Pumpkin Spice(x)

by papofglencoe

Summary

I hate that somewhere in between childhood and now we’ve learned to keep secrets from each other.

Like: I’m hopelessly in love with you.

Or, in her case: I’ve been shopping at the Brown Bag It for sex toys and condoms to use with some dickwad boyfriend who is not, and will never be, you.

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A Modern AU

Notes

Rated E for explicit language and sexual content.

Originally written for District 12 Drabbles (on tumblr) as part of their Week 5: Dialogue prompt.

Prompt: "What's in the bag?"

Thanks to @dandelion-sunset for her friendship and late night betaing. This is for @everhutcher, @hutchhitched, @joshsl-leaf-lobe, and @hutchercougarwife. ;) Come say
I'm on tumblr, where you can also find me as papofglencoe. I love hearing from people.
Chapter 1

The creaking of our front door announces her arrival, followed by the plunking of her car keys as she drops them into the ceramic bowl we keep on the hall stand. Even from the kitchen and over the din of the television I can hear her let out a sound that’s half-growl/half-sigh and completely done-with-the-world’s-shit. I count to ten, waiting for the thudding of her combat boots as she kicks them off into the large pile of shoes that she insists on leaving in the foyer, and then I count to ten again before I start talking.

When I can sense her behind me, leaning against the doorframe, I shoot a look over my shoulder to assess how bad the situation is. “You came home. I didn’t expect you back so soon.” I try not to sound too happy about it, settling for what I hope sounds like pleasant surprise and not heel-clicking, tap-dancing jubilation.

She doesn’t look that bad—doesn’t look bad at all, really, and couldn’t in a million years—but it’s obvious something is eating at her. Long strands of her hair have fallen from her braid, silky black wisps that frame her face like the smoke of a forest fire clinging to the trees. Her gray eyes flash at me like light glinting off steel, a sure sign she’s pissed about something, and she’s wearing her trademark scowl. She looks rumpled and annoyed and... windswept, somehow, or frazzled.

That’s my girl, I think fondly before I realize no—she’s actually someone else’s.

“Yeah, well, the asshole canceled on me. Again.” She wraps her arms around her stomach, and I try, but fail, not to notice the way her arms squeeze her breasts together, pushing them up so that her chest swells gently over the fabric of her tank top.

I bite the inside of my cheek because biting my fist might make it slightly too obvious that I want to kiss every inch of her exposed skin. Tired, pissed, fed up—it doesn’t matter. The girl is still the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever laid eyes on, and no matter how many losers like Gale Hawthorne pass through her life, or how many women I’ve dated trying to forget her, that fact has remained a constant for as long as I’ve known her. For me, she’s perfect. And that’s the problem.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I lie, grabbing a mitt to pull the baking sheet from the oven. It’s hotter than a solar flare in the kitchen, and with Katniss standing five feet away from me, in that skimpy black tank top and even skimpier cutoff shorts, all lean legs and soft, dewy skin, it feels like the temperature just skyrocketed another thousand degrees. Dropping the mitt onto the counter, I search around for a dish towel to wipe off my suddenly sweaty forehead, but I have to settle for the hem of my t-shirt instead.

“So,” I ask, dropping my shirt back down over my stomach, “does this mean I have a date tonight for MasterChef?” When I glance at her, I notice a flush has crept onto her cheeks from the heat of the kitchen.

She gives me a wry smile, the one that makes the blood stampede to my groin every time I see it, and affects an English accent to imitate Gordon Ramsay. “That sounds like.. the... most... stunning Saturday night.”

I know she’s kidding and would probably rather be with Gale, or with anyone else doing anything else, but I couldn’t happen to agree with her more. A Saturday night on the couch with Katniss curled up in the crook of my arm sounds... stunning.

“Alright,” I chuckle, assuming a grotesquely bad accent to match hers, “Let’s dine on some pizza,
shall we? Made with... the... freshest... most rustic... local... ingredients.” Cutting into the piping hot pizza, I drop a handful of slices onto a dinner plate and slide it across the counter toward her. “Here, take this over to the coffee table and I’ll grab us a couple beers.”

She drops her arms to her sides, and it’s then that I notice she’s clutching a smallish brown paper bag in her right hand, her fist clenched awkwardly at the top, crumpling the paper. For a second she seems to consider something, biting her lip and casting a cursory look down the hall toward her bedroom. “Um... sure,” she replies, placing it onto the kitchen table.

“What’s in the bag?” I ask, rummaging through the fridge to grab a couple Coronas. Honestly, I don’t know what inspires me to ask, but her brief moment of hesitation has piqued my curiosity.

“Nothing.”

She grabs the plate and walks around the counter, down the half-step into the family room, and sinks onto the couch. All nonchalant-like and cool. But I can tell that she’s lying. If there’s one thing I know about her, it’s that she couldn’t lie to save her life or mine.

“I’m—ah—gonna have to call ‘bullshit’ on that, babe.”

“Dammit, Peeta. I said it was nothing. Now get your ass over here, and let’s watch TV before the pizza gets cold.” The tone of her voice makes me smile, no matter how stern she’s trying to sound. There are many things I’m afraid of in this world, like Donald Trump’s hairpiece or earthquakes or Shark Week. Katniss Everdeen isn’t one of them.

Whatever is in that bag, she really doesn’t want me to know about it. So instead of calling her out on it, I play innocent. “Alright, I’m on my way.” I pop the caps off the beer bottles and saunter casually toward the family room.

As I pass by the table, though, I do something colossally stupid. Loathsome. Unforgivable. A best friend-slash-roommate party foul for sure:

I open the bag.

Katniss hears the rustling of the paper and gasps, dashing back into the kitchen to intercept me, but by then it’s too late; I’ve seen what she was trying to keep from me. Some part of me understands why—the part of me that coils into knots of jealousy at the mere thought of another man touching her. But the other part, the magnanimous and noble part that knows with certainty I’ll love her come hell or high water because, aside from everything else, she is my best friend, is just profoundly sad she felt the need to hide anything from me, much less this.

I hate that somewhere in between childhood and now we’ve learned to keep secrets from each other. Like: *I’m hopelessly in love with you.*

Or, in her case: *I’ve been shopping at the Brown Bag It for sex toys and condoms to use with some dickwad boyfriend who is not, and will never be, you.*

Katniss swipes the bag out of my hand and storms out of the room, taking it with her down the hall toward her bedroom.

“I’m so sorry, Katniss.” I follow her, desperate to make things right. She tries to close the door in my face, but I easily stop her, wedging my foot between the door and the jamb. “Wait. Please. Don’t do this,” I beg.
“I told you it was nothing.” Her voice quivers as she speaks, and I don’t know if it’s from anger or shame or something else, but I want to hold her to take away whatever it is. “You should have listened to me, Peeta.” Angrily, she throws the bag onto her bed and faces me. She’s so close I can see the half-moon shaped scar on her chin that she got in our freshman year of high school when we were practicing our ollies and my skateboard accidentally pegged her in the face.

“You could have just said it was something boring like tampons,” I lamely joke, hoping to say something, do anything, to make the tears welling in her eyes go away. Her lower lip trembles at my words, her skin—her beautiful, smooth olive skin—flushing an angry scarlet. “Look,” I add when I see that sincerity is the way to go, “I’m only teasing. I’m so sorry I didn’t listen to you. I had no idea... I didn’t mean to invade your privacy like that. And really,” I swallow thickly, finding the resolve not to think about Katniss having sex with a prick like Gale Fucking Hawthorne, “it’s not a big deal.” I take a deep breath to force my stomach to unclench. “It’s a vibrator and a cock ring and... a package of off-brand Pumpkin Spice flavored condoms that you apparently bought on clearance. It’s not anything I haven’t seen before. Well,” I correct myself, “it’s almost not anything I haven’t seen before.”

She groans at my words and gouges her thumb and forefinger into the corners of her eyes, effectively shielding half her face from me. “Don’t say that.”

“What?” I ask, pulling her hand away from her face. Relief washes over me when she lets me hold on and twine my fingers through hers. When she doesn’t answer me, I press the point, tapping beneath her chin to coax her to meet my eyes. I give her a crooked smile. “What don’t you want me to say? Pumpkin Spice flavored condoms?”

“No—” she bites down on her lip, looking suspiciously like she’s trying not to smile back at me. When she looks away, I can’t help but stare at how full and wet that lip looks, wondering how it would feel if I kissed it, sucked on it, tasted it. “Don’t say the other thing,” she mutters under her breath.

I give a bemused smile, not sure how we got to this place. “You mean ‘cock’? You know I’ve used it before right? Both the word and my—well, you know—”

She punches my chest with her free hand, definitely embarrassed now. “Stop it.”

I trap her hand easily with mine and hold it, running my thumb lightly across her palm. “But seriously, Katniss, can we talk about this? Because we used to be able to talk about stuff.”

It was true. In high school and in college, we’d talked candidly about our sex lives—our first kisses, first times, breakups, makeups, hangups, and hookups. And it wasn’t ever easy hearing about the guys who had a chance with Katniss—and how they fucked up those chances each and every single time—but at least I knew I was the guy she could count on for everything. I don’t know if it was a gradual change, a slow process of sequestration where we hid away our sex lives from each other, or if it was something that happened the day we moved in together, but we haven’t really confided in each other over the past couple years. Not that I have much to confide, lately, aside from the massive boner I get whenever my best friend walks into the room.

But I miss her. I miss hearing what she thinks, knowing the lay of the land, where exactly I stand. I miss being that shoulder she leans on when the other guys don’t treat her right. I miss feeling needed. Maybe that makes me selfish. Or a sap. I don’t actually give a fuck.

“Are we really gonna talk about this?” she sighs.

“I don’t know. You tell me.” I drop her hands and cross my arms, standing in the door so that she
can’t shut me out or run away. I won’t force her to talk, but I’m not exactly going to let her go either, when she decides that the easy thing to do is bolt.

“Fine.” She sinks onto her bed and pushes the bag of her purchases away with disdain. “I’m miserable.”

“How so? You’re going to have to be more specific.” I contemplate joining her on the bed, but I hold myself back. From over here, I feel like I’ll be able to handle better whatever she has to tell me. Katniss groans and flops onto her back, covering her face with her hands. “God, how do I begin to explain it? With Gale… it’s not working out, and it hasn’t been in a long time. We have… compatibility issues. And it’s to the point where we fight about it all the time. He can’t even—I mean he doesn’t want to… It’s been a while since we—”

“How long of a while?”

“Christ. Um, I guess it’s been about six or seven weeks since we even tried. And it seems like the same sort of problems ultimately come up with every guy I date, and I think the problem is me—sexually.”

I swallow and fight against the mess of feelings that surface within me at her words. “Okay. Well, let’s take it back a minute. Where do you want to start filling me in? With the vibrator, the cock ring, or the sketchy condoms?”

Her gray eyes meet mine, and when she speaks, her words steal every last molecule of oxygen from my lungs. “Look. It’s fairly simple, Peeta.” She shrugs, her slight shoulders moving like she is carrying the weight of the world on them. “I can’t come.”

My heart thunders in my chest, beating out a sick rhythm of hope and anguish and desire and disgust. “With Gale?” I ask, my voice clawing its way out of my throat.

I can barely hear her reply, but I watch her lips, those beautiful lips I want to kiss senseless. “With anyone.”
As soon as the words are out of my mouth I regret them. If only I could reach out and reclaim them, plucking each syllable from the air one by one, and hold them to my chest, hiding them from him. But I can’t, and now he sees me for who I really am: a badly damaged girl. Broken. Frozen. Someone to be pitied.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, don’t look at me like that.”

Peeta is standing in the doorway stock still, obviously dumbstruck. Valiantly, he’s trying to keep his jaw from dropping to the floor, but he can’t hide his shock from me. It’s written across his entire countenance—in the bright pink blotches covering the fair, freckle-kissed skin of his face, in the rigid lines of his body as he unconsciously straightens up, and especially in his deep blue eyes, so wide right now I can almost see the whites around the entire circumference of his irises.

I could kick myself for telling him. Why did I tell him? I do this every time—every damn time—and I have for years. All he ever has to do is look at me with those puppy dog eyes, and somehow, against my better judgment, I spill. Although it feels more like melting.

And I had been doing so much better lately, too, keeping a safe distance between us. When we’d moved in together I realized it was going to be hard enough coping with him going out on dates or—worse—bring girls home, to our home. I couldn’t hear about any of it anymore. Peeta had never been closer to me—just ten steps down the hall, night or day—but he’d never felt farther or more out of reach either.

It’s a weird situation, living together but not being together. We never have been and never will be, and I know the day will come when I will lose him forever, when he’ll find the right girl and move in with her, the way it’s supposed to be. It’s simply a lucky twist of fate that, so far, he hasn’t brought a girl home. Yet. But I know she’s out there, waiting to destroy what little bit of hope I hold onto that at least he might always love me like this.

I’d gotten used to the inevitable a long time ago: not mine. He’ll never be mine. Girls like me, sullen and cynical and difficult, don’t end up with guys like him. To be honest, it’s a wonder he ever wanted to be my friend at all. For years I chalked it up to good timing: when we met he’d been a skater punk, rebellious and fun-loving, and I’d been a pissed off emo chick with a chip on her shoulder and a contempt for authority. After blowing out his kneecap skating he’d grown out of his rebel’s uniform and into J Crew, but here I am, pissed off as ever and still dressed in black.

Mismatched as we are he stayed around anyway, and there’s something of a miracle in that.

Peeta frowns, and when he does the lines on his forehead appear, the ones I normally love so much—except when I’m the cause of them. He takes a shuddering breath and finally says something, sounding more than a little worried, “Look at you like what?”

“Like you feel sorry for me.”

He visibly relaxes, like I’ve given him something he can work with. “Well I don’t.” He bites the inside of his cheek, the way he always does when he’s searching for the right words. “I’m more—concerned.”

“Isn’t that basically the same thing? I wish you’d stop.”
“Look,” he says, running a hand through his messy, sweaty blond hair. He looks every bit as hot and uncomfortable as I feel, burning up in embarrassment from where I lie on the bed. “You just told me you’re miserable. How am I supposed to feel about that?”

“I don’t know,” I groan, squeezing my eyes, willing this all to end. “I guess—try not to feel anything about it, okay? I can’t stand your pity.”

My eyes are still closed when I feel the mattress sink beneath me. Peeta sighs heavily as he sits down, elbowing me in the ribs. “Can we talk about this without it being weird?”

“It’s already weird.” I impatiently push the loose strands of hair clinging to my sweaty temples away from my face. “It’s so damn weird.”

He lies down right next to me, and I open my eyes because, even though I want to be a million miles away from here, there’s also nowhere else I’d rather be than six inches from Peeta Mellark’s eyes.

“Yes, I know,” he concedes. “But how about if your stubborn ass stops trying to make it worse?”

He’s so close I can see what looks like a nebula surrounding each of his pupils, deep pools of stardust and light that hold the entirety of the universe.

He has a point, so I nod reluctantly and keep my mouth shut. “So,” he hedges, looking equally reluctant, “has it... always been that way?”

His breath fans across my face, its heat spreading through my body, tickling my ribs, winding itself around the sensitive nerves of my spine, caressing me where I want to be touched. “No. It’s just—it’s just been the past couple years.”

“What changed?”

*Me. You. This. Us. Everything. Nothing.* I look up at the ceiling, at the cheap popcorn stucco creating crests and valleys of light and shadow, and I lie to myself, and I lie to my best friend. “I don’t know.”

“Katniss...” He nudges my thigh with his, the fleeting contact sending a jolt coursing through me. “I’m so tired of calling bullshit.” Out of the corner of my eye I see him cross his hands together, resting them lightly on his stomach. He looks up at the ceiling too and waits for me.

“It was just... I noticed it the first time I slept with Marvel—”

Peeta makes a small, scoffing sound and shoots a fleeting glance my way. “Sorry. Go on.”

I scowl at him, knowing full well he was never a fan of Marvel, and, as it turned out, for good reason. “Anyway,” I continue, trying not to be annoyed, “I uh—always felt rushed because he wouldn’t—he couldn’t—last, and he didn’t bother to—.” My voice breaks off because, of all the things I want to do tonight, rehashing with Peeta the disappointments of my recent sexual history isn’t one of them.

“And he didn’t get you off first?” Peeta’s lifts up one of his hands, examining his palm and scratching it lightly.

“No. And after—I could tell he wasn’t into it anymore, so yeah.” I let Peeta fill in the rest of the blanks himself.

“Gotcha. So Marvel was an asshole. What about Gloss?”

With Gloss it was complicated. He had certainly looked the part, all muscled with linebacker
shoulders and blond hair he’d grown out for me when I mentioned I’d prefer something to hold onto. In the darkness of his bedroom he’d almost looked right. But that had been the problem—it was wrong. Everything out of his mouth, the way he touched me. It felt… “Empty,” I tell Peeta. “Like there was nothing there. Nothing between his ears. Nothing between us. Nothing at all. Only… mediocre sex. It got to the point where it made my skin crawl when he touched me.”

“And Gale?” he asks, his voice low.

“He tried for a while,” I answer weakly. “At least I think he did. But he doesn’t like going down on me and—”

“Wait,” Peeta cuts me off, his expression incredulous. “You’re telling me he doesn’t like oral sex?”

“Giving it, anyway,” I grumble, holding a hand over my eyes because, suddenly, all I can do is look at Peeta’s mouth and wonder what it would feel like to have him tonguefuck me.

He sighs, sounding exasperated. “Okay, so the guy’s not into giving oral—that's a case for CSI. But what about—other ways?”

I gesture vaguely toward the brown bag. “He’s frustrated. I’m frustrated. That’s where all that shit comes into play.”

Knitting his eyebrows together he says, almost urgently, “Walk me through it.”

“Really—Peet—” He shushes me by pressing his palm to my mouth, something he’s always done and that I’ve always pretended to hate. I resist the urge to bite him because he can’t honestly expect me to tell him everything.

But he does. “Tell me everything,” he says. “It’s okay. You’ve got me, and we can figure this out, alright?”

*Like it’s his problem to figure out.* But the way he says it, like whatever we do we’re a team, comforts me. When I nod he removes his hand, resting it back by his side. I notice he clutches the comforter, scrunching up the fabric.

“Well he can’t make me come just by fucking me.” I hate the way it sounds as I say it. There’s something too honest, too baldly there in the words.

“But you used to be able to that way?”

I nod.

“Okay,” he says. “So it’s not you.”

I frown because of course it’s me. “He said he’s never had that problem before—”

Peeta waves a hand dismissively. “What I mean is that maybe it’s the two of you together, something missing there between you. Can he get you off with his hands?”

It’s too much—his words, his body next to me, being here on this fucking hot, sweltering, miserable night—and I have no idea how he’s able to talk about this so calmly, almost determinedly. I bolt upright and prepare to do what I do best—to run—but I feel his hand curl firmly but gently around my bicep.

“Not so fast, Everdeen.”
“I’m done,” I tell him, but the break in my voice betrays me. He can press me and push me and I’ll tell him. I know it. I’m done. I’ll tell him.

I’ll tell him everything, if he asks.

“So that’s a no, then?” His eyes lock on mine, his pupils blown even in the harsh glare of my bedroom.

“No, he can’t get me off with his hands either.”

He keeps his grip on my arm, and I can feel how sweaty his skin is on mine. Looking away, he swallows noisily. “And—what about you?”

I shake my head, not quite understanding. “What about me?”

“Can you—get yourself off?” His hand falls from my arm, and he wipes his palm on his shorts.

The embarrassment spreads like an uncontained wildfire, blazing through my gut, down to my center, upward along my chest, raging rapidly across my face. Because yes—I can get myself off. I do it all the time, here in my bedroom, on the bed we’re sitting on. I touch myself when I’m ten steps from his bedroom door, biting my lip so that I don’t accidentally moan his name. I’ve brought myself to orgasm to the thought of him more times than I can count.

“Yes,” I whisper.

A blush creeps onto his face too, and he nods, looking satisfied. “That’s good,” he exhales, giving me an encouraging grin. “It means you can if someone is doing it right.”

“Yeah, if that someone is me, whatever good that’s for.” I roll my eyes at the thought that maybe the only person I can have a gratifying sexual life with is myself. That’s not exactly a comforting thought. “Katniss Everdeen, Do-It-Yourself Queen… It has a ring to it, I guess.”

“Knock it off,” he laughs, taking my hand in his. His thumb caresses my skin, the movement of the callused pad over my flesh sending shivers up my entire arm. I close my eyes for a second and imagine it means something more than comfort to him. “As I see it,” he says, “the problem isn’t you... I mean it’s not biological or anything like that.”

“The problem is that I’m an uptight bitch. Or that I’m broken. Or that I’m disgusting because apparently no man wants—”

He squeezes my hand almost to the point of pain, his voice losing all humor. “I said knock it off. You’re talking about my best friend. I don’t let anyone talk about her like that, okay?”

“Are we done here,” I say, not really asking. The last thing I want is to fight with Peeta, but he obviously isn’t willing to see the truth staring right at him. I disentangle my hand from his and stand up before he can grab me.

“Almost,” he replies, standing up too.

I huff and try not to notice the way his biceps bulge when he crosses his arms by tucking his hands into his armpits. “Fine. If it's not me, who is the problem then?”

“I think you mean what is the problem… or problems, really.”

“Okay then.” I roll my eyes at his game of semantics, “What are the problems?”
His answer is blunt. “Selfish assholes who can’t see past the length of their own dicks, for starters.”

I wait for him to go on, but when he doesn’t after several moments of pregnant silence, I press, “And… What else?”

“Well….” He shifts his weight, looking more uncomfortable now than he has the entire conversation. “Did you—do you—love any of these guys?”

I can’t help but laugh at the thought. “No. But what does that have to do with anything? I mean… you don’t need to love someone to have sex with them.”

Peeta looks down at me earnestly, flushed pink to the tips of his ears from the heat in the room. “But that’s what I think—that maybe you do.”

I watch his lips as he speaks to me, those soft lips I want to feel on me, and I say the first thing I know to be true. “Well then I guess I’m really fucked.”
Her words have been playing on a constant loop in my brain for the past hour, over and over, tormenting me. If someone gave me the choice between replaying them like this or listening to “It’s A Small World” on repeat, I’d take the option with the creepy kids.

Well then I guess I’m really fucked.

What does that even mean? I should have nutted up and asked her, just gone out on a limb and asked her who it was that had ruined love for her. What had he done to her? What makes her so certain she’ll never love or be loved? Does she believe herself incapable of it—or does she think she is somehow unworthy of it? The thought of having the answer to any one of these questions fills me with a mixture of dread and hope.

There I’d been, standing right the fuck in front of her, too scared shitless to tell her that, no matter how anyone had loved her in the past, I could do it better, if she’d let me. I want more than anything to do it better. Because, when it comes to Katniss, she can have everything from me. Every last bit. I love every inch of her, every cell and firing synapse, and I think I’d die for the chance to show her what it feels like to be thoroughly loved like that.

But instead of talking about any of these things I’ve been sitting silently next to her, the backs of my thighs sticking uncomfortably to our leather sofa, pretending to watch MasterChef while I sip the dregs of my room temperature Corona, agonizing over her confession.

“Please, Peeta, you’d make it so much better,” she groans, snapping me out of my thoughts.

My eyes train on the TV as I try to catch up on whatever I’ve missed. Some hack is getting his ass reamed by Gordon for trying to serve him undercooked scallops in a broken lemon beurre blanc. And I know she’s talking about the guy’s cooking—and I know she’s right because I’ve made that exact dish for us more times than I can count—but the way she says the words, ferally, like the sound has crawled its way out from some primal place deep inside her, finally breaks me.

“Yeah, I could,” I say, not at all referring to the dish. I scratch the side of my nose even though it doesn’t itch, just to give my fingers something to do. “Can I—ah—ask you something?”

I look at the empty bottle in my hand and worry the label, gingerly peeling it off in one, slow motion so that I don’t have to look at her. Out of the corner of my eye I can see her, sprawled out on the couch next to me, her long, dark hair fanned out in loose waves over the armrest. Because I’m a gentleman—and because I’m her best friend goddammit—I studiously try to avoid noticing how, with her knees bent upward and her shorts riding up, I can see the swell of her ass, the smooth skin that looks so impossibly soft I want to nestle my face against it and then run my stubble along it to make her squirm. For all her tough talk, I know how ticklish Katniss is and how one of the easiest things in the world is to make her wriggle.

“Sure, what’s up?” she asks distractedly, her fingers toying absentmindedly with the hem of her tank top while she stares at the screen. I resist the urge to grasp them, to still her and to demand her attention for what I’m about to say. For what I need to say.

Before I can come to my senses, I take a deep breath and blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. “It’s just—I’ve been thinking. If you don’t love Gale, what are you doing with him?” The words hang in the air, an accusation I never intended to make. Wincing, I look at her, already contrite. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that I—” Shit. How did I mean it?
“It’s just that you’ve been with him since Christmas, and if the sex is… yeah…” I scratch the back of my neck uncomfortably, not wanting to spend another second tonight thinking about Gale Hawthorne fucking her, and I switch gears instead. “Well, if he’s a shit boyfriend and you don’t love him—which is a fundamental problem by the way—then what are you still doing with him?”

Her gray eyes lock on mine, but instead of looking angry or annoyed like I’d expected, she looks exhausted, and maybe even a little scared. She leans up far enough to grab the remote from where it lies between us and pauses the program before falling back down onto the cushions. Sighing heavily, she seems to weigh her words for a moment before answering. While I wait, I try not to breathe too heavily so that she can’t hear the thundering of my heart, the tsunami crashing through my veins, the tumult raging within me that threatens to wash away all my composure. My pulse is so loud it has drowned out the sound of the traffic whirring by on the street outside. It’s all I can hear, all I can feel, my useless heart beating for her.

“It’s not the best reason,” she says, “it’s a shit reason, I guess—but don’t you ever get so tired of being alone? I mean…” her voice breaks off, and she gives me a meaningful look. “You’ve got to want more than this, right—” she gestures between us with a finger like what’s between us is nothing I could want instead of absolutely everything, “hanging out with me when you could be off somewhere getting laid?”

My face flushes red at her question, betraying me. Because of course I’m tired of being alone. And I do want more than this. She can’t possibly know how much fucking more I want. But she’s wrong on one count, and that’s the question I choose to answer. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be right now, no one else I’d rather be with,” I tell her. I can’t speak for her—I’m sure I don’t—but for me, that truth is simple.

“Please.” She makes a soft tutting sound, a wet snicker from the collision of her tongue against the roof of her mouth. “I find that a little hard to believe. Why do you always have to be so difficult anyway?” She scratches the bare skin of her thigh, her sharp nails dragging thin white lines across her flesh, narrowing her eyes suspiciously as she looks at me. I know my face is scarlet by now—I just have to hope she thinks it’s from the closeness of the air in the room as opposed to her. “How long has it been for you, anyway?”

Clearing my throat, I shift on the couch cushion, desperate to evade that question. “We were talking about you.”

“Yes, we were,” she says. “And now we’re talking about you.”

I’d been dreading this question, but I suppose it’s only fair after that excruciating birds and bees talk we’d had in her bedroom. Wiping my palms on my shorts, I swallow thickly and answer as I exhale, “Eight months.”

Foolishly, I hope to myself that she doesn’t connect the dots. But she frowns, and from the way she’s wrinkling her nose I can tell she’s doing the goddamn math. “You mean to tell me you haven’t had sex since January?”

I watch as the storm clouds roll in across her face, and I know what she’s going to say before she opens her mouth—maybe even before she knows herself.

“Who was she?” she asks darkly.

There’s no way around it: I have to tell her the truth, or part of it anyway, knowing how awful it will sound. “No one, really. Just some girl I met at Finn’s New Year’s Eve Party.”
“Don’t tell me it was that fox-faced girl that was hanging all over you?”

My silence is the only answer she needs.

“Christ.” She scratches at the heat rash blooming on her chest. “Wait, so that’s why you didn’t come home after the party? Finn said you’d had too much to drink and crashed there. Why would he say that? And as for you…” Sitting up, she crosses her arms around her stomach, squeezing them tightly like she’s trying not to spill her guts all over the furniture. “I didn’t think you were capable of—”

I don’t know why Finn would lie to her about where I’d slept that night—probably because he, along with the rest of our friends, knows I’m hopelessly in love with her and doesn’t want to torpedo the snowball’s chance in hell he thinks I might have with her. Right now I can’t care about that because I’m too busy processing what Katniss has just told me. She knew that I didn’t come home that night.

Which means…

I cut her off. “How did you know I didn’t come home if you went back to Gale’s place? Wasn’t that the first time you guys—Annie said she thought you two were going to—”

Katniss shakes her head quickly, resolutely. “No. I didn’t—we didn’t—” She struggles to say the words, even though we both know what we’re talking about. “I didn’t sleep with him until a couple weeks later,” she says quietly. “I left early with Gale, but I told him I wanted to go back home.”

I feel sick at her words, sick at the knowledge they bring me. Because there was only one reason I didn’t come home that night after watching her leave with him. There was only one reason I’d taken off another woman’s shirt, closed my eyes, and swirled my tongue over another woman’s nipples. Only one reason I’d buried myself as deeply as I could inside another woman.

It was to try to forget that someone else was doing all those things to the woman I love.

“Why did you want to go home?” I ask in a whisper, trying to keep my voice steady, not trusting it above that.

“It doesn’t matter.” Katniss grabs the remote, blindly jabbing at the buttons until a live program comes on, and then throws herself back down onto the couch, curled up loosely in the fetal position.

I watch her for several moments as she grimly stares at whatever crap is on the television, wishing she’d just look at me, talk to me, say anything at all. “If it doesn’t matter,” I point out, “then why are you scowling like that?”

She lets out an exasperated sigh and rubs at her forehead, physically pushing the frown lines away. “I just didn’t think you were the type of guy to have a one night stand, is all.” She doesn’t look at me when she answers. She’s wrapped an arm around herself, making herself as small as she can on the cushion like she’s shrinking away from me.

“I’m not,” I retort, feeling defensive. “And that’s not what it was.”

“I’m calling bullshit,” she huffs. “You’d just met her. Are you telling me you saw her again after that? Are you telling me that you looked at her that night and thought you’d made a real connection, so hey,” she puts on a dopish, manly voice, as if to mimic me, “why not go back to her place and fuck?”

“Look, we went out a few times after that, Katniss. But it was never going to lead to anything, so
there really wasn’t much of a point.” I try to keep my voice calm, even though she’s royally pissing
me off. Because wasn’t she just encouraging me to go out and get laid? Didn’t she just admit to
sleeping with a guy she doesn’t love for the better part of a year because she doesn’t want to be
alone? “I don’t really think you’re in a position to judge, babe.”

“Why not?” she asks.

“Um, maybe because you just said—”

“No, I mean why wasn’t it going to lead to anything with you and Foxface?”

I can feel her eyes on me, assessing me, but instead of soothing or comforting me like they usually
do, they’re burning me alive, making me feel like every inch of me is covered in fire ants. Rubbing
my eyes, I search for the words to make her see without making her see everything. “Neither one of
us wanted to be alone that night. I didn’t want to come here and—and—spend the night alone. You
of all people should understand that, right?” I look at her pointedly until she gives a small, reluctant
nod, and then I look at the TV as I add, “And there were no hard feelings afterward. We were both
just trying to get over other people, okay?”

Out of the corner of my eye I watch her frown, wrinkling her nose as she mentally goes through the
back catalog of my exes. Normally, I find that wrinkle adorable—like when she’s trying to remember
the name of the Latin restaurant we went to a few months ago or the name of our AP Government
teacher we’d had in the tenth grade. But right now it terrifies me because there isn’t going to be an
ex-girlfriend that explains why I’d fuck some random girl.

There’s only her and what I thought she’d done that night.

“You were hung up on... Clove?” Katniss shoots me an incredulous look, clearly unconvinced.

And with good reason. I haven’t so much as thought about Clove Kurpiniski in the two years since
we’d broken up.

“No,” I laugh, snatching the remote from her hand before she can ask any follow up questions,
channel surfing to pretend I’m occupied.

It doesn’t work.

“Who then?” She nudges me in the thigh with her feet to get my attention, not knowing she already
has all of it. I capture her feet and tug them onto my lap, using my forearm to pin them to my thigh as
I continue to surf through the channels. “Please tell me it wasn’t that bitch from work.”

“No,” I sigh, sending up a quick prayer to whatever god might happen to be listening that Katniss
will drop the subject so that we can try to enjoy what’s left of our night. “It wasn’t Glimmer either.
And she’s not a bitch. It just didn’t work out.”

For the same reason it didn’t work out with Clove: because she wasn’t you, I silently add.

“Whatever,” Katniss grumbles, “she wasn’t good enough for you. None of them are.”

I can’t fight the grin that spreads over my face at her words because, even when she’s being stubborn
and difficult and borderline hostile, her fierce loyalty and protectiveness are two of my favorite things
about her. “You say that about all the women I date.”

“Well, you’ve got real shitty taste in women, Mellark.”

“Hey, knock it off.” I clear my throat and resist the masochistic urge to add, ‘You’re talking about my
best friend.’ Flipping through the channels, I settle on women’s beach volleyball, the one sure thing that is certain to set Katniss off on another tangent. “Awesome,” I smirk, “they’re replaying the Long Beach Grand Slam.”

“Ugh, what is it with guys and women’s volleyball?” She glowers at the television. “It’s like none of you have seen a naked woman before, so you need to leer at them wearing what is essentially their underwear.”

This is not the first time over the years that I’ve heard this same exact speech out of her, verbatim. And, just like the first time, I chuckle and think about how I’d like to hold her face in my hands and kiss the cross look off it, assuring her that there’s no one who looks half as hot as she does in what is ‘essentially her underwear.’ “Gotta take what we can get, Everdeen,” I quip, settling back farther into the cushion.

As we watch the game I gently wrap a hand around one of her ankles and begin to massage the bottom of her foot with my thumbs, mindlessly kneading the sole like dough from heel to arch to ball to toe. It doesn’t take long for her eyes to glaze over and her eyelids to droop. The tension visibly melts off her body as she relaxes into the cushions, her breathing growing heavy. She looks peaceful and relaxed and happy, the pumpkin spice-flavored drama from earlier in the night a distant memory. I love that I can make her feel like this. It’s not even something I have to think about.

But at that thought my mind sets off in a direction that is anything but innocent. Thinking about the way I’d like to make her feel, everything begins to take on a sexual tone—her exhales sound like breathy little whimpers, and I find myself wondering what she’d sound like with my thumb on her clit, working her to orgasm. And when one of the volleyball players picks at her green bikini bottom, straightening out the fabric, I think about how they’re the same exact color as the ones Katniss owns and how, whenever she wears them, the fabric never seems to cover her right asscheek, so she self-consciously tugs on it whenever she thinks no one is looking.

It makes me feel despicable, sitting here fantasizing about sneaking my hand into my best friend’s wet swimming bottoms, feeling the cool water from the pool mingling with the slick warmth of her arousal, while she’s lying next to me, practically asleep. But I think about it anyway.

It’s this combination: the warm weight of Katniss’ smooth legs on my lap, the pleased sighs, something between a murmur and a mewl, that she’s unconsciously making, and the thought of her in her too-small bikini, sliding that skimpy green scrap of fabric down off her legs so I can drive into her again and again until I feel her walls fluttering around me, that makes the blood rush to my groin, my cock hardening against my will.

There’s only one thing I’m willing to change about this scenario to fight the increasingly cramped condition in my pants: no more women’s volleyball. I turn off the television and let my head fall back against the couch cushion, my right hand drifting upward along her ankle to rest on her shin. We lie like this for what seems like hours, drowsing in silence in the sticky air, our bodies stuck to the couch, feeling deliciously stuck in time. I wish I could freeze this moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever.

But I know I can’t.

My cock aches from being hard for so long, and I’m dying to peel off my clothes and take a cold shower, maybe even take Miss Michigan on a quick date. Tracing a line along Katniss’ shinbone with my thumb, I reluctantly break the silence. My voice is low and husky from desire, and I hope she mistakes it for sleepiness. “We should get to bed.” I drum a light pattern on her leg. “It’s almost midnight.”
“Yeah,” she rasps, looking at me with sleepy, heavy-lidded eyes. As she moves to sit up, her bare foot accidentally brushes against my erection. Her mouth falls open, her eyes widening with horror.

“Oh—Peeta, I—”

“No, no,” I reassure her, my face reddening to match hers. “You’re fine—it’s fine.” I run a hand through my hair, internally screaming fuck fuck fuck, but managing somehow to keep my cool. It’s not like this is the first time she’s accidentally encountered one of my hard ons, not by a long shot, but it’s just that this time I feel so caught. “No damage to the family jewels,” I joke, hating how weak my voice sounds.

Katniss laughs—or tries to anyway—but the sound that comes out of her mouth is something strangled. She’s still resting on her elbows, half reclined, her feet frozen on my lap, and I’m scrambling to think of the right thing to say—to blame it on the volleyball or boredom or any of the other million reasons that make a guy, sexually frustrated or not, get hard—when she bites her lip and wrinkles her fucking nose, figuring me out again.

I’m about to say something—anything—but she exhales heavily, such a deep, shuddering breath it seems like all the air has rushed out from her lungs.

And then it happens.

She moves her foot, gently grazing my dick through my pants. I look at her in shock, my jaw hanging slack, as she watches herself touching me, lightly tracing the outline of me, her lip clamped so tightly between her teeth I almost can’t see that it’s trembling.

It’s all the invitation I need. My head falls back in bliss, my eyes closed, and I trail my hand upward along her leg to her knee, delicately tracing a circle over the spot where I know she’s most ticklish. But I don’t stop there. My fingers slide upward as far as they can reach to the soft skin of her inner thigh, to a place I’ve never touched, and when I can feel that the skin is even softer than it looks, I involuntarily moan. Her leg shakes, an uncontrollable tremor that I still with a “shhh,” and, by pressing my fingers firmly against her flesh, I ease her thigh back down onto the sofa.

“I want to kiss you so fucking bad,” I confess, my words falling spectacularly short of the truth.

It happens so quickly I don’t even have the chance to open my eyes. She gasps, and then the couch shifts as she moves her weight, my cock already missing the friction from her foot, but her warm, wet, trembling lips ghost against mine. She barely kisses me at all—I haven’t time to react—before she begins to pull away. When I open my eyes she’s right there in front of me, half a foot away from my face, staring at my lips.

She’s so close to me I can feel her hot breath on my face, a mixture of pizza and beer and something else I never dreamed I’d taste.

Half a foot is too fucking far.

Grasping the sides of her face, I close the distance between us by pulling her back down to me, and then I do what I want and taste her, gently sucking her lower lip into my mouth to nibble and lick and feel its full softness. She whimpers into my mouth, her hands falling to my shoulders, grasping, clutching, scrabbling, as she climbs onto my lap, fitting herself snugly against me like a puzzle piece.

We kiss to make up for all the years of empty kisses we’d shared with other people, filling each flick and caress of our tongues with everything we’d kept locked away. As my tongue meet hers, we explore each other like a newly discovered country, tentatively at first, in unsure steps, and then bolder, bolder, bolder, until we feel like the other is ours to claim and own and conquer.
I run my hands along her jaw, caressing her face, relishing how fragile but strong she feels to the touch, a delicate, featherweight bird and a fierce, undaunted warrior all at once. That's my girl, I think senselessly, incoherently, but for the first time ever it makes perfect sense.

Digging her fingers into my shoulders, Katniss begins to grind against me, our gasps mingling from the friction of rubbing against each other. “Oh god yes,” she moans, throwing her head back, her eyes rolling back in her head.

The sound makes me greedy. With a wicked smile I clutch her hips, digging my fingers in firmly, and pull her down as I thrust upward. She wails louder, so I repeat the motion until the only word I can understand is my name, over and over, my name. I’ve heard her say it a million times, a million different ways, a cacophony of “Peetas,” but the way she says it now is like an ancient, long-forgotten language resurrected in her moans. As she pants my name, I kiss her, tasting the sound of it, and she kisses me back, drawing my tongue into her mouth, passing the vibrations of her moans into me, through me.

“Katniss?” I gasp, stilling her by clutching her hips, holding them so tightly I know I’m leaving marks.

She pulls away enough to look into my eyes, and I soak in the sight of her pupils fat with lust, her lips swollen and bright pink from the force of my kisses, the wisps of her raven hair clinging to her already sweaty face.

“Yeah?” she asks, panting for air so hard her breasts heave from the motion.

I reach out and cup one of her breasts through her shirt, dragging my thumb over the peak of her nipple. Her eyes close in response, her mouth opening into a silent “o.”

“You’re so fucking beautiful,” I tell her, leaning forward to lave her collarbone with my tongue.

“So—so are you,” she gasps.

“Earlier you told me you were really fucked,” I say, my hand skating down along her ribcage and down to her waist, my fingers teasingly dipping just below the waistband of her cutoffs.

“Yeah,” she says, her voice already hoarse from crying out my name.

I love her voice, the sexiness and richness of its tones, the way it somehow manages to be both sunshine and shade, the familiar and the unknowable.

But for once I want to see what it sounds like wrecked.

And I want to be the one to wreck it.

So I ask her, “What if I showed you what that was like, to really be fucked?”
He has been my best friend for so long I thought I knew everything there was to know about Peeta Mellark’s mouth: the way the corners of his lips quirk up mischievously when he’s amused by something perverse, how he bites the tip of his tongue when he’s deep in concentration, and even the words that pour out of it—their cadence and tone and content. I thought I knew it all.

But it turns out I didn’t know the first thing about his mouth.

I had no idea what his lips would feel like on mine or what he likes to do with his tongue—how he uses it to stroke and sketch and trace as if he were illustrating his desire—or what words he is capable of saying next. Because, of all the things I’d ever expected or hoped to hear out of my best friend’s mouth, a proposition to fuck me wasn’t one of them.

I don’t know what got into me, whether it was madness or courage, but when my foot brushed against his crotch and I felt how hard he was, I didn't care about the whys or hows, I just wanted to make him feel for a moment the way he always makes me feel—to fill him with a hunger that feeds and a fire that soothes.

And, okay, I wanted that for myself too.

When we kissed it felt so natural—the way our bodies met and moved together in tandem, restlessly searching, exploring, connecting, like we should have been doing this all along. It felt innate. Instinctive. It felt like a goddamn biological imperative.

What he’s offered to do to me—to show me, he said—I want it so badly, more than the air I’m trying to breathe. (I can’t breathe. Why can’t I breathe? I can’t fucking breathe.) I want to feel his broad body pressing down on me, his hips snapping and rolling as he moves between my legs. I want him to kiss me on every inch of my skin, to run his tongue along every peak and valley. I want to clutch his back and his ass and his arms and to bite down on his shoulder as he fucks me. I want to feel the weight of him in my hand, to lick his length and discover his contours, every ridge and vein, and then to take him deep in my mouth. I want him to taste me. I want to taste him. I want everything he’s willing to give me, to pretend he’s all mine—and then I want more.

But it doesn’t matter what I want.

I can’t say yes.

He’s actually asked me, and I can’t say yes.

I don’t know whether he’s offered out of pity or friendship, or whether it’s as a distraction from someone else—or from the loneliness of having no one else—or whether it is for some other reason altogether. I can’t say yes. Because I love him, and not like he loves me, but irrevocably, with a brand stamped on my heart. With Peeta it could never just be what he’s offered.

And I’ll ruin it. Spectacularly. I’ll ruin us. And then I’ll ruin him. Everything I touch burns and crumbles and turns to ash between my fingers, and why would he be any different?

(I can’t breathe I can’t breathe I can’t—)

I’ll disappoint him. When I can’t come, he’ll come to resent me. He’ll hate me for making him feel less, when I’m the one who’s nothing. And then he’ll leave. Suddenly it’s not just an abstract thought, the knowledge that someday he will go. It’s the reality of it, the way a room feels as cold as
a crypt without him in it, as lifeless as a field left fallow. It’s the emptiness and darkness of a world without him, every day for the rest of my life.

I fall back onto the sofa and gasp for air, suddenly fighting the urge to sob. The thought of losing him is too much—I think I can bear just about anything but that.

“Hey, no, no… please don’t. I’m sorry,” he says, a look of panic washing over him, and seeing it confirms my fears. Even now, in this moment, I am ruining him. Forget coming—I can’t talk, I can’t even breathe.

Useless. This is what it’s like to be useless.

“It was stupid of me to say that, Katniss, so stupid.” He reaches out for me, afraid I’m going to run, but even if I could move I’d never leave him now.

A choked sob escapes me, and, because I still don’t seem to have enough air to talk, my arms reach out to him as he envelopes me in a hug. Clutching his sweaty shirt in my fingers, the salt of my tears meets the salt of his body, and for once I let go, crying into his chest.

Useless. I am useless.

“Shhhh,” he soothes me, threading his hands in my hair, caressing my scalp, cradling my head to his chest like he would a small child. After several minutes he adds in a hushed voice, again and again, a desperate mantra, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to fuck it up.”

His words sink into me, the weight of his unnecessary apology, the knee jerk way he always assumes the blame even when he is without fault. It pains me, galls me, infuriates me.

“It’s—you, you dumbass,” I cry, pulling away far enough to smack his chest with my palm. I take a shuddering breath, hastily swiping the tears off my face, and because he’s frowning at me in that way he always does when he’s trying to figure me out, I know I have no choice but to explain myself. “I’m a mess. You—you’re perfect.”

At that he gives a rueful smile, easily capturing my hand with his to kiss my wrist. It’s not something he seems to think about—he simply takes my hand and brushes his lips against my skin, calming me with one small gesture.

“You’re so full of shit, you know that,” he says affectionately. “What’s going on? Talk to me.” He swipes a tear smudge off my face with his thumb, and his blue eyes fix on me, waiting patiently for a reply.

“It’s—it’s...” I point vaguely to my broken hoohah, the vagina that doesn’t tick, “my problem.”

He smiles conspiratorially, looking relieved at my reply, and uses my finger to tap my temple. “That doesn’t seem like such an insurmountable problem, you know.”

“But it is,” I protest, pulling my hand away. “You say that now, but what happens when I don’t come... and not just tonight, but anytime we might... What happens to us—” I gesture between the two of us, at a loss now to understand what exactly ‘us’ even means, “—when I disappoint you? Every. Single. Time? Because it wouldn’t be just the once, Peeta. With you... it couldn’t be...and I can’t—”

“Wait a minute. Wait. Wait. Wait. Hold on a second. You mean you’d give me more than one shot—you’d want it to be a... thing... that we do?” Peeta’s eyebrows rocket up at my words, and I see him try to bite back a grin and fail. “You think you’d disappoint me?” He runs a palm along the length of
his thigh. “Fuck, let’s put sex aside for a minute, okay? How long have you been my best friend?”

I sniffle and try to refuse the consolation he’s offering, because I know I’m the one who’s right. “A long time.”

“That’s right,” he says. “Do you think there’s some deep, dark secret about you I haven’t discovered yet? Something that’s gonna shock me—_disappoint_ me? You think I don’t know you… inside and out?” He flushes pink at the last question, and it’s only now I realize that maybe the heat’s not to blame. There’s something yet we don’t know about each other—and that’s precisely the problem.

I bite the inside of my cheek, refusing to answer. Ever the stubborn ass, Peeta is refusing to see the inevitable.

“Christ, you’re so stubborn,” he grouses. He rakes a hand through his messy hair in exasperation. “Can you at least give me _some_ credit here?”

“You?” I scoff. “You’re not the worthless one. You’re not the fuckup.”

“I said _knock that off_ already. You’re talking about…” he swallows thickly and finishes the sentence, but the phrase that once sounded so familiar to me is now almost unrecognizable on his tongue. “You’re talking about my best friend.”

“What credit am I not giving you—for putting up with me so long? Because trust me, that’s grounds for sainthood. I’m well aware.” Rolling my eyes, I fidget on the sofa, gathering my hair together to rebraid it. Maybe it’s the way he’s looking at me, or maybe it’s the fact that it’s one thousand fucking degrees in the room, but I need to get it off my neck or I’m going to pass out.

He tugs on one of my arms so that my hair falls back down around my shoulders, and then he casually shrugs, answering me like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Give me some credit for having the most amazing fucking taste.”

He looks so pleased in himself, so proud, I can’t help but narrow my eyes in suspicion. Thinking about what he’s saying, something flutters in my stomach, taking wing and struggling to escape, expanding within me until I think I might burst from the force of it. “What do you mean?”

“I think you know what I mean, but is this really how you want to hear it... right now?”

I look down at my hands, suddenly feeling shy, and smile. “I guess not.”

He nods once and leans back against the couch, pulling me toward him and tucking me into the crook of his arm. I curl my legs beneath me, letting him support my weight. We sit like that in silence for a couple minutes, absorbing everything that’s been said and all the things we’ve implied, my heart galloping in my chest like a caged animal that has been set free for the first time in its life.

When Peeta finally speaks, I expect to hear a smile in his voice, one to match the expression I know I have on mine. Instead his voice is raspy and uneven. “Can I ask you a question?” His thumb drags a line along my upper arm, and, despite the summer heat, I break out into goosebumps at his touch.

“Haven’t you asked enough?” My eyelids flutter shut, and I’m thankful he can’t see it. Something about it makes me feel so self-conscious.

“Almost,” he says, “but I need to know… who it was that ruined it for you. What did he do to you?”

“What do you mean?” I wrinkle my nose, trying to figure out what exactly he’s asking. “You mean who ruined sex?”
“No—not really. Not at all. I mean... love.”

I don’t know where he got the idea that it was love that had been ruined for me instead of only having been denied, but how do I tell him that? Where do I start to tell him that there is no competition for him anywhere—no one who begins to measure up—and that has always been the problem?

When I don’t speak, he elaborates as if I haven’t understood him. “Well, you seemed so certain you could never love someone you’re having sex with, and I wanted to know... who did that to you.” His hand freezes, and he holds his breath, his body tensing up beneath me as he waits for me to say something.

His nervousness give me the courage to answer him truthfully, in a way I know how. I nuzzle my face into his neck so that he can’t see how naked he’s made me, and I use his words. “Is this really how you want to hear it... right now?”

He exhales a loud, ragged breath, his body sinking back into the cushions. Wrapping his arm tighter around me, his hand skates over my collarbone before dipping lower and lower, agonizingly slow, until it’s cupping my breast, his thumb brushing lightly across my nipple.

Now I can hear a smile in his voice. “I guess not.”

He kisses the top of my head, inhaling deeply, like he’s smelling me. *Fuck—is he smelling me?* For a split second I consider this in wonder, but I’m too distracted by his hand, the way his knuckles graze my nipple a fraction of a second before his thumb, to ask. Under my palm I can feel his heart hammering in his chest, racing and skipping and stumbling at a pace that matches mine. The rhythm travels through me, dizzying me, heating me.

When he finally breaks the silence I’m surprised by the vulnerability I hear in his voice. It makes him sound so young, and I’m reminded of the first time we ever talked, when he smacked his skateboard down next to mine on the concrete and plopped down heavily next to me on the curb, holding out a hand and giving me a shaky smile to introduce himself. I think I understand now what I didn’t then—that he’d been wearing his heart on his sleeve.

“Why did you come home New Year’s Eve?” he murmurs into my hair.

“Why didn’t you?”

He groans, his arm falling to my waist to draw me impossibly closer to him. “If you’re saying what I think you are, I’m gonna regret that every day for the rest of my fucking life.”

How do we begin to take inventory of our regrets, the two of us? If I think about all the things I would change if I could, they become so overwhelming they threaten to choke me. I don’t know how to comfort him—I can’t even comfort myself—so I use the flat of my hand to rub his chest in large circles, right over his breastbone, as if to massage out the ache.

“C’mon, tell me,” he urges, so quietly I almost can’t hear him. “Why did you come home?”

I go with the simplest answer I can find, the only one that really matters. “I didn’t want to be with anyone else—just you.

He inhales sharply at my words, the air hissing as it passes through gritted teeth, and he wraps his arms so tightly around me it almost hurts. “You didn’t want to be with anyone else? And... what about now? What do you want now?” He asks, but he knows. He has to know.
My arm falls to his abdomen, so low I can feel his cock straining at his pants. He holds me to him, rooting me to his body as if he’s worried I’ll sprout wings and fly away. As if there’s any chance of flying when I’m falling, plummeting, diving headlong into him. My hand winds its way beneath his shirt, delicately tracing his abdominals like I’d desperately wanted to earlier in the kitchen when he’d lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat off his face.

_and now I can_, I think deliriously.

Peeta shivers to my touch, his stomach muscles contracting as my fingers ghost over his skin.

“I—I want to sleep with you,” I tell him in a whisper.

At this he makes a low, pleased sound and nudges my head with his nose to gain access to my ear. “Like a sleepover?” he teases, nibbling on my earlobe. “Should I throw a bag of popcorn in the microwave and put on some dorky pajamas?” His voice is playful—and I know it’s to make this easier for me, to remind me that, even though this is something new for us, it’s with him—but there’s nothing childlike or innocent about the way his tongue begins to trace the shell of my ear. I gasp, feeling myself grow embarrassingly wet for him.

And he hasn’t even touched me yet.

My brain scrambles to remember what he’s asked as he lightly flicks the tip of his tongue in my ear, but I’m lost in him, lost in the feeling of him stroking my earlobe, how he suckles on it, nibbling it, and all I can think about is how that tongue—Peeta’s tongue—will feel between my legs, on my clit, fucking me.

One of his hands finds its way to my bare thigh, a finger curling beneath the frayed hem of my shorts. “Tell me again what you want to do.” His voice is so low it sounds like the engine of a distant motorcycle, the deep, rumbling purr of a well-oiled machine.

Desire courses through me, pulsing through my skin at every point of contact, traveling through me, electrifying me. My hand finds its way to his erection, palming him over the fabric of his pants. I say the first thing that comes to mind—the only thing. “I want to suck your cock.”

Peeta groans loudly, covering his face with his free hand as I stroke him over his clothes. “I’ve uh—” his hand falls from his face, covering mine to stop me from working him. “I’ve fantasized about you saying that—christ, since I was fifteen?”

“Really?” I wrinkle my nose, trying to think about any sign he’d given me over the years, any indication, that he’d wanted me more than a friend, but no one major thing comes to mind, just a lifetime of little, insignificant moments that, in hindsight, tell our story. Small smiles andfurtive glances, inside jokes and late night phone calls, a shoulder—always there—to cry on and a hand to hold when we stumbled home drunk. Valentine’s Day dinners spent alone together, pretending to commiserate, and homemade birthday cakes decorated in an expert hand, but tentatively shared.

He’s wanted me the entire time.

“Yeah,” he admits, sounding almost sheepish. “Maybe earlier than that—fourteen? I don’t know. I think it was the week we’d met. And you were even sexier just now saying it than I’d ever imagined… and trust me, I have imagined some filthy things out of your mouth.” He laughs weakly, and I blush, wondering about all the things Peeta would like me to say to him.

He keeps his left hand over mine, pressing it down firmly to his cock. Beneath his pants he feels long and thick, and I stare down in fascination, desperate to see him after all these years of wondering.
His right hand make its way between my thighs, over the narrow strip of denim covering my soaked underwear, and he begins to trace me, drawing a path over the fabric as he explores my contours. Even through the denim, his touch is exquisite, and it makes me throb for him.

It shouldn’t be this easy—it never is—but the fact that it’s Peeta’s hand between my thighs—that it’s Peeta who wants to feel me—leaves me breathless and aching.

So I watch him as he touches me, opening my legs for him to give him better access.

“Never thought I’d say these words to you,” he whispers, kissing my temple, “but I’m gonna take a rain check on that cock sucking.” He gives a light thrust into my hand, encouraging me to grip him, as he trails kisses along my jaw. “So what else do you wanna do?”

“I want to fuck you,” I gasp as his index finger runs along the seam of my shorts, pressing it to the sensitive skin.

He nuzzles his face to my cheek, and I can feel his smile on my skin before he leaves a sweet kiss there. “Okay. What else?”

As I listen to him drag the zipper of my shorts down with one hand, I have to force myself to breathe. There’s no air in the room—there’s only our bodies, our need, our heat. “I want you to touch me,” I pant.

His hand dips into my underwear, his fingers dragging through my folds to my entrance. He closes his eyes, pressing his face to mine, as he pushes the tip of a finger inside me. “God, you’re so fucking wet.” He teases my lips, his fingers coating me in the warmth of my desire for him, before making their way to my clit. “Can you feel how wet you are?”

“Yes,” I hiss, my eyes rolling back as he begins to rub tight circles. It feels so good. *Fuck, it feels so good.* My hips move, searching for more friction because I’m too wet for his fingers to find purchase.

“Tell me what else you want.”

I struggle to find the words. “I want you—to—m-make me come.”

He sits up, slipping his hand out of my panties, and pushes me back onto the couch, my head smacking against the leather cushion from the force of the motion. Gripping my ankles, he bends my knees and then spreads my legs, the slick wetness of my arousal on his fingers chilling my bare skin. My body begins to tremor from nerves, but when he crawls up between my legs and looks down at me, a wide grin on his face, I know it will be okay. Because it’s Peeta, and I love him.

And somehow, impossibly, I think he might love me a little bit too.

Leaning down, he kisses me lightly, a bright grin still on his face. “Thought you’d never ask.”

He looks down at me with his fathomless blue eyes, and I lose myself in their depths, sinking fast and deep, the world growing quiet all around us. All I can hear is the roar of the tide in my ears, the thundering of the breakers in my chest, the wind whistling over the waves as I exhale, and his voice, low and calming, the surf that pushes ceaselessly toward the shore.

“Here’s how this is gonna work,” he says. “You tell me what you want. Anything, okay? And then I’m going to do it. Easy as that. If I’m not doing something the way you want me to, or if you want more of something or less of something—*anything*—you’re gonna say something.” Cradling my face with one hand, he cranes his neck to steal a kiss, a soft whisper of his lips against mine.
“I’m not good at saying something,” I murmur into his mouth.

“Yeah.” He kisses me again, but more roughly this time, even though his voice is still filled with the same agonizing fondness. “I know.” Nipping my bottom lip with his teeth, he rolls his hips, rubbing his erection against the seam of my shorts over and over until I’m whimpering and clutching his biceps, digging my nails into his skin to anchor myself to him because he is the only reality I have left. “You can always show me,” he adds in a tone as dark and deep as the ocean floor.

I nod my head frantically because yes—yes—I’ll show him anything he wants. “Okay,” I gasp, bucking my hips to meet his thrusts, wanting him so badly I think I could break.

“Okay,” he breathes, kissing me to seal our promise.

He reaches down between us to tug at the hem of my tank top, sliding it up over my stomach and breasts. I lift my arms above my head to help him, watching him take in the sight of my bare chest for the first time. I know I'm small and not particularly pretty, and in the bright light of the room I ought to feel self-conscious, but here, with him, and the way he's staring down at me with something that looks like awe... I feel kind of... beautiful.

“Fucking hell. You’re perfect,” he says in a husky voice, the words sounding like shrapnel caught in the back of his throat. He tugs my shirt over my head like it's committed some mortal offense against him and chucks it carelessly across the room, never once taking his eyes off me. His fingers dance over my nipples, the callused pads of his thumbs creating an almost agonizing feeling of ecstasy on my tender skin. I lie there for a moment, closing my eyes to bask in the feel of his hands as they cup my breasts and then drag a path down my ribcage, his thick fingers splayed wide to feel as much of me as he can. His skin is rough, but his touch is gentle, and I want to know everything there is to know about that juxtaposition, about all the ways he can be rough and gentle at the same time.

When I open my eyes, I realize that I want—I need—to see him too. “Hey, yours next.” Impatiently, I pull on the fabric of his shirt. It’s not like I haven’t seen him shirtless a thousand times before—I'm certain that by now I know each and every freckle that peppers his broad shoulders, each and every fine blond hair that smatters across his chest. But I’ve never touched his freckles, my hands lingering over them as I jealously wondered about the luck of the pigment that had gotten under his skin. I’ve never threaded my fingers through his chest hair, hoping to root myself to him—and I need to do both now, or I’ll fucking combust.

Peeta smiles crookedly down at me, looking amused as my hands find their way to the hem of his shirt. But instead of grasping at the fabric, they sneak beneath it to glide over the smooth skin of his stomach, winding around his waist to coax him closer to me.

They seem to have a mind of their own, all of a sudden.

“Hold on. I got it,” he chuckles softly, taking his shirt off in one fluid motion and casting it off to the side to join mine somewhere on the floor. “There,” he says in one ragged breath, obviously trying—and failing—to maintain his facade of calm. “Now we’re even.”

His skin is pale, so fair compared to mine, and a pink flush covers his chest. It could be from the heat—he colors so easily—but as I look at him, drinking in the sight of his hard muscles and his perfectly sculpted chest, the color spreads to his neck. Silently, I smirk, wondering how I never knew until now that I could have that effect on him. It makes me feel powerful, and something more.

My willful, headstrong hands skate upward along his stomach and chest—reaching and stretching upward until they clutch at his shoulders, not bothering to be gentle with him. They pull him down to me until his chest flattens my breasts under the weight of him. It might hurt a little—I don’t know or
care—all I can register is Peeta’s skin on mine, the heat of his breath on my neck, the wet warmth of his lips and his tongue as he suckles the spot where my neck meets my shoulders, one of his hands carding through my hair, the other blazing a path upward along my thigh. He could bury me under the weight of him, smother me here on the couch, and I would die happy.

“I want your mouth on me.” The words tumble out before I can think about them, and when Peeta looks up to meet my eyes, his are wide with surprise and something that looks like pride.

A mischievous grin hitches up the corners of his lips, my favorite of his smiles. “My mouth is on you.” He resumes his ministrations on my neck as if to prove the point, sucking my skin into his mouth and worrying it with his teeth.

“That’s—that’s—um—fuck—not what I meant,” I pant as one of his hands reaches between us, slipping into my underwear.

“Hmmmm,” he asks, his long fingers teasing my folds, touching me everywhere but the place I need it most. “Where do you want it then?”

“On my tits.” I wriggle, trying to align his fingers with my clit, but he’s too clever for that, and he withdraws his hand to caress my hipbone. Obediently, he dips his head to my breast, the pink tip of his tongue darting out to flick my nipple. He takes it into his mouth, laving the nipple back and forth, sucking until I’m writhing and whimpering, senselessly clawing at his back, his shoulders, his hair.

He releases my nipple with a pop, reaching over to stroke the other, lest it feel neglected. “And?” he prompts, stooping back down to lick the cord of my neck, his tongue firmly pressing against my skin as if he were writing the answer on my body, a braille of desire.

“My stomach,” I exhale, too breathless to speak.

“....And?” he asks, already knowing the answer, but wanting me to tell him anyway because he is infuriating and stubborn and absolutely wonderful. Sliding down my body so that his face is flush to my abdomen, he kisses my stomach slowly, languidly, like we have all the time in the world, before he begins to lick my flesh, dragging a path down toward my panties, stopping to dip teasingly in my belly button. It tickles and it taunts me, and I clutch at his hair, tugging it harshly and—before I can help it—I push him down toward my pussy because I want him to lick me there.

He looks up at me, a devilish smile on his face. Resting his chin on my hipbone, he thrums his fingers along my inner thigh, making me squirm beneath him. “Is there something else I can do for you, babe?”

I look down at my best friend, at the beautiful and improbable picture it makes of him nestled between my thighs. His wavy blond hair is tousled every which way, his lips are swollen and bright pink, his shoulders are covered in fine red scratches, and his blue eyes sparkle—they honest-to-fucking-god sparkle—and I’m responsible for all of it.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” I tell him in a small voice. “I would understand. I mean, you work tomorrow, and we might not have that kind of time, and…” I can hear myself rambling, but I press on, needing to get it all out there, “and I’m not gonna come anyway, so if you would rather just have sex, we could—”

His broad hand is over my mouth, silencing me, before I even register he’s moved his arm.

“Listen to me,” he says, sounding stern and sweet all at once. “I want to go down on you. I have fantasized about it for ten fucking years. If you’re telling me you want that too, and you think I’m
passing that up, you’re out of your mind.” He slinks down just far enough to kiss the inside of my thigh and then nudges his nose at the crotch of my shorts, sending a jolt through my entire body. “If I remove my hand are you gonna listen? Because I’m not done yet.”

He looks up at me for an answer, so I nod. As he removes his hand, I lean up to kiss his palm, earning one of his easy, affectionate smiles.

“Good,” he says, wrapping his broad hand around the back of my thigh, rubbing the sensitive skin behind my knees as he speaks. “So here’s the thing. I have no intention of going to work tomorrow, and you’re not either. Maybe we’re gonna play hookie the next day, too—I haven’t decided.” He grins guiltily, not knowing how much I love when he’s bossy. “We live together. By my reckoning we have provisions to last us a solid week of being holed up together,” he grins wider as he says this, but I can’t help notice how serious he sounds. “We have nothing but time—”

“But—” I try to interrupt, because he’s saying that now, but…

“No buts,” he interrupts back, cutting me off before I can even finish my thought. “We have an infinite amount of time. Honestly, I could spend the next thirty-six hours eating you out. I could die between your legs a happy, happy man. Which,” he adds with a cocky grin, “would still count as having fucked you, by the way, so I don’t know what you mean about this ‘we could just have sex’ crap.”

“Peeta!” I smack his shoulder, trying my best to sound scandalized.

He doesn’t buy my act. Nibbling the skin of my thigh, he strokes me over the fabric of my shorts. “Look. Maybe you come, maybe you don’t. But it seems like to me the point is that we’re finally doing something we’ve wanted to do for a long time, right?”

I nod, shivering to his touch as his hands hook in the waistband of my shorts.

“I’ve never told you how much I love these ridiculous shorts,” he murmurs, sitting up far enough to peel them off, taking my panties with them. “They don’t cover anything—” his voice breaks off when he sees me, glistening and wet for him. “Mother of fuck,” he hisses, his jaw dropping as he takes in the sight of me. He scrubs at his jaw unconsciously, his hand noisily scraping against his five o’clock shadow.

It’s too much, the way he’s looking at me like I’ve hung all the stars in the sky. Even though he’s kneeling between my legs, I try to snap them shut.

“Don’t you even.” His hands land on each of my knees to spread them wide again. He settles down between my thighs and kisses each tenderly. “So,” he says, his fingers stroking me from my entrance to my clit, spreading my arousal everywhere he touches. “Like I was saying—is there something I can do for you?” His voice shakes a little as he speaks, and it makes me think he’s asking for himself as much as he’s asking me. Before I can answer, he slides one finger inside me, then a second, pumping them in and out, in and out, curling them forward like he’s beckoning me to answer.

“I—I want you to go down on me,” I rasp out, desperate to feel his tongue on me.

“Don’t have to ask twice.”

And then his mouth is on me.

His tongue is powerful, and he moves it confidently, greedily, lapping up my arousal. He moans at the taste of me, sending vibrations coursing through my entire body. My hands scrabble at the leather sofa, trying to hold onto something that doesn’t send me spinning. His tongue fucks me like it was
made for me, and me for it, and I can’t think for the life of me why we haven’t always done this, why we couldn’t always do this.

I watch him as he spreads my lips apart to plunge his tongue inside me, plundering me like I’m a hidden treasure. He looks up, his eyes meeting mine, and groans when he sees me watching him. He withdraws his tongue to tell me in a hoarse voice to touch myself, so I listen, if only because I feel so empty and hollow without his mouth on me, in me. Absentmindedly, I begin to pluck at my nipples, closing my eyes to think about the way Peeta’s mouth had felt on my—

My body spasms, my eyes shooting back open, as his mouth finds its way to my clit, sucking it into his mouth with so much force his cheeks hollow. His fingers work me, curling, curling, pumping, pumping, as his tongue flicks my clit back and forth in a relentless rhythm.

My hands fly from the couch to his hair, and when I press his head closer to me, demanding more, harder, more, I cry out for him—his name—again and again.

It’s Peeta fucking me with his mouth, lying there sprawled out in front of me as if he were worshipping me, and it— he makes me feel cherished and desirable and powerful, like I could fly into the sun and not burn my wings.

He makes me feel like I’m flying, floating, gliding headlong into something greater than myself, and I let go.

His mouth isn’t on me for more than a few minutes when it happens—

I come.

Hard. So much harder than I have ever come before, the waves of bliss spreading through my body, numbing me and electrifying me all at once. My toes curl into the couch, my fingers tear at his hair, my walls clench around his fingers, and I cry out the only truth I know.

“I love you, oh god I fucking love you.” I cry it to the ceiling, to the gods, to the stars, to anyone and anything that will listen, not caring who hears or knows because I am so profoundly grateful to be alive, with him, here, like this, and, as it turns out, whole.

Peeta’s blue eyes lock on mine, looking at me in a way I’ve never seen before. I don’t know what I expect him to say or do in response to what’s just happened or what I’ve said, but he does the thing I least expect—this new best friend of mine, who I seem to know everything and yet absolutely nothing about. He laps up my arousal, drinking up the mess we’ve made—and then he does it all over again, spreading me apart and pushing his tongue inside of me as he rubs my oversensitive clit with his thumb.

It’s agony and it’s bliss and it has to stop, but I don’t ever want it to stop, and I try to push him away, but instead I end up pressing him closer, and he makes me wail his name again and again as he insists on breaking me apart—and, oh god, I’m already in pieces. I am a civilization reduced to rubble, a city of ash that slips between his fingers, slipping, slipping...

My body heaves and shudders, my legs uncontrollably trembling, as he works my g-spot with his strong, capable fingers. How I love those fingers, that hand, that arm, those shoulders, the man they belong to. So I cry it out that I love him, that I love everything about him, as I come for him a second time.

His fingers work me through the aftershocks of my climax, his tongue wringing every last wave of pleasure out of me, before he pulls away to kiss the insides of my thighs. He covers them in dozens
of wet, sloppy kisses that are half my doing, half his, an unknown admixture of arousal and saliva. Then he crawls up my body, kissing my stomach—I shiver—and my ribs—I shudder—and my breasts—I quake—and my neck—I quiver—until he reaches my mouth, where he stoops down to claim me. It’s a kiss that marks me, branding me as his, always his, forever his. It’s slow and deep and tastes like my desire for him and our hopes for the future.

“Did you really say that?” he asks, looking at me with a soft expression in his eyes. His face is open and vulnerable, not a sharp edge or closed door anywhere in sight.

After what he’s done for me—what he always does for me—he finally deserves the whole truth. So I tell him, “I really said that.”

I learn something new about Peeta in this moment: that he can smile brighter than an exploding star. It’s so beautiful it’s painful—so forceful that it annihilates the darkness. It’s instantly, irrevocably my favorite of his smiles. It obliterates all memory of the others.

“I thought so,” he says, scooping me up and effortlessly pulling me onto his lap. Because I’m boneless and spent, I wind myself around him like a vine to a trellis, burying my face in the sweaty skin of his neck and letting him do the hard work of holding us up.

Nuzzling his face close to mine, he whispers words in my ear I never thought I’d hear from a mouth that had been, until tonight, unknown to me. At his hushed promises—I love you, I’m nowhere near done with you—I wind tighter around him, my fingers like spurs rooting themselves to his flesh. Locking my ankles together, I hold on as he stands, carrying me to bed.
Chapter 5

With the taste of Katniss still on my tongue and the memory of her wrecked voice crying out that she loves me still echoing in my ears, I am forced to accept a truth that is as bitter as it is sweet: that everything happens—or, in some cases, not—for a reason. Every missed opportunity, every torment and doubt, all the nights we’d spent in other people’s arms or completely alone, listening to the clock strike midnight as we panted each other’s names under our breaths, pleasuring ourselves to the thought of the other, never knowing the other was doing the same...it brought us here, to this perfectly imperfect moment.

The reality is that when I was fourteen I met the love of my life, and she met me.

But I watched her as she grew up—stood by as she dated other guys, a parade of jerkoffs and fuckups who took her virginity and then whatever pieces of her they could—her innocence, her hope, her joy—until she thought she was broken and to blame, until she believed they’d stolen her fire too. And I did nothing but love her uselessly, holding her hand when I should have been holding her heart.

It took a box of Pumpkin Spice flavored condoms to get us to admit our feelings to each other—for her to fall apart and, in falling apart, to come back together.

It could have happened sooner, but it happened when it should—

So what’s the use of regret?

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Somehow I make it up the half-step into the kitchen, over the Everest-sized pile of her shoes in the foyer, and down the darkened hallway without tripping and dropping her on her perfect, bare ass. The reality of the situation hasn’t even begun to sink in: Katniss is wrapped around me, completely naked, the dampness of her arousal spreading over the skin of my stomach, her breasts pressed flat to my chest, her lips sucking the column of my neck, as my hands grasp her asscheeks—

And she wants to have sex with me.

Holy fuck.

We are going to have sex.

This can’t possibly be my real life now.

The silence in the house is charged with nervous energy, punctuated only by the wet sounds of her mouth on my skin, our labored breathing, and my heavy tread. Each step I take toward the bedroom feels like a journey toward home—with all the excitement and anticipation of walking through the door, the feeling of comfort that only comes from being in the place you’ve grown up. I feel exactly like I’ve found my way home, and it’s to her.

“Your place or mine?” I ask, hoping to pass for teasing and relaxed instead of whatever feeling this is that is building inside of me, threatening to sunder me—something stronger than need or want or lust or love. I think it’s what fuels the universe and propels us forward, always onward—the imperative to be, to know, to do, to make. She can’t know how badly I need to get someplace with her, wherever that is, to fall into her and stay there for as long as I can. Always, if she’ll let me.
As soon as she lifts her head to consider her options I kiss her, not really caring where we go as long as it’s together and right this fucking minute. “Hmmm,” she moans into my mouth, our tongues exquisitely, deliciously sliding against each other. I kiss her again and again, not allowing her to break for air, not allowing her to speak, and I press her against the wall opposite her bedroom door because suddenly the hallway seems like the perfect place to fuck—and why didn’t I see that until now?

She hisses when the cold wall touches her back, thrusting her pelvis against mine instinctively, like the friction from our bodies rubbing against each other could somehow compensate for the unforgiving chill of the plaster behind her. My hips roll in response, my aching cock searching for her, and she buckles back against me, locking us in a tangled, throbbing mess of tongues and limbs and—

“Your place,” she gasps into my mouth, clawing at my shoulders, a sexy little smirk crawling onto her lips as I begin to walk us toward my room.

When my knees bump the mattress, I gently toss her down onto the bed, watching in awe as her breasts bounce and the locks of her dark hair cascade over the crisp white sheets like the wings of a raven fluttering against a stark winter sky. I wish I could paint her like this—beaming and radiant and splayed out in front of me, completely alive, bathed in the light from the streetlamps that streams in through the open window.

“What’s that look for?” I ask, wanting to kiss the corner of her mouth that’s hitched up.

“I just—” she scoots herself up toward the pillows, wiggling her ass on the mattress as her smirk blooms into a full smile. Her hands run lightly along my sheets, her fingers caressing the cotton like she’s touching some sacred relic that might crumble into dust if she’s not careful with it.

I smile down at her and kneel on the bed, nudging my knee between her thighs as I crawl my way up her body, kissing and licking and tasting her everywhere I can, hoping my lips can coax an answer out of her. “You just what?” I mumble into her smooth olive skin. It tastes like sweat and smells like lavender and is exactly what a woman should be, both savory and sweet.

“I just—ah—always—um, fuck—” She grinds herself against my thigh, her hands blindly grabbing at my arms as I flick the tip of my tongue across her nipples, one by one. “I wondered what your—oh god, Peetahhhhh—” Her voice breaks as I take one of her nipples into my mouth, scraping my lower teeth against it. Lightly, I bite down, impatient for her to tell me already. I need her to say it, I need to know. Her body writhes beneath me, her fingers winding their way into my hair, scratching at my scalp, as I nibble and bite at her. “What it—what it would feel like… ungh… to be in your bed,” she pants, pressing my head down to her breasts, anchoring me to her.

Her words spike my pulse, my ears ringing faintly because I think I’ve forgotten how to breathe. I smile into the soft mound of her breast, wondering how I could have ever gotten so lucky. “And?”

Penitently, I lick her, finally crawling the rest of the way up her body to look into her eyes. Supporting my weight with one arm, I touch her, my left hand cupping the soft skin behind her ear while the other slides down along her torso until it reaches her hip. My hand freezes on her hipbone, gripping her tightly as if to assure myself she’s really there, and then I grip harder in the hopes of keeping her.

Katniss’ hand covers mine, her fingers running along my knuckles. She looks hesitant to answer, or maybe bashful, and she gives me a small smile. “I think I could get used to it.”

I want to thank her, love her, worship her for saying that, so my hand drops down over her mound to
cup her sex, my middle finger rubbing easy circles over her clit. “Good,” I somehow manage to say, even though my throat is tight and voice raw from all the things I’d really like to tell her. I settle for teasing because the truth would probably scare her—that the minute she laid on my bed it became hers too, and everything I have, everything I am, is hers. “You’re gonna have to... Since I’m the one with the grown up’s mattress and all.”

She swats at my chest playfully, her skin slapping against mine, even as she continues to ride my hand. “What? Like sleeping on a double—”

I dip a finger inside her and kiss her sweetly, teasingly. “You’re so pure... Who said anything about sleeping?”

She tries to scowl at me but fails miserably as I slide a second finger inside her, fucking her with my hand. Selfishly, because I want to see her squirm, I add a third finger, and her breath escapes in shallow, little pants as her hips work to meet each thrust. “We’ll have to sleep—ah—eventually.”

“Eventually,” I agree, unable to keep the grin off my face at the thought of Katniss, naked and sweaty, flushed and thoroughly fucked, passed out in my arms.

As I kiss my way back down her stomach she pushes at my shoulder. “Hey,” she half-grumbles, half-gasps. “Isn’t it about time you—mmm—ditched the pants?”

It’s the perfect time—it might even be past time—but I wasn’t going to take them off until she asked me, until she was certain that this is what she wants and that she’s good and ready. “You still want to do this? Because I could literally just go down on you all n—”

“Shut up, Mellark.” She pushes herself up into a sitting position, forcing me to kneel in front of her. “And quit holding out on me.” Her hands reach for my waistband, fumbling with the button of my pants. The button’s not an easy one, but maybe she’s as nervous as I am, because she struggles with it for several seconds before huffing impatiently and tugging at the waist of my pants as if to yank them down.

“Easy, Tiger. I got it,” I chuckle, kissing the tip of her nose before sliding off the bed. I try to keep my hands steady as I unbutton and unzip my pants, letting them pool around my ankles before kicking them off one leg at a time. Exhaling roughly, my eyes meet hers—and I stand there, unable to move, rooted in place because I’m one thin layer of cotton away from everything I’ve always wanted. Motionless, we look at each other for several moments, letting our eyes canvas each other, recording and cataloguing each and every freckle and expanse of skin like the other is the revenant of a long-deceased civilization.

We’ve seen each other nearly naked more times than I can count, in segments and pieces anyway— I’ve seen the curve of her bare shoulders in a strapless dress, the jut of her hipbones over the waistband of her low-slung pajamas, the outline of her dusky nipples through the fabric of her t-shirt when she goes braless. But I’ve never seen her laid entirely bare before me, wearing only her heart on her sleeve.

And she’s never seen me that way before either.

Silently, Katniss crawls across the bed toward me, biting her lower lip in concentration as she reaches out for the waistband of my boxers. Her hands feel so soft on my skin, and she’s so close to me, so close I can feel her breath through the fabric of my shorts, that I throb for her. I ache to be inside of her, covering her body with mine, kissing her as I rock into her again and again. Her, I keep thinking, a mantra that repeats itself in my mind over and over. I want her. I want her. I want...
Even through the shade of the darkened room I can see her look up at me through her long eyelashes, and I swallow thickly. She’s not just any girl, and I care more about what she thinks—and how she feels—than I knew was possible. I hope that I can be good enough, that however she may have thought about me, I can be better.

But I remind myself that she’s also my best friend, the person I trust most in this world. She wants to feel good, and I know I can give that to her.

So I watch her peel my boxers off. I watch as she licks her lips at the sight of me, my heart thundering at the flush that spreads across her chest and neck. I watch as her mouth falls open and small sigh escapes her. I watch as she almost shyly takes me in her hand, her skin cool and soft on my shaft as she begins to stroke me, caressing me. I watch as she kisses my head, as her tongue laves me from the base to the tip, wetting my skin with her saliva.

I watch as she leans forward and takes me into her mouth.

_I want her.... I want...._

It’s too much—the feel of her warm mouth as it envelops me, the way her tongue strokes the underside of my cock, how her hand moves in concert with the bobbing of her head. She’s kneeling in front of me, her ass in the air, and all I can think about is how it would feel to take her from behind.

“Rain check,” I croak, cradling her head by her jaw to guide her away. She lightly scrapes her teeth along my shaft as she pulls back, and my hips roll toward her, protesting my decision.

“But it’s been too long and it feels too good and it’s Katniss’s mouth on me—

And I need to make her come again.

“Don’t look at me like that.” I laugh, half-begging, as I lean down to kiss her frown lines, tugging at her arms because there’s no earthly reason she should be crossing them against her breasts to cover herself from me. “That was just... too good, is all.”

“So?” She throws herself down on the mattress, petulantly covering her face with her forearm, and groans. It’s not the kind of groan I ever imagined her making in bed with me—she sounds mortified, maybe even a little ashamed. And I hate that I’m the reason for it.

“So.” I climb onto the bed, spreading her legs to nestle myself between her thighs, and nudge her arm with my nose. She responds by lowering her arm and wrapping it loosely around my waist, but, ever the stubborn ass, she continues to stare at the ceiling, refusing to make eye contact with me.

“Hey, don’t,” I chide her softly, reaching down with one hand to tickle her knee. She bites her lip and tries not to squirm. But she caves, and when she laughs, her beautiful gray eyes finally meeting mine, I arch my back and then lower myself, grinding against her in one fluid motion, coating my cock in her juices. Her laugh dies in her throat—a choked, strangled sound—and she gasps as I hit her clit. Kissing her, I swallow the sound, tasting its flavor and depth. As she kisses me back, I think about how it tastes like passion ripened by time, like fruit that has sweetened on the vine. Pushing a sweaty lock of hair off her forehead, I smile down at her, hoping she can’t see that it hurts to want someone this much. “I was just kinda hoping we could have fun other ways, if that’s okay.”

_Fun._ I choose the word carefully, keeping it light for her. But it’s so inadequate it feels like a lie.

“Okay,” she whispers, taking a shuddering breath, her fingers tapping on my waist a language I’ve learned to decode through the years. It means _I’m scared_, but more than this, it means _I trust you._ I’m
“Okay,” I whisper back.

“Should I—should I go get a condom?” She juts her chin vaguely toward her bedroom.

“No—I ah—” I scratch my nose before rolling myself off her and reaching over to my nightstand drawer. “I have some in here.” Opening the drawer, I fumble blindly for a moment before pulling out a strip of condoms and tearing one packet off with my teeth. When I look back over at Katniss, I can’t help but notice her face has fallen a shade.

“Yeah, good idea,” she says. Her head turns to the side, her eyes fixing on the open drawer. She looks pensively at it like it’s the source of all our regrets, like it holds a lifetime of missteps and almosts.

I know what she feels bad about, and why. Because it kills me too, the unnecessariness of all of it.

“I should check the expiration date on these,” I joke to make her feel better, making a show of squinting at the wrapper even though I know they’re still good.

“Please—it hasn’t been that long.”

“No. It hasn’t,” I admit, running a hand up and down her thigh. There’s no point in pretending otherwise. “But these guys have been chilling in that drawer since we moved in together. I’ve never —” I pause, watching my hand caress her knee, unable to look at her as I say this. “That is—I haven’t brought a girl home because it didn’t feel—it wouldn’t have been—” Out of the corner of my eye I can see her watching me, deciphering me. I hope she says the right thing, that she sees the truth after all this time and that I don’t have to say it.

“So if it wouldn’t have been right for you to bring a girl home, what have they been doing in your nightstand, Peeta?”

When I look at her I sigh in relief, because she’s smirking at me like she knows. I shrug and smirk back. “I think maybe they were... hoping?”

At this she sits up and pushes me onto my back, straddling me. I watch in awe how gracefully she moves, how she fits herself to me like she knows she belongs there.

“Now look at us,” she says, stroking my chest and then the skin of my abdomen, her fingertips winding through the hair of my happy trail and then down to my cock, where she runs them along my length, her thumb rubbing the sensitive spot right below the head.

And I do—I look at the richness of her skin contrasted against mine, the way her slender body curves around me just so—and I see the entire world in front of me, the far-flung corners I never thought we’d live to reach, and I see where we started, the place I never thought we’d see again.

I reach up and trace the crescent-shaped scar on her chin. “I have loved you a very long time.”

She lets out a strangled cry and shows me she loves me too, swooping down and crushing her lips to mine as she grasps the sides of my face. Roughly, needfully, she begins to rub herself against me. I clasp her hips, her ass, her thighs, her back, pressing her to me, squeezing my eyes shut to relish the sensation of her arousal coating my cock. We rock together, and she gasps. And as we move, her nipples grazing against my chest, we keep our lips pressed together, stealing each other’s sounds, whispering things to each other that are as sweet as they are filthy.
I flip her onto her back and kiss her once, quickly, before I pull away to tear open the condom wrapper. She watches me, her chest heaving, her breath escaping in short, desperate huffs, as I roll the condom on and climb back over her.

“Katniss?” I ask. My eyes search hers, and I drag the head of my cock through her folds, teasing myself, teasing her, wanting to lose myself inside her, wanting us to fall into oblivion together, to lose ourselves together.

“Peeta,” she says, wrapping her legs around my waist and pulling down on my shoulders, drawing me closer to her every way that she can.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I reach down with one hand to line myself up to her entrance, and I give a shallow thrust, pushing into her. I have to bury my head in the crook of her neck because she’s so tight, so warm, so perfect, so everything. Arching my back, I pull back, and then thrust deeper, feeling her stretch to take me in. I do this again, slowly pushing deeper and deeper, until I’m completely sheathed by her, and then I hold still to let her adjust to me, savoring the feeling of her as I kiss her neck and then look into her eyes because holy and fuck we are actually doing this.

“Oh god,” she exhales, hanging onto the final consonant like it’s a tether keeping her from drifting weightlessly into the abyss. One of her hands finds its way to my face, her small palm cupping my jaw. “You feel so”—I begin to move inside her, rolling my hips to fuck her, and she groans, “You feel so good.”

But it’s more than fucking, and it’s more than good, and it goes beyond feeling or anything else that words can describe.

I kiss her over and over, wet, sloppy, bruising kisses that do little to muffle the deep moans she makes every time I push inside her. Deliriously, perversely, I hope that the pedestrians stumbling home from the bar can hear us from the street, coveting the bliss that can’t be found in any bottle—that can’t be found anywhere but in the arms of the person you love. She meets me thrust for thrust—at first easy and slow and shallow, and then deep and rough and punishing—but her mouth is on me, and my mouth is on her, and she’s crying out to the night in a broken, raspy voice that I can barely recognize but somehow claim as mine, all the things she wants me to do to her.

And I do them all—every last thing she asks, everything I’ve wanted to do all these years. Biting and licking, clawing and gripping, kissing and tugging and pinching and flicking—everywhere I can reach, I cover her with my hands, my mouth, my body, our sweat.

I can feel the pressure mounting, and I know I won’t last much longer. It’s been so long, too long, and I’m inexplicably here with her in this place that’s ours, and I’m doing what I was made to do, and that’s loving her, loving her.

“Katniss, are you close—I—”

“I won’t be able to,” she murmurs, her eyes squeezed shut and eyebrows knitted together, as she shakes her head. “I can’t—”

“You can,” I say, pulling out abruptly and grabbing her hips to turn her over onto her stomach. Her body moves as easily as a leaf tossed by the wind, recklessly submitting to the whims of the elements.

“On your knees,” I urge, patting her thigh with one hand to encourage her up. She fumbles, struggling to work her way onto shaky legs, so I wind my left arm around her waist, helping her onto all fours.
Her head hangs between her arms, her back arched and heaving from the effort of breathing, and she looks spent even though we’ve just begun.

I trail kisses all along her spine, her body shivering as I pull my body up to cover hers. “Touch yourself,” I tell her, murmuring the words in her ear before I lick the shell.

Without protest, she snakes her right hand between her thighs, and in the dark I can hear the wet sounds her fingers make as they drag through her folds and begin to rub her clit. As she touches herself, I touch her, rolling the stiff peaks of her nipples between my fingers, kneading her breasts, running my lips against the smooth skin of her back. My hands glide down along her ribs to her waist, and I hold her body tightly against me so she can feel how hard I am for her, so she can feel how I want her but will always wait for her.

“Peeta,” she gasps after several moments, her hips beginning to push back, searching for friction.

“How do you want it?” I ask, rubbing her back affectionately with my left hand while stroking myself with my right, getting off to the site of her letting go. If there’s anything more beautiful in the world than Katniss in the moments before she comes, I haven’t seen it.

“How hard,” she says, her voice raw and low.

In one rough motion I push into her, the force of it causing us to fall forward onto our forearms. Katniss makes a sound that is half-laugh, half-sob, and I bite down on her shoulder to keep from laughing with her. There’ll be a time and place for that with her, some other time in bed together, and I look forward to it, laughing as we make love. But not tonight—not when she’s this close and needs to know she’s not broken, that together we’re whole. “Are you okay?” I ask, kissing her shoulder, licking it to taste the salt on her skin.

“Mmhmmffff,” she answers, her voice muffled by the mattress.

It’s all the answer I need. Bracing myself on one elbow, I wrap the other around her waist, lifting her as I begin to thrust into her so that she can keep touching herself if she wants. Instead her hands reach above her head, clutching the edge of the mattress, gripping it so tightly that her knuckles whiten, so I wind my hand between her thighs to work her clit. The sounds of our bodies slapping together, the bed frame creaking beneath us, and the drunken laughter wafting in through the open window are the only soundtrack to our lovemaking. It’s a chorus as timeless and transcendent as the greatest of masterpieces—this one we make together.

She begins to cry “oh god” as she comes, her walls convulsing around my cock, beckoning me, inviting me, goading me to come with her. But I bite my lip and bury my face between her shoulderblades, continuing my pace to wring out her orgasm. When her body sinks bonelessly to the mattress, I finally let go, spilling into the condom, my fingers gripping whatever skin of hers I can—I don’t know or care what I’m holding onto as long as it’s her. It’s her—it’s her. All I can think, all I know, is that it’s her.

As I soar and then plummet I fall atop Katniss’ body, lying sprawled out across her as if I were protecting her from a sky raining fire and bombs, covering her as if to shield her from the eyes of the world and everything that might hurt her. It’s quite possible I’m crushing her, but in my arms, like this, it feels like this is where I can keep her safe.

After several seconds she breaks the silence in the room, muttering, “Oh my god,” into the comforter.

All words have abandoned me, so I simply laugh, pulling out swiftly and collapsing next to her on the mattress. I scoop her into my arms so that we’re spooning, her head resting on my bicep.
Katniss threads her fingers through mine, linking our hands together across her stomach. “Don’t you have to—” she yawns, sounding drowsy, or at the very least, well fucked.

“Yeah, but it can wait.”

She raises my hand to her lips and kisses it. I can feel her grin against my skin. It makes me impossibly happy knowing I’m the reason it’s there.

I kiss the back of her head, nuzzling into her hair. “So,” I say, “we did it, huh.”

I don’t just mean sex, or even the fact that together we made her come—I mean we did it, made the massive leap together into something more.

“Yeah,” she sighs, “We did. And as for sex—” She drags my hand down one of her breasts, down, down across the flat plane of her abdomen, “we’re going to do that—” she places it between her thighs, where she’s still wet—or already wet—for me, “again and again.”

And we do—the night fading into early morning—as we alternate between making love and dozing in each other’s arms, waking up to the other undulating their hips or exploring with their hands. She wakes up with my head between her thighs, and I wake up to her hand around my cock, and it’s hard to say what’s better, the sound of her heavy breathing as she comes or the sound of it as she sleeps on my chest.

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When I wake up in the morning she’s gone.

Despite the open window, the air in the bedroom is heavy with the smell of sex and sweat, and the sheets are a rumpled mess from the tangling of our limbs. My entire body aches, from my overworked jaw to the scratches on my back and the muscles of my calves. But for one fleeting moment I panic that everything that happened last night was nothing more than a fantasy—that, regardless of what my senses are now overwhelmingly telling me, maybe none of it was real.

A quick glance at the bedside trashcan snuffs out those thoughts—Katniss and I definitely had sex last night. And not just once or twice. Many times. The bin is littered with wrappers and tied off condoms, tissues, and even a wadded up washcloth, chalked up as lost. Closing my eyes, I conjure the image of her spread out in front of me, her pussy glistening and wet, the expression of bliss on her face as she unraveled from my mouth. I run my palm over my morning wood and think about how I want to do it all again, how I want to fuck my best friend.

I’m allowed to think these things now—I think—without guilt or self-recrimination.

From down the hall I hear her rustling through the drawers in the kitchen, and then I hear her pad softly toward the bedroom. I don’t know what to expect when she walks through the door, and my pulse races from the suspense. Will we be awkward—fumbling and uncertain about the changes between us—or will we be the same old Katniss and Peeta, back to just friends?

...Or will we be some new race altogether, the kind of mutt you get from mixing friendship with love?

I lift my head as she walks into the room, and when I see her smiling at me, every doubt I might have had about our future is instantly annihilated. I smile to match hers.

“‘Mornin’, beautiful,” I croak, my voice thick from sleep and desire because all she’s wearing is one of my white undershirts. Through the cotton I can see her nipples, and even though it’s already
oppressively warm in the room, they’re stiffened into hard buds that poke against the fabric. I shift on the bed, hoping out of habit that she doesn’t notice my hard on for her.

“Mornin’,” she says, walking toward the bed and climbing onto it. She’s been up for a while, I can tell—her hair’s wet from showering, and she’s foregone her trademark braid, opting to leave it in loose waves that hang past her shoulders. She can’t possibly know how much I love it when she leaves her hair down like this—because I know it means she has no plans to leave the house.

Her hands are full—she’s holding her cell phone in one and a plate of cold pizza in the other—and I notice she’s tucked the box of Pumpkin Spice flavored condoms under her armpit.

“Whatcha got there?” I ask, rubbing the sleep out of the corner of my eyes.

“I thought I’d make you breakfast in bed,” she smirks, proffering the plate.

“A girl after my own heart.” I take it from her and begin to devour a slice, having worked up an appetite in the night. As I’m chewing, she tosses her cell phone onto the bed next to me.

“For you,” she says. “You can call off work—that is... if you still wanna play hookie with me.”

She places the box of Pumpkin Spice condoms on the nightstand on what I suspect will be her side of the bed and looks at me, suddenly seeming vulnerable and small.

It takes me several seconds to realize she’s worried I’ve actually changed my mind, that in the light of day I might not want this—

She still has no idea. I wonder if she ever will.

“Um, fuck yes,” I say, unceremoniously dropping the rest of the uneaten slice onto the plate and placing it onto the nightstand next to me. Picking up her phone, I rack my brain for my boss’s number and leave her a voicemail, explaining that I won’t able to make it into the office today or even tomorrow (I never want to leave this house again, my new vocation being ways to make my best friend come), and then, before I toss the phone back down onto the bed, I stop to consider that Katniss handed me her phone, not mine.

When I look up at her, she’s gazing intently down at me as if to say something. The thing is, she’s not good at saying something—but she’s promised to show me. Katniss nods once, silently, and I scroll through her recent calls.

She’s made a few this morning.

To work, which means she has nowhere to go.

To Annie and Finn, which means all our friends will know.

And to—

“So,” I say, trying to keep my hands from shaking as I place her cell phone on the night stand. Katniss shuffles on her knees across the mattress toward me, and I can’t help but grin stupidly at her. That’s my girl, I think, admiring the lean lines of her legs, the soft swell of her breasts, the way her eyes sparkle at me like I’m the one carrying the fire.

“So,” she says, climbing onto my lap.

“What you’re saying... is that you’re all mine.”
“Basically.” Taking a deep breath, she kisses me, cupping my jaw to look me in the eye, a tiny smile quirking up the corner of her mouth. “Officially. As long as you want me.”

The answer is always, but then she already knows that. I kiss her crooked smile and run my hands up her bare thighs, sneaking beneath the hem of the shirt she’s wearing until I’m lightly stroking her clit, tracing my way through her folds to her entrance. I’ve barely even touched her, but she’s already soaking wet.

“No underwear?” I ask, my voice husky from all the things I want to do with her. I lift my hips and press my cock to her center, wanting to be inside her.

She winces at the friction and shifts off of me. “Sorry. I’m—ah—a little sore this morning. We might want to take it easy next time. I thought for now I could maybe cash in that rain check of yours?”

“I’m completely unwilling to argue with that,” I chuckle, cupping one of her breasts through my shirt. She grabs my hand and kisses it, then bites playfully on my index finger, drawing it into her mouth to suck on it, flicking her tongue against the skin. “I’m sorry I hurt you,” I add in a whisper, mesmerized by the way her mouth stretches around my finger.

Her mouth makes a popping sound as she releases it. “You didn’t.” She turns and grabs the box of condoms from the nightstand, opening it and tearing off a foil wrapper. Ripping into the wrapper, she pulls out an orange condom.

“Hey look, my favorite color,” I joke, trying not to think about how it’s the same shade as an Oompa Loompa’s junk with VD. Surely that can’t be a good thing, a DayGlo orange, food-flavored, off-brand condom? I claw at the back of my neck, not really wanting it anywhere near either of our bodies. “We’re actually gonna use one of those things?”

“Yeah,” she shrugs. “Why not? I guess I’m curious to see if they really taste like pumpkin spice—aren’t you?”

My eyebrows dart up at the question. “Am I gonna find out?”

“Fair point,” she laughs, peeling the covers off my lap. She smirks up at me when my erection juts toward her. “No underwear?” she asks, mimicking my question.

“Nah,” I laugh, flushing pink as I think about how going commando had paid off last night and how, with Katniss, sleeping naked was going to be an inevitability. “I didn’t want to seem... inhospitable.”

“Well, you’ve always been a welcoming guy,” Katniss teases, bending down and surprising me by taking me deep into her mouth.

“Oh shit,” I gasp, winding my hands in her hair and making a royal fucking mess out of it. She sucks hard and then releases me, giving a long, slow lick along the shaft. Her mouth is heaven—I am convinced of this. Men would fight wars and endure the worst kinds of torment to find themselves a woman half as wonderful as her.

She rolls the condom on, and I watch her in wonder—the way she handles me, how beautiful she looks when she licks her lips, how her hair hangs over her shoulder as she bends over, my cock disappearing between her full, pink lips—

Then she pulls away suddenly, gagging and retching.

“Oh hell, that tastes awful,” she gasps. Scrambling over me, she grabs the half-eaten slice of pizza and takes a large bite, viciously chewing it and swallowing, then taking another. “Gah—I’ve gotta
“What?” I can’t help but laugh, “You mean to tell me it doesn’t taste like cinnamon and nutmeg and the spirit of fall?”

“No,” she grimaces. “It tastes like latex and—I don’t know—dirty dish towel? Or—or something curdled?”

She looks crestfallen, and because there’s something so earnest and innocent about her disappointed hopes for those damn condoms I bite back my laughter. “C’mon.” I pull her onto my lap by her armpits, gingerly resting her against my length, wanting to feel her without hurting her.

“What?” She presses her forehead to mine, and she closes her eyes, stroking my chest, then my abs, moving her hand lower until it’s between us, her thumb stroking my glans. Even through the condom it feels amazing, but I resist the urge to lift my hips. “You don’t have anything else smartass you wanted to say?”

I shake my head, too smitten to joke with her about things that don’t matter.

When she leans in to kiss me I taste traces of latex, and it reminds me what a waste of a perfectly mediocre condom it would be not to make love to her this morning. She said we should take it easy, and that’s what I want to do—to take it easy with her, inside of her, letting her set the pace.

She seems to have this idea too because she lifts herself up on her knees and guides me with a hand to her entrance. Slowly, she sinks down onto me, biting her lip and knitting her eyebrows as she takes me in inch by inch, gently lifting her body and lowering herself to ease me inside of her.

When our pelvises are flush we sit for a moment connected, unmoving, looking at each other in awe. In the light of the morning she looks even more radiant and alive than she had last night—and what’s more, on the first dawn of the rest of our lives, she looks powerful and sure. The expression on her face tells me she knows all the things I’d like to say to her, from teasing to adoring.

But I tell her anyway.

She rides me, and I let her move, holding my hips steady for her. I hold her and kiss her and whisper sweet everythings at her as she braces her hands on my shoulders and sinks down again and again onto me. Her winces turn to whimpers turn to wails, and when she comes, burying her face in the crook of my neck, I whisper that I love her, that I always have and always will.

And then I snap my hips once, twice, three times and come, rooting myself as deeply as I can inside of her, feeling her body wrapped around me, right where it belongs.

Our breathing is ragged, our bodies covered in sweat, and the next thing I want to do is take her in the shower—

She slides off of me in one quick motion, and when I look down at my cock I notice something is different—

The condom is gone—vanished like it never existed.

She looks down at my normal-colored, non-DayGlo dick, and then our eyes meet. I know mine must be as wide as hers. Because if the condom isn’t on me anymore then it’s—

I hold her face and kiss her vehemently, saying whatever I can to remind her that it’s me. That it’s us. That everything will be okay because we have each other. I press my lips to hers and tell her, to
make it easier for her, because that’s what I will always do, “Well, I think we know why they were on clearance.”

I hold my breath and wait for her laugh or cry.

She doesn’t keep me waiting long—

We’ve waited long enough as it is.

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As I hold her in my arms, I embrace the beautiful truth that everything happens—or not—for a reason.

It took a box of sketchy Pumpkin Spice flavored condoms, marked down on clearance and intended to be used with someone else, to make my best friend my lover.

It’s also what made us a family.

Her hand clasps around my finger, gripping me like her life depends on it, and just like I am for her mother, I’m a goner for her.

It might have happened later, but it happened when it should—

So what’s the meaning of regret?

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