Lone Star State of Mine
by Jenye

Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Notes

Okay, so be warned: this is my first post here & so the formatting, tagging, etc. could be completely screwed up. And I apologize for that, but all things considered, I hope you enjoy my first dip into The Hunger Games fandom.

Also, all thanks go out to my dear friend and wonderful beta: Ivory. Thank you dear, truly!
“A lot of people called it prison when I was going up, but these are my roots and it’s what I love.”

Dawson, Texas.

As of the 2000 census we had just over 850 people living in our city limits, but that’s the funny thing about Texas – city limits are just the beginning. Texans don’t thrive in cities: in fact, we run from it like our tails are on fire. We don’t do well with high rises and mini-malls. Call us hicks though and you’ll be staring down the barrel of a Benelli 12 Gauge Nova. We aren’t hicks - those are the hillbillies hanging around the mountains of Tennessee or Kentucky. We’re certified rednecks and damn proud of it. We don’t take too kindly to people knocking on our doors to do a head count either. So who knows if the census is telling the full truth.

The first famous person to come out of Dawson, Texas was Baptist evangelist Lester Roloff, and he died about seven years before I was born. And famous probably isn’t what most would use to describe the man. I mean, the only reason I know of him is due to the wooden sign we have made outside his childhood home: real fine piece of carpentry that is. And those who’ve shot BBs into it throughout the years have only given it more Dawson character.

Dawson is your typical, run-of-the-mill, Texan small town. We don’t ask for much, but we work for every bit of it. We take pride in two things: America and football. If you don’t support either you’ll probably be run out of here faster than a stray cat. We’re about two hours south of Dallas and about a world of difference. We have two gas stations, three bars, one convenient store, one middle school that also blends into the high school, and one diner all within the city limits. And all of which shutdown at six o’clock on Fridays from the end of August to the beginning of November. Why? Because it is unconstitutional to miss a single football game be it an away or home game.

It’s a cliché, but it’s our cliché and we take a lot of pride in protecting it.

There are also three types of people in Dawson: those who spend their entire childhood waiting to escape the clichés of Texas small towns, those who embrace their fate and take to spending the rest of their days here, and the Mellarks. Sounds a bit melodramatic doesn’t it? Putting an entire family into its own category, but facts are facts and this is just one of them.

The Mellarks didn’t start this town – no one really knows who started this place. Whoever it was
didn’t see fit to stick around and take the credit. Anyway, the Mellarks may not have started this tiny piece of paradise, but they’re the reason it’s still making it today. Their cattle ranch has made quite the dent in Dawson history. See, the Mellarks own about three hundred acres of black gold just past the Dawson city limits. That’s right, we’re talking oil – and lots of it. Texas’ fastest means to riches. Don’t go getting ahead of yourself though, this isn’t Southfork and no one is sleeping with someone else’s significant other for turf purposes. And even if they were the Mellarks have a good way of shutting the rest of us off to their dirty laundry – they don’t air it.

In fact, it’s quite a peaceful affair. There is oil throughout the property, but Mr. Mellark has made it perfectly clear that he doesn’t want all of his property going to oil tycoons and they’ve respected his wishes. It’s been a cattle ranch since he grandfather started it generations before and he wants it to stay that way. Of course all good things come to an end, but no one sees the Mellark good thing ending anytime soon. Oil brings in a profit which is good for the family, but the cattle brings employment and that’s good for the community.

Everyone in Dawson knows someone who’s worked or is working on the Mellark ranch. Be it mending fences, building new barns, herding and branding cattle, delivering the product, or milking the ladies in the barn. There is always something Mr. Mellark needs done and he’s a generous soul. I’ve never seen it, but rumor has it that if someone approaches him because they’re hard up he’ll give them temporary employment on the spot with always a promise for more. He’d probably just hand them the money, but we’re Texans. We don’t take what we haven’t earned and he’s not about to go and insult someone’s honor.

That’s who Daddy should have worked for, a man who understood that the importance of a product wasn’t as important as a human life. But Mama always thought the real money was being a farm hand. The hours were long and the timing was a bit unpredictable, but the pay was decent. My father worked about twenty minutes outside of Dawson at a 100 acre farm for Mr. Snow. The rumor mill about Mr. Snow was nowhere near as kind as it was to Mr. Mellark, but Daddy never said a harsh word about the man. And I never had one ill thought of him either until the weeks after Daddy died from an accident on his farm. The man showed no remorse and offered zero help for now our one-income family. Mr. Snow washed his hands clean of us and moved onto the next sorry soul.

I was eighteen, just fresh out of high school, when I approached Mr. Mellark for a job on the ranch. He immediately offered me a position inside helping Mrs. Mellark managing the estate affairs. It was dull work and completely outside of my comfort zone, but we needed the money and I wasn’t about to bite the hand that fed me. I helped with the budget, ordering, and other necessary office tasks, but I craved to be outside. Finally, after being part-time business help for nearly a year, I approached Mr. Mellark about a recently opened ranch hand position. It was the most genuine laugh I’d heard escape a person when he shook his head and commented that I’d lasted longer indoors than he thought I would.

He gave me the job over a year ago and today is my first day moving into the on-site duplex. I’m nineteen and as much as I hate to leave my little sister, Prim, it’s about time I move out on my
own. Or…at least she’s finally convinced me. I’m only about fifteen minutes away from my old house and I know I’ll be visiting almost nightly. Prim needs me and my mother needs the constant reminder to be a mother. It’s not an ideal situation and I’d rather have my watchful eye on Prim always, but she’s growing up and I know she won’t need me forever. But it’s not about her needing me any longer. It’s about me needing her. She’s been my purpose for nearly seven years now. And I’m just not sure what purpose I’ll have without her.

But that’s my problem, not hers.

The familiar entrance to Mellark Ranch welcomes me in, like it always does, and I turn down the long dirt road driveway that splits off in different directions. I wave at several of the other ranch hands out mending nearby fences and pull up into the gravel driveway of the workers’ complex. Complex is truly a poor word for the several small houses on the property. They are nice places, small, but by Dawson’s standards they’re plush. They come furnished with the minimal necessities and the décor mimics that of what Mrs. Mellark has down with the main house, just less luxurious.

I throw my truck in park, releasing the clutch, and jumping out of the cab. I stretch to reach into the bed and pull out the one large duffle bag I’ve brought with me. I could use the excuse that the house already comes furnished to shrug off my lack of luggage, but in reality it’s because I’ve never owned much. Even the bed I slept on was belonged by Prim and myself. Everything I own fits into one bag. It’s a reality I’ve accepted long ago.

Before walking into the small house, I notice that Mr. Mellark has already had someone change the mailbox outside the door to read “Everdeen.” It’s a small gesture to some, but to me it’s everything. When I walk inside I take a quick inventory of the place: living room and kitchen space right as I walk in, and a small hallway to my left that I soon learn leads to the one bedroom and bathroom. It’s small, but it’s enough. And it’s mine.

The zipper of my duffle bag echoes through my quiet bedroom as I begin to pull out my belongings. Most of the bag consists of clothes; old work jeans, t-shirts, tank tops, and undergarments fill my dresser drawers. The closet is left mostly empty save for the only nice dress I own, which Annie insisted I get, and couple dressier tops. I toss my only four pairs of shoes on the floor of the closet and set to work on arranging the pictures I’ve brought with me atop my vanity.

The first picture is of Prim and myself. It was taken at my high school graduation; I was still wearing my cap and gown and Prim wore her finest floral printed dress for the occasion. She had her arms around my waist with that beautiful grin she could produce on command. She could light up a room with that beautiful smile. This picture was just proof that she got my mother’s delicate futures and I was left with my father’s strong build, but we complimented each other.
The second picture I pulled out always stabbed me in the heart; it was of my entire family. This picture was one of the last times I remember my mother truly smiling. She had Prim sitting on her lap behind the picnic table and I was slung over my father’s shoulder like a sack of potatoes, but I had managed to turn my head enough to get into the picture. I could practically hear my laugh as I looked at this picture. It was always such a bittersweet memory. It was at a family reunion nearly a year before my father died – the last one my mother, Prim, and myself ever attended. The Everdeens tried to make an effort to remain in contact after he died, but my mother all but caved in on herself, and communication became nearly impossible.

I slid that picture toward the back and grabbed for my lastest framed picture; one of me and my best friend. We were covered in mud and grinning from ear to ear. His arm was slung over my shoulders and I had my arm loosely around his waist. This picture was taken right here at Mellark Ranch last season. We’d just started branding the cattle that morning when a true Texan downpour hit. We didn’t have any time to search for cover and being in the middle of the ranch didn’t help much either. So we took that as a sign to simply enjoy life…something we rarely did. And it had been such a relaxing moment. Mr. Mellark reached into the cab of his truck for his camera as soon as the rain had ended and commented on how we’d always want to remember this moment.

He was right. I still smiled when I looked at the picture.

“Catnip, you here?”

Speak of the devil.

“Back here,” I called out, setting the picture down and tossing my now-empty duffle into my closet.

“Hey,” Gale gives his signature crooked grin as he rounds the corner into my new bedroom, “What do you think of your new place?”

“It’s all mine,” I smile back, looking around at the full size bed with plush looking down comforter and matching vanity/dresser set. “And now I can save a ton on gas.”

“Yeah, because that seven miles to and from here was a real deal breaker,” He rolls his eyes and I shove him back out the door, walking with him back to the main living area.
“Come on, let’s see if they need our help finishing the south side fence.” I grab my work gloves that I’d tossed on my café style table and shove them into my back pocket, “And then I’m buying at Red’s.”

“Not so fast, Catnip.” Gale rebutted, opening my front door and gesturing for me to go first. “Mr. Mellark wants us all up at the main house for dinner tonight, Boy Wonder is coming home from college.”

“That is tonight, isn’t it?” I roll my eyes and walk to the passenger side of Gale’s old pickup truck.

The second famous person to come out of Dawson, Texas is Peeta Mellark; current starting running back for Ohio State and pride and joy of Mellark Ranch. And he’s coming home.
SuperStar

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

My newness is probably still showing, but I have the first four chapters of this story already written & posted on FanFiction. Since I just got my AO3 invite today I figured I'd just go ahead and post them all now. Chapter Five will be here shortly.

Again, Ivory is a queen.

“\textit{I’m invisible and everyone knows who you are.}”

Ohio State University.

Or The Ohio State University. Established in 1870, or so I assume by the school crest worn on Mr. Mellark’s favorite, and probably only, sweatshirt. Main campus is located in Columbus, Ohio – a fact I obtained while getting the mail one afternoon - and a little over one hundred miles north of the Mason Dixon Line. The school hosts over 40,000 students, another tidbit I’d received from Mr. Mellark one day while bailing hay. All the other bits and pieces of information I’ve gathered from Mr. Mellark seem trivial to the main topic of Ohio conversation: sports.

I don’t consider myself to be an expert on much. In fact, I don’t consider myself an expert on anything. But I believe I could impress Alex Trebek with my extensive knowledge of all things Ohio State sports. The Ohio State University athletics are known as the Ohio State Buckeyes – don’t worry, I’m just warming up. They compete in the NCAA’s Division I level. They have over thirty varsity sports teams. They are considered to be a part of the Big Ten Conference, (don’t ask me what that truly means), and are one of only four schools to have won national championships in men’s basketball, baseball, and football.

And yet do you know what Dawson, Texas thinks The Ohio State University’s greatest athletic accomplishment is?

Getting a Mellark to leave the great state of Texas.
They haven’t done that in generations. Mr. Mellark’s great-, great-grandparents started this ranch and ever since the bloodline hasn’t ventured far. And rightfully so - why would you leave a good thing? This ranch has truly become a small piece of paradise and it doesn’t take a county eye to see that. The landscape is well groomed by nature and the buildings have been well maintained by a caring hand. There is always work to be done, but when you love the finished product it makes the blood, sweat, and time that much more worth it.

Even the Mellark members that grow up and move off the land don’t move far. It’s like there is some sort of magnetic draw between the proper lines of this place and Mellark DNA. Mr. Mellark’s siblings all live close enough, the farthest living in Austin. Peeta’s brothers are all within thirty minutes, his oldest deciding to live within the city limits of Dawson. Mellarks and Texas simply seem to go hand-in-hand, like peanut butter and jelly or sunrises and sunsets. You don’t mess with that sort of chemistry.

Unless you’re the youngest Mellark.

“Rumor has it, Mrs. Mellark is in rare form.” Gale fills the silence as we make the short trip up to the main house, “She’s been decorating and cooking all day. Even called in Madge and her mother to help. I guess the standard kitchen help wasn’t enough.”

The eye roll that I give is immediate and almost second nature. Mrs. Mellark is almost as well-hated as her husband is well liked.

“But of course,” I say in my most proper tone, “Only the best for her pride and joy.”

Gale’s scuff is heard over the music coming from his radio and I glance over at him with an amused look. Gale isn’t someone with many words, which is well enough considering neither am I. We spend a lot of our time talking of simple things and it suits us, but when it comes to the youngest Mellark I always have a question bubbling in the back of my throat. One that I have yet to have the nerve to ask.

What happened between Gale and Peeta?

I think one day I’ll get my nerve, but that day has yet to come. I’m not sure if it’s because I don’t wish to upset my best, probably only, friend or because I’m afraid to know the answer. Afraid that the answer will change my opinion of the boy who has always been a symbol of hope for to town. To me.

We are apparently one of the last to arrive at the main house; Marshall Beetee is standing with Samantha Wiress, no doubt talking work. I don’t think those two would know what to do if Mr. Mellark forced them to take a day off. Jackie Seeder is busy sweeping the wrap around porch; probably something Mrs. Mellark has had her do every time someone walked across it. Peeta’s two brothers, Reese and Clement, are standing near their father, talking animatedly with one another. And everyone else is waiting around aimlessly waiting for the guest of honor.

“Hey, look on the bright side,” I say, reaching across to playfully smack Gale’s arm to get his attention before we climb out of the truck, “At least she’s a decent cook.”

“Yeah, so is Sae down at Red’s,” Gale mumbles, tossing his keys on the floorboard and climbing out.

He always was one to look on the sunny side.

I slam the door shut and start towards the porch, knowing I’d have better luck chatting with Seeder
about chores than trying to pull Beetee and Wiress out of their growingly intense conversation about the upcoming drive. Gale heads toward some of the other ranch hands, the hope of the world opening up and swallowing him whole etched across all of his features. His eyes dart ever so often, like everyone else’s, toward the entrance to Mellark Ranch.

The driveway up to Mellark Ranch is straight as an arrow and probably the length of two football fields. Any person wishing to go unnoticed doesn’t use the main entrance; your trail of dust would give away before you even got close to the main house. Mr. Mellark usually jokes that it was his great, great grandparents’ way of preparing for the future generations and making sure the youth of this ranch couldn’t sneak in or out without the adults knowing the morning after – the dust still floating in the air. And now that he’s older with three boys more than willing to push their luck he appreciates their attention to detail.

And finally, with a nearly audible sigh from Mr. Mellark, the familiar dark blue Chevy pick-up truck turns inside the fence and starts down the country runway of Mellark Ranch. Mrs. Mellark, having the sixth sense that she does, finally steps out of the house just as Peeta’s truck pulls up next to the other trucks in the drive, looking much newer than most of the workers’ worn-out handed down versions.

He’s always surprised, and I believe genuinely so, when he sees the collection of people that are gathered for his homecoming. Everyone always says that Mrs. Mellark demands that we be here, but I know in my short time being here that most people are just glad to see him again. All the Mellark boys are good people, but there is just something about Peeta that reminds everyone of Mr. Mellark and that’s comforting. Mr. Mellark makes sure to be the first to greet his son, not that anyone would begrudge him that right, with a large bear hug that the he openly accepts.

The interaction makes my stomach twist. I’d give my last breath to be hugged by my father one more time and it’s intimate moments like this that make me realize just how raw that wound still is. How raw that wound will always be. My dull nails dig into my forearm as I cross them. I don’t envy for much, but in that moment I envy the look of pure joy and pride that Peeta is getting from Mr. Mellark. I glance away, looking at the doorway where Mrs. Mellark still stands looking like a cold statue, waiting for the men in her family to exchange their greetings.

She doesn’t wait long before stepping forward and there is a noticeable change in the attitudes of the help: we’ve all learned it’s better to be not seen or heard by Mrs. Mellark. Her family, though, seems to pay no mind to the matriarch standing atop her southern palace.

“Dinner is ready,” she announces. Her voice neither welcoming nor warm, but everyone knows that expecting such a tone from her would be like expecting snow on Christmas in Hawaii.

Everyone takes that as their unspoken invitation to head into the main house and start the slow journey inside. I’ve been inside numerous times, especially when I first started at Mellark Ranch, but I still find it hard to get used to the grandeur. The decorations are beautiful, but it’s simply the size that astounds me most. The dining room could easily substitute as our high school’s cafeteria. The kitchen is large enough to fit two islands and a small dining table that I assume is for just the Mellark family meals. There is an entertaining room off to the side that has fit nearly thirty people for numerous Superbowl parties throughout the years. I suppose it’s all for the best, though, since Mr. Mellark insists on playing host for nearly every sporting event and holiday in existence.

Gale and I have just stepped inside when a familiar voice comes up behind him, “Hey Gale, how have you been? Reese was telling me you joined his softball team this summer.”

“Sure did.” Gale says, his jaw in clenched as he looks at the blonde standing in front of him.
Peeta watches him for a moment, his hands sliding into the pockets of his jeans. I contemplate walking away. I’m not sure why I even stopped in the first place, it’s not like Peeta called out my name. But I can’t seem to make my feet move; instead I want to elbow Gale in the ribs for being so cold. These two used to be friends and yet the question bubbles in my throat once more; what happened?

“Awesome.” Peeta smiles, sensing the cold reaction, but doing his to push past it. “Well, don’t let Reese fool you – he likes to pretend he’s some kind of pro, but we all know he can’t hit the broad side of a barn.”

“Noted.” Gale nods, not even bothering to look at Peeta, but past him toward the dining room where everyone is starting to sit down.

Peeta must make a silent decision that this battle isn’t one he’s willing to tackle tonight and finally just nods as if to signal his forfeit. He then does something I’m not expecting; he looks past Gale and smiles at me.

“Hi Katniss,” He waves, “It’s good to see you.”

Before I can even open my mouth to respond he’s being pulled away by Clement’s arm around his neck, the two laughing about something. I turn my attention toward Gale and shake my head. I’m not sure why there is bad blood, but apparently it’s bad enough to make my friend act like a total jackass.

“Way to be Mr. Congeniality,” I mumble, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Because you’re one to talk.” He counters, turning back toward the dining room, “Come on, I’m starving.”

The meal gets underway like many before it; everyone takes a seat along the large dining table and starts to dig in. There are bowls of this passing one way while dishes of that are heading the other. It’s loud and seemingly pure chaos, but not a piece of food is dropped and no one is left empty handed. When I first arrived at Mellark Ranch and attended my first real “feast,” I was a complete wreck. I was too afraid to ask for anything and didn’t want to get in the way. I kept looking toward Gale to help me through it. I thought the whole evening was some kind of test, that I would be questioned on everything from my work ethic to my people skills – or lack there of.

Now I’ve come to realize they’re just another part of life on Mellark Ranch; a piece of the life that I’ve come to feel completely included in. Inclusion is an entirely new feeling for me.

My eyes move along the table toward the other end where Peeta is engrossed in a conversation with his two older brothers. Growing up in Dawson it was hard not to know everyone, but it was especially hard not to know everything about the Mellark boys. The Mellark name, by birth, made them infamous in our small town, but it didn’t help that they all seemed to be born with excellent genes. For example, a Dawson townie might know the name of their neighbor’s dog, but everyone knew that Mrs. Mellark named her three boys after whatever it was she had craved during her pregnancy; Reese for Reese’s Peanut Buttercups, Clement for Clementine oranges, and Peeta for pita bread.

Nothing stays a secret when you’re a local celebrity. And that’s exactly what the Mellark boys
were growing up.

Reese, the oldest of the three, knew of his good looks in high school and made his rounds easily. The wake of broken hearts seemed to be endless. His high cheekbones and 100-watt smile must have made the evitable hurt seem like a distant fate. Clement, the middle, has the rugged good looks of his father and the quiet reserve that made him come across as mysterious. A mysterious man; the kryptonite to many southern girls. Unfortunately for many, Clement, unlike his brother before him, had eyes for only one beautiful brunette who he made his wife a year after graduation. And finally there was the baby of the family, Peeta. He has Reese’s 100-watt smile and Clement’s sweet demeanor, but he has something entirely Peeta; his kindness. It wasn’t superficial charm that makes Peeta so well-liked, but his genuine concern toward others. And it doesn’t hurt that the mop of dirty blonde curls always falls just-so, or that when he smiled he has a dimple on the left side.

Not that I’ve noticed before.

“Earth to Katniss,” A voice breaks me from my trance and I look over to see Wiress giving me a rather intuitive smirk. “You going to finish your chicken or can I steal from you what Beetee took from me?”

“Don’t listen to her.” Beetee leans past her to speak to me, “She’s been chowin’ like one of the hogs all night.”

She quickly shoves him back over into his chair and laughs, “It’s because I’m always around you— and when I’m around you it’s eat fast or don’t expect to eat at all. It’s not like you couldn’t afford to miss a meal or two.”

“Ouch, Darlin’. That really hurt,” Beetee’s voice mocks hurt as he reaches across the table for a nearby pie, “I suppose I’ll have to drown my sorrows in coconut cream.”

“A typical Thursday.” Wiress grins, patting him on the shoulder.

I laugh, sliding my plate to the side so Wiress can take the piece of chicken she requested. She thanks me before turning back to look at Beetee, having fallen into yet another conversation that would probably over everyone else’s heads. I’m convinced they are the two smartest people on this ranch.

Glancing around the table again, I realize most people have started to finish their meals. Some have moved on to dessert, while others lean back in their chairs, completely stuffed, and sip on their drinks. Gale pops a small piece of brisket into his mouth while arguing with Darius about the Cowboys’ starting line-up. Apparently Darius is under the impression Romo needs to throw in the towel before he needs a walker. Gale might be sending him to an early grave for even suggesting such an idea.

Peeta has finished his meal and is now completely mesmerized by whatever it is his father is talking about. Mrs. Mellark has long left her place at the table, probably to go where she is most comfortable - away from everyone else.

Wiress is right; a typical Thursday.

Once everyone has had their fill we all start to push away from the table. Some will hang around to
talk, but within moments someone has suggested a pick up game out in the back yard and most of us are making our way outside. Like saying no is even an option. Clement runs upstairs to his old bedroom to grab a ball and Reese and Peeta argue about who gets to be the other team captain. Reese wins; Peeta never pushes hard enough.

“Ate without me, I see? Has moving up North really changed you that much, Mellark? Can’t wait for an old friend, Hershel? You better still have cold beer available.”

Haymitch Abernathy.

Dawson’s very own Eric Taylor, minus the Clear Eyes, Full Hearts motivational speeches. He’s lead Dawson to a many of victories and sent many of his players off to large colleges with full rides. He’s full of himself and the most unfortunate part of it all is that he has every right to be. Peeta walks up and shakes the older man’s hand, the two sharing some small talk.

Mr. Mellark’s laugh can be heard through the dining room as he gets up from the table to meet Haymitch. He sticks his hand out to greet the man, both smiling from ear to ear.

“Being without cold beer and having you within a twenty mile radius is hazardous to our health.”

Mr. Mellark grins, leading the man into the dining room, “Please, eat what you want and you know where we keep the beer.”

“You’re a smart man, Hershel. I take back everything awful I’ve said about you in the past.”

Haymitch reaches for a piece of okra and pops it into his mouth, “Except I stand by the fact that your offspring can handle the ball better than you ever could.”

At this Gale quickly excuses himself to head out back, mumbling something about favoritism. Never before have I felt that my friend was bitter toward the Mellarks, but in that moment I feel like there was a lot that maybe he hasn’t been telling me. I quickly follow Gale, somehow believing I have found the courage to confront him about his extremely sour attitude, but once I reach the porch I see he’s already tossing the ball with Darius and I’m not about to pull him away from the one thing he’s always loved: football.

“I’m trying to remember if I stole his lunch money or something back in school.” Peeta’s voice is light, but when I turn to look I can tell Gale’s attitude is obvious to him as well.

“He – um, I –” I try to find an excuse, but there really isn’t one. And why am I trying to find one anyway? Gale is my friend, if he’s upset with someone I should be to.

Peeta steps forward and shakes his head, “Don’t worry about it. I thought two years away would change things a little bit. It was awhile ago, he’ll get over it someday.”

So he must understand what Gale’s poor attitude is for. I wanted to ask him. I want to try to figure out how he could leave for school two years ago – stay away nearly that entire time – and come home knowing that his childhood friend would want nothing to do with him. But the loyalty in me says I should confront Gale first. Give him a chance to explain his part of the story.

Peeta glances over at me, obviously noticing the wheels turning in my mind, “And if all else fails I’ll just have to turn up the charm. I did grow up with Reese after all. I’m sure I learned a few tricks along the way.”

The lopsided smirk he gives me makes my insides twist in a rather pleasant way.

“Move it, Buckeye. You might make the Ohio State cheerleaders swoon with your talent, but your big brother can still outrun you!” Clement calls from the backyard.
Within a second Peeta bolts off the porch and is sprinting toward his brother. My eyes follow him the entire time. In fact, my eyes seemed to find him throughout the entire game.

I lean against the wood railing as the twilight sky began to grow dark, the game in full swing. My dad would have really loved a night like this; he probably would have been the first to suggest a pick up game. Like most in Dawson, football coursed through his veins just like blood did. He lived for a warm summer night and small town camaraderie. He would have liked working on the ranch. He would have liked the Mellarks.

He would have liked Peeta.
Dirt Road Anthem

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Ivory, my amazing beta, thank you.

“\textit{I’m hittin’ Easy Street on mud tires.}”

Southern Saturday nights.

Friday nights are nice. You look at them like an open book to the rest of your weekend. You get off work and you know you have two whole days before you have to look back. But Friday nights are rushed. You don’t have all day to plan for them like you do Saturday. You either have to make a quick change once you get home or just go looking the way you are. Plus you’re still not completely de-stressed so the start of your night usually isn’t as relaxed as you’d want it to be. You have to knock a few drinks back first. And Sunday nights? Well, they might as well be another work night because you can’t do much with them. On top of that you have this heavy pit in your stomach just knowing that you’re about to kiss your weekend goodbye and do it all over again.

But Saturday nights? Saturday nights are no-holds-barred, last call, full throttle kind of fun. Saturday nights anywhere are treasured, but Southern Saturday nights are practically weekly holidays to those who spend their entire week working toward them. The list of possibilities is endless and makes them that much more appealing. You could spend your night closing down the local drink hole playing pool, shutting the bull, or winning the newest suitor over to take home. You could head off the beaten trail with just your heart’s desire, a blanket, and a bottle of Boone’s Farm. You could find yourself and several others in some un-expecting farmer’s acres throwing back Keystone and blasting country radio.
Or, in true Southern cliché fashion, you could put on your favorite pearl snap shirt and boots to head down to the local honky-tonk. Country music, dancing, and beer; favorites both north and south of the Mason-Dixon, but an absolute staple on a good Southern Saturday night. And where better to find all of those things than at a honky-tonk? Even those who don’t thrive in such a loud and outgoing atmosphere still find themselves at such a place at least several times a year, most of those times being during the summer.

Those like me.

“Everyone’s going to Panem tonight, you going?” Gale asks, tossing another load of hay into the trailer.

I openly groan, not bothering to respond. He should know my answer. I may make an occasional appearance there, but that certainly doesn’t mean I enjoy it. My plans for this Saturday evening are quite simple: curl up on much couch to channel surf, and only leave my post when I run out of beer or need to use the bathroom. I am dedicated to this cause. I continue to work, letting the silence consume our chores once more.

“Oh come on, Catnip.” Gale grins, he’s always been amused at my lack of social abilities. I find nothing about this amusing.

“I’d rather groom Buttercup.” I deadpan, racking a pile around my feet.

That seems to quiet him for a moment, but I doubt it’ll last. If there’s one thing Gale and I have in common it’s our stubborn nature. We’re both headstrong and when we’re in sync it works well. When we’re at odds bar the doors. Fortunately most of the time we’re not at odds and if we are it lasts no longer than several hours. We make a good team and we’re not stupid. They aren’t many out there that would put up with us – we’ve got to keep each other around.

The sun beats down and I can feel the heat through my threadbare t-shirt. It’s the first tell-tale signs of summer; the humidity is rising and the sun seems to have taken a step closer to the earth. The cattle can feel it too, they’re becoming lazier and herding is a bit harder. Not to mention we now have newborns to deal with and the calves are usually like pre-teens: you tell them to do one thing and they do the opposite.

“Madge is supposed to be there.” Gale says, breaking the silence once more.
Sometimes I think Gale can’t stand silence because we hardly ever have it for long. I tend to be more relaxed in silence. The silence is an old friend, one that’s stood by me through it all. Silence was the one thing I could look forward to once my sister fell asleep at night after our father died. Silence was the one friend I had once my mother all but lost it after realizing he wasn’t coming home. Silence was certainly better than those alternatives. But much like silence, Gale has been there through it all as well. And for that I tolerate, and even enjoy, his constant need for conversation.

“Is that a good or bad thing?” I ask, stopping my haul long enough to wipe a drop of sweat slowly sliding down my temple.

Gale shrugs, “We’re friends. And this is Dawson, do I have a choice?”

No, I guess he doesn’t. It’s not like he could truly avoid her for long. Although he’s been doing a pretty fair job of it for where we live. They’d broken up nearly three months ago and he’s maybe run into twice. That’s saying something. Personally I never disliked Madge, but she certainly wasn’t who I’d thought Gale would decide to fall head over heels with. She was a bit…different. And the mayor’s daughter. That alone was enough to get tongues wagging; the mayor’s daughter with the Mellark’s ranch hand. God, it sounded like an awful Danielle Steele novel. We just needed Fabio for the cover art.

But Gale was happy: truly, genuinely, almost giddy happy. And because of that I never wanted it to end. But unfortunately it did. Gale didn’t really say much about the break up and since I don’t really speak to Madge I’m not too sure what happened. I know she broke up with him - he told me that much. And then went on to mumble something about how they were just going to be friends. I didn’t buy it for a second, but said nothing. He swallowed that hurt like he did every other one: with a strong jaw and hard heart.

Gale didn’t talk about his woes much, but I knew they dug down deep in him. A drunk driver killed his father only a year before mine, when he was fifteen years old. I’m not even sure he missed more than one day of school or his part-time work out here at the ranch. Mr. Mellark tried to tell him over and over that he could take all the time he needed. He didn’t listen and showed up for the early morning milking the next day. He needed to support his family and he wasn’t going to do that sitting around in his own pity. I understood that. Gale was the oldest, that alone held a lot of pressure, but I’m not sure Gale ever allowed himself to fully grieve.

Not that I’m one to talk.

“I’ll go tonight.” I speak up again, feeling the sudden need to be there in case Gale needs a shelter. Not that he would ever admit to needing such a thing, but that’s the beauty of our friendship. Nothing needs to be said.
“You sure? You’re going to miss America’s Most Wanted.” Gale smirks, tossing another pile of hay into the trailer.

I shoot him a quick glare before shrugging, “I’ll survive. Never know, might find one of last week’s at Panem tonight. Collect some reward money.”

He smiles as he tosses his pitchfork in the trailer, “Come on, the animals aren’t going to feed themselves. Jump on, I’ll drive.”

He says that like there would be some kind of argument. He always drives the tractor over toward the stalls. He also always tells me to jump on with the announcement of him driving. Sometimes I truly believe he just likes to hear himself talk. Fortunately, I don’t mind it either.

I toss my own pitchfork in the trailer and climb up, taking a seat on one of the old wooden beams built up around the edges. Gale climbs into the seat of the old tractor before looking back at me.

“Push you around the dance floor tonight?” He gives a knowing grin.

“Don’t hold your breath.”

His laugh intermingles with the roar of the tractor starting up and we’re off, making the slow drive across the ranch toward the stable of horses. Feeding is one of the easiest chores, but it’s the one that takes the longest and obviously needs to be done every day. Loading the hay, moving the hay, spreading it around the stalls. Repeat. If one isn’t diligent about their time they could easily spend an entire day doing such an easy task.

I’ve been a part of the Mellark ranch for nearly five years and it still takes my breath away just how vast and beautiful the place can be. Most of the time I’m too busy with any given chore to notice, but there are these rare moments when all I can do is sit back and admire the view. And now is one of those moments; the melancholy hum of the tractor lulling me into a peaceful state, the summer breeze pushing the fly-aways from my braid out of my face, and the sun resting over me like a winter time blanket.

The rolling hills push against the row of trees at the very end of my eyes’ view. The slow-moving cattle graze in the pastures without a care in the world. I can see the paths winding and turning throughout the property. Trails that have been made from years of trucks, four wheelers, horses, and tractors making their own way to their destinations. Trails that I know like the back of my own
My head turns toward the north point of Mellark Ranch, away from where the tractor is heading, and I see the familiar fire red that I immediately associate with one thing and one thing only: Peeta Mellark’s favorite work truck. It’s a piece of junk. It’s a 1983 Ford F-350 and meant for hard labor. The windshield is cracked from a freak hailstorm we had several summers ago. The back bumper has been tied onto the frame. The frame itself is beginning to rust. The right headlight is busted out – very few know what from and those that know don’t talk about it. No one wants to ever see that side of Mrs. Mellark again.

But Peeta insists on using it whenever he’s home and Mr. Mellark refuses to buy new for that reason, Lord knows they can afford to. Mr. Mellark once told me that only his son could find the beauty in a hunk of junk like that one. He believes Peeta has a knack for the finding the beauty in just about anything.

I find myself believing that too.

Peeta is out fixing a slack piece in the fence. Even over the low hum of the tractor I can faintly hear the music blaring from his truck’s stereo. I imagine he’s humming along, I’ve noticed him doing that before as he works. Not that we work together all that often. But he’ll be off key, like always, and it’ll be low enough that you only catch parts of it. And that’s only if you’re really listening.

He’s hard at work, a default setting for all of us here, and his arms flex as he pulls the wire tight. We are a decent distance away, but not far enough that I don’t notice the contour of his bicep muscles or the way some of his curls are starting to stick to the nape of his neck. His grey t-shirt has darkened in places with sweat and his work jeans have spots of dirt smeared into their light colored wash. He looks like something out of a goddamn country music video.

My jaw clenches and I look away, but apparently not soon enough because Gale has taken an opportunity to turn and look at him and I know he’s noticed. My eyes meet his, but I find I can’t look at him for too long. I look away again, acting as though I’m just admiring the familiar terrain. I don’t dare look back at Peeta, now fearing I’ll have an audience. Instead I glance over at Gale again; he’s gone back to keeping his eyes on the path. Not that it’s truly necessary. We’re going maybe five miles and hour and he knows these paths just as well I as I do, if not better.

The rest of the short ride is a storm in my mind that I’m working to keep at bay. I try to fool myself into thinking that I don’t know brought up this sudden twist. I lift up my hand to play with the end of my braid that’s resting over my left shoulder and twist the coarse pieces through my fingers. I wrinkle my nose slightly, feeling the familiar dull sting of minor sunburn. The first of the season, it’s always expected at some point. My eyes dart from one end of the ranch to another,
avoiding the one place they want to travel to the most until we’re about to reach our destination. I look back, my eyes suddenly feeling less strained, and he’s tossing his tools in the back of his truck.

Resistance is obviously futile.

Gale kills the tractor engines and jumps down from his perch. He wipes his hands on his jeans, more for a distraction from me than because they actually need it. I slowly move from my perch, jumping down at the end of the trailer. I grab both of our pitchforks and reach out to hand him his. He slightly takes it and I go toward the stalls to open up the main entrance. Most of the horses have their heads out waiting for their expected meal.

We work in silence for awhile, but this silence feels different. This silence feels loaded. And I know what that means; Gale wants to say something, but he’s hoping maybe I’ll bring it up first. He’s always disappointed in this game.

“Look, Catnip, I know you’re not really experienced with this.”

Ah, there it is.

I look up from pushing the hay evenly around the feeding bens. I want to say something, to instantly argue with whatever he’s about to say, but I bite my tongue. Part of me wants to hear him out, better understand where he’s going with this before I ram him with my pitchfork.

“But guys like that aren’t really – well, they’re not attainable.”

“Excuse me?” I can nearly taste the venom in my voice.

“You know what I mean, like they’re not the kind that stick around here. They’re not the kind that are meant for this small town life.” He’s not looking at me when he talks. He’s going about his work, like we’re talking about sports.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but from the sounds of it you’re trying to reason why I’m not good enough for whoever it is you think I’m interested in.” I argue, pushing a bit harder into the pile of hay with my pitchfork.
“Don’t be like that,” Gale bites back. “You know that’s not what I’m saying and I’m not dumb, Katniss. You don’t look at someone like that without having something invested.”

He said my actual name. Gale never says my real name. I mean, hardly ever. That right there is enough for me to start taking this a bit more serious. I swallow my latest bitter retort and remain silent. He’s standing there waiting for me to react, maybe rebuttal what he’s just said, but I can’t find my reasoning. Instead I continue to work.

I do not have a crush on Peeta Mellark - that part is obvious. I don’t have crushes. Crushes are for girls like Madge Undersee. I am too calloused for crushes. I am too calloused for a lot of things.

“I get it.” Gale’s defeated voice fills the silence once again and I look up from what I’m doing. “Just be care.”

“I hardly know him.” I say, feeling the need to assure him that it’s nothing.

I think I’m also trying to assure myself.

The afternoon fades away and soon enough we’re packing it in for the day. It’s still early, but weekend chores are usually kept the bare minimum. Mr. Mellark doesn’t want us to overdo ourselves and I appreciate that. Gale and I ride back to the barn together and put up our respective tools.

“We’ll probably all meet up at Red’s first, grab a bite to eat. Leave at six?” He asks, wiping his hands off with an old rag.

“Can I meet you there? I told Prim I’d stop off at home sometime today.” He gives me a skeptical look and I can’t help but laugh, “I said I’d come, didn’t I? I’ll be there. I just need to go home for a bit. It’s been over a week.”

“Alright, see you tonight.” Gale smiles and turns to head toward the door. When he gets to the
open doorframe he stops and turns back to look at me. “Hey, about earlier —”

“Don’t mention it.” I shrug, shoving my hands in my pockets.

He nods and disappears into the afternoon. I stand there looking at where he once stood. I’m not sure what made me more furious earlier; the fact that he thought I was some kind of child that needed protection simply because my experience in the romance department was null, the fact that he doesn’t see me ever having a life outside of Dawson, or the fact that he saw Peeta Mellark looking right through me as nothing more than another notch on the bedpost.

I chose to believe it’s one of the former.

My eyes are still staring at the empty doorframe when another silhouette forms there. I don’t realize how much I haven’t really been focusing on that space until I have to focus to see exactly who it is. He’s shorter than Gale, but not as lanky. He has structure and a broad one. His hair isn’t cut short and crisp like Gale’s either and his silhouette shows that his curls move every which way. The more I concentrate, the more realize something else; he’s shirt isn’t like Gale’s either. His shirt is missing entirely.

“Shit,” Peeta lets out a surprised sort of gasp under his breath. He quickly recovers and clears his throat to speak clearer, “Sorry, I didn’t realize anyone else was still working.”

_Swallow, Katniss._ My mind screams, it’s also telling me to look away, but I can’t and I know I must look like a doe caught in the headlights. My throat has gone dry and my mind seems to be shorting out. I can’t form a coherent thought let alone get something to spit out of my mouth. He doesn’t seem to notice as he turns off to the side to throw down the toolbox he’s carrying in one hand. I notice his soiled shirt is hanging out of his back pocket like a forgotten dish towel.

Without my permission my eyes start to travel from his back pocket up his bare back. The years of football and manual labor are obvious. His waist widens up into his shoulders perfectly and the muscles are prominent there. His neck is thick, another sign of a football player. When he turns just slightly to move around the workbench I see the hint of a tattoo on the inside of his right bicep. He doesn’t leave the arm lifted long enough for me to notice what it is, but I now know it’s there. He slowly starts to turn and my eyes instantly travel down the planes of his torso. He’s toned, that’s to be expected, but he’s not ripped like those athletes you’d see in Gatorade commercials. Of course, I don’t know if anyone is _that_ toned.

I find myself uncharacteristically wanting to reach out and touch the sharp edge of his hips that travel past the vision of my eyes. His jeans are tightened securely with an old brown leather belt,
but a small portion of his boxers – or briefs? – peek out over the tops. The black material is a deep contrast to his light skin. He steps away from the workbench and faces me directly. We’re still a good distance from each other, but I instantly feel a rush come over me.

When he reaches into his back pocket for the forgotten t-shirt I finally regain control of my eyes and look away as he wipes the sweat from his face with the grey material. I look at him as his arms drop to his sides and he has the hint of a knowing smirk. Oh God, he’s noticed my obvious appreciation and in this moment I want nothing more than to have the world open up and swallow me. I half expect him to make a coy comment, like his brothers undoubtedly would, but he just turns back around and starts putting the tools on their respective hooks.

I appreciate Peeta’s understanding nature more.

“Finnick tells me everyone’s heading out to Panem tonight.” Peeta says, his back still turned toward me. “You going?”

“He said everyone didn’t he?” I counter, hoping my voice sounds more sarcastic than condescending. I’ve been told I can be rather harsh without meaning to be.

But by the sideways smile I receive I realize I must have come across just right. I’m not sure why I’m still standing there. I’ve finished my work for the day and I need to shower before going over to visit with Prim, but there I stand nonetheless. He finishes putting away the tools and turns back to face me, leaning against the workbench. We’re both just standing there in some sort of standoff. We don’t know what to say, but we both want to say something.

“Are you going?” I ask, desperate to break the silence.

I half expect him to counter with my earlier comment and inwardly smack myself for asking such a stupid question. Of course he’ll go and he’ll be the main event. He’s only been home for several days and the tongues are practically wagging to get a chance to talk to him.

“You said you’re going to be there?” He asks again.

I give him a confused look and nod. Where is he going with this? Is he trying to best me or make a sarcastic comment at my expense? It wouldn’t be uncommon, well maybe from Peeta, but here on the ranch we’re all usually trying to outsmart each other. A joke given in your expense is usually a common happening.
“Good, then I’ll be there.” He smiles, pushing himself off the workbench once more and starts to walk back out of the barn. He stops at the doorway and I inwardly laugh at how alike he and Gale truly are sometimes. “You want to ride together?”

“Sure.”

My answer escapes me before I can even comprehend it. My insides instantly twist again and I can’t say I’m all that upset by it. I like how his features seem to light up at my simple answer and I like that his eyes linger on me a moment longer before he nods.

“Okay, I’ll pick up you around 8.”

Thank God he doesn’t see the way my mouth gapes open after he leaves.

Eight o’clock comes too soon. Or not soon enough. I’m not sure which since I kept glancing at every single clock I’d come into contact with. I didn’t want to be distracted when I’d visited Prim, but even she could see I wasn’t my usual self. Our conversation was normal, but I’d ask her to repeat almost everything she said and was continually caught staring off into space. She’d asked me numerous times what was wrong with me, but I’d just shrug it off as being tired. I was tired. I’d gotten up at sunrise that morning and had been working ever since. That would distract anyone.

So would a shirtless Peeta Mellark.

By the time I’d gotten back to my new home I had less than an hour to wash the day off. My shower was quick, but they normally were. And as I stand here in front of my fogged mirror I can’t help but over critique myself; even in the blurred reflection I can see the dark circles forever beneath my eyes, my nose that’s a bit small for my face, and the tiny scar just above the cupid’s bow of my lip. It’s a scar I got years ago while playing outside with Prim; one that’s had plenty of time to fade, but tonight I notice it. Tonight I’d notice an arm hair out of place.

Why was I being like this?
I quickly brush my teeth and braid my wet hair in its traditional style. I don’t wear makeup. I’ve never had a real reason to. The cattle don’t seem to mind that I lack mascara and Gale has never told me I need to add a bit of blush to the apples of my cheeks. Which is just as well, since I can’t imagine I’d be all that good at putting it on.

My outfit of choice is the usual as well; white t-shirt tucked into my dark washed jeans and boots. Not cowboy boots, just boots. A brown leather pair with this buckle thing going across them. Prim picked them last winter - she called them riding boots - but I’m not sure they’re those either. All I know is they’re comfortable and I’m not picky. Plus they’re the cleanest pair of shoes I own.

I’m looping my belt through my jeans when I hear the knock on the door. My heart instantly beats twice as fast. I finish that task and look up at my reflection, judging my appearance. I catch myself just as I’m about to fix a piece of hair that’s fallen around my face.

“Stop.” I tell myself and turn to leave my room.

Peeta is leaning against one of the awning posts when I open the door and I swear in this setting he looks like he just walked out of a *County Living* spread. He’s wearing a blue plaid button up with the sleeves rolled up to just under his elbows, the jeans the shirt is tucked into are dark and loosely fit, and his boots poke out from underneath his denim. His hair looks ever the part in its own curled way.

“Ready?” He asks, pushing himself off the post.

*As I’ll ever be.*

I nod, shutting the door behind me. We walk to his truck in silence and I’m terrified that I’ve made a mistake. What if the ride there is awkward? Filled with silence and unnecessary small talk? I can’t do small talk. I’d rather sit in silence than idly talk about the never changing summer weather of Texas. Maybe I should have just told him I’d see him there. Maybe I can still fake a headache or something. But when he walks over to my side to open the door, ever the Southern gentleman, I climb right in.

He’d left the truck running and I recognize the song on the radio as a Lynard Skynard classic. My eyes instantly look up to see the inside of both the driver and passenger visors lined with CDs. There are also several tossed into the console. Every last one is a Southern Country classic and I’m slightly surprised. I never really saw Peeta listening to Skynard or Waylon.
When he climbs into the truck I want to say something about it. But then he smiles over at me and I lose all hope of forming a coherent sentence. I really need to get a grip here.

“I have to admit, I miss a lot of things when I’m away at school,” Peeta starts, being the first to break the silence before we’re even out of the ranch. “But Panem is not one of them.”

I crease my brows together slightly confused. I always assumed someone like Peeta lived for such a place. He was always fawned over by all the females and even the males made it a point to search him out at some point. His brothers had always seemed to thrive in such an arena. Why would Peeta be any different?

I look down at my hands as they fidget together in my lap, “So why are you going?”

“Why are you going?” He counters with a smirk.

Good point.

I let out a small laugh and look out the window into the darkness. The drive into town is certainly not the most entertaining during the day so at night it was almost a total drag. Very few houses stand between Mellark Ranch and Dawson city limits. And those that did were few and far between.

“So, um, how’s school?” I ask, looking back over at him.

“It’s good. I mean, it’s school.” He shrugs, looking over at me. “It beats being around here having my mom ragging on me about not going to school.”

“You didn’t want to go to college?” I ask, suddenly very intrigued by this man I thought I had all figured out. But apparently I have Peeta Mellark chalked up to be exactly like his older brothers and today he is bound and determined to prove me wrong.

“I don’t know, I guess I never thought about it much.” Peeta’s eyes never leave the road and my eyes never leave him. “My mom always talked about me going to college and my dad always wanted me to play football for as long as possible, so I guess there really was no option.”
As I listen to him I realize pressure is always present. It doesn’t matter how talented you are. How much money your family has. Or how much life has been handed to you. Pressure is there to stay. It just takes many different forms. My eyes still haven’t left his strong jaw, clenching ever so slightly, or how his one hand grips the steering wheel loosely. When he looks over me I’m a bit stunned and instantly feel heat rise to my cheeks.

“God, I sound like some sort of spoiled brat, don’t I?” He smiles and pulls my heart along with it. “Sorry to bore you.”

I can’t stop the words that fall from my lips next.

“You don’t bore me.”
One Of Those Nights

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Ivory, my amazing beta, thank you.

“Someday you’ll be looking back on your life, at the memories.”

Panem.

Or, more officially, Panem et Circenses: because every southern small town just isn’t complete without a honky-tonk bar with an extremely Latin name. I’m not even sure most of our residents know that it’s Latin they’re trying to pronounce. A classmate of mine, one of the seven brainiacs Dawson produced that year, did an informative speech on the place and the meaning during my senior year. Apparently the name was once used in a formal political setting by ancient civilizations; something to do with public approval and absolutely nothing to do with a southern landmark. And therefore Panem is really the only name that has stuck, even if the neon sign flashes a much longer representation.

To truly comprehend everyone’s lack of questioning on such a bizarre name you would have to meet the honky-tonk’s longtime owner: Effie Trinket.

Effie Trinket isn’t a Dawson original, but she’s been around long enough to be considered a resident. Not too much is truly known about her time before entering our small town. Everything is all hearsay, like most things in rural America. Rumor has it her parents got busted early on in her life for God only knows what and did hard time for it. Rumor also has it that her mother didn’t want the fatherless child and so she was dropped off on a doorstep on her mother’s way to the bright lights of Hollywood. But also, rumor has it that her father was actually the one to drop her
off on said doorstep on his way to chasing the tail of some fine female. Whatever the story is, one thing is obviously known: she ended up living with her uncle by the time she was ten years old.

And whatever eccentric traits were passed down from her unknown parents has lasted in her blood this entire time. She’s a sight in any city, but in Dawson she’s her own show. Her bottled platinum hair is always curled to perfection and her makeup can usually be seen from the other side of town. Her outfits are styled to match down to the color of her nail polish. And her demeanor makes the rest of us females seem tame in comparison. Dramatic doesn’t even begin to hit the nail on the well-manicured head. We’re simple folk, through and through. Effie Trinket cringes at the mere idea of such an existence.

When she bought the rundown bar everyone thought it was a train wreck waiting to open. Even her own uncle tried to talk her out of it. He had always imagined that the bright-eyed blonde would take off out of Dawson for bigger things once she graduated from high school, but the diploma was handed her way and she remained. She enrolled at some local community college in a nearby town, telling everyone she ran into that her plans were to open up shop in the town she loved. Loved? I think most were just amused that Effie Trinket saw Dawson as more than a speed bump.

Story goes that the man who signed off on her bank loan all but laughed her back out into the streets, but she didn’t care. She had her money and she had her destination. The place was all but condemned when she bought it, but now it’s the pride and joy of Dawson. Everyone expected Effie to try to bring some sort of sophisticated martini joint to this one-horse town, but she embraced the very thing we all thought she’d try to run from. It wasn’t expected, but somehow it’s still been a rather charming coexistence between Dawson and Effie Trinket.

Most residents have frequented Effie’s establishment their fair share of times and it’s always worth coming back for the next. And although a conversation with her is anything but dull, it’s always pleasant. Probably too pleasant for most, I know she always makes me feel like a shell of a human for not always looking on the sunny side of life. But it’s entertainment and she means well. She always means well – and she’ll make sure to tell you so too.

Of course, all that being said, the people of Dawson aren’t all that picky about their establishments. As long as the beer is cold, there is a friendly face in the crowd, and the music is loud we’ll usually be there. And that’s why I’m not surprised that Peeta has to park his truck toward the back of the lot when we arrive at Panem a little after eight.

What I am surprised at is how relaxed I felt the entire time. I never once glanced out the window begging for the familiar building to come into view so that this encounter could be over. I never once was at a loss for words when he spoke to me. And I never once had to feign interest in something he was saying. Peeta Mellark and I have more in common than I would have thought and I’m not completely bothered by that.
The music can be heard from the parking lot as I jump from the cab of the truck. I instantly feel nerves start to overtake me, which is fairly normal when I enter a social situation, but in this moment they are stronger than ever. My mind starts to race at what people will say when I walk through the door with the ever-popular Peeta Mellark. What girls like Clove or Glimmer are going to speculate. What wisecrack Finnick is going to come up with. What kind of death glare Gale is going to give me.

Gale.

He’ll probably fall off whatever barstool he might be sitting on. God, I hope he’s standing. No, maybe standing isn’t good either; that would give him less time to reach me. Lord knows the guy has fuse of an American made muscle car. It won’t take him long to let me know just exactly what he thinks of this entire situation. This entire situation that he will no doubt read into as some sort of torrid love affair that has been happening behind his back for years. I love him dearly, but he has such a wild imagination sometimes. No, maybe I just hope that he’s in the bathroom.

I am not normally one to care what others think, but when it comes to my best friend and the trust we share I’d go to any length to protect it. And I may not understand why Gale feels the way he does toward the blonde football protégé, but as his best friend and confidant I am agreeing to stand by him. Yet here I am heading toward the door with Peeta Mellark not even a foot from me. And I can pretend all I want that I don’t feel this instinctive pull, like a magnet, just being within reach of him but I’d rather ignore the feeling altogether.

When Peeta opens the door for me, my senses are overloaded with the inherit smell and feel that is Panem. The bass of the music can be felt in my chest and the multiple perfumes and colognes mingle with the smell of stale beer. And yet those potent sensory devices are overridden by the mere whiff of Peeta’s scent as I pass him walking into the establishment. I’m not sure if it’s cologne or an aftershave of some sort, but it’s now a smell that will forever be tattooed with me. A smell that makes my flesh tingle, my stomach turn to butterflies, and my fingers get this immediate need to pull him closer.

I stand just inside the door, surveying the familiar location; the dance floor is already packed, the bar is surrounded with people doing their best not to leave alone, and even the walls seemed to be lined with those that are in between dancing and a refill. For as small of a town as Dawson is it sure knows how to pull a crowd on a Saturday night. And they all seem to be familiar faces; some don’t look twice at us though, while others can’t seem to take their eyes off. My stomach turns at the eyes on me. For a girl that wants nothing more than to blend in, this sort of silent attention is torture.

“Ready to face the wolves?” His voice tickles my ear, as his breath is close enough to move the
small hairs falling from braid. I must look like a deer in headlights and I’m not sure if he’s read my mind or voicing his own thoughts, but then I feel his hand against the small of my back willing me forward. The heat I feel shoots up my spine and a rush goes through my cheeks. And I feel like he could steer me in any direction with his mere touch.

As we move through the crowd my eyes zone in on our destination and I see whom he’s heading toward. My stomach starts to twist, if it wasn’t already a complicated knot. Being at Panem is out of my comfort zone to begin with, walking in with the big neon sign that is Peeta Mellark makes it all the more unsettling for me.

Finnick is the first to spot us and I can see by his reaction that he’s more than a bit surprised at the pairing in front of him. He unwraps his arm from his longtime girlfriend, Annie Cresta, and starts toward us and not in a silent fashion.

“Peeta Mellark!” He yells over the thumping music. “I was beginning to think you were too big time for us small town folk.”

I glance over at Peeta to see him grinning and that’s when I feel his hand drop from the small of my back to reach out and shake the older boy’s hand in an excited fashion. I don’t realize how quickly I’ve grown accustomed to the touch of the youngest Mellark until I no longer feel it.

“Hey Finnick, it’s been too long. How’ve you been?” Peeta smiles, letting Finnick wrap his arm around the shorter boy’s neck and pulling him toward the large group in the corner.

I start to hear Finnick’s smartass comment, but my attention is drawn toward the person glaring holes in me. My eyes meet Gale’s; several other classmates surround him, keeping him just far enough from the part of the group Peeta is being drawn toward. Not because I truly want to, but because I know I look like a fool standing alone in front of everyone, I head toward Gale’s side of the group while mentally preparing myself for whatever scolding I’m about to receive.

“Prim is looking a bit rough around the edges lately.” Gale mumbles, not even bothering to look my direction as he takes of drink from his bottleneck. “Her teenage years must not agree with her.”

“Bite me.” I snap, my voice still muffled by the music and the crowd. He’s digging and he knows it. And only Gale could get away with such a comment because I know he truly loves Prim. “I did go see my sister. Peeta just so happened to be leaving around the same time I was. Not that I have to report to you.”
“Convenient.” He pouts.

And I’m really not interested in him spoiling my night; he’s the reason I’m here to begin with. He’s the one who told me I should come. He’s the one who always insists on bringing me into places he knows I’ll be uncomfortable. Of course, it’s not his fault that my gut tells me the most enjoyable part of my night will be ride to and from this Dawson landmark.

We stand in silence as if in some sort of showdown and I can’t help but let my eyes move toward Peeta, who’s surrounded by several of his old teammates. They are all speaking animatedly so I’m surprised to see his steel blue eyes meet mine when I look up from my calloused hands. Against my wishes, my stomach yet again responds to his slightest of attentions with butterflies. He gives me a smirk and I understand it because I know what he feels. This isn’t his favorite place to be either and in that moment we connect with that common thread. I can’t help but smile, but I do my best to hide it when Gale looks in my direction.

He’s not looking at me though; he’s looking past me. I turn my head toward the doorway to see Madge Undersee walking in with a friend. A male friend. I quickly glance back toward Gale; his jaw is clenched and his eyes are dark. He wants to pretend he and Madge never happened, but that’s how he deals with all harsh moments in his life. He completely ignores them. I suppose I have no room to judge, since I am not known to embrace my hurt either. We just let it build up. Gale’s builds up into rage while mine takes the shape of walls.

Sometimes I’m not sure which is worse.

“Hey Hawthorne!” A female voice beside him tries to grab his attention from the petite blonde at the door. Samantha Wiress is leaning against the pub table, placing down her beer bottle and smiling her brilliant smile. She reaches up to rest her forearm on his shoulder, “I think it’s time you push me around the dance floor.”

She must have seen what I saw and, unlike me, she knows how to defuse a situation, while I tend to let it fester into a complete disaster. Gale’s eyes linger for only a second longer before he grins down at the woman next to him. He pushes himself away from the pub table and offers her his hand. Gale may be a quiet, reserved individual, but if there’s a place he can blow off steam its Panem. When we were in high school it was football, but that all changed his senior year.

We don’t talk about that day much.
As they are heading toward the dance floor Gale takes a second to squeeze my shoulder before disappearing into the crowds. The gesture isn’t lost on me and I appreciate his silent cease-fire. That’s usually how it goes for us. Apologies are rare, but we never walk away angry. We’ve had one too many loved ones taken from us too suddenly for us to get caught up on the small stuff. I give a small smile and watch the two start moving with the fast-paced song. But it’s not lost on me that I am once again left nearly alone in the crowded room.

“Hey Katniss!” A voice calls from just a few people away and I look up to see Finnick Odair waving me toward him.

Finnick and I have an amusing relationship, to say the least, but most have an amusing relationship with Finnick. He’s not known for being serious about much. He’s a couple years older than myself, Peeta, and Gale, but he’s always been present in our lives. Well, present in Peeta and Gale’s, and by associate mine. The only person that seems to get a sincere and even endearing reaction from Finnick is the meek brunette standing next to him.

Annie Cresta doesn’t say much, but she’s always been a kind person to me and it seems everyone else. It always amazes me just how different Finnick and Annie are, but yet they work. Truly work. No one doubts that one day he’ll make an honest woman of her, but with Finnick’s wild child behavior and Annie’s less-than pushy demeanor it could be a decade from now.

I smirk and zigzag my way through the several people that stand between myself and Finnick. He’s holding his arm out to greet me when I near him. He instantly pulls me to his side and looks down at me with that goofy grin. I am stiff against him and he loves how uncomfortable this contact makes me.

“I think I am wounded by the fact that you didn’t even acknowledge my existence when you walked into our beloved Panem.” His voice is laced with sarcasm and I can’t help but roll my eyes. “I’m sorry, I must have missed you.” I say, shrugging as he drops his arm from around my shoulders. “You know, you tend to blend in.”

“I understand, I mean I guess Peet’s got that unconventional appeal to him. I get distracted on a regular basis, too.”

My cheeks instantly flame and my eyes drop to the floor. I’m praying the floor will open up and swallow me when I feel Peeta stepping a bit closer to me as he laughs. I would normally want to step away on instinct, being embarrassed at being the butt of one of Finnick’s common sexual jokes, but I remain standing. For some reason having Peeta next to me makes me feel a bit at
ease. Like a kindred spirit standing next to another.

“Finn, how many times do I have to tell you? I’m just not interested.” Peeta’s voice breaks the silence that feels like it has lasted an eternity, but no one else seems to notice.

“I’m hoping to get a little booze in you and you lighten up.” Finnick smirks, “You’ve always been so damn uptight for me anyway.”

“Not enough in Texas.” Peeta laughs.

“Whatever, I just like to boost your ego.” Finnick turns slightly to wrap his arm around Annie’s waist and give her a quick peck on the cheek. “I need you on call in case this one ever realizes she’s slumming with me.”

I smile. It’s endearing, but not sickly so. In fact, I find moments like these nice to see from Finnick every once and awhile since most of the time comes off as a total arrogant piece of work. Annie, always the quiet one, just laughs and pushes back against his chest.

“Come on, Beautiful. We’re going dancing.” Finnick starts to pull her away toward the dance floor and I’m beginning to think this is some sort of conspiracy the universe has against me.

I’m almost afraid to look at Peeta; I really don’t want him to ask me to dance. I am a terrible dancer and I don’t need an occasion to showcase that. When I do finally look his way I see he’s avoiding my gaze as well. I’m not sure if I’m upset or relieved by this. The silence between us is deafening and I find myself searching for something, anything, to start conversation again. Unlike the silence we’d occasionally fall into on the ride over here this one is loaded. Loaded with expectations of the other’s next move.

“I have to admit,” Peeta finally speaks and I find myself sighing in relief, “I am a terrible dancer. But if I buy you a drink, does that make up for it?”

He’s grinning over at me and my knees feel weak. I can’t help but smile as I speak, “It’s a start.”

He tilts his head toward the direction and the bar. I take the signal to lead the way and we start toward the bar. I am acutely aware of the looks some familiar faces are giving us, but I’m more aware of how Peeta’s arm occasionally brushes up against mine when he steps closer to avoid
colliding with someone else. It’s harmless, I’m sure, but the small connection is practically a flame to my skin.

We just reach a clearing at the bar when a perky blonde appears next to Peeta, grinning. “I’ll be if it isn’t Peeta Mellark, back in little ole Dawson!” Her voice practically squeals over the loud music, “Becca said she’d heard you’d be coming home for the summer, but I just can’t believe it.”

“Glimmer.” Peeta says with a tight smile, leaning against the bar and not even bothering to look over at her.

“Hey Clove! Look who it is!” Glimmer turns away for a second to wave a petite raven-haired girl toward us.

Rebbecca Clove and Sarah “Glimmer” Alexander: the two most annoying, lapdog-like girls in Dawson. In fact, I’m sure if a Pomeranian and a Chihuahua took human form they would look just like Rebbecca Clove and Glimmer Alexander. Glimmer’s nickname says it all. Apparently her mother thought entering her beautiful baby girl in every pageant imaginable was required and her competitive years led her not only to her obvious nickname, but also the prize-winning personally she thinks she possesses.

And what Glimmer lacks in humility, Rebbecca Clove – or Clove, as most recognize her as – makes up for in bitterness. How the two are best friends is truly beyond most comprehension. The only thing they have in common is their mean spirited nature and what stronger tie is there? The two have been basically tied to the hip since they were pulling pigtails in kindergarten. And they’ve been destroying teen spirit ever sense.

“Remind me why we came here tonight?” Peeta leans close to me to whisper and I laugh, feeling oddly pleased.

“You dragged me here.” I smirk, enjoying how his dimple appears and his blue eyes dance with amusement.

“Ah yes, but what other excuse did I have to get you alone even if it’s just for a car ride?”

He’s flirting. Peeta Mellark is flirting with me. Peeta Mellark is flirting with me, Katniss Everdeen. And he couldn’t look more attractive doing it. I want to say something, I want to be as smooth as he is, but everyone who even slightly knows me knows that’s not possible. He
continues to smile at me and I know even in the dim light he can see my blush.

“Peeta Mellark, how the hell are you?” Clove’s voice pulls his attention from me and I’ve never wanted to punch someone more. She’s a petite girl, but her attitude stacks up with that of the tallest man. She crosses her arms over her chest and pops her hip out in that standard attitude stance. Her eyes roam over Peeta before practically discarding me like an old sandwich with a mere glance. I am obviously not worth her time and she has not shame in letting me know that.

“Can’t complain, Clove.” Peeta says with a shrug. “Where’s Marvel and Cato?”

“Ancient history, baby.” Glimmer makes her reappearance into the forced conversation by leaning close to Peeta, Clove laughing at her obvious drunk behavior.

Peeta takes a step back, closing in on me and I can’t help but feel slightly protective over something that isn’t even mine. Has never been mine. Will never be mine. I truly need to get a damn grip. I look away from the trio and see if the bartender has decided to make his grand appearance to help break up this interaction. No such luck.

“I assume you both remember Katniss Everdeen?” Peeta says, a blunt ploy to bring their attention to me. Of course they remember me. I haven’t left Dawson and neither have they. We remember each other every Saturday night, Sunday morning, and any other social events we may attend at the same time.

Clove looks over at me once again - this time for longer than a dismissive second - and Glimmer looks like some sort of predator as she sizes me up, twisting a blonde strand through her fingers.

“Hard to recognize her with Gale not attached to her hip—“

“Or her to his.” Clove finishes Glimmer’s sentence and the split second look of slight disappointment on Peeta’s face doesn’t go unnoticed by me.

“I guess the same can be said for you two.” I finally speak, getting more fed up by the moment. “Kind of like Lloyd and Harry.”

They don’t get the reference and continue to just stare at me, but that all fades to the background in my mind when I see Peeta’s bright grin out of the corner of my eye. He gets the *Dumb and*
A Dumber reference. More importantly, he thinks it’s funny. Not many would consider me humorous, but when I have my moments I’m grateful someone is around to get it. And right now I’m extremely glad it’s Peeta.

I can tell Glimmer is about to say something when I feel my phone vibrate in my pocket. I quickly reach into my jeans and pull out the device, seeing Prim’s name above a picture from last summer. She knows where I am – or where I was, in her mind. She probably assumes I’ve already found an excuse to leave. I look up at Peeta, who’s watched me pull out my phone, and show him the screen. He gives me a begging look that I assume is telling me to hurry back before I turn and start towards the door, needing to find some place quieter to answer.

As I’m leaving I notice Clove and Glimmer’s respective, assumed, exes standing at the corner of the bar. Marvel is looking in the direction I just came from, while Cato has decided following my whereabouts is more interesting. He’s obviously a complete creep. I remember the stories Gale used to tell about how he treated the girls – mostly Clove – he dated. Marvel didn’t seem like a total jewel, but at least he is just a mindless drone. He and Glimmer have a lot in common.

Finally I push through the last of the crowd and put my phone to my ear, “Hey Prim.”

“Where are you? Are you still at Panem?”

“Yeah, where else would I be?” I ask, stepping to the corner of the building so I can hear her better.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Katniss. I know you hate that place. I’m surprised you’ve lasted this long.”

I can hear the humor in her voice and I’m only slightly annoyed that my younger sister seems to be more knowledge of me than I am. Of course, that’s another trait she gets from our father.

“Did you call for something or just to give me useless trivia about myself?” I shove my free hand in my back pocket.

“You hate lima beans, but everyone hates lima beans. Okay, here’s a good one; you have always liked —”

“Prim!” I cut her off, “The point?”
“Are you coming over for lunch tomorrow? Momma says she’ll cook. And she’s even talking like she’ll go to church too.”

I’ll believe it when I see it, but I say nothing. I know Prim still carries a small flame of hope that one day our mother will someday wake up out of the fog she’s lived in for so long now. It infuriates me, but it also devastates me when I hear that familiar tinge of hope in Prim’s voice when she talks about future plans.

“I’ll be there around eleven.” I sigh, looking out into the dark parking lot.

“Or you can just come home with us after church.” Prim’s voice is still hopeful and it makes me want to yank my mother right out of her dazed reality.

“Sure, I’ll call you tomorrow. Okay?” I don’t want to talk about this. I don’t want to give my sister fake hope, but I refuse to diminish what little she has. This town is too small for another destroyed story. And I cringe at the idea of being another statistic.

“See you tomorrow!” She hangs up and I smile at the pure joy I hear in her voice.

I look down at my phone as the call ends and the screen goes dark. I envy her for the perpetual optimism she has. She deserves so much more than this town or our family can ever offer her. I just hope one day we don’t become some sort of roadblock for her bright future.

My phone goes back into my pocket as I start to turn back toward the building. My nerves are already getting the best of me at going back instead to meet Peeta. My boots crunch against the rocks, but stop suddenly when I see two strong shadows rounding the corner to greet me.

Marvel and Cato.

Or Sawyer Daniels and Joshua Cato. Both were part of the group that practically ran our rural school and are the only two that truly haven’t left the halls of Dawson High School behind. They both played football with Gale and at one time made up the small group of friends that Gale had, besides myself. You normally didn’t see Gale, Peeta, Marvel, and Cato when they weren’t together – Finnick usually not far behind either. They always stood out as being the jackasses, but they made for a good laugh. At least, that's the excuse gave me on numerous occasions.
At first I think about just ignoring them and going around - they are no doubt just trying to get a rise out of me after seeing me with Peeta and their two girlfriends. Or…ex-girlfriends? Whatever. It’s easier to keep track of a firefly than their statuses. But then I decide it’s best to say something, why not poke the beast?

“I think you passed the bar,” I say, pointing back towards the doorway, “It’s back that way.”

“We saw that,” Cato counters, crossing his arms over his chest. “Looks like your boyfriend was holding up quite an audience there.”

I don’t have a boyfriend. I want to say it and everyone knows that’s the case – or at least they should - but I am not about to take whatever bait they are throwing my way. Instead I just shake my head and start to walk around them, but Marvel steps in front of me. He’s so much taller than me that I have to tilt my head to look up at him. I immediately step back and try to remain calm. These two are harmless. Sure, they talk an awful lot, but when you live out here there isn’t much else to do.

“No need to hurry back, he seemed to be doing just fine without you.” Marvel smirks.

“Almost like you aren’t even missed.” Cato laughs and Marvel joins him.

I roll my eyes and take a deep breath, “You’d know what that’s like, wouldn’t you?”

I don’t want to wait for an answer and once again I try to walk past them. This time Cato’s strong arm reaches out to grab around my waist and I instantly push him back, my hands landing firm on his arm. His grip grows tighter and I can hear Marvel’s amused laughter from beside him. My heart is racing out of my chest.

“Where are you going?” Cato’s voice is full of venom and it makes my stomach turn. “We’re not finished here.”

His other arm starts to come around me and I know if he does that there’s no way I’ll be able to fight back. Cato is strong. Brute force alone would be enough, but the fact that I can’t even seem to see straight doesn’t help my situation.
“Hey!”

A booming voice surprises us all and my eyes dart toward the corner of the building once more to see my last hope standing there. Cato’s arm instantly drops from around my waist and he steps back. That’s when I realize just what kind of a hold he had on me and it takes all I have to keep my balance. Before I know it, Peeta is shoving Cato and the two are facing off, Marvel and I both a bit stunned.

“What the hell, man?” Cato argues, “We were just talking with her.”

“Well I think you’re done talking,” Peeta’s voice is low and I don’t think I’ve ever seen such aggression from him. I wasn’t even sure he had it in him.

Cato steps forward, taking Peeta’s words as some sort of challenge. I should be focused on the situation at hand, but my mind travels to just how strong Peeta is. I thought Cato was strong, but apparently college football has really worked out well for the other blonde because he’s nearly the size of the brutal Cato.

“She’s not your property, she can do what she wants.” Cato’s jaw is clenched and Peeta’s mirrors his.

“And I’m sure being manhandled by a meathead like you is on the top of that list.” Peeta comments, “Now I’m not going to tell you again, move on.”

“Or what?”

“Come near her again and I’ll personally give you a reason to go to the emergency room.” Peeta doesn’t flinch and his voice remains calm, but his arms flexed slightly, showing the anger he feels.

The silence is deadly. At first I think Cato is going to throw a punch, he isn’t nearly as level-headed as Peeta, but then he steps back and glances over at Marvel. The Marvel who was once so cocky about stopping me in my tracks now looks like a deer in headlights. Silently he tilts his head back toward the doors front entrance and steps past Peeta. Marvel silently follows.

We both stand there silently for a long moment, watching the two disappear from sight. When Peeta looks back at me I suddenly feel a wash of anger, the shock of the entire situation starting to
wear off. I didn’t need him to be my knight in shining armor. I would have held my own. I’ve spent most of my life telling Gale he didn’t need to always protect me; I certainly don’t need another male with a savoir complex in my life.

“Are you okay?” He asks, the soothing familiar voice I’ve become accustom to back.

“I’m fine.” My voice is harsher than I expected, but I stand by it. “I would have been just fine. I don’t need you to save me. I’m not some kind of damsel in distress.”

“No, but Cato is an ass who’s been drinking,” Peeta argues and I can tell I’ve annoyed him with my attitude. “And he doesn’t take no for an answer very often.”

“I can handle myself.” I argue, knowing it’s foolish as it comes out of my mouth. I know Peeta’s right, but I’m not about to admit that.

“Fine, then lets just say I met my Superhero quota for the evening.” His joke is a dark one, but I know it’s his way of throwing in the white flag. He’s not about to fight over a topic he won’t win – at least not out loud.

And yet again I’m in another stand off. This one isn’t threatening, but more a battle of wills. I know I don’t want to be the first one to admit to anything and I can tell by the look on Peeta’s face that he’s not interested in arguing in circles, but neither of us want to walk away either. He shoves his hands in his pockets and looks down at the gravel before letting out a deep sigh.

“Come on, I’ll take you home.”

And to that I don’t argue.
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Ivory will remain to be the best beta ever.

“\textit{He gave up on arrows & I ain’t bulletproof.}”

Avoidance.

It’s the best defensive tactic that no one admits to. It’s the reason at least one out of five disagreements don’t end in murder. Sure, it’s not statistically proven, but I’m no naïve fool. It’s one of those defensive tactics that, if used just right, can completely defuse a situation entirely. Look at celebrities; they’ve got it down to a fine art. One makes an embarrassing public move, goes into hiding for a while, and then come out with a brand new blockbuster and smelling like roses some time later. Alright, maybe not the best example since most of us don’t have blockbuster success on our side.

But the sentiment still rings true: there is much to be said about avoidance when used properly. Properly used I’m sure it’s probably stopped a few wars, or at least stalled them dramatically. Again, my facts are not proven, but I avoid such formalities. Avoidance has its perks - that much is obvious. For example, avoiding doing homework usually means I have more time to be outside with Gale or my sister. Avoiding my mother’s presence usually means that I can pretend there was no elephant in the room for another moment. Avoiding memories of high school usually keeps my sanity in tack for another day. And avoiding Peeta Mellark since last Saturday night has meant that I do not have to face my pride’s triumph over common sense.

Of course avoidance, as it’s more commonly known for, tends to make the matters worse once they
are faced again. My grades certainly suffered from my lack of attention in high school. My mother certainly didn’t change in my absence; in fact, I think she began to believe it was alright to be completely void of emotion toward her children. And my high school memories are still there waiting in vivid color whenever I lapse and turn down Memory Lane. And Peeta Mellark? Well, that’s an avoidance I have yet to break.

But all good things must come to an end.

And I have to say…avoiding someone on a three-hundred acre ranch on the outskirts of a tiny town is a lot harder than it sounds. It’s like avoiding snow in the Arctic. I’ve all but resorted to doing office work in order to avoid the youngest Mellark.

On Sunday, whether you believe or not, everyone shows up at church. And so guess who’s involved in ‘everyone’? You guessed it: Peeta Mellark and myself. The church really isn’t that big, so avoiding him there took all but hiding out in the baptistery. Fortunately after that it was easy to take sanctuary with Prim and my mother at their home for the afternoon. Of course, Prim being the busy body that she naturally is meant that she wanted to know all of the details. Again, it’s fortunate that’s she’s long since realized that I am abysmal at details so she gives up soon enough. Monday soon follows and I’m almost naïve enough to think our paths won’t cross, but they do and far too early. It’s only seven and I’ve just met Samantha in the barn when he walks in.

I don’t mean to stare - I never mean to stare - but sleepiness looks good on him. I’m beginning to think most things look good on him. His eyes are still lazy from slumber, but their vibrant blue is still the same. His curls flop every which way and his cheeks are red from the early summer sunburn that we all get by the end of May. His t-shirt rises when he reaches for a pair of nearby work gloves and a toolbox.

Apparently he’s said good morning without me knowing because Samantha subtly elbows me in the ribs. I quickly look from the now visible skin of his side to her face and then to his. I think I mumble a greeting, but I’m too quickly working to hide my flushed features by grabbing at any work utensil available to busy myself. It’s not until he leaves that Samantha’s laughter can be heard echoing through the empty structure.

“What?” I grumble, trying to act aloof. A game I’m never good at.

“We’re changing horseshoes this morning,” she says as she smiles.

“I know that.” I’m aware I sound agitated.
“We probably won’t need barbed wire.” Samantha looks at the bucket of tools I’ve just assembled and my eyes follow hers.

My hands instantly cover my face as I feel Samantha wrap her arm around me in amusement. I’ve obviously never been very good at trying to look busy either. I think I’ve become the ranch’s laughing stock overnight.

“Do you want to tell me why you’ve been hiding in the shadows these past couple of days?” Gale asks, lifting his pitchfork covered in muck over the wheelbarrow.

I glance at him for a moment before finding anything else to look at while I put on my work gloves. I don’t want to tell him about Saturday night. He knows the basics, but he doesn’t know the full reason why I disappeared without telling him goodbye. Not that it is completely uncommon. The uncommon part has come in the last couple of days when I’ve hardly been around to socialize. Normally I’ll stick around with the others after chores to grab dinner or just relax, but both Sunday and Monday nights you can find me hiding away in my small home.

Gale tenses, I see it out of the corner of my eye, and I already know what he’s coming to the conclusion of. I look up at him fully and see the silent anger that’s set into his strong features. Before I can voice my objection to his thoughts he’s dropped his pitchfork and stepped closer to me.

“What did he do to you?” His voice is low and deadly, just like I remember it being the day some senior tried to get the best of me our freshman year.

Forever my protector.

“Gale, relax.” I groan, my voice loud compared to his. “He didn’t do anything. I – I don’t have to answer to you. Just leave it alone.”

It comes out harder than I expected it to, but I don’t waver. Instead I stare into his eyes, waiting for him to back down. I know he will because as much as Gale wants to protect me, he wants to trust me that much more. When I ask him to back off he will. Because although he may not completely understand my need to avoid certain realities, he respects my opinion enough to allow it.
Slowly his eyes soften and I feel him scan my features, because so much between us are the things that go unsaid. He’s checking my stance; seeing if my confident voice echoes through to my demeanor. He then reads my expression. I know my jaw is clenched, mirroring his, and my eyes never leave his.

After a momentary standoff he must be satisfied with what he sees because he backs away and starts back toward the stall he was mucking out. That’s when I realize I had been holding my breath and I exhale. Why does Peeta cause such tension between the two of us? And then it hits me. I know Gale isn’t fond of Peeta, but that’s not the reason for the tension. The reason for the tension stems from my sudden need to defend him. To prove to Gale he’s not this superficial jock that he’s somehow chalked him up to be.

“What happened?” I ask, cutting the silence like a sharp knife. The question comes out before I can even think about it. “Between you and Peeta. What happened? And when? You two used to be as thick as thieves.”

“Used to be.” He mumbles, but I’m not sure he wanted me to hear him because he doesn’t look at me. He looks past me as though the answers are written on the stall walls behind me.

I’m waiting and I truly believe this is going to be the moment where it all comes to light. The moment where I finally understand Gale’s sudden climate change toward the shining star of Dawson, toward the guy he used to stand by through thick and thin. Those times seem so long ago that I’m not sure if they ever even existed anymore. And I also realize how I’m desperate to know. I realize why; because I will side with Gale. I always have and I always will. And that means then I can finally cut these unfamiliar feelings I have toward Peeta. I can finally rid myself of the awareness and excitement I feel whenever he’s near. I will no longer be in this self-proclaimed dance with the boy I’ve spent my entire life avoiding.

But then he grabs his once forgotten pitchfork and disappears into the stall, “Just be careful.”

I’m stunned. I want to run in after him and knock him over the head. Demand that if he’s going to root himself so deep into my business that he better be good and ready to tell me why he’s Peeta’s anti-cheerleader. But then I realize this is what Gale and I do; we test each other. We push each other’s buttons to see where we lie. Because most everything between goes unsaid. And it works for us. But now it pisses me off. He wants me to push because that shows him I have something truly invested. I bite my lip and dig twice as hard into the muck of my stall.

Damn you, Gale.
Tuesday afternoon is far less eventful than Tuesday morning. Gale and I, like always, have called a silent truce and have decided to steer clear of all issues that could be even remotely linked back to past friendships, Saturday night, burnt bridges, and all things Peeta Mellark. In fact, the afternoon is pretty standard as far as conversation and events go. Gale talks about his younger siblings, I mention Prim’s attention to Rory, we both laugh at the idea. We know they’re playing with a fire we never could get right. And we both know it’s better left unlit. At least for us.

Gale sets two paint cans atop the workbench and looks over at me. He has a goofy grin on his face that can only be accompanied by an equally goofy plan for what we should be doing tonight.

“I hear Sae is making lamb stew tonight.” He starts; tossing a few used paintbrushes in the pan I’m currently sorting through, causing several splatters to land on my arms. He laughs and I just give him my best glare. “I owe Beetee a round for losing last week.”

“You lost to Beetee at darts?” I laugh, raising an eyebrow. “Sounds like you’re getting a bit rough around the edges, Hawthorne.”

He elbows me in the side, “It was an off night. So are you coming or not?”

“No.” I admit, still laughing. “If you don’t mind I think I’ll live vicariously through reruns of Dallas.”

“Vicariously? You have been hanging around College Boy too much.”

His comment is meant to be light, but it’s tender territory and I’m not ignorant to the catch of bitterness in his voice. But I’m not interested in another pointless fight and it doesn’t seem Gale is either because he quickly grabs his old work gloves, shoves them in his back pocket and heads toward the door.

“If you change your mind we’ll be there around six.” He’s smiling, but I can tell he’s feeling a bit foolish. “Have a good night, Catnip.”

I watch him leave. It’s hard to be mad at him for long especially since I know the reason we butt heads so much: we’re cut from the same cloth. His temper burns bright, just like mine. He’s as stubborn as a mule and I live to be that much more stubborn. We cut at each other just as much as we sooth. I suppose that’s just our fate.
Before long I find myself at the brass sink positioned toward the back of the familiar barn. These paintbrushes aren’t going to wash themselves. I half laugh and curse Gale for so smoothly removing himself from this chore. He’s a hard worker, no one would argue otherwise, but when it comes to getting a cleanup crew afterwards I’d say he’s lacking. He knows it too.

I turn on the water and start scrubbing, knowing as soon as I finish this task my day is complete. I do love my job, but the call to end the day is always a strong one. I suppose that comes with working your tail off for nearly ten hours with the sun beating down on you like a leather whip. I hear the side door open, but I don’t take notice of who opened them until I hear a toolbox slam down nearby.

Of course it’s Peeta Mellark. I’m beginning to think this damn barn is the essence of this forsaken dance we’ve been doing. He’s noticed me, I’m sure of it. He hasn’t particularly told me so, but it’s hard to miss the person standing in front of the large – and rather loud – sink in the back. He doesn’t say anything, but continues to look through the draws of the workbench. I continue to scrub the brushes, doing my best to focus on each tiny piece of whitewash that travels toward the drain.

These brushes have never been cleaner, I’m sure of it, but I was hoping my work would keep me busy until he left. It didn’t and he’s still rummaging around. And my hands have all but shriveled up beneath the warm water. I look up at the dirty mirror; I can just make out his form behind me. He’s look through the wiring tools and I can tell from the hunch of his shoulders he’s becoming a bit frustrated. I take this opportunity to turn the water off, the silence so very prominent now, and watch him through the mirror.

“Are you done avoiding me?” He asks and my heart stops.

I quickly avert my eyes, not that he could truly know if I was looking at him or not. I grab a nearby towel and start to dry the brushes. I replay the question over in my head. I’d expected him to sound at least somewhat annoyed, but he doesn’t. In fact, to my frustration, he sounds slightly amused. I’m on my third brush when I glance up into the mirror again and I stare directly into his eyes. He’s now looking at me through the reflection, leaning against the workbench. I want to look away, but I’m drawn to those blue eyes that still hold their vibrancy even in this old, mistreated mirror.

“Because if you are, I could really use your help fixing a snag in the western fence line.” His eyes don’t leave mine.

“I – um,” I want so desperately for the floor to open up and swallow me yet again, but it doesn’t
and I’m left standing here like a stuttering fool.

“Your secret’s safe with me anyway.” Peeta smiles, “No one knows I practically saved your life from the evil monsters of Dawson. Well, no one except for Finnick.”

Except for Finnick? That’s like writing a letter to the town paper. Everyone will have known for at least twenty-four hours at this point. Finnick couldn’t keep a secret if his life depended on it. Well, that may not be the case, I don’t really know, but that boy sure does love to talk.

Peeta must see my distress because he laughs, pushing himself away from the workbench to head toward me, “I’m kidding.”

My skin betrays me when he’s near and I feel it start to tingle with the awareness I wish wasn’t there. He stops short just behind me and we’re at tense standstill. His eyes still don’t leave mine. I want to kick him for being so light and amused when I feel so very on edge when he’s near. And yet him I want him this close. That’s what this avoidance of mine has taught me; I think of Peeta more when he’s not near. I find my thoughts lingering to the last time I saw him. I find myself wanting to search him out.

“So are you going to help me or not?” He asks, his smile turning up on one side.

I turn around to face him, realizing we’re much closer than the mirror had allowed me to believe. My breath catches, but only for a moment and I look up to him as I pull my work gloves from my back pocket.

“Like you could do it without me.” And before I lose my momentary confidence, I turn on my heels and head toward the door he just came in through.

After about an hour into repairing the fence I realize that the word “snag” is truly an understatement of the century. Apparently a rather large branch had fallen during a recent storm and taken part of the fence with it, but fortunately Peeta had come prepared. While he made easy work of taking the chainsaw and cutting up the offending branch into pieces, I made myself useful by straightening the new wire we’ll be using. Luckily this was a part of the ranch that even the cattle didn’t venture to often thanks to the lack of water source and harsher terrain. It wasn’t a wooded area by any means, but the low hills made it ideal for heavy brush and several large trees.
We work in silence; any conversation we could wish to have is easily overpowered by the noise of the chainsaw. Of course, that doesn’t stop my eyes from wandering in Peeta’s direction more often than I’d ever admit to.

His grey OSU shirt is damp with sweat and his curls are beginning to stick to his forehead like a soggy mop. He’s wearing sunglasses to protect his eyes from any sort of stray woodchip. And my eyes could not overlook his arms. Those strong arms that look somehow so perfect working here on the ranch. Those strong arms that I know have helped him win several important football games. Those strong arms that so willingly jumped to my defense on Saturday. Those strong arms that I’m so suddenly afraid to push away from.

I hate the Mellark genes. It would be one thing if he were good looking and a complete asshole or ugly with a heart of gold, but no. God has decided it be best to give Peeta Mellark both pleasing traits. Another sign to me that God and I have not always been on same page when it comes to my life.

Finally Peeta kills the engine of the chainsaw, pulling me from my thoughts, and starts moving away the pieces from the snagged fence. I quickly fall in beside him to move some of the larger pieces that require two sets of able hands. I appreciate how he doesn’t even give me a look of uncertainty that I can actually help. It’s a small gesture, but even in my years on the ranch I still have some that look at me like I’m a delicate flower whenever I try to do something one of the men usually do. I appreciate his trust and it’s immediately something I don’t want to lose.

Within a half hour the task is finally complete, the hard part behind us with moving the pieces of wood, and step back to look at our handy work. It’s a wired fence, I don’t expect to see a work a beauty, but I’m more concerned that it’s stabilized enough to stop a rebellious young calf should they stray this far.

When I turn back around I see Peeta sitting on the tailgate of his truck drinking from a bottle of water. Without a word I start toward the spot next to him, silently accepting the bottle of water he himself just drank from. We sit in silence, once more, appreciating the setting Texas sun and evening breeze rolling over the hills.

“God, I love this place.” Peeta says.

I smile as I look over at him. I can feel the reverence he speaks with and I understand it completely.

The comfortable silence falls over us again and this time my mind is wandering in directions I
know it shouldn’t. Peeta is the youngest, Clement and Reese have both set their lives in different directions away from Mellark Ranch. And Ohio is certainly a far cry from the rural lands of Dawson. The mumbles have been going on for years now, but with Peeta’s graduation in two years time they’ve gotten louder. The cynics of the group swear they’ll be out of their jobs soon and those too afraid to see it end avoid the topic altogether.

“Do you –“ I start to ask, but lose my courage and look down at the ground below us before trying again. “Are you coming back after school? To take over for your dad?”

“I want to.” Peeta says, taking in a deep breath. “I plan to. But not without a good degrading from my mother for the choices I’ve made, I’m sure.”

I watch as his hands run up and down the denim on his thighs. He’s obviously anxious when talking about his mother and I don’t blame him. Everyone is anxious when it comes to dealing with Mrs. Mellark. And her reputation with her three sons is not a bright one. Most know of the abuse they’ve all taken in one way or another, but no one would admit to knowing a single thing. I want to say something, but I’m not sure what. Instead I left my left foot up to rest on the tailgate so I can rest my chin on my knee. I’m still looking over at him when he turns to look at me with that trademark easy smile.

“She’s not all bad though.” He must know what we all say about her, but he stops short of what he’s about to say to defend her. It’s like he can’t even think of a defending argument. “I – I think she just wants us to have better than what she has here. I think she expected more out of her life.”

More? I can’t imagine many people in Dawson wanting more out of life than what the Mellarks have. They are the shining example of what a little piece of paradise looks like.

“I don’t get it either,” Peeta smiles, seeing the confusion I thought I was doing well to hide. “I prefer the worst day here to any day away from here. But I think she thought my father would get tired of playing cowboy sooner or later and sell the place. When that didn’t happen she turned – well, you know.”

I nod, because I do know. I realized a long time ago that Peeta and I have something pretty trying in common: less than perfect mothers. Mothers that we will spend forever trying to please in our own way, but always come up short. But Peeta is better for it where as I’m not convinced that I am. I know I’ve become bitter toward the woman who has all but written Prim and I off. Peeta refuses to even admit to Mrs. Mellark’s abuse where I continually look down upon my mother for her blatant disregard for us.

“At least we have one decent parental figure, right?” I give a weak smile, speaking of my father in the present tense sends a shock of pain to my heart that I wasn’t expecting. Peeta looks at me and I
can see the sadness in his eyes and for the first time I don’t resent it. I usually resented those who felt pity for me at the loss of my father, but with Peeta I see a genuine understanding. Like the look I receive from Gale from time to time.

“How’s Prim and your mother doing?” He asks and I know he means specifically with the loss of my father. Everyone knew how hard my family took it and everyone knows the difficulty my mother has been since.

“They’re okay. I know it was years ago,” I shake my head, looking back toward the sunset, “But some days I wake up and I feel like it just happened.”

I’m not sure where the sudden honesty came from, but I feel slightly relieved when I say it. Like I’m finally able to be honest about how it’s affecting me. With Prim I have to be strong. With my mother I have to tough. With Gale I have to be slightly removed, because I don’t want him to think that I somehow believe my situation is worse than his. And with everyone else I am just fine. It feels good to not be okay, even if the moment is fleeting.

He’s watching me; I can see it out of the corner of my eye. I wrap my arms around my propped up knee and smile, wanting to move on before I completely lose all control. “Prim is getting ready to start high school in the fall. So of course, she now knows everything.”

“Naturally.” He laughs and I’m grateful for his ease into a new conversation. “Wow, I can’t believe Prim is going to be in high school. I remember when she was still chasing you around and you still had two braids instead of one. And you always wore overalls. Always.”

The expression of surprise isn’t hidden well on my face. I want to say something witty, but, alas, I am still Katniss Everdeen and cunning responses are usually not forthcoming when I am surprised. He looks over at me and laughs again, shaking his head.

“Don’t worry, if it makes you feel any better, when I was eight I wore my mom’s apron. Every day. For an entire summer. Clement and Reese both have blackmail pictures.” Peeta grins. “I think overalls pale in comparison.”

I smile, but it’s slightly forced as I work on suppressing the sense of surprise that I still feel in my stomach. I clear my throat and shake my head, “I can’t believe you remember that, but I suppose Dawson is pretty small. Not a lot of people to notice.”
“I think I’d notice you in the largest of cities.”
These Are My People

Chapter Summary

Summary: There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Due to our crazy schedules, Ivory didn't beta this chapter. All mistakes belong to me because she would never make mistakes. I apologize in advance for any you may find, but I hope you can look past them & enjoy nonetheless! Thank you for all your great support! Enjoy!

“Holler ‘bout a bad call; preacher breaking up the fight.”

Church League Softball.

Every sport has its perks: football has cool fall weather, baseball is the honored sport to have the beautiful weather of summer, basketball is an inside sport – weather isn’t even thought of. And Church League Softball usually has “Church Lady” food to follow, which beats even the nicest and most perfect of weather. “Church Lady” food usually beats most things. And in Dawson, the women were abducted by Paula Dean and put through rigorous testing before being returned to their families. They all pasted with flying colors and mountains of butter.

And Thursday nights during the summer in Dawson are truly a work of southern cuisine art. The tradition starts around six at the local park. It’s really not much of a park; a swing set and a slide, one rundown softball diamond with enough bleacher seating to fit the Brady Bunch – so most bring their own chairs or blankets - and then there is a pavilion. And the pavilion is where the magic happens; the ladies and their given dishes usually start showing up while the first game is going on, and are all set up by the time the preacher calls for a twenty minute break in between games.

That’s when the night really begin; everyone knows what they want and it’s a race to get to the
front of the line first. Southern hospitality goes out the window when Mrs. Undersee’s pecan pie is involved. And the “Ladies’ First” rule? Oh no. You obviously haven’t had Mags’ fried chicken. Of course, there is plenty to go around and most of us can usually afford to skip a meal, but when this kind of food is involved it’s like we’ve all been on a liquids only diet for the last thirty days.

The games themselves provide the entertainment, but the food is what draws the crowd in this small town. We all know good food and we all know how to appreciate it.

Fortunately, the games are all for fun. The teams don’t change much from one summer to another. But then again, there really aren’t any rules about adding to the roster. So a team gaining one player or another from week to week isn’t new. Majority of the players are men and as much as they’ll laugh that it’s all for fun, I’ve seen instances that turns Pastor’s face red with shock from the language that comes out of these boys’ mouths when a call doesn’t go their way. But no matter what arguments take place they can usually be all forgotten by the time Greasy Sae pulls out her homemade ice cream.

And tonight is a good night for a cool treat. The Texas heat is on high and even flying down a dirt road with the windows down doesn’t do much to subdue it. But when your old pick up truck lost its air conditioning abilities before you were even born there isn’t many other options. Prim has already drank half the water bottle I bought for her and she’s leaning her head out the window like an old hound. Her smile is tired, but she’s still humming along with the music coming across the tattered radio.

“I think I should go into the bumper sticker business.” She muses, her eyes closed as the wind whips the pieces falling from her ponytail around her relaxed face. I know she can’t see my confused expression, but she must sense it because she goes on without a word from me. “My first one would be: ‘Welcome to Texas: Winters are great, but don’t be fooled you’re screwed come summer time.’”

Our laughter fills the cab and I shake my head. Prim could do so many things if she put her mind to it and for that reason I don’t ever doubt her when she changes her career every other day. Of course, bumper sticker maker is one of the stranger ones. Most days she wants to be a nurse or even a doctor, but she doesn’t admit to that one too much. I think she fears she’s dreaming too big. Everdeens don’t come from much and we don’t seem to make too much either. Sure, we live an honorable existence, I suppose, but it’s a humble one and some days I think that it’s going to be Prim’s stumbling block.

Her potential screams for so much more than this small town of Dawson, but the Everdeen in her doesn’t let her forget the rest of us. I understand that. I know I’m the same, but for me it doesn’t feel like a burden because I know I’m not meant for much. I’m content in this place living from paycheck to paycheck. In fact, it’s all I’ve ever wanted. She never says so, but Prim wants more.
And she deserves more.

The rest of the fifteen-minute drive is spent with Prim going on about her time spent volunteering at the local vet clinic or how she had a couple classmates over several nights ago. We don’t mention Mother. We’ve become rather good at dancing around that issue. Whenever the conversation looks as though it could head in that direction one us quickly turns directions. Maybe it makes us terrible children, but most days we feel as though we’re talking her issues in circles. And it’s not like she ever cares about the toll she’s taken on our family. She’s been long gone for years now, I’m not sure she’s even aware she has an affect on us.

We used to spend hours trying to think of ways to pull her out of this forever rut that she got herself into after Daddy’s passing, but once plan after plan fails you begin to waste your energy elsewhere. And so that’s what we do. Now that I’ve moved out I try not to bring her up and Prim will only mention something if she’s having an especially bad day.

“I hope Mrs. Cresta brought her chicken salad.” Prim says as we pull into the impromptu parking lot of the park. “I’ve practically had dreams about it since the Memorial Day picnic.”

I am about to respond until I see the one person I’ve found myself overly drawn to these past few days climbing out of his truck nearby. My mind completely clears of whatever I was about to say to Prim as I watch Peeta reach into the bed of his truck and pull out an old sports bag.

I kill the engine and hear Prim clearing her throat extravagantly. My eyes dart back over at her and I can’t help but blush when I see the obvious smile painted across her face.

“Don’t say anything.” I mumble, pushing my door open.

Prim mimics my movements and laughs, “What would I say? I mean besides Peeta and Katniss sittin’ in a tree –“

“Primrose Everdeen.” My tone is low through my teeth, hoping she might actually think I’m angry and hush. The last thing I need is Peeta – or anyone - hearing her singing that God-awful song.

She stops, but her melody-like laughter tells me she knows I’m not actually mad. Not that I’ve ever been good at being mad at my baby sister. The problem is: she knows it.
We start towards the field that already has several players warming up. The audience has started to gather around the diamond while some of the women are starting to set up their dishes nearby. I try to tell myself I’m walking a little slower than normal because we’re early. But I know the way my eyes tend to want to pull in *his* direction every few seconds isn’t due to the time.

“Katniss!” My heart rate is linked to that voice and my eyes finally cast a good look in the direction they’ve been threatening to turn toward. Peeta is jogging towards us and Prim doesn’t hesitate to give me a knowing look.

“Hey Peeta,” Prim says first with a bright grin and again I’m reminded why I am so thankful for her casual, carefree nature that eases most situations.

“Hey Prim,” Peeta smiles back, adjusting the strap of his bag. “How’s your summer?”

“Can’t complain. *Something* has put Katniss in an unusually good mood this summer, so life is pretty good.” Prim smirks, Peeta continues to smile, and I quietly pray for the ground to open up and swallow me. Her eyes look past Peeta and then back at us, “Hey, Sarah just got here. I’m going to say hi. Good luck tonight, Peeta!”

“Thanks,” Peeta says, giving a casual wave as she runs pasted him.

I look to the direction she’s taken off toward and inwardly groan; Sarah is nowhere in sight. My cheeks are still burning when Peeta looks back at me, but he doesn’t look anything less than perfect. God, the world is truly against me.

“I’m glad you’re in a good mood.” Peeta says, looking over at me as we start to walk toward the field.

“Prim talks too much.” I mumble, tucking a stray hair behind my ear. I’ve decided it's better to look straight ahead.

His laugh is infectious and I find myself breaking into a grin myself. We fall into one our comfortable silences as we close the short distance from the parking lot to the dugout of his team. People are continuing to fill in around the fence as both teams gain members on the actual diamond.
When I look over at Peeta he’s unzipping his old sports bag and pulling out an old glove.

“Have you played before?” He asks, offering the glove to me.

I know my eyes grow wide as I look at him, “Does hiding in the outfield during P.E. count?”

“Outfield experience. Perfect.” Peeta grins, “We’re short a right fielder.”

“Oh no,” I start to shake my head; trying to push back the glove he’s forced into my hands. “You know, sports don’t come natural to all people, Peeta. This is not a good idea.”

“Katniss, it’s right field. I’m not asking you to throw a no-hitter.” Peeta laughs, turning on his heels to head toward the rest of his team.

Our team.

Surprisingly, three innings into the game and I have yet to make a mistake. I have also yet to be up to bat or had the ball within ten feet of me, but I like to count the small victories in my life.

And more surprisingly, I’ve had a lot of fun being a part of this summer tradition and enjoy most of my team. This is quite the band of misfit players. Most have an athletic background, but none seem to take the game too seriously. Finnick spends more time running his mouth than covering first base. Beetee argues with “ref” Wiress over every call – including the ones that work in our favor. Gale is busy trying to coach Rory into becoming a better player while Rory is busy mocking Gale’s coaching behavior. Reese and Peeta are continually talking trash while Clement silently, like always, shows up his two brothers.

And looking into the crowd shows the same carefree nature. Annie, sitting next to Madge, can’t keep her eyes off her boisterous boyfriend. Prim has finally found Sarah and a group of other girls. Even Marvel and Glimmer look like their enjoying themselves, but I try to avoid looking in their direction. My stomach still turns sour when I remember that night. Haymitch is standing against the fence, coaching both teams as though this were football practice. The women in charge of dinner have finally finished their set up and are now occupying up several blankets behind home.
plate. Clement’s wife is among them and it doesn’t go unnoticed how loudly she cheers whenever he does anything.

And I suddenly realize I’m beginning to understand the look in her eyes.

That feeling hits me like a ton of bricks and I think it’s enough to scare me back into my ever-present tendency for avoidance, but I’m not allowed to focus on it that long because soon our team is up to bat and I’m third in the line-up this time around. The thought makes my palms sweat and my stomach twist.

Peeta gives me a reassuring smile before he walks out of our dug out. He’s up first and everyone on our team instantly starts cheering him on. I find my own nerves put at bay for a moment while I focus in on the way the tension in his arms showcases his practiced muscles.

I watch him for a moment longer while he takes a few practice swings before stepping into the box to bat. Gale’s eyes are intense and try I ignore the obvious determination to strike Peeta out that’s behind them. His toss is harder and Peeta lets the first one pass. Wiress calls it a strike and Beetee is soon to follow with his rebuttal.

Peeta doesn’t seem phased, but Gale looks pleased with himself. Not something that most would notice, but I’ve spent most of my life reacting to those subtle expressions. Reese claps his hands loudly from his shortstop position cheering Gale on.

With the second toss, Peeta gets his stride and the “ting” sound of the ball meeting his bat fills the evening. The ball soars above the infield’s heads and makes a perfect line toward right field. Peeta starts to run toward first base while Cato runs back toward the fence where the ball has landed.

Peeta’s football training pays off as he rounds first and heads straight toward second. Reese is now covering second while the second basemen goes out to be the cutoff for Cato. Peeta is rounding second - making sure to tap Reese on the back has he passes - by the time the ball hits the second basemen’s glove. And he comes to a slow stop at third. Jackie just gets out of his way when he comes jogging in.

Reese holds the ball, walking it back to Gale once he realizes Peeta isn’t going anywhere. Our team cheers for Peeta while Clement walks up to the plate to bat next. And my nerves wake back up as I realize it’s now my turn to stand inside the “on deck” position. I slowly grab a bat and walk out onto the field, wiping my free hand on my jeans. The sweat pools back into the creases instantly.
At least Clement is before me and Peeta is on third. He’ll easily hit his younger brother home and our team will be up a point. My turn to bat won’t be nearly as important once at least one of the Mellark boys has crossed home plate. I watch Clement get in his stance and I know that I should be practicing my own swing, but in order to practice that would mean I’d have to know what I was doing. And I don’t.

Standing watching Clement bat is probably the best practice I could get at this point, but my session is short lived when Clement swings on Gale’s first pitch and the ball pops high up into the air. Clement looks annoyed and Reese takes several steps back and catches the fly ball before his younger brother can even reach first base.

“Clement is out!” Wiress calls and Clement shakes his head before heading toward our dugout.

“Just relax, Katniss.” Clement smiles, tapping my shoulder and giving me a reassuring nod.

I slowly make my walk of shame up to the plate and look towards Gale. He’s smiling and normally that’s enough to calm any nerves I may have, but tonight it does nothing. I am slightly relieved knowing he would never try to make me look like a fool, but the unfortunate part is that I don’t need his help. I can do this task all by myself.

“Come on, Katniss!” Prim’s voice cheers in the crowd.

“You got this, Katniss.” I hear Peeta’s voice behind me at third. “Gale’s got nothing.”

It’s a common phrase. It’s not a personal attack. I know Peeta doesn’t mean it as a negative comment toward Gale, but as a way to give me some sort of comfort. But Gale doesn’t see it that way and I can tell. He glances at Peeta for only a moment, but I know the anger is there. When he looks back at me his jaw is tense and my grip tightens on my bat. The ball lobs toward me and when I swing there is nothing but the whiff of air. Both teams begin to cheer again. My team is cheering for my to hit it next time while Gale’s team is cheering for him to keep up the good work.

“Keep your eye on the ball, Katniss.” Peeta cheers and I can’t help but feel relief that he still believes in me. “He’ll throw it right down the middle. Gale isn’t quick enough for any tricks.”

Again, I know Peeta is saying those things for my benefit, but with Gale’s talent as his target he’s playing with fire. My eyes are on Gale and his jaw is clenched as he glares toward Peeta.
“Keep your mouth shut, Mellark.” Gale spits.

My attention turns toward third base where Gale is looking and Peeta looks slightly amused. He shakes his head and laughs, “Relax Hawthorne. I’m just cheering on a teammate. You might want to thicken that skin, man.”

“My skin is thick enough,” Gale argues back, taking several steps toward third base. “I just don’t appreciate you using me as a punching bag while you cheer on ‘your teammate’.”

My back straightens up and my eyes bounce back and forth between the two. I know mine are the only ones following this interaction. The whole crowd has gone quiet along with the two teams. If I wasn’t so invested I would almost find this scene comical. Two grown men acting like hypersensitive teenage girls over something one of them said.

Peeta rests his hands on his hips, “Come on, Gale. Just pitch the damn ball. If it means that much to you I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

“Oh now I have to ask you to keep your mouth shut?” Gale’s eyes grow along with his anger. Whatever Peeta just said has obviously triggered something in Gale, but as to what only they know. “I thought that was something you were good at.”

“That again? Just let it go.” Peeta runs a hand through his blonde curls.

“Just let it go? I’m sorry,” Gale finally drops his glove, ball rolling into the dirt, and starts for Peeta. Peeta doesn’t back down and finally comes off third base. “I didn’t realize your life was forever changed by the events of that night. In fact, last time I checked your plans stayed exactly the same.”

My eyes scan the crowd, the confusion etched on everyone’s faces. Everyone except for several and then I realize what this silent anger toward Peeta is about. My eyes go back toward the two standing in the field. The two contrast each other completely; Peeta’s light hair and skin against Gale’s dark hair and tanned skin. Peeta is shorter than Gale. But it doesn’t look like an uneven fight.

“And that night is my fault how?” Peeta argues.
“You could have said something. You should have said something!” Gale yells, stepping toward Peeta so they are only an inch from each other. “You knew that play was too much of a risk – they were too strong. Too big. You laid me out to dry!”

“You need to back up,” Peeta’s voice is low and the look in his eyes is the same one I saw that night when he went toe to toe with Cato.

“Or what?” Gale’s voice meets Peeta’s. “You going to hit me, Mellark?”

The silence is defining and my lungs seem to have forgotten how to work. I look as Reese slowly starts toward the two, almost waiting to see if this will work itself out. Clement has come back out of the dugout and so has Rory and Finnick. Haymitch, once only partially aware of the game, is now standing against the fence, his eyes never leaving the two boys.

I know we should all want to break this up before it comes to head, but we’ve also all seen this boiling up for several years. We’re all curious and as terrible as it sounds; we’re all waiting for this to be over.

Peeta is the first to move and all he does is shake his head, dropping his hands to his sides.

“Forget it, just play ball.” He sighs, starting to turn back toward third base when Gale reaches out to stop him.

No one will ever know what Gale’s intention was in reaching out to him, because as soon as he touches the blonde’s shoulder Peeta turns around and shoves Gale. Hard.

“It wasn’t just my fault, Asshole.” Peeta yells. “You could have said something! We all should have said something! But if I remember correctly, we all wanted to win so bad we would have done anything.”

“Like throwing your best friend into the fire?” Gale yells back, shoving Peeta in return.

Before anyone can react, punches are being thrown. Gale gets a sharp hit to the jaw while the eyebrow above Peeta’s left eye starts to bleed. And all at once it’s chaos. Finnick, Rory, Clement,
and Reese are heading toward the two while Jackie backs up and everyone else – who wasn’t already – is on their feet.

Finnick has a hold of Peeta while Reese pushes Gale away, both looking a little worn for wear. Everything begins to slow down and both boys’ chests are heaving. The fight may have only lasted half a minute, but the damage is done.

Peeta pulls himself from Finnick, but Clement makes sure to step in between the two. He wipes the blood from his eye and glances at Gale, who rubs his jaw.

It’s in the calm after the storm that I can read their expressions. Behind the anger and annoyance is a sense of what they lost. So often the depths and security of friendship is taken for granted until something – usually so petty – happens to tear it away. And the worst part of it is, you hardly ever see it coming. In some cases the damage is done in the blink of an eye.

Or in the snap of a ball.

“If I would have known you’d be hurt I wouldn’t have done it.” Peeta says breathlessly, “None of us would have. It’s not like we all decided you were the sacrificial lamb.”

“Hurt?” Gale groans. “Hurt is a scarp on my knee, Mellark. That play destroyed me. It blew out my knee. Tore it to shreds. I couldn’t play another competitive yard!”

“And I’m sorry about that!” Peeta yells, stepping forward. Finnick’s hands still on his shoulder to hold him back if he decides to go back for more. “But that could have happened during any play. During any game. To any of us.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t happen to you. Nothing but good things ever happens to Buckeye Mellark. Haymitch made sure of that.” Gale glares.

“Fuck you. You’re out of line and you know it.” Peeta continues to yell as though no one is listening. “Haymitch wanted all of us to go further. That’s why he called the play he did and that’s why we went along with it. If I remember correctly, you were just as eager to get that title as we were.”

Gale doesn’t say anything and no one moves. The air is thick with tension and we’re all afraid one
tiny motion will make it all explode. Peeta looks down at the ground and shakes his head before looking back up at Gale.

“I’m done. You can be pissed off at me all you want, I’m done trying.”

With that Peeta turns and starts to walk off the field. Before anyone can move from their stunned stance he is in his truck and peeling out of the parking lot.

Slowly everyone starts to move about, but the evening has gone sour. Finnick and Rory stand with Gale for a moment, checking to make sure he’s okay. Reese and Clement huddle together obviously concerned for their little brother. The teams in the dugouts and the small crowd are all whispering together. I already know this story will be all over Dawson before the sun comes up tomorrow. I notice Haymitch is still standing at the fence, but now his eyes are on the ground. The guilt practically oozes from him.

And I can’t stop myself from wondering how Peeta is.

The rest of the night goes by in a haze. The game is called short, everyone saying it’s because they want to eat, but we all know it’s because no one is in the mood to play anymore. Even the usual festivity that is eating is slightly hindered. The conversations are quiet and short. And people don’t stick around to visit.

I try to check on Gale, but as soon as the game is called he disappears. Rory says he saw him getting into his truck and driving off. Prim and I climb into our own soon after dinner. Rory walks Prim to her door and I wait, slightly annoyed, while they say their prolonged goodbye. I feel guilty after I clear my throat loudly to get them to hurry along. I’m just on edge now. I try to ignore the reason why.

Prim tries to carry on a conversation throughout the ride to her and Mom’s house, but my answers are distracted and my attitude is poor. Finally she gives up and silence fills the cab. When I drop her off she leans over to give me a quick kiss on the cheek and she watches me for a moment. I know she wants to say something about what happened tonight, but she doesn’t.

And I am grateful.
When I pull up to my small house I suddenly don’t want to go inside. I feel exhausted from tonight and I know it’s not from my impromptu right field position. It’s because I watched the two men of my life – although I’m not sure how big of a part Peeta is – tear each other apart. I ache remembering they used to be so close. I ache knowing that I watched the play that unraveled their friendship and knew nothing of it. I ache for Gale because I remember the day he realized he wouldn’t be going to The University of Alabama. I ache for the way Peeta looked when he realized Gale blamed him for all of that.

I ache because at the end of the day it all doesn’t matter anymore.

My thoughts have drifted along with my feet as I walk through the endless dirt roads that make up Mellark Ranch. The darkness comforts me as I see all the quiet barns, sheds and ranch hand homes. Even the main house is dark and I wonder what time it is.

Soon my eyes are drawn to one of the only soft glows of light I see and it’s coming from the main barn. I know the work has been done for several hours now. Normally I mind my own business, but I’ve noticed over the years that Mellark Ranch has become like my home and I am rather protective of it. I like to know as much as possible about the place I’ve grown to love.

When I enter the cracked door I see where the light is coming from. It’s the light right above the old sink with the cracked mirror. In its reflection I see myself in the background and Peeta’s bruised face in the foreground. He notices me soon after I walk into the light and gives a tired smile.

“If you’ve come in here to tell me to apologize or defend Gale’s honor I’m really not interested.” He says, looking me in the eye via our reflections.

At first I’m not sure how to react. Several months ago that would have been the only reason why I was here, but now that I stand there in front of him and that’s not even on my mind. I blink several times and then shake my head. I’ve never been good with words and fortunately Peeta seems to understand that.

“I never would have gone through with that play if I’d have known,” Peeta’s voice is quiet and I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or to himself.

And I now understand why he stormed off. It’s not because he got into a fight with Gale and it’s not because Gale was hurt in a stupid sports accident several years ago. It’s because he can’t believe the guy that was once his best friend now believes he would sacrifice his future for his own. To Peeta loyalty is everything and for someone to question his is worse than the hardest
blow to the gut.

And I understand that.

I walk forward, seeing that he’s trying to clean up the cut above his eye. The rag he has in his hand has an ugly stain on it from his blood, but the cut above his eye is still a violent red from dried blood.

“Here,” I say without thinking and take the rag from his hand. I start to dab the spot above his eye. At first I avoid his gaze, but once my eyes meet his I can’t look anywhere else.

The silence between us is loaded, but for the first time that night, comfortable. And slowly the dried blood starts to disappear from around the deep gash. Gale’s knuckle must have hit right on the ridge of Peeta’s eyebrow bone to cause such a mark. It probably needed a stitch or two, but I doubt he’ll ever go get them.

“I hid out here because I really didn’t need my dad, or worse, my mother asking about what happened.” Peeta states, as if he has to explain himself to me.

“Sometimes you just need to be alone.” I say, understanding. “I get that.”

Again, silence comes and we allow it to take over as I finish cleaning up. I place a small Band-Aid over the deepest part. Peeta tries not to wince when I push on the tender bruised area around the cut, but I notice how his eyebrows crinkle slightly and I quietly apologize.

“I’m glad you’re the one who found me.” He looks me in the eyes and I am now highly aware of the mere inches that separate us.

I look down to put the band-aid wrapper on the side of the sink along with the used rag, but I can’t keep my eyes away and look up to find his dark blue eyes watching me.

I want to say something, but I’m not sure what to say. My skin is tingling and I’m highly aware of all of my senses. My heart is racing and my stomach is filled with butterflies, but I’ve never felt more alive or bolder. And when my lips meet his I swear I’ll never be the same.
The kiss is light and his response is almost instant. My hands rest on either side of his face and my eyes flutter closed. I’ve only kissed three people in my entire life and two of them were when we were under the age of seven and don’t really count. I’m not sure what I’m even doing, but I know I don’t want to stop.

But I do. It’s like the fearful part of my mind wakes up and I slowly pull away to look at him. And now I’m afraid because I know me. I know whenever I try to speak in moments of high emotion I usually make them worse. But I don’t want Peeta to speak either because I’m now regretting everything, but only because I’m afraid this isn’t what Peeta wanted. Maybe I misread everything.

“I – I –“ I try to speak, while pulling away to leave.

Peeta quickly reaches out to gently tug me back toward him, “You’re definitely not leaving me now.”

And when his lips collide with mine I’m sure again. I’m bold again.
Little Miss

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

As always, Ivory wins all the beta awards. And thank you to everyone who shows support for this story!

“Little Miss, hide your scars.”

Morning after.

The idea alone is enough to make even the strongest groan in understanding. They happen to the best of us. Well, okay. I’m obviously not the person to speak with about “morning after” moments. I am vanilla in a world of hundreds of flavors. I don’t even have many sprinkles atop me. Though, I once did get drunk enough once that I had a headache the entire next day, Gale laughed so hard when he saw me that morning. I truly thought my experience was the worst it got, but he told me that was a typical Sunday night. Sunday night. That was the morning I realized I was more of an amateur than I originally thought.

So needless to say, morning after experiences aren’t something I’ve ever dealt with first hand. But from the stories Beetee and Gale have told me they aren’t something I should be eager to learn about. Of course, their morning afters usually involved quietly – and quickly – finding their discarded clothes and high-tailing it out of there before their bedmate wakes up to realize they don’t even remember their name. Again, apparently my situation isn’t as worse as it gets. But it’s as worse as it gets for me.

I am not a smooth person in the easiest of situations, give me something out of my comfort zone and I become more frantic than a fish out of water. But with Peeta I surprised myself. I usually
run away from new experiences, but I didn’t want that moment to end. When I felt his hand grab onto my waist it was as if I found a new energy. My kissing abilities were nonexistence and for a mere second I worried that he’d be able to tell. But if he could he didn’t make it known. I’m not sure how long we stood there tangled up in that moment, but by the time he slowly pulled away my arms were wrapped around his neck.

He pulled away just far enough to look into my eyes and brush a piece of hair away. The smile he wore only helped my racing heart to speed up. I think I’ll remember that lopsided smile until my dying day. And I know my lips mirrored his. What else could I do? I don’t think I stopped smiling the rest of the night. Even as I fell into bed I knew I was smiling. Every nerve in my body was still zinging from the moment and the sweet kiss he placed on my lips prior to letting me walk inside my little home.

He kissed me good night. Peeta Mellark had kissed me twice. Those were the only coherent thoughts I could possibly have as I drifted off to sleep.

And then this morning came.

Have you ever had one of those mornings where you wake up with an automatic pit in your stomach that screams of all the things you’d change if you could? I blink several times, running my hands over my face. The sun shining through my sheer curtain tells me it’s still early morning. Mr. Mellark lets us get started late on Fridays during the summer. He silently understands that the majority of those who work for him are young and summer seems to be the time our irresponsibility shows the most.

I turn over in bed and see the clock reads almost seven in the morning. Shoving the covers off, I do everything in my power to think of anything but last night. I grab a change of clothes and head into my bathroom.

While I’m undoing my braid I make the mistake of looking in the mirror: I instantly go back to the moment I’d felt Peeta’s calloused hand against the sensitive flesh of my neck. He’d pulled me closer and it hadn’t taken much coaxing to get my body to fit perfectly against his. I’d never experienced such a heated exchange, but in that moment I was focused only on what I wanted. And what I wanted was Peeta.

I realize I’m smiling while I mindlessly run my fingers through the tangled locks. My hair falls past my shoulders and I bite my lip to suppress my smile. That is my next mistake: I remember the kiss in amazing detail. When my lips had found his the first time it was unsure. I felt him tense for a mere second before he started to respond, but I pulled away. His blue eyes search mine and I know he’s looking for an answer I don’t have. I remembered the thrill I got when his hand reached for my elbow to stop me from leaving.
My stomach erupted in butterflies, but I didn’t have long to realize that before his lips are on mine again. This kiss was sure. This kiss told me everything I’ve suddenly felt this summer had been mutual. His hands grasped my waist and I couldn’t remember a time I’d felt more secure. My hands were against his chest, and looking back I realize I was gripping the material of his t-shirt. Hoping it was real. Needing it to be real.

Again, my smile has returned as I finally turn away from my mirror to turn on my shower. But my smile falters when I realize the moment is over. That the rest of our reality hasn’t left. Regret is not what I feel, but anxiety. Anxious because this is all new to me. Anxious because I can’t even imagine everyone’s reaction – especially Gale’s. Anxious because I feel as though I’ve somehow betrayed him. And I know I’m mostly anxious because I don’t want whatever happened last night to end. Not yet anyway.

And that’s a feeling I’ve never had before.

The pit rests in my stomach the entire I’m showering and getting ready. It doesn’t leave as I brush my teeth. It remains in place as I re-braid my newly washed hair and get dressed. It doesn’t even flinch when Prim calls me and I speak with her for awhile. By the time eight o’clock rolls around, I’m making coffee and deciding that this dreadful feeling is going to be my constant companion for a while. Reverting my thoughts doesn’t seem to work because everything reminds me.

I reach for the sugar and I’m reminded of the small fact that Peeta hates sugar in his coffee. A trait I’ve known for a while, but something that now seems suddenly earth shattering. I reach up to grab an old coffee mug and remember the winter I first started helping at Mellark Ranch. I was doing the dishes in the kitchen after dinner when I, being my ever-graceful self, caused several dishes and glasses to go crashing to the floor. I had been so sick thinking Mrs. Mellark would be the one to find me cleaning up the mess. But Peeta had been the one to race through the kitchen entryway.

We spent the rest of the night sweeping and finding tiny pieces of ceramic and glass throughout the large kitchen. Peeta had made the whole thing that much less stressful. I think I remember even laughing a couple of times. At the time, I thought he was just being nice – like his father undoubtedly taught him. But now I see everything differently. The way he inspected my hands to make sure I wasn’t hurt. The way he didn’t leave until not only the mess was cleaned up, but also the dishes – that were still intact - were finished and put away.

I’ve been mindlessly stirring my coffee for several minutes when I hear a knock at the door. I jump, my eyes going toward the offending sound. My stomach knots harder as I walk toward the doorway. I turn the bolt lock. Even though I have a curtain over the window of my door, I can make out the familiar shape and I try to ignore the fact that I’m slightly disappointed.
“Good morning, Rocky.” I say, moving out of Gale’s way to let him in.

“Very funny.” He mumbles, walking in and heading straight toward the coffee pot.

I shut the door and watch him. From where he is standing at my counter I can see the dark bruise that has formed from last night’s impromptu boxing match. It doesn’t look swollen, but the purple shading looks like it’s going to be around for a while.

“What happened to you last night?”

I watch him make his coffee, adding more milk than coffee. He’s about like me when it comes to his coffee preference, except my additive is sugar. He doesn’t look at him until he’s finished. He turns and leans against the counter. Gale makes my kitchen look even smaller than what it is. His massive frame takes up the majority of my counter space and he towers to nearly the top of my cabinets. It’s almost comical how he looks like a giant in a dollhouse. Even more so because I know his house is almost exactly like mine.

“I just needed to get away.” He shrugs, “I went home. Watched TV and fell asleep on the couch. Sorry if you tried to call, I turned my phone off.”

I didn’t. Another wash of guilt comes over me.

“It’s understandable.” I nod, taking a prolonged drink of my cooling coffee.

I’m not sure I want to ask my next question, or that he’ll even answer. Gale and I are as thick as they come, but we both burn hot. We know it’s better to let us fizzle out before the other approaches. And usually I know how long that’ll take, but this is all different. I didn’t even know this type of storm was raging. But I just have to know.

“Are you okay?” I ask. The question is simple, but the possible answers make my nerves twitch with anticipation.

“No worse than Mellark.” He smirks. Gale knows that’s not the answer I’m looking for. I know they’re both a little worse for wear, but no permanent physical damage has been done. I give him a look that I know resembles the one my mother used to give when we’d get smart with her.
He knows it too, because he looks down at the floor, lifting his free hand to rub the back of his neck.

“IT all needed to be said,” Gale says. “But I suppose we could have picked a better venue.”

We. He must understand, at least a little bit, of where Peeta is coming from.

I remember being a bystander in that instant. That night had been one of the few games I actually attended and only because Gale practically begged me to. They were going for the title and the game was nearly two hours away, but Annie had told me she’d take me. I had no excuse not to go and by the second half I was glad I had.

The game was tied with almost three minutes left. I knew very little about football, but with Annie’s constant coaching I was beginning to understand it. And these last few plays were make or break moments for us. I was on the edge of my seat as they broke away from the huddle. It was third down and they needed eight yards to reach another first down. Annie was cheering next to me – the loudest I’d ever seen her. Finnick was calling the play. Gale was crouched low in his position. Peeta was running into place.

The ball was snapped.

Finnick faked a handoff to Marvel while Peeta took off hard down the field. Marvel went down hard, but Gale did his best to hold his man from breaking free and getting to Finnick. Finnick found what he was looking for - a clear shot to Peeta. He threw the ball with stunning accuracy. He was tackled soon after, but was able to see Peeta cross into their end zone.

The defending team’s shoulders sunk as they watched the score change. Cato, Marvel, Finnick, the rest of the team, and our crowd were on their feet cheering. Everyone was up. Except for Gale. He lay on the ground curled up around his knee. Several players from both teams were waving over the athletic trainers. They knew he was hurt badly.

That was our junior year. Gale never suited up for another game.

I knew the transition from star football player to sideline assistant had been hard on him, but I never knew just how deep that scar ran. He became less social with those he once surrounded himself with, but I just assumed he was too busy with physical therapy and work to go out as often.
Looking back I saw all the angry signs, but chose to ignore them. I was never one to get into other people’s business and whatever issue he had with his team was not mine to have. I was his friend. I was there for him. But I never asked why. I never asked anything. And I should have. I had failed him. I let him slip into the same routine as myself. I never once considered that maybe that wasn’t what he wanted. That working for the Mellarks was not the dream situation that it had been for me.

“I’m sorry.” I apologize, not for last night, but for everything I have ignored. For everything I should have said, but never did.

“Ah, it’s nothing.” Gale shrugs again. “It’s not like my life is some awful nightmare. So what if I didn’t get to go play college ball? It’s not like I would have been much for college anyway. I hated school. That stuff doesn’t come natural to me.”

But football does. And I watch him give the speech I know he must have told himself daily after the accident. I’m not sure I believe it. I’m not sure he believes it. But there is nothing either of us can do.

“Why do you blame Peeta?” I ask while I’m still brave enough to do so.

“I blamed everyone on that field that night. I blamed everyone.” Gale says. He doesn’t look at me, but at the tile of my kitchen. “Peeta was just the one that got everything. His whole damn life was handed to him on a silver platter. Doesn’t that piss you off a little bit?”

I never thought about it that way. Gale is right; there is no doubt about that. Peeta comes from the wealthiest family in Dawson. He has a full ride to a premier football college. He has good charm and even better physical features. Gale is not the jealous type, but even the saintliest of people would find it hard to stomach the thought of Peeta Mellark. I know that, but I also know the kindness he shows toward others, his willingness to help, his genuine work ethic, and his nightmare of a mother. That alone makes all Peeta has been given dim drastically.

She is Dawson’s worst nightmare and all of her children have felt her not-so-secret wrath. Mr. Mellark can only do so much to tame the angry woman he has by his side. And her hateful behavior practically oozes from her whenever she is present. I want to remind Gale of that, but I remain silent. I sit there and just watch him.

“He was nothing more than a target last night.” Gale admits, and I know it’s hard for him to do so.
“Him coming home is just a reminder of what I didn’t get to do. Childish, right?”

A little. But I understand it. Gale bottles it all in. He always has because he’s always had to. I know I’m the same, but I’ve never had any one person to blame for my situation. Well, besides the man who worked my father to death, but it’s not like I see him on a daily basis. I suppose I could be angry with my mother and I used to be. But I get more reaction out of being angry at a blank wall.

I look at the clock on the wall; it’s nearly nine. We’ll need to be at the barns by ten. I finish the rest of my coffee and stand up to put the cup in the sink. Gale watches me, as if waiting for me to tell him he’s alright. That what he did is justified. But I can’t. And it’s not just because of Peeta. It has nothing to do with Peeta. It has to do with Gale. He’s angry. And his anger will destroy him. I don’t want anything to destroy him.

“Is it out of your system?” I ask, reaching behind him to empty out the coffee pot.

He’s not expecting this question and takes a minute to respond.

“I guess?” He says.

“Good.” I don’t look at him as I answer, “Because the next time you get into a senseless fight if they don’t completely kick your ass, I will.”

He smiles for the first time that morning and I feel myself doing the same. We stand in silence for a while as I clean the few dishes we’ve dirtied. Every once and awhile I feel his elbow push me slightly or a hand reach up and pull at my braid. He’s back. At least for now. And I try not to remember the fact that I’m leaving out a rather important portion of this conversation.

---

Saturdays on Mellark Ranch are known for two things: free time and food. Mr. Mellark has made it a point to keep us feeling as though we are appreciated – which I’m not sure any of us doubted to begin with. And that includes Saturdays off, except for the daily chores that need to be finished, and large meals for breakfast and dinner. Of course, you are not required to attend, but I’m not sure any of us have missed unless we’ve been sick. And even then we’ll usually camouflage it the best we can and show up anyway.
Gale picks me up that morning and it’s all back to normal between us. We work well together and we spend most of our evenings together. And normally that is enough for me, except now I find my thoughts drifting toward Peeta. I’ve looked for him on several occasions; going out later than normal to close up the barn or making one last check of the eastern fences. Never once have I found him. It’s only been two days, but I feel like it has been an eternity. A fact that I’m not proud of.

I still mention nothing to Gale. He hasn’t asked, not that he would know there is anything to ask about, and as the hours tick away I am beginning to think there is nothing to tell him. The thought makes me sadder than I wish it did.

When we pull up to the main house, Beetee and Wiress are walking up the main steps. Wiress waves us good morning while Beetee tips his hat; we both wave and head in their direction. I am both nervous and excited to go inside. Peeta will undoubtedly be there. And this will be the first time I’ve seen him since he wanted me home Thursday night. Since everything changed. And I hope it hadn’t just changed for me.

“Good morning!” Mr. Mellark greets us soon after we walk in, “Head on into the dining room, I think Deb has gotten everything set up.”

Deb. Deborah Mellark. Mrs. Mellark. The idea that even her husband has anything other than rude names as a nickname for her is beyond me.

I follow Gale into the large area where many have started to fall in line to get their share of food. The smells make my stomach turn in a pleasant way. The table near the wall is lined with numerous options and it’s hard to believe Mrs. Mellark had anything to do with this. For all her personality flaws, the woman can do amazing things in the kitchen.

Gale hands me the tongs so I can put pieces of French toast on my plate and right as I’m about to pick up a slice I am stopped cold. I first see his familiar hands that are holding onto a place of breakfast pastries. My heart begins to race. My eyes slowly scan up his strong arms and then I reach his face. My breath catches. He has that same lopsided smile that I know will be forever imprinted in my mind. And it doesn’t go unnoticed to me that his t-shirt and arms are covered in flour.

He did all of this?

Apparently Peeta Mellark isn’t as readable as I previously thought.
“Good morning.” He speaks softly and a sudden wash of warmth comes over me.

“Good morning.” I say, my smile lighting up my face.

Our eyes are locked on one another and every doubt I’ve felt over the last couple of days seems to disappear as I stand there in his dining room. The world around me seems to fade away and I’ve forced to notice how he has one obnoxious curl that will not leave his forehead. Or how his bright blue eyes seem darker slightly. Or how I think he’s managed to get blueberry preserves on his grey t-shirt and all I wish to do is reach out and wipe it away.

“Hey Peeta, we need more syrup.” Jackie’s voice breaks into our moment like a sledge hammer. “Do you have some heated up already or would like me to get it?”

Peeta seems to have a hard time tearing his eyes away from me and I know this because I feel the same struggle. I look towards Jackie at the kitchen entryway and I’ve never wanted to throw a piece of toast so bad at someone.

“I’ll be right there, Jackie.” Peeta calls, glancing back at me once again. “I’ll see you later – I have something I want to ask you.”

And with one sentence he has put me back on the pins and needles I’ve been trying to remove myself from since that night. My nerves are on fire and I know every moment until I see him again will most likely run as slow as molasses in the dead of winter.

The rest of breakfast goes like many others before it, except for Peeta and myself sneaking glances at one another from our places at the long table. He is sitting next to Reese on the other side of the table and a few chairs down while I am wedged between Gale and Wiress. I try to stay involved in the conversations about me, but every once and awhile I look toward Peeta and find him doing the same. We give small smiles, but never hold each other’s gaze.

There is a pause in our conversation long enough for me to catch the one Peeta is involved in.

“You coming with me over to Greenville today?” Reese asks his youngest brother.

“I can’t.” Peeta shakes his head. “I’m picking up Jo from the airport this afternoon. I’m leaving right after breakfast.”
“Oh sure, anything to get out of dishes duty.” Jackie grins, taking another bite of her pancakes.

“You just make the dishes sparkle so well, how could I deny you of your gift?” Peeta smirks.

Jackie picks up a piece of her biscuit and tosses it toward him. And I’m irrationally jealous of their easy exchange. Peeta laughs, popping the piece into his mouth before picking up a grape and mimicking her action. I’m mesmerized how easygoing he looks in that moment. How his smile is relaxed and childlike. His smile matches that of Reese’s. And I now understand where his playful nature comes from.

The moment is ended too quickly when Mrs. Mellark clears her throat, even as Mr. Mellark smiles at the joy on their faces. Nothing is said, but the food war ends and they instead continue their conversation with less enthusiasm.

“I forgot about that.” Reese says, still giving a slight glare in his mother’s direction. Always the protective older brother. “How long are they staying?”

“Until the end of summer. We’re going to ride back to school together.” Peeta says.

And before I can hear the rest of their conversation I am pulled back into a debate Gale is having with Wiress. The conversation is comical, but I find myself wishing I was hearing more from Peeta. I am also wondering who this Joe is. He must play on the same team as Peeta.

For the second time that morning I’m irrational jealous of someone.

__________________________

My afternoon, like I’d predicted, goes in slow motion. I try to keep myself busy, so that means a visit with Prim. I spend some of the afternoon listening to her go on and on about this friend or that friend. Sometimes she would talk about Rory, and sometimes ask me if Gale had said anything. But I reminded her that they are boys. And boys aren’t the ones to share like we do.

She makes me lunch, which is nowhere near as large as breakfast. We have ham sandwiches and some stale potato chips. As she looks through the cabinets I can’t help but feel I am not giving them enough of my paycheck to survive on. There are essentials and plenty of canned food, but
after the breakfast I had this morning I can’t help but feel guilty. Prim assures me that her part-time job at the local grocery story is giving her enough for anything she needs. Plus the bills are all paid on time and she still has money in her pocket.

She is too young to go through this. She is too young to know the due dates of bills. She is too young to have a mother who spends her days in the same old recliner in silence and her nights in her room crying uncontrollably until she falls asleep. I had begged her to move in with me when I moved onto Mellark Ranch. We were used to sharing a room already. And she wouldn’t have to face that every day.

But Prim has a kinder heart than I do. Prim doesn’t see our mother as a burden. She still sees her as our mother. She still makes her meals for her and combs her hair. She is the daughter I gave up on being years ago.

And I am so proud of her for that. I just hope that one day it won’t be her downfall and keep her in this one horse town. She deserves so much more, and I tell her that daily.

The rest of our visit is spent playing Scrabble. I personally loathe the game and cannot make words bigger than ‘cat’, ‘save’, or other three to four letter words. Prim completely destroys me, but that’s yet another reason I know she’ll go far. She’s absolutely brilliant.

After I say my good night around six and I can’t get back to Mellark Ranch fast enough. I hadn’t seen Peeta prior to him slipping out to go pick up his friend at the airport and therefore that question remained unasked. My mind was ablaze with what the question could possibly be. A question? What could he possibly have to question? What are we? Are we anything? Could we be something? Did that kiss mean anything? Was it just an emotional night?

Okay. Maybe there was a lot to be questioned.

And that was why this day had been near torture. But as I checked myself appearance in the mirror, I was beginning to get that familiar excited tingle that always came about when I knew Peeta was in my near future.

I came alone up to the main house and saw I was one of the first ones there. I didn’t see any of the other workers’ vehicles besides Wiress’. She must have come early to help for dinner. I momentarily think I should wait in my truck until someone else arrives, but that would look strange. I’ve been in this house a million times. What was so different now?

Everything.
Walking into the main door I see Mrs. Mellark and Wiress standing in the dinner room setting the table. The smell of chili fills the air and my mouth waters. Mr. Mellark’s chili is some of the best around and matched with Mrs. Mellark’s – or Peeta’s? – cornbread this was going to be a fantastic night.

I’m about to head into the dining room to lend a hand when I hear laughter in the kitchen. Mr. Mellark’s booming voice can be heard throughout the house along with several others. One I recognize is being attached to my heartstrings. I turn my direction and head in toward the kitchen.

“So let me get this straight,” A female I don’t recognize says between laughter. “You guys literally have a rooster that goes off at dawn?”

“‘Goes off?’ Come on, Jo.” Peeta laughs, “He’s not an alarm clock. We don’t have to set him. Where did you think that stereotype came from anyway?”

“Well it is a stereotype.” Johanna argues, her hands resting on the marble island.

Mr. Mellark and Peeta are both are grinning from ear to ear and shaking their heads. My eyes can’t leave the dark haired girl standing in the middle of the kitchen. She’s beautiful and rather tough looking. Hard, almost. Like her life hasn’t always been the easiest. I know that look. I wear that look.

“Katniss!” Peeta notices me first and I like how his smile grows even wider. He walks over to me while Mr. Mellark and the girl watch. They both look like they know more than I do, but all of that is forgotten when Peeta walks up next to me, placing a strong hand on the small of my back to lead me toward the conversation. The small touch gives me chills that I hope he doesn’t notice and leaves me wanting more.

“Katniss, this is Jo –“

“Short for Johanna.” Jo grins, cutting Peeta off. “Johanna Mason from Los Angeles, nice to meet you.”
“And she’s rather shy, if you couldn’t tell.” Peeta jokes, looking at me.

Johanna sticks her hand out for me to shake and I do.

“Katniss Everdeen.”

“Oh I know who you are.” Johanna smirks, dropping my hand and glancing toward Peeta. “Glad to put a face to the infamous name.”

My eyebrows crease slightly and I can’t help but notice that Peeta has turned a bit red while he moves himself away from the conversation. Mr. Mellark is still grinning widely, like always. Peeta excuses himself quickly to go help finish getting ready for dinner and Johanna’s laughter fills the kitchen. Mr. Mellark soon joins her.

Apparently I don’t understand California humor.

By the time dinner is being cleaned up I feel as though I’ve ate my weight in Mr. Mellark’s chili and from the looks on everyone’s faces so do they. Everyone has started going off in their own direction: some outside to toss a football, some in the entertainment room to watch television, and it doesn’t go unnoticed to me that Gale hangs around the table longer talking with Johanna.

Mrs. Mellark has, once again, silently dismissed herself and therefore the kitchen’s state is left to those who have not yet found what they wish to do after stuffing themselves like turkeys. Those two individuals would be Peeta and me. The man I once tried to avoid is the one person I want to be the nearest to. So I begin by carrying the emptied dishes into the kitchen while Peeta is putting away the leftovers.

“Guess we drew the short straws.” Peeta smiles at me when I sit some bowls down on the counter.

“Guess so.” I say, watching him for a minute.

“Or maybe you knew I’d be helping clean up tonight so you decided you’d take one for the team.” He’s smirking and I like this playful side to him.
“Something like that.” I laugh, leaning my side against the counter.

The silence between us is loaded and I want to ask him what it was he was thinking of asking me, but my courage isn’t that high yet. Neither of us wants to be the first to look away. Peeta slowly turns his body to mirror mine. My heart starts to pound against my chest.

“Do you remember – well, I said earlier I had to ask you something.” He sounds nervous and he looks away from me for a moment.

Do I remember? It’s all I’ve thought about since the sentence left his lips.

I nod, afraid any words that come out of my mouth won’t be coherent. He looks at me for what seems like forever and I begin to fidget with the dishtowel I’ve been holding.

“I think – well, would you like –“ He pauses and I think my breath pauses along with him. “Katniss, do you want to go out with me sometime?”

I think I’ve forgotten how to function. Every piece of me is doing double time and my breath won’t seem to even out. It’s such a simple question and yet I feel as though it’s going to change everything. It is going to change everything. It pales all the other possible questions I had in my mind.

“Yeah, I’d like that.” I say slowly, praying my words come out right. “A lot.”

Peeta grins, “Then it’s a date.”

It’s a date. I’m going on a date with Peeta Mellark.
Beat This Summer

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

I have to give a major congratulations to Ivory for the achievements in her life lately! I wish you all the very best in the future! There couldn't be a more deserving person! And now I must thank Court over at Court81981 for stepping in to beta this chapter. She did a flawless job with the choppy work she was given. I apologize for the tense, silly grammar, etc. mistakes. You made this chapter rock. She works magic and if you haven't read her stories you are MISSING out.

“I ain’t ever going to beat this summer with you.”

Going on a date.

It’s what we’re all here for, if you think about it. All the way back to Adam and Eve. The selection then wasn’t nearly as vast as it is now, but maybe that was easier. They couldn’t say no. Well, they could have – but that’d be an awfully short story of mankind. Boy meets girl. Girl says no. End of all possible future dates ever. Good story.

Without that initial date, we’re all destined to be alone. And I for one always thought that was an okay option. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I have lifelong dreams to become a spinster or the cat lady who lives outside the city limits — I hate cats. But romance never seemed like something that was going to cross my path. In school I spent most of my time with Gale, and any guy who was possibly interested usually assumed I was with Gale. Not that the line of guys was really that long — or existent at all. Sure, there was that awkward stage in middle school where your hormones take over. You become attracted to anyone who looks at you long enough. It’s science, not romance.
I did have a date to a school dance once. His name was Lenny Griggs. It was in eighth grade. I was taller than him. He was practically the size of an old outdoor water spigot, had bright red hair and the freckles to match. He bought me a flower, and my mother took pictures of us outside on our porch. I wore this awful black, glitter-covered dress that my sister picked out at our local shopping mall. At the time I thought I was the belle of the ball. Looking back, I was just a perfect match to the disco ball above our middle school heads.

My father drove us to the dance, which started at six. Lenny spent most of the time with his friends off in the corner. I spent most of my night complaining to Gale about how uncomfortable I was. He had brought Madge — well, actually his mother brought both of them. So whenever she was ready to dance, which was all of the slow songs, I was either left alone at a small table with half empty punch glasses or swaying awkwardly with Lenny. By the end of the night Lenny found a ride home with one of his friends, and my father stopped to buy me ice cream.

After that, dating didn’t seem like all that it was cracked up to be.

Of course, I listen to Gale’s tales of love — or lust. Gale is good looking and played football. He might as well be a young James Dean in this small town. Unfortunately, most of the girls could only talk about how appealing he was in high school since he spent most of that time joined at the hip with Madge. Well, he spent most of his life that way. But high school was when they really became a couple. For nearly four years it was always them, they became the constant for Dawson High. And everyone expected they’d get married, because what else is there to do in this town after high school?

But then she ended it.

I still remember that day. It was April of our junior year. A Thursday to be exact. I was outside the main barn when Gale’s truck tore down the road. When he got out, I could tell he’d had it out with Madge, but that was pretty typical. They might have had their good times, but the two were like oil and water when it came down to the very nature of their relationship. I wasn’t ever going to rain on his parade with that information, but everyone knew it. Even Peeta had tried to tell him on several occasions. It usually ended with Gale storming off, mumbling something about Peeta just being jealous.

No one could talk to Gale when he didn’t want to hear the truth.

We started to work, and I said nothing. It was usually better to let Gale clean out the wound on his own. It wasn’t until we were halfway finished with our chores that he told me what had happened. Madge wanted bigger things. She wanted to enjoy her last year in this small town with her friends. She didn’t want to draw out the inevitable by staying with him. She had plans to leave Dawson. He had plans to plant roots here. The two couldn’t work together. Just like that, Madge Undersee
was done with Gale Hawthorne.

Two weeks later she was dating Darius Parks. And almost four years, later she’s still in Dawson.

If only murder was legal.

Gale moved on. He moved on with Lisa Dorris. And then he continued to move in the direction of Aubrey Green. He even had a short travel partner in Rebeccca Clove. That was obviously not his shining moment. Not only had he did he periodically begin to act like the petite sourpuss, but he also solidified the rivalry between Marvel and Cato with himself, Finnick and Peeta.

Sometimes I think some of those MTV shows have nothing on us, but we’ll keep that our little secret. The last thing I need in my awkward reality is a camera shoved in my face wanting to dissect every little thing that happens.

Especially with this new upcoming event.

I’ve analyzed the possibilities on my own already. Where he could possibly be taking me. Are we planning this date together? Is he paying for everything? Am I even going to be okay with that idea? Do I need to go buy something to wear? Well, I know that answer. Unless he’s planning on an evening working on the ranch as our date, I have nothing appropriate.

“Catnip? You home?”

He knows that answer. My truck is sitting outside in my driveway. My boots are right next to the outside door. So unless I’ve decided to become a free spirit out in the fields, I think it’s a safe bet to say Gale knows I’m home. But that’s his way of not only announcing he’s here, but also his mood. He wants to talk. This isn’t a casual, impromptu visit. No, this visit has a purpose, and I’m not sure I’m ready to know that purpose.

I slow my mind down enough to finish braiding my hair and leave my bathroom, flipping off the light as I go. When I round into the hallway, I see him standing there like a large statue. His jaw is tight and he’s resting his hands on his hips. I know that stance. I instantly feel smaller and wish I had an escape route. Unfortunately, he’s blocking the one escape I have and I’m strong, but Gale is stronger.
“A date with Mellark?” he says hesitantly, and I’m surprised.

I expected a stronger reaction to the news. I expected my door to come off its hinges when Gale finally found out. Of course, I also expected the news would have come from me, but apparently my nerves got the best of me and someone else decided to take it into their own hands. But who? Maybe it was Peeta. I haven’t seen him since yesterday; maybe he told Gale last night and he’s now going to have a black eye for our date.

I sigh, making my way down the rest of my small hallway. When I get closer to Gale, I figure he’ll try to block me in until he gets answers, in true big brother fashion, but he doesn’t. He moves just as I try to pass and watches me with curiosity. I fall into my tradition of making morning coffee, feeling his eyes on me the entire time.

“You could have at least started coffee,” I mumble, filling up the pot with water. “Being as you have a tendency to show up unannounced and drink all of it anyway.”

“Katniss,” Gale demands, but still not in the angry sense that I expected.

I stop, setting the coffee pot down a little too hard on the counter and turn to face him. I brace myself on my hands as I lean against the worn surface. He’s waiting for an answer, and for the first time I don’t feel like I owe him one. This is something new to me. Something I’m trying to figure out. The last thing I need is someone else wanting me to figure it out for them too.

“What do you want me to say, Gale?” I ask. “Yes, I’m going on a date with Peeta. He asked me the other night after dinner and I said yes.”

He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to. Gale doesn’t have a poker face. Everything he wants to say is usually painted across his features. The crease in his forehead tells me he doesn’t agree, but the way his lips tighten tells me he doesn’t want to argue. He doesn’t want to argue? That’s rare.

“So when is it?” He moves to sit at my small table as I finish making coffee.

“Tomorrow,” I say, not looking at him but at the chipped mugs I’ve pulled for us.

The silence fills the room and unlike most silences between us this one has a bite to it. He’s
waiting for me to argue. To confess that I believe he’s being too hard on Peeta. To tell him that I’m a grown woman; I can make my own decisions. I’m waiting for him to tell me this is a bad idea. That Peeta isn’t who I think he is. But nothing is said. And I like it that way because I didn’t wake up in the dirt ready to fight. I woke up on Cloud Nine and I want stay there.

“Are — are you excited?” Gale’s voice is forced and I can’t help but laugh. He’s trying.

“Let’s not do this.” I say, turning with a mug in each hand. I set his down in front of him and take my own seat.

He looks relieved, and I am too. He might be trying to be supportive, but the best he can do is just stay silent on the subject. I’m barely holding it together on my own; I don’t need his help in coming undone. He nods and reaches for the sugar dish. And just like a knife sliding into warm butter, we fall into easy conversation about nothing.

We are just about to finish with our coffee when there’s a knock at the door. I glance at Gale, who just shrugs, turning to see the silhouette behind the curtains on my door. I get up and in a few short steps I’m turning the doorknob and facing the newest addition to Mellark Ranch.

“Morning, Cowgirl.” Johanna smiles.

“Morning,” I say, knowing I don’t hide much confusion at Peeta’s friend being at my door on a Saturday morning. Without Peeta.

Still I open the door the rest of the way and allow her to come in. She doesn’t hesitate and steps right in, looking around the place with mild interest. I see her eyes land on Gale and how her once-hardened smile seems to brighten slightly. Gale stands up like the gentleman he’s never been with me and I almost want to laugh. Yep, Gale certainly does not have a poker face.

Johanna notices the coffee pot on my counter and sighs, “Oh thank God. Your coffee doesn’t look like tea. Mrs. Mellark sure likes her coffee weak.”

“Just like her men,” Gale mumbles, and I glare at him.

If Johanna hears, she doesn’t show it, but continues to make herself at home as she searches my cabinets for a coffee mug and pours herself a cup. She doesn’t add anything to the black liquid but
moans like she’s just eaten a decadent piece of chocolate when it passes her lips.

“I think I’ll be coming to your place from here on out for a decent cup of coffee.” Johanna nods, obvious to how her noises have affected my best friend and the way he clears his throat to keep from choking. “Hell, I might come here to stay.”

Funny, I don’t remember offering.

“Peeta is a saint for staying in the same house with that woman,” Johanna laughs dryly. “They all are. I mean, I knew she wasn’t a joy — Peeta told me that much — but he described her nicely.”

Neither Gale nor I know what to say. We are both still slightly shocked by the tornado that is Johanna Mason. Gale seems to love the new winds, but I’m still unsure. Johanna starts to walk around my open living room and kitchen combination. I’m not sure what she’s looking at. I don’t decorate. I hardly even have furniture. She holds her cup of coffee in one hand and picks up a nearby frame in the other.

“Sister?” she asks, turning to show the picture to us.

I nod. “Prim.”

“Prim. Katniss. Peeta.” Johanna smiles, setting the picture down. “I thought California had some eccentric parents. They have nothing on Texas.”

Normally I would have thought that to be an insult, but the way she said it was more of a fact instead of a dig. A fact that I couldn’t really disagree with.

“Gale, what are you doing the rest of the day?” Johanna turns her attention toward him, and his eyes go wide.

“Um — uh, well I have to help heard some cattle west and then I’ll be going to the softball games tonight.”

“Softball games? Are those the ones that turn into boxing matches from time to time?” she smirks,
obviously having observed the healing cut above Peeta’s eye.

“Those are the ones.” He laughs.

“Well I hope you have fun today.” Johanna looks from him to me. “And that you won’t miss Katniss too much, because we’re going shopping.”

If Gale had still been drinking his coffee, it would have sprayed all over the room. The shock in his expression mirrored mine, but Johanna didn’t seem to take notice as she finished her own cup of coffee and placed it in my sink.

“Do you want me to wash these before we go?” she asked. “I don’t mind.”

And just like that, Johanna Mason wedged her way into our existence like a bull in a china shop.

Dawson doesn’t have a mall. Dawson doesn’t even have a dollar store. We are home grown to the core. A chain anything would most likely burned down before it had its grand opening. I figured hearing this news would derail Johanna’s terrible plan to take me shopping. I even said the news with fake frustration in hopes she wouldn’t notice my sheer glee.

I know people that like Johanna Mason. I spend the majority of my time avoiding people them. Not because I have something against them or because I think they’re malicious in anyway, but because they’re determined, pigheaded, and headstrong. Just like me. Except she has one thing I don’t have: the confidence to take on just about anything. There is something about her I respect, but I don’t trust her. She’s closed off. She’s too carefree. It’s as if she’s hiding everything to keep herself together. She’s a better actor than I am. My scars show in the permanent scowl on my face and proverbial chip on my shoulder.

Even through my continual nagging, Johanna doesn’t gather her things to leave until she has finished my small pile of dishes. Gale has long since left, wishing us a good time on his way out; his infatuation showing the entire time. I curse under my breath and wave as he heads out the door. Johanna waves too, but she’s too busy drying the dishes to pay too much attention to his departing figure.

Not having a mall within ten-mile radius doesn’t shake her plan like I had hoped. No, Johanna is
too bullheaded for that. She simply stops off at the main house, dragging me inside along with her, to ask Mrs. Mellark where we can find the nearest shopping facility. Fortunately we don’t run into Mrs. Mellark, but Jackie will do and Johanna makes quick work of asking her where the nearest shopping center is. She doesn’t notice Jackie’s confused glance toward me. It’s no secret that I don’t shop unless it’s at the local farm store for new boots or Prim is biting at my ankles.

Johanna thanks Jackie, while I silently plot her demise, and we’re back out the door. I don’t mention to Johanna that I already knew the way to said shopping center. I was trying to prolong this adventure for as long as possible and when I see Peeta walking back toward the main house, I’m glad I did.

I try to linger, but Johanna is having none of it. She’s at the passenger side door before Peeta is within hearing distance. She notices him and then looks back at me with a grin.

“Come on, you can see Lover Boy later. We’ve got some damage to do,” she calls, waving to Peeta.

I hate California.

“Here, lets go in here.” Johanna says, pointing toward a store that looks more like a surf shop than a clothing store.

She reaches for my arm; apparently I’m not turning into the place with enough vigor. She pulls me along with her. As we enter, several clerks greet us with overzealous smiles and a rehearsed speech about all the sales they had going on. If I wasn’t feeling overwhelmed before, I am by the time the young girl rambles off ‘half price on this,’ ‘buy two of those and get that free,’ or ‘spin around in circles ten times and receive twenty percent off.’

“Where are your swimsuits?” Johanna asks, popping the gum she’s been chewing. “My friend here has absolutely nothing in the way of swimwear.”

How does she know that? She doesn’t know that. She hasn’t been through my drawers. For all she knows, I could have plenty of “swimwear”. And wait —

“All swimwear is on the back wall,” the sales girl smiles. “Let me know if you need anything.”
“Why do I need a swimsuit?” I demand as soon as we walk away from the girl.

Johanna either doesn’t hear me or doesn’t feel my question is relevant enough to answer, but I’m not giving up that easily.

“Johanna, why do I need a swimsuit? Where is Peeta taking me?” I try not to sound panicked, but it’s not easy.

Some girls might live for the summer when they can run around in short shorts, swimsuits, and dresses. But I’m not most girls. I don’t own a swimsuit for a reason. I don’t swim. It’s not that I can’t. I just don’t. Swimming means swimsuits. Swimsuits mean showing off more skin than I’m comfortable with. My body isn’t awful; I suppose I have the hard labor of the ranch to thank for that, but I don’t have the beautiful curves of the girls I see hanging above me modeling the swimsuits this store wants me to buy.

“Please, Johanna is the name my mother uses when I’m in trouble. Jo will do,” she says, browsing the different styles and colors. “And I don’t know. He just told me to make sure you have a swimsuit.”

“Look, I am not wearing a swimsuit.” I don’t hide my panic now. “I just — I can’t.”

Johanna laughs, like she’s suppressing a sarcastic comment until she looks over at me. I know my expression said it all and I hate that. I spend most of my life hiding my emotions, but with everything that’s been happening recently, it’s becoming harder and harder to do so. Apparently a swimsuit is my breaking point. And Johanna sees it.

She steps closer, watching me for a moment. I think she’s afraid I’m going to cry, but this is far from a crying moment. And if she’s as much like me as I assume she’s probably thankful for that. Tears have never been my specialty and I can guess they aren’t hers either.

“Peeta likes you,” Johanna says in a low voice, looking around the rest of the store like she’s expecting someone to be listening. “I mean really likes you. I’ve heard about you since our freshman year. And he’d kill me for telling you that so keep it between me and you.”

When she looks back at me it’s like she’s just told me something top secret. Like she’s breaking some unspoken law even mentioning such stories. I can’t help but smile slightly, but my nerves
are still a wreck and her words haven’t soothed them yet.

“He wouldn’t waste your first date on a plan that didn’t mean something.” Johanna crosses her arms over her chest, “So when he asks me to make sure you have a swimsuit I’m going to. We can ask them if they have a turtleneck one of you want, but you’re leaving here with a swimsuit.”

Only Johanna could make a reassuring speech and end it with a minor threat. I haven’t known her long, but I respect her for that. And my respect for her only grows when I see just a glimpse of the fierce loyalty she must have for Peeta. We have something in common.

“Fine. But I demand a cover-up.” I surrender.

“Deal. I’ll ask if they have a parka in the back.”

I thought my nerves were a mess in the mall until the day actually comes when I have to put it on. I am standing in my bedroom, staring at the offending objects laid across my bed. I continue to chew on my already ragged nails as I reconsider the entire thing. This is a big mistake. A swimsuit? On my first date with Peeta?

“It’s like a Band-Aid.” I jump nearly to the ceiling when I hear Johanna’s voice in my doorway. She was obviously trying to be quiet or I was that lost in thought. I figure it’s the later.

“What?” I ask, frustrated.

“It’s like a Band-Aid.” Johanna repeats, walking over and picking up the top of the swimsuit. “A gorgeous, overpriced Band-Aid. Just put it on. I guarantee you’ll love it. You looked great in the store — and their lighting was terrible.”

She’s humoring me. She has to be. I know what I looked like in the store. Sure, it wasn’t as terrible as I expected. But I’m certainly not ‘going on a date with Peeta Mellark’ material. I’ve seen some of the girls he’s dated. They were gorgeous and striking. And that was just in high school. Lord knows they’ve probably gotten better since he’s a star football player. I am Plain Jane on my good days.
Before I can argue, Johanna is shoving the newly bought clothes into my hands and heading out my door. She closes it behind her and I know what she’s expecting. I glance down at the material and groan.

“Just like a Band-Aid, my ass.”

The knock on the door only helps quicken my heartbeat as I pace my kitchen. He’s here. This is happening. I have spent the last hour being talked off the ledge by Johanna. She has tried to get me to wear makeup, but I refuse. That is a battle I won’t lose. And my hair is in its normal braid, but somehow it looks like it belongs with my summer-like attire. The cover-up Johanna had picked actually turns out to be rather simple. Thank God. The navy blue strapless dress is loose and, although I’ll never admit it, rather comfortable.

But I still felt like a fool.

And then I open the door and all my nerves seem to calm. He looks so relaxed and casual. He looks so safe. He gives me that lopsided smile that is somehow connected to my knees and I forget everything I’d once been worried about. His blonde curls and tanned features make him look like one of those models pictured in the store. And the old t-shirt and swimming trunks doesn’t hurt matters.

He looks perfect.

“Hi.” He smiles.

“Hi.”

Then we stand there — not awkwardly, just in awe of the moment. And I tell myself for the hundredth time that day that this is actually happening. I’m going on a date with Peeta Mellark. And my nervousness turns to excitement. I don’t realize how much I want this until it’s actually within my grasp.

“Ready?” he asks, turning to walk away from my door.
I follow, closing the door behind me. I almost ask if I’ll need anything, but I see the bag he’s carrying. He’s obviously thought of everything and I’m just along for the ride. I look around for his truck, but it’s not in my driveway. In fact, he’s walking like he’s going to turn behind my house.

“Where are we going?” I ask, trying to sound more excited than confused.

He looks over at me and laughs. “You’ll see.”

So instead, I stop questioning and start walking along with him. He asks me how my day has been, and I ask him the same. We both seem to make those answers short and sweet. It gives me a sense of ease knowing he must be as nervous as I am. We fall into casual conversation, mostly about the past or different people who work on the ranch. I realize Peeta notices more than I previously thought. And I also realize I open up much easier with him than I do most others, even Gale. That fact scares and assures me at the same time.

Before I know it we’re walking through a wooded part of the Mellark property and I notice how far away from home we really are. I’ve never really been out here before. I’ve taken a four-wheeler out here before to double check some fencing, but I hardly paid attention to anything else.

Peeta knows where we’re going though, and he takes the opportunity to link my hand with his as we walk on a well-beaten path. Some people have obviously come before us. And my stomach sinks. Has Peeta brought other girls here before? Should that bother me? I mean, if he’d taken me to dinner, he probably been to that restaurant with another girl before. But this is different. This seems somewhat personal.

“How do you know about this place?” I ask.

“How do I know about the property my family owns?” He smirks, making a lighthearted joke, but I blush all the same. “I used to come out here a lot.”

“With other girls?” The question escapes before I can stop it, and I instantly regret it.

He looks over at me with a serious expression. “Never with other girls.”

The butterflies swarm when I feel his hand tighten around mine and pull me through the last of the
trees where the wooded area gives away to a small pond. My eyes search the area; how does no one know this place exists? Well, apparently some do because there is a rope tied to a branch that hangs over the water and several old, beach chairs sitting on the dirt-like bank. They have taken the time to plan out every little corner of this handmade paradise. The small rocks poured to keep the weeds from overtaking the bank. The circular fire pit off to the side to make sure the party can go on around the clock. This was an island in the middle of Texas. It is definitely the closest to an island I’ve ever been.

“Me, Gale, and Finnick did all this.” Peeta looks over at me, like he knows what my next question is going to be. “We spent almost every day of summer out here when we weren’t working. Even in the fall we’d come out here from time to time. Finnick always bought us beer.”

Of course he did.

“I guess I shouldn’t we say I did all of this.” Peeta shrugged, walking closer to the water and looking up at the rope hanging from the tree. “Reese and Clement did that. They were the ones to show it to us. Making us swear we’d never bring anyone else out here.”

“But you brought me,” I say.

“I’m sure Finn has brought Annie out here a couple times too.” He smiles.

And the excitement all but boils over on me. He sees me how Finnick sees Annie? I’m not the type of girl to believe in fairytales, but if I’ve ever seen a good, true fairytale, it’s been in Annie and Finnick’s relationship.

But I don’t have much time to think of the meaning behind his comment because he sets down the bag he brought with us and begins to take off his shirt. I always thought I’d look away out of shyness if this ever happened, but I can’t take my eyes off of him. He embodies the part of star football player. Again, I get a glimpse of the black and white tattoo inside his right bicep. It’s a college emblem, but it’s not for Ohio. His arm goes down too fast for me to notice all the details, but it’s piqued interest. And it’s all forgotten when my eyes meet his again. He tosses his shirt to the side and just smiles like he has no idea the effect he has.

“Swim?”

I take a couple steps forward and feel slightly empowered. It’s just like a Band-Aid, right? Before
I lose my courage, I grab the fabric of my dress and start to pull it up, keeping my eyes on his. He looks mesmerized and it urges me on. I pull the piece over my head completely and toss it down to join his shirt. I’m nervous, and my hands come together in front of my exposed stomach. I glance down at the pale orange bikini Johanna somehow convinced me was a good idea. I cringe at the obvious tan lines around my shoulders from my everyday tank tops.

But when I look up I don’t think I’ve ever felt more confident. The look Peeta is giving me is one that shows just how attracted he is to me, and I now understand why girls always insist on wearing so little around boys. Of course, in front of anyone else I wouldn’t be wearing this, but the way Peeta stares at me makes it worth it.

“Johanna worked her magic,” I supply.

Peeta shakes his head and walks toward me, “You’re beautiful.”

When he reaches for my hand, I let him take it and we start toward the water. It seems a bit like a dream and I know a month ago if someone had told me that this was their first date, I would have gagged at the cheesiness of it all. And I know if I told others they would feel the same way, but I couldn’t imagine a better first date. It’s perfect in its cheesiness.

The water is cool and even in the damp, heat of the summer I feel goose bumps rising on my skin. The earth sinks beneath my feet and I almost like the sensation. Peeta drops my hand as we’re nearly waist deep. He pushes himself and I watch him sink beneath the surface. My fingertips skim across the top, ripples dancing around me. And soon I’m pushing off the soft bottom of the pond, letting myself dip below the surface. When I reemerge, Peeta is wiping the water from his eyes and then running his fingers through his soaked locks. We’re both nearing the middle of the pond.

As we’re swimming I notice we seem to be keeping our distance. We’re close, but not close enough to touch. We talk about our childhoods. I steer clear of my father’s sudden death and Peeta avoids any imaging of his mother. Soon we’re asking each other questions. Some are goofy ‘what-if’ scenarios, but others cut into our being.

“Favorite color?” I ask, treading water easily as Peeta swims calm circles around me.

“The color you’re wearing.”
“Nice line,” I laugh. “Think of that all on your own?”

He laughs, splashing at me lightly. “I’m serious though. It reminds me of sunsets. My dad always used to take Reese, Clement, and me out to the west side of the pastures for the sunsets. He said it reminded him to breathe, to take a moment and just be.”

Peeta’s love for his dad is touching and saddening. It makes me long for that relationship, but I know Peeta deserves it more. He’s had to live with such an awful mother. If he were to lose his father, it’d be more than just a vacancy. It would open the floodgates. No one would be there to play defense between Mrs. Mellark and her sons.

“Your turn.” I smile, wiping my face.

“Did you ever date Gale?” He asks, watching my reaction.

I laugh. “Don’t you think you’d know if I did?”

He shrugs, smirking with slight relief. “Well, I have been gone at school during the winter.”

“Doesn’t matter the season, Gale and I wouldn’t work.” I start to swim closer to him, feeling the need to reach out to him.

“And I’m completely okay with that.” He grins.

“Have you dated in college?” I ask.

“That’s how I met Jo,” Peeta says casually.

But my stomach knots. So Johanna is an ex-girlfriend? This whole time I’ve been prepped by a girl that once had Peeta’s full attention. Does he still have feelings for her now? Is that why she’s out here? To try to rekindle something?
“I dated her roommate for about two months,” Peeta continued, not noticing my inner turmoil. “Jo’s friendship was the best thing I got out of that relationship.”

I’m relieved and the weight that comes off of me is enough to nearly make me fly.

Soon I feel his arm with my outstretched hand. I grip his bicep and pull myself to him. It still amazes me how brave I am with him and when I feel his hand grasp my bare hip I can’t help but gasp. We’re both still slightly treading water, but we’ve neared the bank and I can feel the soft earth below my toes. Soon we’re able to stand, both submerged up to our chests, but he doesn’t let go of me. He holds me to him.

“Your turn,” I say, my eyes more focused on his lips than his beautiful blue eyes.

“You want to kiss me?” He asks.

“No,” I smirk, loving the surprise in his eyes. “I want you to kiss me.”

And he does. Our lips connect timidly, at first and my arms wrap completely around his neck. When I feel him flush against me, I nearly gasp at the bare contact. It’s something I’ve been craving without even knowing it. His hands grasp my hips possessively, but with a level of caution that I am slightly thankful for. I want Peeta. There is no doubt in it, but this is all so new to me that I couldn’t handle going any faster.

Soon this timid kiss isn’t enough, and I feel his tongue seeking entrance. I allow it and soon our tongues meet — this alone is enough to make my insides stir with pure heat. My fingers tangle themselves in his wet curls, and I press every available inch of myself against him. His arms are my refuge, and I never want to leave.

But soon he pauses the kiss to lead me up onto the shore where he’s brought us several blankets and towels. I would have been happy to continue where we left off in the water, but he’s brought us dinner. We eat and laugh about different things. I get icing from a cookie on my nose that he’s more than happy to reach over and kiss off. I return the favor by smearing some on his cheek and licking it off.

It all comes natural and I’m surprised. I never thought any type of intimacy would come natural to me.
Soon we’re laying back on the blankets, the sky twilight to night. For a while we’re silent as we listen to the nature around us. His hand is laced with mine and the conversation finally comes. It’s easy. And it’s needed. And it’s everything I thought it would be like. And I don’t dare believe its love. It’s too soon to be love.

But I do know that it feels like no matter the directions our lives could have taken we would have ended up here. To this place. To this feeling.

To each other.
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my wonderful beta, Court81981, and to all those who support this story. Your love of it is truly inspiring! Thank you!

“Gonna make you mine, there’s a real good chance.”

Summertime.

It’s a cliché, sure. But it’s one thing people always looking forward to. Whether you live in California or Montana, there is just a certain air to summertime that no other season can compare to. From the time you’re born it’s engrained into your existence the greatness that is summertime.

When you’re in school, you count down the days until your freedom finally calls with that last bell. You never have any sort of big plans for the three months you’ve been longing for, but that’s the point. There is no longer an agenda that someone else dictates for you. You can do whatever you want — and there is nothing stopping you. Well, except maybe your parents. But as you get older you learn to sideswipe their rules like a rogue pitch.

You want to stay out late breaking the rules? Well, you’re staying at a friend’s house. You want to skip town for a weekend away? Well, you’re joining a local volunteer organization to help gain you something colleges are looking for. The ideas are endless. And the crazier you get the better the stories get.
Of course, my knowledge on the subject is simply hearsay, but in a small town like Dawson, hearsay is practically scientific fact.

Summertime is what we’re all looking forward to, even when we get older. Sure, we work year round and the three month stint of “freedom” is over, but summer is still summer. The days are longer and the nights are that much more jam-packed with happenings. And the best part? You are now old enough to not to need an excuse to feed your parents.

And like winter has Christmas or fall has Thanksgiving, summer has the Fourth of July.

A southern small town will make a festivity out of any tradition during the summer, but Fourth of July holds merit all its own. Not only are we showing much gratitude for those who have served to keep this fair country safe, but we’re also putting all the bullshit aside and standing together to say that we actually are thankful for this nation. Everyone can celebrate something like that.

And Dawson is certainly no exception. There have been cookouts and fireworks lighting up the Fourth of July in this town since the very beginning. At one point the high school was in charge of the celebrations and then the town hall took over. The festivities would start early that morning with church ladies showing off their baking muscles, followed by different games for the children, and then when the sun finally went down, everyone would look toward the sky for the main event. But like the population, the funds started to dwindle and the festival was soon to be a thing of the past.

Of course, in true small town ‘cape crusader’ fashion, Mr. Mellark picked up the cause and ran with it. The Independence Day festivities have been on Mellark Ranch since before Prim was born. At first, most of those in attendance were employees, but then word got out that Mr. Mellark wasn’t about to deny anyone their patriotic pleasure of a day off amongst friendly faces. Ever since, the town has started showing up nearly in time for breakfast on that blissful holiday.

With hosting the town’s largest summer event comes the preparation, and that’s something the entire ranch has come to be a part of nearly two weeks before it takes place. It’s normally something I’m looking forward to — not that I don’t enjoy my usual tasks — but a little change never hurt anyone. Even me. I like setting up the large barbeque pit with Mr. Mellark. I enjoy the peaceful task of clearing part of the pasture with Gale. I even find entertainment in cleaning up the main barn with Jackie. But this year I hardly even notice June turn into July.

I blame this on the youngest Mellark.

Distraction doesn’t even begin to describe how much he’s invaded my thoughts or my time. I
didn’t even know it was possible to be this distracted by one human being. Better yet, I didn’t know it was possible to want to be this distracted by one human being.

In the morning, I always start off with the best of intentions. I am going to eat a quick breakfast, not think about Peeta, meet up with Gale to start work, not think about Peeta, spend the day doing our assigned task, and not think about Peeta. But somewhere between breakfast and meeting up with Gale, my mind slips back to that curly haired blond.

My memory slips back to the time he snuck up behind me in the barn, wrapped his arms around my waist, placed a light kiss at the nape of my neck, and without a word was gone. The fire that ignited inside me kept me distracted the rest of the afternoon.

Or the evening we spent in the bed of his truck talking and simply staring up at the sky like the kind of cheesy romance novels I used to scowl at.

But my troubles truly start when I catch him out in the horse stalls. My original plan is to simply wish him a good morning and maybe a kiss or two, but that all goes awry when I see him.

He looks beyond decadent in his simple t-shirt and jeans. His hair is going every which way due to his lack of caring once he rolled out of bed. But I am completely lost when I see his eyes. How blue they look against his freshly tanned cheeks. His smile welcomes me as he continues to work on several horseshoes. The welcome is heartfelt and quiet and I return it as I slowly walk toward him.

I’ve become bold in our few weeks together, but I am not sure if it’s an intention to be bold or a simple need for him. In my quiet moments I am almost afraid of how much I seem to need him, but then he comes around and I’m not sure how I lived so long without this feeling. And this morning is no different.

“Good morning,” I greet him casually, a smirk playing at my lips. My hand comes against his clothed side as I walk up behind him. I’ve come to crave this closeness in a way I never thought I would.

“Good morning,” he counters, setting down the horseshoe he was working on and letting his hand come atop the one I have against his side.

The silence is loaded and it thrills me. I feel my temperature rising and my skin tingles where he’s
touching me. For the flash of a second I wonder what those calloused hands would feel like against all of my skin. I am thankful my face is out of his full view since the blush I cannot contain covers my features. The thought is one I have entertained before, but I’ve never dared to cross that territory in his presence. Until now.

“How was your two hours of sleep last night?” he asks and I can hear the grin on his face as my cheek presses against his shoulder blade.

He knows I’m exhausted. And so is he. We spent most of the night up in the hayloft, intentionally forgetting we both were expected to be working first thing the next morning. Time was easy to forget when I was with him. The rational side of me screamed at the problems that could cause, but my reckless side was winning over. My reckless side saw nothing wrong in spending every second with him.

“Refreshing.” I joked, and his laugh vibrating through his chest.

“Liar.”

He easily changes our position so I’m standing in front of him and my heart rate increases as I finally get a close look at his face — the face I could spend hours watching. Every expression, every glance, every nervous habit. I could memorize each one. I lace our fingers together in one hand as I feel his free hand landing at the curve of my waist.

If any more words were going to be shared between us they were long forgotten when I feel Peeta’s lips against mine. The kiss is languid at first, neither of us having plans for it to go further. Then I feel the fingertips of his free hand graze underneath the hem of my shirt. And something is lit inside of me. My arms wrap around his neck, and he grips my hips with both hands. My heart is in my throat, but my lack of nerves is surprising. His hands are beneath my shirt, against the small of my back while mine are clenching in his already disheveled curls at the nape of his neck. I let his tongue slip between my lips to tangle with mine. He still tastes like the toothpaste he’s used this morning.

I can’t get close enough to him and the feeling must be mutual because he’s lifting me to sit atop the workbench and stepping between my legs. My heart is in my throat, but my lack of nerves is surprising. His hands are beneath my shirt, against the small of my back while mine are clenching in his already disheveled curls at the nape of his neck. I let his tongue slip between my lips to tangle with mine. He still tastes like the toothpaste he’s used this morning.

It is in that moment I realize how much I want him. Not just now, like how we are. But I want more of him. And I am not even sure what all “more” is. I’m not an idiot; I know what sex is. I had to take the embarrassing week of health class just like everyone else and Gale has never been shy about the subject, but the steps that supposedly lead to the ‘main event’ are a complete mystery.
I’m not sure if the ‘ready’ that everyone talks about is something I will instantly feel or if it’s something that will slowly build in me. But the need that’s rising in me is so palpable that I feel like I could reach out and grab it.

And then fear creeps in and I’m terrified that this is all coming too fast. We’ve been together for a little over a month, and I’m not sure what Peeta is expecting. Does he plan for it to go that far? Of course, he’s a male and I have to believe that on some level he probably does. But he hasn’t pressured me. There are times like these when I can feel how much I excite him and as much as that frightens me, it also thrills me. And he never comments on it. He takes the lead, but it seems only enough to give me courage. The rest is my decision. It’s the silent kind of promise he’s made to me. I’m grateful.

But my thoughts have gotten the best of me and I break the kiss before my body wants me to. My eyes remain closed as I rest my forehead against his. Our ragged breath mingles together and my nerves are still zapping beneath my skin. I feel Peeta pull away enough to kiss me lightly in the cheek before I open my eyes to look into his, and they are darker than I’ve ever seen them.

He laughs. “Feel free to greet me that way always.”

My inner turmoil subsides as I smile, lightly shoving at his shoulder. I roll my eyes, but I like the idea. I just wish my mind wouldn’t have gotten the best of me in that moment. Or maybe it was a good thing — we are in an open area after all.

I lean forward, pressing another kiss to his lips before jumping down from the workbench. I remain stationary in front of him, suddenly not wanting to be any further from him. But that’s irrational. There is still work to be done — even for those in love.

He smiles, stepping away first to get back to work and I wish him a good day before I start to leave the horse stalls. It’s not until I’m at the doorway that my stomach turns and I stop dead in my tracks. I turn back to look at him, my heart pounding. He looks back up at me with a confused smile.

“Did you say something?” he asks.

I shake my head, afraid words won’t come out even if I will them to. I give a quick wave and leave the stalls.
I’ve fallen in love with Peeta Mellark.

“This is your first time at this, isn’t it?” Johanna asks, taking a bit from the piece of celery in her hand and looks over at me.

My plan wasn’t to spend my day with the noisiest girl this side of the Mason Dixon Line, but as fates would have it, she’s actually a pretty decent worker and I needed her help moving all the different picnic tables for the events happening the next day. Now we sit atop one of said picnic tables to have a quick bite to eat before getting back to work.

I look over at her, not even remotely sure what she’s talking about, and the confusion must be painted on my face because she laughs. She pops the rest of her celery stick into her mouth, reaching over for a bottle of water. I’m still waiting, and she’s still not explaining. She takes her time getting a drink before looking back over at me.

“Well, I’ve been in love before,” Johanna begins, “I mean, I thought I was in love. I was in high school. And the guy was a total tool. Of course, at the time I thought he was some kind of god among men.”

If she notices my shock, she doesn’t say anything or even react. What is she talking about? Love? I had just barely realized it myself. How the hell was she figuring it out? I am not even sure I am in love. My experience with love is next to none. I loved my father desperately. I love Prim unconditionally. And I think I love Gale like one would love a brother, but romantic love? My knowledge on the subject is nonexistent.

And that’s beside the point. The real question is why am I having this conversation with Johanna?

“Took my virginity and took off like a thief in the night.” Johanna continues, still unaware of my internal screaming. “And then there was the guy from freshman year. That was the reckless kind of love, I guess. Neither of us was any good for one another, but maybe that’s what made us so entertaining to each other. The sex was great, though.”

I’m having this conversation. We are actually having this conversation. I think having the “Birds
and Bees” conversation with my mother was less mortifying.

“Anyway, I’ll spare you the toe-curling details.” Johanna finally looks over at me, “My point is, Peeta’s the real deal. You know?”

Honestly? It’s not Peeta I’m concerned about. I’ve known Peeta long enough to see his true colors: the loyalty he has for those he cares for; the selflessness he shows on a daily basis; the silent strength he hides from his mother’s behavior behind. He’ll be the “real deal” to whomever he’s with because it’s in his nature.

It’s me that becomes the real problem. I’m not a terrible person, but I don’t think I’m easy to deal with either. I am naturally suspicious. I have a tendency to run from all problems. I’ve always done things on my own. I’m not sure being with someone else is what I’m meant for.

But that doesn’t stop me from wanting it. Wanting it with Peeta.

“And he’s crazy about you.” Johanna smirks. “But you probably already knew that. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that he’s hardly ever in his room before early morning. I sleep across the hall. And Peeta is a lot of things, but quiet is not one of them.”

My blush is probably covered from the warmth that’s already spread across my cheeks due to the sun, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling it. I also feel a small sense of pride. I like that I’m the reason Peeta is sneaking back inside at night. And I like that Johanna knows about it. Finally my laugh escapes me and mingles with Johanna’s.

Slowly she becomes serious again and looks over at me, “You’re like me.”

No, I’m not like Johanna Mason.

“You have your guard up always. Like everyone is the enemy. I’ve seen it. Even with Gale, you’re ready for things to fall apart,” She says, her eyes never leaving mine. “And I get that. After I lost my parents I became the same way. I put my guard up assuming no one would want to waste their time breaking through it. But sometimes they do.”

I’m grateful for her silence because I know she is right and I don’t need the reminder. I don’t need to be reminded of how the day my father died, I became an entirely different person. I became
someone who sees the world as a battlefield. And up until the beginning of this summer, I never saw a real problem with that.

Johanna is the first to start packing our lunch away. She tosses the empty sandwich bags and snack bags in the lunch box, pulling out another bottle of water before she closes the cooler. Normally I would be helping even in this small task, but I’m still deep in thought when she hands me the lunch box to put back in the truck.

“All I’m saying,” she continues as though we haven’t been in silence for the last five minutes. “is when someone is willing to stick around and break down those walls, maybe you should let them.”

Prim can’t get out of the truck fast enough when we pull up to Mellark Ranch. She’s been talking about this night nearly nonstop since last week. Of course, most people have been talking about this night nearly nonstop since Christmas. She doesn’t say anything, but I know it has something to do with Rory. I’d warn her to be careful, but at this point I don’t believe I’m one to be giving that lecture.

I watch as she runs off toward her group of friends already that is gathered at a nearby picnic table before I scan the rest of the event. The cars lining the driveway don’t even begin to explain the amount of people on the property. Most are mingling around the picnic tables eating dinner. There are already some that have taken advantage of the music playing in the barn. I remember that has always been a teen favorite since it gave you the excuse to get close to that one person you couldn’t get enough of.

My eyes still haven’t landed on Peeta when I see Gale walking my way with an extra cup in hand. I smile, accepting his offering. Mrs. Mellark may be a real sourpuss, but her lemonade is some of the best in Texas and she makes it by the gallons for tonight.

“Stranger,” Gale greets me and I give him a warning glare.

We haven’t really talked much about Peeta and me, but I take that as a good sign. Gale isn’t one to sit back silently when he thinks things aren’t right. It only helps confirm my theory that things between him and Peeta may eventually work out, but neither of them is admitting to that.

“Rory here?” I ask, leaning against the side of my truck.
“Is Prim?” Gale counters.

We both laugh, falling into a comfortable silence. The sun hasn’t yet fallen too close to the horizon, but the hints of a sunset of beginning to appear on the west side of the ranch. Sunsets on Mellark Ranch were always my favorite. The wide-open space of the pastures allowed for the eye to see the colors bleeding out in their entirety. Most nights they were also the most peaceful time, but not tonight. Tonight sunset was abuzz with the anticipation of what was to follow.

When I pull my eyes away from the starting sunset I notice Gale is looking across the yard. My eyes follow his line, expecting to see a blur of blonde hair and gossip, but I’m surprised. The object of his attention is certainly not a blonde and she may be nosy, but gossip is not her forte. Johanna is too busy helping Jackie refill the lemonade pitchers to notice that she now had an audience.

“Apparently I’ve missed more than I thought,” I comment, glancing back over at Gale.

“What?” Gale asks, feigning innocence.

“Do I need to go get Prim? I’m sure she’d love to sing ‘Gale and Johanna sittin’ in a tree’ to you.”

Gale rolls his eyes, taking another drink from his cup. What he’s not saying is written all over his face and it’s happy. And really, that’s all I need to know. I’ve heard several rumors from the ranch hands that Gale had been taking Johanna out and around Dawson on some nights. Even Peeta had mentioned Johanna spending some nights with Gale, but Gale was never one to indulge me in the details anymore. Maybe it was a sign of him maturing, because high school was a completely different story. I usually had to bleach my brain daily to get rid of the vivid details he’d offer.

“Dancing should officially be starting soon,” I comment, casually filling the silence.

“We better get in there.”

It’s official; he’s really is falling for her, because Gale Hawthorne does not dance.
Music plays throughout the entire evening, but once mostly everyone finishes dinner, they need to fill the time before fireworks with something. Some may stay at the picnic tables and talk, others may roam the property; the young kids usually wear themselves out by running around, and most are in the barn dancing to whatever music comes over the speakers.

By the time Gale and I enter the barn, the makeshift dance floor is crowded and many others are lining the walls, sitting on hay bales or leaning against the old wood structure. I immediately spot Prim dancing with a rather nervous-looking Rory. He must have his brother’s gift of two left feet. He looks so very focused on the task at hand while on the other hand Prim looks like she’s just been given the Crown Jewels.

“So is this what you’d call a hoedown?” Johanna asks, walking up next to Gale and leaning forward to give us a both a knowing smirk.

“Shep, and we can only dance with our cousins.” I deadpan. “Or a goat.”

Gale laughs and Johanna sticks out her tongue in my direction. Before I know it, Johanna has said something to Gale and she’s dragging him toward the dance floor. I half expect the look of sheer panic I receive from Gale when he realizes what she’s doing, but I just wave in his direction.

Now that I’m left on my own I am painfully aware that I have yet to see the one person I’ve been looking for. I thought he’d be sitting with his brothers and family, but their picnic was filled with every blond head except for his. I am about to make my way back out of the barn when I feel a light hand at the small of my back. My body senses his presence completely before my eyes land on his.

“Come here often?” He smiles.

I shrug with a smirk. “Every Fourth of July.”

“Predictable. I like that.”

“I am hardly predictable, Mellark.”
“Whatever you say, Everdeen. Whatever you say.”

I revel in his closeness and I silently note the hint of his cologne that plays in the air around us.

“Dance with me.”

“What?” I look at him as he’s grabbing my arm and pulling me toward the dance floor. “I don’t dance.”

“Me either.” Peeta smiles, turning back to me. “But I think I could with you.”

All my other arguments are lost as he pulls me close. The music is slow and I’m actually grateful. I don’t think I could possibly keep rhythm with an upbeat tempo. I feel his free hand rest against my hip while his other holds mine against his chest. I rest my hand on his shoulder as we begin to sway with the relaxed beat. I look around to see other dance partners mirroring us. Peeta and I just sort of melt into the crowd.

There’s an older couple off on the edge. They are hardly moving but still hold each other lovingly. They’re familiar with each other, and yet they look at each other as though it’s their first dance. She looks at him like how I look at Peeta. The thought doesn’t frighten me like that day not too long ago when I realized what it all meant. Instead it sends a chill down my spine and a shock of thrill beneath my skin.

I allow myself to come closer to Peeta, letting my arm drape around his neck. My fingers play with the short hairs at the nape of his neck and my eyes look up toward his. He’s looking at me with a mesmerizing smile across his face. In the dulling light of twilight, his sharp features are more beautiful than usual. He lets his lips graze gently against my cheek as he wills me closer to him with the hand that’s resting on my hip. I let my cheek rest against his after he’s kissed me and I don’t remember a time I’ve felt so peaceful.

His gesture was small, but my entire body feels it. The electricity that’s flowing through me could light an entire town. I feel my soft body pressed against his hard one and I nearly gasp at the contrast. This isn’t the first time we’ve been this close, but every time seems to awaken something new in me. A new need I swear I didn’t have the time before.

My eyes close as I silently plead for the song to last forever. Even through the material of my shirt, Peeta’s fingertips cause me to lose all coherent thought. His arm has come to wrap around my
waist, his hand at the small of my back once again. And I want nothing more for him to reach beneath the thin cotton, but he doesn’t. He wouldn’t do something like that in the sight of others.

I wish the others weren’t here.

That thought sends another tremor down my spine and I know Peeta feels it because his grip tightens slightly around me. I let my hand slip from his grasp to bring it around his neck and join my other one. He doesn’t object and lets his hand come to rest in the middle of my back. I notice we’re hardly moving with the beat anymore, but that’s a mere side thought as my body continues to respond to his subtle movements.

I slowly pull far enough away to look up into the darkest blue eyes I’ve ever seen. His expression is as glazed over as I feel and I lean up to kiss him soundly on the lips. It’s a break in the tension we’ve been building, but it’s nowhere near all that’s needed. I feel his hands grip the material of my t-shirt and my hands rest on his face almost possessively. The world goes into the background as I focus on my need for the man in front of me.

“Fireworks are starting!”

Our lips part at the sound of the little girl yelling at the top of her lungs, but it takes us much longer to come out of our haze. The music doesn’t stop, but the sound is turned down as everyone starts to make his or her way outside. We are some of the last to head out, and Peeta’s hand never leaves mine as we walk toward the crowd of people.

We stop at the edge of the group just as the first set lights up the sky. Peeta stands behind me, his arms wrapped around my waist and I lean into the warmth he offers. The smile on my face cannot be removed as I turn my attention from the sky to those standing around us. I see Prim with her friends, and Rory, ahead of us. They gasp with each new sparkling spectacle. Beetee and Wiress aren’t too far from them; their constant bickering has ceased as they admire the show above. Mr. Mellark is standing with Mrs. Mellark and Reese, looking very pleased and happy. He deserves this. And then I spot Gale standing with Johanna. At first I believe they are just standing next to each other and then I look back and smile.

They’re holding hands.

My attention is brought back to the sky until I feel Peeta’s hand that lays flat against my stomach pull me closer to him. The gesture warms me to my toes and I can’t help but bite my lip at my sudden thoughts. I wait for the rebuttal within myself, the one I expect to follow any sort of impulsive thought. It doesn’t come. In fact, the only thing that comes is the sensation of Peeta’s
lips grazing the bare flesh of the spot where my shoulder meets my neck.

I slowly untangle myself from his arms but never letting my hand drop from his. He looks at me with an adorably confused expression and I can’t help but laugh slightly. In the dark I doubt he sees my reaction. I start to pull him away from the crowd and he lets me.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

“To be unpredictable.”
Want To

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

I'm baaaack. Not that I really went anywhere, but I thought you'd all be happy to know I come with an update! But before I get into that I have a couple pretty important things to say:

First, I want you all to know I am so grateful for all the support you have shown me. Your reviews are beyond amazing and the alerts and follows? I cannot say enough for how supportive the Everlark fandom has been. This is my first dip into the fandom & I've had nothing but love. Thank you so, so much from the bottom of my heart. With that comes my apology. Due to my heavy schedule it's not easy for me to reply to every review I get - although I do try. So if you don't get response please don't assume I don't care because I do, so much. I am so grateful for even the smallest review of "update soon!" They all inspire me greatly, please know that.

Second, this could not be done without my two betas. Ivory, my original beta, who fed me encouragement after encouragement to continue. Thank you. She has since had real life kind of take over, but I still speak with her and her support for this story in unmatched. And then there is miss Court81981, who's beta powers are of the unhuman variety. She is so amazing. There aren't enough words to describe her perfection and support, especially in this chapter. She put me at such ease during my "M" rated writing and I can't thank her enough for that. Now everyone remember this: after you're done reading my chapter you need to race over and read Crash My Party. She puts my writing to shame, she's so good.

Basically, I have had the best support team during this story and venture into Everlark, I just can't wait to write more stories!

Sorry for the terribly long AN, but maybe not. It all needed to be said, but it's done and we're at chapter ten! Almost halfway through the story! Woohoo! Now, peeps, be warned this story is rated M for a reason and this chapter starts it. So, not work appropriate(even though I'm updating from work - on my personal laptop, but whatevs) and definitely NOT for young readers.

You've been warned, now enjoy!
“You’ve got a dream of a degree and a shirt that smells like me.”

Sex.

The word itself causes a commotion.

It’s the thing everyone and no one is talking about. If your friends ask, you’re basically a champion in the homerun derby. If your parents mention the subject, you haven’t even been called out of the dugout yet. If you’re a male you make your “number” higher, but females tend to round down. (The double standard is hated, but still very much in tact.) If you claim you’re waiting for marriage you’re a traditional quack — or just ugly. But if you’re fast and loose with the idea you’re obviously getting paid for it.

And that’s just in Dawson. The verdict is still out on the rest of the world.

In its barest form — pun intended — it’s how the population extends. Of course, most of the time that’s a reaction to the action hardly anyone under the age of 21 pays attention to. And it’s usually one that garnishes the looks of pity and petty gossip from the same crowd. We all went to school with that girl who got pregnant before she actually wanted to. Hell, some schools produce higher teen pregnancy statistics than future college graduates.

Ours was Cashmere Lewis.

She was in high school while I was still in middle school, but her reputation hung like a black flag of “this could be you” for years after she left Dawson High School. Left, not graduated. She got pregnant in her junior year. Apparently the father was more interested in Friday night touchdowns and Saturday night keggers to actually take responsibility for his unborn child. Not that he actually claimed it has his. Cashmere was devastated, or so the story goes. Her parents even more so. They took Cashmere and her older brother, Gloss, out of Dawson before the baby was even born.

No one mentions them much anymore.

Thus continues the belief that sex leads to nothing but problems. And you can’t mention problems without mentioning love. Every boy is in love until they get what they want from their lover. Or so we’re taught. Girls’ chastity belts seem to loosen at the mere word. Girls who sleep around without love are simply easy. Girls who are in love are simply expressing said emotion.

Again, they’re all stereotypes. But we cling to them.

I cling to them.

Because living secondhand has always been my way. Hearing stories and making assumptions is easier than actually going out and gathering the scars myself. I have enough scars without letting love, and all its attachments, make a few dents of its own.

In fact, a lot like love, I have never really thought much about sex. I’d listen to Gale’s stories and try to tone out the really graphic moments. I’d hear gossip in the hallways about who had slept with whom over the weekends. I’d even eavesdrop on several conversations better Jackie and Samantha about different hookups happening on the ranch. But my actual knowledge on the subject is not much past the secondhand education from classmates and awkward classes with our P.E. teacher in the eighth grade.
That need everyone talks about?

Well, I suppose I’d be an out and out liar if I said I never felt it in some way, but my experiences on my own have been less than…stellar. The whole idea embarrasses me so much that it hinders even the shadow touches I’ve dared at night. I’ve awoken from my far share of incredibly vivid dreams feeling like I’ve been caught in with my hand in the cookie jar. Even the memory of it in the early morning house causes me to blush instantly.

Needless to say, in touch with my sexuality, I am not.

And yet here I stand at my front door, pulling Peeta Mellark against me in a way that would cause all the church ladies to faint. I know what I want, but in the broadest of terms. I want Peeta. I want to feel completely connected to this boy who has managed to turn my world on its head in a matter of months. He’s awoken something in me that I didn’t even know existed. And looking back I realize this isn’t as sudden as I feel it is.

Before this summer the slightest mention of him usually piqued my attention. I noticed him in a crowded room. I secretly sympathized with him, on some level, when Gale would mention his distaste for him. I silently wished him the absolute best when he left Dawson in the pursuit of a football scholarship. Peeta Mellark was always the boy off in the distance that I associated with my salvation. His family offered me security and work without pity. Mr. Mellark had been the first to open his arms to me, but Peeta instantly followed suit. He didn’t look at me like some charity project. He didn’t treat me with kid gloves because my father had just died. No, he understood I didn’t want that. Peeta understood me long before I realized — long before I took notice. He simply showed me around the ranch, showed me a few tricks of the trade, and then let me stretch my legs.

Peeta didn’t hover, but he acknowledged. And in return I started to do the same. In the halls of Dawson High we were in two separate worlds, but at the ranch we were on the same field. And this was where we truly wished to be all the time. I see that now. I see how Peeta seems at ease in the acres of quiet pastures. How he can work a twelve-hour day of hard, sweaty labor and still have the ability to make everyone laugh at dinner. How he’d much rather spend his nights quietly on a porch swing than at any honky-tonk or bar in town.

Sometimes I forget this place is as much a part of him as it is me — probably more so.

And I think for the second time in this month that somehow this would have happened anyway. Whether it be now or down the road, Peeta Mellark was always the direction I was heading. In the light of day that realization will scare me, but tonight it does nothing but fuel the burn I have for this boy.

I feel the hand he has against my hip gently slide beneath my shirt. His calloused fingers against my bare side send chills through me. I untangle one of my hands from his curls to reach behind me for the doorknob. The sudden click in the quiet night startles us both, but Peeta freezes. My previous confidence easily begins to melt into uncertainty as his lips leave mine. I search his features, only really able to make out anything when a firework explodes in the distance.

"Katniss – we don’t,” His voice cracks with nerves and it strangely puts me at ease. “I’m not expecting anything. We don’t have to do anything. I mean, I want to – I just – God, this –“

“I… I love you.”

And it’s out there. Saying it aloud feels like some kind of weight has been lifted from me to be replaced with butterflies. I hadn’t meant to say it. I hadn’t meant to put myself out there in such a
way because for as long as I can remember my instincts have lead to self-preservation. Because putting myself out there would mean a possibility of getting hurt, and that is not an option. Not anymore.

I want to look away, but then a firework ignites overhead and my eyes find his. His expression is unreadable, which is rather strange. Peeta is a lot of things, but unreadable is not one of them. Have I completely ruined this? It’s too sudden. I knew it was. I may be new to all things “relationship,” but even I know the topic of love usually scares off many boys. My heart already aches at what I’ve done. And my mind is already preparing me to put on a stone face for the rest of the summer.

But then Peeta leans in to kiss me and all thoughts are lost.

The kiss is soft, almost ghostlike, as he pulls me flush against him. In my shocked state my arms still know their place around his neck and they find it comfortably.

“I knew it.” His voice tickles against my lips. “My dreams of you saying that could never have done it justice.”

I don’t have time to process what he just said before his lips find my again and this kiss is no longer soft and lingering. This kiss is to express something. My arms have dropped to grip his biceps while his hands have found purchase on my neck. Our tongues duel for dominance and the heat inside me threatens to boil over as I reach behind me yet again and push my front door open. This time Peeta doesn’t argue.

We stumble a bit as I pull him over the threshold. I can feel his smile mirrors mine, and it’s something else that helps ease my nerves, even if for a moment. He blindly pushes the door closed and when I hear it click behind us, I pull away just enough to look at him. The silence between us, like the rest of the evening, is loaded. Our breathing is labored and mingles together in my dark kitchen. Slowly I lean forward, one of my hands resting on his chest. My lips brush run across his strong jaw and my other hand reaches behind him.

The sound of the deadbolt in the quiet atmosphere is deafening and promising. When my eyes meet his again, I’m sure. I may be inexperienced in everything we’re about to do tonight, but I know exactly what I want — and he’s standing right in front of me.

There is a still moment where neither of us knows what to do next. I take this moment to kick off each of my shoes and he does the same. It’s mundane, but it fills the space of uncertainty.

I keep my eyes on his for a moment longer as I turn to walk down my small hallway toward my bedroom. Within a few steps I hear his behind me. My heart is racing, and I’m still in shock that I’m actually doing this. Not only am I doing this, I’m leading the way. I walk close to the wall, my fingertips grazing it as if at any moment I’m going to lose my nerve and my footing alike.

Before I reach my familiar room, I feel Peeta’s hands come around my middle, one hand sprawling against my stomach while the other rests on my lip. Our walking slows to a near stop as I feel his lips against the heated flesh of my neck. I bite my lip to keep from gasping and my eyes close instantly. The moment is small but intimate. In the stillness I swear I can feel his heartbeat against my back. His warm, damp breath blows the small flyaway pieces of hair near my ear. My fingers intertwine with his against my stomach.

Finally I move us forward, entering my bedroom. I’ve always known it was small, but now with Peeta, it feels like a dollhouse. There is hardly three feet between the foot of my bed and my dresser. Normally being in such close proximity to anyone would lead me to squirm away, but now I wish there was less space. I wish to stay as close to this boy as possible.
And he must feel the same, because even the few inches I’ve put between us to lead him in here has been closed by him coming up behind me again. This time he simply places a hand against my side. And my nerves take over before I can control them. I’ve done everything to push us forward up until this moment. Peeta has only done as much as I’ve allowed, but in reality I know nothing from this point forward. I’m not even sure if he does. I’m scared and unsure. I try to swallow the large lump that’s formed there and I know my frame has gone rigid.

Then Peeta’s hand slips from my side and I feel his hands gently undoing my braid, the tingling sensation in my scalp as he undoes the twists I had done earlier. Once he reaches the top I feel his fingers gently shake my tresses, letting them fall completely loose. And then his fingers are tracing patterns at the base of my skull, pushing all of my hair over my right shoulder. His lips kiss at the nape of my neck, following a pattern to my left ear.

“Let go, I’ve got you,” He whispers.

The shiver that rushes through my body is obvious, and I feel his arm come around my middle. Not in possession, but in protection. He’s promising me security and safety. Something I’ve always wanted, but never dared ask for. In that small sentence he’s telling me I don’t need to be in control not to get hurt. Not with him.

My eyes close as his lips connect with a spot just behind my ear. It tickles and it’s familiar. I remember the first time he found that spot only weeks ago. We were leaning against his old pick-up. The moment had started off playful until he found that spot. My knees instantly went weak and I was grateful for his strong hold. Now I’m grateful for the same thing, but slowly his lips move away, and he’s turning me to face him.

In the dim lighting I know he can’t tell, but my features are flushed and my chest heaves with excited, short breaths. The only light that dances off our features is the light atop several barns nearby that cascade into my single bedroom window. It’s dull, but enough and the shadows soothe me. Peeta reaches up and gently traces my cheek with his hand. His attention to detail, even in the dark, is astounding. With each touch my skin aches for more. He leans forward, his lips light against mine.

My response is slow, like his. He’s patient, and this kiss proves it. He starts to walk me backwards until I feel the back of my knees hit the edge of my bed. Taking his lead, I slowly lay myself back. With his continued guidance I move toward the head of the bed and lay back against the several pillow I own. And then he’s above me, careful not to rest all of his weight on me. But the weight I do feel sends a thrill through me. Our lips connect again and I’m hungry for more. This change in position has done nothing but make me anxious for more. I find my hands traveling down the material of his old t-shirt to the hem where I’m greeted with the feeling of his bare skin.

I’m bold again, and I start to pull the fabric upward. I don’t get very far before Peeta leans up on his knees, towering over me. He easily strips the shirt off, tossing it to the side. In the dim light I can make out the contour of his athletic muscles, and he hovers above me like some kind of Greek God. It isn’t long before he’s coming back atop of me, but it feels like ages and my hands search for him. I grip his strong shoulders as his lips start a trail down my jaw. I feel the heat of his bare chest through the material of my shirt that I’m now wishing wasn’t there.

His hands must have the same idea because soon I feel his fingertips just above the waist of my jeans. He’s tickling lightly and I can’t help the breathy laugh that escapes me. I feel his smile against my pulse point, and it makes me smile longer.

And then he’s pulling at the hem of my shirt. It’s gentle, almost asking for permission. Slowly I push myself up, following his lead, and toss the material over my head and off to the side. He’s
leaning back on his heels and looking at me. My insecurities run rampant as I feel his eyes move down from my shoulders to my bra-covered chest and then my bare stomach. It’s nothing he wouldn’t see when I’ve been in my swimsuit, but my bra is anything but Victoria Secret and my ranch work tan lines are never appealing. I want to ask him what he thinks; I know I’m not some kind of gorgeous supermodel, but the way his eyes follow every line makes me believe he thinks so.

He’s the one who moves first, forcing me to lie back as his lips attach to my collarbone. I feel his hand against my bare stomach and my heart nearly pounds out of my chest as his lips continue their journey downward. He places light kisses atop each breast, just above where my bra covers. My flesh forms goose bumps on the surface.

The gasp that comes out when he lightly nips at the sensitive flesh of my ribs surprises me, but it only encourages him to continue. And he does, sometimes lightly tracing the tip of his tongue over where he just nipped.

His lips continue to lave down, stopping at my bellybutton. The sensation causes me to suck in a sudden breath and when he nips just to the right of it I giggle — actually giggle.

“Someone’s ticklish,” he mumbles, still kissing around my abdomen. “Good to know.”

“Don’t you dare, Mellark.”

“Don’t sass me, Everdeen.”

His laughter mingles with mine and this feels so natural. This feels like something I will spend the rest of my days looking forward to. Not just the sex, but also these intimate moments with Peeta. These moments when everything else fades away and it’s simply us.

But the laughing stops when he moves back up my body, kissing a trail as he does. Slowly I feel his hand come up to the front clasp of my bra, and it unclips easily. The material loosens around me, but he doesn’t push it away at first. He looks at me, watching my reaction. He’s looking for uncertainty he won’t find. Tonight and Peeta are some of the few things I’ve honestly been sure about in a long time.

His fingertips move beneath the material, and I feel his calloused touch against my flesh. The rush of heat to my stomach nearly ignites me from the inside out. A simple touch from Peeta has always sent me ablaze, but tonight is a newfound need. He moves the material aside; both of my breasts now free to his touch and his eyes. I subtly move to allow for him to remove the offending bearer from me completely. It gets tossed somewhere to join our t-shirts.

What little I knew about pleasure is completely dissolved when Peeta’s lips slip around one of my erect peaks. My mews of pleasure can’t be contained as I feel his tongue run circles around my nipple. My hands, as if on feminine instinct, tangle in his curls, begging him not to move. My back arches to meet his lips and his hand glides up my side. Then I feel his thumb rub over the sensitive bud of my other breast. My eyes slam shut, and my head rolls back into the pillows.

Peeta switches his attentions, slowly moving between each. But before he does, he makes sure to worship the valley between them, running wet kisses up and down my chest, even coming up to capture my lips in a passionate lock. My chest heaves noticeably, and I know he’s aware of just what he’s doing to my body.

My hands are gripping his shoulders hard enough to leave marks, and I find something about that positively exciting. The sensations I feel cause me to buck my hips, accidently at first. The throaty
groan Peeta lets out when I do it causes a chill to run through me. I am new to all of this, but apparently whatever I had just done had caused Peeta some kind of pleasure, and since I wish to give him even a fraction of the pleasure he’s giving me, I do it once more.

The noises he makes are beautiful, but that’s not surprising. Everything Peeta does, everything Peeta is, is beautiful.

Soon Peeta is kissing his way back up to my lips. He stops for a short moment at my collarbone again and I believe I have found one of Peeta’s favorite parts about me. When his lips come to mine, our tongues meet in a lazy, passionate duel. His hips have settled against mine completely, and I feel what I can only imagine to be his hardened length against my sensitive core.

My hips decide then to buck against him, and he half-moans and half-laughs against my lips.

“If you continue that much longer, this will end long before it begins.”

His hand grasps at my hip, his fingers slipping just below the waistband of my jeans. It’s in this moment I can just take in the sensation of having Peeta flush against me. Our body heat has raised the temperature in my room enough that we both have a thin layer of sweat against us. This causes a delicious slick feeling between us.

My hands find purchase on each side of his face as I deepen the kiss even more. My legs easily wrap around his waist, and I know I want more. My legs don’t stay wrapped him for long because he’s soon coaxing them apart so that he can push himself back up onto his heels. I will never get tired of watching him tower over me. His fingers trace patterns down my sides, and I grin at the tickling sensation. When his fingers stop at the button of my jeans, my breath hitches and my nerves start again.

Uncertainty is still nowhere to be seen, but the anxiety to move forward to painted all over me.

The button comes undone easily and the noise of my zipper fills the quiet room. And then there’s nothing stopping him. He gently begins to tug at the material, my hips raise when needed, and then I realize my underwear is going with them. My heart races at the vulnerability that I know is inevitable. And as my legs are completely freed from my old jeans I feel the humid air of the room hit my flesh. My stomach twists with nerves and I can feel Peeta’s eyes memorizing me in the dim lighting. He’s standing at the foot of the bed looking down at me and I can’t help but look away.

Nudity is nothing I’m familiar with outside of showering, and nudity in front of someone else is nearly unbearable. I fight everything in me that wants to grab the blanket and throw it across me. And then I feel his hand grab at my ankle and pull it upward. This does nothing to relieve my nerves, but his lips against the arch of my foot sends a shiver through me.

“You’re absolutely perfect, Katniss,” he whispers against the flesh of my ankle.

His lips continue to move up my leg; placing it back down on the bed, he forces me to move them farther apart. This causes me to squirm with nervous excitement. His lips are at my thigh before I realize his final destination. Of course, it’s something I’ve only heard people talk about and to be honest I’ve always thought it sounded rather gross. Why would anyone want someone down there? Better yet, why would anyone want to be down there?

And then my questions are answered.

His tongue comes in contact with the apex between my legs experimentally and I nearly come unglued. My hands grasp the blanket around me and my moans fill the air. Instantly my hips rock
gently as if to keep contact with this new intruder. Peeta’s arm comes across my hips, keeping them in place as he continues his assault on my center. I thought his tongue would be my undoing until I felt his lips enclose my sensitive bud and suck gently. His name falls from my lips like rain.

The coils in the bottom of my stomach tighten with each suck or lick. His hand that holds my hip tightens and I realize this must be doing something for him as well. I never thought giving pleasure to someone would be such a turn on, but as I think about it, I realize how much I wish to touch him. But that will have to wait because I suddenly feel Peeta’s finger slip inside me and start moving in time with his tongue.

At first the intrusion feels strange, and when he adds another I feel as though I am being stretched uncomfortably. But soon the discomfort fades, and he starts curling the tips of his fingers just so that he is hitting a spot I didn’t even know existed. My cries fill the room unashamedly now. There is something building within me — a something I’ve only felt on a much more mundane scale when it’s been my fingers or a vivid dream bringing it forth.

I can feel my walls tightening around his fingers and my back arches nearly completely off the bed. My eyes are shut tight and the thin layer of sweat has turned into beads rolling down my sides and neck. I bite my lip for a moment when Peeta hits a particularly sensitive spot and times it perfectly with a light lick to my tender bud.

“Come for me, baby.” Peeta encourages, kissing the inside of my thigh. “Let go.”

And when his lips come back to my center I come undone. The explosion inside me is like nothing I’ve ever felt before. I swear I see stars behind my closed eyes as Peeta’s name continues to come out in breathless moans. My hands are tangled in his curls, and I’m completely lost.

When I come down from my high, Peeta is gently kissing my abdomen and nipping at my hipbones. I can feel the smugness practically illuminating off of him and I can’t help but smile at how boyish he looks against my slick skin. As he works his way back up my body for what seems like the hundredth time that night he places light kisses on my overly sensitive nipples, the smirk never leaving his face.

“What?” I ask.

“You’re beautiful when you come.” His sincerity leaves me breathless and ignites another fire inside of me.

He kisses me then, and my heart starts its erratic beating all over again. I feel him flush against me once more and I feel as though something had been missing from me before. His hands are everywhere and mine follow suit. My hips move against him; this time the feeling is near surreal. The coarse fabric against my damp curls and sensitive center is maddening.

My hands find the button of his jeans and easily undo it. He pauses, pulling away from my lips just enough to look at me. I’m brave again.

“I bet you are too,” I say, leaning up to capture his lips with mine.

If he has an argument it’s lost for the moment has his fingers tangle in my hair, his lips collide with mine. My hands continue to undo his jeans, starting to push them down the best I can. But he pulls away again. I think he wants to ask if I’m sure, but when I reach down to grasp his hardened length underneath the confines of his jeans he’s quiet once again. There’s no turning back. I want this.

He pushes himself up off the bed, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out his wallet. At first
I’m confused, until I see the small square package he pulls out. I’m naïve, but I live in the twenty-first century. He tosses his wallet to the side and looks up at him.

“Never thought I’d thank Reese for anything.” He smirks and I laugh.

This is easy, and I wonder if everyone else’s first time is this easy and carefree. I’m sure its not. I’ve heard plenty horror stories. And like always, I’m thankful for Peeta.

His jeans slide down his hips easily, his boxers following suit. My stomach is filled with excitement, and my eyes can’t be torn from his now bare body. My thoughts are completely confirmed; he is a Greek God. He looks so beautiful as my eyes scan down his body. In the dark, his all shadows and contour, but the details are there and I suddenly wish to explore them.

Crawling back to me, he takes his time to find places to attach his lips. Peeta is nothing if not thorough. He pauses only to tear the small package and roll the condom down his length. I get bold then and reach my own hand out to help him. His groan is reassuring and my hand runs up and down his erection several times after the barrier is in place.

Peeta grabs my hand, gently pulling it away and places a flat kiss against my palm. He lays atop me then, aligning himself with my center. I tense instinctively, but he doesn’t enter me. Instead he looks at me, kissing my lips lightly.

“This is going to hurt at first,” he says between kisses. “Try to relax.”

I nod, but the tension still has hold of my muscles. I’ve heard of the original pain girls feel at their first time and even with that instruction my body does as it will. My hands are gripped around his biceps and my knees rest against his sides. I feel the weight of his elbows on either side of me and try to focus on anything but the impending pain.

Yet he still doesn’t enter me; instead he kisses me deeply. My lips mold to his easily, and my tongue searches for his. When they connect I moan lightly, my muscles are relaxing without me realizing. He parts our lips enough to speak.

“You have no idea the affect you have on me,” he whispers, kissing me again. “I love you.”

My heart soars and he enters me deeply. I gasp at the sudden intrusion, my nails digging into his arms as my head tips back against the pillow. The pain isn’t instant, but it does come. Peeta holds still through the sharpness, peppering my face with silent kisses. My eyes sting with sudden tears, but a few blinks and they are gone.

My lips search for his and then they connect; my hips buck against his gently. He must understand me because he gently starts to thrust into me. The discomfort remains for several moments before the pleasure starts to wash over me in quiet waves. My quiet whimpers slowly turn into heated moans.

Soon enough Peeta’s slow, gentle thrusts aren’t enough and I find my hands resting against his lips quietly begging for more. The smirk on Peeta’s lips tells me he understands my meaning, but he does nothing to change the pace. Instead he leans down and kisses my sweaty pulse point before moving up to the shell of my ear. “What do you want?”

His voice is deeper than normal. His chest practically rumbles with the gravel and strain in his voice. The mere sound is enough to have me crying out in a wave of pleasure. My hands are still tight on his hips as I try to meet his thrusts in way that tells him I need more. But still our pace remains painstakingly slow.
“You. Harder,” I choke out, my eyes opening to see his once blue eyes nearly black in the darkness. And his thrusts are quicker, deeper. The discomfort I once felt has faded to the background and it’s replaced with that familiar build that I remember from earlier. My legs tighten around him and my hands rest around his neck, bringing his forehead against mine. The closeness brings a tightness to my chest and I’m mumbling his name against his lips. My walls tighten around him and I feel his thrusts lose their rhythm for a moment. I think it’s his silent way of telling me he’s close.

His hand slides beneath me, coming to rest in the small of my back. He twists me upward, and the new angle is spine tingling. I cry out instantly when he hits a spot deep inside me. Within a few deep thrusts I’m coming undone. His name, once again, pours from my lips and my hips arch into him easily. Peeta is losing his resolve and it’s absolutely beautiful.

“Come for me, baby.” My words echo his from earlier.

And I am just coming down from my high when Peeta starts to fall over the edge inside of me. His eyes close tight and his grip on my hip tightens. I swear my name has never sounded more perfect than it does coming from his mouth at this moment. His thrusts slow as he starts to come back to reality. My hands are still resting around his neck and his forehead is still against mine. Our breath mingles together as we both struggle for steadiness.

“I was right.” I smile, my lips finding his.

I don’t finish my thought because he deepens the kiss and I’m lost. When he slips out of me I whimper, but remain attached to him as he rolls over. I’m now lying against him, his arm coming around me, and his hand resting against my hip. Part of me thinks I should cover up, but the air is so warm that my slick skin finds the bareness cooling.

“I could stay here forever,” I mumble, sleep suddenly sounding rather appealing.

“Hold that thought.” He whispers into my temple before crawling out of bed and heading towards my bathroom.

I smirk at the sight of a very naked Peeta finding his way, rather clumsily though my house, attempting to locate my bathroom. My smirk turns into a smile as I lay there thinking about everything that has happened. How I could spend the rest of my nights like this and find no complaint. My eyes start to drift close as I remember the sound of Peeta’s voice telling me he loved me.

I fall asleep that night before Peeta returns, but I ghostly remember him saying those three beautiful words to me before I am completely overcome by sleep.
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

So are you sitting at your computer in serious shock right now? Two updates in less than a week? I mean, just a day short of a week, but still less than a week. Holy smokes! I'm in shock and you want to know why? Because my beta is the quickest one on the planet. And thorough and wonderful. Obviously I'm beyond lucky to have her. So thank you, Court81981! One, for being the awesome beta that you are. And two, for ruining me in the best way with your stories. And thank you to everyone who continually shows me amazing support. Your reviews, favorites, follows, and alerts make me smile and push me forward. Thank you!

And now onto the chapter! Some answers will be answered, for those who've been asking, while others are going to be raised. And the drama is coming..dun, dun, dun! Enjoy!

“It’s supposed to get a little cool tonight. Looks like I’m going to have to hold you tight.”

The smell of summer.

I suppose to say there is only one smell of summer would be a bit of a stretch. For everyone it’s different. In a small town there are a million different scents that can remind a person of those three months. I’m sure the city is no different. Some have odors that they dread, while others stop in their tracks with a smile on their face when a certain scent wafts through the air.

The summer, like every season, has its iconic scents and I’ve heard some experts say your sense of smell is attached to memories, to emotions. I’m not a scientist, but from what I’ve experienced this theory seems to be true.
The smell of Dove shampoo will forever be the smell of my mother. She has used it since I was little. The steam from her shower would always cast it out into the small hallway of our modest home and into our rooms. The smell would sit there for hours and in the summer, it tended to stay permanently, the humidity only adding to its potency. It also reminds me of the time when Prim was little, maybe three or four, and got a hold of the full shampoo bottle while we were driving home from the grocery store and proceeded to dump most the contents into the backseat. My Dad’s car still has the lingering of Dove — not that we get in it much. Even now, from time to time, when I’m walking through the aisles of the pharmacy I will catch the scent lingering and I remember.

There is this thing that humidity tends to do to growing corn, especially toward the end of summer. It’s a smell that you have to be searching for on most days around Dawson, but if the wind is just right, you can’t avoid it. It’s a type of musk that doesn’t really smell terrible, but it doesn’t smell good either. It just makes itself known, but most don’t pay attention. I know I didn’t until my father died. Then the stench seemed to find me. I would be working on the ranch or out with Gale at the baseball diamond and it would hit me like a ton of bricks. It was almost as if I had seen Mr. Snow himself walk past. My chest would get heavy, my heart would race, and my stomach would twist — the bile practically begging to come out. It still has an effect on me, but nowhere near what it used to. The sadness will linger for a moment, but my life goes on.

Of course, there are always the generic smells of summer — the ones that don’t really expose any nerves or stir any memories, but you recognize them as soon as they hit your nose. The smell of sunblock, for example. You associate it will swimming, pale skin, and undoubtedly still the need for Aloe Vera that night. But for most it doesn’t rekindle any sort of iconic memory. Some smells are just so common you don’t think much of them. Unfortunately, not all those smells are pleasant. I love my job, and I love this place, but summertime is easily the worst time for your nose. Animals are not the most hygienic and the temperatures are unforgiving.

Summer nights usually consist of bug spray lingering in the air and burning your senses, while the nearby campfire soaks into every fiber of your clothes so it’ll stay with you long after you’ve gone home. Around the ranch there is usually someone cooking on the grill while others are popping open cold beers. The smells mingle, together and somehow they comfort me. It’s natural and it’s normal. Change and I don’t get along much, so I welcome anything that reminds me of the constants in my life.

And then there are summer mornings. Summer mornings are always my favorite. The way the breeze has yet to be tainted by the hot, afternoon sun. The way the stillness has the crisp coolness of the night prior. The way the moisture still hovers in the atmosphere without causing discomfort. All of that comes together to create this fresh, new smell. Like the world is reminding you that it’s a new day and you can start over however you wish.

But this morning is different. This morning, before my eyes have even begun to flutter I get a hint
of something new to my usual morning smell. Its heaviness is soothing, and it’s earthiness tickles. It’s not until I smell the distinct smell of spice that my memories rush through me like an alarm clock and a sleepy smile plays at my lips. The smell of cologne on Peeta isn’t common. He normally just smells of worn leather from his gloves, sweat from a hard day’s work, deodorant that has begun to fade before the day is even half over, and a hint of flour that I’m unsure of from where it originates. But when he does, all of those smells combine with it in the most comforting way.

This morning the scent has become imprinted in my mind and I’ll forever associate it with the way Peeta looks so peaceful in his sleep, the way the sun creates shadows with my swaying curtains across the bed, the way I slowly stretch and feel a delicious soreness overtake me, and the indescribable safety I feel.

My eyes don’t take long to adjust to the morning light. My eyes move from Peeta to glance around the room, but the detour is short-lived. I like to look at Peeta. I’ve always enjoyed watching him move about the ranch, but now I am simply looking at him. Studying him in an intimate way. The way his nostrils slightly flare when he lets out a quiet snore. How his relaxed features seem to have sadness in them: his lips fall into a small frown, his eyebrows are worried, and there is a crease in his forehead I want to reach out and soothe away. They tell a story Peeta himself has never said: he lives a harder life than he lets on.

We’ve all talked about the type of person Mrs. Mellark is to her children. Behind closed doors, we could only imagine the wrath she lets out on them. And in her more heated moments she’s even let that anger ooze out into the landscape of the ranch. I’ve personally seen her throwing a pot in Mr. Mellark’s direction as he leaves the house and others have told stories of her all but strangling the other members of her family on their front lawn.

Suddenly I wish her away. I wish all things away that could cause such a stressed expression on this beautiful man’s face.

After I have memorized his face, my eyes trail downward. His neck is twisted as he lies on prone and I’m close enough to see his pulse point bob rhythmically. His shoulders are relaxed, but their muscles still remain prominent. His right arm is lifted up, tucked underneath the pillow he’s using. A trace of the tattoo I’ve only spotted briefly mars the skin that’s against the mattress. He also has a tan line across his arm where his t-shirt normally rests. His back is tanned, but nowhere near the darkness of his forearms and face. I find the unevenness of it appealing.

The sheet lands just below the curve of his back and I want nothing more than to reach over and yank it off completely and memorize every inch of flesh, but that would undoubtedly ruin my interrupted moment to watch him. So instead I direct my gaze upward again as I move myself closer to Peeta, allowing the sheet to fall just below my chest as I do so. The movement causes him to stir and I’ve decided I would rather have an awake, naked Peeta than a sleeping one.
I place my lips against the warm skin of his bicep and let them linger there to drop several wet
kisses. His body starts to move slowly. His eyes flicker open and his sleepy smile is another thing
I’ve decided I want to see more of. My hand reaches over to lightly trace the muscles of his
shoulder and my eyes meet his.

“What time is it?” he asks, his voice gruff with sleep.

“I don’t know, maybe seven.” I muse, still tracing my fingers along his skin.

He groans, tucking his face into the pillow. “We have the day off.”

“We do.” I smirk, reaching for his arm and pulling it over my waist as I slide closer.

He must get my obvious innuendo, because he turns his head back again, but this time there is a
knowing smile. His blue eyes are dark, and it sends a chill through me.

Shifting slightly, I watch him turn to lie on his side facing me. My eyes move down as he turns,
the sheet only allowing the smallest of glimpses and my curiosity isn’t quenched. But my eyes
don’t linger because he’s moving toward me, his lips easily finding mine and guiding me back onto
the bed. He hovers over me, his upper half pressing mine into the mattress.

His lips are on my jaw when I hear him ask, “How are you feeling?”

Wonderful. Over the moon. In love.

But then I realize why he’s probably asking, and it has nothing to do with emotional state, although
I’m sure he cares about that as well. My body does ache, but no worse than it has on my harder
work days. And I would much rather the ache come from this type of activity.

“I’m sore.” I admit, hoping it doesn’t derail where this morning is heading.

“I’m sorry.” His lips remain close as he drops little kisses on my neck and just beneath my earlobe.
“I’m not.”

Peeta pulls away to look me in the eyes, his arm coming up to push a stray hair from my eyes. It’s another quiet moment, but an intense one. His breath tingles on my lips and my chest presses against his with every breath. I feel my hand run down his side, remembering the spot I found last night: the spot just above the V of his hips that causes him to let out this sexy ragged laugh. Our eyes remain locked and I watch amusement come across his aroused expression.

“Me neither.”

My laughter fills the quiet room, and I give him a playful shove.

Dramatically, Peeta falls back against the bed and I’m not far behind him. We’ve not changed positions, and I’m the one hovering over him. This time my eyes are roaming all over his now-exposed chest then onto the defined lines of his abs, the light dusting of hair that trails past the sheet that still covers him, and the evidence of just how much he’s enjoying our morning activities.

The sight makes me blush and also fills me with pride. I linger there for just a moment before looking back up at him. This time my eyes find the arm that’s wrapped under me and I see the tattoo I’ve wanted to get a better look at. The tattoo that I assumed was some kind of tribal, generic piece of ink that he’d gotten as a way to rebel like most tend to do around here.

But I am beyond surprised at what I find there. It’s nothing tribal, religious, or the dreaded barbed wire. The shape is completely shaded black and a bit aged.

It’s an insignia. A college insignia, but it’s not the familiar “O” shape that’s passed around here on Mr. Mellark’s t-shirt or the bumper sticker on Reese’s truck. It’s a steer’s head. More specifically, it’s a longhorn. As in the University of Texas. My eyes are riveted there and Peeta must see my confusion because he lets out a slow breath and a laugh.

“Sometimes I really shouldn’t listen to Finnick.”

“Finnick didn’t go to the University of Texas.” I say, looking up at him as my fingers trace the image.
“No, but Gale was going to,” Peeta says, looking over at me and tucking his other arm behind his head. “The summer before our senior year, after Gale and I had officially signed on to play at Texas and Ohio, Finnick convinced us that we all needed to celebrate the achievement. Naturally that involved a bit of alcohol.”

“Naturally.” I laugh, placing a kiss atop the tattooed flesh.

“A tattoo parlor was somewhere between the third beer and the second shot of tequila.” Peeta laughs, looking up at the ceiling like he could still see the memory up there. “Obviously Finnick knew a guy — Finn always knows a guy — and somehow he was able to get two minors tattoos without anyone blinking an eye.”

“Gale has a tattoo?” My surprise is evident in my voice.

“You didn’t know Gale has a tattoo?”

“Obviously not.”

“Right shoulder blade. It’s the same as mine, style-wise, except it’s the logo for the Volunteers,” Peeta continues. “Finn has the Buckeyes tattoo, outside of his left bicep.”

There is a silence in the room as I process the story I’ve just heard. It’s really not that unbelievable since Finnick, Gale, and Peeta used to be practically inseparable. But the story also makes me realize just how much this rift has probably affected all of them. Finnick maybe more than anyone, he’s probably had to spend his time playing referee when really he wants it all just to go back to how it was. To how Peeta wants it to be. To how Gale wishes it never stopped being. But anger and jealousy are ugly emotions.

My eyes move from where they’ve been studying the tattoo to meet Peeta’s eyes, a laugh escaping. “So you guys basically have permanent friendship bracelets?”

Peeta laughs, pulling me closer and placing a kiss on my forehead. My head lies against his shoulder as I reach for the hand resting across his stomach. I lace our fingers together and enjoy the moment.

“I guess I should be relieved you didn’t know Gale has a tattoo,” Peeta muses. “That means you
haven’t seen him without a shirt. Guess that means –“

“That I was a virgin last night.” I interject, turning my head up to get a better look at his face. My smirk playing at my lips, “You knew that. Feel better now that you’ve heard me say it?”

“Glad to hear there wasn’t only one in the room last night.”

My eyebrows raise, the look of confusion barely seen by Peeta who doesn’t have a good view of my face in this position. The way he was last night, although I have nothing to compare it to, seemed like a man with experience. And although the thought of Peeta with someone else turns my stomach, I still assumed it to be the truth. Why wouldn’t he? I heard how the girls talked about him in school and I’m sure college girls are no different. He certainly wasn’t a virgin because he hadn’t had the opportunity.

“Having two older brothers gave me a sex education that would make Mrs. Undersee faint on the spot,” Peeta ran his hand down my bare side as he spoke. “But I wasn’t like Reese. I guess I took after Clement in that area.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, watching his thumb trace small circles on the skin of my hand.

“I have to spell it out?”

“You made me.”

And suddenly, with an unexpected yelp, I’m on my back and Peeta is above me. With a few unsteady movements, Peeta is completely between my legs, and I can feel his hardness against my sensitive center. The contact alone causes me to gasp and grip his shoulders. He leans into kiss me, but it doesn’t last long because he’s working his way down my neck and then to my bare breasts.

“I.”

His voice is against my skin and then I feel his lips dragging across my chest — first to the left and then downward. He then lifts his lips just slightly before meeting my burning skin again to drag out another line, finishing it by enclosing my perked nipple in a wet kiss. And then I realize what he’s doing. He’s spelling it out.
“Love.”

He moves away from my breasts and starts to spell the word across my stomach, causing me to giggle every so often when he hits a particularly ticklish spot. My fingers are lightly entangled in his hair as I watch him with what I can only describe as admiration. I watch and sigh as his tongue dips into my bellybutton. And then his I feel his teeth snag on my hipbone in the most appealing way. The heat is rising to a boiling point inside of me, and I can’t help but believe it will always feel this way.

“You.”

Peeta doesn’t spell that word; instead he comes back above me and finds my lips in a passionate kiss. One I eagerly welcome and in response, I spread my hips wider. The feeling of him slowly sinking into me causes another gasp that I can’t contain, but then Peeta stills. He just watches me, and I reach up and move a curl from his vision.

“You are full of surprises, Peeta Mellark.”

“You have no idea, Katniss Everdeen.”

And then the fourth of July turns into the fourteenth of July. Before we know it, August is just around the corner and I can hardly ignore the pit in my stomach that grows with each passing day. Peeta will be going back to school soon, and I’m not sure what I dread most; the fact that he’s leaving or the fact that I’ll have to admit how much I am going to miss him—how much I have come to need him.

Most days I can be distracted from the fact that he’s leaving by the shadow Johanna has become to me. Since Independence Day went so well, her words—not mine — she has decided that staying the remainder of the summer is in her best interest. Apparently she doesn’t come from the best home life back in California, although she’s pretty closed up about the whole topic. Not that I blame her, it’s not that I air my father’s death often either.

Plus she and Gale have officially, at least in my eyes, become an item. I’ve seen them together and it’s the brightest I’ve seen Gale’s smile in a while and he must be doing something right because the normal expression of “I’ll slit your throat” that Johanna tends to wear is gone. They’re happy. And I completely understand that. Johanna and I don’t talk much about our existing relationships,
not much really needs to be said from one recently satisfied girl to another.

Gale and I don’t speak much of our new relationships either, mostly because he’s still not completely ready to be around Peeta just yet. I have noticed he’s actually speaking to him now, but I don’t dare bring it up in case he’s like a scared dog that will run away at the first sign of notice. Gale has stopped mentioning his disapproval of Peeta and for that I’m grateful. This is all new to me and I don’t need naysayers — even if it is my best friend — filling my mind with uncertainty. I can do that all on my own.

Then there is the rest of Dawson who doesn’t need a public announcement to figure out what’s going on in everyone’s love lives. They just need one good gossiper to catch wind of it and it’s all over town. In our case it was Finnick. I’m sure he meant no harm in spreading the word, but after the Fourth of July bash the whole thing was out in the open. At first I was nervous that Mr. Mellark would think poorly of me, but apparently dating his son makes me some kind of saint. He must be thinking of the wrong son. Mrs. Mellark still has a chilled atmosphere around her. And Reese and Clement keep nudging Peeta and mumbling something. I’m not in on the joke. So I suppose things have all remained basically the same.

Besides the toe-curling, back-arching, mind-blowing stolen moments I have with Peeta certainly are not few and far between. On the nights he doesn’t spend over at my place, he’s usually at my door plenty early before work is supposed to start. One morning I was in the shower when he showed up, but that didn’t seem to stop him when I felt his arms close around my waist from behind. I still fill heat rush downward when I think of the way his naked body pressed against mine so passionately. That is one of my favorite wake up calls. I may new to this, but it’s certainly something I can get used to.

And then I remember it’ll all be ending soon.

My eyes watch the calm waters of the lake as I hear the crowd behind me talking and laughing. Lake Greer is probably one of the only selling points to Dawson and technically it’s not even in the city limits, but Dawson claims it as her own. I don’t make it out here much, but when I do it’s usually to watch Prim splash around or make sure Gale doesn’t drink too much and end up drowning. But this year the town hall has decided to throw a small summer bash in conjunction with the church’s annual missions’ fundraiser, out here. Which means I’m off babysitting duties.

I had originally planned on having a good time. Peeta and I had rode together and I hadn’t left his side, his thumb sliding through the back belt loop of my shorts, pulling me closer from time to time. We’d eaten with Finnick, Annie, Gale and Johanna and had even played a couple rounds of Corn Hole. Surprisingly Peeta is terrible at it. We lost in the first rounds each time. Then Peeta got pulled away from some folks from the church, and I heard him talking about his next semester at school — mostly football. I hated how much a conversation like that could ruin my mood.
So here I am, standing along the shore of the lake, holding a half-empty Solo cup trying to figure out how I got so attached to someone so quickly. How I allowed myself to get so attached to someone so quickly. And then I feel his lips graze against the side of my neck as his arm wraps around me loosely. My body naturally leans against his, and I know all the answers to my questions.

“I know what you’re thinking.” His voice tickles my ear.

He can’t possibly. I should talk to him about him going back to school. It’s something we haven’t even brought up yet, but it’s coming and neither of us can stop it. Does he want to stop it? Maybe this has all been too much too fast for him? I’ve been so worried about my own feelings that I didn’t even begin to consider his in that regard. Now I can feel my stomach twisting again.

“You’re thinking about skinny dipping.” He continues, his hand coming to rest on my hip, allowing his thumb to skim the bare skin there. “And as much as the others would probably be completely against it, I say you go right ahead.”

I laugh, my head coming to rest on his shoulder. “And let everyone see me naked?” I ask, only slightly enjoying his tender possessiveness of me.

“Good point. Maybe later.”

I turn to face him then, letting my arms come up around his neck. I lean forward and place a quick kiss on his lips, trying to remember that we are still in sight of others and that Dawson loves to talk.

“How about now?” I ask, lowering my voice suggestively. “I know another body of water not too far from here.”

Right now the idea of cooling off in Mellarks’ pond on this hot July night with Peeta snuggly between my thighs is winning over our need for this talk. But, then again, usually having a naked Peeta anywhere wins out. Conversations can wait.
Anything But Mine

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Chapter 12 has arrived! And can you believe we are down to single digits, folks. There are only 9 chapters left in this story. Nine! Holy cow! Again, I want to send out my forever thanks to all those who have shown such great support for this story. To those who have continued to make my writing better with their suggestions and critics. And simply just listened to me rant and complain while I write. Thank you all so, so much! This story wouldn't be anything like it is without you! Again, I try my hardest to respond to reviews, but life always seem to get away from me. Trust me, that doesn't mean I am any less grateful. I love and re-read every review. If you have questions(plot, character, etc. wise) I do try to respond as well, if I missed one please send me a PM or add another review and I'll get to it!

Always, Court81981 rules all. Thank you so much for all you do!

“And I don’t see how you could ever be anything but mine.”

Stars.

They aren’t something folks around here get too excited about. Just like skyscrapers and bright lights really aren’t things city natives get too excited about. Most nights around here they pepper the sky like fireflies; they start at the horizon of the farthest pasture and go as far as the eye can see. We take them for granted. But that’s not uncommon for something so common. Plus, no one around here really knows any fascinating facts about said stars. The only constellation most people can point out is Orion’s belt. Three stars, in a straight line. Future astronomers we are not.

And contrary to popular belief, most romantic nights do not take place beneath the stars. The idea is sweet, sure, but in reality it usually ends rather badly. If the elephant-sized mosquitoes don’t
make you itch from head to toe within fifteen minutes you’re usually starting to feel the late night
dew form against your skin. In theory, again, after a hot day that sounds rather appealing but then
the night chills set in. Which is nothing you’re dressed for because wearing anything but cutoffs
and a tank top in Texas after June is a felony — and just plain foolish.

Of course for the right guy, any girl would go along with a mosquito-filled night in the back of a
pickup with a smile on her face and shiver up her spine. I used to roll my eyes when Samantha
would come to work the morning after a particularly anticipated date with pink ointment all over
skin. She looked like a diseased cast-off, but she always had a smile on her face. I didn’t
understand it. Why not just come inside after the sun’s gone down? Watch the sunset, gush about
how romantic and perfect is all is, and run to the nearest building before you were forced to scratch
your skin off.

Samantha would always laugh at my reasonable suggestion. She never said why she laughed —
she’d simply shake her head and laugh. I didn’t understand what was so funny. It was obviously a
good idea with merit.

Then I realized certain things tend to blur your reason. For everyone it’s different. For me, it’s a
mop of curly blonde hair and searing blue eyes. It’s the way his arms come around me and I lean
into him so naturally. It’s the way he whispers into my ear and I suddenly feel like I’m in on the
secret. The thing that most girls my age have experienced several times over, but I’m certain it
wasn’t like this. It couldn’t be. They didn’t have Peeta. Peeta. The one person I’m starting to
believe knows me better than myself. And it’s frightening and thrilling all at the same time. The
one person who makes me feel like I’m jumping into the great unknown all while falling right into
place. Where I belong.

And that will make a girl sit in the bed of an old pickup truck, the smell of bug spray stinging her
nostrils, the blankets surrounding her like a mountain of cushions. The chill in the night air all
seems to fade away when his fingers graze across your bare collarbone while his lips linger over
the nape of your neck. The shivers you get aren’t from the night air then. You lean back against
him then, but it’s not for warmth. It’s for more.

Peeta’s other hand rests against my abdomen and it feels as though it’s burning right through me.
He’s not progressing though. He’s lips linger around my shoulder, but he does nothing more. It
aggravates me. And he knows it, which frustrates me more. He has turned me into some kind of
monster that craves his touch for survival. He loves it. I don’t. Because lately it reminds me that
soon his touch will be states away. His touch won’t be something I get every day. It’ll be
something that keeps me awake at night. It’ll be the ghost I feel in my quiet, breaking moments.

He’s leaving tomorrow. Tomorrow. And I have said nothing about any of it. Neither has he. It
scares me. Is he going to say anything? Is he planning to simply pack his bag and leave me here
without answers? I don’t do open-ended well. I don’t do stressful conversations well either.
That’s why I was hoping he’d be the one to tear off that Band-Aid. He hasn’t and I haven’t. And this inner monologue has played in my head nonstop for nearly a week. I’m slowly unraveling while he remains fully intact.

His fingers that were once on my collarbone have come to join his other hand against my stomach, holding me close. My hands rest against the worn material of his jeans and I find a snag in the fabric to occupy myself with. Normally our silences are comfortable, but this one is tense — at least for me. I have so many questions running through my mind I’m surprised they aren’t flashing on my forehead. He leans against the toolbox, and his breathing is steady and calm. I lean against him and my heart feels like it’s going to fall right out of my chest.

“You’re leaving tomorrow.” I blurt out in my typical fashion.

I’m afraid of what he’s going to say. I’m afraid he’s going to blow this conversation off as no big deal, like I was stating a fact that doesn’t need defined. But it needs defined. We need defined. Are we for the summer? Just the thought makes my insides twist unpleasantly and my head ache. And when I feel the rumble of his chest from a low, quiet laugh, I nearly come undone. This really is a joke to him. This is not something he’s been worried about at all. I’ve read all of this so wrong.

I feel his chin come to rest on my shoulder and his arms tighten around me. He holds me close for a moment and then lets out a sigh. “Thank god.”

My skin goes cold, my veins turn to ice, and I’m left hardly able to gasp out an answer. Thank god? He’s ready to leave me? I open and close my mouth several times, but no words will form. I want to push him away and simultaneously hold him closer. My natural instincts to push people away start to kick in and I dread the cool exterior I know will come from this — the cool exterior I had started when my father died, but was somehow warmed by Peeta’s constant, gentle persistence to get past it.

“I thought your distance was because you were getting tired of me,” he says, his breath tickling my skin.

And then I want to smack him. I want to turn around and smack him square in the face for making me believe he was somehow thankful to get away from me. But then I want to kiss him for being so patient. For noticing my distance, the distance I thought I was hiding so well, and still waiting for me. For knowing me well enough to know I wasn’t ready to talk about it. Because even though I silently hoped he’d bring it up I also inwardly knew if he did before I was ready that I would push him away. Pushing people away was my specialty, but Peeta is quickly becoming a statue that couldn’t be shoved.
“Well that too,” I say, trying to make a joke, but my voice comes out too small to be effective.

Peeta laughs again, and this time it’s louder and reassuring to me. I can imagine the way his eyes sparkle in the darkness behind him. I can see the one dimple I have grown to love, the crease in his forehead and the arch of his eyebrows. I have memorized every piece of this boy and that thought sends me up in flames. I have kissed his hipbone, nipped at this ribcage, and licked the spot on the inside of his knee that causes him to laugh. Peeta Mellark is ticklish behind his knees — I know that.

“It’ll go by faster than you know it,” Peeta mentions, bringing me back to the conversation I suddenly don’t care if we have. “The fall is a busy time around here. And I’ll be that awful, annoying boyfriend who calls you every night.”

“You were always clingy.”

“To you. I’ll always be,” he continues without missing a beat. “I expect naked pictures weekly.”

I gasp, turning to look at him as I smack his leg. I twist so I’m facing him properly, my legs hang over his and the space between us once again becomes nonexistent.

His grin is more beautiful than I can ever imagine in my memory. Our laughter fills the quiet night. My eyes are as wide as saucers, and I’m thankful the only light we have is the dim, distant moon as my blush creeps through me. The idea of taking pictures of myself naked makes me cringe. I could never. I’d look like some kind of fool.

“And all those girls wanting a piece of a Buckeye football stud?” I ask, my jealousy oozing from me in the most unattractive way.

“I’m sure a I know of a couple,” he muses, looking into my eyes with such sincerity. “You know me as more than that. You know me. Why would I ever go somewhere else?”

He’s right and I’m surprised he’s not upset for me thinking so little of him. He had plenty of opportunity before we met to “go somewhere else” and he didn’t. They weren’t what he was looking for, and I am. The thought still sends shocks through me because I never thought that kind
of connection truly existed. But it does and I’m a part of it.

“Plus, I have Johanna to ward off all the groupies,” Peeta smirks, reaching up to tuck a stray hair behind me ear. “She scares most of them enough that they won’t even speak to me.”

“Your own personal bodyguard.”

“My own personal bodyguard.” He repeats, leaning forward to rest his forehead against mine. “But I really don’t need her. This all may be pretty sudden and fast, but you need to know, Katniss, for me you’re it.”

I believe him completely and I understand him because I feel the same way. Peeta Mellark was nothing I saw coming until he was right in front of me and suddenly I can’t believe I’d been wearing blinders this whole time.

“You’re it for me,” I echo softly, reaching up to rest my hands on his cheeks. My eyes close as I just revel in this closeness. And I know it’s not always going to be this easy, but it’s all going to be worth it.

Peeta doesn’t let the moment pass and reaches his lips to mine. The kiss is soft, softer than I’ve ever experienced. I try to deepen the kiss, quicken it somehow and show him my obvious need, but he keeps the kisses light. His lips feel like a ghost against mine. He presses his mouth gently against mine and then pulls away just enough to kiss the corner of my mouth and then he’s kissing my chin, followed by the end of my nose. He worships my face before coming back in for another kiss.

This is the kiss that undoes me. This is the kiss that tells me where the rest of the night is heading, as if I ever had any doubts. My lips are parted slightly and I feel his tongue come across their sunburnt surface before meeting mine. My hands find purchase on his shoulders as he pulls me up to straddle him completely.

Peeta makes easy work of ridding me of my old tank top and is greeted by my bare breasts. I used to be self-conscious that my boobs were small enough to go unnoticed without a bra, but now I’m thankful for their modest size. I feel them go instantly hard when they’re introduced to the cool night air. Peeta’s hands slide up and down my bare back as he pulls me flush against him. I let my fingers tangle through the hairs at the nape of his neck as he tilts his head up to keep contact with my lips.
I don’t realize one of Peeta’s strong hands have left my back until I feel him worry one of my erect nipples between his fingertips. I gasp into his mouth and he takes the opportunity to tangle his tongue further against mine. We battle for a dominance that neither of us really wants. We simply enjoy the chase.

He’s the one who breaks the earth-shattering kiss and starts showing attention to my collarbone. His hand squeezes my breast gently while his teeth nip at the sensitive flesh near the base of my neck. The two sensations are enough to make me throw my head back in abandon. My hips instinctively rock against him, and his response is a raspy groan. He free hand squeezes my hip in appreciation and his mouth moves to capture my other, lonelier nipple.

“Oh God,” I whimper, my eyes slamming shut.

“Peeta will do just fine,” He mumbles, his lips still close enough to tickle my nipple with his words.

“Ass.”

He doesn’t respond, but I feel his laughter vibrate my chest lightly. And normally I’d push the issue, never wanting to be out-witted, but then he bites down and any words I would have thought of are long gone. The slight pain is masked easily by the immense pleasure that shoots through me. The things this man can do with just his mouth are criminal.

And then both of his hands drop to my hips and come to rest just atop the button of my jean shorts. He undoes the button easily, but in this position that is about all he’s able to do. For a moment I remain seated there, bringing his lips back up to mine as I teasingly rock against him. I can feel how already soaked I am for him as I move. And then I remember where we are, and normally it would have stopped me in my tracks, but tonight is does nothing but thrill me.

Finally, after I can no longer take the teasing I’m causing us both, I move up to my knees and off to one side of a very aroused looking Peeta. I’m only away long enough to remove my shorts and panties before returning to my original position, the offending garments tossed elsewhere. When I’m pressed back against Peeta, I realize he’s wearing far too many clothes for my liking and grab the hem of his t-shirt. He allows me to pull it off him easily and I know he’s enjoying this controlling side I’ve learned to exhibit during sex. Most of the time I let him set the pace, but tonight it’s all about what I want and he’s going along with it easily.

I don’t touch his jeans, yet. Instead I let my lips pepper his god-like chest, making a show of my nude form in front of him. I let my chest graze against his heated bare skin, and it causes us both to
moan in pleasure. My confidence with Peeta has grown leaps and bounds in such a short time that I can’t remember a time when it wasn’t like this. But then again, Peeta has always made me brave.

When my lips can’t reach any lower because of our current position I sit back up on my knees, Peeta’s hands dropping from my sides to the bed of the truck. He looks up at me, and in the moonlight his eyes are nearly black with desire. I’m doing this to him. It thrills me. I lean down for a chaste kiss before moving my knees so I’m now positioned between his legs. This new angle allows me to kiss farther down the abdomen that I can’t worship enough. I make slow work outlining the definition of his muscles with my tongue. My breasts rub against the worn fabric of his jeans and the roughness gives me chills.

I notice the bulge beneath the restricting item of clothing and again I’m flooded with pride. I’m doing this. I let my hand snake up his left thigh before coming to rest atop it while my mouth nips at his ribcage. His hips buck against me, and I know he’s getting restless. I’ve never had him beg for it, but suddenly the idea of making Peeta do such a thing excites me — but not tonight. Tonight I’ve wound us both up so tightly that I think we’ll explode into the night sky.

Instead I reach up and undo the button of his old work jeans. My eyes meet his and I give my best seductive smirk as I start to pull them down, his boxers along with them. He lifts his hips up so I can free his erection completely and my mouth practically waters as the sight. That’s new. My confidence wavers slightly at the ideas running through my head, but my passion and curiously won’t be denied tonight.

After Peeta’s helped me remove his jeans and boxers, along with his shoes, I’m back in my position hovering above him. My hand runs along the inside of his thigh as I focus on not shaking. I follow my hand with a trail of kisses and feel Peeta tense beneath me. He’s realized what my intentions are, and it only adds to my anxiety. Do I ask him what I should do? That feels like it would ruin the moment so instead I let my hand grip him, stroking him lazily as I look into his eyes. The excitement I find there gives me a sense of relief — so far I’m doing all right.

And then I let my lips come around the head of his cock and I suck experimentally. The groan that falls from Peeta’s lips is animalistic and my chest swells. I continue my slow torture, taking as much of him in my mouth as possible and covering the rest of his length with my hand. It doesn’t take but a couple seconds and I’ve found a moderate pace that Peeta seems to like and I squeeze him gently from time to time. Surprisingly enough, I find that I enjoy doing this sort of thing as much as I love receiving it. I enjoy the way Peeta’s thighs tighten when I hit a particularly good rhythm. I enjoy the feel of his fingers tangled in my hair. And I enjoy the noises he makes above all.

“Fuck, Katniss,” He moans and I continue my movement until I feel his hand on my arm, tugging slightly.
I slowly release him, afraid I’ve done something wrong until I see the wolfish grin that plagues his face. It’s just the opposite; I’ve done something extremely right. He leans forward to capture my lips with mine. This kiss is so hungry I think we’ll swallow each other whole before the night is done. My hands find purchase in his hair and we move so that I’m straddling him once again. I buck my hips, rubbing against him. But before we get too out of hand, Peeta reaches over to his discarded jeans to find the condom he keeps within his wallet.

Instantly I take it from him, tearing the small silver package open and starting to roll the latex material down his shaft slowly. He groans, his head going back against the toolbox and again I’m reminded of just how exposed we are. Sure, we’re about a mile from the house, but still, this is the outdoors. This is indecent exposure and yet there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

Once the condom is in place I pull my attention back to Peeta’s face. I lean in to kiss him while my hand guides him to my soaking entrance. We’ve done this position only once before and I’m still nervous about it, but the idea of having complete control over this gorgeous man pushes all fears to the side. Peeta’s hands grip my hips, but he lets me slide down on him at my pace. And the pace is slow. In this position, I’ve learned, Peeta reaches farther in me than I’m used to and it still causes some discomfort.

My nails dig into his shoulders, and my whimpers mingle with his moans. Once we’re joined completely I remain still for a moment, letting him stretch me, but the process doesn’t take long and soon my body craves more friction. I start to rock my hips and Peeta instantly bucks his against mine. My head falls back, and I feel his lips come up against my pulse point.

I love Peeta always, but Peeta in the heat of passion is my absolute favorite. He loses all the control that he normally walks with. His stoic, calm nature is replaced with a wild need for pleasure and to please. He mumbles into my ear as his hands come up to tease my breasts. The mix of all these sensations leaves me knowing I’m not going to last long. In this position I normally don’t.

My cries fill the night and Peeta grips my hips possessively. My need for control is replaced by my need for release and Peeta seems to know the speed for such a destination. He moves me until I’m falling on him at a quicker speed. My thrusts up and down are shallower, but he’s still hitting all the right spots.

“I’m going —“ I start, but cry out instead when a delicious wave of pleasure comes over me.

“Let go, Baby.” He finishes my thought and the way his breathing shallows I know he wouldn’t be far behind. “Come for me.”
It’s the only coaxing I need before I’m falling over the edge in the most powerful orgasm I’ve had yet. My eyes slam shut and I still see stars behind my lids. My once constant rhythm as faltered and Peeta is using his hands to guide me. It only takes a few more seconds and I feel Peeta still beneath me and explode. The nose he makes can only be classified as some kind of roar, and in other circumstances it would have been seen as comical, but in my state it’s the most appealing thing ever.

We come down from our high together, my sweaty forehead resting against his as our chests heave against each other’s. His hands run down my spine before I shiver, suddenly aware of how cool the night has gotten. Peeta notices and reaches for one of the many blankets in the bed of his truck. He wraps it around us both and I lean into him, our naked sated bodies still very much connected.

“God, you make it impossible to leave,” he says against the top of me head.

“Good. My plan is working.” I yawn, waiting nothing more than to stay awake with him all night. That had been our plan originally, but now sleep doesn’t seem so far off.

“I love you.” He kisses the top of my head.

“I love you more.”

In a very cliché turn of events, the rooster is what wakes me from my restful sleep. I roll slowly, at first confused about where exactly I am and why I’m covered in a mountain of blankets. And then I feel Peeta’s arm around my waist and the bumps and ridges of the bed of his truck beneath me. We slept in the pasture last night. I grin; we did more than sleep in the pasture last night.

“If I can guess what you’re thinking about, you have to help me finish packing.”

Peeta’s voice causes me to open my eyes and I see him turned on his side, his head leaning on his hand. He looks good in any lighting, but I think mid-sunrise lighting is my new favorite. The yellow glow only highlights his blonde hair and causes his blue eyes to appear brighter. The shadows of the leaving night still play around his strong jaw line while the sun outlines his
shoulders with almost a heavenly glow. If I didn’t love him so much, I’d hate how perfect he always was.

“And if you guess wrong, you can’t leave at all.” I counter.

“The game doesn’t work if you’ve already decided whatever I say is going to be wrong.”

“It’s my game. Those are the rules.” I smirk sleepily.

“Then we’ll just have to play a different game,” he says, tugging at the blanket beneath me to pull me closer to him.

I watch Gale throw Johanna’s bag in the back of Peeta’s truck and my stomach churns. My nerves are getting the best of me, and Gale notices. He gives me a reassuring smile, but my scowl remains. I’m not unsure of my relationship with Peeta; I just loathe the distance that’s about to be created. Johanna and Peeta are still inside checking over their rooms for any last minute things, and Peeta’s family, minus his mother, are gathered up on the porch waiting to give him a proper send off.

Standing next to Gale near the bed of the truck feels the most comfortable to me because I don’t have to pretend I’m excited for Peeta to start another year of school. I don’t have to pretend that this is being seen as his breakout season. I can be completely selfish and grumpy. I can cross my arms over my chest and stare into the dirt as I silently try to figure out a way to keep him behind. It is selfish, and I hate that I’m being this way, but love has an ugly side and this is it.

“Haven’t seen that look in a while,” Gale comments, looking at me with an amused expression.

“Yeah well, I haven’t felt like wearing it in awhile,” I bite back.

“Easy Catnip.” He laughs. “It’s college, not war.”
He’s right and my reasonable side knows it, but right now I don’t wish to be reasonable.

I’m about to say something until I hear Peeta’s brothers talking animatedly up on the porch and I look up to see Peeta carrying out his bags with a goofy grin on his face. Just seeing him puts me at ease, and I smile for the first time that morning. I walk to the driver’s side of the truck and meet Peeta halfway as he tosses his bag to join Johanna’s in the bed.

“Hi.” He greets me even though it’s only been ten minutes since we last saw each other.

Neither one of us wanted to spend a second apart on our last morning together so after we finally managed to tear away from each other in the bed of the truck we got dressed and went back to my place. It was still early and most weren’t even out of bed yet. I had made him my sorry excuse for breakfast — mushy oatmeal and burnt toast — and he ate every last bite without complaining. He then tugged me with him to the shower where we spent far too long before finally heading back to the main house to finish up packing. Since then my mood had gone nowhere but south.

“Hi.” I attempt a smile, but it’s hard.

He doesn’t say anything, just pulls me to him as he walks us to stand with the rest of the group that has now gathered at the front of his truck. The conversations flow easily back and forth, and for a moment I’m removed from the fact that Peeta and Johanna are leaving. I’m actually more interested in the fact that Gale and Peeta are holding a conversation — and no one is forcing them.

“Alright, you guys need to get on the road if you’re going to hit Tennessee before midnight.” Mr. Mellark’s booming voice stops all other conversation and for the first time I dislike the man.

“You’re right,” Peeta agrees, releasing me to start his rounds of goodbyes.

I’m left only for a moment to feel the emptiness that I’m afraid will be permanent once he pulls off the property of Mellark Ranch because Johanna wraps her arms around me suddenly. Her grip around me in strong and I have no other option but to hug her back.

“I’m actually going to miss you,” Johanna says candidly.

“Well I’m actually going to miss you too,” I respond, actually feeling that it’s the truth.
“And don’t worry, the skanks won’t be coming near him as long as I’m around,” Johanna continues. “Not that Peeta would even notice them when they do.”

I know she’s trying to comfort me, but it doesn’t work. Instead of saying anything, I turn to watch Peeta say goodbye to his brothers and finally his father. Their interaction warms my heart. The man holds the back of his son’s neck affectionately and pulls him close to tell him things. They stand like that for a good five minutes before Mr. Mellark kisses the top of Peeta’s head and pulls him into a strong hug. It feels like too intimate of a moment to watch, but it warms me so that I can’t pull away.

Finally Peeta is back in my arms, and I don’t care who sees as I pull his lips to mine. The catcalls and whistles from his brothers are all hazed away as I pour every last ounce of emotion into this kiss. This behavior is beyond foreign to me, but it doesn’t at all feel wrong. It’s like I now completely understand what all the sonnets, songs, books, and movies have been talking about.

And it’s fucking perfect.

“Don’t miss me too much,” he mumbles, resting his forehead against mine.

“Too late,” I say, rubbing his cheek with my hand before I pull away.

Fortunately when I look around most aren’t paying attention and I haven’t embarrassed myself too much. Johanna and Gale are in a similar embrace and I look away quickly. I don’t need to lose Peeta and burn my retinas in the same day.

“Come on, Jo!” Peeta calls, breaking the two up.

Johanna heads to the passenger side of the truck, and Gale walks over to Peeta and sticks his hand out. Peeta takes it and shakes it strongly. The grin on my face nearly takes over.

“Good luck this season,” Gale says honestly.

“Thanks, man.” Peeta nods.
When they drop hands, Peeta walks over and gives me one last kiss before climbing into the cab of the truck. The engine roars to life and before I know it, they’re heading down the long driveway leaving Gale and I to watch their dust settle.

Gale wraps his arm around my shoulder and pulls me close. “This is going to be one long fall.”

I hate how right he is.
Keg In The Closet

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Lone Star State of Mine

Chapter Thirteen: Keg In The Closet

“We went to class just to pass the time.”

Fall.

In some places physical changes are obvious. The leaves change, sweatshirts become common accessories, and tan lines start to fade like the long daylight hours. In some places the rain sets in until it turns to snow while others enjoy crisp sun with cool temperatures. The fields have been plowed, and what remains looks like a forgotten battlefield that will soon frost over and become a haven for scavengers. For some, fall is a time to prepare for hibernation, time to put away the grills, lawn furniture, and cover the pools. Windows get shut and locked until the first flower blooms next spring. Fall is cold, but it’s just a warning of what is to come. In some places, fall is simply the preamble to winter.

But in other places — places like Dawson — the physical changes aren’t as noticeable. Sure, the temperatures become more bearable. Layers are needed in the evening and on the occasional night we’ll even forgo the outdoors for an indoor fire, but those are rare. The noticeable changes aren’t due to the weather. The atmosphere changes around here. There is a shift in the air. The work is no longer maintaining the bounty that the spring and summer have brought us, but more about protecting what’s left for the following year.
Farmers have plowed their fields and have locked away their large combine harvesters for winter repairs. Their large trucks are being seen on the roads as they take their collections to the nearest grain elevators. Those in routine commutes hate this time of year because nine times out of ten they’re late to their destination. They have lived here their entire lives, and they have yet to realize leaving early during harvest time is essential to arriving on time. But they become a part of the familiar fall atmosphere all the same.

Children aren’t swarming the rundown public pool while their babysitters chase after them with sunblock. They’re now racing down the hallways toward their new assigned seat, and excited to be another year older. Teenagers no longer beg for odd jobs around the town or flaunt their raging hormones proudly. They now flock the small schoolyard begrudgingly as they await their first dreaded assignment. And those who are heading toward a higher education have long since left for their respective dorms, waving to their parents, shaking their friends’ hands, and kissing their girlfriends goodbye.

It was never something I thought I’d care about. The change from summer to fall really never had a true effect on me. Sure, my workload differed and I usually had to scrap together some funds for Prim’s supplies. But those were minor changes. Those weren’t the kind of changes that kept me awake at night or left me feeling on edge during the day.

Peeta Mellark changed all of that.

He changed a lot of things. And it wasn’t the subtle types of changes you expect with a Texas fall, but the sudden, life-altering changes you get with a northern winter.

I used to like the tired ache of my muscles after a long day on the ranch; now all I feel is the need to have Peeta’s strong hands rubbing out those aches. I used to enjoy dinners at Greasy Sae’s with Gale, and now I continually look toward the door whenever someone else entered the old diner expecting Peeta to walk through. I used to roll my eyes at the girls who complained about the temporary distance between them and their boyfriends, but now I am that girl. Of course, I wouldn’t be caught dead speaking of such an attachment in any way. But that doesn’t stop my mood from souring easily.

And I used to treasure the stillness of a Saturday morning, but now I fill that time by flipping through past postcards and letters from Peeta. When I received my first postcard I couldn’t help but comment on the cheesiness of the gesture that night when I had him on the phone. Now I looked forward to skimming through my mail at night.

I mindlessly tossed junk mail into the trash bin while I look for the images of the Ohio State
University campus that I’ve began to recognize like a familiar piece of the ranch. Instead I find my name written across a white envelope in Peeta’s scratchy handwriting. A letter? An actual letter. Peeta will usually write several sentences on his postcards, but he says what needs to be said over the phone.

Curiosity is a quick motivator and soon I’m dropping the rest of the mail on my small table as I tear into the flap of the envelope. I pull out the folded piece of paper. A plane ticket falls out to land atop the rest of my mail. My heart beats rapidly as I look down at the note that’s dwarfed by the size of the paper. My eyes go wide and my breathing is shallow. I reread the simple note over and over, making sure my eyes aren’t playing tricks on me. It’s not until the muscles of my cheeks start to feel sore that I realize I’m grinning ear to ear.

You can be your stubborn, independent self later. Just get here.

-Peeta

The airport experience is new to me. Not surprisingly, my worldly travels are limited to the state lines of Texas and really mostly the county lines of Dawson. One time my parents did take Prim and myself to Dallas for a small vacation, but Prim was young enough to still be pushed in a stroller and I hardly had any interest in anything that wasn’t candy.

My anxiety is high as I make my way through security, repeating the tips Samantha has shared with me silently in my head. I slip my shoes off, tuck everything into a plastic bin, and step toward the metal detector. As if on instinct, I hold my breath when I walk through, like air in my lungs is somehow going to turn my body into a walking iron rod. No noise is made and I am shuffled along with the rest of the crowd, in a movement that seems oddly familiar to the ranch, and I start my search for my terminal.

I made Gale drop me off nearly three hours before my flight was scheduled because I have read it’s important to give yourself plenty of time. Add in my given nerves for this whole experience, I figured I needed double that time. When I find an empty seat in my assigned pasture I set my bag down and take in a deep breath. I let it all sink in. Just two days ago I received my plane ticket. Just a day ago I was pacing on the porch of the Mellark house waiting for either Mr. or Mrs. Mellark to join me. Fortunately for me it was the former I had to share my sudden vacation plans with. And apparently this wasn’t news to him at all — his son had already prepared everything for me.
And as much as it frustrated me to know that Peeta had taken it upon himself to alter my life in more ways than a sudden vacation, I welcomed the change. Dependence is something I avoid and in my honest moments I know that is exactly what I’ve come to do with Peeta. I don’t depend on the things he can offer me, the things I could never do on my own — such as flying across the country on a whim. I depend on his kindness to pull my out of my perpetual negativity. I depend on his understanding to see me through a particularly bad mood. I depend on his infectious laughter to brighten a mundane day. I depend on his hands to bring me to an ecstasy I’ve never known.

I’ve come to need everything that Peeta Mellark represents in my life.

My tight smile reflects the anxiety I feel as I hand my ticket to the lady behind the counter before I board the plane. My nerves about flying are only trumped by my longing for Peeta. My mind is in such a fog that I have to check my ticket several times to remember my seat number. Uncertainty fills my mind as I finally take my seat and stare out the window.

My nervousness about seeing Peeta mixed with this distance has brought more fear than I’d like to admit and as I chew my nails to the beds I watch the distance shrink beneath me and the fear grow larger.

My eyes scan the clouds and my stomach churns every time we hit a piece of rough air. Everything in my mind screams to me how unnatural flying in a large metal tube is and how it’s just a matter of time before we hit land harder than expected. And the only thing that can bring my mind away from that fear is to focus on the nerves I have about meeting Peeta after nearly two months.

I think about the bubble we’d allowed ourselves to hide in over the summer. How nothing else seemed to exist when it was the two of us and how much I adored that bubble. Now I wish I had been more realistic, that I had forced myself into some distance with him. Not because I truly wanted it, but because we both knew this would be the outcome. Peeta would go back to the bright shining life in Ohio, and I would be left at home looking like the other girls I used to pity. The ones whose boyfriends would go off to school and leave them behind with promises of returning.

Why would Peeta return?

My negativity told me I wasn’t enough. That summer flings happened all the time, even for someone as kind-hearted and innocent as Peeta seemed to be. Peeta said he loves me, and I believe him, but what do we really know about love? It’s not like either of us have had our share of experiences in the matter. My boyfriend list dies off after the seventh grade, and Peeta’s relationships always seemed to be put on the back burner for family and football.
He pushed everything aside for the family that was overrun by their matriarch’s distaste for her children and bitterness towards her husband’s generosity and hospitality. He has sacrificed much for the things that he cares for and only one has ever seemed to pay off. Dawson, Texas had only ever produced one good, constant thing for Peeta Mellark: football. It gave him his way out. It gave him something to become more than the punching bag for his mother. It gave him something to run toward.

And I slammed on the brakes.

My eyes stare hard at the wing of the plane as I realize just how selfish I’d become. Continually making puppy dog remarks about Peeta’s impending absence. Clinging to him for his attention the weeks leading up to his departure. Becoming distant myself when I realized it was only a matter of time. And now I’m coming here to remind him just how much I miss him.

But he invited me here. No, he brought me here. His must miss me as well.

I can’t help but smile slightly as we start to descend to the ground — to the state where Peeta stands waiting for me. And my thoughts go back to the numerous conversations we’ve had over the phone. Conversations that hardly seem to focus on him, but more on me; I would ask him a question and he’d somehow manage to turn it around on me — to make me the topic of said question. His insistence that I talk about myself annoyed me greatly, but yet I did so because I could practically hear the smile across the wires with every little comment.

I have become his world.

My stomach lurches forward and I’m not sure if it’s the landing or the realization of such dependency that causes it. My mind pulls from the clouded thoughts as I look around at the other passengers slowly gathering their things and fidgeting in their seats. Their anticipation to move out of this compact space hangs in the air with my own and I cling to my handbag until my knuckles turn white. It’s a matter of moments before I see those bright blue eyes I’ve been dreaming about, and suddenly two months seems like two decades.

When the plane has made its final stop, everyone starts to stand and file out row by row. I do the same, but I’m too anxious and knock my elbow into the panel next to me. I groan at the dull ache. Do these people not understand that my nerves are at their wits end and remaining in this seat a moment longer is like sitting atop an erupting volcano?
Finally, it is my row’s turn and I all but bolt into the aisle and make my way down the cramped walkway. I give a small smile to the stewardess wishing me a nice day and start toward the baggage claim. Well, I start following those who I assume are heading toward the baggage claim. I’m beginning to believe the town of Dawson could fit into any airport, and the size overwhelms me. Everything seems to overwhelm me today, but yet I push forward. I push forward because I know what awaits me and it’s all I can do not to start into a dead sprint.

I reach the baggage claim soon enough and my hands feel clammy as I rub them across the fabric of my old jeans. I spot my flight’s particular baggage carousel and make my way toward it. The place is crowded as I realize we’re probably not the only flight to land recently. I duck between several people, bumping into one unceremoniously. My apology falls from my lips as I continue on my way, finally reaching my destination.

Scanning for my old, torn suitcase I notice I’ve seen many of these bags once before. My heart rate increases at the idea that they’ve somehow managed to lose my suitcase in this one plane trip. What am I to do for an entire weekend wearing the same jeans and old Dawson t-shirt? The panic reads on my face, for that I am certain, but as I look frantically around in hopes someone has grabbed mine by mistake I stop an undeniably familiar set of mischievous blue eyes.

My heart rate spikes for another reason entirely as I head towards the owner of those beautiful eyes. He’s grinning from ear to ear now and he looks completely relaxed. Not the boy with stress lines across his forehead or the hunched shoulders that come from a lifetime of always expecting a backhand. And I falter for a moment as I realize that maybe this is where he belongs. With his OSU t-shirt and sunburnt forehead and the muscles of his biceps more defined from months of training and jeans that hang comfortably low without a belt. He looks at home.

He looks like my home.

And my steps quicken once again until I’m close enough to drop my bag and throw my arms around him. My grip must nearly choke him, but he says nothing. Instead I hear my old suitcase hit the ground and his arms are instantly around my waist, lifting me up off the ground. The moment is cinematic as I pull away just enough to place my hands on either side of his face and pull him into a desperate kiss.

When our lips finally break apart the grin he wears is mirrored by my own and slowly he lets my feet touch the ground once more, but his hands don’t leave my hips.

Peeta speaks first. “You know, I thought about tossing the suitcase entirely. Figured if you had no clothes for the rest of the trip you’d be forced to stay in my room. With me. Naked.”
I open my mouth to say something, but Peeta reaches down to pick up my suitcase and purse with one hand and reaching for my own with the other. He easily leads me out of the chaotic baggage claim and toward what I assume in the exit.

“Come on, we’ve got about a half-hour drive for you to yell at me for buying the ticket.” Peeta leans over and places an easy kiss on my cheek. “And then we’ll enjoy the rest of the weekend.”

“I guess I better get busy.” I laugh, pulling myself closer to his side.

I am not sure what I expected, but when Peeta pulls his truck up to an old looking house with a large OSU banner hanging from the front porch I find myself staring. Peeta had mentioned he lived with teammates, but I had always assumed it was in a dorm-like setting. The house was rather nice looking, with a manicured lawn and old brick charm. But the presence of college boys isn’t far hidden within the charm. There are empty Solo cups sitting on a table on the porch, a basketball laying in the yard to go along with the rundown hop in the driveway, and several sports bags with what I assume to football gear laying around. And that’s just the front lawn.

Peeta jumps out first, reaching in the truck’s bed to grab my suitcase and coming around to the passenger’s side. I am already standing on the side of the street with my eyes scanning the large home when he reaches me. His eyes go to what mine are looking at and he laughs.

“If you want me to lie, I’ll say we just cleaned because we knew you were coming.”

“Don’t lie,” I say, glancing over at him.

“I think Thresh’s mom ran a vacuum when she stopped by several weekends ago.”

“She named her son Thresh?” I ask, following Peeta up the front steps.

“She named him Jackson. Football named him Thresh,” Peeta corrected, opening the front door and allowing me to walk through first.
Again, I think I was expecting a constant party to be happening inside a house full of college boys, but instead I am greeted with an empty entryway that leads straight into a large living room with mismatched sofas and chairs. There is a television on for a nonexistent crowd and an empty pizza box lying across the coffee table. Off to the right is the tiled kitchen that probably with a stove that has yet to be run once this year.

Peeta closes the door behind us just as I hear someone descending the stairs. My eyes meet one of the biggest men I have ever seen. He is easily pushing seven feet tall and has the build of a man who can hold up the framework of his enormous house. His cocoa complexion looks exotic against the white of his Henley shirt. But what really makes him stick out is his baby-like face. Even with his massive size, his face has a sweet, rounded expression to it that makes me pause. And the bright smile across his face only helps in making him approachable.

“Red!” He shouts loud enough to shake the windows as he lands in the entryway and steps closer to us. “And this must be the future Mrs. Red.”

Both my and Peeta’s eyes go as wide as saucers at his comment, but he doesn’t seem to notice as he pulls me — rather unexpectedly — into a massive hug that I have no choice but to reciprocate. I fear for my vital organs when he squeezes me for a moment before letting go.

“I’m Thresh,” He continues, reaching over to pull Peeta to him with one strong arm. “I protect your pretty boy’s ass from getting smashed every week. And let me tell you, sometimes I think it’d be easier to let him eat grass from time to time.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kat —“

“Katniss.” A voice from atop the stairs finishes my sentence and I look up to see a brunette with a crew cut hopping down the stairs easily. His shirtless torso holds several different tattoos across its toned planes. The only thing that breaks his hard looking exterior is the grin that plays on his lips. “Red hasn’t shut up about you since freshman year. It’s a wonder we haven’t hung him on the flag pole yet.”

“Katniss, this is Mitch Howard.” Peeta points in the direction of the man at the bottom of the staircase while still tucked under Thresh’s arm.

“Starting quarterback,” He finishes, reaching out to shake my hand.
The confidence oozes from him and I’m slightly amused. I shake his hand and then get a good look at the three men in front of me. How they respond to Peeta and how they obviously care about their teammate swells my heart and breaks it all at the same time. This truly is where he belongs and I’m not certain I fit into this game, but before my negativity has a chance to take over Thresh is yelling again.

“Pollux, get your ass down here!” He calls up the steps, “We got a lady in the house!”

Within minutes a small — in comparison to Thresh and Mitch — man appears at the top of the steps. He slowly makes his way down to us, an American Literature book tucked under his arm and headphones hanging around his neck. He somehow looks younger than the three of them, and I wonder if he’s a freshman. His green eyes stand out again his caramel-colored skin, and I instantly know his smile probably lights up a room — if he ever smiles.

Instead of saying anything, he simply comes to a stop next to Mitch on the bottom step and gives me a small wave. It’s not unfriendly. It’s shyness. And I find it hard to believe someone as attractive as this man is has a problem with being shy, but he doesn’t even really look me in the eyes. Instead his attention goes towards Thresh, as if he were some kind of mentor to the kid.

“And now you’ve met Pollux — Jordan Pollux, actually. He’s our resident statue.” Thresh grins, looking over at him. Pollux smiles, but says nothing more. “Needless to say, he’ll probably never become the motivational speaker for the team. But he’s got a sick boot to him.”

The room falls silent for a moment before Peeta picks up my bag again and grabs my hand to head towards the stairs. He looks up at them with a smile, “Okay, well now that that’s done, I think we’ll be heading upstairs now. Thank you for the embarrassing Welcome Wagon.”

“Anytime Red,” Thresh grins. “Now get your business done before eight tonight. We’re heading to a party. And you and Mrs. Red aren’t missing this one on a technicality. You have all weekend.”

Pollux and Mitch clear the way, and I can see the reddening in Peeta’s cheeks spreading down his neck. I feel a familiar stirring low within me when I realize I’m the only one who knows exactly where that blush stops. Once we reach the top of the stairs, Peeta leads me down the hallway to the last door on the right, opening it up for me.

When I step into his room, I can tell he’s a lot cleaner than his roommates. Of course, there are still t-shirts thrown across the desk chair and empty Gatorade bottles in random places around the room. But his bed is actually made and I take the opportunity to flop down on the edge, glancing
over at the open window nearby.

“So, Red?” I ask with a smirk.

“Redneck.” Peeta laughs, closing the door behind him and the click of the lock does not go unnoticed by me.

The nickname makes me laugh, but my laugh is nearly a choke in my throat as Peeta easily pulls at the collar of his t-shirt and removes it. I am left admiring the toned lines of his abdomen that I have missed these last few months. I notice the blush that stops just above his bellybutton and itch to reach out and touch it as he toes off his shoes.

“So what’s on your agenda for today?” I ask, leaning my arms back to prop myself up on the bed as he saunters to me.

“For the next few hours —” His voice is low in his throat as he starts to position himself above me, letting me lay beneath him. “You.”

--

Pulling me out of bed that night was like yanking a child from under the covers on their first day of school. I am sure the only way Peeta convinced me to get up and get ready was to shower right along with me. Of course, this persuasion technique causes us to leave much later than originally planned. I hadn’t realized just how much I missed being connected with him until I felt it again, and now that I had it I wasn’t about to let it go at all this weekend.

It is well after eight when Peeta and I finally leave the house and everyone else has already gone. I hold tightly to his hand as he leads me down the sidewalk of the different dorms and houses in which the students stay. I hang onto his words like an excited tourist as he pointed out different places that were really of very little meaning to anyone but him. But if they mean something to him, they mean something to me.

I could spend the entire evening walking along the quiet path with him, but soon I’m hearing the boom of a nearby base and loud laughter coming from three houses down. And then we’re here, although I’m not sure where here is. Peeta wraps a warm hand around my waist and his thumb slips beneath the material of my flowing top. The contact chills me and I suddenly want to race back to the cocoon we’ve made out of his bedroom.
“One hour,” he mumbles into my temple. “And then you’re all mine again.”

“One minute?” I counter with a smirk.

“Katniss!” A female screams before Peeta can respond.

We both look toward the house where Johanna stands at the top of the porch with a Solo cup in hand. Her features are flushed and her fitted black t-shirt rides up to reveal the dragon tattoo on her left hip she’d shown me over the summer. She moves slowly down the stairs, cautious of how much alcohol she’s obviously had, before breaking into an awkward run to greet me.

“I have missed you so much!” She grins, wrapping her free hand around my neck. “Peeta is so greedy wanting you all to himself this weekend. I just think that’s unfair, don’t you?”

I open my mouth to respond, but she continues, now practically leaning on me to hold her up. “But I get you tomorrow during the football game and there is nothing he can do about it!”

“What number are you on, Jo?” Peeta asks, laughing as he reaches over to take her from me so I’m not completely capsized by her weight. He lets her hand go around his neck as he grabs her waist.

“Seven.” Johanna looks into her Solo cup before downing the rest of its content. “Eight!”

She raises the glass in the air triumphantly as we head toward the house, Peeta practically carrying her through the crowded doorway. I am overwhelmed once again by how many people are crammed into this house. People are dancing on tabletops and making out in corners. There is beer pong set up in the living room and keg stands in the kitchen. Apparently the college party cliché is a cliché for a reason.

“Peeta! I want Katniss to meet some people. Can I borrow her for a second?” Johanna asks, looking at Peeta like a child begging their parent to play with a new toy.

“I suppose that’s up to her,” Peeta smiles, glancing over at me.
“Sure,” I agree, unsure of how these interactions are going to end.

Before I can think anything else, Johanna moves her arm from Peeta to me and we’re heading toward the kitchen. When I glance back at Peeta, several people are already greeting him and offering him drinks. He is in his element here, and I am so far out of mine.

That realization makes me reach for the drink Johanna is offering without a second thought. And before I’ve even started to drink, she’s introducing me to face after face. Most just give a friendly greeting before going back to their current state of partying, but some — mostly girls — seem highly interested in finally meeting Peeta Mellark’s girlfriend. I try to ignore the glares I feel like they are giving me and come out of my own shell a little bit.

By the fourth drink and several rounds of people later, it’s a lot easier to simply enjoy the party. I don’t let Johanna far out of might sight, but I do branch out enough to get my own drink or talk to someone on my own. I’ve seen Peeta several times throughout the night. Each time he seems spot me from across the room and gives me a knowing wink. And each time it heats me to my core.

I am halfway through a game of beer pong when I realize I’m actually enjoying myself, that maybe I’m not as far out of my element as I had originally thought. I give a blurred toss of the ping-pong ball, and it lands in my opponent’s cup easily. The room cheers and I throw my hands up triumphantly. That’s when I feel a strong, familiar arm wrap around my waist and a pair of lips rest against my ear.

“Are you ready to get out of here, Champ?” He practically purrs, and the smell of beer hits my nose. Peeta’s been drinking just as much as I have. And I suddenly couldn’t care less about the game I’m in the middle of. I pick up the nearest cup and empty the contents down my throat.

“I think she’s gonna have to forfeit this one,” Peeta grins as I’m already pulling him towards the door. The room erupts in knowing cheers, and I know I’ve had too much to drink because it doesn’t even embarrass me slightly.

“I think I could get used to it here,” I say once we’re outside, turning to press myself against a flushed Peeta.

“I could get used to you being here.” He replies, his lips crashing into mine.
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Aaaaand here we go! Straight in to Chapter Fourteen! First & foremost, I need to say thank you to everyone who's still keeping up with this story & enjoying it! I apologize for not responding to all the reviews from last chapter. These past couple of weeks have been crazy, but it's settling down & I've made it my personal mission to keep updates coming quickly over these last seven chapters. Because guys, we're getting into the meat of this thing. All I can say is: do you trust me? Trust me.

Always, always, always thank you to Court81981. I am awful, terrible, no good at all things grammar and she is such a trooper to put up with not only my medicare writings but my whining along the way. All the awards to her! Now go read all her stories. Right. Now.

And again, please remember: I did not attend OSU. I have never been to OSU so I'm keeping some of the details a bit vague because I'd rather them not be there than be there wrong. Also, I've taken some creative liberities with the game naratives. I know they don't normally do a ton of talking during the games, but for this story we're going to say that's commonplace. Deal? Deal.

Now enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“What’s the one regret you can’t work through?”

Orgasms.

Books tell you they’ll be like the heavens have opened up and the choirs are singing. Movies make every one out to be some longing reach for a passionate connection. Your peers tell you they’ll be a toe-curling, life-changing experience. Your parents are still telling you the stork
dropped you off at the front door. And of course, your solo performances tell you they’re nothing more than a way to relieve some unforeseen tension. But then we all know most of the hype is simply friends trying to boost their own egos.

And they’re all right. Well, except your parents. But give them credit, they’re trying.

Okay, my experience is limited, but it is experience. And I can say without a shadow of a doubt that I’ve experienced each kind there is to be had. Peeta has brought me over the edge so many times in our short time together that I’m not sure how I ever survived without such pleasure existing in my daily routine. And each time is memorable for its own reason. Because Peeta is Peeta and he is perfection.

I can’t make coffee in my house anymore without remembering the morning Peeta lifted me up on the counter while quickly removing my panties and sliding home within a matter of seconds. My nails dug angry marks into his bare shoulders and his teeth nipped just a little too hard at my collarbone. The moment was quick and perfectly rough. My orgasm flew through me like bright headlights, leaving me breathless, sleek with sweat, and completely satisfied.

Walking into Peeta’s bedroom rekindles the memory of us spending the night on the floor. We had been walking around the ranch late one night when a sudden downpour hit. We instantly took off running toward the nearest shelter, and it had been the main house. His house. Fortunately for us, Mr. and Mrs. Mellark were out of town for the weekend and our loud entrance was unnoticed. We’d barely made it through the front door before I felt Peeta’s arms coming around me, pulling me deep into a searing kiss. The path to his bedroom is still a blur of hot kisses and passionate pauses against the hallway walls.

My orgasm built up a slow burning fire before turning into a complete inferno, leaving me collapsed atop Peeta mumbling incoherent declarations.

The smell of freshly cut hay doesn’t hit my nostrils without the familiar tightening in my stomach making its own appearance. It was mere days after our first time and my need for Peeta had never once been completely fulfilled. I needed him everywhere I went and on this particular afternoon seeing him working in the old hay barn without a shirt — he sure as hell knew what he was doing — was just too much. Taking a quick look around told me no one would see me slip in and sneak him up to the loft. Grabbing the nearest old horse clothe, I snuck up behind him and tugged him along with me. There was no foreplay, but I continually pulled him as close as possible — my hands on the side of his face as he kissed me senseless. The act itself was still a bit misguided and jumbled, but neither of us noticed. My orgasm came in like crashing waves, leaving me shaking and blissful.

And I know that after this morning I will no longer be able to hear the small squeak of an old
headboard without remembering Peeta’s impressive tongue or how tenderly he treats me.  

He wakes me by peppering kisses along my shoulder before I feel his calloused fingertips ghostly trace down my spine. His lips soon follow to give wet, open-mouth kisses. By now I’m fully awake, but I haven’t moved. I simply let the heat pool between my legs and enjoy the complete attention of the man I love. The man who, here in Ohio, is completely in his element. The thought is one I’ve tried to avoid for the last 24 hours, but today’s the football game. Today it’s all going to hit me dead on.

But not now.

Now I can pretend my usual fears aren’t getting the best of me. Now I can feel Peeta’s hand skim across my hip and start down my thigh, his lips still working their way down my back. At one point this would have sent my insecurities soaring, but with Peeta I feel like the most treasured jewel. Even my flaws are worshipped and there is nothing to hide.

I am still motionless until I feel Peeta playfully bite my ass and I can’t help but giggle. I can feel his smile against my sensitive skin and his hand starts to work back up, landing on my hip to tug me over on my back. I easily let him and grin when I see the horrible case of bedhead he’s sporting. It reminds me of our first morning together and my pulse quickens.

“Good morning,” I mumble, reaching up to push one of his curls off his forehead.

“Not yet,” He says, leaning down to kiss my neck just below my ear. “But it will be.”

I don’t have the opportunity to say another word before I feel the blankets pull away from my nude form and his lips lock around one of my tight nipples. My back arches to keep him close and the heat continues to build within me. I can tell by the way his tongue slowly laps at my sensitive buds that he’s going to be torturously slow.

My craving for intimacy is higher than normal and I try not to allow the meaning behind that lurk into my mind, especially when Peeta is kissing a dangerously slow path to my core.

I comfortably spread my legs wider to allow him the access he is requesting. My eyes are locked on him in the bright morning light and I find myself imprinting every detail on my memory. The way his shoulder muscles tighten slightly when he slips one arm beneath my leg to move it to rest atop his back. The tanline he sports on his biceps. How perfectly intertwined our bodies look together. How his dark pink tongue darts out to lick my hipbone before disappearing between my dark curls. How my pleasurable sigh causes the hand resting on my thigh to squeeze tighter.
His motions make me want to allow my head to lull back and simply enjoy the amazing sensations, but the image in front of me does nothing but add to Peeta’s talented tongue. I love seeing his naked form between my legs and I nearly come when I see his own hips buck instinctively against the sheets trying to cause the friction I know he so craves.

I do my best to keep my sounds of praise quiet, but soon it’s becoming too much and I have to bite my lip to keep from calling his name for the entire block to hear. My hands are gripping the sheets when my orgasm finally takes over. It speeds through my veins and finally I allow my eyes to slam shut as my whole body tenses. I feel Peeta slowly kissing his way back up to me and when his lips meet mine I moan at the taste of myself. It’s something I never thought I’d find so erotic, but there is nothing more pleasing to me than to know my taste is the only one to ever cross Peeta’s lips.

My orgasm hasn’t completely washed through me when I feel Peeta slowly enter me. My mouth immediately gapes open and I grip his shoulders tightly. His thrusts are shallow and slow, but they’re exactly what I need as my first orgasm comes down while my second one simultaneously starts to build. His forehead is resting against mine and I realize this closeness is exactly what I need. I know by the way he grips my hips and the sharp breathes he takes that this moment won’t last long, but I don’t need it to as long as we remain this close.

Our chests are pressed together and during a particularly quiet moment I swear I can hear our heartbeats pounding in unison. My legs are wrapped tightly around Peeta, not allowing his thrusts to be more than the slow, shallow speed that he started with. My love for him falls from my lips like water and the way his words echo mine only help to rub my emotions completely raw.

My orgasm collides with his and the moment is strong and passionate. My hands are pressed around the back of his neck keeping mw close. I feel his hand holding tight to my thigh, pulling it up and allowing him to slip just that much deeper. My cries only grow louder then and my hips buck up toward his.

It feels like forever before I am able to catch my breath again, and slowly I open my eyes to see him looking down at me with those gorgeous, stormy blue eyes that I get lost in so often. His boyish grin is itching to stretch across his face, but he’s waiting to see my reaction, and I just laugh quietly. The moment isn’t something either of us expected. It was perfect.

“New pregame ritual?” I grin, my hand coming across his slick forehead before pulling him into a chaste kiss. “Good luck charm.”

“I don’t think it worked,” Peeta says, his lips going to my jaw. “I’m pretty sure I won’t be leaving
“Will you be missed?” I ask, already knowing the obvious answer.

“No, not at all.” Peeta licks a drop of sweat I feel sliding down my temple.

“Liar.”

“I’ll lie, beg, borrow, or steal to stay here with you. Forever.” Peeta says and his eyes are back on mine. They are so sincere that I feel my breath hitch in my throat. And the fear starts to lurk in like a Texas storm cloud. He would give all of this up for me. That’s what he’s tell me — or at least how I’m taking it — and the thought makes me physically sick. Back in Dawson — where my life will always be — he could have a decent life, but not like the one he would have if he stayed away from there. Ohio was his out. This place is the best thing that ever happened to Peeta.

Not me. He just doesn’t realize it yet.

The Ohio State University stadium, like most this weekend, overwhelms me. I follow closely behind Johanna in fear I’ll be forever lost in the sea of people, and watch closely to avoid bumping anyone. Although, that’s a hopeless cause as I am treated more like a table hockey puck bouncing from one person to the next. And it’s not just me; everyone seems to be doing that. I’m just the only one who seems to mind. Johanna walks ahead of me like a seasoned pro, her popcorn held high above her head to make sure it isn’t dumped along the way. She smiles at some she knows, but doesn’t let them deter her on her mission to us to our seats.

Soon I’m being swept through a tunnel that undoubted leads back outside to the actual field. The sight dwarfs me completely. The sea of red surrounds me, and I stop instantly. The field itself is empty of players, but the prep teams are hard at work to make sure everything goes off without a hitch. The crowd is still milling around, but most have found their seats and are waiting for the big event. My mouth dries as I think of Peeta playing in front of all these people. How he does it all the time. How his name is commonplace on SportsCenter when they’re talking about college football. How this world seems complete even without me standing here.

“Mrs. Red!” Johanna calls, already climbing a set of nearby steps. “You going to stand there like a statue or do you want to sit with me?”
My eyes slowly pull away from the scene in front of me to look toward the voice calling my newly given nickname. Apparently I have Thresh to thank for this. Quickly I realize how in the way I am and start shortening the distance between Johanna and myself. Soon I’m behind her once again and she’s leading us to two empty seats in the middle of what I assume is the student section.

“Johanna Fucking Mason!” A boy directly behind us calls above the crowd.

I immediately turn around to be met with the sight of a shirtless man painted in red, white and black wearing oversized sunglasses and a red Afro wig. And he’s not the only one — apparently this is normal because there are at least a dozen dressed just as obnoxiously as him.

Johanna turns around and grins. “Blight. Not too hung over, I see?”

“Babe, please. I hold my alcohol much better than your scrawny ass does.”

“Please,” Johanna repeats, “Call me ‘babe’ one more time so I have a reason to knock your teeth in.”

“Sassy. Wonder if that translate in bed,” Blight continues, still screaming over the crowd. I feel my face turning red at the awkward conversation, but Johanna just laughs.

“Guess you’ll have to ask my boyfriend,” She says, turning back around to face the field.

“Jo, you wound me,” Blight says with a hand over his heart.

Before the conversation can continue, the music coming over the speakers dies and a large, booming voice replaces it as the fans automatically start going wild.

“Good afternoon Buckeyes!” The voice fills the stadium over the cheers. “Welcome to another gorgeous day at Ohio Stadium where our beloved Buckeyes will be taking on the Wisconsin Badgers. My name is Caesar Flickerman and I’m here with Claudius Templesmith — say hello to the amazing fans, Claud.”
“Hi, yes, hello.” A much smaller voice fills the air and everyone around gives a small laugh at the change in demeanor of the two. “Welcome to —“

“Ah yes, and here come the Wisconsin Badgers!” Caesar interrupts Claudius’ introduction easily, and my attention turns toward the large team running out onto the field. Everyone around me remains rather quiet, expect for the occasional “boo” coming from a drunken frat boy. All around, most seem rather unimpressed by the opposing team, but Caesar continues easily. “The Badgers will undoubtedly prove to be a worth opponent for the Bucks with their current record of 3 and 1. Isn’t that right, Claud?”

“Exactly, Caesar. The Badgers have proven to have a fantastic running game this year and they’ll definitely make the Bucks work for their win today. It’s going to be a fantastic game.”

“That is is, Claud. That it is,” Caesar agrees smoothly.

And then the crowd starts to erupt in applause. My eyes go toward the opposite entrance of where the Badgers just came from and I see four men running across the field with large flags that spell “OHIO.” The crowd instantly turns up the volume as the cheerleaders and band members line up on either side of the tunnel, a large banner being held above.

“Now, ladies and gentlemen, it’s time to get on your feet and welcome your undefeated OSU Buckeyes!” Caesar’s booming voice is hardly audible over the crowd’s relentless cheers.

My heart skips a beat when I look up at the animated screen to see a rather intimidating looking photo of Peeta flash across it. I believe I hear the cheers from the female fans get a little bit louder then and my stomach turns uncomfortably. But I can’t help but smile when I look back on the field and see the familiar ‘29’ jersey leading the pack onto the field.

“Our Bucks are being lead by quarterback, Mitchell Howard and running back, Peeta Mellark. Mellark is easily closing in on the OSU rushing record and I may be speaking a bit out of turn, but I believe I see NFL in this young man’s near future.” Caesar talks like a proud papa over the speakers while the crowd continues to scream. “There is nothing stopping this kid.”

He’s wrong. I am. I’m stopping him. Not intentionally, but I can see the difference. Peeta’s focus is no longer on football and making something of himself. His postcards usually end with counting down the days until he returns to Dawson. When he talks about the future it’s about living in Dawson. It’s about having me by his side. He knows I’d never survive the publicity of dating some kind of football legend. I wasn’t cut out for that kind of life and it’s like he’s made it his unspoken mission to never make me chose between him or sanity.
My clapping ceases without me knowing it and my arms are crossed as my thoughts pull me deeper into this doubt I’ve been struggling to ignore. The crowd around me doesn’t seem to notice, not even Johanna, who is still cheering among the loudest, making her presence known as she continually chants Peeta’s name. She’s proud of him and when I look at the huge smile on her face as they list off his accomplishments I can see that. And everyone else cheers at the mention of his name as well. Here he is some kind of star. Outside of Dawson he has the world at his fingertips.

Am I holding him back from that?

“Look at your man!” Johanna screams over the crowd. “He’s like some kind of football god!”

I smile, but my inner turmoil doesn’t allow me to really celebrate that fact. She’s right. This is his talent. This is where he belongs and I’ll always be on the sidelines because I’ll never fit in here. Sure, I can cheer for him and smile at his accomplishments. But being the center of attention never works out well for me. Peeta is meant to be the face the crowds adore. I am meant to be in the shadows.

Who are we trying to kid?

“And that’s the half! With our Buckeyes up by 16, we’ll be back to see if they can hang on to that strong lead shortly,” Caesar announces as both teams start to head toward their respective locker rooms. “Now refill your drinks, grab an extra hotdog for yours truly, and meet us back here for an outstanding performance from the band!”

Johanna leans forward in her seat and looks over at me, “You alright?”

“Yeah, why?” I ask, knowing I spent most of the first half practically brooding.

“So you’re always this stoic watching an exciting college football game?” Johanna removes her bug-eyed sunglasses and continues to watch me. “I call bullshit.”
Like she would even begin to understand if I were to tell her the truth. I hardly understand myself. I'm over-thinking it all and I know it, but that doesn't stop it from being the truth. Johanna doesn't understand Peeta the way I do. He's as self-sacrificing as I am self-sabotaging. If he even begins to think I doubt us in any way he'll toss everything he can to the side to prove himself. He doesn't realize it's not him that I'm concerned about. It's me.

"Hungover," I mumble, glancing down at the concrete floors beneath my feet.

"Ah, strenuous activities led into this morning, didn't they?" Johanna smirks. "Say no more, but I thought Peeta was playing with an extra pep in his step this afternoon."

I look over at her, pushing my braid over my shoulder. She looks back at the field for a second, popping several pieces of now rather stale looking popcorn into her mouth. She chews for a moment and then glances back at me.

"It's because of you," She says and then stands up to stretch.

It's almost as if she understood the thoughts running through my head and needed to cause something to break some sense into it all. But she couldn't possibly. I haven't known Johanna long enough for her to really understand me. Especially without a word being shared on the topic.

Slowly I take her lead and stand up as well, rolling my neck as I realize just how uncomfortable those stadium chairs are. Most people around us are either wandering around visiting with other students or have left the arena entirely only to return for the second half. I'm half daydreaming as I watch the crowd when I hear Johanna let out an annoyed groan beside me.

"Great. How did I know she'd find us?" Johanna mumbles, running her hand over her face.

My attention is drawn in the direction she's looking where I see two girls climbing the steps. One has long dark hair and she wears a permanent sour like expression on her lips. The other, walking ahead of Lemon Drop, has long blonde hair and fair features. By all accounts she's stunning.

"Why? Who —"

"Johanna, long time no see!" the blonde calls, finally reaching our row and walking passed the several empty seats.
“Delly.” Johanna greets coldly, sliding her hands into her back pockets. “Has it been that long? Guess when you’re avoiding someone it goes by pretty quick.”

“And you must be Katniss,” Delly says with a smile, obviously ignoring Johanna’s comment.

“Nice to meet you.” I nod, suddenly remembering Johanna’s roommate. The roommate Peeta dated for a while. The roommate whose name was most certainly Delly.

“Likewise.” She grins, the sweetness practically oozing from her lips. She turns behind her to point toward the other girl with her. “This is Enobaria, a friend of mine.”

My attention goes to the girl behind her and I give a small smile and a wave. I nearly have to do a double take when I see the girl grin. Her teeth are rather jagged and I have to wonder if she had that done on purpose or she was born looking like Dracula.

“Ohio’s resident vampire.” Johanna leans forward as if to whisper to me, but says it loud enough for all around to hear.

“How long have you and Peeta been together?”

“Take a hike, Delly.” Johanna cuts in before I can respond. “Last time I checked, second-time-around skank really wasn’t his style.”

“Retract the claws, Johanna.” Delly smiles, still as sweet as ever. “I’m simply meeting the girl everyone on campus has been hearing about.”

“Everyone?” I ask, my voice betraying me as he cracks slightly.

“Of course, Silly!” Delly says, and Enobaria giggles behind her. “Everyone wants to know about the girl who took OSU’s most eligible bachelor off the proverbial market. You know, at least temporarily. We all know those football boys have very short attention spans.”
“Shut your mouth, Delly, before I shut it for you.” Johanna continues, stepping closer to me as if she’s simply waiting for me to give the go ahead before she knocks the girl to the ground.

“I think I’m keeping his attention just fine, but thanks for the concern,” I respond.

“Ah new love,” Delly says, placing her hands over her heart affectionately. “Good luck with that. Maybe you’ll last until Christmas. But then again —“

“Delly, I swear to god,” Johanna starts forward, only being stopped by my arm coming up in front of her. “Leave now before I throw you on the field to be tackled in the first play.”

“I’d get new friends if I were you, Katniss. Boys don’t like angry bitches.” Delly smiles, starting to turn and leave. “Oh, and tell Peeta I’ll see him next Monday for our study session.”

I blink and watch as the two girls start down the steps again. The crowd is just quiet enough that I can hear Enobaria laugh and say, “Well at least we know the competition is low.” And then they disappear into one of the nearby tunnels leading outside of the arena.

“They’re full of shit.” Johanna shakes her head, replacing her sunglasses over her eyes. “Peeta only sees Delly in one class. Of nearly 150 people. They don’t even talk. He can’t stand her.”

“How long were they together?” I ask, still watching the place where they disappeared from.

“Like two months? Three maybe?” Johanna shrugs, taking a seat. “But Delly has been wagging her tongue in Peeta’s direction ever since. She’s a real treat, if you couldn’t tell.”

“Obviously.” I mumble.

My thoughts aren’t on Delly. My intimidation doesn’t even come from Delly. She’s obviously not even a threat, but it hits me again that this type of thing will always be around Peeta on this path. The path I know that he should the take. The path that I know will undoubtedly give him the most happiness. This was just another way to prove to myself that I don’t really belong here. I can’t really handle jealous girls like Delly. I can hardly handle simply bitchy girls like Clove and Glimmer. I’m better off in solitude, living under the radar. In this life with Peeta, I’ll never be under the radar.
“I’m — I need to get some air.” I quickly start down the row toward the steps.

“Katniss?” Johanna calls. “Are you alright? Do you want me to come with you?”

I’m already halfway down the steps before I hear her words. I don’t look back; I simply push through the crowd. This time I can’t care less about the people I run into. The realization is suffocating and it’s all I can think about. Coming to see Peeta was all I could think about in the weeks leading up to it. I missed him so much that I got caught up. I forgot the rest of the world existed and now it was smacking me in the face. Our paths are heading in two very different directions and sooner or later one of us is going to have to turn.

Chapter End Notes

Again, trust me babes.
There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Update is here! And we all know what that means: you have to trust me! And I apologize this update is a bit later than I wanted. Colds, work, and life tend to get in the way of writing. Rude, right? But it's here and I've already started the next chapter. So an update will be coming soon! Like always, thank you for the continued support & reviews! Your feedback is always loved and welcome! And I seriously have some of the best readers. Thank you so much for all your kind, sincerely, and very meaningful reviews! I love reading them all! Although these next few chapters are going to make for some nervous review reads, ha!

Always, always: Court81981 is the very best. Without her this story would not be half of what it is now! She's perfect. Besides the fact that she cheers for the Giants, but we all have a faults ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There you go, wrecking my whole world.”

Sunday afternoons.

It doesn’t matter what kind of weekend you’ve had, Sunday afternoons are always the worst. It could even mean the close of a terrible, awful weekend and you’d still find a reason to complain about it coming to an end. Because it doesn’t matter how horrific your weekend is, a week full of responsibilities is worse. And the worst part of this whole Sunday afternoon debacle? It comes at you at any age. Either you’re grumbling because you have a nine to five job calling your name like a playground bully or you’re rushing to finish some homework assignment that you should have started weeks ago.

Sunday afternoons on a bad weekend are hard, but Sunday afternoons during a fantastic weekend are hell on earth. You’ve spent your entire weekend doing what you wanted. Doing it with people
you want to be around. And it has probably snuck up on you like a haunted house ghoul. Because no matter how mundane the fun you’re having is, it’s easy to forget it has to come to a close come Sunday afternoon. And Dawson, even the football frenzy is coming to a close and Sundays are usually pretty bland days, minus the ever-popular debate of Texans or Cowboys. The blood may shield, but it wouldn’t stop Monday from coming.

My dad, along with half the other males in Dawson, used to cage himself up at Greasy Sae’s and watch whatever sporting event happened to be on the big screen. The women would occasionally attend baby showers, birthday parties, or any other happening that might be taking place. And if there was no happening, it was the day for grocery shopping, laundry, or another type of week preparation. Everyone goes about his or her day likes its any other, but it’s in the air.

And organizing a suitcase only adds to that already familiar ‘Sunday afternoon’ pit in your stomach. The clothes you once so anxiously shoved into their place now nag at you to be put back. Most pieces need to be washed, another gnawing reminder that your week is about to begin all over again.

And for me that’s a week back in Dawson, away from Peeta. Away from this weekend I thought would be a glorious escape. The weekend that has turned into a reminder of why it’s always dangerous to let yourself get close to someone. Anyone.

I try to keep my attention focused on folding the same old t-shirt several times before I dare a glance at Peeta. He’s still sleeping. The familiar crease in his forehead seems lighter here. He’s more relaxed here at school. Even all the pressures of being the perfect running back still can’t compete with the unnerving power Mrs. Mellark has on him back home. The power Peeta gets to break free from whenever he climbs in his truck to head back North. Back here.

My eyes scan over his sun-kissed, bare chest and my stomach turns in knots. The lines I’ve memorized move rhythmically with his breathing. I can practically hear his heartbeat in my head as I pull myself back into packing. I reach for an old t-shirt on the back of Peeta’s desk chair. When I hold it I realize it’s his. Or it was his. Until I stole it after the rainstorm we were caught in. It’s my favorite shirt. It’s from Dawson High School, and old gym shirt I believe. It must be from his freshman year because it’s smaller than the ones he wears now.

The letters are faded and there are several holes on the left sleeve, like it was snagged on something. The tag, like the rest of the t-shirt, is worn, but I can still make out the letters “PM” that had been marked on for ownership. I pull the fabric close to my nose and close my eyes. His smell still lingers even after I’ve washed it numerous times—the sweetness of hay bales and the tang of sweat that had been so long pressed into the material that no wash could remove it. It smelled like comfort. A comfort that now put tightness in my chest. A comfort that wouldn’t last.
I numbly toss the t-shirt into Peeta’s laundry hamper and continue with my other articles of clothing before I can change my mind about the t-shirt. It’s just a t-shirt. One I don’t need. I have plenty of shirts I can sleep in at night.

Seeing the leaves change up close is a beautiful experience. In Dawson the leaves tend to change from dehydration. Their leaves fall off brown and crisp, but in Ohio the leaves are first different shades of orange, yellow, and red. I can’t take my eyes off of them as Peeta and I walk along one of the many sidewalks throughout the campus. He’s been pointing out different spots all afternoon and I’ve silently listened. My arm is linked inside his and I find myself always pulling closer to him. Peeta has asked me several times if I’m too cold. The weather is cool, but not cold enough to be bitter.

He doesn’t realize I’m hanging on for dear life. He doesn’t realize I’m trying to keep myself frozen in this moment forever. Because I can’t imagine getting back on that plane tonight. I can’t imagine going back to Dawson and starting all over again. And I will have to start all over again. That much I’ve decided. I’ve looked for reasons not to, but everything this weekend has screamed the opposite. Even now as we’re walking along the semi-quiet campus people are stopping Peeta to congratulate him on yesterday’s win or to simply say hi. And Peeta is beaming. His smile is carefree and his steps are light. This is what the Ohio State University does to him. Something back home could never do.

“So do you want to talk about it?” Peeta asks, breaking our silence and casting an umbrella over the storm in my mind.

“About what?” I ask, even though I know the answer.

“Jo told me about Delly,” he continues as we walk, “How you disappeared for a while after that. And I just hope she didn’t really get to you. She can be a real piece of work and —“

“I’m fine, Peeta.” I reassure him. “She’s just another Glimmer. You have to take her at face value. I just needed some air.”

“I’m really glad you came up here,” he smiles in my direction. “I know this place really isn’t your…well, out of your comfort zone. So thank you.”

My stomach twists as I turn to look at him. He is so sincere. He completely understands just how
different this all is for me, and he’s patient enough to allow my insecurities. He’s patient enough to allow it to ruin everything for him. And I’m insecure enough to let it happen. I’ve seen what this kind of dependence leads to. I’ve seen my mother continually melt into the shell she became after my father died because her identity was wrapped up in him. Much like I’m becoming wrapped up into Peeta.

“Do you know just how much your name and the NFL draft are mentioned together?” I ask in a desperate attempt to change the subject. “Because I’m pretty sure most of this campus — along with fans across the nation — are expecting to see your name in lights before it’s all said and done.”

I swear I see him wince slightly as he looks down at the ground and laughs. He’s heard it all before, I know. But we’ve never talked about it. Whenever the future is mentioned he simply tells me wherever I am is where he’ll be, but that’s unfair to him. I’ll be in Dawson until the end of time; my life plan is set whether I like it or not. But the worst part is, I like it. I want to be in Dawson. I belong there. Peeta doesn’t.

“They just have to have something to talk about.” Peeta shrugs, looking around the campus. “It would be boring to announce, ‘Peeta Mellark has just scored his first touchdown of the game and he also has a Psych paper due on Monday!’ What a multi-talented player!”

My laughter bubbles through my sour mood, and Peeta’s laugh mingles with mine for a moment. It’s small seconds like these that make me wish I could forget the rain cloud over my head. The sense of fear I have over letting someone close enough to hurt me. How I’ve already let Peeta in and how much it’s going to hurt without dragging it out. We are, after all, just kidding ourselves.

“Would you go?” I ask, fearing the answer. “Enter the draft, I mean?”

“My mother would hang me by the rafters in the barn if I didn’t finish school.” Peeta gives a dry laugh. “I have a year and half left here. It all depends.”

“On what?” I ask.

Peeta stops walking then and drops my arm linked around his. When he turns to face me my stomach fills with butterflies. His eyes are so blue I swear I could swim away in them. His jaw is clenched and he swallows hard, “Katniss, it’s always going to depend —“
“Red! There you are!” A strong voice interrupts Peeta’s words and I turn to see Thresh walking toward us.

I can see Peeta’s eyes still linger on me for a moment longer before he turns as well to greet his teammate. He and Thresh exchange a handshake that must be taught to all men at birth while we girls are learning to braid our hair. Once they slap each other on back and step away from each other, Thresh turns to greet me with another bear hug — one I’m not completely prepared for that leaves me gasping for air.

“Howard is talking shit about how he can beat anyone in pool over at The Hob.” Thresh grins. “What do you say?”

Peeta glances over at me and I simply smile and shrug my shoulders. “What else would we do all day?”

He reaches over and grabs me by my waist and kisses right below my earlobe, “I could think of a few things.”

My cheeks burn red and Thresh just rolls his eyes and laughs, “Alright bunnies, we get it. You have fantastic sex. Now, Mellark, what’s your answer?”

Peeta removes his lips from my cheek too soon for my liking and grins back at Thresh, “Challenge accepted.”

Thresh claps his hands together and turns to lead the way toward our new destination.

The Hob is a rather small college bar and when we walk in it’s pretty much shoulder to shoulder — even on a Sunday afternoon. I feel Peeta’s hand on the small of my back as we follow Thresh through the crowds of people. Most recognize Peeta and make it a point to slap his shoulder, shake his hand, or yell his name across the bar. I feel like I am in some sort of cinematic moment where the hero is greeted warmly by his peers. Peeta’s expression tells me just how much he does enjoy these moments. And why shouldn’t he? He’s had them for most of his life.

“Red!” I hear a voice ahead of us cry and when we finally make our way toward the back of the bar, I see Mitch standing with Jordan at a free pool table. “I figured Thresh would run and find
you — he knows he doesn’t even stand a chance going against us with anyone else as his partner.”

“All talk, Howard. All talk.” Thresh shakes his head, grabbing two pool cues from the wall.

“What’s the stakes?” Mitch asks.

“Round of drinks — including spectators.” Johanna appears beside Peeta and grins.

“Boozer,” Mitch replies.

“Chicken,” she counters.

“Fine, a round of drinks for the bar.” He looks back at Thresh, obviously unable to be shown up by anyone.

“Either way, we win.” Johanna laughs, looking over at me and then at Peeta. “Hey Rockstar, did you have a nice post-game celebration?”

“Classy, Jo. Real classy.” Peeta laughs, unzipping his jacket and sliding it off his shoulders.

“Always.” She says, rocking her hip sideways to bump into his. And then her attention is on me, “Katniss, come on. I have a table just over there.”

Peeta leans in and gives me a quick kiss on the cheek before Johanna can lead me away. My eyes linger on the pool table where Peeta is already joking with the boys. His familiar laughter can be heard over the crowd at whatever Thresh has just said that caused Mitch to glare.

“Are you bummed to leave?” Johanna asks as we take our respective seats. “I know Peeta is going to be a pain in my ass without you.”

“He’ll be fine,” I disagree. “He’s totally in his element here.”
A waitress comes over before Johanna can respond and she orders us two beers with a smile before glancing back at me, “Peeta may be in his element here, but in his mind it’s not complete without you in it. He’s all but told me on several occasions.”

Johanna’s eyes are drilling a hole into me, but I can’t bring myself to look at her. She’s an insightful pain and I know she’s seeing right through my casual answers. She’s also a protective mother hen over Peeta, and I fear I’m about to get on her bad side. The silence at our table seems to drown out all the noise of the bar and it seems like a decade before our waitress returns with our drinks.

“Thanks,” I mumble, reaching into my back pocket to pay but before I can, Johanna has handed her the money and she’s off to her next table. I look up at her, “You didn’t have to do that.”

“And you don’t need to act like some wounded animal,” Johanna says casually, sipping her beer.

“What does that mean?”

“You’re acting like you and Peeta are having problems — did you get into a fight?”

“No. We didn’t — “

“Then what’s with you? Is it Delly? Look if she got under your skin yesterday, I can handle that. Consider it done.” Johanna leans forward, resting her elbows on the pub table.

“It’s not Delly.” I sigh, getting frustrated that everyone thinks one girl can have such an impact on me. “I’m just not – this isn’t where I belong.”

Johanna watches me knowingly and I’m waiting for her rebuttal. I figure she’ll tell me that it’s where Peeta is and therefore I should be happy. I’m waiting for her argument that she’d love for Gale to be here with her. I’m waiting for her to tell me that I’m simply being overdramatic. But she doesn’t say any of that.

“Peeta knows that,” She says, looking down at her molasses-colored bottle. “He was surprised you even came at all. Because you’re so set in your ways and he normally wouldn’t bring you out of your comfort zone, but he missed you too damn much, or some shit like that. But do you want my opinion?”
“I’m going to hear it anyway.” I smile, trying to lighten the mood. It doesn’t work; Johanna just continues to stare into me.

“You’re afraid. You’re creating problems that aren’t even there because you’re afraid to let him in. I saw that from the beginning and I related with it. I get it, I really do. But sooner or later you have to quit running and decide something is worth fighting for.” Johanna leans back in her chair. “Peeta’s made his decision, whether he’s realized it or not. I see it in the way he looks at you. And how doesn’t look at any other girl. They don’t exist. They never have. And you’re a goddamn idiot for creating these little problems in your head as easy escape route.”

There is a long silence and I know I look like I’ve just been struck upside the head. Johanna watches me and I simply blink at her. She’s waiting for a response. A response I know I don’t have because I’ve never had anyone be so forthcoming with me. Sure, I had Gale to tell me I’m doing something wrong on the job or I’m being too harsh with Prim. But no one has ever called me out on my inability to let someone in. I’ve also never had anyone I related to as much as I relate to Johanna. She’s right, for whatever reason; she has that same instinct in her as well. But she must have had something I didn’t before today: someone to call her on it.

“It’s alright easier said than done,” I reply lamely, my fingers nervously tangling together.

“I know.” Johanna says, standing up and grabbing her drink. “But if you don’t think he’s worth it than you don’t deserve him.”

Before I can argue she’s disappeared into the crowd, leaving me completely shell-shocked.

--

The ride to the airport is here before I know it, and I’m leaning against the passenger side window staring hard at the blurred buildings going past us. When I first arrived, I thought this thirty-minute drive had felt like a millennium and now I feel as though it’s all flying past in the blink of an eye. I should talk to Peeta. I have to talk to Peeta, but Johanna is right. I have to quit running. I’ve spent most of my life running from anything that I could remotely become attached to. Running was always safer than letting someone in. That’s why my world consists of Gale and Prim. I don’t need anyone else. At least I didn’t think I did.

I turn my head to look over at Peeta and the frown that’s drawn deep on his face. He can sense the difference. When he approached the table with only me sitting there last night, had been the start
of it. He asked where Johanna had run off to and I had simply shrugged. He instantly apologized for her, not even knowing what he’d been apologizing for. And he had no reason. She was right. I just couldn’t face that.

Our drive is a silent tension and I’m reminded of the drive home after he had just protected me from Cato. How neither of us tried to start a conversation, but the air could have practically be sliced with a knife it was so thick. That was the night it all started. That was the night I truly saw myself being drawn toward Peeta Mellark. That was the night I should have simply ran like hell.

When we arrive at the airport I get out slowly, watching as Peeta pulls my bag from the bed of the truck. I hold tightly to my plane ticket and walk to the front of the truck. People all around us are saying their sweet goodbyes and waving to loved ones. We’re in a standoff and neither of us knows how it all started. Not really, at least.

“Peeta, are you planning to come back to Dawson?” I ask suddenly.

He looks at me strangely and gives a small laugh. “Yeah. I’ll be home for Fall Break.”

“I mean after college. After – when you graduate, will you come back to Dawson?” I ask, feeling desperate for answers. Peeta starts to open his mouth, but I can’t hold my own words in any longer. “Because I don’t think you should. You don’t belong there. This is where you belong — maybe not in Ohio, but out of Dawson — in a world that appreciates you. That adores you.”

He looks like the wind has been knocked out of him and he stares at me for a moment. My chest heaves like I’ve just run a mile, but I know it’s my adrenaline and emotion boiling over.

“And I think we’re kidding ourselves if we think this will continue on past that point.” I can’t stop the words from falling from my lips. “You’re heading for great things. I’ll just end up holding you back —“

“Katniss, stop!” Peeta’s voice rises over the crowds and I feel only slightly embarrassed when several around us stop their conversations to stare for a moment. “Are you going to let me answer any of your damn questions or have you already had this all already played out in your mind?”

I don’t say anything. I don’t have to. He already knows the answer.
“I don’t know where I’ll be after college — hell, I don’t know what I’m having for dinner — but I
do know I want you there.” Peeta steps closer to me and I feel his free hand rest against my arm.
“Where ever it is, I want you there.”

“I can’t do this life, Peeta. I can’t be the girlfriend of a famous football player. It’s too much. I
like my mundane life back in Dawson, the one where I can blend into the shadows. I was doing
just fine with all of that before you came along.” My voice is barely above a whisper.

“And who says that’s the life I want?” Peeta asks, and I can see an uncommon anger boiling in
him. “Did you ask me? Or were you casually deciding all of this for me? Deciding that because
you saw me for one weekend up here that you have me all figured out?”

“You’re so at ease around here.” I argue, my own steel will settling in. “You’re happy!”

“Did you ever think you did that for me?” He counters. “I love you. Happiness comes with the
fucking territory!”

I reach out to take my bag from his hands and he lets me, looking defeated. He knows he hasn’t
gotten through to me. And I so badly want to believe him, but I can’t. I won’t believe that
someone like Peeta would even consider dating me, let alone throw such a bright future away just
to be with me. I’ve been fooling myself for long enough to believe what we had would last
forever. Not with me, because I ruin everything. I’m damaged goods. Peeta Mellark deserves
someone whole.

I take a deep breath, praying my voice comes out stronger than I feel. “Goodbye Peeta.”

He reaches for my arm as I turn and I hear him say my name, but with the slightest tug I’m free
from his grasp and heading inside the airport. I don’t look back. I know if I do, I’ll change my
mind. I’ll decide we can weather anything. I’ll become delusional because that’s what love does.
It makes you delusional enough to think someone out of your league would keep you around
forever.

Regret chases me through the check in process and catches up with me at the metal detectors.
Johanna is right; some things are worth fighting for. But that would mean putting myself out there
at the risk of being completely ruined by love. Running is so much easier.

I easily make it through security, the regret only partially nagging at me. The tightness in my chest
doesn’t appear until I’m walking towards my terminal. The heartbreaking pain doesn’t take over until I’m seated near my gate. And my tears don’t win out until I’ve boarded the plane to go home.

As I keep my blurred vision fixed on the runway outside my window, all I can think about is doing it all over again. Starting from the beginning. Back when Peeta came home for the summer. I tell myself I wouldn’t do any of it as I wipe away a fallen tear. I’d keep my distance and have it be like any other summer. But I know I’m lying and that thought only makes my tears fall faster.

Chapter End Notes

Faith, babies, faith. And if you have questions, comments, etc. please head over to my Tumblr: fourfinick!
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

And here we have chapter sixteen! We are getting so close to the end of this rollercoaster & I have to thank everyone who has continued to show such awesome support for this story — my first dive into The Hunger Games fandom. Thank you so, so much! Forgive me for the slow update this last time around. I really have no excuse, just let time get away from me. Never a good thing. But hopefully (famous last words) the final chapters will come much quicker!

As always, thank you to my amazing beta: court81981! Without her this story would be nothing like what it is. Thank you, thank you, thank you!

Now, enjoy!

"God, I miss when you were mine."

Regret.

It can take a lot of forms. There is the type that creeps up on you gradually the next couple of days after the incident happens. It's that drunken night out with friends that you don't quite remember the next morning, but then run into someone who remembers the details all too fondly and isn't afraid of telling you all about it. And then suddenly all the whiskey starts to dry up in your system, the blanks start getting filled in, and it's like your reliving your courageous moments all over again. That attractive person across the room you came on to just a little too strong. That keg stand you just had to do in the middle of the kitchen. Or the vase you puked in just before you left.

It's now all clear as glass, and you're ready to sink into the nearest hole and call in a major party foul.

Of course that's not even the worst type — because then you have the kind that haunts you years later. Usually it isn't something small. Something you maybe did back in high school that made you look like a damn fool. A joke you told in class you thought would be funny and everyone looked at you like some kind of three-eyed monster. And this type of regret is tricky because you don't even realize you have it until something — completely out of the blue — triggers it.

You hear a song on the radio you used to believe was your anthem during those "awkward" times
and you're thrown back to days of glittery eye shadow and gifting your crush — who had no idea you existed — with god-awful cologne your dad never wore. Your stomach turns into knots, your cheeks still turn red with embarrassment, and you're willing to ram yourself into the nearest wall, anything to forget that awful memory.

They are minor regrets, but they still can do their damage of causing secondhand embarrassment for you whenever the memories return.

And yet they are still not the worst type. Not by a long shot.

Because then there's the type that hits you a millisecond before the moment even happens. This is the type that hindsight points out with glaring reason. And these are usually the regrets that are life altering and earth-shattering. The ones you can't go back on, at least not easily, because one or more persons have been hurt in the process. It's the nasty words you screamed at your parents during a heated argument. It's the affair you had with an unknown stranger after eight years of blissful marriage. It's the best friend you didn't stick by when they got back with a no-good ex and the unkind words that followed.

It's the doting, caring, passionate, selfless boyfriend you left standing outside an airport in Ohio. The one who swore to give you the world, and you believed him because why wouldn't you? Nothing up until this point has proven he's anything but trustworthy. Nothing up until this point has proven he's anything but yours. Completely and wholeheartedly. But that scared you. It scared you because you've only ever needed one other person the way you've needed him and he disappeared from your life in the matter of a split-second accident.

But the damage is already done. Because I do need him. I've needed that boy since he returned from Ohio for summer vacation — I just didn't know it. And before I could even walk through the sliding glass doors into the airport I knew I had done something regrettable on an irresponsibly selfish level. But fear is its own beast to be reckoned with, and it usually trumps most other feelings, including regret. Because needing Peeta Mellark means that I'm not as strong as I once believed I was. Instead I've been impervious. And that thought shakes my very foundation.

And unlike the other two types regrets, this one doesn't seem to dull with time. Not truly. Instead, several weeks later, I still feel the remorse of my decision crash over me like a strong wave only seconds from tugging me completely into the current of darkness I've created for myself. Every move I make reminds me of what I did. His scent still lingers on my pillow and I can't bring myself to wash it because I can't bring myself to completely wash myself of him.

When I check the mail, I still half expect to find a new postcard amidst the pile. It's not there. And why should it be? As far as Peeta knows I've erased all contact from him. Moved on. I didn't answer his several phone calls in the first week so why would he continue to try? And why do I still want him so desperately?

The weekdays go by steadier. I can keep myself busy with the tasks of the ranch. I can work in the barns until well past dark if I so choose, and lately I have. If I work myself to death by the time I reach my modest home, all I can think about is washing off the day and falling on my face. But of course, Peeta's presence lingers in those tasks as well.

I close my eyes as the hot water cascades down my back and I remember his ghostly touch gliding down my ribcage, his lips replacing the water that drips past my shoulder. I remember the feel of his soaked locks between my fingers as I reach up and pull him into a passionate kiss, one that we've perfected in our short time together. He turns me to face him and I gasp at the contact of my tight nipples grazing across his own bare chest. He's hard against my flat stomach, and it only helps grow the heated pool between my thighs.
My head drops against his shoulder when I feel his hand slip between my legs to tease my sensitive bud. I should be embarrassed by how wet I already am for him, but I've long since realized how instantly my body responds to Peeta's presence. This moment won't be like others that are long and drawn out — the times we've stayed in the shower past the water turning cool. We're both far too gone for that type of lovemaking.

And when his hand stops its teasing to rest on my hip, I instinctively step back, closer to the shower wall I know I'll soon be pressed against. I pull him with me, not willing to lose any sort of contact. Peeta's hands slide down my dripping thighs and lift me easily, and I can't help but grin against his lips. I'll never get used to feeling lighter than a feather in Peeta's strong arms. My legs link around his back while my fingers comb through the hairs at the nape of his neck.

"God, I love you." Peeta's voice echoes in my memory before he slides home.

We both still, my head lolls back against the shower wall, and I feel Peeta's lips on my collarbone. He doesn't move until I buck my hips slightly, egging him on. And it's all the convincing he needs. His thrusts are shallow and quick. It's just what my body craves. Later that night I'll want to take our time, explore every inch of each other, but right now my nerves are already starting to tingle, and the build low in my stomach is one of a strong, quick release that I know isn't far away.

When I come it's loud and echoes off the bathroom walls. Peeta's name drips from my lips like the shower above us. His thrusts are becoming even more erratic and I know he's close. When I open my eyes, I see his eyes are closed and he's biting his lip, a sign that I know he's just coming to the edge. I take my cue and lean my lips to his ear.

"Fuck, you feel so good inside me," I moan, already starting to feel my second orgasm on the horizon. My nails drag across his shoulders leaving red trails I know will still be there in the following morning.

My hips meet Peeta's thrusts halfway, and the friction against my sensitive clit is almost too much to bear. He has a bruising grip on my hips, and I use the shower wall for leverage as I lean against it. We're both so close to the edge I don't think it'd matter if we went toppling down the soaked shower. Thank God we decided to do this before the shampoo was used — making that mistake once will insure you never make it again.

"Come for me, baby." My words plead as I reach a hand from his shoulder to slide between our joined bodies. Peeta's eyes instantly follow, and I know this visual will send him over the edge within seconds. Me as well.

When he comes, it's with a shout of ecstasy, and we're both lost in the sensations. My second orgasm is a slow, drawn out explosion that reaches from the tips of my fingers to the tips of my toes. My breathing is still heavy when I feel Peeta slowly lowering my shaking legs beneath me. He holds me tight, both of us needing each other for balance. My lips find his in a lingering kiss, and I know I'm right where' I'm supposed to be.

My head tilts back into the spray, letting the water wash over my flushed face along with the heated memory. My stomach quickly turns from coiled need to knotted regret again when I open my eyes away from the spray and realize there is no indication that Peeta was ever here. His shampoo and body wash are gone, leaving mine to look somehow lonely in the mundane shower. I bite my lip and make quick work of the rest of my shower. Just like every place else on this ranch, if I stay there for too long it feels more like a prison than a home.

My mistake has caused that. And today is Saturday: a day where I have nothing else to do but focus on that mistake. Put it under the microscope and find ways to make myself feel worse for the
fear that still won't allow me to pick up the damn phone.

My phone sits atop the worn arm of my couch. I try to keep my eyes on the television in front of me, but they side glance on their own accord. I wait with built up anticipation. If he calls, I'll pick up this time. The problem is I made that promise to myself several days ago. And still Peeta's number has yet to appear once more on my caller ID. I've typed several text messages that get erased before I can even contemplate sending them. A text message? He's worth more than a damn text message.

I can't relax. Not really. I sit on perpetual pins and needles. I'm anxious around my fellow ranch hands, knowing that they've undoubtedly heard by now. I'm anxious around Peeta's family, although they've yet to even recognize that their youngest son and I are no more. But I know they know. I overheard Mr. Mellark speaking with Reese in the barn several days after my return. I'm anxious around Prim because all she wants to talk about is my feelings. Which is the last thing I need since I spent most of my time suppressing them just to make it through the day. And being alone is the worst. Because the memories come around, and the downward spiral begins again.

The comedic rerun in front of me is long forgotten as I watch the raindrops slam against a nearby window. I had noticed the clouds rolling in that morning, but my mind has been in such a fog that I hadn't even realized the rain had started. I tuck my knees up to my chest, hugging them tightly, watching the splatter of each drop. Maybe if I make myself small enough, I'll simply disappear.

"Katniss!"

My name coming out in a harsh breath causes me to jump as I turn to look in the direction it came. I see Gale closing my door behind him, shaking off the water that's landed on his old flannel shirt in the short distance from his truck to my entryway. Normally I'd stand to greet him, ask if he wants a towel, or simply acknowledge his existence, but instead I remain seated, staring in his direction.

"Is ignoring loud knocks at your front door part of your new reclusive state?" he asks, reaching for the dishtowel sitting atop my kitchen counter. I still remain silent as I watch him try to dry his hair with the small square of fabric. "It's really moving in out there. Radio's saying could be tornadoes if these winds keep up."

My mind has drifted again, and I'm back to looking out the window near me. My chin rests against my knee, and I struggle with wanting to feel normal again. Wanting to feel anything at this point would be a step up. The pain in my chest has ceased and been replaced with a tight emptiness. I've become a shell of myself, and that though is enough to make me sick. I'm turning into my mother. That thought alone should get me up and running toward the nearest activity, but yet here I am, content to watch the droplets run down the window.

"Hershel wants everyone up at the main house tonight," Gale continues from somewhere in my kitchen. I hear him rummaging through my refrigerator and silently wish him luck. He'd have better luck trying to go catch rainwater in one of my cups. "Says he wants everyone safe and Mrs. Mellark is planning to make dinner. Plus, if the power goes out at least we'll all be together — or something overly hospitable like that."

Gale laughs at his own joke, and I hear him pop open the top of something, probably my last Coke. Good, I'd been saving it for Peeta. Couldn't bring myself to get rid of it before.
My weight shifts slightly when Gale sits down next to me. He's closer than normal, and I know he's trying to pull me out of myself, trying to get me to at least look at him. He's been doing this for the last several weeks. We haven't talked about Peeta since the night I came back, and even that night was mostly my muffled sobs against his shoulder as he sat there with his arm around me. He didn't say much, but Gale never does. And I'm sure it surprised him more than he let on to see me as upset as I was. Breaking up with someone and then blubbering like a damn fool. I sure can fuck things up royally when I put my mind to it.

I finally turn to face him. My other cheek now rests against my knee as I watch him. He's watching the TV show I'd long forgotten until he hears my broken voice. He's mid-swallow and looks so relaxed. Gale once wore hard lines across his face and a stern glance. Smiling was a rarity, but now his smiles are more common than a frown. He's more talkative and cracks more jokes. Most probably haven't really noticed, but I have. And I know Johanna's done that for him. Her brash demeanor and no-bullshit attitude are exactly what he needs. He hasn't come out and told me, but he doesn't have to.

I had that too. I had my balance in Peeta. And it scared the hell out of me.

"How's Johanna?" I ask, unsure if I really want to hear the answer.

"Oh you know, the usual: feeding the hungry on Thursdays, sleepovers on Fridays, restful Saturdays, Sunday brunches, and fighting for world peace the rest of the week." Gale smirks, looking over at me. "My own little girl scout."

I laugh despite myself and close my eyes, as if trying to savor the feeling: the vibration in my chest that's not caused by my quiet sobs, the tug on my lips of my mouth turning in the almost foreign shape of a smile, and the momentary lightness I feel as I forget the almost constant ache I usually feel.

"Fighting sounds about right," I mumble, opening my eyes to see Gale watching me. His smirk has disappeared and has been replaced with the familiar concerned expression he's been wearing lately. I want to tell him I'm alright, but lying to him is useless.

"Greasy Sae has been askin' about you," Gale fills the silence. "Wants to know if you're ever planning to come back around for lamb stew. Says you're the only one who can stomach the slop."

I don't say anything, just glance down between us as the worn material of the cushions.

"She's gonna take it off the menu here soon if you don't start coming around," Gale probes.

"And replace it with what? Lamb soup?"

Gale laughs at my joke, but the ring of laughter never infects me and I'm left numbly sitting there watching him. It's a strange predicament I'm in when I'm around Gale. When I'm around anyone, really. I don't want to be around civilization because I am not allowed to be as reclusive as I feel, but I don't want to be alone because I'm afraid of the memories that haunt me there.

The quiet becomes too much and I have to talk about it. I bite my lip; afraid to ask the question I've had on the tip of my tongue since the night I came home. I'm afraid of the answer.

"Does it get better?" My voice shakes when I ask him.

His head drops down slowly before he turns to look at him. His eyes are so pitiful, and I know it's the sympathy he feels for me. Gale doesn't show a lot of emotion, but his eyes tell it all. They can't be masked like the rest of his expressions. He hasn't seen me like this since my father died, and I
think it scares him. It scares *me*.

He doesn't answer. Instead he stands up, reaching for the remote on the coffee table. The television switches off with the push of a button, and Gale heads toward the kitchen. My eyes follow him while my stomach drops. Why didn't he answer? Is he still not over Madge? Is that how awful it is? Does the pain really stay with you for that long and he's not willing to tell me the truth?

"Come on, Catnip. Mrs. Mellark is supposed to have dinner by six." Gale says, finishing off the Coke he just opened and tossing it into my trashcan.

Silence fills my house as I slowly stand up. I'm not liking the vulnerability I feel as I uncurl my body. I feel like an open wound that needs to be pressed on constantly, to remind myself that I'm still here, I haven't completely fallen apart. Not yet anyway.

I push a piece of hair away from my eyes as I grab my jacket hanging over a kitchen chair. Gale stands quietly by the door once he finishes putting his shoes back on, patiently waiting for me to get myself presentable. I know what I must look like: frail from lack of confidence, dark circles from lack of sleep, and expressionless features from lack of emotion.

I look like my mother.

"You never answered my question." I demand, finding some of my forgotten strength to look at him.

"It did for me," He says, looking past me.

"What does that mean?" I ask again.

"I lost the wrong one." Gale steels himself and looks at me. "I can't answer for you, Catnip."

The sour feeling in my stomach appears instantly, and I can't help but look away, tightening my jacket around myself. Fortunately Gale is already pulling my front door closed and we're both hurrying toward his nearby truck. The cold rain hits my face and I'm grateful. It helps camouflage the tear that runs down my cheek as I realize he's right. I walked — no, ran — away from the right one.

---

Rain doesn't deter spirits in Dawson, and any reason for a gathering is a reason for celebration. And that means the beer is cold and the food is to die for. Even Mrs. Mellark understands the importance of a social gathering, and although she may not stick around for long, she does her part and prepares a Southern feast. Tonight it's fried chicken and so many different sides that most have to grab several plates.

They haven't pulled out the long tables for all of us to sit at so most have dispersed into little groups throughout the first floor of the house. I prefer this set up tonight with my current mood. Originally I had planned to stick close to Gale's side, but the empty kitchen appealed to me.

Everyone knew what had happened with Peeta and me — or at least that we were no more — and everyone had decided to approach the sensitive topic differently. Some thought it was best to handle me with kid gloves, as how I'm doing every five minutes, tell me they're always there for any support, or look at me with pity. Others decided ignoring the change in relationship status was
the best approach to take. I preferred the latter, but mostly I preferred to be alone.

My eyes glance up toward the bay window in front of me as a large flash of lightning fills the dim room. I've been pushing my green beans around my plate for the last twenty minutes, listening to the commotion in the other rooms. I have never been a social butterfly, but I've all but collapsed on myself since I returned from Ohio. I may have never been one for social situations before, but I didn't hide from one either. In fact, the few short months I was with Peeta, I found myself enjoying them. I liked being the girl with Peeta Mellark. Not because of who he was to everyone else, but because of what he'd become to me.

And now I feel like my current status is flashing on my forehead every time I step into public. Plus, being around any of the Mellarks for any amount of time makes my skin crawl with how awkward I feel. None of them mention it, but I know they know. Reese, Clement, and I hardly speak past casual small talk — but that's not any different than from before. Mrs. Mellark looks at me like I've just sprouted horns, but she looks at everyone else like that. But it's Mr. Mellark that makes me feel the worst. His caring demeanor hasn't even faltered once. He speaks to me like I'm some kind of long lost daughter. He asks about how I'm doing. Makes sure my family is well and all around cares. Still.

Sometimes I think it'd be easier if they all pretended I didn't exist.

I hear his heavy footsteps before I hear his slightly slurred words, "Still got about as much charm as a dead slug, I see."

I glance away from the rain-streaked window to see Haymitch entering the kitchen and heading toward the nearby refrigerator. He sits his empty bottle atop the counter before grabbing another. He makes easy work of the cap, and I remain quiet, assuming he'll be leaving now that he's come for what he's always coming into the kitchen for. Which I never understand since I know the Mellarks always put plenty of drinks on ice in the dining room, even the kind the Haymitch gravitates toward.

He doesn't leave. Instead he pulls out the barstool next to mine and takes a seat. He's leaning one side against the granite, just watching me. Assessing me. At first I try to ignore him. I've never really known what to do with Haymitch. And it's not like we've really had much contact with each other. He is Dawson's beloved football coach, and I'm simply a no-name face that once walked the halls of Dawson High. Our paths don't cross more than when he arrives to shoot the bull with Mr. Mellark. And even those moments are few and far between.

I push a cold green bean into my mouth and chew slowly, now back to watching the rain fall outside. I hear the slosh of his beer as he takes a swig from the bottle. I half expect to smell booze with how close he's sitting, but I don't. Maybe he's not as much of a drunk as I always assumed. Of course, he probably can't if they allow him to coach budding athletes year after year.

My nerves are wearing quickly as I continue to feel his grey eyes on me. He hasn't moved much. Hasn't even bothered to speak since he's endearing comment when he first entered. But his eyes haven't left me. I don't feel uncomfortable, but I know he's studying me. I'm under the microscope, and I yet to figure out why. Finally I can't take it anymore and I turn sharply to look at him, my eyes glaring coldly at the calm man before me.

"Can I help you with something?"

He gives a knowing laugh and finally looks down for a minute. He shakes his head and sets his half-full bottle on the counter and looks back up at me. "I can see why he likes you so much."
"Kiss my ass," I spit before I know what I'm saying. Even that small mention of Peeta, even if it is a dig at me, brings up a vile taste in my mouth and a sensation that I'm going to be sick soon follows.

"Feisty," Haymitch continues as though he hasn't heard my retort.

I don't respond; I just stare down at my long-forgotten food. I want nothing more than to disappear — or cry. But I refuse to cry in front of someone so infuriating as this ma, this man that the whole town practically idolizes. I have yet to see the appeal.

"Trust me," he sighs, picking up his bottle once more. "You could live a thousand lifetimes and never deserve him."

That's it. I refuse to sit here and be bluntly bashed for my decision to walk away. I stand up from my stool easily, avoiding eye contact with him as I collect my meal. I'm leaving; I don't care if the whole damn town is washed away excluding the Mellark home, I'm not sticking around any longer. I can't, unless I want the entire ranch to see me have yet another breakdown over my wrong choice. I turn on my heels and head around to the sink, wanting nothing more than to rinse my dishes and disappear.

"Don't you want to know how I know that?" Haymitch asks, still watching me.

"Not particularly," I respond, amazed that voice didn't once crack with the emotions that are boiling up instead of me.

"Well, Sweetheart, that's just too damn bad," he laughs, "Because you need to hear it."

I don't say anything; I just focus on the water running over my plate. I don't want to know what he's about to tell me because I'm afraid it'll be some kind of saint-like portrait of Peeta that will only drag me further into a pit of despair. A story that will continue the guilt I already feel for breaking his heart along with mine.

"She was the prettiest thing this side of the Atlantic." Haymitch starts, "And she didn't even know it. She hit this town like some kind of tornado. No one in Dawson stood a chance. She was the kind of girl that gets tongues wagging, prayer chains moving, and elaborate stories started."

This plate can't any cleaner and so I twist the water off, reaching for a nearby towel. I am still trying to ignore Haymitch's chatter, but now that I've realized it's not Peeta he's talking about I can't help but be interested. Finally I glance up at him and even in the dim lighting produced by the canisters above us I can see the way his eyes seem to shine as he recalls this mystery woman.

"Of course, Dawson could never produce such an elaborate woman — no offense, Sweetheart — and everyone just assumed she was buying her time until she was old enough to create a dust storm as she hightailed it out of here. But that didn't stop a naïve fool from falling in love with her."

If he's simply telling an entertaining tale, he's doing a fine job of it because he's got my interest peaked. I lean against the counter near the seat and watch him. Haymitch has never been someone I've taken all that seriously, from what I hear no one does. And apparently the feeling is mutually because the only thing he's ever been serious about is football.

"And it was perfect too because she was willing to stick around. She even started planting her own kind of roots here just to stay near the fool. She swore she saw something in him that no else did, and she spent most of her time proving it. But fear is a fucking ugly monster and can bring the worst out in anyone. And after about several years of having this girl tucked under his arm this fool
I don't realize it until Haymitch pauses to take a swig of his drink that I'm waiting with actual anticipation to hear the rest of this story. Unfortunately I know how it's all going to end — Haymitch has been single for as long as I can remember, there hasn't even been a woman *mentioned* around his name for years. I can see in his expression that there is still sadness there, a missed opportunity for something great. His eyes, usually full of mischief, are harder somehow and even the taste of his favorite beverage doesn't seem to change that.

He clears his throat, "Anyway, I ain't no story teller — I assume you know how the rest of it goes."

The story ends just like that and I know I'm not going to get the gory details of how it all fell to pieces, but he's right: I do know how rest of it goes. But I'm also left wondering if what I'm left looking at in Haymitch is the years of built-up regret and heartache.

He slowly stands up from his stool, but stands there for a moment longer. Finally his eyes meet mine and he gives me a pitiful smile, "Life's like game tape, Sweetheart. Just make sure you're rewinding to learn from your mistakes, not simply to relive them."

I'm once again standing in the kitchen alone, my arms crossed over my chest and my mouth slightly gaped in surprise. Haymitch Abernathy had just given me advice. And what's even worse? It actually all makes sense.
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Chapter seventeen is here! And we are a mere four chapters away from this beautiful ride being over. Sad, I know, but I already have several story ideas to follow this fun little adventure. The Hunger Games fanfiction base as been so welcoming and warm to my first attempt into your world, so I just want to take a special moment to thank all of you.

As always, this chapter would be nothing without Court81981, so thank you so much darling! I hope you all have had a wonderful Thanksgiving(for those who are in the United States) and are all geared up for Christmas!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"89 cents in the ashtray, half-empty bottle Gatorade rolling in the floorboard."

Family.

The term takes all shapes and meanings. For most, family is what the word was intended to be for: the bloodline they were born into. For some, their actual family isn't the most appealing, so they find their comfort and safe haven in the arms of friends and other loved ones. For others, family is simply a fleeting concept that they've never really had the joy and heartache of grasping. And then there are the rare few that find family in all sorts of places.

I don't always consider myself one of the fortunate roaming the earth, but there is one aspect I feel entirely rich in and that's my family.

When I was young my parents and sister were my whole world. Weekends held their reverence in my life. Friday nights were made for my dad and I to sit on the porch and listen to the bug zapper and watch Prim chase after fireflies. I lived for Saturday mornings with Prim and my dad. We would always help him make the worst tasting pancakes on the planet and then watch as my mother choked them down with a smile. And I thought there was no better Sunday tradition than grocery shopping with my mother. Begging her for sugar-filled thing and watching as Prim would quietly grab a box off shelf and open it before my mother could even notice. We brought home a lot of cereals and cookies that way.
That was my family.

And then one day it wasn't. At least, not all of it, not completely. The loss of my father created a ripple effect that lasted years and the damage was never really repaired. Friday nights I sat alone on the porch, staring into the dark distance trying to remember every piece of my father. Saturday mornings were then spent entertaining Prim with cartoons and a bowl of off-brand cereal while my mother stayed under the covers for as long as possible. And Sunday's grocery trips happened whenever I had an extra couple of dollars in my pocket. The way he used to cock his right eyebrow at me when I was a little slow at getting one of his outdated jokes. The way he'd pick at his teeth after a meal with his old pocketknife.

Or his laugh. I strain the most to hear his laugh in my memory. The rumble that seemed to come from his toes, the way his chest heaved against the worn flannel of his shirts, the way his head fell back to allow for maximum volume. It all used to seem so mundane, but it's the one thing I wish for the most. And it was the first thing to fade almost entirely. Soon all I can do is see the moments that sparked the laughter in my mind, but the sounds of his voice, his laugh, they're gone. Along with my perspective of family.

Soon after, family started to take different shapes. First came within my friendship with Gale. We understood each other before the loss of our fathers, but after they were both gone it became even more so. And then he got me the job at Mellark Ranch, and those who I considered to be family nearly doubled. Mr. Mellark never leaves anyone out and those that work for him feel a family-like loyalty to the man who does so much for them.

And without me even knowing, Peeta had become a staple in my makeshift family as well. Several weeks after Haymitch's cryptic story, I am still left trying to figure out where it all leaves me. A part of me thought the longing I felt for him days after I returned home would fade with time, but the only thing that has faded is the excuses I once fed myself to keep from calling him. And that's been replaced with a nagging regret that only time can fester. But fear still grips me in the idea of needing someone so completely for survival.

My mother used to always tell my father how she just couldn't live without him. It was meant as a term of endearment, I know, but after his passing I saw how true that was. Years later she still has days she can't get out of bed because of her grief. Why would someone sign up to go through that? Life is too uncertain; it's better to keep everyone at an arm's length.

Or so I led myself to believe. Peeta had long since ruined all that, and if I ever get the courage to call him I'd tell him so.

Because he's already broken the barrier I had so strategically placed. I see him in everything still and how he has punctured my very existence so thoroughly sends a thrill through me.

Time hasn't made it better, but it's caused those around me to be set on getting me out of my known slump. And that's what brings me out to Greasy Sae's on this Friday night. I had originally planned to do exactly what I do every other night: finish work, go home, take a shower, scrounge up something to eat, and then become a useless lump in front of the television. It probably isn't what therapists would suggest, but it was getting me through the days. But Beetee had suggested everyone come out for dinner, and Seeder wasn't about to let me stay away.

"Katniss Everdeen, how the hell have you been?"

My stomach drops as I set down the empty beer bottle against the bar. I'd know that confident, feminine drawl anywhere. And normally my emotions toward it are of mild annoyance for its owner, but after how we left things, I'm more concerned that she'll throw a punch in my direction.
And I'm not sure I'd blame her.

I slowly turn around on my stool and see Johanna Mason making her way toward me with a slight smirk. I was hoping I'd see Gale following close behind, but someone has stopped him right by the entrance, and I'm left to my own defenses.

"Johanna," I say in a form of greeting, unsure of how I should respond. With the truth? The truth is I'm miserable, but I'm not about to give her the satisfaction of that knowledge. And since she's about as stable as a water balloon, I'm not about to make some off hand comment.

She easily slides onto the empty stool next to mine and orders herself a drink from the bartender before looking back over at me. And then it hits me. What is she doing here? Gale hadn't mentioned her coming to visit, so she'd obviously surprised him. My eyes glance back toward Gale, trying to force the end of his impromptu conversation with a table of locals.

"He already told me to play nice," Johanna laughs, her eyes following mine across the bar. "And don't worry, he's not the first one. I was all but threatened by Peeta to do so when I told him I planned to come down for Fall Break."

My stomach drops at the mention of his name, and my eyes shoot toward her. My heart is racing, and it feels like all the moisture has suddenly left my mouth. Fall Break. The campus was closed for classes. Did that mean Peeta was home as well? Was he going to walk through that door next? I suddenly wanted him here more than anything. This was going to be my chance to come clean. And in a rare expression of weakness that's exactly what I planned to do.

"Where—" I clear my throat trying to regain my composure after my silent meltdown. "Where is Peeta?"

Johanna thanks the bartender before looking down at the label on her bottle, "Chicago, I think. He mentioned going home with Thresh for break."

And just like that, my heart comes up into my throat as I try to will my mind not to over think it all. He hadn't come home. He hadn't tried to call even once since the first week I returned. Maybe I wasn't the only one stopping our reconciliation. Maybe reconciliation wasn't even possible. It all made sense really. I had been rather selfish and irrational with my decision to walk away. That sort of behavior didn't work well in my favor. Plus Peeta certainly had options. An absence doesn't always make the heart grow fonder.

There is a short silence between the two of us before Johanna turns on her stool to face me. I am staring down at the old wood of the bar, but out of the corner of my eye, I can tell she's studying me. And as much as I want to hide my disappointment, my features are tired of acting and I stilling frown.

"You're miserable." She comments like she's talking about the weather. And I give a humorless laugh in return, never bothering to look over at her. "Which you kind of deserve to be, if I'm honest. You—"

"Please Johanna, go give your pep talk to someone else," I snap, glaring over at her. "I don't need your sarcastic comments, your smug smirks, and certainly not your honesty. I've got enough of my own. Thank you. If I wanted your advice, I'd ask for it."

"Yeah, see that's the thing; I don't really care what you want — in fact, my advice would be to write you off completely, but Peeta sees it differently," Johanna continues, her voice still strangely calm. "He's miserable. And he's my best friend. He's the first person in years to actually give a damn
about me. And for that I am fiercely loyal to him.

My eyes start to soften as I see how passionate she gets about Peeta. I can appreciate that passion, and I like her for it. Peeta deserves a person like Johanna in his life because with all of her stability and rage issues, the girl is a strong ally that most wouldn't dare to cross. And one that stays loyal until the very end.

"So you're going to just listen to what I have to say, and if you love Peeta half as much as I think you do you'll make it a point to get your shit together." She leans forward slightly. "He's miserable. Fucking miserable. He covers it up well for everyone else, but I see it. He's confused and angry — you did that. You walked away. So the fact that you think he's just going to show up here and try to fix all of this just shows how completely self-involved you can be. You have to fix this. You have to make the fucking effort."

"I – I want to," I feel my throat start to tighten as I speak, but I swallow it down the best I can. "You don't understand how hard it all is to—"

"Need someone so much you can't breathe without them around? And how terrifying that idea is?" Johanna asks, and I see her glance toward where Gale is standing before looking back at me. "Yeah, I understand that. I also understand that life is hard and throws terrible curve balls at people. Peeta and Gale are the only family I have — you don't think I understand heartache from the loss of a loved one? I've had the feeling in spades, trust me."

Johanna is softer now. Her voice is no longer threatening and one of a defender, but instead one of someone who understands. I saw the hardened look in her eye the first time I met her. One that I know she got from the loss of a loved one. I know, because I wear the same expression.

"Katniss, you're a real pain in the ass," she smirks, and I can't help but give a small laugh. "But take my advice: life throws enough punishments at you. You don't need to punish yourself because you're afraid of getting to close to someone and losing them again. That's no way to live your life."

She's right. Haymitch is right. These are things I've known, but that doesn't make it any easier to come to terms with. Fear doesn't settle well after it has been the lead director of your life for so long. Making decisions without fear playing a factor isn't familiar to me anymore. All my decisions stem from some form of fear or another. Fear that Prim and my mother won't have enough money. Fear that those I care about will be in some sort of unforeseen danger. Fear that those I love will leave me in some form or fashion.

Johanna smiles at me, "And please do not feed me that 'easier said than done' bullshit. I let you say it once. That's all you get."

The atmosphere of our conversation—and all-around presence around each other has changed—and just in time too because Gale has finally finished his conversation across the bar and is now heading in our direction. We both glance over in his direction when he appears next to Johanna.

"You guys are still alive." Gale glances down at Johanna who simply gives him her most innocent smile, which still has a hint of malice laced in it. "Are we alright, or are we just taking a time out to lick our wounds?"

We both look back at each other for a long moment before I smile, "We're fine, but Johanna is a real pain in the ass."
The sound of the gravel beneath my feet as I make my way toward the stalls is all I hear on this quiet Monday morning. My mind is still slightly fogged from the weekend. It was the most fun I'd have since I'd come home from Ohio, but Peeta was still never far from my mind. I contemplated calling him on several occasions, even got as close as dialing his number once, but then uncertainty would settle in and I'd quickly find something else to busy myself with. Johanna was right, fear wasn't an excuse, but it was certainly a crimpling setback. I made it a goal to call him before Johanna left on Tuesday.

That left me today. Today I would call him. Of course, what I would say was still completely up in the air. Part of me wanted to remain a closed book and simply ask him how he was doing. Another part wanted nothing more than to tell him how much I missed him and dumb I had been. My mind grew dizzy just thinking about the latter option. There were so many things that could go wrong with that scenario. Even with Johanna's input on just how Peeta is taking all this my mind still goes to the worst possible scenario. He could tell me he didn't miss me. He could tell me he'd moved on. And I would be left out in the cold.

Hurt like that was something I wasn't ready to feel, but I knew with each passing day I was ready to take the chance. I needed to, if not for my own feelings, but for Peeta. He deserved an explanation. My thoughts remained on Peeta as I silently grabbed the tools I would need for the morning's task of cleaning the stalls. I just get all that I need and turn on my heels when I hear footsteps against the gravel outside. Soon I am face to face with the sour expression of Mrs. Mellark standing in front of me. She is never a truly welcome sight, but I haven't really even spoken to her since I returned from Ohio. Not that I really spoke to her before, but at least then, I was on good terms with her youngest son.

"Katniss," She states. It's not a greeting but identification. "Have you seen Hershel?"

"No, ma'am. I haven't," I respond, still frozen in my place by the tool closet.

There is a loaded silence that passes between us when she turns and starts to leave again. I barely get a small sigh out before she's turning back around and gesturing toward me. I give her a confused expression as I watch as she opens her mouth to say something. But nothing comes out. Not at first. Instead she walks back toward me and I'm frozen again.

"I — um — well, Hershel seems to think I haven't been the most welcoming toward you. But his bleeding heart always thinks I'm not welcoming enough," Her words sound more like a ramble than the coherent start to a two-person conversation. "But you do understand why, don't you?"

"Well, I—" I start, but then realize I don't know, and I really have no response to her question. So instead I just shut mouth again, hoping maybe she'll finish this strange interaction quickly.

"Peeta is going places, whether he knows it or not," she continues, not even registering my stuttered attempt at a response. "He's getting out of Dawson. And well, I just thought — you know, you're the help. You're here in Dawson and this was just some kind of...way to pass the time."

Her words are accompanied by elaborate hand gestures, and I realize it's probably a good thing Deborah Mellark isn't a big talker. Someone would have been accidentally slugged by her directing traffic-like motions. Plus, her lack of tact is even obvious to me. The way she just flippantly said 'the help' was evidence enough that her lack of manners made me look like royalty.
"But Hershel swears that Peeta has made it perfectly clear — because you know that boy never talks to his mama — that you're what he wants." She shrugs, crossing her arms over her chest. But the relaxation for her arms is short-lived because she starts talking again. "So, well, I suppose I owe you an apology. So there it is."

I think Prim apologized better than that when she was too young to even know what she was doing. If I wasn't so stunned by the fact that I am actually having a conversation with Peeta's mother — a woman no one ever talks to — I might have time to be offended by her obviously rude comments. But since we're more likely to see her throwing one of her tantrums outside the main house than we are to actually speak with her, all I can do is simply stare at her.

And instead of my own anger toward her for the things she's just said, all I can think about is how terribly she has treated Peeta — and her other kids — for as long as I've been around here. Her abuse toward them is silently known throughout the ranch and probably most of Dawson, but it's never truly been seen. Sure, she's come running out of the main house yelling at one of them from time to time. I even remember her throwing a glass of tea at Reese's truck as he drove away one time. The glass had shattered, causing tea to blast all over the hood of his new pickup. Mr. Mellark wasn't far behind her, trying to act calm as he pulled her back into the house. But the anger was etched so plainly in his eyes. Deborah Mellark was an unpredictable tornado that no one even bothered to cross — no one except Mr. Mellark.

"Peeta is just —" She pauses to look down at the ground. Her expression is unreadable, as she seems deep in thought before she looks back up. "Peeta is just one of the good ones. He deserves… well, he deserves everything he wants."

My anger slowly boils in me, but I do my best to remain calm as I glare at her, "Why don't you tell him that instead of constantly treating him like he's some sort of castoff?"

As soon as the words leave my lips, I regret them. Not that I said it per se, since I know it's the truth, but because this is Mrs. Mellark I'm talking to. She's unstable as it is; I really don't need to be poking the bear. Especially when I don't have any witnesses around.

The loaded silence returns as we simply stare at each other. I tighten my grip on the pitchfork in my hand subconsciously. Her expression is calmer than I expected it to be, and she looks almost like one of those forlorn pictures from TIME Magazine to be used to explain the hard times of our country. With the sun coming up over the pastures behind her, the worn denim jacket that hangs loosely on her frame, her dyed hair blowing in the breeze, and her tired expression, one would almost feel sorry for her until she opened her mouth.

Another word is not shared between us as she turns on her heels once more, and this time does not turn back as she leaves me standing in the stables, seemingly alone. I wait a little longer to release my sigh of relief and turn away from her to head farther into the stables. Most of the horses have their heads sticking out to look at me, and I wish several of them a good morning, still only slightly shaken from my unplanned interaction.

"Duke's acting a bit off." Another voice fills the air just ahead of me, but this voice is one I welcome. The deep drawl startles me since I thought I was alone, but when I peek inside the stall, he's hiding I smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Mellark." I say, leaning against the door.

He gives me a tired smile that tells me he's probably been here long before the sun started to come up over the ranch. His hand runs over Duke's back. The older horse seems to like the constant attention and just watches me from where he stands at the back of the stall.
"Good morning, Katniss," he responds, pulling away from Duke and grabbing his jacket that's been tossed in the hay.

I back away from the door to allow him to exit the stall and glance back toward Duke, who now walks forward to stick his head out. I'm probably imagining it, but I swear the horse glares at me for taking away the attention that was once all his.

"We'll probably need to call the vet this afternoon, see if she can come out on such short notice," he says, brushing off at his jacket to knock extra pieces of hay as he walks back toward the tool closet.

I nod, still slightly unsure of how to act around Mr. Mellark. I have guilt for what I did to Peeta and it never seems to magnify itself more than when I'm around he's caring father. The man knows about Peeta and I, even though he's never really mentioned it outright to me. And yet he still acts so sweet and caring toward me. But then again, I'm not sure Mr. Mellark has any other setting. Gale has mentioned on several occasions that Mr. Mellark has asked him about how I was doing with the break up. Gale doesn't go into details, and I'm slightly thankful, about what they say about Peeta's end, but he does mention that they talk about it.

"Mrs. Mellark is looking for you," I say, watching him put away the electric lantern he'd been using earlier this morning with Duke.

He gives a soft laugh. "I heard."

He'd heard. I stand in place, not really sure where else to go with this conversation. I kick at the ground beneath my feet, watching a small rock bounce several times before settling again. I'm not sure why I'm suddenly nervous. It's not like he's unaware of his wife's inability to have a humane conversation with anyone. He's married to her after all. And that's a connection I have still yet to understand at all.

"She really does have her moments of decency," Mr. Mellark starts, closing the door to the tools and looking back at me. "But I apologize for her outright, insensitive comments. Believe it or not, I think she was trying to compliment you."

I grin and roll my eyes, "Hopefully she doesn't make that a habit. I don't think my ego can take the beating."

His laughter fills the quiet stalls, and I'm suddenly reminded of the rumble of my own father's laugh. My heart tightens as I watch Mr. Mellark's features wrinkle with his laugh, the lines on his forehead becoming more defined like my father's used to, his chest raising beneath the old bib overalls he wears and the squinting of his eyes. His laughter has the same effect on me, and I'm put at ease again.

"That's why she married me, I suppose." He smiles, "I can usually decode the compliment inside the insult. And she is right: it's always been you for that boy. I'll never forget the first day he saw you at school. He came running into the kitchen, talking a mile a minute about the girl with the pigtails, the girl who sang at the top of her lungs during the start of school assembly. How pretty she was. How smart she was. How perfect she was."

My heart races as I simply stare at him. I knew Peeta had known about me before this summer, but I just assumed it was because we lived in a small town and I was a friend of one of his best friends and teammates. I had no idea he'd actually noticed me.

"Mind you the boy had only ever heard you sing," Mr. Mellark grins, "but as far as he was concerned, the world was created just for you."
"I — I had no idea," I state lamely.

"Neither did your mother." He looks down at the old rag in his hand that he's pulled from one of his pockets to whip the invisible dirt off. "But I suppose Peeta was always a bit more daring than his old man."

The confusion is written all over my face. What is he talking about? My mother? What did Mr. Mellark have to do with my mother? I know they were never an item; my mother would have certainly mentioned that. But does that mean Mr. Mellark had wished them to be? I want to ask, but before I can Mr. Mellark is looking back up at me and continuing with his thought.

"This is just a bump in the road, I know it." His confidence gives me a strange sense of comfort. "I knew you were it for Peeta a long time ago, but when I saw the way you looked at him this summer, I was convinced that he was it for you too. Whether you're ready for that or not is up to you, but wait don't until it's too late."

I finally find my voice and smile, "I don't plan to."

"Good."

That's all that's say before he turns to start to head of the stalls. I look away with a renewed outlook on my day, almost excited to get to tonight when I'll have some time to call him. The whole town of Dawson seems to be in on the mission of getting us back together, even calling in reinforcements from outsiders when Johanna came to town. And I'm grateful, even if stubbornly so, because sometimes I do need a push in the right direction.

I've only been turned around for what seems like the blink of an eye when I hear a thud up against one of the stalls behind me. I turn around quickly on instinct and see Mr. Mellark now on the ground, leaning against a stall door for support. He's only about fifteen feet from me, and I can tell he's clutching his chest and his eyes are squeezed shut. I drop my pitchfork and gloves and run the short distance toward him.

"Mr. Mellark, are you alright?" I'm panicked as I squat down next to him. He already has sweat collecting on his brow and his face is an uncomfortable shade of red. His breathing is coming out in ragged puffs and my own heart begins to race.

I glance around me and all I see are about a dozen horses watching us from their stalls. It's still earlier, and some of the work hasn't begun yet. I've left my own phone at home for the morning, and I soon realize we're going to need help. My panic continues as I stand up quickly and run toward the nearby door. Fortunately, I see Beetee strolling toward the hay barn not too far away.

"Beetee!" I cry, the panic causing me to nearly scream. His attention is instantly drawn toward me, and he starts in my direction. "Call 911! It's Mr. Mellark!"

Chapter End Notes

Never fear, I already have chapter 18 written...so I'll try not to keep you in suspense for too long. ;)
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Long time to no see! First, happy holidays to you all! Terribly sorry for the long delay, but with the holidays and travel, blah blah updating was simply not a possibility. Fortunately, life has calmed and I am hoping — I always say this don't I? — that I'll be able to get these last several chapters out much quicker! Only three left! Can you believe it? I have been at this story for over a year and we're about to come to a close. But never fear, I have several different stories in store. And possibly several chapters of this story from Peeta's POV. We'll see. Again, thank you to all who have continually showed support for my first dive into Everlark fanfiction! I truly believe this is the best fandom to write for, so thank you for making it that way!

Always, thank you to Court81981 for her continued support and knowledge, making this story all it can be!

Please note, I am no doctor. So some creative liberties may have been taken with this chapter and some a bit in following. So forgive me all you in the medical field that find some of this to be completely wrong — I did try! Now run, enjoy!

"Old man, hospital bed, the room is filled with people he loves."

Hospitals.

When you think about it, they're really one of the safest places you can be. If some sort of trauma happens, you want to be near a hospital. You want to know that trained professionals will be there to mend your wounds, ease your pain, and comfort your loved ones. Inside hospital walls there are cures and answers for most ailments, nurses and doctors who have won awards for their trade, and the kind of medical technology that other countries can only dream of owning. We want hospitals. We need hospitals.

And yet the mere mention of the word leads people's stomach to flop over and a sudden clamminess to take over. Because for as much good as hospitals do, most have a terrible story to associate with that medical safe haven. For as much as we want to have a hospital nearby when we cut ourselves at work or break a bone during a sporting activity, we don't want to be that family member who gets the phone call saying we need to rush to the hospital. The phone call — that if
received — will alter our world forever. Our minds automatically land on the absolute worst outcome as we break every traffic law known to man to reach our previously unexpected destination.

But the worst is when you arrive there and race through the sliding doors like a bat out of hell. No one is nearly as excited as you are, because they've been trained to stay calm. You don't want calm — you want answers. Once you manage to get the patient's name out — your loved one's name out — they can either lead you one of three ways. The first is straight back to the patient in question. The relief that comes over you is like none you've ever felt as you finally see their familiar face. The second is to the waiting room where a doctor of important status promises to keep you updated on their state. This usually means they're not out of the woods, but they're not yet far enough gone that they're leading you to the third option.

The third way is one I'm all too familiar with. I can still remember the outfit I was wearing when I was led toward that sterile room off to the side of the emergency waiting room. I remember the way my mother gripped my hand so tightly that her knuckles were turning white and a steady throbbing coursed through my own hand. I remember Prim's little eyes looking around our unfamiliar surroundings frantically. She had learned early on in our quick car ride over here that Mom was not in the mood to give answers. She had remained quiet ever since, but the fear was written all over her pale features.

Once we were in the room, the nurse gave us a small smile and assured us the doctor would be in momentarily. I remember taking a seat on the stiff couch, and I watched as Prim roamed around our new, small surroundings. The room was warmly lit and once the door was closed, it almost felt like someone's sitting area: generic paintings hanging on the walls, lamps on the end tables, and several boxes of tissues. Looking back, that should have been my sign.

The doctor comes in not nearly five minutes after the nurse leaves us. My mother and I both sat on the edge of the sofa, our hands entangled together. I pulled Prim to my side, more for my own support than hers. He took a seat on the matching ataman just across the coffee table from our couch. He didn't have any forms, folders, or anything in his hands. He simply leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and glanced at us. His professional demeanor — in hindsight — was lost in his eyes. His face was stone, but his eyes were sad, regretful. But at the time my own emotional stated overruled any awareness. And I know we must have looked completely whitewashed and when he started speaking the expressions only got worse with each sentence.

He was gone and that was their comforting way of telling us. That was their way of making it a private moment of mourning. My mother's strangled gasp filled the air as she leaned back into the cushions, her hand over her mouth. Prim's eyes went wide and I saw a silent tear streak down her cheek. And I'm left completely dumbfounded. I felt as though the air has been sucked out of my lungs, the ground dropped beneath my feet, and I had no hope of finding either anytime soon.

And just like that, the apologetic doctor left and is to be replaced with a minister holding a worn Bible ready to comfort you in your time of need. Another comfort factor the hospital has in place that only assists in rubbing you completely raw. You allow the minister to read from scripture not because you can honestly hear a word their saying, but because you're too numb to turn down any source of possible relief from this sudden heartache.

Within that moment my emotion toward hospitals was forever altered and even as I stand off to the corner of a large waiting room I am reminded of that terrible afternoon so many years ago. I rub my hands together and realize just how clammy they feel. My eyes scan the room as people start to filter in. The news of Mr. Mellark's…status…has reached most of Dawson at this point, and somehow this hospital waiting room has become some sort of morbid town reunion.
The first to arrive are Reese, and Clement and his family. They hug Mrs. Mellark tightly while Beetee and I remain in a darkened corner. I'm not sure about him, but I know I'm wishing I could simply blend into the dated wallpaper behind us. I hadn't even wanted to come, but Mrs. Mellark had insisted as she climbed into the ambulance to be with her husband. Beetee then offered to drive me. I appreciated the gesture, because I knew I wouldn't be able to handle this sort of thing completely alone.

It isn't long before others from the ranch are arriving. Wiress has brought Seeder with her. Wiress, being close to Mrs. Mellark's age, reaches out and hugs the normally distant woman. To my surprise, Mrs. Mellark doesn't let go of Wiress. At this point, she is holding on to the woman's hand while she listened to her two oldest sons talk back and forth. Maybe they are closer than I ever knew. Then again, I had never been one to catch on to other people's relationships.

Haymitch comes rushing into the waiting room soon after, instantly badgering the nearest nurse to ask for an update. Their conversation is extremely hushed in the large room, but I do my best to hear any detail I can. Nothing of value comes to me. And once he nods at the nurse in gratitude he's looking over at Reese and Clement, both getting up to hug the man that's been a somewhat dysfunctional father figure to them both.

Very little news on Mr. Mellark's condition has been given to us. The nursing staff still says it's early and that they are doing their best to stabilize him. It makes me uneasy that nearly two hours after we've been here that there is still very little to update us on, but I try to hide my concern as I stand with Beetee and Seeder. Others are still trickling in, and soon I feel as though most of the room is full of those wanting to hear the status this well-loved man. It warms my heart to see how much he is treasured. He deserves that.

"Katniss."

I look up as I hear my name coming from the entrance to the waiting room. Gale, with Johanna not far behind, comes walking toward me. He glances around the crowded room before looking back at me. Johanna keeps her hand linked with his after they've stopped walking and even in these dark times I'm happy he's finally found someone so connected to him.

"How is he?" Gale asks, "Have you heard anything?"

"Um, I —" I start, clearing my throat. "They haven't updated us in awhile, but Mrs. Mellark said the paramedics thought it was a heart attack."

Gale nods and looks up just as Haymitch is walking toward us. He claps onto Gale's shoulder and looks over at the rest of us. His eyes are unusually sober, and the sadness etched in them causes me to bite my bottom lip and look away for a moment. I am reminded of just how many times I've seen Haymitch out at the ranch. Even after all of Mr. Mellark's boys were done being coached by him, he wasn't just visiting to keep track of his star players, but he was there because they were friends. Good friends, possibly even best friends.

"You holding up alright, girly?" Haymitch asks and he's directing his question toward me.

I nod, "I'm alright."

"Seeing that sort of thing can traumatize a person." Haymitch continues, watching me. He's studying me.

"I've been through worse."
He nods, as if he's just remembering who my father was. Everyone in Dawson knows the story of the Everdeen man who was overworked at Snow's farm and finally killed for it. He reaches across and grasps his hand over my shoulder. Our eyes meet for a moment, and he just gives me a weak smile. "I suppose you have."

"Someone call Peeta?" Beetee asks.

"Mrs. Mellark had Reese call him on his way to the hospital." Haymitch drops his hand from my shoulder and slides it into his jacket pocket. "Said he was able to get a flight out of Chicago pretty quickly."

"He texted me about five minutes ago," Johanna adds. "Said he was grabbing his luggage and he'd be on his way. I think Finnick is picking him up at the airport."

My heart flutters and as much as I hate the circumstances, I am so glad I'll be seeing Peeta. It's selfish and I know that, but I need him here. And I want to be here for him, if he'll allow it.

There is a silence that fills our little group before we slowly start to disperse to different corners. Haymitch walks away first, heading toward a group of local farmers who know Mr. Mellark through trade. Gale mentions something about going to speak with Reese and then leans down to give Johanna a quick kiss atop her head. I watch as he walks away, and soon Beetee follows silently to go sit next to Wiress. I don't even notice Seeder disappear, but soon she's no longer next to me. Instead it's me and Johanna left.

She moves to lean against the wall next to me, "He's going to need you. I hope you're ready for that."

"I am." I look over at her and she gives a quick nod.

And within minutes of our brief conversation ending a doctor comes out from behind a door that leads to the trauma area. Everyone seems to straighten up as they stare in the direction of this woman who hopefully has good news. Reese and Clement instinctively stand and the doctor walks toward them. The doctor must suggest they walk away from the rest of the group, because soon Reese is grabbing his mother's arm and helping her into a standing position. This is the first time she releases Wiress and replaces her with Reese's arm.

They walk toward one of the rooms I am all too familiar with and my stomach intuitively lurches. Is this it? Is she about to tell them they were unable to save the man we are all quietly rooting for. I try to remain calm, but my expression is panicked, and I glance over toward Gale, who is still across the room. His expression matches mine, and when our eyes meet he simply clenches his jaw and looks toward the ground. We're silently begging that this won't be it.

But instead of walking into one of the rooms, the doctor simply stops them once they are a bit farther from the rest of us. Privacy, she's just creating a distance for privacy. Everyone seems to straighten up as they stare in the direction of this woman who hopefully has good news. Reese and Clement instinctively stand and the doctor walks toward them. The doctor must suggest they walk away from the rest of the group, because soon Reese is grabbing his mother's arm and helping her into a standing position. This is the first time she releases Wiress and replaces her with Reese's arm.

They walk toward one of the rooms I am all too familiar with and my stomach intuitively lurches. Is this it? Is she about to tell them they were unable to save the man we are all quietly rooting for. I try to remain calm, but my expression is panicked, and I glance over toward Gale, who is still across the room. His expression matches mine, and when our eyes meet he simply clenches his jaw and looks toward the ground. We're silently begging that this won't be it.

And then we hear it: the loud, gasping cry of Mrs. Mellark. My eyes immediately train back toward the family. My heart feels like it has jumped into my chest, and the once conversation-filled room now feels as though you could hear a pin drop. Everyone wants answers. Has Mr. Mellark passed away? Why did the doctor feel the need to give such news in front of everyone? I push myself off the wall I'd been leaning on and start to walk in their direction, but Johanna reaches out to grab my arm. I look back at her and she just stares at me. She's right. I have no right to demand answers, not
right now. I am not family. But I feel like family. This man gave me shelter when I had none. It's because of him my family kept food on the table for so long.

I'm frozen in place as I watch the doctor point toward a young nurse who quickly steps up to apparently lead the family back into the trauma area. Reese continues to hold his mother as though he's the only thing keeping her from being a pile on the floor. And Clement reaches for his wife's hand, who has until now simply been sitting with the rest of us. His face is flushed and he's fighting back tears. She sees it and wraps her arms around his waist, becoming his support.

We're all about to be left without answers until Haymitch steps forward and grabs the doctor's arm. At first I can tell she isn't willing to give any information out, but then Haymitch's voice gets louder and I can tell he's begging her. His typical flippant attitude is long gone and has been replaced that of a nervous, broken man. The doctor must see this and ushers him against the wall, instead of standing in the middle of the waiting room. They speak in hushed terms, with us all watching, and when she is finished she leaves a shaken Haymitch leaning against the wall.

Still waiting, we all remain quiet and I'm still terrified. Have we really lost Mr. Mellark? And Peeta isn't even here. Who is going to deliver this news to him? Peeta is the light of his father's eye. Everyone knows that. I close my eyes as I will myself not to cry.

"He – he suffered a massive stroke," Haymitch finally speaks, and his voice shakes with emotion. I look at him, as do most others, and I see a man who's just gotten terrible news. "Which caused him to lose consciousness and prevented oxygen from flowing to his brain — It's going to be a rough 24 hours. He might not make it." He pauses, and I see the tears forming in his eyes. The redness of his face speaks to the emotions he's trying to boil down. "And even if he does, the best case scenario is — they say if — is if he makes it through the night he'll be paralyzed."

There is an audible gasp in the room as the news settles with us. My mouth gapes open and I instantly feel the sting of tears against my eyes. Soon I see Gale moving back toward us, and I step forward into a bone-crushing hug from him. My cheek rests against his shoulder and I close my eyes as I let the reality of it all sink in. Too soon, Gale is releasing me to go stand with Johanna, and I realize I am no longer his only source of comfort. I see Johanna wrap her arms around his middle and look up at him with sympathetic eyes. I turn away, suddenly feeling like I'm invading on a private moment.

I'm left standing in the middle of the waiting room watching as everyone absorbs the news. Haymitch is still leaning against the wall the doctor left him at. I can see his features through the strands of hair hanging in front of his face as he stares at the floor. He looks like the shell of a defeated man and I've never felt more pity for him. Haymitch doesn't have many he can call family, but Mr. Mellark has been that for him.

And even though this news isn't a complete death sentence, for those of us left in the waiting room we feel as though it is. The darkness that Mr. Mellark is still not completely out of the woods weighs on us heavier than the idea that even if he is, he'll be paralyzed. To what degree? I want to ask someone if he'll be paralyzed in his speech, his right side — or is it left when it's a stroke? But no one in this room seems at all concerned with the true details, because the answer will not be what they wish it to be.

My eyes seem to glaze over as my mind slowly processes this devastating information. The people around me become a blur while the heavy pulsing in my ears tunes out their conversations. I lean against the wall that I've all but become a part of these last couple of hours and simply process.

Then the door to the waiting room opens quickly to reveal a harried Peeta, with Finnick and Annie not far behind on his tail. He looks around frantically. He must see a room full of people he
recognizes, but none able to comfort him. I push myself off the wall and start to walk toward him quickly. I'm halfway to him before he even registers I'm there. Relief floods though me when I hear his bag drop to the ground, and his arms are soon around me. I am brought into another bone-crushing hug, and my eyes close as I let the familiar sensations overwhelm me.

"I'm so glad you're here," he mumbles into my hair, and I let out a ragged sigh. "I needed you to be here."

I pull away only enough to rest my forehead against his, and I feel the tears run down my cheek as he looks at me. I give a small nod, "I'm not going anywhere again. Not ever."

His hands come to rest on my cheeks, and he pulls me into an emotional kiss. One that I know everyone is watching, but I'll be damned if I care. I know this moment of bliss is going to be short-lived and reality is going to come rushing back all too soon, but before that happens Peeta needs — deserves — to know where I stand.

When we pull away from each other, Haymitch his beside us. He first offers Peeta a tight hug before looking at him with a sorrowful look. "You really need to head back there to see him, son."

Peeta's fear is written right on his face, but all he does is nod. There is a nurse standing by to show him the way, and I realize Haymitch must have gotten her attention while we were caught up in the moment. I'm afraid to leave Peeta alone, like letting him out of my sight again will mean it starts all over, and I can't allow that. But I also must give him the space he needs to be with his family, so I take a step back and wait to watch him leave.

I feel his hand reach mine and grasp tightly. He's silently asking me to go with him, and so I simply follow as the nurse leads us through the doors. The emergency room is filled with cubicles covered by curtains when necessary, and I can hear the cries of a child off in the distance. Nurses are moving quickly, and I realize it must be a busy night for this small hospital.

The nurse leading our way takes us out of what seems like the bullpen of the hospital and down another hallway. This is where she fills Peeta in, graciously, on the details of his father's condition. I try to focus on what's around us instead of re-hearing the terrible news.

This hallway is a much quieter part of the hospital, and there are rooms with actual doors instead of curtains. I can see into several of the rooms, where families sit around beds. The atmosphere here is much slower, but still just as sad. I pull myself closer to Peeta, linking my arm through his and he looks over at me. The stress of the situation is etched across his features, and I want nothing more than to be able to take it away from him.

Finally, we reach a room near the end of the hallway, and the nurse stops just outside the door. She points silently to the nearly closed door and Peeta gives a weak smile of thanks. His hand never leaves my grasp as he walks inside first. The room is only lit by the afternoon light from the single window and the overhead lighting above Mr. Mellark's head. The rest of the room is filled with different wires and tubes, making it look as though the usually strong man has now become a defenseless being.

The sight sickens me, and I keep my stance near the door. Not only because I'm not sure I can handle the sight for much longer, but also because I suddenly feel like an intruder on this extremely sensitive scene. Reese greets his brother first, pulling him into a long hug where I can almost hear both of them sobbing into one another.

My eyes move from Mr. Mellark to Mrs. Mellark sitting beside his bed. Her chin is resting on the spot where their hands are joined, and she looks so grief-stricken. I never expected to feel
sympathy for this woman, but right now she looks so lost that it's hard not to. My eyes then move toward Clement's wife, who has decided to keep somewhat of a distance between her and the rest of the family. Her eyes come to rest on mine just as I look at her and she gives me a sweet smile, reaching her hand out. I take it and she pulls me to her. She's petite, like me, but her arm around my shoulders gives me comfort, and I'm suddenly at ease.

We have never really shared any interaction before this, but I am now extremely grateful for her generous behavior. She has always been the one off in the distance at large gatherings. She was never unfriendly, just preoccupied with those around her. And I know that I do not always seem like most approachable person so I can't hold her lack of effort against her when I've made none myself. But today seems like a decent day to start.

I lean against her for silent support, and she does the same. Under different circumstances, I feel as though we'd have a lot to talk about, possibly even find a way to relate to one another besides our connection to Mellark men.

Reese releases his little brother, and soon Peeta is passed over to Clement. They share a long stare before Clement pulls his brother into yet another hug. All three boys are close, but Clement and Peeta have always shared an unspoken bond. I remember Peeta telling me late at night while we were tangled together about how Clement used to protect Reese and him from their mother. How he'd always take the fall if it meant getting the younger two out of trouble. Clement was a lot like Mr. Mellark in that aspect.

When Clement finally unfolds himself from Peeta, they are both red-faced and puffy-eyed. The emotions of the two men are too much for Clement's wife and out of the corner of my eye, I see a tear stream down her cheek. That's when I realize how wet my own cheeks are. I quickly reach my free hand up and wipe the evidence away and quietly clear my throat. But my composure is short-lived when I see Peeta making his way over toward his frail father's side. Mrs. Mellark stands, looking at her youngest son for a long time. For a moment I think she'll reach out and hug him, but instead she simply runs her hand down his arm. I see Peeta flinch and I can tell it takes all he has not to pull away from her.

Grief can cloud a lot of things, but anger is not one of them.

I watch Peeta take a seat in his mother's place and slowly reach up to take his father's hand. If he feels on display having us all watch him, he doesn't show it. He looks up at his ailing father and gives a weak, humorless laugh when the older Mellark finally opens his eyes to look at him.

He's awake, that must be a good sign. And although I have seen very little movement from the man besides his chest heaving with hard breaths, I try to keep a sense of hope that this will all turn around for the better.

"Hey Dad," Peeta croaks. "I guess you're not going to be free this weekend to come watch me play in Ohio."

His father gives his own weak smile, one that is not unnoticeably lopsided, and looks around at all the machines and tubes keeping him comfortable for the time being, "No, I – I – I guess not."

His speech is heavily slurred and hardly understandable, but Peeta is hopeful at the ability for his father to simply grasp the scene in front of him.

I hear Clement tell his wife that the doctors had suggested Mr. Mellark be put into a medically-induced coma to make him the most comfortable, but apparently Mr. Mellark didn't want to leave the world like that — if that was to be the outcome of his terrible situation. And I quietly smile to
"Maa-maybe nex-st time." Mr. Mellark says and I see Peeta's hand tighten around his listless one.

Peeta doesn't say anything — he can't. He's too taken by emotions, and I notice his chin quiver as he looks up at his father with a lost expression. I realize Peeta is losing his hero. Mr. Mellark was everything Peeta ever hoped to be and as I watch them, now I realize just how alike the two of them are. Mr. Mellark is lying there, waiting for an uncertain future, and all he can think to do is comfort his youngest son. Peeta would do the same thing, I'm sure of it.

He lets out a shaking breath and begins, "Sso pr-proud of you, F-feeta."

"Don't, Dad." Peeta openly sobs, and my heart breaks. "Please don't do this."

My own tears continue to fall silently as I watch Peeta put his hands over his face and rub away some of the tears. But more soon replace those tears, and there isn't a dry eye in the room as we watch this intimate interaction. Even Mrs. Mellark snifflies in her place near the edge of the room. And although she's staring out the window, I know she's listening.

"I am so l-lucky to was-ch you gr-grow up. Play ball." Mr. Mellark glances in my direction slowly, seemingly to take all of his strength to do so, and I feel my skin grow warm. "Fh-fall in love."

I feel my knees weaken when Peeta looks at me. The moment is brief, but the fire behind the hurt in his eyes is enough to cause anyone weakness. Before he can turn away, I give a small smile and I feel Clement's wife squeeze me just a bit tighter. Reese and Clement both look in my direction and smile. Mrs. Mellark simply stares. Her expression is unreadable, like always, and I try to brush past it.

Mr. Mellark is looking at Peeta once more when he speaks, "Be ha-happy, Peeta. Do what ma-makes you happy." The room's grief is all but palpable as he continues. "Rh-un ah-way and j-join the damn circus. Just be happy. T-th-ruly and unabashedly happy."

I don't know if I imagine the plea I hear in Mr. Mellark's voice. A plea for happiness he never truly had until his boys came along. He doesn't want Peeta to suffer that same kind of fate. He doesn't want Peeta to settle, like I'm beginning to believe Mr. Mellark himself did after my mother. That whole history is still a fresh wound in my mind, and I can't seem to pass it up every time I sense Mrs. Mellark's bitterness.

"But put her happiness first," Mr. Mellark is still looking at his youngest son, his voice slurring harder. Everyone in the room knows who he is talking about and their eyes are back on me. Except for Peeta, his eyes are still locked on his father's. "Tha-th's going to be the key to y-your happiness. Pha-phretty sure it already is."

The room is silent for a long moment, everyone just letting his words sink in. And all I want to do is wrap myself around Peeta and never let go. Mr. Mellark may have known that Peeta's happiness is linked to mine, but he forgot to mention how much mine is linked to his. We're linked together. We have been for so long, whether or not I was ready for it.

Peeta stands and leans in to give his father a gentle sort of hug before moving away from him. His eyes are still damp from tears, but he seems to have gained some composure, for now. Reese takes this opportunity to sit down in the chair Peeta just vacated, and Clement pulls his wife away from me slightly. At first I'm confused, my mind still in an emotional fog. But then I see Peeta making his way to me across the small room, and before he can say anything, I just wrap him into the strongest hug I can offer.
This is where I belong, for better or worse. I'm a damn fool for taking this long to realize it.
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

Well, this chapter has been a long time coming. And I am so terribly sorry about that. Life kind of took my breath away personally this last month and it's been a lot harder getting back on my feet than I thought it would. But I don't want to bore you with that any longer, so please; I hope you enjoy this chapter and accept it as a peace offering for my long absence. Never fear, this story is still my baby and with two chapters left I am more than excited to close it out for you guys! And always, if you have any questions, please message me over on Tumblr (even if it's anonymous because you don't have an account there). My URL is fourfinick.

Thank you all for your continued support, love, and (most of all) patience! You are too wonderful to me!

Always, thank you to my wonderful beta, Court81981, she is beyond fabulous — as you are all aware. Without her this story would be absolute trash. So thank you so much & wishing you the very, very best my dear!

P.S. - Please read my note at the bottom in case you have some input for a sequel — of sorts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sometimes it’s just plain hard.”

Grief.

They say it comes in stages. But I don’t see how that can be possible, because for it to have set “stages” means there is something that makes sense about grief, that there is an organized way to handle the heartache you are undoubtedly feeling. Stages give the impression that you are making some sort of progress and maybe in the big picture that’s true, but for a while — a long while — you are simply stuck in some kind of rut. You have somehow become the hamster spinning on the wheel you used to watch as a child.
Stages also give off the impression that once you’re finished with the emotion of the current stage that you’ll never return to it again. Why would you? You’ve moved on from that stage. You are on to the next one. The next one that certainly means you’re that much closer to closing this current chapter of your life.

But see, here’s something they don’t tell you about grief: Grief isn’t some stage of your life that you’ll slowly pull yourself out of. Not really. Sure, you’ll get better. You might even go a full twenty-four hours without thinking about that certain moment your grief took you over. But it doesn’t leave you. It hibernates. It even allows you to enjoy life again. Because it knows sooner or later you’ll have a weak moment. A moment when you smell your loved one’s favorite shampoo. Or a moment when you remember what life was like before the accident. It only takes a second. A split second, and grief will slip back in seamlessly and effortlessly. And you’ll let it. Because sometimes giving into the momentary heartache, that grief, it reminds you of them. Reminds you of a better time; even if it’s that better time you’re grieving for.

Grief is an endless cycle. Denial, anger, sorrow, bargaining, and acceptance play on a constant repeat in your life from that point on. Sometimes the emotions are avoidable. And sometimes they are crippling. But sooner or later you realize they’ve become just as much of a part of you as your hair color or favorite t-shirt. You can wear grief like a badge of honor. You should. You survived. And that’s something to be proud of.

Grief and time can be a pretty freeing combination.

It’s waiting for the time to pass that becomes the nightmare. And sometimes the complete loss of a loved one isn’t the hardest burden to bear.

Mr. Mellark pulled through the night with minimal complications, and we all had a sigh of relief at sidestepping the worst. But the euphoria of his survival was short-lived once the doctors began to run their tests. The paralysis was, as they had predicted earlier, through loss of his left side, with only partial movement of his arm and facial features. Of course, all of this seemed like a small price to pay to keep the patriarch of the family around. But soon reality and doubts begin to creep in.

Mrs. Mellark was back to her cold, harsh self in record time leaving Reese, Clement, and Peeta to try and understand their futures on their own. Reese paced the hospital halls on the phone, thanking members of our community for their continued support and keeping everyone updated on Mr. Mellark’s condition. Clement immediately went into preparation mode, speaking with doctors, nurses, and patient advocates figuring out the best possible outcome for his father. And Peeta shut himself off completely.

After that first treacherous night, Peeta has yet to speak to me. The morning after, only mere hours
of the stress starting to lift, he blankly looked at me and said it’d probably be best if I went home to get some rest. I tried to argue, but he simply walked back into his father’s room. Confusion, hurt, and anxiety set in instantly. I blinked back the sting of melodramatic tears and quickly left the hospital.

Gale and Johanna met me back at my place and asked question after question. I did my best to answer their inquiries over bland, burnt coffee that I’d been too distracted to fix properly. But my mind was elsewhere. It was back in that hospital room, selfishly on Peeta. The way he’d simply shut himself off to me scared me. The look in his eyes as he’d told me to go home was beyond removed; it was cold. That reality made my stomach go sour and my terrible coffee feel like a rock sitting in it. I listened to Gale and Johanna talk back and forth about everything, only giving the input expected. And not soon enough they were heading back toward my door, Johanna only stopping long enough to give me a quick hug and telling me to get some rest.

Fortunately I was too exhausted from the previous night to avoid sleep for too long, and I drifted off only moments after crawling into bed, not caring that the sun leaked through, telling me it was time for work not sleep. But the faster I slept the faster I could return to Peeta.

But I never did.

Today Mr. Mellark is coming home and I can’t help but feel nervous about the homecoming, because for the last two weeks my time on the ranch has been wondering about his youngest son. Peeta never once stopped by or called. Of course, I understand the amount of stress he is undoubtedly under, but I expected him to need me. Or at least I’d hoped he would need me. Like I need him.

Peeta homecoming had been under such terrifying circumstances that we hadn’t really spoken about anything. But those brief moments in his arms and night spent holding his hand felt like home to me — a home I had been foolish to walk away from so easily. One I had been all too eager to return to. But time has made me realize just how childlike and selfish I had been to think that that one traumatic night at the hospital had fixed all the damage I had done.

Nothing is fixed. Not even close.
My eyes stare out the bay window of the Mellark kitchen, watching patiently for a sign of life to come down the driveway. I’ve all but drowned out the sounds of people bustling around behind me. Seeder and Wiress are busy trying to organize all the food that’s been dropped off through the weeks. There is enough to feed the entire town of Dawson for the next three Thanksgivings. Beetee is helping Haymitch move furniture, and most importantly, creating a bedroom out of Mr. Mellark’s old office on the first floor. And several other ranch hands are putting on the finishing touches to the wheelchair ramp Gale built last week. People from town have started to arrive, a strange kind of makeshift homecoming for their old friend.

The nervous air in the house and along the porch is hums. People speak in low tones about the future of the ranch. Everyone comments on how terrible the whole situation is. That it couldn’t have happened to a less deserving person. Like they’re all saying something profound; it’s not profound, it’s small town gossips that like to hear themselves talk. But their concerns are merited, even if they aren’t wanted.

Life is certainly about to change on the Mellark Ranch.

“Watching the driveway won’t make them appear any faster,” Gale says from behind me.

The noise startles me a bit and I turn to look up at him. My shoulder leans against the frame of the window as I cross my arms over my chest at a desperate attempt for a sense of security.

“Sorry.” I clear my throat and push myself to stand straight. “What can I help with?”

Gale gives a sad smile, “Nothing. You doing okay?”

I roll my eyes and walk past him toward the mounds of food sitting on the counter. “You can tell Johanna you’re keeping a good eye on me. I haven’t walked in front of a moving vehicle yet.”

“Funny.” Gale follows, picking a strawberry off a decedent looking cake. He pops it into his mouth and I can feel him watching me as I busy myself with a stack of napkins. “Have you talked to him?”

I let out a shaky sigh, “Nope.”

“Have you tried to call him?”
“And say what? ‘Hey Peeta, I know you’re dealing with your dad right now, but I really just want to know we’re alright after I walked out on you like a selfish bitch?’” I glare at him. “No. I haven’t called him.”

“You’ve been hanging around Johanna too much.” He smirks, grabbing another strawberry.

My hard expression cracks on its own accord and I laugh slightly. “Shut up.”

“They’re here.”

Our lighthearted moment quickly turns to lead in my veins as I look toward the older woman standing near the entryway. Everyone starts to move toward the porch, waiting for them to arrive. My feet seem locked in place for a moment as I watch the small crowd disappear and I’m left alone in the kitchen. Gale watches me, as he’s one of the last to leave the house and I swallow hard. I should follow and try to blend in with everyone. I shouldn’t push Peeta into something he’s obviously not ready for — or doesn’t want at all.

My mind slips back to the day at the hospital. The moment I first saw him and we came together like there was some magnetic pull between us. I’m beginning to believe that magnetic pull isn’t just in my mind. I feel drawn to him like the air I breathe. I am stronger with him. I am braver with him. I can face anything with him. Have I completely thrown that away?

My fingernails dig into my palms as I finally move from my place and join the crowd on the porch. The hospital transport is the first vehicle to pull up. Mrs. Mellark climbs out of the passenger seat and goes toward the wheelchair-accessible door to wait for her husband. But she doesn’t look how I assume many wives would look: overwhelmed with a mix of joy and concern for her husband. She looks like an impatient mother waiting for their child to finally climb out of the backseat. A nurse removes herself from the back first, helping carry some of Mr. Mellark’s things as she smiles up at him.

The van lowers him down slowly and even though his left side is obviously paralyzed, a bright smile can still be seen playing on his features, the right side trying to make up for the left’s inabilities at the moment. Everyone all but claps at seeing their dear neighbor and Haymitch steps forward. From my spot toward the back I can hardly see much, but I can just make out the misty look on his face.

“Good to see you, old friend.” Haymitch grins, grabbing Mr. Mellark’s offered right hand and
holding tightly.

The exchange is heartfelt and again I’m reminded of just how much this man means to so many. This town would do anything for Hershel Mellark. And Haymitch would always be the first in line for the task.

And then I notice the pickup coming down the driveway soon after Mr. Mellark has started up the ramp on the porch. Clement, Reese, and Peeta all climb out of the vehicle slowly. They look a little worse for wear. Reese wears sunglasses and a hat to cover his tired expression. Clement’s once clean-shaven face now has a distinct five o’clock shadow about it. And Peeta’s usual bright demeanor looks just as worn as his clothes. This week has been hard on them all and it’s obvious a homecoming party is not something they’re looking forward to. I suddenly feel like I’m invading a home that normally wears an open door policy like a welcome mat.

But in true Mellark boy fashion, they put on their best smiles and begin thanking everyone as they make their way into the house. I hang back, hoping Peeta will notice me and at least make some kind of gesture in my direction. My hands sweat as I rub them against my thin cardigan. I stand close to Gale for some form of protection, and I watch as he shakes Reese’s hand and I smile at the middle Mellark son. Clement’s hand comes to rest on my shoulder briefly before he moves inside.

And then I feel his eyes on me. I would feel that warm sensation coursing through me a hundred years from now. When I look in his direction I’m met with those gorgeous eyes I’d spent so many nights getting lost in. Time seems to stand still as I take in the bags under his eyes and how his forehead creases with concern. Even worn out from emotions he looks absolutely perfect.

I start to step forward and engage him in small talk; my courage has built enough for that. But then his eyes leave mine and he looks at Gale. His hands slide into his pockets and he nods at his old teammate and friend. I’m frozen again and Gale reaches forward and offers his hand to Peeta. Peeta takes it and shakes it firmly.

“Thanks for all your help.” Peeta offers a tired smile to both of us and then disappears into the house.

And I’m left to fall apart on the porch. Gale watches me and quickly reads the situation. He wraps his arm around my shoulder and starts to pull me inside. I don’t want to go inside. I want to run away and never look back. I feel as though I’ve been sucker-punched and all the air has escaped from my lungs.

“Come on.” Gale coaxes me along into the house. “I’m sure Haymitch has a hidden stash around
My presence on the edge of the party remains pretty constant throughout the rest of the afternoon. I watch as people mingle in groups. The small stockpile of food slowly shrinks. Mr. Mellark sits in the center of the large family room, everyone stopping to spend his or her fair share of time with him. Haymitch is never far from his side, while Mrs. Mellark is never farther. And the hospital employee that helped Mr. Mellark from the van I’ve learned is his new in-home nurse.

Cressida Sinclair I overhear her introduce herself to several people. Apparently she’ll be moving into the Mellark home for several weeks to help rehabilitate Mr. Mellark. From the conversations I witnessed her in, she seems like a rather outspoken woman, which is good. She’ll need that personality when it comes to living in close quarters with Mrs. Mellark.

I try not to notice that Peeta has disappeared from the festivities altogether, but as the crowd slowly starts to thin his lack of presence becomes more and more noticeable to me. I busy myself by going around and picking up empty paper plates and cups. I do my best to avoid the Mellark family entirely. The last thing I need is some kind of endearing conversation. I don’t deserve their kind words. And I don’t desire Mrs. Mellark’s cold glares.

Keeping busy with clean up really isn’t a disguised attempt of avoidance with the large amounts of food there is leftover. By the time the last of the visitors are wishing the family well, Wiress and I are standing in the kitchen wrapping the leftovers up to place in the refrigerator.

As the last car pulls out of the driveway, I finally spot him.

My hands fall still atop the covered bowl of potato salad as I watch him out the window. He’s sitting on the porch swing, gently rocking back and forth. I can only see his profile, but his shoulders are slumped so deeply that I can practically feel the weight on them. His hands rub together slowly as he stares at something on the wooden surface of the porch. His curls move away from his forehead in the quiet breeze, and I can’t help but imagine my own hands running through those locks trying to comfort him.

A loud thud happens behind me and I jump slightly, quickly turning to face the sudden racket. My heart beats wildly and I see Wiress bending down to the floor where she’s dropped several empty plastic food containers. My heart still beats wildly as she looks up at me with a giggle. I smile and shake my head at her, turning back to the person who previously held my attention. When I do, my eyes meet his and I freeze in place. He must have heard the containers drop through the small opening of the window.
We remain in some sort of trance until we hear the worn screen door crack open and then close again. Soon I see Gale joining Peeta on the porch swing. I am too far away to hear their conversation above anything more than a mumble. I try to turn my attention from them and finish putting away the leftovers, but every once and while my eyes will slip to watch the two of them again. Their conversation isn’t very animated and it looks casual enough. Just like old times. The moment warms my heart.

Once I’ve finished pulling the food away, I quickly grab a broom and start sweeping. At first my intentions are truly to sweep and help Wiress make this place look like something, but then I reach a particularly close spot to the window out of sight. My arms continue to sweep, but in a much slower fashion than earlier.

“There’s just a lot to do.” I hear Peeta’s voice, “A lot to get ready for next season, and buyers to contend with. Mom’s not gonna want to do any of that. Clement and Reese both have their own lives going on — I just —“

“We’ll figure it out.” Gale cuts him off and I’m slightly surprised at how understanding he sounds. “This ain’t our first rodeo, Mellark. Have a little faith.”

They both laugh at Gale’s terminology and I suddenly feel at ease. Hearing the two of them starting to get along again somehow makes all of this just a little bit easier to bear. My hands still on the broom as I lean up against the wall near the window. If Wiress sees me she doesn’t make acknowledge that she does and just continues on with her own tidying tasks.

Their silence lasts for awhile and I’m just about to move when I hear what sounds like someone rising from the porch swing. Gale clears his throat and he lets out another laugh.

“Plus, I highly doubt a wheelchair is ever going to stop your dad. Nothing else on this green earth has — a chair on wheels doesn’t stand a chance.”

I can practically hear Peeta’s smile as he speaks, “Yeah. You’re probably right.”

“But anyway, just tell me what you need from me. I’m here to work.”

It doesn’t sound like much of a statement, but knowing where they had come from this past summer that comment means everything. That was Gale’s way of letting go of everything. Peeta
doesn’t say anything and I really don’t have too much time to process the moment entirely because the screen door opens again as Gale walks through it. He instantly notices me standing near the kitchen window. He just shakes his head and smiles, but before he can say anything I’ve placed the broom against the wall and thrown my arms around him.

“Thank you.” I mumble into his shoulder.

The rest of my day goes by without a hitch, but that’s mostly because I spend the rest of it alone on my couch watching terrible reruns of television shows long since cancelled. Gale offers to take me to Greasy Sae’s for a cheap drink and burgers, but after the day I’ve had I want nothing more than to curl up away from everyone. Everyone except Peeta, and since he seems to be avoiding me completely, alone is my only option.

I am just about to drift off to the sound of David Letterman’s one-liners when I hear a knock on my door. Immediately I jump up, being just in that state of sleep where everything startles me. I clear my throat and try to get my bearings about me, turning off the television and reaching for the nearest lamp. There is another knock before I reach the door to peek past my curtain and see exactly who wants my attention at this late hour.

Pulling open the door his name quietly slips from my lips, “Peeta.”

We just stand there for a moment in yet another trance before I move out of the way and gesture for him to come in. He does and I watch him intently. My heart beats harder with his every step; I’m sure my pulse can be seen pumping through my veins. When I shut the door I take an extra moment to latch it, staring at the worn gold knob that practically glows in the dim lighting from my lamp.

“I can’t do this again.” Peeta begins, and my breath catches.

I don’t want to turn around now. If I turn around he’ll have to continue talking, and if he continues his obviously prepared speech I will no longer have any hope to grasp on to. I will no longer be able to pull from those stolen moments when he first arrived home. He’ll forever leave no doubt as to where he stands on the issue and there will forever be no doubt that it was I who ruined it in the first place.
Focusing on my breathing and trying to ignore the stinging I feel beneath my eyes, I can’t find it in myself to turn around, so instead I stare at the tile beneath my bare feet. My arms wrap around me, a position I’ve been taking a lot lately. And I realize it’s because I no longer have his around me.

“You walked away — you didn’t even give me a chance,” He continues. “And the one person I needed this week was the one who’d decided this relationship wasn’t worth taking a risk. How fucked up is that?”

But not because he needed me, but because all I could think about was how much I needed him. I needed to comfort him. I needed to tell him it was going to be all right.

“I told myself the next time I saw you I’d make sure you were the one who made a move — if it’s what you wanted. Because I wasn’t putting myself out there like that again.” I can hear the distain and frustration in his voice. Both emotions seem laced with exhaustion and my stomach lurches to know that I’ve only contributed to his turmoil this week. “And then my dad…and you were. I needed you, Katniss. And you were there. I’m thankful for that — but I can’t do this again. Not if you’re going to walk away again. It seemed like such an easy decision for you, to just leave without another word.”

“It wasn’t.” My voice cracks when I finally speak and turn to face him completely. I spin so quickly, wanting to react before he can continue. I feel a tear slip down my reddened cheek. I quickly wipe it away because I know I don’t deserve to cry over this. “I made a mistake, Peeta. And I’m so sorry. I wanted to call you, talk to you —“

“Why didn’t you?” His voice is harsh now and I can see the anger etched in his eyes.

“I – I was scared,” I mumble, looking back down at my hands that clench tightly to my sweater sleeves.

“And I was hurt,” Peeta rebuttals. “You did that to me. And I should really just walk away.” My heart sinks lower and my chin quivers with sobs I’ve been holding back for far too long. He takes a step forward and I instantly look up at him. “Because if I stay, you need to know I plan on sticking around long enough that I’m sure something else will scare you. And how do I know you won’t decide to walk away again?”

“Because I’m more scared of life without you.” I respond without an ounce of hesitation. It’s a bold claim for someone as inexperienced as I am, but these past few months have proven it to be so very true.
His expression is unreadable. His eyes are searching my face so hard that I nearly feel the weight of his gaze on me. He’s completely frozen and I’m beginning to think I’ve said something wrong, that I’ve overstepped some imaginary boundary we’ve set for ourselves.

The silence becomes too much for me and I open my mouth to speak, but Peeta reacts first.

I feel his hands come to rest against my neck before I even realize he has moved toward me and I don’t have time to truly process another thing before his lips land against mine. I’m still for nothing longer than an instant before I respond in earnest to his kiss.

My fingers grip at the sleeves of his t-shirt as I pull myself closer to him. It feels like home coming up against his solid chest as his arms move to tangle themselves around me. There is absolutely no other place I’d rather be in this moment, and I easily get lost as he moves to deepen the kiss.

The taste of his tongue is one I immediately recognize and it sends a shockwave of heat to my core. I’m practically melting as I reach for the hem of his t-shirt. I don’t hesitate to signal what exactly I want to happen to it and Peeta doesn’t seem to question. I feel his arms fall away from me long enough to help me remove the thin material. The sight of his bare chest mesmerizes my eyes and I’m drawn back to the morning after our first night together. The butterflies instantly soar to life in me and the courage I felt just a moment ago starts to get replaced by nerves.

But Peeta doesn’t let the moment stop and instead pulls me back to him and captures my lips once again. I audibly sigh at the feel of his bare flesh and I let my fingers trail up his arms and take purchase to the strong muscles of his shoulders. He takes that moment to bend just slightly and lift me against him. My legs instinctively wrap around his waist and I grin against his lips.

“Bedroom,” I mumble, never letting my lips part far from his.

Peeta has other ideas and walks toward the nearby kitchen table. He unceremoniously sets me atop the old oak surface and before I can say for certain I won’t break the small table entirely he has started tugging my sweater over my head. He tosses it to join his t-shirt and I feel his lips nipping at my collarbone.

“Too far away,” He finally says rather incoherently against my heated skin.
I laugh as my head falls back, allowing him easier access to the sensitive spot just behind my ear. My legs proceed to pull him tighter as I feel his fingers working toward the waistband of my old track shorts. I need to feel him against me. It’s like a hunger I’ve never known before and when I buck my hips against his I hear him groan low against my ear.

“Careful, or this will end before it’s even begun, darling,” he says and I can feel the words rumble against my own chest. The vibrations go straight to my already soaked core and I can’t help but do it again.

Peeta’s hands come down to squeeze my thighs tightly in an attempt to still me. I give him a wicked grin and lean forward to place my own open-mouthed kisses on his shoulder. My fingers run along the defined lines of his torso until I reach the button of his jeans where I make easy work of popping it open. I can already feel his excitement against the rough material of his jeans, and the anticipation nearly makes my mouth water.

The nerves I momentarily felt are long gone and all I can think of is I can’t have him soon enough. I’ve thought about this moment so many times. I was once terrified it would never happen again. I would never feel Peeta’s lips against my own. I’d never again have him look at me as though I’m something to be devoured — like the way he’s looking at me now. It’s a look that only fuels my need and feeds my courage.

I reach the cool tab of his zipper and begin to pull it down slowly. The sound fills the air as Peeta’s lips come back to mine hungrily. He’s already undone the clasp of my bra by the time the zipper reaches the bottom of its track. My arms drop momentarily to my sides as I let the material fall downward before tossing it off in the distant to be forgotten.

Within an instant his lips encircle the already taut bud of one of my nipples and I can’t help but to cry out in ecstasy. My current mission of removing his pants is long forgotten as I revel in the sensations he’s causing in me. My back arches against him and my nails dig into the skin of his biceps. I feel one of Peeta’s hands on the small of my back as the other makes a slow journey up my thigh.

He bites down gently and I feel more moisture pool between my thighs. My need nearly causes me to crawl out of my own skin with madness and I cannot contain the way my hips wiggle at a helpless attempt for any sort of friction.

“Touch me,” I beg breathlessly, leaving marks against his flesh I know I’ll be able to see in the morning.
“I am,” he says coyly, peppering kisses across my chest.

“More. I need more.”

“Is this what you want?” he asks, his fingers drawing small circles against my bare stomach just above my waistline before moving just below the hem of my shorts. “Or is it this?”

My thigh twitches against his ghost-like touches and I nearly whine with built up frustration. He leans in and kisses me and I fight back the urge to bit his lip, which will remove the smug smile on his face.

“I need you to touch me,” I say again, this time pulling him tighter to me between my legs. “Or I’ll have to do it myself.”

“Well that does sound appealing,” he muses, but before he even finishes the sentence I feel his fingers sneak beneath my shorts and soaked panties to enter my dripping core smoothly.

I nearly come undone at the instant relief my body feels against his. My mouth falls open in a silent gasp of air and I cling to him tighter than I already was. I feel his eyes watch me and I’m driven even closer to the edge by how dark his eyes have become. I’m driving him just as wild as he’s driving me. I will never tire of that feeling.

His two fingers slide against me in lazy strokes and my hips move in unison with them. His lips trail along my jaw line and the friction of his bare chest against my sensitive nipples causes me to cry out in pleasure. I can feel the thin layer of sweat that is covering both our bodies and it only heightens the sensitivity of my skin.

When his thumb joins his other fingers by massaging my clit I see stars. I’ve been spun so tightly that the explosion nearly causes my entire body to shut down. I freeze against him as I cling tightly to his shoulders and my orgasm takes over suddenly. There wasn’t even a build up to the sensational feeling.

And coming down from my high is not a fast process, but as I do, I feel Peeta’s hands lazily running down my thighs, moving them up higher against his sides. He leans in and kisses me. The urgency we once had is lost as his tongue meets mine. My hands grasp at the sides of his face, as I get completely lost in him.
“That was fucking gorgeous.” he says, pulling away to leave me breathless.

I feel on display as I sit atop my kitchen table, but the way he watches me makes it seem like more of an appeal than I would have ever thought. I feel his hands run down my neck, spending only seconds on my sensitive breasts before moving downward. His calloused hands leave a trail of fire wherever they touch and I’m already squirming with want again.

By the time his fingers hook beneath the waistband of my shorts my need is all but boiling over again. My eyes stay focused on his as he makes slow work of removing the remainder of my clothes, my hips lifting momentarily to help. Once they’re off and forgotten, he slowly pushes his own past his hips and steps out of them. My eyes go to the appealing erection that has sprung to life. What I’ve been all but craving since his lips met mine.

In the dim lighting I can just make out the bead of moisture sitting atop his cock and I can’t help but reach out to touch it. My hand grasps around his member gently, my thumb crossing over the dot of pre-cum. I can hear his breath hitch in his throat and I lean in to bite gently on his collarbone as my hand run down his hard-on. His hips buck against my hand and I can only remember what those beautiful hips look like grinding in and out of me.

Peeta doesn’t wait long before he gently coaxes my hand away and steps closer to me. My eyes meet his as I feel his erection against my entrance. I feel his hand guide it up and down my sensitive slit before he slowly starts to push inside me. My mouth instantly opens in a pleasurable sigh and my hands come up to grasp around his neck. His hands grip my thighs tightly. When he bites down on his bottom lip, I know he’s fighting for control.

It’s an instantly full feeling that overcomes me and it’s familiar. I feel him stretch me with each inch he moves, and I can’t help but moan at the sensation. When he’s finally completely sheathed in me all I can do is rest my forehead against his and revel in the amazing feeling. His chest heaves against mine and I’m lost in the closeness of it all.

The emotions are too much and I can’t help the silent tear that runs down my cheek at the realization of how close I was to losing all of this. How stupidity and fear of needing someone nearly meant losing the one person who’d never walk away from me. I don’t deserve him, not in a hundred lifetimes, but he’s chosen me over and over again.

And I will always choose him.

“I love you.” I whimper, pulling him into an impassioned kiss.
He can undoubtedly taste the salt of my sudden overload, but he doesn’t say anything. He simply kisses me back while slowly starting to thrust in and out of me. And it doesn’t take long before we’re both panting into each other’s lips. Peeta’s eyes are so dark in color, and it thrills me. His skin slides against mine so easily.

I feel a drop of sweat run between my breasts as I lean back onto my elbows against the small round surface of the table. Peeta must see the drop because he instantly leans forward to lick at it. My gasp fills the air as I open my legs more offering him deeper access. The position allows him to hit the perfect spot inside me and my cries of pleasure don’t hide just how wonderful it feels.

Our moment of reverence is long over as Peeta thrusts hard into me and grips my hips tightly. Soon I’m lying completely back against the table and being driven wild by the image above me. Peeta’s lost all control he was once striving to keep and his movements show a man in complete abandon. It’s absolutely beautiful. And I know my own cries only mirror what his body is doing because soon I feel the familiar build inside me.

And unlike my first orgasm, this one comes on in waves. I’m calling out Peeta’s name when the first wave crashes in and I can feel my walls tighten around him. Peeta’s own thrusts are beginning to lose their rhythm, and I know he’s not far behind.

I push myself back into a sitting position, craving the closeness we had moments ago as I orgasm. His thrust momentum changes into a shallow rocking of his hips. My climax milks his and his arms tighten around me, holding me close. My lips tangle against his jaw line as I chant his name and taste his sweat. His nails dig into my hips and the bruising pressure feels delicious as I start to come down from my second high of the night.

Peeta’s breathing starts to even out along with mine, but neither of us are willing to completely part with one another yet. Even after he pulls out of me, leaving me feeling strangely empty, he remains close. My hips remain tight around his waist as we silently cling to each other.

The moment seems like a deep one until Peeta wraps his arms around me and once again picks me up. I laugh at the suddenness of it. And when I wrap my legs around him, yet again instinctively, I gasp at the feel of his stomach against my overly sensitive core. We must look like fools walking around completely naked and completely attached to one another, but the moment is perfect.

“On to the next surface?” I ask, laughing as I see him lead us down my small hallway.
“On to the next surface,” he confirms.

We enter my bedroom and he easily lays me down atop my bed, climbing to rest above me. My eyes meet his in the moonlight-filled room and I smile. I run my fingers along his forehead to push away stray curls.

“I think you’ll need to just pack me into your suitcase when you head back to school,” I muse, watching his expression closely.

He smiles and looks away from me for a second. “I’m not going back to school.”

My stomach drops and I search his expression. Why isn’t he going back to school? If he doesn’t go back to school he can’t play football and I know for a fact that football is a huge part of his life. He has to go back to school.

“Why – why aren’t you going back to school?” I ask as he moves to lie next to me. He must sense this is starting a conversation he doesn’t want to have because he stares up at the ceiling instead of looking at me.

“The ranch needs me,” he says. “Reese and Clement have their own careers to think about. They can’t take the time off its going to take to keep this place running. And who knows if my dad will ever be able to —“

“He will,” I interrupt, turning on to my side to face him.

“And if he can’t?” he asks, looking over at me.

I don’t have an answer and the haze of our joyful reunion starts to clear as I realize the reality of everything. How completely uncertain it all is, but still somehow I have a sense of peace. I reach over to rest my hand against his cheek, stroking it softly.

“We’ll get through it together.”

Peeta’s smile is broken, and it causes me more pain than I would have originally expected. He
wants that to be enough, I can tell by his tried expression, but the storm that rages behind his eyes says it isn’t. Even in the darkness of my bedroom I can see the sadness so constantly etched in his features now. The crease between his eyebrows remains even when he’s at rest. And the once ever-present smile has been replaced with a frown.

“My mother is back to her ice queen self,” Peeta muses, his hand coming up to run through his hair. “So even the ranch aside, I can’t leave her alone with him. I mean — I don’t think she’d really do anything. But he doesn’t deserve that kind of treatment while he’s trying to get better.”

I watch his chest rise and fall in a deep sigh, and I let my hand that has been stroking his cheek slide down to rest against it. His skin is warm and in this stillness I can just make out the pounding of his heart. I had assumed by his worn demeanor that he was stressed, but now I have a newfound respect for it.

“You are not alone in this,” I speak quietly, my lips coming to place a gentle kiss against his shoulder. “There are so many that love your father and will do anything for this —“

“But they aren’t me, Katniss,” he interrupts, “They aren’t required to do everything in their power to make sure Mellark Ranch continues to be successful. This is my home…”

He trails off and I’m left watching as his features go from cold determination back to the broken man he’s become over this past week. He sets his jaw and swallows hard. His eyes gloss over in the dim lighting and he blinks quickly, looking away from me.

“He’s my father — my hero,” his voice shakes and he looks back over at me, “I can’t go back to school with all this uncertainty hanging over everything.”

My throat tightens and I feel the burn of a sob building beneath the surface of my chest. I want to tell him it will all be all right, like so many did when my father passed, but I know the feeble meaning it has. And I have never been good with words.

Seeing him so broken causes me a whole new sensation of grief. I long for the easiness Peeta had before this all happened. All within a week, but it seems like a lifetime already. How time truly drags through the rougher spots of life. My fingers draw long lines along his chest in an attempt at some silent comfort and I watch him stare at the ceiling above.

“What can I do?” I ask, trying not to sound completely at a loss. But I’m practically begging for a
way to fix this. Unlike my mistakes, a heartfelt apology doesn’t change these circumstances. I wish it were that simple.

Peeta finally looks at me. “Just be here with me.”

My voice doesn’t come as easy as it once did and I simply nod in agreement as I lean over to place a kiss against his lips. I only intended to make it brief, but Peeta’s fingers lace around my neck and keep me close. I allow his tongue to slip past my lips and eagerly lean closer into him.

Our kiss is lazy as we enjoy the calm our relationship brings, even after my foolishness. I let my hand rest on his chest as I slowly move myself to straddle his hips. I gasp at the intimate contact I feel when I come to rest atop him. Peeta’s hands slide down my bare back, causing goose bumps to rise across my flesh.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I speak between our growing passions, pausing to fully look at him. “I don’t know what will happen, but I know where my heart lies. And that’s with you, Peeta. So I will be here with you as long as you’ll have me.”

His smile lights up his entire face for the first time in our conversation, and I can’t help but notice how my insides burn with excitement by seeing that expression. He pulls me back to him gently, kissing me fully.

“How does forever sound?” he whispers against my lips.

“Perfect.”

Chapter End Notes

So I’m contemplating a Peeta version of this story...like a fill in the gaps per-say. I don’t want to give the ending away of this story, but if you want to request some scenarios in which you wanted to know Peeta's side of thing feel free to request them here or via message/Tumblr what have you! Obviously it wouldn't be a sequenced as this story and it'll probably have chapters that more stand alone, etc. But if you like the idea I might toss around an outline in my head, just let me know!
See you in the last chapters!
What We Ain't Got

Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

No, your eyes are not deceiving you. This is truly an update to this story! I promised I hadn't forgotten about it! But I am so terribly sorry that it took this long to finally see the light of day. I've just really been struggling with my writing lately. Both because I go back and forth with whether it's even any good and plus my busy schedule, etc. Anyway, thank you to all who have reached out to me! It's always so wonderful to see people are actually invested in this story so thank you so, so, so very much! It truly means the world to me. And you're the reason I'm even still here writing in the first place. So this chapter is for all of you — Thank you so much!

Please note, this chapter is NOT beta-ed by anyone but me...and I'm rather terrible at it. I just simply didn't want to bother my regular betas after so many months of radio silence. I know they have their own things going on (and amazing written works, or so I've seen) so I decided to make my own bed and lay in it, so to speak. So all mistakes are MINE, please forgive me. And without any further delay, please ENJOY!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty: What We Ain't Got

"We all wish it didn't hurt."

Sacrifice.

We've all made one, or multiple, at one time or another. Some may be mundane, like giving up the last Oreo so your little sister doesn't scream at the top of her lungs. And some may be life changing, like going to work instead of college after graduating high school because that's what your family needs.

Some sacrifices demand something from us, while others are ones we give all to willingly. Some of us are self-sacrificing by nature. Some people are the type that they'd rather put upon themselves than others. Half of the sacrifices these types of people make are ones they've stepped up to. No one had to ask them, no one even had to look in their direction, and they're already suiting up to the take the fall. It's not for the glory of the sacrifice or the gratitude of others, but simply because they feel it is within their power to fix the entire situation with their sacrifice. They have a Savior Complex, perhaps.
They're always the hardest ones to rescue.

Gale has a 'sacrifice now, ask questions later' mentality, but I think that comes from being the oldest in his family and losing his dad so young. Gale nearly dropped out of school after his dad passed away — probably would have if it hadn't been for Mr. Mellark offering him a part-time job for almost full-time pay as long as he stayed in enrolled. Mr. Mellark rescued Gale in that sense.

I was always impressed with Gale and his aptitude to jump in and fix things. Sure, I stepped up to help Prim and my mother after my own father passed away, but it was after weeks of self-pity and grief. There were days I could hardly get out of bed. There were moments I literally had to will myself to continue breathing because it felt like my last breath left when my dad did. Sacrifice doesn't come as second nature to me. I have to build myself up to it. It's not that I don't want to do these things to help my family or those that I love. I'd do anything for them, but I first have to have my own inward struggle. A fight to continue on when you've been sucker punched by life isn't an easy one to overcome, but some do it better than others.

But then again, sometimes you can live inside your own sacrifice for so long that sooner or later it doesn't feel like the sacrifice you once felt you were making. Instead it feels like the life you were meant for in some sense. That's how I feel about my decisions to put Prim's life before my own. It has brought me here and as hard as it has been I wouldn't change a thing. Except for maybe Peeta's decision.

The sun hasn't snuck over the horizon yet when my eyes flutter open and I slowly start to stretch across my old mattress. The familiar ache of my muscles only help to remind me of the night before and glancing over at Peeta's sleeping figure just confirms it all. I want to curl back up and sleep next to him forever, but I'm also restless as our conversation floods my mind.

I notice the crease above Peeta's eyebrows is deeper now. I used to think he always looked so tired in his sleep. Now he looks not only tired but also entirely put upon. Our conversation went late into the night about how he could at least finish out the year and then spend the summer making a more long-term decision. I had hoped this suggestion would allow him to return to something he truly loved. Something he did that was entirely for him and no one else. He would in turn see how much he needed it in his life and decide to finish going to school entirely. Possibly even go further with his football career. I mean, everyone else is talking about that possibility, why shouldn't he consider it?

But Peeta really said nothing outside his responsibility to his family. And somehow I knew that would be his response. Somehow I knew I wouldn't be able to convince him to make a seemingly selfish decision. But I had tried and I will keep trying, but I'm beginning to think I'm going to need reinforcements.

I turn on my side to place a lazy kiss across his bare shoulder before quietly removing myself from under the blankets. My eyes instantly search the floors for our long discarded clothes when I realize they hadn't been removed in this room. Warmth spreads across my cheeks at the passionate memory. I tiptoe out of my bedroom and down the hall. Only slightly embarrassed by my unusual nudity as I freely roam my small home.

Reaching my kitchen, I grab Peeta's t-shirt and toss it over my head before scurrying toward my nearby laundry room to find a pair of clean underwear in the laundry basket.

Once I'm dressed appropriately enough to walk in front of my kitchen windows, I take to making my traditional cup of morning coffee. I feel about a thousand years old when I think of just how much I relay on that little cup of black liquid in order to survive even the easiest of days.
The water washes down the sink as I reach for the coffee pot. My fingers dip into the flowing stream coming from the faucet more out of habit than for a real need to check the temperature. I pop the lid open to faithful pot and allow it to fill with water. I leave it in place and start grabbing the rest of the ingredients for my coffee.

The coffee flitter has just been placed into the old machine when I feel a pair of calloused hands sneak beneath the worn materially of my new claimed t-shirt.

I jump slightly against his touch, but instinctively lean back into the familiar, hardness of his bare chest. Anxieties I wasn't even aware I had always seem to fade away whenever he's nearby and I feel relaxed in his embrace. The skin above my hips tingles with the feather light trace of his fingertips. A lazy smile crosses my lips when I feel him nuzzle into the side of my neck, pushing my tangled hair away to nip just behind my ear.

"I had great plans for this morning," Peeta hums and my body begins to burn with anticipation. I feel his fingers hook over the waistband of my panties and the moisture that pools at my core is sinful. "I was going to hear you scream my name as you came before your feet hit the floor. But I guess I'm going to have to go for Plan B."

My head turns toward his; my lids feel heavy with desire. My mind has long since forgot about the coffee and the pot now overflowing with water in the sink. I let my hand run up to grasp the back of his neck as I get lost in his open mouth kisses to my neck and jawline.

"And what's Plan B?"

"Fuck you in the kitchen." Peeta's breath is hot against my cheek and I audibly groan as I feel my panties drop to my feet. "Again."

The blood in my veins practically goes into overdrive as my heart feels as though it's going to beat right out of my chest. I am complete putty in his hands as I feel him lifting the shirt up and off of me. My ceaseless need for the man behind me overrides any feelings of embarrassment I have about standing in front of my kitchen windows completely nude. In fact, my only regret is that the sun has just started to rise and its becoming light outside. Darkness would mean I could see my reflection in the window. I could watch Peeta devour me like I so desire.

His fingers tickle across the sensitive flesh of my stomach and the butterflies inside erupt. His lips are still continuing their assault across my now bare shoulders. My hips instinctively buck back against him, wanting more contact with him. My back meets his chest with no bearer and the contact only feeds my need for all of him.

"Anxious, baby?" He asks, biting my shoulder with a roughness I don't see too often in him. The sensation mixed with the growl in his voice causes me to gasp.

We have barely begun and I can already feel my clit throbbing for attention. My knuckles go white from my grip on the countertop when I feel Peeta's fingers find my sensitive nipple and pinch ever so slightly. My mind is in a haze as his hand continues to tease my mounds. I'm only half aware of his other hand making a slow trail across my hipbone and past the coarse curls between my legs. It's not until I feel two fingers against the button that's been craving his attention from the start that I cry out and practically convulse against him. He makes three harsh circles around the bud and I already feel my impending orgasm starting to creep within me.

"Someone is wound tight this morning." Peeta's gruff voice breaks against my ear so I can hear he's nearly as undone as I am. His control will slip soon and it does nothing but thrill me. "And so wet. So fucking wet."
His forehead goes to rest against my shoulder and I can imagine him biting down on his bottom lip as he tries to maintain control. I know that look. That look breaks me every time. My mouth sags open as I allow the image of Peeta losing control to completely consume me. His two fingers work persistent circles against my clit while his other hand continues to split its time between both of my hardened nipples.

I feel his hardened length grind against my bare backside. The rough material of his athletic shorts against me and his fingers working their aggressive course have me all but falling on my knees in front of the kitchen sink. It's then I realize that Peeta is no longer massages my breasts, but instead his free hand has wrapped around me just below my ribcage. His hold is my stability as he pulls me flesh against him.

The coil in my stomach is about to snap completely when I finally find the strength in myself to push Peeta's assaulting hand away from my throbbing center. He complies and I immediately miss the contact. Before my willpower vanishes, I reach behind me and numbly tug at Peeta's low-slung shorts.

"Inside me." I manage to get out before I throw my head back against his shoulder. "I want to come with you inside me."

Peeta says nothing, but I sigh as his hands leave me completely. Soon I feel the material of his shorts drop along my legs before pooling just behind my feet. I glance down to see him step out of them and kick them away. My excitement is floored when I realize there is no barrier standing between us.

Peeta's hands slowly slide up from the small of my back to in between my shoulder blades. Each hand then runs along my shoulders before gliding down my arms. The skin beneath his fingers ripples with goose bumps and I bite my lip to keep from screaming out. My entire body feels like a ticking time bomb just begging to be let off.

"You're so beautiful." He mumbles against my ear, his hands coming to intertwine with mine. He reaches forward to push my hands to grip the countertop they are familiar with.

My hands remain against the cool surface, but Peeta's go to grip my hips and I feel one of his feet nudge mine to silently instruct me to spread them farther. My stance widens and my heart races with anticipation. My eyes look straight ahead and I can almost see the outline of our bodies in the glass of my kitchen window. The sun has come up over the horizon, but the night is still trying to force its own colors on the sky above.

The sky looks nearly as beautiful as the man standing behind me.

His reflection just past mine is mostly blocked, but I see the outline of his unruly curls framing his face. The muscles of his chest are defined by the control he's been hanging to for dear life. His hands grip my hips just above the countertops and I can see where his nails are pressed into the sensitive flesh there. But it's his face that I strain my eyes to try and see the details of. His lids are heavy and I can just imagine the flushed color that spreads from his cheeks down. His lips are parted in a silent cry.

I drop my head and turn it to the side with every intention of telling him just how perfect we look together, but then he enters me. My cries of ecstasy leave my lips before I am able to truly comprehend the amazing sensations coursing through my veins. I am so beyond ready for him that he slips in without any hesitation from my body or his. We are joined within a split second and we're frozen there.
My cries turn into quiet gasps for air as I feel Peeta lean against me for support. His staggered breath tickles at the base of my neck. I'm not sure if it's the position or the high emotions that haven't quite left from the night before that cause both of us to pause momentarily, but I instantly feel a need for more contact. One of my hands reaches up to lace through his against my hip and I turn somewhat awkwardly to place a sloppy kiss against any piece of flesh I can.

His head lazily moves toward mine and I finally feel my lips come in contact with his. The kiss is short and heated, both of us on the brink of losing it completely. When I pull my lips away I make it a point to allow my forehead to linger against his and mumble, "Fuck me."

I know it's the drop that causes the dam to break within him. His hands grip me to the point I'm certain I'll have marks later and Peeta's hips start to grind against me. At first his thrusts are shallow and steady. He's making sure I like our newfound position and as much as I appreciate his unnecessary concern it's not enough. I need so much more.

My hips push back against him as a way to tell him of the need my lips cannot form into words. And it doesn't take him long to understand my message and his hips are bucking hard against me. The sound of our bodies slapping against each other mixed with my continued cries of pleasure fills the air as Peeta continues to hold such a beautiful rhythm between us.

With each thrust he hits an especially sensitive spot within me and it isn't long at all before I feel that familiar build. It's when I feel one of Peeta's hands slip from my waist up to grasp one of my sensitive breasts that I know I'm long since lost. My mouth falls open in a silent prayer as my body goes ridged with its release.

Peeta continues to buck wildly against me as my orgasm rushes over me and I finally let out a loud, miraculous cry. My upper body leans farther against the countertop and I feel Peeta's hand that was once on my breast move around to reach up and grasp my hair. The position is primal, but the mix of pleasure and pain causes my cries to continue. I love this side of Peeta. The side of him that has completely lost all control and it's because of me. Because of what I cause in his body. The thought is enough to bring on my second orgasm without pause.

It's not until I feel the pressure against my clit that I realize I've reached down on my own accord and started assaulting my own center. Peeta's hand clutches tightly to my loose trestles of hair and I can sense his rhythm is faltering. He's close and something primal in me causes me to reach past my own sensitive center to delicately caress his thrusting balls.

The new technique must be Peeta's undoing because it only takes a couple more powerful thrusts for him to still behind me while I ride out my second orgasm brought upon by his last deep thrust. My chest heaves as a mangled cry of release spills from me for the second time this morning. Peeta's own voice is strangled against my neck as he incoherently mumbles my name repeatedly.

Our once vocal lovemaking no longer hangs in the air and my small kitchen suddenly sounds dead silent. The only thing to be heard is our heavy breathing as we both try to get our wits about us. Peeta is planting firm kisses against my shoulder and I lean against the countertop, the cool surface feeling like ice against my heated flesh.

"Fuck. Me." Peeta says against my back, announcing each word overdramatically.

I can't help but laugh until I feel him slip from me. My laugh quickly turns into a groan at the loss of him. I feel myself being turned into his arms so that I'm facing him for the first time this morning. That thought causes me to laugh again.

"I thought we just did that?" I playfully ask, leaning against him completely as I allow for my arms
"Give me a minute and a shower." He says, leaning forward to place a soft kiss on my lips. "And we'll be doing it again. We have a lot of time to make up for."

I smile, but as my eyes search his face I realize there are more important issues that still need to be worked out. Peeta is still not planning to return to school and it's still something that does not set well with me. It's a conversation I had planned to tackle again this morning, but like always, he has a fine talent in distraction. My hands come up to rest on either side of his face and I let my fingers push away a couple of curls from his forehead.

"I think we need to talk first." I say in almost a whisper, afraid to completely ruin this continued reunion.

If Peeta knows what's coming his features only betray him for a second before he's smiling again. He shakes his head and leans forward to place another kiss on my lips. When his lips pull away his whole body does as well and all I'm left with is his hand in mine as he starts to pull me down the hallway.

"Too busy." Peeta comments offhandedly. "We need a shower."

I can't help but follow with a giggle, but silently I plan my attack and it's certainly going to call for reinforcements.

I worry my chapped bottom lip as I make a slow drive across Dawson. My reinforcements are going to have to come in the shape of Peeta's most valued advisors: his brothers. And I know convincing them that he needs to return to school will take little to no convincing. They just need to be aware of what's going on in his head. Or do they?

Doubt creeps in no matter how loud I turn my radio up.

What if they already know? What if Peeta has already spoken with them and they're in support of his decision? What if I'm completely stepping over my boundaries, as he's barely on-again girlfriend? I feel as though I'm doing what's best for Peeta, but what if what's best for him is letting him make this decision on his own without the constant badgering of others?

My inner struggle causes me to remain in my old truck as I stare at Clement's house. My hands grip the steering wheel as I observe the small front yard that his wife has nicely aligned with flowers. Flowers that have started to wilt in the fall-like temperatures of night, but still maintain some of their vibrant summer colors.

This is crazy. I should be helping Peeta right now instead of conspiring against him. What kind of united front does that portray? I promised to stand by his side and support him. This isn't supporting him. But he can't throw it all away this easily. This isn't deciding to cut back on a couple of credit hours. This is walking away from college altogether. Walking away from football. Walking away from a possibly brighter future. That kind of future could easily take him out of Dawson.

The flip of my stomach doesn't go unnoticed as I shove my door open and jump out from behind the wheel. My feet crunch against the gravel driveway as I make my way toward their front door.
The air in my lungs seems to be trapped there as I reach for the doorbell and push once. The sound echoes inside the cottage-style home and I anxiously step away from the door and let my eyes stare around the front porch.

My fingers intertwine in front of me and I can't help but ring them together tightly. My eyes instantly dart toward the door when I hear the sound of the knob. The home is one of the newer ones in Dawson and the door doesn't crick like my mom and Prim's, but swings smoothly to show Clement's familiar face.

"Katniss!" He grins, instantly pushing open the storm door and moving off to the side to allow me entrance. "Peeta with you?"

"Um — no. He's having lunch with your dad." I say awkwardly, walking past his open invitation and into their home. "Your mom took Cressida over to Malone to that seamstress she likes."

I can't help but notice the simple and clean decor of their home. The smell of lilacs and vanilla fill the air and I notice a small candle lit in the entryway on top of an end table. The house doesn't have the country grandeur that Mellark Ranch does, but it's obvious Clement's wife has put her own delicate touches on the place.

Clement shuts the door behind us and walks up next to me, placing a friendly hand on my shoulder and gesturing for me to follow him into the nearby kitchen. I silently follow his lead and do my best to swallow all the voices inside my head that are screaming that this is a mistake. I want nothing more than to turn around and run, but there's no turning back now.

"Well that's good for Dad — he can use a break from her." Clement laughs when we reach the kitchen, offering me a chair at the kitchen table. "Of course, Cressida's in for it. A day with my mother in the closed confines of a vehicle? Hope she packed the whiskey."

My laugh spills from my throat before I can stop it and I suddenly feel a tightening of guilt at how readily I enjoy a joke at her expense. And also at how ready Clement is to offer one. It's tragic really, how Mrs. Mellark's reputation is not only known, but also so common that it's joked about even within her own family. The boys in her life really don't deserve her. It's a miracle they all turned out the way they did.

Well, maybe not a miracle, but certainly a testament of type of man their father is.

"Care for something to drink? I think Tiff finished making sun tea before she ran to the store. Can I fix you a glass?" He asks, walking over toward the refrigerator and pulling out the pitcher.

"Sure, that'd be great. Thank you." I offer, playing with the bottom of the lace tablecloth that covers their small table.

"Sure thing."

Then the uncomfortable silence I knew would happen at some point hits like a heavy rock on my chest. I look around the kitchen almost hoping to find an item to bring up small talk about. My eyes land on several decorative paintings and then a large wooden hutch that holds numerous antique dishes. All very nice pieces, but all things I know absolutely nothing about. I'm not even sure I could fake casual conversation about colorful paint strokes or copper finishing around delicate dishes. Can anyone actually do that?

The sound of the tea being poured into glasses full of ice fill the air and I look back to see Clement finishing our drinks and putting the pitcher back into the refrigerator. Once he's shut the door, he
grabs a cup in each hand and walks over toward where I'm sitting. I reach for my glass and smile with gratitude. He then moves to sit across from me. I suddenly wish his wife were here, like she would somehow be a person in my corner. Even though she has no idea what I'm even doing in my corner.

"So what brings you to my neck of the woods? Peeta acting like an idiot? Reese and I have been looking for a reason to pound on him. Haven't been able to do that recently." Clement grins, taking a drink of his tea.

"Um, well no, he's good — great, really. I'm here because — well, I'm sure you know about everything with Peeta and I — I mean, maybe I don't have any place here, but —"

"Yeah, Peeta kinda filled me in on everything, but hey — fear is a very real thing. I totally get that. Getting married at nineteen? You think I didn't want to run for the hills about a week after we decided that was a good idea?" he says, placing his arms on the table in front of him. "That was definitely a rocky time for Tiff and me. Thank god that woman's a saint."

His easy nature is almost infectious and I can't help but notice the way I relax back against my chair a little more as I listen to him. Peeta always talked about how Clement was his voice of reason and I can already see that in our short time together. My hands don't seem to fidget as much in my lap and I am actually looking at him across the table instead of my worn jeans.

"Yeah well, your brother probably falls into the saint category as well." I laugh, reaching up to take a sip of my tea.

"God, I know." Clement shakes his head, "It used to piss Reese and I off so much how perfect that little brat is. But that's all Peet. I have no clue where he gets it."

"Your dad." I say without thinking.

The expression on Clement's face then looks like the one Peeta gets whenever he hears something he isn't expecting. It's not a look of anger, happiness, or surprise. It's a look of realization. It's as if I'm looking at an older, scruffier version of Peeta.

"You're exactly right." He finally says with a warm smile, "If we didn't love him so much we'd probably hate his guts, wouldn't we?"

"Not possible." I say without thinking. I couldn't hate Peeta even if I tried.

A silence falls between us and my fingers again start to fidget against my jeans. My hands feel damp against the rough material and my stomach has already started its butterflies against. I feel once more like I'm betraying Peeta's decision. Our conversations never fully reached their finality before Peeta and his talented lips found a distraction I couldn't deny. And that's why I'm here in the first place; reinforcement against Peeta's avoidance tactics.

I continually have to remind myself of that.

"Peeta's not planning on going back to school." I blurt out the sentence so quickly the words nearly blur together and it feels like I've been holding my breath up until this point.

Once my confession is out, I stare wide-eyed at the guy across from me. I'm not sure what I'm expecting, but Clement simply leans back in his chair. A loud sigh of air is released as he runs his hand over his mouth. His eyes are looking past me, as if he's trying to reach for some kind of conclusion in his mind.
Then the screech of the chair can be heard against the tile as he pushes it from the table and stands. He reaches for his cup of tea and mine as well. He doesn't say anything as he swiftly moves from the dining area to the kitchen and dumps both contents. My stomach turns uncomfortably as I swallow hard. I've upset him. He's siding with his little brother — like I should have. He's going to ask me to leave in the nicest way possible, but in all reality he can't get me out soon enough.

My thoughts only get worse as I remain stuck in my chair and watch Clement move through the kitchen briefly. When he returns from around the counter he glances at me almost like he's surprised I'm still sitting. He's walking toward their small entryway and I still remain in my chair. Not because I want to, but because I feel literally glued to it.

"Mom doesn't know yet?" He asks, turning to look at me from the doorway.

I shake my head; afraid my voice has long since left this conversation.

"Good. We need to change that little brat's mind before she does. She'll have his hid made into next year's best coat." Clement says, reaching into a small bowl by the door and I hear the jingle of keys. "But we're going to need someone with a bit more…personality. Come on. I'll drive."

Clement is already out the house before I can fully register what has just happened. I hear the screen door shut before I am finally able to move to my chair. I realize what our next step is.

We're going to need Reese.

"Did he slip and fall in the shower?" Reese's voice echoes through his small bachelor pad as he paces in front of his television. "What happened in the last game? Did someone hit him too hard? Someone hit him too hard. There's no way that kid is that dense. That's his way out he's fucking with!"

"But he doesn't want out." I remind him of our earlier conversation. "He wants to be here helping his dad. It's his home. His responsibility."

"Whose side are you on?" Reese glares at me, stopping in his tracks to rest his hands on his hips.

"Relax Gladiator, she's just arguing what Peet's going to argue." Clement laughs, leaning back against the sofa we're sitting on.

"Well he's always been a little not right in the head." Reese taps his pointer finger against his temple as he looks at his brother.

"I can hear you winning him over already." Clement groans, running a hand through his short hair.

"You're the one who came to me. What's your bright idea? Talk it out. The Clement way; everything can be solved with a meaningful conversation about life, liberty and the pursuit of fucking happiness."

"And what would you suggest? Sedate and hog-tie him until we reach Buckeye territory?"

"Whatever it fucking takes! This is his future!" Reese's voice is full of an emotion I'd never seen from him before, but Clement doesn't seem at all phased as he watches his own flesh and blood get
mad enough to boil. "This isn't some high school team he's letting down. This is Division I football! Have you not been watching SportsCenter, Clem? He's got fucking potential. He's going to go places! He's can't just throw that —"

"And you don't think I know that, Reese?" Clement's voice is now matching his brother's as he stands up from the couch. "You don't think I realize all he's throwing away to stick around here because he thinks we won't help pick up the slack? Because he thinks we're too busy with our own lives? This isn't just his responsibility — it's ours."

The two continue their silent stare down for a moment before Reese finally looks away and starts pacing the length of his living room again. My own heart is racing at the reaction these two have over their youngest sacrificing everything. My eyes move from one Mellark to the next and I can't help but feel as though I'm invading on an extremely personal moment. One that I caused and one that I now wish I had waited outside for them to come to a solution.

"And it's our responsibility to make sure that self-sacrificing twit doesn't do something he's going to regret in twenty years." Reese finally speaks, looking down at the carpeted floor beneath his bare feet.

"Then I suggest we all get on the same page." Clement agrees, crossing his arms over his chest.

My eyes move as Reese continues to pace like some kind of a cornered animal. I'm still inwardly surprised at just how quickly and emotionally this hit him. I always knew that the whole Mellark family — hell, most of Dawson — was assuming Peeta would play college football and then continue on to make career of the sport. Even I thought that before I really knew him. There were just certain truths in our southern town: the sky is blue, tea is better with sugar, and Peeta Mellark is destined to make it big.

"Sedation really isn't all that hard to come by." Reese grins.

"Can we at least try to get him to go willingly, first?" I finally speak.

"First? Meaning if it doesn't work, we'll do it my way?" He eyes me mischievously.

My hands clap together in front of my lap as I lean forward on my knees, suddenly aware that I'm the only one still sitting. I look at him for a long moment before I smirk, "Then we'll talk about your way."

"I always knew she'd fit right into the family." Clement pipes in, taking his seat again next to me. Reese follows suit and finally has a sit in a recliner near the farthest corner of the room.

"So what's our drug-free approach?"

"You said Peet's having lunch with our dad and Mom's off torturing Cressida?" Reese asks and I nod in reply. "Then I suggest we leave now."

---

Being stuck between Reese and Clement during our short drive back to Mellark Ranch is like being caught between two women strategizing their shopping route for Black Friday. It's annoying and entertaining at the same time. I kind of appreciate their constant conversation because it's helping distract me from the possibly annoyed Peeta I'm about to be faced with. What if he's reaction is as
heated as his two brothers? What if all the Mellark men start a screaming match? Of course, Mr. Mellark's responses will still be rather limited, but I'd bet my month's wages that as soon as he even opens his mouth they'll all shut up.

But when we turn to move down the long, iconic driveway my stomach turns to a boil and their conversation seems to go mute to my own ears. My palms start to sweat and I feel like Judas about to face his terrible decision. I caused all of this. What if it ends with no real resolution? Peeta stays because he's just as stubborn as these two and these they leave angry? It will all be because I couldn't bring myself to have this conversation with him. What if I had been able to convince him and this was all for not? What if I just made this something it isn't?

The truck comes to a slow stop in front of the main house. Clement and Reese jump out instantly while I move not as quickly. My eyes remain glued on the house as I tentatively push myself toward the passenger door. Reese holds the door open as I jump out, but his mind is already inside as I hear him make an offhanded comment to Clement. My mind's not registering to anything as I follow behind them.

They barrel into house with rightful ownership and it makes my mouse-like behavior that much more noticeable. I close the door behind me, waving at Beetee through one of the side panel windows. I turn around again to see the oldest brothers have disappeared, but my ears hear the informal reunion of the Mellark boys in the kitchen before I actually see it.

"Hey Pop." Clement says, stepping behind the oldest Mellark's wheelchair and leaning against his shoulders affectionately. "What'd Peeta manage not to burn for lunch?"

"Hamburg-ah and frie-ths." Mr. Mellark offers one of his fries to the son behind him with his good hand.

"And it's from Greasy Sae's. I was saving my talents for the peach cobbler in the oven." Peeta says from across the table and I am suddenly aware of the sweet smell wafting through the air.

He doesn't notice as I step into the kitchen because he's still watching Reese and Clement interact with their dad. I stay towards the wall, almost dreading the moment I'll be noticed. The Mellark family is something of an enigma to me, especially the men. Even under the tyrant that is Mrs. Mellark, these four men ooze nothing but stable and nurturing relationships. In spite of their constant troubles caused by her they act as though their lives could be nothing but perfect. It's a state of mind over matter for them.

It's their strength that makes me curious. It's their willingness to live above their problems that makes me envious.

"I'm sure Cressida is going to love that you fed our dad a greasy cheeseburger and fries." Clement scolds Peeta. "And are then a slice of peach cobbler on top of that."

"I'll-th justh have a spoo-wn full." Mr. Mellark argues, patting his son's hand that still rests on his shoulder.

Clement rolls his eyes, still glaring at his younger brother. Peeta looks as though he's the cat who's been caught with the canary. He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest I can tell he's waiting to see what Clement's response will be.

Reese, who has been quietly stealing Peeta's remaining fries, takes a sit next to him and looks at Clement with laugh, "Relax Clem. We'll clean up the evidence before they even get home. And we'll make sure Dad has nothing but cardboard and lettuce for the remainder of his life."
He leans over and nudges Peeta. The look of guilt is still evident in the younger Mellark's eyes, but he laughs along with his brother. Clement isn't as easily swayed, but his hard demeanor does waver slightly when he looks down and sees his father looking up at him with a dropping grin of his own.

"Nothing but lettuce and cardboard." Clement repeats, defeated.

Another silence fills the kitchen and I'm left standing against the wall playing with the pockets of my worn jeans. A small smile graces my own features at the interaction between them. Again, their family amazes me with their petty arguments that always seem to be solved with a sarcastic comment.

"Besides, we didn't come here to argue Dad's diet habits." Reese looks at Clement, then to Peeta, and then finally to me.

I feel a spark down my spine when Peeta's eyes follow his and it's as if he's just noticing me for the first time. Mr. Mellark and Clement also look in my direction and I feel as though I'm on display. I push myself off the wall to stand up straight, but I don't come forward. I'm not really sure I want to come forward.

"Katniss." Peeta says my name with a beautiful smile, one that goes straight to my knees. He stands up from the kitchen table and comes over to me.

Welcoming his arms around me is easy, even when I know the three other men are watching our exchange. His lips grace my cheek for a quick moment before turning back to look at his family. The feeling of betrayal already starts to boil within me and I'm ready to run for the door. This conversation shouldn't be this hard. I shouldn't have made this into such a big deal. Now I feel as though we're creating some sort of intervention for a situation I probably could have just handled on my own.

"Well, really we aren't here to argue at all." Clement turns more to face his little brother, while Reese also stands up from the kitchen table.

"Your flight leaves tomorrow morning." Reese says, crossing his arms over his chest. "So I assume you'll need to be packing tonight. Don't worry, we'll make sure Dad has his fair balance of healthy food while you're away."

Peeta groans, running a hand over his face before glancing at me. I don't say anything, but I reach out to touch his arm. He looks back at his brothers and father, "Look, I was going to tell you guys —"

"We know you think you're not going back to school." Clement interrupts, "But you've always had a knack for being wrong."

"And stupid." Reese grumbles.

"I'm needed here." Peeta pipes in, stepping forward to stand closer to his brothers. "I need to help around the ranch and make sure —"

"What? Do you think Reese and I forgot how to work when we moved off this place?" Clement argues, his voice rising above a relaxed tone for conversation. "Believe it or not, we've been doing this longer than you have. Plus we have Gale, Beetee, and the others to pull their weight — which they always do. We'll miss you, but we don't need you here. We need back at school."

"Dad can't just be left alone all the time!" Peeta's voice rises to match Clements. "Mom will drive him absolutely insane. She already does and she's hardly around."
"And what are you going to do about that?" Reese jumps in, coming to stand next to Clement. "What are you going to do about that ten years from now? Mom doesn't change just because you stick around —"

"But Dad is different. Dad needs all the help he —"

"We'll be here to make sure he gets it. Cressida will be here to make sure he gets it. We don't need your self-sacrificing ass moping around here being some kind of maid."

Peeta steps even closer to his brothers and I can practically cut the tension in the air. My throat has gone dry and my ears ring with the echoes of the raised voices bouncing off the walls. Reese steps up to his little brother like he's just about to say something when we all freeze in our places.

"Enough!"

The booming voice causes my heart to stop for a split second. Everyone's eyes are wide as they look from each other to the person the voice came from. Mr. Mellark has pushed his wheelchair back away from the table and has managed to slightly turn himself in the direction of his sons' face off.

"Is there a reason you are t-talking about me like I'm not here?" He asks, his voice barely slurred. "Like I am some kind of chari-th-y case?"

No one says anything. Instead three pairs of eyes fall to the ground and stare at their shoes. I watch as Mr. Mellark watches all of them. He's angry, but nowhere near the burning rage that I have been unfortunate enough to see coming from Mrs. Mellark.

"Las-th time I checked, I chang-ged each of your diapers. I'm pretty sure, I-I can handle my life just fine without any of you b-babysitting me."

The response to Mr. Mellark's words by the Mellark sons is the closest I have ever seen to true reverence. I can tell Peeta wants to argue by the way he clutches his fists next to his sides, but he says nothing. Clement and Reese look at each other with a fool's expression and I again feel like I'm invading on something.

"Peet-ath, you are leaving for school tomorrow morning. I will see you on TV this Satur-dath. Reese, you'll continue to work at the factory unless Gale or Beetee ask you oth-awise. Clement, you've got your own family — continue to t-take care of that."

Nothing is said, but the boys all look at each other and they know this conversation is over. There is no room for discussion. It's not that they only agree with Mr. Mellark's decision, it's that they respect it. There is a certain peace that only his words can offer. He always had to be the one to settle this argument.

"Are we clear?" He asks, looking at each of his boys.

"Clear." They say in unison and I feel like this isn't the first time he's asked this of his sons.

"Good, because the cobbl-a is probably going to bur-nth." Mr, Mellark then looks to me with a smile. "Katni-th, it's alway-th good to see you. Please stay for cobbl-a."

I smile, shy at the attention that's now back on me. I nod at Mr. Mellark as Clement moves his wheelchair back toward the kitchen table and Reese heads toward the oven to pull out the dessert. The tension that once filled the air seems to be instantly gone and that only slightly surprises me.
When I feel Peeta's arms come around my middle I look over at him, his piercing blue eyes full of amusement.

"Do I have you to thank for staging this little coup?" Peeta asks, his lips close to my ear.

"Are you mad?"

"No." He lips linger just below my ear before he pulls away to look at me. "Actually, I'm rather impressed at the reinforcements you're able to pull together in a day."

"You should see what I can do in a week."

Peeta pulls me flesh against him and plants his lips securely on mine. Like always, it's easy to get lost in the feels of him surrounding me. His hands slide down to my waist and I let my arms wrap around his neck.

"Hey Peet!" Reese's voice breaks us apart and brings me back to reality. "Can you guys share that dessert somewhere else? We're all trying to enjoy ours."

"We can always head to my place?" I mumble, before I turn to look at the rest of them.

"Hey guys, I'll see you tomorrow before I leave for the airport!" Peeta says, pulling me out of the kitchen before I even have a time to say my own goodbye. "We have to pack after all!"

We are nearly at the door when I hear Clement's voice, "You know you're room is upstairs, LoverBoy?"

"I left some things at Katniss' house!" Peeta calls and yanks me into the evening air.

"So you'll be home for Thanksgiving break?" I ask, my stomach in complete knots at the final realization that Peeta is going to have to walk through those security gates and leave me once again.

"I'll be home for Thanksgiving break." Peeta repeats, leaning over to place a kiss against my temple.

"And you're not mad that you're going back?"

"Not at all. I mean, the conversations could have probably been a bit more peaceful, but I love the OSU. I miss it." He sighs, looking toward the gates that lead to one of his great loves. My heart sinks and I fight with every ounce of my being to keep my doubts at bay. Peeta has proved to me over and over again the uselessness of my fears. He'll always be here for me.

Peeta must sense my discomfort because I feel his arms move to embrace me tightly and his lips pepper kisses across my face. I can't help but laugh and the breath of air feels like relief washing over me. I tug on his t-shirt to pull him flesh against me. When he rests his forehead against mine I have to close my eyes to keep tears from falling down my face. My hands move up to cup his face gently.

"You're not even gone and I already miss you."
"You could always come with me. Move in to the house? I'm sure the guys would love a feminine touch around." He offers and his words tickle against my own lips.

I lean in and kiss him desperately. Our lips tangle together and the kiss threatens to deepen, but before it can I pull away and pull him into a strong hug. One that I'm already dreading having to let go. Peeta is my home. It's a realization that was hard for me to admit to, but now that I have it's a piece of my life I'm not easily prepared to let go of.

"I'll see you in a couple weeks." Peeta's words cause my stomach to sink and when his arms loosen around me I want to crumple into a little ball. He brings his hands up around my neck to pull me into another quick kiss and then bends to pick up his bag. "I'll call you tonight."

I nod, knowing words will just cause me to let my irrational emotions loose. I have been doing well to keep the floodgates closed. The last thing I need is to lose it right before Peeta disappears to another state.

Peeta plants one more kiss on my cheek and then turns toward the nearby gates; his ticket in one hand and his bag in the other. I told myself I'd watch until he disappears, but I know my emotions won't allow it. So instead I watch him for a second and then turn to head back toward the doors. I need to get into my truck so I can have my minor breakdown in private.

I navigate my way towards the escalator and jump in line behind several others that are going back down to the exit. My eyes are trained on the floor the entire time. In my mind I'm focusing on anything but the realization that the last time I left Peeta at an airport it lead to the worst several weeks of my life. My rational side reminds me that those circumstances were so much different. Worse. But my irrational side tells me it feels the exact same way.

My feet step off the moving stairs and I head toward the door. I tighten my sweater around me and adjust my purse, staring straight ahead of me.

"Katniss!"

My name being called by that familiar voice makes my heart flutter and I turn around to see Peeta coming down off the escalator. When he's nearly reached me — completely frozen in place — he drops his bag and picks me up into his arms. I gasp as his open mouth meets mine in a passionate kiss. My fingers tangle through his curls and I let my knees lift behind me. I feel weightless in his arms and completely secure.

A moment later, my feet hit the ground but I refuse to let go of him just yet. And he seems to feel the same way because his arms hold me close to him.

"I love you." Peeta says.

"I love you too." I respond.

He kisses me again before he pulls away and I allow it. I watch him picks up his bag and start back towards his gate.

This time as he's leaving he turns around and waves at me. I wave back suddenly feeling slightly at ease after out exchange. These next weeks aren't going to be fun, but I'll get used to it. We'll get used to it because it doesn't matter where we are. We will always belong to each other.

Chapter End Notes
And this, ladies and gents, means we are officially down to one final chapter to this story. Hope you're excited!
Chapter Summary

There are also three types of people in Dawson, Texas: those who are trying to flee, those who embrace their small town fate, and the Mellarks. Mellark Ranch; largest cattle ranch South of Dallas, employer of ranch hand, Katniss Everdeen, and home of Ohio State Buckeye running back, Peeta Mellark. And Peeta Mellark is coming home today.

Chapter Notes

And just like that, it's all over. I first and foremost need to thank everyone who has been beyond supportive of this story! Thank you for your continued love and comments. Thank you for your patience. Just thank you. This is my first real dive into full-on chapter fics and it has been an amazing experience. Words can't describe how much I'm excited to say IT'S FINISHED, but how sad I am that it's over. I loved putting this two in this universe. Thank you again for going on this loooong journey with me!

No beta for this chapter. All mistakes are mine. And be warned: it's fluff and cheesiness galore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Epilogue: The Boys Of Fall

“It’s knockin’ heads and talkin’ trash.”

Thanksgiving preparation.

The grocery list alone can be the size of small novel. The menu consists of three meat selections, enough different side selections to appeal to anyone, and the dessert table might as well be its own country. There are even some things on the list that everyone knows no one is going to eat. Like Grandma Everdeen’s cranberry sauce? She used to swear it was homemade. Of course, homemade doesn’t explain the can shape still apparent as it jiggles in the middle of the table. Homemade or store bought doesn’t really matter though. No one ever asked for that recipe. No one even tasted that recipe.

And yet there it sat every year until she passed. Even then, I think my mom continued to buy the concoction from the store. Again, no one even bothered to cut into it.
When Prim and I were young Thanksgiving was a big to-do. The Everdeen family would all gather at our house. My dad was the oldest of five and therefore it became an unspoken rule that all holidays were to be spent at his residence. The preparation would take days. My mother would be completely stressed out and down to her last burst of energy by the time that fateful Thursday actually rolled around.

The week leading up to the event meant for a near-complete home remodel. Single bedrooms were organized into makeshift hotel rooms for entire families. The four-person dining room turned into a buffet-style set up. Our small driveway transformed into a tiny parking lot. And the cleansing that our home went through would put Martha Stewart to shame. There wasn’t a surface that wasn’t dusted, a piece of wood that wasn’t polished, and you could see yourself in the linoleum. Prim and I were under strict rules to make no messes and our father had to all but wash off with the hose before coming inside from working at Snow’s farm.

My mother really could put on quite the production and everyone always seemed to be impressed with our modest belongings. They would always compliment her on the décor that never changed and her impeccable “style”. My father always joked that it was their guilt taking shape in the form of compliments. They figured if they flattered her enough she’d never make them do too much work for the next holiday.

It always worked.

And then it all changed.

After our father passed away we stopped hosting holidays. We were always invited to them, but it was soon realized that my mother was far from able to cope with an average day without my father let alone a holiday. My aunts and uncles would always bring us leftovers. Offer to take Prim and I over to their house to spend time with family, but none of that ever came to pass. Sooner or later the offers slowly disappeared and the leftovers stopped showing up.

Our holidays did a complete 180-degree turn. Soon we were left with the three of us and wherever it was I could manage to whip up. Sometimes Gale would stop by with festive offerings from their full house, but that was rare since they hardly had enough for a typical meal let alone something that was to be considered a holiday feast.

So Thanksgiving, like the rest of the tradition holidays, soon took a backseat to everyday survival. I always tried to make it something for Prim, but my offerings were nowhere near the miracle workings my mother could preform on a nearly nonexistent budget. And we never complained because growing up with little meant nothing to us because we had each other. We had what we needed and Prim was always just excited to have a day off school.
And then another 180-degree turn happens.

I become a Mellark.

First in tradition and then in name; the summer after Peeta is drafted into the NFL.

Those were his terms. When the agents started calling and the questions started being raised about his future during his senior year Peeta kind of shuts down. He doesn’t want to talk about football and he certainly doesn’t want to talk about a career in it. It isn’t his comfort zone. It isn’t his plan. He’d gone to college to please his parents and now he is ready to do what he wants. Live a quiet life back in Dawson, Texas. It’s all he ever wanted. And there are times my selfish nature takes over and it’s all I want for him as well. But everyone knows he is meant for more.

So he finally decides, one night while we are sprawled out on his bed in Ohio, he’ll enter the draft if I’ll marry him. The statement comes out as if he were talking about what we’d had for dinner and my response comes just as easily.

“Looks like you’re entering the draft.”

Little does he know I’d marry him if he’d sprouted wings and turned a strange purple shade.

Our wedding is as simple as his proposal. On the Mellark Ranch inside that old barn we’d shared our first kiss. I’m not normally one for sentiment, but seeing that place lit up with old fashion hanging lights and wooden chairs filled with our closest friends and family brought a new wave of emotions to my feelings for the man at the end of the aisle.

Gale walks me down the aisle and Prim stands by my side. Peeta’s brothers are next to him. And when the minister announces us as husband and wife is the first time I’ve seen my mother truly smile in years. There wasn’t a dry eye in the house when Peeta’s father gives a heartfelt toast during the reception. Our first dance has Peeta holding me close as the familiar song plays over the speakers, whispering his love and admiration against the shell of my ear. And I’ve never felt safer.

But within weeks of our wedded bliss, Peeta takes off for Dallas for training to begin.
He’s officially a Dallas Cowboy, picked fourth in the draft, and everyone in Dawson feels as though the golden son has finally made it. Within weeks of the announcement there is a large road sign made and placed under the “Welcome To Dawson” billboard. “Home of Peeta Mellark” reads proudly and before Peeta has a chance to leave for several weeks I make him stand beneath it while I snap his picture.

That picture still hangs in our hallway. And that road sign still stands proudly beneath the Dawson city plaque.

And missing him becomes an almost regular emotion that first year. Traveling, practices, and media keep him far from Dawson. Dawson, where we decide I would stay for awhile — at least his first season in the NFL. He’s not ready to completely give up on his small town dreams.

But with a rookie season for the record books, it’s soon realized that his time in Dallas isn’t going to be short lived. I move there the following July. And as much as I love being closer to my husband, my idle hands are no good for me. A kept woman was never a lifestyle I was meant for. So I start volunteering at a local girls’ shelter. It’s a pastime I never thought I’d enjoy, but they have a rather strong archery program that I find myself completely wrapped up in.

It’s not the long hours and hard manual labor I’m used to as a ranch hand, but it’s something I find pride in doing. And it keeps me far from the spotlight, which is exactly where I wish to be. Peeta jokes that he wishes he could join me there because within a year of being in the NFL he becomes the media’s darling. And I knew he would. He’s always been such a charming individual it’s hard not to be drawn to his light. I know I am. It’s what keeps me going some days.

Ava Pearl is born five years into his football career. She wasn’t something either of us had been planning for and honestly children seemed the farthest thing on our radar, but the moment she enters world we’re both completely helpless without her. Peeta finds it harder and harder to leave for away games and if we aren’t in the stands for home games he’s breaking every speed record to get back to us. It’s not hard to see what Peeta’s real job in life needs to be.

A father.

He’s an all-star on the football field, but he’s the man of legends when it comes to caring for us. And from the second I see him interact with our small daughter I know I need to give him more of this life he’s obviously meant for. I’d give him an entire litter if he asked me to.

Fortunately for my body, he’s satisfied with two. And Eryc Hershel is born three months after the Cowboys win the Superbowl in Peeta’s eighth year in the NFL.
And this crazy life somehow becomes normal for our small family. During the season we spend our time in Dallas, but as soon as the team breaks for time off we’re back in Dawson and we’re home. This is where we — and even our small children — feel the most comfortable. And each time we come home it’s harder and harder to convince Peeta we need to leave again.

But fate has a funny way of taking care of things, because the year Peeta’s contract is up for renewal — and a large pay raise is offered to keep him in Dallas — his father takes a turn for the worse. Peeta doesn’t blink an eye when he announces his retirement from the NFL. He holds a quick press conference thanking Dallas for their unending support during his ten seasons as a Cowboy and wishes the team well. Several reporters ask for the reasons behind this seemingly sudden decision and he just grins — that beautiful boyish grin I feel in love with so many years ago.

“I guess I’m just homesick.”

It’s as simple as that. He’s grateful the experiences he’s had, but he’s never wanted to be any other place than Dawson. He stands, shakes Jason Garrett’s hand before the coach pulls him into a tight hug, and stands for one last picture as a Dallas Cowboy.

Within weeks of his announcement, we’re moving into Mellark Ranch. At first we take the old home that used to be mine when I lived on the ranch. The small quarters aren’t easy with two small little ones full of energy, but for the first time in years I feel like I’m finally seeing Peeta completely comfortable and it warms my heart.

Soon, and without any real formal announcement, Peeta has taken over as the lead in the family business. Clement and Reese help out from time to time, but it’s obvious their lives go on outside of Mellark Ranch.

His mother, still her ever-distant self, steps back to aid their father and allows for Peeta to step in completely. He doesn’t make too many changes other than selling Gale part of the land the ranch sits on — only because there was no way in hell Gale would take it from him for free. We build our own home near his parents’ farmhouse and it’s soon apparent this is where we were always meant to be. Life, again, finds a sense of normality to us.

And even holidays find a renewed grandeur in my life and I’m more than happy to share this with my small family in every way possible. Of course, I’ve never been the Susie Homemaker that my mother, or even Prim, is. So I may host the holidays at our home, but they’re the ones doing the cooking. And hearing their laughter in my kitchen while they help Peeta teach our children how to make a simple cake is enough to get me through any hard times I’ve had — or are yet to come.
But with time, Thanksgiving takes on a whole new life because this is Texas, after all, and it isn’t November without football championships. So those last Thursdays in November are important for family, but Friday is important for all of Dawson. For ten years our Thanksgivings consisted of a home game at AT&T Stadium before rushing off to some team meal and then it was the in-between years before the kids entered high school. But that’s all changed.

And we’re going to be late.

The gravel crunches beneath the truck tires as I come to a slow stop. I watch him as I throw it in park and jump out. I know he hears me, but he makes no motion that he does. Instead his hands slide into the pockets of his worn jeans as I walk up behind him. My hands easily wrap around his middle as I rest my cheek between his shoulder blades taking in the smells that are distinctly him.

We stand there for a moment, enjoying the quiet peace that we’ve found in each other so long ago, before I glance from behind his shoulder and look at the dark, granite stone he’s staring at.

HERSHEL T. MELLARK

loving son, father, and friend

Aug. 18th, 1954 – Jan. 4th, 2032

“He loved today.” Peeta sighs, his hand coming to rest over mine.

“He loved you.” I say, because we both know Hershel Mellark may have enjoyed football as a pastime, but he lived for his boys and if they had decided to become circus clowns he would have been at every performance.

Peeta turns himself around in my arms and to this day he still takes my breath away. His blonde curly hair has been cut short now and there are places that shine silver instead of their warm yellow, but his blue eyes are still as vibrate as ever. The conversations I’ve had with just those eyes are enough to fill a lifetime. And still they aren’t enough. I could stare into them for eternity.

I wrap my arms around his neck now, running my fingers down his strong jawline before I reach up to place my lips against his. This kiss doesn’t have the same wanton passion it used to have when we were younger, but there is something better. This passion is one that comes from having someone so firmly placed beside you for so long that you can’t imagine life without them. They’ve become your right hand.
And Peeta has become my heart.

He holds me tight, pulling away just far enough to rest his forehead against mine. I close my eyes against the tenderness because to this day it amazes me the effect this man has on my entire being. I feel his fingertips sneak beneath the hem of my Dawson High School sweatshirt and I can’t help but let out a child-like giggle.

“If you don’t quit that we’re going to be even later than we already are.” I mumble, my own body betraying me as I pull myself closer to him.

“Wouldn’t be the first time in the back of this old pick-up.” His hands are gripping my hips and I sway against him gently.

But before I can find myself getting too carried away, I pull away, causing us both to groan our disagreement, “Later. But now we have a State game to see.”

“You’re the boss.” He grins, swatting at me gently as I head back to the truck.

I glance behind me to see Peeta linger a moment longer at his father’s tombstone before he starts for the passenger side.

Hershel would have been damn proud of this man. I know I am.

--

“’Bout time you got your ass here!” Johanna screams, her tongue not dulling in her older age. “It’s a good thing you’re goddamn royalty in this town. These seats would have been long gone.”

Peeta reaches out and wraps an arm around the woman’s shoulders, pulling her into a quick hug, “It has nothing to do with us. Everyone in Dawson knows the terror that is old Hawthorne’s wife.”

“Hey!” Gale chimes in from the other side of Johanna. “I am not old.”
“Keep telling yourself that.” I laugh, finding my place next to Johanna as Gale reaches over and tugs at my ear.

“You’re all about as old as dirt.” Finnick makes sure to get his comment in from where he’s sitting behind us.

“What’s that make you?” Peeta turns around, greeting Finnick with a firm handshake as I hug Annie. “A fossil?”

“It’s a good thing we’re at a high school event, Mellark.” The older man responds, “Or there’d be words.”

Peeta laughs as the announcer comes across the speakers. We all turn forward and the crowd is practically humming with anticipation. Dawson has been fortunate enough to make it to the State championships multiple times in the last several years, but this is the first time it has happened with home field advantage. The away team comes running out onto the field and the stands on the other side start cheering.

“Mom! Dad!” My attention goes to the left of where we’re sitting and I see Ava standing with her peers waving frantically at us. She’s sitting with several of her friends that have returned home from college for the holiday and Finnick’s oldest son.

I nudge Peeta’s arm and point in her direction as I wave. Peeta does the same thing before leaning over to me and mumbling against my ear, “Should I be concerned she’s sitting with Chance?”

“Hush.” I say, elbowing him in the side before quietly deciding its time to be that conversation with my husband. Ava hadn’t wanted me to tell him right away because she knew he would overreact and as much as I love my husband, I knew she was right. But it has been almost six months since the two became an item and I know Peeta will be finding out before Christmas. Especially with the way those two are.

“Alright y’all, it’s time to get on your feet for your favorite home team!” The announcer calls and the stands erupt into wild applause.

The boys come running onto the field and out of the corner of my eye I see Haymitch standing on the sidelines, leaning against his cane, smiling like a child who’s meeting his hero. Hershel would have been right there with him.
“There they are,” Johanna grins, her hands resting just below her chin as she smiles like a proud mother I never thought she’d have in her. She’s looking at the two boys with our family names plastered across the backs of their jerseys. They’re running side-by-side out of the tunnel to join the rest of their team.

After they all huddle up some start to warm up while others are walking toward the sidelines. My eyes never leaving the senior with Mellark above his number. He removes his helmet, and like his father used to do, starts scanning the crowd for the three people he’s looking for. He spots his sister first and I hear her cheer, “Let’s go Eryc!” And he grins wide before his scan starts again. And soon Peeta’s hand is coming up to wave as he lets out a quick whistle. That grabs our son’s attention and he’s grinning ear to ear.

He looks just like his father, except his mop of curls is my chestnut brown color. But his eyes and jawline are the same strong features standing next to me. He raises his helmet to us and I wave. This is his last year in high school and I’m suddenly emotional about this being his last game in Dawson. After graduation he’ll be back off to Ohio and we’ll be making that very familiar trip nearly every weekend next fall.

And it all rushes back like a beautiful dream.

My hands go to wrap around Peeta’s arm as I rest my chin on his shoulder. He reaches up to grab my hands and squeezes. He looks down at me, placing a quick kiss to my nose before saying, “You did good, Momma.”

I shake my head and sigh, “We did good.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again! I hope the ending lived up to everyone’s expectations! If you ever want to come say hi come find me on Tumblr(fourfinick)!

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