

He had to coax her out of her room to watch the opening ceremonies, reminding her how Peeta wouldn't want them to be acting his way, and so Katniss sat on their small sofa, watching her father set up the small machine that was mandatory in every District 12 home.

"I hope they don't make him look silly," she whispered in passing when he got the machine going. "Last year's outfits looked ridiculous."

Bara chuckled, pleased that his daughter was speaking again, and went to the kitchen to get some tea. The airing wouldn't start for another thirty minutes. "Peeta could be in his birthday suit and he'd still manage to charm the pants off the Capitolites." Her lips perked at his joke and curled herself into her part of the couch, waiting for the ceremonies to begin.
It turned out Bara wasn't too off on his joke. When District 12 rode through on the chariots, Katniss blushed when she saw her handsome brother in nothing but soot.

"He's naked!" she proclaimed, angry because that was her brother and the stupid Capital was already making him look like a fool! Bara had to take her tea away, afraid his daughter would throw it at the wall and ruin the machine.

The days to follow the opening ceremony contained nothing too important. The airings kept tabs on score predictions, what tribute had the highest bets so far, and commentaries on previous games and what this year could hold for these lucky tributes.

Katniss was pleased to see Peeta's scores and predictions weren't terribly low compared to how District 12's tributes scores normally ranged, but these weren't the official scores, the ones that would matter to Sponsors. So Katniss held her excitement in until she saw his final score.

On the night of the Gamemakers' final score, both her and Bara danced around their living room, celebrating, because Peeta had earned himself an 8.

"He has a chance," she whispered to herself that night. "He has a chance."

"How've you been holding up?" Gale asked when she made it to their meeting spot the morning after the Games predictions.

Sighing, Katniss plopped herself on a rock and looked out at the horizon. "I'm managing." She doesn't bother telling Gale about the sleepless nights or the nightmares. His father didn't abandon his family on purpose like her mother had. He wouldn't understand.

"I think he'll do fine," Gale admitted, keeping his attention on the stick he was sharpening.

Her heart lifted a little. "You think?"

"Well, so long as he's smart enough to stay away from the Cornucopia, yeah, I think so."

Katniss mulled this over while he continued to finish sharpening the sticks he'd collected. Peeta was smart, she knew that. He was also strong. Maybe that's what he had used to impress the Gamemakers? "He promised he'd come home," she confessed.

"I'm sure a lot of kids promise that, Mellarkable." She ignored the annoying nickname, kind of happy he used it because it reminded her of Peeta and that made her want to smile.

"He promised me, though," Katniss stressed, taking a look at one of the sticks Gale had finished sharpening. "There's a difference."

He snorted. "How? Are you one of those dumb wood fairies Posy's always going on about?"

"Well, no," she frowned. "But for fifteen years Peeta's always kept his promises." She sucked on her finger where the stick had snagged at. "Why break one now?"

They didn't find much that day, as though the forest knew the Hunger Games was going on and retaliating in its own way, and by the end, all they had accomplished was bettering their aim at throwing knives.

It was getting darker out as the two made their way back to town, and Katniss threw out the offer of
staying at her place for the interviews.

"I don't know," he hesitated. She understood. Though he traded with many of the Merchants, Gale had a strong bias of dislike toward them all. Except for her, and that had taken months to erase.

"You don't have to stay long," Katniss amended. "Just until after the interviews. It would really be nice to have someone besides my dad there."

He reluctantly agreed, and she dragged him through the bakery and up the stairs to her home. Bara seemed surprised to see him, but gave Gale a welcoming smile and offered some tea.

"They better have Peeta look stunning," Katniss commented when the tributes started going up on stage for their interviews. Gale didn't say anything, and that was fine with her. Katniss didn't want him to. She just wanted someone to hold her hand, to not feel so alone for a few hours.

This year's tributes weren't too impressive. Boring, Katniss thought, compared to other years, but that was good. If no one liked those tributes and they loved Peeta he would surely come home. By the time it was her brother's turn, all three in the room were growing antsy.

"Peeta's always looked handsome in a suit, right Papa?"

Bara nodded and told her to be quiet. No one wanted to say how this could be the last time they ever heard Peeta speak.

The host of the show, Caesar Flickerman, joked with Peeta, and it pleased Katniss that the audience seemed to eat it up. She smiled for the first time that day because her brother was being his charming self and she missed him. It was like he was sitting in their living room, but he wasn't and she told herself to focus.

"It's hard to take these idiots seriously when they're shades of pink and purple," Gale said, his first comment of the night. Katniss shushed him and bit her thumbnail, a replacement habit she had taken up after the thumb sucking.

"So, Peeta," Caesar started after they laughed about roses and showers, "tell us about your Reaping. It was rather heartbreaking."

Peeta's eyes casted down to his lap. "Yeah," he breathed, his voice shaking a bit with emotion. "My sister probably took my Reaping harder than I did." It made her sick when the audience laughed at that.

"I can only imagine." Caesar patted Peeta's hand affectionately with his fuchsia pink hand that made his violet powdered hair look more ridiculous. "And what did you say to her before leaving?"

"I told her I would try to win, and she told me I better." Katniss didn't enjoy the Capitalists' reaction to whatever he said. This wasn't funny. Didn't they think of how his family must feel, watching him discuss his possible death so lightly?

The buzzer soon went off, and their country's national anthem started to play.

She didn't realize traitorous tears had started to fall until she felt Gale's arm wrap around her. "They loved him," he whispered in her hair. "He'll be fine."

They did love him. Yes, that's what was important. So long as the silly Capitalists loved him Peeta had a chance of winning.
Bara excused himself shortly after the machine had turned off, heading downstairs for bed, and leaving Katniss and Gale alone.

He still held her, and she was grateful for that because seeing her brother made her realize how much she missed him, needed him. She had never needed someone so much as she needed Peeta.

"We've always been this close," she said after sitting for an hour in silence, the small brass clock ticking on the bookshelf. "Ever since our mother left our family." Gale nodded, probably knowing where her mother lived in the Seam, if she was even alive still. Katniss didn't know why, but she felt it important to tell him about her relationship with Peeta, about her mother. "I don't remember her much before she left," she confessed, "but I do remember how sad I was when she did. I think I cried for weeks, and every time, Peeta would hold me, told me he would never hurt me like she had, and it felt like he could protect me from anything, you know?"

Gale didn't know, but he let her continue.

"We had to rely on each other, and that's all we've ever known." She wiped her eyes again, sick of crying, determined to never cry in front of Gale ever again. "I'm so afraid of being alone, Gale. He could die tomorrow, and I'll be all by myself." Her voice cracked by the end.

"You have people here," he reminded her gruffly, awkwardly. "Lots of people."

Katniss's head started to shake in disagreement the moment he opened his mouth to speak. "It's not the same."

Gale gave her a gentle squeeze before releasing her. "Go to bed, Katniss."

She wanted to ask if perhaps he'd stay with her for the night, the thought of going to her empty bed by herself daunting, but it felt like a betrayal to Peeta and really, it was only because she didn't want to sleep alone. How pathetic.

"Goodnight, Gale," she whispered, leading him to the door. "Thanks for, uh, well... Sorry about that." He shrugged and told her he'd see her later, giving her his blessing for tomorrow morning.

Before leaving, though, he leaned down and gave her a little kiss on the lips. It caused her to blush because she had never been kissed by a boy before, at least not anyone besides her brother, and she tells him goodnight again before shutting the door.

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The games started and it took all of the Mellarks' might to keep their eyes open during the bloodbath. Fourteen children were killed in the first hour, and Katniss was horrified when she witnessed a twelve year old boy from 8 get beheaded by an eighteen-year-old girl from 7 with an axe.

At least Peeta made it safely to one of the taller buildings in the ruined city, avoiding the bloodbath all together.

The commentators were amazed at her brother's ability to run, and it made her wonder if he had let her win their little races for all these years.

By nightfall, a total of fifteen children were killed. One from 1, both from 3 and 5, one from 4, 6, and 7, both from 8 and 9, one from 10, 11, and Junni from 12. Her death was the last one counted for the day.

"Poor Junni," Bara whispered while they watched two Careers from 1 and 4 push her off the ledge.
of one of the buildings after spearing her in the heart.

"At least it was fast," Katniss said, her throat getting tight because it was only a few months ago the
girl was sitting in this very room talking their heads off.

The third day of the games arrived, and alliances had been made between the existing eight tributes,
the boy from 10 was crushed by one of the Gamemakers' crumbling buildings while running from
the Careers. When Katniss started to watch the games that day, she shouted for her father to come
see what was happening.

"Peeta's with the Careers!" she screamed in disbelief. "Peeta's with the Careers!" No person from 12
besides their one living Victor had managed to live this long in the arena let alone join the pack of
vicious Careers, but sure enough, she watched as her brother woke next to District 2's sixteen year
old female tribute.

What the hell did her brother think he was doing?

Bara asked his daughter if she would want to join him for breakfast, but Katniss brushed him off,
saying she was trying to figure out Peeta's strategy. It soon became clear, after hours of watching and
studying the games that day, that he was this Career's little pet, following her around, holding her
hand, kissing her on her freckled cheek, and the feeling of resentment lingered in Katniss' stomach
well past the airing time.

What was he up to?

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Soon cameramen were knocking on their bakery door, asking for interviews from the lovable Peeta
Mellark's family. Katniss was waxed and scrubbed until she could barely recognize herself in the
mirror. Her hair was curly, her eyebrows were plucked, and she touched her lips to see how they had
managed to make them that pink.

She felt ridiculous.

Her father was dressed in his Reaping's best, and she wore the same green dress she had worn for
Peeta's Reaping. She wondered if anyone would notice.

They did.

The reporter asking her the questions commented how pretty she looked, and how they remembered
wanting to cry when she called out for her older brother. The woman looked more ridiculous than
Effie Trinket with her tattoos shining across her creamy white face, and Katniss wondered how
much they had to have hurt putting on.

She had never seen a camera up this close, and it was intimidating seeing it point directly on her
while the reporter asked what her thoughts were on her brother's progress.

"I'm, um, I'm really proud of how far he's gotten." Did that little red light mean they were recording?

"Now, your brother said he better win so he could come right on home to you, any thoughts on
that?"

A bit of saliva got stuck in her throat and she has to cough, ignoring the frown the reporter gives. "I
told him he had to give back my mockingjay bracelet when he comes home."
The woman nodded, smiling. "Yes, Peeta's District token! It's becoming quite the fashion statement in the Capital, did you know that?" No, how would she know that? Why would she care? The silly reporter asked a few more questions on who Peeta is as a person, and what she thought of the budding romance between District 2's Hollis Bunker and District 12's Peeta Mellark.

Jealousy reared its ugly head as Katniss tried to be as truthful and as kind as possible. She had never been a good liar, a trait Peeta would often tease her about since he and their father were excellent liars. This had to appear believable. "I was really shocked when I saw it," she admitted. That part was true. "But...but I just can't believe my brother would run after a girl so soon after the death of his girlfriend, Junni." That seemed close enough to the truth. She tried to remain still, motionless. "You need to stop fidgeting whenever you tell a lie!" Peeta would joke. "You're so obvious because you can't stay still, or just do these weird movements no normal person would do." Katniss had scoffed at him when he had revealed her lack of lying abilities, but Peeta was right. Her hands and arms gained minds of their own when she lied.

Her body remained frozen in place.

The reporter gasped in shock. "Your poor brother! How dreadful!"

Katniss had to refrain from rolling her eyes. Yes, how dreadful to have romance bloom during the games where children are forced to fight to the death. That's what was wrong with this picture. "I'm just looking out for my brother," she lamented, seeing if maybe this could earn Peeta some more favor. "He's such an amazing person, but he always seems to find love in the worst places." She clasped her hands behind her back, sensing the urge to play with them while she talked.

"Are you afraid one of them is going to be forced to kill the other?"

"Yes." Her voice cracked at the perfect moment.

"Well hang in there, Katniss Mellark, and may the odds be ever in your brother's favor!" The cameraman motioned they were done filming, and the reporter smiled, told her she did a good job, and shooed Katniss out of the room, getting ready for the next interview.

When Katniss reached her room, she slammed the door, and threw her shoes at the wall in rage. The thought of that terrible Career killing her brother, holding his heart out for the country to see before squeezing it dry angered her so much she wished she had her knives. Peeta's heart was hers, not Hollis Bunker's. Katniss wished she could ask her brother what he was doing, what his strategy was, because it hurt to see Peeta kiss Hollis. It killed her when the airing would stop on the two teenagers sleeping together just how Katniss and Peeta had been sleeping together every night since before she could remember. But most of all she hated Hollis Bunker because she had protected her brother multiple times in the arena, she was the reason Peeta was still alive.

And Katniss hated being in anyone's debt.

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It was the sixth night of the games; only five tributes remained.

Katniss' spirits were rising each day as she sat in front of the screen, eyes glued for when they would mention her brother. He was actually doing it, she thought. He was actually succeeding in the games, and soon, Peeta would be coming home to her. She just knew it.

That is until the boy from 6 stabbed him in the arm.

Tears started streaming down both Bara and Katniss' faces when they heard Peeta cry out in pain and
the boy had surprised him in one of the dark alleyways. The commentators were pretending to act concerned, but it was obvious they were pleased by this attack. Nothing too startling had happened in the past day and a half after all.

It was only expected, Katniss thought grimly. Peeta was one of the few non-Career District tributes alive at this point and was considered the weak-link.

"What about his Sponsors?" Katniss cried out when Peeta was left to die on the dirty pavement. "Someone needs to do something!"

Bara pulled his daughter into his arms and held her there. He told her that he was sure Haymitch was running around trying to get more Sponsors, and that a lot of people loved Peeta. They were always talking about him and his puppy love with District 2's Hollis Bunker after all. The Capital loved Peeta.

But no one was going to save him it seemed.

His cries of pain were heartbreaking for his family, and Katniss had never seen her brother in this light before. It was terrifying.

Pressing his grimy hand over the gash mark that was protruding blood, Peeta tried desperately to stop the bleeding. It wasn't working, and he took his shirt off, wrapping it gingerly around his arm.

"I hate the Capital," Katniss spat at last, watching her brother die. "How can they do something like this to children? And enjoy it?"

"You know why," Bara whispered, not being able to grasp how his son was dying in front of him. He knew it would happen eventually. Peeta was strong, but not as strong as those children from the richer Districts. His son's death was inevitable.

She got up and turned the machine off, not even caring at this point if they arrested her for disobeying their mandatory watch law. Let them arrest her, Katniss thought bitterly, heading toward her room. Let them kill her if they wanted. They killed her brother, and she'd be damned if she had to live in this bitter world without him.

When Peeta was discovered being nursed by Hollis Bunker for the next few days, Katniss didn't know how to react. She was thrilled he was alive, but this romance angle was becoming ridiculous. Did they really think the Capital would pity them so much as to allow two Victors?

"I bet he has something up his sleeves," she commented while eating her breakfast down in the bakery. "He's not stupid enough to fall in love with a girl in the arena." Bara didn't reply, not much for speaking this early. "He's not in love with her," she insisted.

"Katniss, we should be thankful that girl saved his life."

"I am thankful!" The man shook his head and continued pounding the dough for the bread. "I am thankful," Katniss confessed begrudgingly. "It's just that... Well, one of them is going to have to die, and Peeta promised me." She took another bite out of her stale biscuit. "He'd never kill someone he loves; so he must be thinking of a way to kill her."

"You're starting to sound like one of them."

The accusation astounded her. What? Sound like a Capital citizen? "No I'm not!" she whined, but
even hearing herself confirmed her father was right. Katniss was acting like one of those whiny Capital citizen who got interviewed if they had put heavy amounts of money into Sponsoring a tribute who had recently been killed. "Sorry," she apologized at last.

Bara nodded, accepting the apology and ordered her to go work the ovens. "We're so behind on orders," he commented, pounding the dough. She nodded, tying her apron on, and heading in the hot back room where they kept the Capital made ovens.

They worked in silence, both lost in their own worlds of worry, and that was fine with Katniss. She was caught up in memories of when her and Peeta were children and they would take turns making the treats for their family's bakery. Cookies had always been her favorite thing to bake because they were sweet, small, and when rolling them, the dough would stick to her hands, tempting her to lick them under the counter whenever Papa wasn't looking. Peeta would always cover for her when she went missing under the counter, and she would cover for him when he was tempted with eating the yummy cherries they would have to smash up for pastries.

It all felt like a lifetime ago.

When the heat became unbearable, Katniss asked for a small lunch break, seeing if she could go out for a bit. "To clear my mind," she told her father. He nodded, telling her she could pick up a few items they needed.

"A half-hour," he warned.

It was another hot day in District 12, and her clothes were damp with sweat from the ovens, but Katniss knew nobody would care today. Everyone sensed the games would be ending tonight. They always did when it came down to four tributes. The Gamemakers would find ways of killing two of them off in terrible ways that would still entertain the Capital's citizens, and then create a climatic ending with the last two tributes. It was a formula, really.

The stores were practically empty with everyone sitting around their viewing sets, or out in the town's square to watch the games on the big screens. She got what her father had asked for with fifteen minutes to spare, and Katniss decided to see what was going on in the games. Surely someone would have told her family if Peeta had died, right?

She hated how her father had refused to move the stupid viewing set to the bakery. What if Peeta had already died?

"Katniss!" Turning around at the call of her name, she saw Madge Undersee, the mayor's daughter, running toward her. "I haven't seen you in awhile," the blonde smiled, a bit breathless from her short distance run.

"My dad's been keeping me close," she lied, glad the basket in her arms kept her from fidgeting.


Relief broke out onto Katniss' face. Her brother was still alive, was still fighting. "How's his arm?"

The last thing she remembered was seeing his red, inflamed arm before leaving the room to vomit.

"It doesn't look good," Madge admitted, "but Hollis is protecting him. They're making do with his bad arm." Stupid Hollis, Katniss thought bitterly, clutching the wicker basket for dear life. She hated owing people, especially those who she had no chance in ever meeting. Not if she wanted Peeta to win.

"Has he..." She took a gulp of air, trying to gain the courage to ask. "Has Peeta killed anyone else?"
My dad refuses to watch it, saying we need to work today."

The blonde looked down at her feet and regretfully nods. "Two total so far," she admitted, looking into Katniss' grey eyes. "The boy from 11 and the girl from 7."

"He killed the girl with the axe?" Katniss had to admit she was surprised. The boy from 11 was easy enough, but the girl from 7 seemed so skilled when she had beheaded that twelve year old boy. "How?"

"They crushed her with a dumpster of bricks," Madge explained, twirling a piece of her long hair. "Hollis was on the roof with the dumpster, and Peeta was on the ground, waiting for any tribute to come. When the girl came, Peeta shouted, and all the bricks came tumbling down. Poor girl didn't even get the chance to look up before being buried alive with bricks. It was really fascinating seeing them kill that way, though."

"That's a horrible thing to say, Madge!" But Katniss had to admit her friend was right. At this point of the games, alliances were gone. Nobody trusted anyone else to guard the other's back. "Why do you think she hasn't killed him yet?" It still made no sense why this brutal girl was protecting her brother.

"Peeta does have that magical charm." Katniss blushed at that, knowing all too well her brother's gift. "I think she's been using him for the Sponsors," Madge said at last. "You know how it's all political, and they get a lot of parachutes whenever they do something sweet together like that large basket of fruit they were sent after Hollis killed her own District partner to save him. All political gain."

The siren from the coal mines blared, telling the District it was two o'clock.

"I better go," Katniss said, pointing behind her. The girls said their goodbyes and went on their ways.

Tonight was going to be it, Katniss thought when ascending up the stairs to the bakery. Tonight was going to be the night the Seventy-Second Hunger Games was going to have its Victor.

~*~*~*~

The entire District was quiet the final night of the Seventy-Second Hunger Games. No one wanted to chance the possibility that they could have another Victor by the end of this.

The Mellarks watched with baited breath for what could happen. Would the Gamemakers leave Peeta and Hollis to their own devices, or would they interfere?

Katniss put her bets that the love angle was enough suffering for the Capital and that the Gamemakers would leave it at that.

She watched as her brother and Hollis walked through the deserted city, both holding hands. Both the last two living tributes.

"Are you thirsty?" Peeta asked when they reach a small watering hole by the city's boundary line. The girl nodded, weak from the lack of food, and he smiled, giving her a peck on the lips. "I'll go get us some."

"What are you doing?" Katniss screamed at the screen. "She has a knife, Peeta! She's going to kill you!" Hollis Bunker does take her knife out, stumbling over to where Peeta sat, refilling his water canteen, but she stopped, biding her time for the perfect attack. The audience needed the best finale after all.
The camera pans out, focusing its attention on Peeta. He sits at the edge of the water, running his hand through the water in some sort of pattern. His lips move, but nothing comes out, and Katniss wondered what he could possibly be doing. He should just attack the girl and get it over with. That's what she would do.

But Peeta isn't her, and he pulls out something that looks like seeds from his pockets. Caesar Flickerman commented on how odd Peeta was acting, suspecting the boy must have a plan of attack on his lover. Both Katniss and Bara lean in at the suspense. What was Peeta doing?

He got up, shoving the canteen in his bag, and trudged over to his lover. "Hey, Hol," he shouted with as much joy as his starved and injured body could summon, "look what they sent us!"

"What is he doing?" Katniss sneered in disgust at the screen. "Feeding her?"

Bara shushed her, and they watched as Peeta told Hollis how their mentors had sent them a thing of nuts to eat.

"They don't look like nuts," the girl commented, looking at the handful in his hand. "They look more like seeds to me."

"They're nuts, trust me," he insisted. "I work in a bakery and we handle these types of nuts all the time." He placed some in her hands and told her to eat them. "I'm not that hungry," Peeta smiled sweetly when she asked why he wasn't eating as well. The girl eyed him suspiciously before deciding hunger was her main priority.

Hollis ate the whole thing of nuts and downed all their water. Peeta encouraged her to keep eating, saying it was important to get nutrients. She followed his instructions, but in the hour complained how sick she felt.

"It's okay," Peeta soothed, telling her to lie down. "Not all nuts agree with us, especially since you haven't eaten a real meal in days."

"My heart's beating so fast," she muttered, curling in on Peeta. He wrapped his arm around her to pull her closer. "I've never felt this sick after eating a bunch of stupid nuts."

He brushed her sweaty black hair off her forehead. "That's because they're not nuts," Peeta confessed at last, his voice barely above a whisper. The next thing the audience knew, Peeta was on top of her, pressing her own knife to her throat. She tried to struggle underneath him, caught off guard by his strength, but nothing availed. Hollis Bunker was trapped.

Peeta's weak puppy dog love was all a rouse.

"My sister made sure I knew my way around plants," he breathed, pressing the knife deeper into the girl's throat. "I need to get home to her because I promised, and I hope you understand." Tears were falling from his face, but the knife stayed at the base of her throat. "I'm really sorry, Hollis. You saved me so many times, but..." He sighed, his breath shaking. "My little sister needs me, and I promised." He took the knife and sliced open her throat.

The cannon went off shortly after.

Peeta Mellark was the Victor of the Seventy-Second Hunger Games.

Chapter End Notes
Many thanks to my wonderful tumblr wife, Shelby, for not only being the cheerleader I need, but editing this long chapter! You rock, hon!
I hope you made it this far! I'm kind of nervous about the reaction to this because I don't want people to think I'm 100% following the books with the romance angle, and a lot of reviewers said how they hoped there was never going to be a love angle, but Peeta's charming, smart. I've always seen him using that angle to help himself since he's at a disadvantage of not being trained prior to the games like the Career tributes. He manipulated his way through the games to win, used those better skilled to kill the others for him until the very end when his puppy dog love made him look weak to Hollis, giving him the upper hand.

I hope that all makes sense!

Also a shameless plug: I am currently writing a THG fic based loosely off the lives of Bonnie and Clyde. I posted an outtake to see how people feel about it before posting it, and it would mean so much if you read it!

Thank you all for lovely thoughts! It's so nice to know people are reading my work.

Tell me what you think!

End Notes

I will admit, I'm scared yet excited to hear your thoughts.

I thought I should mention the inspiration for this fic so no one gets confused later on.

This fic was inspired when I was watching The Hunger Games movie and the scene where Haymitch and Effie are arguing over how Katniss acted when she was getting her score. I thought the entire scene could easily be pulled off as a family (Haymitch as the dad, Effie as the mom, Katniss as the teenage daughter in trouble, and Peeta as the brother who just idly sits by and watches). Then this idea popped up while talking with a good friend from Tumblr, Caroline, who is a huge The Borgias fan, and if you're well familiar with that show, you can imagine what this fic will entitle. She encouraged me to write this, and here it is!

I do hope you give this fic a chance, and I hope to hear from all you lovely readers because reviews are precious and I love to hear what people think!

~Terri

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!