Cheese Buns and Bad Puns

by HPfanonezillion

Summary

Peeta has a cooking vlog. Katniss has an archery vlog. They are avid watchers of each other's stuff and strike up a friendship over the internet. But could there be more to the friendship? Or is it just their fans' wishful thinking?

Notes

I'm happy to say that part of this story is thanks to writingbutunpublished, my best friend who, when I mentioned an AU where Rue has a shipper blog dedicated to Katniss and Peeta, said, "But what if they both have YouTube channels?"

I was going to hold off until the new year, but thanks to encouragement from several Tumblr followers and my excitement over their enthusiasm and my own imagination getting the best of me, this happened. You can find me on Tumblr at booksrockmyface. Please let me know what you think.

Happy reading!!
Chapter 1

Peeta quickly closed his computer when Annie walked into the room.

She snorted as she opened the fridge. "Porn in the middle of the kitchen, baby brother? How brazen! I thought only Finnick did that." She took out a block of cheese and started cutting off slices.

He opened the computer slowly once more. "No, I'm watching something else and I wasn't in the mood for any of Finnick's lewd commentary." He typed in his password at the home screen. "And I'm older than you, so stop calling me baby brother."

"By two months." She finished making her snack and sat down beside him. "So what is the great Katniss of slings-and-arrows up to today?"

"Blindfolded target practice. It's a viewer challenge. Katniss is going first."

On the small screen a slight brunette woman dressed in a forest green t-shirt and a pair of hip-hugger jeans stood aiming her shot while a woman with blonde hair teased to the heavens stood behind with a bit of cloth. Her name was Effie, if Peeta remembered correctly. She was in another one of Katniss's videos assisting her with holding things or handing off extra arrows.

"Okay." Katniss said.

The other woman tied the bandana around her head and the archer took her shot. It went wide and the arrow imbedded itself in a tree.

"Well, I guess that's a fail for me." She said to the camera. "Gale, see if you can do any better." She laughed. "I'll see you, for real, in a week! Viewers, that means it's joint video time again. So leave your questions in the comments and we'll answer a few. But make sure to check out the frequently asked questions before you do. That'll be linked in the subscription. Keep an eye out for Gale's attempt." She gave a little awkward wave and the credits started rolling.

Peeta closed out the window. Her friend Gale's would be up in a few days and Peeta was sure Gale wouldn't even come close to the target. Katniss was the better shot between the two, but her friend had a better on-screen personality.

Annie asked, "So what are you going to do for your next video?"

He shrugged as he packed up his computer. "I haven't decided yet."

"Well, it's Finnick's birthday tomorrow."

"Yeah?"

She gave him an imploring look. "Will you please help me cook for him? We could film it and kill two birds with one stone."

He took in a big, dramatic breath and let it out in a huff. "I guess."

She squealed and threw her arms around him. "So I was thinking—"

"Hold it right there, Annie." He put up his hand. "Nothing too crazy. And you have to say, 'Peeta is a better cook than I could ever imagine being and the best brother on the planet.'"
"Why?"

Peeta pulled out his phone. "Say it for posterity's sake. So the next time you start to get on me about the rent and picking up after myself, I can show you this."

Annie rolled her eyes and said to his phone, "Peeta is a better cook than I could ever imagine being and the best brother on the planet. Even though he doesn't know how to pick up socks from the living room."

He put his phone away. "Blame the socks on your boyfriend. I always pick mine up. And I keep the kitchen clean."

"Only for your stupid videos." She took out the box of Mellark recipes. "You know what you haven't made in a while?" She started picking through the cards.

"What's that?" He looked over her shoulder.

"Your dad's stroganoff. That was my favorite when we were kids."

"The only time you would ever eat a mushroom." He grinned and pulled out the card. "You think Finnick would like it?"

"I know he would. You know he never met a mushroom he didn't like." She made a face. "Is that a guy thing?"

Peeta chuckled. "No, it's a taste thing. Mushrooms are delicious." He picked out another card. "We'll make a salad with this mustard vinaigrette. My favorite of dad's dressing recipes."

Annie nodded and placed the cards on the table. She put the lid back on the recipe box and replaced it in the cabinet. "I'll go buy the stuff."

"And will you help me edit the video? It will make up for the loud sex I have to hear afterward."

She grinned. "We try really hard not to be loud."

"Not hard enough." He started looking in the cabinets to write down the ingredients already on hand.

"Well, maybe if you had chosen the room on the other end of the house as your bedroom instead of using it as an art studio, you could avoid it."

Finnick called from the front of the house, "I'm home."

Annie's smile grew wider. "In the kitchen." She called back.

"Is this a secret?" Peeta asked quickly.

"Nah." She waved her hand.

When Finnick walked into the door, she turned and threw herself into his waiting arms. He spun her around and kissed her deeply. "Did you have a good day at school?"

"A very good day. The kids actually listened for longer than ten minutes at a time." She kissed him again. "I missed you."

"Missed me?" He leaned her against the wall. "How much did you miss me?"
Peeta called from across the room. "How about you two love birds take it elsewhere? People eat in here."

Finnick looked over and gave his friend a wicked grin. "Don't worry, Peeta, we clean up after ourselves."

Annie slapped his shoulder. "Finnick, don't."

Peeta looked at them both, aghast. "You've had sex in my kitchen?"

Finnick laughed as Annie tried feebly to explain, "It was one time. You were gone to the vlogger convention and things got heated..." She gave him an apologetic look. "I did suggest the bedroom. We just didn't make it..."

Peeta threw his hands in the air. "What am I gonna do with you two?"

Finnick shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. Annie is a nymphomaniac."

Annie gave her boyfriend a hard look. "Are you serious? I'm the nympho? You propositioned me in the middle of the grocery store the other day."

"You felt me up in the movie theater." Finnick argued.

"You did it at my mother's birthday party." Annie shot back. "And your grandmother's."

Peeta put his hands over his ears and loudly said, "Too much information, way too much. My sister is not a sexual being."

Finnick waved him off. "We're done for now."

Annie moved out from between her boyfriend and the wall. "Did you finish that list? I'll pick up supper while I'm out."

"Want me to join you?" Finnick asked, a seductive gleam in his eye.

Peeta said, "You better not." He held out a piece of paper.

Annie nodded. "Yeah, I'd never make it into the store." She swiped the grocery list and smacked Finnick on the ass as she walked by. "You two boys play nice while I'm gone."

"Video games?" Finnick asked.

"Video games." Peeta agreed. He darted for the living room. "I get the blue controller!"

"No, you had it last time." Finnick grumbled as he followed.

Annie shook her head. "Try not to kill each other." She left while they still grappled for the Xbox control.

Katniss's phone rang as she stepped out of the shower. She saw Gale's name and laughed as she pressed it to her ear. "Gonna back out?" She asked in greeting.

Gale's rich laughter filtered through the line. "Well, I don't know. What happens if I do?"

"You forfeit and prove once and for all that I'm better than you." She giggled as she looked through
her drawer for her pjs."

"No, I'll do it. But if I do make it, you get to cook for me."

"And if you don't?"

"I'll cook for you."

"I'll cook for you." He said and then laughed. "Or probably bring you to your favorite restaurant."

She snorted. "Yeah, I don't want you cooking for me."

"I made something the other day. Prim didn't die." He argued feebly.

"Well, she's got a strong stomach." Katniss teased. She turned her phone on speaker and sat it on her bed as she dressed. "So when are you getting here?"

"Miss me that much, Catnip?" Gale joked.

"You know I do." She grumbled as she pulled her shirt over her head. "Why did you have to move halfway across the country?"

"I fell in love." He said, matter-of-factly.

She threw herself backward on the bed. "Love? I guess only for my sister do I let that excuse slide."

"Yeah, you better say that." Prim called.

"You have me on speaker?" Katniss asked.

Gale said, "Just for a second. I was taking off my shoes. I'll try the shot tomorrow and you and I can finish the editing when I get there."

"Which will be?"

He laughed again. "Like six your time. You're going to be there to pick me up?"

"Maybe I'll send Effie."

"Oh, god, please no." He begged with a laugh.

"I could send Posy. She's driving now, remember?"

Gale groaned. "Don't remind me. I'll see you in a few days, Catnip."

"I'll be there to pick you up." Katniss assured him before warning, "You better watch yourself with the Catnip when we film the Q and A or we won't have any usable video."

He sighed dramatically. "Fine."

She hung up the phone and then sent a text to her sister. "Your boyfriend is weird."

Prim's response came just a minute later. "He was your friend first. Blame's on you."

Katniss laughed as she typed out her next message. "I miss you, little duck." She stared at the words a moment before she pressed send.

"I'll see you at Christmas." Prim assured her. Another text came through, "But that's not soon enough, I know."
"Study hard. Call me in a couple days."

"Love you!"

"Love you too." Katniss plugged her phone into the charger and took out her computer.

It had been a couple weeks since she had caught up on BreakingBread. She snuggled under the blanket and leaned against the headboard. Typing in her password took her a minute. After a long day wrestling unruly yards into something more presentable, she was exhausted. Sadly, there was only one episode she hadn't seen. She clicked on it and waited impatiently for it to load.

The video started and Annie, Peeta's stepsister appeared on the screen. Katniss shook her head at the fact that she knew that detail. But she'd watched his first Q and A video three times. She knew he lived with Annie and her boyfriend Finnick, who was also Peeta's childhood best friend. And Katniss knew Peeta's dad had passed on a love of cooking and ran a bakery when Peeta and Annie were kids.

On the screen, Annie explained, "Peeta and I are going to show you how to cook a perfect steak."

Peeta came into the frame and interjected, "Actually, I'm going to show you, Annie is here to look pretty and pretend she knows what she's doing."

Annie pinched his arm. "Peeta is a little arrogant in his cooking abilities."

"But you know I'm better." He pointed out.

She rolled her eyes. "Get on with it already."

Katniss watched transfixed as Peeta explained how to pick the perfect steak. He had great presence on screen and she could definitely see him with his own show on the Food Network. She zoned out on his actual words as she listened to the sizzle of the steak in the pan and the way his long fingers wrapped around the tongs and the handle of the pan so elegantly. The tools of his trade were beautiful instruments in those hands.

"You have to let this rest for at least five minutes before you cut into it." Peeta said, as Katniss shook herself and focused once more. "If you cut into it right away, all those yummy juices are going to run all over your plate and your steak won't taste good. And you mouth will be very sad."

Annie laughed. "Your mouth will be sad. And Peeta will have you arrested for crimes against meat."

Peeta's face came closer to the camera and he said very seriously, "I won't let bad people happen to good steak. Please, let it have a few minutes alone."

Katniss giggled. The pair signed off and Katniss closed up her computer. She really enjoyed the channel and had learned a lot to improve her own time in the kitchen. But it was mostly the small tips. She was never ambitious enough to try any of the recipes. She really should one of these days. Peeta made it look so easy and Katniss was no stranger to the kitchen. She loved to cook. She just didn't always take the time.

She turned out her lamp and settled into bed, dreaming of making the perfect steak. She could almost taste it.
Gale stepped into view through the airport crowd. He was easy to spot being one of the tallest people in the building. His sandy hair was short and he appeared to have a new haircut since his last video, but it was him. Her best friend had arrived.

Katniss waved her hand in the air. "Hey!" She called to get his attention.

"Catnip!" He called and held out his arms.

She launched herself at him and pressed her face into his chest to inhale his familiar woodsy scent.

He squeezed her back with a deep laugh. "Hey back. I brought a surprise." He stepped away and looked over his shoulder just as Prim walked into view.

"Prim!" Katniss exclaimed and wrapped her arms around her little sister. "What are you doing here? You have school"

"I'm just here for the weekend." Prim explained. "You get my boyfriend for a whole week, but I wanted a little bit of sister time."

"Did you bring your homework?" Katniss demanded.

"Yes, Gale, I did." Prim rolled her eyes.

Gale picked up his girlfriend's bags. "We just don't want you to fall behind, honeybun."

Katniss made a gagging noise. "Please don't do the mushy stuff." She wrapped an arm around Prim's shoulders and steered her out the main doors, Gale trailing behind.

"So what are you going to cook for me, Catnip?" Gale said as he slid into the back seat of her car.

"You made the shot?" Katniss asked.

"I made the shot." He chuckled. "I was surprised, too. I guess I had the target memorized when the blindfold went on."

Prim said, "I checked the blindfold for holes and then I made him do it a second time." She leaned over and touched Katniss's arm. "Katniss, I'm dating a psychic."
Katniss let out little laugh. "Probably not psychic."

"Just perfect, right?" Gale said from the back seat. "Better than you, at any rate."

Katniss looked in the rearview mirror at the first stoplight. "You better be glad you brought my sister along or I'd leave you on the side of the road."

"You still could." Prim said. "He's been pretty full of himself since yesterday."

"I'm going to have to see this video." Katniss said as she pulled into the parking lot of a set of casual dining restaurants.

"Prim transferred it to her phone." Gale said as he got out. "Can we go to Chili's?"

Katniss sighed, "I guess."

"Don't grumble, you like Chili's." He grabbed Prim's hand and headed for the restaurant.

They were brought to a table in the back of the restaurant and given menus. They made their drink order and the waitress walked away.

After looking over his menu for a few minutes, Gale looked at Katniss and said, "I want you to cook me some meatloaf. Mashed potatoes and brown gravy. The potatoes have to be from actual potatoes and the gravy can't be from one of those packages."

"You want me to pick some corn out of my garden and shuck it, too?" Katniss asked.

"That would be great!" He said with a deep bark of laughter.

Prim rolled her eyes. "You two."

"What about us?" They asked at the same time.

Prim laughed. "The Best Friend Curtain has fallen and I am now just going to watch you two have fun while I sit over here trying to follow the conversation."

Katniss leaned over and wrapped an arm around her sister's shoulders. "Sorry, sis." She gave her a sloppy kiss to her cheek. "Tell me about school. Your last year of undergrad!"

"Yeah." She sounded a little apprehensive. "I'm applying to med schools. But I may take a year off." She pointed at Gale. "That one over there swears he'll move anywhere I move until I'm ready to settle down, but I don't want to make him leave too soon. We've got friends in District Two."

"And I like my job." Gale said. "But if you get into med school across the country, I'll go with you. And our friends can call and text and Facebook."

Prim nodded. "I know. But you shouldn't throw it all away for me. I'm just some girl."

"Some girl I love." He said. "And I'll follow you anywhere."

"You don't have to." Prim argued.

Katniss pointed at Gale. "My sister says you stay, you stay."

"Yes, ma'am." Gale said with a chuckle. "You Everdeens don't back down."
"No, we don't." Katniss said with a laugh.

They spent the rest of the meal catching up. Katniss smiled every time Prim and Gale exchanged light touches. Her baby sister was in love. And with her best friend at that. It had taken a little getting used to, but she liked the idea more and more with each passing month.

When they got back to the house, Prim and Gale went to the guest room to put their things away. Katniss got out her computer to start editing Gale's video.

Gale plopped down beside her. "We can do the intro tomorrow. But I can throw the credits together and put up the title sequence tonight."

Katniss nodded. "Let me watch this on a bigger screen. I still can't believe you got the shot." She clicked around a few times and the video came up.

On screen, Gale stood with his bow and arrow at the ready. The target was several yards away. He nodded and Prim came into view to wrap a bandana around his eyes. He let the arrow go and it landed just left of the center.

"Holy cow!" Prim exclaimed on camera.

Katniss started the second video.

Gale's face filled the screen. "So Prim insisted I try this again to make sure it wasn't a fluke. So we're going again. Let's see what happens."

It was a lot quicker the second time and the arrow even landed closer to the center of the target. There was much celebration and hugging between the couple and then Gale looked into the camera again. "Katniss, you owe me dinner."

Katniss chuckled. "Okay, let's splice these things together and add the opening and ending sequences. We'll do the intro and the Q and A tomorrow once you're rested." She started clicking around on the video editing program on her computer. "I have to work for a couple hours tomorrow. It's supposed to rain Monday." She scrunched up her nose.

"Your sister does that." Gale commented.

Katniss chuckled. "It's an Everdeen thing. We get it from our dad."

"I'll do the intro while you work to get it out of the way." He assured her. "And then we do the Q and A when you get back."

"Sounds good. You pick five questions and I pick five?" She stifled a yawn. "And I need to find a meatloaf recipe. BreakingBread did one that looked easy."

"BreakingBread?" Gale asked. "That guy you keep sending me videos of?"

"Yeah." She felt suddenly self-conscious. "It always looks so delicious."

"You talking about the food or him?" He chuckled. "Do you know where he lives?"

"No." She said quickly. "I'm not a stalker."

"You just watch his videos obsessively."
Prim walked into the room just as Katniss punched Gale hard on the shoulder. "I watch them like a lot of people watch our videos, asshole. I'm not a stalker."

Prim squeezed between them. "Hey, what's going on?"

"Your boyfriend is on his way to getting his ass kicked." Katniss said.

"Your sister has a crush on another vlogger." Gale added.

Katniss reached over Prim and tried to poke Gale, but Prim stopped her. "Who is this vlogger?"

"His name is Peeta." Katniss said. "His channel is called BreakingBread and all the food looks delicious."

Gale giggled. "Katniss thinks he has nice buns."

"Cheese buns." Katniss corrected.

"That's totally what I meant." Gale said with a mischievous grin.

Prim indicated the computer. "Show me."

Katniss opened up the browser and clicked on the bookmark to get her to BreakingBread's channel.

"You have it saved?" Gale asked.

"It's a good vlog." Katniss said defensively. She opened up the latest video on how to make the perfect steak.

When it was over, Prim said appreciatively, "I'd eat his steak."

Gale glared playfully at his girlfriend. "Mine is better."

Prim kissed his cheek and rubbed his back. "I love your steak. But I wouldn't kick that guy out of bed for eating crackers."

Gale shook his head and picked up Katniss's computer. "Let me throw together these titles." He started typing and clicking around on the screen.

Prim stood. "I've got to get my computer and work on some homework." She left the room and returned, taking a spot on the floor in front of Gale.

Katniss took out her phone and sat back to find the BreakingBread meatloaf video. She watched it twice, stopping often to jot down notes. "Breadcrumbs." She grumbled.

"What?" Gale asked, pulling an earbud out of one ear. "Did you say something to me?"

"No." She went into the kitchen and started looking through her cabinets. "Who has breadcrumbs?" She asked herself as she made a shopping list. "What could I use instead?" Katniss was a good cook, but she wasn't always the best at improvising. Some things she knew how to replace, but others she drew a blank.

She opened the BreakingBread page again and searched until she found the button to send a message. "Hi, I've been a big fan of your work for a while and finally got up the courage to try your meatloaf recipe (my friend Gale is forcing me to make it for him). But I don't have breadcrumbs and I don't have any use for them other than this recipe, so is there a replacement I could use or am I
She sent the message and went back to Gale's side.

The evening grew late and Katniss reluctantly went to bed. Prim and Gale went a short time later. But sleep was hard to come by most nights and this was no exception. Katniss was finally dozing when she felt the bed shift. She rolled over to see Prim taking the space on the other side of her too-big bed.

"What are you doing?" Katniss asked softly.

Prim froze, she didn't realize her sister was awake. "Gale snores more here than back home." She explained as she settled in. "And I decided I'd rather sleep in here with you than sleep on the couch."

Katniss laughed softly and rested her head on her pillow once more. "So everything is working out?" She asked. "You and Gale are good?"

Prim nodded. "He's really sweet to me. But it's not perfect. We fight a lot. We always make up, though."

Katniss watched her in concern. "What do you fight about?"

Prim shrugged. "Mostly med school. But the vlog is another argument. He was late to our anniversary dinner because he was answering messages from fans."

"I'm sorry, duckie. I'll talk to him about that."

"Thanks." Prim snuggled close and yawned. "We're doing dinner with the Hawthornes tomorrow. We need rest."

Katniss chuckled. "It's not the Hawthornes we have to worry about. Effie and Haymitch will be there."

Prim scrunched up her nose. "That woman is crazy!"

Katniss chuckled. "She is. But she was also one of Mom's closest friends after Hazelle."

"I really miss Mom." Prim said softly.

"Me too."

"And Dad." Prim sighed. "But we move on, don't we?"

"We do our best." Katniss yawned and closed her eyes. "Get some sleep, kiddo, I have to work a bit tomorrow." Her phone made a noise to indicate she had an email, but she ignored it. Whatever it was could wait for the morning.

Peeta leaned over the couch between Finnick and Annie. He held out his phone. "Please tell me my eyes aren't playing tricks on me and that says I have a message from slings-and-arrows."

Annie laughed softly. "That's what that says."

Finnick asked, "Is it from that hot chick or the guy?"
Peeta moved to the recliner at the side and opened the email. "Katniss." He breathed. It was a lovely name.

"Is that the girl?" Finnick asked.

Annie rolled her eyes. "Yes, Finnick, that's the girl."

Peeta quickly typed out his response as Annie and Finnick argued playfully.

"Crackers can be used as a replacement, just crumble the same volume as the breadcrumbs. You can also use rolled oats. But if you want to make some homemade breadcrumbs, cube a couple slices of bread and put on a single layer in the oven at 350 for about ten minutes until crisp. Then you can either pulse them in a food processor or put them in a zip top bag and break them up with a heavy cup. Glad you like the channel. I'm actually a huge fan of yours, too. Can I ask a question for your Q&A?"

The obvious one was to ask about her relationship status, but he didn't know her and that was way too invasive. Though he was sure someone would ask it. Instead he asked, "How did you get your username? Is it a Shakespeare thing or something else? —Peeta"

He read back over his message several times before he sent it. He sighed. "Katniss sent me a message asking about food."

Finnick made a rude gesture with his hand and Annie stopped him. "That's awesome." She said.

"She said she's a fan." Peeta said, dreamy quality to his voice.

Finnick reached over and pushed his leg. "Get you some, Peeta!"

"I get plenty." Peeta said, calculating in his head the last time he'd actually had a sexual experience that wasn't alone. It had been a while. "Well, I'm fine." He said after a while.

Finnick shook his head. "Whatever, dude." He wrapped his arm around Annie's waist and pulled her across his lap. He gave her a deep kiss.

"Get a room." Peeta said as he tried to avert his gaze.

"I believe we will." Annie stood and pulled Finnick up. "Good night, Peeta."

"Good night. Try to keep it down, please." Peeta called after them.

Finnick closed their bedroom door and immediately yelled, "Oh, Annie!"

A hand hit the door and Annie's voice filtered down the hall, "Finnick, harder!"

They simulated sex noises for a short time longer while Peeta squirmed uncomfortably. He heard them laughing and then the noise dropped. It wouldn't be long before it all came back for real. Peeta turned out all the lights and locked the doors before settling into his bed with his earbuds in and his computer on his lap. He probably wouldn't get a reply from Katniss. He wasn't sure where she lived, but it was late in District 12 and he'd had a long week.

He looked over the PowerPoint for his Monday lesson. The kids really liked seeing all the different pictures that he showed them and he loved sharing his love of art with impressionable minds. This week they were starting on Impressionism, Peeta's favorite artistic movement. He loved the way they painted light. It was his favorite thing to paint on his own time. When he had the time.
He'd last painted a full picture for his classroom and it was a reproduction of a cartoon on the wall. He'd copied several other artistic styles at the time, but it definitely wasn't the same as making something of his own.

Maybe one of these days.

Chapter End Notes

If you would like to submit a possible question for Gale and Katniss's Q&A, you can send me a message or ask on Tumblr, I'm booksrockmyface. If you have a Tumblr, I will use your url there unless otherwise specified. If you don't have one or want me to use a different one, tell me one you want to be used in the story. I would love to make this as interactive as these characters' vlogs.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your enthusiasm for this story. I am very excited to be working on it. My most recent Everlark (Catch Me As I Fall) is pretty heavy, so the lighter tone in this is a nice reprieve for me. I hope you enjoy reading this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Happy reading!

Annie swung into the art classroom just as Peeta's last class left.

"Don't you have students?" He teased.

She laughed. "Computer lab day." She leaned against the table. "Did she respond to you yet?"

With a grin, Peeta pulled out his phone and leaned against the table beside her. "She asked about a gravy recipe. I told her I'd love to know how it all worked out." He clicked on his mail icon and frowned. "Nothing yet." He put his phone up. "Finnick's birthday. Are we filming tonight?"

Annie shrugged. "As long as you're up for it."

"I am. You got everything at the store the other day?"

She nodded. "Finnick said he'd be late tonight. I'll let him know we're filming so he doesn't come in and ruin everything." She chuckled and crossed her arms. "I miss Dad."

"Me too." He sighed. "Nothing I make compares to his."

She rested her forehead on his shoulder a moment and then stood. "So what are you guys working on?" She looked over the computer screen. "Impressionists. Your favorite. I remember when you reproduced Starry Night until my mom finally told you to find something else to paint."

"Who doesn't like Starry Night?"

"All of us." Annie laughed. She fished her phone out of her pocket and smiled. "Excuse me. My boyfriend is on a break." She headed out the door, her phone in her hands.

"Are you ever going to marry him?" Peeta called after her.

Annie paused and turned. A look of fear on her features. "God, I hope not." She turned and continued out the door with her face buried in her phone screen.

He finished cleaning up his classroom for the day. He had car line duty and was always the first one out to greet the kids. He knew them all by name and most of the parents took a moment to wave as their kids got in their seats.

After everyone was gone and the room was locked up for the evening, Peeta wandered across the building to Annie's classroom.
"Hey." She said with a smile. "Let's get our butts out of here. I'm ready to cook."

He followed her out to the parking lot. "Do you really not want to marry Finnick?"

She got into the driver's side of the car and waited for him to get in the other side before she answered. "I've been with him since high school. We've had our ups and downs, but I know he loves me as much as I love him. I don't need to be married for that to be any truer."

Peeta nodded.

She gave him a wary look. "Why? Has he said something about asking me?"

"No, but I just… I'd love to be married one of these days." He said wistfully.

She gave him a teasing grin. "To slings-and-arrows-Katniss?"

He felt his face heat up. "I had a dream the other night… Never mind."

"A sexy dream?" She poked his arm.

"Maybe."

"She's got a nice rack."

He waved her off. "You sound like Finnick." He said. Then he reluctantly agreed. "Yeah, she does have an impressive set of breasts."

Annie let out a giddy laugh.

"She's just a girl on a screen, though. I have no chance." He turned and stared out the window.

She was silent for a moment and Peeta was lost in his thoughts until she yelled, "VidCon!"

He jumped and then gave her a confused look. "What about it?"

"Ask if she's going." She suggested. "And keep talking to her. Find every opportunity. If she's supposed to be your girlfriend, you can make it happen."

"Yeah, yeah." Peeta wasn't much for fate. And he wasn't very good at talking to girls he liked. Johanna had only talked to him because Finnick introduced them and forced the conversation. And that relationship was mostly conducted in the bedroom anyway.

His phone chimed with an email. He took it out to find a message from Katniss. "I didn't poison him, so I guess the recipe was a success. I'm going to talk about it in our next video. Mind if I use a clip from yours?"

He grinned as he responded, "Yeah, go for it. I totally don't mind you using a clip. I'm glad it was a hit. Any other advice you need, just ask." He turned his grin to Annie. "They're going to use a clip from BreakingBread in the next slings-and-arrows video."

Annie let out a triumphant cheer. "You've hit the big time." She pulled into their driveway. "I wonder how much fan overlap you two have."

"I guess we'll find out soon enough." Peeta made his way inside. He didn't notice the aching in his knee until he started moving. He grumbled to himself and took a pain pill to get him through the taping. "You want to get the camera and stuff set up and I'll start getting ingredients?"
"Works for me." She exited to her room and came back with the camera. "I'll make sure to start the editing so you don't see anything embarrassing." She said as she began putting it in place.

Peeta gave his step-sister a hard look. "Were you making a sex tape with my camera?"

Annie was contrite. "I'm sorry. It was Finnick's idea. We couldn't get a good angle with the phone and it's all grainy anyway."

"You know, as a teacher, making videos like that could get you fired." He sat several ingredients from the fridge on the island.

"Only if we post them online. We bring them to parties and stuff if we want to share. Only loyal friends get to see our handiwork."

Peeta made a disgusted face. "Just the thought of watching someone else have sex…"

Annie shrugged. "That's what porn is."

"You know I don't watch porn."

She scoffed. "Don't remind me. I had to listen to Jo complain about your lack of interest more times than I could count. I never did like you with her."

"Only because you wanted her." Peeta pointed out.

Annie shook her head adamantly. Then she stopped. "Well, maybe a little. But only because her and Finnick combined—"

He put his hands over his ears. "I've heard this before. I don't need to hear it again."

"Best orgasm of my life." She yelled.

Peeta pointed to the camera Annie was still fiddling with. "I hope that isn't recording." He went back to the meal prep, placing all the ingredients in nice piles. He started slicing an onion. "Anyway, I don't care about your sex life. It's none of my business. Even if I do have to listen to every sigh and moan." He pointed his knife at her. "If I ever bring a girl home, I'm going to make sure she's a screamer."

"You do that. I think it's hot." She pushed a button. "Recording."

Peeta flashed a smile. "Hi, welcome back to BreakingBread!" He said into the camera. "Today is my best friend Finnick's birthday and to honor that, Annie and I are making my dad's beef stroganoff. It was one of mine and Annie's favorites growing up. It seems like it could be a complicated recipe, but I promise you it isn't." He indicated the onion he was slicing. "I'm going to finish slicing this onion while Annie handles the mushrooms."

Annie wrinkled her nose. "Thanks, Peeta." She sighed as she plucked a few and went to work.

Peeta talked constantly. It was one of the things that made editing difficult. He was so passionate about food that he had something to say about every little ingredient, even the salt and pepper.

Finnick arrived home just as Peeta put the egg noodles into the boiling water. Annie continued to stir the sauce and accepted Finnick's kiss. They spoke softly to each other in cooing voices that were almost sickeningly sweet.

Peeta turned to the camera. "I have to live with this every day."
Finnick punched his arm and sat down at the table. "Anything I can do to help?"

Peeta pointed to the fridge. "You can get the salad things out and put that together."

Annie took out some plates and sat them on the counter in front of Peeta. He continued to talk to the camera as he finished the meal. After the salad was finished, Annie and Finnick snuck out of the kitchen for a few moments of alone time. Peeta took one of the plates and artfully placed some noodles in the center. Over that, he slowly, almost seductively, poured on a portion of sauce.

He leaned in and smiled wistfully to the camera. "My dad used to mix it all together in one pot. It's how he made spaghetti, too. But I like it better this way myself. You do it your way." He took a bite and closed his eyes as he chewed. He opened them slowly. "Delicious. Thank you for joining me on BreakingBread. Check back next week for another amazing recipe."

Annie turned off the camera. "Let's eat!" She made a plate for Finnick and kissed his cheek as she sat it in front of him. "Happy birthday, baby."

"Thanks, Annie-Cakes." He accepted the bottle of beer she offered and tipped it toward Peeta. "You, too, Peeta. I'm sure this is delicious."

"You're welcome. I'll bake you a cake later." Peeta promised. "Midnight snack."

"Great! Thanks." Finnick smiled as he dug into the meal. "So have you heard from that Kat chick?"

"Katniss." Peeta corrected. "And yeah. She said her friend really liked the recipe."

"That Gale guy? He her boyfriend?" Finnick asked. He eyed Peeta as he took a sip of his beer.

Peeta shrugged and chewed quickly. "I don't know." He swallowed. "He's got this little blonde in a lot of his videos. They are very touchy. But she could just be a very close friend who touches everyone. Like Delly."

"Speaking of Delly," Annie asked, "why haven't you ever dated her?"

Peeta choked on his sip of water. "Date Delly? She's like a sister. That would be weird."

"But she had that crush on you." Annie pointed out. "When you were with Jo."

"I was too wrapped up in Jo." He pushed his food around his plate. "That wasn't the healthiest relationship. The only thing we had in common was the bedroom. Any attempt at a real date ended in disaster." He looked between the other two. "A win for you guys, though."

Finnick chuckled. "For a little bit. But I get jealous after a while."

Annie rubbed his arm. "This one likes to have me all to himself for long stretches."

"I know what you like. And I know what I like." Finnick grinned. "We work well together." He leaned over and Annie met him the rest of the way for a sweet kiss.

They spent the rest of the meal talking about their day. Finnick took over, as he usually did. It gave Peeta time to fantasize about Katniss. What would she think of this recipe? Would she attempt another of his now that she'd mastered his meatloaf?

"Hey, Peeta, where did you go?" Finnick asked. Clearly he'd been trying to get Peeta's attention for a while. He laughed. "Fantastic about Katniss?"
"No." Peeta's face grew hot. "Just thinking about the next recipe."

"Probably thinking about Katniss," Annie said. "They're going to use part of one of his videos in their next one." She had a proud smile on her face.

Peeta looked down at his plate. "I'm sure it's nothing major."

"For the rest of the world, maybe." Annie said. "But it's one of your favorite channels. And they are going to be talking about you. I'm so happy for you, Peeta. And I'm sure Dad would be proud."

Peeta nodded. "I know he would be." He stood and started to put the dishes away.

"You stop right there." Finnick said. "Cook doesn't clean up around here."

"Neither does the birthday boy. So either we all cancel each other out and have a messy kitchen until tomorrow or I just do this now."

"I'll help." Finnick offered. "It'll get done faster that way."

They all pitched in and had the kitchen clean in no time. Finnick and Annie curled up together on the couch and Peeta stared at them enviously for a moment before he announced that he was going to relax in his room for a while before baking the cake.

But his relaxing consisted of watching Katniss's Greatest Hits and wondering about when the Q&A video would be up. Would she really answer his question like she promised? Maybe he should have asked the relationship one.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This was a fun chapter to write! I want to thank everyone who sent in a question. Don’t worry, there will be another Q&A eventually and I’ll let you know ahead of time so more questions can be sent. But suggestions for recipes for Peeta or historical archery facts for Katniss and Gale to talk about are welcome.

See bellow for an extra note.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katniss sat down on the sofa while Gale finished setting up the equipment. She checked her phone as it chimed. "Oh, Peeta said we could use his video." She looked up. "You know how to grab those, right?"

"Yes, I think." He handed over the remote and settled in beside her. "You could always ask your boyfriend to send over his recording." He teased.

She nudged him with her shoulder. "Stop."

Gale asked seriously. "When are you ever going to get over Cato breaking your heart?"

"Cato was a jerk and not worth a fraction of my thoughts anymore." She smoothed down her shirt. "Time to film." She pushed the button. "Hi, everyone! Katniss here with the second-best archer in Panem, Gale."

Gale shrugged. "I am definitely the second-best. With the exception of that last challenge."

Katniss chuckled and leaned into him. "It's a draw most of the time." She smiled proudly at her friend. "Did you guys watch the video?"

"I killed it!" He said with a triumphant laugh.

"You did." She patted his knee. "So I get this guy for a whole week. And because of that, we decided to celebrate by answering some of your questions."

Gale rubbed his hands together. "I'm ready."

"You better be." Katniss picked up a piece of paper. "We both picked a few of our favorites, but we also decided to answer one we get a lot right here at the start." She grinned at the camera. "Several users have asked 'Are you guys dating?' or some variation of that. The answer is no. We are not dating each other. I am single." She looked to her friend.

Gale smiled at her and then turned to the camera. "And I am dating someone. You see her in my videos often. Her name is Prim, Katniss's sister."

Katniss nodded. "And a few people have caught on." She looked down at the paper. it's-just-ellie-
always said, 'That blond girl in Gale's videos looks a lot like Katniss. Is she your sister? Is she dating Gale? If so, Katniss, on a scale of 1 to 10, how did you react when they started dating?'

Gale started laughing. "Like a twenty."

Katniss started to feel offended, but shook her head. "It was a giant shock."

He sent her a no-nonsense look. "'Giant shock' is definitely an understatement." He scratched his cheek and combed his fingers through his hair. It was a sign of nervousness she had witnessed so many times over the years. Most recently when he'd started seeing Prim. "Katniss and I have been best friends forever."

"Our moms were best friends in high school and stayed that way." She interjected.

"Right." He nodded. "And Prim was just the annoying younger sibling. I have three of my own, I know." He snorted. "So she went away to college over in District 2. She came back for the summer after her first year. And she wasn't the annoying little girl anymore." His face turned whimsical. "She had grown up in those months away. And we were hanging out one day, Katniss was working and I was keeping an eye on my little sister Posy. Prim came over. We started talking. Found out we had quite a bit in common and also quite a bit of complementing traits. I asked her out on a date. She said yes."

"They snuck around for a while, which made it worse," Katniss added. "They made excuses to be other places when I wanted to hang out. Both with different excuses every time."

"She was getting suspicious and angry, so we finally told everyone."

"I hit the roof." Katniss laughed.

"She didn't talk to us for a week." Gale said. "But she loves us both so much that the grudge didn't last too long."

Katniss laughed again. "So the answer is about a fifteen. But they work really well together, so I've accepted it."

They shared a smile and then went on to the next question.

Gale looked over the paper. "'Katniss, who are your favorite celeb singers and YouTube singers?' Asked by thesnowyangelwriter." He gave her an expectant look.

Katniss scrunched up her nose. "That's a hard one because it changes. I really like Adele's new stuff right now. It's... Words are hard with that. But I love it. It's like she makes you want to call your ex-boyfriend."

Gale groaned. "I've had that one stuck in my head since I got here. You're always humming it."

"Which one?" She challenged.

He gave her an expectant look. "You want me to sing?"

"Maybe." She giggled.

He laughed nervously. "It's that one that goes, 'water under the bridge' or whatever." He barely sang the lyric.

She smiled. "Water Under the Bridge! I love that one!" She started dancing to the beat in her head
and sang, "If you're not the one for me, then how come I can bring you to your knees." She nodded. "I love that song. And I am not sorry that I love that song. You guys need to all go listen. I'll link it for you. You have to listen to it at least three times."

"So what's the second answer?" Gale prodded.

Katniss contemplated. "I find new artists all the time. I adore looking for covers."

"You should do one. Everyone's going to be begging after that performance."

"We'll see." She felt her face heating up. "Okay, for my favorite YouTube performers, I recently discovered this girl who did a one woman band thing with an Adele song. Her name is Lilly27 and I'll link her, too." She paused a moment. "Oh, Todrick Hall! Have you ever listened to him?" She asked Gale.

He nodded. "You've sent me a few of those."

"The Spell Block Tango is my favorite. I'll like that one, too."

Gale placed a hand on Katniss's knee. "Maybe we should stop while we're ahead. We'll be linking half of YouTube by the time this thing is over."

Katniss laughed. "Thanks." She turned to the camera. "And thank you for the question. What's the next?"

He read. "'When did you get the idea to do something like this and why? Bye, big fan XShipper'"

"Hi, xshipper." Katniss waved. "The idea came together over time."

"Yeah." Gale jumped in. "You know that game horse that people play with a basketball? The one where they take turns making baskets from all over court? We did the same with the bow to waste time and get better."

"And then we'd start getting a little crazy with it. And Gale's brother Rory started filming it and showing his friends and they said they wanted to see more."

"I moved to be with Prim after we shot our first few videos, so it kind of became a video letter exchange."

Katniss nodded. "Two years we've been doing this now. So it's been a wild ride."

"And so much fun." Gale nodded enthusiastically. "So thank you to all of you who have stuck around and brought in your friends and family. We have nearly half a million followers now. So that's cool."

"We're basically famous." She chortled. "Except that there are several with two and three times that, so not really."

He shrugged. "The numbers don't matter nearly as much as how awesome you all are." He winked at the camera.

"The next question comes from HuntingHavarti. 'What's your favorite bow? And where did you learn archery?'" Katniss felt a warm spot grow in the middle of her chest and a bit of a lump caught in her throat. She swallowed past it and said, "I learned from my dad. I held a bow before I ever held a pencil and could hit the outer edge of a target not long after. He said I was a natural."
"And I learned from Katniss." Gale said. "Well, her and her dad, but he let her do most of the teaching to help her hone her skills."

She nodded. "He was a great teacher. He made bows, hand carved them. I have all sorts of bows made of all different materials for all different things and I like them a lot, but the ones my dad made are my favorite."
"I have one of Caleb's bows and it's pretty awesome. But Prim had this one custom painted for my last birthday with primroses all over it and it's amazing. That one's my favorite." Gale grinned.

"Sentimental much?" She teased.

He shrugged.

"Two more questions, I think." Katniss pointed out.

"Yeah, this one comes from a guest user who didn't leave a name, but it's a good question. They ask, 'Have you ever hunted for food? What could you use for arrows if you run out? Does shooting a bow make you good at other hand-eye things?'

Katniss said, "I used to hunt with my dad when I was little. He did most of the killing, though. Gale came with us once."

Gale nodded. "I made too much noise and scared everything away. Caleb was not happy." He chuckled. "Katniss and I go out sometimes, but he's definitely better than me."

"For sure." She laughed.

"If you run out of arrows, there's not a lot you can do." Gale said. "Katniss makes arrows, but I never got the hang of it myself. I'm better with traps."

"We should each do tutorials about that." Katniss suggested.

He grinned. "We should. We will." He looked at the camera. "We'll have that for you soon."

"For that last question, we're not scientists, so we don't know the science of it, but we're both pretty decent at video games, so it's a possibility."

Gale nodded. "The one thing I'm better at than Katniss. I kick her butt every time."

Katniss laughed. "Yes. All the time." He picked up the paper. "Our last question comes from another vlog that I am a big fan of. BreakingBread is a cooking channel. Peeta shows how to make even the simplest foods look like they took all day. And they only take about a half hour on average. Some take longer, but he makes it look so easy."

Gale placed his hand on Katniss's knee. "Can we cut down on the fangirling so we can get to the question?" He gave her a teasing look.

She felt her face flush. "Anyway, Peeta asked us, 'How did you get your username? Is it a Shakespeare thing or something else?'

"It is Shakespeare." Gale said. "Katniss and I were forced into a production of Hamlet together in high school. Katniss was backstage crew and I was a guard. Katniss was put in charge of helping Hamlet memorize his lines and she ended up having them down better than him."

Katniss laughed. "Yeah, they threatened to put me on as Hamlet if he didn't get his lines down the
week before the show."

Gale nodded. "She would have been a much better Hamlet."

Katniss looked into the camera and leaned close. She softly recited, "To be, or not to be-that is the question.; Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer, The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles." She leaned back. "I hope that answers your question, Peeta. And now for some more fangirling, we'll ignore Gale for a minute." She put her hand over his face when he tried to talk. "In the last video Gale made his shot blindfolded. Twice." She held up two fingers, disbelief still on her face at the fact. "And I promised him if he did, I would cook for him. He requested meatloaf. So I made the recipe from BreakingBread's video. Insert video here. Doesn't that look awesome? Peeta informed me that I could substitute crumbled crackers for the breadcrumbs and it was a success. Wasn't it, Gale?"

He nodded, her hand still over his face.

She smiled and looked back to the camera. "Good. That's all the questions we have time for. Go check out BreakingBread and those other videos. All will be linked below. Have a great day." She dropped her hand.

"And may the odds be ever in your favor." Gale said with a grin just before Katniss cut the feed.

Katniss let out a relieved breath. "That's done."

Gale nodded and started breaking down the equipment. Katniss got up to help.

"You should find out where they bread guy lives and go jump him." He suggested as he picked up the tripod and started collapsing it.

"Jump him?" She shook her head. "Are you going to a lot of frat parties in District 2?"

"I mean it, Katniss. You don't show your emotions much, but you are really transparent about this and I don't know why."

She shrugged and finished packing away the microphones. "I just really like his channel."

He snorted. "Right." He closed the camera case and held up the chip. "You want to start the editing now or wait for tomorrow?"

"Wait." She said. "I had a hard morning trying to beat that storm." She yawned and stretched. "I'm going to call it a night."

"Would it distract you if I Skype with Prim?" He asked tentatively.

"I shouldn't be able to hear anything." She assured him.

"I'll look into that convention while I'm at it. Okay?"

"Thanks." She wrapped her arms around him and took a deep breath. "I'm so happy Prim has you."

He gave her a squeeze. "Me too."

They let go and shared one more friendly smile before Katniss yawned and waved. She called, "Goodnight, Gale." She closed her bedroom door and leaned against it. She took her phone out of her pocket and checked her messages. She read back over Peeta's and smiled. She didn't need cooking advice, but she did want to let him know about the video.
"Just finished filming the Q&A. Should be up by Thursday, I think. I'll make Gale work on the preliminary editing tomorrow while I work. We answered your question last. And the clip of your video will be at the end of that. Would you like an advanced viewing?" She clicked on the send button and then plugged in her phone and got ready for bed.

Her phone chimed with a new message just as she was settling in. She read the sender name and smiled. BreakingBread. "Thank you for the offer to get an early view, but I can wait like everyone else. I'm curious to know what other questions you chose to answer."

She turned out her light. "Well, everyone seems to wonder if Gale and I are a couple. Most of the questions were about that. There were some other really great ones. Are you going to do a Q&A anytime soon?"

She put her phone on the table and curled into her side. She heard Gale's laughter and the faint sound of Prim's response, but not the words. She sounded happy.

Katniss's phone chimed with the response. "No plans yet for my own. Maybe sometime in the spring. But I can answer any questions you have without a video."

She typed quickly, "You covered that with the meatloaf. Thank you so much for that, by the way." She was about to hit send when she had a second thought. She added, "What's your favorite thing to cook?"

She fell asleep before she could see his response.

Chapter End Notes

The one name that wasn't from a Tumblr user is HuntingHarvati which was offered up by everybirdfellsilent. She posed some questions I'm going to use later for later, but also gave me a few usernames to borrow for this fic, so thanks, dear!

To find the videos Katniss mentions, go to YouTube and add the following to the end of the address:

Adele performing Water Under the Bridge -- /watch?v=MIgKHiiFfB0k
Lilly27 One Woman Band cover -- /watch?v=ghIg2sjQYvA
Todrick Hall Spell Block Tango -- /watch?v=GAUZIw95ueM
Sorry this took so long, I wanted to finish up some other things. You can now read Catch Me As I Fall in its entirety. Thank you so much for your enthusiasm with this story. I hope you continue to like it!

As a little extra, I want you to know that whenever someone is watching a video, the action will be bold italics. For emails, it will be italics with quotation marks. From now on, text messages will be bold, no italics. I hope this makes sense. I realized things could get a little confusing if that change wasn't made.

I can't wait to see what you think if this chapter!

Happy reading!

Peeta watched the Q&A video four times as soon as it came out. He memorized the way Katniss's mouth moved when she recited the Shakespeare. And it was doing some very uncomfortable things below his waistline.

Finnick threw open his bedroom door. "Tell your sister I'm right."

"Damnit, Finnick, don't you knock?" Peeta pulled a pillow over his lap.

His friend laughed. "I thought I heard you in here watching that archery chick."

"I was." Peeta said defensively.

Finnick chuckled. "Hey, Annie!" He called. "I was right."

Annie appeared over his shoulder. "Jerking off to Katniss's dulcet tones and rockin' bod?"

Peeta stood and pushed them both out the door. "Privacy would be nice."

"Next time you want to rub one out," Finnick suggested, reaching for the door knob, "lock the door." He flipped the lock before pulling it closed after himself. He and Annie giggled on the other side as they moved back toward the living room.

Peeta shook his head and sat back down on his bed. He opened up the message Katniss sent a few days before and read over it for the thousandth time. He typed out a response. "Love the story about the name. I'm not up on my Shakespeare, but I've seen Hamlet. The one with Mel Gibson. Annie is in love with him, so we've watched everything of his. So I had to think a while about your question. I like to cook everything! But I think one of the things I like the most is my dad's cheese buns. We used to make them together all the time when I was a kid. Do you have a favorite recipe?"

As he sent it off, he wasn't satisfied with his question. He really wanted to ask more about her relationship with Gale. And when she said she was single, did that mean she dated casually? Did she not date at all? Was she even straight? Did she think he was cute?
But Peeta was sure none of that was his business. They didn't even know each other.

He reclined on the bed and looked up at the ceiling. He could hear the murmur of Finnick and Annie's voices as they argued over something they were watching on TV. He only heard a word here or there.

Resigning himself to finish up some prep for the next week, Peeta rolled out of his bed and headed for the desk in the corner, laptop under his arm. His phone went off with a new email as he was getting the computer set up.

"Katniss." He breathed as he opened it. "Mel Gibson's Hamlet leaves a lot to be desired. If you can find it, watch the Kenneth Branagh version. Anything Shakespeare that man does is gold! I'm a giant fan of his Love's Labour's Lost. But I also adore his direction of Thor, for something completely different. My favorite recipe? I make a mean spaghetti! But fried rice is another staple at our house. Both are pretty easy for me. I could make them with my eyes closed. Can I ask a personal question? Is your dad still around? You talk about him a lot, but the way you talk made me wonder. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine. My dad passed away when I was twelve. A work accident. He taught me everything about archery. Even taught me how to make bows and arrows. His were definitely better than mine could ever be. Anyway, I hope you have a good night."

Peeta looked at the message a long time before he turned to his computer to write the answer. His phone was too small to look at when his eyes blurred with unshed tears.

"My dad died just a few years ago. He had a bad heart. He owned a bakery and it was very stressful. It took its toll." He sat back.

He never talked about it with anyone. Not even Johanna had heard the story from him. It was Annie who had told her after Jo had teased him about "daddy issues."

He leaned over the keyboard and added, "I miss him every day. He was a great man."

Peeta sat back and wiped his eyes. His dad had really been his rock all his life. Losing him hit Peeta so hard that he pushed himself to work hard after that. But it also pushed him to share the passion for cooking his father passed down to him by filming BreakingBread.

There was a tap on the door and Annie called, "Hey, Peeta? Can I come in?"

He opened the door and leaned against it. "What?"

"Are you okay?" Annie asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He wiped his eyes. "Just thinking about Dad."

She rubbed his arm. "It's hard this time of year."

Peeta nodded.

Annie wrapped her arms around his middle and leaned her head on his shoulder. He returned the embrace and they held each other a long time before she stepped back.

"I love you." She said. "You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know." He said. "I love you, too."

"I wanted to make sure the teasing didn't get to you. Finnick and I can be a little mean about your
personal life sometimes. But we just want you happy."

"I'm mostly happy." He admitted.

"Mostly?" She always pushed him.

"I'm fine, Annie." Peeta sighed. "I'm fine for now. It's like you said, this time of year is hard. And it would be hard anyway, without thinking about pushing thirty and single."

"You're still a few years from thirty." Annie rubbed his arm again. "I'm available to talk."

"I know." He chewed his lip. "But you and Finnick have been together forever and what do I have? Nothing. A couple girlfriends that didn't work out."

"Peeta, not everyone has the same timeline. You just haven't met your girl yet."

"Maybe I have and I just blew it."

His phone when off and she grinned, "Slings-and-arrows-Katniss sending you messages?"

His ears warmed up. "Yeah. She lost her dad, too."

"Another thing you have in common. You should ask for her number."

"I can't ask for her number. I'm a stranger." He snatched his phone off the desk. "But I'm going to keep emailing." He read the message.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your dad. How about we move on to happier things? What do you do when you aren't making videos?"

He grinned. "She wants to know what I do."

"What you do?" Annie followed him into the room.

Peeta nodded and quickly typed his reply, "Elementary school art teacher. Sometimes they're interested in what I have to teach them. Mostly they like the days we make a mess. And I hang out with Annie and Finnick. Play video games. What about you?"

He sat his phone down. "Would it be weird to say I have a crush on someone I don't know?"

Annie sat down on the edge of Peeta's bed. "You know about her. You know she's an archer. She makes her own arrows sometimes, apparently. She has a sister. Her dad is dead. She's pretty. She's smart."

"Am I not the only one with a crush?" He teased as he sat in the desk chair.

"She's not my type." She grinned.

He laughed. "Right. You like dumb blondes."

She gave him a playful shove. "I like blondes. Their intelligence has nothing to do with it."

He laughed again. "I don't know my type." He indicated his phone as it made another tone. "Her, I guess."

Annie smiled. "Get her number."
Peeta shook his head. "I'm not asking for her number." He looked at the latest message. "I'm a landscape artist. Fancy title for someone that mows lawns and plants trees and bushes. Occasionally I'll even do flowers. I mostly clear weeds and make things pretty. So what kind of video games do you play? Gale and I play a lot of Mario Kart. And Black Ops. He's definitely better than me. We weren't kidding in the video."

He grinned. "Video games."

"What?" She gave him a confused look.

"She plays video games. Mario Kart and Black Ops."

She laughed. "Random." She waved her hand. "Oh! Tell her you're an expert at Rock Band."

"But I'm not."

"She doesn't have to know that." Annie laughed. "But you did beat the guitar part on Rock Band."

"Too bad I can't actually play guitar." Peeta wrote his reply. "I'd love to play against you one of these days. Are you planning on going to VidCon?"

Annie patted his shoulder. "I'll leave you to it." She stepped out. She reached around and flipped the lock. "Keep it down in here." She winked and closed the door.

Peeta laughed and went back to his class prep.

Katniss's next message came quite a while later. "I am going to VidCon. Are you? We totally should meet up and do a video. A lot of people are fangirling/fanboying over me mentioning you. By the way, this emailing is getting a little old. How about texting?" She added her number on the end.

Peeta stared at the numbers for several minutes before he typed them into his contacts and sent her a text. Hi, it's Peeta from BreakingBread.

Her text response was much faster than her message responses. This is so much better! Hi! How are you?

Peeta smiled at the screen. He had Katniss's number. And she was actually responding to him. I'm fantastic! So you do landscaping? That's awesome! I live with Finnick and Annie and Finnick does most of the yard work. I take care of the kitchen. Annie takes care of the rest of the house, except my room.

I hate doing my own yard work. Good think I don't have a giant yard. lol

They exchanged messages for another half hour, mostly talking about Katniss's landscaping business. Peeta was interested to learn that she owned and ran the business herself. She had two other people working with her, but not until this year.

Well, I guess I've bored you enough with my life. Lol Katniss wrote.

Peeta assured her, I'm not bored. Thank you for telling me. And thank you for trusting me with your number.

He watched the three dots show up as she typed, waiting anxiously for her to say that she decided to
take away her phone number. But she didn't. It's been nice talking to you, Peeta. Maybe tomorrow we can text some more. Goodnight. :) 

He smiled and replied, Goodnight, Katniss.

He sat his phone off to the side and got ready for bed, smiling like an idiot. He'd just texted with Katniss from his favorite channel. He replayed the conversation in his head for a long time. It had been so innocent, but he couldn't help thinking about all the wonderful little things he'd learned about her.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katniss sat back and pulled off her gloves. Her back ached from all the bending over she was doing. Weeding was one of her least favorite activities and this job was a big ordeal. The homeowner, Rue Clark had moved into her recently deceased grandmother's house and the former occupant was not able to keep up her garden in her later years. It was a decent foundation, though. The rose bushes all around the house were in desperate need of pruning, but the weeds were first so she could even make it to the bushes.

Her phone went off just as she decided to get back to the pulling and she opened it to find a text from Peeta. Teaching would be great if I didn't have to deal with the parents.

Katniss laughed and typed out a reply. Landscaping would be better if I didn't have to deal with some of the homeowners. Is it parent conferences or something?

She put her phone away, pulled her gloves back on, and went back to work. She heard her phone going off, but she kept working for a few more minutes. It was almost time for her afternoon break. She piled up a few more of the offending plants and headed for ten minutes away from them.

She took out her phone as she walked toward her truck. She stuck her gloves in her back pocket and sat on the tailgate. She sipped her water as she read Peeta's text. This one parent got upset because her kid saw the David statue in one of my books. You know the one? The naked muscular guy?

Katniss snorted. I know the one. Pretty popular. She leaned against the side of her truck and drank the rest of her water while she waited for Peeta's next text. She got it just as she was hopping down to get back to work.

Well, besides the fact that the kid is a boy and has the same parts, she was upset that I would "expose" my students to something like that.

Katniss laughed. She could sort of see where the mom was coming from, but it was art. So did you get in trouble? She knelt down once more and donned her gloves. She got so lost in the repetitive nature of the dig, tug, move on of the process that she didn't realize how much time had passed until the homeowner returned from work.

Rue smiled as she stepped over. "It looks so much better, Katniss."

"Thanks." Katniss took off her gloves and wiped her brow. "Do you need me to clean up or is it cool if I keep going for a while?"

"You can keep going if you want." Rue said, that same kind smile in place. "Do you need any water or anything?"
"No, thank you. I have some water in my truck." Katniss said, rubbing at the small of her back. She'd be sore constantly for another week, she was sure.

"Is it cold?" Rue asked, a playful challenge in her voice.

Katniss shook her head. "My old cooler busted a leak. I keep forgetting to get a new one."

Rue nodded. "I'll be right back." She ducked into her house and Katniss went back to work.

Katniss took out her chiming phone. She smiled when she saw another text from Peeta.

No trouble. The principal just asked me to put the book out of the kids' reach. Only take it out to make copies or show the "appropriate" pictures. Can you sense me rolling my eyes all the way over here?

Katniss laughed and typed out her response. Lol. I think so. Roll them a little harder next time.

Rue handed her a glass of ice water. "Are you texting your boyfriend?" She asked tentatively.

Katniss shook her head. "Just a friend." She took a sip of the water and indicated the flower bed. "I'm going to work until I get to the corner of the house or until I lose light, whichever comes first. And then tomorrow I'll start on the next side."

Rue nodded. "Sounds good." She watched Katniss a moment. "So I watch your YouTube channel."

Katniss nearly choked on her water. "You do?" She'd not yet met a viewer in real life.

"I do!" Rue said. "It's so good!" She giggled. "You're just so talented."

"Did you hire me because of my YouTube channel?" Katniss asked with a sly grin.

Rue giggled again. "Maybe a little. When I saw your picture on the ad, I recognized you. But you fixed up my friends' yard last year when that storm blew through and tore up their yard when the trees fell. They said you did a great job and that your prices were reasonable."

"Well, thank you." Katniss finished her water and handed Rue her glass. "I'll get a little further and clean up."

"You want help with the cleaning part?" Rue offered.

"It's what you pay me for." Katniss said as she put the latest group of weeds with the rest.

Rue shrugged. "I've got to wait closer to my boyfriend getting off work before I can start dinner. I can help."

Katniss smiled. "I mean, if you want. I have some burlap bags in the back of my truck. I take the weeds home and put them in my composting."

"That's a great idea." Rue said enthusiastically.

"Thank you." Katniss smiled. Composting was something she had wanted to do for a long time, but had only recently started.

Rue pointed toward the truck. "Do you mind if I…?"

Katniss shook her head. "They're near the front."
They worked well together. Katniss finished her weed-pulling goal and got another bag to finish the clean-up. Katniss put the bags in the back of her truck and did one last walk around the part of the yard she'd worked on that day gathering her tools and checking for anything they missed.

Katniss said told Rue, "I'm heading out. I'll be back first thing in the morning."

Rue shook Katniss's hand. "Thank you so much. It already looks so much better. Granny would be so proud."

"I can't wait to finish it for you."

Katniss said. "I can tell that it was once gorgeous and I promise it will be again."

Katniss took her phone out of her pocket to check it before she headed home and laughed out loud when she saw Peeta's text.

*Rolls eyes aggressively and causes a headache* Did you see that one?

Katniss shook her head. **Lol. Don't hurt yourself. Are you still working?** She put her phone on the dash and drove home, calling to order Chinese delivery as she walked in the door. She took a very quick shower so she wouldn't miss the delivery of her food. Or Peeta's next text.

They had been talking like this for a couple weeks now and she was glad to have another friend other than Gale and Prim to talk to. Both of them were busy most of the time and they were in different time zones, so it was sometimes hard for them to get in sync with their messages. But from the area code on Peeta's number, Katniss found out he was just a state over. She didn't look any further, even though she desperately wanted to. She didn't want to be a stalker.

She sat on her couch and played on her phone, waiting for food and a text.

Her phone buzzed just as her doorbell went off. She stuffed her phone in her pocket with a sigh and answered the door, cash in hand. She sat the food on the kitchen counter and leaned against it to read Peeta's message before she took out the boxes.

**Done with work. Getting ready for my next video. Making pizza tonight! I'm even making the crust from scratch. Just filmed that bit and I have to let the dough rest. What are you up to?**

Katniss piled some food on a plate, sat the boxes in the fridge for her lunch the next day, and sat down in front of the TV. She took a bite of her rice before she answered Peeta. **Chinese delivery and Netflix. Gale and I are both trying to figure out what our next videos are. I think we're doing the demos. Me with arrows and him with snares.**

Katniss's phone went off just a moment later. **That'll be cool. What are you watching on Netflix?**

She wasn't sure what was next on her list. There were a few TV series she wanted to watch, but she wasn't in the mood to focus. She put on a Disney movie and answered Peeta. **Cheesy Disney movies help me unwind. :)**

**I like that one. But I have to say Lion King is my favorite. My brothers weren't fans of it. I used to run around the house singing I Just Can't Wait to be King at the top of my lungs. Lol**

Katniss grinned at the response. She had done the same thing. But it was a fun song to sing and dance to. And she admitted that.

His response to that took a while. He must be filming the rest of the video. She sat back and ate and
watched the movie. It sometimes made her cry when it hit her just right. Lilo and Nani sometimes reminded Katniss of her and Prim. When their father died, their mother went back to work, sometimes working double shifts to make ends meet. Katniss had to pick up some of the slack and it often felt like they had lost both parents.

Peeta's next response had Katniss chewing her lip in thought. **Maybe your next video can be you singing something. That little bit you did in your Q&A wasn't nearly enough.**

She stared at her message for quite a while before she sent it. **What if I make that a private thing just for you?** Her heart raced as she waited to hear back from Peeta.

Thankfully she didn't have to wait long. **I'd love that.**

Katniss looked at the text. The three dots came up to show he was typing another message.

**As long as you really want to.** He said.

And she kind of did. She turned on her camera and sang the first thing that came to mind. There was a lot of Elvis on *Lilo & Stitch*, so that's what came up.

"Wise men say only fools rush in. But I can't help falling in love with you. Shall I say? Would it be a sin? If I can't help falling in love with you." When she was done with the song she smiled shyly and turned off record. She sent the video with the message, **I hope it doesn't sound too awful. I'm not properly warmed up. :/**

Katniss's movie ended and she cleaned her dishes. She checked her phone several times to see if Peeta responded, but there wasn't one for a while. Maybe he misconstrued the lyrics of the song she chose. As she was getting ready for bed, her phone finally went off with his message.

She opened her phone to see that he'd sent his own video. The text before it said, **Give a little, get a little.** She opened the video and immediately started laughing as he sang.

"I'm gonna be a mighty king, so enemies beware!" He jumped on his bed when he said, "I'm brushing up on looking down. I'm working on my ROAR!" He sang the whole song, complete with different faces and voices for all the parts. He did choreography for all the moves, even standing under his bedroom light for the "Standing spotlight" part.

**He laughed when he was done. "I hope you enjoyed that."**

**From another room a man called, "What are you doing in there, Peeta?"**

"Gotta go. Goodnight, Katniss." He winked and the video ended.

Katniss shook her head. She was glad the words of the song she shared weren't taken to heart. It was just a song. And she was so excited to see his response was lighthearted.

She saved the video to her phone so it didn't get lost in their conversation. She watched it one more time before she settled in to sleep.
I would love to hear your thoughts on the events of this chapter! It was so much fun to write! The songs mentioned are Can't Help Falling In Love With You by Elvis (and covered by lots of people over time) and I Just Can't Wait to be King from The Lion King. You should totally go listen to them.

I think Peeta will have a Q&A in a few chapters, so keep your eyes out for the opportunity to send a question. Thank you so much for reading!

You can find me on Tumblr at booksrockmyface.
Peeta sat his phone on the desk after sending the video to Katniss and headed out the door. He smiled at Finnick. "Hi." He tried to scoot around his roommate, but Finnick didn't move.

"What are you doing?" Finnick demanded.

"Making a silly video." Peeta said.

Finnick poked his stomach playfully. "For that hot Kat chick?"

"Katniss." Peeta moved his hand away. "And maybe." He walked around Finnick and headed toward the kitchen to finish breaking down the camera equipment and clean up.

Annie was already scrubbing down the pans when he came in. The camera was packed away and the chip that held the recording lay on top of the case. She turned and smiled. "Hey."

"Hey." Peeta picked up a rag and the spray they used to clean off counters. "You didn't have to clean."

"Of course I did. I usually end up doing it anyway. You cook, Finnick eats, I clean." She grinned and moved on to rinse off the last pan. "So what was all that commotion in your room?"

Finnick leaned against the doorway. "Peeta was sending a video to Katniss. But not even a sexy one. He was singing The Lion King."

Peeta twirled the rag he was holding and snapped it at Finnick's leg. "I Just Can't Wait to be King is the best song from that movie."

Annie giggled. "I used to always sing the Nala part."

Finnick looked between the two and shook his head. "You two are ridiculous."

Peeta shrugged and snapped the towel at Finnick again.

Finnick hurried across the room and got his own towel to snap back at Peeta.

Annie helplessly tried to get them to stop it and failed. So she took out a towel and joined in on the fun, snapping the towel at Finnick.

"Hey, no fair." Her boyfriend protested. "Two against one?"
Peeta smiled evilly and grabbed Annie, pinning her arms at her side. "Get her, Finnick!"

Finnick got Annie a few times with the towel as she squirmed against Peeta. Her stepbrother was strong, but she remembered many days of wrestling and she knew a few moves. She managed to slide her arm back and pinched Peeta's thigh hard. He squeaked and released her. Annie took up her towel again and she and Finnick attacked Peeta.

After running after each other through the entire house, they finally collapsed in the living room. They laughed, breathless. It was great for them to live together. Some evenings were like a slumber party, even as they grew older. Peeta wasn't sure he'd like it when they decided Annie and Finnick didn't want him around anymore.

Annie smiled up at Finnick. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her lips. "I love you." He mumbled.

She grinned and whispered her response. They kissed again. It made Peeta jealous.

Finnick looked over. "So what was all that business with the singing in your room?"

Peeta looked down at his hands a moment and then stood. "I'll be right back." He went to his room and got his phone. He wedged himself between Finnick and Annie and showed them the video Katniss sent him.

"That makes her ten times hotter." Annie said when the video was over.

Peeta nudged her side with his elbow.

"Hey, you need to watch where you put that elbow." Annie snapped playfully.

"Why?" Peeta felt Finnick and Annie join heads behind his head.

Annie grinned. "You're going to be an uncle."

"Oh." Peeta didn't know how he felt about that. He looked between Annie and Finnick and then back down at his phone. "That's great." He hugged them both. This was good for them. But it also meant that they would part soon. There were really only two bedrooms in the house. "I'll start looking for a new place." He stood.

Finnick grabbed his arm. "Hey, man. You okay?"

Peeta nodded. "Sure. I'm happy for you."

Annie said, "You don't have to move out. Not right away. I'm only about nine weeks. That's quite a ways to go. And then the baby will stay in our room for at least the first year."

Finnick grinned. "And maybe by then you'll be banging Katniss so you won't have to worry about it."

Peeta blushed and waved them off. "Katniss is just a friend."

"That video says otherwise." Finnick waggled his eyebrows. "'I can't help falling in love with you.' That's what she said."

"It's just a song." Peeta smiled.

"Right." Finnick grinned and made a rude gesture with his hands.
Annie put her hands on top of his to stop him. "Finnick, that's enough."

Peeta gave her a grateful smile. "I really am happy for you. Have you told your mom yet? Gage and Toby? The school?"

Annie grinned. "Just the people in this room."

Peeta pulled her to her feet. The shock finally wore off and he was starting to get giddy. "You know what?"

"What?" Annie asked, rubbing his back and staying pressed against his chest.

"I'm going to move into that other little room and I'm going to help you guys fix up the other room for the baby. I'll paint a mural on the wall and everything."

Annie smiled. "That would be great."

Peeta lifted her off her feet and kissed her cheek. "I love you, Annie."

"I love you, too." She stepped away.

Finnick stood and wrapped Peeta in a bear hug. "And I love you, my little bread maker."

"I make more than bread." Peeta gasped.

Finnick let him go. "Your name is a kind of bread."

Peeta gave him a bored look. "We've talked about this before. My name is not the bread."

Finnick laughed and pushed his shoulder. "Whatever, man."

Peeta shook his head. He yawned and stretched. "I'm heading off to bed." He made sure his phone was in his pocket and went to his room. He sat down and opened up his messages. He was sure Katniss was probably already asleep, but he had to talk to someone about this revelation. My sister is pregnant. He sent it and changed for bed.

His phone went off a little while later. Is this a good thing or a bad thing?

He sighed and typed. A little of both. I'm happy for her and Finnick. But I don't know what's next for me. We all live together. When my dad married her mom, I wasn't the baby anymore. And I don't really have friends around here. I don't actually have friends off the internet. I'm your friend. She responded.

Peeta smiled at that response. Well, thank you. But you aren't here. He deleted the second sentence and fixed it. I'm sorry, I bet you're ready to sleep.

Katniss's reply took a bit, but she said, I don't mind. If you want to actually talk, you can call.

He was really tempted to take her up on that offer, but decided against it. He liked texting. And it was pretty late. No, but thank you. So what would you do if Prim was pregnant?

I'd probably kill Gale for knocking her up when she still has so much school to get through. Lol. But then I'd be happy for her and I'd spoil that baby as only an aunt could.

Peeta looked at the screen for quite a while before he was able to send his own. She was right, it was
his duty to spoil the baby rotten. And even though he was about to be completely displaced, it was for a really awesome reason. **Prim is so lucky to have you for a sister.**

He was sure she was asleep when she didn't text back right away. He listened to Finnick and Annie and the house settling and growing quiet. He started to doze off when his phone went off. **And Annie is really lucky to have you. You're so special, Peeta. Don't worry about anything. And I am here if you want to call. I think we're only a few hours apart.**

Peeta grinned. **Spying on me, Katniss?**

**No. But I did check where your area code came from. That's as far as I got.**

He realized he should have done the same thing, but never followed through. He did a quick search and nodded appreciatively. **I think that's about five hours away at the farthest. Want to meet?**

Her reply was very quick this time. **Not a chance. And please don't try to track my number.**

It hurt Peeta that she would be so concerned by that, but he tried not to let it bother him. **Promise. We'll just keep on texting. I look forward to all our conversations. Thanks for the boost to my ego by calling me special, btw. So are you.**

He made a face as soon as he hit the send. "So are you?" He said to himself with a sigh. "Lame."

He dozed off listening for Katniss's response, but it didn't come before he was fully asleep.

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Peeta woke up to the sound of banging in the kitchen. Since Annie was usually a little kinder at breakfast, Peeta figured it was most likely Finnick. He grumbled and rolled out of bed. He headed for the shower but stopped short when he heard someone getting sick.

He tapped on the door. "Annie? You okay?"

"Just morning sickness." She called back. "I'll be out in a bit."

Peeta sat his things on the table beside the bathroom. "I'll just get some breakfast. Take your time."

She opened the bathroom door. "I'm done."

He made a face. "Did you brush your teeth?"

"Fuck you." Annie said with a laugh as she walked past him. She turned. "Oh, I want to invite Mom and everyone over for supper. Is tonight okay or should we wait?"

"I'm fine with tonight. Want me to cook something? Baked ziti?"

Annie grinned and grabbed his arms. "You know that's my favorite."

"Then baked ziti it is. We can run by the grocery store after school."

She wrinkled her nose. "Your breath smells like ass." She pushed him to the bathroom.

Peeta chuckled and went about his morning routine quickly, just in case Annie needed to the bathroom again. He finished up and found Annie and Finnick in the kitchen. Annie nibbled toast and Finnick stuffed forkfuls of egg in his mouth.
"Ugh." Annie groaned. "Slow down, babe. You're making me sicker just looking at you."

"Sorry, Annie-cakes." Finnick said. "I'm late for work." He picked up his plate and ate the rest over the sink.

Peeta poured himself a bowl of corn flakes and took his time cutting up a banana to put in it. He grinned when Finnick downed the last of his coffee and let out a loud belch as his dishes clattered into the sink.

"See you tonight." Finnick said, leaning in to kiss Annie.

She put up her hand. "If your mouth comes anywhere near mine, you're a dead man."

Finnick chuckled and kissed the top of her head instead. "Love you." He grabbed his things by the front door.

"Call if you're going to be late, babe." Annie said.

"Sure thing." Finnick closed the door behind himself.

Peeta sat across from Annie and munched his cereal while she continued to nibble toast. He realized she'd been doing that a lot lately. "So this morning sickness thing has been happening a while?"

"Just a few days." She brushed crumbs off her hands and picked up her tea. "Toast for breakfast helps."

He nodded and ate a few more bites. "Bananas are good."

"For?"

"Upset stomach."

Annie nodded. "I may pack a few in my bag." She groaned. "It feels worse today. Like now that people know, the baby wants to make its presence known."

Peeta chuckled. "You timed it all pretty well. It's October. So that means the baby's due when? May? June? You won't have to take any time off from teaching."

"And I have a good excuse not to attend most of the summer in service meetings." She grinned. "You really okay with it?"

He nodded. "I had a moment of 'Oh, shit, where do I stand?' But I'm fine. I talked to Katniss a little last night and she helped me see the light."

She reached across the table and rested her hand on top of his. "She's a good friend. I'm really glad you aren't dealing with this on your own. It's going to be a big change for all of us. And whenever you're ready to leave is up to you. You can stay forever if you want."

He turned his hand over and squeezed her fingers. "Thank you."

They went through their day as usual. Peeta hopped over to Annie's class a couple times between his classes to check on her. She looked right as rain.

After work Peeta drove to the grocery store. Annie, who started to look a little green on the drive, opted to stay in the car.
Peeta hurried through the aisles picking out everything he needed for the baked ziti and a salad. He stopped in the middle of the store to check his phone for possible morning sickness cures and saw a text from Katniss.

**Sorry I passed out last night and then had to work my butt off to get work done. There's rain predicted all next week. Anyway, how is Annie doing? More importantly, how are you?**

Peeta smiled and typed a quick response. **She's fine. Finnick is over the moon. I'm okay. They're telling everyone else tonight and I'm making baked ziti, one of Annie's faves. What are you up to?**

He picked up a box of saltines and some lemon drop candies for Annie and made his way to the checkout. His phone started going off as he swiped his card. He waited until he had all his groceries in hand and headed out the door before he checked it.

**Afternoon break at the moment. I'm finally almost done with weeding.**

Peeta pulled the crackers and candies out of the bag before he stashed everything in the back seat. "These are supposed to help. Keep a sleeve of the crackers night stand." He pulled out his phone and said, **Some weeds like dandelions can be put in a salad.** He dropped his phone in the center cup holder.

"Katniss?" Annie asked as she popped one of the lemon drops into her mouth.

Peeta nodded and put the car in drive. He heard his phone go off and looked over to see Annie eyeing it in the cup holder.

She asked, "So are you two dating or are you friends or what?"

"Just friends." He said. But he hoped it was more eventually. "Are you feeling okay?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I think these lemon things are helping. What gave you that idea?"

"Internet research." He grinned. "Thank God for smartphones."

Peeta's phone went off with the reminder he had a text and Annie snatched it up. "'Good to know. Maybe I'll save a few dandelions from my composting and try it. Any good recipes?' She scoffed. "You really just exchange recipes and food tips with this girl?" She pointed the phone at his crotch. "Dick pic!"

He laughed and grabbed the phone from Annie. "No dick pics or sexting of any kind. We're being classy." He stuffed the phone under his thigh.

"How's your leg today?" She asked, changing the subject.

"Well, the pressure is changing." He grinned. "But Katniss said there was supposed to be rain, so that's not a knee pain prediction. I did notice after she said it, that I was a little more achy than usual."

"She lives near here?"

He nodded. "About five hours east at the farthest range of her area code."


Peeta laughed. "Have you been watching Ten Things I Hate About You again?"
She laughed. "Maybe a little. But you know how much I love Joseph Gordon-Levitt."

"What I wouldn't do to Julia Stiles..." He sighed. He patted Annie's leg. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Well, tell your nibling to stop torturing me and maybe it'll stay that way." She pouted and leaned against the window.

"Nibling?" Peeta asked as he pulled into the driveway.

"A better way to say 'niece or nephew' without actually having to say 'niece or nephew' every time."

"Nibling." He nodded. "I like it." He got out and gathered the groceries.

Annie got both their school bags and went to the front door.

"I'll get supper on." Peeta said. "You relax." He leaned against the counter and wrote Katniss. Just toss the greens with a light vinaigrette and you're good to go. He pulled out a card that had a recipe on it and took a picture and sent it along. It may be a little late for them to be tasty, unfortunately. You can still find them in the grocery store, I'm sure.

Peeta worked silently on supper, making very little clatter with his pans as he went. Finnick came home just before dark and stretched out over Annie on the couch. The murmur of their conversation drifted to his ears.

"You need a shower." Annie finally said.

"Want to join me?" Finnick asked as he stood.

"Hell yeah, I do." She followed him to the back of the house.

Peeta shook his head. He called, "Mom will be here soon."

"We've perfected quickies." Finnick called back, followed by, "Ow!"

"You make him uncomfortable, babe." Annie admonished just before the bathroom door closed.

Peeta stuck the casserole in the oven and lay on the couch to text with Katniss. I'll look into that. I eat a lot of takeout these days. Hard to cook when you're the only one eating the meal.

He responded, Yeah, I was lucky to live with Annie all through college and then she and Finnick asked me to move with them when Annie and I somehow managed to get jobs in the same school. It's nice to have other people to cook for. Whenever they go out, I get take-out for myself or cook something frozen.

Peeta tried to ignore the giggles and heavy breathing that managed to leak out the bathroom door over the sound of the shower. Annie stepped out of the bathroom just as someone knocked on the front door.

Annie ran to the door and threw it open. "Mama!" She threw her arms around the older woman's neck. Devin Mellark looked just like her daughter. Lots of people sometimes confused them for sisters when they were together. Both women took it as a compliment.

"Hi, Annie! Oh, I miss seeing you every day." She hugged back for several long moments before
Peeta finally made his presence known.

"Hi, Mom." Peeta said timidly as Devin walked around Annie to hug him. He lifted his stepmother up on her toes and then let her down. "You look good."

Devin waved her hand. "Whatever you say." She laughed and wrapped her arms around her children as they made their way into the living room. "It smells good in here."

"Baked ziti for Annie." Peeta said.

Finnick stepped out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. "Mama Dev!" He exclaimed and ran in. He lifted the woman up and spun her around. As he sat her down, his towel started to fall. He grabbed it quickly. "I'll be back for sugar later." He winked and hurried into the bedroom he shared with Annie to dress.

Devin shook her head. "You are one lucky woman, Annie." She laughed when she looked at Peeta. He felt his face flushing and he knew his face was screwed up in disgust.

"Gross. When are Gage and Toby getting here with their brood?" Peeta took his chiming phone out of his pocket. He smiled at Katniss's message.

**Gale and Prim get spoiled when they're with me. Sometimes I'm lucky enough to get invited to Gale's mom's for supper. She's like my second mom. Always makes sure I eat a good meal every once in a while.**

"Is that a text from a girlfriend?" Devin asked.

"Not a girlfriend." Annie and Peeta said at the same time. Annie's voice was exasperated. Peeta's was bored.

Peeta said, **My stepmom's here. Brothers will be here soon. My nephews, too. Might be a bit between texts.** He put his phone back in his pocket and walked into the kitchen to check on the ziti and start working on the garlic bread.

Annie and Devin followed, catching up as Annie handed her mother a glass of water and sat with her at the kitchen table. Finnick came in and stole a kiss from Annie. He then kissed Devin's cheek and walked around to Peeta and placed a wet kiss on the other man's cheek.

Peeta made a face and wiped his cheek. "Aw, come on, man." His phone chimed and he pulled it out.

"Didn't want you to feel left out." Finnick said with a sly grin.

Katniss's message said, **I've heard you talk about your brothers. You always get a little sentimental gleam in your eye. You never mentioned nephews.**

He let out a chortle and typed, **That's a nice observation. If I didn't know better, I'd say you had a little crush on me.** He put his phone away again and put the bread in the oven.

The doorbell rang and Annie ran to answer again. She was getting progressively giddier as the others arrived. Toby and his girlfriend Glimmer came in. Hugs were passed around. Toby was just a little over a year older than Peeta and Annie.

Gage arrived just a few minutes later. He was the oldest, three years Toby's senior. His wife Ingrid
was pregnant with baby number three, so kids weren't anything new. Their two boys, Conrad and Jacob, attacked Peeta around the legs as soon as they came in. They'd bypassed Annie, Finnick, and Devin to do so.

"Hey, you two. God, you're getting big!" Peeta ruffled their blonde curly hair. "Who wants to jump on Uncle Peeta's bed?"

"Neither of them." Gage said. "We're trying to get them to stop that. Uncle Peeta is a bad influence." He still smiled as he said it, pulling Peeta into a tight hug. "You look great."

"I feel great." Peeta said as he returned his brother's hug. He barely heard the sound of his phone going off and discretely pulled it out of his pocket.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were the one with the crush. :) Peeta knew he was grinning like fool as he read it. But he didn't care.

He responded, Maybe. We'll never know. My nephews are here now. It gets a little crazy. I almost didn't hear my phone. And I know I never mentioned them, but I respect my brothers' privacy. My oldest brother Gage is married with two boys and another on the way. He's been married about five years. She's in for some craziness. Mellark boys are a handful.

He was still looking at his phone when her next message popped up. And your other brother? He married?

Girlfriend. Glimmer. It's a stage name. She wants to be a model and refuses to ever marry or have kids. Gage and Toby still run Dad's bakery. My stepmom Devin helps.

"Hey, who are you texting?" Toby asked.

"His girlfriend." Finnick said.

"Not my girlfriend." Peeta protested feebly as the rest of the group started asking questions. He waved his hands. "Hey, why don't you guys just let Finnick and Annie tell you something even better than my non-girlfriend?"

Peeta smiled to himself as all the eyes turned to Finnick and Annie. They had all been hinting for ages that the pair should marry since they had been together so long.

Annie slipped her arm around Finnick's waist and Finnick returned the embrace.

Annie said, "We're having a baby."

The room erupted again.

Peeta went about getting dinner ready as the rest of the group talked happily about the new addition. He sent a text to Katniss. I didn't expect to feel so left out when they told everyone. He didn't hear the sound of his phone, but he checked it anyway.

Need to call me? Katniss asked.

Maybe later. Thanks. He responded. He plugged his phone in on the counter and lost himself in his family.
Katniss tried to ignore her phone for the rest of the evening, but it wasn't much use. She still picked it up every five minutes hoping for a message from Peeta or her sister or Gale, but there was nothing. She busied herself with bills and figuring some of the charges for her clients.

When her phone finally rang, she jumped. She smiled at Peeta's name and answered before it went to voicemail. "Hi." She said softly.

"Um, hi." Peeta said. His voice was shaky. "Is this really okay?"

Katniss laughed nervously. "Yeah."

There was an awkward silence for several breaths and then they both started talking at once. They laughed and Peeta said, "You go first."

Katniss chewed her lip a moment and said, "I'm sorry. I've never been really good with phone conversations. I prefer to text."

"I like your texts." He offered.

She smiled. "Well, the good thing about a text is there's no awkward pause."

This was followed by an awkward pause.

He laughed again. "Well, I'm usually good with words. I don't know what's with me today."

Katniss was taken by his smooth voice. She was sure it would sooth her to sleep. "So tell me more about your family." She reclined on the couch, ready to listen.

Peeta hesitated a moment. "My parents divorced when I was seven." He paused. "And it was just my brothers and Dad and me for a while until Dad met Devin. And she had Annie. And it worked out."

She smiled at the sound of comfort in his voice when he said Devin and Annie's names. "How old were you then?"

"I'd just turned ten." He paused again. "I haven't had a relationship with my mother since the divorce."

"I'm so sorry to hear that." She sat up. "My mom… Well, she died in a wreck when I was eighteen. But before that, she wasn't around much. She worked a lot." She started pacing. Why was she so willing to tell him this? "And when she was home, sometimes she'd stay in bed or float around like a
zombie."

"Depression?" Peeta asked softly.

Katniss nodded and then remembered she was on the phone. "Yeah."

"So what did you and Prim do, may I ask?"

"I grew up quickly. And I took care of her." She rubbed her face with one hand. "Gale's mom helped out quite a bit. And my Uncle Haymitch. He's not really my uncle." She laughed. "I have a weird non-family family."

"Tell me?" He asked gently.

She smiled to herself. "My mom had two best friends in high school. One was Gale's mom Hazelle and the other was a crazy woman named Effie. Hazelle is calm and down-to-earth and a real mother hen. Effie is the complete opposite. Big and vivacious and ready to have a good time. When we were little, she insisted we call her Aunt Effie." She chuckled. "And then she married Haymitch who is this gruff old grump. And Effie got us to call him Uncle Haymitch, which he didn't like. I still do it because I know how much it pisses him off."

Peeta laughed heartily as she finished her story. "Your non-family family sounds like fun."

"They really are." Katniss leaned against the back of her couch. "But I know the left-out feeling well. Posy's only sixteen and she's already had more boyfriends than me. And Rory is married. Vick is too and has a son. I'm already Aunt Katniss."

He paused again and said, "So how do you seem so positive?"

She laughed. "I seem positive? I'm one of the most pessimistic people I know."

He laughed. "I guess you're good at putting on a positive face then."

"I guess I am." She moved around to lie on the couch. She almost asked him where he was, but decided to change the subject. "So when I told you earlier not to find me and that I didn't want to meet, it wasn't a shot at you specifically."

"I didn't think so. Meeting men online isn't statistically a good thing for women."

She scrunched up her face a moment. This was something Prim would be gushing about. Big words and understanding. It made Katniss's heart race to think about what else would come out of his mouth. "Wow." She said softly.

"What?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. It's just... My most recent boyfriend didn't know the word 'statistic.'" She laughed quietly.

Peeta's voice practically cooed through the phone. "I'm sorry to hear that."

Katniss had to suppress a sigh. "Well, the reason I didn't want to meet is because there was a guy early on... He asked to meet up not long after Gale and I started shooting and then he got weird and clingy." She yawned. "We'd only exchanged a few messages before. I think you and I have talked long enough, but I'm not ready."

"It's fine, Katniss." He said. "I like having real conversations with you. And if that means texts and a
phone call every once in a while, I'm completely okay with that.

Katniss's face hurt from her smile. She'd never felt so comfortable in her life. But she couldn't hold back her yawn.

Peeta must have heard it. "I'll let you go. It's late and I'm sure you worked hard today."

"I'm sure you worked just as hard." She said softly.

They said their farewells and then Katniss rested her phone on her chest, her grin still firmly in place. She'd never felt so light as she got ready for bed. Who was this girl?

Her text tone went off just as she reached to place it on her nightstand. She saw Gale's name on her screen and grumbled. "Not the man I wanted to text me before bed."

**Catnip! New challenge!**

Katniss shook her head. **What challenge?**

**Shoot arrows through a series of hoops that decrease in size. The person who gets the farthest wins.**

**Wins what?** She hit send and then added, **Side note: I talked with Peeta. An actual phone call.**

The three dots popped up to show Gale was responding, but they went away and her phone almost immediately started ringing.

"You what?" Gale demanded.

"Hi." Katniss said. "A lovely evening here. How about there?"

"You and the bread guy talked?" He asked, an edge of worry in his voice.

She could hear her sister's voice in the background. "She did what?!"

Katniss chuckled. "It wasn't anything major." She said. "We just talked a little about our families."

Prim's voice came on the line. "You called him?"

"He called me." Katniss said, starting to feel defensive.

"And how did he even get your number?" Prim demanded.

Katniss sighed. She wasn't expecting the third degree. "I gave it to him. We've been texting for a while. And he told me he was going through something and I offered to have an actual phone conversation."

"Katniss, if he has your number, he could find you." Prim argued.

Katniss groaned and rolled to her side. "I asked him not to."

"And you believe he won't? Are you crazy?" Her sister's voice went up an octave.

"Maybe a little. But I believe him." Katniss fought a yawn. "I need sleep, Prim. Tell Gale goodnight for me." She hung up her phone before anymore argument and let sleep take over.
Katniss grumbled at the rain, even though she knew it was coming. She hated being inside. She called Rue to let her know she wouldn't be coming. They had discussed the possibility, but Katniss had a policy to call when she wasn't going to work so that there was a verbal promise of not being charged for the day.

She made herself a bowl of cereal for breakfast and ate it over the sink, washing her dishes as soon as she finished. Then she made a cup of tea and sat on her tiny porch with her knees pulled up to her chest, watching the rain with a blanket draped over her shoulders in the cool air.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Peeta. **I hate rain.** It read.

She smiled and sat her tea beside her on the bench to free her hands. **I only hate that I can't work. I feel useless. Also not getting paid sucks.** She picked her tea up again and pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. She glanced at the clock as she waited for Peeta's reply. She really could have gone back to sleep, but once she was up, she was awake for the rest of the day.

His response came just a few seconds later. **I hate rain on work days. The kids are always so wound up.** Another quickly followed. **What do you do when work is rained out?**

She balanced her tea cup on her knee and typed with one thumb. **Sit around being bored.**

It was quite a while longer before a reply this time. Katniss finished her tea and wrapped her arms around herself to watch the rain some more. It was splashing up from the ground and the dripping under the awning, dampening her blanket. She had just decided to go back in and turn on her electric fireplace for a few minutes when her phone went off.

**Maybe this will keep the boredom away a little.** Attached was a video. Katniss opened it to find Peeta in what had to be his classroom. There were drawings obviously done by kids hanging on the wall behind him.

"Hi, Katniss." Peeta finger waved and grinned. "I know it's rainy and you're home being bored while he rest of us losers still have to work. So to keep you from going a little mad, this one's for you."

He sat his phone against something on the desk and leaned over to his computer. Shake It Off began to play. Peeta stepped back and started dancing, executing some really great choreography as he lip synced to the song and pulled goofy faces. He turned and shook his hips as the refrain played over and over.

When the song ended, Peeta leaned close to the phone and said, "I'll be done at four if you want to call." He winked and the camera shut off.

Katniss laughed her way through the video and sent her reply, **Thanks! I'll play that on a loop when the boredom starts to get too intense.**

She clicked through the channels on her TV four times before she gave up and switched over to Netflix to put on a random cartoon.

Prim sent a text before she went to her first class. **Gale and I are both very sorry about last night. We just worry because we love you.**

Katniss sighed and wrote her response. **I know. But I'm a big girl. And if I need some backup,**
I'll call Haymitch.

Lol. He'll grumble your man to death. Prim replied.

Katniss grinned. His name is Peeta. And he's not my man.

Not yet. Have a good day. Class time. Prim sent a kiss emoji.

Katniss sent, I love you, Prim.

As she hit send, Peeta's name popped up with a text. She quickly clicked over. Glad I could be of service. It read.

How is your day so far? She asked as she got up to make some lunch, pausing to look out at the rain. It had picked up a little. She rested her elbow on the counter and leaned her head on her hand with a sigh. "This sucks." She groaned. "So bored." She watched Peeta's video again and smiled again.

She pushed herself up and took out a pot and a packet of ramen noodles. "I need to eat better." She said to herself as she started cooking.

Katniss's phone went off with another text from Peeta. Had to drive Annie home. But the day's good otherwise. Glad she's not my girlfriend. She was complaining pretty hard. Brotherly love only goes so far and she's not usually a complainer, so it must be bad.

Katniss smiled and replied, She's growing a human.

Peeta didn't reply for a while. She figured he was teaching. She finished her lunch and cleaned her bowl. She watched the rain some more and drank another cup of tea as the hours ticked by. She watched Peeta's video a few more times until she had it memorized.

When she looked at the clock and noticed it was after four, she thought about calling Peeta. She brought up his number and then exited once more before she finally made the call.

It only rang twice before Peeta answered breathlessly, "Hi, Katniss."

She smiled to herself at the eager sound in those two words. "Hi, Peeta." She practically sighed.

"Did you really like the video I sent you?" He asked.

"I did. You were really funny. I've watched it half a dozen times." She reclined on her couch. "So what are you up to?"

"Driving home. I got held up with a conference. Apparently the mother who was upset about the David statue wanted to make sure her kid wasn't exposed to anything else, so the principal wants to go through through all my books and posters and I even had to give over my DVDs for review." He sighed. "Sometimes I hate my job."

"What would you do if you didn't teach?" She asked, excited to know more about him.

"Work in the family bakery." He said softly. "My brothers do a good job, but Toby isn't really into it half the time. Like he feels obligated."

She reached up and traced the lines of the stitching of the couch. "So what made you decide to go
"Annie." He said affectionately. "She always had a passion for kids and when I went to school for art, she would read her education textbooks aloud and I sort of caught the love. Changed my major. Now, here I am."

Katniss loved the way his voice sounded. He was just as passionate about the job as he made Annie seem. Even when it was frustrating, he must still enjoy it on some level.

"So what about you?" Peeta asked.

"What about me?"

"Is landscape artist something you've wanted to do for good?"

She sighed. "On days like today when I don't make money, it would be nice to have something steady. But I like being outside and no other outdoor job ever seems appealing in quite the same way." She grinned to herself. "I don't really work well with others."

He laughed. "I am the complete opposite. I thrive in the company of others."

She chuckled. "Good to know."

He sighed. "I'm home. Want to keep talking?"

"Yes, please."

"What about?"

Katniss took a moment to wrack her brain for a question. "Want to tell me why it makes you so uncomfortable for Finnick and Annie to have a baby?" She asked slowly.

Peeta was silent, thinking. "I guess I'm feeling displaced." He paused. "My mom was neglectful." He said haltingly. "And then my dad divorced her and we got his full attention without my mother taking up his time." He sighed. "And then he met Devin and there was Annie. And I got two mothers because Annie is very nurturing." He laughed to himself. "So I guess I'm spoiled and not ready to share."

She felt her face widen into a smile. "Well, you're what? Twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?"

"Twenty-eight, yeah." He said.

"You were very fortunate to have two mothers all to yourself for that long." She said encouragingly.

He groaned. "Shit. I'm sorry. Your mom..."

"No, it's fine." She said quickly. "I didn't say that to have you pity me. I'm just saying that Annie and Finnick won't care any less. And you'll have another person to love you, too. So you may be a little misplaced at first, but you'll find an even better place soon enough."

Peeta laughed. "That's a good way to look at it."

"And you have two older nephews?" She recalled.

She could hear the proud grin in his voice when he said, "Yeah. And Gage and his wife are having another."
"Boys all over the place. I need to come even everything out a little." She paused. "I didn't mean I wanted to come meet your family. I mean, I do. I'd like to. Maybe one day." She hated when she rambled and immediately stopped herself.

"Hey, it's cool. I know what you meant." He chuckled.

She paused and let out a long breath. "I'll let you go. You probably have to make dinner or something."

"I guess, yeah." He sighed.

"Or we could keep talking. I don't mind. I just don't want to interfere with your evening."

"It wouldn't interfere." He said. "But if you don't want to talk, we can sign off for now and I'll text later. I don't mind texting."

She felt her smile grow. "I welcome texting. But if you play your cards right, I may send you a video. To make up for yours."

He chuckled. "I can't wait."

"Talk to you later, Peeta." She said almost wistfully.

"Later, Katniss." He agreed. "But not much later, I hope."

"Not at all." She waited to hear the line go dead and then locked her phone. She was starting to feel something she'd never felt and it was more than a little frightening. Peeta's comment about her having a crush on him the day before had gotten her thinking. Talking with him hadn't helped.

She pulled a pillow over her face and let out a frustrated groan. She then threw it off to the side and got up to start making supper, cursing herself for ending the conversation.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

I know I've been promising this for a while, but it's finally here! And some really great things are coming. I've decided to alter the time line a little. You'll see in the end here.

This chapter features the song I'm Not One Of Those Crazy Girls by Paramore. You should go check it out!

Happy reading!!

Peeta made note of the clear skies as he got ready for his day and sent Katniss a text before he got in the shower. **No rain! Work for Katniss? Or is it another day of utter boredom?** He smiled at his wit, but it didn't last long. It took her a while to answer and he was sure she didn't find him nearly as charming as he thought.

He sat his phone down and went through his morning routine quickly. Annie was already knocking frantically on the door as he stepped out of the shower.

"Just a minute." He assured her.

"I'm going to puke in your shoes if you don't hurry." She warned him.

He wrapped a towel around his waist and gathered his clothes to his wet chest. "I'm not the one that knocked you up." He pointed out as he opened the door.

She pushed him aside and knelt over the toilet. Peeta rushed out and closed himself in his room before the sounds of her getting sick affected him.

As he dried off, he wondered about Katniss and remembered that his phone was in the bathroom.

"Damn." He grumbled.

Annie called through the door. "Katniss is texting you." He opened the door and held out his hand.

She giggled and said, "It may still be too wet. I'll just have to go down there and check."

Finnick called, "Is that a sext message?"

"She's talking about work." Peeta said, waving his hand.

Finnick laughed. "I'm going to respond for you. 'I can check how wet it is for you, gorgeous.'"

Peeta threw open the door. "You wouldn't dare!"

"Whoa, dude, cover yourself." Finnick said as he and Annie both covered their eyes.

"Give me my phone." Peeta demanded.

Finnick waved the phone around. "Take it already."

Peeta jumped up and snatched it, practically slamming his door shut. He read Katniss's text himself
and then responded. Well, I hope you do. You seemed so bored yesterday.

It was a pretty dull day. Your video made it better. She responded quickly. Another text came in. Getting ready for another day in the trenches?

He smiled and pulled on his clothes before he made his reply. He didn't want to seem too eager. Lol. Yep. Molding little minds to appreciate art and make a mess.

Her message came just as he was sitting down for breakfast. I bet the mess part is your favorite.

Peeta grinned at his phone, earning Finnick's next jab. "She send you a boob pic?"

"Buzz off, Finnick." Peeta said, still smiling. I'd love to let them make messes every day, but the janitorial staff complained…

"So is she working?" Annie asked softly, nibbling a saltine. "The rain is gone." He had talked to his sister about her boredom the day before.

"She's going to try." Peeta said.

Finnick sat a cup of tea and a plate of toast in front of his girlfriend. "I'm sorry, Annie-cakes." He kissed the top of her head. "The books says sometimes it only last the first few weeks."

"You read a book?" Peeta asked as Finnick sat with his own breakfast.

Finnick flipped him off and wrapped an arm around Annie's waist as he ate, much slower than normal. "How do you feel, Anne?"

"Lots better. Thank you, babe." Annie leaned her head on his shoulder and wrapped her arms around him, her meal forgotten.

Peeta was glad for Katniss's text tone. I have a feeling you ruffle a lot of feathers.

He chuckled softly. Maybe a little. But I try to fix my mistakes. Even if I hate it.

Finnick swallowed the last of his coffee and stood. "Gotta go." He pressed a slow kiss to Annie's lips and hurried out the front door. "I'll bring pizza home for supper." He promised as he left.

Annie turned to Peeta. "I'm sorry about him."

He shook his head. "You don't have to apologize. That's just his way of showing his love. I've known him longer than you, remember?"

She nodded. "And I'm sorry you're feeling neglected."

"How did you…” He stirred the last of his cereal. "I can't explain it."

"You don't have to." She squeezed his arm. "I remember when you couldn't even look at my mother."

He nodded. "I thought she'd yell at me or hit me."

"Well, she's not going anywhere." She turned his face and his smiled grew. "And you're still my brother and I'm still going to dote on you. You'll just have to step aside a little for a tiny screaming human."
"Uncle Peeta will definitely take his turn with the tiny screaming human." He smiled.

"You should call Mom more than just on Sunday afternoons." She suggested. "That may help."

He nodded, grabbing his phone off the table when Katniss's reply came through. **The ground is too soggy by my house and my client lives in a bit of a low spot, so I bet her yard is even worse.**

"You should ask her to meet you somewhere." Annie said as she finished off her toast. "You guys have been talking for a few weeks, right?"

Peeta shrugged. "I want to make her feel comfortable before that. She had a bit of a crazy fan just after they started the channel."

"A stalker?" her eyes went wide. "That's scary."

He nodded. "So I'm waiting. If she wants to meet up, she'll ask me. I'm not pushing that one." He typed out his message. **So that means no work today?**

Annie finished her tea and made a face. "The last sip is always too cold." She brought her dishes to the sink and paused. Her hand flew to her mouth and she ran from the room.

Peeta poured her a glass of water and followed. "Have you explained it to your students?"

She took the glass of water and swished some around her mouth before spitting it out. "Not yet. I sent an email to the parents to let them know what was going on and what I plan on telling the kids so they can explain something at home. Or tell me they would prefer I didn't say much." She sipped some water and rubbed her stomach. "I really do hope this calms down a little."

"Yeah." He squeezed her shoulder. "So is anyone against you talking about it?"

"Not really. A few asked that I just give the bare facts and let them answer any questions at home, but everyone has been pretty encouraging otherwise." She sighed. "I'm going to brush my teeth and then we can leave."

"Sounds good." He headed down the hall. "I'll clean up the kitchen a bit."

His phone went off and he leaned against the counter to check it. **I'm going to drive down and check, but most of my work today will just be gathering supplies at Home Depot. Maybe I'll get to work a bit this afternoon if it dries out.**

He glanced up to see Annie in the doorway. "Ready to go?"

"Whenever you are." She pulled her sweater on. "Finish your text. You're driving."

He nodded and quickly wrote, **I hope today's not nearly as boring as yesterday. Got to head to school. I'll answer when I can.**

It was a very busy morning. Peeta wasn't able to sit down until lunch. He walked into Annie's classroom with a tray and sat it in front of her. She looked pretty rough with her nose all red and her eyes heavy. Tears still fell down her cheeks.

"Do you need to go home?" He asked as he sat beside her.

She shook her head. "I'm just a little emotional these days. I got sick and Heaven Jackson came up and hugged me and told me she hoped I felt better. And I just lost it." She sniffed and wiped her
"Heaven is a sweetheart already." He said with a smirk. "Stupid hormones amplifying it." He kissed her cheek. "Eat up." He picked up a chicken nugget and dipped it in his gravy. "Have you talked to Finnick today?"

"A couple texts. They're busy." She stirred her salad and made a face. "Your chicken looks better than my salad."

Peeta grinned and switched their trays. "Anything for my nibbling."

She gave a watery chuckle and sniffed again. "Thank you."

"He usually gets a break during your conference period." Peeta stuffed a forkful of salad in his mouth and chewed.

Annie nodded. "Is that your phone?" She asked.

Peeta pulled his phone out of his pocket and found he had a message from Katniss. He actually had a few.

**Have a good day.**

**Still too wet to work without completely destroying my client's yard.**

**Look at these orchids!** This message was accompanied by a picture of some green flowers. They had five petals around a center petal that was more of a redish purple. **They're cymbidiums. My favorite orchid. And my favorite color. Too bad my client doesn't like orchids. :/**

After lunch, I'm going to make a video for you. I've been thinking about it all morning. And I watched yours a couple more times already, so I guess you deserve a reward for your goofiness.

"You sent her a video?" Annie asked.

"You're reading my personal text messages?" He challenged with a smile as he responded to each of Katniss's texts.

**Not too bad so far.**

**Sorry you can't really work.**

Pretty flowers! I don't know too much about the plants that can't be eaten (vanilla is a type of orchid is all I know). My favorite color is orange, but that green is gorgeous! I could change my mind. You should get some for yourself.

**I look forward to your video.**

After he sent the message, he showed Annie his dance to Shake It Off while they finished eating. It seemed to cheer his sister up quite a bit.

Annie laughed and said, "If she isn't in love with you already, she's in denial."

Peeta shrugged and put his phone away. "We're just friends."
"But you like her, right?"

He thought about it and then said, "Yeah. I think so."

She grabbed his arm and shook him. "So don't give up. If you don't want to be aggressive about it, don't be. I know that's not you. But after Delly and Jo, you need someone that's your speed."

"You think that's Katniss?" He asked.

"Do you think it is?" She challenged.

The bell rang and Peeta stood. "I have to get my next class." He reached for their trays.

She stopped him. "I'll get someone to take those to the cafeteria."

Peeta nodded and kissed the top of her head. "See you after school."

He was able to read Katniss's response just before he stepped into the fourth grade hall. Enjoy!

There was a link to a video that he'd have to save for later.

It was agonizing. But he kept himself busy teaching the kids and trying to maintain order. When his conference period rolled around, he closed his door and sat back with his phone.

Katniss turned on her camera and sat back. She smiled and started drumming on the countertop before she started singing. "'Now when you say you wanna slow down, does it mean you wanna slow dance? Maybe you just want a little extra time to focus on our romance.'"

The rest of the first verse was subdued. But when she started the second verse, she started swaying to the beat as everything picked up. Her smile grew as the words got even more ridiculous.

"'If you're not here when I break in, I'm gonna go to your closet, just so I can smell your skin.' She giggled a little through the rest of the line. "'As the chemicals swim, I know I'll never love again. I swear I'll never love again.'"

When she finished singing, she picked the phone up again and smiled into it. "You can call me as soon as you want. Have a good afternoon." She winked and the video stopped.

Peeta closed himself in his room and dialed Katniss's number. He waited nervously as it rang four times. He was sure her voicemail would pick up, but her chipper greeting met him instead.

"Hi." He said and then chuckled. "I really liked your video. That's a funny song."

"It's Paramore." She said. "I wanted to do something kind of silly, but I'm not one for dancing."

"I'm sure you're good at it." He said softly as he reclined on his bed.

"I'll just leave that one to you for now. These moves are dangerous. Quite literally."

Peeta laughed. "Then I really need to see."

"Well, maybe if we ever hang out, I'll show off. But I'm not going to do it on a video, it has to be experienced in real life." Katniss laughed. "I also don't want you to be able to show anyone. It's pretty embarrassing."
He chuckled again. "You're a really good singer."

"Thanks." She said softly. "I was in choir in high school. All State. I probably could have gone on to be something, but then Mom... I had to take care of Prim and it wasn't a priority anymore."

"You really should do a video for your channel. Or make another channel for covers."

"Maybe." She paused. "So you didn't say anything when I mentioned meeting."

He felt his face heat up. "I didn't want to push that."

She took several audible breaths and then said, "I'd like to hang out. In person. The phone starts to hurt my ear after a while."

He smiled. "You say the word and I'm there." His heart sped up in anticipation.

"I'll let you know when I'm really ready. I just wanted to put a bug in your ear."

Peeta pumped his fist in the air. "Good."

"So what are you making for supper tonight?" Katniss asked, smoothly changing the subject.

"Finnick is bringing pizza home, so I'm off the hook." He heard the door open and sat up and smoothed down his hair. "And it sounds like he's home."

"I'll let you go then." She said. "Oh, before I do, would you be comfortable telling me where you live."

"I'm totally comfortable with it. New Market, Virginia. A very sleepy little town." He heard her clicking around on her computer.

"Well, that's nice." She said.

He stepped toward his door. "What is?"

"We're about three hours apart. I live in Morgantown, West Virginia."

"Oh." He said softly as he leaned against the wall. She was revealing a lot of stuff about herself and he felt privileged. "West Virginia, huh?"

"Yeah." She said softly. "Are you going to say something about college rivalries?"

"I don't follow sports." He paused and then said, "Thank you."

"What are you thanking me for?"

"Trusting me." He said quietly.

She took a moment to answer. "I just feel connected to you." It was so quiet he wasn't sure she said it at first.

"I feel it, too." He said.

Finnick pounded on the door. "Pizza! Come and get it before my preggo girlfriend eats it all."

Annie called, "Fuck you, Finnick!"
"You have." He yelled back. "It's going to be pretty obvious soon."

Peeta laughed. "I guess I have to go, Katniss."

Katniss chuckled. "I'll talk to you tomorrow?"

"Yes, tomorrow. It's Saturday. I get to sleep in." His voice held a dreamy quality as he thought about it.

She laughed again. "Good for you. I may try to work a little."

Annie said, "Pizza's getting cold."

Peeta sighed. "I'm getting warned that the pizza's getting cold, so I'll let you go."

Katniss laughed. "Enjoy your pizza. I'm probably going to order myself some. Talk to you later."

"Later."

They said their farewells and Peeta hung up his phone. He plugged it into the charger by his bed. He knew where she lived. And she knew where he lived.

And Peeta was a goner.
Chapter 10

I need to clear up something about the location. I chose both towns using Google Maps. I'm from Arkansas, so I don't know much about the area (I spent a year in Maryland, but that's as close as I've ever gotten). So if anything is ever unnecessarily wrong, please let me know how to fix it. I will be tweaking things a bit to add Hunger Games world elements, but I'll research as much as possible whenever necessary.

Thank you for reading, commenting, bookmarking, and leaving kudos. Some giant awesome things in this chapter and I am very excited to hear your reactions!

Happiest of reading!!!!

Katniss spent most of the next day removing the rose bushes from around Rue's house that were too far gone to save and pruning the others of dead limbs. The client came out to give her glasses of water. Rue's boyfriend Thresh showed up in the afternoon and talked with Katniss for a few minutes about her job.

"You've cleaned it up really well." He commented. "I told Rue we should just tear it all out and start over, but she loved those rose bushes so much when she was a kid."

Rue nodded as she wrapped her arms around Thresh's waist. "Granny adored them. They were her pride and joy. She hated when the arthritis got too bad to hold her clippers."

Katniss grinned. "Well, I hope I do her justice. I'll finish the cleanup here and we'll schedule some time in the spring to replant where I had to take the dead ones."

"Can you get the same color?" Thresh asked.

"I should be able to. I have plenty of pictures and I know the type of rose they are." Katniss smiled. "I take lots of notes." She heard her phone buzzing in her pocket and pulled it out. Her heart sped up when she saw Peeta's name on the display. "I should take this and then get back to work."

Rue nodded. "Sure. Knock if you need anything." She took Thresh's hand and led him inside.

Katniss pressed her phone to her ear. "Hi there."

"Hi." Peeta said. "You working?"

"On a little break. What are you doing?"

"Just got up." He said with a chuckle. "Lucky duck, right?"

She laughed. "Well, I don't have another job set up for next week, so that may be me. I guess we'll see soon enough."

"I'm sure you'll get something. So what sort of things do landscape artists do in the winter?"
"There's not a whole lot, but there's still work to be done." She said. "I can start the foundation for things. Build walls or flower beds. Trim trees or other overgrowth. I put a pond in last winter. The kids used it for ice skating."

"Sounds boring."

"Sort of is. But I get plenty of work in the spring and summer, so the easy fall and winter are very welcome." She laughed. "I need to get back to work. Can I call you later?"

"Sure." His voice held a little disappointment. "I'm going to post a video tomorrow. Maybe I'll send you the rough cut tonight."

"That'd be great." She said. "I'll talk to you later."

"Bye, Katniss." He said softly.

Katniss hung up her phone and slipped it back into her pocket, feeling the smile creeping across her face.

She worked steadily until she lost light and then she packed up her truck and bid Rue and Thresh farewell. She got home and settled in with her fast food and her phone, finding Peeta's video in her inbox.

He sat in his bedroom and leaned into camera. "Hi there! I'll let you get to the goodness of my latest recipe, but I wanted to take a minute to let you know I'm planning on doing a video answering some of your questions. You can post them here in the comments," he pointed down, "or send me a message, there's a link in the description. You can also ask on Twitter, the handle there is knead-to-know." He pointed up and to the left that was currently blank space. "You should be able to click on that link. Yes, that's knead, like kneading dough." He chuckled to himself. "And now, back to our regularly scheduled programming."

The scene cut abruptly to the kitchen. Peeta stood behind a counter with several ingredients laid out in front of him. He smiled. "Do you like a good burger?" He asked, a critical look in his eye. "A really good, juicy, flavorful burger?"

He indicated a bowl in front of him. "For me, it all starts with an even mixture of ground chuck and ground turkey. I'm doing half a pound of each. That way you won't lose quite as much mass as you cook. You will still lose some, shrinkage happens. Also, they just taste really good together, in my opinion." He grinned and started adding other ingredients, naming them all off. "Now, you don't need to go by these measurements and you can use whatever spices tickle your taste buds, these are just my favorites."

Peeta started mixing the meat and spices with his hand. "This is very similar to the meatloaf recipe, but there are some differences. I won't add any egg or breadcrumbs. Since we're frying this instead of baking, they aren't entirely necessary."

He moved over to the stovetop and turned on the heat just as Annie walked into the frame. "What are we making?"

"Hamburgers." Peeta grinned. "You could get those potatoes out of the water and dry them off."

"Did you explain about the fries?" Annie asked as she picked up a cookie sheet and spread paper
"I was about to and you interrupted." He teased.

"Sorry, I'm starving and you're taking a million years." She leaned closer to the camera. "My brother thinks cooking is an art, but pregnant people can't wait for art." She winked and moved back.

Peeta smiled and rolled his eyes. "I peeled the potatoes and cut them into a shoestring size. Then I put them in water to soak for an hour. That's the least amount of time. More is better, but an hour will do it. Soaking them pulls out those starches and makes for a crisper fry outside and soft inside."

He finished forming the meat into patties and held his hand over the pan. "Okay, there's a lot of heat coming off of here, so time to check." He took a bit of the water from the bowl he'd put the potatoes in and splashed it on the pan. He lifted it up to show the camera. "Dancing water. It's time to party." He placed the four patties he'd made in the pan and washed his hands. "Always wash your hands when dealing with raw meat."

Annie chuckled. "Okay, the oil is heating up in the skillet."

Peeta indicated the large cast iron skillet. "You want to start out at medium heat, about three hundred degrees max. In batches, you fry all the potatoes on medium and then remove all of them and drain them on paper towels while the oil heats up on high and do it again to crisp up the outside."

The pair worked together to finish the meal, bantering back and forth. As soon as the fries were done, Annie filled a plate and grinned at the camera. "My supper." She turned to Peeta. "You're going to need to make more."

He shook his head with a chuckle. "I'll bring you a burger."

"Bring me two." She called as she walked away, munching on a fry.

Peeta chuckled and then artfully put together a patty with tomatoes, lettuce, and pickles on a bun. "Annie thinks food art is useless, but I disagree." He pushed the plate forward and leaned down. "We eat with our eyes as well as our noses and mouths. Sometimes even our ears. This is a beautiful burger and I wish you could smell it." He took in a deep breath through his nose. "And now, I get to go eat it. See you next time on BreakingBread." He put the top on the burger and took a bite, smiling around his mouthful. He gave the camera a thumbs up and a nod. Then he walked toward the camera and shut it off.

Katniss popped the last bite of her fast food burger in her mouth with a frown. "Wish I had one of those burgers." She grumbled to herself. After cleaning up, she called Peeta.

"Hi, Katniss!" A chipper female voice answered.

Peeta said from the background, "Come on, Annie, give me my phone."

Katniss laughed. "Hello, Annie."

"Just wait a second, Peeta." Annie said before she told Katniss, "I've just heard so much about you.
When can we meet?"

"Um…" Katniss began.

"That's my phone and my friend." Peeta said. "Hi, Katniss, sorry about that."

She laughed. "No problem. Annie seems sweet." She reclined on the couch. "So I watched the video and you made me extremely disappointed in my choice of dinner."

"Fast food?" He asked.

"Fast food." She sighed. "But I was too exhausted for cooking tonight."

"Well, if you were closer, I'd make you supper every once in a while so you didn't have to do fast food."

She bit her lip. "Well…" She decided to take the step. "How about I buy you lunch tomorrow and we can talk about it?"

There was a pause on the other end and Katniss started to fear she'd scared him away.

"Peeta?"

"I'm here." He said quickly. "I would love to have lunch. Name the place and I'm there."

"I want to come to you. If that's okay?" She said tentatively. "I want to kind of be in charge."

"It's completely fine. But I'm buying if you're driving here." He said.

"We can discuss that over lunch. You name the place." Her heart sped up and her ears rang. Was she making the right choice?

"Greasy Sae's. It's a diner that is a lot cleaner than it sounds. I'll text you directions."

She felt herself nodding. "Sounds great." That had taken a lot out of her. "Hey, look, I had a really long day and I'm going to be driving tomorrow, so I should probably get off here and get some rest. I'll see you around noon? Twelve-thirty?"

"Sounds great." Peeta said quietly. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." She said breathlessly. She hung up and immediately dialed her sister's number. "Please pick up." She begged as she listened to the ring.

Prim's chipper voice came through after the third ring. "Hey, Katniss."

"Hi, Prim." Katniss paused and said very quickly, "I have a sort-of date tomorrow and I need your opinion on what to wear and how to act and what to say—"

"A date?" Prim scoffed. "You have a date? With who?"

"Peeta." Katniss admitted as she walked into her room and started digging through her drawers.

"Peeta the YouTube guy you've been talking to?" Prim asked.

"Yes." Katniss said almost reluctantly.

Prim giggled. "That's amazing! He lives nearby or you doing a Skype thing?"
"He lives three hours away. I'm driving there tomorrow." Katniss let out a long breath. "It's not really a date. But we're meeting for lunch at a diner."

"Okay, so not-really-a-date requires something casual, but not too casual. You want to look interested, but not too interested."

Katniss chuckled. "Okay."

"No button up shirts or polos or anything." Prim said. "But definitely not a t-shirt with a stain or holes." She paused. "Oh! That green one that Gale got you that says, 'Gardeners do it outside!'"

"I'm definitely not wearing that!" Katniss nearly screeched. "I don't even wear that in public."

Prim laughed. "Okay, now that I've loosened you up a little." She giggled some more. "I think a plain black shirt and some jeans. Don't you own a plain black shirt?"

Katniss dug through her drawer and pulled one out. "Yes, I have one."

"Good. And those one jeans I made you buy that hug your ass."

Katniss laughed. "I know the ones. I never wear them."

"Wear them tomorrow and you're good to go. This guy already likes you, Katniss. You don't have to be impressive, just try not to embarrass yourself."

"Gee, thanks, Prim." Katniss said. "Now I'm going to obsess over all the embarrassing things that could happen."

Prim giggled some more. "You'll be fine. Just be yourself."

Katniss sighed. "Fine." She pulled her phone away when it buzzed to see a text from Peeta awaited her. She put the phone back to her ear. "I'll let you get back to your Saturday night."

"Thanks. Gale and I were making out."

"I didn't need to know that." Katniss practically sang.

Prim giggled. "I'm joking. But I do need to get back to studying. Please call before you leave and as soon as you get back so I know you're safe. And if anything goes wrong, call Haymitch or Rory."

"I will. I'll give them a heads-up before I leave, too." Katniss promised her little sister.

They made their farewells and Katniss opened up the text. It contained the address and some simple directions from the main highway to the diner Peeta suggested. He added, I can't wait to see you.

Katniss grinned and answered, I'm really nervous. I've never done this before.

He responded quickly. Neither have I. But I promise I'm not a murderer. And Greasy Sae's is right in the big middle of a small town where everyone is in everyone's business. No one will let me do anything without comment. And I'm not exaggerating.

Katniss breathed a sigh of relief. Very good to know. I'll see you tomorrow.

Goodnight, Katniss.
Goodnight, Peeta.

She changed for bed and curled up, giddy over the prospect. She was far too keyed up to sleep, so she stared at the ceiling and rehearsed all the things she could possibly say. She probably *would* end up embarrassing herself.
Peeta changed his shirt for the fourth time and then threw his head back and yelled, "Damnit!"

Annie burst into the room. "How can I help?"

He glared. "Don't you know how to knock?"

"I've been standing outside this door for the last half hour waiting for you to step out looking cute and all ready for your date." She looked at the pile of shirts on the floor. "Blue." She scooped a blue shirt off the floor and held it out. "It matches your eyes."

"This isn't a date." Peeta took it and exchanged the purple striped button down for the solid blue.

"Leave it unbuttoned." She said as he reached to fasten it over his tee-shirt.

He sat down on his bed and pulled on a pair of socks. "So what are you and Finnick doing today?"

"Just hanging out." She leaned against the doorframe.

Finnick called, "Fucking on all the surfaces."

Annie stuck her head out the door. "I'm exhausted from puking my guts out all morning thanks to your child. Nothing more than you making me soup and letting me lay on your lap."

Finnick scoffed as he came up behind her. "Fine." He wrapped his arms around Annie's waist. He asked Peeta, "So you ready for your date?"

Peeta said, "It's not a date. I'm just meeting someone for lunch."

"That's the exact definition of a date." Finnick said. "Sharing a meal with someone alone at a restaurant."

Peeta waved him off. "We're friends."

"But she's hot." Finnick said.

Annie sent an elbow to his side. "Stop it."

"Don't you think she's hot?" Finnick asked his girlfriend as he rubbed the spot.

"Yeah, but you can still be friends with someone you find attractive." Annie pointed out. "And if Peeta and Katniss just want to be friends, that's up to them."

Peeta stood up and kissed his sister's cheek. "Thanks, Annie." His phone started ringing with the
tone he'd assigned to Katniss. He answered as he slipped around the others. "Hi, Katniss. Are you at the diner?"

"I'm actually lost. And I can't figure out where I am to fix it. I parked in front of a church. I'm so turned around." Her voice sounded a little panicked.

"Hey, no problem. What sort of church? What denomination?" He grabbed his coat and keys and waved at Annie and Finnick as he left. She explained a few of the sights she saw and the name of the street. Peeta drove to the center of town and talked Katniss in the right direction. They pulled into the diner parking lot at the same time.

Peeta looked over the beat-up white pickup that she drove with a smile. It had a logo on the side that said, "Everdeen Landscaping" along with a phone number he knew well. It somehow fit her perfectly.

"Give me a second." She requested as she took the phone away. He watched her type a text and then she hopped out and met him outside his door.

He stepped out and stood awkwardly. "Hi." He finally said.

"Hi." She answered, holding out her hand for him to shake.

He chuckled as he shook it, still feeling awkward. She was just as pretty in person. And standing right in front of her, he could see she had grey eyes. He'd never seen a person with grey eyes. It was so enchanting.

"Should we go inside?" Katniss asked, dropping her hand.

"Yes, that would be good." Peeta motioned for her to go ahead of him. He'd spent many days in this diner as a teenager. He'd grown up a town over, where the bakery and his brothers and stepmother all still lived.

Delly smiled kindly at them as they stepped in. "Hi, Peeta!"

"Hey, Delly." He greeted. "How are you today?"

"My feet are killing me and my son is giving me a hard time." She nodded toward a back booth where a young boy sat with a coloring book.

The boy looked up and waved enthusiastically. "Hi, Mr. Mellark!" He scrambled out of the booth and ran over. "Is this your girlfriend?"

Peeta chuckled. "This is my friend Katniss. Katniss, this is Jeff, one of my students. His mom Delly, an old friend."

"It's nice to meet you." Katniss said.

"Likewise." Delly said, that same smile on her face.

Jeff's eyes went wide. "You're that girl the videos I watch!" He tugged on Delly's sleeve. "Mom, it's that Katniss!"

"That's great." Delly said kindly. "Okay, honey, you need to go back to your coloring book. I have work to do and Mr. Mellark and his friend are here for lunch."

Jeff gave Katniss one last impressed look and wandered back to his booth.
"Sorry about that." Delly said as she motioned the pair to a table on the opposite side of the room. "What can I get you to drink?"

"Iced tea, please." Peeta said.

"I'll just have some water." Katniss replied.

Delly bounced away, pausing a moment to speak to her son before getting their drinks.

"So what's good here?" Katniss asked as she picked up the menu.

"Everything. Sae's been using the same recipes for about fifty years." He picked up his menu. "I'm pretty partial to the chicken fried steak myself. But the eggs are always cooked to perfection. And you can't go wrong with the soup of the day."

"Excuse me?" Jeff's unsure voice said from beside their table.

Katniss grinned and looked up. "Hi. Jeff, right?"

The boy nodded. "My mom said not to bother you, but I…"

She leaned closer. "What do you want to ask?"

"How long did it take you to learn how to shoot like you do?" He asked softly.

She said, "I started learning when I was about your age. And I practice several times a week. I'm still learning new things all the time."

"Do you think I could learn?" He asked.

Delly walked over with their drinks and scolded her son.

Katniss said, "If it's something your mom wants for you, I think it's worth a shot. But it is up to your mom."

He threw his arms around Katniss. "Thank you." He hurried back to his booth and watched them from across the room.

"I'm sorry about that." Delly said. "If his dad didn't have to be away for the week, he'd be home. Probably watching your videos. They're on a loop." She chuckled. "So what can I get you?"

They made their order and Delly walked away, pausing at tables along the way.

"Do you like your work?" Katniss asked.

He smiled and nodded. "I do. What about you?"

"I love my work." She grinned, taking a sip of her water. "I liked the video. Did I tell you?" She laughed awkwardly. "Of course I told you."

He gave her a kind smile. "Well, thank you. I can't wait to see what you have next."

"It's going to be a toughie. We're going to aim through rings of decreasing size." She laughed. "Gale's idea."

"It's a good idea. I bet you do better."
"I bet I do, too." She laughed. Stirring her straw around in her glass, she said, "So you're answering some questions? For your channel, I mean."

"Yeah." He said, sipping his tea. "But I can answer your questions without filming them."

She laughed. "Well, I mostly wonder what you get asked a lot. For Gale and me it's always 'Are you a couple?' So for you, what is it? What's the big one?"

Peeta picked up a crayon from the cup in the center of the table. Sae had put them there years ago for kids, but he always found himself using them when he came in. He drew on the largest blank spot of the placemat. "People are always so obsessed with relationships. Wanting to see if you're in love or attached. They usually ask if I've got a girlfriend. A couple ask if I have a boyfriend."

Katniss laughed. "Well, do you?"

"Annie teases me that Finnick and I are boyfriends." Peeta chuckled, looking up from his drawing. "But no significant other for me right now, even though Finnick and Annie constantly worry."

Delly returned with their food and took their glasses for refills.

"And you?" Peeta asked once they were alone again. "You said one time 'My last boyfriend.' Is there a current one?" He put the crayon back and folded up the paper, stuffing it in his pocket before picking up his fork.

Katniss cut into her chicken fried steak and shook her head. "Kind of just living life single."

He watched her thoughtfully as she chewed his steak. "Have there been a lot?" He shook his head quickly. "Never mind. That's not my business, sorry."

She swallowed quickly. "No, it's fine. About half a dozen. You?"

"Two." He blushed a little. "I'm not a Casanova or anything."

She smiled. "You don't have to be."

He shrugged. "Just everyone around me..." He shook his head again. "This is getting more serious than I intended."

"I agree." She nodded. "So tell me something fun. Tell me about your favorite painter."

Peeta grinned and leaned forward. "I really like Van Gogh. And I know a lot of people like Van Gogh, but I don't care." He laughed to himself. "I recreated Starry Night so many times when I was a kid, my stepmom finally gave me a book of other artists and begged me to try something new."

Katniss laughed. "I know Starry Night."

He nodded. "It's one of his most famous. I was obsessed with getting it exactly right. I never could match the brush strokes very well."

She smiled and let him drone on for several more minutes.

He trailed off awkwardly after a while, feeling himself blush. "I'm totally dominating the conversation. I'm sorry."

"No, I don't mind." She pushed her plate to the side, only half her food gone. "You're passionate. I like it."
He looked at her plate. "You done?"

She nodded. "That was quite a bit."

His face fell. Was she ready to leave him already?

"Don't let me rush you." She assured him.

"Well, how about you talk for a while? Does your sister know archery, too? Or was it just a thing with you and your dad?" He put a forkful of eggs in his mouth and watched her curiously.

It took Katniss a moment to answer and he immediately regretted bringing up her dad. But when she spoke, she had a wistful look in her eye. "She was just starting to get the hang of it when he died. He'd been working with her for a while. She lost interest after..." She swallowed. "I kept going because it was my connection to him. And she stopped because it was a painful reminder. She was only eight. No eight-year-old should lose a parent."

"You were twelve?"

She nodded.

"No twelve-year-old should lose a parent either." He said softly.

She smiled gratefully. "No one should have to lose a parent before fifty. It would be great if they could live forever."

"Yeah." Peeta said. He took one more bite and sat forward with his drink. "But at least there are good memories."

She smiled and leaned closer. "Lots of good memories."

Delly came over. "Save room for dessert?"

Katniss shook her head. "I'm fine, thanks."

Peeta looked up. "Me too, Delly. Thank you." He reached in his wallet and handed over his credit card. "You can put it on there."

"Will do." Delly took his card and started to walk away.

He stopped her. "Did Sae make any apple pies today?"

"I think there are a couple slices left." Delly said.

"Will you box them up?" Peeta asked kindly.

"Sure thing." Delly bounced away.

Peeta explained, "Annie loves Sae's apple pie. She says it's better than mine."

Katniss laughed. "She's such a kind sister."

"Well, she likes everything else I make, so I'll forgive her this time." He grinned. "Are you going to run off?"

"I don't have to." She stirred the last of her water with her straw. "Want to show me around?"
He felt his heart pounding out of his chest. "I'd love to."

They walked outside and stood in front of both their cars. The parking lot was packed and more cars circled looking for spaces.

"If you want, you can follow me to my house and drop off one of the vehicles and take the other." Peeta suggested.

Katniss nodded. She looked down a moment and then asked, "Do you think I could meet Annie and Finnick?"

"You may open up a can of worms there." He chuckled. "They haven't stopped asking about you since we started e-mailing."

She shrugged. "I don't mind. You speak so highly of Annie." She looked like she wanted to say more, but she stopped herself.

Peeta nodded. "Follow me." He got in his car and watched Katniss climb up into her truck before he backed out into traffic and headed home.
Katniss punched in Gale's number when Peeta's car paused at a stop sign. Gale picked up on the first ring.

"You're not dead?" He asked. He was teasing, but she could hear a bit of worry in his voice.

She laughed. "No, still very much alive." Peeta drove on and Katniss stopped to check the traffic before following. "I'm going to let him usher me around town. Meet his stepsister and her boyfriend." She turned a corner and kept following Peeta's little blue car. He turned into a driveway in front of a modest house just a little bigger than her own.

"Whoa, meeting the family? Did you bring protection with you?" Gale teased.

Katniss pulled in beside Peeta. "I'm not like that and I don't think he is either." She put her truck on park and watched Peeta get out of his car. "But there are some in my purse, just in case. Your girlfriend put them in there the last time she was home."

Gale laughed. "Good. Have fun. Call me when you leave town?"

"Sure will." They said their goodbyes and she slid out of her truck, tucking her phone into her pocket. She met Peeta at the front door. "Nice house."

He nodded. "Finnick picked it out." He unlocked the door and stuck his head inside. "Are you two clothed?" He called.

Katniss felt her face heating up and noticed the curtain on the window beside the door swing shut before the door was ripped out of Peeta's hand.

A woman with reddish-brown hair stood in the doorway with an expectant smile on her face. "You didn't say you were bringing her here. Hi, Katniss!"

Katniss laughed uncomfortably. "Hi, Annie." She held out her hand, but the other woman pulled her
"Sorry." Annie stepped away, a contrite look on her face. "Come in." She moved to the side and Katniss walked into the house.

She heard Peeta whisper, "Tone it down a little, Annie." He handed the container of pie to Annie and then followed Katniss further into the room.

A tall man with dark brown hair and a seductive smile stepped into the room. "Oh, wow, you are even hotter in person."

"Thanks?" Katniss said, glancing toward Peeta who was glaring at his sister's boyfriend.

"Don't you think so, Annie?" Finnick asked.

Annie shook her head with an amused smile. "You're making them both a little uncomfortable, babe." She sauntered over to her boyfriend and whispered something in his ear which made Finnick laugh.

"Anyway," Peeta said, "This is the living room." He indicated the room they were in. He pointed down a hall. "The two main bedrooms are that way." He stepped around Finnick and Annie into the room where Finnick had emerged from a few moments before. "Kitchen." He practically purred.

"Where the magic happens." Katniss said as she looked around the room.

"A lot of magic has happened in here." Finnick said. "And I'm not talking about cooking." He winked at Katniss.

Feeling her cheeks warm up, Katniss fumbled to think of a good comeback.

Annie rolled her eyes and nudged Finnick with her elbow. "Come on, Finnick. Don't be so crass when she's just met you."

Peeta gave his sister a grateful look and then turned. "Want to see my studio?" He opened a door at the back of the kitchen that led into what looked like a mud room.

"Ooh, the inner sanctum!" Annie gushed.

"We hardly ever get to go in there." Finnick teased.

"Oh, shut up." Peeta said with a laugh. "You were just in here yesterday. I show you my stuff all the time."

Annie stage whispered, "Don't anger the artist, babe. He'll paint on all the things you love."

"He wouldn't dare get a paintbrush near you without a fight." Finnick commented.

"Aw." Annie gushed, pushing herself up to brush a kiss over Finnick's lips. "Let's give them some space."

"Can we go make out in our room?" Finnick asked softly.

Annie giggled and pulled him out of the room.

Katniss's eyes lingered on the couple until they were out of sight. She turned to Peeta. "Are they always like that?"
"All over each other?" He asked with a laugh.

She nodded.

"Let's just say, I invested in a very good set of earbuds." He stepped into the other room and waved her in after him.

Lining the walls were several pictures painted mainly in shades of orange. There were landscapes and abstract shapes and still lives. Piles of canvases leaned against the walls were held in place by wooden cases. Katniss stepped to the far end where an easel held a partially completed painting of what looked like an elephant.

"It's for the baby's room." Peeta explained. "I promised a mural, but it's too soon to plan anything big, so I'm going to do a few different small paintings to give them an idea."

"This is very detailed." Katniss leaned close to examine it better. "It almost looks real. How do you do it?"

"It takes a while." He flipped through the canvases on the floor until he found a particular one and turned it around. "This is one of my favorites."

In his hands, Peeta held a painting of a storefront. The sign over the door read "Mellark Bakery." The windows were filled with beautifully decorated cakes and cupcakes. She could see every detail on the confections even though the windows were just a few inches wide in the painting. He'd even made reflections of the people and objects passing by look completely life-like.

"Wow." She looked up. "You are so talented. It looks almost like a photograph."

"Thank you." He put it back with the others. "I was working on it for my dad for his birthday. But he died before it was finished. I should give it to Mom…" He shrugged. "Instead, I leave it here."

"Could I buy it from you?" She offered. "Or would that be too hard to part with?"

He smiled. "You don't need to buy any of these."

"But what if I want to?" She pointed at a field of wildflowers illuminated by the setting sun. It gave all the flower a pink-orange cast over their varied colors. "I really like this one."

"Me too." He looked at her a moment and then said. "You can have it."

She shook her head. "If I take it, I'll pay for it."

"Okay, five bucks." He said with a grin.

She laughed. "Fifty."

"Six." He countered.

"Forty-five?" She asked.

"Six dollars and fifty cents."

She laughed again and shook her head. "This painting is worth ten times that."

"Maybe. But I don't sell paintings to friends."
Her heart pounded at being called his friend. She didn't have many outside of the ones that were almost an obligation. She sighed. "Fine, I'll give you Twenty bucks for it."

He laughed. "Whatever you say."

She fished some money out of her pocket and pressed it into his hand. "I may commission you for something for Prim one of these days. And I hope by then you'll develop a better value for your work."

He stuffed the money into his pocket and took the picture off the wall. "Well, in that case, the next one will be two hundred."

She chuckled and followed him to the front door. "Sounds reasonable."

"I'll drive you around if you want." He offered. "Or we could hang out here for a bit longer."

Katniss looked around the room and cringed when she heard giggling from the end of the house. "I think driving around would probably be best."

Peeta nodded, an apologetic look on his face. "Me too."

She followed him out to his car, pausing at her truck to put the painting in the cab before slipping into the passenger seat of his car. Looking around the interior, she could see that Peeta was a very clean and organized person. He opened up the center console to reveal several CD cases, all in alphabetical order by artist. She was sure if she opened up the glove box it would contain just his car's paperwork and user manual. Unlike hers that was stuffed with receipts and napkins and a few small tools. Maybe even some food wrappers.

"So what do you like to listen to?" Peeta asked. "Other than Adele because I don't own any of her stuff."


He shrugged. "I picked my favorites. I have more in the house. And a pretty big library on my computer of digital music." He clamped his mouth shut before he could ramble any more.

She smiled and picked one out at random and read the front of the disc. "Hozier."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" He asked nervously.

She turned it over and read the track list. "Pretty good. I like Take Me to Church."

He held out his hand and she placed it in his palm, watching him switch out the disc in there. He found the case in his door and put it away, dropping the Hozier case into the door. He put the car in reverse.

Katniss caught sight of the case he put back and smiled. "You like Celine Dion?"

Peeta blushed, avoiding eye contact as he backed out of the driveway. "It's Annie's favorite. She gets really emotional with All By Myself."

"Oh, me too." She reached out and turned the volume up just a little, but it was still low enough for
them to talk. "So where are you taking me?"

He shrugged. "Want to see the school?"

"Could you get in trouble for that?" She asked.

"I don't think so. If you want to. We don't have to." He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel in time to the music.

"Sure." Katniss sang the refrain softly, watching the trees and houses as they passed.

Just a short time later, Peeta pulled into a parking lot. The school was very small.

"How many kids go here?" She asked as she looked the building over. It was much smaller than the elementary she remembered attending.

"Just under a thousand. It's K through sixth." He looked over and asked. "Want to go inside?"

She gave him a mischievous grin. "I've never been inside an empty school."

He grinned and turned off the car. "We should TP the halls or something."

She laughed. "Maybe not this time."

"So you promise to help me with that one day?" He asked with a playful look in his eye.

"I guess we'll see." She followed him inside the building, pausing for him to unlock doors as they went. He pointed out the main office and showed her where Annie's classroom was before he went to the opposite side of the building to show off his classroom.

It was just as organized as his studio and car. All the shelves were labeled. All the books were organized by style, era, and then artist. She saw he had several books on Van Gogh, which made Katniss smile remembering how he'd rambled about the artist over lunch.

She turned to see Peeta leaning against his desk. He asked, "So what do you think?"

"It's nice." She smiled and looked around. "Cleaner than my living room."

He chuckled. "It's only clean because of a great janitorial staff."

She nodded and leaned against the desk beside him, crossing her arms over her chest. "So, you like it? You said something once that was a little like you didn't."

He shrugged, sticking his hands in his pockets. "It's stressful trying to follow some rules that don't make a lot of sense. And I want to teach some things that don't always work out with the level of knowledge the kids have." He looked over and she got lost in his navy blue eyes for a moment. His next words were soft. "But they are so eager to learn anything I teach. They hang on my words. And I get hugs in the grocery store or kids coming up to me in restaurants just to say hi. And I couldn't do anything else."

She looked away quickly. "Passion for your job is important." *He's more handsome than I realized.* "Do you have a favorite place to paint?" She slowly looked at him once more.

"Several." He grinned.

"Will you show me one or two?"
"Sure." He pushed off the desk and headed for the door.

Katniss followed, pausing again at each door as Peeta locked them. They got back in the car and drove around for the next couple of hours, stopping off in pastures and bridges. When he stopped the car at a field of wildflowers, he turned off the car and sat back.

"This is my favorite." He said. "My most favorite."

"This is where you painted the one I have?" She asked as she looked it over.

He nodded. "I've captured it from every angle possible and several times a day. I sometimes take photos and then choose the one that looks best. Or just sit and draw what I can." He looked over a moment before he got out of the car and waved for her to follow.

Katniss clambered out of the car after him. Peeta's steps crunched in the underbrush while hers were silent. All those years as a kid hunting with her dad and getting stern looks every time she made a noise had trained her feet to be silent.

He stopped suddenly and sat down on the ground.

She laughed and followed suit.

He pointed off to the right. "The sun sets that way. It's my favorite time of day. Paints everything orange." He smiled. "My favorite color."

She saw the apprehension in his face the moment he let that out. Not something uncommon for friends to share with each other. She smiled and said, "Mine is green." She indicated the leaves of the flowers all around them. "Nature."

He smiled and nodded, leaning back on his hands. "This place belongs to one of my coworkers. She's very happy to let me come here and paint or photograph for painting."

"That's nice of her." Katniss leaned back on her elbows.

"You want to talk about you for a while?" Peeta asked, looking over. "I've been sort of rambling."

She smiled, "It's fine. I don't mind your rambling. " Your voice is so perfect. "What do you want to know about me?"

"Well, if I come to visit you, where would you take me?" He asked, reclining completely on the ground.

She only hesitated a moment before stretching out beside him. "Home Depot."

He snorted. "I'd love it. You can show off all your dream tools."

She laughed. "I don't do much unless Gale and Prim are around. Sometimes Posy drags me to the movies with her and her friends. That's Gale's sixteen-year-old sister. She tolerates me, I guess. She asked me to help her find her homecoming dress."

He laughed. "Well, it sounds like she likes you."

"She does. She's like my other little sister." Katniss looked over. "So are you as close with your brothers as you are with Annie?"

Peeta smiled. "We've had a few tough times, but we're all pretty close, yeah."
Her phone went off with her text tone and she pulled it out. "Prim." She said as she read it. Are you still on your date?

Katniss sighed and responded. We're just hanging out. NOT a date. But I should be heading home soon. She sat up slowly and asked Peeta, "Will you bring me back to my truck? I need to get on the road."

He nodded and stood up. "Sure." He held out his hand to help haul her to her feet.

She was shocked by his strength as he pulled her up and she stumbled into his chest. She let out an awkward laugh and stepped back quickly. "Thanks."

He led her back toward his car.

"I've had fun today." She said as they walked, again his steps so much louder than hers. It made her smile again.

"Me too." He paused at his car and opened the door for her. "When can we do it again?"

She laughed. "I don't know, let me think about it." She slipped into the passenger seat.

He nodded. "Fair enough." He closed the door and hurried around to the other side.

They rode back saying nothing. Katniss watched the scenery again, thinking about all the hikes she could have in a lot of the overgrown places.

Peeta pulled into the driveway and shut off the car. "So, you're heading home?"

She nodded. "I have to try to find new clients." She twisted her fingers in her lap, trying not to let the empty feeling in her chest take over. "If you're free next weekend, would you like to hang out again?"

"I'm free most weekends." He said with an anxious smile.

She nodded. "Then I'd really like to come back."

"I'd love that." He said eagerly and then cleared his throat. "Want to do early dinner and a movie?"

The empty feeling was filled once more. "That sounds great! I'll help you cook."

He worked a muscle in his jaw a moment before he asked, "Would you mind if we filmed it? For my channel?"

She nodded. "Sure. That will be fun." She slipped out of the car and hesitated as she watched him move toward her.

"I really did have a good time." She said softly.

"I did too." He smiled.

Katniss wasn't an affectionate person, but she had an odd urge to hug him. She suppressed it and opted for a handshake.

Peeta smiled and slid his hand into hers slowly. "Will you please text me when you get home?"

"I will. Promise." She suddenly had an idea. "Can I have your phone?"
He handed it over with an odd look on his face.

She opened up the contacts and added in a new one. "I should be home in just over three hours, but if I don't send you a message in four, call Haymitch and he'll find me." She handed the phone back. "I would appreciate it."

His smile was grateful. "Sure. Thank you."

Katniss looked up to see the curtain beside the door move and she waved at Finnick and Annie's anxious faces. Heaving a sigh she turned and opened the door to her truck and climbed in. It was a long drive home. But she'd be back very soon.

She waved to Peeta after sending a quick text to Gale. One more glance around and then she slowly backed out of the driveway to head home.
Chapter 13

Peeta walked into the house and dropped onto the couch, flipping through the TV and smiling to himself. It had been a great day. Katniss was such a great listener and she seemed to get him so well. Even Annie, who had known everything about him since they were barely teenagers, didn't always get him.

Finnick leaned over the back of the couch. "So?"

Peeta didn't look up. "What?"

"You get a good feel?" Finnick asked with a smirk. "Those tits are cute."

Peeta slowly turned and looked up at him. "Excuse me. Not all of us feel up a girl on the first date —"

Finnick stood up straight and called toward the back of the house, "Annie, he called it a date!"

Peeta shook his head quickly. "It wasn't a date."

Annie walked in and wrapped her arms around Finnick's waist. "Sure looked like a date."

Peeta sighed. "She didn't call it a date. So it wasn't a date. But it was a nice time. And I... I like her, okay? But we're just friends for now." He gave them both pleading looks. "Don't screw this up for me. Please? Next time she's here—"

"Next time?" Finnick asked. "When is she coming back?"

"Next weekend. We're going to cook together and film it for the channel." Peeta stood and made his way to the kitchen to fix himself a quick supper. "And then we're going to hang out and watch movies."

"You should ask her to spend the night so she doesn't have to drive all the way back." Annie suggested as she followed him into the other room.

Finnick held up his hands, made a circle with a forefinger and thumb of one hand, and poked the forefinger of the other hand into the circle several times.

Annie slapped his hands down. "Stop that."

Finnick giggled like a little kid. "Come on, you two, you both know how hot she is and how badly Peeta needs to be thoroughly fucked."
Peeta picked up the sandwich he’d thrown together and walked into his studio. "I've been fucked plenty. In every sense of the word. And I'll have you know that I definitely don't believe Katniss is like that. Especially not right away. If I ever am lucky enough to join her in bed, it will a beautiful session of making love into the wee hours of the morning when we are both thoroughly satisfied.” He grinned and closed the door behind him.

He ate his sandwich with one hand as he sketched at his drafting table that he pulled down from the wall. Katniss had a very stoic look about her. She offered many half smiles and smirks. Very few full smiles crossed her lips in their entire afternoon. But her eyes were thoughtful and kind. She always appeared to be listening intently.

He drew her surrounded by wildflowers with that pleasant, attentive look on her face. He was sure he had gotten her eyes wrong, but he also knew he'd have more time to draw her next weekend if she’d let him.

Peeta didn't realize how much time had passed until he heard his phone ringing in his pocket. He fished it out and pressed it to his ear without looking at the screen. "Hello?"

Katniss's voice came through the line. "Hi, I made it home."

"I'm glad." He sat back and stretched out his muscles. "Was it good drive?"

"It was what it was." She chuckled. "Part of me wished I didn't have to leave."

A smile stretched across Peeta's lips. "A lot of me wished you didn't have to leave. We still have so much to figure out about each other."

It took Katniss a moment to answer. He thought that he'd scared her or something. But finally she said, "I like that we're friends, Peeta."

"I do too." He said.

"And I want you to know that I like talking to you. I don't actually talk much, but you bring it out in me." Her voice was soft, a little unsure.

"Well, I like to talk, so I can take over whenever you want me to."

She laughed. "I may take you up on that."

"So is it straight to bed for you or are you staying up for a while?" He switched the phone to his other ear and went back to his sketch.

She paused a moment and said, "Well, I don't have work tomorrow. Because I don't have a client set up and it's coming on winter, so I don't need to get up in the morning."

"Sorry to hear that." He sat his pencil down and picked up his plate to head to the kitchen. "Maybe someone will call tomorrow for some cleanup or something. Another pond."

"I hope so." She sighed. "I should let you go. You have work tomorrow."

Peeta dropped his plate in the sink and noticed Finnick and Annie were leaning against each other on the couch. "It's fine. I've still got a little time before I absolutely have to get sleep."

"Okay, in that case, what have you been doing since I left?" Her question was kind enough, but he wondered what she would say if he told her what he was really doing.
"Just drawing some stuff." He said vaguely, deciding against the complete truth.

"Stuff, huh?" She asked. "Anything you want to try to give away?" She laughed.

"I wouldn't get rid of this one." He admitted softly.

Finnick looked over the back of the couch and asked, "Talking to your girlfriend?"

Peeta just shook his head and walked toward his bedroom. He shut the door and started to change for bed. Something that wasn't easy with just one hand.

"Gale says to tell you thanks for not murdering his best friend." Katniss said with a chuckle.

He laughed. "Tell him there would be no fun in murdering you. Who would I ramble to?"

"Annie?" She suggested.

"She's heard it all." He pulled a t-shirt over his head.

"Then Finnick?"

He laughed. "Everything would turn into a sex joke. You would think he'd have grown out of it by now. But I guess 29 is the new twelve."

She chuckled. "I'm sure you guys have a few genuine things to talk about."

"A few." He paused and sat down on the bed. "Before he and Annie really got serious, he talked it out with me to make sure it was cool."

"Better than what I got." Katniss laughed.

"Aw, come on now, Gale seems better than that." Peeta reclined on the bed and rested the phone between the pillow and his head. "Didn't he have a talk with you at least before he moved with her halfway across the country?"

"Only after I made him sit down and talk to me." Katniss said, her voice was a little annoyed. She sighed. "I was hurt by them for a while. They lied to me and avoided me. But I love them. So I got over it pretty fast."

He hesitated. "So you don't like liars?"

"Are you going to tell me you've been lying to me about something?" It sounded like a challenge.

"No, just that I want to know if you like real honesty." What am I about to do? "Because I'd like that with you."

"Okay. Sure. Tell me something honest."

"I like you." He said quickly before he could chicken out.

"Oh. Okay." She said nothing else.

Shit. Shitshitshit. "I mean you're a great person and I feel like I can talk to you. And you're outside of everything. And I...should probably stop talking." He chuckled awkwardly. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Now she sounded distant.
He sat up suddenly, hoping to clear his mind. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No." She said. "Nothing to worry about. I should let you go. You have work in the morning."

"Katniss, I'm sorry." He said quickly.

"It's fine, Peeta. Goodnight." She didn't sound like it was fine.

The line went dead before he could say anything else. Peeta dropped his phone on the bedside table and walked out of the room. He plopped down on the chair adjacent to the couch.

Annie looked up from Finnick's shoulder. "What's wrong?" She could always tell when he was upset.

"I just said something stupid." Peeta grumbled, looking toward the TV. He made a face. "Next Top Model? Really?"

"It was Finnick's turn to pick." Annie sighed. She pointed at her snoring boyfriend. "And then he falls asleep." She shook her head and stood up, jarring Finnick awake.

"What?" Finnick looked around in confusion.

"Go back to sleep." Annie said, pulling Peeta's arm and leading him out of the room.

Finnick shrugged and stretched out on the couch. He was snoring again by the time Annie stepped into Peeta's room.

She pushed Peeta onto his bed and then sat on the computer chair in front of him. "Talk."

He recounted the conversation with Katniss, his eyes downcast. Finally, he looked up and said, "Please tell me I didn't completely screw this up."

She smiled and patted his knee. "I can't tell you that." She stood. "But I can tell you that just the few seconds I saw the two of you together, I was picking up some major vibes. She likes you, too. But maybe she's just scared." She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight." He watched her leave and then reclined on his bed. He heard his phone chime with his text tone and he picked it up to find Katniss's name on the screen.

Her text read, **We're friends, right? That's it?**

Peeta typed out three messages before he landed on the right one. First, **Of course, but I still like you.**

Deleted.

The second one said, **I thought so. But then I poured my heart out and you stomped on it.**

Deleted!

The third text read, **I have the biggest crush on you! It's unreal!**

Deleted even before he finished typing it out all the way.

Finally he typed, **Of course we're friends.** He hit send before he decided against it.
Katniss's response took a while. Was she just as indecisive as him? Eventually her reply came through. **Good. It's not that I don't like you. I do. I just want to make sure that we're on the same page. I like you as a friend. You're easy to talk to and I really appreciate that.**

Peeta smiled. **I have always found talking to be easy, but you help me find the words that mean the most.** As soon as he hit the send button, he thought, *I am so lame.*

He finished getting ready for bed as he waited for her text. Just before he fell asleep, he heard the tone and rolled over to see what she had written. **I promise you that your words mean quite a bit to me.**

Peeta fell asleep with a smile on his face.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

It has been so long and I am sooooo sorry! But I hope the events in this chapter make up for the wait. I promise it won't be frustrating for long. Let me give you a hint of the timeline: We're nearing Halloween and there will be more and more time hanging out (with Finnick and Annie added in!!) and then things may heat them up around the New Year... ;)

Thank you so much for all the enthusiasm you have given this story so far. You can come visit me on Tumblr at booksrockmyface.

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Katniss chewed her lip after she sent the text. I promise you that your words mean quite a bit to me. God, she was dangerously close to falling. She'd kept her heart locked up for so long. She just worried mostly about Prim and getting her through life that love and dating weren't very important before.

But there was something about Peeta that made it important now.

She was in the middle of getting ready for bed when Prim sent her a text.

Are you going to tell me about the date? Prim asked.

It wasn't a date. Katniss wrote. Why do you keep calling it that?

Prim's response was quicker than Katniss was expecting. Katniss, are you happy? Really happy? Especially if this wasn't a date.

Katniss sat on the side of her bed. Her day driving around with Peeta had been one of the best non-work days in a long time. She started typing, I'm not sure what happy is. I haven't been happy since we were kids.

She stared at the words for a long time. Was she willing to admit that to her sister?

She deleted it and wrote a new message. I was today.

Katniss was exhausted from all the driving. Six hours round trip was a lot. Time for sleep. She had no plans for the next day, but she was sure she would be awake before eight no matter if she got to sleep right away or stayed up thinking about Peeta.

Maybe next time she drove to spend the day there she would find a hotel to stay in. The last hour of her drive home was so hard for her to keep her eyes open and it was finally catching up to her.

She got a text from Prim just before she dozed off. She read it, but was far too tired to respond. I just want you happy. And if this makes you happy, you need to go for it.
Katniss woke up to a text from Peeta. It was a video message. She settled in with a cup of coffee and opened up the video.

*Peeta's blonde hair was a little tasseled and looked like it was a little damp. Maybe he'd just gotten out of the shower. He smiled into the phone's camera. "Good morning, Katniss." His voice was a little raspy. "I woke up and I couldn’t stop thinking about that text you sent. And I couldn't figure out how to write down a response, so this is my response."

He readjusted the camera, his eyes looking up and off to the side as he gathered his thoughts. Dropping his voice, he said, "My mother wasn't very kind in her words and actions. And I learned from her and from my father the power of words." He finally looked at the camera and she noticed the glistening in his eyes. "I hope that when you say my words mean a lot that it's a good thing. I never want to end up like…" he swallowed and whispered, "like my mother. So I try really hard for my words to have a positive impact."

He smiled into the camera. "I know I could have waited to call to tell you this, but I knew it was more than I wanted to write in a text. And I figured you’d still be asleep when I got up." He looked over the camera and nodded. "I have to get to work. So text me when you want."

Katniss sat the phone on her lap and sipped her coffee while she watched the late morning sun moving higher in the sky. The message from Peeta was a big one to digest. He didn't speak a lot about his mother, but she knew it wasn't something fond for him.

She finally typed out her message. **I want you to know you can always talk to me, Peeta. Whatever you want me to know, I'm here to listen and help if I can.**

Peeta responded a moment later. **What do you want to know?**

She chewed her lip a moment before she wrote, **Do you want to tell me more about your mom?**

The message took longer to get there, so it was no surprise when the text was large. **Nothing we ever did was good enough for her. I remember my brothers and I could make the best grades and it still could have been better. I remember very few quiet days. She always found something to shout about or rail over. I was five when she left my dad, but she still showed up at school functions for the next couple of years. Dad had restraining orders for us, but she still showed up. But I knew to avoid her and find my teachers when she came around. And she eventually stopped trying.**

That was even more to take in. How awful for a kid so young to have to deal with that. And his brothers were so much older. They had to endure it for longer. How could a person ever function? And how should she respond?

She wrote, **How are you the way you are now? That's enough to break a person.**

**My stepmom. Devin. She's been Mom most of my life. And there was Annie and Finnick. They've helped me a lot. And Dad got us all to a counselor as soon as my mother was out the door.**

Katniss smiled at the phone. **I'm glad to hear that you got help. Probably could have used a bit more myself after my dad died, but my mom wasn't in any position to make that choice for us.**
Peeta quickly replied, *It's not too late if you think you need to speak with a professional.*

She tapped out a fast text. *I totally didn't mean to make that about me.* She sent that and then immediately wrote another message. *Have you seen your mother since then?*

*It's fine to talk about you.* He responded. *No, I haven't seen my mother. Toby has, but he said she was just as horrible as ever. Just wanted money from him and was pissed when he refused.*

*Really am sorry to hear that.* Katniss said. She didn't know what else to say.

Peeta's next text read, *Thank you. But I'm mostly past it. I always try to focus on the good things in life. So now, I want to talk about you. Do you mind?*

She chewed her lip a moment as she looked at the request. Tentatively she typed, *What do you want to know?*

His message didn't come right away. She figured he had gotten back to work, so she did the same. She checked her emails to see if anyone had contacted her about work, but there was nothing. Her posts on the local Facebook sites had no hits, so she deleted them and made more. Maybe it was time to get an actual website put together. But that was for later when she felt like she could focus.

"Time to make a video, I guess." Katniss said to herself as she closed down her computer. She packed up the camera equipment and her bow and arrows and locked up her house.

A lot of her videos were shot in the back yard of the Hawthorne's house. They lived just outside of the city limits on four acres of land. There were some really great little obstacles they could set up and shoot around. It's where Gale and Katniss had cut their chops with the trick shooting.

But today she decided to use the outdoor range on the other end of town. She hoped that on a weekday morning there would be no one else there to watch or comment. Stopping at a craft store, Katniss picked up different sized quilting hoops ranging from twenty inches wide to five inches wide. She also picked up several rolls of twine to hang up the hoops.

She grumbled at the price of the purchases and sent a text to Gale. *You better be happy I love you. I just spent a small fortune on supplies for the next video.*

His response was quick. *If you want, I'll pay half and you can send them to me at my dime.*

She grinned. *Throw in editing and posting both videos and you have a deal.*

She snorted when she got his reply. *Edit your own damn video, you lazy ass! :)*

*I guess since I'm not currently working, I can edit both.* Katniss typed. *But I will take you up on the offer to pay half. I'll send these to you this afternoon if everything works out.*

She made her way to the range. As she hoped, no one else was there. She set up four targets and then tied lengths of twine from each target to the pavilion where shooters were supposed to stand. Each hoop was placed in the center of the line. The camera was placed where it could film the arrows going through the hoops. She probably should have borrowed one from Haymitch to get a second angle, but she knew she could use her phone to get a decent shot from where she stood to fire each time.
She set up a fifth target and took several warm-up shots. She knew she was good, but some days she
surprised herself. Her first shot went wide of the center, but she adjusted to the light breeze and all
her following shots hit the center circle in a tight group. She smiled to herself.

"You taught me well, Dad." She said as she walked toward the target.

After retrieving her arrows, Katniss set up the camera to film by remote. Lifting up her phone, she
turned on the front camera and started filming from there.

She smiled. "Hey there, followers! Katniss here. I'm at the local range for the next challenge. It was
Gale's idea, so I'm going first." She turned the camera around. "You see those four hoops? I'm going
to shoot arrows through each of them. I'm only going to give myself two chances on each one. If it
hits the target the first time, I'm going to move on to the next one. Then I'll tally my points." She
turned the phone back around. "I know I'm going to beat Gale, so this really isn't that fair, is it?" She
shrugged and set up the phone to record and moved to the first target. She pressed the remote button
to start the main camera.

She made her stance and raised her bow. Her father's instructions always came back. Breathe in,
breathe out halfway, aim, fire, breathe out the rest of the way before you drop your bow. And then a
pat on the back and his words, "Good job, sis." No matter where she hit the target or even if she did,
that was what he did every shot.

The first two targets were easy. The hoops were large and all she had to do was aim for the center
and the arrows flew through effortlessly. The third was a bit more difficult, but not so much that she
didn't hit center easily.

The last was hard. Katniss raised and lowered her bow several times as she tried to line up the shot.
She only had two chances. The first arrow hit the hoop and sent it rocking for several seconds before
she tried again. Letting out a frustrated sigh, she raised the bow and let the arrow fly just a moment
later, not thinking about it nearly as much as the first time.

And it made it. She let out a whoop and turned to the main camera, "Bet you can't do that, Gale!"
Then she turned and shot three more arrows through the smallest hoop for emphasis.

She turned off the cameras and then broke down the equipment. Checking her phone, she discovered
texts from Peeta, Gale, and Prim.

The message from Prim said, **Hope you have a good day. Love you!** And Katniss responded in
kind.

Gale's message said, **Sounds good. Send me your rough cut. I want to see what I'm up against.**

She grinned and wrote. **You got it. The big ones are so easy. The small one gave me troubles.
Two shots at each one is all you get.**

Peeta's text said, **Tell me more about your family. What's your favorite memory of all of them?**

Katniss closed out that message. It would take her a while to think about those. There were a lot of
fond memories with Prim and her dad, but her mother was a different story. They had never been
really close, but it was a very strained relationship after her father had died. More strained than
normal teenager-mother conflict.

She opened up her phone camera once more and settled in. "So, I hope you liked that little show of
skill. I can't wait for yours, Gale." She chuckled and went on. "I'm going to be trying my hand at
someone else's expertise. If you remember, I mentioned Peeta over at BreakingBread. Well, he and I are going to do a bit of collaboration on his channel soon. I don't know what we're making, but I'm sure it will be delicious. Go check out his channel if you haven't yet and keep your eye out for me over there soon.” She turned off the camera and sat around for a moment looking around the range.

Many of her earliest memories were of her and her father here at this very range while he taught her how to hold the bow and where she got her first bullseye. Caleb was her loudest cheerleader for the first years of her life. And his voice always whispered in her mind when she doubted herself.

She packed up her car and drove home as she thought about it, stopping briefly at the post office to send the hoops to Gale. She looked at the clock and saw the time. It was well after three. Had she really spent most of the day at the range? She decided to call Peeta instead of texting.

He answered on the second ring, sounding slightly breathless. "Hi, Katniss." His voice was always so eager when she called.

"Hi, Peeta." She grinned and pulled into her driveway. "How was your day?"

"Can't complain. It's so close to Halloween, I'm taking advantage and showing the kids illustrations of scary stories." He laughed. "And you?"

"Filmed a new challenge. Kicked Gale's ass before he even has a chance to take it." She paused as she got out and gathered the camera and her archery equipment from the car. "So you asked about memories."

"I did. But you don't have to tell me anything you aren't comfortable with." She could tell he wanted to know, though.

"No, I want to." She set all her things aside and stretched out on the couch. "I was four when Prim was born. She was a tiny, screaming thing and I wasn't sure about her at first." She smiled at the memory. "But then my dad told me how special it would be for me to be a big sister. No one else would love me the same way Prim would. And I remember looking at her little face and feeling that. I didn't like her and I didn't really want her, but I loved her. As much as a four-year-old could realize that, I guess. That's one of my favorite memories of my dad, too."

Peeta's voice broke into the memory. "I remember always loving my brothers, even when they acted like I was a pain in the butt. So I understand the other side of it at least."

"It's a very special thing under normal circumstances." Katniss said. "My dad dying changed everything. My mom grew depressed. And she threw herself into work. I think my favorite memory of her is when she was able to bring herself out of it enough to ask me to help her plan Prim's thirteenth birthday party. And that was fun. But that's the only good thing I can think of. She mostly abandoned us."

There was a long silence on the line before Peeta was able to say, "I'm so sorry, Katniss."

"It's not your fault." Katniss sat up and started pacing. She never really talked about how hurt she was by her mother's behavior, but Peeta had told her some deep truths about his own mother, so she felt he deserved to know about hers. "It's just how she was. She should have found help for herself."

"I know it's not. But we know each other now, don't we?" He was speaking softly like he was trying to coax a spooked animal out of hiding.

"We do." She said.
His voice was still soft. "You don't need to tell me anything else. You know that, right?"

"I do." She let out a long breath. "Thank you." She sat down on the couch once more. "Can we move on? Save this deep stuff for another time?"

"Sure." She heard the smile in his voice. "So Annie mentioned that since it's such a long trip for you that I should ask you to stay with us." He paused a moment and then plowed on. "If you feel comfortable, that is. You can have my room. There's a lock and everything. Or you can just come hang out for the day again and go home. Either way. It's up to you."

She nodded. "We'll see. Thank you for the offer. And tell Annie thank you, too." She moved into the kitchen. "I'll definitely think about it. That drive home was pretty tiring after the drive there."

"Yeah. I understand. Maybe next time I'll come to you." He sounded hopeful.

"Maybe." Katniss wasn't entirely ready for that.

"Okay, enough awkwardness. How about we discuss what we'll make when you come here next weekend?"

"Sure." She leaned against the counter. "I'm really excited."

He laughed. "Me too. So what do you like to make?"

"Everything." She laughed.

They talked about food for the next hour. Peeta had Katniss laughing so much with his enthusiasm for food that her stomach and chest hurt by the time they hung up. He was such a nerd and she couldn't get enough.

They continued to text for the rest of the evening.

Chapter End Notes

BreakingBread Q&A in Peeta's next chapter! Send in your questions now to me on Tumblr (booksrockmyface). I have the anon turned on over there and it will be easier for me to keep them together. Leave your preferred url/screenname/penname there and I will be sure to add it. I'll give you until May 14 to send in your questions.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to you all for reading and reviewing and for being patient. I started a new fic, but I plan on trying to keep up with everything. Everlark will actually be together in the next chapter. Please send in you ideas on things they should cook together.

Much thanks to the following readers for sending in questions: icrashlandedonthetardis, honeylime08, gabrielladaniels6948, dianee93, burkygirl, javistg, alys07, and two anons.

Can't wait to hear all your thoughts on this chapter!

Happy reading!

Peeta settled into his chair and held up the paper he'd printed off with all the questions. He had his answers ready. This was his second ever Q&A and he was still nervous. Would he answer the way they appreciated? Had he picked the right questions?

As he reached out to turn on the camera, his phone went off with Katniss's text tone.

He smiled as he opened it.

I'm going to be there around ten, I think. Is that okay?

His heart started beating quickly. She'd be there tomorrow to cook with him and hang out. Totally okay. And you're staying the night?

Her response took a while. Maybe she'd changed her mind after their last conversation. They always kept it light, but sometimes it dipped into more serious subjects. One or the other of them always pulled it back before it went too far. They weren't quite ready for that.

His phone went off with her message. If it's still okay.

It is. And my bedroom door has a lock so you can feel secure all night. Promise. He sent the text and then typed out another. About to shoot my Q&A. Have a question to add?

That's a tough one. I already know everything I want to know. She sent. A few seconds later another message came through. If you could only eat one meal for the rest of your life, what would it be? That could be something your viewers might be interested to know. A third message popped up before he could type a response. Thanks by the way. You're really sweet.

You're welcome. I try. Definitely going to put that question in there. I'll text you when I'm done filming. He turned his phone off and quickly jotted down Katniss's question.

Turning on the camera he smiled hugely. "Hey, there, everyone!" He leaned back and waved the paper in front of the camera. "I have a list of some of your questions here and I'm ready to answer them. But first, I have some awesome news! You remember Katniss, right?" He paused and acted like he was listening for an answer.
"Well, my friend Katniss will be joining me on a cooking video soon. We'll film it tomorrow. Or, well, today once this is uploaded. If I get this uploaded on Saturday," he chuckled and shrugged. "Anyway, here is a question Katniss thought you'd all be interested in. If you could only eat one meal for the rest of your life, what would it be?"

Peeta chewed his lip a moment and said, "Well, I think that lasagna and cheese buns and salad would be a great meal to eat over and over. I don't think I'd get tired of it too soon. And I used to eat leftover lasagna for breakfast when I was a kid. My dad made good lasagna."

He chuckled and looked down at the paper. "Okay, so icrashlandedonthetardis wants to know, 'What's your favorite season and why?'' He smiled, thinking back to when he was a kid.

"Fall and winter have always been my favorites. My dad owned a bakery and orders for pies and all sorts of cakes and other special holiday pastries flooded in and I remember that my dad's clothes always smelled of sugar and cranberries and apples and cinnamon."

His nostalgia grew even more as he was brought back to his childhood. His own clothes always smelled that way as soon as the leaves started changing. It was in his blood. "My dad taught me everything I know. And everything I make is a tribute to him." His voice broke a little on the last words.

After several calming breaths, he looked back at the paper and laughed. "Okay, honeylime08 says, 'You seem to really have it together in the kitchen. Please share your biggest culinary disaster so we know you're human.'"

He laughed really hard before he was able to say, "Okay, so one year I wanted to make Thanksgiving dinner. Turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, the whole thing. Even a ham. Well, first off, I started cooking the ham too late, which threw off the time for the turkey. A meal that was supposed to start at one didn't start until almost four. My nephews were starving and acting up and my sister-in-law and Annie and my mom were all trying to help me, but I was determined to cook it all myself. I'm a little stubborn like that."

He chuckled again, shaking his head. "Then the potatoes didn't cook all the way and I had these lumpy mashed potatoes and the cranberry sauce exploded all over the stove and my gravy was almost like a jelly and... It was bad. And the next year I let everyone else help out." He shook his head some more. "Just remember you're only human. Don't be the hero."

He grinned at the next question, "Hi, Peeta! I like your YouTube channel! Can you please make our class some cupcakes? Love, Gabby!" From gabrielladaniels6948. He chuckled, "I tell you what, Gabby, I'll make some cupcakes in a video later on and maybe you can ask your teacher if your class can make the same ones on your next party day. Sound good?"

He really wished he could do something like that. Unfortunately most schools didn't allow treats to be brought in from home. They had to be pre-packaged these days.

Peeta looked back down at the paper. "An anonymous viewer asked, 'What is your favorite spice or herb?'" He leaned into the camera. "Salt and pepper." He laughed. "Look, I love to put all sorts of flavor into everything I make and it depends on the meal and what I actually put in there extra. But as long as there is plenty of salt and pepper, your dish will shine. Don't skimp on those!"

"Oh, this is a really good one!" Peeta said as he looked at the next question. "dianee93 wants to know, 'If you had a chance to do cooking as a career, would you?' Yes." He nodded. "Absolutely. I love to cook. But I also love my current profession. I teach elementary level art and I really love my kids and how excited they get to learn new stuff. So if I could find a way to do both, I would." He
shrugged. "This channel is the closest I get to doing both. Maybe if I'm lucky, I'll start to get paid for this." He leaned close to the camera and added, "Sponsors would be cool. Just saying." He laughed and sat back again to read off the next question.

Peeta blushed a little when he read back over the next question. "'You are so adorable! Is there someone special in your life?' burkygirl, I am single. But not really looking." He cleared his throat and looked back down at the paper. "You'd also like to know about other hobbies." He looked up and smiled. "I play video games. I play Halo and Black Ops and those types of games. But I also play racing and skill games and all that." He nodded.

_Time to move on!_ He looked down at the paper and nodded, "'From javistg, 'Do you have any wild game recipes?'" He thought a moment and then said, "'My dad and I went hunting once.'" He laughed. "'We didn't get anything. _But_ we did run into some hunters who happened to get two massive bucks and they offered part of one to us because they felt sorry for us.'"

Peeta chuckled again. "We took it home and my dad cut up the meat into strips. He pounded it out, dredged it in flour seasoned really well with salt, pepper, and garlic powder. Then he put it in a skillet with oil and let it all fry up. After that he drained most of the oil and added flour to make a roux, added milk, salt, and pepper to make a gravy. And then he put the meat back in the gravy to simmer for a bit. That's the only one I have. I'll make sure to write it down in the description." He pointed down with a smile. "'It works well for chicken fried steak, too. The gravy makes it extra tender.'"

"Okay, so this next one is from another anonymous viewer and they would like to know, 'What was the first recipe you created and your most memorable cooking incident?'"

Peeta thought a moment and said, "'The first recipe I created was in college. I had some ramen and a chicken breast and some soy sauce. I cut up the chicken and fried it. And I boiled the ramen, just the noodles. Then I sprinkled just a bit of the flavor packet on the noodles and put them in the frying pan with the chicken and added a little soy sauce and let it all fry up. It was pretty yummy for a cheap meal.' He chuckled and looked at the paper again.

"'My most memorable cooking incident was when my dad taught me how to make cheese buns for the first time.'" He smiled and leaned on his hand. "'I was supposed to watch the timer and I wasn't paying a lot of attention, so they stayed in just a little too long and they almost burnt. But my dad told me it was no big deal. Food being overcooked isn't the end of the world. He said it's the experience that matters, not what ends up on the table.'"

He took a deep breath to keep from crying. So many emotions about his father today.

"'One last question. This one comes from alys07, 'I tried putting cheese on top of my cheese buns but they wouldn't melt, they just got hard, help.'" He nodded. "'Okay, this is a common problem. What's probably happening is that you're cooking at too high of a heat so before it can cook properly inside all the way, it's also burning your cheese. First, crank back the heat by about fifty degrees. I also suggest putting the cheese on top in the last five minutes of cooking. Or try placing some aluminum foil over them form the start with the cheese on and then taking that off in the last few minutes to just brown the cheese. Try both and see what works best for you.'" He smiled. "'I usually put the foil on myself if I put cheese on top from the start.'"

He smiled and leaned back. "'So that's the last of them. I want to thank each and every one of you for sending in questions. Look for the next video to be up in the next day or so.'"

He turned off the camera and rubbed his face. He turned on his phone to text Katniss and found a text waiting for him. _You don't have to try._
He smiled and asked, **Can I call?**

Her response was quick. **Of course!**

She picked up on the first ring. "Hey, you!"

"Hey!" He asked, "Will you talk to me about some good things?"

"Sure, what kind of good things?" She sounded a little confused.

"Like what have you been working on?" He got up and walked out of his room. Annie and Finnick were on the couch, Finnick whispering something to Annie's stomach as she combed her fingers through his hair and watching him lovingly. He hurried into the kitchen and started to make himself a sandwich.

"Well, I have a job lined up to start on Monday. I'm clearing ivy off a house." Her voice was relaxed and slow. "And after that I have a rock wall to build."

"A rock wall? Like giant rocks? All by yourself?" He made his way back to his room.

"Not too big. But I have some helpers for the heavier rocks." She chuckled. "But most of them are manageable."

"Good. I'd hate to hear that you've thrown out your back or something."

"Yeah, that would put a damper in our weekends."

"Weekends? Plural?" Peeta asked. "Like you plan on this being a normal thing?"

Katniss paused and said, "If you want."

*Thank you, sweet baby Jesus!* He said quickly, "Yeah, I'd love to." He pulled himself together and spoke more calmly. "Maybe one weekend you can show me around your city."

She laughed, "Maybe. We'll see." She paused. "I don't want you to come here just yet because I live alone and you don't. I hope that makes you more accountable."

He sat down on his bed. "I know this is just words, but I'm not looking to take advantage of you in any way. We're just friends." **Unless you want to be more.** "And I could just come and let you drive me around all day like I did for you here."

She paused again. "I'll think about it."

"You do that." Peeta decided it was time to move on and not press the issue. "So what are we going to make tomorrow? We can go to the store to get the stuff for whatever you want to make."

"I don't know." Katniss said. "It's your kitchen."

"But you'll be my special guest. So I want you to show me how you cook and I'll be your assistant."

She laughed. "I really don't know. I've never cooked in front of a camera. I don't want to screw anything up."

He laughed with her. "You'll do a good job. And editing will work it all out in the end." He took a bite of his sandwich. "Do you like pasta or some sort of casserole? Chicken? Fish?"
There was silence on the line as she thought about it. "I make a pretty good spaghetti, but you've done that before."

He shrugged. "Well how do you make it?"

"Like spaghetti." She laughed nervously. "I put sausage in it."

"See that's different." He pointed out.

"Let me think about it a little more and we can decide in the morning?"

"Okay, that works." He took another bite of his sandwich.

"Are you eating?" She asked, teasing accusation in her voice.

He swallowed quickly. "Yeah." He was contrite. "Sorry, was I smacking in your ear?"

"A little." She laughed. "I'm starving. I should make something. I've just kind of been snacking all day. The dangers of not working."

He grinned. "Everyone deserves a little downtime."

"I'm getting tired of my own company. But tomorrow we get to hang out." She paused. "Hey, can I ask something?"

"What?" His heart started pounding in his chest.

"Why did you want to talk about good things?" Her voice was uncertain. Did she suspect something was wrong?

He reclined on the bed and looked up at the ceiling, taking several breaths before he finally said, "After the Q and A, I was thinking about my dad and I was going to a place I didn't really want to be."

"I do that a lot with my parents." Katniss said softly. "When Gale and I did ours, I got to thinking about my dad, too. It's rough."

"I wish he could see the channel. He'd so want to be part of it." He wiped his face. "It's getting kind of late and you have some driving to do tomorrow."

She chuckled. "Got a little too serious, huh?"

"Yeah, you have to buy me dinner before I tell you anything else." He chuckled.

Katniss laughed. "We'll see about that one."

Peeta felt himself start to giggle like a kid. "We will."

"I'll text you when I'm on my way. Sound good?"

"Sounds great." After she hung up, Peeta placed his phone on his chest and sighed. Tomorrow.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Peeta and Katniss together again! A lot of little gems in here! I can't wait to hear what you think!

I mention a couple Adele songs in here. If you haven't heard them, you should go look them up because she is just fantastic!

Happy reading!

Katniss sighed when Prim asked for the millionth time, "You're staying at his house? On the second day you're meeting him in person?"

"I am." Katniss said as she zipped up her suitcase. "And I'll be okay," She assured her sister, again, for the millionth time.

"Do you at least have protection?" Prim asked.

"Of the weapon variety or the condom variety?" Katniss snarked, taking down her bow case from the top of her closet.

"Both." Prim said. "But mostly weapons. You barely know this guy.

Behind the bow case was another that she hadn't taken out in a while. It held throwing daggers that she had just started learning to use the last year. Even being relatively new at it, she was still pretty good. "My daggers will be in my suitcase."

"Put one under your pillow. And don't let any of them know you have it." Gale said.

Katniss dropped the case in her bag. "Am I on speaker?"

There was a pause and then Prim said, "Yeah."

Katniss sighed. "The whole time?"

Prim laughed. "In the middle of the whole lady-scaping conversation."

"Damnit, Prim!" Katniss plopped down on her bed.

Gale commented, "It's not like you didn't have those sorts of conversations with me before." He chuckled. "He needs to be happy with your lady garden."

Katniss was glad she was alone in her house so they couldn't see her blushing. "Peeta won't be seeing my...lady garden." She shook her head. "We're friends. And I have the daggers and Peeta says his bedroom door has a lock."

"Did you grab condoms?" Gale asked.

"He's sleeping somewhere else," Katniss said. "You missed that part of the conversation."
"Get some anyway, please?" Prim asked. "You never know what will happen and you need to be safe."

"Sure." Katniss said, writing the item on her shopping list. "I have to get to the store and pick up a couple things. So I need to go."

"I love you, Katniss." Prim said.

"I love you, Prim." Katniss sighed. "And I guess I love Gale, too."

Gale laughed. "Love ya, Catnip. Call or text us when you leave-"

"And when I get there." Katniss finished. "Bye, guys."

She hung up the phone and headed out of the house.

Katniss was anxious the entire drive. She was staying the night. But she knew it would be easy for her to leave if it was uncomfortable. And that Peeta would be okay with it, because he was that kind of guy.

She pulled into town and found Peeta's house easily. She was pretty good with directions and could easily find her way back after just one visit somewhere.

Peeta stepped out the door, looking as anxious as she felt.

She waved and held up her phone before she typed a quick text to Prim. *I'm here.*

Her sister quickly replied. **Text again in a few hours. If I don't hear from you, I'll call. And I won't stop until you answer.**

Katniss shook her head and grabbed her bag. **Okay.**

Peeta held out his hand. "Can I take that for you?"

She hesitated a couple breaths and then passed it over and followed him inside.

"Annie and Finnick are out registering for their baby shower. Our mom suggested it. Annie didn't really want to." He opened his bedroom door and ushered her inside. "The bedding is freshly washed. I just made the bed back."

"Good." Katniss laughed and looked around nervously. "Did Finnick want to?"

He quickly looked away. "Did Finnick want to what?"

She chuckled. "To register for the baby shower."

"Oh." He laughed nervously and looked up. "Not really." She watched as his adam's apple bobbed. He was nervous.

Well, so was she. Alone in a house with an attractive man everyone she knew assumed she was going to sleep with...

Peeta stepped into the hall. "Did you decide what we should make?"

Katniss followed him as he made his way toward the kitchen. "How about chicken fried rice?"
He nodded. "That's one I've never thought of before. I like it." He took out the pad they used to write their shopping lists on and began writing. "Okay, we need chicken and rice. What else do you put in yours?"

She was lost a moment in his blue gaze and had to look away before she could talk. "I use frozen vegetables, whatever I have on hand. Usually peas or corn."

"We'll get mixed, if that's okay?"

She nodded. "It's your show."

He grinned. "You'll steal it, I know."

She felt her face heating up and wandered toward the counter where she noticed an old recipe box. "Do you mind if I look through here?"

"Go for it." He sat back. "That was my dad's. Mom gave it to me. She made copies of all her favorite ones and put them in a binder."

"Your dad must have been pretty special." She opened the box to find everything was in categories by types of food. The cards were mismatched, but had the same precise writing on most of them. A few were slightly different and looked like they were much older.

"He was." His voice came from over her shoulder. "That's one of my grandmother's, actually. She gave him the box when he married the first time. Some of the recipes he had to copy down again because the old cards were so worn."

"Your mother..."

He smiled sadly, "My birth mom wasn't a huge fan of cooking, so she was happy my dad was a chef. She just sat around and pretended to be the perfect housewife. All she really did was a little light cleaning."

She reached up and gently squeezed his upper arm. It was the most contact they had ever experienced. Her hand tingled and she let it slip down the length of his arm before she let go. "Do you want to talk about her? Or your father?"

He thought a moment and then shook his head. "I'm not ready for the really deep stuff. I feel like I can tell you everything and I want to. Just not right now."

She nodded. "I understand." Walking around him, she picked up the list he'd started. "Do you have eggs and soy sauce?"

A quick check of the fridge confirmed they needed both and Katniss leaned down to add them. She heard a sharp intake of breath behind her and straightened up to see Peeta's face reddening.

"Let's get shopping." He said quickly to recover, ripping the paper off the top and folding it up. "He was totally just checking out my ass! She laughed. Prim would have a field day if I told her."

"We can take my truck." Katniss offered as they made their way to the front door.

"Are you sure? You just drove for three hours to get here." Peeta pulled his jacket from the closet and slipped it on before he pulled his keys from the hook.

"I like to drive." She commented, stepping out the door.
He shrugged. "As long as you're sure."

"I am." She promised. She really just wanted to have this little bit of control. "I hope you don't mind listening to Adele." The engine came to life with a roar and then the notes from the chorus of All I Ask floated out of the speakers.

"I like Adele. But I haven't listened to a whole lot of her stuff." Peeta admitted.

Katniss grinned. "I'm going to have to give you a lesson then." She picked up her iPod and started Rolling in the Deep. In all actuality, she wasn't sure she was comfortable listening to All I Ask with Peeta just yet. It was too emotional, even as Adele songs went. "I know you must have heard this one."

He nodded. "I like this one."

"Good." She backed out of the driveway and followed his directions to the small town's single grocery store, singing along with the radio in the moments of silence.

"You're a really good singer." He commented when she turned off the truck and turned to open the door.

She smiled. "Thanks." She slid out, taking in the front of the obviously aged grocery store. "Wow, are you sure the food here is safe for human consumption?"

He laughed. "The outside looks bad, but I promise the inside is much better." He tilted his head toward the front. "After you?"

She continued on and discovered that it really wasn't bad inside. "Where to first?"

Peeta grabbed a cart and handed over the grocery list. He slowly led her around the store, grabbing the things they needed and pointing out his favorite brands as he picked out a few other items.

"I'm kind of a nerd, right?" He asked as they finally made their way toward the front to check out. "Having brands of food I like to buy over others."

Katniss shook her head. "Not at all. Well, I mean, maybe. But nerds are cool. I have brands of gardening tools and stuff I prefer. It just comes with the territory."

He smiled gratefully as he placed their purchases on the conveyor. "Oh, hey, Margot."

"Hi, Peeta. How are you?" The young woman asked.

"Just great!" He replied. "How is Christian?"

"About the same. He said he was going to make himself better by Halloween, though."

"Can't miss that free candy." Peeta indicated Katniss. "This is my friend Katniss. Katniss, this is Margot. She's the mom of one of my students."

"Nice to meet you." Katniss said, sure this woman already knew about her from the last visit just a week ago.

"My son is going to flip when he finds out I met you." Margot said as she bagged the last of the groceries. "He watches your videos on repeat."

Katniss grinned. "Well, tell him I said hello."
"Oh, believe me, I will." Margot placed the last bag in the cart. "Have a good evening."

"Are they as obsessed with you around here?" Katniss asked as they loaded the bags in the back of her truck.

Peeta laughed. "Cooking isn't nearly as interesting to most kids as archery trick shots."

"Maybe I'll pull in a new demographic." She said with a chuckle.

He laughed. "Maybe."

One and Only came up next and Katniss belted it as she made her way back to Peeta's house. She didn't think about the actual lyrics as she sang them until she pulled into the driveway. *It's just a song, Katniss. Get over yourself.*

They went through the bags and got out all the food they needed for the fried rice. Katniss explained her recipe as Peeta put the groceries away. They discussed portions and Peeta pointed out where the silverware was stored that she might need.

After all the extra food was put away, Peeta got to work setting up the camera. "You ready for your BreakingBread debut?" He asked as he ran all the cords to the right places.

She smiled. "I guess. I just hope I don't mess up."

"You already do well in front of the camera." He walked behind the island to stand in front of her. "This is just cooking instead of archery. But you're good." He gently squeezed her upper arm like she'd done to him earlier. "And I'm here." He trailed his hand down her arm, leaving his hand resting on her wrist.

There was only a breath of space between them. She could just roll up on her toes and press her lips to his. It would be so easy. The look in his eyes told her that maybe he was thinking along the same lines.

She took a deep breath and prepared herself to make the move when the front door opened and Finnick called, "We're home."

Peeta quickly stepped away and went to work cutting up the chicken breast they'd just unloaded. "We're getting ready to film."

"I'll get water on for the rice." Katniss offered.

Annie walked into the room and leaned over the ingredients laid out on the counter. "What's for dinner?"

"Chicken fried rice." Peeta announced.

"Sounds good." Annie said.

Finnick came in and wrapped an arm around Annie's waist. "We bought you something." He held out a bag to Peeta.

Peeta pulled out a shirt and started laughing. He turned to Katniss. It read, "Hot uncle."

Katniss chuckled. "Nice!"

"I saw it and knew Peeta had to have it." Finnick nodded and walked toward the camera and
"What?" Peeta asked, stepping toward the camera.

"Was that on purpose?" Finnick asked.

"That was so not me. Get away from my equipment." Peeta nudged him out of the way, pushing buttons.

"I'm hurt, Peeta." Finnick pouted. "You've never been so concerned about your equipment before. But I guess it was thinking for itself when the camera zoomed in on Katniss's chest. Hope it wasn't recording."

Katniss felt her face heating up and moved away slightly so that Finnick couldn't see he was making her self-conscious. He was definitely the kind of person that needed teasing right back instead of defensiveness and she didn't know him well enough just yet.

"Stop it, Finnick." Annie admonished, but there was humor in her voice. "Sometimes Peeta's equipment has a mind of its own. Don't worry, Peeta, it's perfectly normal."

Peeta balled up a dish towel and tossed at the laughing couple. "Get out of here."

The pair continued to laugh as they went into the next room.

Peeta sighed and looked over the camera. "You ready to get started?"

"Sure." Katniss said. She was shaking from the nerves, but as soon as Peeta was beside her, she felt herself calming down.

He waved at the camera. "Hi, everyone. Thanks for clicking over. Peeta here again with a very special guest. This is Katniss. She's the co-host of her own channel called slings-and-arrows with her best friend Gale where they challenge each other to different types of archery trick shots." He turned to Katniss. "Do you mind if I share a clip? I totally forgot to ask."

She nodded. "Sure, that'll be great."

"Good." He grinned and then put a pan on the cooktop. "Okay, today, Katniss and I are making chicken fried rice. So what are you doing over there, Katniss?" He poured a little oil in the pan.

She swallowed and said, "Just cutting up the chicken to fry up."

"The cut should be as close to the same as you can get."

Katniss nodded. "So that they cook at the same rate."

Peeta grinned. "Yes, you want it all done at the same time so nothing overcooks or undercooks. It's very important with chicken that it's done all the way through."

"Right." She slid the cutting board toward him. "All done." She walked over to the sink and washed her hands while Peeta explained that you didn't have to use chicken in the fried rice.

"This is a very versatile recipe and you can use any meat and vegetables you want. Whatever you like or have on hand. Right, Katniss?"

She smiled. "Right. Sometimes I don't even put in veggies because I forgot to go to the store."
He chuckled. "It happens." He turned to another pot that she'd put water in earlier. "Katniss put on some water a little bit ago for rice. It's boiling now, so we're going to put in the rice. It's one to one ratio for rice. You need one cup of rice, you boil one cup of water. Get it?" He smiled at Katniss. "Would you like to do the honors?"

Katniss poured in the rice, gave it a stir, and then placed the lid on, leaning down to turn the burner down to a simmer. "Sometimes I put chicken bouillion in the rice. Gives it a little character."

"I never thought of that." Peeta stirred the chicken and tapped the spoon on the side. He reached up in the cabinet and produced a can of bouillon cubes and handed them over. "It's your show."

She smiled and took the jar from him. Their fingers brushed and she had to keep herself calm as she opened up a couple of the cubes and dropped them in the simmering rice. "Now we need to let this go for a few minutes."

"Yes." Peeta agreed. "Do you make fried rice a lot?"

Katniss nodded. "It's one of my favorite quick meals. I usually have rice on hand. It's one of my staple foods."

"What else do you cook?" He asked.

She smiled. "A lot of stuff that comes from boxes that you just add meat to." She chuckled. "But I do know how to cook. Since I live by myself, I usually don't bother with a big meal. Sometimes it's something simple like a pan fried steak and some frozen corn I fry in butter. I make mashed potatoes from boxed flakes. Butter up a piece of bread and call it a meal."

"You have all the food groups at least." Peeta pointed out.

"I try really hard to eat right. It's not always easy."

"No, it isn't. Especially after working all day." He indicated Katniss. "My friend here is a landscape artist. And I've seen a few pictures of her work. She's very talented on that front."

"I'm a jack of all trades." She chuckled. "At least that's what my sister tells me."

"Well, it's true." Peeta gave the chicken another stir. "Now we're going to add in some frozen mixed vegetables here. Remember, you can use any frozen or fresh veggie you like. This is your meal."

Katniss dumped half of the bag into the pan and Peeta stirred some more. "What's the meal Annie and Finnick usually ask you to make?" She asked as she turned off the rice.

"Finnick likes anything with beef and a starchy side. He's a very meat-and-potatoes guy. Annie likes really likes dessert. I make really good cinnamon rolls that she loves."

"You make cinnamon rolls? Why haven't you told me you make good cinnamon rolls?" Katniss demanded.

"You like cinnamon rolls?" Peeta sat the spoon down and reached for the pan of rice.

"I love cinnamon rolls! You should make me some." She grinned. Am I being too flirty?

"I should." He poured the rice into the frying pan. "We just let this all work together for a minute."

Katniss reached for the carton of eggs. "Two eggs? Is that what we decided?"
"I think so." Peeta made a well in the middle of the pan and Katniss reached over to crack the eggs into it. He started stirring again to get the egg through the mixture as it cooked. "Then we'll go around the pan with a little soy sauce and leave the bottle in the middle of the table for everyone to add more if they like. I'm not a big soy sauce fan myself."

"We can't be friends after all." Katniss teased as she poured the sauce into the pan.

"Darn!" Peeta chuckled.

"That smells awesome." She commented as she leaned over the pan. "Can we eat yet?"

He laughed. "We'll try it out." He handed over a fork as he turned off the burner.

Katniss took a bite and nodded, holding up her thumb. "Really good."

Peeta agreed, swallowing his own bite, he addressed the camera. "Thank you so much for tuning in. As always, if you have any questions about this recipe, send it in. I'd love to hear your own results. Thank you, Katniss, for joining me and sharing your recipe with me. I'll see you all next time."

He walked around and turned off the camera and then called, "Food's ready." He piled rice on two plates and handed one to Katniss.

She accepted a plate and followed Peeta to the table at the other side of the room as the other two came in. She poured more soy sauce onto her fried rice.

Annie asked, "Did Peeta offer you anything to drink?"

"No, I didn't." Peeta said. "Water, milk, or sweet tea?"

"Water's fine." Katniss said as he got out four glasses.

"Annie? Finnick?"

"You know I like sweet tea, sweetie." Finnick said with a grin.

"Water." Annie said. "Since you're getting it."

Peeta distributed glasses and sat back down. "How was shopping?"

"There are so many things!" Finnick said. "Did you know there are dozens of designs for breast pumps? And you'd think with the word 'breast' in them that it would be something sexy, but it isn't."

Annie chuckled and shook her head. "I'm not even sure yet if I'm going to try breastfeeding, but Finnick was so fascinated that he put one of every kind on the registry."

"You'll go back later and remove them all, right?" Peeta asked.

"Probably." Annie grinned. "We saw all these sweet little clothes and blankets and toys." She sighed. "I'm ready to have our little bundle here so I can just shower it with kisses and cute clothes."

Peeta smiled. "It'll be screaming its head off at all hours of the night."

Annie shrugged. "Can't win them all." She looked toward Katniss. "You have a sister, right?"

Katniss nodded and finished her latest bite. "Yeah. She's in medical school right now."
"That's good." Annie nodded. "How much of an age gap is there? We're discussing how long we should wait between babies."

"You already decided you want more?" Peeta asked with a chuckle.

Finnick nodded. "We agreed that we don't want to have just one. I was an only child and I liked it well enough, but I'd like to have more than one."

Annie added, "As much as I love you and Toby and Gage, I think more than two is impractical. For us at least."

Katniss said, "There are four years between Prim and me. For us, that was a good gap because she wasn't entirely in my business and she wasn't stuck too much in my shadow. My friend Gale has brothers that are just over a year apart. The younger one said it was frustrating being called 'Rory's brother' instead of just 'Vick.' Rory didn't have quite the same issue since Gale was nearly five years older." She stirred her food. "But the good thing is that Rory and Vick are there to take up for each other. There are pros and cons to any sibling age gap, I guess."

Annie nodded. "I guess it will all depend on how easy this one is. If we're too exhausted by one year, we'll wait a bit."

Peeta chuckled again. "Just warn me so I can start looking for somewhere else to live."

Finnick said, "If you play your cards right, Katniss may be asking you to move in with her soon."

Katniss snorted. "What makes you think that?"

Finnick gave her a hard look. "I have a sixth sense about these things." He went back to his food.

Katniss glanced at Peeta, who was shaking his head in disbelief. He said, "You also thought the same thing about Johanna."

"Jo didn't ask you to move in with her, but you broke up with her when she did." Finnick pointed his fork at Peeta. "Don't fuck this one up, bro."

"I didn't fuck it up with Jo, she did."

"Anyway, my love life isn't your business."

"Well, your girlfriend is staying the night, so we all know something is bound to happen." Finnick said.

"I'm not his girlfriend." Katniss said, giving Finnick a challenging look. "And nothing is going to happen besides hanging out." She followed Peeta to the sink. "Do you want me to help clean up?"

Peeta shook his head. "Finnick and Annie get to clean up since we cooked." He started unhooking the camera and other equipment. "Want to take a look at the Q and A video? Help me edit it?"

"Sure." Katniss helped Peeta finish the break-down and then followed him to his room.

He made sure to leave the door open.
Peeta watched past Katniss's head as Annie and Finnick made their way down the hall to their room. Once they shut the door, he leaned closer to her slightly. "I'm glad you came."

She turned and smiled. "I'm glad too."

He trailed a finger down her arm and was satisfied when she didn't pull away. "I want to tell you about Johanna."

"Why?"

"Because I think you should know." He swallowed a lump in his throat. "It wasn't right from the start. Not for me, anyway." He pulled his hand away. "She and I had fun when we were in a bedroom. Or in a car." He gave a self-deprecating smile. "One time she even convinced me to sneak into a public bathroom."

"Oh, wow." Katniss said softly.

Peeta nodded. "Yeah. She's adventurous. I'm not very." He cleared his throat. "But there was no substance and I wanted more."

"And she didn't." She speculated.

He shook his head. "She asked me to move in with her and I said no. So we broke up." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "A little after, Finnick and Annie had a threesome with her. And they acted like couldn't understand why I was upset about it."

"Well you had dated her. I'd be pissed." She placed her hand on top of his. "I bet it was tough living with them for a while after that."

"For a long time." He nodded. "And I never really got the courage to seriously date after that. It never was a priority anyway."

Katniss nodded. "And you dated before?"

"Yep." He rested his arm on the back of the couch. "Delly. That waitress at the diner I took you to."

"Right." She glanced at his hand and then back at his face. "You said she wanted to settle down and you weren't ready." She stretched her arm out behind her, their fingers brushed.

"Yes." He smiled. "But there was really no one else. A few first dates. Even fewer second dates."

"I haven't dated since high school." Katniss admitted. She swallowed and let Peeta press his fingers between hers. "I slept with Gale once. Just after my parents died."
"Oh?" He could feel his heart pounding harder against his ribcage. "And you're still friends? Just friends?"

She smiled and nodded, squeezing his hand gently before she let go. "It was a very hard time for me and he was there for it all."

Peeta sat back, a little stung by her moving away. "I bet that was awkward for a while."

"It was." Katniss said softly. "But I wanted my friend. I needed him. So we had a long talk and we worked it out."

He watched her a moment before he asked, "Who else knows?"

"Prim. And now you. We told her when she and Gale started dating." She chewed her lip. "And I like you. That's why I wanted you to know."

Peeta felt his face break into a smile. "You like me?"

Katniss nodded uncertainly. She leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to his lips. "I'm going to bed."

Peeta sat there stunned for several breaths, not entirely sure about what had just happened. Listening to the house settle and Katniss rustling around in his bedroom, he got an idea. It wasn't a good idea. But it was one he wanted to follow.

On slow, tentative feet, he made his way down the hall. He paused outside his bedroom door and tapped lightly.

She threw the door open and pulled him in. He kicked the door shut behind him as he followed her to the bed, lips still attached. She had already moved the comforter off to the side and she broke the kiss just long enough to slip underneath, tugging on his hand when he hesitated.

Her mouth tasted like the cinnamon rolls he'd thrown together to appease her. A moan escaped him and he felt her smile against his lips just before she pushed him off her.

She whispered, "I don't want anything more than kisses. Is that okay?"

He smiled. "Totally fine." He pulled her close and renewed the kiss, his hands gently roaming the planes of her back and the length of her arms. He could feel the muscles flexing and imagined seeing her shoot her bow in person, which was the last thing he should have been thinking. But if he thought too much about other activities that could flex those same muscles, he was in trouble.

Slowly she pulled her mouth away. "Thanks. I haven't kissed anyone in a while. A long while."

"Same." He breathed. He stared into her sleepy eyes a moment and decided it would be better for him to get to the couch.

As he started to move away, she stopped him. "You can stay."

"Do you really want me to?" His voice shook. This is really happening.

"Please?"

He nodded and settled down in the familiar space with the fast-becoming-familiar company beside him. He fell asleep quicker and slept better with her there than he'd experienced in quite some time.
Peeta slowly came awake and it took him several groggy moments to remember that Katniss was in his bed. The realization brought a smile to his lips and he pressed his nose into her hair.

Then he heard the voices. Annie said, "Doesn't look like he slept in here."

Finnick chuckled. "Of course not. There was hot chick in his bed."

The bedroom door opened and before Peeta could tell Finnick to mind his own damn business, something silver flew through the air and landed in the doorframe just inches from Finnick's head.

Finnick's eyes were wide as he looked to his side. A dagger was imbedded in the wood. "Shit! Sorry! Don't kill me!" He closed the door and hurried back down the hall, speaking too softly for Peeta to hear.

"Sorry about that." Katniss stood and pulled the knife from the doorframe with a little difficulty.

"Where was that hiding?" Peeta asked as he got out of bed and stretched.

"Under the pillow." She smiled sheepishly. "I'll fix the frame."

"I'll do it. Don't worry about it." He assured her, running his finger over the slice. "Daggers, huh?"

She opened her bag and pulled out a case that had several similar knives in it. She slipped the one she'd used into the empty slot. "I'm still learning." She snapped it shut. "I might do a video with them soon."

"Does Gale throw daggers?" He sat down on the edge of the bed.

"No. I've been trying to get him to learn, but he said he doesn't need another hobby." She chuckled and then bit her lip. "About last night..."

His heart sped up again and his lips started tingling for hers. "Please don't say it was a mistake."

She shook her head. "I just... Don't break my heart." She leaned over and kissed his forehead before she walked toward the door with her bag.

"I don't plan on it." He called after her.

She turned and smiled gratefully over her shoulder. "Thanks."

Peeta walked into the kitchen to find Finnick flipping a pancake out of a pan and back without dropping it while Katniss and Annie watched. It was an old trick Peeta's had taught him years before. One that Peeta never had mastered.

Katniss glanced over when Peeta walked further into the room. He squeezed her shoulder as he passed on his way to the coffee pot. "Want me to warm that up for you?" He asked, waving the pot.

Katniss nodded and held out her cup. "Thanks."

Peeta grabbed onto the mug and carefully poured the hot liquid into it, his hand shaking the entire time it held onto hers around the cup. He really wanted to return that forehead kiss she'd given him earlier, but the look on her face made him keep his distance.

"Finnick's putting on a show." Katniss commented as Peeta slid into the chair beside hers.
"Finnick is always putting on a show." Peeta and Annie said at the same time.

"Yeah, fuck you, too." Finnick said genially as he placed the last pancake on top of the stack he'd created. "At least I can do the pan flip."

Peeta nodded. "That's true." His tone a little forlorn.

Katniss rested her hand on Peeta's knee a moment and then sat back. "So what other talents do you have, Finnick?"

"I created a life." He winked at Annie as he walked around the island. "A very cute life."

"It'll be adorable, but only because of Annie's genes." Peeta said with a smirk.

Finnick rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say." He looked to Katniss. "I have other real talents, though. I work in a hatchery. The fish flock to me every time they see me because they know I'm the meal ticket. They like me better than all the other workers. And my babies there are beautiful and grow fat very quickly."

Annie made a face. "You better not be saying that the fish you grow to feed people are more beautiful than the human baby we made together." She warned as she took a pancake and some bacon onto her plate.

Finnick started filling a plate. "You know my feelings about my fish, baby. They mean the world to me." He winked and shoved a forkful of pancakes in his mouth.

Annie picked up his plate and smashed it in his face. "Well, how do you feel about that?" She got up and stomped out of the room.

"Well, shit." Finnick flicked broken pancake back onto his plate. "I forgot you don't tease the pregnant lady first thing in the morning." He got up and quickly followed. "I'm sorry, babe."

"Our child isn't a fucking fish, Finnick!" Annie shot back.

Peeta snorted. "Those two fight like cats and dogs. But then they make up. Loudly. So we should eat and then find something to do for a while outside the house."

Katniss chewed thoughtfully for a while and then asked, "Can we go back to that meadow?"

A smile spread over his lips. "Would you mind if I paint there?"

She nodded. "I'd love to watch you paint."

He reached out and gently placed his hand on the side of her face. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips against her forehead and his eyes closed.

She whispered, "Not what I was expecting."

He whispered back, "And what were you expecting?"

She chewed her lip a moment and then pulled him in for a quick peck on the lips before she went back to her breakfast.

Peeta couldn't keep his eyes off Katniss as she ate. God, she was so gorgeous. Especially up close with the sun shining through the window just right, illuminating the side of her face.
Annie came back into the room and picked up a piece of bacon. "Sorry my boyfriend's kind of a jerk."

Katniss laughed. "Hey, he's got a lot going for him. He can afford it every once in a while."

Annie smiled happily. "That's true. And he's my jerk, after all." She winked.

Finnick came back into the room and looked contrite. "I apologize for the scene I just caused. My girlfriend is an amazing woman and she's carrying my child, which makes her a superstar." He leaned over Annie and kissed the top of her head. "That was all right, wasn't it?"

Annie nodded. "Yes, it was. Thank you."

Finnick sat down once more and stuffed three consecutive slices of bacon in his mouth.

Peeta laughed and snapped his hand like he was cracking a whip. "Whpshhh!"

"Yeah, I am whipped." Finnick said. "And damn proud of it."

Katniss picked up her plate and stood. "What do I need to do with this?"

"Give it to me." Peeta said as he took it from her. "We'll head out in a couple minutes. If you still want to go to the meadow for a while."

Katniss nodded. "I do. I just need to head home before dark. I actually have a job in the morning."

"I'll have you back before midnight, Cinderella." Peeta promised, setting their plates in the sink and walking toward his studio.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

We definitely need some fluff in this world right about now, so I hope this hits the right spot for you.

I only have three chapters and an epilogue planned for this and then it will be done. It's a little bittersweet. But we may revisit this world in one shots and drabbles in the future.

I'm almost done writing my other fic Worry Is Calling. And then I'm going to focus on Elaborate Lives for a bit. I have some more Everlark ideas coming down the pipe, but I hope to start working more on original fiction by the end of the year. I encourage you to read Promise I'm Worthy (Gale/Annie post-Mockingjay) if you're the slightest bit interested because I will be pulling it soon to turn it into an original work.

And, if you're interested in reading my original stuff, head over to fictionpress and look for DanielleCheri!

Happy reading!

Katniss sang along softly to the radio, watching the scenery pass. Peeta pulled into the same spot as last time they drove to the meadow and got out of the car.

Katniss followed, helping Peeta carry his things out into the field. When she shivered, he ran back to the car and returned with a blanket and a Thermos of coffee he'd made sure to grab before they left.

She accepted the blanket, wrapping it around her shoulders as she watched him sit back with his pencils and paper. "This probably wasn't the smartest idea."

He laughed. "Are you kidding? This is my favorite place."

"I know." She still shivered under the blanket, but she was content to watch him draw.

"I like being outside." He sketched quietly for a while.

Katniss poured herself some coffee and moved closer, sipping and letting the warmth fill her from the inside. "So what are you drawing?"

"I was drawing you, but you moved." Peeta said with a smirk. He twisted the book to show her. "Got the top of your head done."

She laughed and offered him the coffee. "Your cheeks and nose are red. You should warm up."

Their hands brushed when he took the cup. "Can I warm up with you?"

She nodded and held the blanket out for him to climb under. He finished the coffee and screwed the lid back on. He pulled her across his lap and cupped her cheek.

With a laugh, she pulled away. "Your hand's like ice."
"Sorry." He slipped it under the blanket and wrapped it tighter around the both of them.

Katniss reached up and framed Peeta's face with her hands. "Your cheeks are cold."

"I bet my lips are, too. You should test them." There was a playful gleam in his eyes.

She laughed again and pressed her lips to his for the briefest moment. "Freezing."

"I'm freezing all over." He rested his forehead against hers. "Wanna warm me up?"

She pushed him back, straddling his hips. Picking up his hands between hers, she leaned over and rubbed them, pausing to blow a long breath on them. The way she was sitting was obviously not the best choice as she could feel him getting hard beneath her.

She mumbled an apology and moved to the side, stretching out to rest her head on his chest.

"It's quiet here." He said softly. "That's why I like it."

She propped her head on her hand, her other still resting on his chest. "Does it get loud with Finnick and Annie?"

He nodded, placing his hand over hers. "They fight, they make up. They get excited about things."

"When the baby comes, there will be crying."

"There's already crying." He smirked. "Mostly on Finnick's part."

She laughed and leaned down to kiss him. "I think I like you, Peeta."

"I'm glad." He pulled her down on top of him and their lips met tentatively.

Katniss braced her arm beside Peeta's head as her hand moved up to tangle in his hair. He shifted until the blanket was draped over her and held her close as she grew more confident in the kiss.

His lips grew warm beneath hers. She darted her tongue out and licked across the seam, asking entry to explore and he very quickly complied. He tasted like coffee and there was a very faint remnant of syrup.

Peeta tightened his embrace and rolled Katniss under him. After a moment, he lifted his head and looked down at her. "I'm very warm now."

She smiled and pulled him down for another kiss. "So am I. But I'm still not going farther than kissing."

"And that's totally fine." His lips brushed over hers again and then rolled away. "I drew your picture once. From memory."

She turned her head. "What? Really?"

He nodded. "Creepy, right?"

She shook her head. "Will you show me?"

"Sure. It's warmer back at the house anyway." After jumping to his feet, he held out his hand to help her.
She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him once more. "You'll have to bring me back here when it warms up again."

"Oh, I definitely will." He stepped away and they both started gathering their things. "Hey, maybe you can film a video here. I can get you permission."

"That would be awesome." She turned and pointed to the farthest edge of the treeline. "I can totally make that."

"I bet you can." He looked back at her. "Do you think you can teach me?"

"Archery? I can try." She grinned and followed him to the car. "Never could get Prim too into it."

Once inside, Peeta slipped a new CD into the player and pulled into the road. "Do you mind if we just drive around for a while?"

"Not ready for me to leave?"

"Not really." He admitted softly.

She reached up and took his right hand on the steering wheel, slipping her fingers between his. "Can't say that I blame you."

He brought her hand to his lips. "A weekend isn't enough. Especially since it's really not a full weekend since you can't really leave very early on Fridays and you're tired."

"Maybe you can come to me next time." Katniss suggested, shifting in her chair. "When's the latest you get off?"

"I'm usually out of there by four-thirty." He grinned. "If I leave right after, I can get to you by about eight." He glanced over as he stopped at a stop sign. "Are you sure?"

"I am." She squeezed his hand. "I can show you around my world."

"I look forward to it."

They rode around in silence for a while. Katniss answered texts from Prim and Gale asking if she was okay and when she was leaving.

"I should get on the road home soon." She said reluctantly.

Peeta sighed. "Okay." He pointed the car toward his house. "I've had a good time." She grinned. "You should know, that it's been a while since I kissed anyone, so I was especially impressed by you."

He laughed. "Good to know. I was impressed by you, too."

She felt her cheeks heat up.

He kissed her hand again just before he pulled into the driveway of his house. "Can you stay long enough to look at the picture?"

"Of course." She got out of the car and walked around to where he waited, slipping her hand into his as they walked to the door together.
Finnick and Annie peered over the back of the couch at them.

"Holding hands, huh?" Annie said.

"I guess you owe me five bucks, Annie." Finnick commented.

Peeta rolled his eyes and pulled Katniss through the kitchen and into his studio. He picked up the folder sitting on his drawing table and opened it up to retrieve a piece of paper.

Turning to Katniss, he kept it held to his chest. "Remember, I did this from memory, so it's a little off."

She nodded. "I understand."

Peeta stepped forward and turned the paper around. "What do you think?"

Her jaw dropped. "You did that from memory?" She took the paper and looked down at a perfect rendering of her face. "I'm so in awe of you."

"You like it?" His voice was so unsure.

"Yeah, I do. You're a great artist, Peeta." She tried to hand it back, but he stopped her.

"You keep it."

"Okay. Thanks." She looked it over again and then sighed when her phone went off.

A text from Prim. **It's getting late, Katniss.**

"I guess I should get on the road before my sister has a heart attack." She said. She typed out a response. **Calm down. It's not even four yet.**

Peeta walked Katniss back to his room where she gathered her things. They paused in the living room so Katniss could bid her farewells to Finnick and Annie.

Finnick said, "I hope you were safe."

Katniss gave him a hard look. "Did my knife not scare you enough?"

Finnick put his hands up in surrender. "You got me."

With a laugh, Annie pulled Katniss into a tight hug. "I've so loved spending time with you this weekend. Please come back soon."

"I will." Katniss hugged her back. Annie was a really good hugger. Katniss wasn't a fan of hugging for the most part, but some people deserved a good hug, especially if they could give them. Katniss pulled away. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"You're very welcome." Annie grinned and kissed her cheek.

Peeta took control of Katniss's suitcase and led her out of the door to her truck. After putting her things in her passenger seat, he turned and pulled her close. He kissed her deeply. She gathered the front of his shirt in her hands as she let him kiss her for a long time.

She reluctantly pulled away and took her keys from her pocket. "I'll call you when I get home."
"Thank you." He tucked some hair behind her ear. "Drive safe."

"Yeah." Katniss really didn't want to leave, but she had to. She typed out a text to Prim. **Leaving.**

**Love you.**

And then she pulled away, watching Peeta in the mirror until she couldn't see him anymore.
There were few things Peeta adored more in the world than time to himself. Growing up in a small house attached to the bakery where his family all worked was cramped. He'd used his art to escape the crowd. Or at least to escape his brothers. The house had three bedrooms and after Annie and Devin entered the picture, all three boys had to share until the garage was converted into two more rooms. Peeta ended up on Annie's floor more often than not.

Now, nearly two decades later, sometimes Peeta and Annie ended up in the same room in the middle of the night. That room was usually the kitchen.

And tonight was no exception. Even though it was the one night, Peeta missed Katniss in his bed. He couldn't get comfortable and eventually gave up, making his way to the kitchen. He got the ingredients for a cake out and started working as quietly as possible. He mixed everything by hand and stuck the pans in the oven just as Annie walked in, rubbing her eyes.

"What's going on?" He asked when he saw her.

"Finnick's snoring in my ear." She yawned. "I was about to crash on the couch, but I heard you in here."

"I couldn't sleep." He got a stick of butter out of the fridge and sat it on the table.

"Any particular reason?" Annie asked ass he took a seat.

"I think I..." He shook his head. "Nevermind." He dropped onto the nearest chair.

"No, what is it?" Annie moved closer to him. "You know I'll always listen."

"I've only known Katniss a little while, but I..." Peeta took a deep breath and let it out. "I love her."

Annie wrapped her arms around Peeta and he easily reciprocated. "That's great."

"You really think so?" He moved back. "I've only actually seen her in person twice."

"But you've texted daily for nearly two months. And talked for hours on end." She pointed out. "When you know, you know."

He nodded and started working on the frosting. Cream cheese was his favorite, but they were fresh
out of the key ingredient.

Annie watched him in silence for a while before she stretched and made her way to the couch. "Wake me when it's done."

Peeta chuckled. "Sure thing." He continued to work.

And he thought about Katniss. Was she able to sleep? Was she thinking about him as much as he was thinking about her? Did she crave his touch and his kiss as much as he did?

He worked on auto pilot as he took out the cakes to cool and finished the frosting. He heard Annie mumbling in her sleep from the living room and smiled to himself. She'd always been a sleeptalker.

Once the cake was finished, Peeta leaned over the back of the couch and watched Annie sleep for a few moments before he pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. "Cake can wait." He whispered before he went to his bed.

He had a text from Katniss on his phone and kicked himself for leaving it in the other room while he cooked.

Sleeping alone is lame. I can't believe I went so long doing it.

He checked the time and noticed it was a recent message, so he replied. Yeah, I baked a cake because I couldn't get comfortable. It was so much better last night. Better than ever. He sent the message and settled into bed, his eyes finally growing heavy.

Just as he was dozing off, her message came through. Is it Friday yet?

Peeta laughed and responded, Don't I wish? After sending that, he added, I have some days saved up. If you want, I could come maybe Wednesday night?

It felt like forever. The dots appeared and disappeared under his message several times before she finally sent, That would be fine. If you want.

I do want. Let me see what I can do. Get some sleep, Katniss.

I'll try. Goodnight, Peeta.

He rolled over and slept hard until his alarm went off.

Katniss still couldn't sleep. Had she really just agreed to let Peeta come sooner? Was that a good idea?

She was sure if she told him she changed her mind that he would honor that. He was such a good man. And she really needed more people in her life. Not that she didn't have plenty. The Hawthorne family was big, and grew all the time it seemed.

But Peeta was different. He was a new sort of comfort. He understood her in a way most other people didn't. He knew what it was like to grieve a parent. And he wasn't grieving the same parent, so it was easier for her to just let go of all her worries around him. She didn't have to be the strong one. When she was ready, he would let her fall apart.

He also knew how to read her body language and adjust. He seemed to know when she wanted to talk and when she didn't. And when he kissed her, he could tell how she wanted to be touched
without her even saying anything.

She eventually fell asleep just a couple hours before her alarm went off.

Katniss spent the better part of the day trudging through an overgrown property that was about four times as large as her own. The tiny house was dwarfed by the plot that boasted trees that were dying and others that were simply in danger from dying because they were overcrowded.

The owner was a woman who had been nursing her injured husband. His recovery took so long that the yard became secondary. Now that he was getting released to come home, she needed it to be clear for construction of a wheelchair ramp. She also wanted it to be welcoming.

"I swear that it didn't used to be quite so bad." Wiress explained. "My husband and I are scientists, but we still managed to keep a tidy yard."

"I understand." Katniss nodded. "Other things come up that are more important."

"Yes." Wiress said. "After Beetee's accident, it all went to hell."

Katniss nodded again. "I can do the work, but it's going to take a while. A lot of these trees need to go before they fall and cause more damage. I can't do that myself, but I have some connections with a tree removal company and I can get you their number to give you an estimate on that end." She wrote down an estimate and handed the paper over. "That's the lowest I can go working the rest on my own. And that includes thinning out these smaller trees and getting the grass and bushes under control, not just clearing leaves."

The woman looked at the number and frowned. "I don't think I can afford this right away."

Katniss smiled kindly. "I understand. And I don't need it all at once. We can work out a payment plan, whatever works for you. And I don't mind getting it paid out even after I do the work." She patted the woman's arm. "He needs to be able to get into the house. And I want you to have a beautiful yard your husband can come home to."

Wiress raised a handkerchief to her nose and wiped it. "Thank you. I can at least give you a small deposit."

"Whatever you feel you can handle." Katniss followed the woman into the house.

The smell of freshly baked cake filled Katniss's nostrils and she thought of Peeta. He hadn't sent her a message all morning, so she was worried. Maybe he'd just woken up late and not had time. She hoped it wasn't because something had happened to Annie and the baby.

After enjoying a slice of cake and a cup of coffee as well as receiving a decent deposit for the work she'd start the next day, Katniss headed to Home Depot to pick up the supplies she'd need for the job. She paused outside of the store to send Peeta a message.

Hey, what did you find out about coming sooner? I was a little nervous, but I want you to know that I'm really excited to show you around and to just spend time with you. And I have a pretty good job lined up, so you can help me with that a little if you want. :) Katniss was headed to the register when her phone went off with Peeta's message.

I'll be there Wednesday night. I'll leave after work. I'll gladly be your assistant Thursday and Friday, but only if I can help and not just mess everything up. lol
She smiled and quickly typed, **I can't wait! Call when you get off?**

**I definitely will.**

She spent the rest of the afternoon giddily waiting for her phone to ring.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter! Epilogue coming eventually. See the bottom for more.

Happy reading!

Peeta was nervous about the trip. Mostly because he would be driving into the city just as it was starting to get dark and he wasn't sure where he was going. He plugged in her address to his GPS app on his phone and headed west to Katniss.

He enjoyed the scenery change. Being so late into fall, the colors were vibrant, but there were also a lot of bare trees. And as he got closer to the city, they thinned out. Street lamps replaced them, lighting the growing darkness and becoming more frequent.

Peeta turned down the radio and listened more closely to the directions coming from his phone. He remembered when Katniss gave him the address she said the sign to her road kept being stolen because she lived on Hamilton. The city got tired of replacing it after the third time, so it was currently unmarked. He drove past it once and had to turn back.

_Fourth house on the left_, he reminded himself after making the turn. He recognized Katniss's truck and pulled in behind her. She stepped outside as he unloaded his things and he paused. She walked over slowly, hands in the pockets of her coat and stood in front of him.

It only took a moment for them to reach for each other. Their mouths connected in a hot kiss that was definitely welcome. Peeta didn't realize just how much he enjoyed kissing her until this moment.

Katniss stepped away too soon and reached into the car to pick up his pillow. "Gotta have your own?" She gave him a smile.

He gave an embarrassed chuckle. "It's nothing against you, I just really like that pillow."

She waved him inside. "I ordered a pizza. It should be here soon."

Taking up his suitcase, he followed her toward the door. He stood just inside, taking in his surroundings. To his left was an eat-in kitchen and the living room was to the right. They were separated by a long bar.

"Bedrooms are this way." She motioned him down a small hallway. "There's the bathroom." She pointed to an open door and he saw a plain green shower curtain and he remembered it was her favorite color. That's when he noticed it was repeated everywhere in the house.

She opened a door and stepped inside. "Guest room. Make yourself at home." She sat the pillow on the bed and stopped in front of him. "My room's across the hall. There's a bathroom in there, so the other one is all yours." She chewed her lip a moment before pressing herself up on her toes and brushing a quick kiss over his lips. "I'm glad you're here. Don't forget to let Annie and Finnick know you made it."
Peeta watched Katniss leave and then shed his coat. Sitting down on the bed, he contemplated removing his shoes as he sent Annie a text. **I'm here. Love you bunches! Don't scare the neighbors.**

She responded, **lol. Same to you. Finnick slipped a ton of condoms in the front of your suitcase. :) Have fun!**

He kicked off his shoes, made a quick trip to the bathroom, and then ventured into the living room. Katniss sat in the corner of the couch with a computer open on her lap.

"So what's the order of the evening?" Peeta asked as he sat opposite her.

"I usually just watch TV." She smiled sheepishly. "I'm answering emails right now, but I can do that and make conversation."

"Sounds good." He sat back.

She typed a little and then looked over. "How was the drive?"

"Long." He chuckled. "But pretty. Fall is a beautiful time of year."

She nodded and typed a little more. "I like spring." She sat her laptop on the coffee table and twisted. "All the flowers and plants blooming. Kills my sinuses, but I manage." She leaned her head on her hand and smiled.

Peeta scooted closer. "Allergies are a very unfortunate thing."

Katniss nodded and moved an inch toward him. "One of these days I want to take some time and get some flower beds of my own put in. I'm always busy with everyone else's that I don't really want to by the time I'm home."

"Lucky you, I have a whole spring break and I know my way around a patch of land." He leaned in. "Still think you're going to be coming around then?"

"I know I am." He reached his hand up and cupped her cheek. He was about to go in for the kiss when the doorbell rang.

She gave him a quick peck anyway before she got up to answer. He watched her make her way to the door. She wore a pair of pajama pants and a baggy shirt, but somehow she was still very attractive.

And he wanted to rid her of both of them.

He turned around at the uncomfortable thought and tried to do anything to squash his growing arousal. He tried to focus on the color of the wood floor and noticed that the coffee table was a few shades lighter.

"Do you like soda?" Katniss's voice broke through his thoughts.

Peeta's head jerked up and he repositioned himself, hoping to hide the evidence of his thoughts. "Uh, yeah."

"Good." She sat the pizza box and a bottle of Sprite on the coffee table. "I'll get plates and cups."
He popped the box opened and leaned over to breathe in the scent of pepperoni and melted cheese. The crust was glistening with melted butter and dotted with herbs. Thankfully, the pressure started to ease from his groin as he looked over the pizza enough that it wasn't as distracting.

Katniss handed over a plate and sat a cup down in front of Peeta. They both got a slice of pizza and filled their glasses. She put on a cooking competition show and they ate in silence for a long time.

After a while, Peeta chuckled. "These are so nerve wracking for me."

"Why's that?" Katniss sat her things on the coffee table and turned.

He shrugged. "I know how long it usually takes for stuff to cook, but in an unfamiliar kitchen, things could be different. The ovens may heat up at a different speed or dials could be different. And all of these usually have gas burners, but what if there's one that's electric."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but Katniss grabbed his face and kissed him hard. "That's kinda hot." She said against his lips. And then she kissed him again, leaning over him.

Peeta pushed her up slightly so that he could put his dishes on the coffee table. And then he pulled her down on top of him and straightened out his body so that he could feel all of her pressed against him.

His heart pounded in his ribcage as he tentatively slipped a hand under her shirt. He could feel the rhythm of her own heartbeat against his chest telling him to continue.

Her skin was so soft. And warm. He was sure his hands were cold but she didn't seem to be upset by it. He was growing hard again and her hand slipped down to palm him to life.

"Bedroom?" She said.

"You sure?" He panted.

"I'm sure." She stood, closing the lid on the pizza box and turning off the TV before she held out her hand. "Let me have a minute. Meet me in my bedroom." She kissed him again and led him down the hall.

They parted ways to each of the bedrooms. He sat his phone on silent and dug around in the front of his bag to find the promised condoms. There were the contents of most of a large box in there.

Peeta's hand touched a bottle at the edge of the compartment and he pulled it out. A bottle of lube. New, it appeared, thank goodness. Written in permanent marker on the side was, "Make it great, lubricate!" Peeta recognized Finnick's handwriting and shook his head.

Katniss stepped into the doorway. "Change your mind?"

He shook his head and held up the provisions. "Finnick and Annie decided to help out a little."

She covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. "Well, that's very generous of them."

Peeta felt embarrassment. "I promise this really was all them. I wasn't expecting-"

Katniss shook her head and made her way across the room to cut him off. "I bought a new box the other day. I wasn't expecting anything either, but I thought..." She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him softly. "Come to my room. My sister sleeps on this bed." She grabbed his wrists and walked backwards to the other room.
He laughed and dropped the condoms and the bottle of lube on the table as she pulled the blanket aside.

She glanced over as she stood again and leaned into him. "We probably won't need that." She pointed to the bottle.

"Oh, really?" He pressed his nose to her hair. "Want to let me see?"

She held his arms tight around her. "I just like being here like this. Give me a second."

And Peeta had to admit that having Katniss in his arms was so perfect. He wouldn't be able to do it much longer and he was sure she wouldn't either, but it was fine for a little while.

Finally, she turned in his arms. "I want to take it slow."

He nodded. "Okay. I can do that."

She kissed him softly. "I'm all for this. Don't get me wrong. I just... It's been a while for me and I want to savor it."

"I completely understand." He slipped his hands under her shirt again and smiled at the sharp intake of breath from her throat. "Do you know how hard it is to jerk off in a house occupied by other people?"

She laughed. "I lived with the Hawthornes for a while. There was always someone waiting for the bathroom. And I shared a room with Prim and Posy, so no privacy there either. Part of the reason Gale and I-"

He cut her off with a kiss. "I don't want to hear about Gale when I'm about to make love to you."

She nodded. "I ramble a little when I'm nervous."

"No reason to be nervous." He moved to the middle of the bed and pulled off his shirt. "Hey, wanna see the scar I got when my brother dropped a hot pan on my neck?"

"A hot pan on your neck?" Katniss removed her shirt and climbed into the bed, straddling Peeta's hips.

He took a moment to look her over, running his hands up her bare sides. "I'd bent down to tie my shoe and Toby didn't see me there. He tripped, dropped the pan, and got me." He turned his head and touched the long, thick scar where his neck met his shoulder.

Katniss leaned over him and placed a kiss against the spot. She sat back and held out her arm to show off a long, thin line. "I got into a thorn bush once and this one cut was so deep it left a scar. There are a few others." She turned her arm over and pointed them out.

He noticed a larger patch along her left wrist. It was more of a callous. "What's that from?"

"The bow. Before I got a wrist guard." He watched her bring her lip between her teeth as he brought her wrist up to his lips. "God." She breathed.

He looked up, a twinkle in his eye. "Maybe. I guess you'll see soon enough.

She laughed and pulled him in for a kiss, her breasts brushed against his chest.

He whispered against her lips, "Can I kiss you all over?"
"I'd like that." She sat back a little and pointed to her neck. "There."

He leaned forward and pressed his lips where she pointed.

"Here." She brought her finger down to her collarbone.

He kissed her there.

"And..." she trailed her finger down to the space between her breasts, "here."

Peeta smiled a moment before he leaned down to kiss the valley, sticking his tongue out to taste her skin. It was salty and sweet all at once, just like her mouth. Katniss tangled her fingers in his hair and let him lick his way to her breast. Reaching up to palm the other, he took her nipple in his mouth and sucked gently.

Her fingers tightened in his hair and a soft whine accompanied her exhale. "Oh, Peeta." She sighed.

He lifted his head to kiss her again and she ground her pelvis down into his. It was driving him mad, he just wanted to be buried deep within her, moving with her, making her cry out.

He dropped his hand to her waistband. "May I?" He asked, even as he dipped his fingers beneath the band.

She nodded, dropping her head to press a series of kisses to his shoulder and neck, opening her mouth to suck a bruise over the burn scar.

His hand shook as he slipped his fingers into her wet folds, stroking gently, trying not to come so quickly himself. But the way her mouth moved against his skin and the feel of her arousal slicking up his hand, it was difficult. The little mewling sounds she was making against his neck weren't helping either.

"Oh, god!" She lifted her head and rested it against Peeta's. "That feels good."

"Yeah?" He kissed her swollen lips. "Can I taste you?"

"Please do." She moved to the side and very quickly removed her pants as he moved over her.

Peeta started at her lips, kissing her gently over and over. He moved across her jaw and down her neck, pausing to nip lightly at her skin.

Katniss giggled and wrapped her arms around him. She draped a leg over his waist as his head moved lower. The sound of her laughter was just as arousing as the moans and gasps and it was all he could do not to grab up one of the condoms and drive into her.

But he continued his exploration of her body, noting each time she pressed herself up into him or shied away. He filed those spaces away for next time.

When he licked just below her navel, her breath caught in her throat and he heard her softly say, "Please, just do it."

So he did, letting his tongue follow the same slow stroking his fingers had done earlier from entrance to clt and back. He paused to tease every bit of her with a swirl of his tongue. He could feel her writhing beneath him, panting and begging. She grabbed at his hair and he looked up to see her watching him with hooded eyes.

He sucked her clt into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the delicious, sensitive flesh and her
head fell back with a loud groan that ended in a very guttural, "Fuck, yes!" Her body pulsed and she let out a rhythmic whine.

When she eventually went slack, Peeta kissed up the length of her body in a much quicker journey than before.

As soon as their lips met, Katniss twisted him onto his back. She fumbled with his fly a moment, then released his throbbing erection.

It was such a relief to have that bit of pressure released. But as soon as she wrapped her hand around him, he screwed his eyes shut tight and prayed he'd last just a little bit longer.

She leaned over and whispered, "I want you inside me."

He opened his eyes and clutched at her. "It won't take long for me to finish."

"We have plenty of time. It's not like you're leaving right after you come." She kissed him deeply.

The thought of her tasting herself on his lips only spurred him on. He rolled her beneath him and reached for a condom, sitting back to open the package.

She followed him, taking the condom from him once he removed it. She rolled it on, but quickly moved her hands to his stomach.

Peeta looked down into her eyes, focusing on the way Katniss smiled up at him before she pressed her lips to his shoulder. She kissed the scar again and then licked a line up to his ear, sucking the lobe between her lips.

He clutched at her and let a moan escape his throat.

She crushed her lips against his and then reclined on the bed. "Come on, then."

He didn't need to be told twice. He leaned over her and kissed her deeply as he lined himself up and slipped inside. They both moaned in the same instant and it made Peeta smile.

He looked down to see such adoration in Katniss's face. He kissed her again as he slipped his arms beneath her shoulders. Pressing his forehead to hers, he began to move and her hands roamed over his back.

Peeta was soaring, feeling her slick skin against his. And the trust she showed only drove him further. She smiled and murmured softly words he couldn't understand because of the blood rushing in his ears. But it looked like she was saying his name and he tried to focus.

"You're amazing, Peeta." He heard her say. "You make me feel good."

"You make me feel good, too." He gasped. "So damn good."

A soft whimper from Katniss's lips finally did Peeta in. He gasped and gave into the release. A string of words escaped him, but he didn't know what they were.

And then he collapsed on top of her. She kissed his ear and nuzzled against his hair as he came back to himself. He eventually moved his weight off of her, but he didn't move too far away.

"Did you mean it?" She asked softly after a while.

"Mean what?" He turned his head.
"That you love me." There was fear mixed with hope in her grey eyes.

He blinked a few times and then nodded. "Yeah." He cupped her cheek and stroked his thumb over the bone. "You don't have to feel obligated to say it back."

She wrapped her hand around his wrist. "Isn't it too soon?"

"I don't know." He rested his forehead against hers. "Your bed is really comfortable."

She smiled. "Yeah, I have good taste in beds."

He laughed and kissed her softly. "Thank you."

"What for?" She shifted to her side and wrapped her arms around him.

"Sending me that first email. I had such a crush on you." He kissed her again. "I was so excited when I saw your name."

"Well, I had a crush on you too. Good excuse, huh?" She bit her lip and then kissed him again.

Peeta could feel the exhaustion of the day catching up with him a lot faster than it had before. He pulled Katniss close, running his hand down her arm. They were both asleep in no time.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank you all so much for reading and for everyone that participated in all the Q&As and the suggestions I asked for over the course of this fic. You have all been great!

I want to send a special shout-out to my bestie writingbutunpublished who convinced me to write this in the first place and gave me a ton of really good ideas that may be revisited in one shots later on. She gave me the idea for the note on the bottle of lube and is the inspiration for Katniss's road being called Hamilton. And speaking of that! She has a Hamilton fic she's starting if you're obsessed with that like half of the rest of the world seems to be. She's also got some other great stuff (including an Everlark one shot).

I hope you all stick around for the last half of Worry Is Calling (which I will start updating this week as I finish the last several chapters) and jump on board for Elaborate Lives. I also have a few more things planned in the coming months which I talk about over on Tumblr (booksrockmyface), so come see me there!

Hope you have a great rest of your summer (or winter, depending on which hemisphere you're on)!
Katniss slipped her fingers through Peeta's as they sat in the front row of the VidCon panel. She was shaking because she wasn't sure she could handle what was coming. She knew how Peeta would react. They'd talked briefly months before, on the first anniversary of their first official date, that maybe they should solidify a few things.

Peeta still lived with Annie and Finnick, but he was considering a move closer to Katniss. He just really liked teaching and he wasn't prepared quite yet to leave his position. Or New Market.

And Katniss wouldn't have been able to make a successful business outside of Morgantown. She had worked so hard to get here she was and get clients. There was no way he could ever ask her to move.

But Katniss didn't care to have their long-distance relationship. It was only three hours difference. During the school year, Peeta lived with Katniss Friday night until early Monday morning. And he made his home there every school break. He'd spent a large portion of the previous summer living in "The Big City," as he teasingly called it, until he had to go to his training and then get his classroom in order for the start of the school year.

But Katniss decided there was something else that could be done, even if they were still trying to decide where they lived.

The panel was drawing to a close when the host stood and said, "We have a sort of special video. Someone twisted our arm, but it didn't need to go too far." He pointed to the back. "Please enjoy."

The lights lowered and Katniss heard the first notes play before Elvis started singing I Can't Help Falling in Love with You. The song she'd sung to Peeta in that first personal video.

Images flashed across the screen: Katniss and Gale shooting, Peeta baking, snippets of their shows.

Katniss felt Peeta's hand tense in hers and then it slowly started to relax. She chanced a peek at him and she could see he was transfixed on the current clip.

It was her first appearance in one of his videos. She'd chosen a close-up of herself because she hadn't realized just how much adoration was in her eyes the first time she watched it back.

He glanced over when the shot changed to a shot of him trying to shoot her bow. She'd loved the way he laughed when he was frustrated and trying not to let it get the best of him.

The last image faded and a message came up on the screen, "Now all you have to do is answer
Katniss's question.

Katniss let go of Peeta's hand and stepped up on the stage and took the mic that was offered. She waved him up and he bounded up after her. "You already know the question." She said, even as she made a big show of dropping to one knee and taking his hand.

A whoop rose through the crowd. There were a few shouts of, "Finally!" and, "Get it, Katniss!" And one person started crying hysterically.

Katniss looked up at Peeta. Her throat constricted and she managed to choke out, "I don't care where we live or what jobs we have, I just want to be married to you."

He caught her up in a tight embrace and whispered in her ear, "I want that too."

They hugged for quite a while as the audience asked, "What's your answer?"

A few people said, "Isn't it obvious?"

Peeta took the mic and said, "Is there a preacher in the house?"

The room erupted again and a few people actually volunteered.

The wedding would probably take another year to commit to. Why rush? "Thanks, but no thanks." They said to the people making the offers.

As they left the hall, being stopped by fans asking for autographs and congratulating them, Peeta pressed his mouth close to Katniss's ear. "I got a job."

She gave him a surprised look. "And here I thought I was the only one keeping a secret."

He looked around and then pulled her down a hall until it got quieter. He took her hands and kissed them. "There's a teacher retiring at the start of the term. She just put in for it, ill or something. So if you'll have me, I'd like to completely move in with you and plan this wedding."

"Let's do it." She threw her arms around him. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too." He kissed her hard and then stepped back, leading her back into the fray. "How in the world did you keep this from me?"

"A complex network of spies." She said with a secretive smirk as they were swallowed by the crowd.

There were so many plans to make and a life to fully blend together. But first, fun!

Chapter End Notes

Here's the thing: I still have a lot of love for this world as much as all of you! So I will do some drabble/one-shot outtakes and future scenes in this world. And I would love to have requests from you! I did this with one of my earliest fics and it was so much fun!

So send in your prompts to my Tumblr (booksrockmyface)! I'll try to get to them in a timely manner. I may need them as I get to the meaty/angsty final chapters of Worry Is
Calling.

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