Summary

You can waste your lives drawing lines. Or you can live your life crossing them. But there are some lines that are way too dangerous to cross. When two toxic lines begin to blur, can anything good come from it? Everlark AU

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Katniss stared at the deep purple polo Seneca Crane was holding out to her. She tentatively reached for it as if it could grow teeth and snap at her fingers. She hated her school colors, not at all convinced that purple and gold actually looked good on anyone. More than that, she hated that the research lab she worked at suddenly decided to enforce the archaic dress code and insist that all the student researchers needed to look like they worked for the university. Her direct supervisor, Dr. Beetee, grimaced when he handed her the official memo. She felt slightly better knowing he was as opposed to this new rule change as she was. Not that he could do anything to prevent it, but at least he could sympathize with her unpleasantness about the situation.

“Still a small, right, Katniss?” His beady eyes roamed over her petite frame. She cursed the early summer heat for forcing her into shorts instead of her normal jeans.

She crossed her arms and scowled at him. "Yes," she snapped, "Please."

He rubbed his well-manicured beard, aptly detailed with tiny flames. "I'll have to get them from the back, we're all sold out up here. Mind covering the register while I'm gone?" He squeezed her bare arm and walked past her without giving her the opportunity to refuse.

Katniss huffed. When she was a freshman, she took a temporary job as a stocker at the university bookstore over winter break. Seneca, the manager, was so impressed by her that he kept her on staff ever since, but almost always in a position that didn't require her to actually interact with customers. Her awkward social skills were only made worse when she started doing research in the biology lab during her junior year and spent too much time studying dung beetles alone in the basement.

She couldn't really complain about running the register at the moment. Summer session was set to start next week, so the bookstore wasn't as busy as it would be the day before classes, when students finally realized summer classes weren't fluff and they would actually have to work. There were two types of summer-school students; those wanting to graduate a semester early and those who hadn't successfully transitioned from high school to college and needed an opportunity to make up for those D's and F's they got during the year. The pair of girls now making their way toward the front counter now fell into the latter category.

“Can you believe it?” One of the overly tanned, bottle-blondes said to her friend, setting the stack of four novels onto the counter. “It's like she actually expects me to read all of these this semester. Hello, it's summertime!”

The other girl, an equal shade of orange, scoffed and fished her phone out of her purse. “And did
you see the syllabus she emailed out? Two page reflection papers over each book? Don't these professors realize that we have other classes?"

“Seriously. And a thing called a social life.” The first girl giggled. “They're so damn old they probably don't even know what that means anymore. Could you imagine running into one at a bar? They'd probably want to talk about the literary content of the drink selection.”

The second girl set an 'Intro to World History' book on top of the pile. “This is so stupid. Who cares if I failed Western Civ? Hello, we live in America and I passed American History. Plus, I'm going to teach elementary school, not history.”

Katniss let out an involuntary snort at this comment and felt the two girls finally acknowledge her presence with a sneer. She couldn't be sure because she kept her head down as she started scanning their purchases.

“Whatever. Oh, the Pikes are having a party tonight. You in?”

Of course they'd be going to a fraternity party. She hadn't missed the golden *Gamma Phi* pin on their tank top straps. The Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity was notorious for having wild parties before and after every semester, with a few thrown in to celebrate things like “midterms” or “spring break” or “Friday.” Katniss went to one her first semester with her randomly assigned Gamma Phi roommate and ended up kneeing a senior ‘brother’ in the crotch when he drunkenly tried to unbutton her pants in the middle of a conversation. Needless to say, her roommate moved out at the end of the semester and Katniss never went to another frat party.

“Have I ever turned down a Pike? Please.”

The girls giggled again, making Katniss want to gag. She hadn't meant to listen in on their conversation and now she wished she hadn't. “Did you find everything you were looking for?” she asked in a flat, bored tone. The first girl stared at her for a moment and then broke out into the most artificial smile Katniss had ever seen. *These bitches get better at being fake every year.*

“Yep. Thanks.”

“Ok, that’ll be $417.52.”
The girl handed over a platinum credit card which made Katniss roll her eyes. Nothing like using Daddy’s money to pay for books they’ll never read. She started filling the thick plastic bags with the books. “Remember that if you want a full refund on any of these, they have to be returned within the first two weeks of the semester. Otherwise you’ll have to wait until finals.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” As soon as the two turned from the counter, they whispered something to one another, looked over their shoulders at the counter, and began giggling loudly.

Underclassmen girls like these irritated her, especially the ones who felt like they deserved to be in college without having to work for it. Maybe that was because her parents instilled the value of an education in her from a young age. Or because she actually had to work to keep her grades up for her scholarship.

“Who needs world history?” she mimicked the girl's haughty tone. Resting her head in her hand, she let out a loud groan. "Just fucking kill me now."

“Well, that’s not exactly the most positive attitude to take going into the new semester.” A hearty voice answered. Other than those two girls, she hadn't seen any other customer in the place. And that voice was definitely not Seneca's almost comical, high-pitched voice. She began to panic, sure that if a customer heard her swearing and told her boss, he’d fire her. He liked her well enough to occasionally leave her in charge of the store over the summer, but she was pretty sure that was only because his other employees had lives and homes to get back to when school wasn’t in session.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, raising her head.

“Don’t even worry about it,” he answered, shaking a stray blond curl away from his sapphire blue eyes. He was attractive enough, just barely taller than her but was obviously someone who spent more time at the gym than in class. He looked far too comfortable in his low-hanging Under Armour gym shorts and over-priced Nike's. He certainly didn't look like the “graduate early go-getter,” so she assumed he was just another summer school make-up if the 'Introduction to Psychology' textbook cradled in his elbow was any indication.

“I stood behind them for about fifteen minutes while they tried to figure out what psychology book they needed. Turns out neither of them were even taking psychology this semester.”

She snorted. Not in the cute, Julia Roberts way, but in the obnoxious, I laughed so hard I snorted like a pig way. She closed her eyes tightly, as if it could reverse time and take back the noise. When she opened them, he was still there. Smiling. At her.
She told herself it was just those unrealistically blue eyes that made her act so unlike herself. The eyes and maybe that stupid grin. The eyes, that stupid grin, and the lone piece of hair that fell haphazardly across his forehead in a way that made her want to brush it back. *Wait. What?*

Shaking that thought from her mind, she opted to keep her own eyes on the computer screen. He slid the psychology textbook across the counter so she could scan it. “You sure you want to buy this new? We have plenty of used copies that, that are cheaper.”

“Nah, I’ve never been a fan of used books. I don’t want to try to figure out what someone else thought was important. Probably ended up spending a couple thousand dollars extra just on books, but that’s the price we pay for a quality education,” he joked.

She knew he was expecting her to laugh at his comments, but she couldn’t. Brand new textbooks weren’t a luxury she could afford, even with her 25% discount. Her student loans were high enough as they were without the added cost of no extraneous highlighting. She hadn’t even bought used books from the bookstore since discovering how much cheaper it was to buy books online. Before that, she spent well over $300 and it took her the rest of the year to pay off her ‘emergency only’ credit card, since she could only make the minimum monthly payment. “Um, it’ll be $93.67.”

He scrunched his eyebrows at the number. “For one book?”

She sighed, and scanned the room for Seneca’s return. She remembered hearing horror stories from other employees about customers flipping out over the price of their textbooks, like any of them had some sort of control over how much everything in the place cost. The publishers ship the books at wholesale price, Seneca bumps it up 20% for profit, and that’s what they’re left with. “Blame your professor for ordering such an expensive book,” she muttered, making the mistake of catching his eye again.

He stared at her for a minute, those blue eyes piercing through her, before he laughed loudly. “Got a new one this semester. Obviously hasn’t figured out the system yet.”

“Most of them don’t,” she admitted. She thought back to the rants her lab partner used to go on about how professors and anyone else involved in higher education were too far removed to really understand the plight of the average student, ranging from time management to cost to the whole inequality of majors within the school. She usually drowned him out and went about the lab so at least they wouldn’t fail. “Well, they don’t really care. They don’t have to buy the book, so the cost doesn’t affect them.” She heard herself drag out the last part of the sentence and cringed.
He considered this, leaning in closer to her on the counter. “Then maybe the students should band together. Form a revolution of sorts.” He smiled again and stood back up, pulling his wallet out from the pocket of his shorts. As he fished for his credit card, she noticed a bright gold card sticking out from behind his ID.

“You’re a University employee?” she asked.

The slight raise of his eyebrow indicated his surprise and suspicion. “How did you know?”

She pointed to his wallet. “You get a discount with that, 20% of anything in the store, including books.” That discount card was the main reason most of the students tried to find on-campus jobs. They pay wasn’t always very good but the discount card nearly made up for it.

He slipped the card out with his thumb and handed it to her. “Thanks for the heads up. I just got the thing today so I haven’t been able to try it out yet.”

She slid his card through the reader. “$65.57.”

“This,” he said, shaking the card slightly. “Is a golden ticket.” He reached for the plastic sack she slid his book into. Their fingers brushed slightly and she felt her breath lodge in her chest.

“Two weeks,” she said, her voice shaking in a completely uncharacteristic manner. At this point, she didn't think she could ever look away from him even if she wanted to. “Um, I mean if you want the refund, it has to be returned within the first two weeks of the semester.”

His lips curled into a full smile. “I don’t think I have to worry about returning the book, but thanks.” She could have sworn that his fingers were no longer wrapped just around the bag but had slid around hers.

Seneca's reappearance broke their spell and she pulled her hand away. She clenched and unclenched her fist, trying to shake the feeling away. "Want me to add the shirts to your tab?"

"Oh, um, yeah, yes, that would be great." She took the pile of folded polos from his hand and slipped out from behind the register. "Thanks."
She opened the door and groaned at the sweltering heat that met her outside the building. May had just begun, but the Midwestern humidity was already working her over. Her t-shirt instantly stuck to her body as a thin layer of sweat formed on her skin. It wasn’t normally this hot in May, but they had an unusually mild winter and the threat of a hot summer loomed. She stripped off her t-shirt and used it to wipe off her face. The tank top she wrote underneath was too tight and revealing for her liking but she was too hot to care. *Besides*, she thought, *the lab is only across campus.*

Katniss kept her eyes on the pavement in front of her feet, hoping the more scantily clad girls on campus would catch more attention than her. Cat calls and cheers of approval made her uncomfortable but when she caught a glimpse of a group of sorority girls in their bikinis setting up a Slip-N-Slide on the front yard of their house, she knew she'd be spared the awkwardness.

Intersections were the only time she looked up from the pavement on her walk, and even then it was just to check for traffic. She didn't bother waiting for walk signals if no cars were coming. Stop lights and cutting across the grass on campus. Katniss Everdeen, rebel. She was sure that if her mother cared enough to think about her, she'd be glad that was the extent of her daughter's rebellious phase.

She stepped off the curb when she felt fingers grip her exposed bicep and pull her back. She opened her mouth to yell but the sudden *thud* of her body hitting whoever grabbed her knocked all the air out of her chest. She just caught sight of the red flash of the car that would have hit her before clenching her eyes shut and catching her breath.

"You know, that's why they teach children to look both ways before crossing the street."

She peeked her eyes open and up into the face of that guy from the bookstore. Ah. That would explain the solid mass she ran into. Mr. Muscles.

She pushed off of him, rationalizing the fluttering in her stomach as a normal reaction to almost being hit. "I'll remember that next time." She looked down to where his fingers were still wrapped around her arm, albeit less tightly than before. "Uh, I need that."

He had been studying her face the entire time. The flecks of blue in her grey eyes. The speckling of freckles across the bridge of her nose out to under each eye. The tiny strands of hair that stuck to her neck despite the braid she wore. He hadn't noticed that he was still holding onto her until she said something. "Sorry. Force of habit."

She didn't say anything back, just turned her attention back to the light, which had just turned to the 'walk' signal. She continued on, ignoring the ghostly feel emanating from where his hand was.
"You know, this is twice now we've talked and I don't know your name."

He was behind her, following at a far enough distance to still talk but not be creepy. "Why do you want to know my name?" she asked.

"Friendly conversation. It's only natural for two people to crave interaction with one another."

She rolled her eyes, even though he couldn't see her. "And what if I don't crave interaction with you?" She felt foolish, seemingly having this conversation with herself since he wasn't next to her. Not that she wanted him next to her. She wanted to get to the lab and get to work.

"Ah, but you do. Otherwise you wouldn't still be talking to me." She could hear the cocky smile on his face.

"I was always taught that it was rude to ignore someone when they're talking to you. Even if you're not interested." She smiled, sure she had won. When he didn't respond, she turned her head slightly to the side to see if he was still there. He was. Just walking. "See? Now you're being rude."

"I believe you just provided evidence for my hypothesis. The conversation had ended, as there was no logical progression to be made. Yet here you are, initiating a new one."

She opened her mouth but no words came out. She was shocked that somehow he had bested her. She may not have been the most clever girl or have the most silver of tongues, but she was usually successful at putting people in their place. In fact, she was so caught off guard that she stopped moving all together.

"Three conversations and still no name. Now who's being rude?" he said, coming up behind her.

"Katniss. My name is Katniss," she answered, stubbornly refusing to turn around.

"Katniss." She blamed the heat for the light-headedness that followed hearing her name pour from his lips. "I wouldn't expect purple to be your color."
She rolled her eyes. “I need something to wear to the Pike party.” As soon as she said the words, she grimaced. She was fairly certain that he was somehow involved with the Greek system and they were a strange, twisted family when it came to outsiders speaking down about any of them.

His laugh seemed to emanate from deep inside him. Maybe he was one of those rare Greeks who could make fun of his chapter’s antics. Or maybe he wasn’t really a Pike. That seemed hard to believe, given his physical appearance. Pikes were known for partying but they were also the most attractive fraternity on campus. As much as Katniss didn't want to be affected by some guy who had to buy his friends, she couldn't deny that he was something somewhat spectacular to look at.

Suddenly his voice was much closer and she could feel his warm breath on her ear. “Just don't forget to sew your letters onto everything you own. That way they know where to send you when the party's over.”

She shivered, despite the heat. They walked the rest of the way to the lab in silence but she felt his gaze on her the entire time. "Right, well, this is me," she offered lamely when they reached the intersection across the street from the lab.

"Be sure to watch for cars, Katniss." He reached for her shoulder, giving it a slight squeeze. "See you around."

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"Seriously, Madge! It's almost 10, all the tables are going to be gone by the time we get there!" Katniss bounced her knee impatiently as her roommate finished getting ready. "If you insist on dragging me to this bar tonight, I'd prefer to be in a dimly lit corner and not at the edge of the dance floor."

"Hold your tits, Everdeen!" Madge yelled back through the bathroom door. "Some of us put some work into our appearance. We can't all be as naturally adorable as you."

Katniss snorted in reply. Truthfully, Madge was probably one of the few girls who didn't need to put much work into her appearance. She was naturally beautiful; silky blonde hair, flawless skin without makeup, curvy enough for her small frame, and sparkling blue eyes. Katniss never understood why Madge put so much effort into looking better, but she had been doing it since the girls met freshman year.
"Look OK?" She opened the bathroom door and gave a quick spin.

"Who are you looking to bring home tonight?" Katniss joked as Madge dug her knee-high six-inch black boots out of the closet. Katniss never did embrace the skinny jean phase quite as enthusiastically as Madge did, who seemed to have at least 10 pairs in her wardrobe. Madge was the girl those designers must have had in mind when they designed them because they made her toned legs look thin and somehow made her ass look better than normal jeans. They were both thankful that early summer nights weren't nearly as stifling as hot summer days.

"If you think I'm carrying your drunk ass home tonight because your feet hurt, you've got another thing coming," she warned as Madge zipped up her boots.

"That was one time," she whined. "And I had no idea tequila shots and I didn't get along." She fluffed her hair and rolled her eyes. "Now, if my hair poofs up in this humidity and takes over my face, I may need some assistance."

Katniss laughed as she pulled herself out of the shabby recliner. Compared to Madge, she was sure she looked like a bum in her ripped jeans, red boat shoes, and a fitted T-shirt with a muffin lifting weights and the words 'stud muffin' across her non-existent chest. Her hair was braided and her face was clear of makeup save for a bit of concealer Madge insisted she use to cover the bags under her eyes, a lovely side effect of working almost 70 hours a week between her two jobs. She was looking forward to summer classes next week to get a break from work, even if the extra money was nice.

Katniss was never too concerned about her appearance, and tonight was no different. Tonight was about helping Madge get over her ex-boyfriend, who she caught cheating with his ex. She held herself together well enough during the week, but she proclaimed weekends to be 'self-destruct' time. Which is why, much to the surprise of her roommate, Katniss agreed to go out the weekend before classes started. The lucky tavern of choice was Madge's go-to; a rundown country bar with loud music and cheap drinks. It suited Katniss because it was big enough to meet new people but small enough to just relax.

The weekend crowds were hit or miss, especially in the summer. Sometimes the rowdy twenty-something's took over, drowning out the entertainment of choice. Other times, it was the forty and up crowd, who serve as their own source of entertainment, two-stepping around the floor. Katniss tended to prefer the older crowd. The women were nicer and the old men loved to teach the young 'whippersnappers' how to properly dance. "None of that humping nonsense," one told Katniss as he held her hand and led her onto the floor.

Tonight they weren't so lucky. The younger crowd was more obnoxious and on this particular evening, that meant a night full of out-of-tune karaoke. The bright side was $5 pitchers of beer and $1 shots of whatever low-alcohol content, overly fruity concoction the bartenders made, and named,
that night.

"Oh, look, Madge, tonight's specialty is 'salty sailor's sperm.' Mmm, sounds tasty," Katniss joked as they read the drink specials outside the door. Sadly, that was tame compared to some of the other names they had come up with.

Madge clutched at Katniss' arm and dramatically fanned herself with her hand. "You know me, my darling. If it's not from a salty sailor, it's just not worth my time. Well, except..." She trailed off as they approached the bouncer at the door. Katniss rolled her eyes and fished a $10 bill out of her pocket.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't my favorite lab partner. How are you tonight, Catnip?"

"Fuck you, Gale. You know I hate that nickname."

"That's why I use it," he answered with a smile. "Hey, Madge."

"Gale."

Once again, Katniss rolled her eyes. "Here," she handed the bill to Gale, "I'm getting us both." Gale stamped both of their hands and turned his attention to the gaggle of girls in short shorts and halters behind them.

Katniss scouted the bar once inside and pulled Madge to the only open table. "Is this OK?" she yelled over the current singer.

Madge pouted. "It's so far from the dance floor."

"Madge, that was part of the deal. I told you I'd come out if I could slink in the shadows," Katniss huffed.

Madge's reluctant sigh gave Katniss hope that she'd won the battle until they sighted Leevy, one of Madge's business class friends. Leevy, who annoyed Katniss for reasons she could never explain other than she just didn't generally like people. And of course, Leevy was sitting at a table near the
dance floor. That happened to have two empty seats. Yep, Katniss lost the battle.

"Leevy!"

"Oh my God, Madge!"

Katniss watched on as the girls hugged. Madge pulled out an open seat and gestured triumphantly to Katniss. "Your seat, dear lady," she said with a wink. "These are Leevy's friends but she said we could sit with them."

Katniss forced a smile. How nice of Leevy's friends, she thought. Luckily, Madge, Leevy, and Leevy's friends all really wanted to dance, so Katniss sat at the table alone with the pitcher they just bought. She poured herself a glass and kept a close eye on the group of girls.

"We meet again."

Even in the dimly lit bar, she could make out his mop of curly hair and crooked smile full of perfect teeth. And those eyes. "Technically, we didn't meet the first time," she corrected him, "Since you know my name, but I don't know yours."

"True." His smile widened and he sat in a chair across the table from her. "Four conversations later, I'm Peeta. Can I buy you a drink? Or, get you a straw?" he laughed, pushing the nearly full pitcher toward her.

"You want some? I'm afraid it may have been abandoned."

He tapped the small glass tumbler of ice and an amber liquid in front of him. "Learned the hard way that mixing alcohol leads to bad decisions. It's probably safer this way."

Katniss turned her chair so she could talk to Peeta and still keep an eye on Madge. It wasn't that she didn't trust Leevy and her friends, it was that she didn't know them. And she knew Madge. And, OK, she didn't really trust them. With good reason, she soon discovered, as a group of guys quickly surrounded them. It was the one cornering Madge, running his hand down her arm, leaning in close to her ear to tell her something that made her blush. She narrowed her eyes and clenched her jaw as she quickly recalled all the reasons she fucking hated Cato.
"Is there a reason you can't keep your eyes off of Big, Blond, and Beastly over there?"

She whipped her head around and saw Peeta tipping his now empty glass toward where she had just been staring. Cato was still hanging all over Madge, leaning in, pushing her hair behind her ear, tracing her jaw line with his finger. She wanted to be mad at Madge for giggling and leaning into him in return, but she couldn't be. It wasn't Madge's fault that Cato was an ass who just decided to be done dating Katniss without telling her. He was charming. And good looking. And Madge was already buzzed. They'd have to have a chat in the morning.

"Big, Blond, and Beastly is my recent ex. And the girl he's flirting with is my best friend slash roommate." She didn't want to watch them, especially when Cato glanced her direction and winked. "Cocky bastard just wants her because he knows it would piss me off."

She turned back in disgust and downed what beer was left in her plastic cup. "I'm glad you don't want any. Looks like I'm not in the mood to share anymore."

"How recent?"

She scrunched her face and concentrated on pouring her next cup. "That wasn't exactly the response I was expecting, but...um, I dunno, about two weeks. At least, I think it was two weeks. It was a very confusing breakup."

He raised both eyebrows. "Two weeks and he's already making a move on your best friend? You must have really pissed him off."

She shrugged. "I may or may not have paid the bartenders to tell girls he's got a tiny dick." He nearly choked on the ice cube he had been chewing on. She smiled and blushed slightly. "Not my finest moment, that's for sure."

They spent the night talking about anything they could think of. He learned she was a biology major and she found out he studied psychology, a thought that made her visibly gag.

"What's wrong with psychology?" he asked with an easy laugh. As she continued to down cups of beer, she was more willing to talk to him with a scowl, even when she was completely dismissing his field.
"What isn't wrong with psychology? I mean, it's not even a real science, for crying out loud. You watch people and make assumptions that don't really have a basis in fact because people have too many variants. There's no way to determine what I'm going to do in any given scenario so why bother wasting your time? Also, why do you all see sex in everything?"

"Have you even taken a psych class, Dr. Phil?" he asked.

Scoffing, she polished off the pitcher of Bud Light. "No. But I have to this semester. It's one of my last Gen Ed requirements. Nothing like being the senior in 'Intro to Psych.'"

He opened his mouth, a retort on the tip of his tongue when a new singer came up on stage for karaoke. "I hate this song," she confessed.

"What? Who hates 'If I Had A Million Dollars'? I mean, really? Haven't you always wanted a monkey?" He raised the pitch of his voice on the last syllable, replicating the signature squeak-like sound from that verse.

She laughed. "No, no monkeys. I'd probably be OK hunting a monkey, though."

She laughed harder when he jaw dropped. "Hunt a monkey? That's just cruel. What'd the monkey ever do to you?"

"In some parts of Asia, they're seen as a nuisance. I'd be doing a favor, actually."

"You're serious? About hunting, I mean?" he asked, genuinely surprised by her hobby of choice.

She nodded. "My father taught me how to hunt when I was a kid. Had to protect the homestead from wolves and mountain lions somehow."

"Well look at you, a regular old Grizzly Adams." He held his glass up in mock approval.

She smiled but shook her head. "Something like that, I suppose. Except I don't think the beard would
work so well on me."

He lifted her chin with his fingers and pretended to examine her face before smirking. "True. You
don't really have the chin for facial hair."

A heat spread through her body, stemming from the touch of this man she hardly knew. *Must be the
dooze.*

"Kaaaaatniss!" Madge yelled, grabbing her arm from behind. "We're gonna go sing!" She nodded to
the empty stage.

"Have fun," Katniss laughed, waving her off. When she was sober and in public, Madge had a quiet
charm about her, which was what initially attracted Katniss. But private Madge, the Madge who
came out once you got to know her, was a flamboyant character who happily flirted with whoever
she could, man or woman. Alcohol brought 'private Madge' out in public. And, apparently, that
meant singing 'Wannabe' with a group of equally drunk girls.

"You want another?" Katniss saw him indicate to her empty pitcher.

She craned her neck to check bar time on the digital clock on the wall. 12:05. They had another two
hours to kill, knowing Madge would want to stay until they were kicked out.

"Uh, sure." She shifted in her seat to get her money when he waved her effort off.

After he left, she turned her attention back to the stage, where the girls were now dancing along and
really not caring about what words were actually on the screen. When they finished, Madge bounded
over and plopped down in Katniss' lap. "Having fun? I see you've been flirting with Mr. Hottie-with-
the-Body all night," she giggled slightly.

Katniss flushed. "I was not flirting with him. We're just talking. And 'Hottie-with-the-Body?' Really,
Madge?"

"Come off it, Madge. I do not." Sometimes Katniss really hated drunk Madge.

Madge shrugged. "Can't let a piece like that get away too easily. Who knows who might pick him up."

"Right," Katniss mumbled, knowing that Madge may very well be the 'who knows' who picked him up. It wouldn't be the first time it happened. It wasn't like she tried to be more charming than Katniss, it just didn't take much. And it wasn't her fault she was blessed with good genes and killer curves. Men gravitated toward Madge in a way they never did toward Katniss. It wasn't personal and Katniss trusted that if she ever, miraculously, was interested in someone, Madge would respect that.

When Peeta came back, Madge snatched an empty cup from the table. "Well thank you, Handsome. How'd you know I'd drink whatever Katniss drank?" she winked as he poured. "I don't believe we've met. I'm Madge."

"Peeta," he shook her outstretched hand. "You're the best friend slash roommate."

Madge slid off of Katniss' lap into the empty seat between them. Katniss tried not to let her deepening scowl show too much as Madge and Peeta fell into an easy conversation. She didn't like Peeta like that, but she was genuinely enjoying the conversation. Once drunk Madge started talking, it could be difficult to get a word in.

She could tell she wasn't going to be missed, so she excused herself out on account of 'needing air,' the not-so-secret code for a cigarette. She was relieved to see Gale leaning against the wall. Katniss bumped her shoulder into him. "They let you off guard duty?"

"Ah, Catnip!" he exclaimed, hugging her side. "I didn't think I'd see you again, what with Blondie fetching your drinks all night."

Katniss accepted the cigarette once dangling from his lips. "Turns out 'Blondie' likes his own kind. Newly single Madge is drunk. And in major self-destruct mode," she smirked, knowing Gale would understand exactly what that meant.

Of all people, Gale would be the one to commiserate with her. He hooked up with Madge once during their junior year, right before she started dating the reason for her current destruction, and wasn't subtle about wanting more with her. She strung him along for a few weeks after but then she met Marvel. She had, on many occasions, drunkenly confessed to Gale that she made a mistake and
should have given him another chance. But Gale was respectful and never reminded her of her words once she sobered up.

Katniss knew they weren't just drunken thoughts because she vividly remembered an incident when another woman spent the entire night talking to Gale and Madge responded by yelling at him for being unprofessional. She later divulged to Katniss that he kissed her that night, but she slapped him and ran out. The two were on shaky ground ever since.

"I have to get back to the bar. Those beers aren't going to pour themselves," he said, tossing the butt out the window onto the sidewalk. "You want another before I head back in?"

She shook her head and tossed hers out, too. "No, I'm good. Just needed a break."

He slung his arm around her shoulders and grinned. "If you want, I can think of a way to make at least one of them jealous enough to ditch the other."

She scrunched her face at his suggestion. "Gale Hawthorne, I know some girls are into the scruffy bartender thing, but I can assure you I'm not one of them. Not even pretending. Besides, I don't want to make anyone jealous, I just..."

"Whatever you say, Catnip. You want a drink?" He slipped back behind the bar and gave one of the other bartenders, a redhead named Darius, a slap on the back.

"Oh well look who it is, Katniss Everdeen," Darius announced, reaching across the bar to pull on her braid. "Finally going to take me up on my offer?"

She groaned. "Darius, your 'offer' was as Gale's wingman when he first met Madge and needed you to keep me company. Mistake number one was telling me that."

Gale doubled over in laughter as Darius' face matched his hair. "Let me make it up to you. Fancy a shot?"

"Sorry, but it's going to take more than a shot of 'Salty Sailor' to make up for being the grenade," she answered with a wink, pushing away from the bar.
"I'm not giving up on you, Everdeen!" he called after her.

"In your dreams, Darius!"

"Don't tease the man!"

She laughed as Gale attempted to defend his wingman's honor. The two had some weird bromance which meant when she hung out with one, she got the other as well. Darius was a nice enough guy; she didn't dislike him for proclaiming his wingman status that night, but she knew it embarrassed him whenever she brought it up.

"Katniss!" Madge cheered upon her return. "You're back!" She stumbled out of her seat in an effort to hug her roommate. "We missed you."

I'm sure you did, she thought to herself, but smiled nonetheless. She gave a sigh of relief when Leevy pulled Madge away for 'one more song.'

"Your friend slash roommate is quite a chatterbox. Cute girl," Peeta quipped, a piece of ice between his front two teeth. "She asked me out."

Katniss caught the eye of Madge, who smiled and did some ridiculous shimmy. She knew what to do, having been in a similar position with Gale when he first showed interest. "Yeah, she's a great girl. She, uh, loves Chinese food and really bad horror movies - the ones that are actually funny and not scary at all."

"I told her no."

She eyed him, suspiciously. "Why?"

"Because I don't want to go out with her."

He answered as though it was so simple. As though it were obvious he didn't want to date Madge. And for some reason she couldn't understand, she saw red. "Why the hell not? Madge is a great catch and, frankly, you must be a total idiot if you think you can do any better than her. What is so
"Calm down, firecracker. There's nothing wrong with your friend, though I'd be more afraid of you if I wanted to date her. You're worse than an overprotective father." He was laughing but she didn't see what was so damn funny. "Look, I just got out of something not too long ago so I'm not really looking to start anything new."

She set her lips in a thin line. "It's just a date, Peeta."

"From a girl who just got screwed over. To a guy who goes big or goes home."

His breath wisped across her cheek and she could make out the faint whiff of whiskey on him. Involuntarily, her eyes closed and she inhaled. Was she relieved that he wasn't into Madge? She was surprised, because she couldn't remember the last guy who said so. Well, Darius used the 'who wants a girl everyone else wants' line, which Katniss interpreted as more of an insult than a compliment.

"Besides," he added, "she's not really my type."

She cocked an eyebrow. "No? And what is your type?"

"I like girls who hate psychology." The shocked look must have immediately registered on her face because he laughed heartily and covered her hand in his. "I'm kidding, Katniss."

The rest of the girls came back to the table, all drunk, most trying to flirt with Peeta, much to the chagrin of Katniss and the guys trying to flirt with them. They all started talking about the after party they were all going to in one of the guys' garage. Leevy looked expectantly at Madge who was back on Katniss' lap, head resting on her shoulder, twiddling with the edge of her braid.

"Madge?" Katniss poked her in the side. "Leevy wants to know if you want to go to an after party."

"When?" She mumbled into Katniss' shoulder.

"Tonight, honey. Right now."
Madge let out a garbled groan and Katniss bit her bottom lip to prevent herself from laughing too hard. "I think she's out tonight. Sorry."

Leevy pouted dramatically but they all said their goodbyes and headed out, wanting to get to the liquor store before it closed. Most of the bar crowd was making their way to the exit, obviously with the same intent as Leevy’s group.

"Katniss?" Madge whined in a quiet voice, "I'm hungry."

"Want me to make you some toast when we get home?"

Madge shook her head in a pitiful way that Katniss would later make fun of her for. When the girl hit her limit, she hit it hard. "Want oatmeal."

"You ate the last of the oatmeal this morning, remember?"

She finally lifted her head off of Katniss' shoulder. "I did?" Her eyes were bloodshot and her hair had about doubled in size from the humidity.

"Let me take you guys to breakfast," Peeta offered. The girls' responses could not have been more opposite. Madge smiled brightly and accepted his offer at the same time that Katniss scowled and refused it. They then got into a silent stare until he spoke up again. "I'm just saying, you both need to sober up before you go home and Perkins is just down the street."

"I'm gonna throw up." Madge scrambled off of Katniss' lap and stumbled toward the bathroom. Katniss didn't miss that Gale swiftly made his way toward the bathroom shortly after, with a concerned look on his face.

"Thanks for the offer, but I should really get her home as soon as possible." It didn't take Madge long to return, sheepishly chewing on a piece of cinnamon gum, with her hair pulled back from her face. She was a champ at the 'puke and rally' routine, as she was now walking much less wobbly than before. Katniss was just glad that she wouldn't have to carry the girl into their apartment now.

"Sorry," she offered, her face flushed with embarrassment. "Gale said he could take me home if you
wanted to stay." She tried to be sneaky about her glances at Peeta as she said this, but her intent was clear.

"No, I'm ready to head out." Katniss smiled at Peeta. "Are you going to be OK to drive?"

Something flashed across his face but it was too quick for her to catch. "I'll be fine. Will you let me know when you get home? It's the responsible adult in me."

She saw Gale from the corner of her eye motioning for them. "Yeah, of course. I, uh, I don't have your number, though."

He smirked. Damnit. She begrudgingly handed him her phone, upset that he bested her once again.

"See you around, Katniss," he called to her retreating figure. She looked over her shoulder at him. She stopped in her tracks, seemingly spellbound by the blond-haired, blue-eyed man who sought her out tonight, who turned down her beautiful roommate, and spent the entire night talking to her. Smiling at her. Making her skin flush and her stomach flip. Perhaps she misjudged him at the bookstore; maybe he wasn't just another Greek letter-toting douchebag. Then again, maybe the beer was blurring her judgment. It wouldn't be the first time she had been misled by a charming smile after a pitcher of beer. It was how she met Cato, after all.

"Coming, Catnip?" Gale called, his arm wrapped around Madge's waist.

"Yeah," she answered, thoroughly confused.

***

2:30am. Katniss. /Sorry for the late text. We got home. All safe and sound./

2:34am. Peeta. /Good. Was getting worried about you. Had fun tonight./

"Is the princess finally asleep?" Katniss asked, accepting a bottle of Heineken he brought in from his truck and tucking her phone in her pocket.
He laughed and popped the cap off his own. "I think so. Either that or my kissing skills are in terrible need of assistance."

"I don't need the details, Hawthorne."

He waggled his eyebrows at her. "What's wrong, Catnip? Don't want to hear about the scandalous affairs of your roommate and former lab partner?"

"Not particularly." She tilted her bottle in his direction. "But the lipstick smeared all over your lips and the hickey forming on your neck tell me all I need to know." She laughed as he furiously began rubbing his face to wipe the remnants off.

"Fuck you, Katniss. Don't be jealous because I'm finally getting some and you aren't.

"You keep telling yourself that, Gale, but $50 says she winds up cuddling with me rather than you tonight." She smirked. "And what makes you think I'm not getting any?"

"Because when she wasn't giving me hiccys, your roommate blabbered on about how you should screw Blondie before you forget how to. Or, as she called him-"

"Mr. Hottie-with-a-Body," Katniss supplied. "Yes, she enlightened me earlier about it. Clever girl."

"So are you going to?"

"Going to what?" She downed the rest of her beer, and acknowledging that she would regret every drop of alcohol she had consumed that night, grabbed another bottle off the island in the kitchen.

"Screw Blondie."

"Jesus, Gale! Warn a girl before you go fucking insane." She wiped the slight dribble of beer that fell from her lips with the back of her hand.

"So you don't want to? You should. Maybe it would get tiny-dick out of your head."
"I'm so glad you have nicknames for the men in my life, Gale. Really, it's sweet." She smirked, taking a drink. "I never really thanked you for that. Childish as it may have been, I appreciate it."

He waved her off. "Don't mention it. None of us liked Cato even before you started dating him. We just needed a better excuse to say shit other than him just being an ass." He glanced over to Madge's door. "How's she been doing? Speaking of asses."

Katniss shook her head. "She's dealing, and not in the most healthy way. But it's definitely not the worst coping mechanism she's ever used. She'll be fine."

"How long should I wait?"

"This time?" she sighed, wondering just how honest he wanted her to be. "Just don't push her unless you want to get destroyed. Her rebounds don't last too long, and as much as I like you, you know Madge would get me in the divorce. Don't worry your pretty little head about it, Hawthorne, I'm taking care of her."

He silently finished his beer and Katniss was glad for it. She believed that he cared for the girl as much as he could, but Gale often showed the emotional depth of a teaspoon. And he had no idea what she was going through, as much as he tried. It was Katniss who had been taking care of Madge and she was the only one who could help.

"Cut the sappy shit. One more beer?"

***

'One more beer' turned into polishing off the six pack of Heineken and the half bottle of vodka in the freezer. Gale fell asleep in the recliner and was snoring loudly by the time Katniss stumbled into the bathroom. Drunk or not, her body had a nighttime routine she never broke. Routine was a comfort to her; it kept her sane and 'sane Katniss' was a happy Katniss. Her contacts stuck to her eye and she hissed as she dropped them in their case.

3:27am. Katniss. /We should hang out again sometime./

3:31am. Peeta. /Now that I have your number./
She smirked around her toothbrush, toothpaste foaming from her mouth. She closed one eye, trying to make the second cell phone screen in her vision disappear.

3:37am. Katniss. /You must think you're pretty damn smart don't you, Mr. Tricky?/
3:42am. Peeta. /They don't just hand out PhD's to everyone who asks./
3:43am. Katniss. /Meh./

She stripped off her jeans and crawled into bed, pulling her blankets over her head in anticipation of the Sunday morning church service that would inevitably float through her open window and wake her up at 8:30. Like clockwork.

4:05am. Katniss. /Are you still awake?/
4:08am. Peeta. /Insomniac. Always awake./
4:10am. Katniss. /Creepy. Go to sleep./

***

Sure enough, at 8:30am, Katniss woke up with a pounding headache, cotton mouth, and a face full of blonde hair.

'Our God is an awesome God, He reigns from Heaven above...'

She groaned. "Why can't your awesome God sleep in on Sundays like normal people?"

Madge snorted. "My window faces the other direction." She yawned and rolled over, blue eyes peeking through the mess of hair. "So worth having to walk further to get to the bathroom."

"I hate you." Katniss pulled her pillow over her head and squeezed it around her ears. "Is Gale still here?" she mumbled.

"Why would Gale be here?" Suddenly Madge's face is next to Katniss', buried under the pillow.
"He brought us home last night."

"Oh. No. No! Katniss!" Madge hissed, eyes now wide open. "Did we do anything?"

"What do you remember doing?"

Madge blushed. "It's fuzzy," she admitted, "I remember him saying really sweet things about me and that I deserved better and that he promised he would never make me cry. Then we kissed. When I woke up, I heard your phone buzz so I came in here and fell asleep again." She closed her eyes as the singing outside started up again, this time with the addition of an electric guitar. "What time did all of this happen?"

Katniss chuckled. "Shit, I don't know. He put you to bed as soon as we got home, then we drank some more. He passed out on the recliner around...um...3ish, maybe?" Her phone started buzzing, causing her to sit up far too quickly for her aching head. She swatted the covers and eventually felt the vibration on her foot.

"I left my glasses in the bathroom. Will you read it?" Katniss handed her phone to Madge to read. She could have read it, but she would need to squint and didn't want to make her headache any worse than it already was.

8:42am. Gale. /Fuck this noise, Everdeen. What are they so excited about? God will love them all day, not just this early./

"He's still here. And he's not nearly as excited about Jesus as the First Evangelical Free Church people outside." Madge started giggling, scrolling down to read his entire message when she gasped and dropped the phone in front of her. "Oh, my."

Katniss scowled. "What?" She reached for her phone and held it inches from her nose. The screen was still fuzzy so she rubbed her eyes to clear them.

4:12am. Peeta. /It'd be easier to sleep if you were with me./

4:14am. Katniss. /You think we'd be sleeping?/

4:16am. Peeta. /Whatever could you be implying?/

4:17am. Katniss. /You're the psych guy. Use that perverted sex-infused imagination all of you have.
"Katniss Everdeen!" Madge shrieked. "You were sexting someone. Not just some someone, but the hot guy from the bar who was completely into you!"

Katniss horrifically stared at her phone as the screen faded to black. "What?!?" she sputtered. "I wasn't, I was not sexting anyone," she answered, in as controlled a voice as she could muster. She wasn't exactly positive what 'sexting' was, but the way the girls in her classes talked, it involved pictures you wouldn't want your mother to see. And she was 100% certain she was not so drunk that she'd have forgotten taking naked pictures of herself. She quickly checked her phone gallery, just to make sure, and let out a sigh of relief when the first picture that came up was one of her and Madge at a bonfire the night after their last final.

"If not sexting, then flirting. Hard. Almost had me fooled, Everdeen."

"I was drunk. Let's not start talking about the things certain people do when they've been drinking," Katniss answered with a knowing smirk. Madge threw a pillow at her and Katniss launched herself at her friend, pillows in both hands.

"Okay! Okay! Uncle!" Madge squealed. "I'm hungry. Want to get breakfast?"

They found Gale sprawled on the rickety recliner where he fell asleep, his feet tangled in the thin blanket Katniss left for him. "Morning starshine," Katniss greeted him. "Breakfast?"

He yawned and stretched his limbs beyond the chair. The bottom hem of his t-shirt rose up, exposing a strip of dark hair down his stomach. She didn't dare look over at Madge, who was most likely blushing. "I'm game. Where at?"

"Your choice, Hawthorne, since you'll be buying."

"How do you figure that, Catnip?"
Katniss wrapped her arms around Madge's middle. "I believe you owe me $50. Breakfast is just the start."

***

After breakfast, Gale dropped them off at the bar to get Katniss' car. The girls spent the rest of the day lounging around their apartment, neither able or willing to do too much on the day before summer classes started. Madge had a Business Leadership Seminar that would last all summer, as opposed to just 6 weeks, like Katniss' psychology course. Katniss cracked her book open, determined to have some idea of what she was getting herself into, but the words just swirled around the page every time she tried. She threw the book into the corner of the living room and got lost in the mindless reality show Madge wanted to watch.

She purposely left her phone in her room. Madge had hers and anyone who really needed her could get a hold of her that way. She was embarrassed by her behavior the night before. At the time, she blamed the beer. But in the harsh, hungover light of day, she realized it was Gale's implication that she should use Peeta to get over Cato and all the talk of Madge's relationship status. Normally those jabs and comments didn't affect her, and she didn't know what possessed her to be so brazen to a guy she just met. It wasn't at all her, at least not anymore. She used to be less rigid and more carefree with people, but that was a long time ago.

She considered apologizing but talked herself out of it. He was most likely not sober last night and potentially embarrassed about it, too. He had flirted with her at the bar but it seemed like normal, everyday flirting. Nothing directed at her personally. Apologizing meant bringing it up. It'd be easier to forget it happened. He'd figure out she wasn't like that sooner or later, and stop texting her all together.

Which was just as well. If she never saw Peeta again, she'd be just fine.

12:02pm. Peeta. /Katniss? We need to talk./

2:34pm. Peeta. /Seriously, I need to talk to you. Text me or call me./

4:15pm. /Missed call./

7:50pm. /Missed call./

10:25pm. Peeta. /I'm sorry if I crossed a line with you last night. I'd understand if you're upset. But we really need to talk about your class tomorrow./

She read over his texts a few times. She let Madge read them before asking her advice, which, of
course, was to call and find out what he wanted. "Why do I even bother asking you anything?" she half-jokingly responded. "I'm going to shower. Maybe that'll clear my head."

She crawled into bed after a quick exchange with Gale who told her the same thing Madge had, more determined NOT to answer just because she knew she should. Which was stupid.

11:15pm. Katniss. /Sorry, got caught up in other stuff. Have to get some sleep so I don't fall asleep in class but let's talk after./

***

The line at the local coffee shop was out of control, but that's what she got for going before a 9am class on the first day. As she waited for the horde of girls in front of her to order their iced mocha latte, no whip, extra shot, sugar free hazelnut syrup monstrosities, she impatiently tapped her foot and checked her watch every few minutes. When it was finally her turn, she quickly rambled her usual order – a large cinnamon chai tea. The redhead behind the counter sighed in relief and asked if she wanted a muffin or a cookie on the house, just for having a 'normal order.'

Katniss slinked her way through Baker Hall, the natural and social science building, which was just as crowded as during a normal semester. She took the stairs two at a time; the holdup at the coffee shop made her five minutes behind her planned schedule. She always arrived at class early to get all of her things properly situated on her desk without feeling rushed. Rushed meant out of control and more often than not, out of control led to a panic attack. She was hoping to continue avoiding panic attacks in class.

Luckily, the 3rd floor was nowhere near as full as first floor and she pushed into Baker 353, sliding into the seat closest to the door in the back row. Other students began clamoring in, some more awake than others, but she ignored them as she pulled out her textbook and a brand new spiral notebook. She began carefully writing the name of the class, room, and time, on the inside front cover.

She heard the door fly open and could feel the floor vibrate under the heavy footsteps of whoever was trying to sneak in. She gloated to herself. If you're going to be late, at least be quiet about it.

"Sorry for the delay, guys. Somehow I managed to get lost between 23rd Street and the faculty parking lot."
Oh, crap.

"Here is the syllabus, if you wouldn't mind passing them around, we can get started and probably get out of here early. Enjoy this warm weather, huh?"

No. No no no no no.

"Contrary to what your online schedule says, my name is not 'Staff.'"

The room chuckled but Katniss continued shaking her head in disbelief. *This cannot be happening to me.*

The professor cleared his throat. "Uh, my name is Dr. Mellark. And while some professors insist upon formality, I still haven't gotten used to it yet. So feel free to call me 'Peeta' or 'Mellark' or whatever makes you comfortable."

She broke her eyes away from the blank notebook page in front of her as the stack of syllabi came to her. Sure enough. Peeta. Mr. Hottie-with-the-Body, Mr. Muscles, was standing in front of the room. *Fuck me.*
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Three weeks later

Katniss stomped up every stair to her third floor apartment, perfectly content to continue the tantrum she had been having all day. The neighbors would be getting ready to settle down for the night and were probably grumbling to one another about all the ruckus in the hallway. But none would suspect 'the quiet girl in 326' being capable of such noise, so she didn't concern herself with the potential complaint they could file with the landlord.

It had been a terrible day. And it all started where most of her stress seemed to start from. Dr. Peeta fucking Mellark.

Earlier that morning

She avoided him during the first half of the summer semester. She sat in the back, didn't raise her hand, and snuck out as soon as he dismissed them. When they had to turn assignments in, she handed hers to the boy a few seats down who seemed content to be the errand boy for the back row. She noticed that Peeta, Dr. Mellark, would look in her direction during his lectures. They were fleeting glances, under the guise of scanning the room, but she knew better. He held her eyes a hair longer than anyone else’s.

No one noticed. No one suspected.

"Before I let you guys out, I wanted to give each of you an idea of where you stand in the class. If there was one thing I hated about my classes, it was having no idea how I was doing." He handed a sheet of paper to the girl in the front row whose exposed skin grew each day of class. "Just go ahead and find the alphanumeric code you assigned yourself at the beginning of the semester and next to it will be your points so far and current grade. If you have any questions, feel free to ask and you can head out once you're comfortable with your grade, last person to see it can just bring it down here. We'll go over your midterms next time."

It felt like a ploy to make her stay longer, since she would be the last student to see the grade report. Smooth. Annoying as hell, but smooth. She debated not even checking; she had done well on the assignments and felt confident about their first test last week. She wasn't worried about her grade. Everyone else stayed in their seats until they saw their scores, which ruined her chance of a stealthy exit. The wait was unbearable and when the report finally made its way to the back row, she eagerly started tapping her fingers on her desk.

As it slid in front of her, she quickly scanned for her code near the top of the list. KE0508. 82. B.

What the hell? A B? She was getting a B? Katniss Everdeen did not get B's, especially in intro level courses. Something had to be wrong, there had to be a mistake. Maybe he was mad that she didn't go to breakfast with him that night. Or called him back before class. Or ignored him ever since. It was a petty thing and just the thought made her so mad she began to shake.

She glanced up at the line forming around Peeta. Dr. Mellark. Knowing she'd have to go up anyway to return the grade report, she violently slung her backpack over her shoulder and pushed against the students leaving.
The 'Katniss Everdeen scowl' was in full effect the closer she got to him. The only person left in front of her was the girl from the front row. She was actively pushing her chest toward him, throwing out lines that were straight from a bad porn. “But Dr. Mellark, I need to do well in this class. There's got to be something I can do to raise my grade.” Katniss wanted to vomit. It was trashy, the way this adult woman was trying to use sex to make up for her shortcomings. Worse, she wasn't even trying to be subtle about her intentions.

"I'm sorry, Cashmere, but the only thing to do is study harder for the next test. If you do well on it, I don't see any reason why you can't get this up to a passing grade," he smiled sympathetically at her.

"The material is just so hard. Maybe I need a tutor or something." There was that cheap porn star act again, emphasizing 'hard' and 'tutor' and giggling suggestively. She even went so far as to brush her fingers over his forearm.

He nodded. "Academic Success can set you up with someone. A tutor is a great idea if you're having a difficult time grasping the concepts. Their number is on the syllabus." He smirked at this and pulled his arm away, just out of her reach. If Katniss wasn't so angry, she'd give him credit for using her own ridiculous ideas against her. But she was angry so she refused to acknowledge it.

Cashmere gave him a tight smile before spinning around to leave. The pleased look on Katniss' face dropped when she felt his eyes intently focused on her.

"What can I do for you, Katniss?" Her name dripping from his lips had made a permanent home in her memory and hearing it in real life did more than any memory ever could. His hand was reaching out toward her and she felt a pull in her stomach, suddenly missing the warmth that rushed through her during those few, brief moments of contact. "Do you have a question about your grade?"

That snapped her out of her memory. Her grade. The B. Damnit! "Yes," she set her face into a scowl. "I'm confused." She realized his outreached arm was for the report, so she handed it to him, her breath hitching when his fingers slid over hers. Damnit!

He studied the paper. "I don't know why, you're doing fine in here."

"Fine? You think a B is fine?"

"There's nothing wrong with a B. It's better than average."

Most girls, when they got upset, raised their voices up a few octaves into 'squeaking' territory. Katniss lowered hers until she was practically growling. "I am not average. I do not get B's. I have done well on all my assignments, I know I did well on the test, and yet I have a below satisfactory grade. If this is your way of punishing me for what happened before classes started, then I will take it up with your department head, I swear-"

He slammed his bare hand down on the paper and the echo resonated throughout the nearly empty classroom. "That is enough, Miss Everdeen. It's quite obvious from your accusations that this is not a matter that will be solved quickly. And as there is another class scheduled in here, we will continue this in my office."

Katniss was not intimidated by him and his refusal to handle her issues immediately only fueled her fire. "Fine," she hissed.

"Hey, guys, sorry to do this to you, but can we talk about your grades on the way to my office?" Peeta addressed the two remaining students who were hanging back with an easy-going smile that immediately disarmed the entire room. He packed up his messenger bag and slung it across his body,
motioning for them to walk with him. One steely look over his shoulder at Katniss indicated she was
to follow as well. She stayed behind him as he explained their grades and what they needed to do to
improve. Then he laughed and patted them on the shoulder, promising that they were fully capable of
getting out of the class alive.

She absolutely did not focus on how his Oxford button-down stretched across his back. Or how the
thin, black suspenders snaked down to his well-tailored slacks that cupped his ass. *Who wears
suspenders anymore? Oh, what I wouldn’t do to pull his body tight to mine by those thin, black
suspenders. Damnit, damnit, damnit.*

The other professors in the faculty area took no notice of her as they passed, save for one crotchety
old man with a beer belly and greasy dark hair who took one look at them and shook his head,
muttering about something insert his breath. Peeta unlocked a back office with a crude name plate
above it. 'P. Mellark, PhD.'

She stepped inside and was instantly transported to a different world. Rather than the diplomas and
awards and academic achievements that lined Dr. Beetee's departmental office, Peeta's walls were
covered in oil paintings with sloppy finger painting replicas underneath. His desk was already
cluttered, which made her stomach tighten. *Who could work like this?* Near his computer screen was
a small picture frame of him and a stern-looking woman at graduation. Next to it was one of who she
presumed was his family, a younger Peeta and the woman again, plus a jolly fellow and two boys
slightly older than Peeta. Taped up on his desk was an ink printed photograph of a toddler with
blond curls, bright blue eyes, and her face covered in chocolate ice cream. He closed the door behind
her and she shuddered at the thought of him pushing her up against it, hands roaming over her –

"No. Stop it, Katniss. You're here about your grade."

She sat on the couch that spread across the back wall and waited as he slipped his bag off his
shoulder and started rifling through his desk, never once acknowledging her. She quickly grew
impatient and cleared her throat. "I just wanted to ask about..." she paused, annoyed that his back
was to her.

"Yes, Miss Everdeen, I'm well aware of what you wanted to ask me about." He waved his hand for
her to continue.

"I don't think it's fair to penalize me because I turned you down for a date." As the words came out,
she realized what she sounded like. Even though she hadn't come up with another explanation for
her low grade, it sounds ridiculous that a professor would leverage a grade because he was rejected.

He snorted and finally turned to face her. "You think your grade in my class has more to do with an
interaction that occurred before either of us knew who the other was and not because of your actual
work? You think I haven't noticed that you've yet to add anything to the conversation, despite my
warning that participation was a quarter of your grade?" She squirmed slightly in her seat. His eyes
were trained on her and she realized they turned a darker blue when he was upset. She also realized
that darker blue made her stomach knot in a totally new way. "I can tell the difference between a
student who is struggling because they don't understand but are willing to try and those who
obviously understand but don't put forth any effort, Miss Everdeen. Care to venture a guess at which
one you are?" He raised both of his eyebrows and waited for her response.

She was stunned into silence, embarrassed that he saw through her disinterest and her assumption
that she made an impact on him. She felt just as silly as Cashmere after her failed proposition.

"Your response, or lack thereof, confirms my suspicions." He grabbed a copy of the syllabus.
"You're not out of the running for an A. Just, talk in class. You know the material, so feel free to
jump in. And improve your assignments beyond the average work you've been turning in and you'll
"Average work?" She spit out. "My work is not average. I am an A student, I have a 3.97 GPA. How dare you insinuate that I am average." She was furious. If there was one thing Katniss Everdeen could always have some control over, it was her school work.

"Your grade would suggest otherwise."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Is there anything else, Dr. Mellark?"

She was so busy being mad that she didn't see the way he stiffened at her use of his title. He leaned in closer to her. "You tell me, Katniss. You're the one unhappy with your grade."

She swallowed hard. Thoughts of just leaning a few more inches closer and feeling his lips against hers raced through her brain, along with mental images of him laying her out along the couch, eyes dark with lust and wanting. *Damnit.*

Katniss hated the effect he was having on her, making it too easy to remember that she was mad. "No, sir." She stormed out of his office, letting the door slam shut behind her. She passed by the old professor again, who was still watching her with a suspicious accusation on his lips.

She still had an hour until Beetee expected her in the lab, but she knew he wouldn't care if she showed up early. She pulled her ugly purple polo out of her bag and ripped it on over her head, muttering and cursing 'Dr. Peeta Mellark' and his stupid eyes.

"You seem stressed, Katniss," Dr. Beetee said, in an odd moment of humanity. He was too smart for most people and was often labeled as a total kook by his students. His inability to relate to the average person was what originally attracted Katniss to his lab. They didn't often communicate with one another beyond him giving her instructions when she came in and her giving him an update as she left.

His passing statement caught her off guard. "What?"

He pushed his thick glasses up his nose. "You've nearly sliced that little guy in two with just your tweezers."

She sighed, blowing the few strands of hair that escaped out of her face. "Sorry, Dr. Beetee, I just, I had a meeting with a professor that didn't go very well. Guess I'm still in my head about it."

"Why don't you spend the afternoon in the research room? Start putting together the manual for the exhibition. That way you can't hurt any more of our honored guests."

As he chuckled at his own joke, she snapped off her rubber gloves and chucked them into the disposal. The research room was where most of the other student workers spent their days, hunched over computers or highlighting reports or flipping through thick journals that hadn't been scanned into the system yet. She selected a computer as far away from the crowd as possible and opened up the Beetle Exhibition file.

"I hear he's brand new this year, fresh out of graduate school."

"I wish he taught in the Chem department. We could use some young, sexy blood over there."

"Almost makes you wish you hadn't gotten all your gen eds out of the way early, huh? I'd love to lay on his couch for an examination."
"I bet he's got one hell of a Freudian slip, if you know what I mean."

"You are so bad! Oh, come on, if we hurry, we may be able to catch him on his jog. It's hot so hopefully he's already lost his shirt."

Katniss stared at the retreating figures of the two girls who had disturbed her silence. They had been gossiping for the past few hours about anything and everything, including some of the young, hotshot professors brought in to breathe some new life into the university. There was a lit professor, who made a student cry because he stupidly referenced the 'bathtub scene' when she asked if anyone had ever read 'The Scarlet Letter' on the first day of classes. Then there was the new art history professor who was married to the biology professor that had more “peppers” next to his name on Rate-My-Professor.com than any professor at any university. And of course, the current object of their affection, who she was quite certain from their stupid puns was not Dr. Odair. Katniss pitied their meaningless existence that they were reduced to gossiping about other people.

"Holy hell, you'd think those girls never saw an attractive man before.” A voice piped up from the computer terminal next to Katniss. She didn't even notice that anyone was there when she originally chose her spot. “If they hadn't left I swear, I would have-"

"Oh stop, Rue,” a deep male voice rumbled from across the room with a slight chuckle. "You wouldn't have done anything and you know it.

The girl next to Katniss popped her head past the side of her terminal and stuck her tongue out at the hulking boy who was also peering out. She laughed and turned to Katniss. “Don't pay any attention to Thresh. He's just butt hurt because he always gets stuck next to those girls. And they don't talk about how 'sexy' he is.”

Thresh snorted.

"I'm Rue. Physics. You?"

Katniss stared the girl who didn't look old enough to drive, let alone be in college. “Katniss. Um, biology. I usually work downstairs with Dr. Beetee.”

“ You work with Beetle Beetee?” Thresh asked.

Katniss scowled. "Dr. Beetee is a premier entomologist. He has received numerous grants from the State Department and his work has directly influenced ecology policy both here and abroad. His research brings this center more funding than any other professor and I'll be damned if I let you make fun of him."

Rue and Thresh looked at each other, then back at Katniss, before they both started laughing. "Katniss," Rue smiled, "We're not making fun of him. The first time we met him he talked about his work and said 'I guess you could call me Beetle Beetee," she shrugged. "We've been doing it ever since."

"Beetee's a kook, man. You're lucky you work with him and not 'Flotsam' and 'Jetsam' like I have to," Thresh added. "I swear, all they've talked about all summer is that professor. What's his name again, Rue?"

"Mellark. Over in Psychology.” Rue answered. “Have you repressed that little nugget of information, Thresh?” She clasped her hands together under her chin and dramatically batted her eyelashes. "'He's so dreamy,'" she mocked. "'He's probably not that attractive anyway."

Katniss fought the snarl brought on by Rue's off-handed comment. "Have you ever seen him?" she
asked quietly.

"Nope. But apparently he goes running by here every day," Thresh offered.

"What time?" Rue asked. Thresh gave her a suspicious look and she smiled sheepishly. "I just want to see what all the fuss is about."

Thresh shook his head. "What is today? Wednesday? Um," he leaned over and peered into the terminal next to him. "They've got it down to sometime between 3 and 4."

"It's just past 3 now. Let's go check it out!" Rue shut the journal she was going through and pulled at Katniss' arm. Katniss tried to protest but the tiny girl wouldn't listen. Even Thresh got dragged along, although he covered it up by claiming he needed his nicotine fix.

They leaned against the wall of the center, where the roof came over the edge and created shade. Thresh lit a cigarette and Rue would cough obnoxiously whenever he exhaled. He countered by blowing smoke in her face. The sidewalk in front of the lab was part of the most popular jogging path on campus and every time someone ran by, Rue would make commentary about if she thought he was who they were looking for.

Katniss absentmindedly picked at a few blades of grass, not particularly excited to see him after what happened that morning. Rue will get tired of this game eventually, she thought, then we can go back inside and finish our work.

"Ooh." Rue's soft voice broke through. Katniss looked up and, sure enough, there he was, in those same Under Armour gym shorts he wore at the bookstore. His curls were drenched in sweat but still determined to fly into his face. With the sun beating down onto his bare chest, because of course he was running without his shirt, she made out the muscles in his stomach that were starting to form and the inked symbol over his left pec that she couldn't completely make out from this distance.

She watched as sweat dripped down his body as he ran, from the damp curls that clung to his neck and forehead down his neck, behind his ear. Another traveled his chest, disappearing below the waistband of his shorts. Unconsciously, she wetted her lips, the desire to trace that bead of sweat's journey down his body with her tongue clearly in her mind.

*What would his skin taste like,* she wondered. Would it be masculine and salty, as she imagined it to be now, or would it be more reminiscent of earlier that morning, in his office, of cinnamon and dill? Would his abs ripple like that when he was hovering above her? When he pushed into her?

She was vaguely aware of her bottom lip under her teeth. Of her own fingers looped around the waistband of her khaki shorts. Of how tightly she clenched her thighs at the thought of him between them. Of how much, in that very moment, she wanted him.

"I hate when those girls are right. That is a certified Dr. Hot Stuff."

Dr. Professor. Her professor. Damnit.

"You girls get your fill? Or will you be making spectacles of yourselves every day from here on out?" Thresh's teasing made Rue slap his arm and distracted them both from the rising flush on Katniss' neck and face. "Let's go back in before we melt in this heat."

"So, Katniss, he's cute, right?"

4:45pm. Peeta. /You should tell your friend that smoking is bad for him./
She almost threw her phone across the room.

She was still frustrated when she got to her apartment. When Madge and Gale, who had made himself at home as their unofficial third roommate recently, tried to ask her what was wrong, she grumbled something about bastards who are ruining her GPA and running without shirts.

"I have to work in the morning so you two better keep it the fuck down!" she hollered from her room before slamming the door shut. Madge looked up from whatever magazine she was flipping through at Katniss' closed door and sighed.

“Do you want to deal with her or should I?” she asked, leaning her head on Gale's chest.

***

That weekend, Katniss begrudgingly took Dr. Mellark's words about the effort she put into her assignments to heart and began work on her final project. They were tasked to write an analysis of any popular movie or television show, using evidence provided in class or textbooks, which would indicate they actually learned anything in the class. She knew, from the random snippets of conversations she overheard in class, that most people were picking easy options; *A Beautiful Mind*, *Girl Interrupted*, and *Monster* were currently the top three among her classmates.

She still had three weeks until the end of the semester and the paper only had to be five pages, but she was determined to prove to him that she could exceed his current expectations of her. When he called her work, and by extension her, 'average,' the sting stuck with her the rest of the day. It wasn't the first time she had ever been called 'nothing more than average' but she made it a point to never be seen that way again, by anyone. It was why she poured herself into her classes and refused to settle for anything less than perfect. She didn't get distracted from her work and she didn't get 'B's.' Katniss Everdeen would never again be told she was 'average.'

She was so engrossed in thumbing through her textbook, trying to find anything about gender roles or power structure that she could stretch to apply to the strong female characters in the ‘merry old land of Oz’, that she almost missed Madge's attempt to sneak out of the apartment. Almost.

“Going someplace?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow at her roommate. Madge's attire was not her normal bar-look which gained as much attention as possible. Instead, she was in white cotton shorts and a mint green blouse, a look she only wore when she was actually trying to impress someone.

Madge's eyes widened and she fidgeted with her charm bracelet. “Oh, I'm just going to have dinner. With some friends.”

“Yeah?” Katniss asked with a smile. “Which friends are you going out with? Have I met them?”

“Ok, Mom.” Madge answered, slipping past her to the front door. “I'll be back later. Don't wait up!”

“Seriously, Madge, where are you going?”

Madge stepped back inside and closed the door. “I, uh, I have a date, I guess.”

Katniss whistled. “So Gale finally worked up the nerve to ask you out? I'm impressed. Where is Mr. Hawthorne taking you tonight?”

She fidgeted with her charm bracelet again and scrunched her face.

“Madge?” Katniss set her highlighter down and stared at her friend.
“It's not with Gale,” Madge mumbled. Katniss cleared her throat so Madge repeated herself more clearly, still refusing to make eye contact. “It's with someone else.”

“Obviously.”

Madge let out an awkward laugh. “You know, your Alan Rickman impression has come a long way, Everdeen.”

“So have your powers of avoidance, Undersee. So you're not going out with Gale tonight, that's fine. I assume that means he won't be doing his laundry here tomorrow? Madge! Stop playing with that damned bracelet and answer my question.”

Madge groaned. “I don't know, Katniss, okay? Gale's been great and I know he's interested but...”

“But what? Madge, everyone knows that at the end of the day, you'd rather come back here with him than whoever it is you're going out with tonight. I just don't fucking understand you two.” She shook her head and went back to her textbook. “Do what you want, but I'm not getting in the middle of it when he finds out you've strung him along again.”

It was mean and hurtful and she knew it. It was exactly what she shouldn't have said to Madge, even if the girl needed to hear it. She was just as likely to internalize Katniss' words as Katniss internalized Peeta's, Dr. Mellark's, words. But Gale was her friend, too. And just like she helped Madge get over all of her relationships, she was the one Gale came to with his girl-problems. For a girl who didn't really date, these two seemed to think Katniss was some sort of expert on the subject.

She knew it as soon as she looked up at Madge, whose eyes were welling up with fat tears. “Oh, Madge, I'm sorry.” Katniss pushed away from the table and wrapped her arms around Madge's neck.

“I-just-don't-want-to-hurt-him!” she sobbed.

Katniss brushed Madge's hair as the girl continued to cry on her shoulder. “I know you don't. I know, sweetie. Are you going to tell him about this date?”

“I will. Just, not yet. I want to know for sure, you know? I don't want to throw this in his face right now. Promise me you won't say anything about it to him?”

Katniss felt her face betray her. Madge wanted her to lie to Gale? If it was just a date, then why couldn't Gale know about it? If it was more than a date, why wouldn't Madge just say so? It frustrated Katniss because if they continued down the road they were going, at least one of them would end up hurt. And she'd be caught in the crossfire. Which was someplace she did not want to be; not again. It was bad enough the first time.

“Alright. Who is he?”

***

Katniss finished her analysis of The Wizard of Oz not long after Madge left for her date. She didn’t need to watch the movie to write about it and watching it only reminded her of her sister, which put her in a funk for the rest of the day. After the events of this week, however, she resigned herself to feeling gloomy for the night and gave in. She almost got through Judy Garland singing about happy little bluebirds before her chest tightened and her nose began to sting, warning her of forthcoming tears. The last time she heard this song was at the funeral. It was the one she was supposed to sing but couldn’t.

9:22pm. Gale. /Coming out tonight, Catnip?/
Gale’s invitation to go out broke her free of the distant memory. She knew if she told him why she really wasn’t going out, he’d get someone to cover his shift and come over. Even though they had never talked about it, she knew that he knew her pain. But she didn’t want to see Gale tonight and field his questions about Madge’s plans or put up with his newest pastime of mocking her dislike of Dr. Mellark and his class.

9:25pm. Katniss. /Doubtful. I’ll just hang out here and check out the terrible infomercials./

9:57pm. Gale. /You sure? Blondie’s here. Looks a little lonely./

10:02pm. Gale. /He asked about you./

10:10pm. Gale. /The offer to make him jealous still stands./

10:13pm. Katniss. /Fuck off, Hawthorne. Go do your job./

12:05am. Peeta. /Your grade was not personal, Katniss. It had nothing to do with that night./

Damn you, Gale Hawthorne.

She didn’t know that when Peeta asked Gale about how Katniss was doing, the bartender started ranting about her idiotic professor who was making her life a living hell. Neither Gale nor Madge knew that ‘Peeta’ from the bar was the ‘Dr. Mellark’ Katniss bitched about every day after class. She was certain she’d never hear the end of it from Gale, and Madge would probably start gushing about star-crossed lovers or something like that. Because Gale didn’t know the connection, he saw no problem passing along all of Katniss’ problems with the class and the professor who had been incredibly rude to her once.

“I told her to just turn the guy in to the Dean for creating a hostile environment or some shit like that, but that just pissed her off more,” Gale told him with a laugh. “She told me I had no idea what I was talking about and if she could handle Odair in biology, she could handle this fucker. It was like she flipped a switch or something and suddenly he was the greatest thing since sliced bread with all his ‘accomplishments at such a young age’ or whatever.” He refilled Peeta’s glass with Johnnie Walker. “She’s a strange one, that Katniss Everdeen. If that temper of hers doesn’t scare you off, then you may have more problems than she does.”

Peeta just snorted into his glass and listened as the bartender started a new conversation with a gentleman at the end of the bar. The crowd was different tonight than the last time he was here, which he graciously welcomed. He had nothing against the college crowd, given that he wasn’t too terribly far removed from them himself yet at the same time, he was no longer part of that group. Katniss had been a refreshing break from most of the women he had seen around town and it afflicted him to hear that she didn’t like his class. He had tried to make it as non-awkward as possible when he discovered she was going to be his student but he couldn’t force her to participate or give a shit about any of it, even though he saw a marked improvement in her participation last week. He couldn’t treat her differently just because she intrigued him.

It was the second part of what the bartender told him that kept him from driving home to finish his own bottle of Walker Black. She defended him. Adamantly defended him, if her friend’s retelling of the story was accurate. She could have easily turned him in for inappropriate conduct; even though she wasn’t his student at the time and they hadn’t actually done anything, the text messages could be enough to cost him his job. He wasn’t thinking that night. He knew she was still a student and taking a psychology class that summer, but he couldn’t stop himself from wanting to talk to her more. Even now, despite the explicit rules about fraternizing with students, he thought about her.
He probably would have been fine if she hadn’t called him ‘Dr. Mellark’ in such a low tone when she was in his office.

***

“Alright, guys, good class. Remember that next week is the last week of class, so your final paper has to be in by Monday.” Peeta released the class early and right as Katniss was slipping her notebook into her backpack, she heard him call her name. “Miss Everdeen? Can I see you down here for a moment?”

She scowled at the chorus of “oooh’s” that followed. What? Are we in elementary school again? Katniss waited until the mass of students exited the row and slinked to his desk. She wasn’t sure what to expect from this but had heard that when Dr. Mellark called people after class, it was usually to discuss a problem. Of course, she heard that from the kid next to her who only showed up to class once a week, so who knows how reliable he was as a source.

“I wanted to let you know I graded your movie analysis. If you have any questions, let me know.” He handed her the paper back and she flipped through it, noticing very few red edit marks. In fact, it was the complete opposite. The margins of her paper were flooded with approval, ‘good idea,’ ‘exactly!’ and even a few ‘See? I knew you understood this better than you let on.’ She flushed slightly when she noticed a citation circled with the note of, ‘you didn’t have to cite your professor just to get a good grade on this, Everdeen.’

She looked up at him and saw him chuckling to himself as he packed his bag, knowing full well that she had just read that note. She turned to the last page where her grade was written in the bottom corner. 98.

“Now, if you do half as well on your final as you did on your mid-term, you’ll be in the clear to get that ‘A’ you wanted.”

The filter between her quick-to-react brain and mouth must have been broken because she heard the words fly from her mouth before she could stop them. “Are you doing this just to make up for something?”

His exhale was especially pronounced in the quiet room. “I just can’t win with you, can I? First you get a grade you’re unhappy with and you think it’s because I have some unrequited love for you. Then, you turn in one of the best papers I’ve read from any undergraduate class I’ve taught and you’re unhappy with that grade. I take my job very seriously, Miss Everdeen,” he lowered his voice as he walked around the desk and faced her.

She didn’t like him being as close to her as he was, just looking at her like that. He was upset, but something in his face made her feel naked and vulnerable. She didn’t like it. But she wouldn’t be the first to break contact with him. She didn’t want to back away and let him win.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed, closing her eyes to end the standoff. She expected him to have moved away when she reopened them, but there they were, ridiculously blue, locked on hers. He stepped toward her and set his hand over hers. She inhaled sharply at the contact, just as she had done when his fingers grazed hers a few weeks ago in class.

She bit the corner of her bottom lip as her stomach twisted and turned. He was closer than before, even if only by a few inches, and she could feel the heat radiating from his body. She tilted her head up as he tilted down and she was glad he wasn’t so ridiculously tall that she’d have to stand on her tiptoes. She hadn’t told anyone before how she wondered what this moment would feel like.
“Katniss.” His lips were nearly on hers and she sighed, suddenly impatient at the lack of contact. Then the heat was gone. She opened her eyes as he pulled away from her, running his hand through his hair. “Oh, God,” he muttered, backing to where his bag was sitting on the desk. “I’m sorry, Katniss, that was…totally inappropriate. I really didn’t mean for any of that to…” He was breathing heavily and his face was flushed.

“Oh, no,” she said, trying to play off the embarrassment she was currently feeling. “Totally inappropriate. But, um, I should get going, I have to work this afternoon and I don’t want to be late or my boss will be upset. We have this beetle exhibit coming up and I have to finish setting the beetles and…” She trailed off, knowing she was speaking too quickly and not giving herself enough room for a pause that may reflect her emotion.

“Right. Well, good job on your paper. I mean that, it was really well written.” He started toward the door when she called out to him.

“I won’t report this.” It was the only thing she could think to say. “I mean, nothing happened, so there’s nothing to report but I don’t want you to worry.”

He nodded. “Thanks. Good luck on the final.”

When he left the room, she brought her fingers up to her lips, recognizing how close they had come to crossing the line. She didn’t do things like this, it wasn’t at all her. A crush on a teacher is one thing; girls get them all the time. But to actually act upon it, or nearly act upon it, was a totally different story. She stuffed the report into her backpack and hurried out of the room, needing to get away from the stifling truth of what almost happened. And how badly she wished it had.

***

Madge flung open Katniss' bedroom door and leaped onto her bed, right on top of her sleeping roommate.

"Oof! What the fuck, Madge?" Katniss rubbed her eyes and rolled Madge off of her.

"Guess what day it is, today?" Madge asked in a sing-song voice.

"The day I finally make good on my threat to kick you out if you wake me up early on a Saturday?" Katniss grumbled. She turned her head and saw Madge bouncing giddily on the bed. "What in all that is holy has gotten into you?"

"Today, my dear, is my favorite day of the summer."

Katniss groaned and smothered her face with her pillow. "No."

"Yes. This is our last chance to celebrate Cruise Night together and we're taking full advantage of it. You've been done with class for two weeks, so you have no excuse today! Now get up and into the shower. I'll make us a carb-heavy breakfast so we don't get sloshed too early." Madge slapped Katniss' ass before, literally, bouncing out of the room.

Cruise Night. It started as a way for the town to raise money by showcasing classic cars. The night still ended with the mile and a half loop up and down Main Street, but it was the day drinking that led up to the showcase that kept the student body coming every year. Madge had tried to get Katniss to go every year, even before they were legal, but was never successful. This year, she played the guilt card right away, claiming it was the one 'rite of passage' they hadn't experienced together. Then
she got Gale and Darius in on it so Katniss had no choice but to relent. She had been hoping they would all forget and let her sleep in today, but that was obviously out of the question.

"What do I even wear to this?" Katniss yelled over the clanging pots and pans in the kitchen.

"Something cute."

"Well, that's helpful," she mumbled to herself, forcing herself out of bed. "You and I both know I don't own anything like that!"

"That's why I'm letting you borrow something of mine. And don't you dare tell me it won't fit you because you know damn well it will."

She smirked when she saw that Madge had laid three ensembles out on Katniss' dresser with a post-it note that read, 'These are your options. Pick one. No complaining.' She reluctantly chose the simplest outfit, dark brown shorts with a floral tank top that clasped in the front with a series of hooks. It was a little girly for her liking, but so were most of the items in Madge's closet.

After her shower, she eyed the stack of pancakes Madge set on the table. "You know eating this means you won't get to drink as much," she warned with a smile.

"Shut your face, Everdeen. These pancakes have gotten many an Undersee through their drunken escapades," Madge answered with a wink. "Fill your plate. The boys will be here soon and you know they won't leave anything behind."

As if on cue, the front door opened and Gale and Darius entered, with cases of beer under each arm. "Cruise Night! To fast cars, drunken girls, and no fear of public intox arrests!" Gale cheered loudly as they both cracked open a can and chugged them.

"It's 9:30, you guys," Katniss said, shoveling a large piece of pancake in her mouth. "Isn't it a little early to be shotgunning beers?"

"Can't drink all day if you don't start in the morning," Darius joked, tugging on Katniss' braid on his way into the kitchen. Madge giggled as Gale pecked her cheek and stole the bite of pancake off her fork. The smile fell when Katniss glared disapprovingly at her. She still hadn't completely forgiven her roommate for not telling Gale about the multiple dates she had been on with the guy from her business seminar.

"So, where to first?"

Cruise Night house parties were loud, crowded, and not at all Katniss' scene. She didn't know anyone at the first house they ventured to, so she followed Madge wherever she went. Including one awkward trip to the bathroom. Gale and Darius ventured to the beer bong competition across the street, ready to, in their words, "Show these babies how to drink like men."

The owners of the house dared Madge to try it, but Katniss volunteered when she caught the fear in Madge's eye. "So what do I do?" She asked, holding the rubber tube in her hand.

"Suck and swallow, baby!" A random guy yelled out, followed by a loud woop and some high fives.

"No shit, Sherlock." She looked back at Darius. "Seriously, how do I do this without getting beer all over me?"
He stepped beside her and held the tube up. "Just keep this above your head. As soon as the beer hits, don't think, just start swallowing. Breathe through your nose and keep your throat relaxed. Whatever you do, don't stop swallowing until it's gone, okay?" He smiled and rubbed her shoulder for encouragement. "They're not timing you or anything. They just don't think a girl can do it, that's all."

Katniss snorted and held the tube up as the boys began pouring two cans of Bud Light into the funnel connected to the tube. She brought the tube to her lips and raised her hand like she saw Gale do earlier. As she dropped it, the boys lifted the funnel and the beer came rushing through the tube.


It wasn't as hard she thought it would have been. Darius' advice was nearly spot on so she just continued swallowing down the cold beer until no more passed her lips. She pulled the tube out of her mouth and held it up.

"Holy shit! That girl downed it!"

"Damn, that was hot!"

Katniss rolled her eyes at the boys and handed the tube back to them. "How'd I do?" she asked the slacked-jaw trio. Gale was the first to recover and threw his arm around her shoulder.

"I say I'm reconsidering only seeing you as a friend, Catnip."

She elbowed his stomach at the same time that Madge did. "That's not funny, Gale!" But Katniss eventually found herself loosening up, with the help of the bountiful drinks at every house party the foursome meandered to. She didn’t know anyone at any of these parties and the other three thought it’d be fun to play a game of 'Let’s try to ditch Katniss and laugh at her when she realizes she’s alone' every time. She threatened to leash herself to all three of them if they didn’t behave.

The day passed quickly and at around 7:30, Gale suggested they head downtown to get good seats. "Seats" was an exaggeration. Some people brought lawn chairs and tarps to lie out on the concrete, and a few of the houses that lined Main Street even had couches on their lawns so they could watch, and drink, in comfort. But most people stood around until they were too drunk and eventually plopped down in the grass or on a curb.

The boys were so proud of themselves for having sweet-talked some regular from the bar to let them all sit in the bed of his pickup in his driveway. The sun was just starting to set and the temperature beginning to drop slowly, so Gale cuddled up next to Madge and shot Katniss a look. She groaned and scooted closer to Darius, who looked like a kid on Christmas morning.

"I knew you’d come around, Katniss," he joked.

"I’m only using you for your body warmth, Darius. So don’t get any ideas."

"I'll take what I can get from a pretty little thing like you." He made a big show of flashing Gale a thumbs up from around Katniss’ shoulder. She just snorted and shook her head. She could do worse than Darius. He was cute and funny and not actually all that dumb and if Madge ever got her shit together, the four of them would be able to hang out around each other all the time. Sure, she never felt anything spectacular when she was around him, but at least him touching her like this wouldn’t get her kicked out of school.

She sighed and leaned her head on his shoulder. She could tell he considered resting his head on top of hers but instead just tightened his arm around her.
“Cinnamon chai latte?” Katniss looked up and saw the red haired girl from the coffee shop walk past and wave. “Hey!”

Gale, Madge, and Darius all gave her strange looks until she smiled and waved. “It’s the girl from my coffee shop,” she mumbled as the red-head came over. “What does it tell you that I’ve become such a regular that you know my drink order outside of work?”

“No, it’s my thing. I like having a familiar face at the shop, makes the days more bearable.” She laughed and rested one hand on the truck bed between Katniss’ legs. “I’m Jess, by the way. I don’t think we’ve actually met.”

“Katniss. And this is Gale, Madge, and Darius.” She nodded her head toward each of the rest of the crew.

“Sure, I’ve seen you guys around before. Katniss is kind of the beacon of hope in that hell hole some days.” Jess looked over her shoulder. “I should probably get back to my friends. I just thought I recognized you so I came over to say hi. See you on Monday?”

“Well, my class is over so I’m not really sure, but probably.”

Jess’ smile widened even further, if that was possible. “Fantastic. See you then, Katniss.”

Gale and Darius started snickering as soon as Jess was out of earshot. Katniss looked to Madge who just shrugged. “What?”

“Someone’s got herself a lady crush on Katniss,” Gale snorted.

“What are you talking about? Who?”

“Jess. She came over ‘just to say hi’ to you? Please, Katniss. Didn’t you see how excited she got at you saying you’d come back to the coffee shop?” Darius asked, trying to contain his laughter.

“Why does that mean she has a crush on Katniss? Maybe she was just being friendly,” Madge suggested but Darius shook his head vehemently.

“Maybe, but I’d bet hard money the girl’s got it bad for KittyKat over here.”

Katniss shook her head in disgust. “You boys are pathetic, thinking that just because a girl came over to say hi to me and recognized me from the coffee shop I’ve been going to almost every morning for the past three years, that she’s a lesbian? And she’s got some crush on me?”

Gale glanced at Darius who gave him the go ahead sign. “Katniss, we know she’s a lesbian because she used to date one of the waitresses at the bar. And we know she’s into you because despite how dense guys are at all of this…flirting crap…we pick up on someone trying to mark their territory.”

“And, no offense, Katniss, but as dense as these two are, you’re probably more so,” Madge added with an apologetic smile. “But, it’s got to be a bit of a boost to your ego that you could pick up a hot chick easier than Darius.”

“Hey!” Darius exclaimed and Katniss finally broke her scowl.

“Fine,” she huffed. “But I still don’t think she’s got a crush on me. And I’ll take that bet, Darius. Say $20?”

He leaned in close and rested his hand on her thigh. “$20 and dinner of the winner’s choosing.”
“Deal. You’re going to feel like an idiot when you discover how wrong you are.” She sat back and smirked as the cars began one of their many loops up and down the street. The cars themselves got old after the first couple passes. Gale and Darius kept pointing things out on them, whether they had been refinished or were taken care of by their owner, what car actually deserved the ‘classic car’ label, but Katniss found herself doing more sky watching than people watching. Clouds had begun rolling across the sky during the latter part of the afternoon and were now blocking out all the potential stars. A cool breeze picked up and the faint whiff of summer rains followed shortly after. “Shit,” she muttered as a few raindrops began falling from the sky.

There are two types of summer storms in the Midwest; there are the gentle rainfalls that every child and college student alike love to play in, and there are the storms that produce hail, gusts of winds that move cars, and tornadoes. Nearly everyone celebrating Cruise Night has experienced both kinds of storms and have been drilled constantly about what to do should one occur. But when the first chunks of ice began to pelt the observers, it became a free for all; people yelling and running as fast as they could to get into shelter. Katniss leaped off the truck bed and started following her group toward the nearby shop, where the truck’s owner currently was.

“Madge! Gale!” Somehow, someone came between the group and Katniss was squished between frantic bodies and fell to her hands and knees. She shot back up but her companions were no place to be found. She let the crowd move her toward the shops, while and the same time, she tried to get to the outside of the mob. The winds were picking up and the hail and rain came down harder, making it more difficult to see. She felt a strong hand grasp her arm and she tried to shake it free.

Over the howling winds, she heard him yelling at her. “Katniss! Come with me, I know a place.”

“Dr. Mellark?” she asked, as someone ran past her and bumped her into his chest. *Yep. That’s him.* I’d recognize this chest anywhere, she thought, before realizing those probably weren’t the kind of thoughts she should be having about Peeta Mellark. Even if he wasn’t her professor anymore.

He wrapped his arm around her and pushed his way through the crowd to an old tractor storage and maintenance facility that had an open door and short line of people waiting to get in. Once inside, he kept his grip on her until they were in the large showroom and could find a spot away from everyone else. It was freezing in the showroom and Katniss let out a slight shiver before his hands were rubbing her bare arms to warm them up. She watched her skin pebble in the wake of his gentle touch and shivered again, but she wasn’t so sure it was from the rain.

“Still cold?” he asked, his hands pausing their movement. She was suddenly engulfed in a warm fleece and realized he had taken off his Chicago Cubs zip-up and draped it over her. “Sorry, it’s still wet but the inside should be fine. Want to sit somewhere?”

They walked over to one of the tractors and sat inside the large wheel well. “These things are a lot bigger up close,” she commented, finding the silence that was normally so welcoming uncomfortable. She brought her knees to her chest and rested her feet on the inside of the tire.

“I can’t say that I’ve ever spent too much time around tractors.”

“Gale’s family has a farm back home. I’ve been there once.” She swallowed hard and watched the lightening light up the black sky through the small windows in the garage doors. “I liked the class,” she said, breaking the silence. “For a non-real science, psychology isn’t completely terrible.” She looked over at him, curls still sopping wet and sticking to his face, his light blue t-shirt molding against his chest, eyes down on his interlaced fingers.

He chuckled. “Not completely terrible, huh? I should put that in my next course description.” They
fell quiet again, save for the pitter-patter of the rain and hail hitting the side of the building. “And that professor of yours, what did you think about him?”

She shrugged. “He was okay.”

“Just okay? Well, maybe if he wasn’t so distracted he would have been better.”

“Distracted? You’re blaming this on me now?” Katniss asked, lightly slapping his arm. He caught her hand before she could pull it away and the smile fell from her face.

“Every class, when I’d be going over something, I always checked on you. You would frown when you disagreed with what I was talking about. Then there was the furrowed forehead when you were concentrating especially hard on a new topic you hadn’t quite grasped yet. You distracted me the most when you finally figured it out, when you made the connection to what I was teaching. I always knew when that moment happened because your face softened and you lost every hint of scowl.” He cupped her face with his hand and traced her lips with his thumb. “You shouldn’t scowl so much, Katniss, you’re so much more beautiful when you don’t.”

She could see in his eyes what he wanted. She wanted the same thing. It was the same desire as that morning after class, when they came so close and she left so empty. He brought her face up to his, his lips ghosting over hers. She licked her lips in anticipation, feeling his warm breath on her skin. This time, this moment, was right.

He hesitated and her eyes flew open. It was just like that morning in the classroom. Fear. Embarrassment. Rejection. I am so stupid! she thought, trying to flinch away.

But his hand stayed locked in hers, not allowing her to move away from him. “We can’t do this, you know.”

“Why not? The semester is over. You’ve already given me my grade.”

“Grades for summer classes aren’t finalized until mid-August. Until those are final…”

She sighed. “I’m still technically your student.”

“There’s still a power differentiation and potential conflict of interest,” he nodded.

“Oh.” The single syllable hung heavy between them.

“But I want to, so badly. I’ve wanted to since that night in the bar. I think about you all of the damn time and I hate it because if you weren’t you and I wasn’t me then this,” he gestured between them, “This could be so good.”

“Yeah,” she answered, furrowing her forehead as she rehearsed everything that happened. Everything he said made sense, he was looking out for her; he didn’t want her to get in trouble. That was a good thing, what he was doing by not kissing her was actually for the best. In her head, she knew that was true. And she certainly didn’t need to get mixed up again with someone who was going to cause more problems in her life. She’d had enough of that in the past.

“You could do one thing for me, though.”

“Shoot.”

Peeta smiled. “You could let me drive you home. Seems like the rain’s letting up and I’m not parked too far from here.”
“I suppose that’s the least you could do for calling me a distraction,” she joked.

Laughing, he stood from the wheel well and helped her up. “That’s what we ‘just okay’ types do. It’s in our blood.”

The ride to Katniss’ apartment was quiet. Not uncomfortable, just quiet. He kept shifting his eyes around the cab, occasionally stopping on her before quickly looking away and smiling. When they finally pulled up to her building, she started unzipping his sweatshirt when he covered her hand with his. “You can hold onto it. It’s still chilly out there.”

She climbed out of his truck and started up the stairs to her building. “Dr. Mellark?” She turned; glad to see he was still sitting in the parking lot. She walked over to the driver’s side and leaned against the door as Peeta rolled down the window. “Thank you for getting me out of the mob and the sweatshirt and the ride home. And, you know, for, looking out for me, I guess.”

“Sucks being a good guy sometimes, I won’t lie,” he chuckled.

She considered this and nodded. “I know the feeling. I just wanted to say thank you.” She turned to leave but paused. “I just…I just need to know something.”

Peeta rested his elbow on the window. “What’s that?”

Katniss took a breath and decided to go for it. She pushed up on her toes and kissed him. It caught him off guard but he quickly kissed her back, holding her face between his hands to deepen it. He tasted like cinnamon and she smelled like rain and neither could get enough of the other. A loud buzz that sent vibrations up the truck door broke them apart. She sheepishly fished her phone out of her pocket.

9:15pm. Madge. /Katniss? Where are you?/

“It’s my roommate. I should…”

“Yeah,” he agreed in a breathy voice, his cheeks still with a hint of pink. “Definitely.”

She started walking away from the truck when the passenger side window rolled down.

“Katniss? I don’t think I can wait until August to do that again,” he called.

She bit her bottom lip to stop the grin that was spreading across her face. “I used to get coffee in the mornings before class from this little shop on College. They have the best chai tea I’ve ever had.”

“I’ll see you around, Katniss.”

Chapter End Notes

Chelzie – thanks for tackling this beast with all the other wonderful stories you worked on last week. You are fabulous, dahling! And for using your actual life to fix some boo-boos. Darn FERPA ;-) Thank you to everyone who’s read and reviewed this story. It’ll most likely be a few weeks between chapters, so I try to make them extra long to make up for it. :) If you have questions or whatever, I’m on tumblr at mitchesberay (dot) tumblr (dot) com.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was understandable why Peeta focused more on his memories of Katniss than the ridiculous seminar he was in. The university wanted all the staff to be ready for the fall semester, so they planned a series of speakers and presentations and "skill building activities" throughout the summer. Whatever the fuck "skill building activities" meant. Today's speaker was a woman from admissions, who was showing a video about the history of Panem University that had everyone in the auditorium falling asleep. He felt worse for the tenured professors who had been enduring this hell for who knows how long. Though judging by the snores coming from the economics professor in front of him, Peeta figured most members of the audience hadn't actually seen this video in its entirety for some time.

So when his mind wandered back to Katniss Everdeen, he didn't feel guilty.

That was a total lie.

He was wracked with guilt. It began when he talked to her in the bar. He knew she was a student and his preoccupation with her would go well beyond friendly chatting. Anything beyond friendly chatting would be frowned upon and would do little to help him gain any kind of respect within the university. Not that it was going to stop him. But it did urge him to actually read the school's policy on professor-student relationships. ...Any romantic and/or sexual relationship between an instructor and a student in an instructional context is prohibited...regardless of who initiates the relationship; the instructor is responsible for complying with this policy.

He remembered her saying she was taking the intro class during the summer semester, but Peeta held onto the hope that she meant the other class that session. He should have told her to switch to the other summer class as soon as he saw her name on his roster. You tried, he weakly reminded himself. He didn't, though. Not really. He craved her; her apparent disinterest was his own personal challenge. Her sharp grey eyes drew him in every morning, refusing to release him until they flitted away first.

He could hear his mother's voice in his head, reminding him of what he was there to do, which did not include getting involved in an inappropriate relationship with a co-ed. Or any relationship whatsoever, but that wasn't the point. What he felt for Katniss Everdeen was a crush. If they were both in the same place, he would be actively pursuing her rather than trying to push her from his mind.

After class ended for the semester, he knew he wouldn't run into her again. He could find a new jogging route that wouldn't go by her job. He could frequent a different bar, one less likely to serve students. She was in a totally different department, housed on the opposite side of campus; so unless she was taking more social science classes, which he highly doubted she was, they would most likely nerve cross paths again. Out of sight, out of mind.

He surprised himself with how little he thought of her the first couple of weeks after finals.

That was also a lie.

He thought about her more than before. His cognitive psych professor would surely click her tongue at his current predicament. "A classic example of the ironic processing theory, playing out before our
eyes. Don’t think about the polar bears, Mister Mellark, and what will happen? You will see polar bears everywhere you go.” Repressing his thoughts about Katniss inevitably led to increased thoughts about Katniss because he focused all his attention on not thinking about Katniss.

At the time, Peeta had no interest in partaking in the town’s summer booze fest with Finnick, Annie, and Johanna. If he wanted to get drunk, he could do it in the privacy of his own apartment, not surrounded by undergrads he may eventually teach. He caught enough slack from his mentor for choosing bars that students went to, even though he often sat in a back corner, out of sight of most people. He didn’t want the added lecture about being seen publicly drinking with students. It didn’t much matter that his mentor carried his flask into class and didn’t bother trying to conceal it; Abernathy would have no problem trying to curb Peeta all the same.

When the rain started that night, the group made for cover when Peeta caught sight of her braid whipping past him. When she fell, he was there in a flash, pushing through the crowd and ignoring the calls of displeasure. She was beautiful then, with her hair flat against her head and her floral tank top soaked. He tried not to notice the way she looked, huddled inside his sweatshirt in attempt to warm up, knowing it would smell just like her when he got it back. She was so bold, stealing that kiss when he dropped her off at her building, then so nervous afterward. Like a child, swiping a cookie off the counter behind her mother’s back, only to get caught with crumbs all over her face.

_Thinking about Katniss isn’t all bad_, he realizes. Because he knows that if he weren’t thinking about her, he’d revert back to thinking about the other her - the girl he doesn’t get to see anymore. The little girl that loved him and needed him, who cried when he moved out because her mother couldn’t explain to her what was happening in a way that a four year old would understand. The little girl who didn’t know why Peeta wasn’t going to pick her up from daycare anymore or help her make cookies when she got the sniffles. All she knew was in the weeks prior, there was a lot of yelling, some crying, and every night, Peeta sat on the floor by the head of her bed and stroked her hair. That’s not something he can think about without wanting - no, needing - a drink. He scanned the room for his mentor, hoping he could flag him down at intermission and swipe a swallow from his flask, but Haymitch is nowhere to be seen. Peeta sighed and slouched back in his seat as the clipped words of their presenter floated aimlessly through his brain.

11:45am. Jo. /Think I can get out of this if I jam this pencil through my eye?/

11:47am. Peeta. /Sure. But I hear you’ll just have to make it up another time./

11:52am. Jo. /Worth it./

11:55am. Jo. /Seriously, though, want to ditch after this? Finn says the afternoon session is worse./

11:57am. Peeta. /How is that possible?/

11:59am. Jo. /Do you really want to find out?/

The econ professor woke mid-snore when the presentation ended and the audience gave the presenter a round of applause. Peeta held back his laugh as the man began to clap enthusiastically, surely giving the impression that he was fully engaged the entire time and not dead to the world. “It is a wonderful gift, Boy,” Abernathy told him during their first meeting, “Being able to fool those around you. They don’t much care about the truth around here, only what looks like the truth.”

Having a nurse in the family meant every Everdeen had a yearly physical and saw the dentist every
six months. Even now, four years removed from her mother's roof and rules, Katniss never missed a checkup. Madge joked that she was more accurate than any calendar or watch, what between her to-the-day appointments and perpentuency to be early to whatever she has scheduled. But Katniss didn't mind. Early detection meant early treatment and checkups were the only way to catch things before they become a major headache.

Too bad no one told her dentist that when she went in today.

"I don't know how we didn't see this last time, Katniss, but two of your wisdom teeth are completely impacted." The dentist held up her x-rays so she could see them and pointed to the teeth on the far left ends of her jaw. "This one is trying to push through on its side. It's amazing you haven't been experiencing more pain. But you're in luck," he said with a smile and pat on her hand, "I'm also licensed to perform oral surgery, so we can remove them today. Sound good?"

She shrugged. Getting her wisdom teeth removed didn't sound like that big of a deal, since almost everyone she knew had been through the procedure already. "Sure. Should I call my roommate to come pick me up?" When Gale had his wisdom teeth removed, Katniss had to pick him up because he was still too high from the gas they gave him to knock him out. He spent the entire car ride home telling her about where cauliflower babies came from, even though she was pretty sure he was getting it confused with the Cabbage Patch doll he recently bought for his baby sister. At least Madge had the decency to pass out the entire way home when she had hers taken out, even if she did drool all over Katniss' interior. And pillow.

"Oh no, unless you'd like the company. You should be able to drive after Novacaine."

Katniss gulped as the blood drained from her face. She did not like needles, not one bit. She was the last girl in her grade to get her ears pierced because the thought made her nauseous. She nearly passed out when Prim got hers done a few years later.

"We only need to remove two so there's no reason to increase the risk of adverse side effects. You've had cavities before, right? It's just like that." The dentist made it seem like it was no big deal, jabbing needles into her gum and having her listen, see, and even smell him removing her teeth. She couldn't even tell him that, actually, she'd never had a cavity before and how that had never been a bad thing.

The dental assistant was nice enough to distract her while the novocaine was injected, but she still felt the needle and the pinch. Then, she couldn't feel anything. She was only aware that she was drooling because the assistant would randomly wipe her chin or suction the excess fluid from her mouth. She kept her eyes closed until the dentist asked if she wanted to see the first one. Katniss tried to tell him “No, thanks, that's pretty gross,” but it came out a garbled mess because she managed to get Novocaine on her tongue.

“Sowwy,” Katniss muttered as the dental assistant flexed her fingers and let out a sigh of relief. The dentist had taken a break from his drilling and it was the first chance she had to apologize for her vice-like grip on the assistant’s hand.

“It’s okay, dear. Halfway done.”

“Thankfully.” She paused and ran her tongue over the edge of her teeth. “Th-th-th.” She shouldn’t be able to make that noise. She hadn’t been able to even a few minutes ago when she didn’t have control of the muscles in her mouth or feel anything, including the roughness of her teeth. Or the drill currently cutting through her gums. She let out a loud cry and instantly her eyes widened with fear. Katniss flailed her arms and smacked the assistant’s arm.

“What is it, dear? Oh. Oh my. Doctor!”
The dentist looked up to his assistant, then down at his crying patient who was now writhing in pain while attempting not to move her head. He quickly prepared more Novacaine and injected it into her searing gums. It took a few minutes for the numbness to return to her mouth but as soon as it did, he apologized profusely and set to finish the extraction as quickly as possible. “In case we get another string of bad luck,” he said with a wink.

Katniss glared at him through the tears that were still streaming down her cheeks. *String of bad luck, my ass!*

“I’ve written you a prescription for oxycodone for the pain. Make sure you get some food in your system. I’d suggest starting with half a pill at first so you know how it’ll affect you. Keep those gauze pads in your mouth until the bleeding stops. Change them frequently or you increase the risk of infection. Use some ice packs on the left side of your face until the swelling goes down; that could take anywhere from a few days to a few weeks.” The dentist rattled off the remaining directions and handed Katniss a sheet of paper with typed instructions for “post-surgery care” and what she presumed to be the prescription for her pain meds. She scoffed at the idea, priding herself on her very limited use of medication throughout her life. *I might as well throw this out now,* she thought.

There was a drugstore on the way home from the dentist, otherwise she wouldn’t have filled the prescription.

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_This must be what death feels like._ A few hours later, as she curled up on the couch, she was glad she had the meds. The left side of her mouth was reeling in pain and she couldn’t get the metallic tinge of blood off her tongue. She found herself having to change her gauze pads every fifteen minutes at the most, nearly gagging as she tried to fit them into the back corners of her jaw. She swallowed too much of the blood and felt nauseous but couldn’t work up the energy to sit up long enough to eat anything substantial to combat the feeling. After forcing down some soup at Madge’s insistence, Katniss split one of her pain meds and swallowed it down as well. Three hours later, when the half pill began to wear off, she took the other half and easily fell asleep. *Alright, maybe these were a good idea.*

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“It doesn’t look that bad, Katniss.”

The next morning, Katniss and Madge stood in the bathroom, inspecting the intense swelling that overtook the left side of Katniss’ face.

“Not that bad?” Katniss mumbled. “I look like a hive of wasps fell on my face!”

Madge shook her head and held an ice pack up to Katniss’ cheek. “It’ll go down. Luckily you don’t have work today or tomorrow, and then it’s the weekend. Remember when I had mine out? I was miserable.”

Katniss laughed out of the right side of her mouth. She did remember Madge’s recovery. She had all four teeth out at once so when her face started to swell, it was almost comical. The dainty girl’s cheeks ballooned out four sizes, resembling a chipmunk. It only lasted a few days and then Madge
was back to her normal self, but it was a particularly traumatic experience in the normally well-put-together girl’s life. Yes, the odds were in Katniss’ favor that this happened over the summer and she had logged enough hours in the last few weeks at the lab to afford a few days off. *Lucky me.*

Madge knew Katniss didn’t need to be tended to, but her own recovery was so bad that she felt a sense of obligation to repay Katniss. She was an easy patient, sleeping most of the few days away, sipping some soup whenever she woke up, just to keep her stomach somewhat satisfied. And Madge had to admit that listening to Katniss a few hours after she took her pain meds was probably the funniest thing she had ever heard. Katniss very rarely let herself go like she did when she was under the influence of something. She found it ironic that her roommate thought she turned into a different person when she had been drinking and didn’t realize how different Katniss could be when she let go of her inhibitions.

Katniss didn’t talk much about what happened that changed her personality, only that she didn’t used to be so tightly wound or as prone to anxiety attacks like she was now. Madge knew it happened before she came to college and involved the sister she very rarely talked about, but they didn’t push each other. When the girls first met, neither were in a particularly good place in their lives and found an easy friendship in that. Two broken bodies floating through until a poetry discussion in an Intro to Lit class brought them together.

> “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may”

They were the only two in the freshman-level class who didn’t see the poem as a happy-go-lucky, ‘let’s love spring’ poem but instead saw it as a call to live each day as it’s own. After class, when Katniss mumbled about how the entire premise of the poem was BS and living for the moment only led to pain, Madge knew they both had seen too much in their relatively short lives.

She knew she was a lot to put up with, to the point of annoying the hell out of her ever-patient roommate. It wasn’t intentional, it was just her coping mechanism. She could hide how lonely she felt when she dolled herself up and allowed men to ogle her. It was empty and shallow, but she couldn’t refute that for a moment, it made her feel alive, like the girl she used to be.

She knew Katniss hated that she wouldn’t just take the plunge and date Gale Hawthorne. She even hated herself for not doing it. But he deserved better than what she was right now; a shell of her former self who had learned to live half alive. She would just destroy Gale if she tried anything with him now. And if she destroyed Gale, she’d lose a piece of Katniss in the process. They both knew it. Despite the looks and comments under her breath, Katniss understood Madge.

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“Katniss? Leevy texted me and asked if I wanted to go out with them tonight. But if you’d rather I stay in with you, I can.” Madge sat on the edge of the sofa cushion near Katniss’ head and pulled off the ice pack to check for swelling, just as she had been doing all afternoon.

“No, you go. I’ll be okay here.”

Madge gently ran her fingers over Katniss’ jaw, eliciting a slight hiss. “Your face looks a lot better, you know. The swelling has almost gone down completely. And I can actually understand what you’re saying.”

Katniss snorted. She still felt like she’d gotten hit by a semi. “What time are you going out?”
Madge checked her phone and frowned. “They want to head out pretty soon, get some dinner beforehand. But I can come home early, that way you’re not home alone for so long.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little face about me, Madge,” Katniss answered. “I just took my oxy so I’m going to eat my soup and head to bed. You go out with your friends and have fun.”

Madge frowned again, but Katniss pushed her off the couch. “Alright. Here’s your phone.” She set Katniss’ cell phone next to her head. “If you need anything, text me and I’ll come home right away.”

7:15pm. Madge. /We just got to the restaurant. You doing okay?/

7:17pm. Katniss. /Stop checking in on me and have fun./

7:20 pm. Madge. /You know that won’t happen./

7:24 pm. Katniss. /Go away, ya derp./

Katniss stared at her phone. She didn’t want Madge to come home, but she didn’t anticipate being this bored. She flipped through all the channels a few times already, finding nothing to watch for more than a few minutes at a time. And she’d be damned if she would be forced to sit through a marathon of *Bridezillas.*

7:55 pm. Katniss. /Hi/

8:02 pm. Peeta. /Hey stranger. Thought you lost my number or something./

8:09 pm. Katniss. /Damn. You caught me./

8:13 pm. Peeta. /Red handed. What’s up?/

8:14 pm. Katniss. /Bored at home. Got my wisdom teeth removed a couple days ago./

8:16 pm. Peeta. /Want some company?/

Katniss chewed on her bottom lip as she stared the screen. She texted him, initially, because she was bored but hadn’t really anticipated a response, let alone an invitation to see him. It was almost 8:30 on a Friday night; surely he had plans or friends or something to do besides babysit her. It wasn’t like she could go have a drink with him because of her meds and she didn’t want to go out in public.

But she did want to see him again. She couldn’t deny the flutter in her stomach at the thought of him. They hadn’t talked since she kissed him at Cruise Night, even though she was pretty sure she invited him to coffee at some point. She didn’t stop by the coffee shop for a full week, just to make sure she would avoid seeing him. Jess made a comment about it when she finally returned, but Katniss just shrugged it off, checking over her shoulder whenever the door opened.

8:20 pm. Katniss. /Do you even remember where I live?/

8:23 pm. Peeta. /I remember more about you than you think, studmuffin ;)/

8:33 pm. Peeta. /Which one is your apartment?/

Katniss sat up quickly. Too quickly, her head reminded her by spinning around violently. She peeked out the living room window and saw a truck running in the parking lot. He was here already? He was serious about coming here? About spending time with her? He actually remembered where she lived? She slipped on a pair of flip flops and scurried down the stairs.
When she got to the parking lot, she crept up on the driver side of his truck and watched him as he stared at his phone in one hand and drummed his fingers nervously on his steering wheel with the other. He was nervous? What did he have to be nervous about?

She tapped lightly on his window, “We don’t much care for loiterers here.”

He jumped slightly before rolling down the window and leaning out. “Evening.”

Katniss smiled and rolled her eyes. “Can I help you?”

“I was supposed to meet someone but I can’t seem to figure out which apartment is hers. Maybe you could direct me?”

“Depends on who it is you’re looking for, I suppose.”

“Well she’s got dark hair,” he flicked her hair as he said this, “Grey eyes, and this perpetual scowl that I’ve become quite fond of. You have to be careful around her, though; she may come out of nowhere and kiss you when you’re just sitting in your truck, minding your own business.” His smile was breathtaking, even when she couldn’t see the rows of white teeth behind his lips.

“Like a ninja?”

“A kissing ninja.”

Katniss looked around her and shrugged, “Can’t say I’ve ever encountered this mysterious kissing ninja.”

“It’s a real shame, she’s not half bad.” He tilted his head toward the cab of his truck. “Have you eaten?”

“I can’t really eat much,” she answered, pointing to her face. “Not for another couple days.”

“I didn’t ask what you can eat, only if you have eaten. Come on, I’ll make you dinner.”

She looked down at herself, still in the penguin pajama shorts and light blue tank top she slipped on after her shower because she was too lazy to get dressed. “Let me go change first.”

Peeta cocked an eyebrow at her. “Trying to impress someone, Miss Everdeen? I think you look just fine the way you are but if you’ve got a hot date later tonight, I’d totally understand.”

“Shut up,” she scowled. “I should at least let my roommate know where I’ve gone in case she comes home before I do.” Katniss watched him unsuccessfully fight another smile and she turned to run back into her apartment.

“You can change if you want,” he called out after her. “But you’ll probably be more comfortable in that.”

She didn’t take long, just grabbing her phone and charger. She wrote Madge a note and stuck it on the fridge. Out with a friend, be back soon, don’t wait up. Will text you before I head home. She headed out the door before backtracking to add one more line to her note. Thank you. Madge would understand and appreciate the sentiment. They didn’t need much more than that.

Katniss pulled open the passenger side door and hopped in. “Sorry your kissing ninja didn’t show up. Hope I’ll be an acceptable alternative.”

“The night is young.” Then he winked and pulled out of her parking lot. It was dark in the cab of the
truck so she didn’t think twice about the blush that crept over her cheeks.

His radio was playing some song that she kind of recognized but didn’t know the words as well as he did, apparently. This wasn’t the first time she caught herself watching him. There was that day she ended up having to teach herself the biopsychology section because she had been too preoccupied by the way his forearms flexed when he rolled his dress shirt sleeves up to his elbows. Or how his eyes darkened slightly when he brought up the slide about the epidemiology of different neurological disorders and the sad truth that regardless of the progress made on understanding the physiology of the brain, there was still a long way to go toward recovery and renewal.

That was from a distance. Up close, she could see things she hadn’t expected; the callouses on his fingers as they tapped along to the song, his impossibly long, blond eyelashes, the hint of stubble that traversed his jaw down his throat. She noticed the way his adam's apple bobbed up and down as he sang to himself. He wasn't a terrible singer, she decided, even if he was on the flat side and often went too low in his register. His obvious enthusiasm shone through and all but made up for his missed notes.

“How I wish, how I wish you were here. We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl, year after year, running over the same old ground...”

"Are you a Pink Floyd fan?" he asked when she started humming along. She hadn't realized he stopped singing a while ago and had been listening to her voice.

"Oh. No." She shook her head and slumped back in her seat. "I mean, I only really know one song, but it's the one everyone knows so I don't think it counts."

Peeta kept his eyes on the road and had a sly grin on his face. "We don't need no education. We don't need no thought control."

Katniss bit the inside of her cheek. She knew he was trying to get her to finish the line. It wasn't that she didn't want to sing it, but she recognized a game when she saw one.

"No dark sarcasm in the classroom." He finally turned his head to watch her.

She huffed and mumbled the rest of the lyrics.

"I'm sorry, Miss Everdeen, you're going to need to speak up."


Peeta just shook his head as he finished loudly and obnoxiously out of tune. "All in all you’re just another brick in the wall."

When he approached a condo complex, Katniss tensed, as if the practical side of her brain finally caught up. They were going to his apartment. Alone. Somewhere between him showing up at her place and this moment, she chose to forget that vital piece of information. I shouldn't be here, she panicked. This was totally inappropriate. Plus, she didn’t quite know where here was. Sure, Peeta was a professor and seemed like a nice guy, but weren't most sociopaths that lured unsuspecting girls to their apartments, never to be heard from again, often described by their neighbors as “nice guys”? Could he be hiding his true, sick persona under that boyish charm and killer smile? If he were to try anything, she wouldn’t be able to tell anyone his address. And she missed the name of his complex as they drove in. She couldn’t even run, since he had his truck and her car was back at her apartment. This was a bad idea. This was a terrible idea.
“Peeta,” she started. “I don’t think this is - oh, my.” The complex he brought her into was one of the nicest ones in town, complete with it’s own gate and code for each resident. When she and Madge first started looking for apartments, Madge’s father insisted they try for Victor’s Village. It was easy to get in when you had the money Madge’s father had, but there was no way Katniss could afford to be an employee there, let alone a resident. The idea that a professor, especially a brand new one, could afford to live in this part of town shocked her.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” he answered with an eyeroll and obvious disdain in his voice. “I hate living this far from campus. When I was in graduate school, I was only a few blocks from my main building and that was the best. Guess it’s not really appropriate for faculty to live near the students, though, is it? So, this is where I ended up.”

At least now she knew if he were going to murder her, it wouldn’t be in some dimly lit back alley. Nope, she’d die in the most luxurious apartment complex in the most hoighty-toighty part of town. Definitely could be worse ways to go.

“Do I need to take my shoes off or...” Katniss asked as she stepped inside. The carpets were a light beige and even though she had only been outside for a short time in her flip flops, she was suddenly very conscious of how much dirt could be on the bottom of them.

“Don’t worry about it!” he called from somewhere inside. She looked down at the rug next to the door and noticed that there were two pairs of shoes that looked like they were literally kicked there. She slipped her own off and neatly set them next to the door.

She wandered into his expansive, yet empty living room. With the exception of a flat screen, collection of DVD’s and a rocking chair in the corner, there was not a single piece of furniture in the entire room, despite him having lived in the apartment for at least a month and a half. This notion didn’t quell the serial-killer-in-professor’s-clothing fear she developed in his truck.

Katniss knelt down in front of his DVD collection, deciding that was the only way she could get an idea of who this guy really was. Psychopaths wouldn’t have any normal DVD’s on hand, would they? Probably just twelve copies of ‘Silence of the Lambs’ or something, she told herself. As she ran her finger along the spines and read the titles to herself, she calmed down. *Caddyshack, Star Wars, The Patriot, Indiana Jones, There’s Something About Mary*. All normal movies for a normal young adult male to own.

She glanced over the rest of the titles in his collection, smirking at his small but impressive section of romantic comedies. On the far right side of them was an unmarked, black case. She knew she shouldn’t be snooping, but a quick glance over her shoulder confirmed that he wasn't behind her.

‘Maddie’ was scrawled across the front above a picture of the same curly haired girl Katniss remembered seeing in his office. Only she was younger in this picture and sitting upon his broad shoulders. Her hands were fisted into his curly hair and Katniss couldn’t help the duet of laughter.

She snapped the case open and other pictures fell out. One of a newborn wrapped in a blanket, so tiny in Peeta’s arms. Another of a toddler, in an apron that pooled on the floor and a chef’s hat that covered her bright blue eyes, on a stool next to Peeta. Picture after picture, Katniss couldn't get past the resemblance of the pair. She hadn't allowed herself to believe that the girl may be his until she got
to the last picture. He was sitting on a couch next to an equally blonde, and beautiful, woman, the young girl perched between them. A picturesque family if she had ever seen one. She recognized the look in Peeta’s eyes, it was the same one her father had in his wedding pictures.

She stuffed the pictures back into the case and hastily stuffed it back into its place among the others. Just in time, too, because she suddenly became all too aware of his heavy footsteps entering the room. "Hungry?"

She forced a smile, trying to push away the visual of Peeta with a family. “Famished.”

“Come on, I've got a whole mess of stuff you can eat."

She followed him into his kitchen, the biggest one she had ever seen in an apartment before, and laughed at the spread on his table. Mashed potatoes, applesauce, and a container of what looked to be homemade macaroni and cheese. All foods she could eat with ease. "Do you often cater to the chewing-impaired?"

He scoffed and filled his glass tumbler with whiskey and hers with water. "Don't flatter yourself, Miss Everdeen. Do you think you're the first person I've had to feed who couldn't eat solid food?"

Her stomach dropped. Of course she wasn't. It was clear from those pictures that he had played an active role in that little girl's life from infancy. He must have had to prepare her food, too.

"What's wrong? I don't know what else I have, but I can run to the store if you'd prefer something else." He noticed the change immediately and threw open his pantry, mumbling to himself as he pulled out a few cans of soup and packages of pudding.

"Peeta!" She stepped behind him. "It looks delicious. I, uh, I took my meds a while ago and they're just disagreeing with my empty stomach." She didn't like lying to him but if she told him the truth, he'd know she was snooping. His past wasn't really any of her business. They weren't dating, he was just keeping her company. And making her dinner. At his apartment. Alone.

"You sure?"

The look of concern aged him slightly. Gone were the boyish features, replaced by a man who looked older beyond his years. But as soon as she reassured him, the youthfulness returned. "Then let's eat. If you clean your plate, you may even get a special dessert," he added with a wink.

She rolled her eyes but allowed him to scoop some of everything onto a plate for her. "How did you have time to make all this?"

"Ah, well," his cheeks flushed, "The applesauce is from a jar and the potatoes are of the instant variety."

"I'm disappointed in your moves, Mr. Mellark. Instant mashed potatoes are not the way to win a girl over," she countered, stuffing a forkful into her mouth with a grin.

"Then it's a good thing I'm not trying to win you over, isn't it, Miss Everdeen? And that's 'Dr. Mellark' to you, young lady." He pointed his fork of macaroni at her. "The macaroni and cheese is homemade. Reheated, but homemade, so get off my back."

"You’d better hope your special dessert leaves me satisfied," she shrugged.

He wiggled his eyebrows. “My special dessert leaves every woman satisfied.”
Katniss just shook her head and dove into the rest of her food. Every so often, she would glance up at him, only to avert her eyes when he’d catch hers. She could feel the blush run over her cheeks and she felt like one of those idiot girls she always made fun of at the bar for acting so...well...girly around a cute guy. Madge always warned her that one day she’d be just like those girls and she’d understand why they “insisted on acting so silly.” She blamed it on the side effects of her medication starting to kick in.

Once they cleaned their plates, Katniss even making a show of licking hers just to prove she could, he laid a soft blanket on the living room floor and instructed her to pick out a movie for them to watch.

"Dinner and a show? I'm one lucky gal," she mused.

"What can I say? I'm a romantic at heart," he quipped back. "Now pick one out while I put together your dessert."

She heard the blender run in the other room as she scanned the titles in his collection again, consciously avoiding the side with the blank case. She could feel the slight buzz that came along with her pain meds and knew she'd never last through the entire movie as it was, so she grabbed one she had seen enough times, Robin Hood: Men in Tights.

Peeta walked back in with a glass goblet filled to the brim with what appeared to be chocolate ice cream and topped with a healthy dollop of whipped cream.

"What in the world is that?"

He laughed and sat on the blanket, patting the spot next to him. "This," he said as she crawled to join him, "Is my famous milkshake-frosty."

"Famous?" she cocked an eyebrow as he handed her a spoon.

He nodded. "It's a national treasure, really. One of the great wonders of the world."

Katniss dipped her spoon in and tentatively tasted it. She wasn't a huge fan of sweets but she wouldn't be so rude as to decline something he actually made. "Lord almighty," she groaned, letting the chocolate-spice mixture dance on her tongue. "What is in this? Crack?"

"Yes, Katniss, crack," he answered with as straight of a face as he could muster while the opening credits began to roll. Not that she noticed. She was too busy shoveling spoonful after spoonful into her mouth until she got brain freeze and had to take a break. "I take it you approve?"

"It's so good. This is, hands down, the best damn thing I've ever had in my mouth!" She started snickering and then covered her face with her hands. "Oh. That was bad, wasn't it?"

They had finished the entire goblet before Cary Elwes’ big escape, Katniss eating most of it herself. She was laying on her stomach facing the TV and absentmindedly playing with Peeta’s bare feet.

"What are you doing?"

"Counting," she answered, the oxycodone high starting to take full effect.

"Well, knock it off," he joked, kicking her hand away.

"Why?" She twisted her body around to look back at him. "Are you ticklish?"
He quickly pulled his feet in close. "No. I just don't want you messing with my toes. Watch the movie, goof."

She rolled her eyes and turned back. He wanted to stay focused on the movie as it was one of his favorites, but he couldn't stop his eyes from taking her in. Her long, slim legs leading up to the ridiculous penguins on her shorts, her back, and her exposed neck and arms. Everything about her was beautiful and different. He watched her gleefully quote her favorite parts of the movie and break into laughter, her legs kicking with delight every so often. She was innocent and naïve here; carefree and open, not guarded and scowling like he saw so often in class.

*Class. Get it together, Mellark,* he chastised himself.

"Peeta," she called to him in a sing-song voice. "I'm cold."

"Cold? Really?" He craned his neck to check his thermostat which was still set at his usual 68. He shook his head and fetched a blanket from his room to lay over her. He dramatically tucked it all around her, effectively cocooning her in the blanket. "Better?"

"Thanks."

He resumed his spot sitting next to her for a few more minutes until she called out for him again. "Yes?"

"Why aren't you sitting by me?"

"I am."

"No," she drew out the syllable and untucked herself on one side. Lifting the blanket up, she nodded. "Come sit by me."

"Katniss. That's not a good idea," he warned.

"Please?"

His resolve wavered. How was he supposed to deny those grey eyes or her bottom lip that was caught, once again, between her teeth? He sighed and laid on his side beside her. She instantly turned to her side and cuddled up with her back to his chest. Her hair was right under his nose and he recognized the light scent of cucumber melon with an undertone of earthiness from Cruise Night. She laughed too often during the movie, no doubt due to the medication, and when she did, her whole body shook against him.

“I have a mole?!?" she howled at the screen, half a second before Richard Lewis’ Prince John said it. He couldn’t help but laugh along with her. Not because the movie wasn’t funny but because her reaction was infectious. It helped that she let out little tiny snorts when she laughed especially hard, like she was now.

She turned to her other side to face him, her face still red from laughing. “I love this movie.”

“I couldn’t tell,” he answered, “What, with you repeating every line and laughing like a six-month-old who just discovered that her feet were connected to her body.”

Katniss furrowed her brow for half a second before relaxing her face. “It’s because I’m high right now.” Her eyes widened and she covered her mouth with her palm. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Said what?”
“That I’m high.”

He chuckled and gently moved her hand from her mouth. “And why shouldn’t you have said that?”

“Because you’re my teacher. And teachers shouldn’t know when their pupils are under the influence of substances.”

“Katniss…”

“No, really! I mean, I know you’ve seen me drunk before and that was mortifying enough already, but you weren’t my professor then. At least, I didn’t know you were my professor. So that didn’t really count. But now I know that you are my professor, so you can’t know. Or you shouldn’t know. Even though you do know. So just pretend that you don’t know…” she rambled on until he shushed her.

“Katniss. You’re not my student anymore. Not really.”

“But you said-”

“I know what I said. And that’s true. But for what you’re talking about, I’m not your teacher anymore.”

He was next to her, watching her intently as she sucked her lower lip into her mouth. More than anything, he wanted that lower lip in his mouth. As if she could read his mind, she closed the small gap between them and kissed him. She could taste the whiskey he had with dinner on his lips. He was intoxicating on his own but the added hint of oak fueled her desire to taste more of him.

In his state of confusion, it took him half a second to recognize what was happening. But unlike their previous kiss, this time he wasn’t going to let her get away. Each kiss built upon the last; lips against lips, tongues slipping past one another as they became familiar with the other. His hands gripped her hips, his fingers hooking into the waistband of the shorts she never bothered to change out of.

Without releasing their hold, he rolled onto his back, pulling Katniss on top of him. He shifted one hand down to hold her ass and the other entangled itself in her hair, easily loosening chunks from her braid that he would pull slightly when she sucked his lip into her mouth after a kiss. She shifted her hips over him, hissing at the initial contact between their clothed bodies.

"Thank you," she pulled away slightly to tell him. They were both red in the face and breathless, but the loopy smile remained on her face.

"For what?"

She kissed the corner of his mouth. "For texting me back." She kissed the sensitive skin below his left earlobe. "For dinner." She pulled his shirt off over his head and kissed the inked skin over his heart. "For the movie." Slowly working her lips down his chest, she thanked him for keeping her company, for not making classes awkward, for kissing her. "For taking care of me," she finished, her mouth right above the drawstring of his gym shorts. "Now I want to take care of you." Her voice dropped half an octave at the end of her sentence and his breath hitched.

He gulped as she hovered above his obvious erection through the light material. If it weren’t for the glassy sheen in her eyes, he would have let her continue. The rational part of his brain was reminding him that he wasn’t ‘that guy’ who takes advantage of girls. Especially when he was certain that girl would regret this in the morning and never look at him the same way. "Katniss," he reached down for her. "Stop. Come back up here."
"Don't you want me to suck your cock, Peeta?" she asked. Her innocent tone sent a shock straight to his groin, and he stifled a groan as her lips danced along the fabric covering his hardness.

More than anything I've wanted before, he thought. "I do, but..."

"Then stop talking and let me." She gave his straining head an open mouthed kiss. "Let me 'take care' of you." Her fingers began pulling down on his waistband and he was fully intent on letting his brain shut down to just enjoy this moment until she giggled slightly.

Oh yeah, dumbshit. She can't fucking consent. A slew of words slammed into his brain, all directed at his own stupidity, and he sat up quickly. "Katniss, stop."

She furrowed her eyebrows. "Don't you want me?"

"It's not that, I promise." He reached for her arm and pulled her back toward him. "But, um," he stalled, trying to think of whatever he could that would best diffuse the situation and her surprising change of demeanor. "You just had major dental surgery, your mouth's been through enough trauma."

She stared up at him through her eyelashes. "Someone's cocky," she deadpanned. A second later, her head was buried in his chest and her body was shaking once again from her laughter. "That wasn't even funny, was it?"

"Not particularly," he conceded, wrapping his arms around her. "I do want you, Katniss. But that would most definitely violate the 'we can't do anything until grades are posted' rule."

She twisted her lips into a slight pout. "But what about kissing? Can we keep doing that?"

He wasn't sure if that was allowed, but he had just denied his body a sure thing and he'd be damned if he did it again. "I suppose that's harmless enough."

She wiggled up so their faces lined up and kissed him. It was less ferocious this time, as they spent the moment learning the feel of their lips and the dance of their tongues.

"We could possibly do something else," he whispered against her throat. "Something that wouldn't break the rule."

"Yeah?" she moaned as he suckled a spot under her chin.

"Yeah." He slipped a hand down to her cotton shorts, running up and down the length of her legs. His fingers brushed against her center through her shorts, teasing her like she had teased him. "I can't touch you. Not yet."

Her hips bucked with each pass. As if her mind wasn't slightly hazy enough, the building heat between them fogged out everything. "But," he let his hand rest dangerously close to where she wanted him the most. "You can touch yourself." His voice was low and husky and she shifted her hips so his fingers could brush against her.

The medication had clearly taken away all of her inhibition. Katniss didn't have a problem with masturbation; Madge even gave her a new vibrator for Christmas last year because her old one "made too much damn noise." But it was her own personal thing. She was embarrassed about her present only because it meant that Madge knew when she was using her old one. Under normal circumstances, she would have clenched her knees together and stopped all talk about it with Peeta. But these weren't normal circumstances and truth be told, she didn't want him to stop talking about it. Especially when he dragged her hand down to join his.
She could feel the heat radiating from her center, not realizing just how turned on she was at the idea of him watching her get off. He rolled her off to the side of him and kissed her. "If you don't want to do this, we don't have to." He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

She shook her head. "I do want this," she whispered. "I want you to watch me."

"Watch you what, Katniss?" His eyes were dark and his free hand snaked under his shorts as he began to idly stroke himself.

She licked her very dry lips. "I want you to watch me come." In the dark corners of her mind when she had her vibrator buried between her legs she'd think that way, but those were not words she used out loud in a very long time. "And I want to watch you come."

He freed both of his hands, lifted his hips, and pulled his shorts off. She gasped slightly. He was bigger than she expected, not that she thought he'd be small, but he had to be above average. The dusting of light chest hair he had became slightly darker the further down his torso it went. He chuckled. "You approve?"

"Yes," she answered as he resumed stroking. She couldn't tear her eyes off the way his abdominals or the muscles in his forearm flexed as he slid his hand up and down his length, gathering his precum for lubrication.

"You like watching me."

She knew it wasn't a question. "Yes," she answered breathily.

"And you wish this cock was deep inside you right now, don't you?"

"Yes," she moaned.

"Show me." His eyes had been locked on hers the entire time and she found herself lost in them once she looked away from his dick.

She fumbled slightly to remove her shorts when he stopped her. "No, wait. This isn't how this should go."

"But-"

He sat up slightly and kissed her, pulling her as close to him as he dared. His hands pushed under her tank top, resting right underneath her breasts. She pulled her tank top off, completely exposing her now bare chest to him.

"God," he murmured, gazing over her breasts. "You're so beautiful."

"I'm tiny. I don't think they count," she answered.

"No," he held his hands over them without touching. "See? They fit perfectly." She snorted. There was no way her barely-size B breasts fit 'perfectly' in his hands. "You wait, Miss Everdeen. You'll see."

She shuddered at his words, at the implication. 'You'll see' meant this would happen again. It meant he'd finally touch her with his hands or mouth or tongue or...or that cock. She knew she didn't have a big enough chest for him to do anything with his cock that was enjoyable, but it didn't stop her imagination from running wild. *Maybe this drug haze isn't such a bad thing after all...*
When he kissed her again, his chest brushed against a hardened nipple and they both groaned at the contact. It didn't take long before Katniss slipped her shorts off, leaving her only in her light blue boyshorts.

"They match your tank top," he mused. "Cute." He hooked his finger around the waistband and pulled them off her. He was practically growling at her naked body.

She was glad she thought to shave yesterday, so she was still relatively smooth save for the small strip she left in the front. She could never go completely bald like some girls, it made her feel too exposed.

"I can see how slick you are from here..."

She knew how aroused he made her. She was surprised she hadn't soaked through her shorts watching Peeta jerk himself off. But she faked her innocence and slipped a finger down to her glistening folds.

"You get like that just thinking about my cock."

She moaned and inserted a finger deep inside her, using her thumb to rub circles around her clit. As much as she wanted to close her eyes, like when she was alone, the rhythmic slapping sound coming from Peeta forced them open. It was almost enough to send her over the edge. He was watching her finger disappear inside herself with such intensity and stroked himself at the same pace as she did.

*If I'm going to do this, I'm doing it just like at home,* she told herself. Her free hand reached up and began caressing her breast, pinching the hardened nipple and gasping at the slight pain. His moans only enhanced her own desire and she added a second finger, thrusting faster than before.

She heard him spit into his hand and paused. She hadn't considered the fact that he was basically dry rubbing himself and not using lube. She nudged his shoulder and told him to bring his occupied hand over to her.

"What are you -" His words were cut off by the loud exhale as she took his fingers in her mouth.

The dentist's orders about not sucking through a straw floated into her head, so instead she opted to run her tongue along his first two fingers to coat them with her saliva. "If you didn't have that 'no touching each other' rule, I could have used something different," she said with a smirk. "So that will have to do for now."

"I swear, Katniss, if you can suck my dick even half as good as that, I could die a very satisfied man," he chuckled darkly, kissing her. The sounds of their rising orgasms filled the living room, intermittent with kisses and gasps. "Katniss, are you-"

"Close," she finished with a shaky breath. The spring wound tighter and tighter in her lower stomach when she heard him cry her name. Turning her head, she watched as he finished on his stomach. Her own coil snapped and she pressed firmly on her clit as the warmth of her orgasm flooded through her. Her hips bucked with each wave of pleasure; she closed her eyes and let her breathing even out, sliding her fingers out of her. They brushed over her sensitive clit and her body shivered. "Wow."

"Yeah," he agreed, equally as breathless. She smiled when she felt him get up and grab a wash rag from the bathroom. He cleaned himself off but when she reached for it, he tossed it over his shoulder. "Allow me to return the favor..." He grasped her wrist and ran his tongue along her slick fingers, tasting her fully. She tried to pull away at first until his hold tightened and he finished licking her
She smiled shyly and pulled her hand close to her chest. “Thanks?”

“Oh, Miss Everdeen, just wait.” His repeated promise of future time together had the same effect as the first time. He slipped his shorts back on but left his t-shirt crumpled on the floor. She pulled her panties and tank top on and sat up next to him. “You tired?” he asked, watching her try to stifle a yawn. She was amazed at how quickly he could revert from the man whose words dripped like sex to the nice guy she was used to. She nodded. “Want me to take you home?”

“What time is it?” Katniss asked.

“Almost 11. I’m okay to drive you back to your apartment if you’d like.” He had refilled his whiskey glass at least twice since dinner but had done a fairly decent job of building up his tolerance. Grad school was not for the weak of heart, nor liver.

She struggled to keep her eyes open. “Yeah, that’s fine. I just need to find my pants...”

He reached over her and fished her shorts off the floor. “You can always stay here, you know,” he offered, handing the cotton bottoms to her. “My bed is pretty comfortable.”

“That’s very forward of you, isn’t it?”

He flushed. “No, I meant, you can sleep in my bed and I’ll sleep out here.”

“Out here?” she asked, looking around the living room. “You mean on all your fancy furniture? Where is your furniture, by the way?”

“It’s being delivered. I had to buy all new stuff when I moved here and I’m very...particular when it comes to what’s in my space, so it took me a while. But I think it’s due here sometime next week.” He laughed. “I’m sure I look like a weirdo or something with no couch in this enormous room.”

She considered his offer. She was getting more and more exhausted by the minute, thanks to the oxycodone. It was one of the reasons she hated these pills; once she started coming down from the high and could begin to pretend to think rationally, she became so tired she couldn’t function. *I need to start weaning myself off these soon,* she told herself. Madge wouldn’t be home until late, so Katniss would be spending at least three hours by herself in their apartment. And even though she was just going to sleep, the idea of having someone else, even Madge who couldn’t kill a spider, there when Katniss couldn’t actively defend herself was reassuring. Staying with Peeta would be just that, reassuring her anxiety.

It had nothing to do with the burning she still felt for him. “Okay,” she agreed. “If you don’t mind having a roommate for the night, that is.”

His smile was heart-stopping. He helped her to her feet and led her through the short hallway to his bedroom. It was similar to the living room, spacious and luxurious, but at least had some semblance of decor. His queen-sized bed was in the corner with an antique-looking wooden headboard against the wall. On the other side was his wooden desk, complete with the same design as the headboard with half-hazard stacks of papers all over it, just like the one in his office. He had a makeshift dresser of stacked plastic totes with masking tape labels over each drawer. She stifled a giggle at his “underwear” drawer, complete with a drawing of a stick figure wearing tighty whiteys. The meds were wearing off but weren’t fully out of her system yet. At least the clothes in his closet were hung up so he didn’t look like a total college student, although there was absolutely no semblance of order to them.
“Um, you should be warm enough in here with all the blankets. But if you need more, there are some under the bed.” He ran his hand along the back of his neck and shuffled his left foot along the carpet. “It gets pretty dark because of the curtains, so feel free to leave them open a little. Otherwise you may never see the sun,” he gave a slight chuckle at this, recalling the day he literally slept away his morning because he had no concept of what time it was.

“Where are you going to sleep?” she asked as he started to walk out of his room.

“In the living room.”

“On the floor?” It was a stupid question. Where else would he sleep, Katniss? He doesn’t have a couch, remember?

“It’s not the first time I’ve slept on the floor,” he answered with a twinge of something she couldn’t recognize in his voice. He turned back and gave her a stiff, artificial smile. “I’ll be okay. Go to bed. I’ll make you breakfast in the morning if you want.”

Katniss stood by the edge of his bed for a few minutes after he walked out and closed the door most of the way behind him, waiting for, for what? For him to come back in the room? Resigned that he was actually going to sleep in the living room, she walked over to flip his light off. Holy shit, he wasn’t kidding about it being dark in here, she thought, giving her eyes time to adjust to the total darkness that enveloped her. She could make out the shape of the bed in the darkness and eased her way toward the black shape. It was warm under his blankets and far more comfortable than the floor had been. Yet she tossed and turned, unable to find a comfortable way to sleep.

She knew why the bed felt wrong. It was too empty. A bed this big needed another body in it. That’s why she wanted Peeta back, to make the bed feel like it wasn’t swallowing her. Not because she wondered what it would feel like to fall asleep in his arms.

She tiptoed toward the living room and tripped over his sprawled-out body on the floor. “Oof!” she exclaimed, her arms stretching out to the floor to catch herself.

“Katniss?” His voice was quiet and put her on edge. It was just like when he left his bedroom and she didn’t like that he wasn’t sounding like the confident Peeta she knew. “Is something wrong?”

“I, uh, I couldn’t sleep,” she answered, sliding onto the floor next to him. “Your bed is really big.”

He laughed and reached for her. In the darkness, she could make out his pale arms and scooted over to him. “It’s a little excessive, isn’t it? Somedays I wish my couch was here just so I don’t feel so small when I sleep.”

“Can I sleep out here with you? That way neither of us feel so small?”

She could tell he smiled even if she couldn’t see it. “No. But we can both go sleep in my bed. I’m getting too old to willingly sleep on the floor.”

“Well, that’s for damn sure. Come on, Grandpa, before you throw your back out.”

As they curled together in his bed, she ran her fingers along the tattooed symbol on his chest.

"Do you have any?" he asked, brushing through her hair with his hand. "Tattoos, I mean."

She shook her head. "I don't particularly like needles. Besides, why would I want to color all over my body? It's just going to look like shit by the time I'm old. Did this hurt?"
"It was worth it," he answered. "I got it right after my eighteenth birthday. My mother was livid when she found out about it."

"She doesn't like tattoos either?"

He laughed. "Not in the least. I think her exact phrase was, 'Tattoos only belong on criminals and soldiers, of which you are neither' and then didn't talk to me for at least a week." He sucked in a breath. "I can't remember which one of us broke first. We're both stubborn as hell, so it was a tense week in the Mellark household."

"What about your dad?"

"Uh, I never really knew my dad. He wasn't really...active...in my life. Mom basically raised me by herself," he admitted.

She wanted to ask him more, about his mom and his absent father, about what his tattoo meant and why he got it, who the girl on the DVD cover was and where she was. Katniss wanted to know more about this young, attractive professor who clearly had a story to tell. She rested her head over his tattoo. She wanted to know, but the drowsiness was taking over her body faster than she anticipated.

"Sleep, Katniss," he whispered, kissing the top of her head. As if he could read her mind, he assured her that they would talk more later.

She was comforted by his arms around her. She didn't even want to make up a secondary reason for it. Comfort. That was what she felt with him.

Chapter End Notes

Katniss’ wisdom teeth experience? Yep. That happened. Novacaine definitely wore off while the dentist was cutting into my gums. Most traumatic experience of my life.

“Gather Ye Rosebuds While Ye May” is a fantastic poem by Robert Herrick.

Songs included are both by Pink Floyd. “Wish You Were Here” and, of course, “Another Brick in the Wall Pt 2”

As always, I appreciate all the favorites/follows/reviews and a big THANK YOU to Chelzie for tackling this monster. To my SSS girls, I know I kind of promised this chapter to end differently but to get it to that point would have doubled the length of this chapter...oops.

Check me out on tumblr (mitchesbcray) where all kind of nonsense goes down.
The first time Katniss woke that night, she didn't bother to open her eyes and was almost instantly lulled back to sleep by the warm arms embracing her. Like a pleasant dream, she felt safe and content.

The second time, the warmth had been replaced by a soft glow from a computer screen. She painfully cracked an eye open and saw Peeta sitting at his desk with his laptop open. "Peeta," she croaked, sitting up on her elbows, "What are you doing?"

He turned his head and smiled at the sight of her bed-tossed hair. "I couldn't sleep so I wanted to get some work done, but if my computer is bothering you, I can go in the other room."

Katniss pulled off the blankets and crawled over to where he was sitting. Up close, she could make out the redness in his eyes and his slightly puffy cheeks. "No," she answered, crawling into his lap with an audible yawn, "What are you working on?"

"Katniss," he kissed her temple. "You're tired. Go back to sleep."

She shook her head. She was tired, but it didn't feel right without him there. "I'll keep you company until you're ready for bed."

He chuckled and wrapped his arm around her so he could continue typing. "Okay, but this is pretty boring stuff."

She yawned again and rested her head on his shoulder. "Of course it is, it's psychology." He poked her ribs with his elbows, making her giggle and squirm. "Alright," she conceded, "I'm sure not all psychology is boring. Just apparently whatever it is you do is boring." After a few minutes of searching online and saving articles to his jump drive, she broke the semi-silence. "What do you do?"

"I study the effects of social ostracism in group relations," he answered without taking his eyes of the screen.

"Fascinating," she mumbled, her eyelids getting heavy despite the light in front of her. He must have said something else, because she could feel his body vibrate, but the warmth was back so she drifted off to sleep again.

It was morning when she fully awoke. She was back in bed with the blankets tucked around her, but again, she was alone. When she opened her eyes, she immediately cursed herself for not taking her contacts out last night.

Peeta was shirtless in the kitchen, standing over a steaming pot on the stove when she stumbled in, nearly blind from the dryness of her eyes. He turned when he heard her and flashed a brilliant smile, "I made some breakfast you should be able to eat, if you're hungry, that is."

"Sure, I just, uh, need to use the bathroom first, if that's okay?" She heard the words nervously tumble out of her mouth and quickly turned on her heels to run down the hall and splash some water onto her face. For someone who hadn't even shared the deepest parts of her past with her best friend,
Katniss found that she couldn't stop herself from wanting to snoop into Peeta's life, or at least his medicine cabinet. She was in the middle of scolding herself when her eyes landed on rows of amber bottles, all almost completely full of little white pills.

She quickly closed the mirror and scooted back into the kitchen, where he was setting bowls of oatmeal and cooked spiced apples on the table. As she sat and watched the steam rise from the breakfast he so thoughtfully made for her—the apples were peeled and soft enough for her to painlessly eat—she caught herself thinking about the night before and all the questions she had before she fell asleep.

"Peeta, uh, can we talk about what happened last night?" The bravery that led her to go through his bathroom was gone as quickly as it came on, and the nervous energy returned.

"So you wanted to talk?" Peeta asked, swallowing a spoonful of his oatmeal.

"Don't you think we should?"

Peeta set his spoon down in his bowl and studied her, the way she chewed on her lip and fidgeted with her hair. He knew last night shouldn't have happened - any of it. He shouldn't have invited her over, he shouldn't have allowed her to kiss him, and he definitely shouldn't have kissed her back. And while they technically hadn't done anything wrong, beyond the kissing, he knew better. He knew even that was unacceptable and could get him fired if anyone found out. She was a student. He was a professor.

But to actually sleep with her, to hold her until she fell asleep, that had consequences beyond his career. There had been a feeling of intimacy last night he couldn't afford to feel again. He hadn't shared a bed with anyone since Delly, and even that was long before he eventually left. His share of one-night stands ever since ended with him sleeping alone, just like the doctor ordered. Kind of.

His unofficial shrink told him it would be best for him to wait two years, minimum, before he could even consider having a functioning relationship with someone else. Melinda Paylor had never been one to bullshit him, even when he was a lowly first year and she was finishing up her dissertation and training. They kept in contact and met up for drinks for the duration of his time in grad school. She knew everything about him and provided him with her objective viewpoint and clinical evaluation. They were friends, but she was a clinician first. 'Two years, minimum, Peet,' she said after the breakup. 'But you were with Delly for four, and you were part of a family with her and Maddie. It could take even longer. You can't rush into something new; you need to take this time to right yourself. You're not exactly prime rib right now. If you get into something with someone before you're better, you'll risking hurting her and yourself. That will happen. You just need to decide whether it's worth it.'

It wasn't worth it. He didn't want to hurt anyone and he had been through enough of it himself. He could go two years. It wouldn't be hard. He kept enough reminders of why he wasn't ready for it around the house, enough evidence of the life he had that damn near killed him. He couldn't go through that again. And he would never put anyone else through that kind of pain if he could help it. So he didn't. Until he met Katniss, who somehow wriggled her way in and latched on to the one part of him he didn't want.

Melinda told him two years minimum, if the next girl didn't come with excessive baggage of her own. And Katniss Everdeen had baggage. She had so many skeletons, her closet was like a graveyard. He first started to suspect it when Madge talked to him that night in the bar and told him that if his intention was to screw her over, he'd need to find a new target. He laughed initially, and reassured the girl that he was just getting to know Katniss. And that he would never intentionally screw a girl over. But Peeta saw a recurring pattern in her work during class which confirmed she
was no ordinary college student. Even for a senior, she viewed the world differently than the others. It was a cold and calloused place, according to her, that would chew you up and spit you back out if you didn't protect yourself from its harsh realities.

He had no idea just what she had been through, as her responses to any personal questions or applications of theory were vague or incomplete. But he knew that even once they were in the clear, their relationship would be a strain if they got too serious. He wasn't sure he could give her up entirely, in fact he was positive of it, but she would be graduating at the end of the year anyway, so maybe it wouldn't be completely insane to think they could be non-serious together. Whether they could or not, he had to make it clear that whatever they ended up being, a conventional relationship was just not in the cards for them right now. He had to make sure they weren't serious.

"I think we can both agree that what happened last night was a...a mistake," Peeta said quietly, dropping his eyes to his bowl.

The words stung more than she initially realized. She thought, foolishly perhaps, for a while that eventually jabs like that would no longer affect her, that she had become desensitized to the implications of "mistake" and "average" and "ridiculous" and "crazy." Lord knows she had heard them enough that under normal circumstances, she would be. But those weren't really normal circumstances, she supposed. And neither was this.

"So, um, do you want me to take you home?" Peeta asked when Katniss finally exited the bathroom. He was leaning against the table, wearing a t-shirt and a worn Cubs baseball cap over his still unruly hair. "Or I mean, if you want to call your roommate to come get you or something, that's fine, too, I suppose."

She watched his fingers twitch, undoubtedly urging to run through his hair, a nervous tic of his she noticed during class. "Um, well, if you had plans for today, that's fine. I don't want to be an inconvenience."

"You're not an inconvenience, Katniss." They were dancing around the awkwardness that still surrounded them. The reason she spent so long locked in the bathroom. Why he had gripped the back of the kitchen chair so hard she thought he'd snap it.

But it was too much for right now, too deep for their first actual time together. It was just a matter of who would break first; who would be willing to relent.

Katniss shrugged. "What did you have planned?"

"Well, the Cubs play today so I was just going to watch that," he answered, chuckling when she immediately crinkled her nose. "Not a baseball girl or not a Cubs girl?"

"Baseball," she responded. "I just never got into it as a kid, I guess."

He nodded. "We can do something else. If you're wanting to stick around for a while."

"And miss listening to you try to convince me the Cubs don't suck this year?"

Peeta grabbed at his chest. "You always go for the kill shot so early? Insulting a man's team is grounds for punishment of some sort."

"Like having to sit through a Cubs game?"

"You're just on fire with these zingers, aren't you?" He laughed and shook his head, "If you're not
careful, you won't get any kind of reward for your troubles."

Her heart pounded and her blood rushed through her at the mere implication of a punishment from Peeta. She could tell it affected him, too, the way his breathing shallowed and his eyes couldn't leave hers. The shockwave that pulsed through her body overwhelmed their recent "talk" about what they could or couldn't do together. They were playing with fire, even just talking to each other, but she found herself unable to resist. And by the sounds of it, he couldn't either. She cleared her throat, thankful she had the muscle control to do even that. "I, uh, I should probably change first."

He shrugged, "I don't know, I kind of like it."

"That's because you're an old perv."

"Can't really deny that, can I?"

"Really, Peeta? A beer? It's only like...11:30," Katniss joked when Peeta cracked open a bottle of 312 and settled beside her on the ridiculous Cubs blanket he pulled out from the closet.

"What? It's a baseball game," he protested. "And everyone knows you can't watch baseball without having a beer. It's just...part of the atmosphere."

She cocked an eyebrow and took a sip of her water. "Part of the atmosphere?"

"Yeah!" he exclaimed. "I got my PhD at Northwestern so field trips to Wrigley Field were a common occurrence. It was a tradition of sorts, I guess – a Chicago style hot dog and a draft of whatever was on tap that day." He shrugged. "I don't know, I just can't seem to watch a game without one now. That's probably ridiculous, isn't it?"

"Yep," she smiled, watching him throw a mock glare at her. "So you went to games a lot?"

"Whenever I could, really. There's just something relaxing about being out in the air watching guys play a game they love, being with your family. I miss it, actually. You don't really have much for professional sports around here so I have to settle for WGN's broadcasting." He took another swig of his beer as the announcers began their pre-game commentary. Starting lineups, team stats, all the stuff that hardcore baseball fans lived and died over.

"Was your Mom a big baseball fan?" she asked after a few minutes. She tried paying attention to what was happening on the television but couldn't stay interested. She didn't know any of these players, but cracked up when they talked about former players like Milton Bradley and Coco Krispy and wondered why any parent would name their child that. And if baseball fans knew there were players with names like that. And how many other players had hysterical names.

"Ah, no. She never had much time for it. David loved it - he's the one who got me interested in it, I suppose. It's the one good thing he gave me."

She scrunched her face as she watched him realize what he just said. It was obvious it came out unintentionally from the way his eyes got big and he took a very long drink - nearly finishing off the bottle in one swallow. She wanted to ask him who David was and why he hated the man so much, but didn't know if it was her place. They were friends, she assumed, but was that an aspect of his life that friends delved into? And what if he asked the same type of questions about her? She wouldn't tell him anything about her parents or Prim or anything about the life she had before college. She didn't even talk to Madge about those things, and yet Madge was her best friend. Whatever that meant. "Who's your favorite player?"
He was relieved when she didn't push him. He didn't know what made him even think about mentioning that asshole who all but ruined his and his mother's life. David did significantly more damage to the Mellark family than anyone else, even the dick who knocked up his Mom and walked away. He released his white-knuckled grip on his bottle, the same reaction he had whenever Ron came up in conversation, and sighed. "On this team? Shit, it's hard to say who's any good anymore. I'd have to go with DeJesus. He's not bad, if slightly underrated. He was a new trade from KC last year and didn't necessarily do a whole lot, but he's got potential. Some people don't like him, but I think he's got it in him still."

She nodded and leaned back against the wall, her shoulder brushing against his, as the game finally started. She wasn't a huge fan of baseball, not on television anyway. It was too slow and too frequently interrupted by the color commentators giving their opinions on why that batter struck out or what the third basemen should have done differently to catch the ball. All too often, she found herself wanting to comment back with a, "maybe if he didn't swing at pitches that were below his knees," or "if he put his glove on the ground, that ball wouldn't have slipped through his legs," but Peeta's groans and sighs of frustration were enough to keep her mouth shut.

Miraculously, the Cubs were winning. She may not know much about professional baseball, but she knew that was a miraculous thing. Peeta was giddy next to her, tapping his thumbs on his bouncing knees and smiling like a kid on Christmas morning. He began throwing more stats out to her whenever players came up to bat. "Rizzo batted a .250 last year, we really need him to pick up his shit," or, "A lefty versus a lefty. Conditions are prime for a homer." She didn't really understand most of what he spouted out, but it made her smile to see him acting so carefree. She decided she liked this Peeta, the guy who was passionate about his sport but still willing to teach her. She could be friends with this Peeta. And when the time came, she really wanted to spend more time with this Peeta. "And coming in to close it out for the Cubs is Carlos Marmol…"

"No! No no no no no! No fucking way! What the fucking hell!"

Okay, maybe passionate-about-baseball Peeta wasn't all that great. "Um...who is Carlos Marmol?"

Peeta shook his head and let out a heavy breath. "Carlos Marmol is a worthless piece of shit."

"That doesn't really help me."

"He's a relief pitcher that should be released as soon as possible, but the management are fucking idiots and gave him a fantastic fucking contract when they signed him. He's every other team's wet dream and the bane of all Cubs fans' existence."

She stared at the television screen as the new pitcher threw some warm up pitches. He seemed alright to her, even though she couldn't tell just how far "inside" or "outside" the zone pitches were without a batter for reference. And he was a professional baseball player, so he couldn't be that terrible. "Why? You guys are up by three runs with one inning left. How much damage could one guy do in the bottom of the ninth?"

A lot, it turns out. Carlos Marmol was indeed the bane of all Cubs fans' existence and could do quite a bit of damage, especially when he gave up a three-run homer on his fourth batter. Peeta was furious, yelling obscenities at the TV, all directed at the "worthless piece of shit pitcher." She tried not to laugh at him. She could tell how important baseball was to Peeta and how much he loved his team. And she was guilty of getting over excited during football season, to the point of getting kicked out of a sports bar for starting a fight with the rival team's fans after one of their players was caught crying on camera. In her mind, no one talks shit until someone starts shit. Then, it's fair game. It's not her fault the other team sucked and lost on senior day. There was something about Peeta when he
was all riled up that she couldn't resist watching. Even when he finally looked over and caught her, she found herself unwilling to look away from him. She licked her bottom lip at the way his eyes locked onto hers.

He reached toward her, pulling her face to his, and kissed her. This was wrong on so many levels. Friends don't kiss like this. Teachers don't kiss their students like this, even if it was just a technicality. And they had just finished their talk about what was acceptable and what wasn't. Kissing was definitely on the unacceptable list. But the taste of her skin was too much for him to just give up that easily. He was riled up and all reason flew out the window when he saw the way she looked at him. He pulled her onto his lap, her legs wrapping around his back as their kisses intensified.

"What about the rules?" she asked between kisses. "No touching? No kissing?"

He pulled away, pressing his forehead against hers. "We did agree on those rules for a reason. I should just take you home because I question my self-control right now."

"We'll start tomorrow," Katniss answered, pulling him in for another heavy kiss.

His hands splayed across her back, pulling her closer to him. She let out a throaty sigh when she felt his bulge nestle between her legs. And another when he reached down to "rearrange" himself and his hand brushed against her shorts-covered center, which was already buzzing from the kiss. She thrust her hips against his, the friction caused by her shorts against his building erection sparked a flame in her lower abdomen.

She could tell he wanted to touch her, his hands shifting from her hips to her thighs, and then back to her hips. She groaned. As amazing as dry humping was, and she couldn't remember the last time dry humping felt this good, she wanted more. She needed more. She needed him.

"Peeta," she moaned into his ear before latching onto his earlobe.

He threw his head back against the wall with a groan. "Fuck, Katniss, I want you so bad."

Her mind was hazy from the surge of hormones rushing through her. "Take me, Peeta. Please." Her voice was breathy and thick with need. She moved her lips to the skin behind his ear and continued to thrust her hips against his. "I'm yours, Peeta."

He bucked his hips under hers, eliciting a cry of pleasure from the new angle. He was breathing heavily, his grip on her hips tightened as he directed her body over his. She could feel the tension inside her building at a feverish pace until it completely overtook her. She buried her head in his shoulder, biting into the soft fabric of his shirt as she rode out her orgasm.

He was panting below her and wrapped his arms around her. "Fuck," he exhaled into her hair.

"Right?" she laughed, sliding off of him and taking a long drink of her once forgotten water. This was a mistake. They were coming dangerously close to the point of no return. She wondered if she'd ever be able to resist him. And what would happen once they crossed that line? Peeta was addicting; his eyes, his touch, his lips, his entire essence was something she didn't know how to do without.

The realization was sobering. She needed out before it was too late, before she let him in completely.

"What's up with you?"

"What are you talking about?" Katniss looked up from her plate into her roommate's worried eyes.
"You've been weird lately, like for the past few weeks. You haven't wanted to do anything; you just stay holed up in the apartment or at work." Madge took a bite of her take-out, their typical 'Friday night at home' dinner. "I'm just worried about you, that's all. Does this have anything to do with that guy?"

Katniss shrugged. "No reason to be worried, I guess. I just haven't really wanted to do much." She pushed her food around on her plate, dreading the question she knew was on her friend's mind. Since that weekend with Peeta, Katniss had felt a bit fuzzy with everything. She couldn't help but ruminate over what happened and more often, what she couldn't let happen again.

"Do we need to schedule another-"

"No," Katniss interrupted with a firm voice. "No. I'm okay, Madge. Just kind of having a blah time. It's not like it was before." She forced a small smile. "Really, it's not. Trust me?"

Madge pursed her lips before finally relenting. "You'll tell me if it starts getting bad again?"

"Yes, Moooooom," Katniss rolled her eyes and threw a spring roll at Madge, who skillfully caught it and took a large bite before throwing it back with a giggle. "That's gross, Madge."

The girls continued their dinner in relative silence, broken up only by the heavy sighs coming from Madge, which increased as the clock ticked toward 8pm.

"Madge, dear, is there something you want?"

"No," she answered with a smile. And another sigh.

Katniss raised her eyebrows and waited for the blonde to look in her direction. "What's wrong, Madgey?"

"Oh my word, don't ever call me that again," Madge groaned. She should have known better than to tell Katniss her grandmother's nickname for her. "It's just..."

"Yes?"

She sighed. "Never mind. You probably wouldn't be interested."

"What do you want me to wear?" Katniss deadpanned. Madge let out an excited squeal and jumped over to the couch next to her, enveloping her in a bone-crushing hug.

By the time they arrived at the bar Gale directed them to, the line outside was already at least thirty people deep. 'The Innocents' were a popular cover band that only came through town three or four times a year and almost everyone wanted to see them. They were also Katniss' favorite act, a tidbit Madge didn't even need to use to convince her roommate to come out. She was relieved that Katniss agreed; sometimes when she got into moods, like the one she had been in for the past few months, getting her to socialize was damn near impossible. Well, more impossible than normal. She considered herself lucky that this happened to work out when it did.

"Fuck this line, Madge," Katniss grumbled. Lines only meant one thing - the bar was nearly to capacity and the bouncers were starting to limit who got in.

Madge scanned the line, her lips set. "Gale said he and Darius could make sure we got in, but I don't see them anywhere."
"Let's just take our spots before this wait gets any worse." Katniss grabbed at Madge's elbow, dragging her to the end of the line, which was now beginning to wrap around the back of the building to the courtyard, where the band would be performing.

It was there that Katniss spotted Darius' messy red hair standing near the exit of the courtyard. Yanking Madge's elbow again, they crept over to him, knowing full well the boys were planning on getting them in without them having to pay the cover. Sure enough, when Darius saw them, he turned so they were blocked by his body, and followed after them. It wasn't the first time they'd snuck into a concert at a bar, they knew the drill.

"Damn, Katniss, you look sexier every time I see you," Darius whistled. Madge snorted when Katniss glared at him, then down at her legs. She had relented and worn the only skirt she owned, a black and white cotton one that barely grazed her mid-thigh. Madge's influence, partially, though it was a tradition of theirs since they both donned skirts the first time they ever saw the band perform. And of course, Darius would make a big show of it.

Gale laughed and handed Darius the second bottle of beer he had been holding. "I can't believe you're still harboring a crush on that girl, Dar. She's colder than a fucking penguin."

"Oh fuck off, Gale," Katniss shot back, stealing his beer and finishing it off. "Yuck, why'd you let it get warm, Rookie?" She would have preferred to stay at home, watching cheesy movies on TV all night, but she also had to admit that being around her friends was probably a better decision. She knew isolating herself wasn't healthy, but sometimes she couldn't snap her mind out of its 'island' mindset. These were the times when she was thankful that Madge was so social and outgoing. If it weren't for her, Katniss may never leave the apartment except for work.

"Katnip, isn't that the guy from the bar?" Gale slurred, his arm draped heavily over her shoulder. He pointed wildly until Darius laughed and veered his finger toward a table near the bar. Sure enough, there was Peeta, in a deliciously tight green plaid button down with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was tapping the bottom of his glass against the table; leaning in to talk to a woman she had never seen before.

Even sitting down, Katniss could tell the woman was tall and muscular, with dark mocha skin and brown hair cropped short like a pixie. Her sharp cheekbones and wide set brown eyes only aided her exotic beauty, but more so was the confidence that oozed from every pore. Gale let out a long whistle which earned him an elbow to the gut and a glare from Madge.

"Uh, yeah, I think so," Katniss answered, trying to come off nonchalant, as if seeing Peeta next to another woman, next to a woman like that, didn't make her stomach churn. She had no claim on him. They both agreed that what happened that night almost three weeks ago was a mistake, especially given that their prior relationship wasn't technically over. She just didn't realize that meant he'd be moving on to someone else so soon. And judging from how comfortably her hand rested on his thigh or how carefree they both appeared together, it was clear that he had.

"Wait, the same guy you-"

Katniss downed the rest of her drink. "Yes, Madge."

"Oh I have half a mind to march over there and tell him off," Madge huffed. The girl meant well, but it was so hard to take her seriously when her 'upset' face was as cute as it was. Instead, Katniss grabbed her arm and pulled her to the area in front of the stage. "Katniss Everdeen! Are you here to dance?" Madge asked with a surprised laugh.
"Yes, ma'am. Are you objecting?" She was just buzzed enough to no longer care about the attention they were sure to receive by their presence in the dance space.

Madge shook her head gave her friend a hug. "You okay?" she asked quietly.

"I just want to forget for a while and have fun," Katniss responded. Pulling away, she flashed a smile. "Besides, we both know how much you love 'The Innocents', so let's enjoy them together!"

Because it was still relatively early in the evening, there weren't many others around them. Normally that would instantly have pushed Katniss back to a table, but seeing Peeta attached to another woman set something off inside her and she wanted to clear him from her mind. If she were at home she'd go for a run or to the gym, to replace the anxiety with sweat, but her only option here was to dance. So she did. And when Gale and Darius joined them, followed by others who gained the liquid courage themselves, she found it easier and easier to forget about Peeta's presence.

When the band took their first break, Katniss yelled to Madge that she was going to get them drinks before everyone else got the same idea. She knew the trick to get these particular bartenders to pay attention to her and she was hoping not to have to use it. As luck would have it, the bar was already clamoring with guys wanting shots and bombs, so she inconspicuously adjusted her shirt and pushed her arms across her body, creating the illusion that she wasn't completely flat chested, realizing she really should have sent Madge instead. She leaned over the bar and lightly ran her tongue over her lips. The bartenders here were pigs but they were predictable, because a few seconds of looking bored was all it took before one slid in front of her.

She thanked him with a smile and a wink, ensuring he'd take care of her the next time she came up.

"We need to stop meeting like this," a voice quipped as she turned and bumped into the person behind her.

"Oh, uh, hey," she flustered, trying her best to sound collected around him. He sure didn't seem to be affected by seeing her so why should she let him get to her? "Uh, how are you?"

He stuck a hand in his pocket to fish out his money. "Not too bad. You?"

"I'm good," she answered, bobbing her head.

"I got my new furniture last weekend."

"Oh good, so your apartment doesn't make you look like a creepy serial killer anymore?" She chuckled at the memory of his bare apartment and her initial reaction to it.

"Less so, definitely." The invitation for her to come and see it was hanging off his lips but he couldn't get the words out.

"Peety, if I had known it was going to take you so long, I would have come with you. You left me to the wolves."

Katniss felt her jaw twitch as the woman from Peeta's table slid her hand onto his shoulder and her other arm around his waist. She rested her chin on her hand and smiled. Katniss couldn't help but think her possessive body language and toothy smile resembled a shark honing in on its prey.

"Sorry, Jo, the line is crazy. Then I got distracted talking to Katniss." He nodded his head toward her. "This is Katniss. Katniss, this is-"

"Johanna," the woman offered, keeping her arm wrapped around his middle. "How do you know
"Katniss here took my Intro to Psych class over the summer," Peeta answered with a smile, which Katniss nervously returned.

"Really? And what did you think of Professor Peeta?" Johanna asked with a purr.

Katniss nervously shifted her weight. She didn't know this woman but could already tell she didn't like her. She was beginning to think she didn't much like Peeta either if this was who he wanted to be around. "He was good," she squeaked. Clearing her throat, she decided she wasn't going to let the vixen get under her skin. "It was a very informative class." She held up the two bottles of beer in her hands. "Look, it was good to see you again, Peeta, er, Dr. Mellark. And it was nice to meet you, Johanna, but I should be getting these back to my friends before they get warm."

She pushed past the couple and kept her head down. She wiped her cheek quickly and hoped no one would be able to tell she had just been so upset. More than ever, she wanted to just get lost in the music and the dancing and the moment. If Peeta was so eager to move on from her, then she could play that game, too. She could show him how desirable she was to other men, how sexy she could be in her own right.

Peeta watched her walk away from them. As soon as Katniss was out of sight, Johanna unwrapped herself from him and grabbed her drink from his hand. "Dangerous game you're playing, Mellark, sleeping with a student."

"Jesus, Jo, keep your voice down will you?" They wandered back to their table to sit, his eyes still trying to track her in the crowd. "I'm not sleeping with her, okay? I'm not a complete idiot."

Johanna raised both of her eyebrows, not believing a word he said. "Okay, so you haven't actually had sex with the co-ed, but you're interested. And she's interested back. Why else do you think she freaked out when I came up?"

"Oh, I don't know, Jo, maybe you all but grabbing my junk in public. That's enough to freak anyone out," he snorted, taking a sip of his drink.

Johanna let out a barking laugh. "Look, Peeta, that may be. But that girl felt threatened by me, it radiated off her."

"Maybe it's just a crush."

"Peeta Mellark," Johanna set her glass down on the table and stared at him until he glanced over at her. "I may not be a social scientist like you, but I know when I'm being bullshitted, so save your breath."

"Jo..."

"Goddamnit, Peeta, what are you doing, messing around with a fucking kid like that? Did you not learn your lesson with Delly?"

"Don't bring her into this," Peeta growled, suddenly irrationally angry at the only person in his new life who knew about his old life. "Katniss is not like Delly, okay?"

"You didn't think Delly was going to be like Delly until it happened." Johanna countered. "You've made some mistakes here, Peeta," she continued with a knowing look, "But they've been innocent enough. Getting tangled up with a student is not innocent. They aren't going to care who your Mom is when that girl slaps you with a sexual harassment lawsuit and has you fired."
Peeta shook his head. Katniss wouldn't turn him in. She had said as much that afternoon they almost kissed in the classroom. But that was just kissing. There was no telling whether or not she thought they had gone too far the night before. She seemed to understand where he was coming from the next morning, why they shouldn't see each other at all until August; but even then, they should take things slow. That they weren't tied down to each other - if one of them met someone else, the other would be accepting of it. They had to keep their emotions out of it as much as possible. More than friends with benefits, but not a full-fledged relationship. There was no way either of them were ready for that.

By the time Katniss got back to her group, her legs still felt woozy but she had her have face back on. She knew better than to get this upset about him being here with another woman. He said himself that they shouldn't even see each other until August, so what business was it of hers what he did? She stopped dead in her tracks. *What business is it of his what I do?*

If he was fooling around with another woman, then nothing was stopping her from having a good time with another guy. She had been clinging to Madge all night, stupidly afraid of offending Peeta by dancing with another guy - even Gale or Darius. Not anymore.

"Katniss! We thought we'd lost you!" Gale loudly exclaimed upon her arrival.

She handed Madge her beer and laughed. "How many sheets to the wind is he?"

The band returned to the stage, playing a cover version of 'Your Love' and when she felt Darius' hands land gently on her hips, rather than shove them away, she swiveled her hips into them. And during the next song, when a different pair of guys cut in on Darius and Gale, Katniss and Madge danced with them, too.

She knew her roommate was glad to see her out having fun. And it helped Katniss relax to see Madge genuinely having fun, rather than putting on the act she usually did when they went out. At some point, the band slowed things down and Gale and Darius muscled their way back to the girls' sides. Katniss didn't object when Darius wrapped his arms around her middle to sway to 'Knockin' on Heaven's Door' or when he pulled her closer to him and quietly hummed along. She let herself be carried away by the singer's smooth vocals and the gentle rocking motion. She tried not to compare the way it felt to have Darius' arms around her to Peeta's; to feel Darius's breath on her neck as opposed to Peeta's when he fell asleep. But those memories had stayed with her ever since that night. And as hard as she tried, there was no forgetting what it felt like to be with Peeta. *Fuck.*

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Peeta. 2:15am. *I'm sorry about Jo. Sometimes she forgets about boundaries when she's in public./*

Katniss. 2:20am. *It's fine./*

Katniss. 2:30am *I don't care what you and your plaything do together./*

Peeta. 2:34am. *Plaything? Katniss, Johanna and I aren't together./*

Katniss. 2:36am. *Sure./*

Katniss. 2:38am. *I told you I don't care. You're the one who said we should be with other people./*

Katniss. 2:40am. *So I don't care that you're fucking her./*

Katniss stared at her phone, mostly drunk, and still angry that she hadn't been able to get him out of
her head, even after the bar and a sloppy kiss with an equally drunk Darius. Then to go and text her, with an apology, like that would make things better. Her eyelids began to droop, tired from the night, when her phone buzzed. She picked it up, readying herself with a smart ass response to whatever he typed.

"Katniss?"

She stared at the phone. "Shit," she hissed. He hadn't texted her back, he had called her. Why the fuck was he calling her?

"Katniss?" he asked again.

With shaking fingers, she held her phone to her ear. "Hello?"

"I don't appreciate being told who I am or am not fucking, Katniss." His authoritarian tone sent shivers through her body. "Johanna and I are not fucking. The only person I have any interest in fucking anymore is you."

She had her retort ready to go, but he left her speechless. His voice was low but held her completely captive.

"But we both know that can't happen, can it, Katniss?"

"No," she answered.

"And so until the day it can happen, I will not question what you do or who you spend your time with, and I expect the same respect from you."

Embarrassment swept across her face. That was what she agreed to that morning. She just hadn't anticipated being so angry at seeing him with someone else. Jealously, she supposed. And possessiveness. She had never really been jealous before, not to the point of being so angry. She had been on the receiving end of both of those ugly emotions before, from the ex who got pissed when she spent "too much time with her sister" to his "friends" who wanted him so badly they constantly tried to stab Katniss in the back. She vowed, after him, to do her best to keep those feelings under control. Nothing good came from being that jealous.

"That's the only way we can ever really see each other, Katniss," he continued, his voice softer now. "You have to know that even when we can be together, it won't be a normal thing. We'll have to be more...creative...together."

She nods until she realizes that she's on the phone and he can't see her. "Right." She really doesn't understand what he's talking about or why he's talking about it now, right after he told her they can do what they want until at least August. But she's content to listen to his voice, with its barely noticeable slur, so she doesn't stop him. Just hearing him is enough to dissipate the anger she felt just a few seconds ago. If she were sober, she'd hate herself for losing her resolve so easily. But she wasn't sober. And she didn't care. "Creative how?"

She heard him chuckle through the phone. "We can get around to that later."

"No!" she exclaimed, then clapped her hand over get mouth. Madge and Gale were too busy with each other to hear her and Darius basically passed out as soon as he hit the couch, but that didn't mean she needed any of them to hear her. "No," she repeated just as adamantly as before, though in a hushed voice. "Not later. Tell me now."

"I think it'd be tough to describe."
"But I wanna know."

"How badly do you 'wanna know'?' he asked, mimicking her.

"I think you owe me."

"Is that so? Why do you say that?"

"I'm sorry, do I need to remind you of the sex-in-heels who was all over you?"

Peeta surprised her when he began laughing. Not just a short snicker, but a full on laugh to the point of pulling the phone away from his face, judging by the muffling that occurred.

"If you're just going to laugh at me, I'll hang up," she threatened. "I don't appreciate being the butt of some joke."

He was breathless when he finally returned to the phone. "Katniss, I wasn't making fun of you. Johanna and I are friends, like you and that bartender. She's just...protective, that's all."

"She seemed like a total bitch," Katniss huffed. "And now you definitely owe me."

"Oh, do I? And what would you like for your troubles, Miss Everdeen?"

"What are you willing to offer?" she countered.

"What are you doing?"

She didn't really know why he was suddenly asking the question that normally starts a conversation, but she figured he knew what he was doing. "Nothing. Just sitting in bed."

"Absolutely nothing? Well, that doesn't sound like much fun. Why don't you at least lay back, get comfortable."

Katniss rolled her eyes but laid back, resting her head on her pillow.

"Are you relaxed?"

She let out a breath. "Yes."

"Good. Describe your room to me."

"Why?" she asked, her forehead crinkled in confusion.

"I want to get a complete picture of you - where you are, what you're doing, what you're wearing."

Katniss laughed uncomfortably. "You want to know what I'm wearing? Why, are you going to tell me to take my clothes off or something?"

"That's exactly what I'm going to ask."

Her skin broke out in goosebumps and she took a shaky breath. "Peeta."

"Yes, Katniss?" His voice was husky when he said her name, sending a racing heat straight to her core. He must have heard the quiet whimper she released because he continued to say her name in the same deep tone. "Tell me about your room."

"Uh," she gulped, "There's not much to tell about it, I suppose. I don't really have much - a bed, a
dresser, a desk, and my bookcase. That's really about it." She flushed in embarrassment at her very minimal possessions, especially since he lived in the swankiest part of town while she bought her dresser from a garage sale and had to repaint it herself.

"What's your favorite book?"

She was relieved that he didn't ask the question she normally got when people found out about her very bare bedroom. She wouldn't be able to scowl her way out of answering on the phone. "To Kill A Mockingbird," she answered easily. Her father read it to her when she was a child and always told her Atticus Finch was why he went to law school in the first place. Her hero's hero. "What about you?" She relaxed, realizing the real reason he was talking to her about her room and her favorite book was to get her to feel comfortable.

"I've always been partial to Catcher in the Rye, myself."

She wrinkled her nose. She remembered reading about Holden Caufield and hating everything about him. He was selfish and immature and every bit as ridiculous as he claimed everyone else would be. "That's unfortunate."

"One more thing about me you hate?" he joked. "First it was psychology, then the Cubs. And now my taste in literature? Tsk tsk, Katniss, why are you even still talking to me?"

"I'm sure there must be some reason, but I can't seem to figure it out. Maybe you should enlighten me."

"Katniss?"

"Yes, Peeta?"

"What are you wearing?"

She laughed. "Absolutely nothing."

"You're lying. What are you wearing?"

She bit her bottom lip. She could tell him the truth, that she was in her penguin shorts again and a white tank-top, neither of which were inherently sexy or provocative. Or she could lie again, telling him she only slept in her panties. Guys liked that visual, right? Surely the image that she was some sex kitten like that Johanna was what he wanted, even if he claimed they were just friends. No straight man would turn down someone like Johanna, and Peeta was most definitely straight.

"Katniss?"

"Um, sorry. W-what was the question?"

"Are you still nervous?"

"Yes. A little," she admitted.

"Because of me?"

"The situation. I've, um, I've never done anything like this before." She nervously chewed on her lip, realizing she was confessing some of her naivety to this man who had clearly done this before, given how confident he sounded.

"Done what?"
"This," she repeated, gesturing wildly with her hands.

"You're going to need to be a little more specific," he instructed in his professor voice.

She couldn't figure out what game he was playing. Wasn't it obvious what 'this' meant? Or was she reading more into it than she should have? Maybe 'this' really wasn't anything and he was kidding earlier about telling her to take her pants off. She groaned. "Never mind."

"No, that won't work, Miss Everdeen," he chided. "You're going to need to learn to tell me what you like and don't like; what you want and don't want; what you know and don't know. That's the only way we learn what pleases each other."

She felt like she swallowed a boulder. Something about his words, the implication of what they could be - and likely would be - doing together elicited intense excitement and anxiety in her.

"What exactly haven't you done before?"

"I've never done this... over the phone," she mumbled.

"But you've done it in person? Dirty talk, I mean?"

"Once or twice. But not very well." At least, that's what she had been told the last time they tried, so she figured it must be true. It just didn't feel natural, saying the things she was expected to say. She never liked the sound of the word "pussy" and didn't find it particularly sexy, so she tended to laugh when she said it. Laughing, it seemed, killed the mood.

"We'll start with something easy. Tell me a fantasy of yours."

She gulped. "Uh... I don't know?"

He chuckled into the phone. "It's not a test, I'm just curious what you're into."

Katniss shrugged. She didn't know there were things to be "into" that were anything special. "You mean like positions?" She hated feeling so naive with him. She had had sex plenty of times, it wasn't like she was some blushing virgin.

"Positions, yeah, or maybe some pairing that gets you off? Policeman, doctor... teacher?"

The way he emphasized the last option made her clench her legs together. She sure as hell wasn't going to tell him that ever since class ended she had used the image of him bending her over his office desk to help get herself off more frequently than anything else.

"Katniss? You still there."

Her throat felt like sandpaper. "Um, yeah. I don't know Peeta, what are you into?"

"That's a loaded question, Katniss," he answered, mysteriously. "But I'll give you a recent one. Remember when you stayed at my place and I was making breakfast? All I could think of, the whole time, was how sexy you were. The night before, when you made yourself come it was the hottest thing I had ever seen. And all I wanted was to be the one making you to make those noises."

Her breathing shallowed. His admission hadn't been at all surprising, the sexual tension between them was thick and suffocating, even over the phone. But hearing him say it was different than just assuming it.

"So I had this image that it was you cooking breakfast, in those little shorts of yours. The ones that
She let out a snort. "My pajama shorts make my ass look good?" She played with fabric around her legs in disbelief. "They're just pajama shorts."

"That's because you can't see them from my angle," he countered and she felt herself blush at his words. "Those shorts are sexy, Katniss Everdeen. If I had it my way, you'd only wear those. Or nothing, I suppose. Nothing is better. In fact, I've just changed my fantasy. Instead of those shorts, you're cooking in just your panties."

"That doesn't seem very hygienic. Or safe," she nervously joked, although the idea of walking around Peeta's apartment in just her underclothes made her rub her legs together in anticipation.

"It's a fantasy, darling, we don't worry about practical things. Instead, you should be worried about not letting your food burn."

"And why would my food burn?"

"Because you'd be distracted, obviously. Distracted by my lips against the back of your neck. By my hands running up your sides, over your stomach, under your tank top, along your ribs, brushing the bottom of your bare breasts."

Katniss whimpered, her hands following along with his under her shirt. "Please."

"Please what, Katniss?"

"Touch me."

"Patience, Katniss, patience. It's better if you don't rush it. You want my hands on your breasts, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Do it to yourself. I want to hear how it sounds when you play with your breasts."

She did as he instructed, rolling her nipple between her fingers and groaned in approval. She wondered if he was just as turned on by this, by imagining being with her. She imagined him stroking himself as he talked to her and it made her urgently aware of the growing heat between her legs. She shifted her hips to slide her shorts down over her ass and brushed over her clit as she brought her hand back up. She was met by a low hum from the other side of the phone which only confirmed her suspicion and further spurred her on.

"Unf," she sighed into the phone.

"I bet you're so wet, aren't you, Katniss? Soaking through your panties just imagining my mouth on your skin. Tell me how wet you are."

She dipped her finger into her panties and gasped when she felt just how turned on he was making her. "Dripping," she answered in a ragged voice.

He moaned loudly into the phone. "Goddamnit, Katniss. I want to pull those panties of yours down and bend you over the counter."

She bit down hard on her lip as her fingers picked up speed, venturing further down to her wet core. The way he described how he'd tease her with his cock, the head just barely grazing inside her,
making her beg and pant and thrust back toward him. The image of him with his pants just around his ankles as he plunged deep into her, that he couldn't restrain himself long enough to actually be completely naked before he had his way with her.

His eloquence with words was not lost on her imagination, nor was the memory of what exactly he was fucking her with in his memory. Being bent over, completely at his mercy while he continually pounded into her, each thrust touching upon the one place that was always just out of reach. She contemplated reaching for her vibrator but the reality of moving, of stopping, just wasn't an option for her.

He continued on, describing each move, each detail, each sense, chanting her name as they both tumbled closer and closer to the edge. She heard him finish first, her name hanging on his lips. He didn't stop talking to her, his voice was deep and velvety on the phone, pushing her on and over until her body spasmed and she cried into the receiver.

"Now you can say you've done that before," he joked, his voice still breathless.

As her own heartbeat slowed, she smiled. "Even if I had, I don't think it would have been like that."

"Was it good for you?"

Katniss let out a full-on laugh which triggered his own laughter to join in. She realized she couldn't remember the last time she laughed after sex, or, well kind-of sex. Maybe she hadn't. Never with Cato. He was all about the deed; even when they were both drunk and giggly beforehand, post-coitus was never a laughing matter. Usually it was because he would fall asleep soon after or because they had somewhere to be. Sex with Cato was fun but never really comfortable. And before Cato - no. No, sex before Cato was never funny. Hell, for a while it wasn't even fun. Most of the time it wasn't fun, if she was being honest with herself about it.

"Katniss? You okay? You got quiet all of a sudden." Peeta's voice finally broke her out of her trance, and she welcomed it. Thinking about the past did nothing but cause her misery, which was why she blocked it off to so many people. If no one knew, no one could ask her about it. She had had enough people asking about it when it happened, so she was content to never have another person ask her about it again.

She shook her head, wishing her memory worked like the old Etch-A-Sketch she loved as a child and would just disappear that easily. "Yeah, I'm doing fine. Sorry just, uh, got in my head or something."

"You want to talk about it?"

"No thanks, Psych Boy," she joked, knowing full well it would change the subject.

"Now, now, Miss Everdeen. No need for name calling. Use your feeling words, remember? How does this make you feel?"

"I feel like smacking that shit eating grin I can only imagine you're wearing right off your face," she shot back with a satiated smile. She listened to him breathe easier in the phone, finding serenity in this innocent moment. She didn't understand how easily she could be excited and calmed by the same person, how those conflicting emotions could emanate so effortlessly from one body.

"Hey, we're...we're okay, right?" he finally asked, hesitation clear in his tone. "I mean, God, I know this was wrong. I knew that when I called you, but..."

"Why did you call then?"
Peeta sighed. "I just...you were saying things about me and Johanna and they weren't true and I felt like you needed to know that they weren't true. And you didn't seem to believe my texts about it."

She bit her lip, debating if she wanted to ask what she wanted to ask. Or more, if she wanted to know the answer to what she wanted to ask. "Did it really matter what I thought about you and Johanna?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Why?" The question was almost silent, a whispered breath from her lungs.

"Well, look at you, all fancy schmancy for work today," Rue teased as Katniss plopped down beside her in the grass. She had moved back down to the basement so she hadn't seen much of Rue or Thresh, except on their breaks.

Katniss wrinkled her nose. "What are you talking about? This is what I always wear."

Thresh let out a deep snort. "It's what you've been wearing lately, Katniss, but it's still fancy. For you."

She glared at him. What did that mean, 'for her'? And what was so fancy about shorts and her polo? Granted, her shorts looked like they came from Madge's closet, but that was only because the two girls went shopping recently and Katniss trusted her roommate's judgment about clothes. Otherwise what was so fancy about her?

"It's not a bad thing, Katniss. I think you look nice," Rue offered, "I never realized how thick your hair is." She ran her hands over Katniss' loose tresses with a sigh. "It's gorgeous."

Katniss weakly smiled. She didn't often wear her hair down, especially in the summer when it was hot and her hair clung to her neck. But she had been lately, thanks to a text she got from Peeta a few days ago that complimented her on it. She pushed a strand behind her ear and chuckled. "Thanks. Just trying something new, you know?"

Thresh gave her an approving look. "Long hair is sexy."

"Jesus, Thresh!" Rue cried. "Must you turn everything sexual?" She rolled her eyes at him, which only made him laugh.

"What? All I'm saying is that guys are more attracted to women with long hair. It makes them appear more feminine and, by default, more attractive." He shrugged and took another drag of his cigarette. "It's evolution. Feminine features are signs of stronger genetic codes and therefore, more successful offspring."

"Where'd you pick that shit up from?" Rue asked. "Because it sounds like bullshit societal rules to perpetuate the stereotypes of women."

"I took that socio-politico-psycho-biology seminar last year. Men are hardwired to be more attracted to feminine features and women are hardwired to be more attracted to masculine features." He winked at the girls. "It's all about sex."

Rue wasn't convinced and Katniss played along, though she was curious how relevant what Thresh said was to reality. She had to admit that Peeta's broad chest and defined jawline were overtly masculine. And she was, obviously, very attracted to him. But what about her was feminine enough to attract such a desirable male? She had no real curves, her eyes were small, her cheeks plain. She
didn't even smile all that often, so her sunny disposition was definitely out.

"Muscles are masculine, right?" Rue piped up. When Thresh confirmed they were, she let out a soft whistle. "Well then I'll give your theory this, that is still one masculine man I wouldn't mind creating some offspring with."


Katniss was glad neither of them were paying particularly close attention to her or they'd have seen the way her neck and face broke out in a deep blush just at the sight of Peeta. She chewed on the inside of her lip as she took in every plane of his body, every fine golden hair that led down to his shorts. They may have noticed that her eyes never left him. Or that he chose that moment to glance over at her. She licked her lips. He cocked an eyebrow. It was so much a part of their daily routine, the dance they had been doing for the past couple weeks. Step forward, step back, never too close to one another but unable to completely let go. Even with both of them knowing they should.

'Nothing good can come from this,' he had told her. 'I'll end up hurting you.'

'How do you know I won't hurt you first?' she had countered. 'Why do you want this? If we both know we'll get hurt?'

'I can't stay away from you. I can't get you out of my head."

'Mutual pain, then?"

'Hearts don't break even, Katniss.'

Still, she wore her hair down more often. He would pause his run to stretch in her vicinity. He never called her. She never texted him. It was teasing and cruel, but it was how it had to be done.

Katniss needed out of her apartment. The summer temperature hit an all-time high and the building's air conditioning system completely shut down that morning. Ironic, given that she just sent her check in for utilities that very morning. Madge was out for some weekend "field trip" or something with her business seminar classmates to celebrate finishing the semester, so there wasn't anyone to complain about the heat to. After what felt like the millionth trip to the freezer to switch out her ice packs, she gave up. She needed to be someplace with some air conditioning, even if only for a few hours.

The bar was surprisingly slow when she got there. She waved to Gale, who immediately poured her a glass of Bud Light. "Did you scare everyone off, Hawthorne?" she asked, taking a sip.

'I don't know, man. Just been one of those days. Maybe people are too afraid to go out into the heat and content to stay home?" he answered, wiping his brow. Even though the bar's cooling system was in perfectly fine working order, they weren't immune to the sweltering heat outside. Plus, the bar was right in the doorway, so anytime it opened, they were hit with a wave of fire.

"I'm going to go sit in a dark corner and cool off. Our shitty AC broke," Katniss groaned, sliding her beer off the counter and sauntered to the back. Her phone buzzed in her pocket, a message from Madge with an update about the trip. Turns out the guy from her seminar she went on the semi-date with earlier in the summer was trying to make her jealous by hitting on every other girl in the place. It was backfiring on him, according to Madge, because they all rejected him and Madge wasn't at all interested in him anymore.

Katniss snorted and typed out a message letting her roommate know she went to the bar for a few hours to enjoy modern luxuries.
Madge. 10:14pm. /Piece of shit landlord. How does an entire building's system go out on the hottest day? And he hasn't done shit about it/

Madge. 10:16pm. /Fuck. The winner is on his way over. This should be fun. Will update later. Enjoy yourself./

Katniss stared at her phone, her fingers hovering over the keypad for a few minutes before she slipped her phone back into her pocket, proud of her self-control for the moment. The bar slowly began to fill up, still not a normal Friday crowd, but more impressive than when she arrived.

"Mind if I join you?"

Katniss looked up right into the piercing blue eyes of Peeta Mellark. She nodded her head to the open chair across the table from her. They sat in relative silence, exchanging eyes and smiles over their drinks as the bar slowly came to life. They probably should have talked; it was the normal thing for two people sitting together to do, but she was convinced that talking would ruin the atmosphere between them. Every so often, he'd get up from the table to bring her a new drink and she'd give him a very quiet "thank you" and get a very quiet "of course" in return.

Sometimes she would sing along with the karaoke singers, and he was enthralled by her voice. Then, when she caught him watching her, she'd blush and immediately stop, taking long drinks of her beer to hide her embarrassment. She knew she was a good singer but didn't like the attention it drew.

She was caught off guard when he cleared his throat and leaned across the table toward her. "Do you know what today is, Miss Everdeen?"

"A-plus, Miss Everdeen." He turned around and slowly walked toward the door. A few steps away, he turned his head over his shoulder. "Coming?"

Katniss let out the breath she had been holding and steadied her hands around her beer. She knew if she went with him, what would happen, what that could lead to. For both of them.

All she had to do was remind herself that it was just physical, that the emotional side needed to stay blocked off. *Fuck it.* She downed the remainder of her drink, slapped a few dollars tip on the table and caught up with him at the entrance.

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh I'm sorry, for the delay, you guys! There's been a lot going on since the last chapter (fic-wise and in RL) that have delayed this chapter's progression. Hopefully it
was worth it.

As always, thanks to Chelzie for looking this over. And thanks to everyone who kept me motivated and focused. Thank you to all the reviews, alerts, favorites, readers, everyone! I promise I'll get on top of replying to reviews from the last chapter and this chapter ASAP.

Feel free to come visit me on tumblr: mitchesbcray.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings in this chapter. Emotional abuse, alcohol/drug use, self-injury. If any of these things may trigger, please let me know (send me a message) and I'll try to edit it out without taking too much of the story.

Sorry for the delay, hopefully the length/content makes up for it! Thanks to my beta, Chelzie for her amazingly quick turnaround and to everyone else who helped me get through this chapter!

Katniss was surprised to find Peeta fidgeting with his keys when she pushed into the hot, stifling air outside. He caught her eye and gave her a shy smile as she made her way to his truck. "I wasn't sure if you were going to come or not."

She rolled her eyes. "Right. Come on, then."

They both slid into his truck and were comfortably silent for the majority of the ride home. At some point, he dropped his right hand from the steering wheel to where hers rested on her leg, giving her fingers a light squeeze, almost as if he were some nervous teenager taking a girl out for the first time. She laughed away this thought; she knew he could be vulnerable, she had seen it before, but she refused to believe that he was somehow this uneasy because of her.

"Something amusing you'd like to share with the class, Miss Everdeen?" Peeta joked, cocking an eyebrow at her. He went to move his hand away, but she made sure her fingers twitched just enough to hook the tips of her first few fingers around his.

"Nope," she popped the "p" at the end of her word, her face erupting into a smile and a playful blush sweeping across her cheeks. They stayed that way until they arrived at Victor's Village and he reluctantly released their light hold in order to guide them into the building and apartment.

Inside, once again, Peeta seemed to transform into a totally different person. He locked the door behind her and pulled her into his chest. "Do you know how long I've wanted this?" he asked in a hushed whisper, his lips ghosting over her skin. "How long I've wanted you?"

Katniss wanted to know when he stopped seeing her as his pupil and thought of her as more. That night in the storm, perhaps, when they nearly kissed? Or in the classroom at the end of term? Surely it was then, when they were seemingly free from the confines of their titles. She wanted to ask but when she opened her mouth, soft gasps were released as opposed to words. His hands were holding her tightly, his lips pressing urgent kisses across her jaw, down her neck, anywhere they could reach.

He walked her backward, pulling her hair tie out and letting her hair to fall in soft waves down her back. "So beautiful," he murmured against her skin. She trusted him, walking backwards through his darkened apartment, as he hadn't bothered turning the light on once inside. His lips teased hers, brushing across her skin everywhere but where she wanted him most, her own. His hands trailed through her hair, down her back, cupping her backside. She let out a surprised yelp when he lifted her up, and she instinctively wrapped her legs around his waist.
"You going to carry me?" she joked.

"You have a problem with that?" he answered playfully, dropping his hands slightly.

She yelped again and tightened her hold around his neck, pressing her entire body against his. She looked up, his blue eyes gleaming visibly in the dark. She craned her neck up and kissed him. Her lips were soft and warm against his, and she felt her arms pull him impossibly closer, mouths opened slightly, his tongue entering hers as he resumed their path toward his bedroom. He laid her down gently on his bed and she unhooked her legs. They smiled together, kissing more urgently. Peeta pulled her shirt over her head, reveling in her uncovered breasts. She had nearly forgotten that she decided to forgo her bra that night, figuring there was no place in town cold enough to make the extra clothing worthwhile. Now that he was running his hands over her exposed skin, she realized it was a blessing. While she may have been self-conscious the first time he saw her, now, with the slight sliver of moon cutting into his bedroom, she could see the desire radiating through him. The same desire she felt in herself.

He brushed the hair from her face, tracing over her cheekbones and down her jaw. He followed his fingers with kisses, tracing a line down her throat, between her breasts and down to her stomach. He cupped her breasts, squeezing them delicately. He pulled her shorts off in the process; Katniss' chest started to rise as her breath quickened. Her chest rose to meet his touch with every pass of his fingers.

He dragged his palm down along her stomach, to the edge of her panties. With the pads of his fingers, he stroked her thighs to part her knees. He could feel the heat radiating from her and his cock twitched in anticipation. He swept his index and middle finger over her covered lips, her clit passing between his knuckles.

She let out a shaky gasp and attempted to cover it with a half-smile. "You've done this before."

"Once or twice," he winked, hooking her panties with his fingers and pulled them down. Katniss reached up and pulled his lips to hers, opening her mouth so her tongue could find his. His fingers slipped down to stroke and touch and explore her pussy. She inhaled sharply as his fingers brushed against her exposed clit and he licked his lips at the sight.

He moved down, planting kisses down her legs, to her ankles, to the soles of her feet. She giggled at the light pressure but when she tried to pull her legs away, his hold on her ankles tightened. He smirked and moved them to his shoulders, completely opening her up to his gaze. He kissed and tongued her his way back up her legs, alternating between her left and right thighs. He glanced up at her, eyes closed, head slowly rolling back.

His head slid along the back of her thighs and he lowered himself to her center. His tongue flicked out and took its first lick of her. They both let out simultaneous groans and Peeta couldn't contain himself. Like a moth to a flame, the more of her he tasted, the more he needed her. Her fingers raked across his scalp, fisting his curls and pulling him closer to her.

He lifted her slightly, allowing his index finger access inside her as he continued licking her. Her back arched off the bed and she continued to thrust toward him, bumping her clit against his lips. Peeta added another finger and, without retracting them fully, began pumping them into her. His lips latched onto her sensitive bud, alternating between sucks and light nips.

He kept his eyes on her, watching her stomach muscles quiver with each breath she took. Her eyes were still closed, her mouth opened though occasionally she'd bring her bottom lip under her teeth. He gasped with each flick of his tongue, her soft moans increasing in pitch.

The heat within her was rising, spreading throughout her; her stomach twisted and turned tighter with
each thrust and lick. She felt herself break loose but her voice ceased as her muscles clamped around his fingers, pulling him in with each subsequent contraction. Her hips continued their movements as she rode out her orgasm. A flushness spread across her bare chest, up her neck, across her cheeks.

He slid up her body, kissing her deeply so she could taste herself on his tongue. She fisted the fabric of his shirt and urged it off of him, needing to feel his skin against hers, to know if his heart was racing like hers was. The rough denim of his jeans against her still sensitive clit was next to go, and they wasted no time in removing them and his boxer-briefs completely, leaving him as bare to the night as she was. Katniss slithered her hand from his shoulders down his chest, over his tattoo, down his taut stomach to the fine trail of hair leading to his already hard cock. She wrapped her hand around it, really feeling him for the first time. He watched her with awe and desire as she slowly pumped him from base to tip.

"Katniss," he breathed, letting his face fall into her hair. "I want you."

He felt her nod her head and heard her nearly silent affirmation before reaching behind him for a foil wrapped condom from the desk drawer near his bed. He kissed her again, positioning himself at her center, using all of his control not to push into her immediately. Katniss broke the kiss and gazed into his eyes. "Peeta," she nervously tapped her fingers on his shoulders. "When this happens, in the morning...will you still... want me, I mean?"

He couldn't help but wonder if she knew how small she sounded, how young and childlike. Surely she was only joking, she had to think more of him than to just use her for this night and throw her away. Did she see him as a one-night stand kind of person? But one look into her face, so truthfully vulnerable, and he knew. "Of course I will want you, Katniss. I would want you even if this wasn't going to happen. I've wanted you since we first met, I'll want you, still, tomorrow and the day after." He kissed her, gently and sweetly. "I promise you. But if you don't want-"

"No," she interrupted. "I want you. I just...needed to make sure."

"As long as you don't proclaim your undying love for me afterwards," he joked.

She laughed. "Why? You have a magic dick, Mellark?"

"That's Dr. Mellark, Miss Everdeen," he clicked his tongue at her. "Manners, young lady."

"Well, Dr. Mellark?"

"Yes, Miss Everdeen?"

"If I promise not to tell you I love you, will you just fuck me already?"

He laughed loudly, his entire body shaking over hers. "Oh, Katniss Everdeen. How could I ever not want you?" He brought his hand down to her center, brushing his fingers over her. "Are you ready?"

She reached down as well, guiding his erect cock to where his fingers once were. "Yes. For you." She kissed him as he pushed into her, stifling the moan that ripped from her throat. He filled her, almost to the point of uncomfortable, but she bit her lower lip and tried to relax. She knew from experience that relaxing would allow her body to respond to him the way it should, that overthinking would cause pain and discomfort.

She half expected him to be rough, to take her completely in one fell swoop. Instead, he pressed into her slowly, completely sheathing himself before slightly pulling out, repeating the motion over and over. It was different, that much she knew, but not unwelcomed. He controlled himself, a difficult feat at this point, using her facial expressions and vocal patterns to his advantage. But she needed
more. She wanted more. And in that one word she was able to croak out, that "more", he changed his tactic. His movements became faster; shallower thrusts that seemed to hit deeper inside her. He brought her legs around his waist again and her hands above her head. She cried out as he plunged into her over and over. His other thumb worked on her clit, rubbing that small bud in time with his thrusting, making her come with him inside of her.

Time had no meaning for her at this point. How long he had been inside her didn't matter, only that he was. And that he felt right. They felt right. When his movements shifted and his breathing began to catch in his throat, she internally groaned, dreading the emptiness that she was about to feel.

"Fuck, Katniss," he groaned, pulling out of her in time to fill the condom. She was still coming down from one of the orgasms he brought on, but focused enough on him to know he was beautiful. The light layer of sweat that covered his skin and matted his hair. The clensed eyes and stifled moan as he came, it was all she could see.

He discarded the condom and laid beside her, kissing her passionately. Their tongues fought against each other as their bodies shuddered together in post-orgasm. Katniss could feel his heartbeat in his chest, and could hear that it matched the thumping in her own ears. "Wow," he whispered against her skin. "That was, um, wow."

She chuckled, brushing his hair from his face. "Hey, Peeta," she said, the smile dropping from her lips. "I, uh, I love you."

His eyes widened for half a second before he caught himself. "Um...what?"

She smirked. "I'm kidding. Turns out your dick isn't so magical, huh?"

"Oh, you're going to pay for that, Miss Everdeen," he joked, pulling her tightly against him. "I'm not too old for the likes of you," he whispered into her ear, trailing his hand down her front. "I'll get you nice and ready before I properly punish you."

That's three times now Peeta's phone had rung while his head was buried between her legs. And damn, while it is downright sinful what that boy can do with his tongue, the techno tune is enough to distract her completely. She groaned and threw her head back against his pillow. "Peeta."

His shoulders slumped. That's not the way he wanted her saying his name. He pulled away and she crinkled her nose. "I should probably answer that," he said ruefully.

She laughed and let her legs fall closed as he extracted himself and reached over for his phone. He stared at the screen before hesitantly hitting the answer key.

"Dell? Are you...slow, slow down, Sweetpea. I can't understand what you're-" Peeta rubbed the bridge of his nose and glanced over to Katniss. 'I'm sorry,' he mouthed and nodded to the kitchen. "I'll be right back."

He slid out of bed and padded into the kitchen, closing his bedroom door behind him. She brought his sheet up to cover her naked chest and chewed her bottom lip. She could still hear bits of what he was saying, feeling guilty about eavesdropping, but she couldn't help it. Even after spending all weekend together, they hadn't exactly spent much of that time talking. Not productive "get to know each other" talking, that is; they had been too preoccupied taking advantage of their new-found physical freedom.
"Sweetpea, is everything okay? Are you hurt? Is your momma hurt? Does she know you called?"

Still, it wasn't her fault he was talking loud enough for her to hear, right?

A heavy sigh and the scraping of his kitchen chair against the floor. "You know you're not supposed to call without her permission, Sweetpea... shh don't cry, honey. What, what's wrong?" There was a long pause before he spoke again. This time, Katniss could hear the smile in his voice. "It's okay to be scared, Pre-K is a big step... yep, bigger than daycare. But you know what else?" he chuckled. "Pre-K is waaaay more fun than daycare... What do you mean, how do I know? Don't you trust me, Peanut?" Another laugh. "How about this? If after a week... Yes, a whole week. If after a week if you still don't like it, I'll tell your mom to let you come to school with me. But I gotta warn you, my school is pretty boring... Nope, no finger painting or music or... Snack time? You get snack time? Aw man, can I go to Pre-K? Yeah, I'll go to Pre-K and you go to my school. That's fair, right? No? Are you sure?"

There's a silence again, the joyful laughter abruptly cut off, his voice dropping to ice-cold levels. "She called me, Dell, what was I supposed to do? You want me to hang up on her? I know, I know, okay? It was my idea but I'm not going to just completely drop her when she reaches - she was nervous for her first day of school, I was just- fine. Fine. Tell her good -"

Then he stopped. She could hear him setting his phone down on the kitchen table and letting out a long sigh. She wanted to go to him, to wrap him up in her arms and bring him back to their safe cocoon, where they had drowned out the world and just were. All weekend. But if she went out now, he would realize she listened to his side of the phone call.

She waited a few minutes and when he didn't reappear, she wrapped the sheet around her and wandered out. He was sitting at the table, shoulders slumped, head in his hand, fingers pulling at his hair. He looked so broken down, so lifeless, it made her heart ache. "Peeta?" she called, softly. When he didn't respond, she stepped closer. "Peeta?"

He finally lifted his head and turned to her. His eyes were rimmed red and his pain shone through clearly. Katniss had noticed how expressive his eyes were, true windows into his emotions. She used to be that person; she could remember a time when her emotions couldn't be used against her and she could, and did, wear her heart on her sleeve.

She envied him at that moment. Whatever he had been through, whatever convinced him that he would hurt her, at least he was still himself, not some muted, guarded mutt like she was. Self-preservation came late in her life and it came at a heavy price.

He reached out for her hand and pulled her onto his lap. "Hey."

She rested her head on his shoulder. "Want to talk about it?"

He shook his head, intertwining their fingers. Peeta brought their conjoined hands up and gently kissed her fingers, then her inner wrist, smiling when the skin broke out in goose bumps. "I'd much rather do something else," he answered quietly.

In one move, he shifted her off his lap and onto the table.

"I, uh, I should probably get you home at some point, huh?" Peeta asked, bringing their hands to his lips. "Your roommate will be worried about what's happened to you."

Katniss shrugged. Madge was due home from her trip sometime today, but she doubted her
roommate would even notice her absence right away. Most likely, Madge would drop her bags on the floor right by the door, crawl into her bed with her shoes still on, and sleep until mid-Wednesday. "I'm in no rush." She glanced over at their fingers, interlocked with one another, and gave his hand a light squeeze. "Unless this is your subtle way of telling me to get lost."

She was only joking with him but her smile quickly dropped at his somber expression. "Don't you ever think that, Katniss Everdeen. No one could want you more than me."

Her body immediately reacted; her eyes shifted away from him, her hand pulled away, the brick in her throat made it impossible to breathe, though the urge to vomit was occurring simultaneously. 'No one wants you more than me.' She saw the concern etched across his face and excused her behavior away with the claim that she just needed the bathroom, but would be right back.

Locking the door behind her, Katniss gripped the edges of the cool porcelain sink and attempted to catch her breath and slow her heart rate. It was only an anxiety attack - the breathing, the feeling of suffocation, the shaking limbs and fingers. It would pass, she reminded herself. She thought back through her therapies, the skills that worked in the past. Breathing. *Inhale through the nose. Exhale through the mouth. Repeat. Repeat. Keep breathing. Inhale. Exhale.*

"You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, Katniss. But you can't shoulder all of this all of the time. It's okay to give up control. All of these things that have happened to you, they didn't happen because of you."

"What about Prim? If I hadn't been with-"

"What happened to Prim was an accident, Katniss, a terrible accident. There is no way you could have known what was going to happen. It wasn't your fault."

"No. It was. I shouldn't have listened to him. I shouldn't have stayed with him."

"Katniss, you stayed because he manipulated you, he twisted your sense of reality."

"I stayed because I was weak! I was weak and sad and so afraid of being alone that I allowed him to..."

She felt the cool drips of her tears splash against her hand. She glanced up at herself in the mirror, her hair partially covering her face, sweat forming along her brow and cheekbones, her bottom lip bleeding slightly from biting down on it as hard as she had been - the nervous habit becoming extreme when she was anxious. She licked the blood off, cringing at the slight hint of metallic on her tongue. Her breathing continued to come out in short, loud puffs, but at least she could breathe again.

Her head was still spinning; the breaths she was able to take weren't nearly deep enough but it didn't matter. 'Focus on your breathing, Katniss. Just keep focusing on your breathing.' At least she wasn't crying or choking. Maybe it wouldn't be quite that terrible this time around. After all, she was able to actually make it to the bathroom before her total meltdown. Her therapist would call that a positive step, even if it was utterly pathetic. 'No, Katniss,' she could hear his gentle voice in her head, 'Not pathetic.'

Dr. Aurelius was always talking to her like that, like what she was feeling or experiencing wasn't abnormal or weird. Like it was perfectly natural to hear her ex-boyfriend's voice in her head whenever someone said anything negative about her. Like having flashbacks to the worst week of her life, to the point of completely shutting down, was something that happened to everyone. Dr. Aurelius would tell her that it was part of the healing process, that she needed time to relearn what was true and what wasn't, that two years of hearing manipulative lies at such a young age would
have a greater impact on her than anyone could have realized at the time. She wasn't going to be
better overnight, it was going to take time, and she would have to be patient.

But what the hell did Dr. Aurelius know about her life, other than what she had told him? He
confessed to her that he didn't have anything to compare to what she had been through, that he had
no idea how she had made it through as well as she did. That she was already better off because she
was able to survive and didn't fall back into Alan Gloss' scheme. Somehow it was that, that simple
sentence Dr. Aurelius had mentioned off hand that pushed her. She didn't fall back into his scheme.
And she wouldn't. She couldn't do that to Prim, not again. She hadn't listened to her little sister's
warnings or pleas about him when they first started dating and she paid for it dearly.

She exhaled until her stomach hurt and splashed some water on her face. Dr. Aurelius' last advice to
her was to, "Fake it till you make it." She could do that, school her features so no one could tell she
was upset. She slipped with Peeta, allowed her face to show her pain, but she wouldn't do it again.
She would be the strong one, the girl Prim always saw her as even when she couldn't see it herself.
She would do this for Prim.

"I was getting worried about you," Peeta smiled as Katniss re-entered his room. "Thought you might
have fallen in or something. I was prepared to go all superhero to rescue you."

"Rescue me from the bathroom? You really do have a serial killer apartment," she answered,
crawling back into his arms and resting her head on his chest. "Is that a tweed jacket I spied hanging
in your closet?" she laughed. He ran his fingers through her hair and she listened to the steady beat of
his heart. Despite his warnings that he would eventually hurt her, Katniss knew it couldn't be worse
than anything she hadn't already been through. He couldn't say anything more hurtful, couldn't tear
her family apart, couldn't do anything except further break her already fragmented heart. But even
that was only possible if she was willing to give him that. And despite the primal urge she felt toward
him, the undeniable heat and electricity that flowed between them whenever they were together, it
wasn't love. It could never be love, so he could never hurt her.

Peeta knew she wasn't okay. He knew as soon as she leaped out of bed. He could hear the gasps of
breaths and the painful, chest-tightening sobs that racked her body. She wasn't fooling him, he knew
that kind of pain. Those demons that seem to come out of nowhere. The ones elicited by a fleeting
thought, a laughter that's too similar, a few innocent words taken out of context, hearing the voices of
those who hurt you the most. Of those who hurt you the most. Of those you hurt. No, Peeta Mellark knew pain. He knew she was in
it, and he knew he couldn't do anything to help her when he was in too much himself. So when he
took her home, he gave her a gentle kiss on the lips to show her he understood and still cared but
couldn't do this right now.

He made the mistake of stopping by the liquor store on the way home. He wasn't out at home, but
the six-pack of 312 wasn't what he wanted. Beer wouldn't help him forget, not like whiskey would.
And he needed to forget what had happened, needed to wipe his memory clear of the phone call that
set him back again, that proved he had no idea what he was doing or how he was supposed to move
on with his life. He needed to rid himself of his own demons, the only way he knew how. The same
way they condition sex offenders or pedophiles out of their urges. Show them something they enjoy
and give them something they don't. In theory, the enjoyable thing would become associated with the
aversive behavior and they would no longer want the previously enjoyable thing. Operant
conditioning at its finest.

He hadn't watched the DVD that he made about Maddie yet. It was made as a special present for
Delly on Maddie's birthday. When things started to disintegrate between them, he thought he could
use it as a reminder to her about what they could have had. What they did have. He hated himself for
trying to use that perfect little girl as a way to fix his relationship, but he was a desperate man who
was willing to do almost anything to keep his family together. It wasn't enough, and a part of him knew it never would be enough, and when he finally moved out, Delly made sure the DVD was on top of one of the boxes he hauled away.

"Delly's probably going to kill me for this."

Peeta heard his own voice over the black screen and broke the seal off the bottle of alcohol sitting next to him. He had forgone the tumbler with ice, knowing he'd need the full strength of it to get through this.

"But I'm going to do it anyway. She'll forgive me eventually." Slowly, the screen was filled with the sights and sounds of the hospital hallway he was navigating through. He pushed open a set of doors into Delly's room.

"Oh my God, Peeta! Get that camera out of here!" she groaned. "I look like a sweaty cow!"

"Peeta leaned down to kiss her dampened curls. "You look beautiful."

"You are so going to pay for this, Peet." She hadn't even bothered trying to hide the exhausted smile. "You're so good to me. To us." The camera panned down to the newborn in Delly's arms. Swaddled tightly in a pink hospital blanket, a matching pink cap over her already unruly blonde curls, a pair of bright blue eyes peered up into the camera.


"She's got his nose."

Peeta reached down to gently stroke the infant's blush-red cheeks. She smiled and cooed at his contact.

"Look at you, charming her already. Like mother, like daughter, huh?"

Peeta took a long drink, straight from the bottle, wincing slightly at the alcoholic burn in his mouth. That moment, looking down at that innocent little girl, he was lost forever. Even then, he knew he would have done anything to keep her safe. Love at first sight was created just for that brief moment in time.

"What did we decide for a name?" The nurse who had stayed by Delly's side during childbirth asked, after doing a quick physical checkup of the two.

Delly beamed. "Madaline." It was her grandmother's name, and as soon as she found out she'd be having a little girl, she decided she would carry on the name. When she initially told Peeta her fear that it was too old of a name for a young girl, he suggested that they just give her a nickname, Maddie, until she was older.

"Very pretty name. So, Madaline...Cartwright?" The nurse asked with a nervous glance between Peeta and Delly. "Or did you want her to have her father's name?"

"Cartwright," Peeta answered, giving Delly's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "We can always change it when it's official."

To this day, Peeta recognized that Delly's subsequent tears were mainly due to the hormonal free-for-all that came after giving birth, but he liked to believe that his gesture had something to do with it. "Madaline" was easy, but deciding how to handle her last name had taken a stressful toll on the very pregnant Delly up to the end.
He took another swallow as a soft lullaby began to play, accompanied by a series of pictures of the trio, mostly of those first few nights with Maddie. A drink for each picture.

**Peeta holding Maddie in the hospital while Delly slept.**

**Delly trying to feed Maddie for the first time, an aggravated face because that girl was obstinate.**

**Peeta and Delly curled up in the hospital bed together, Maddie in her bassinet beside them.**

**Packing up the car for the way home.**

Peeta and Maddie had bonded instantly. To anyone watching them, he was the best 'Daddy' any little girl could have hoped for. Delly would joke that she could just pack up and leave and neither one would notice.

Another drink.

**Maddie's squeals of excitement could be heard from the next room over. **"Peet's trying to give Maddie a bath," Delly's voice explained. She panned into the kitchen where her daughter was laughing and splashing in the sink, effectively soaking Peeta in the process. Delly let out a little snort at Peeta trying to calm the excitable girl down.

He glanced over his shoulder. "You think this is funny, do you?"

"I do, actually. Almost as funny as you thought it was when she threw up all over me."

"Do you hear that, Sweetpea?" Peeta turned back to where Maddie was watching them with rapt attention. "Your mommy thinks it's funny that I'm all soaking wet. Is that funny?"

Maddie laughed as Peeta tickled her and kicked her feet, causing another splash of water to hit Peeta in the face. Delly snorted again. "See? Even she agrees."

"We can show her how funny this is, can't we?" He said to the baby, picking her up and holding her against his body, completely forgoing the towel on the counter that was borderline useless at this point. He grabbed the spray hose and a stream of water came flying at the screen.

Luckily, Delly had jumped out of the way to protect the camera but from her shriek, it was clear she had been hit, much to Maddie's delight.

Another drink. He could hardly taste the alcohol at this point, which was just as well; it was easier to keep drinking without the distraction. He knew full well that this was only going to get worse for him as more pictures filled the screen.

**Maddie napping on Peeta's chest.**

**Maddie and Peeta both sleeping with their left arms hooked behind their heads and their legs splayed out.**

**Peeta and Delly curled up on the couch with Maddie in front of them.**

Another drink. Then another. His head was starting to swim, just the beginning of the intoxication he needed at this point.

**Maddie with spaghetti all over her face, crinkling her nose in disgust.**

**Delly holding Maddie's hands to help her walk.**
Maddie walking on her own toward Delly's smiling face.

His eyes began to water at the sights in front of him. His head was heavy but he refused to look away. He brought the bottle up one last time, finishing it off and wiping his lips with the back of his hand. He hadn't realized just how much of it he had consumed, but he didn't care. He was spiraling, the images of his past were taunting him. That happy family on the screen that he needed so badly wasn't his to have. Those were memories that he was supposed to have given up when he moved out. When he left that crying child behind for good. When he told her he wasn't coming back. When her mother had to physically remove her from his leg.

There wasn't enough alcohol in his apartment to wipe those feelings clean. Rebecca would call him an idiot right about now for even still having that DVD, let alone for watching it. Drunk. He knew better, but he didn't care. He couldn't think about anything else except the look on Maddie's face when he walked away from her. When he abandoned her. It didn't matter what anyone told him, he knew. And he hated himself for ever doing that to another person. To a child.

Peeta stumbled into the bathroom, trying to focus his eyes on the pill bottles hidden in his medicine cabinet, more than he knew what to do with. He didn't like medications, so even though he always got his prescriptions filled, they often sat untouched in his bathroom. Used only for emergency purposes. This was as much of an emergency as anything, he supposed. He was in pain, worse than when he broke his leg as a child, worse than the car accident in college, this was pain that started deep inside him, radiating from the inside out. It was unbearable. It made his limbs ache and his head pound. He needed it gone, he couldn't handle it anymore.

He knew better than to mix any of this with alcohol, he just didn't care. It was a dangerous way of thinking that had gotten him in trouble before, but it didn't matter. At this moment, he just needed to forget. He needed to rid himself of the scorching flame that threatened to consume him whole.

Peeta was not looking forward to the "beginning of the semester" meeting with his adviser. He had finally lifted himself from his depression cycle and hadn't drank for almost a week, but he was sure he still looked like shit. He had planned on spending the day with Katniss, to make up for being a total dick to her lately, especially since they wouldn't have as much time together once classes actually started. He figured she would be taking a full load, plus working at the research lab, and he was set to teach his first full load of classes, which effectively scared the shit out of him. He liked teaching just fine, but this was the first step toward proving himself, toward stepping out of his infamous mother's shadow and becoming recognized on his own. He worried if he'd be able to handle the stress-load that came with teaching and doing enough research to get published so he could get on that damned tenure track. There was no room in the slow lane here, not if he wanted to keep his job in this volatile economy. Every year, there were more and more fresh-faced grad students searching for jobs, doing more than the years before to prove they were worthwhile. He already felt a step behind and his head started to ache.

"Ah, Peeta. You're late."

Peeta rolled his eyes as Dr. Haymitch Abernathy came strolling up to him, still reeking of day old booze. Summertime to Haymitch apparently meant giving less of a shit than normal. At least during the year he was sure to shower and attempt to scrub off the layers of his extra-curricular hobby. It was no secret that Dr. Abernathy was a functioning alcoholic, but he was tenured and still published and his classes were always full. His students hated him personally, but they continued to come back semester after semester. He was a conundrum to all the other psych faculty members but he seemed to prefer it that way. He was the one who reached out to Peeta before graduation, offering him a position and to serve as his mentor of sorts. 'There's something about you, Boy,' he said gruffly, the
first time they met. 'You know what you're capable of, but you don't go showboating like the other little fuckers. You're one of the good ones.'

His mother, upon hearing the news of his position and mentor, only responded by giving Peeta a rundown of Dr. Abernathy's work on the evolutionary function of our cognitive and visual biases and stating that Haymitch at least had the decency to use actual scientific theory in his work, despite being part of the "soft" science and twisting biology to fit his own belief system. Peeta suspected that was the highest form of a compliment possible to receive from his mother, so he shared it with Haymitch during one of their meetings. Haymitch laughed and called her the battiest old kook he ever had the fortune of knowing and that he was damned close to having that cross-stitched on a pillow.

"Come on in." Haymitch limped slightly past him, a side injury he sustained during his youth when he got into a particularly nasty scuffle with some other kid from his neighborhood, exacerbated by weather, age, and his own flair for dramatics. Haymitch was the premier psychology professor in the department, meaning he got first pick of the offices when they renovated the building. Of course he would pick the one in the corner, furthest away from anyone else. He claimed it was so he never had to deal with meddling peers or sniveling undergrads who wandered by with questions about grades or some assignment, but Peeta suspected it was also so no one could give him grief about the state of it. Haymitch was brilliant but an absolutely unorganized slob. How he survived graduate school, no one was really sure. "Take a seat." He indicated toward one of the overstuffed chairs that bookended a small end table with a chess board atop. "Your move."

The pieces hadn't been touched since their last meeting, so Peeta slid his messenger bag off his shoulder and slumped into his normal seat. "Rook to d8"

"So, ready for this big, big, big adventure?" Haymitch asked, pouring himself and Peeta each a glass of the brandy he had hidden in his bookcase. He snorted as he took a sip. "Just met with that insufferable Head of Admissions who gave me some spiel about cleaning my act up for this incoming group of little shits. I swear if she didn't have me to fuss over, I don't know what she would do all day. Queen to xf6+

"Probably her actual job," Peeta mused, his eyes scanning the board. Effie Trinket did seem to have a nose for Haymitch and his antics. The two had a strange relationship; Peeta could never tell if they hated each other or had some odd mutual respect for one another, but Haymitch had told him enough stories about her harping on him for his behavior during department head meetings or staff assemblies to make Peeta realize that she was almost always on him for something. His behavior toward the incoming students was apparently just another in a long list. "King to xf6. I take your queen."

"See? I'm providing her a vital service. No one here actually wants to do their job." Haymitch leaned back and nodded his head. "Smart move, Boy. Now, about this upcoming semester, you know your case load?"

Peeta nodded. "Two Intros, a research methods, and a lower level social. Do I get any research assistants this year?"

"Ha! Bishop to e5+. If we get any undergrad volunteers. We'll have to hope Cecelia doesn't snatch up the undecided students first. For some reason, everyone is always so damned interested in her stuff. Don't they realize that we can't all do work with that fancy schmancy virtual driving machine? Some of us have to do the boring lab stuff in order for her to actually test her ideas. Kids."

Peeta rolled his eyes. Haymitch warned him about this, about how difficult it could be to get undergrads who wanted to help in labs until their senior year when they realized that in order to go to
grad school, they'd need research experience. And the school wondered why they never could pass anyone on. He shook his head. "It's fine. I've got some stuff lined up that I can start doing as soon as the pool opens for participants. I can do it myself, it'd just be easier to have a few others around to help with the day to day data collection."

"Yeah, well, I'll see what I can do. I might be able to spare a few."

Peeta let out a long breath and scanned the chess board again, his tongue resting slightly against his lips as he concentrated on the puzzle before him. He could move his King but he wondered if that's exactly what Haymitch would be expecting, since it seemed like the most logical option at the moment and Haymitch seemed to revel in setting Peeta up with his little mind tricks.

"You ready for your classes? Got your syllabi all done?"

"Yes," Peeta answered, still staring at the board. "I brought them with me in case you wanted to take a look at them."

Haymitch nodded, but kept his eyes on the young professor. "I'm sure you're fine. Your summer syllabus was well above what was expected so I don't doubt these are fine, too."

"Okay."

"There is, um, uh, one more thing I needed to talk to you about."

This caught Peeta's attention. Haymitch sounded so uncomfortable, which only occurred when students came crying to him and he hadn't had enough booze in his system yet. Looking up, he noticed that his mentor did, indeed, look a bit pale and awkward. He retracted his hand from the piece he had finally considered moving and sat back. "Yes, Sir?"

"Aw knock that 'sir' shit off, Peeta, it's nothing that important. Just a, uh, warning of sorts. I don't want to know what the hell you young'ns are doing in your spare time. Believe me, I get enough of the TMI from my students, I don't need it from you. As long as you're not kicking puppies or stuffing babies in freezers, I'll stay out of your business. Lord knows you've done well to stay out of mine."

As he said this, he reached across to pour himself another glass and offered Peeta a refill, which he declined. "And I know this isn't exactly a thriving place for you kids, not really a ton of places for you all to go and relax. But I've been hearing some rumors that your little group of kiddos have been hanging around some of the undergrads' bars, down on University."

Peeta gulped and felt the blood drain from his face. Haymitch never paid any mind to the never-ending gossip that spread through the departments, so if he was bringing this up then he must know about himself and Katniss. Someone must have seen them sitting together. Maybe even leaving together. He tried to make sure to leave well enough ahead of her so it wasn't painfully obvious that they were headed toward the same place, but someone must have put two and two together. They were safe that time, she wasn't his student. But he had totally forgotten about the rampant rumors that may fly, since she was still a student.

"All I'm suggesting is that you guys should maybe search out some different watering holes, maybe on the other side of town, away from the college kids. I know you're all smart enough to know better than to get involved with anything that's going to get you in trouble, but you especially need to make sure you keep your nose clean. There's more than one professor on this campus who would love to see Dr. Helena Mellark's kid crash and burn. Spiteful bastards."

Peeta licked his suddenly chapped lips. "May I ask, ah, what you've heard? Or who you've heard it about?"
Haymitch eyed him curiously over his glass. "Is there something you'd like to get off your chest first, Dr. Mellark?"

He knew. There was no way he didn't know. That wasn't an offer so much as a statement. 'Tell me what happened so I can know what's going on.' Peeta moved his King to g5 but stayed silent. He needed to tell Haymitch what was happening but what was he supposed to say when he didn't even know himself what was happening between them. It didn't really matter, he supposed, since the University saw no difference between dating and sex when it came to professor-student relationships. Only that there was some power differential that may impact grades and class work.

Haymitch shook his head and leaned back in his chair. "Dr. Mellark, if something inappropriate happened between you and a student while she was still your student, I need to know before anyone else begins to suspect. All I know is that you two have been seen spending time together in a bar while both of you had been drinking. That's not a crime; we've all been known to interact with our older students from time to time. Hell, I take my upper level stats classes out after our final every year. But something tells me this isn't just a matter of having a few drinks with a pretty co-ed."

"No, Sir," Peeta finally answered, staring at his hands. "Nothing happened between ... her and I until after grades were finalized. We did run into each other a few times while we were out but we didn't, um, you know, until after we could. I made sure of it."

"I'm not asking about when you banged her, Boy. I'm asking if there was anything inappropriate that could come back to haunt you should this girl decide to come clean."

"She won't." Peeta answered instantly, his fingers digging into the arms of the chair.

Haymitch cocked an eyebrow. "So your ... relationship with this girl did not begin until after grades were finalized? And it is a completely consensual relationship between the two of you."

"Completely."

Haymitch shrugged. "Well, like I said, you're a smart kid and you've got a lot more to lose in this situation than she does, so I don't doubt you've made sure you're not breaking any rules. I'll do what I can to downplay the rumors but know that if you two are seen around campus together, there'll be no way to keep it quiet. These bastards love a good 'love story' almost as much as they love gossiping about a couple of 'star-crossed lovers.'"

"I understand."

"Do you? Because I don't need to tell you how much additional pressure there is on you than anyone else in your cohort. You don't need anything that's going to distract you from what you're here to do."

"You sound like my mother," Peeta mumbled.

"Even lousy moms can be smart every once in a while. Bishop to g7. Checkmate." Haymitch added with a grin. "Glad we had this chat, Peeta."

He was excused. Haymitch was done talking about Peeta's personal life, having done his duty as his adviser. "Thanks, Haymitch."

Haymitch just waved his hand as Peeta grabbed his bag and slipped out. "Oi! Boy!"

Peeta stuck his head back into Haymitch's office. "Yes?"
"I don't want to see you not live up to your potential. I meant it when I said you were one of the good ones."

Madge was a woman on a mission as she downed yet another shot of tequila, having already brushed off Katniss' pleas to stop. When they got to the bar that evening, Madge hadn't indicated that she was looking to get plastered. It was supposed to be a low-key night for them, and that was the only reason Katniss agreed to go out in the first place. Two weeks after the last time she actually saw Peeta, with only a handful of text messages between them, and Katniss was still struggling to figure out what exactly was happening between them.

But now, rather than working that out with her best friend, Katniss was busy trying to locate whoever kept buying Madge shots, so she could not-so-politely tell him to knock that shit off right now. Actually, she should give Gale a piece of her mind for serving some asshole trays full of shots but when she caught sight of him, he was on the far side of the bar helping a different group of patrons, totally unable to be the provider of the shots.

"To all the fuckers who fuck fucking bitches!" Madge's voice rang out from the small crowd of people, followed by a roar of approval. Katniss located her roommate's bleach-blond hair and pushed through the crowd to get to her, throwing death glares at whoever complained about how rudely she shoved them out of the way. She didn't even know where all these people came from, but she figured she'd gladly take them all out at this point if they stood in her way.

She was, however, stopped short when she finally got through the crowd and watched Madge aggressively making out with some stranger next to her, amid the cat calls and cheers for either the guy or her, Katniss couldn't tell for sure. Either way, Madge had her arm wrapped around the man's neck and was pressing her body flush against his and Katniss could swear there was slight pelvic thrusting going on. "Madge!" she cried, pulling on her friend's elbow.

"Katniss!" Madge yelled with a smile. "Fucking hell, it's my bestie, Katniss!" She jumped off the rando she had been sucking face with and flung her arms around her roommate's neck. "Someone get this girl a fucking shot for being the best fucking friend in the entire fucking world!" The group cheered again as Madge planted a very sloppy kiss on the lips of a very unsuspecting Katniss.

"Madge," Katniss warned, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, cringing at the amount of Madge's 'Rouge Volupté Shine' lipstick that rubbed off. "Madge, what are you doing? I thought you said this was going to be low key. And here you are, taking shots, kissing people, making a joke of yourself. Come on," she reached for Madge's elbow again but Madge quickly jerked it away.

"Madge!" Two shots appeared in front of them but before Madge could drink it, Katniss snatched it away and downed them both, one right after the other, losing the battle not to gag as the spiced liquor drained down her throat. "Jesus, Madge, how are you still standing?" she sputtered.

"I ... don't know," Madge admitted, "I'm honestly a little disappointed that I still am." She turned back to the group. "Who's here to get fucked up?"

Katniss reached for her again, pulling her away from the still cheering group. "What is going on with you, Madge?"

"What are you talking about?" Madge asked, stumbling slightly at being forced to move so quickly while drunk. Her words were beginning to noticeably slur and her eyes glossy and bloodshot. "I'm fine. I was just trying to have a good time and these fiiiine gentlemen started providing shots."
"Do you want me to take you home?"

Madge squinted at the clock behind the bar and shook her head. "I'm sorry, Katniss. I know I promised you a quiet night. I just...I just need to forget tonight. I don't...I can't explain it right now. But you should go, I know this isn't fun for you. I can just call a cab when I'm done here."

Katniss wanted to protest, to tell Madge just to come home now, but she knew it would be a lost cause. When Madge needed to forget, there was no getting her off her method. Tonight it happened to be through alcohol and social validation. It wasn't healthy and Katniss hated it, but Madge didn't interfere with her coping mechanisms unless they became problematic, so she wouldn't either. She gave Madge a hug, reminding her to be safe and to call her if she needed anything.

But just to be safe, she figured she'd let Gale know, so he could at least keep an eye on her. As Katniss approached his side of the bar, she understood exactly what Madge was trying to forget. Sitting at the edge of the bar, running a finger along the rim of her beer bottle was the same sex-kitten she was once jealous of. Only this time, instead of hanging allover Peeta, Johanna was quite clearly interested in Gale, who was leaning over the bar, looking at her in a way that he had previously reserved only for Madge. Katniss felt her stomach drop as they laughed and Gale's hand slid over the back of hers when he had to pour someone else's drink. She watched Johanna's eyes follow him over her bottle and smile when he finally turned back to wink at her.

Gale winked at her? What the hell? It took everything in Katniss' body not to march over there and give him a verbal lashing but she knew that wouldn't solve anything. It was clear Madge knew about this current development and didn't want Katniss to get involved, or she would have told her. And she did did hate getting in the middle of those two's problems. Instead she turned around and found her former place at the table, switching her drink to a Diet Coke and kept an eye on her roommate with a sad smile.

At some point, Madge realized she hadn't left and came over to her, far more intoxicated than was probably healthy. "You stayed?" Her eyes flitted over to the bar and began to water. "I know he's your friend..."

Katniss squeezed her hand. "Hey now. None of that. You're my best friend. Chicks before dicks or something, right?"

Madge laughed and wiped her eye. "Something like that."

"You ready to go home?"

"Yeah. I think so. Um, do I look...do I look like I've been..."

Katniss stood and used her thumb to wipe the tear and bits of eye shadow that had smudged on Madge's face. She fluffed her roommate's hair and smiled. "Gorgeous, dahling. But if you want, you can walk on the other side of me." Madge nodded and Katniss wrapped her arm through Madge's elbow, pulling her close. She caught Gale's eye for just a second on their way out but turned her head to focus on Madge, who was doing her absolute best to appear collected, despite her level of drunkenness. Surprisingly, to the untrained eye, she was pretty convincing, but Katniss knew Gale would be able to tell if he wanted. So she used her body to block as much of Madge's as possible until they were in the car and on their way home.

When Katniss climbed into bed behind Madge and wrapped her arms around the blonde, she heard the tears start to fall. "Katniss," she sobbed.

"It's ok, Madge," Katniss answered, running her fingers through Madge's curls. "I'm here."
"Do you...do you think she's prettier than me?"

Katniss frowned. Madge's insecurities, which Katniss never really understood, were exacerbated by alcohol, leaving the blonde girl a broken mess when she got this way. There wasn't much Katniss could do for her other than answer her questions and prepare for the onslaught of the next few days until Madge finally roused herself out of her funk. "Absolutely not. That's the same girl, remember, who was hanging all over Peeta that night."

"Fuck her. She's probably a skank whore." Madge was quiet for a few minutes. "Actually, I'm sure she's really nice. It's Gale that's a skank whore."

Katniss let out a laugh that took over the room and soon both girls were laughing. "Go to sleep, Madge. We'll deal with this in the morning, okay?"

"Yeah," Madge answered softly, snuggling in closer against Katniss' body.

Just as she was about to fall asleep, Katniss' phone lit up.

Peeta. 3:33am. /I'm sorry I've been so distant./

Katniss. 3:35am. /It's okay./

That was a lie. Katniss wasn't ok with it; it had been plaguing her since he dropped her off with little more than a kiss on the cheek.

Peeta. 3:38am. /You deserve to know why./

Well, there it was. She had been so confused about what he was going through and what it meant for them. But his willingness to explain, to open up about whatever had happened that day, that had to be a positive step, right? Alan had never tried to explain when he was an ass and just dismissed it when she asked, assuring her it would never happen again. Which, of course, it always did.

Peeta. 3:39am. /Let me know when you're free?/

Katniss. 3:40am. /Next week? After classes get settled?/

Peeta. 3:43am. /You let me know. I'm just so sorry, Katniss. You deserve better./

Katniss. 3:46am. /You don't know that. I'll text you when I'm free. Night, Peeta./

Peeta. 3:50am. /Sweet dreams, my beautiful girl ;)/

Katniss laughed at the last message and fell asleep with a goofy grin on her face, which should have made her anxious since she was frustrated with him only minutes before. Instead, she felt slightly guilty for feeling so giddy while her friend was so hurt. But Madge was soundly asleep at the moment, so Katniss allowed herself to feel the lightness that overtook her whenever Peeta said things like that to her.

It took another couple of weeks before Katniss felt calm and collected with her schedule. None of her biology professors were going to make this semester easy and when she made out her calendar of due dates, tests, study sessions, and her work schedule, she thought she might lose her mind. Adding onto her pressure, her advisor loved her idea for her senior thesis so much that he less-than-subtly hinted he wanted her to try to get it published in an undergrad journal. No pressure or anything. She wondered if she should preemptively apologize to Madge for the inevitable fighting that will occur
Madge was still having some issues but only Katniss was privileged enough to know when she had a breakdown. Both girls had become pros at hiding whenever anything bothered them from everyone but each other. The morning after the bar, Katniss scoured through Madge's room, checking all possible hiding places for anything that could be used to puncture or cut into her skin. She had made remarkable strides in her coping skills and had done a very thorough cleaning herself, but she always thought of herself as a recovering alcoholic in that sense. She would never be "cured" of the desire to hurt herself, but she could find better ways of dealing with things. But when Madge got into a spiral, her behavior was always somewhat unpredictable, and this thing with Gale had most definitely sent her into a spiral.

Madge had scheduled an appointment with that therapist for a Friday afternoon, since his office was back home, nearly two hours away. She had tried to find other people closer to town but never felt comfortable with anyone else. Her parents were going to be out on some trip anyway, so she'd have the entire 'Undersee Manor' all to herself, no overbearing parents to circumvent any progress she may be able to make in her session. But it meant Katniss would have the apartment to herself for the entire weekend.

Katniss. 4:25pm. /You free tonight?/

Peeta. 4:30pm. /Say around 6? I can make us dinner if you want./

Katniss. 4:33pm. /See you then./

Katniss found herself slightly nervous as she came upon Peeta's door. She wanted to know what had happened to him; he said himself she deserved to know. But she remembered that look on his face that morning, which she knew alltoo well. A look of loss. Of despair. Of complete abandonment. Was she really prepared to deal with whatever he had lurking inside him that served as a switch of sorts, flipping his personality from charming and welcoming to completely closed off? She could leave now, she realized. She hadn't knocked on his door yet, her arm was only hovering slightly in the air. She could leave and he would never know and she could just tell him it was too much. That the power differential wasn't something she could handle. That she needed to focus on her coursework and didn't need the extra distraction.

But she couldn't leave. She couldn't seem to break that bond between them, even when she was angry at him and wanted nothing to do with him, they were drawn together in some unimaginable way. Sure she could walk away now, but it would never last. She'd be back at some point, she'd see him again, and it would all have been for nothing. He was in her system now, like some drug that addled with her brain and made her incapable of thinking of anything else. She didn't like it, but that disapproval never seemed to last long enough for her to act on it. It was fleeting, the last bit of rationality when it came to Peeta was brief and fading quickly. And was replaced by a feeling of contentment. A feeling of fullness and satisfaction that she hadn't experienced for some time. A new kind of hunger that refused to be quenched.

So she knocked. And when he answered the door, she couldn't stop the small smile that flitted across her face. The smile previously only reserved for Prim. For her Prim. The thought alone replaced the smile with a scowl. How dare she allow herself to share that with anyone else. It was hers and Prim's, and no one else's. Her mind was reeling and she felt light-headed. Hands reached for her and pulled her into a warm body.

"Katniss. Are you okay?"

Everything stopped. And all she could see were those blue eyes that she had so missed with that mop
of blonde hair. But that wasn't her voice. And those weren't her hands. That's not her, Katniss. Not anymore. She blinked a few times, allowing Peeta's broad form to come in clearly. "Um, yes. Sorry, bit of a head rush, apparently. Can I uh, have a glass of water?" It was a cover, but not enough to slip past him. His eyes were trained on her, worry seeping through them, as if he thought she may collapse at any moment.

He led her to the couch and slipped into the kitchen to fill her a glass. "Here," he handed it to her, sitting on the opposite side of the sofa, just far enough away so their knees would brush against one another if either shifted just right. "I, uh, I'm glad you came over."

Katniss took a large gulp of water before responding. Her head was still dizzy but she knew where she was, knew why she was here. No more images of her baby sister. "I'm not happy with what you did, you know," she said quietly. "It was what I was afraid would happen. Why I asked -"

"I know. And I'm so sorry, Katniss. Believe me, when you asked that it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. And I had every intention of calling you every day. You were always in my head, I just...I couldn't talk to you then. Not until I figured some stuff out." He sighed and moved from the couch over to his television, fishing out the blank DVD case. "This is why I couldn't talk to you," he explained, holding the case up.

She nodded, debating if she should tell him that she understood. That she had seen it before, that she knew he had a daughter and a family someplace else and that while she didn't want kids, she wouldn't be scared off by him having one. Because surely that's what it was about. She saw the pictures. She heard the fight that morning. If she came clean, it would make it easier, right? "Peeta, I know."

"You know?"

"I know about her. About the little girl. And the woman."

Peeta smiled sadly at the DVD case, running his finger along the art cover on the front. "No, Katniss, you don't know. That's what I need to tell you about." He sat back down on the couch and opened the case, pulling out the stack of pictures. He held up the one of the three of them together. "This," he said, pointing to the woman next to him, "Is Delly. Delly was the absolute love of my life. Second only to Madaline." He pointed to the little girl. "I didn't think it was possible to love anything as much as I loved her. Well, love her, I suppose."

"Your daughter."

Peeta chuckled. "Even before she was born, I loved that little girl. Delly used to joke that she would know when I was near because her heart would calm down and she'd stop kicking. She was pretty feisty. She had me wrapped around her tiny little finger her entire life and there was no place else I ever wanted to be than near her. She's, uh, going to be five soon."

Katniss didn't know what to say. Wasn't sure if he actually wanted her to say anything. "Delly and I started dating after she got pregnant, about three months in or so. She was so scared at the time, I remember that, but I knew I would protect her. She was my best friend and I would never let her go through that alone, that I would do anything she needed. And we were happy, for a long time."

"You were together for almost five years? Peeta, that's not a relationship, that's a marriage."

He nodded. "It almost was, bought a ring and everything. I told her she deserved to have someone
who wasn't going to just leave her, that we could be an actual family, no questions asked."

"She said no?"

"No, she accepted. Maddie was so excited," he laughed. "She didn't really understand what it meant
but it made us happy and that's all she ever seemed to care about. She was three when that happened.
It was all so perfect."

Katniss swallowed another drink of water. "So what happened?"

"There was, uh, someone else," Peeta admitted, sucking in a large breath of air.

"She cheated on you?"

He exhaled slowly. "Not exactly. No, the uh, Thom, that's his name. Thom came around one day,
looking for Delly, apologizing for running off, saying he was just a scared kid and wasn't ready to be
what she needed at the time. But that he had grown up, he wanted to try again, wanted to be a
family."

"A family?"

"Thom was...is Maddie's father, Katniss."

She watched as his blue eyes welled up. She set her glass down and moved over right beside him,
pushing his hair out of his eyes. "But I thought...

"We made a pretty little family, didn't we? If you didn't know, you'd never be able to tell. But Delly
always could. Maddie had Thom's nose and his toes. And every so often, when she'd get really
excited, she'd do this snort-wheeze thing that was just like him. None of that mattered to me, I never
saw her as anyone's but mine. We raised her, she didn't know anyone different. At first, Delly was
furious; she threw him out immediately, told him that she didn't need him and that he couldn't
reappear only when it was convenient for him. I was so proud of her and I thought, in that moment,
that he'd be gone. We'd never have to tell Maddie about him showing up."

"He came back," Katniss realized. "And Delly forgave him?"

Peeta nodded. "It took a while, but she did. She wanted them to be the family she always hoped
she'd have with him. They were high school sweethearts, dated all through college, everyone always
assumed they'd end up together. But Maddie only needed one dad. And that," he choked out, "Was
not me. We fought constantly; I warned her that he may just leave again, that caring for a child may
be too much for him, that Maddie wouldn't understand why both of her dads left her. But she was
adamant. Madaline deserved to know her real father, that they should be an actual family. So, uh, so
I left. I packed all my stuff and moved out here, accepting the offer from Haymitch to teach."

"You just left?"

"Biggest mistake of my life. I left it up to Delly how to talk to Maddie about me leaving her. I'll
never be able to forget that day. It took weeks before I could close my eyes and not see her face
crumbling as I walked out."

"That was her who called that morning?"

"Yeah," he affirmed. "She was nervous for her first day of Pre-K so she stole Delly's phone and
called me. I used to drop her off at daycare every day when I had class and I guess she...she wanted
me to do it this year. Then Delly got on the phone and started-"
Katniss shushed him by kissing him softly, tasting the salty tears that had escaped his beautifully blue eyes at the memory of the little girl. His lips quivered slightly as she pushed hers harder against his.

'It's okay,’ she told him in the kiss. 'I understand.’ and 'I forgive you.’
October rainstorms were some of Katniss' favorite kinds of storms. The nights were cooled to the perfect temperature and the rhythmic pitter-patter of the raindrops on the window was calming and soothing. At least, it would be if Katniss could hear the raindrops over her yelling at her idiot football team.

"I just don't understand! Why would we keep running straight up the middle against the best run defense in the conference?!"

Madge shrugged and grunted some form of approval, since she didn't really understand what Katniss was talking about.

"Especially when our backs are so much stronger on the outsides!" She took another swig of her beer and glanced over to where her roommate was struggling to keep a straight face. "What?"

"It's just," Madge started. "I mean, it's only the beginning of the...second...quarter, Katniss. Calm down. Have a Jell-O shot."

Jell-O shots were Madge's second favorite thing about football games. The first being the "hot boys in tight pants" as she so eloquently pointed out at the start of every game. She didn't grow up in a football town like Katniss had, hadn't gone to a high school that cared much about sports in general, so before rooming together, Madge had never actually seen a football game. Upon hearing that, Katniss insisted on dragging her to the only bar in town that consistently played her college team, which was difficult to do since she cheered for the rival college than the majority of people on campus, and introducing her to the lifestyle, which included the free Touchdown Jell-O Shot. Now, whenever they watched games at home, Madge made sure to have a tray of Jell-O shots ready to go.

Katniss stuck her tongue out at her and sauntered into the kitchen to grab a couple shots from the fridge. She ran her tongue around the edge of the plastic container to loosen the Jell-O before sucking it down in one shot. She handed the other to Madge and plopped back down on the sofa.

Peeta. 7:16pm. /What are you up to?/

Katniss. 7:18pm. /Yelling at my football team and drowning my pain in vodka and Jell-O./

She glanced at Madge and bit her bottom lip. "Madge? Would you be okay with me inviting Peeta over for the game?"
Madge cocked an eyebrow. "You mean I finally get to meet this mysterious man who has stolen you from my life?"

Katniss rolled her eyes. "You've met him before."

"I was drunk. Besides, he wasn't your boyfriend then."

"Ugh," Katniss scoffed. "He's not my 'boyfriend,' we're just, you know, 'seeing each other.'"

Katniss. 7:24pm. /Wanna come over? Watch the game with us?/
Peeta. 7:26pm. /Who is 'us'?/

Katniss. 7:27pm. /Me, Madge, and about two dozen Jell-O shots. /
Peeta. 7:29pm. /I am a sucker for Jell-O shots. Need me to bring anything else?/
Katniss. 7:30pm. /Nope. Just you. And dat ass. /
Peeta. 7:31pm. /Someone's feeling sassy tonight ;)/

Katniss shook her head and tossed her phone next to her. "What now?" she asked a bemused Madge.

"Oh, nothing. Except that no one grins like that when they're just 'seeing someone.'"

Katniss threw a pillow at her. "Shut up and order the damn pizza already, will you?"

The first time the bell rang both girls stared at each other. "Five bucks to you if it's the pizza man, five to me if it's Peeta?" Madge wagered.

"You're on." Katniss grabbed the pile of cash on the counter and went to check on the door. With a smile, she turned back to Madge. "Oh darn, Undersee, looks like you owe me five bucks."

"You are so full of shit, Everdeen. Let the fucker in. Peeta!" She called in a sing-song voice to the open door. "Come in and out of the rain!"

"Thanks, Madge," Peeta's voice carried through. He kissed a scowling Katniss on the cheek and slipped his shoes off. "What was that all about?"

"Madge is just being a bitch," Katniss answered. "Hi." She leaned into Peeta's body as they made their way to the couch.

"Pay up, beyotch."

Katniss rolled her eyes and fished a $5 from her pocket. "Fine. But I'm not paying for the pizza boy's tip. So, ha."

"You never pay the tip," Madge shot back. "Peeta, you want a beer, since someone is being rude tonight?"

Peeta looked between the roommates, both with sarcastic grins hiding their pretend feud. "Uh, sure, thanks."

Madge mockingly laughed at Katniss and jumped up to get a beer from the fridge, just as the doorbell rang with their dinner. "So, Peeta," she started as she handed him a beer and a slice of pizza.
Tell me about yourself. Katniss hasn't really shared too many details about you with her best friend slash roommate. What do you do?

Katniss' eyes widened for a second. It wasn't that she had intentionally kept personal details about Peeta to herself. In fact, she was quite certain there were only two people in the world who would accept her for whatever they were doing and one happened to be her best friend slash roommate. Things just hadn't really come up. Especially that. It wasn't that Katniss thought Madge would judge her for sleeping with her former professor, had it been any other former professor. Not the former professor who she used to consistently complain about. Not the former professor she had, on multiple occasions, called a prickless, soulless, self-righteous bastard who even the cheapest whore wouldn't screw if she were wasted. It certainly wouldn't bode well for Katniss if it turned out that she was lower than said cheap whore who actually bragged to Madge about how good Peeta was in bed. She stuffed half a slice of pizza into her mouth and bumped Peeta's leg with her foot.

He tapped his beer can against her knee and answered without missing a beat. "I am a teacher, actually."

Katniss let out an inaudible sigh of relief as the two kept conversing normally. Peeta continuously bounced the can on her knee gently and she finally relaxed enough to turn her attention back to the halftime statistics no one else seemed to care about. As it turned out, despite being a male born and raised in the Midwest, Peeta was about as knowledgeable as Madge when it came to football. But he was just as content to goad Katniss on and celebrate when her team finally started to play better and eventually take the lead. They ran out of Jell-O shots before the end of the fourth quarter because Peeta and Madge created some new drinking game where they took a shot anytime Katniss sat but then stood back up less than a minute later.

By the end of the game, Katniss' emotions had flip-flopped between irrationally angry and uncontrollably happy more times than either could keep track of, but ultimately resulted in an excited, somewhat exhausted apartment. It was Madge's idea to watch a movie afterward, rather than going out to do something, which the others readily agreed to.

"I'll find us some blankets. You two wanna pick out a movie? Nothing-" 

"Nothing scary, I know," Katniss finished. She turned to Peeta and in a hushed voice added, "We don't even have any scary movies out here. So, what are you thinking? Funny? Adventure?"

"Hmm," Peeta wandered behind her as she searched through the bookcase full of their shared DVD collection. He reached around her, pressing his chest against her back. He dipped his head, his warm breath tickling her ear. She smirked and let her head fall back on his chest. "All that cheering wear you out?" he mused.

"Have I scared you off with my rabid obsession?" she joked.

"Not even close, sweetheart." He kissed her temple. "It only makes you more adorable."

"Blech. I'm not adorable."

"No, but the pair of you are," Madge added, leaning against the chair she had been sitting on with a smirk and an armful of blankets. "Did you pick something or should I just go back in my room with headphones?"

"Shut up, Madge." Katniss grabbed one of their favorites off the shelf and tossed it at her. "Be useful and skip past the previews, will you?" She smiled smugly at Madge and nodded at Peeta toward the couch.
"Should I leave the lights on? This is a PG-13 apartment, you know."

"Oh my God, Madge! Turn off the damn lights and start the stupid movie already." Katniss hid her face in her hands. The playful banter with Madge was always that, playful, but having Peeta around while Madge insinuated that they couldn’t keep their hands to themselves was mortifying. As soon as the lights were off and everyone was settled under their blankets, Peeta pulled her close to him and she forgot all about her roommate as his scent and warmth overtook her. She rested her head against his shoulder and lost herself both in the movie and him.

Halfway through, Madge yawned loudly and slid out of her chair. "I'm going to bed. You two going to be okay?" Katniss waved her off and Madge just shook her head and shuffled into her bedroom. But not before throwing back one more jab. "Just put down a blanket or something, okay? Because I still have to sit on that couch."

"Good night, Madge!" Katniss shouted back. She was surprised to feel Peeta's chuckle. "What?"

"You two, how close you are. It's nice. Almost makes me miss having a roommate. Almost."

She rolled her eyes. "She's a pain."

"Could be worse. She could still be out here instead of letting us have time to ourselves," he said with a twinkle in his eye. "I had a roommate in college who could not take a hint, so my girlfriend and I always had to get creative with where we could fool around."

"Are you trying to say you want to fool around, Peeta Mellark?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying," he answered, pulling her legs until she was lying flat against the sofa cushions and he hovered above her. "Complaining?"

She hooked her hand behind his neck and pulled his face to hers. "Never." Their lips met in a fever, pressing hotly against one another. His tongue spread her lips and met with hers, dancing inside her mouth as they pressed their bodies closer. His hand tangled in her hair, pulling a few strands loose with his fingers. The other slipped under her shirt as he deepened their kiss. Her hips twitched under his, their legs tangling together. She got the leverage she wanted and began turning slowly so eventually it was Peeta on his back and Katniss lying on top.

"Well look at you, sneaky girl," he muttered against her lips.

"Shut up," she groaned when both of his hands trailed under her shirt, up her torso to the sides of her breasts. His hands roamed over her body, his clipped fingernails scratching her skin lightly, down to the waistband of her jeans. He squeezed his hands as far into her jeans as possible, his fingertips just brushing over the curve of her ass before he grunted in frustration.

"Off," he said, scowling at her pants.

She lifted herself up and returned his look with one of her own. "Excuse me, Peeta Mellark, but this is my house and therefore, we play by my rules. Rule number one in this house is that I wear the pants. Which in this case means..." she smirked and let her eyes drift down to the bulge in his jeans. She shifted her hips against him, eliciting a low exhale as she did. She lifted the hem of his shirt and began planting kisses down his chest. She let her tongue trail after her lips, tracing down the dark blonde hair that trailed down to his jeans.

"Off," she mimicked in a low voice, her face just inches from the button. Peeta knew if he could move at this moment, he would, but he was too enraptured by her small fingers quickly working his pants open. He was proud of himself for being able to raise his hips enough for her to
slide his jeans and black boxer-briefs down.

She wrapped her hand around his erection and quickly found a rhythm, her brain working hard to remember how her exes had liked it and how Peeta had shown her that night at his apartment. She experimented by twisting her wrist as she pumped his cock, using the bit of fluid from the tip for lubrication.

She scooted back to sit on her ankles and covered the head of his cock with her mouth. He let out a deep moan when she closed her lips around him and licked the tip with her tongue. She took a little more of him with each press of her mouth, swirling her tongue as she bobbed up and down, her hand covering what she couldn't fit in her mouth, so every inch of his cock was being touched. His fingers found their way back to her hair, wrapping around the tendrils that came loose from her braid.

She forced her eyes open, keeping grey locked on his blue. His hips would spasm up every so often and she could see the look in his eye - desire mixed with a hint of guilt for subconsciously forcing his cock deeper into her mouth. She took a deep breath and relaxed her jaw, wondering just how much of him she could fit without gagging. When the tip hit the back of her throat, she paused and forced herself to take just a little more.

The deep rumbling that came from Peeta as she did that was enough encouragement. She blocked the feeling from her head and continued to suck him, taking him that deep whenever possible. Her other hand moved to his balls, massaging them as she increased the pressure from her mouth. She could feel his body begin to tremble, his fingers tightening in her hair and she couldn't help but smile.

"Katniss." His breath was labored and when she looked back up at him, his eyes were screwed shut and his head was thrown back on the armrest of the couch. "I'm..."

She released him with a quiet pop only long enough to tell him that she wanted him to, that she needed to make him feel good, that she couldn't wait to taste him. He let out another hard breath and she returned her mouth to his cock. She could feel his balls tightening in her palm and she took a few deep breaths, preparing herself for him. He jerked and moaned as he came. She closed her eyes and just kept swallowing as he filled her mouth. She gave the head one final lick and sat back on her feet.

He opened his eyes, a groggy smile on his lips, "Hey." He reached for her and pulled her down so her head rested on his chest. "That was...uh..."

"Okay?" she asked.

He kissed the crown of her head, right where his fingers had been entangled. "More than okay. Totally unexpected."

She smiled into his shirt. "Good." She let the steadying rise and fall of his chest lull her into peacefulness. He pulled a blanket over them and wrapped his arms around her. The rain continued to fall against the window. They watched whatever was left of the movie that way, wrapped up each other's warmth, kissing each other and running their hands over the other's body.

After the movie, when Katniss finally peeled herself off of Peeta and began folding the blanket that had been covering them, she gave him a look. "It's pretty late. You could...stay...if you wanted."

He buttoned his jeans and began cleaning up the plates around the living room. "Ah, thanks, sweetheart, but I should probably get home. I've got an early morning tomorrow."

"On Sunday?" she joked.

He shrugged. "Have to keep up with the academic life, even on the weekends."
She nodded and silently took the plates from him, moving quickly to finish cleaning.

"Hey," he reached for her and pulled her close to him. "It's not that I don't want to, okay? Fall semester is the best time to collect data and I have to keep on top of things if I want to start on the tenure track. But it's nothing to do with you." He lifted her chin with his fingers and kissed her. "I promise."

"Okay," she conceded, still not happy but begrudgingly understanding of what he needed to do.

"Walk me to my truck, though?" he asked with a crooked smile. "Even though it's raining?"

She rolled her eyes but agreed, sliding the remaining pizza into the fridge and slipping on her flip flops. They walked next to each other down the stairs to the main door and out into the drizzling rain. Katniss was ready to step out from under the overhang when Peeta's grip pulled her back. "What are you doing?"

"Shh," he said, with a finger to his lips. He nodded his head to the edge of the steps and squatted down. There, caked in mud and barely visible, was a tiny, mangled kitten, shaking and shivering in the cold. "Hey there, little one," Peeta cooed, reaching his hand out to the kitten. It eyed him and cautiously sniffed the back of his knuckles before letting out a quiet squeak and nuzzling against him. Peeta picked it up and brought it under the overhang. "Look at it, no tags, poor baby."

Katniss cocked an eyebrow at him. Poor baby? The thing fit comfortably in one of his hands, obviously the runt of the litter, left behind because it wasn't able to keep up with the rest of the clan. She had little sympathy for stray cats; their neighborhood was full of them, especially runts that couldn't survive on their own. And here was Peeta, not only holding this mongrel but petting it and letting it rub its muddy head against his face. "What are you doing?" she asked, as he tucked it under his arm.

"What? Someone's got to take care of this little baby," he answered, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Unless you want to."

Katniss scowled. No. She did not want that cat. "Uh, I can't. Um...Madge is allergic," she lied. Somehow watching him take care of that tiny little thing made Katniss realize that if she told him she was one of those rare women who didn't like baby things, it would turn him off. It was easier to blame it on Madge's non-existent allergies than on her own missing maternal gene.

"Well, then I guess I'll have to take it," Peeta answered. The kitten meowed in response, looking up at him with big eyes. "Yes I will," he said down to the kitten, oblivious to the way Katniss watched their interaction with disgust. She corrected her features as soon as he looked up. He kissed her cheek and smiled. "Thank you for inviting me over, Katniss. I'll call you soon?"

"Uh, sure," she agreed, still eyeing the kitten under his arm. She could have sworn it narrowed its eyes back at her, mirroring the scowl she often wore. Even as she slept, she saw that scowling cat, imagining it hissing at her threats to drown it when Peeta wasn't looking.

A sharp knock on his door frame pulled Peeta out of his focused reading of one of the journal articles stacked on his desk. "Office hours don't start until 2," he called, without looking up.

"Good thing I'm not in need of your assistance then, Mellark," Johanna replied. "Only your presence for lunch."
He sighed and ran his hand through his hair, messing up any semblance of neatness it may have had. "I don't know, Johanna, I really need to get through these to find some reasoning for my hypothesis."

"How long have you been at it?" she asked, entering his office and plopping down on his couch. She grabbed one of the books he kept on his bookcase and absentmindedly flipped through it.

"All morning," he admitted, waving the stack of articles at his feet. "I just can't seem to find what I'm looking for in these."

"Isn't that good, though, to blaze your own trail?"

Peeta sighed again. "Kind of. Sometimes. Probably. It's just frustrating. I'm not looking to reinvent the wheel, just understand it better, I guess."

"You know what I think?" Johanna asked, tossing the book on the floor near the bookcase.

"Do I want to know?" Peeta liked Johanna, obviously; the two met in graduate school and her presence here made his decision to come that much easier for him. But at times, even he couldn't handle her crass and impulsive nature.

She rose and walked over to him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and forcing the article he had been reading down to his desk. "I think you need a break. Come on, my treat."

Peeta gave her a surprised look. "Your treat? What happened to the Johanna who could weasel her way out of paying for anything?"

Johanna let out a laugh but pulled on his arm. "First time for everything. Come on, Mellark."

Peeta couldn't help but feel paranoid when he and Johanna searched the unofficial "Professor's Corner" in the Union for a place to sit. As if it wasn't enough that there was a very obvious hush that fell over whichever table they walked by, the whispers started right back up once they passed. If Johanna had noticed anything, she didn't let on, so he tried to shake it himself, though he was unable to ignore it completely.

Especially when one particularly unsavory professor from biology wouldn't stop watching him. With that little smirk on his face. And the unnerving look in his eye that made Peeta more uncomfortable than anything else. He turned his chair as much as possible to face Johanna instead. "So what's new in the world of English?"

Johanna snorted over her forkful of chicken salad and shook her head. "More of the usual. I'm the bottom of the totem pole so I get all the whiny freshmen who can't seem to figure out why they need to learn how to write correctly."

"Oof," Peeta agreed, unwrapping his sandwich. "That's never a good sign."

"Oh, it gets better. And by better, I mean horrendously worse. In my lit class, when I asked for my students' favorite authors, it was like I was speaking Martian or something. I mean, I got nothing. Crickets. Quieter than crickets. I almost died."

"They couldn't come up with a single author?" Peeta asked in shock. "I mean, they couldn't just make something up? Shakespeare, Twain, Hemingway, Seuss?"

Johanna took a long sip of her pop. "Apparently not. I mean, I would have even accepted that vampire chick for God's sake!"
Peeta bit into his food to hide his grin. Johanna, for all her rough edges, was a bit of a literary snob. She could rattle off the most prominent Russian authors from the 15th century that you never knew you didn't know until she explained how they influenced Stan Lee's comic book heroes. Most modern, popular authors had not, in her mind, proven themselves to be worth her time yet, so to be willing to accept one as a "favorite author" meant she was seriously desperate with her students. He suddenly felt far more concerned for her students' well-being this semester. "And what of your new boy? Does he have a favorite author?"

"Yeah, whoever wrote the fucking Karma Sutra."

"Jesus, Johanna!" Peeta answered, once he got the wedge of bread unclogged from his throat at her lack of decorum.

She shrugged at him, smiling fondly. "Sorry, Peet. I forget about your delicate ears."

"At least warn a guy before you start bragging about your sex life. And here I was thinking it'd be whoever wrote the newest 'Guide to Bartending' or something. Good to see he can expand his horizons."

Johanna narrowed her eyes at her friend. "My, my, Dr. Mellark. Someone is being very judgmental."

"I'm not being judgmental. I'm just surprised, is all. He doesn't really seem to be your type."

"My type?"

Peeta set his sandwich down and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You know, he's not...you know."

"No, Peeta. I don't know," Johanna answered, clearly knowing but wanting him to actually say what he was thinking.

"I mean, did he even go to college?"

Johanna and Peeta eyed each other for a few minutes before she broke down and laughed. "Fine, he didn't go to college. And he isn't as well read as some of my exes, but look how well those relationships ended up." She stabbed a piece of chicken and stuffed it into her mouth. "Gale's different. He's not one of those pretentious know-it-alls who tries to overcompensate by proving how smart he is or any of that bullshit. He just calls shit like he sees it and wants to enjoy life. It's fun."

"Aww. Does Johanna actually like someone?" Peeta asked in his best baby voice. He laughed and ducked when she threw a chunk of ice from her drink at his head. "No, I think that's great. I've met him a handful of times and he seemed like a nice guy."

She screwed up her face. "Oh, he's more than nice, Peeta my friend. Speaking of..." Her conspiratorial smile returned and she waggled her eyebrows. "How is your little friend?"

He knew he was being paranoid, but the corner of the union seemed to fall silent at that exact moment, as if all the professors were waiting to hear his response. He cleared his throat and tried to quiet his voice, hoping it wouldn't carry too far. "Uh, she's good. Been keeping busy, you know."

"So screwing a professor doesn't have its benefits?" Johanna joked. "Girl still has to keep up her grades?"
"Ha, ha," he deadpanned, flicking the last piece of his sandwich bread at her.

"But I guess we can't be too surprised that Dr. Mellark is sleeping with a student. It wouldn't be the first time."

Peeta felt the blood drain from his face at the newest addition to their once private conversation. The wheezy voice of the professor that had been watching the pair made Peeta's skin crawl. He felt his stomach drop at the clear accusation made against his mother. His hands fisted instantly and if it hadn't been for Johanna's subtle shift of her leg against his, he may have snapped.

"I'm sorry, Dr. Cray. I didn't realize this was a conversation you were a part of," Johanna quipped.

Dr. Felix Cray, head of the biology department, had been teaching longer than Peeta had been alive. He had grown up hearing about his constant battles with his mother for grants and publications and conference presentations. He never had a positive view of the man or his work, and it was obvious that there was no love lost on the other end, either.

At Johanna's comment, Dr. Cray shifted his gaze from Peeta to her. "Mason, isn't it, from English?" It could have been an innocuous question had it not been for the way his eyes grazed over her body and the pretentious tone he took with her. "You'd be smart to remember who your superiors are and how you should be speaking to them."

Johanna set her jaw and stared back at him, unrelenting and unwilling to back down from his power trip. This time, it was Peeta who calmed her down. "What can we help you with, Dr. Cray?"

Cray's smile was almost as unnerving as his voice. His teeth were crooked and yellow and his lips peeled back like some sort of lizard when he spoke. He leaned down near Peeta's face and studied his expression. "You can help me by not making a total mockery of this school and your position, Dr. Mellark."

"That's the goal."

Cray licked his lips, his tongue blackened from years of his chewing tobacco habit. "Then try to be a little smarter about where you dip your pen. The Mellarks don't need to add another scandal to their history. Especially another one involving a co-ed. One bastard child should be enough for your family, don't you think?"

Peeta could only see red as he violently pushed his chair from the table and was nose to nose with the older professor. He had a handful of Cray's shirt in his fist, pulling him even closer. "I'd be very careful what you say about my family," he growled in a low voice, the veins in his forearms bulging as he tightened his grip.

Cray just smiled back into the face of his nemesis' son. "And I would be very careful about what threats you make toward your superior. Especially the superior who has a direct connection to your... little friend. Senior in biology, isn't she?"

Peeta's jaw twitched in response. He hadn't thought about the consequences of his actions; that this creep of a guy could have an effect on Katniss' schooling. He could pull her research job. He could even hold up her graduation. Cray could see this realization on Peeta's face and his smile grew wider. When Peeta reluctantly released his hold, Cray made a show of fixing his clothes.

"Good choice, Boy."

Peeta swallowed, his face still hard and his eyes dark with anger. He let out a deep breath. "Thanks for lunch, Johanna. I need to get back for my office hours." His mind was reeling the entire trek back
to his office. He was angry at Cray for using his mother and his relationship with Katniss to get to him. He was angry at the other professors who thought it was their job to spread stupid gossip to about him. More so, he was angry at himself for not being able to keep his cool.

It wasn't the first time he had to deal with idiots making disgusting comments about his family; it was a consequence of having the mother he did. She always taught him to stay calm and collected, to not show them how they had any power over him. She always brushed off the comments as ugly jealousy, but he watched the impact it had on her. He saw it when he cleaned up the empty bottles and had to help her into bed; it was the only time her tough veneer showed any cracks.

Much to his chagrin, the incident stuck with him all day, to the point where he cancelled his afternoon classes and opted to make the three hour drive back to his hometown to visit her himself. His mother never shared much with him about his biological father, only that he wanted nothing to do with them once she found out she was pregnant and left, leaving her to raise him completely on her own. He didn't even know what his father looked like, save for a few physical characteristics that were very clearly not his mother's, but he hadn't ever been curious. If she didn't need the man in her life, then Peeta didn't, either. But now, Cray's words were hitting too close to home, making him wonder just what had happened in his mother's youth that would spur that particular set of comments on.

The drive didn't take as long as he thought it would, or maybe he just couldn't remember the drive since he was so focused on other things. Before he knew it, he was turning into the complex his mother currently lived at, punching the code to get into the gate and driving up the long path to the main office. He handed his keys and a $20 bill to the valet driver who thanked him profusely. Most residents here didn't get many visitors, he suspected, and the ones he had bumped into during his trips were often hurried and rude, as if spending time with their loved ones was so painful they'd rather be anywhere else. Unfortunately, that often translated over to how they treated the staff, which only made Peeta want to be twice as polite toward them. His mother was definitely one of the most difficult residents, so he didn't feel the need to make their lives any harder.

"Peeta!" A young girl behind the counter greeted him as he entered the office area. Lavinia had started as the day desk clerk when Peeta's mother moved in, so the two always shared a special bond. She was the one who helped Peeta the most during the first few months of his mother's stay and even sent him a baby basket when Maddie was born. "This is a random visit. Is everything okay?" Peeta chuckled and signed his name in the visitor's log. "Hi, Lavinia. Everything's fine. I just had the afternoon free and figured she probably hasn't had many visitors lately."

Lavinia covered her mouth with her hand, but he knew she was hiding her sad smile at his words. Truth be told, no one ever visited his mother except for him.

"How's she been?"

"Oh, you know your mother. Such a sweet lady, but her swings have been a little worse lately."

"Still spending all her time in her room?"

"With all the journals that get mailed here." Lavinia shook her head. "I think some of the staff are intimidated just by the mail she gets." Lavinia handed him a visitor's badge and an electronic key to get into his mother's building. "But, like everyone else, she still has her moments of pure brilliance. Followed by..."

"Total bitch?" Peeta finished, clipping the badge to his shirt.
"Oh, Peeta," Lavinia slapped at his arm. "You know we can't talk about our residents that way."

Peeta smiled and winked. "That's why I said it, Lavinia. So you wouldn't have to."

"She's a lucky lady, your mom, to have a son like you. Stop by on your way out? I want to catch up and I'm so bored here."

"Deal. Thanks, Lavinia." He waved as she buzzed him through the lobby. The complex his mother lived at was made up of five different buildings, each designed with the residents' specific needs in mind. His mother was in Building 4, which was the second closest to the main office, presumably to prevent asshole relatives from using the "it's too far away" excuse as to why they never visit. And if anything did happen to them, security and EMT wouldn't have far to go. It was better than Building 2, which he hoped she'd never move to. People moved into Building 2 to die; even the staff hated when they got called to an apartment there.

He knocked on the door to her third floor apartment and nervously ran his hand through his hair. Visits with his mother were never particularly pleasant, though some days were clearly worse than others. He never knew which version of his mother would be waiting on the opposite side of the door, the one who welcomed him in with open arms and stories of what she'd been reading about, the one who insulted everything he had ever done during his childhood, or the woman who stood coldly in the doorway, looking at him like he was a stranger she had never laid eyes on before. The last was the worst. At least when she was insulting him, she was acknowledging his presence.

"Who is it?" Her clipped tone through the door made Peeta nervous. Usually it was accompanied with "mom 2 or 3".

"It's Peeta, Mom."

She was silent, he couldn't even hear if she was shuffling toward the door or just sitting on her couch.

"Mom?"

"Peeta?" Finally, he could hear signs of life. The door handle turned and she looked him over for a few seconds before flinging the door all the way open. "You're here. Why are you here? Is everything alright? How is the baby? Does she still have that dreadful cough?"

"No, Mom, Maddie's fine. Everything's fine. I just didn't have classes this afternoon so I thought I'd come visit."

She nodded and turned to walk back in. "Your professors must be very lenient, to not make you go to classes on a Wednesday afternoon. I never liked professors who gave their students days off for no good reason. Come in, Peeta, would you like a cup of tea?"

He followed her in, making sure to slip his shoes off and leave them outside of her apartment so he didn't track anything in. He wandered over to the kitchen, searching for her teapot, sure she didn't actually have anything ready to go. "How have you been, Mom?" he asked, getting the cups down and tea bags prepared. He grimaced at the half bottle of vodka he found in the cupboard. And the littering of empty wine bottles in her trash can.

"Oh, I've been fine. I'm losing my mind, though, Peeta, I'll tell you. These contemporary scientists, if that's what they like to call themselves, have absolutely no respect for the historical underpinnings of their theories." She sat on the couch and began flipping through one of the journals she had scattered on the coffee table. The room was full of stacks of journals; four, five, even six years old, piled high
around the apartment. She refused to throw any of them away, swearing that she'd need them again, once she got back on her feet and able to begin conducting her research once more. The day she caught Peeta trying to remove the more obscure ones, she threw everything she could get her hands on at him, bruising his back with a rolling pin she dug out from the kitchen. Since then, he had resigned himself to leaving them, or taking them to the weatherproof storage facility on the complex grounds with her in tow, on the grounds of not wanting them to be a fire hazard.

"Yeah? Why do you say that?"

"Look at this little idiot," she spat, opening the journal to a page she dog-eared. "They are trying to understand the neurological basis for how nicotine and alcohol affect each other without taking into account that there has never been evidence for non-humans to actively choose to ingest nicotine. They're looking for their fame and fortune but not willing to put in the work behind it. So typical of academics these days." She accepted the cup of tea he handed her. "Tell me, is your little field just as inadequate?"

"I'm sure there are lazy researchers in every field, Mom," he answered, dreading the conversation that was sure to come.

"Hmph." She took a sip of her tea. "Needs lemon."

Peeta nodded and got up to search for a lemon in her kitchen.

"I just wish you'd get over this little infatuation you have with the social sciences. It's such a waste of your capabilities. Why couldn't you go into a real major where you'd be taken seriously?" She accepted the slice of lemon he handed her and squeezed it into her cup. "Name me one social scientist with the standing and influence of Newton or Bohr or Dalton or Sanger?"

Peeta could think of some. John Watson, Noam Chomsky, Steven Pinkert, Jean Piaget, Alfred Binet, Albert Kinsey, B.F. Skinner, William Wundt, just to name a few. But he knew better than to battle her on this topic. It wouldn't matter if it turned out Einstein was actually a social scientist who occasionally dabbled in physics, she would never give him any relief from her biased views of the sciences. But at least it wasn't fine arts or anything like that, he supposed. He couldn't imagine what life in the Mellark household would have been like if he had pursued his passion for painting.

His mother's tirade against his chosen field didn't last long; they never really did, and she quickly began diving back into her journal articles, muttering to herself and making chicken scratch notes in the margins. If he ever went through her notes, Peeta wasn't sure if he'd find the work of his genius mother or the crazy ramblings of a woman past her prime. In truth, he was almost too afraid to find out. Despite her tendency to let her brain wander, he knew he'd always see her as the smartest woman he'd ever met, the smartest person he ever met.

He left her to her musings and wandered around her apartment, looking for anything that would help relieve the anxiety he still felt about Cray's taunts. But Helena Mellark wasn't ever a sentimental woman. At least not in Peeta's memories of her, so there was very little evidence of any life outside of her academic achievements. Her diplomas still hung in frames on the walls, along with the cover pages of all her publications. The only pictures were those of her with other scientists or after receiving an award of some kind, all things he had seen before, the same ones that littered the walls of his childhood home.

She had only a few more casual reminders of her life that stayed in her bedside table drawer, locked away from the world. "Go figure," Peeta thought, sitting on the edge of her bed and pulling the contents out of the drawer. A picture of Peeta as a toddler sitting on her lap, grinning up at her like she was the most important thing in the world. She, of course, wasn't paying attention; she never
really did, and was instead focused on whatever papers were spread across the kitchen table. One of Peeta's valedictorian speech during his high school graduation, taken by the professional photographer that he had to beg her to buy so there was some photographic proof of his accomplishment. None from college. Nothing from his PhD ceremony. He sighed and flipped the contents back into the drawer. He had seen those pictures before, they were of no help to him. And he surely was not about to go searching around her bedroom for evidence.

It wouldn't matter anyway. Nothing he found in her apartment would change the minds of people like Dr. Cray. Helena Mellark didn't make friends. She didn't care about friends. She was the purest of the pure when it came to academia, a mind so set on solving the problem at hand that she missed the bigger picture. It was why she didn't have friends. It was why she didn't have relationships. The sheer fact that she had a serious boyfriend in Ron for as long as she did mystified Peeta more than anything. She was never particularly nice to the baker, or his two sons from a previous marriage, she was her usual cold self. He could remember only a handful of times when Ron would pull a smile out of her, often bribing her with homemade Koulourakias or Melomakaronas. She was happier when she was with Ron, he supposed, for a while. It didn't last, obviously, and despite Ron's promises to keep them as a family, to protect and care for Peeta, he left. And once again, it was just the two of them. Only this time, Peeta was about to leave for college, a decision he never questioned before.

Helena never truly recovered from Ron. If it was possible, she became even more cold and detached afterward. She forced Peeta out of the house, demanding that he attend Stanford and stop putting other people before his career. "That makes you soft, Peeta Mellark," she warned him, "And softness will not get you anywhere in the real world. It feeds on softness and I didn't raise a failure."

She was still mumbling and jotting down notes when he returned, making absolutely no acknowledgment of his presence. He couldn't stay much longer, not with classes in the morning and a kitten that wasn't used to spending so much time alone yet. "Mom? I have to get going."

She waved him off, not looking up from her notes.

He clenched his jaw slightly and nodded. That was the most he was going to get from her at this point, as she was too far gone in her academic spiral for him to expect anything more. He took her teacup to the sink, sure she'd forget it there and most likely knock it over at some point, and paused at the door. He wished so much that he could do more for her, but he knew he couldn't. She wouldn't accept help even if he could.

He called Katniss from the road, asking if she wanted to come over and spend some time with him that night. He swung by the liquor store first, picking up a bottle of whiskey he was almost certain he didn't need but couldn't bear to not have. Although he was glad to have taken time to see his mother, his visits always left him feeling empty and alone, which was a bad combination if memory served him correctly. He needed to not feel alone tonight, he needed to get lost in Katniss, to feel her underneath him and know that she was there. That someone was still there. He didn't talk about what had happened, what was being said by whom, or that he even visited his mother. Instead, he held her as tightly as he could and whispered sweet words of affection into her ear until she fell asleep. If only sleep would come as easily for him.

Katniss held up a bagged costume and wrinkled her nose in disgust. Sexy cop. Sexy army girl. Sexy nurse. "Of course there's no sexy entomologist," she joked to Madge, who was scouring through the rack of costumes across the aisle.
"You should write an angry letter to the company," Madge suggested.

Katniss laughed. "'Dear Makers of Slutty Costumes. Bugs are hot. Sincerely, Science.' Something tells me they wouldn't take that suggestion too seriously." She sighed and pulled out the Greek Goddess costume. "I mean, look at this one. Sure, it's cute on the model, but this isn't realistic."

Madge stifled a giggle at the image. "I'm pretty sure the only reason they're showing her from the side is because her hooch is showing from the front."

"Classy," Katniss answered, shaking her head. "Twenty bucks says we'll see at least...four girls in this costume this year. Tell me again why we're shopping for costumes two weeks before Halloween?"

"Because," Madge answered, turning back to her row, "We don't want a repeat of last year."

"Ah. Yes," Katniss cringed. Last year she didn't even think about Halloween until the last possible minute because she had a conference out of town the day of and wasn't planning on being home in time to go out with Madge. Of course, the others who went to the conference with her had other plans and not only convinced her to leave the conference early, but managed to cut the four hour drive down to three. She and Madge spent the better part of an hour digging through their combined wardrobes, scrambling to find anything that would work as a costume. And even though she pulled off a respectable "evil Black Swan," partially thanks to Madge's extensive corset collection, she couldn't help but wonder if everyone else could tell that hers was a last minute outfit.

Madge refused to let that happen again. So here they were, searching through the local party store's collection. "Are you going over to Peeta's place tonight?" she asked.

"I think so," Katniss answered. "Hey, are you okay with this? With me spending so much time with Peeta, I mean? Because I know I've been gone a lot more and we haven't done nearly as much together like we used to, but I can totally call off this thing tonight with him if you want. It's not going to be anything major, just-"

"Katniss. Chill," Madge laughed. "It's fine. How many times did I ditch you at home because I had random dates? You're happy with him, right?" Katniss tried to hide the grin that overtook her face, making Madge laugh even harder. "Who am I to stand in the way of a guy who gets you to smile?"

"Hey now," Katniss argued. "My smiles may be hard to come by, but I care about people."

"I know, Katniss, but I haven't seen you this happy about a guy since...well, really since ever. I don't think you were ever this happy around Cato either, except when you were both wasted and didn't know any better." Madge shrugged. "You found someone who somehow has gotten past your scowl and still wants to be with you."

"I guess," she mumbled.

"Have you told him anything about...anything?"

Katniss sighed. "No. It's never really come up." That wasn't a total lie. True, she could have brought up her family when Peeta told her about Maddie and Delly, but that was his moment. And there hadn't been any other times for her to just spring her baggage onto him. Besides, they had only been together for a few months, way too early to unload on him. She learned that lesson from Cato.

"You're going to have to at some point," Madge countered. "I mean, I know you've never even told me everything, but I'm not fucking you into happiness."
"Madge!" Katniss clamped her hand over her roommate's mouth. Madge immediately licked her hand, making Katniss cry out and pull her arm away. Both girls collapsed into a fit of giggles as Katniss wiped her hand on Madge's shoulder. "We are in public, young lady."

"Yeah, looking for slutty costumes. Oh, look!" She held out a plastic bag with a ladybug on the front. "If you can't be a sexy bug scientist, you might as well be a sexy bug! Go try it on!"

Madge shoved Katniss toward the dressing room, which was really just a tiny bathroom in the back storage area of the store, ladybug costume in hand. As she stuffed herself into the cramped room, she considered Madge's words. It was true, her friend didn't know everything about her past, but she definitely knew more than anyone else. Except for her therapist, but he didn't really count since he could judge her directly for anything. Cinna had to be objective with her, but Madge certainly didn't have to be.

And Peeta. "Ha," she audibly laughed at the thought of telling Peeta anything. Peeta, who overcame the bullshit with his ex and somehow was this normal, functioning, successful man, would never understand. There was no way he'd be able to handle her train-wreck of a backstory. Worse, he probably wouldn't want her if he knew how broken she really was; if he knew the Katniss he saw was just a mask of the real girl. And while they had only been together for a few months, she was sure she wasn't ready to let go of him just yet.

Maybe she could ease him into her world of crazy. After all, he told her something personal, the least she could do was reciprocate a little. That wouldn't be so hard, she decided.

"So? What'd you decide on the ladybug?" Madge asked when Katniss emerged from the dressing room.

"At least it covers everything. Did you find something?"

Madge held up a "naughty Girl Scout" outfit with a sinful smile. "Nothing like Halloween to bring out the pervy pedophiles. I'm going to go try it on. I'll need your opinion on it, though."

Watching Madge model her costume, confirming that it was just enough to make her youthful without being creepy, Katniss got an evil idea of her own that was sure to get a rise out of a certain professor. Without telling Madge, she snuck back to the costume section and found the perfect outfit she had in mind. She didn't bother trying it on before buying it, despite the store's 'no-return policy.' This costume would definitely help make up for any ill feelings he may have from learning one of her unpleasant secrets.

Katniss watched as Peeta dragged a shoelace across the floor, as that mangy kitten they found outside her apartment a couple weeks ago chased it. He took the thing to a local vet a few days ago for shots and to get it, well, *him*, it turned out, neutered. "So what did you end up naming it?"

"Buttercup," he answered, laughing at the kitten's overexcited jump.

She snorted and shook her head. 'Buttercup' was a ridiculous name for a cat, especially a male one. She couldn't help but see the paternal instinct in his interactions with the kitten. It looked so natural; it was easy to picture him playing with a child of his own. She still hadn't warmed up to the damn cat, or it her, but it didn't surprise her. Even as a kid, animals didn't trust her. Not like they did the other Everdeen women. "Prim would have liked that name."

He turned to his other side and watched her for a few minutes, ignoring Buttercup's head nudge.
against his thigh. Katniss knew what he was going to ask as soon as she slipped up. "Prim?"

"Oh, uh, my little sister." She hoped it would be enough information to get him to drop the subject entirely. If only she could be so lucky.

"I didn't know you had a little sister. Is she still with your parents?"

"My Dad, actually."

He nodded and picked up the kitten, who had begun meowing at the lack of attention, and plopped him on his chest. Buttercup immediately curled up and began purring like a truck engine as Peeta idly scratched under his chin. "How long have your parents been divorced?"

Katniss curled her legs under her and shifted uncomfortably on the couch. "Ah...they've been apart since I was eleven."

"Long time. Did you get to see him much?"

She winced. "Not at all, actually."

He furrowed his brow and pursed his lips. He stopped scratching the cat, moving the now irritated Buttercup to the floor to his own devices, and sat up to face her. "So is Prim your half-sister?"

"Nope. She's just...she's with Dad and I got stuck with Mom." She faked a yawn to indicate that she was tired and, hopefully, that she didn't want to talk about this subject with him anymore. She did think she was ready to deal with this stuff with Peeta, but now that they were in the moment, she realized she just wasn't yet.

"Tired, sweetheart?" Peeta rose and reached out to help her up. He pulled her close and tightly wrapped his arms around her, taking deep breaths and just holding her.

They laid in bed, facing each other, neither able to fall asleep right away. Peeta brushed a few loose strands of hair out of her eyes. "So your Dad's been...out of the picture since you were eleven. When did your sister go with him?"

His eyes were so focused, his face so soft and unassuming that she knew, in that moment, he had a pretty good idea of her truth. She bit the corner of her bottom lip and glanced down at his bare chest. "I was seventeen," she answered quietly.

He brought his forehead to hers, their lips almost brushing, before turning it slightly, nuzzling her face with his forehead. "How?"

"Car accident. We hit a patch of black ice one night and the car spun out of control. She held on for a while but..."

His lips were on hers, effectively shushing her. She didn't realize she'd begun crying until she tasted the salty liquid between them. These weren't their normal fervent kisses, but slow, sweet, full kisses. It was as if he knew how much she needed his presence in that moment, to feel the life radiating between them.

"I've never told anyone else about how Prim died," she admitted when they broke apart. "Everything just kind of fell apart after that, you know? Like she was the only bit of sanity left in my life, so when she was gone..."

"I get it, baby. You don't have to talk about it anymore if you don't want to." He cupped her face
with both of his hands, using his thumb to brush away a stray tear. "Thank you."

She sniffed. "For what?"

"For opening up to me. I can't imagine what it must be like to lose your family like that. And to be able to admit something so huge," he smiled brightly, searching her eyes. "I just really appreciate it."

Katniss shrugged. "You told me about Delly."

"Everyone's got 'ex' baggage. That's nothing compared to..."

"Death?"

"Yeah."

Katniss suddenly felt an inappropriate laugh bubble up through her and before she could help herself, she was cackling loudly. It was completely absurd, laughing after talking about Prim, but she just couldn't stop; the harder she tried, the louder she became. "It was the worst experience of my life, sitting in that room as she took her last breath, but you know what the real kicker was?"

Peeta had taken a few clinical-based classes in his education and knew that people dealt with grief in very different ways. He just wasn't expecting Katniss, scowly, closed-off, quiet Katniss, to be laughing at this story. But he knew his best bet was to just go along with her. "What's that?"

Katniss snorted. "My douchebag boyfriend at the time, the driver of the car, the guy who walked away with a few shallow lacerations, had the balls to ask why I wasn't taking care of him instead." She rolled onto her back, wrapped her arms around her now sore stomach, and kicked her legs. "I'm sitting here, with my dying sister, and he's telling me I'm a shitty girlfriend for it. Oh, and all along, Primmy's telling me to just fucking dump him already and be fucking happy for the first time in years. She's the one on her deathbed and she's still more concerned about me!"

The tears that were now streaming down her cheeks very well could have been due to her intense laughing fit or the horrible memory of that day; even she didn't know for sure, but she didn't really care. Getting the story out was all that mattered at this point. When she finally calmed down, she rolled back over and wiped her eyes. "I think I win, family and 'ex' baggage." She smirked. "Have I effectively scared you off?"

Peeta shook his head and pulled her into his body. "Not even close."

Peeta glanced over at his clock for what had to be the fourth time in the last forty-five minutes. Every other professor had gone home already, most to get their kids ready for trick-or-treating. But here he was, still in his office at quarter to six on Halloween, trying to create a computer simulation that would work for his first of many studies. The only break he had taken so far that evening was the series of text messages between him and Katniss. He had to admit that he was jealous that she was actually done with classes and getting ready to go out with her friends. Finnick was hosting a party at their place and he agreed to go, but at this rate, he'd be showing up in time to watch everyone pass out.

He groaned when he heard a soft knock at his door. Sure, he still was technically holding office hours, but he didn't expect there to be any students still roaming the halls. In fact, everyone was supposed to be gone and while he didn't enjoy computer programming, he certainly didn't need the added distraction. "Come in," he called. He minimized his program and smiled when he saw who
was at his door. "Katniss. What are you doing here? I thought you were getting ready."

She shrugged. "I felt bad for you being all cooped up in here alone on Halloween. So I thought I'd come visit."

"Well come in, have a seat," he indicated to the couch.

"Nuh uh uh, Dr. Mellark," she chided. "I'm knocking on your door at Halloween. You're not so old that you don't remember the rules, are you?" She knocked again. "Trick or treat?"

"Well if you're offering, you know I'll take the treat."

She winked and walked into his office, closing the door behind her. "I was hoping you'd choose that." She unbuttoned the long jacket she borrowed from Madge and let it fall to floor, exposing the costume she'd bought specifically for him.

His jaw literally dropped as he took her in. Her normally braided hair was up in a high ponytail. She had a white button down shirt tied above her belly button that was sheer enough to show the red orange bra she wore underneath. A plaid, schoolgirl skirt that barely reached mid-thigh, topped off by knee-length white socks. If that wasn't enough, by the time his roaming eyes made it back to her face, she had on the most innocent face he had ever seen. "Well...uh...what..."

She smirked, pleased that she could surprise him and throw him off a little. She crossed her feet and twisted her fingers together. "Dr. Mellark, you told me you needed to see me in your office. About my test..."

He raised his eyebrows, finally understanding the game she was playing. "Your test. Right."

"Was there a problem, Dr. Mellark?" She could see the lust spark in his eyes when she called him 'Doctor,' so she made a mental note to continue using it.

"Why don't you have a seat, Miss Everdeen." He pointed to the couch and made sure to sit close, but not too close, yet. He let his eyes linger over her legs as her skirt climbed higher on her thighs. "I was looking over your test and I'm afraid to say, I think you cheated."

Katniss' jaw dropped and she stared into his eyes. "What?"

"Your answers were exactly the same as the girl sitting next to you. Do you really expect me to believe that she was the one who cheated?"

Katniss let her chin fall to her chest and shook her head. "No, Sir."

"I have no other option but to give you a zero on this test."

"No!" She sat upright, her eyes wide in protest, hand clamped over her mouth in disbelief. "Dr. Mellark, a zero will mean I fail the class! I can't fail your class. Please, I'll do anything. Anything! I, I, I...I'll write a paper for you. Or I can retake the test, right here, to prove I know the material."

One half smirk in his direction sealed the deal for him. His pants strained at the innuendo of what 'Miss Everdeen' was willing to do. She was doing her absolute best to appear innocent, batting eyelashes and smiling shyly at him, though it was still clear she knew exactly what she was doing. He didn't know which version of her turned him on more, the innocent or the vixen, but either way, the desire to control her overtook him. "I don't know, Miss Everdeen. The punishment for cheating
on a test is set in stone. I don't know that there's much else I can do for you."

Katniss uncrossed her legs and turned to face him, her hands resting higher on his thigh, dangerously close to his growing erection. She made a show of staring at it before looking up at him. "There must be...something."

He closed his eyes and repressed the groan that was rising in his throat. "Well, Miss Everdeen, I suppose I could handle your...punishment...in-house."

She smiled brightly at him. "Thank you so much, Sir."

"I wouldn't thank me just yet," he answered, his voice thick with lust. He smirked at the goosebumps that peppered her exposed skin. "As long as you do everything exactly as I ask, I won't give you a zero on this test."

Katniss nodded. "Of course, Dr. Mellark."

Peeta let out a controlled breath. "Why don't you come with me, Miss Everdeen?" He rose from the couch, his erection painfully evident. He directed her to his desk. His heart was racing in anticipation. There was no way she could know that he had been secretly fantasizing about having her in his office like this since the first time she entered over the summer, could she? He turned from her, aware that her eyes tracked his every movement, and began searching through one of the desk drawers.

Her eyes widened when she saw him smack the ruler against his open palm. 'Is he going to use that on me?' she wondered. She had never ventured into the world of pain, nor had she ever even considered it would be something she'd be into. Her lip quivered just slightly, the only break in her façade.

He leaned in close to her, and in a voice that was barely above a whisper, simply said, "Mockingbird." He made sure she nodded in understanding before stepping behind her. He flexed the ruler and once more slapped it against his palm. "Step up to the desk so your thighs touch the edge."

"What are you going to do?" Katniss asked.

"Now, now, Miss Everdeen, if you don't want a zero, you'd better do exactly as you're told," he warned her, with another smack against his palm. She jumped slightly but obeyed, inching forward so her bare legs were against the edge of his desk. He reached around her, moving the stacks of journal articles and folders out of the way. "Bend over, Miss Everdeen. And hold on."

She felt the jolt of electricity from his words ignite her insides. "Sir?"

"Bend. Over. And. Hold. On." He enunciated each word with a smack of the ruler.

Katniss swallowed and slowly lowered her torso over the desk. She could tell her skirt had hitched up enough to expose her lacy panties, red-orange to match her bra. Even though it was only a game, being bent over a professor's desk, almost completely exposed to him, brought a flush to her cheeks.

Peeta slowly and lightly ran the ruler up and down Katniss' legs, smirking at the involuntary spasms it elicited. She groaned against the desk. "No complaining now, you got yourself into this little predicament. Just hold still like a good girl and it'll be over soon." He lifted her skirt over her backside, fully exposing the tantalizing panties which contrasted against her olive skin perfectly. He made sure to start slow, bringing the ruler down against her skin softly.
She jumped at the first couple of blows, surprised they didn't hurt as much as she expected them too. More than that, with each slap of the ruler against her skin, she could feel herself growing wetter and wetter. He was most definitely 'punishing' her, but it felt more pleasurable. This wasn't like any kind of 'punishment' she had experienced in the past. She allowed her body to relax, feeling safe in this charade, even though she knew she'd sit uncomfortably for the rest of the night. As if he could tell she was relaxing, the next few blows were more powerful, stinging against her skin. "Ow!" she cried, "That hurts!"

"It's supposed to hurt," he responded in a gruff voice. "That's why they call it punishment." He rested his spare hand on her lower back, keeping her flat against the desk. A few more slaps against her skin and her cries of pain audibly changed into moans. He cocked an eyebrow, even though he knew she couldn't see him. "What's this? Do you like this?" He set the ruler down on the desk next to her and ran his hand up her thighs to her covered heat. He could feel her arousal through the thin fabric. "Good girl," he murmured, slipping his fingers past the barrier and into her.

She moaned and pressed herself back against his hand. She turned her head, using her arm to keep her from making too much noise. She figured they were alone, but didn't want to take any chances and get caught.

He pulled his fingers out and from the corner of her eye, she watched as he cleaned them off in his mouth and clenched when he let out a blissful groan. She could hear the sound of a zipper and rustle of fabric and whimpered into the desk. He rubbed the head of his fully erect cock against her opening. He took hold of her hips and slid into her, both of them releasing sounds of pleasure, him at the tightness around him and her at the satisfying intrusion. He kept one hand on her hip and reached up with the other to grab a hold of her ponytail.

She let out a deep groan when he grabbed her hair, so he continued to test the water, pulling harder, wrapping her hair around his fingers to tighten his grip. She arched her back, allowing him to hit a slightly different spot inside her. Katniss didn't even recognize her own shallow, husky breaths as he continued to thrust into her. She let out a loud yelp and gripped the side of the desk harder when he gave her ass a hard slap. Despite her hold on the desk, she felt herself slide across it every time he pounded into her. Her thighs were sure to have bruises from being forced against the edge, and likely on her ass as well, but it was well worth it. She felt her arousal build as her nerves continued to fire.

Sex with Peeta had always been great, but this time it felt different. It was unlike anything she had ever felt before. From the slight pain, to the role playing, to being bent over his desk, to the feel of his cock pumping in and out of her. It was just...

"Fuck!" she yelled, looking back at him. "Peeta! Fucking condom!"

He halted mid-thrust and stared down at where they were connected. "Fuck me!" he groaned. "Shit, Katniss, I'm sorry. I can't believe I for-"

"Fuck." She interrupted him. "Fuck, just...be careful? I mean, I'm on the pill but don't...you know...finish inside?"

He looked at her in disbelief, but nodded. "Yeah."

"Good. Now, continue, Dr. Mellark," she ordered with a wink.

He growled and pulled her off the desk, spinning her so she was facing him. He kissed her, pulling her head back by her ponytail and planting hard kisses down her neck to her collarbone. His fingers deftly unbuttoned her shirt, pulling it open to expose her bra. He pulled down one of the cups and latched his mouth onto her sensitive skin. Peeta backed her up and lifted her so she sat on his desk. He released her breast and pulled her right to the edge before entering her again, this time sensually
and tortuously slow.

"I'm going to make you come, right here on my desk," he warned. "I've wanted to fuck you in here for so long, Miss Everdeen."

"F**k," she sighed, letting her head fall back. "Dr. Mellark, please."

He grunted and began plunging into her faster. He wrapped her legs around him and used a spare hand to thumb her clit. Katniss groaned louder and louder as her orgasm built inside her, finally bursting through, sending shockwaves through her body.

Peeta controlled his breathing until she relaxed and pulled her off the desk. "I'm not gonna last too much longer."

Katniss immediately dropped to her knees and took him in her mouth, pumping him with one hand, ignoring her own taste on him. He wasn't exaggerating when he said he was close. A few deep bobs and he came, filling her mouth. She licked him clean and he helped her back to her feet, sitting her on the desk once more. He leaned his head against hers, both sweaty and satisfied. Katniss laid back on the desk, letting her arms and legs fall off the edges, with her skirt hiked up and shirt completely open. Her panties were still clinging on one leg, her socks pushed halfway down her legs.

"Well, Miss Everdeen, you were extremely cooperative today. I'll see what I can do about that test grade of yours," he said, pulling his pants back up.

She lifted her head and smiled widely at him. "Maybe I'll have to cheat on some more tests."

"Katniss, why do you have leggings on under your dress? It was so cute without!" Madge cried when Katniss made it to the bar. After their afternoon tryst, she and Peeta spent time afterward cuddling together on his couch and when she realized what time it was, she texted Madge to tell her she'd meet everyone at the bar. She tried on her costume and caught sight of the bruises on the fronts of her thighs; there was no way she'd be able to explain them away without confessing to an early evening romp. Leggings it was.

"I was afraid it would be cold. Don't worry, Madge, they still go with the costume," she reasoned.

Madge eyed her suspiciously, a question clearly on her face.

"Yes," Katniss whispered. "I'll tell you about it later." In a louder voice, to the rest of the small group of people they were out with, she announced she was going to the bar to get the first round. On the way, she texted a picture she took before putting her leggings on to Peeta.

10:45 pm. Peeta. /Round two tonight?/

She smiled and sent her confirmation. "Happy Halloween," she cheered Madge. 'Happy Halloween, indeed.'

Chapter End Notes

First off, happy father's day to all the dad's of people and fuzzballs. Thanks so much for
everyone who has stuck by this story. I will try to get another chapter (or two) up before school starts but no guarantees. Hopefully the increased length and double smut in this one will make up for it ;). A HUGE thank you to Sunfish for all your help as I was working on it (including your sassy comments that I so very much love...erm...hate) and Chelzie for beta'ing this up. Hope everyone enjoyed this little piece. I'm on tumblr at mitchesberay if you wanna chat or ask questions or whatevs.
So, Katniss, how are things with your man candy going?” Madge asked, sliding into the empty chair across the table from where Katniss was sitting in the library.

Katniss glared at her roommate over her herpetology textbook. “Really, Madge? You want to talk about that now? Here?”

“Yes. Now and here,” Madge mimicked her. “A, this is the only place I can find you consistently anymore and B, I know you study on the fourth floor because there’s no one around to bother you and therefore overhear this conversation. So spill.”

“I’m trying to study,” Katniss huffed.

Katniss’ scary, grumpy, ‘I don’t want to talk to you’ routine never worked on Madge. It was a defense mechanism the other girl always saw right through and didn’t let slide. “You have been studying non-stop all week. Between school and your boyfriend, I never see you anymore. Give me something so I don’t feel like I need to call my therapist for you.”

Katniss set her book down. “Why would you do that?”

Madge set her jaw, just as stubborn as her roommate. “Don’t think I forgot the last time you spent days on end in the library. You worked yourself into a nervous breakdown.”

Oh yeah, Katniss remembered. That was after she caught Cato fucking some other girl in the back room of a bar. That night, something snapped. All the stress that she had been keeping inside, pushing further and further down, erupted in full force. She couldn't focus on anything for the first few days, dead to the world except for going to class. When the walk from campus to their apartment became too much for her to deal with, she packed up all her school supplies, claimed a table on the deserted fourth floor of the university library, and began reading her textbooks cover to cover. She filled pages and pages and pages of her notebooks with detailed notes and began her final papers that hadn't been assigned yet and weren't due until the end of the semester. She worked tirelessly day and night, not eating or drinking except to pound back double espressos from the cafe on the first floor when she thought she was about to pass out. She started smoking again just for the buzz to keep her functioning, allowing herself ten minutes to smoke as many cigarettes as possible every two hours. If she did sleep, it was in short bursts at her table.

By the time Madge and Gale found her, she was completely delirious and shaking. She refused to go to the emergency room, lashing out and kicking Gale in the chest when he suggested it. Madge spent the weekend emailing Katniss' professors and getting the work she would need to make up from when she zombied through their classes. Katniss was only allowed to work on school-related work for two hours a day, and this was after she showed she could keep down real food and drink. They were lucky the breakdown occurred right before fall break so neither girl missed any classes while
Katniss recovered.

“You promised me you'd see someone if you ever started feeling that way again,” Madge continued.

Katniss sighed and looked down at her notes. What started out in her normal, neat handwriting quickly dissolved into a frantic and chaotic jumble. She set her pen down. “Alright. Break time. Want something to drink?”

“Really? Coffee?” Madge asked with a pointed look.

“Pumpkin spice latte.”

Madge smiled. “Fine. But not the biggest one. And no extra shots! And you're buying.”

“Oh. My. God. How have I missed this heaven for the last four years?” Madge moaned, taking the first sip of the fall-themed coffee. The two wandered around outside and sat on the base of one of the many statues that littered campus.

“Alright, Madge, let's not cause a scene on Ann Landers' feet,” Katniss teased, inhaling her own drink, letting the spicy aroma fill her senses. Autumn was her favorite season. Not just because everything was pumpkin flavored or because her weekends were full of football, but because fall was the first time her father took her out hunting. And hunting memories were her best memories.

“Seriously. Where have these been all my life?”

“The library. You know, that big building with all the books? Where people study?”

Madge rolled her eyes. “Don't be ridiculous, Katniss. You know business majors don't study.” She elbowed her roommate. “Okay, Everdeen. Spill.”

“There's nothing to spill. Peeta and I are going really well. No problems, which is...so nice, you know?” She chuckled and sipped her coffee. “He's...”

“Aww,” Madge pouted her bottom lip. “You loooove him.”

“No,” Katniss dismissed the notion quickly with a wave of her hand. “I don't love him. Please, Madge, it's been like three months. No one falls in love in three months.”

Madge snorted. “You're denying it just a touch too hard. I'm just saying.”

Katniss shook her head. She wasn't in love with Peeta. She didn't even know if she believed in love anymore. Not the kind of love Madge was talking about. It had burned her too fiercely in the past; that door was likely locked for good. It was something she accepted after Cato, and it had made her life that much easier. One less variable. “It doesn't matter anyway,” she muttered.

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Just...just forget it. What's new with you?”

Madge glared at Katniss. “Oh no you don't. You don't get off the hook that easily, young lady. Come on, we should be able to talk about this stuff. You're my best friend, and I'm concerned about
you.” She waited until Katniss looked up from her cup to continue. “Why doesn't it matter?”

“Because Madge, he's a teacher. He's, like, an adult, you know? He has a job here and friends here and a life here.”

Madge crinkled her eyebrows and pursed her lips. “Okay. And...you don't want to stay here? No offense but, since when?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Madge paused to consider her next words. “You've never talked about your future. I've known you for almost four years and I don't know what you want to do with your life once you graduate. I didn't know you didn't want to stay here.”

Katniss shrugged, playing with the lid on her cardboard cup. “I don't know what I want anymore. Do I really want to stay and end up getting stuck here? And worse – for some guy?”

“Is that really how you see him? Just as 'some guy'? Because I haven't known him for as long as you have but even I can see that he's more than that to you.”

Another shrug. “The thing is...there's this program. Dr. Beetee told me about it. It's an intensive, year long master's program that specializes in entomology.”

“Katniss, that's amazing!” Madge exclaimed, throwing an arm around Katniss' shoulder and hugging her.

“It's in Boston.”

Madge's face fell. “Boston? Like halfway across the country, Boston?”

Katniss nodded. “It's not certain, of course. I haven't started the application process and it's really competitive and almost impossible to get into-”

“It still would be a great opportunity for you though, wouldn't it?”

“That's the thing,” Katniss smiled, “I didn't even realize it was something I wanted until now. There are programs all over the country I could apply for. Beetee still thinks I can take the test in time.”

Madge was quiet. “That doesn't necessarily mean you can't do both, you know. Love someone and go to school.”

“Yeah, but what's the point?” Katniss asked, resting her head against the legs of the statue, letting the crisp autumn air blow across her face. “Why love somebody who you're just going to end up leaving and hurting? Which is only going to hurt you?”

“You're too analytical about something that makes no sense,” Madge answered quietly. “You can't help who you love or how long it takes to fall in love. If the feeling's there, it's there; you can't deny that for too long.”

“You would if you were in my position.” Katniss drained her cup and began to fidget with it.

Madge watched her for a few minutes before grabbing her purse and fishing out the emergency cigarettes from the hidden pocket. “It's going to be one of these conversations, isn't it?”

Katniss took a cigarette from Madge's hand. “Better keep the pack out.”
“Nice specs,” Peeta joked, tapping the edge of Katniss’ glasses when he opened the door to his apartment to greet her.

“You didn’t know I wear glasses?” Katniss asked, swatting his hand away from her.

His reflexes were still pretty sharp, so he caught her hand and pinned her against the wall with it. He leaned down and kissed her deeply, eliciting a long moan from her. “I didn’t. But you should wear them more often. They’re sexy in a librarian or...naughty schoolgirl way.”

She rolled her eyes. “I regret that schoolgirl thing now.”

“Don’t,” he murmured in her ear. “I’ve never come so hard in my life.”

She clenched her legs together as the electric shiver that started deep inside her rushed through the rest of her body. He winked and released her hand. She missed the support he gave her now—wobbling knees. She gripped the wall with one hand and tried to casually adjust her glasses. “You, uh, you’re cooking?” She mentally slapped herself as she heard the words pass her lips. He invited her over for dinner while she studied. Of course he was cooking. “Sorry. What are you cooking?”

He smirked, loving how sexy she was even when she was nervous. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Katniss followed Peeta into the kitchen, dropping her backpack on a chair and joining him at the stove. “Smells good,” she wrinkled her nose, “whatever it is.”

He chuckled. “It’s Tandoori Chicken. When you said you were going to take the GRE, this was the first thing that popped into my head to make.”

“That’s a little random.”

“Eh. There was this Indian restaurant in town I would go to when I was studying for my GRE. I was there like, everyday, I swear,” he laughed as he stirred the sauce. “The owners started reserving a table for me in a corner that no one else ever went to so it would be as quiet as possible. When I got into my program, anytime I needed to study for anything, I craved Indian food.”

“You’re making that up,” she commented. “You just got used to studying in that place.”

Peeta shook his head. “Nope. I was conditioned. I can’t eat Indian food anymore because I get too stressed out about what I should be studying for. Food and smells are very powerful stimuli for memories.” He winked again. “Psychology, baby.”

Katniss snorted but leaned into his side. Slowly, she was learning these little details about the life of Dr. Peeta Mellark and finding that she wanted to be around him more and more. This — standing in the kitchen, making dinner — felt so natural and right. Like she could do it forever.

Forever.

No. No, she couldn’t think about forever. Not after three months. Not after realizing she wanted more from her life. There was no use in thinking about forever. She couldn’t afford to think about forever right now. “Hm. I wonder if that’s why I hate hospital food,” she offered. “Because of...
memories.

“Could be. But it’s more likely you hate hospital food because hospital food is disgusting. Here,” he held the wooden spoon up to her lips, “taste. Tell me what you think.”

The spices from the sauce danced across her tongue, cut by a hint of lemon juice and garlic. “Ohh,” she moaned. “That’s delicious. You’re amazing.”

“I did a lot of studying in grad school.” He kissed her, licking her lips gently. “Could use something.” He rummaged around his spice collection before adding a pinch more cumin. “This won’t be ready for another half an hour or so. Will you survive until then?” He joked, patting her stomach.

“I suppose,” she grumbled. “I brought snacks with me anyway.”

“Seriously? You brought snacks,” he deadpanned.

She laughed. “You eat Indian food when you study, I eat Goldfish.” She strode over to her backpack and pulled out a brand new bag of Goldfish crackers. “Multicolored, even.”

“Big spender,” he chuckled. “Don’t ruin your appetite, young lady.”

Katniss rolled her eyes. “Like that’s ever happened.”

“You know, when you finally hit puberty, you’re going to be in for a real shocker,” he joked as she ripped open the package and stuffed a handful of crackers into her mouth.

“Me and my ‘changing body.’” She pulled out the GRE workbooks she recently bought, hoping the obscene amount of money she spent on them would be worth it. “Verbal or Quant first?”

“It depends,” he answered, setting the spoon down and coming over to lean against the back of her chair. “Do you feel like you have a penchant for memorizing word lists or substratal algebraic equations?”

A Goldfish fell out of Katniss’ open mouth. “Huh?”

He was confused by her confusion. He knew she was a hard worker and planned everything out to a T, so the fact that what he said didn’t make sense to her had him worried. “Which part of that didn’t make sense?”

“Uh...the words that no one actually uses in that context. Penchant? Sub-strantal?”

“Substratal,” he correct. “It means ‘basic.’ It’s a pretty common example of a GRE word.” He paused. “Have you started looking at any of the vocab? Or verbal tests, yet?”

Katniss knew she had turned bright pink at his accusation. This was the first night she even cracked open her books, even though her test was in two weeks. She was smart, though, with a 3.96 GPA in college and a 4.0 in high school. Dr. Beetee seemed confident in her ability to handle graduate work, so she didn’t think about what kind of prep work would actually be needed for this test. “Um...”

“Oh, Katniss.” He sat in the chair right next to her. “So you have no clue what you’re getting yourself into, do you?” He twitched his lips as she shook her head. “The good thing is that the math should be fairly simple once you get the formulas and equations down pat. And you’re an excellent writer, so the written portion shouldn’t cause you too much pain, either. But the verbal...well the verbal tends to trip everyone up.”
Katniss felt like crying. She was so not prepared. There was a written section? She needed to have an extensive vocabulary? She did some math in her classes, but hadn’t been in an actual math class since College Algebra her freshman year. And even then she didn’t really learn anything since the professor didn’t seem to know what the hell she was doing most days. Katniss dropped her head onto her notebook. “Fuuuuck.”

Peeta reached out and held her hand, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. “Hey, it’s okay. You’ll be fine. I’ll help you study, alright? We’ll get through this.”

She looked up at him. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “Do you know what score you need? Or what your goal score is?”

She shook her head. “I don’t even know what a good score is. Oh!” She lifted her head and rummaged through her bag. “I have one of the applications. It’s probably on there, right?” She scanned the cover letter. “It says...no minimum but last year’s average was a 1210.” She looked up at Peeta. “Is that high?”

Peeta nodded. “Well the highest is 1600, so, yeah, 1210 is pretty high. Most PhD programs use 1200 as their bare minimum. Is that for a PhD program?” He reached for the application.

“No, it’s a master’s program. Dr. Beetee thought it’d be good for me. I’ve been looking at it and figured it couldn’t hurt to apply, right? Even if my odds aren’t all that great for it.”

“Absolutely! I didn’t even know you were interested in post-bach work.”

He seemed so happy for her, not upset that she wanted something for herself like she anticipated. He was willing to help her and didn’t immediately shut her down when she brought up the idea of school. This was so foreign to her. She had to keep her study habits and academic successes to herself when she was in high school because Gloss always got irrationally angry whenever she mentioned college, claiming she was just using her grades to show she was better than he was and wanted to get away from him by going to school without him. Gloss wasn’t dumb by any means, but he was too unmotivated to do anything beyond being a “cart boy” at the local big-box store with his friends. He was comfortable and content with that life and expected Katniss to be as well.

“It’ll be tough to get you there, but you’re pretty stubborn,” Peeta continued, interrupting her thoughts. “That may end up being more beneficial for this than you think.”

“What was your score?”

“Which time?” He laughed, rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

Katniss’ eyes bugged out of her head. “How many times did you take it?”

“Uh...three, I’m pretty sure. But you have to remember that my mother insisted that I go somewhere she approved of, which meant a 1250 the first time and a 1310 two months later were not acceptable scores.” He rolled his eyes. “It didn’t matter that those scores would have gotten me into just about all the schools I was interested in. She wanted me to go to an Ivy like she did so I had to do better. Northwestern was the only ‘acceptable alternative’ because she knew almost all the board members there, but only if I got a 1400.”

“Holy shit!” she exclaimed. “You got a 1400? Out of 1600? Fuck me, you’re like a fucking genius or something.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I was raised by a fucking genius. Who also happened to be a
perfectionist. Who instilled that mentality in me. Though, I am unnaturally good at standardized tests. It’s a curse.”

“Fuck me. 1400.”

“1420, actually,” he admitted, sheepishly.

“You are fucking kidding me,” she groaned. “Alright. Teach me your ways.”

He got up and kissed the top of her head. “Start with a math refresher. We’ll do vocab after dinner. Formulas you will learn, young grasshopper.”

“You just mixed two references there, old man,” Katniss commented.

Peeta gave her a look. “Did you even understand either reference?” She didn’t meet his eyes. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Hit the books, Everdeen.”

Katniss sunk back in her seat and pulled her cell phone out. “Peeta, I’m never going to get this. Am I really expected to memorize all of these words? I’ve never even heard of most of them,” she whined as soon as Peeta picked up the phone.

“Shh!” A student from the next table over hushed her.

Katniss narrowed her eyes at whomever was invading her personal corner of the library. Midterms and finals week were her least favorite parts of the semester, not because of tests, but because they were the only time when the rest of campus decided to act like students and invaded the library. They were like a swarm of locusts, filling every table and computer on every floor and buzzing about with each other as they crammed half a semester’s worth of knowledge into their heads, only to replace it over the weekend with copious amounts of alcohol. She didn’t know why they even bothered most of the time.

Their nervous energy set Katniss off every time, making it more difficult for her to keep up with her typical study habits. Peeta understood this and offered his apartment as her own sanctuary. It worked out well for both of them: he graded papers and wrote tests and she studied. They were both quiet and studious and Peeta always had tea, not coffee, ready for her. By the time Katniss got off work or out of class, Peeta was ready to head home, so it was an ideal process. Unfortunately, that wasn’t an option on this particular day because he had a department meeting that afternoon, therefore Katniss was stuck in the library with everyone else.

“Katniss, calm down, you’re only a week in. Have you been trying those websites I suggested?”

“Yes,” she answered, “and I’ve given enough rice to feed a family in China for a month, not that my verbal score has shown it.”

“And you’ve been doing your building block flashcards? Roots, suffixes, prefixes?”

“Yes, but I keep getting the Latin and Greek mixed up.” She sighed loudly. “I should just pull out of this fucking test and not go to grad school.”

Katniss heard Peeta shut his office door. “Katniss Everdeen, you stop that right now. We’ll work
twice as hard to figure out a method that works for you.”

“But,” she started to hyperventilate, her chest tightened, and she fought to keep the panic from flooding through her body and taking over. “Peeta, what if. I can’t. do-”

“Katniss, sweetie, take a deep breath, okay? Deep, deep breaths. Just try to relax. We won’t do any major studying tonight. You’ve been running yourself ragged, you need to give your brain a break.”

“I can’t take a break, Peeta!” Katniss hissed. “I don’t have time to take a break!”

“Okay,” Peeta answered, keeping his voice calm. “No break, but a different way to study? Something less stressful, alright?”

She sniffed. “Okay.”

“Okay. Now, I have to go to my meeting. I’ll call you as soon as it’s over.”

“Okay.”

“Try to stay calm, Katniss. No GRE prep until I come get you.” He hung up his phone, slipped it into his pocket, and dashed down the hall to the conference room where, thankfully, Haymitch saved him a seat that wasn’t right up front. Throughout the meeting, rather than listen about budget issues and how Dr. So-And-So’s tenure progress was coming along, all Peeta could think about was Katniss.

Without even realizing it, she had made a place for herself in the darkness of his life. He craved her in every sense of the word; her mind, her charm, her wit, her body. He wanted to make them all his without her losing any bit of herself in the process. She was just as likely to initiate sex as he was, she fought fiercely for what she believed in, held her ground when she thought he was being unreasonable. And now this – throwing everything she had into getting into a graduate program on the other side of the country.

He didn’t know much about current biology programs, so he spent countless hours researching different programs, particularly the one at Boston College that she was so interested in. He was completely blown away with their one-year master’s program but knew that it wouldn’t matter how intensive it was because Katniss had the drive and ambition to be successful at it. Her work ethic and determination weren’t things that could be measured on the GRE, but would almost certainly ensure her success in the program. Once she got in.

As soon as he could, he bolted from the meeting to pick up Katniss. He found her sitting on the steps of the library, finishing off a cigarette and anxiously tapping her feet. She lit up when he pulled up and ran to the passenger side. “Hi,” she smiled.

“Smoking?” He asked when she slid in. It wasn’t that he particularly cared about people who smoked, but he did find it concerning that she never told him she smoked.

“Only when I’m really stressed out,” she answered, exhaling slowly. “When I’m studying for a test it tends to be worse.” She opened the zipper on the front of her bag and held up her toothbrush. “I was going to brush my teeth when we got to your place.”

Peeta couldn’t help but smile at her. “Want to get some dinner first?”

“I’m starving,” she answered, slipping the toothbrush back. “What a silly question.”

Starving was putting it lightly, he learned, as Katniss all but inhaled her double cheeseburger and
large fries. She always ate like she’d never see food again, but somehow was able to maintain her thin physique. He ran every day and watched what he ate while she shoveled down food and didn’t gain a pound, but he knew better than to bring it up, knowing food became a really sensitive subject for her after her sister died and her mother zoned out. He just encouraged her to eat and was glad she wasn’t a “salad and water” kind of girl.

“What?” she asked, after catching him staring at her. “Do I have something on my face?”

“No,” he answered. “You’re just adorable.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, okay.”

“Seriously.” He grabbed her wrappers to throw them away and leaned down to kiss her.


“Don’t mention it,” he answered, coming back toward her. He held out his hand to help her off the couch. “Grab your bag and come with me.”

“Where we are going?” She giggled, a behavior that was occurring more often around him.

“Just grab your bag and come with me,” he repeated, disappearing into his bedroom. Katniss tossed her bag on the bed and sat next to it with an expectant look on her face. Peeta tossed Buttercup off his spot near Peeta’s pillow and shut the door behind him. “Okay, we’re going to try something a little different with the verbal portion. Give me your workbook,” he instructed. Katniss let out a breath and unzipped her bag. Peeta fished the book out and set her bag on the floor. He flipped through to the back, where the exercise questions were. “Alright, Miss Everdeen, since my other methods aren’t helpful, I have a new idea. I’ll ask you a question and if you get it right, I will remove an article of clothing. If you get the question wrong, then you have to remove something.” Peeta cocked a daring eyebrow. “You game?”

Katniss set her lips, eyes dancing at the premise. “Strip Vocabulary? Deal. But no cheating!”

He waggled his eyebrows as he read the instructions to the question. “Each of the following includes one, two, or three blanks, indicating an omitted word or words. Fill in the blanks in the way that best completes the text.” He smirked. “The blank value of embryonic stem cells is clear enough, given their capacity to develop into many different types of human tissue. However, the genetic program that underlies this quality is not yet known.” He flipped the book to her to let her see the options and select the best answer.

She smiled sweetly. “D. Potential. Now strip, Dr. Mellark.”

He unbuttoned his dress shirt and tossed it on the floor next to him. “By blank office staff members for legal research and for drafting alternative provisions of the bill, the senator was able to focus her attention less on the blank aspects of her proposed legislation and more on it’s policy and political implications.”

Katniss studied the choices, easily selecting relying on for the first blank but was unable to decide between mundane and trivial for the second. She ended up having to “eenie-meenie-miny-moe” between the two. “Trivial.”

“Lose it, Everdeen,” he grinned. “Rely on and mundane. You need to be careful to not let the value of the word bias your answer.”

“Damnit. I got half of it right,” she protested.
He shrugged. “There’s no such thing as half right on the GRE. It’s all or nothing. Bare down.”

She pulled her t-shirt off, glad she was wearing a cami underneath since she had opted not to wear a bra. Peeta let out a long whistle. “Oh Lord, just get on it with,” she joked, throwing her shirt at him.

They alternated between the different type of verbal questions until Katniss was left in only her panties while Peeta kept his boxers and undershirt on. “What do you say, Everdeen? One more question wrong and I win.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Bring it.”

“It was her view that the country’s problems had been blank by foreign technocrats, so that to ask for such assistance again would be counter-productive.” He flipped the book over. “Two answers.”

She read the word list in her head. Ameliorated. Ascertained. Degenerated. Esoteric. Exacerbated. Obsequious. Fuck. She knew this one, had seen these words before, if only she could remember which lists they came from. “Um…” Shit shit shit. “Exacerbated. And…” she was certain about that one. But which one of these fucking words meant the same as exacerbated in this context? What the hell did obsequious mean? And Ameliorated? She knew better than to second guess herself, the book did mention that gut instinct played a role, but she also knew the test liked to throw words that seemed like the right answer on first glance but weren’t really. “And, uh, degenerate.” She looked up into his eyes and disappointment washed over her as he smiled. “No?”

“That’s right.”

“What?” She covered her mouth with her hands. “Seriously? You’re not just messing with me? I got it right? I got it right!” She lunged at him, knocking him onto his back and kissed him out of excitement.

“You got it right, smarty pants. Or, smarty pantless.”

She looked over her shoulder at her simple cotton underwear. “Do you think they’ll let me take the test like this?”

“They do want you to be comfortable,” he confirmed. “But I can think of something far more enjoyable to do in this state.” He lifted his neck up and caught her lips. Her hands ran through his hair, his rested right above her ass, his thumbs on the two small dimples she had there.

They paused to pull his undershirt off and Katniss kissed her way down his chest to where the fine blonde hairs on his stomach met the elastic of his tented boxers. She glanced up at him, fire pulsing through her eyes. In one swift move, she pulled his boxers down, releasing his hardness.

Peeta groaned as she took him in her mouth, swirling her tongue as she bobbed up and down. She moaned when his fingers got lost in her hair, finding this subtle sign of dominance from him incredibly hot. She changed up the pressure from her mouth, sucking in as she went down and releasing as she came back up. One sharp tug on her hair and she released him, crawling back up to kiss him again.

She almost missed him sliding her panties down and off her legs but couldn’t miss his fingers slipping into her. She muffled her pleasure against the skin on his shoulder, biting down when his thumb pressed small circles on her clit. “Please, Peeta.”

He brought his fingers up to her mouth and she readily accepted them, mimicking the pressure she had on his cock. He replaced them with his tongue, crashing their mouths together in a fight for control. He blindly reached into his nightstand, knocking the alarm clock off, for a condom. She took
it from him and rolled it down his cock before positioning herself above him. “Ready?” He asked.

They let out simultaneous groans as Katniss impaled herself completely on him. They hadn’t tried this position yet; it took them both a few seconds to adjust to the difference. Slowly Katniss began to swivel her hips, toward and away from him, circling her pelvis sensually. She kept her eyes closed tightly, feeling inexplicably full in this position. His hands were at her breasts, massaging, pinching; anything and everything he did was heightened. She clasped her hand over his, using the other to stabilize herself by reaching down to hold his hipbone. She dug her fingertips into his skin, her groans growing louder and deeper.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so fucking hot,” he moaned, thrusting up into her. She adjusted her feet and took over the movement for herself. Almost immediately, the heat rushed through her body and her muscles spasmed around him.

“Holy shit,” she let her head rest against his shoulder until her body recovered.

He wrapped his arms around her back and held her body flush to his. She was intoxicated with his skin, the scent, the feel, the taste. “You doing okay?” He asked her shaking body. He kissed the side of her head, brushing the hair from her face.

“Uh-huh,” she exhaled. “Yeah, very okay.”

“Good,” he growled, flipping her onto her back. He hooked her ankles over his shoulders and slid into her with a hiss. “What do you want?”

“Fuck me,” she answered, recognizing the dark look in his eyes, feeling his fingers digging into her anklebones. Tugging on her hair earlier was his sign that if she finished first, he wanted more to get himself off, and she was more than ready to give it to him. Hard, fast fucking was always a sure bet, and it helped that she usually got off from it as well. He pushed into her, over and over, watching her fall apart beneath him. He traced the flush that started at her neck, across her breasts, nearly down to her belly button. She broke out whenever she came – the deeper the color, the bigger the orgasm. It was a joke between them that they could rate the sex on a scale of blush pink to deep red.

His abs flexed in anticipation of his impending orgasm. He reached down to try to get her just as close, but the slight change in angle was all it took. He fell over the edge and came with a series of grunts and groans. Katniss whimpered underneath him, clearly not having reached her second orgasm but painfully close. Peeta knew it wouldn’t take much to push her completely over, so he dropped to his knees. He sucked her clit into his mouth, using his fingers to continue pumping into her. She cried out loudly and gripped the sheets with white knuckles, her hips bucking violently into him.

He disposed of the condom and wiped himself off with a shirt from his hamper. He laughed when he crawled up and found Katniss already huddled under the blankets, ready to sleep. “How you hanging in there, trooper?”

She gave him a lazy thumbs up but kept on her side.

He kissed her and curled up beside her, his hand resting across her stomach. “Best teaching tool, ever. You’re amazing, you know that?” He kissed her shoulder. “So sexy and so fun.”

“I’m a good lay,” she answered.

“Of course you are. Plus you’ve got that wicked mouth of yours.”

“Mouth and vag. My best qualities.”
“Hey,” Peeta turned her to face him. “What did you say?”

She shrugged, a cold, distant look in her eye. “Nevermind.”

“No. Why do you think that?”

“That’s a lot of what we do,” she finally offered in a barely audible voice. “You always make jokes about me in that way so I just...”

“Just what?”

“I just assumed that’s all you wanted me for.” She shook her head. “Don’t, worry about it, Peeta, it’ll pass.”

“Katniss,” he brushed her hair off her face and neck. “There’s so much more to you than sex. I’m sorry if I ever made you feel like-”

She sighed. “It’s not just you, Peeta. It’s my life. It’s everyone, you know?” She leaned up to kiss him. “Night.”

Peeta thought about it as Katniss turned back around and almost instantly fell asleep. He brushed his hand up and down her arm. How did it come to this? he wondered. They went from being happy and in-sync to her thinking he only wanted her for sex. Where did she even get that impression from? He always told her she was smart, charming, wonderful, all these things outside of the bedroom. Was he just too dominant with her here, too demanding of sex because it was what made him feel closer to her? Because it wasn’t just sex or fucking when he was with her. They did have a lot of sex, but they did other things - they made dinner, watched movies, just talked, all the things that couples normally did.

Almost all the things. He still hadn’t taken her out on a proper date, in public. Was that what she meant? She had to understand why he hadn’t. Why he couldn’t. Not yet. It was the same reason they had to wait to do anything together. He had every intention of taking her out to show her off the moment she graduated. That was all he could offer her at this point. But they talked about it, they came to the agreement. Didn’t they?

How much he slept that night, he wasn’t sure. His mind continued to race, trying to think of some way to show her that she was more than that to him.

Katniss woke up after Peeta that morning, but she could hear him chatting to Buttercup in the kitchen. She slipped on his dress shirt from the previous night and padded out to join him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head between his shoulder blades. “Morning.”

He twisted around to properly hug her. “Good morning. Nice shirt.”

“Thanks,” she said, playing with the top button, “I just picked it up.” She poured herself a bowl of cereal and growled at Buttercup when he hopped onto the table to drink the milk from her bowl.

Peeta picked up the kitten and set him on the floor by his own food bowl. “Stay down, Bubs.” Buttercup meowed in response and lapped at his water. “Do I need to drop you off at home this morning for clothes?”
“Nope. I’ll be okay for today. I only have two classes,” she answered with a mouthful of cereal.

He chuckled, “And no one will notice you wearing the same thing as yesterday?”

“Jeans are jeans. And I’ve got my cami.”

He walked into his bedroom and reappeared with a sweatshirt. “It’s supposed to get chilly today. Your tanktop isn’t going to be enough.”

“This is like modern day ‘pinning’ you know,” she said, accepting the hoodie. “Almost like you’re asking me to go steady with you.”

He kissed the top of her head. “Maybe I am. Hurry up, kid, we need to get going soon.”

Katniss watched him walk back into his room to get dressed and the cereal she just put into her mouth lost its flavor. She dropped her spoon back into the bowl, which caught Buttercup’s attention. She set the bowl on the floor, whistling for the cat, who came bounding over. “Well...shit.”

She tried not to let this potential relationship status change affect her current dynamic with Peeta as they drove to school. He dropped her off at her building with as chaste a kiss as possible, since they were on school grounds and could easily be seen by the wrong people. “I’ll pick you up this afternoon?”

“I’ll probably be at home,” she answered. “My classes get out at noon today and I can’t go back to the library.” She nervously tugged on her braid. “Um, have a good day at work.”

He smiled sadly. “You, too. Try and stay calm today.” She nodded and turned to leave when he called out to her. “Katniss! Purple’s a good color on you.”

“I hate purple,” she answered, pulling on the strings of the hood. It was a faded purple Northwestern hoodie that was obviously well-worn by Peeta. It smelled just like his bedsheets, like his scent was ingrained in the fabric itself. “But this shade suits me, I suppose.” She finally gave him a smile. “Now get to work.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hit the bricks, Everdeen.”

Katniss hugged the sweatshirt around her all day, keeping the collar up by her nose so his scent was always present. It was warm and protective and she could easily curl up inside it and sleep peacefully.

“Almost like you’re asking me to go steady with you”

“Maybe I am.”

Just like that, the smile that she had been hiding under the sweatshirt fell and she felt like she was going to vomit. Her second class still had an hour to go and the clock was not her friend. Every painful minute that ticked by made her more anxious and she began to consider just leaving early. It wasn’t like she could focus on native prairie grasses at a time like this anyway.

The walk back to her apartment was long and cold, even with the fleece sweatshirt. Her mind was preoccupied with thoughts of Peeta and her past and future. They kept jumbling together into a mass of confusion that refused to cut itself loose throughout her shower or lunch.

Peeta’s shirt lay on the couch, staring at her, forcing her to make a decision. Did she want to “go steady” with him, so to speak? She had only seriously dated one person and he damn near destroyed
her to the point of thinking that an asshole like Cato was worth her time. She didn’t want that with Peeta, but she was more afraid of what might happen with Peeta. She was afraid of how she felt about Peeta, afraid that he would end up hurting her just as badly. Or that she would hurt him.

But he wanted to be with her, even after what he had been through. Especially after he told her what he went through. It acted like a release for him; since that night, he had been far more attentive and warm with her. She jumped up and scoured through her closet, finding a folded t-shirt hidden deep in the back with a giant Superman logo across the front. She brought the shirt out and laid it next to Peeta’s sweatshirt. Her past. Her present. One of them would become her potential future, it all depended on what she did now.

Peeta had just sat down for his office hours when his computer alerted him to a new email. He was surprised to see one from Katniss’ personal email account, since usually she just texted him anything she wanted him to know. He opened it up and leaned forward on his desk to read it.

Peeta.

I’ve started this email about three times now. It’s just easier to jump in with both feet, I suppose. Here we go.

My parents were head over heels in love with each other from the moment they met. My dad died when I was 11 years old. He was a defense attorney and was meeting with a client in her home when he was fatally shot. My mom gave up on us. It didn’t happen all at once; it was a slow process that started with her picking up more shifts at the hospital to avoid being home with Prim and I. When I was in high school, she changed completely. She was manic all the time and Prim was so convinced she had come back for good. Turns out she was just really good at keeping her self medication techniques to herself.

I did a pretty good job of keeping myself together, too. I tried to focus on my school work and refused to talk about my dad to anyone, even the friends I had before he died. Until I met Alan Gloss. He was five years older than me, and was the first person to make me smile other than Prim. He was mature and helped me to cope with all the feelings I had been keeping inside about my dad. He bought me my first drink, was with me the first time I smoked pot, he had a lot of my firsts.

For the first six months things were really great. We clicked. I thought we were going to be forever, even if I didn’t particularly believe in “forever”. We were happy with each other. We spent all our time together and talked every day. He said he loved me and I believed him. Because I was absolutely in love with him. He made me forget so much of the pain and loneliness I was feeling.

The counselor I went to here at the university would later tell me that was just the first step toward a controlling and abusive relationship. Where was she when this was happening, I wanted to ask. Why didn’t anyone else try to warn me? Looking back, I suppose they did, Prim especially. But I was 16. I was in love. I wanted to spend all my time with him and I was the luckiest girl in the world because he wanted to spend all his time with me. No jealous little sister would get in the way of that. What did she know anyway, right? She didn’t have to take care of the house because our mom was never home. She didn’t have to keep up the charade of being “fine” because she was just a kid.

My entire world revolved around Gloss.
So when he told me that no one would ever love me except him, I believed him. He said anyone who claimed to was lying to fuck me. When he told me that I’d be nothing without him, I believed him. When he blamed me for something I said or didn’t say, something I did or didn’t do, for why he was in a bad mood, I believed him. When he hung up on me because he heard someone else’s voice in the background, it was my fault. I should have known better. When I wanted to stay home one night to help Prim with her homework and he got mad at me, I was wrong.

The first time I didn’t want to have sex with him, he threatened to break up with me. He told me that there were tons of girls who wanted to sleep with him but he never did because he loved me and why couldn’t I love him back? I pleaded, I cried, I ended up begging him to sleep with me to prove that I loved him, even though I had no interest in having sex with him. He finished and told me that’s all I was good for, most days. That’s all anyone saw when they looked at me. And I believed him.

It was the most degrading and humiliating year and a half of my life. I was 16, 17 years old. I was a child. A naive, innocent, broken child and he took advantage of that. He shattered everything about me. What he said to me and about me are still true in my mind. I can’t shake them. I know he was being manipulative. I know he’s an abuser. But it doesn’t change the fact that I’m a disaster. I’m not normal. I’m not...lovable.

Gloss was driving the car when we got into the accident. He was angry with me for bringing her along. Angry because I told him things needed to change. He had been drinking. Prim begged me to find another way home but I couldn’t see it. He ordered me into the car and I dragged her along. I wonder if he wanted to kill us all, to go out in a blaze of glory. I don’t blame him for Prim’s death, I blame myself. There were so many times I wish God had taken me instead. Prim was the only source of true love in my world when she died, a huge part of me did as well. My mother went off the deep end and stopped hiding her addiction.

I don’t know if I believe in love. I don’t believe anyone is ever not being manipulative of me somehow. Years and years of therapy later and I still can’t accept a compliment. I still look for the hidden meaning. I don’t see good in me. I hate myself. I was weak then. And now...even now I wonder if I’d be able to get out in time.

I’m a mess, Peeta. I’m destruction in human form. I just...I needed you to know this so you can know me. I hope it doesn’t scare you off.

-Katniss

Peeta stared at his computer screen, his heart dropping into his stomach and his head spinning, trying to make sense of what he just read. He read the email three, four, five times, each time becoming more and more angry at this man for what he did. For what he instilled in her. He felt his fists clench tightly and his teeth grind. He grabbed his jacket and stormed through the department down to Haymitch’s office.

Without knocking, he opened it up. “Haymitch, you need to teach my 1:30.”

Haymitch awoke from his afternoon nap with a jolt, nearly falling out of his chair. “What in the hell are you talking about, boy?”

“I need you to teach my 1:30 class today,” Peeta repeated, none of his anger having subsided.

Haymitch raised an eyebrow and nodded. “You’ll want to calm down before you get someone hurt with that rage. What class is it?”

Peeta had no memory of how he got to Katniss’ apartment. He drove, that much he knew, because
he was sitting in his truck trying to count to ten. He couldn’t be upset when he saw her; she’d think he was mad at her, which couldn’t be further from the truth. Another count to ten. And another. And another. Finally he was able to think about something other than strangling that asshole and left his truck. He knocked on her apartment door and as soon as she opened it, he engulfed her in a body crushing hug.

She was confused at first, only registering the flurry of colors and clothes that came at her, but as soon as she smelled him, she burst into tears, apologizing over and over again. He led her to her bedroom and laid down with her, letting her cry as hard as she needed to in his arms.

When she finally calmed down, she asked if he would take her to the local campground a few miles away. He didn’t ask why, but agreed to drive her wherever she wanted. She pulled a shoebox out from under her bed and brought it along with her. When they arrived, she jumped out of the truck and quickly began finding sticks and leaves to build a fire in one of the pits. Silently, as the fire burned brighter, she opened the box and began throwing the contents into the flames, one by one.

Pictures. Letters. Cards. Ticket stubs. Everything that reminded her of Gloss. The t-shirt nearly exhausted the flame, but once the cotton started burning, the fire shot up in a blaze of bright white.

She and Peeta sat together in the bed of his truck and watched the fire burn well into the night.

“I’ll never hurt you like he did, Katniss.”

“I’ll never hurt you like she did,” she promised back. She tucked herself in close to his side. “I needed this. I need you.”

He rested his head against the top of hers. “I need you too, Katniss.”

The official testing center was a tiny brick building near the baseball field on the opposite side of campus from the library. Madge offered to drive Katniss over before class but Katniss waved her off, saying the cool morning air from the walk would be the best thing to wake her up. Campus was totally different at 7 in the morning, void of any students except the handful who jogged past her with no awareness. She focused on the quiet crunch of leaves she stepped on on the sidewalk, the smell of the breeze as it blew past her, anything that distracted her from the impending doom she was walking toward. Peeta reassured her the night before that once she got through the first written portion, she'd be fine, but she didn't fully believe him.

He also told her not to stay up and study the night before. She considered spending an hour on flashcards wouldn't hurt. She needed all the help she could get and even now was fairly certain everything she had crammed over the last two weeks was falling out of her head.

She signed in and filled out all the appropriate paperwork in the testing center and was led to a cubicle in the far corner of a separate room. The girl running the testing center said there may be other students coming in, but that the headphones provided would block out all the noise. Taking a deep breath, Katniss read the instructions about how to select school codes and testing options carefully, delaying the inevitable as long as possible.

Okay, Katniss. Here you go. Moment of truth.

She slipped the headphones on and clicked 'Start Now.'
Katniss was quiet during the entire ride to Finnick and Annie's house, the cheesy potato casserole that sat on her lap shifted as she nervously bounced her legs. "You're sure it's okay that I come? Because you can drop me off at home and I can still go get-"

Peeta reached over and squeezed her knee. "Of course I'm sure. These are my friends, Katniss, not a group of vicious murders. And there is absolutely no way I'm letting you spend Thanksgiving alone." He shut his truck off and looked over at her with a smile. "Ready to meet the gang?"

Katniss eyed the house with trepidation. It wasn't huge, by any means, but already felt too imposing for her liking. Every light in the place was shining brightly and silhouettes could be seen through the windows. As soon as Peeta found out Katniss intended to spend Thanksgiving alone with a bucket of KFC, he insisted she join him and his friends for their annual "Friends-giving" celebration that Annie, Johanna, and Peeta started in grad school. Even though she had met Johanna before and had taken a few classes with Finnick, she knew this would be a totally different experience. Now, she was no longer seeing them as "her professors" but as "her boyfriend's friends." She sighed. "You're sure you wouldn't rather just split some Extra Crispy Recipe?"

"This is a fun night, Katniss and I want you to be a part of it." He walked her to the door, his hand resting on the small of her back. "Hello!" He called, opening the door. They were met by a tiny yapping furball that jumped at Katniss' knees.

"Shit!" She hissed, nearly dropping the casserole.

"Hey, Cas, come here, boy," Peeta cooed, distracting the dog and letting Katniss regain her composure. The dog yipped and ran circles around Peeta's legs, tail wagging excitedly.

"Casanova! Bad boy, go to Dad!" A female voice called. The dog barked and bolted down the hall. "Peeta! How are you?" The woman finally appeared with a smile on her face and full wine glass in her hand. She was a wispy thing, tall and thin, with flowing brunette hair that framed her face with a slight curl. Her voice had a musical quality, rising and falling like the harmonies of a song. She hugged Peeta and handed him the glass.

Peeta took a sip and laughed. "This tastes like that crap we drank too much of after our comps."

Annie stole the glass back and stuck out her tongue. "It's the same kind. I found it in the basement." She took a sip and scrunched her face. "Okay, still can't drink this without remembering that night." She turned to Katniss and smiled brightly. "You must be Katniss! I've heard so much about you, I'm glad I finally get to meet you." She all but shoved the casserole dish into Peeta's hands. "Peeta, you know where the food goes, right? Katniss and I are going to get something better to drink." She led a still bewildered Katniss away and toward the dining room. "What do you drink? Reds? Whites? Something mixed?"

Katniss took in the alcohol selection in awe. Peeta told her they tended to go all out when they got together, and if this was any indication, he wasn't kidding. Several bottles of wine, vodka, and gin lined the dining room table. "Uh...I'll take a white," she answered quietly.

Annie poured two very full glasses of wine and two whiskeys over ice. "For the boys," she explained, handing one of each to Katniss. "Finnick and Peeta always start with this and quickly dissolve into drinking wine out of the bottle," she laughed. "They're still children deep down, I
Katniss nodded, not sure what to say about her professor's drinking habits, especially to his wife. Instead she followed Annie through the kitchen and into the living room, next to Peeta, who was arguing something about baseball to Finnick. She tried to sink into the couch cushions, not really sure how to interact with these people who were so much smarter and...adult than she was.

"So, Miss Everdeen," Finnick's voice boomed. "How does it feel to hang out with your favorite professor outside of class?" He laughed and Annie backhanded him.

"Would you stop, Finnie? She's nervous enough as it is."

"And Johanna's not even here yet," Peeta added, sipping his drink. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "It'll be fine," he repeated.

"When is she supposed to get here?" Finnick asked. "And that 'friend' of hers." He reached down and grabbed the toy Casanova had been playing with and threw it across the room. The dog ran after it as fast as he could, bringing it back with excitement. "What's his name?"

"Hello? I'm here to rob you! And your little dog, too!" Casanova's ears perked up and he dropped his toy and bolted for the door. "There's the little monster!"

Annie rolled her eyes. "And that would be Jo. If you'll excuse me."

Katniss sat back against Peeta's body, sipping her wine. Okay. You've survived fifteen minutes. You only have to make it through an hour and then maybe you can convince Peeta to take you home. She had to admit this wasn't the type of house she thought Dr. Finnick Odair would be living in. He was extreme and extravagant in class but the house was pretty low key. There were a few pieces of art on the wall that she suspected were Annie's, since Peeta told her Annie was an art history professor. The mantel over the fireplace held simple silver frames, all of Finnick and Annie looking madly in love. Anyone seeing them together would never doubt their love and happiness with one another.

Johanna came bursting into the living room like a raging thunderstorm, glass of wine in one hand and a wriggling Casanova in the other. She plopped down on the couch opposite Peeta and Katniss and rested her bare feet on the coffee table. "Heya kids."

"Johanna. The lion tamer," Finnick greeted her, nodding to the dog that was now sitting very calmly in her lap. "Where's your man friend?"

"With Annie," she waved toward the dining room. "I stole her glass so she had to get her own anyway."

Katniss kept her eyes on her glass, still not totally comfortable with the abrasive girl who caused her friend pain. Peeta's friend or not, her loyalties were with Madge first and foremost.

"Katniss?"

Katniss' eyes shot up. "Gale?" She knew Gale and Johanna had flirted at the bar, but he hadn't mentioned anything about seeing anyone new, so seeing him walk into the living room was a complete shock.

Finnick and Annie's eyebrows shot up and they exchanged looks. "So, uh, you two know each other?" Annie asked delicately. She looked at Peeta and Johanna who looked just as surprised.
"Well this is Gale," Johanna said, trying to cut the tension. "Gale, this is everyone. Annie, Finnick, Peeta, and apparently you know Peeta's girlfriend, Katniss."

"Um, yeah," Gale answered with a bob of his head.

Finnick cleared his throat. "I'll ask. How?"

"We took a class together a few years ago," Katniss answered.

"She couldn't get enough of me after that," Gale answered with a smile.

Katniss rolled her eyes. "Please. You wouldn't have even passed that lab if it weren't for me."

"True," Gale agreed, taking a sip from his glass. Just like that, the air calmed around the room. Katniss was sure the others suspected she and Gale had dated or something, not that they were just friends surprised to see each other at their significant others' friend get-together.

Katniss made sure to catch Gale's eye with a 'we'll need to chat about this later' look that he accepted with an almost imperceptible nod.

"So, Katniss, I hear you took the GRE recently," Annie said, trying to get everyone talking while they waited for the food to finish cooking. "How was it?"

"Still a living hell?" Johanna asked.

Finnick laughed. "It has to be better now that they changed the format."

"Yes!" Annie agreed. "Antonyms were the absolute worst. Talk about a complete waste of time. I don't think I've ever used any of those words again. I was just glad English wasn't my main area. Poor Johanna."

Johanna let out a groan. "Oh my God, I'm pretty sure I only got into my PhD program because I already had my MA and a couple publications. My scores were a damn joke," she admitted. "I spent an entire year reading the New York Times, British literature, and doing crossword puzzles."

"Did anyone have to take a subject test?" Finnick asked.

Peeta nodded. "Northwestern was one of the only schools that required it for non-clinical psych students."

Annie agreed. "I did. It was the worst. But I guess it was good to show that I understood the field? I don't know." She turned to Katniss. "How'd you do?"

Katniss bit her bottom lip as ten eyes focused on her. "Um, I did okay, I think. I, uh, I got an 1170 cumulative."

Finnick let out a whistle. "On your first try? Way to go. Better than I did."

"Really?" Katniss asked in shock. Finnick may have been somewhat obnoxious as a professor, but he was easily one of the smartest professors she had ever taken a class from. To hear that he hadn't done as well as Peeta on the test surprised her.

"Oh, yeah. I think Annie was the only one who took it once, aren't you, honey?"

"Don't even say that, Annie," Peeta chastised. "You earned that score."

"I still think I got an easier version of the test," she mumbled. "But 1170 is amazing. What kind of program are you looking into?"

Katniss felt Peeta's hand graze against her arm and looked up. He looked so proud of her, so happy to be here, that all the insecurity she felt melted away. These were professors, except Gale who somehow fit in just about everywhere he ever went, but right now they were also just people. People who hated stupid graduate school entrance exams as much as she did. Here they were, talking about things that normal, everyday people talked about. They didn't look down on her for being a student or for being too young.

She didn't know if it was the bottles of wine the group ended up consuming or Finnick's turkey and stuffing, or just the reality of spending a holiday with people, but by the time they consumed as much food as they could hold, Katniss finally felt like she belonged.

"Annie! We're out of wine!" Johanna yelled from the dining room.

Finnick, Annie, and Peeta all "ooooh'd" at each other. "You know what that means, JoJo!" Peeta called out.

Johanna was silent for a while and the others waited like children on Christmas morning for her reaction. "Fuck you all." And just like that, they burst out into a roar of laughter and snorts and wheezes.

Johanna came marching into the room with a bottle of vodka in her hand. "Who took the last of the wine and KNEW it?" She narrowed her eyes around the room, but in her drunken state, she ended up looking like a mole rather than intimidating. She plopped onto the couch and took a long swig of the vodka, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "Fuck that's bad. Alright. Fine." She rolled her head from side to side. "Happy Friendsgiving you fuckers. I am thankful for the support you all have provided me with so far this year. These past few months have been a hell of a ride and I couldn't have gotten through them alone." She held the bottle up and took another swig. "Annie. Top it, bitch."

Katniss leaned over to Peeta. "So, what's the point of this game?"

"It's um, well it's kind of gross but it's kind of a waterfall thing. Everyone says what they're thankful for and takes a drink of whatever the most full bottle is. But then whoever went before them has to take a shot first. And so on and so forth. So Johanna has to take like six shots? It's basically just a way to get even more drunk," he answered. "Childish, I know."

Katniss shrugged. "You guys have some strange traditions. Why does Johanna have to go first?"

"Well," Peeta drew out, "Johanna wasn't paying attention to the levels of alcohol that was left. So whoever is the first to announce that they're out of their choice booze starts the tradition." He leaned down into her ear. "That's part of the reason I drink whatever I can find and don't stick to one thing."

Katniss scrunched her mouth and ran her hand down the side of Peeta's face. "Thank God you're pretty." Peeta grabbed her hand and pulled her close for a kiss.

"Um, excuse me, love birds, but Annie's about to tell us what she's thankful for and I'm about to do another shot so please save all vom-inducing activities until after we've all partaken?" Johanna said in an unamused voice. She took a drag of the vodka, handed the bottle to Annie and pulled Gale's face to hers, making a big show of making out with him. "Or at least wait until we can all participate."
Now. Annie-muffin, you go."

Annie shook her head at the name Johanna gave her. "I am thankful for my best friend agreeing to marry me on a whim." She took a drag of the bottle and handed it back to Johanna as the room "aww'd."

They went around the room: Finnick was thankful for Casanova gladly keeping the baby's room warm until he and Annie were ready; Gale was thankful for good health and shitty booze, which got a loud cheer; Peeta was thankful for a job and coworkers he loved and who loved him in return to which Finnick responded by planting a very sloppy kiss on Peeta's cheek. The bottle made it's final pass around the circle and ended up in Katniss' hands.

"Um. Well. On top of everything else that's been said, I'm thankful that you all have welcomed me to this get-together and have, uh, treated me like some form of equal, not a little kid or anything. Um, and I'm thankful for Peeta," she added quietly, quickly swallowing the vile liquor. Peeta leaned down and kissed her again, not caring that the rest were making crude sounds at them.

The bottle made another few rounds before it was emptied. Finnick carried the very drunk Annie to their room with the instructions that not a single person was to leave the house for any reason. Gale and Johanna claimed the pull out sofa, which left Peeta and Katniss with the old, lumpy air mattress.

"Hey, Katniss," he whispered as he pulled a blanket over them. "I'm thankful for you, too."

She snorted, his cheese factor having increased thanks to the copious amount of alcohol he had consumed. She decided that the grin that refused to leave her face was thanks to the booze, too, even if the back of her mind told her there was more to it than that.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the bit of a delay, but this actually got out quicker than I thought it would. That's mostly thanks to my beta-extraordinaire, Sunfish. She whipped this sucker out after betaing my beast of a story for the Fandom for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society fundraiser. If you haven't had a chance to donate yet, you have until the end of the month! For a minimum of $10, you get a ton of stories from some of your favorite authors in the fandom that won't be otherwise released until December.

Come check out my story updates and ask questions on my tumblr - passionatelycuriousff
"Hey, Katniss?" Rue stuck her head in the tiny room Katniss had holed herself away in to work. "Are you busy?"

Katniss looked up from the case the beetles were stored in to keep them preserved before and after viewings. Dr. Beetee had been asked to send some of his samples to another university and she had been working almost non-stop to prepare the exoskeletons and dung. "Yeah, Rue, come on in." She closed the case and snapped her gloves off, tossing them into the nearby trashcan. "What's up?"

Rue hopped up on the table. "Well, I need an elective this year to keep up my hours for my scholarship. The problem is, there aren't any physics classes I haven't taken that fit into my schedule, so I had to look elsewhere. My adviser said that it would look better to my scholarship committee if I took a science course, right? But, like, I hated organic chem. So that kind of left me with a biology class."

"That's a great idea, Rue. Which class are you looking at?"

"Physiology. Thresh took it last year and he liked it," Rue answered. "Have you taken it?"

Katniss nodded. "With Palmer? Yeah, I took it last spring."

"I'm...just trying to figure out if I'd be killing myself with that class in my semester, you know? Especially with so little biology background." She pulled a textbook from her backpack. "I was looking through Thresh's book and it just seems so intense, you know?"

Katniss scooted her chair to Rue and flipped through the book. "I mean, it is intense, but it's broken up really well because everything builds. So, you'll learn about cells, then the brain, then the spine, and so on." She smiled at the tiny girl. "You should be fine. Really. It's an upper level class but we had some non-bio majors in our class and they seemed to keep up with the rest of us."

Rue let out a long breath. "Thank goodness. I have been stressing out about this so hard. Want to take a break with me? I could use some fresh air."

"Fresh air? Rue, it's December!" Katniss exclaimed.

"So? Come on, you have spent how many days on end down here in this hole staring at bug carcasses? Let's just go get a hot chocolate or something. Anything to get out of this building for a
few minutes." Rue grabbed Katniss' arm and dragged her out of the room. At the last minute, Katniss reached for her sweatshirt, since the room she worked in had to be kept at a specific temperature that was not conducive for winter wear.

The cold air cut Katniss' face like a dagger and knocked the breath from her chest. She hugged her arms around herself, wishing she had worn more than just Peeta's sweatshirt today. It was still early December but the typical Midwestern winter was already well on its way. Rue prattled on about her semester, which Katniss was glad for since it distracted her from the cold.

The student union was a welcomed Mecca on the dull, grey, lifeless campus. As soon as they stepped inside, Katniss' glasses completely fogged over. She was annoyed that she didn't think to wear her contacts this morning, but would take foggy glasses over the winter weather. "I think everyone on campus thinks like you," Katniss commented, looking at the line at the coffee shop.

Rue groaned. "At least they seem to be moving fast, right? Let's get in line before it gets any worse."

They found the end of the line and tried their best to tune out the idle chatter around them. At least, Katniss was trying to. A group of sorority sisters were huddled together a little further up in line, making it nearly impossible for anyone to pass by them without running into at least one, garnering dirty looks and offhand comments from the gaggle. Katniss rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. As far as she could tell, these girls rarely did anything that didn't piss her off.

"Ladies, I'd love to stay and chat but I have a meeting with one of my professors to have a little meeting about my grade," one girl said, loudly enough for everyone around her to hear. Katniss couldn't help but wonder if that was part of her plan, to just draw attention to them. "Whichever one of you told me psychology would be an easy way to keep my GPA up was being a little bitch."

"Who do you have it with?" Another girl asked, voice full of concern like the first girl just announced a deadly illness rather than a poor mark.

"Ugh, that old fart, Abernathy. I hate it. Did you know he pulls test questions directly from the textbook? Not stuff from his power points but the actual readings? Like, why do I even bother going to the class if he's not going to test me over what he teaches? Isn't that his job?" The first girl scoffed in a condescending voice. It took every ounce of self control from Katniss to keep her mouth shut.

"I told you to take it with the new guy. He's super easy, and not just in class," a third girl added, conspiratorially twisting her hair around her finger.

This caught – and held – Katniss' attention. The new guy – her new guy – her Peeta. She didn't much care for this girl's tone or implication; Peeta was not an easy grader by any means and how would she know what he was like outside of class?

"Cashmere! Did you hook up with a professor?"

"And not tell us about it?"

The girl – Cashmere – who Katniss recognized from her summer class, didn't answer. The smirk on her lips and micro shrug of her shoulders told enough to send the girls into a tizzy. And had Katniss seeing red. How dare that skank lie about doing anything with her Peeta. Like he would even go for some bimbo with blonde hair and big boobs and … shit. Dejectedly, Katniss recalled the pictures of Delly and instantly saw the similarities. The hair, the perfect smile, the blue eyes. Based solely on physical features, Cashmere was just Peeta's type.

Who's to say he didn't hook up with her once? It would have been before Katniss, right? No way
would Peeta cheat on her after what he had been through with Delly. But is it cheating if they weren't really "together"? She had that drunken mistake of a make-out session with Darius after seeing Peeta and Johanna at the bar over the summer. Was that cheating? Should she have told Peeta? The thought of that blonde bitch's hands and lips and body claiming Peeta before Katniss was too much for her. The spacious union shrunk down to box her in. Her chest tightened and she felt her clenched fists start to shake.

"Rue, I need..." she started, not waiting for any reaction, before pushing through the line and running toward the main door. The tears nearly froze to her cheeks before she even realized she had been crying. She hastily wiped her face and shook her head. What the hell is wrong with you, Katniss? She blasted herself. Why are you crying over this guy? Snap the fuck out of it. You're stronger than this. You don't cry over guys anymore. Remember the last guy you cried over? How he ... no. Stop. Peeta is not Gloss. It's not the same. It's not. Right?

A few deep breaths of the chilly air and Katniss' mind finally began to settle. She pulled herself together and reentered the union, ready to apologize for running off from Rue with no explanation. Thankfully, she was still in line when Katniss returned and the group of sorority girls had largely dissipated. There was no sign of Cashmere or the girl complaining about her grade. "Hey, Rue, sorry about that. I don't know what came over me."

Rue waved her off. "Don't worry. Are you feeling better?"

Katniss nodded, unsure if she actually felt better but figured it was better than trying to explain anything.

"Must have been those sorority girls," Rue added.

"W-what?" Had Rue overheard them as well and put the pieces together? Enough to figure out why the implication about that girl and Peeta had sent Katniss into a spiral?

"Between too much of their overpriced perfume and their snotty attitude, they almost made me sick," Rue laughed. "You should have heard them after you left. Can you believe how much some people complain about having to do their own homework in college? Seriously."

"Oh," Katniss laughed nervously. "I know. I...I think it's just the nature of that sorority." She pointed out the Gamma Phi patches that were sewn onto their bags.

Rue nodded. "Without a doubt. I actually rushed for them freshman year."

"You did?" Katniss asked, dumbfounded. She couldn't figure out how a smart girl like Rue almost got sucked into one of the notoriously dumb sororities on campus.

"They claimed to want 'diversity'," she snorted. "Really, they just needed girls who could be used as tutors for the older sisters. That house was like two totally different sororities; some girls are paraded around and encouraged to flash their pins and some girls were all but locked in the basement and treated like the red-headed stepchildren." They watched the Gamma Phi girls flip their golden locks over their shoulders. "If it weren't for the stepchildren, there's no way the sisters would maintain their house GPA."

Katniss could stop the snarl that formed on her face. She didn't want to dislike sorority girls, there had to be sane ones somewhere, but damn these girls made it so hard to actually believe that. "So much for the bonds of sisterhood."

"Tell me about it. It's pathetic, really, but the organization has such a history and such a powerful
alumni system, that nothing would ever happen if that truth was revealed. Instead we get to deal with them thinking they're better than us all the time."

"When really they have no clue how many people can't stand them," Katniss added. She made a visible face when she overheard the girls order the most extravagant, sugary concoction on the menu – with non-fat milk. "Yes. Because the milk is the problem in that order."

Rue giggled. "You can tell they were raised in a totally different environment than me. Whole milk was a luxury when I was a kid. My mama usually had to add water to the jugs of milk just to stretch out our supply. Six kids could go through a lot of milk and we didn't have the money to buy it as often as we should have."

As Rue stepped up to order her hot chocolate – with whole milk – and Katniss' cinnamon tea, Katniss realized how little she actually knew about Rue. She had been so involved with classes and work and Peeta that she was letting her other friendships slip. Madge was a near constant reminder of that; it seemed like the two girls were just cohabitating in the apartment rather than being two friends living together. Katniss could make excuses for it until she was blue in the face, but she knew it was all because of her choices. She could have made time for Madge rather than spending all her free time with Peeta, but she chose not to. Because you're selfish, Gloss' voice rang in her head. You don't have any friends anymore because you're a selfish girl. Thankfully I still want you. I'm the only one who will ever want you.

Katniss spent most of her winter break at work; between the research center and the bookstore, she was clocking in well over 40 hours a week. Madge had been keeping herself just as busy, interning for the mayor in hopes of starting a job there once she graduated. The distance between them was almost too much for Katniss to stand, but whenever she got home, dog tired from work, Madge was locked up in her own room.

One evening, though, Katniss decided enough was enough. She knocked on Madge's door, which was another indicator of the change in their relationship since the girls usually just walked into the others' room with no warning. Madge slowly opened the door and peeked her head out. "Yes?"

This felt so wrong, like how Katniss and her first roommate interacted. "Hi," she offered weakly. Hi? Really? That's the best you can come up with? Fucking hi? "Um...look, Madge, I'm...I'm sorry. I've been such a jerky friend to you lately."

Madge quirked an eyebrow. It wasn't like Katniss to apologize. Especially first. "It's okay," she answered. "You've been busy and."

"No!" Katniss exclaimed. "I mean, I have been busy and so have you but...I never get to see you anymore. You're my best friend, remember?" It was true, somewhere along the way the two girls, without ever having to say it, became the other's best friend. "I thought maybe we could stay in and watch movies and eat junk food and drink cheap wine? Like we used to?"

Madge smiled. "Yeah." She ran her fingers through her hair. "Yeah, that sounds great. Just what I need," she laughed. "Just...let me put some pants on and we can go to the store."

Katniss nodded and spun on her feet to grab her coat from her bedroom. From the corner of her eye, she saw her cell phone light up with a new message from Peeta.

8:13pm. Peeta. Plans tonight?

She bit her bottom lip. Especially since dead week, she had seen about as much of Peeta as she had
Madge. He spent most of his "break" holed up in his office, writing grants or analyzing data or making edits to his manuscripts. As hard as she had been working throughout the semester, she was in awe that he was able to teach, fulfill his research requirements, and have time for her. He was the true Energizer Bunny or something. If she didn't fall asleep and wake up in his arms, she'd swear he wasn't even sleeping. Then there were those times he told her he'd be completely unavailable and disappear for days on end. He told her he had to go out of town, but never anything more. She instinctively thought he was seeing some other girl. She trusted Peeta, but part of her was still waiting for the day that he got tired of her problems and found some other girl who was more open and unafraid.

But he'd come home so exhausted, she could hear it in his voice when he'd call and leave messages on her phone. Plus, she figured if he was seeing some other girl, there's no way she'd let him only visit for a day or two a week. If Katniss only got Peeta part time, she'd probably hold him hostage and never let him go.

She wanted to see Peeta. She missed him. But she just promised to hang out with Madge. What kind of bitch would she be if she bailed on her friend just to get laid? Even if it was sure to be a really great fucking lay. Madge would understand, wouldn't she? Katniss would understand if it were the other way around. No you wouldn't.

"You can go," Madge said, coming up behind Katniss. "I know you haven't seen much of Peeta recently. We can hang out another time."

Katniss stared at her phone. "No. Chicks before dicks, or something, right?" She slipped her coat on and smiled at her friend.

Madge rolled her eyes. "Says the girl getting some on a regular basis. I'm starting to think I should have given myself that fancy vibrator last year for Christmas instead of you."

"Who'd have thought?" Katniss joked.

"Not this girl," Madge answered, lightly pushing her shoulder into Katniss. "Come on, Lotharia, let's get some food and you can tell me all about how great in bed he is."

"Please, a lady never kisses and tells," Katniss shot back.

"When did you become a lady?"

Katniss huffed her way up the stairs to her apartment, eyeing the dark grey clouds that hovered in the skies and blocked the rising sun. As soon as she opened the door and was blasted by the high heat, she began to sweat profusely. "Holy shit." She plopped down the couch and began to fan herself with her hand. "Madge, why is it so fucking hot in here?"

Madge stuck her head out of her bedroom. "It's not, idiot. You never let me change the thermostat, remember?"

"Wah wah wah," Katniss mimicked, falling lengthwise onto the couch.

"Are you ready to go?" Madge asked, slipping a sweatshirt on and sitting on the armrest of the couch near Katniss' head. She absentmindedly ran her fingers over her roommate's scalp, trying to help the other girl relax before the long drive home.

Katniss let out a sigh. "Am I ever really ready?"
Madge snickered, "You only go home once a year, Katniss. At least you aren't expected back for every single holiday like some of us."

Katniss turned her head to catch the look on Madge's face. She used to be jealous of Madge's life back home. Her parents were still married and beyond wealthy. They gave Madge everything she ever asked for and actually wanted her around the house. Over time, Katniss learned the truth about how her mother's perfectionism toward Madge and her body caused more problems than it solved. That her father just bought her things rather than ever showing emotion. That Gale was the first person who ever told Madge he loved her. That she did just about anything she could think of in high school to garner any form of attention from her parents, but even a short stint in the hospital after an accidental overdose on prescription pain meds, her father just bought her a new car and her mother shut herself in her bedroom, refusing to come out for weeks on end. When she finally re-emerged, she treated Madge just as she had before, as if nothing happened.

Katniss used to be envious of Madge's life. She should have recognized the forced nature of her friend's personality. Madge was too put together. She was too okay with things. She hid her scars just as well as Katniss did.

Madge did have a point though: Katniss only went back to her hometown once a year, a few days before Christmas. She didn't want to stay any longer than she had to, and if the drive weren't eight hours, she'd do it all in a day. As it was, she usually ended up staying in a hotel room for a few days and driving home the day after Christmas. The desk clerks at the only hotel she stayed in all gave her sympathetic glances when she checked in and out with just her duffle bag in tow, but she didn't care anymore. She wasn't there for them. "I know. It's just...irritating."

Madge nodded. "Family can be that way." Madge didn't know what Katniss did when she went home. They may have been best friends and may have known way too much about each other than was probably healthy, but Katniss' family – other than her sister's death – was still a complete mystery. She just knew it wasn't pleasant and Katniss came home far more drained and moody than when she left. "When do you leave?"

Katniss craned her neck to look at the clock on the DVD player. "I should leave soon so I can beat traffic." She swung her legs around and sat back against the couch. "I only came back because somehow I forgot my road snacks."

Madge snorted. Katniss and her snacks. "I put them in a canvas bag on the counter so you wouldn't miss them." She pushed herself off the couch. "I'll still be at home when you get back. I don't know when I'll be released to come back to the apartment. Hopefully by New Years Eve, but knowing my parents, I'm sure there will be some gala or something I should go to. So..."

Katniss smiled. "I'll text you when I get there and back. Don't worry about me."

"Okay. Well, I just know the roads may be bad and this is a stressful time and."

"Madge. I'll be fine. Believe me. You know that I'm overly cautious on the road." She glanced out the window. "Especially now." The roads looked dry; they hadn't gotten any real precipitation in the last few days so the threat of black ice was low here in town. And the interstate was kept relatively clear between school and home, so she should be alright. Not that it made her any less stressed to drive in the wintertime. She was one of those obnoxious Midwestern drivers who drove slowly and cautiously whenever there was a hint of bad weather.

The girls exchanged awkward hugs and Katniss made her way out to her car, glad she had filled up the tank the night before so she could just leave. Popping in a recent mixed CD, she let the familiar tunes fill the space around her and distract her enough from her upcoming journey.
Most people in Katniss' hometown stayed in all Christmas weekend. A few brave souls ventured out on Christmas Eve for an easy dinner before having to cook the next day. Luckily, it was almost eight by the time Katniss pulled into the hotel parking lot, so the crowds had dissolved. The drive took a few hours more than she anticipated since she had to stop multiple times for coffee and bathroom breaks. And because she was sure her body purposely drove slower than needed.

She lugged her duffle over her shoulder and entered the hotel lobby, cringing at all the faux snow and Christmas lights that assaulted her senses. The only good thing about this place was the fresh baked cookies that were offered at the check-in desk. They were cooled by now, but she wasn't one to deny herself a free cookie. She grabbed one and stuffed half of it in her mouth before the desk clerk could ask her her name.

"Katniss Everdeen," she mumbled with a full mouth, sliding her ID across the desk. The desk clerk gave her a judgmental look but typed her information into the computer anyway. Katniss rolled her eyes. If guests weren't supposed to eat the cookies, why did they offer them? She made a mental note to steal an extra cookie before going to her room.

"233. That's- "

"Got it." Katniss grabbed the envelope with the key card from the woman's hand. "233 on the second floor. Thanks." She stared at the woman and grabbed two extra cookies, stuffing one completely in her mouth as she walked away toward the stairs. She knew this hotel well. The beige walls with the tacky art on the walls that made her roll her eyes. The stained, ripped carpets that got worse and worse every year and always made her question her sanity for picking this hotel over the others. Free cookies. Close enough to the cemetery so she'd never run the risk of running into anyone she may have known. She didn't come home for a clean hotel or a comfortable bed. She came back to this God-forsaken town at Christmas for one reason and one reason only.

For Prim.

Prim, who loved Christmas more than anyone else Katniss knew. Prim, who would rather spend the holiday serving dinner to homeless people than opening her own gifts. Katniss never used to hate this time of year. She used to love the way their tiny home smelled like the ginger snaps her father loved. After he died, Prim insisted that they carry on the tradition. For a few years, their mother was coherent enough to help.

She swiped her key through the scanner and swung the door open. Inside, the cloud of industrial cleaner enveloped her and all she could process before collapsing onto the bed from sheer exhaustion was the memory of how the lemon-scented bleach D12 Memorial Hospital mixed with the undeniable pungency of blood. Over the years, her nightmares had gradually diminished except when she was under extreme stress. She tried to fight the drowsiness that surged through her because she knew what dreams would plague her. But the battle was in vain as the darkness swallowed her whole.

Katniss was sitting across from Prim, smiling fondly at the younger girl who was currently devouring her fourth piece of pizza. At thirteen years old, Prim had just started her growth spurt and was eating like a teenage boy, without gaining a pound. It wasn't often that Katniss could treat her baby sister like this, so she didn't flinch when Prim came back from the buffet with a tray completely loaded up with pepperoni pizza. Katniss picked at her plateful of salad – dressing on the side – wondering if she could sneak some of Prim's pizza since Gloss had taken a seat on the bar side, nursing yet another beer. She lost count of how many he had drank at that point, but he always had a talent for holding his liquor so she wasn't concerned. Plus, he agreed to drive them home.
"Having fun?" Katniss asked, sipping her water.

Prim nodded with a grin full of pizza. She wiped her mouth, "Thank you, Katniss."

Katniss frowned. "Please, Primmy, it's the least I could do since I couldn't be there for your birthday." She glanced back down at the unappealing leaves on her plate. Gloss had made plans for them on Prim's actual birthday. And it wasn't until now, almost a month after, that Katniss was finally able to spend quality time with her sister. The guilt ate her up every day and she knew not even a trip to the local pizza buffet would really make up for it.

"Well, you're here now," Prim shrugged. "And that's all that matters to me."

"When did you get so smart?" Katniss laughed, reaching across the table to ruffle her sister's hair.

Prim giggled. "Well I am a teenager now."

"Shut up and eat your pizza," Katniss answered, swiping a breadstick off Prim's plate and stuffing it into her mouth. Carbs were her biggest enemy and if Gloss caught her eating that way, he'd have a fit. Prim giggled even more at the way her big sister filled her cheeks like the squirrels that ran through their backyard. If Katniss had known that would be the last time she saw that precious smile, she would have paused that moment and lived in it forever.

As Prim polished off her bowl of ice cream, Katniss slipped through the patrons sitting at the tiny bar to where Gloss sat. His eyes were narrowed and his lips set—never a good sign. She placed her hand on his back and he jumped, smacking the side of her face with the back of his hand as he did. "Jesus Christ, Katniss. You can't sneak up on me like that!" He spat, his breath reeking of beer. His eyes softened when he saw the red marks on her cheek. "Babe." He reached his unsteady hand up and cupped her face gently. "Are you okay? You just caught me off guard. You know how quiet you can be."

She nodded. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay." He leaned down and captured her lips with his, the drops of stale beer dripping from them into her mouth. "Did you need something?"

"Uh," she swallowed, "it's, it's almost 8. And Prim needs to be home by 8:30."

Gloss' expression completely fell; his eyes narrowed and face hardened. "The game's not over yet."

She glanced up at the screen. Bottom of the fourth. "Oh, w-w-well, I promised my mom-"

He groaned. "Fine." He pulled three twenties from his pocket and slapped them onto the bar in front of him. "Sorry guys," he called to the group of men sitting around him. "I gotta take the little lady home." He grabbed her arm and pulled her out of the bar. She kept her eyes on the floor, knowing better than to look at anyone when she was with him. He dragged her over to the table where Prim was sitting quietly, having watched the entire ordeal. "Ready, Squirt?"

"Primrose," she mumbled, rising to her feet and slipping Katniss' hand-me-down jacket on. Forcing a smile on her face to appease her sister, she nodded.

Gloss led them out, his gait heavy and off-kilter from the alcohol he had been consuming. Katniss watched him carefully, not trusting him to drive them home in the state he was in. "Gloss, do, do you want me to drive home?"

"What the fuck are you blabbing about?" He snapped, picking up the keys that dropped from his
hand onto the pavement near his car.

Katniss felt Prim's hand clasp around her own. She pushed her younger sister behind her as much as she could without losing their hold. "I'm just asking because I know you've been drinking and..."

"Fuck you, Katniss. You think I can't drive you home? I've drank more than this and driven you all kinds of places before." His words were slurred from drink and rage. His temper was always shorter the more he had to drink, but he never took it out on her in front of other people.

"I'm just worried..." Katniss scanned the road. "There may be cops and I don't want you-"

"Just get in the fucking car."

"Katniss, no," Prim tugged on her hand. Katniss shifted her gaze back to her sister's blue eyes, brimming with fearful tears. "We can walk. Or take the bus. Anything else but getting in the-"

"Shut the fuck up!" Gloss called from the car, turning the engine over. "Jesus Christ, Katniss, get that little shit of yours in control and get in the damn car or I'll leave."

Katniss swallowed hard. She knew he didn't just mean he'd leave them in this parking lot and force them to find their own way home. He meant he'd leave her. Forever. Fear shot through her body and she tightened her grip around Prim's fingers. She couldn't let him leave her. She'd be alone, really alone, for good if he did. No one else would want her – she wasn't desirable to anyone else. "Come on, Prim," her voice broke.

"No," Prim whimpered, pulling back.

"Prim!" Katniss hissed, turning to face her sister. Her own grey eyes exposed her brokenness. "Prim we need to go. We won't get home in time any other way. Trust me?"

Prim nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Okay." Katniss shook away her tears. Gloss didn't like it when she cried. She slid into the passenger side seat and he took off as soon as the door was closed, not even waiting for them to buckle in. Katniss gripped the door handle as he blazed around corners, narrowly avoiding other cars. Prim whimpered in the backseat but bit her tongue, not wanting to upset Katniss' boyfriend on Katniss' behalf.

The rain started not long after they set out; Katniss wanted to tell Gloss to slow down, to drive more carefully, to pull over and let her get them home. She wanted to tell him that she was more in control of what was happening and more aware of the road hazards. She wanted to tell him to take the upcoming curve with more caution because it could be dangerous even under the sharpest mind. She felt the car jerk to the left and her throat constricted. She heard the string of swear words spewing from Gloss' lips. She heard Prim's ear-piercing screams from the back seat. She watched as the scene around her spun into blackness. She felt the metal clash with the guardrail. The car slid back across the road, down the embankment at full speed, smack into a tree, finally bringing them to a halt. Katniss was vaguely aware of the hard plastic dash she had smacked her head against. She heard the labored breathing of her boyfriend next to her.

It took all the strength she had to push herself off the dash enough to peek into the backseat, immediately wishing she hadn't. Prim lay in the backseat, blood pooling in and around her blonde hair. Katniss' chest weighed heavily against her, her arms betrayed her as she attempted to unbuckle herself and reach for her sister. "No," she croaked. "Prim."

Prim's chest rose and fell lightly as blood continued to mat into her locks.
"Prim."

Katniss' adrenaline was wearing off, the extent of her injuries beginning to affect her. Prim was slipping away from her grasp. She cried out in pain. The red and blue lights of a police car flashed in her periphery as the rest of the scene blurred out. "Prim!"

"Prim!" Katniss shot up out of bed in a cold sweat. Her heart was racing and tears were streaming down her face. Her forehead ached and her shoulder locked. The doctors told her those were phantom pains – sensations caused by nerves under high stress from the injuries she sustained in the car accident. As far as she was concerned, they were more real now than they had been when she was taken to the hospital. She fought with the paramedics to go with her sister, even attempting to bite one when he went to restrain her body. She had low-risk injuries. Bumps, bruises, cuts, a fracture in her ankle. She'd be fine.

None of the doctors told her that she'd never be able to drive that patch of road again without shaking uncontrollably. They didn't warn her that she'd be able to survive her sister's birthday, she'd survive the day of the accident, the day Primrose finally subcomed to her injuries. They didn't tell her that it would be her sister's favorite holiday that would be hardest of them all.

She glanced at the clock. 3:13 a.m. She wanted to call Peeta. To hear his calming voice and feel a sense of security with him. But it was Christmas. And only the really fucked up people like her were awake at 3 a.m. on Christmas morning.

Peeta let out a long sigh as he pulled into the visitor's parking lot at Merchant Citizen's time here was a strange grab-bag of absolute joy from the families who actually gave a shit about their loved ones and total depression from the singles who sat alone in the lounge while Nat King Cole sang about chestnuts and Jack Frost, staring out the windows at the winter wonderland that was building up around them. Peeta hated seeing those people because he realized that, if not for him, his mother wouldn't even be bothered to leave her apartment and join the others.

He remembered times when Christmas was a happy occasion in his life. When Ron and the boys were around, the house smelled like cookies and bread. Rye and Bahron, Ron's sons, would always build igloos in the yard with Peeta, even if they were quite a bit older than him. They'd go sledding down the biggest hill in town until they couldn't breathe. Then they'd trek home to fresh hot cider and a roaring fire. His mother and Ron were always grinning impishly and couldn't keep their hands off of each other, blaming it on the spiced eggnog they had been drinking all day.

A few years later, Peeta would get a full glass of that eggnog and never felt the need to be touchy feely with anyone. When he confessed this to Rye, the older boy just snickered and told him that their parents always had a little more than eggnog when the boys were out.

After Ron left, Christmas in the Mellark household ended. It held too many positive memories for his mother to handle. At least, that's what he assumed had happened. He could remember the first Christmas post-Ron and how different everything felt. He had tried to decorate the house but his mother never noticed. Or if she did, she never mentioned it. The traditional Christmas smells were gone, replaced by the pungent odor of bourbon and rum. Peeta could never drink eggnog again.

He came home for Christmas every year he was in school. Mostly out of obligation, but also because once Delly and Maddie came into his life, his mother had a newfound joy in her eyes. She smelled less of alcohol during those years and was, cognitively, the clearest he had seen. He didn't know if she even realized Maddie didn't come visit at Christmas anymore. She still had presents wrapped for the young girl, which Peeta ended up giving to the children who were visiting grandparents in the home.
"Merry Christmas, Peeta!" Lavinia greeted him with a smile. She had on a green elf hat, complete with felt ears, and a necklace of golden bells.

"Merry Christmas," he joked. He leaned over the counter and flicked one of the gold bells. "You really should try getting into the holiday spirit more."

She flushed and pushed his hand away. "Jealous much? How was the drive?"

He nodded. "Good. Uneventful as always. How's she been?"

Lavinia's smile tightened. "Oh you know your mom, she's a real pistol."

Peeta's face hardened. His mother was only a handful when she was having a particularly challenging day. The way Lavinia answered made Peeta wonder just how many of those days she'd been having. Or just how down she was.

Lavinia reached across the desk and offered his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Maybe she'll be better this weekend since it's almost Christmas?"

Peeta nodded. "Sure. I'm sure she will be. Have the doctors been around yet today?" He knew it was still early in the day, earlier than he normally came to visit, so he wasn't sure if he'd have a chance to visit with anyone who actually dealt with his mother on a daily basis.

Lavinia typed some things into the computer at her desk and scanned the screen. "Um, looks like Dr. Coin hasn't completed her rounds yet. Your mom is usually one of the last ones. So she might be up there when you get to your mom's room."

"Thanks Lavinia. Merry Christmas." He waved as she buzzed him through the door. He hated this hallway. Every single step felt heavy and thick, as if walking through a syrup. *Merry Christmas indeed.*

Katniss found it ironic how picturesque the cemetery looked on Christmas morning. The snow was new and untouched, with flakes continuously falling from the skies. The trees were buried under the white, fluffy powder that fell to the ground when the few remaining birds hopped from branch to branch. Hers would likely be the only footsteps treading across the hallowed grounds today. Cemeteries were depressing enough as they were, let alone on a holiday like Christmas. Christmas morning was a time for opening presents and drinking hot cocoa and surrounding yourself with family. Prim was the only family Katniss had anymore. It was only fitting that this would be the only place she wanted to be on Christmas morning.

Prim's headstone was well off the beaten path, under an old willow tree. Katniss picked it out, knowing it would be the exact place Prim would love to sit if she could. She'd lean back against the tree trunk and look out over the other plots, all colorfully decorated by loved ones even in the winter. Katniss replaced the old flowers in the vase – the same ones she brought last Christmas – with newer, brighter, versions. Fake Primrose flowers weren't always the easiest to find, but Katniss wanted to ensure her sister always had color marking her final resting place. She wiped off the bench that rested near the tree, laid out the comforter she swiped from the hotel that morning, and sat on the far side, as if leaving a seat for her sister. She leaned her head against the bark and closed her eyes.

"Hey, Prim."

"Hi Katniss."

Katniss' eyes shot open and scanned the environment. "Who's there? If this is some sort of trick, it's
"not fu- it's not funny!" The only response were whistles from the birds in the tree above her.

"Katniss. It's not a trick. It's me."

Katniss shook her head. "I'm going crazy."

"Maybe. But I doubt it. You've always been a little crazy, sis."

"Prim?" A tear slipped down her cheek. "Is that you?"

"Who else would it be? I've been waiting for you to come visit me. I've missed you, Katniss."

"I've missed you too, Primmy. So much." In a hushed voice, she choked, "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Dwelling on what happened won't bring me back. I forgave you so long ago. I wish you'd forgive yourself."

"How? Why?"

"Sometimes things happen for a reason. Reasons that don't make sense and don't seem fair and you can't understand at the time. But after awhile, you get it."

Katniss wiped her eyes and eased down, laying completely across the bench with her head close to Prim's marker. "When did you get so smart?"

"Well I am a teenager now."

"I should have protected you," she whispered. "I was supposed to protect you."

"You did. For so many years you took care of me. More than any sister should have. You still come visit me."

"I could have done more."

"Stop, Katniss. Today's not the day for pity. Today is for celebrating. For catching up."

Sweet Prim never did dwell on the negatives. She was always the one who saw the sunlight peeking through the clouds after a storm. She was so good and pure and wonderful. She deserved so much more than she got – of the two of them, she should never have had to struggle. Katniss did everything she could to keep her sister above the consequences of their family life.


"Boys!"

Prim sounded just like the thirteen year old sister Katniss remembered, giggling softly in her ear like the gentle chime of the wind. Katniss rolled onto her back and began to tell Prim about Peeta and all the other things that had happened since last Christmas.

"How does he feel about Boston?"

"He supports it," Katniss replied. "He knows how important education and this advanced degree is. He's the one who gave me the final push to apply."

"And if you get in? What happens then?"
Katniss sucked in her cheeks. What would happen then? Boston College was still a long shot. There would be plenty of applicants who were far more qualified—had better GPA’s or test scores or personal statements. "I don't know," she answered honestly.

"Would you go? Even if it meant leaving him behind?"

"Catnip," Gale yelled over the beating bass that filled the bar. "I'm so glad you came out tonight!"
He winked at her and shot her a prize-winning smile that he reserved only for when he was three sheets to the wind.

She laughed. "And miss drunk Gale? Drunk Gale is my favorite Gale!"

"Damn straight!" Johanna piped up, handing them both a shotglass full of some unidentified liquid.

"Let's up the ante. Shots, bitches!" They clinked their shot glasses together and swallowed them down in one gulp.

Even Johanna gagged as the liquid hit her throat. "Jesus H. Christ, you would have thought these bartenders wouldn't fuck a girl over like this on New Years Eve."

"You're referring to the one who's still staring at us and currently trying to figure out if Gale's with you or me?" Katniss asked, nodding her head toward the bar.

Johanna glanced over and nearly snorted the liquid out of her nose. "Holy fuck. Good eye, Brainless!" She wrapped her free arm around Gale's neck and pulled him down into a fierce kiss that forced Katniss to spin around to avoid vomiting all over Johanna's shoes. She assumed it was the liquid courage that transformed Gale, who was more of a peck-on-the-cheek PDA guy, into this guy who was practically having his face chewed off in the middle of a bar.

Katniss considered heading back to the bar for another drink when a pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist and she felt a warm breath tickle her neck. "Hey baby," he murmured against her skin.

"If you're not Peeta, I will not hesitate to kick you in the groin, Bucko."

"Remind me not to sneak up on the master hunter," he answered, giving her earlobe a soft nip. "Of course it's me. You think I'd let anyone else get near you tonight?" He was being possessive. Annie warned her that when they used to go out in grad school, he tended to get that way. It made a shiver run up her spine when she was told and spent most of the night with the heavy, recently reopened wounds Gloss left her with. But now, with his arm pulling her flush against him and his lips whispering sweet, sinful words into her ear, she reminded herself that Peeta wasn't Gloss. Peeta promised not to hurt her like that. So she let her head roll back onto his shoulder, giving him full access to her throat. She reached her arm up, snaking her fingers through his damp curls as he continued to map out her skin with his tongue.

"When the fuck did we become the boring couple?" Finnick's voice cut through the sexual tension and Katniss felt herself flush as she spun to Peeta's side. It took a very obnoxious cough for Gale and Johanna to separate, neither one looking a damn bit shamed for their very public display.

"Jealous, bro?" Johanna joked, leaning over to kiss Annie's cheek, leaving a light imprint of her lipstick. "Aww, poor Finnie."

Finnick stuck his tongue out at Johanna and pulled Annie into his side. "I just didn't want all the lovebirds to miss the countdown. It's about to start." He pointed to the large television screen that
proudly displayed the crystal ball from Times Square and a countdown that ticked under 30 seconds.

When Peeta initially mentioned New Years Eve, Katniss was hesitant to accept his invitation to go to Finnick's family's cabin, a few hours from school. But when Madge decided to stay at home for another week and Peeta explained that this would be the only place they could go without possibly running into students, she knew she had to say yes. Looking at the group now, all sufficiently buzzed off the cheap alcohol and fast-paced pop songs that the DJ blasted through the tiny club's sound system, she was glad she agreed. Peeta would have stayed home with her, watched "It's A Wonderful Life," both curled up on the couch while she fell asleep before George met his angel. But he came home from his Christmas trip with dark circles under his eyes and a higher stress-level than when he left.

"Katniss," Peeta said, moving her so they were front-to-front. "Thank you. For being here."

She rolled her eyes. "Where else would I be?"

"10...9...8...7...6...5...4...3...2...1!" The crowd counted down and at "one", they erupted into a thundering applause. Katniss stretched up and into Peeta's waiting lips. The room swirled around them. His hands cupped her face, bringing her as close to him as he could. Hers wrapped around his neck and she pressed her chest against him. She could feel him smile against her and when they pulled way, his blue eyes, slightly glazed from the night, sparkled just for her.

"Happy New Year, Katniss," he whispered so quietly she only knew what he was saying by reading his lips.

"Happy New Year."

"I'm so lucky to have you. Katniss, I-"

They were interrupted when a waitress offered them glasses of champagne. They both gladly accepted them and lightly clinked them together. Katniss knew the muscles in her mouth were in a permanent grin. While this would normally bother her, or feel wrong, she decided to let the haziness and the holiday and the company win out and not fight it.

"Happy Fucking New Year, bitches!" Johanna shouted for what had to be the fifteenth time since they arrived back at the cabin, nearly three hours after the ball dropped. Katniss and Annie held up their Solo cups and cheered along with her, both too drunk to care. All three drained their cups in one gulp and cheered again.

Katniss leaned back against Peeta's chest and let her head drop onto his shoulder. "I'm gonna fuuuuck you tonight," she whispered.

"Nice, Katniss. You kiss your mama with that mouth?" Gale asked, his eyes glassy from the rounds of shots the boys did at the club.

"Nope," she answered, flipping him off. "But I suck a mean cock with it."

Finnick laughed so hard he started coughing and Annie fell back on the floor in a fit of giggles. Katniss had gotten closer to Peeta's friends since Thanksgiving, but this was the first time they had all been this drunk and carefree around each other. Katniss quickly overcame her nervousness with them and their crass talk about each other around drink number two, when Annie admitted wishing she personally knew how good Peeta's tongue really was.

"What?" she giggled, taking a too innocent sip of her too strong rum and diet. "I've heard stories."
The conversation compounded from there. Peeta's tongue, Finnick's fingers, Johanna's tits, it was a round robin of "what you'd like to try out". Katniss had never felt so comfortable around people she didn't know well and only once felt guilty about being out with Gale and Johanna while Madge was stuck at home.

"Well on that note," Peeta said, subtly pushing his hips against Katniss. "I think we're going to retire for the night."

"Boo, you whore!" Johanna yelled, pouring another glass of straight whiskey.

"Jo! Let the boy get his dick wet," Finnick shot back, winking at Katniss who winked right back. The group cat-called and cheered as Katniss led Peeta into their separate bedroom and shut the door.

As soon as they did, Peeta spun Katniss back against the door with a loud thud.

"Fuck, Peeta," she groaned. "They're going to hear."

"Let them," he growled against her. "They already know we're going to fuck. So why not really let them know?" He punctuated his meaning by thrusting his hips against her. She should have cared that her moans would easily float through the walls of their room. She should care that the people just a few feet away were very aware of the noises she was making. But the feel of Peeta's hard cock against her overrode any logical part of her brain. The feel of his teeth against the sensitive skin of her shoulder made her lose any sense of caring.

"Fuck it," she hissed, letting her eyes close and her logic wander.

Peeta hitched her leg up around his hips, cupping her ass and pulling the lower-half of her body against his. She moaned at the increased friction between them. His mouth continued its assault against her skin, sucking and biting the sensitive flesh. She couldn't tell if he was actually biting hard enough to draw blood, but something told her she'd have one or two hickey's to show for the night. She hated hickey's, they were too possessive in her mind, too much of a branding mark to ever be pleasurable. But for the first time since Gloss, Katniss realized she didn't care. She WANTED to show everyone that she was taken. Even if everyone only consisted of the people outside who were clearly aware that she and Peeta were an item. She pulled his head closer to her skin, encouraging him to leave his mark all over her.

His hand slid from her ass to the front of her jeans, down her leg to where her knee-high boots melded into the tight denim. "I love these fucking boots," he mumbled into her ear. "You look so fucking sexy in them."

"I knew you'd like them," she answered. She had worn her well-loved hunting boots to his place once and it was like a whole new side of him was unleashed. When she admitted that to Madge, her friend gleefully suggested getting a pair of heeled boots, just in case.

"I only have one problem with them," he answered, his hand gliding back up to the front of her jeans. He popped open the button and forced the zipper down. Katniss moaned impatiently when his hand slipped into the front, staying above the black lacy boy-shorts she had opted to wear. The fabric was thin and only barely separated them, something she needed resolved instant. Yet he seemed to be reveling in his teasing – even though the straining bulge in his pants proved he wanted her just as badly.

"What's that?" She licked the outer shell of his ear. Her warm breath sent a shiver through his body.

He pulled away, his pupils fat with lust and a carnivorous smile played against his angelic features.
"You'll have to take them off if I'm going to fuck you like you want."

If it weren't for his other hand's firm hold on her, Katniss may have slumped into a puddle on the floor. She never could get over the way this silver-tongued professor affected every nerve in her body. Even when he was being innocent with his words, she hung on every single thing he said, unable, and unwilling, to miss a single syllable that dripped from his lips. And when he was trying to turn her on, he could read the phonebook and she'd be putty in his hands. "Poor you," she pouted, a smile playing on her own lips. "Whatever will you do?"

She let out a loud cry when he plunged his fingers deep inside her. He swallowed her sounds, kissing her fiercely as he continued to twist and thrust his fingers. In return, she used her leverage to ride against him, swiveling her hips just enough to brush her clit over his knuckle with every move.

"Fuck, Peeta," she groaned. She needed so much more of him but couldn't bear the thought of losing any second of his intoxicating touch. Screw the stories of what Finnick's fingers could do, Katniss couldn't believe for a second that there was a man in the world who could do anything as well as Peeta Mellark. "Please."

She pulsed faster against his digits, the warmth in her body burning through her limbs until she thought she may actually light ablaze there against the door. Peeta rested his forehead against her, locking eyes as he drove her to the brink. "Keep your eyes open," he commanded as her body pulsed around him. She focused on the flecks in the thin irises of his eyes, surrounded by the golden hair that was in desperate need of a trim. She watched his tongue slip from behind his now-red lips as she fell over, chanting his name.

Peeta pulled his fingers from her, licking them clean as she gasped to regain feeling in her legs. He carried her over to the bed, making quick work of all her clothes. The color in his eyes had yet to return and his cheeks were beginning to flush from the intensity of the moment. His hands brushed against her breasts and she gasped into him. He hooked her knees over his shoulders and teased her, planting kisses along her thighs, closer and closer to where she was still wet and ready for him. "No teasing," she commanded. "Not tonight. Just fuck me tonight."

He pulled away and smirked at the whimper she released. All was forgotten when she caught the sound of his zipper and the plastic rustling of a condom. She sat up in a flash and stole the condom from his hand. "Oh, please, Dr. Mellark. Let me help." She crawled between his legs and took his cock in her hand, licking it from base to tip. Peeta let out a low groan as she enveloped him in her mouth and his fingers instantly tangled themselves in her disheveled hair. She held her head still and looked up at him with a silent assent. He closed his eyes and began to thrust his hips toward her, being as cautious as could be expected as not to overdo it with his enthusiasm. His eyes peeked open for a second and raked across her body, catching sight of one of her hands between her legs, pleasuring herself. His head fell back and she took back over, swallowing as much of him as she could, using her free hand to make up for what her mouth couldn't. She released him for a second before the familiar feeling of latex being rolled on overtook him. Looking down, he was surprised he didn't lose himself when he realized she was rolling it on with her mouth.

As soon as she released him, he flipped her around so she faced the headboard, and pulled her ass up. "Katniss Everdeen," he groaned, the tip of his cock pressing against her. In one swift move, he entered her completely, the two of them releasing loud cries at the sensation. The sound of skin slapping skin competed with their alcohol-fueled moans. They were vaguely aware of the bed creaking underneath them and the headboard smashing against the wall as they got lost in each other. Any thought of the others just outside disappeared completely as they melded into one. His grip in her hair tightened and she whimpered in pleasure when he tugged on it in rhythm with his hips. His fingers dug deep into the skin around her hipbone, deep enough to leave light bruises.
The electricity in the air sparked and shattered. They were the only two in the entire world at that moment. Peeta wanted nothing more than to freeze it and live in it for eternity. Katniss wanted nothing more than to allow it. Her voice was hoarse by the time his body began to twitch at the impending sign of his orgasm. There was no time anymore, just them. Together. Building into a crescendo of need and desire. Her legs were tired and shaking but her adrenaline gave her strength.

At some point the raging hormones and buzz of alcohol wore down and Katniss and Peeta slumped into a pile of sweaty limbs in the plush bed. Despite the body heat radiating between them, he refused to loosen his hold around her, keeping her against his body. He kissed her temple and sighed against her hair. "That was...um..."

She chuckled. "Yeah. Different. Good though. Good different."

"Very good." They nestled against each other, letting the exhaustion set in. "So, Miss Everdeen. Any resolutions for this year?"

She snorted. "Nah. I gave up on resolutions years ago. I had a therapist that was really big into resolutions and whenever I didn't meet them, I just felt worse about myself. So I just...stopped making them." She glanced up. "Is that too much to share? I'm still drunk."

His body shook with laughter. "Not too much at all. You're adorable when you're drunk. And pretty nasty."

Katniss rolled her eyes. "Please. You really think I was the one who was nasty?" She leaned her ear against his chest, listening to his heart beat. "What about you, Dr. Mellark? Any resolutions?"

"I make the same one every year. My resolution is to make the next year better than the last."

She nodded. "That's a good one. And with how rough last year was, it shouldn't be too hard to have a better one."

"That's the goal," he agreed, settling down into the bed. "It's already starting off on a pretty great note," he whispered into her ear. "I have no doubt this year will be even better."

"So an example of a negative correlation then, would be..." It was the third time that Peeta felt his phone vibrate in his pocket during his General Psychology lecture. Whoever was trying to get ahold of him didn't seem to understand that he had a job and couldn't drop everything just to answer some telemarketer's questions about how happy he was with his cable services. "Ah, sorry. An example of a negative correlation would be the relationship between cigarette smoking and longevity of life. The more cigarettes a person smokes, the shorter their life. Does that make sense? What conclusions can we draw from the cigarette-health relationships we've talked about?"

"That cigarettes and poor health go hand in hand?" A student spoke up.

Peeta nodded. "Yes, we know there's a relationship between cigarette smoking and health. Anything else? What else can we or can't we say about that relationship?" When the room was silent, he pressed. "Do cigarettes cause poor health outcomes?"

"Not necessarily?" A different student answered in a nervous voice.

"How so?" Peeta sat on the desk on the front, his left leg dangling over the edge. He stuffed his hands into his tweed trouser pockets, searching for the mute button to keep his phone from continuously vibrating.
The student who previously answered grimaced. "Well, um, couldn't there be other things that are involved, too? I mean, like, my grandma used to smoke and had all kinds of problems but she also didn't eat the best and didn't really exercise and...you know...things like that? So we all kind of assumed the smoking was what caused her problems but there might have been other things?"

Peeta nodded. "That's a great observation, Ashby, and leads me directly into my next point, which is possibly the most important thing any of you will take from this class. Correlation is not causation. What does that mean?"

"Just because there's a relationship between two variables doesn't mean one leads to the other?"

"Basically, yeah. I can find random relationships between all sorts of things – shoe size and IQ, hair color and potential earning, number of toasters and number of children – but your shoe size does not cause your IQ to be higher or vice versa. Make sense?"

"Dr. Mellark?" Ashby raised her hand. "But cigarette smoking is bad for your health, right? Why then, can't we say it causes lung cancer when we know it does?"

Peeta nodded. "But how do we know it does, Ashby? Intuitively, sure, we can see the connection. And knowing what's in cigarettes, it makes sense to say that they cause lung cancer. But the only way that we can ever know that one thing causes another is to test it empirically, which is something we'll cover in about a week. So hold onto that question and we'll revisit it when we learn about experimental design and control groups, okay?"

He flipped to the next powerpoint slide, about Naturalistic Observation, when his phone buzzed, yet again, in his pocket. He glanced at the clock, class was set to get out in 15 minutes but he was beyond tired of whoever was trying to get ahold of him. "Alright, guys, I'm going to let you go early as long as you all promise you'll read up on the rest of the methods used in psych, okay? I don't want to have to give you a quiz so you're on the honor system." He released them with a grin and a smile, echoing the scattering of "goodbyes" from a few of them.

When he finally looked down at his phone, he shook his head in frustration. Four missed calls complete with four voicemails all from the same number. He loaded up his messenger bag as he wondered who in their right mind calls someone four times at 10:30 in the morning, when normal people were working and couldn't just answer their phones. "Someone better be fucking dead," he muttered, shaking his head and pressing "play" to listen to the first.

'Um, Peeta, uh, Dr. Mellark, sorry. Uh, this is Lavinia. From Merchant Citizen's Home. I'm sorry to bother you, I know you're at work, but I need you to give us a call right away. It's about your mother-'

The rest of the message was lost on him. His heart fell into the pit of his stomach and his cell phone slipped from his hand to the tile floor. Lavinia's voice echoed through the hall but he couldn't hear any of it. A few students pushed against him, as he had stopped cold in the hallway. He could feel the blood rushing through his ears and the vision around him tunneled to black.

"Boy?" Haymitch's gruff voice called to him, muffled and garbled. His hand on Peeta's shoulder felt like a 100-pound weight and Peeta collapsed into his mentor's shaking arms. Haymitch led him to a bench along the wall until the hallway was free of bustling students and rubbernecking faculty. Haymitch helped the young professor to his feet and led him to his office, brushing off anyone who tried to stop and ask what was happening. Peeta's face had lost all it's color and Haymitch couldn't tell if the boy was about to be sick or pass out or both. Haymitch closed the door and sat in the desk chair as Peeta's breathing returned. "Peeta?"
"My mom…"

Haymitch nodded. "How's she doing?"

"Not good…I just got a call…I couldn't…I don't know." He looked up at his mentor, his eyes still struggling to make sense of what was happened. "I need to go see her."

"Go. I'll get your classes covered." Haymitch stood to leave and leaned against the door. "You're in no shape to drive by yourself, though. Get someone to go with you. Someone level-headed." He tossed Peeta his phone back and closed the door behind him.

With shaking fingers, Peeta scrolled through his contacts. He knew the smartest choice would be Johanna, or even Annie, since they had been his friends the longest. But as he hovered over Johanna's name, his thumb prepared to hit 'send,' he couldn't. He didn't want Johanna to be with him. This was his mother, and it was clear that something major had happened if Lavinia, of all people, called him four times in one day. Without a second thought, he scrolled back up near the top of his contacts. "Hey," he answered, his voice on the verge of shattering, "I, uh, are you busy right now?"

"I'm at work right now, but I can talk. Are you okay? You sound horrible."

He sighed and ran his hands through his curls, frustrated because he knew today was a Wednesday and she always worked mornings in the lab on Wednesdays. "Yeah, no, I'm fine. I, uh, if you're busy, I can call back. It's no big-"

"Peeta. " The voice on the other line dropped. "What is going on? You never call me in the middle of the day. Are you hurt? What happened?"

"My mom…" was all he could choke out before the realization overwhelmed him. "Katniss, I think my mom's dying."

The car ride to his mother's nursing home was simultaneously the shortest and longest trip he had ever taken. Katniss originally attempted to get him to talk, but when it became clear he was in no place to have a conversation, she turned the radio on and sang quietly along as Peeta stared out the window in disbelief. He couldn't help but think of his mother, his cold, clinical, academic-minded mother who never wanted a child but was burdened with raising one by herself. He saw the disappointment in her eyes every day, and even before he was old enough to know exactly what she was thinking, he understood that she preferred it when he wasn't around. His free time was put to good use as he got older, studying excessively for every test, working nonstop on every paper. He was popular at school but never at home, because too much noise upset his mother.

He could remember the time in third grade that he didn't ace his spelling test; the stress of having to tell his mother was severe enough enough to make him wet the bed. Even though he tried to wash his blankets and sheets by himself, she found out and punished him severely. To this day, he couldn't tell if she was more upset by the grade, his emotional reaction, or the fact that she had to call a plumber the next day to fix the washer.

She hated that he refused to follow her path into biology, that he found his calling in the social sciences instead. She threatened to kick him out of the house if he didn't change his mind. She ranted and raved about the lack of rigor in social science research, the confounding human variable, the sheer newness of the field. She refused to provide him any assistance with his college career if that was the path he had decided to take. He considered changing his mind, especially after Ron and his boys left, but he couldn't let himself be dragged into a field he wasn't passionate about.
"Isn't that what you always complain about, Mother?" He shouted, when his acceptance letters from Harvard and Stanford came in and she still wasn't happy. "You want young scientists to be passionate about what they're doing, like you were when you started. For once in my life, let me be passionate about something!"

He drove himself to college and true to her word, his mother never gave him a dime for assistance. His full-ride tuition scholarship kept his loans low enough, but he always harbored resentment toward her for turning her back on her own child. He could remember the Christmas of his junior year of college, telling her that he was interested in graduate work. It was the first time her lips even hinted at a smile. She told him it was the least he could do for getting into a soft field, and that she expected nothing less from him. That was followed by a biting promise that if he didn't get into a reputable school, he might as well become a bartender. He mailed her a copy of his Northwestern acceptance letter. She sent him a letter back saying that since he was continuing his education, there was no need to trifle with an undergraduate graduation ceremony. That afternoon he sold his unused cap and gown to some schmuck online.

Maddie never understood why "Nana Mellark" didn't want to play with her like Delly's parents did. Or why she never seemed excited to see the young girl. Peeta tried to explain, but when it was apparently that she couldn't understand why some mommies didn't express love like hers did, he gave up trying. But he never missed the dim light that glowed in his mother's eyes whenever she saw Peeta and Maddie interact. It was fleeting and she would brush it off and insist it meant nothing, but he knew better. It was the same look she had when Peeta would play with Ron's kids. Or when he was the first student in his kindergarten class who learned to read.

Pride.

He choked back a sob at the realization that she would never be proud of him again. That he hadn't made her proud for years. That he was never good enough to warm the icy heart of Dr. Helena Mellark.

Lavinia rushed outside before they could even get into the building. Her eyes were glistening and her demeanor was uncharacteristically somber. "Peeta," she flung herself into his arms and clung tightly to him. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks, Lavinia," he answered, embracing her. "I, uh, I'm sorry I didn't answer my phone, I was..."

She wiped her eyes. "No, it's okay. Um, they moved your mom this morning. She's in the emergent care building. I'd take you but I'm really not supposed to leave my post. I just...Peeta, I just needed to tell you...I'm...I'm so sorry."

Peeta smiled at her, resting his hand on her shoulder and giving it a light squeeze. "Emergent care. Building Two, right?" He looked around at all the buildings, feeling lost for the first time in the maze of the complex.

Katniss stepped next to Peeta after Lavinia ran back inside the main building. "Building Two? Which one is that?" He led her through the complex to the brick building labeled Two: Emergent Care. The process to get in was similar to any other building, but even through the glass doors, it was evident that there was a completely different air inside. Nurses and doctors rushed in and out of rooms with serious smiles and deep worry lines.

"Your mother is in room 127," the nurse informed them, handing them their visitor badges and allowing them inside.
The emergent care rooms were designed to keep the patients as comfortable as possible, so rather than a traditional hospital room, each room was set up much like the living rooms in their apartments. "Mom?" Peeta called, rushing over to where she was laying in bed.

The nurse who was monitoring his mother's vitals and administering her medication smiled at the young man. "I gave her a low-dose sedative a few hours ago, but she should wake up soon. You're her guardian, right? I'll call the doctor to come speak with you."

He reached down and interlocked his fingers with Katniss'. She gave him a light squeeze of encouragement when the doctor came in to discuss his mother's condition. Her kidney functioning was deteriorating. She was no longer in control of her bodily functions. She was no longer eating or drinking. She had been fighting her medication. The fever she fought before Christmas seemed to have returned. "Her body is shutting down, Mr. Mellark."

"Doctor," Peeta corrected. "Dr. Mellark. And what does that mean? How much longer does she have?"

The doctor flipped through the first few pages of her chart. "What were her thoughts on being kept on a ventilator?"

Peeta shook his head. "No, I signed a DNR when she was admitted here. That's not an option."

"Her kidneys aren't looking good," he answered. "We're keeping her as comfortable as possible right now. We've got her on some pain medications through her IV but, Dr. Mellark, it could be any day now. I wish I had better news for you."

Peeta struggled to swallow the rock in his throat. He knew this was the biggest possibility, but hearing it from a professional made it so much more real. "Can I stay here? With her?"

The doctor looked over at Helena and then back at where her son was standing, trying to remain as strong as possible. "Visiting hours are until 9. But when patients are on the critical list, their guardian is allowed to stay past that. I'll put a note in your mother's chart." The doctor patted Peeta's shoulder. "I know this isn't easy. It never is. But we are doing everything we can for her."

Katniss tapped her head against his shoulder. "I need to call Madge about where I'm at. And Dr. Beetee about making up my work hours. Want me to call anyone?"

"Haymitch? Maybe Jo? She can tell the others." Peeta answered, unable to look away from where his mother slept. Katniss kissed his cheek and slipped out of the room, leaving Peeta and his mom alone. He pulled a chair over to the side of her bed to sit with her, sure that Katniss would be awhile with her phone calls. "Mom..." he whispered. "It's Peeta. I'm here."

Helena stirred and opened her eyes, which were clear and lucid. "Peeta? Why not in school?"

Peeta smiled at her and reached for her hand. "You weren't feeling well, so they called me to come check on you."

"I'm...fine. How baby?"

"Well, I'm here now, so you're stuck with me for at least the day. Do you need anything?" He answered, carefully avoiding her constant question about Maddie. He had told her before that Maddie was no longer a baby and no longer part of his life, but he didn't want to get her riled up today. "A glass of water or something?" He got up to fill up the plastic cup of water next to her bed. He took deep breaths, keeping himself as calm as possible so as not to worry her too much. "Here you go."
She accepted the glass and they fell into their comfortable routine of her talking about research she had read about and him biting his tongue about his own. The nurse returned a few minutes later to check some of her vitals. Peeta saw the change as it occurred. He watched her eyes cloud over and the recognition drop from them. Her forehead furrowed, just as his normally did when he was thinking about something, as she looked at him. "Look familiar."

The nurse snapped her head over and locked eyes with Peeta. His heart dropped and he struggled to swallow the rock in his throat. He had always been the one person in her life that she recognized, through all her memory lapses. "Who does he look like, Helena?" The nurse asked kindly, trying to reassure Peeta with her eyes.

Helena narrowed her eyes. "No...look just like…” she let out a breathy laugh. "A student...or…” She cocked her head to the side and through the smoke in her eyes, a twinkle shined through. "Son. Like...son…no."

"Go with it," the nurse mouthed and left them alone.

"No," he smiled, blinking the impending tears back. "Tell me about him."

"Peeta and...doctor, like me."

"You must be proud of him."

She laughed. "Yes. He is...um...very smart. Smarter...smarter than me."

"Really?" Peeta didn't think his mother would ever admit that anyone was smarter than her, especially not him.

"He...un...understands people. Like...father. Such a good boy." She looked down. "He hates me I think."

"He doesn't hate you. I'm sure he loves you."

She squeezed his hand. "Good boy to say such things."

He bit the inside of his cheeks, his nose burning as he struggled to remain calm. This version of his mother - the one that didn't recognize him - wouldn't understand why the strange man she was speaking to would be crying. Why everything she was saying meant so much to him. Katniss returned to the room at that time, and quickly introduced herself to Helena.

Peeta's mother seemed to like Katniss enough when she met her - though that probably had more to do with her biology degree than Katniss herself. The two women chatted politely, as the strangers they really were and Katniss didn't seem flushed by his mother's speaking impairments. Helena asked if they were married, which Katniss flushed and stuttered through the explanation that they weren't married. "Good girl...for you," she said to Peeta. "Don't let her...slip away." It was a side of his mother he never knew existed but always wish he could have seen. They talked for a few hours before the nurse returned for more medication.

"You two should be fine to go get some dinner," the nurse said as she administered the sleep aid. "I'm giving her enough to get her through most of the night."

Peeta looked over at Katniss. "I just have one more thing, then we can go." Turning back to his mother, he held her hand one last time. "Dr. Mellark, about your son."

Her eyes lit up at the topic. "Peeta?"
He felt the tears prick up again in his eyes. He swallowed his shaky breaths. "Yes, Peeta. You, um, you must have loved him a lot."

She rested her other hand above her heart. "More than...I thought...I was...c-c..capable of."

That was the last time Peeta and his mother spoke. She was sleeping when he and Katniss returned from dinner and slept through the night. Katniss fell asleep in Peeta's lap but he stayed awake the entire night, not wanting to miss a single moment with her. The nurses came in every hour to check on her. And each time, they threw more and more sympathetic glances at Peeta. He caught phrases of their whispered communication outside her door and he could tell it wasn't good.

"...decreased output…"

"...death rattle…"

"...dropping BP…"

He fought the drowsiness as long as he could. Before he knew it, a gentle shake of his shoulders woke him up, and he was staring into the saddened eyes of a nurse he had seen in and out of her room a few times. "Dr. Mellark, would your mother like anyone to come up and bless her?"

And for the first time, he let the tears he had been holding back rock his body. His mother was gone.

"God, that has never happened before. I'm sorry, baby." Peeta fished his boxers off the floor and pulled them up over his hips. "I can't believe I couldn't-"

"Stop." Katniss shook her head and reached for his hand, pulling him back to her. She ran her finger through his curls and kissed him. "That literally happens to everyone."

"You're just saying that."

She snorted. "Please. Remember that night I sucked you off twice? I wanted to fuck you so much but my body just wouldn't...cooperate."

He rolled onto his side. "Really?" When she nodded and kissed him again, she felt him smile against her lips. "Well then," he murmured, "I guess maybe I should return the favor." He grabbed her hips and spun them both so he was on his back and she was on top. "Up," he instructed, urging her further up his body.

"Wa-what?" She asked, when she was straddling his chin. "What are you doing?"

He glanced up at her with a cocky smile. "I'm returning the favor." He pulled her further up so his lips were directly beneath her. He kissed her, almost as if he was kissing her mouth, eliciting a soft moan from Katniss. He kissed her again, adding his tongue to lick her bottom to top. This was a new sensation for her, clear from the shudders and moans coming from above him. He glanced up, loving the sight of her. One hand held onto the headboard while the other was tangled in her hair. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was slightly open. He worked his tongue, delving deep inside her, his nose bumping against her swollen clit. He moaned into her as her thighs tightened around his head.

"Peeta, oh God, it's so...ah it's so fucking-" Katniss babbled.

He smirked against her, shifting his hands to her ass, lifting her further against his face. Unrelentlessly, he tongued her deeper, with a greater urgency, to fit the bucking woman above him. Any time his lips weren't on her, he'd gently bite at her exposed leg. He loved to watch her come...
undone, she was even more beautiful because she was totally exposed and natural - she dropped her guard and any facade and was just her.

"Jesus!" Katniss cried. Peeta had removed his tongue from her and clamped his lips around her clit. He sucked it deep into his mouth, gently grazing the sensitive bundle with his teeth. He flicked his tongue as quickly as he could against it, alternating his deep sucks with light flicks, and adding one, then two fingers, into her. He held his fingers steady, allowing Katniss to control her own pace. He could hear the sharp, high-pitched intakes of breath, felt her tighten around him, so he took over the thrusting, angling his fingers just enough to send Katniss plummeting over the edge.

She gripped the headboard with both hands. Her head fell against it as she cried and pulsed around him. Unintentionally, she could feel herself squeezing around his fingers, which were currently motioning toward her, still pressing against where she needed him. Her toes curled and a leg cramp shot through her body as waves of pleasure crashed over her. As her orgasm subsided, Peeta's licks and plunging tongue relaxed back to soft kisses.

When Katniss regained feeling in her legs, she swung one off and rolled next to him, leaning back against the headboard as he sat up, a dreamy smile on her face. "Feel better?"

"I'm glad I could give you that," he answered, running his fingers through her hair as she rested her head against his shoulder. "Since I couldn't…"

"Peeta." She moved away from him, attempting to turn his face to hers.

He fought against her touch. "I'm just so tired, Katniss." Peeta swung his legs around the edge of the bed so his back was to her. With his shoulders hunched and hands pulling at his hair, Katniss saw, for the first time, a broken boy who just lost his mother. She crawled over to him and wrapped her arms around his chest.

"Hey," she rested her chin on his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around hers and leaned his head against hers. "You'll get through this."

"I just feel so alone," he admitted. "I mean, God, I hated so much about her, but she was my mom, you know? We were all each other had, really."

She sighed, understanding exactly what he was going through, but knowing that wasn't what he wanted to hear right now. So she didn't say anything, she just let him be. And when she felt a warm tear slip from his eye onto her cheek, she just tightened her hold against him. "Do you want to sleep?"

He nodded and she released him enough to let him roll back onto the bed. When he moved to wrap his arms around her, she shook her head. "Katniss," he whined in a quiet voice. "I want to-"

"I know," she answered, laying on her back and pulling him toward her. His head rested on her breasts and he curled his arms around her. She ran one through his hair and let the other lay on his chest, right above his heart. "Let me."

He relented and let her soft breaths lull him into a sense of peace. "Will you sing?" he asked, glancing up at her. "I heard you in the car and I just...it's stupid, nevermind."

She shushed him. "Of course I will. Do you have any requests?" It was supposed to be a joke, but she watched his forehead furrow. He was searching his memory for a song that would mean something to him.

"Beautiful Boy?" It was the only song he could remember his mother singing to him. And he didn't
even really remember it, but he heard it playing in her room once when she was looking through an old photo album. She had stopped at a picture of the two of them smiling – obviously a candid shot – and had begun to whisper the words to the music. He hadn't thought of it at the time, but given when he learned today, he realized it must have been important to her.

"I'll try my best," she promised.

"Close your eyes, have no fear.

The monster's gone, he's on the run, and your mama's here.

Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy.

Before you go to sleep, say a little prayer.

Everyday in every way, it's getting better and better.

Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy.

Before you cross the street, take my hand.

Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.

Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy.

Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to my wonderful beta, Sunfish, who has announced her retirement at the closure of this story. Waah. Thank you to everyone who has stuck by through this story. Sorry it's been a little dark, I wish I could say it gets better before it gets worse but it sure doesn't. Three chapters to go! Come check me out on tumblr: mitchesbcray
Any stress or anxiety Peeta may have been feeling the nights following the death of his mother were completely forgotten as the funeral drew nearer and nearer. Katniss discovered that Peeta had three coping mechanisms for dealing with bad news: running, drinking, and sex. Since it was too cold to run and he had too much to do with work to drink, that left sex as his only option. At first, she didn't complain; she was just as addicted to the touch of his skin as he seemed to be to hers. And the text messages he'd send her full of dirty promises he intended to keep sent chills down her spine and made her cross her legs tightly in attempts to dull the ache between them.

But she figured she should draw the line when, in the middle of the wake, he pulled her into an unused hallway of the church for a quickie. Based on the flush on his face and the very noticeable wrinkles in her dress from where he pushed it up over her hips, she was sure that they’d be found out. It did little more than to fuel his desire for her. On their ride home, her skirt was once more pushed up and his fingers found their way deep inside her, making her come while staying completely focused on the road.

That night, when he pulled her onto his lap during a movie and latched onto her breasts, he told her he needed to feel something. That it was only with her that he felt alive. She couldn't deny him that – she knew how it felt to be empty and void of anything. He was in mourning. She met Gloss during one period of mourning. He may not have been the best person to have in her life, but she had to admit that being around someone who seemingly cared about her was the best thing that could have happened to her after her father's death. If she had turned inward, she probably would never have finished school and would be some hermit living in the woods, eating squirrel meat. They were better for each other than she and Gloss were.

Who was she to deny him when he needed her this way?

He always fell asleep with her wrapped tightly in his arms, refusing to relent any hold on her, quiet tears streaming down his face. And she would sing quietly to him until she heard his breath even out. She didn't ask him to talk about his mother. He never brought it up. They were coping, together.

The morning of the funeral, Peeta swore he could feel the earth rotating under his feet. Everything in his world had shifted far too dramatically for his liking and he felt out of control. Nothing he could do would bring his mother back. She was gone, like a puff of air, and the dull ache that permeated through his body was enough of a reminder. Her legacy would remain: she would forever be the foremost expert on the neurobiological impact of post-traumatic stress disorder, still be the first female biologist to win the Darwin-Wallace Medal, still have a scholarship at Harvard named in her honor. Her legacy would never truly disappear, but Peeta couldn't help but wish that Helena Mellark, the person, could have outlasted Helena Mellark, the scientist.

Katniss slipped into the bathroom behind him and peered over his shoulder in the mirror. He smirked and turned around. "How are you that tall?"

She rolled her eyes. "Madge lent me some heels to wear with my dress. She said that as your 'esteemed guest' it was important that I don't look like a ragamuffin."

Peeta kissed her forehead. "You never look like a ragamuffin. But you do look very nice."
"As nice as one can for a funeral," she muttered. She didn't think she looked anything too special in a simple jersey dress with capped sleeves and a conservative neckline. It was the same dress she wore to Prim's funeral, though now she filled it out a little better thanks to the many months of Peeta's cooking. Along with Madge's shoes, Katniss had borrowed a pair of thick grey stockings to help keep her legs warm from the early February morning. Her hair was in a simple braid that started from the top of one ear and twisted across the back of her head down her other shoulder.

"I'm sorry if this is going to be too difficult. I know you've had too many of these -"

"Oh please," she waved him off. "Today is about celebrating your mom. And about you getting to say your final goodbye to her. I'm just the arm candy."

He laughed and embraced her. "I think my mom would have actually liked you."

Katniss furrowed her forehead. "Really? Didn't you tell me your mom didn't like anyone?"

"True," Peeta nodded, "but she probably would have hated you less than a lot of other people." He reached into his trouser pockets and pulled out a small velvet box. "Here, I, uh, I found this when I was going through her things at the home."

She turned the box over in her hands. "What is it?"

"Open it up. I hope it's not too creepy to say that it was the most beautiful thing she ever wore. She didn't really wear jewelry very often, especially after Ron but..."

Katniss opened the box to find a single champagne-colored pearl on a delicate silver chain. She gasped as she held the necklace up and watched the light bounce off the iridescent ball. "Peeta."

He took it from her and shifted behind her to help put it on. As he placed it around her neck, she couldn't help but reach up to touch it, still not believing it was real. "Do you like it?" He asked, clasping it shut.

"It's beautiful but...Peeta this is your mother's. Why..."

He rested his head against hers and smiled at their reflection in the mirror. "Everything that was hers is mine now," he muttered. "And I would look silly wearing a pearl necklace."

She laughed and leaned her head back to rest against his shoulder. "You're a good man, Peeta Mellark."

"Did you just quote Charlie Brown to me?"

"Excuse you, but it was clearly a Lucy Van Pelt line. And way to ruin my sentiment with your knowledge of musicals."

He leaned down and captured her lips in a kiss. His hands rested on her hips and pulled them flush against him. She could feel him through the thin fabric of their clothes

"Peeta," she whimpered as his lips trailed down her neck. "We have the funeral."

"In like two hours," he murmured, his hand slipping under her dress and down the top of her stockings. "Please, Katniss? I need this. I can't get through her funeral alone..."

"You're not – ah – you're not alone," she moaned when his fingers slipped her panties to the side and slid along her slit. She was putty in his hands and they both knew it. So when he nudged her legs
apart with his knee and bent her over the bathroom sink, she didn't fight him, she even reached down to help pull her stockings down far enough.

He entered her in one swift move, pushing her hips hard against the edge of the sink. Her hands immediately went to the mirror above her, holding herself steady against his thrusting body. She loved the way he felt inside of her, the way he knew what to do to elicit embarrassing noises from her. She loved that her noises only encouraged Peeta further. She glanced up into the mirror and locked eyes with him. She watched as his pupils fattened in his eyes and the way his teeth bit slightly on his tongue. She watched the muscles in his face and neck contort and the bead of sweat drip from his hairline down his chiseled chin. "Kat-"

He pulled out of her quickly and she dropped to her knees, knowing he hadn't put on a condom and that he didn't want to take any chances. She took him in her mouth, swirling her tongue around his shaft and inhaling with each pass. She felt his muscles contract and she reached around to hold onto his thighs as she took him in jus ta little more. She held in the gag as the tip of his dick tickled the back of her throat and pulled out just enough to swallow him without choking when he came.

He slumped back against the wall and she tucked him back into his boxers. She slid up his front and rested her head against his chest. "You feel better?"

"You make me forget all this pain," he admitted into her hair. "I don't ever want to lose you."

"I'm right here," she answered, closing her eyes and listening to his heart race.

Despite their moment in the bathroom, Peeta and Katniss made it to the church well before the funeral was set to begin. She gave him one last reassuring kiss and hand squeeze before making her way to the front of the church. Helena didn’t have much family, so the front pew was uncomfortably empty. Thankfully, Finnick, Annie, Johanna, and Gale were right behind her, so she could rely on their presence.

Peeta and a few of the employees who worked with Helena the most carried her casket down the aisle to its resting place at the front. He silently slipped next to her and immediately reached for her hand. His eyes were rimmed in red and he continuously clenched his jaw while the pastor began the usual biblical reading.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul…"

"...surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever. Amen."

"Family, friends, co-workers, all who gather here, I thank you for joining us at this always humbling ceremony, where we ask the Lord to provide a safe passage for our fallen son, Oren Everdeen. A hard working man, a man of song, a man of passion, but most importantly, a man dedicated to his family."

Katniss fidgeted against the hard wooden pew, aching for release from the unrelenting heat that stifled the community stuffed inside the local church. Her mother sat silently next to her, hardly moving, letting the tears fall freely down her face. Six-year-old Primrose sat on the other side of her mother and was content to flip through the pages of the hymnal as the pastor continued on about what their father was like before he was shot by a paranoid witness he was supposed to have been interviewing.
“We’ve asked the eldest of Oren’s daughters to come sing a song for her father, if she’d be so inclined.”

Katniss snapped her head to the front. Her aunts had warned her that they may be calling on her to sing, since her voice was so reminiscent of her father’s. But she wasn’t expecting it so soon in the ceremony. She was anticipating maybe at the burial, where it would be more private and meaningful. Not here in front of so many people she had never seen before. She watched as the pastor motioned for her to come forward to where a standing microphone had been set up.

Smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress, Katniss nervously walked to the microphone. She glanced over at the musicians, who were prepped as to which song she might be singing. It was one of her father’s favorites, “The Hanging Tree.” Giving them a curt nod, they began to play the introduction to the song. But as she opened her mouth to sing the haunting lyrics of a lover waiting for his other half, the words caught in her throat. She hadn’t understood the song in the past, or why her mother always rolled her eyes when her father would sing it to the girls. But as the lyrics swirled around in her memory, she saw flashes in her eyes.

A man, hanging in the tree, waiting for his love.

Her father. Dead. Waiting.

It was too much. She clamped her mouth shut, stopped the entire service. Prim finally looked up from the hymnal with wondering eyes. Katniss was locked in that moment, unable to move, unable to speak, unable to think of anything other than her father.

She felt a pair of tiny arms wrap around her leg and a mop of blonde hair pressed against her hip. Blue eyes peeked up at her and the wall she had so carefully constructed surrounding the unfairness of his death crumbled. Katniss sank to her knees in the front of the church and for the first time since hearing the news, cried without care.

“Katniss,” Prim whispered to her, gently running her fingers through her hair. “Katniss.”

“Katniss?”

Katniss felt a large, warm hand touch her forearm. Her body was shaken slightly, so similar to the way her father used to rock her to sleep when she was young. When she opened her eyes, so hopeful to find her father sitting next to her with his rough hands and gentle touch, the way he always smelled like pine and spring, she saw that it wasn’t. It couldn’t be him. It never would be him again. He had been her rock and was stolen from her far too soon. Just like Prim. Everyone she loved ended up leaving her permanently, leaving her with scars too deep to be healed for good. Their deaths changed her in ways that could never be reversed. She’d never be the Katniss she used to be – that Katniss was gone. Dead. The realization of how prominent death and abandonment was in her life hit her in unrelenting waves.

"Katniss, are you okay?"

She felt another one of those large hands massage her fists, willing them to open with gentle fingers. Rough hands. Gentle touch. Soothing voice. Such concern. She felt his lips tickle her ear as he asked her, again, if she was okay. Katniss turned toward this beautiful man with her; the selfless, good, caring, beautiful man who was more concerned about her well-being than his own at his mother’s funeral. He was so good. And you destroy everything you touch. Everything you love leaves you because you’re destruction.

She nodded and offered him a weak smile. She pushed Gloss’ hurtful words, the words that became
so ingrained in her self-worth no matter how many therapy sessions she went to, out. This was a day for Peeta. Allowing his fingers to intertwine with hers, she ran her thumb over his. "Are you?"

He leaned over and gently kissed her temple. "As long as you're with me."

The strength Katniss felt through Peeta's near bone-crushing grip on her hand kept her focused for the rest of the funeral. When he got up to help carry the casket back down to the waiting hearse, they both fought the distance as long as possible, until just their fingertips touched. He looked at her and pulled his hand away. She felt the entire weight of the situation come crushing down on her and her body began to shut down from the stress. Her rock was gone, even if it was for just a few more minutes, and she already felt lost. Gale reached forward and squeezed her shoulder.

Glancing back into coal-grey eyes so similar to her own, she saw another lost boy. A boy whose father was taken too early. A boy who was also struggling to watch someone bury a parent. Johanna was clinging tightly to Gale's other side, her face buried in his shoulder. Even Annie and Finnick were physically closer than normal. "Thank you," she mouthed at Gale. He said nothing in return, giving her just a knowing nod.

The Merchant Home hosted a lunch after the burial for people to pay their best wishes. Katniss could see the exhaustion in Peeta's face, even as the first person approached him. But he flashed his winning smile and thanked them for coming and for their kind words and assured them that, yes, she was in a better place and was no longer in pain.

"Peeeeeta!" A little girl's voice cut through the church basement and Katniss watched as every ounce of stress dissipated from Peeta's face for a moment. His eyes shined brightly as a mop of curly blonde hair came flying at him. He picked the young girl up and spun her around in his arms. The girl tightened her tiny arms around his neck and gave his cheek a sloppy kiss. "Peeta! I missed you!"

He shifted the girl to his hip and smiled brightly at her. In that moment, Katniss knew exactly who this young girl, who looked so much like Peeta, was.

"Madison!" A woman's exasperated voice called after her. "Madison Cartwright, you cannot just run off like that." Delly came rushing into the hall, heading straight for where Madison was in Peeta's arms.

"But maama! It's Peeta!" She answered, burrowing her head in Peeta's shoulder.

"Yes, I see that." Delly smiled sadly at Peeta and reached to touch his arm. "Hi, Peeta. I'm so sorry about your mom."

Peeta allowed Delly to hug him and kiss his cheek. "Thanks."

"And I'm sorry that Maddie came to attack you. I swear, as soon as I opened the car door she just bolted out."

Peeta tightened his hold on the little girl. "She was always a force to be reckoned with. Aren't you, Maddie Pie?" Maddie giggled and rested her head against his shoulder. He copied her movement, letting his own weary head rest against hers. "Thank you for coming. Is uh...is...he..."

Delly shook her head. "No. Thom's not here. I...I didn't think it would be appropriate. Given..."

"Yeah. That's probably smart," Peeta agreed, swallowing hard. "You look good, Del."

She waved him off. "Please. Four hours in the car with this one, I feel like a mess."
"Never," he answered, quietly, causing her to blush slightly.

"Peeta, do you think that maybe we could...we could talk? Alone?" She asked, nervously playing with the hem of her black cardigan.

Peeta sucked in his cheeks and Katniss could feel her heart pounding in her chest. She saw the way Peeta was looking at Delly, just like he had in all those pictures of them together, as if he had forgotten what she did to him. He should be angry, she thought, he should tell her off like the bitch deserves. She was shocked when he nodded and walked over to where she was sitting. He knelt down so both he and Maddie were on eye-level with Katniss.

"Maddie, your mom and I are going to go talk. This is Katniss and she's very nice. Do you mind waiting with her until I get back?" His eyes met Katniss' and she saw the truth. He was angry. But he was also the Peeta who was with his mother when she died, who got some level of peace with the woman who had the greatest impact on his life, for better or worse. Delly hurt him, there was no one who could deny that. But this was an opportunity to provide a little girl with a better relationship with her mother than he had had.

"Maddie, do you want to draw?" Katniss asked quietly, bringing the memorial program from the funeral in front of her and retrieving a pencil. Maddie nodded nervously and slid off of Peeta's side. She crawled into the chair next to Katniss.

"You have pretty hair. What's your favorite animal? I like ducks."

Peeta leaned down and kissed the top of Katniss' head. "Thank you."

He and Delly walked out of the lunch into the parking lot, where visitors were trickling in and out, not paying much attention to the pair. "What did you want to talk about, Delly?"

She sat on the edge of the stairs and let out a long breath. "Peeta, I...I need to apologize. For what I did. I was..."

"...a heartless bitch?" he finished. Now that Maddie was out of earshot, Peeta felt more comfortable showing his true feelings to the woman.

"Yeah. Basically."

Peeta shook his head in disgust. “I just don’t get it, Del. We were supposed to get married.”

“I know.”

“We were a fuck-...we were a fuckingfamily. How could you do that to me? To her?”

Delly shrugged. “I didn’t do it intentionally. You have to know that, Peet. I would never intentionally hurt her. Or you. I lov-”

“Don’t,” he snapped, “don’t you dare say you ever loved me. You don’t just walk away from love.”

“I loved you, Peeta. I did! I still do. I’ll never notlove you. Maddiewill always love you. She still asks about you. Do you know how much that kills me?” Delly hastily wiped her eyes. “I’m sorry I ever tried to kick you out of our lives.”

“That’s not enough. You broke my fucking heart. And for what? For some guywho was too much of a chicken shit to support you when you needed it? Who decided to show up once all the hard work was done?” Peeta felt his voice rising but had no intent to contain it.
“He’s her father!” Delly yelled. “Are you telling me that if your father didn’t come back into your life you wouldn’t have wanted to get to know him? Are you saying you preferred it with the dad who ended up deserting you after you got to know him?”

“I wouldn’t have left you two.”

“But you never would have been truly happy, Peeta-”

“I was happy! I loved you, Delly! You were my family!” Peeta ran his hands through his hair. “You and Maddie. But you decided I wasn’t good enough for you. You thought that that prick was a better choice to raise her.”

Delly choked back a sob. “You think that’s what it was? You...you think that I left because I thought Thom would be a better father to her?”

“Well what the hell am I supposed to think when he shows up out of nowhere and you take him back without a second thought?” He watched her fight back the tears that were threatening to pour out of her eyes. The worst part of this whole situation was that after five years of being in a relationship with her, he knew she was genuinely struggling with this. Delly was never really able to hide her emotions, especially from him.

She moved up to sit next to him and leaned her body against his. “Peeta…” She turned his face toward hers so he was looking her in the eye. “If I were to tell you that I wasn’t with Thom, that I now realize what a mistake I had made leaving you and wanted to be a family with you again, would you take me back?”

He was silent and swallowed hard, trying to figure out if she was serious about this or not. Delly was never a good actress. And despite hurting him, he still believed that she would never be cruel enough to pull some sort of cheap shot at his own mother’s funeral. She understood the impact the woman had on his life and respected the way he learned to deal with the pain his mother inflicted.

Her eyes were fixed on his, closer than they had been. He didn’t know when they moved so close to one another; he could smell her very faint perfume, could see the flecks of green in her eyes, the small scar on her chin that she got when she tripped in the kitchen and smacked it on the counter.

“Peeta,” she breathed, closing the gap between them. Her lips felt so foreign and yet so familiar, like an old friend. He couldn’t ignore the tugging in his heart as the memories of them together came rushing back.

She pulled away and waited for him to open his eyes to meet hers. “Even after that, would you ever, truly be able to forgive me?”

“No,” he answered softly. “I...I can’t, Delly.”

“That’s how I know it had to be Thom,” she answered, letting out a breathy laugh. “Do you believe in soul-mates, Peeta? That there are two people who are just destined to find each other no matter the circumstances? After Thom left, I told myself that there was no way I would ever be able to forgive him. But when I saw him again, even after four years and so much anger, I just…” she looked at Peeta and shrugged. “I just knew that it was him.”

Peeta began to turn away when she reached out for him. “Peeta, I wasn’t the girl for you. You weren’t the boy for me, no matter how much we loved each other. You deserve the girl who after four years will still make you feel brand new and untouched and perfect.”

He took her hand in his. He could remember the time when it felt like such a perfect fit, when
they felt like such a perfect fit. “If he hadn’t come back, would you have married me?”

She nodded. “Yes.”

He shut his eyes, not sure if that response made things better or worse for him. “But you would have thought about him?”

Delly paused. “He was never going to leave. Maddie looks too much like him for me to ever have been able to forget him completely. But I would have been faithful, in every aspect, to you. I did love you but...but I couldn’t deny what was in front of me.”

“I’m still mad at you.”

Delly nodded. “I’m mad at me, too. You were my best friend and I didn’t treat you like it. You deserved so much better than what I gave you.”

“How, uh, how is Maddie taking to...to Thom?”

Delly chuckled. “Well, she’s eager to point out that he doesn’t cook very well. And he’s a pretty terrible drawer.”

“Does she call him—”

“Daddy? Only when she’s tired.”

Peeta bit the inside of his cheek. When Maddie was first learning to talk, ‘Dada’ was her first word. Delly joked that it was because she spent so much time with Peeta. But he had been so insistent not to be called ‘dad’ until things were permanent, until there was no chance of him not being in her life, so they taught her to just call him Peeta. ‘My Peeta’ was her official name for him, and it was better than ‘dad’ because, according to her, it meant he was hers. She only slipped and called him “daddy” when she was sick and pitiful. And that last night, when she cried and clung to his leg when he tried to leave. When he had to peel her off of him and leave her wailing in the apartment, crying out for her daddy to come back.

“But he’s...he’s good with her?”

Delly smiled. “He’s trying his best. She must have picked up on your charm because apparently he can’t punish her either,” she added with an elbow to the ribs. Peeta rubbed the spot, pretending it hurt, like they did so many years ago. “But he’s trying.”

“And you’re happy.”

“I am.” She pushed a curl out of his face. “What about you, Peet? Are you happy?”

Peeta thought about the visual he left in the basement – of Maddie taking an instant liking to the somewhat shell-shocked Katniss. He felt all the tension melt away at the image of Katniss and the smile that left him breathless whenever he saw it. His chest lightened at the memory of how her sharp grey eyes became so focused when she was concentrating on something. Everything about her was beautiful and intense and perfect.

“I know that face, Peeta Mellark.” Delly’s voice cut through. She wore a smile as big as a cheshire cat. “Do you love her? The girl?”

“You don’t draw good,” Maddie announced after investigating Katniss’ half-hearted attempt to draw
Buttercup. She had made the mistake of talking about the mangy cat and Maddie wanted to hear everything about it. They weren’t allowed to have pets because of the apartment complex rules, but Peeta apparently used to take her to the humane shelter quite often to play with the kittens and puppies.

“Madison,” Delly snapped. “That is not polite.”

Maddie shrugged. “Sorry. But you don’t.”

Katniss cocked an eyebrow. The girl had a point; Buttercup somehow ended up looking more like some wild beast than the annoying kitten he really was. “Yes, but I didn’t learn from the best.”

“Yep,” Maddie agreed. “My Peeta taught me all about drawing. Right, Peeta?”

Peeta bent over and inspected her drawing before kissing the side of her head. “That’s right, Maddie. Is this for Mom?”

Maddie slid the paper in front of Katniss. “No,” she announced. “It’s for Kat-Niss.” She beamed up at the bewildered woman who weakly smiled in return. Katniss hadn’t been expecting quite the ball of energy that Maddie ended up being. Physically, she looked so similar to Prim at that age, but her personality was the total opposite. Where Prim was quiet and shy, Maddie seemed more at ease talking about anything and everything.

“Mads, want to get some food?” Delly asked, holding her hand out. Maddie nodded enthusiastically and hopped off the seat, skipping over to her mother.

Peeta replaced her in the seat next to Katniss and gave her a kiss. “Thank you.”

“You two seem…friendly.”

Peeta sighed at the scowl growing on Katniss’ face. “She explained. I don’t...I don’t really know. I’m still mad but I guess I’m trying to understand where she was coming from. Honestly, I’m beginning to think it was for the best.”

“What? Why?”

“Because,” he murmured in her ear, getting a slight grin from her. “If Delly and I hadn’t gone through what we did, I wouldn’t have moved and I would never have been hit on in a bar by a drunken co-ed who ended up being my student.”

“I’m going to let that one slide because of what today is,” she answered, rolling her eyes. “Even though we both know you’re the one that hit on me.”

“Agree to disagree, Miss Everdeen.” He kissed her, relishing in the familiar feel of her lips against his. These were the lips he wanted to be kissing, not Delly’s. Delly was the past. Katniss was the now. There was no use in dwelling on what could have been when what he had right now, in his arms, was exactly what he wanted.

“Ahem.”

Katniss sucked in her cheeks, clearly upset at whoever was interrupting her kissing session with Peeta. They weren’t being obnoxious, but she could tell that despite ending well, the talk with Delly took a lot out of him. Kissing him seemed to help calm him and she was determined to keep him calm during this entire day.
Peeta turned his head and Katniss felt his grip on her knee tighten. She didn’t recognize the man standing above them, with his mop of golden hair and large build. There were two adult men standing behind him with similar hair color and builds. “Ah, um, Peeta. I just wanted to say…”

Peeta’s eyes narrowed in disgust. “I don’t really give a damn what you have to say,” he spit in a low voice, laced with malice and venom.

The man was obviously taken aback by the very non-welcome he received. One of the men behind him started to snort and the other pushed him away, also struggling to keep a straight face. “Excuse me, young man? I know your mother didn’t raise you to speak that way.”

“You know jack shit about how my mother raised me.”

“I know plenty about her, Peeta. You and I both know I am well aware of how you were raised. How unhealthy that house ended up being. Why do you think I left?”

“It doesn’t matter what I think, Ron. Because I was a kid. And I thought you were my family.”

“There was,” Ron answered, his tone even-keeled despite the spiraling tension between them. “We were. But the way she got at the end. Peeta, that was not a place fit for children.”

Peeta rose and moved toe-to-toe with the older man. “If we were family and it was so unhealthy then why the hell did you leave me there? I was just a kid. And you left me there to deal with everything.”

“You know I wanted to take you with us, but legally-”

“Fuck ‘legally’, Ron.” Katniss hadn’t ever seen Peeta get quite so angry before. His face was turning red and his blue eyes were so dark they appeared black. “She had early onset dementia, Ron. That’s why she started acting the way she did. She was a fucking time bomb and your one shitty decision to just leave was the last thing she needed.”

Ron’s face softened and he took a step back. “Peet, I didn’t kn-”

“You don’t have one. And you don’t have a reason to be here.” Despite the anger that threatened to take over his body, he kept his voice level, not wanting to cause a scene. He wanted this man out of his life and refused to let him ruin what had surprisingly become a positive event. Learning the truth from his mother and from Delly had done more for him than he ever imagined. And having Katniss by his side seemed to exacerbate that feeling. He’d be damned if this coward attempted to thwart that. And for what purpose, to avenge his own guilt for leaving? To make himself feel better that he didn't have to care for her at the end? To remind Peeta of what he used to have?

“You are nothing if you don’t stand up for yourself.” A vague memory of his mother slipped into his consciousness. They were in her room at the Home and Peeta was telling her about the latest reviewer notes he received on an article he sent in for publication.

“The guy has no clue what he’s talking about,” Peeta said. “The only reason he's a reviewer is because it's hypothesizing directly against his own framework.”

“Does he have any valid points you can use?” When it came to talking about academia, Peeta could
never tell if his mother was fully conscious of what they were talking about or if she just went into the mode and saw him as just another student.

He sighed and ran his hand through his curls. “A few. But his major complaints are theoretical and he's just missing the point. He can't accept that his precious ideas may be undermined by a student.”

“The data support your hypothesis completely? Or is there any leeway?”

“No. The main effects are significant and beyond average power. Mom, these findings have huge implications for how we study social isolation. But that dick won't ever pass it through.”

Helena shook her head and threw him a disappointing glare. “So you're just giving up? That's unfortunate.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Stand up to him, make the evidence stronger if you need to. If you don't resubmit with additional data then you're letting him win. You are nothing if you don't stand up for yourself.”

“I came to pay my respects, Peeta. You can't deny me that.”

“This is for people who respected my mother while she was alive. I'm asking you, politely, to leave now so I don't have to cause a scene and throw you out.” Peeta pushed his shoulders back to puff out his chest. He raised his head as far as he could and refused to break eye contact with Ron.

“It's a shame,” Ron finally relented. “I was hoping we could reconnect sometime. Be a family again, now that you don't really have one.”

Peeta glanced over his shoulder where Katniss was watching the entire exchange with a fire rushing through her eyes. Just a few seats further away he saw Johanna, Gale, Annie, Finnick, and Haymitch stealing haggard glances in his direction. Turning back to Ron, he smirked. “I have a family. One that will stay with me. Leave.”

He felt a sense of relief rush through his body as Ron called to his sons and walked out of the hall.

Haymitch was almost instantly at his side, pushing a flask into his hands. “You look like you could use a drink, Boy.” Haymitch grunted, staring at the door.

Peeta thankfully took a large swallow, wincing as the harsh alcohol filled his mouth. He had been curtailing his drinking for the past few months and, with the exception of the holidays, had successfully abstained from liquor completely. A second long swallow had his head buzzing pleasantly. “Thanks.”

“Don't mention it. Look, uh, I'm going to head out. Not that I didn't respect your Mama, I just...” He waved his arms. “All this death and shit. Can't handle it.”

Peeta nodded. “I understand. Thank you for coming. And for...you know...”

“Yeah yeah. Whatever you say, Boy. Remember, bright and early Monday morning you have a class. University seems to think you've have enough bereavement time.” Haymitch rolled his eyes and sauntered out of the room, gripping the wall to keep him upright the whole time.

“Peeta?” Katniss came up behind him and gently placed her hand on his back. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”
“Need some air?” Johanna asked, with a hard look. “I was just going out for a smoke.”

Peeta nodded. “Yeah. Air would be good. Thanks, Jo.”

“Do you want me to go with you?”

He turned and looked into Katniss’ eyes. He wanted to say yes. He wanted to tell her that he wanted her to be with him forever. That she really was his family and that she was all he wanted. But he couldn't. She had her own problems, she didn't need him dragging his along with. “Uh...no, you stay here. Keep Gale company?” He kissed her, attempting to convey all his feelings for her in that moment.

He and Johanna snuck out the back door, not wanting to be seen smoking in front of the church. Once outside, Johanna smirked and handed him two tightly rolled joints from her purse. “I figured you might need one or two at some point.”

They lit a third, smaller one that Johanna had and let their bodies rest against the back of the church. “How are you holding up?”

“Oh you know. Me and parental funerals. Always a blast,” Johanna answered, sarcastically. “It was nice, as far as they go. It was nice to see you tell Ol’ Ron off for once. And Katniss seemed to hold up well.”

“She's been a rock, honestly. I don't know how she's holding herself together. That girl's been through so much, anyone else would have fallen apart.” Peeta inhaled deeply and held in the smoke until he was forced to exhale.

“Has she heard anything about her school in Boston?” Johanna asked, accepting the blunt from him. He shook his head and she shrugged. “If she gets in, do you think she'll go?”

“She should,” he answered truthfully. “It'd be a brand new start for her. She'll be far away from her hometown and all those ghosts. I sometimes wish I had moved further away. But with Mom...it just didn't work out. What about you and the bartender?”

Johanna laughed. “The bartender is fine. Very fine, actually. We may head to California during spring break. He wants to be a part of my life, which is completely stupid and frightening but whatever. If he wants my shit, he can have it. Lord knows I don't want any of it anymore.” The two finished the blunt in silence. Johanna pushed herself up off the ground and held her hand out to help Peeta up. She turned, “Grass on my ass?”

Peeta chuckled and swatted at her. “More like your ass on grass.”

“Oh god. I forgot how unfunny you get when you're high.” She threw her arm around his shoulder and let her hip bump into his. “You'll be okay, right, Peet?”

He returned the hip bump. “I will. And you will, too?”

“I'm always okay.” She winked at him, but he didn't miss the hint of pain her eyes held. Johanna's childhood was very different than his own; he was the straight-A overachiever and she was the fuck up who almost got suspended from high school for drug use. But she was surprisingly motivated and had a natural gift for interpreting literary symbols in original ways. The pair met at a grad student get-together their first year, and while she rubbed many students the wrong way with her brash, in-your-face attitude, she and Peeta hit it off immediately. They shared hidden scars that took years to fully understand but they were loyal to one another above almost anyone else.
Annie gave the pair a pointed look when they walked back in and Finnick just laughed and high fived Peeta. Johanna detached herself from Peeta's side and plopped down in Gale's lap. She whispered something in his ear and he stoically nodded and wrapped his arms around her. Peeta enviously watched the pair and desired to pull Katniss into him the same way. “Where’s Katniss?”

Annie pointed toward where the flowers from the service were positioned. Katniss was talking to some guy, or more like being talked to. She nodded politely along with whatever it was he was saying and at one point scanned the room. She locked eyes with his and a smile ghosted across her face. The man she was talking to looked over at him and Peeta could see the color drain from his face before rushing off. Peeta bounded over to her and hugged her protectively. “Was that fucker hitting on you?”

“Jesus, Peeta, calm down. No, we were just talking. Then he just left.” She nuzzled her head into his chest. “Why do you smell like weed?”

“What were you talking about?” He demanded, searching out the guy who had the balls to flirt with his girlfriend today. Apparently the envious feeling he got looking at Johanna and Gale brought out the possessive side of him. He needed Katniss today, she was his, not some random guy’s. His.

“Your mom. Well, really, he complimented the necklace and I told him it was hers. I was telling him that I wish I had gotten to know her since I’m a bio major and he said that he took a lot of classes with her when he was an undergraduate. Said he was never anything special but she really instilled a love of the field in him. It was nice to hear her impact on students,” Katniss shrugged. “I promise, Peeta. It wasn't anything bad.” She craned her neck up to kiss the corners of his mouth. “But then he caught sight of something and got spooked.”

“Yeah,” he grunted. “He saw me.”

She rolled her eyes. “That's why you thought he was hitting on me? Lord, Peeta. You think everyone is hitting on me like I'm so desirable or something.”

Peeta lifted her chin with his fingers. “You have absolutely no idea,” he answered, leaning down and capturing her mouth in a passionate kiss. “I think things are winding down.”

“Thank goodness,” she sighed. “My feet are killing me.” He laughed and together they walked back to where his friends were gathered.

Peeta couldn't get that guy out of his mind for the rest of the luncheon. He kept catching glimpses of men who looked similar, but could never tell for sure. It wasn't until the end, when only Peeta, Katniss, a few employees from the Home, and the church volunteers remained, that he saw the man again. He was by the flower table again, holding a picture the Home provided of Helena.

“You were one of her students?”

The man jumped and set the picture down. “Um, yeah. Helena, uh, Dr. Mellark taught my Introduction to Biology Class when, when I was in school. She was, so...amazing.” His voice trailed off as he entered his own mind for a moment. “Sorry, I've overstayed, I really should get going...”

“Wait!” Peeta called, reaching for the man's arm. The man stopped and turned, looking Peeta in the face. And once Peeta saw him, really saw him, he could never unsee it. The same facial structure, only aged. The same body build but with more weight and less muscle. The crooked smile that had gotten Peeta out of so many scrapes. The only thing that ever worked with his mother, so he saved it for when he needed her the most. “I just...I wanted to know what she was like. Before she got sick. I was...I was too young to remember.”
The man's eyes scanned Peeta's face. With a sad shake of his head, he pulled his arm away and ran out of the hall.

“What was that about?” Katniss asked, nestling under his arm.

Peeta watched the retreating figure until he could not longer make it out in the dark hallways.
“Nothing. No one. No one important. You ready to go home home?"

Since the funeral, Peeta's insomnia had returned full force. Even with Katniss in his bed, he couldn't stay calm. His attempts to exhaust his body into sleep with sex left him sweaty and satiated but unable to sleep. He reasoned that he could go back to the sleep aids in the bathroom, but the nightmares that often came with those made his mornings worse than if he didn't sleep. When Katniss didn't stay at his apartment, he found that his old friend Jack Daniels was enough to get his thoughts to slow down enough to find peace, but he woke up feeling nauseated and like a semi ran him over in his sleep.

He did things all over the house now. Dishes at 2 a.m. Working on his manuscript at 2:45. Doing pushups and situps in the living room at 4. Drawing at 4:30. Back in bed by 6, just in time to turn off the alarm and wake Katniss for the day. His favorite part of the morning routine was drawing. He was always gifted, free-handing the organisms and neurotransmitters and brain pieces from his mother's textbooks to the point where they looked like exact replicas. Of course art was never a subject he even pretended to potentially major in. If his mother hated the social sciences, there'd be no way she'd ever accept one of the humanities. So he kept his drawings to a minimum, never letting her see what he was doing in fear of the repercussions.

He didn't draw much once he got into college, focusing on his actual school work and future ambitions. Since his mother's death, he rediscovered his passion for it and found it to be the most soothing way of dealing with the memories – of her and Ron and Delly and Katniss – of everything. He sketched the room his mother died in, some of Maddie's toys, a cup of egg nog, Katniss' braid. Little by little, his sketches morphed into full drawings and he was filling sketchbooks with portraits and landscapes.

That morning, he had no intention of drawing anything in particular, just letting his mind wander. He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't hear Katniss come up behind him. “Morning,” she mumbled, rubbing her eye with the palm of her hand. She had slipped into one of his shirts and padded across the apartment. She kissed the crown of his head and wrapped her arms around his neck. “What time is it?”

Peeta smiled and turned to pull her into his lap. She leaned her head against his bare chest, her lips ghosting over his tattoo. “It's late. Or, early, I guess,” he murmured, finally looking up at the kitchen clock. “I couldn't sleep. What are you doing up?”

She sighed against his skin, her warm breath rushing across his chest. “Nightmare.” Katniss' nightmares increased along with Peeta's insomnia. The funeral seemed to have reopened all the old wounds that she thought had healed. The nightmares were worse than ever, and woke up screaming more times than she ever had before.

She stood, frozen in place, and watched as the gun was pointed at her father's face, as he was called a traitor to his kind because of the case he was working on. She felt her body recoil as the bullet flew from the barrel. She was covered in his blood and watched as the life drained from his haunting grey eyes. “Why?” he choked, his breathing shallow. “Why did you do this to me, Katniss? This is your fault. All of this is your fault.” She looked down at her shaking hand and cried as the warm metal fell from her fingers onto the ground. The gun powder mixed with his blood and covered her
skin, spreading up her body and suffocating her.

“No,” she gasped, with her last breath. “No!”

He tugged her closer to his body. “I'm sorry. I should have been-

Katniss shrugged against him. “S'okay. What are you working on?”

Peeta glanced down at the sketchbook. “Just some doodles. Let's go back to bed.” She nodded and he picked her up and carried her back to the bedroom. Once in bed, she pressed herself firmly against him, nuzzling her face into the space between his head and shoulders. He kept his arms wrapped around her back, letting his thumb run over her shoulder blade. She fell back asleep, though he could swear he heard soft whimpers for the rest of night. He knew part of the problem was the fact that he wasn't there to help her through them. He vowed to make it up to her that weekend, especially since he had a conference coming up and they'd have to spend almost an entire week away from each other.

“Dad!” Katniss screamed, shooting straight up from bed, covered in sweat. She thrashed around in the bed, tangling the blankets around her limbs. “Daddy,” she whimpered quietly. Looking around, she sees the Saturday sunlight streaming in through the curtains. Peeta is gone, just as he always was when she woke up from the same nightmare. She was jealous of his inability to sleep – at least he wasn't haunted by his subconscious.

She considered curling back up in the blankets to wait for Peeta to come back. He thought he was so smooth – sneaking out after she fell asleep and sneaking back before the alarm went off. But there was a very definite change in her own sleep habits when he was and wasn't with her. The nights when he was able to sleep, her dreams were peaceful. She felt as though she could conquer the world with just a steady touch from him to reassure her. She wished she could ask him to stay on those nights his insomnia was the worst, but it was too selfish of her – who was she to put her own needs ahead of his when he so often took care of her? She had grown so accustomed to her nightmares long before she met Peeta. And she suspected she'd have to deal with them long after he left as well.

But still. Katniss missed the way it felt to be held in his arms. She missed the way his curls stood up in every direction after a hard night's sleep. She even missed the way he'd kiss her first thing in the morning, even though they both had morning breath. She hugged her legs up to her chest, hoping to recreate some of the warmth and safety, but it wasn't the same. She needed him. “Peeta?” She called timidly. When he didn't respond, she tried again. Slipping on her favorite old t-shirt of his, she crept through the apartment but couldn't find him.

His sketchbook lay open on the kitchen table and she flipped through it, in complete awe of the talent in such simple drawings. His use of shading turned what should have passed as just a smattering of lines and shapes into a clear representation of what she imagined his mother looked like through the eyes of a young child. He had pages and pages of the book filled with similar drawings – some so angry and spiteful, she could feel his malice leaping out to choke her. Others showed the late Dr. Mellark at her finest – studying brain scans with a stern face but the slightest glint of a shine in her eyes.

Katniss knew Peeta respected his mother's academic work, even if he didn't talk about it. He kept copies of the journals she was published in tucked away in the bookcase in his office. And she could remember the way he taught the lesson on bio- and neuro-psych – pain in his eyes but such a strong, proud voice. Despite the few stories he had told her about how cold and indifferent his mother was, Peeta seemed to forgive her and her behaviors. Possibly due to the disease that ripped the most important part of her life away, or maybe she was now dead. Either way, Katniss had yet to hear him
speak a single negative word about the woman who pushed him harder than any mother should.

She didn't understand how a parent could have a child they didn't want. She didn't know how anyone could be so distant without forever pushing their child away. Even Madge's family, despite their problems, wanted Madge and loved her. Having been raised by parents who never fought and showered their children in affection, Katniss could not wrap her brain around the notion that not all parents were like that. Madge was the first person she knew who didn't have that same family structure. And now Peeta. How could these people who had childhoods so much worse than hers remain so good despite of it?

Katniss heard a thump from the bathroom and slammed the sketchbook closed. “Katniss?” Peeta called.

She furrowed her brow. “Yeah?”

The door opened and Peeta stood in the doorway, bathed in the soft light that spilled from the room. “Come here.” He held his hand out to her. The room was lit by small tea candles that littered the counter tops, flickering light over the walls. The room was warm and smelled like sandalwood and vanilla.

“What is this?” Katniss asked.

He pulled the shower curtain back, revealing a warm tub filled with bubbles. “I thought, well, I know your nightmares have been worse. So I thought maybe you'd like to relax this weekend.” He shrugged and continued, “I had to guess what scents to buy but they reminded me of you.”

Katniss wanted to giggle. She was most definitely not a bubble bath type of girl. Especially when the bubble bath also included floating flower petals and candles. This was something Madge would have found relaxing, not her. But he was so sincere, and his eyes were so focused on her, that she shrugged. Then nodded. “Thank you,” she answered, kissing his cheek. “But, um...what about you?”

“What about me?” He asked with a chuckle. “This day is about you relaxing. I'll probably go write or something in the other room. Maybe even get lunch prepared for when you get done.” He kissed her and smiled against her lips. “Get in. Relax. I'll be right outside.”

He couldn't help but feel a twinge of disappointment when he left the bathroom. She had just spent the entire night without him, now he wanted her to spend the morning alone as well. She ran her hand over the top layer of bubbles, releasing an even stronger vanilla scent that she loved so much. “I guess...” she muttered to herself, slipping the shirt off over her head and stepping out of her panties. She unbraided her hair and let it fall about her shoulders.

Letting out a content moan as she slid into the hot bath, she let her head rest against the wall and stretched her limbs out as far as she could. She closed her eyes, letting her other senses take over – the smells, the feel of the water, the small splashes she made as she tapped her feet against the end of the tub – but none of it was as relaxing as it was supposed to be. She missed Peeta. She needed him. “Peeta?”

The door creaked open and Peeta stuck his head in. “What's wrong? Is the water not warm enough?”

Katniss flushed. “N-n-no, the water's fine it's just...”

“But what?”

She shrugged, suddenly feeling shy and childlike, sitting in a tub, looking up at him. “Will you...stay
with me?"

He glanced around the bathroom. “In here? But what about your - "

“Please?”

He chuckled and sat on the toilet lid next to the bathtub. “Good?”

She nodded contently and reached her hand out toward him. When he took it in his, she smiled and closed her eyes, finally able to relax. She always felt better with him around, especially as of late. “Thank you,” she offered, using her free hand to flick some of the bubbles at him.

“Um, excuse you.”

She flicked some more toward him. “What?” She asked with an all-too-innocent smile. “Is there a problem?”

He shook his head and tried to fight the grin that threatened to take over his face. “You, Miss Everdeen, are being a pain in the ass,” he said in his best professor voice.

“Me?” Another flick. “Never.”

“Knock it off.”

“Knock what off?”

“Flicking me with bubbles!” He shouted, laughing as she continued to spray his face with the bubbles he provided in the bath. He reached out and grabbed both of her hands.

Katniss narrowed her eyes and cocked an eyebrow. “Are you gonna make me, Dr. Mellark?”

He smirked. “Maybe.”

“How?”

He released her hands and pulled his t-shirt over his head. She was always distracted by the way his muscles rippled whenever he moved without his shirt. The fine golden hair against his pale chest was difficult to see in the soft glow, but she grinned at the darker patch that led down to the waistband of his shorts. She pulled the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth as he pulled the shorts down, leaving him as naked as she was. He grinned mischievously at her and plopped into the tub, displacing water all over the wall and floor around them.

She let out a shriek and shielded her eyes from the flying bubbles. “Peeta! What are you doing?”

“You can’t flick me with bubbles if I’m in here with you. Come here.” He reached for her arm and pulled her so she rested between his legs with her back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her and nestled his face against her. “This is nice,” he murmured against her skin.

She let her head fall back against his shoulder and sighed. “I’ve missed you,” she admitted quietly.

“Mhm,” he agreed, his lips vibrating against her. His thumbs began to form small circles around her skin, moving slowly up her body. She let out a moan when they began to caress her nipples, the warm water in such opposition to the cool air. He rolled the hard buds between his fingers and slowly kissed his way up her neck to the sensitive skin behind her ear. She giggled slightly and wiggled against him.
Katniss felt his erection pressing against her and let out a soft whimper. He released her nipples and slid one hand down to her stomach, pressing her against him. His fingers slipped down to find her clit, circling the bundle of nerves. “Fuck,” she breathed, the sound catching in her throat.

She arched her back against him, her hands gripping around his thighs for some sort of support. His fingers continued their tease against her clit and his other hand roamed up and down her side. He reached over to the side of the tub and pulled out a bottle of shower gel that was in the same scent as the bubbles.

“You’ve...really thought...about this...haven’t you?” She choked out as she spied the gel.

He smiled. “Today is all about you, Katniss.” He pulled his fingers from her clit and smirked at her whine.

“What-”

He turned her head toward him and kissed her deeply, their tongues battling for dominance. She moaned deeply into his mouth and he felt himself grow harder against her.

He poured some gel into his hands and rubbed it around his palms. He rubbing the lather onto her skin, covering her in the scent that was so her as far as he was concerned. He massaged her breasts, kneading the soft flesh between his hands. His hands roamed over her body, leaving a sudsy trail behind, back down between her legs. He urged her thighs open and returned to her clit. He wiped the gel off on a nearby towel and easily slipped his fingers into her.

Katniss' panting filled the room as she rode against his hand. She was vaguely aware of the splashing water with every buck but she was well aware of the feel of his cock nestled against her ass.

Peeta's other hand found its way into Katniss' dark wavy hair, grasping hard as he pulled it taut to expose her neck. His mouth met her throat and trailed kisses over the skin. His teeth nipped every so often and she felt her senses overload. Her eyes closed tight and she felt her walls clamp around his fingers. As she fell over the edge, her cries rang through his mind. He loved the sounds she makes when she's coming undone, loved the look on her face as her orgasm builds then shatters throughout her body. He could lose it himself just by watching her over and over again.

Katniss expected him to withdraw his fingers. Instead they continued their deep ministrations inside her. She felt electricity bolt through her limbs. Every hair on her body stood on end as the mix of pleasure and pain coursed through her veins. She couldn't breathe but she couldn’t stop. Her sensitive body fought his touch while desiring it more. Her fingertips left crescent moon imprints in his thighs, digging deep into his flesh.

The world paused. There was no sound, no feel, no sight. She was only aware of her breathing and the tingle that ravaged her body. She needed him. In ways she had never needed anyone. She needed him to fill the cracks in her heart. To give her life. To surround her with his golden light. She needed him in ways she couldn't explain.

“Peeta,” she gasped. “I-” She craned her head to meet his eyes. She felt drunk and high and sober at the same time. She couldn't control her traitorous brain from flooding with hormones that made her want to say things she'd regret. Reaching to his neck, she pulled him in for a kiss, turning her body to straddle him in the now lukewarm tub. She ground herself against his erection.

“Katniss,” he answered. She wrapped her legs around him and he held onto her as he tried as gracefully as possible, to stand. He carried her out of the tub and wrapped a fluffy green towel around them both. He blew out the candles on the counter and swiped them into the sink. Hoisting
her up onto the counter, she kept her arms locked around his neck and pulled him in. Their lips met in a heated, needy kiss. Her fingers played with the damp curls at his neck, which had gotten progressively longer – not that she was complaining.

Peeta ran his hands down to her hips and pulled her to the edge of the counter. “This should be more romantic.”

She let out a breathy laugh. “You drew me a bath. Complete with candles and bubbles and petals that are probably still in my hair. I just want to feel you. I want you, Peeta.” She kissed him again and smiled against his lips when she heard the drawer open and plastic condom wrapper open. He pressed the tip against her opening and pushed in all the way. He waited for her to adjust and pulled all the way out before slamming back into her. She let her head fall back against the mirror and cried loudly with each thrust. Peeta held tightly onto her hips to keep her in place as he filled her over and over. He paused to pull her legs over his forearms, changing the angle of penetration. She raised her ass slightly off the counter to match his rhythm. Her body clenched around him. Sparks flew behind her closed eyes.


He grunted in response, his brain unable to make any coherent words when he was buried so deep inside her. He leaned forward and planted wet, sloppy kisses on any inch of skin he could reach. His stomach turned tighter and tighter. “Katniss, I’m-”

“Do it. Come for me, baby. Please,” she begged. She pulled on his hair, her fingernails raking against his scalp. His pace became erratic and he let his head fall against her skin. His teeth latched onto the flesh of one breast and Katniss felt him pulse inside her. She continued to massage his head until he slipped out of her.

“That was...” he looked up at her, his eyes glassy and dopy. “I'm sorry, Katniss. I tried to...”

“Shh,” she shook her head with a smile. “You've got all afternoon to make it up to me.”

He laughed and rested his head against her chest again. His fingers traced the imprint of her soft skin. “Sorry about this. I guess I got a little heated. It was just...fuck that felt so good. It was different. Right? Something was different.”

Katniss nodded but stayed silent. Something was different. She was in too deep with him and would never be able to turn back. What began as an infatuation developed so quickly into whatever they were now. There was no label. There was never a specific label for them. Neither of them ever brought up that conversation; it was an unsaid agreement between them. At least, as far as Katniss knew. With the time they spent together, both physically and over the phone, she assumed he was being just as faithful to her.

She couldn't imagine being with anyone else now that she had Peeta. And it scared the hell out of her.

Katniss twitched violently and woke up with a gasp. Her head was resting half on fabric and half on an arm. There was another hand resting lightly between her legs. She felt a constant warm breath against her neck and heard a quiet noise from the television. She glanced at the tv, her vision blurry from not having her glasses on. Her brain finally caught up and made out her surroundings. She was in the living room. On the couch. With Peeta. She stretched against him and felt his fingers twitch against her. It was only in the moment when his fingertips brushed against her center that she realized they never did get dressed after the bath that morning.
"Katniss?" he whispered into her ear. "You awake?"

She moaned at the almost touch of him. "Yeah," she answered. She could have sworn she heard him chuckle before he slipped his fingers inside her. She arched her back, rubbing her ass against his groin. Part of her wasn't surprised that he was already hard, their sex life had increased ten-fold in the last couple of weeks. At the same time, she was always surprised at just how ready he always seemed to be.

"You're so fucking sexy," he grunted into her ear, biting the lobe gently. "So ready for me, aren't you? You want me again?"

Katniss bit her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. The surge was always stronger when he was so in control like this. It reminded her of the first time they were really alone together, when it was forbidden and wrong for them to do anything and it was all they wanted to do.

He stilled his fingers. "I asked you a question, Miss Everdeen." She let out a whimpered yes, but it wasn't enough. "Say it. I want to hear you say it."

"I want you," she choked out. "I want your cock."

It didn't matter that they had been together only a few hours ago, she was amazed at how much she wanted him. She wanted him all the time; he made her feel good, feel wanted, feel safe. Feel loved. No, Katniss, she chastised. Don't bring that up. That's not what this is. He doesn't want the love thing. Don't ruin what you have because of rushing hormones.

She inhaled sharply when he replaced his fingers with his dick. He rocked into her slowly, keeping her body as flush against his as possible. "Goddamnit, Katniss," he groaned, lifting her leg to push deeper into her. "You feel so good."

Katniss moaned in response. This was entirely different than anything she had felt, far more intimate despite not actually facing each other. She felt every shift and movement of his body. She was better able to tell when he was getting close to finishing and before he could even warn her, she slipped her hips up and spun him onto his back, crawling down his chest to take him in her mouth. She was taken aback when he stopped her and swung her around so her feet were by his head.

Plunging his tongue inside her, she almost forgot what was happening. Her nerves were on high alert from their position and she knew it wouldn't take long before he sent her completely over. He repositioned his hands so they held onto her hips. A slight tug down and she snapped into reality, taking his cock in her mouth. He moaned into her pussy, sending the vibrations through her body and she hummed pleasantly around him. She couldn't help but dip her hips down into his mouth in rhythm with her own sucking, frantically needing them both to come together. She was tight with tension, a bubble that had grown just too large and needed the slightest bump to burst.

"Katniss-" he moaned into her. His dick throbbed and filled her mouth as he came. His release rippled through them both and pushed her over.

Swinging back around to face him, she felt herself blush furiously.

"What's wrong?" Peeta asked, a rosy hue overtaking his own face. His pupils were still thick and black from his arousal.

"I, uh," she worried her bottom lip. "I've never...you know...done...that...before."

Peeta leaned up and kissed her, their tastes mixing on her tongue. "And?"
She shrugged. "I...I don't know. It was nice?"

Peeta laughed and pulled her down to rest on his chest. "Nice is better than nothing. But we don't have to do it again. I just felt guilty about not taking care of you earlier so I wasn't going to let it happen again."

"Oh. Well in that case...thank you." She smiled, kissing his chest.

"No need to thank me." She could feel the vibrations of his voice through his chest. "I love the way you taste."

Katniss clenched her thighs together. Damn him for being able to turn her on right after getting her off. She relaxed against him as his fingers began to work through her hair. "So, Dr. Mellark, what's on the agenda for today? Other than impromptu sex sessions on your couch?"

"Well, I need to go get some more food for the baby."

"Where is Buttercup?" Katniss asked, realizing for the first time that the mongrel wasn't climbing all over Peeta like it usually did.

"He's in my room. I closed him in there during the bath and when I went to check on him, he was sleeping, so I just...left him in there," Peeta answered. "I'm sure he's up now and is very upset at me for not giving him my fullest attention."

"You are a terrible owner," Katniss agreed with a smile. "Okay. Food for the cat. What else?"

Peeta was quiet for a moment. "Well, uh, I...I made an appointment-"

Katniss sat up quickly. "An appointment for what?" she snapped, defensively.

His eyes widened. "Calm down, there firecracker. I made an appointment at a tattoo parlor."

"For who?" Katniss felt her skin crawl. She hated needles, didn't want them anywhere near her for medical reasons, let alone vanity reasons. And she sure as hell didn't want a tattoo, or anything permanent, on her body. It was pretty presumptuous of him to just make her an appointment without even talking to her about it. She reached behind her and wrapped the discarded blanket around her naked body.

Peeta reached for her wrists. "For me, Katniss. I wanted to get another one. And I...I thought maybe you'd like to come with me."

Katniss cocked an eyebrow at him. "Why?"

"I wanted you to be with me when I did it, I guess. But you don't have to if you don't want to." He broke his gaze with her and she immediately reached down to cup his face. "It would mean a lot if you were there."

She rolled her eyes. "You idiot. I'll go with you. On one condition."

"What's that?"

She reached down and outlined the ink on his chest. "Tell me this story."

"It's a talisman," Peeta explained. "Or, it's based off a talisman that's popular in Norweigan culture. I can remember my morfar, or...uh, grandfather, had one when I was little. I only met him once but I was so enthralled by it. And my mother gave me her last name instead of my father's, so I wanted
something to celebrate my heritage."

"What does it mean?" She asked.

He wrapped his hand around hers. "According to my morfar, the moons symbolize new beginning and the making of dreams into reality. He got it from his father who brought it over with him."

"Deep," Katniss murmured.

Peeta snorted. "My mother certainly didn't think so."

Katniss furrowed her brow. "How did she ever see it? Or did you walk around half naked all the time?"

He laughed. "It was pure happenstance. I think she caught the edge of it from the neck of a shirt or something? I don't really remember how. But, yeah, she lost it. Threatened to kick me out of the house."

"Are you serious? You were 18, an adult!" Katniss gasped. She knew Peeta's mother was cold but it was hard to imagine she'd be so cruel.

Peeta shrugged. "She was still really upset about Ron. And was drinking a lot more. It wasn't too surprising. Though her throwing a rolling pin at me wasn't a lot of fun."

"What? Peeta! That is not okay! How..."

Peeta shook his head. "Don't...don't be mad at her, Katniss. She was going through so much and...I...I think that's really when it started hitting that her memory losses weren't normal. Can you imagine what it would feel like to know your entire life was slipping away from you? Your being? I mean, that was what she always prided herself on and now she couldn't even remember the simplest things. How was she supposed to do her work?"

Katniss frowned. "It's still not okay, Peeta. That kind of violence..."

"I know," he agreed. "But she was scared. And backed in a corner. So she lashed out."

"Like an animal..." Katniss said quietly. "Like a trapped animal."

"Basically."

Katniss let out a loud breath. "For the record, it's not right what she did to you. How she treated you. It's not fair."

Peeta chuckled. "I'm aware, Katniss. Believe me, I spent the better part of twenty years being angry at what my life was like, wondering if I should have left and tried to find my dad. Or anything other than living with that...that woman."

Katniss watched in silence. He had never really talked about his mother, other than a few snippets here or there about how cold and disinterested she was. Even then, he never really said anything disparaging about her. Not like this. He was so angry, his fists were clenched and his eyes narrowed.

"Why didn't you?" she asked quietly. "When you went off to college, why did you keep coming back?"

Peeta sniffed and wiped his eyes. "She's my mom. She's all I had and I was all she had. I knew..." he swallowed. "I knew that someday she'd forget about me, you know? That I would just be another
person to her. But I wasn't ready to let go. She was a bitch and looking back, it WAS an unhealthy environment for me. But I loved her." He sniffed again. "And over the years, I had gotten too used to being left. I couldn't..."

Katniss nodded. "You couldn't leave her like that. I get that." She glanced down at her hands. She had never felt guilty about deserting her mother. She defended it by telling herself that her mother was too spaced on out on the painkiller of the month to even notice if she was there or not. The truth was, Katniss didn't know if she'd ever be able to look her mother in the eye. Prim's death weighed heavy on Katniss' conscious and anytime her mother looked at her, she could feel the disappointment radiating from the woman's eyes. Already unstable after the death of her husband, Katniss' mother fell completely off the wagon after Prim was lowered into the ground.

Slowly, she disappeared from Katniss' life. Now, almost four years later, Katniss was sure she wouldn't even remember what her mother looked like if she didn't resemble Prim as much as she did.

Yet here was Peeta, who was never able to run from his problem like she was. He was forced to deal with it on a constant basis. Forced to look at the woman who made his life miserable. To take care of her. And he was able to forgive her in a way Katniss never could.

Peeta was a good person. The kind of person she could never be.

"Hey. Where'd you go off to?" Peeta asked, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

"I was...just thinking," she said, shaking her head. "Or, um, wondering. What tattoo you're going to get next."

Katniss took long slow breaths as Peeta pulled his shirt off in the tattoo parlor. He gave her hand a squeeze and laid on the chair with his right shoulder blade closest to the artist. She sat on the small folding chair next to him and laced their fingers. "Are you sure you want to do this?" she asked, nervously looking around the room. The walls were covered in pictures of freshly inked tattoos, complete with red and inflamed skin. Everything about this process made Katniss want to vomit and she knew it'd be even worse once it got started. "Because if you want to go home, I'd support that."

Peeta chuckled. "Katniss, it'll be okay. I'm the one who's supposed to be nervous about this, remember? You're here for support."

The artist silently laid the stencil he created on Peeta's shoulder. He pulled it off, revealing an outline of the piece Peeta designed and brought in. Pollux, the artist, was a man of few words, but indicated that because the drawing was already done, the tattoo itself shouldn't take long to do. Katniss watched in fear as Pollux prepared his machine.

"Talk to me, Peeta. I may pass out if you don't," Katniss warned as Pollux turned his machine on and the gentle whir of the needle filled the tiny room.

He shook his head. "Okay. So this tattoo I'm getting."

"Neurotransmitters, right? The structures of them at least."

"Right," Peeta confirmed, wincing as Pollux began his work. "The structures are - ow."

"The structures are for...serotonin, right? And...dopamine and...acetylocholine," she finished, inspecting the drawing on Peeta's shoulder. "Okay. So. Serotonin, um, impacts perceived happiness in the brain. And dopamine is the pleasure circuit. Acetylcholine. Damnit. Acetylcholine is..." She cocked her head to the side and looked directly into Peeta's eyes. She pushed back a strand of hair
from his forehead. "Acetylcholine is associated with memory."

Peeta nodded, squeezing her hand tightly. "My mom's... work on the... fuck that hurts."

"Don't move," Pollux instructed.

Peeta rolled his eyes and Katniss stifled a giggle.

"My mother studied the role of neurotransmitters on - ah - on addiction." Peeta said, his face twisted in pain. "And as you know, those neurotransmitters are the biggies in psychology."

"You're blending the worlds," Katniss finished. "Aren't you a suck up." She leaned down and kissed him, softly caressing his face. "I think it's very sweet."

Pollux was right, Peeta's tattoo took less than an hour to complete. And before Katniss knew it, he was wiping the fresh ink down with some sort of liquid. He handed Peeta a small hand mirror so Peeta could see the finished work.

“So?” Katniss asked. “What do you think?”

“I...I love it.”


Pollux snapped a picture of the finished work and covered it in a plastic film-wrap, then handed Katniss a sheet of paper with after care instructions. They seemed pretty self-explanatory – don't scrub the tattoo, moisturize with lotion, loose clothing, don't pick at it, keep it clean. She even took the keys from Peeta to drive him home, so he didn't have to move his shoulder too far. She had a hard time keeping her eyes completely focused on the road in front of her. Though she still had a fear of needles and would never be able to sit through a session like that, she had to admire what he did. The design turned out perfectly, an amazing blend of his mother's past and his own future.

This man was just unbelievable, as far as she was concerned. How he ever managed to turn out half as decent as he did, she still couldn't understand. How he ever put up with her and her issues boggled her mind. She would never really be good enough for this man, he deserved someone who could forgive like he could. She didn't deserve him. But she couldn't shake the feelings she had for him. She couldn't stop herself from falling harder and harder for him. And the deeper she fell, the worse she felt about it all. The more hopeless the situation felt. And the harder it was to push it aside and focus on the now.

11:30pm. Katniss. /Picture attached. Your cat is trying to kill me./

11:35pm. Peeta. /Look at that leg. Sexy./

11:37pm. Katniss. /Shut up Peeta. Seriously. Look at it. Fucker./

11:40pm. Peeta. /Well what did you do to him?/

11:43pm. Katniss. /…/

11:47pm. Katniss. /I tried to stop him from running out the door./

11:50pm. Peeta. /Ah. yeah. He apparently really wants to go outside./
11:54pm. Peeta. /Sorry. :/ Is your leg okay?/

11:56pm. Katniss. /It's fine/

12:02am. Katniss. /How's the conference?/

12:05am. Peeta. /Been good so far. My talk is tomorrow. Then I'll be able to relax./

12:10am. Katniss. /You'll be fine. You're a great speaker./

12:12am. Peeta. /Thanks. Still. These are experts, you know?/

12:14am. Katniss. /You're an expert. :)/

12:20am. Peeta. /How have you been?/

12:23am. Katniss. /Lonely. I miss you. It's only been a few days but still.../

12:25am. Peeta. /I know. I miss you too. Are you at home?/

12:28am. Katniss. /Yours still. Is that okay?/

12:32am. Peeta. /More than. That means my bed will smell like you when I get home./

12:35am. Peeta. /I can't wait to be in bed with you./

12:35am. Peeta. /Naked./

12:35am. Peeta. /Licking every single part of you./

12:36am. Peeta. /I love the way you taste. I wish I had my head between your legs right now./

12:38am. Katniss. /What are you doing to me.../

12:39am. Peeta. /Telling you I want to lick your clit while I finger you. That's what. My dick is hard just thinking about it./

12:40am. Peeta. /I can't stop thinking about your pussy./

12:45am. Katniss. /What about it?/

12:47am. Peeta. /How much I want to feel it wrapped around my cock./

12:49am. Katniss. /I want it so bad./

12:58am. Katniss. /Thinking about it makes me so wet./

1:01am. Peeta. /Dirty. Where did this come from?/

1:02am. Katniss. /I told you...I miss you./

1:03am. Peeta. /Good girl. /

1:05am. Peeta. /Are you touching yourself when you think about it?/

1:07am. Katniss. /Yes/
Katniss couldn't help but feel giddy as she walked up the stairs to her apartment. It was Friday and Peeta was finally coming home from his research conference in Colorado. They had texted each other every night, always culminating in Katniss touching herself to relieve the ache between her legs. Even electronically, Peeta's words were able to send chills down her spine. She had been counting down the days until he returned, like some prepubescent schoolgirl with a crush. She smiled, maybe she was. She never really did the “crush” thing in school, other than with Gloss, and even that wasn't so much a crush as a whirlwind. It made her heart ache when she realized the truth, but figured it was worth it if it meant crushing so hard on Peeta.

“Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy,” she sang quietly to herself, unlocking the door. She hummed the rest of the song, completely in her own world until a snort from Madge made her jump three feet in the air. Embarrassment ripped through her body and she cringed at Madge's amused smile.

“Someone's happy.”

Katniss stuck her tongue out at her roommate. “So what if I am?”

“I like you when you're happy. I like you when you're happy and here...” Madge countered with a
pointed look. “Since you've basically been MIA for months.”

“It hasn't been months!”

Another pointed look.

“Okay. It's been like..five weeks. I'm sorry, Madge. Peeta's been going through stuff and I felt bad just leaving him.” Katniss shrugged. “I've been a bad friend.”

“The absolute worst,” Madge agreed with a wink. “But you're here now so you can start getting ready for the party.”

Katniss' face dropped. She had completely forgotten about the party. Truthfully, she hadn't forgotten the party, she just didn't realize it was tonight. A few weeks ago, Madge got accepted into Beta Gamma Sigma, the honor society for business students. It was a big deal for her, the school only offered admission to the top 5% in the department during their senior year and was known for its influential members around the country. Admission into the society meant an almost automatic connection to most CEO's at almost any company throughout the country. It was a surefire way to get a head start after graduating.

And every year, the alumni host a party for the incoming students. Which inevitably turns into the biggest unofficially university-sponsored party of the year. When Madge invited Katniss, she was hesitant initially, but ended up giving in since she had been neglecting their friendship for so long. She had no idea that Peeta would have been gone the week before. Or how much she'd miss him. Or that she had every intention of keeping him in his bed the entire night.

“The party...”

Madge sucked her cheeks in. “You forgot.”

“No, I didn’t forget, it's just that Peeta-”

“Right.” Madge rolled her eyes. “What was I thinking? Of course you'd rather go be with Peeta right now. Forget I brought it up. No big deal. Tell Peeta I say hi.” She spun on her foot and stormed into her bedroom.

“Madge!” Katniss called, just as Madge slammed her bedroom door shut. “Madge!” Her shoulders slumped. “Come on, Madge, you know I'll go. I'll just call Peeta and have him come with us and-”

The door flew open and Madge stood in the frame as angry as Katniss had ever seen. “Seriously? Katniss, don't you get it? This is a big fucking deal for me and you still can't figure out how to be there for me. I haven't said a goddamn word about how much time you spend with him. Or about all the times I don't know where you are because you don't call, or text, or anything. Fuck, Katniss, I don't even care that you are buddy-buddy with Gale's new girlfriend who, if you remember, you hated for a long time. I kept my fucking mouth shut because we're friends. But this is one thing. The biggest thing that's ever happened to me and you can't even be there for me. You're choosing some guy who won't even actually commit to you over your so-called best friend. I don't know who the fuck you are, but you're not the Katniss I know.” She slammed the door shut once again, leaving a shell-shocked Katniss in the hall.

Katniss stared at the closed door, Madge's words ringing through her head. Who the hell was Madge to decide how Katniss should spend her time? Or who to spend it with? She knew damn well that Katniss hated big parties, yet she insisted on dragging her to them anyway. So what if she'd rather spend time with Peeta than anyone else? Madge had been just as bad when she was with and not-
with Gale. *Fuck her.* Katniss rolled her eyes and stormed into her room, packing a small overnight bag, slamming everything she could to make as much noise as possible. She flipped off Madge's door as she stormed past and out the apartment. Peeta wasn't due home for a few hours, but she couldn't spend another minute with Madge right now.

*And I could close the curtains but this is too much fun*

*I get off on you getting off on me*

*I give you what you want but nothing is for free*

*There's a give and take kind of love we make*

*When your line is crossed I get off. I get off*

Katniss heard the muffled ring tone of her cell phone, but Peeta's lips on her throat overrode her senses. It had been too long and she missed him. She didn't care that it had only been a week since he touched her and that a week wasn't that long. All she cared about was them getting lost in one another. This was where she wanted to be and for all she cared, the rest of the world could float away entirely.

*And I could close the curtains but this is too much fun*

*I get off on you getting off on me*

*I give you what you want but nothing is for free*

*There's a give and take kind of love we make*

*When your line is crossed I get off. I get off*

“You can answer that, you know,” he whispered huskily in her ear. The vibration sent chills down her spine, followed immediately by a heat that coursed through her limbs. The voice that just a few nights ago sent her over the edge on the phone was here now and he wanted her to answer her phone. She growled and hooked her leg over his, spinning him onto his back.

“I'm not answering the phone, Dr. Mellark,” she murmured, knowing full well he wouldn't resist her when she called him that. It was a cheap shot but she had been lonely and horny and he promised her a night of fucking. She wasn't going to let him off that easily.

His hands roamed under her shirt, slipping around her back to release her bra when her phone rang for a third time. He groaned and dropped his hands to his side. “Answer your phone or turn it off, Katniss. Because as sexy as Lzzy Hale is, I want to be with you right now.”

Rolling off of him, she leaned to where her phone was sitting beside the bed. An unknown number appeared on the screen. “382? Peeta, where does the 382 prefix go to?”

He sat up and rested his chin on her shoulder. “It's the hospital. Why would the hospital be calling you?”

“No idea,” she shrugged. “Hello?”

“I need to speak with Katniss Everdeen, please.” The female voice on the other side was sharp and direct.
“This is she. Who is this?”

“Miss Everdeen, my name is Cecilia Watts, I'm a nurse at the trauma center at Capitol Hospital. I'm calling because you are listed as the 'in case of emergency' contact for a Madge Undersee. She arrived about an hour ago after being attacked...”

Whatever else Cecilia Watts, trauma center nurse, was saying, Katniss didn't hear. The room darkened and she vaguely felt the phone slip from her hand onto the bed beside her. She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. Madge was attacked. She was in the hospital.

“Miss Everdeen? Miss Everdeen?”

The nurse's voice was muffled and in what felt like slow motion, Katniss picked the phone back up. “Yes. I'm sorry.”

“I asked if you'd be able to come down. Miss Undersee is unwilling to proceed with the physical examination without you.”

“Yea, yea I can do that. I just need a few minutes.”

She hung up the phone and sat, trying to control her racing thoughts. *Breathe, Katniss, remember to breathe. Inhale and exhale. Inhale and exhale.* She closed her eyes and listened intently to her breathing. It was the oldest trick in the book, the first thing she was taught to do when life began to overwhelm her.

“Katniss?”

“I need...I need to go to the hospital.”
Capitol Hospital was too bright and sterile for Katniss' liking. The harsh fluorescent lights flooded every nook and cranny of the waiting room and stung her tired eyes. She may not have cried on the ride over but her grey orbs burned with every blink. She was still in shock. Denial, even. She remembered bits and pieces of the time between getting the call and now – Peeta's hand on her shoulder, climbing into his car, texting Gale. In the fog that was her brain, she remembered knowing that Gale deserved to know. Regardless of their past relationship, Gale and Madge cared about each other. And if she was being honest with herself, Katniss needed him just as much.

The ER was too loud. There were too many crying babies and hacking coughs. There were too many adults curled up in the hard plastic chairs, waiting for their turn to see a doctor. The air was too thick, threatening to choke Katniss with every breath she took. The exit sign glowed brightly and taunted her. Fresh air and freedom lay right beyond it. She could leave. Gale would show up. He could call Madge's parents. Her mind raced and she judged how long it would take if she sprinted toward the door now – could she get out without anyone even knowing she was there? No one was paying attention to her, it would be that easy.

No. Madge needed her to be strong. Madge was the one who pulled Katniss out of her own spirals more times than she could remember during the beginning of their friendship without question. Madge always had Katniss' best interests at heart, was always trying to get Katniss out of her comfort zone, supporting her no matter what. Katniss couldn't run. She needed to be there and be strong for Madge.

"Can I help you?" The nurse at the front desk didn't even bother looking up from the mountains of paperwork that surrounded her.

"Um," she cleared her throat, "I'm K-Katniss Everdeen."

The nurse held a clipboard up. "Fill this out and bring it back when you're done," she directed in a bored tone.

"Uh, no, I uh, I actually need-"

"Are you having problems breathing?"

"Well, no, but-"

"Are you bleeding?"

"No, but I need to see-"

"If you're able to breath and not bleeding then you will need to fill out the form on the clipboard and
bring it up here when you're done." The nurse finally looked up at the pair. "A nurse will see you as soon as possible, depending on the severity of your illness."

Katniss slammed the clipboard on the desk. "I don't need a nurse, dammit. I got a call about a friend of mine and I need to see her. My name is Katniss Everdeen, I'm looking for Madge Undersee. I'm her...I don't know, I just got a call saying I needed to come down."

"Who called you?"

Katniss glanced back at Peeta for help. She considered herself lucky she remembered whatever details she did. He leaned down and whispered the name of the nurse. "Cecilia Watts."

The nurse picked up the phone and quickly dialed a number. "Cecilia? I have a young lady here who says you contact her. Yes. Yes. Katniss Everdeen, correct. I'll buzz her though. Thanks, Cee." She hung up the phone and took the clipboard back from Katniss. "Your friend is in room 115. Go through these doors, take your first left, past the row of curtains. 115 is on the right. If you hit the MRI room, you've gone too far." She pressed a button and a short buzz sounded. "No running!"

But Katniss did run down the hall toward Madge's room. She heard a panicked voice that sounded like Madge, which she used as a guide. The words became louder and more pained as she approached.

"No!"

"Madge, the doctors have already explained why this is important. It's a very standard procedure and will benefit you greatly if you decide to press charges against this man."

"No!" Madge sounded like a toddler throwing a fit, her wails carrying on for three or four extra syllables. "Don't wan!"

"Madge?" Katniss whispered, stepping into the room. She couldn't comprehend what she saw laying in the bed. This wasn't her beautiful roommate. Her hair was matted down and caked in dried blood. Her face was so swollen that she was hardly recognizable. Her skin was a mix of purple, red, green, and blue where the bruises were raised. Small round burns scattered her face and neck. The left side of her face had blood trickling down from a large cut over her eyebrow. Her bottom lip was split, and she struggled to swallow. The broken body looked nothing like the woman she knew. Katniss couldn't stop the tears that slipped down her cheeks.

"Ka-nih." Madge's mouth could barely open and she struggled to form the word. She reached out for her friend before crying out in pain.

Katniss ran to her friend's side and sat next to her, cradling her head. "Oh, Madge." Madge rested her head against Katniss' chest and Katniss pressed a gentle kiss in her hair. Madge reached up and wrapped her hand around one of Katniss' arms and both girls cried softly. Katniss' guilt and pain increased with each sob released. She wished she could fix this, that she could fix her best friend who worked so hard to help fix her. "Madge, what happened? Why are you so upset at that nurse?"

Madge pulled away, her eyes wide and wild. She shook her head violently. "Wape kih. No, Ka-nih."

Katniss furrowed her eyebrows. "What?" She glanced at the nurse for clarification.

"She came in unconscious with GHB in her system," the nurse explained, "a date rape drug. Combine that with the bruises on her and we have to assume that sexual assault also occurred. A rape kit is part of the standard protocol followed in this hospital for such cases."
"Madge," Katniss said softly.

"No! I wahnent waped, Ka-nih."

"One of the side effects of GHB is memory loss, especially while under the influence. A kit is a definitive way to know if a rape occurred and the only way we can hope to obtain any potential DNA of the attacker," the nurse said. "Madge, your friend can stay with you, if you're more comfortable. And we won't bring the police officer in until afterward-"

"No!" Madge screamed. "No no no!" She turned to Katniss, her eyes scared and pained. Tears were pouring out of her eyes, slipping into her cuts and causing her to hiss in pain at the contact.

"Shh," Katniss cooed, cradling Madge's head against her chest again. "Shh, Madge. I believe you. Okay, honey?" She looked at the nurse and swallowed the lump in her throat. "No rape kit." The nurse tried to argue but Katniss shook her head. "No. That's her decision and I'm supporting it. No rape kit."

The nurse sighed in frustration, and likely disappointment, but began cleaning up the various cuts on Madge's face. "The police will still take pictures, once she's cleaned up, in case she wants to file anything against the guy who did this. And it looks like we'll need to take her in for an x-ray to look at this collarbone."

Katniss nodded and gave Madge's hand one last squeeze as the bed is rolled out of the room. Peeta finally entered and wrapped his arms around Katniss' shaking body. She clung to his shirt, crying openly into it and whispering "not real" over and over.

"Catnip?"

Peeta released her when she saw Gale standing beside them. "Gale!" She launched herself at him. "I'm glad you're...thank you for coming. Madge is, uh, she's..." Katniss wiped her eyes with the palms of her hands, "she's getting some x-rays but hopefully will be back soon."

"What the hell happened, Catnip?" His eyes flashed and she saw his jaw clench.

Katniss shook her head. "I don't know the full story yet. She was attacked at that party she was at. They said she was unconscious when she came in with GHB in her system."

"Are you kidding me?" Gale hissed. He raised in hands in disgust. "Fucking Christ."

"There's an officer here, apparently," Katniss mumbled, leaning into Peeta's side.

"Probably needs an official statement," Peeta said.

Gale shot him a glare. "No shit, Sherlock. You're just so fucking helpful right now, aren't you, Doctor."

Peeta stepped toward Gale, his eyes narrowed. Katniss held onto the loops on his jeans. "Peeta, don't," she whispered. "Gale, knock it off. Peeta's just trying to help."

"Yeah well he doesn't really know what's going on right now, so he's not being much help. Why couldn't he couldn't be like Jo and just wait in the fucking waiting room?" Gale paced through the room, breathing heavily through his nose.

"Fine," Peeta said, walking toward to the door. Katniss tugged on his hand but he stopped her. "No, Katniss, Gale's right. Madge is in good hands with you two. I'll go wait with Jo." He leaned down
and kissed her.

After Peeta left, Katniss glared at the back of Gale's head, boring a hole into it. "Stop it, Catnip," he barked. "I can feel you looking at me with that face."

"What the hell is your problem, Gale? You brought her here? Really? What part of your idiotic brain thought that would be a good idea?" She snapped.

"Don't do that. You brought golden boy."

Katniss marched over and shoved him against the wall. "Yeah well, Madge actually likes Peeta. The same can't be said for the girl her ex is currently fucking."

"Don't be crass."

"Don't be a dick."

Gale sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "How bad is she?"

Katniss felt her nose twinge and eyes water. She turned from him, knowing if she had to watch his reaction she'd lose it completely. "Not good, Gale. She just...God whatever happened to her, whoever did that, had so much anger. She doesn't even look like herself, she can barely talk. And she has these burns...like someone held a cigarette to her skin."

"Was she...raped?"

"She says she wasn't. But the nurse said that GHB causes memory loss and what if she doesn't remember and she was and it's worse than we thought?" Katniss felt the words, her own fears, rush out of her in one breath. She sucked her cheeks between her teeth. "I was supposed to go to that party with her. If I had been there then maybe-"

"No," Gale interrupted. "You can't think that way, Catnip. Not right now."

She nodded. But it wouldn't stop her. She couldn't stop replaying their fight over and over in her mind, wondering how things might have been different if she had just gone. Peeta would have understood. She kicked herself, letting her feelings for a guy come first. Just like Prim and Gloss.

She was relieved to see Madge being rolled back in, with a blue cloth sling holding her right arm in place. Her eyes land on Gale and Katniss holds her breath. She knows telling him was the right decision, but she's not sure if Madge would think so right away.

"Gale," Madge said quietly.

"Hey, Madge," he answered, crossing the room to her side. "You look like shit, kid." Madge's face twisted into a rough smile and more tears filled her eyes. Gale sat beside her and used his thumb to gently wipe her cheek. "No tears, baby." They entangled the tips of their fingers together and Gale continued to whisper softly to Madge until she had stopped crying completely. She insisted that both Gale and Katniss stay while she gave her report to the police officer, mostly to help interpret since she still struggled to form the words due to the swelling in her face. The nurse came in afterward and inserted an IV into Madge's arm.

"Madge, now that you've given your statement, we can hook you up to this morphine drip. The GHB is going to wear off soon and you'll really start to feel your injuries. It's a patient-controlled painkiller, so whenever you feel like you need more, you push this button, okay?" She pushed the button and handed Madge the controller. Turning to Katniss and Gale, she continued. "This is for her to push only. It's on a timer to prevent her from getting too much in her system too quickly. If that
does happen, she'll get too tired to push the button again." She checked her watch and made a note in the file from the foot of Madge's bed. "Madge, as soon as a room in ICU opens, we'll move you up there for a few days. For now, I'd suggest you try to get some sleep. I'll be back in a little bit to check in on you."

Katniss looked up at Gale, who hadn't taken his eyes off of Madge the whole time and was stroking her hair with his free hand. Madge, for her part, was smiling and leaning her head into his touch. Katniss felt as though she was interrupting an intimate moment and without saying a word, she slipped off the bed and out the door. It became clear to Katniss that Madge's body wasn't the only thing that needed to heal.

She found Peeta and Johanna sitting in a corner of the waiting room. Peeta was nonchalantly flipping through an old magazine while Johanna nervously picked at the edge of her shoes. Katniss hadn't given any thought to how Johanna may be reacting to this. Her boyfriend was here with his ex. Alone. As happy as Katniss was at the possibility of Madge and Gale reuniting, for Madge's sake, she hadn't considered what that meant for Johanna and Gale. She wasn't as close to Johanna but had gotten to know her better over the past ten months or so. She was Peeta's best friend, and she and Gale were happy once. Katniss let out a long breath. No matter what, someone was going to get fucked in this scenario. Wasn't that why she wanted to stay out of it in the first place?

"How's she doing?" Johanna asked quietly.

Peeta put his magazine down and pulled Katniss into his lap. Katniss leaned her body against his and shrugged. "She's stable. More stable, anyway. Broken collarbone, bruised ribs, deep cuts, but no internal bleeding. She still can't really talk but they gave her a morphine drip and they'll move her to ICU as soon as a room opens."

"Do they know what happened?" Peeta asked, handing her his half-drunk coffee.

She took a sip, making a disgusted face at the harsh hospital coffee. "She doesn't remember much. She said she always got her drinks from the bartender, never left them alone or anything like that. She remembered after her second drink she felt really woozy and unsteady but after that it was a blur. She heard a man's voice but she was so out of it that she'd never be able to place it. She came to a few times but quickly faded back out. The last time, she was alone in a bedroom, but she had no idea where she was. She tried to leave but couldn't even hold herself up, so she crawled toward noise. That's the last bit of the night she remembered before waking up here."

"She's lucky someone found her when they did," Johanna said quietly. "Or that something worse didn't happen to her."

"We don't know that something worse didn't happen to her. She refused the rape kit," Peeta answered.

"She said she wasn't raped," Katniss said.

"She said she doesn't remember. She doesn't even know how long she was 'out of it'. Anything could have happened."

"Peeta," Johanna said. "It's her choice to make."

"Well it's the wrong fucking choice."

Katniss turned and faced him. "Are you kidding me right now?"

"Katniss, do you know how many girls are attacked every year and never report it? Why would
anyone pass up that opportunity when it's right there? She's in a hospital for fuck's sake. They'd be able to catch the guy who did it." Peeta looked over to Johanna for any kind of reassurance, but she stared down at her feet. "It's stupid not to. I just don't get it."

"No," Katniss hissed, moving off his lap. "You really don't. What's more, you don't get to decide what the right choice is for Madge. You don't know her. If she says nothing happened, then nothing happened." She turned away from him, the urge to slap him too strong at that moment.

"Where are you going?" He asked.

"Away from you."

"Katniss."

"No." She turned back to him. "No. I can't really handle what you just said and implied about my best friend right now. Maybe you two should just go home. Madge has all the support she needs. I can get Gale to drive me home." She narrowed her eyes at Peeta with more anger than she had ever felt before. She didn't bother waiting for him to respond before turning on her heels and storming away from him.

Madge was released from the hospital three days later. Katniss was glad to have her home since it meant she had healed well enough not to be in danger of bleeding out. But it also meant she didn't have to experience the flashbacks of Prim every time she walked into Madge's room and saw the tiny blonde hooked up to beeping machines. Gale stayed as long as he could and was pained whenever he had to leave for work.

Peeta tried sending Katniss a few text messages, but she was still too angry at him and refused to respond. Eventually he gave up trying. She had no idea what had happened with Gale and Johanna but he anytime she saw him, he was with Madge, so she kept her mouth shut and didn't ask.

The first night Madge spent at home, she cried out constantly. Instinctively, Katniss began sleeping in Madge's room, the girls winding their limbs around each other protectively. This was her opportunity to protect Madge like she never could Prim. It was finally her chance to learn from her mistakes before it was too late and she lost Madge forever.

"Katniss," Madge whispered one night, "why did this happen?"

The question caught Katniss completely off guard. For well over a week, neither girl talked about the attack. They didn't even talk about Madge's injuries except when they joked about Katniss having to help Madge wash her hair in the sink and how Gale probably wished he could help her wash everything else.

"I don't know," Katniss answered truthfully. "It never should have. But sometimes things happen and they don't make sense or seem fair. And you feel like you'll never understand why they happened the way they did. But maybe, after awhile, you can see the reason."

"I don't know if I'll ever find anything good out of this, Katniss."

Katniss hugged her tightly. "We'll find something. You and me."

"And Gale."

She smiled into Madge's shoulder. "Yeah. And Gale. All of us together." Maybe that was the silver lining of this. As horrible as it was, Katniss had to admit that all three of them had drifted further and
further apart as the year went on. Madge's attack forced them together and forced them to deal with their issues with each other.

"How's Peeta?"

"I don't know," Katniss mumbled. "I haven't talked to him in a while."

"You should," Madge said. "You're happier around him. You deserve to be happier, Katniss."

"He was kind of an ass."

"Yeah, well you're kind of a bitch sometimes." She started to giggle at what she said. "I'm sorry. Katniss, you're not a bitch. But...but you're so hard. You're softer with him. You balance each other." Madge turned over and cupped Katniss' face with her hands. "You've spent so much time trying to protect people – me, Gale, Prim, yourself – that you never let yourself be vulnerable. There's nothing wrong with it. Didn't you just tell me that things happen for a reason? Peeta happened for a reason. And maybe he happened to loosen you to the fuck up."

Katniss laughed. "You're delirious, Madge. Go to sleep."

"Fine. But you should still talk to Peeta."

Madge rolled back over and promptly fell asleep. Apparently being a lightweight for alcohol carried over to drugs, too. Once she was sure Madge was asleep, Katniss reached for her cell phone.

12:10 am. Katniss. /I'm sorry./

12:20 am. Peeta. /Me too. I miss you./

12:23 am. Katniss. /I miss you, too/ 

12:25 am. Peeta. /I hate this. Can we talk tomorrow?/

12:26 am. Katniss. /Do I need to make an appointment, Dr. Mellark?/

12:28 am. Peeta. /Don't be a tease, Miss Everdeen./

12:30 am. Katniss. /:) Night Peeta./

Katniss stopped by the sandwich shop just off campus to grab lunch for her and Madge. She hadn't been in a while, since it was right next to the cafe with a particular red-headed barista that still caused a flush to cover Katniss' face, but it was Madge's first day back in classes, only two weeks after being admitted into the hospital and the sandwich shop had Madge's favorite chicken tortilla soup. Katniss had to admit, it helped that the shop was also the only place in town she could get the perfect Reuben sandwich – with hand-made sauerkraut and Russian dressing. It was a challenge not to eat the entire thing before she got home.

"Madge?" She called, pushing open the apartment door. "I got you soup." Katniss set the soup and sandwich on the counter.

"Yum!" Madge said, walking slowly into the kitchen, still holding onto the wall for support. Though she was cleared for normal, daily activities, she was still slightly unsteady and slower on her feet than normal. "I got the mail today."

"Yeah?" Katniss asked, pouring them both glasses of water. "And how much did 'resident' get this
Lately, with the exception of bills, all they seemed to get were nondescript fliers and coupons. The mail was a fickle temptress in mid-April, so anytime they saw anything in the mailbox, they got excited. Madge was waiting to hear back about a job; Katniss from schools.

"Nothing major," Madge answers with a smirk. "Just a letter from a school."

Katniss stops and stares at her roommate, who is now holding a thick envelope. "Gimme." She reaches and grabs for the envelope, which Madge hands over with a grin. Katniss turns it over and runs her fingers over the ink.

"I didn't know you applied here. I thought it was just Boston," Madge said, taking a small sip of her soup.

"Backup," Katniss muttered. "Just in case." She ripped open the envelope and pulled the stack of papers out. Her eyes skimmed over the words, her lips read them silently. Once. Twice. Three times.

Hello, Katniss,

Congratulations on your conditional admission to the MS Biology program...

"I got in," Katniss said. "I got in."

Madge stood up and slowly made her way over to where Katniss sat, still shocked from the news. "Katniss!" She hugged the other girl as tightly as she could. "That's fantastic! Congratulations! I mean, here you were worried about getting in anywhere and now that's two!"

Katniss nodded, her mind racing. She had heard, unofficially, from one of the professors in Boston that 'while they hadn't made any official offers yet, she was at the very top of their list and should expect to hear something good soon.' She only told Madge because when she read the email, she shrieked so loudly, it sounded like she hurt herself. Top of the list or not, Katniss was one who wanted to wait until things were certain to start getting excited.

"You have to tell Peeta. We have to have a celebration or something. We can go out for dinner or something this weekend!" Madge chirped. "Wait."

Katniss looked up. "What?"

Madge's eyebrows furrowed. "Which one are you going to pick?"

She sighed. As far as Katniss was concerned, the best part of not having heard from either school was not having to make that decision. She was prepared to not go anywhere, or to not have a choice. Now that she did, she wasn't even sure what she was supposed to do. Boston was better. But staying here meant getting to work with Beetee. And, well, Peeta.

They were sitting together on the couch, Peeta watching some show on Cubs' Spring Training and playing with Buttercup. A preview for a new movie came on that caught Katniss' attention. "We should go see that."

Peeta looked over at her in confusion. "Who should go see what?"

"That movie," she nodded toward the tv. "You and I should go see that movie. I've heard it's good."

Peeta just shrugged and turned his attention back to Buttercup. "I guess."

"What?"
"Nothing."

Katniss snapped her head toward him. "What? Come on, Peeta, it's a movie. It's not like I'm asking
you to wear an 'I heart Katniss' shirt. We could even go separately."

He picked up Buttercup, who gave his hand a disapproving nip. "I don't want us to go separately."

"Then we can go together."

He glared at her. "No, Katniss, we can't. I thought we talked about this – why we can't go do the
normal stuff."

She huffed. "Yeah. I got it."

"No," he said, setting the cat down and holding both of her hands, "you don't get it, Katniss. Believe
me, I want to take you out. I want to wine and dine you and show you off. I want that for you as
much as I want it for me. Because you deserve that. But with...our situation...we can't."

"I'm not your student anymore," she whispered. "I thought it was okay."

"Technically. But you're still an undergrad here. And I'm a professor. We may not be breaking any
rules but it wouldn't look good. For either of us." He cupped her face with one of his hands,
brushing her cheek with his thumb. "We both have too much to lose."

"What if I wasn't an undergrad? Like, after I graduate. Or if I were a grad student."

Peeta smiled and softly kissed her. "Katniss, the only thing standing in our way is you being an
undergrad." He pulled her against his side, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and resting his
head on hers. "Since we can't go out, what movie do you want to watch in?"

"Katniss?" Madge's voice snapped Katniss out of her memory. "Which one do you think you'll
chose?"

11:30pm. Katniss. /I have some news./
11:30pm. Katniss. /About next year./
11:32pm. Peeta. /Yeah?/
11:35pm. Katniss. /I got in.../
11:37pm. Peeta. /I KNEW you would! Congratulations!/ 
11:00pm. Katniss. /...to two schools. /
11:02pm. Peeta. /Two?! That's fantastic! Which two?/ 
11:07pm. Katniss. /Boston. And. Um. Here./ 
11:10pm. Peeta. /Katniss. That's great. I'm so proud of you! Where do you think you'll go?/ 
11:12pm. Katniss. /Dunno. Boston would be amazing but here I could keep working with Beetee.
And get to stay.../ 
11:20pm. Peeta. /You need to go where is best for YOU./
Katniss hitched her backpack higher on her shoulders and knocked on Peeta's apartment door. Since their little spat, they had been trying to get back to normal, which included quiet nights of homework and grading. As much as she loved spending time with Peeta, she found herself growing more and more confused around him since their text conversation. He couldn't have been more vague about what he wanted. All she was looking for was something to indicate he even wanted her to stay. Instead, they dropped the subject altogether. Madge, for her part, was trying to be sensitive about it, but reminded Katniss of the same thing Peeta did – that grad school was about Katniss and she'd have plenty of time for relationships afterward.

"Come on in," Peeta called from the other side. She found him hunched over the kitchen table, piles of papers surrounding him. He looked up and gave her a tired smile. "Hey."

"Hi," she answered, slipping her shoes off. "Busy night?"

"Only for the idiot professor who assigns a term paper this close to the end of the semester."

Katniss pushed the front door shut and walked over to him, leaving her backpack by her shoes. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed his crown of curls that he had obviously been repeatedly running his hand through. "Can I help?"

"Don't you have work of your own to do?" He asked in a joking voice. "It's fine. It's just...God you kids can't write."

"Us kids?"

"You know what I mean, undergrads in general. I swear they get worse and worse at basic skills every year. Not you though. You were an excellent writer, if I remember correctly." He winked at her, which just made her snort in return.

She retrieved her bag and brought it to the opposite side of the table, pulling out three spiraled notebooks and her Plant Taxonomy textbook. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. You don't need to butter me up, Dr. Mellark. I've already completed your teaching evaluation." She pulled out her familiar bag of Goldfish crackers and tossed a second bag at him. For someone who made fun of her study snack, he sure had gotten comfortable swiping half the bag for himself. She wrinkled her nose when he opened a beer to wash the cheese crackers down, but at least she had enough to get her through the evening.

"Finished," Peeta announced with a heavy sigh, setting the last of the term papers in the pile on his left, "finally. With this class anyway. How's your work going?"

Katniss rolled her eyes. "Oh fine. Our final in this class is cumulative which is a pain in the ass but we divided up the chapters and are supposed to put together like a study guide for them that we'll exchange."

"We did that in grad school a lot. It really helped."

"It would be if I trusted anyone else in the class to provide a good enough study guide for me. Oh, God. That's really conceited, isn't it?" She winced. "It's just...I study differently and I just would prefer to do it myself."

"So you're writing out a study guide for each chapter?"

"All eighteen, yeah. I'm on...chapter 3 now I think? But I mean, we still have a while before the final
so...What?" She saw Peeta standing in the kitchen with a concerned look on his face.

He looked down at the empty food bowl on the floor. "Where's Buttercup?"

"I don't know?"

"It's almost eleven, and I always feed him at eleven. Usually he's winding his way between my legs or nipping my toes when it's that time." Peeta said. He gave a short series of whistles and shook a bag of treats to get the cat's attention in case it was just hiding under the bed or something. When Buttercup didn't come flying into the room, Peeta left in search of him.

Katniss put her pencil down and joined in, checking behind the couch or in the impossibly small spaces around his apartment. "Stupid cat," she whispered to herself.

"I can't find him." Peeta's eyes were worried and he was wringing his hands together. "Do you think he could have gotten out? Oh, God, what if he got out?" He hurried over to where his shoes were and slipped them on without untying them. "I have to go find him."

"Go find him? Peeta, it's dark out, how do you know you'll even find him?"

"I don't know," he answered, rushing back into the kitchen to grab Buttercup's treats. "But I have to try. What if he's hurt or something?" He looked back at Katniss. "Are you coming to help?"

She sighed and looked longingly at her textbook. She really wanted to study and not go look for the damn cat that was probably just sitting in the hallway. "Fine." Once outside, Peeta went left and Katniss right, checking the bushes that grew along the side of the building. "Here, kitty kitty kitty. Come here, Buttercup, you stupid cat." She listened for any type of movement that would indicate he was close but couldn't hear anything except the light spring breeze. "Fuck my life," she hissed, pulling her emergency pack of cigarettes from her jacket pocket and lighting up. She took a long drag and exhaled with a content sigh as the nicotine spread through her system.

"You're smoking again?"

Katniss almost dropped her cigarette at Peeta's accusation. "I, uh...oh! You found him!"

There, in Peeta's arm, was Buttercup, curled up as close to his owner as possible, mewing pathetically. "Yeah, he was in the bushes just around the corner, chasing a leaf." His eyes didn't leave Katniss' fingers.

"Good. I'm glad." She smiled.

"I'm going back in. You can come in when you're...uh...finished." Peeta said, his voice colder than normal, leaving her standing outside on her own.

His tone stung and a sense of guilt rose up in her. She stared down at the lit cigarette, the smoke curling up from the end. The guilt was quickly replaced by anger. Who was he to judge her for smoking? Didn't he say early on that he didn't care? And it wasn't like she was smoking inside. Or forcing him to smoke. And hell, she knew he smoked pot occasionally so what was the difference? She sat on the pavement and took her time, dragging out her smoke as long as possible. It'll give him more time to bond with that dumb cat, she thought bitterly. When she finished, she contemplated having another, but having never really been a chain smoker she knew another would make her want to vomit. She flicked the end into the street and pushed herself onto her feet, taking one last deep breath of cold air to hang onto the slight buzz she was feeling.

Peeta was back at the kitchen table with a new stack of papers when she crept back in. He didn't
look up at her when she slid her chair out and restarted her study guide but she could feel something radiating off him. He slammed papers down and seemed to be making far more red marks than was probably necessary – he was one of the more lenient graders she had ever had. "I didn't know you were still smoking."

She glanced up but he kept his eyes focused on the paper in front of him. She shrugged. "Sometimes. When I study."

"Huh."

The anger bubbled up again at his condescending tone. "Is that a problem?"

He shook his head. "It's your body, Katniss. You can do what you want with it."

"Where is this coming from all of a sudden?"

He finally looked up at her, his blue eyes hard. "Forget it."

"No!" she snapped. "No, none of this 'forget it,' bullshit. You have a problem with something I'm doing then tell me."

He rolled his eyes. "Katniss, I don't care that you smoke. But the fact that you felt the need to hide it from me like that? Really?"

"Jesus, Peeta, you're acting like I'm shooting heroin or something. It's a fucking cigarette. I wouldn't have even had one if we hadn't been out looking for your stupid cat." She knew she was being ridiculous but right now the frustration and anger she was feeling was clouding her judgment. That damn cat had been trying to get out for weeks now, it was only a matter of time before he did. In her mind, Peeta should have been keeping a better eye on it – it was his pet, after all. Not hers. "And I'd be real careful throwing accusations of hiding things at me. Don't think I haven't seen all the beer you've been drinking lately."

There it was. His weak spot. And she knew, as soon as she said the words, that they'd hit him hard. She regretted it immediately but at the same time, she didn't. Because he had been keeping that from her, too. "Luckily, you won't have to see it for too much longer, huh?" He started cleaning up his workspace, making a big show of dropping the empty beer bottle in the trash can. "Unless you meet another drunk in Boston."

Her stomach fluttered, like it had when she got the call about Madge. "What are you saying?" she asked, praying that her assumption wasn't correct and he wasn't saying what she thought he was.

"I'm saying...go to Boston, Katniss."

There it was. She felt the muscles in her face contract and her tear ducts begin to betray her. That was what she was looking for, wasn't it, for him to give her some sort of indication on what he wanted? And he had. She pressed her lips together and closed her eyes, doing everything she could think of to stay strong. The room was spinning faster and faster around her and she felt like she would get thrown off at any second.

He hated to see her glassy grey eyes, but he knew if he didn't say it then she would stay here. For him. Instead of going out and doing what was best for her. Sure, the biology program here was fine. And Dr. Beetee did amazing work. But she wasn't someone who remained complacent. She'd get bored here, she wouldn't get the education or the experience like she would in Boston, and she'd come to resent him for it. He wanted to tell her to stay. More than anything, he wanted them to be together and be normal. But more than that, he wanted her to be happy. And that could never happen.
if she stayed here. So he told her to leave. He knew she'd listen, he knew she'd go. Whatever she was feeling now would fade once she realized Boston was the place for her. He would be a memory for her – for better or worse – but she'd move on and find someone else who made her happy. Someone who she didn't feel she'd ever have to sacrifice for.

He turned away, unable to watch as her strong exterior began to crumble. He heard the soft gasps she took as she packed all her stuff into her backpack and zipped it up. He didn't turn toward her as she put her shoes on and opened the apartment door. And when her voice cracked out one final "Goodbye," just as she was leaving, he didn't say anything back. It wouldn't be fair of him to say anything, to prolong their pain.

He wished she had fought back, had pushed him, but was glad she didn't. He wasn't nearly as steadfast in that decision as he pretended to be and it wouldn't have taken much for him to tell her to stay. He cracked open another beer and quickly drained it. There was one left from the six pack he bought yesterday. Katniss was right – his drinking had increased recently. And if his current emotional state was any indication, it was bound to get a lot worse before it got better. She was his rock, his strength, and now she was gone.

And it was all his fault.

Katniss was tired. Not the "I shouldn't have stayed up so late last night" tired but the "my body refuses to go on" tired. Everything ached – her chest, her head, her mind, her heart. She skipped the last week of classes, which were all just review sessions anyway, and stayed holed up in her room, reading her textbooks, rewriting her notes, packing, doing everything she could think of that would prevent her from thinking. And remembering. And hurting. And missing him.

As she looked around her room, which no longer felt personal or hers because it was full of cardboard boxes and plastic totes full of her belongings, everything felt heavy and dense. Technically, the lease on her and Madge's apartment wasn't up until the end of June. But she needed to get out of this town as soon as possible. The night Peeta told her to go to Boston, she came straight home and began the process of finding an apartment there. She accepted the school's offer and applied for graduate school housing. It didn't take long for her to be assigned a single-occupancy apartment in the complex designated for graduate and non-traditional students, less than a mile from campus. She could move in as soon as she signed the lease and paid the deposit.

Madge didn't fight her decision to cut out of the lease early. She, herself, had gotten a job offer in a different state and was looking forward to leaving as soon as possible. Their landlord didn't care – he could rent it out to the next group of college students earlier that way. She hadn't started packing just yet, but Katniss knew from experience that once Madge started, it wouldn't take long before all of her belongings were boxed up and labeled as well.

A soft knock on her door proceeded Madge peeking her head in. "Hey, Katniss. Um, Gale wanted to know if we wanted to go to his place tonight for pizza and movies? He said it was just going to be him and Darius otherwise."

Katniss bit her bottom lip and stared back down at her textbook. Realistically, she could go. She was more than prepared for her finals and probably should get out of the apartment. But she didn't want to deal with seeing Gale and Madge together right now. Or having to talk about what was going on in her life. And she didn't want to listen to anyone congratulate her on leaving. Because it just reminded her of what she was leaving behind. And who.

"I think it'd be good for both of us to get out of the apartment."
She looked up and saw the sincerity in Madge's face. The dark cloud that was hovering over Katniss had been present throughout their home. The police still hadn't caught whoever attacked Madge, and to make matters worse, the students interviewed from the party said they didn't think Madge's behavior was odd because they just thought she was drunk like so many others there. No one, it seemed, paid any attention to who she went upstairs with.

"Okay."

"Really?" Madge smiled. "Great, I'll let Gale know. Thanks, Katniss."

"Hey, Madge?" Katniss called as Madge turned to leave. Katniss looked down at the sweatshirt she was holding in her lap. Peeta's Northwestern sweatshirt that she hadn't been able to part with yet. She still wore it constantly, even though his scent was long gone from it and she couldn't stand looking at herself in the mirror when she had it on. As well as she was holding herself together now, she knew the moment she gave that shirt back, she'd completely fall to pieces. That sweatshirt was the only piece of him she still had – it was the hope that even though she was going halfway across the country, that he would still want her. "Do you mind if we make a stop before we go?"

"Open up, Mellark." Johanna barked, kicking at his apartment door. "I brought you dinner since I know you're not cooking."

Peeta opened the door, still in the pants he wore to work that day, his suspenders hanging down his pants leg, his dress shirt unbuttoned. He cocked an eyebrow at Johanna, who was also still dressed in her work attire, with a bag of take-out in one hand and a six pack in the other. He stepped back to let her in and didn't even attempt to hide the reminders of all the "not-cooking" he'd been doing since Katniss left.

"Nice scruff," she said, walking past him into his kitchen. She slid the six pack into the fridge and started pulling boxes of food from the other bag. "I didn't know what you wanted. But I figured anything you don't eat tonight you'll save and eat later." She cocked an eyebrow at the sink full of dirty dishes but kept her lips locked.

He ran his hand over his chin. He hadn't been shaving lately – just another sign of him seemingly falling apart after what happened with Katniss. He hadn't actually given it much thought since he barely looked in the mirror anymore. He was too disgusted with the person looking back at him. Luckily, his hair was fine and light so he didn't look particular homeless yet. Haymitch hadn't mentioned it at his evaluation meeting so Peeta didn't think much of it, but now that Johanna mentioned it, he wondered just how bad he looked. "Why are you here? With...food?"

She glared at him. "Don't ask stupid questions." She shoved a few boxes into his hands and fished two of his beers from the fridge. She all but shoved him into the living room and onto the couch. She didn't say much, instead she started shoveling food into her mouth like she hadn't eaten in days.

He watched her as she expertly used the cheap chopsticks to eat her food. He had been in a bit of funk lately to say the least, and didn't notice how Johanna's clothes were hanging slightly loose on her body. Or the circles under her eyes. The same ones that marred his face. "Johanna?"

She glanced over at him, noodles hanging out of her mouth. She quickly slurped them up. "Yes?"

He didn't really need to ask the next question. He could see past her disguise, her attempt to mask over her true feelings. He knew then why he didn't have to call her to come over on a Friday night, when most people spent theirs with their significant others. How she knew not to ask questions. Why she was still in her work attire even though it was almost 8 p.m. and she should have changed hours.
ago. She was doing the same thing he was – hiding out in her office so she didn't have to go to her empty apartment. To the reminders of what she no longer had either. For someone who boasted their independence, he knew she was just as lonely as he had been. "Never mind."

She shrugged and they ate in relative silence – save for Johanna's eating habits. Peeta appreciated that while she may have been tiptoeing around him, she wasn't acting differently. She was still Johanna and she was waiting for him to come out and say something to her. But she also didn't seem to be in any hurry to push him into talking about anything. So he didn't.

"I brought enough so you could have leftovers," she said, casually picking up the empty boxes after they ate to the point of their stomachs bursting. It was the first time Peeta ate that day, and he hadn't realized just how hungry he was until the first bite touched his lips. "I figured you'd need them."

"Thanks," he answered, opening another bottle of beer. He knew he shouldn't be drinking tonight. He learned long ago that drinking when he was upset only exacerbated his feelings. But he wasn't alone. Johanna was here. So there wasn't anything wrong with what he was doing.

"So." She turned to face him, her legs crossed under her body. "What's with the boho chic look?"

He shrugged and and took another pull of his beer. "I just haven't shaved in a while."

"Or got your hair cut, apparently."

He ran his hand up to his curls. How had he forgotten about getting his hair cut? He probably looked like some sort of wild beast with his long, unruly curls. "Yeah. That slipped my mind too."

Johanna took a deep breath. "Lay it on me."

"I don't want to talk about it," he grumbled.

"You know you'll have to at some point, right? That you can't continue to let yourself go completely if you want to keep your job." When he didn't respond right away she kicked him. "Peeta Mellark. You did not work as hard as you did to let your career go for a fucking girl."

He snorted. "You sound like my mom."

"Well the old bat wasn't a complete idiot." It was enough to get a chuckle out of him. "Look. You'll meet another girl, fall in love with her and be happy."

He shrugged. He didn't want another girl. And he wasn't sure he'd ever really be happy with anyone other than Katniss. "Maybe."

"No maybe's. Look, she'll come to her senses and come crawling back here, begging you to take her back. And I know you will."

Peeta swallowed. Johanna was under the impression that it was Katniss who ended things. Because Johanna knew how Peeta felt about her. That he was so head over fucking heels for the girl that he would never be the one to send her away. That's not what people who are in love do. "Uh, not likely. Since...since I told her to go to Boston instead of staying here for school."

"Please tell me you at least told her why you told her to go to Boston." She waited for him to respond and slammed her beer down, nearly shattering the bottle on the coffee table. "Are you fucking kidding me? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I, uh..."
"No. Are you kidding? You're one of my best friends and even I'm siding with her. You just told her to go? You didn't say it was because it was best for her? You didn't tell her you would wait for her?"

"No. I didn't tell her anything. I couldn't. Johanna, you know better than anyone what it's like to have some asshole tell you that he'll wait for you when you go off to school."

Johanna's face twisted. When she moved to Chicago for school, her boyfriend back home made that exact promise to her. She stressed out for the first few months about not being too "Johanna" so she wouldn't give him any reason not to trust her only to find out he had been sleeping with some other girl who still lived in town. "You wouldn't do anything like that."

"No, but is it fair to her to keep her from living her life? She'd be constantly thinking about life back here instead of actually getting integrated out there. I couldn't ask her to do that."

Johanna thought about it, running her finger over the lip of her beer bottle. "No. But you didn't even give her the opportunity to make that decision on her own, did you?"

Peeta sighed, polishing off his bottle. "Do you want another? Because you know your relationship is next."

"Might as well break out the hard shit, then."

They quickly made their way through the whatever Johanna brought and the bottle of SoCo Peeta found stashed in his pantry and were well past thinking about their past relationships. Johanna confessed to ending things with Gale not long after their trip to the hospital. She claimed to be fine with it – that she didn't love him the way he loved Madge. Peeta didn't question her, even though it was obvious by her shaking voice she was lying. If that was what she needed to say to get through it, then who was he to stop her?

Instead, they sat on the couch and talked about school and advisers and their students. Anything and everything to keep their minds off the ones they let go. Peeta couldn't remember what exactly led to him leaning down to capture Johanna's lips in a kiss. Maybe it was the alcohol. Or his own pain that he didn't know how to deal with. She was there, a warm body underneath him, responding to his lips and his touch, rolling her body up against him, making him feel for the first time since Katniss left.

Her skin didn't taste right. Her body didn't feel the same in his hands. Her moans were foreign to his ears. Yet at that moment, he didn't care. He needed different. Visions of Katniss had been haunting the few hours of sleep he got at night. He kissed his way down her neck, her hands made quick work of sliding his undershirt off, exposing his chest to the cool apartment air. Johanna was so unlike Katniss that he could hardly contain himself. Clothes were ripped off in a frenzy, both of them needing to feel skin on skin. She encouraged him, her hand working his cock to get him hard. His hand slipped into her, sliding past her dark curls and feeling her wet center waiting for him. He groaned at the feel, his head falling into her shoulder. If he closed his eyes, he could pretend this was Katniss. He could hear her voice urging him on, asking him to fuck her. He could remember the way Katniss felt when he was inside her. The way her body rocked and responded to every touch. How she would encourage him by lifting her hips or wrapping her legs around his. How with a single look, he could tell what she wanted – harder, deeper, closer to her. He pulled out and flipped Johanna over, pulling her hips up to him. Her hair color was wrong. And too short. Her skin was too dark. Her hips too wide. She wasn't his Katniss. Even without looking at her face, he knew she wasn't his Katniss.

A surge ripped through his body. Not his Katniss. Because his Katniss left. Without a fight. Without a word. She left him standing in his kitchen that night. That wasn't his Katniss. The Katniss he had
come to know would have snapped back. She would have said something – anything – to tell him he was wrong. To show that she wanted him. He was tired of feeling guilty for pushing her away when she didn't push back.

Damn her.

_God. Damn. Her._

He pushed into Johanna with enough force that the couch shifted slightly underneath him. Their grunts and groans grew louder. He wanted to hear her – he needed to hear anyone other than Katniss. She was more than ready to oblige, likely drowning out her own ghosts. She pushed her hips back against him, matching his rhythm with one of her own. She needed this as much as he did.

Neither heard his door open slightly. Or the quiet gasp at the sight of them. It wouldn't be until Johanna forced him to get his hair cut the next morning that Peeta saw his Northwestern sweatshirt folded up outside his door. He picked it up, holding it up to his nose, breathing in the familiar scent he knew he'd never get again. "Tell me I did the right thing, Jo."

Johanna took the sweatshirt from his hands. "I can't."

"Did you? Was ending things with Gale the right thing?"

"It was for him," she admitted. "But I'm not in love with him."

"Katniss?" Madge asked, as Katniss came walking out of Peeta's apartment building. "Are you okay?"

Katniss nodded, not able to make heads or tails of what she had just witnessed. Was that real? Peeta and Johanna? The noises she heard from the other side of his door should have been enough of a tip off to stay out. What the hell was she thinking, going in without knocking? She should be angry at him for not locking the door. But why would he? Why would he expect her just to show up? Did she really think he would just wait around for her? He was the one who gave up on them when he told her to go to Boston, wasn't he? And here she was – hoping that a fucking sweatshirt would be enough to convince him to want to be with her. To wait for her.

She was an idiot.

"I'm fine," Katniss choked out. "Can we just go?"

Madge pulled out from the complex, driving across town to the small house Gale and Darius lived in. "Hey, look, if this is too much -"

"No," Katniss said with a wave of her hand. "No. I need this. We need this."

Katniss realized she hadn't ever actually been inside the boys' house before. She wasn't sure what she was expecting – a frat style house, maybe, decorated with old band posters and stolen street signs, beer bottles scattered on the floor. Instead it looked like an adult's house. The furniture matched, the walls were sparsely decorated, the floor completely clear of clutter. There were a few signs that boys lived in the house, namely the game systems in a corner by the television, a car calendar with girls in bikinis, but nothing overly crass and disgusting. Darius stuck his head out from the kitchen when Madge knocked and opened the door.

"Hey, ladies." He came out, wiping his hands on his jeans, which Katniss had to admit looked especially good on him today. _Why doesn't he wear those jeans to the bar?_ she wondered, knowing
he'd get even more tips if he showed off the surprisingly nice ass he had. "Have a seat wherever. Gale's just pulling food out so he'll be out in a second." Madge sat on the couch and as much as Katniss wanted to join her, she knew Gale would most likely be preferred in that spot, so she opted for a spot on the floor, with her back leaning against the wall. She didn't protest when Darius sat near her, in fact, there was a piece of her who wanted him to sit closer. Like he used to. When she was single. Because she was single now. Darius wasn't a bad guy. Isn't that what she told herself last summer, when the two had their drunken make-out session? It was still true. But she couldn't ask him to sit closer.

When Gale came out to join them, sure enough, he took the spot next to Madge and the two quickly and easily curled up next to each other. Katniss felt a twinge of jealousy at the intimate moment. She craved it. She had that with Peeta. Stop it, she scolded herself. He's not yours anymore. He's moved on, remember? So can you.

Before they started the movie, the boys grabbed blankets and pillows to make the evening more comfortable. The entire time, Darius kept his respectful distance from Katniss. She watched him in the flickering light of the television. His ginger hair was pulled back in a stubby ponytail, his face had a slight stubble and she wondered how that would feel over her skin. Peeta had been clean shaven for the duration of their...whatever they were.

Gale and Madge were out before the movie was halfway over. Katniss heard the light, harmonic snores coming from the pair first but it wasn't long before Darius became aware of the sleeping duo. He shook his head and chuckled. "Gale's been running himself ragged the last couple of weeks. It's nice to see him relaxed." He reached out to turn off the DVD. "Come on, we can finish in my room so we don't disturb them. If..." he hesitated, "if that's okay with you? Otherwise I can pull out the air mattress in here..."

Katniss worried her bottom lip. Being along with Darius was never a concern before – he had always respected any boundaries she put up with only a few light-hearted jokes. She had slept in his bed a few times, after parties at the house went late and neither she nor Madge wanted to drive home, but he always was passed out on the floor or the couch. Never with her. While she was single. And heartbroken. And vengeful. "Okay."

She had no interest in watching anymore of the movie. Instead, she crawled into his bed and peeled off her shirt and jeans, leaving her clad in just her bra and panties. She didn't know what she was doing other than trying to forget Peeta. And for now, that was enough. So when Darius turned and spied her lying on her back, holding herself on her elbows, he cocked an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

She furrowed her forehead and pursed her lips. "What do you mean? I'm...I'm...I'm getting comfortable," she spat out. That's what she'd say to Peeta if he were here. "Why don't you join me?" Apparently it worked with Darius, too and she felt her jaw physically drop when he pulled his t-shirt off, exposing his solid chest. Katniss had to admit that she had so rarely thought of Darius' physique that seeing his muscular chest caught her off guard and sent chills through her body. Strawberry blonde hair, lighter than that on his head, was trimmed close to the skin and grew darker as it trailed down to the waistband of his jeans. Her mouth was suddenly dry and she had to wonder how he didn't have more notches in his headboard than he did.

He smirked. "Problem, Everdeen?"

She shook her head, licking her lips as she watched him unbutton his jeans and step out of them slowly, leaving him only in his boxers. Without saying a word, he slid next to her and pressed his lips against hers. She hesitated – was she really doing this? Kissing Darius? In his bed? Wearing
practically nothing? She closed her eyes and the vision of Peeta and Johanna on his couch flashed in her brain. That was all it took for her to roll onto her back, pulling him along with her.

His lips didn't feel right. The pressure from his hands didn't feel the same. The sounds he was making felt alien to her but she didn't care. Different was good. Peeta was moving on and she could too. Darius was so unlike Peeta that she could hardly control herself. She wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him closer to her, needing to feel his skin on hers. She didn't recognize his touch when his fingers slipped into her, but if she kept her eyes closed tightly, she could remember how Peeta was able to play her like an instrument, getting her body to hum in anticipation and desire.

"Fuck," she moaned, not trusting herself to say anything more, knowing that it was Peeta's name on the tip of her tongue. He obliged, rolling a condom on and pushing into her. The change should have been enough to jar her from her memories. Darius was longer than Peeta, but all she could think of was the way it felt the first time she felt Peeta inside her. How she felt her body stretch to accommodate his size. And how perfect they fit together – two puzzle pieces meant to lay together. She turned her head to the side to stop the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. Peeta was no longer hers to fantasize about. He made his choice. He moved on. So could she.

She fished a pair of boxers out of Darius' dresser and pulled a sweatshirt over her head when he went to the bathroom to clean up afterward. She had just pulled the first draw from her cigarette when she heard the back screen door open and felt him drape a blanket over her shoulders. "Thanks," she said, offering him a drag.

He held her wrist near his mouth and took a puff, causing her to snort and roll her eyes. "You want to talk about it?"

She snorted again. "Talk about what?"

"Come on, Katniss, I'm not stupid. I know about...Boston."

She nodded, knowing he was referring to more than just her leaving town. But she didn't want to talk about any of it. So instead she took another puff of her cigarette and leaned against his warm body. "I'm sorry, Darius."

He kissed the top of her head and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Don't stress."

"You should be mad at me."

"For what? Sleeping with me because you're trying to get over another guy?"

Katniss felt like one of those cartoon anvils had just been dropped on her chest. She knew, obviously, that's what she was doing with Darius, but to hear it said out loud, by him, made the situation the guilt she was feeling that much harder to fight off. Darius deserved better than her.

When she told him that, he just chuckled. "I knew what I was getting myself into." He tapped the side of his head. "I'm a lot more than just a pretty face. But I care about you and I'd much rather see you make a mistake with me than with some random guy."

"It wasn't a mistake," she protested quietly, not sure if she was convincing him or herself at that moment.

"Whatever you say, Katniss."

"At least...it was a good mistake?"
Darius let out a hearty laugh. "I should get that put on a t-shirt. 'I'm a good mistake.'" They sat in silence for a while, watching as the spring clouds meandered across the night sky, slowly exposing and hiding the stars.

The fogginess crept into Katniss' mind as she sat wrapped up next to Darius. She wished she felt more for him. She wished she could forget Peeta. That would make everything so much easier on her now. She wouldn't be sitting here heartbroken, next to the guy who should be mad at her but somehow was still protecting her. She wracked her brain, trying to figure out just how everything in her life seemed to get so messed up. This was supposed to be her best year, she was just looking to get out a semester early and move on with her life. Ever since meeting Peeta, she felt like she had changed. The entire time she was with him, everyone told her they noticed the change. Gone was the scowling girl who didn't socialize and rarely smiled. But with her grimace went her priorities. She had lost herself in Peeta, had given him parts of her that she now realized she'd never get back.

She loved him.

And look where that got her.

"Katniss Jean Everdeen."

Katniss walked across the stage, collected her fake-diploma, shook hands with all the bigwigs, and that was it. College life was over. She had successfully closed that chapter in her life and really could move on. Graduation was bittersweet for the girls, their apartment was completely packed up and waiting in moving trucks outside the building. Madge heading to Kansas City, Katniss to Boston.

Madge's parents had come into town to see her graduate. Her mother made a fuss about the scar over Madge's eyebrow that hadn't disappeared completely and her father agreed to take the girls, plus Gale and Darius, out for lunch after the ceremony. Madge hated the fuss, but Katniss could tell she was glad to have them around for the day.

Katniss didn't tell her mom about graduation. It would appear in the town paper and if her mother cared enough about her to come, she would. As she returned to her seat with the other natural science majors, she couldn't help but scan the crowd. There were so many blonde women, but none as worn and scrawny as she remembered her mother being. Sometimes she held onto the hope that her mother was in a hospital, finally getting treated for her addiction, but if she was, Katniss never knew. Prim's death shattered whatever connection was left between the women and neither seemed too motivated to repair their broken relationship. Maybe someday, Katniss always thought, in the back of her mind. She was angry at her mom but had to admit that watching Peeta's reunion with his made some of the guilt she had been repressing creep back in.

She couldn't help but search the rows of faculty members who were also at graduation, decked out in their robes and hoods, sitting just across the aisle from the students. She saw Finnick and Annie almost immediately. Finnick somehow had made even the billowy fabric of graduation robes look good and his unnatural mega-watt smile lit up everyone around him. Around them were other biology faculty, professors she recognized from her gen ed classes, ones she remembered seeing scurrying across campus but never actually knew their names.

But no Peeta.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It had been almost three years since Katniss had been back at her college stomping grounds, not that she'd ever be able to tell the difference. Greek Row was still the same row of fraternity and sorority houses with the same obnoxious members outside on the lawns, cat-calling anyone exposing any skin. She still found them irritating though she had to admit – the frat boys in Boston were far worse. She meandered slowly through the nearly emptied campus grounds, passing by the bookstore which was a complete ghost town now that the semester was over and everyone sold their books back. The science building, where she got her first taste of what she loved, the research center where she cultivated her skills and became "an asset to the field" according to her thesis committee. Nothing about this place was different from when she left except herself.

25 years old and Katniss Everdeen felt like herself for the first time in years. It turned out that moving halfway across the country and being forced to dive head first into a highly intensive program – that had a nearly 30% dropout rate in the first year – was exactly what she needed to refocus herself. After graduating, she was offered a coveted year-long research position within the university, and got paid to spend eight months in Oklahoma to continue her research. She was away from everyone she knew and was forced to spend large amounts of time with a small group of fellow researchers, but it was well worth it in her mind since she was finally able to do what she was passionate about on her own terms. If the invite to come back had been sent any sooner, she would have declined it without hesitation. As it was, the card announcing Dr. Beetee's retirement and subsequent party reached her at her highest. Freshly graduated with a few potential jobs under her belt and Katniss felt ready.

The university was sponsoring a party for the retiring professor, ironic given how anti-people Beetee was. 'There's a reason I work with bugs,' he would huff after any prologue social engagement. It was tradition, though, and the biology department had planned a special, more intimate, celebration that night to make him slightly more comfortable.

The science hall smelled the same as when she was last here and Katniss didn't know if that was good or bad. The familiarity and nostalgia washed over her as she slowly walked down the hall. It was as if she was a freshman all over again, one of the few who came to explore campus before classes started so she didn't feel lost. At least, not physically. At the time, she was lost. Her sister had just died, her mother had completely checked out, and she had just broken up with the only boy who ever told her he loved her. It had taken a bit of searching, and some legally-questionable signatures, to get the student loans she needed to finish paying for her first semester of school.

The retirement party was being held in the large foyer of the building, set up with a line of tables showcasing some of Dr. Beetee's achievements at the university. Katniss smirked because on the end of one table was a box of some of his favorite beetle exoskeletons, which were likely to freak out anyone who wasn't completely familiar with Dr. Beetee's work. She signed the guest book and added a short sentence thanking him for providing her with so many opportunities. Short, to the point, not sappy.

She didn't need to see him enter to know he's in the room. Even after three years, just his presence made her body tense and her stomach flutter. She kept her back to him, pretending to still be interested in the "table of accomplishments" the university put together for Dr. Beetee. She's well aware of what he's done in his academic career by now, but maybe it'll detract him from coming up to her. Besides, she thought, surely he's got colleagues here he'd rather talk to.
Another part of her wondered, though, if he would even want to come talk to her. It had been three years. Three years of intentionally missed calls and deleted voice mails. Three years of sexual frustration – which on her part meant at least two vibrators because she ran them completely down. *Fuck*. Being halfway across the country was bad enough because he was the only thing she ever saw when she closed her eyes, but at least he wasn’t there when she opened them. Not like now, where she knew if she turned her head, she’d see that mop of blonde curls, the deep blue eyes that have seen every piece of her former self.

"Ah, Miss Everdeen."

She turned with a smile on her face as the man of the hour walked toward her. She held back the chuckle at his appearance. In all the time she had known him, he always wore the same thing – black dress slacks, a white button down, an argyle sweater, and those thick black frames that made him appear twice as smart as he was. She used to wonder if those were all the clothes he wore or if he was once a wild and crazy grad student; though she had to admit, it was difficult to picture him as anything other than completely studious and slightly odd.

"Dr. Beetee," she answered, turning toward him.

"I'm so glad you could make it. I read your thesis and I have to say...remarkable work, young lady."

Katniss flushed. She knew what she had done was good – her committee wouldn’t have passed her otherwise – but she didn’t even send the document to Beetee to look at. If he was giving her a stamp of approval then that must mean something.

"Tell me, did you get to do the field work you discussed?"

She nodded and proceeded to tell him about the year-long position she had as a research assistant to a professor in Boston that allowed her to travel to Oklahoma to study the symbiotic parenting relationship of the American Burying Beetle. She could remember when she was nervous to talk about science in front of him, but now the words flowed easily.

"Are you planning on pursuing your PhD then?"

"Not right now," she admitted. "I have some interviews with a few national wildlife reserves around the country."

"A noble future indeed. But do not rule out further education. You would make a fine professor someday."

Katniss held back her snort of derision out of respect for Beetee. Her adviser in Boston suggested the same thing but she had no interest in going back to school at the time. While in Oklahoma she got to work with other MS graduates and found she loved being able to apply her work. That and she was ready to start her life. She had been avoiding any real connections since she started college – even her time in grad school was spent more on school work than fortifying relationships with her peers. She wasn’t so afraid now of planting her roots somewhere.

When another professor came to speak to Beetee, Katniss slipped away, away from the eyes she could feel on her from across the foyer. Finding a classroom that was unlocked, she crept in and leaned against the door, letting out a long breath. This was the room she had her very first college course – an honors intro to biology class, Monday morning, at 9 a.m. She wasn’t even an honor’s student at the time but was accidentally stuck in with the other ten students who were crazy enough to take a 9 a.m Monday, Wednesday, Friday biology class. She tried to explain the mistake to the odd professor who was light years ahead of anyone she had ever met in terms of brain power, but he
just gave her a small smirk and told her he thought she'd do just fine. At the time, she had no idea she'd aspire to be like the strange, supportive Dr. Beetee, let alone attend his retirement party.

She walked down toward the front of the class, her fingertips dancing across the rows of desks. If she closed her eyes, she could still hear the unique syncopation of Beetee's voice as he taught them about photosynthesis and genetics. She could remember the way the classroom smelled that first day, like chalk and paper; she remembered the nervousness that settled in her stomach when she realized she was in the wrong class, the pride when Beetee assured her she'd be fine.

"Can't keep you out of a classroom, can we?"

Katniss closed her eyes again, inhaling deeply, her senses flooded with everything Peeta. Her heart fluttered and she found herself caught between wanting him to come closer and keep away. "Seems not."

"How have you been?"

She turned and saw him leaning against the wall, his legs crossed and hands stuffed into the pockets of his dress pants. His hair was significantly shorter than the last time she saw him, his face more wearied and aged. At the sight of her, he offered her a small smile and in that moment, she saw the faintest of spark in his eyes. She had to avert hers, too vulnerable to be swept up into the life they once had. "I've been good. You?"

"Good. I...uh...I've had enough publications to earn a promotion."

"Yeah? That's great, Peeta. I'm sure you deserved it." This felt so wrong, so stilted and uncomfortable. They had never had a conversation that was so impersonal. But she couldn't let herself express the actual pride she felt for him.

"Are you excited about going home, Katniss?"

"I'll be happier when I'm back here," she confessed, picking at the arm of her chair.

"Why is that?"

She didn't answer, only shrugged. Even after three years of working with Cinna, she was ashamed to admit how much Peeta still affected her. She should be over him, over the pain he caused, over the hold he had on her.

"You know that what Peeta did was not the same as what Gloss did. I know it feels the same right now. And I'm not saying he didn't hurt you in a similar way, but from everything you've told me, you know as well as I do that they aren't really comparable."

She nodded. It was the same thing Cinna had reassured her of from the beginning. He couldn't say definitively if Peeta ever really did love her, only that Gloss never did. And while Peeta hurt her, he was not abusive or manipulative in the way that Gloss was. They spent almost two full years helping Katniss really come to terms with what happened with Gloss and Prim. They identified her triggers, created coping mechanisms, taught her to listen to her body for signs of anxiety and stress. And through that all, Cinna always told her "I'm sorry this happened to you."

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"It was the first time anyone ever said that. "Most people tell me I'm lucky."

"I'm not most people," he answered with a sad smile. It was in that moment that Katniss realized she trusted Cinna. With everything. She told him about her father's death. About turning to Gloss because she had no one else to turn to. About feeling guilty over her sister's death and mother's
spiral into self-medication. In return, Cinna helped her finally realize that none of that was her fault, that she was manipulated and used but not at fault.

"Beetee says you did some field work."

She chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip. "Yeah, at a, uh, with some researchers from Central Oklahoma University."

He ran his hand through his hair. "How, how was it?"

"Good. It was good; helped beef up my resume, gave me some on-site experience." She twisted her fingers together in front of her. Her heart was pounding and she felt light-headed and cursed her body for betraying her. Having him so close to her again made all their memories come flying back faster than she anticipated. "What, um, what have you been up to?"

"I quit drinking," he answered quickly. "Uh, I mean, um..."

"That's good," she smiled. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks," he shrugged, "one vice down, I suppose. Where, uh, where do you have your interviews?"

She glanced up at him, her mouth suddenly dry and lips cracked. "Quite a few places. There's one around here, a few on the east coast, and one back in Oklahoma."

He nodded. His brain screaming at him to say something. Anything. But he couldn't. The thought that she may return here made his chest tighten in hopeful anticipation. Maybe he hadn't screwed everything up entirely like he thought. He had tried to contact her after she left, but after enough intentionally missed calls and un-returned text messages, he assumed he lost any shot he had with her. He just wanted to explain what happened, why he told her to go, why he knew it was a mistake now but that he needed to make sure she was happy with her choices. That he loved her. That he still loves her. That seeing her again makes him want to run up to her and hold her in his arms and kiss her until neither of them could breathe.

"Katniss."

She closed her eyes when he breathed her name that way. She didn't want to admit that she missed the way it rolled off his tongue that way, the shivers that shot through her body, the memories associated with it. He was so close to her now, or maybe she was close to him, close enough to feel the heat radiating from him, to smell his cologne, to tilt her head just slightly up and kiss him. Kiss those lips that took away so much of her pain, that made her feel so safe and secure, that belonged to the man she once loved.

He turned his head slightly, his lips resting a hair away from hers. "Katniss, I'm so-"

"I have to go," she whispered, rushing past him out the door.

"Katniss!" he called. "Please, Katniss. I'm...I'm sorry."

"Do you think you could ever forgive him, Katniss? If he asked for it?"

"I don't know."

"Peet-ah!"
Peeta looked up at the wobbling toddler who was smiling brightly at him. "Heya Nicky. Where's your momma?" He pushed himself up off the floor and walked over to Finnick and Annie's son. He scooped the boy up atop his shoulders.

Nicky began to giggle and grabbed fistfuls of Peeta's hair "Peet-ah! Peet-ah!"

"Nicholas?" Finnick's voice echoed through the empty hall. "Nicholas Odair, where did you run off to? Your mother is going to kill me if I can't find – oh. Whew."

Peeta smiled as Finnick turned the corner and spied them. "Lose someone?"

"I swear to God, Peeta, this boy's favorite activity is making me look like an incompetent father," Finnick said with a sigh. He reached for Nicky's foot and the boy gleefully kicked it away hard enough to almost send him toppling off Peeta's shoulders. Which only made him giggle harder.

"That's a pretty lofty ambition for a three year old," Peeta answered, shifting his grip on his godson.

"What are you doing in the hallway?"

Peeta looked in the direction of the door Katniss ran out of. "Katniss was here."

"Yeah? How'd that go?"

"I was sitting in the hallway alone and she left half an hour ago. How do you think it went?"

"Don't get snippy with me. I'm not the one who was too emotionally stunted to be honest with the girl I'm in love with."

Peeta cocked an eyebrow. "According to Annie, you were once."

Nicky laughed at the joke he didn't understand that made his dad make a funny face. Finnick took a deep breath. "That was a long time ago. I learned my lesson the hard way."

"And I didn't? Finnick, look at me. I'm a fu – I'm a mess. I need to make this right with her and I don't know how."

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Peeta had just parked his car, kicking himself for still not being man enough to tell her how he felt. To tell her that he waited for her, that he wanted her, that he loved her. He knew what she was implying when she talked about job opportunities – and he knew that this time, she wouldn't resent staying with him. He should have told her everything but he still couldn't. Despite his progress, personally, over the last three years, he still felt like he'd never be what she deserved. At the time, he told himself it was fine because she was only in town for a night – she had said so herself. It wouldn't have done him any good.

"Still living in the same old place, Dr. Mellark?"

His head shot up and he spun around to face the row of cars parked behind him. There she was, leaning against her rental car, twirling the keys around her finger with a smirk on her face. Her signature braid was slung over her shoulder, the few random hairs that never seemed to stay in place blew around her face.

"I'm thinking about relocating, actually."

She cocked her head to the side. "Oh yeah? Why's that?"
"Security," he answered, waving his arms. "Seems they'll let just about anyone onto the property now a days."

"I hear that's a real problem in this part of town. I would have thought residents would change the pass code to get into the lot every once in a while. Turns out, some things never change. Even after three years."

He watched her play with the end of her braid, twisting and untwisting it around her fingers. How he had missed that braid, her fingers, those nervous tics of hers that made her so easy to read once you got past her hard exterior.

"Why did you ask me to come here?" The playfulness in her voice dropped away.

"I didn't think you would," he said quietly.

"You didn't answer my question."

Peeta sighed. It was now or never. Finnick told him he needed to man up, to admit everything if he even wanted a shot at forgiveness. 'The more uncomfortable you are, the better.' He stuffed his hands into his pockets, sure he'd have a permanent red mark on the back of his neck otherwise. "I...um..."

He glanced up, right into the expectant grey eyes that left him feeling so completely alone.

"I quit drinking."

"You said that," she answered quietly.

"Yeah. Um. Cold turkey. It's been...two and a half months. I remember sitting in my living room for days and was just...God, Katniss I couldn't feel a damn thing. It didn't feel worth it, you know? All the stupid shit I had done just led me to that moment where I lost you."

"You told me to leave."

"And you didn't fight back. I wanted you to stay, I wanted you to want to stay. But you didn't. You just left without...without even a word. And I knew it was my fault but I had to do it. I couldn't be the one who decided you'd stay. I couldn't make that decision for you!"

Katniss narrowed her eyes. "I never asked you to make that decision for me!"

"You didn't have to!" He screamed. "I could tell. I could hear it in your voice and I could see it in your eyes. You didn't have to ask me to but you wanted me to. You didn't want to make that decision and I...well, fuck, Katniss I didn't either."

"But you did."

"For you. It was always for you. You deserved a life outside of this. Beyond your comfort zone – at a place you'd be pushed. And you were. I read your thesis, Katniss. You never would have written that here."

He closed his eyes, attempting to refocus the jumble of thoughts floating inside his brain. "I messed up. I let you go without telling you that I was doing it for your benefit. I did a lot of stupid shit to try to forget you. To justify what I did to you. And none of it worked. I couldn't drink enough to get you out of my head. I couldn't write anything without imagining you and wondering what you were doing. I just...I was so lost."

Katniss didn't say anything. She watched him come unraveled in front of her and was paralyzed to
help him. Because she knew. She heard the voice mails, words slurred and full of regret that no amount of alcohol could mask.

"I thought about you. All the time, every day, I couldn't get you out of my head." He paused. "Did...did you ever think of me?"

The other students in her department organized a night out during their first week to get to know each other and have fun before the program got too stressful. Katniss hadn't wanted to go but the prospect of being the only person not going was stronger than her aversion to socialization. And she told herself she’d stay out for a few hours – long enough to get to know a few of her cohort before they got too wasted – and then back to her sparse apartment alone.

She liked a few of the other students well enough, particularly the girl who studied plants, the boy who was interested in mating calls of songbirds, because they were intelligent but quiet – and looked just as uncomfortable being out with the rest of the group as Katniss felt. She spent the majority of the night with them and quickly lost track of time as they talked about some of their biggest fears and insecurities with the program.

"I'll get the next round," she offered at one point. She slid out of their booth and saddling up to the bar, using Gale and Darius' tips to catch the bartender's attention. She never understood why even her tiny breasts were enough to capture a man's eye, but like Darius always told her, boys don't make sense so don't question it.

"Hi."

Katniss looked over at the blonde man who slipped in beside her at the bar. "Hi," she offered, turning back to try order her beers.

"Think you'd mind ordering my drink when the bartender gets back? He's not nearly as interested in what I have to offer."

She slowly looked back over at him. He was smiling, his blue eyes dancing in delight at his own joke. He held up a five dollar bill between two fingers and she swiped it from him. "Fine. What do you want?"

"Whatever you're having..." He raised his eyebrows expectantly at her.

"Katniss," she offered, knowing what he was looking for. When the bartender brought her beers over, she shamelessly flirted with him, asking him to bring 'just one more, please?' which he obliged with a smile.

"You're very talented, Katniss."

"I've learned a trick or two in my day." She acknowledged. She thanked the bartender for the extra beer and handed it over to the man. "Here you go..."

"Peter."

Her smile dropped and she stared at him like he grew a second head right in front of her. "Wh-what?"

"My name. It's Peter."

In her head, she was aware that he said 'Peter' and that it was his thick Boston accent that made it sound like...like Peeta. And there were so many blonde haired men in the bar, it wasn’t like she was
a magnet for them. And anyone could have eyes that blue. She blinked and suddenly it wasn't Boston-accented Peter standing in front of her, looking so concerned. It was her Peeta, with this unruly curls that she used to run her hands through when he fell asleep, it was his smirk that made her knees weak and stomach flutter. It was the Peeta that, despite everything, she missed.

"I, uh, I have to go." She spun around, dropping the bottles off at her table with no explanation, leaving her new-found friends and Boston Peter completely bewildered.

"No," she whispered.

"Oh."

"It's just...You hurt me," she spit out.

"I know. And I know nothing I say will make that go away. But I am so sorry. You know I never meant to-"

"I knew about Johanna."

His body stiffened. After the night he and Johanna spent together, the two realized they were both using each other for the same thing – to forget. But in reality, it had done the opposite. Their friendship was on rocky ground for a while, until Johanna started dating someone new. Now it's like it never happened, a distant memory they could both forget.

Except. Apparently, they weren't the only ones who knew. "I told you I did stupid shit."

"Why?"

"I...I thought it would help. But it didn't. It made things so much worse." Another glance up. She was still looking at him, maybe he hadn't lost everything yet. She hadn't run off, hadn't said anything horrible yet.

"Do you believe in soul-mates, Peeta? That there are two people who are just destined to find each other no matter the circumstances?"

In a few steps, Peeta crossed the distance between them. He held her face in his hands. "Katniss Everdeen. I am so sorry, for everything. Please, let me try to make it up to you." And he kissed her, closing his eyes tightly. He felt her mouth resist at first, and a wave of depression crashed over him, until the tell tale sign of her kissing him back. Her body melded into his and he could swear he felt her smiling. When they parted, he rested his forehead against hers. "Does that mean-"

"I want to forgive you, Peeta. But-"

"No. No, Katniss please. I love you."

She turned her head as tears slipped down her cheeks. "It's not enough."

"Yes it is. It has to be."

She shook her head. "No. It's not."

He felt his body give up when she kissed him once more, got into her rental car, and drove away.

"No," he whispered to the empty parking spot. "No."
She sped back to her hotel using every back road she could remember, knowing the cops wouldn't pull her over for her excessive speed and veering all over the road. She was glad her mental map of the town was still strong because she was fairly certain she was driving completely blind. Her eyes were flooded with tears that she didn't bother wiping away. Because she did forgive Peeta. And she hated herself for giving in so easily.

It felt like a weakness.

And Katniss Everdeen was not weak.

Rather than taking her to her hotel room, Katniss' body took her down the familiar road that led to the rundown country bar with loud music, cheap drinks, and too many memories. It was another one of those things that hadn't changed a lick in three years. It was familiar and safe, like everything else in the town. There was the same line of people standing outside, having the same conversations they always had, waiting for the same band to play, taking the same shots they had for years. It was as if this town were stuck in some time vortex that stood still while the rest of the world moved on.

"Look who the cat dragged in."

Katniss smiled at the doorman. "Hey, Gale. I didn't know you were here this weekend. Is Madge with you?" Last she knew, Gale and Madge were still seeing each other, making the long distance thing work until Gale could finish his degree. Somehow he worked it out with the bar to spend most of his weekends down in Kansas City, with her very rarely coming up to visit him.

"Nope. I'm a free man this weekend. Why? You looking to finally make things happen between us?" He asked with a sarcastic wink.


"What are you up to, Catnip? How'd the retirement party go?"

Katniss rolled her eyes. She told Madge she was going to be back in town for Beetee's party and apparently Madge sent the information onto Gale. She had to wonder if that had anything to do with why Gale was still in town as opposed to visiting his girlfriend. Maybe Madge knew Katniss would have a hard time being back in this town. Katniss has to admit she'd do the same if she could for her former roommate. "Fine, as far as retirement parties go, I suppose. I, uh, I ran into Peeta. Or, he ran into me."

Gale's eyebrows shot straight into his hairline. "Really? And..."

"He apologized," she answered. "Said he's been thinking of me and felt really stupid for what he did."

"Sounds about right."

She narrowed her eyes. "What sounds about right?"

Gale sighed and visibly contemplated telling anything more to Katniss about it. "He...he stopped in here a while back. He was real messed up, Catnip, I shouldn't have let him in but he said he just wanted to talk. I took him out to the back alley so no one would hear us, and he just, I mean, he poured everything out to me. I mean, I'm pretty sure he had no clue what he was saying but, damn, he was in a lot of pain."

Katniss huffed. "You don't know what he did, Gale."
"True, but I know a thing or two about being a guy who fucks up. I mean, shit, just ask Madge about when I forgot her birthday last year." He chuckled, "I remembered that night but boy was I in the doghouse for a while."

She snorted. "Forgetting a birthday isn't the same as using someone to cope with pain."

"You think that's what he did? Really?"

"It's what he does," she said. "It just took being on the outside to see it."

Gale shook his head. "I don't know, Catnip. I don't think it was that easy. If he was just using you to cope why would he be such a train wreck after you left? I mean, damn, he slept with his best friend to try to get over you. Honestly, it'd be like you sleeping with me to get over him."

Katniss made a face of sheer disgust, which made Gale laugh. "Exactly my point. Look, I'm not saying what he did wasn't stupid – it totally was – but I just think that maybe he's not the horrible guy you think he is. Maybe you should..."

"Forgive him?"

"At least consider telling him the truth. I'm assuming he told you how he felt, Katniss. Maybe you owe him the same. You were happy when you were with him and he was good to you. You don't just throw that away."

"I gave up parts of myself to him."

"Is that always so bad?" He shrugged one shoulder. "You give and take and if you're lucky, you get rid of the bad and get the good."

Katniss turned her head away from him. When did Gale get so damn insightful? Was he right? Was that what a relationship was really was about? She hadn't thought about it in that way, hadn't had that experience. All of her relationships were one-sided: she gave and if she ever did get anything back, it wasn't what she wanted. It wasn't anything that made her feel good about herself. Looking back, she found it hard to think of a moment when Peeta didn't try to make her feel good about herself. Up until the end, he was the selfless one and it was her who kept taking from him. What did she she offer him that he couldn't get from any other girl? She wasn't particularly pretty or special, nothing compared to most other women. She was a train wreck when she was with Peeta, a mess of emotions and instability, she had no real identity and was clinging onto the few people in her life to keep her from going under.

Cinna helped her overcome that. Helped her develop her sense of self that was beyond what happened to her past. Those were things that happened, not who she was. The moment that realization finally hit her, she experienced a new found clarity. If she had stayed here, with Peeta, in this life, she may have never known who she really was away from her relationships. She would have forever defined herself in terms of him. Or Beetee. Or Gloss. Or Prim. But she was more than that, more than just "someone's something." If she had stayed here, she would have been like this town – stagnant and flat. She'd be the same old Katniss with the same triggers and the same emotionally-charged knee-jerk responses.

"I have to go."

Katniss paced back and forth in her hotel room, her thumb hovering over the 'send' button. She had typed and retyped the message at least six times. Did she ask him to come over? Did she tell him to stay away? Even with the realization that pushing her away did end up being the best thing that
could happen, she didn't know if she was ready to see him yet. She didn't know if she was strong enough to stand her ground against those knee-buckling eyes, that heart-melting smile. Those lips and hands and that heart. The heart that somehow forgave his mother for years of abuse. That forgave the ex-girlfriend for breaking him. The heart that was so capable of loving and protecting. She was no match for a heart like that. For a love like his.

10:15pm. Katniss. /I lied./

She tossed her phone on the bed and plopped down beside it. There was nothing else to do at this point but wait. Wait to hear from him, wait to find out if that damaged heart survived. If there was a wall clock in the room, she'd be impatiently listening to the monotonous ticks of the second hand as time passed impossibly slow. Instead she was cloaked in a deafening silence that became too much for her. No next messages. No new calls. Nothing.

She stripped her clothes off and headed straight for the shower, turning the heat on as high as it would go to fog up the mirrors. She decided to call Cinna when she got out, maybe he would know what to say, could explain what had happened and how she was supposed to get through it. How to deal with the guilt that finally overwhelmed her. The shower water burned her skin but she didn't care. Her legs gave out and she sat, curled in a ball, under the cascade. Her tears mixed with the water, running down her legs and spiraling down the drain. She stayed that way until goosebumps plagued her skin. With a significantly colder shower, Katniss quickly washed her hair and jumped out. The mirrors were still fogged up and she couldn't stop herself from writing over the glass with her index finger like she and Prim did when they were children. Right in the middle of her nonsensical notes was his name. P-E-E-T-A. She stepped back when she realized and watched the drops of water slide down the mirror from the letters.

She used her hand to wipe away everything she had written – all of it relating to him – and forced herself to stare into the now clear mirror. Taking a deep breath, she remembered Cinna's 'fake it' tricks. Back straight. Shoulders back. Head up. Eye contact. This was her now. Strong, confident, Katniss Everdeen. 25 years old. Survivor. Fighter. Capable and deserving of love and happiness. She braided her wet hair, flipping over her shoulder, and slipped into the terry-cloth robe. She tightly cinched it shut and padded back into the bedroom. Her phone remained dark.

"That's okay." She told herself. "It's okay. I'm Katniss Everdeen. I'm 25 years old-"

A loud pounding at her door caused her to jump and drop her phone back on the mattress. She grabbed the bible out of the side table drawer, in case she needed to hit whoever was behind the door, and quietly slinked across the room. She made sure the chain was still in place and cracked the door open.

"Yes?"

"Katniss?"

The bible fell from her hand and she slammed the door shut. Oh. Fuck. "How did you find me?"

"There are only so many hotels in town. I just checked the parking lot for your rental."

"Why?" She called through the door. Silence. "Why?"

"You know why."

"Tell me," she answered in a shaky voice.

"Let me in, Katniss. Please."
She unlocked the chain and slowly opened the door, allowing Peeta to step inside. He closed the door behind her but made no move toward her nor any attempt to speak. If waiting for his text was bad, this was torture. The tension swirled between them and filled every corner of the room. She noticed the redness of his eyes, the splotches on his cheeks, the way his hair was disheveled from him running his hand through it constantly. She saw that he kept his eyes on hers, never dropping to the skin exposed from her robe.

"Why are you here?" She asked again.

He took a deep breath. "I know I hurt you, Katniss. But if you're trying to get back at me then-"

"Get back at you?"

"With that text. Look, I get it, okay? I know I wasn't easy to be with and I had a lot of problems, but you could have just left town again. You didn't need to tell me that you lied about how you felt about me. I could have gone a long time without knowing that."

He wasn't angry. He should have been angry, but he wasn't. He was broken, lost, hopeless. And it broke Katniss' heart. "That's not what I meant," she offered quietly. He glanced up at her and she turned away, unable to look him in the face. "I lied...I...I lied about other things."

"Like what?" He had moved, was now right behind her. She could feel his breath on her neck. From the corner of her eyes, she could see how hard he resisted to run his hands over her arms. "I knew every time you published." She played with the edge of her braid and continued, "I, uh, I had your name saved in the database at school."

"Is that all you lied about?"

She shook her head. "I did think about you, all the time. Every time you called, I wanted to answer. I was so mad at you but I missed your voice. I missed everything about you. But I couldn't, because every time I thought of you, I saw you...you and..."

"You don't have to say it," he said, dejectedly. "I just, I just want you to forgive me. So I can forgive myself."

"I just wonder...if you had known, you know, that I slept with someone else, could you ever forgive me?"

"Yes," he answered immediately. "I would forgive you as soon as you asked for it."

"How can you be so sure?" She asked, turning back to him. "It took you years to get over Delly. How do you know you could forgive me so quickly? How could you act like nothing happened and go back to normal?"

He smirked. "She was right."

"Who?" Katniss demanded, not really understanding what was so funny about the conversation.

"Delly. When we talked. She told me..." he shook the thought from his head. "I would forgive you, Katniss, because, because you're the girl who after three years still makes me feel like someone of worth. You make me feel like my flaws and problems are part of who I am, not who I am. I look at you and I feel...I feel complete. I would forgive you because I love you, more than I've ever loved anyone else before."

"I did," she admitted. "After...after I found out about you and Johanna, I did. I was mad and hurt and..."
lonely."

He shook his head. "I don't care. You could have slept with every guy in Boston and I wouldn't care."

She snorted. "Every guy in Boston?"

"Every single one. And even a few girls," he added with a smile, taking her hands in his. "I mean it, none of that matters to me right now. All that matters is you, giving me another chance."

"You're an idiot," she muttered after a few minutes.

His smile grew. "Seems to be the popular opinion." He gave her hands a squeeze. "What do you say? One more chance?"

"I've...I've never been in an actual relationship before, Peeta." She raised her eyes to meet his, "you're assuming a lot."

"Yeah?"

She nodded slowly, a smile breaking out across her face. She let out a sharp cry as he picked her up and spun her around, which quickly dissolved into a laugh that made her stomach hurt. He set her down and kissed her deeply, pressing his lips firmly against her, marking her as his. They pulled away, breathless and smiling like fools. "No sex," she said.

"No sex?"

"For...three months. I...I don't want to feel like a coping mechanism for you."

He nodded, the smile never leaving his face. "Three months, I can do that. But can you?"

"Please, I've gone three years, okay?" She closed her eyes and covered her mouth with her hand. Had she really just blurted out that she hadn't had sex since she left? And saying it out loud she realized just how long it had been. Three years was nothing when she wasn't thinking about it but now that it was there, she couldn't ignore the tingling throughout her body and the desire to have Peeta take her right then. *Shit.*

"Three months. Three years and three months for us both. But first, a date. A proper one – out in public with...people around," he suggested. "Tonight."

"Tonight?" Katniss looked over at the digital clock on the nightstand. "Peeta, it's past midnight. Where are we going to go?"

"Well, if I remember correctly, I owe you breakfast."

After their late-night breakfast, which lasted well into the morning to watch the drunks stumble in after bar closing, they spent hours talking about the last three years, never once with an uncomfortable silence. When they ran out of things to talk about, Peeta reached across the table and intertwined his fingers with hers. He dropped her off at her hotel room with a chaste kiss, but as he began to pull away, she refused to drop his hand and pulled him inside.

"Katniss," he warned in a hushed tone.

She shook her head and silently led him to the bed, pulling him down onto it with her. Side by side, they laid, facing each other, letting their hands roam over their clothed bodies, re-exploring what they
had lost. Slowly, their clothes came off, followed by innocent touching and soft kisses. His body was still firm despite the long hours and late nights he had been spending in the office; hers began filling out slightly when she gave up smoking completely, but the biggest changes were the ones they couldn't touch. His eyes shone more brightly, she smiled more easily, they both knew what to ask for what they wanted.

"When do you leave?" He asked as they huddled under the sheets. He wrapped his arms around her and she rested her head against his shoulder.

"6:30 tonight."

"Will you come back?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Do you want to?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"So stay. Stay here. With me."

It took five years after their initial meeting to get engaged. As soon as Katniss got back to Boston, she took the job that would let her be closer to Peeta. He flew out a few days later and helped her pack up her apartment. It wasn't always easy between them, they had fights and arguments over silly things but were better apt to fix them without walking out on each other. And after three months, they found that sex was a great way for them to work out their aggression at each other – but only if they agreed to actually talk afterward. The engagement ring that Peeta offered her was nothing spectacular, which was exactly what she wanted. They picked out wedding bands together and she surprised him by having them engraved. When placed side by side, they created the structure for oxytocin, the neurotransmitter associated with love and pair-bonding.

She tried to back out once. He relapsed twice. Somehow they ended up outside a courthouse with $50 between them. Madge whined into the phone when Katniss told her they weren't going to do a big ceremony. She wound up on the doorstep of Peeta's apartment a few days later and told Katniss she wouldn't allow her best friend to not have a wedding reception. Thanks to her father's connections, Madge was able to rent out a banquet hall on short notice, decorated with evening primroses and a fondant covered wedding cake with little Peeta and Katniss figurines on top.

It took ten years after their initial meeting for Katniss to become pregnant with their first child. Annie and, surprisingly enough, Delly, became lifelines, coaching Katniss through her fear and insecurities. The first time the baby kicked, Katniss thought she was going to pass out and wondered if it was too late to reverse the decision. The worst part of the pregnancy was the nausea she got anytime she smelled any hint of curry powder, which was still Peeta's go-to food option when he was working on school-related stuff. He had just recently been promoted to Associate Professor and was still working on earning tenure and becoming a full professor. Cuts to funding had hit his department particularly hard and they had a few years of stress when he didn't know if he'd still have a job the next year.

Labor was an excruciating process for Katniss. She had been in the middle of a presentation about the risk of the latest heat wave on the natural insect population in the wildlife refuge when her water broke. Twenty six hours, at least a dozen "this is your fault" yells at Peeta, and three threats directed toward her doctor, a dark-haired, light-eyed baby girl made her entrance. And all the fear and insecurities the pair had about being parents vanished the first time Katniss held her and she wrapped her tiny fingers around Peeta's. His initial question about having another was met by a deep-set scowl
and a few nights on the couch, but eventually she realized that her daughter needed to be a big sister. Katniss loved the time she had had with her sister and she knew Peeta would have given anything to have siblings around him.

It took fifteen years after their initial meeting for Katniss, Peeta, their two kids, and Buttercup (who was a grumpy, fat, but somehow still alive, cat) to move into their own house and feel like a complete family. Katniss set up an archery range in their expansive backyard to teach her kids how to shoot. Peeta helped them with every piece of homework they had – often being a little too helpful according to his wife. They went to every soccer game, summer camp parent days, and girl scout meetings. Katniss had some breakdowns, like when her youngest daughter's eyes caught the light just right and looked like Prim's. And some nights, after a particularly rough day at work, Peeta would come home and bury himself in Katniss without a word.

But every night, before they fell asleep, Peeta would hold Katniss in his arms, running his fingers through her hair, and ask her if she still thought she made the right decision when she decided to come back and stay.

And every night, she answered, "Always."

Chapter End Notes

That's it, you guys. Thanks to everyone who has stuck by me and these two idiots through out this story. I hope the you enjoyed their adventure and their ending. Please, everyone give their thanks and praise to the wonderful Sunfish for all the hard work she put into this as well. This is her last chapter as beta (hopefully just for now but no pressure, lady) and I will miss her snarky comments within my stuff. Even if I hate her. ;)

End Notes

This little nugget was born over coffee with Chelzie during winter break. She's been fabulous throughout this entire process, ps.

I don't own THG or any characters you first part of summary is from Grey's Anatomy, so I don't own that either

No offense to sorority/fraternity people, especially the Gamma Phi Beta's and the PIKES. Or to

You can find me on tumblr (mitchesbray)

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