**Between Real and Not Real**

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**Summary**

An accident throws Peeta Mellark together with the unexpected love of his life. A take on the 1995 film, "While You Were Sleeping" starring Sandra Bullock and Bill Pullman. Written for Everlarkian Archive’s Movies in the Month of May Challenge on Tumblr.

**Notes**

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Damndonnergirls for the gorgeous banner (look for your shout out), my lightening fast beta, myusernamehere for wrangling numerous commas, and last but not least, chele20035 for always being eager to preread!!!

I'm dandelionlass on tumblr too, come find me! :)

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Chapter 1

Between Real and Not Real

Part 1

My dad always told me, "Life doesn't follow a recipe…"

When I first heard Prim, I was instantly drawn to her. My eyes flitted up to the sound of her laugh as she fluttered through the door with her ebony headed friend. It was uninhibited, vibrant, and almost melodic in its tone as it floated to me behind the counter like a crisp oak leaf on an autumn gust. It resonated joy and life and was both familiar and infectious. After hearing that rich timbre, I had no doubt I would marry her someday.

Prim and her friend were wearing matching pink scrubs. The fringe of her bangs perfectly framed her ocean blue eyes while the rest of her shining golden hair was pulled back into a high ponytail that brushed her shoulders. A comically large pink bow perched on top of her head like a crown.

The bow suited her. And the sight of it made me chuckle and brought a smile to my face. It reminded me of the clowns I once saw as a young child at the circus with my brothers. Her excitement was tangible, and her accompanying smile was luminous as a candle. She filled me with a warmth that brisk September Tuesday that surrounded me like one of my father's great bear hugs, thawing me to the bone. I savored that warmth, a sensation I hadn't felt since my family was still alive.

The badge clipped to her pocket displayed her name, Primrose, and that she and her companion worked at the county hospital downtown.

"Good Morning, welcome to Peet's Coffee and Buns!" I greeted them in my typical manor. "What can I get for you lovely ladies?"

"I'm not quite sure," the dark haired woman, Posy, admitted. "We've never been here.

"We just moved back to start our pediatric fellowship at Parkland today and thought we'd save on parking and traffic by taking the DART Rail," Prim elaborated. A light rail station sits not 100 feet from the apartment complex where my shop rests and is a straight shot into downtown Dallas.

"Well then, might I recommend one of our tropical smoothies? They’re really popular. Or we have a plethora of pastries that we bake fresh each morning," I suggested, gesturing to the nearly full display case to my left.

"I'll try the tropical smoothie then please. That sounds refreshing." Our green smoothies are deceptively delicious. The tropical one is filled with spinach, mango, pineapple, strawberries, banana, and Bulgarian yogurt, to make it especially creamy.

"Ooo!" Delly Cartwright, my coworker and friend, chimed in, shaking her shoulders back and forth. "The tropical smoothie is one of my favorites."

"Great choice!" I agreed. "And I like your bow by the way."

"Thanks, but you don't have to say that. I know it's ridiculous. All I need is the red nose. I just really want the kids to like me and not be scared when we do rounds." I was taken back by the thoughtfulness of her confession. I couldn't comprehend anyone being frightened by her petite form.
"No, truly. It suits you," I assured her.

Grabbing a clear to-go cup and purple sharpie from the Mellark's Bakery coffee mug next to my register, I asked, "What name should I write?"

"Oh, Primrose. Prim, actually." I jotted her name on the cup's side, punctuating the ends with flowers.

"No, no. Put that away," I told her as she began digging in her wristlet for payment. "Breakfast is on me this morning. Congratulations on your first day!"

The two women chorused their gratitude. Then Posy ordered our signature giant cinnamon rolls, stuffed with pecans and cranberries and smothered in a gooey bourbon glaze, as well as a small cappuccino. Meanwhile, Primrose eyed her incredulously as she moved down the counter to watch Delly purée her own meal.

"What? I'm celebrating the first day of my dream job!" Posy explained with a giggle and shrug. "Here. At least let try a pinch," she offered once I handed her the boxed confection.

The groan Prim emitted as she devoured her bite went straight to my groin, and I shifted behind the register to ensure my growing erection was hidden from their view.

"Good gracious, that's divine!" she exclaimed after swallowing. "What’s in there? Crack?"

"I can't say. It's an old family recipe, and I'm sworn to secrecy," I bantered back with a wink. She blushed, and I felt my heart swell.

"Will you let me have it back if I promise to give you half?" Posy questioned jokingly.

"Sorry, Posy," Prim replied sheepishly and handed the box back.

Posy strained to look at her watch with full hands. "Come on, we better get to the platform. It's five 'til."

"Y'all will have to come back so you can get one of your own," I called as they turned to leave.

"Don't worry, we will!" Prim confirmed with a wave.

"Could you be anymore obvious?" Delly chided after the door shut behind the two women. She was smirking as she laughed. "We'll see if you scared them off, Mellark."

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Prim did come back.

She returned to my shop several times in the following weeks. And multiple times per week, to my immense pleasure. Each visit, she wears her same pink scrubs but with a different bow or themed accessory. A bow in my favorite shade of sunset orange with large dangly spider earrings for Halloween. Turkey-like feathers on a hair clip the week of Thanksgiving. They must be a big hit with the kids at the hospital.

She never orders the same drink or pastry twice, and I always leave her a tiny drawing to brighten
her commute. It's not much really, a little primrose blossom in different locales. I looked up her namesake after our first meeting. One day the flower was growing in the crack of a sidewalk, another day in a flower pot sitting on a windowsill. The Monday she mentioned she had a cold over the weekend, I drew a balloon with the bloom that said, "Get Well Soon!" I simply draw whatever happens to pop into my head in that moment with her.

We haven't had an in-depth conversation, only our brief exchanges while taking her order, but I know when I finally get the courage to ask her out, it will have been well worth the wait. If I can't work up the nerve soon, I will have to make it my New Year's resolution.

Even with our seasonal pastries and beverages and the fresh pine garlands I placed sporadically throughout the shop after Thanksgiving, Delly insisted we weren't up to her standard of festiveness. The Cartwrights routinely went above and beyond for Christmas, but now even that extreme has been surpassed. It looks like Santa Claus and all his reindeer threw up in here. Being up and productive like this, before the first streaks of light stretch across the horizon, are some of my favorite mornings. They make me think of my childhood growing up in my family's bakery. She won't come out and say it, despite her propensity to chatter at record speeds, but I know she partly does this to keep my spirits high during the holidays. I only allow it because Delly is my best friend and the closest thing to family I have left. Well, that and she volunteered Thom and herself to put it all away come the 6th.

Delly has been going on all morning about the trip out to the country she and Thom have planned for Christmas.

"So tonight we'll be at his Gran-Gran's house in Linden for Christmas Eve supper. I went last year and all the aunts, uncles, and cousins came. I swear there must have been fifty people in that two-bedroom house. I'm pretty sure our apartment is bigger. Most of the uncles were outside sneaking beer and moonshine while the kids ran around though," Delly continued.

"You were invited back. That's got to be a good sign?" I interject with a smile.

"Of course I was invited back, silly. I took out the big guns and brought two of our chocolate pecan pies with the graham cracker crusts. Thom wasn't lying when he said his grandmother is meaner than a bucket of nails. She didn't give me a second glance until she had a piece, and Thom told her I had made it. Then she started interrogating me about my 'intentions for her grandson,'" Delly elaborates, using air quotes towards the end of her sentence.

"So I guess you told her it was your recipe?" I inquire, turning to stare at her with one eyebrow lifted and making a valiant effort at keeping a straight face.

"Fine. Yes," Delly reluctantly admits. "I took credit for your glorious creation. Thank you for getting me in the good graces of Thom's cranky old grandmother, Peeta James Mellark."

"Finally! Appreciation accepted."

We are finishing up our decorating and serving our sparse customers when I hear the jingle bells on the door, and Prim walks in. She's decked out in light-up reindeer antlers, a flashing red nose, and a hand-knit scarf patterned like a candy cane tucked into her hunter green peacoat.

"Morning, Rudolf! So what'll it be today?" I ask when Prim reaches the register.

She laughs, turns off the nose, and places it on the counter before answering.

"Oh, I want to try everything on the menu." I futilely try to stave off the blush creeping up my neck at her compliment. "How about the gingerbread kombucha and an orange-cranberry scone?"
That sounds Christmassy."

"We put orange juice and zest in the second fermentation of the tea along with the gingerbread spices: ginger, cloves, cinnamon, and cardamom. So that'll be a prime pair," I confirm. "It'll be $4.67."

"I'm sure it's scrumptious," Prim agrees, handing me her debit card.

"Will you get to see any family over the holiday?" I proceed, adding my latest primrose to her cup, retrieving her scone, and throwing in two of our "ginger bends," soft ginger-molasses cookies, for her to enjoy later today.

"That's the plan. Unfortunately with my hectic schedule, I haven't been able to see much of them since my fellowship began."

"You're all set," I say, passing off her cup and bag. Our fingers brush, and in an effort to pause the moment, I freeze, staring into her brilliant blue eyes, a few shades lighter than my own. "Merry Christmas, Prim." I send her off with a final squeeze below her elbows.

When I return to my position at the register a couple minutes later, I see Prim's red nose.

"Cover the register for me, Dell?" I call back as I dart out the door.

"No problem!" she yells back.

It's still dark, but the train platform is illuminated by a lone arrest lamp at its center. Running towards it, I see Prim cornered by two men. They are in her face, but I'm still too far away to hear what's being said. One pulls on her scarf while the other removes her antlers and places them on his own head. My blood boils at the sight, her abandoned red nose forgotten.

"Hey," I shout from the stairs, "leave her alone!"

The men jump at my voice and bolt, bumping Prim in their hasty escape. She steps back to catch her balance but stumbles on the edge, sending her backwards off the raised platform and down onto the train tracks. I leap down onto the tracks after her.

Rushing, I kneel by her side. "Prim, Prim!" I gently shake her as the volume of my voice and panic grow. Her chest rises and falls with her breaths, but she is otherwise unresponsive.

The howl of the oncoming train's whistle pulls my attention from Prim. It's barreling towards us on the same track where Prim lies. Without hesitation, and possible neck injury be damned, I scoop her up into my arms and carry her over the adjacent set of tracks as the train passes, inches away from us. The force of its turbulence blows me forward and we stumble into the opposite platform.

"Someone, call 911!" I cry out to the few passengers who have assembled. At my petition, a man comes and takes a still unconscious Prim from my arms and lays her down. I regain my bearings, and I climb up off of the ballast.

An ambulance arrives shortly, and I ride along with Prim to the hospital. The sirens blare, draining out everything during the journey except my racing mind. What if I hadn't let Prim forget her nose? What if I had run faster to catch up to her? What could I have done differently to prevent her fall? My head is reeling when we pull up to the emergency room.

On arrival, Prim is whisked away on a gurney and a nurse begins rattling off questions I have no idea how to answer. "What is her full name? How old is she? Does she have any known
allergies? What is her blood type? Is she pregnant?"

"I don't know! Please, I need to be with her!" I say, breaking away from the inquisitive nurse and flying down the hall to where I saw them wheel Prim. I pass the nurse’s station, catching up to her half-rolled through a set of double doors.

"Wait! Prim!" I beg, trying to catch my breath.

"Are you a family member or next of kin?" a doctor with shoulder length, pin straight gray hair queries.

"No, but..."

"I'm sorry then, you can't be in here," she cuts me off. Pushing the remainder of Prim's gurney through the doors, she follows after, and the electronic doors slam shut in front of me.

"I was going to marry that girl," I say to myself in an exhale, turning to retreat into the waiting area. Sympathetic looks greet me as I again cross the nurse's station.

The waiting room is a cheery mint but still has the sterile, chemical odor from the hallway. It is open on two sides and lined with rows of padded metal chairs and florescent lights. Each row is bisected by a round table or miniature ficus tree. The back wall is a sheet of tinted windows while a rack of magazines takes up the other remaining half wall.

Plopping down into one of the surprisingly comfortable chairs, I remove the phone from my jean pocket and send Delly a text. I explain what happened at the train platform and tell her I won't be coming back until I find out if Prim's alright.

Several minutes later, the young bird-like girl I passed at the nurse’s station approaches me. She's wearing sunny yellow scrubs that beautifully complement her dark corkscrewed hair and deep sienna skin.

"I'm Rue. I'll be Ms. Everdeen's nurse this shift, so if you need anything don't hesitate to ask, alright?" I nod in response.

She leads me to an elevator and then to a patient room in the Intensive Care Unit. We find Prim lying peacefully in bed, attached to an array of IVs and monitors. She has been changed out of her scrubs into a hospital gown, and her typical ponytail is gone. Her flaxen waves now spill over the pillow and surround her head like a glowing halo. The sky blue walls of the room match the shade of her closed eyes and are bordered at the top with flowered wallpaper. And I think that she would like that.

"Go ahead and talk to her, darlin'. It's good for her to hear your voice," she encourages me. "I'm just going to take her vitals and check the monitors."

"Prim," I start, moving closer to the side of the bed and taking her hand in mine for the first time. "Everything's going to be alright. I'm here for you. It will all be fine."

"So you're the guy who stopped the assault and hauled her off the tracks?" A ginger haired policeman speculates, entering the room. I startle at the intrusion. He proceeds, extending his hand. "Officer Darius Odin. When you have a second, I need to go over a few questions for the report."

Before I can answer, a man that looks like he just stepped out of a GQ photo shoot swaggers in. This guy is a doctor? How does he look that good? The black dress shoes that peek out from under his creased charcoal slacks are mirrors, and his crisp turquoise shirt is rolled up to the
elbows, making his biceps bulge that much more. He is an adonis, all the way up to his bronze locks, meticulously coiffed in homage to Don Draper. The potent aroma of his hair pomade only adds to the effect.

I'm jerked from my introspection when a screech pierces the air.

"Prim!! She's in here everyone!"

A blonde woman in her mid-thirties teeters in on a pair of 5-inch magenta stilettos that perfectly match the pin stripe of her navy skirt suit. Her hair is teased and piled on top of her head in a curly bouffant. She is immediately followed by a stampede of people. Prim's room is now bursting at the seams, everyone either babbling or wailing.

The supermodel doctor is not amused. He takes the tootsie pop out of his mouth and whistles to gather the mob's attention. "I'm sorry, but everyone can't be barging in here like that."

"She's my sister!" a tall, brooding man with cropped coal colored hair rebuffs him, scowling. His arm is wrapped around a weeping, older blonde waif of a woman. Another blonde with an angled bob and closer in age holds his hand in both of her own.

Ms. Stilettos approaches the doctor and attempts to quell the situation. "What's the diagnosis? Doctor?"

"Odair. Dr. Finnick Odair. Ms. Everdeen, I'm afraid, is in a coma."

"On Christmas Eve!" the wispy woman exclaims with a resurgence of sobs.

"But." Dr. Odair proceeds, "her vitals and brainwaves are strong. I think she'll pull through in time."

"How old are you. Are you even a specialist?" a scruffy man in boots, wranglers, and a warn, black, fitted t-shirt butts in. He looks to be in his forties, but his grizzly salt and pepper beard makes it difficult to tell for sure.

"Haymitch, sweetheart, please" Ms. Stilettos pleads, grasping the grump's arm with her well manicured hand.

"Yes, sir. I am a neurologist." Dr. Odair, confirms.

"Bless her heart! How could this even happen!" Sir-Scowls-A-Lot's younger blonde friend articulates what I'm sure everyone else is thinking.

"She fell onto the train tracks," I speak up from my spot in the corner behind the gathering. At the sound, all heads in the room whip in my direction.

"Who the hell are you?" I turn towards a voice at the doorway to meet smokey eyes and a furrowed brow. The girl I see is petite like Prim, but her coloring is the exact opposite. A raven braid hangs over her left shoulder. She is makeup free and wears only a simple evergreen top and skinny jeans, but she's as gorgeous as Prim.

"Katniss! Manners, please," Ms. Stilettos chastises.

"I'm Peeta Melkark. I..."
At this revelation all hell breaks loose.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Whew! Part 2 is finally up!
I could never have done it without the support of so many lovelies in the fandom who gave editing advice or preread on different drafts along the way. Many many thanks to Chele20035, Court, damndonnergirls, mitchesbray, myusernamehere, norbertsmom, papofglencoe, & titania522. I'm sorry, it's been so long I know I probably forgot someone (let me know!)...
I hope y'all enjoy and please let me know what you think.
Come find me on tumblr @ dandelionlass if you want to be friends. :)

Between Real and Not Real
Part 2

"Yes. Wait, no!" I holler, but my refusal is swallowed up by the ruckus of everyone jabbering.
"What!?"
"Prim's fiance?"
"She's engaged?"
"You saved her?"

In the commotion, the tiny silver-haired woman next to Prim's bed begins to wobble. The speechless Katniss bounds to her just as she collapses, followed by a taller, brunette woman behind her.

Ms. Stilettos lets out a glass shattering screech at the sight, silencing the clamor. "Mags!" Crossing over to the slumped woman, she and the older version of Prim ease Mags into a nearby chair with Katniss' help.

"Do you have her nitro pills, Mom?" Katniss asks.

"Here in her purse, Cicely." Ms. Stilettos passes the dropped bag to the older blonde, staying in a squat to fan Mags.

"She has a heart condition," Haymitch tells Dr. Odair as he cuts through the crowd. "Move out of the way so the Doctor can do his job, Effie," he barks. Ms. Stilettos moves over slightly but remains at Mags' side, holding her hand.

"Nurse Rue, a cup of water please," Dr. Odair asks, checking Mags' pulse.

Mags slurs a few syllables, rubbing her forehead. She must have suffered a stroke or something before. Nurse Rue returns with the water, and Mags accepts it graciously, mumbling what I assume is her thanks.
Eyeing the exit down the hall, I debate making a run for it while everyone is focused on Mags. But right when I think I have faded back into the fray and my departure will be undetected, Mags regains her strength, pushing the helping hands away and rising from her chair.

"Please, Gram!" Katniss grips Mags' elbow, steadying and halting her movement. "You should sit and rest."

Mags is undeterred, however, and continues walking in my direction, successfully thwarting my escape. Katniss stays at her side, keeping Mags steady as she mutters something I can't decipher.

"Gram says she's sorry for our horrible welcome. Prim would be so embarrassed," Katniss translates.

"She's been so busy with her fellowship," Cicely confesses. At this Katniss whips around.

"Too busy to tell her own friends and family? Her own sister!? Prim tells me everything!" she says. Her cattywampus jaw, jutting out to the side, broadcasts her suspicion. "Gale, back me up here."

So this coarse, onyx-haired woman and equally dark, brooding skyscraper of a man are Prim's siblings? And this older blonde is their mother? The sisters are like night and day, but the mother could be Prim's twin if she was thirty years younger. Given our interactions so far, I can see no possible explanation for Prim's sunny disposition—it's clearly not hereditary. And these covert introductions don't explain the remaining half of the present motley crew.

"Catnip," Gale chuckles, stuffing his free hand in his pocket and rocking back on his heels. "Prim is such a hopeless romantic; they were probably waiting to announce their engagement to everyone at supper tonight."

Now directly in front of me, Mags pauses her stroll. Reaching her hands up to cup my cheeks, she starts murmuring again.

"Mags has been wanting Prim to find a nice boy for a while now," Katniss proceeds with her interpreting. "She's so happy Prim found you, Peeta."

Mags pats my cheek then pulls me into a surprisingly strong hug. She turns her head and mouths something to Katniss that makes her olive cheeks flush with color.

"I'm not repeating that, Gram," Katniss leans in, whispering through gritted teeth. Mags just laughs.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

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Ring!

"Delly! You've got to help me!" I rush out in a harsh whisper when our call connects. I think I'm far enough away from everyone not to be overheard, but I don't want to risk it. Another shock is the last thing this family needs.

"Peeta, wait! Slow down. What's going on? How is she doing?"
"She's in a coma, Dells. And her family thinks I'm her fiancé." Pacing the small doorway at the end of the hallway, I proceed to share the events of the morning with my best friend. Her exaggerated gasps and exclamations of surprise might be comical if it weren't for the gravity of the situation. "And then her grandmother held me so tight. I just couldn't tell her. She has a heart condition, for Christ's sake. What am I going to do?"

Delly goes into mama bear mode, doing her best to console me. "Oh, Peety, I don't know. We'll think of something, darlin'. I can't think of a scrape this... interesting, but we'll get through it." Her honeyed tone drips with genuine concern. Regardless of the saccharine quality her words possess, two decades of unconditional loyalty have proven her sincerity time and time again.

Scanning back towards Prim's room, I see Haymitch striding towards me. "I've got to go, Dells. We'll talk more at home this afternoon, before y'all turn the wagons east." Her popping laugh is reassuring before she says her goodbye and disconnects the line.

When Haymitch reaches me, he wipes his palm on his jeans then extends it to me. Following the trail of his hand brings my eyes in line with the seven-inch sheathed blade of a bowie knife attached to the side of his belt. I don't know what this man does for a living, but then and there I decide I don't want to piss him off and thrust my hand out to meet his.

"I already know who you are, but you don't know me, and you should. I'm Haymitch Abernathy, the godfather. Basically an honorary uncle," he introduces himself, squeezing my hand in the vise-like grip of his own. Visions of Haymitch dressed as Marlon Brando and seated behind a heavy wooden desk, playing with his knife, flood my mind. I attempt to quell my thoughts, however; they are only replaced by more vivid, violent depictions of Haymitch's particular set of knife skills. His lips form a surly grin which is half covered by his mustache, and we are about the same height, but the intimidation I feel at his close proximity has got me sweating like a whore in church.

"Nice to meet you," I reciprocate, prying my hand free.

"Cicely wanted me to tell you we're all going to get some lunch if you'd like to join us. The doctor needs to run some more tests before he can tell us anything else."

"I'm sorry, I really wish I could. But I've got to get back and close up my coffee shop for the holiday. My coworker has been there alone all day." I take a few steps back in the direction of Prim and her family to say goodbye, but Haymitch pulls me up short.

"Wait. Before you go, son, you really softened the blow for Mags and Cicely, despite the surprise. I just hope this doesn't send either of them into another episode." His menace is only slightly lessened by his comment. "And don't let Katniss scare you off. She doesn't know the effect she can have. Underneath that gruff exterior, she's got a lot of..." Haymitch furrows his brows for a few moments until he settles on a word and a mischievous smirk softens his features, "spunk."

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I take the DART train back to Peet's where Delly and I close up shop for the long holiday weekend. Last year, we kept Peet's open until 2 p.m., like my parents always did with the bakery. But after Thanksgiving and Thom's repeat invitation to Christmas, Delly convinced me to close at noon this year. I don't know what I would have done today otherwise.
We box up all the leftover sandwiches and baked goods for our lunch and for Thom's family tonight. After Thom gets home from his half day, he joins us for lunch at our shared apartment above Peet's. The new apartment complex that sits over the row of shops including Peet's are expensive, but there being three of us brings the rent down to a reasonable level. Most importantly, the convenience to our respective jobs can't be beat. Delly and I take the elevator down to my shop, and Thom rides the DART train a few exits north to the the corporate park off the highway. He is a software engineer for Ignite Inc., a tech company specializing in clean energy utilities.

Delly is singing along with "Santa, Baby" as she plates our lunch in the kitchen. I'm in the living room, working on some new gluten-free recipes I'm considering adding to our menu, when Thom arrives. I greet him with a wave from the couch. In response, he jerks his head at the bedrooms down the hall, motioning for me to follow him into my bedroom. This is extremely strange, considering Thom's usual ritual of mauling Delly when he comes home. The wall of the galley kitchen blocks her view of the front door.

"What can I do you for?" I query after he shuts the door. I barely have time to react when he turns back around, tossing the little black box into my chest. I catch it on reflex, a reaction ingrained in me by a childhood with two older brothers. I look up to meet Thom's eyes for permission. He merely nods, and I open it. The white gold ring I find nestled in the black velvet is clearly an antique. The rectangular diamond in the center is surrounded by a filigree frame of clear blue sapphires, and a small single diamond lies within a filigreed leaf on each side where the band cradles the larger gem's border.

As I examine the ring, Thom's explanation tumbles out at record speed, his clipped Cajun accent making it difficult for me to keep up and decipher. "Mamere gave it to me at Thanksgiving. She said as the oldest grandson, it was mine, and she'd be pleased if I chose to give it to Delly."

"It's beautiful, Thom. When are you going to give it to her?" I inquire, handing the box back to him and clapping him on the back in a brief hug.

"I'm goin' to ask her tonight... that is, with your permission." He runs his hand through his chin-length, ink-colored hair, pushing it behind his ear. This is a tic I've seen him do a thousand times when nervous around the Cartwrights. Does he think I could say no? Despite being the friendliest person on the planet, Delly would wring my neck. Taking my minuscule pause as hesitation on my part, Thom continues. "I drove down to talk to Mr. Cartwright last weekend, but seeing that you're practically her big brother and all, I wanted to run it by you last. Peeta, if it weren't for you moving up here, opening the shop, and dragging Dells along for the ride, I'd have never met her, and that's no lie. I can't thank you enough." This has got to be the most Thom has ever said to me at one time. He is now rambling, so I cut in.

"Man, of course you have my permission! You didn't need to ask, but I'm touched that you did. You didn't think I'd actually say no, did you?" I tease, raising an eyebrow.

"F'true, bruh? Since my talk with her père, I've been more skittish than a mudbug at Mardi Gras. Delly let it slip to Sam that I used to be a heartbreaker who liked to make the misere. Her père didn't take too kindly to it, yeah," he confides, stuffing the box and his hands into his creased beige trousers.

"If her brother, Sam, didn't keep his trap shut, then I'm not surprised on either front. Not a one of them can keep a secret, and Mr. Cartwright has always been fiercely protective of his only daughter." I should know. I got the talk before our first play date in kindergarten.

"That vieux had all his pointed leather working tools out to be cleaned when I got there. It was like I was in an episode of Dexter. And the way he handled them while reading me the riot act like
I was some couillon. Merde! It makes me shiver just thinking about it.” Thom shakes his whole lean body, as if to erase the thought from his mind like an Etch-A-Sketch.

A barking guffaw escapes my throat at the image of the portly, balding Harry Cartwright scaring the brawny, 6-inches-taller Thom shitless.

"Believe you me, you didn't see the evil eye he was puttin' on me when he warned never 'to hurt her.' I don't know what would have happened if her mère hadn't walked in.” Thom seems legitimately spooked so I try to reassure him.

"You've got nothing to worry about, Thom. Delly loves you and will be over the moon. I'll get my ear plugs ready for her inevitable squeal-filled call."

"Thanks. And, I hope to God you're right. If not, look for my body at Cartwright Boots first.” He cuffs me on the shoulder this time.

"Now come on. Delly's probably wondering what we're up to, and I'd hate to ruin the surprise." I remind him.

"Alright, alright. Let me go change, and I'll be out there in a minute,” Thom says, slipping out the door and heading towards their own room.

We sit down and admire Delly's handiwork. Our carved mahogany dining table, one of the few pieces of furniture I kept from my boyhood home, is spread with a red and green plaid table cloth and platters of sandwiches, salads, and Christmas cookies. Delly joins us with a kettle full of mulled apple cider. It has the aromas of Christmas wafting through the house and wrapping us in a toasty seasonal blanket like the layered choral harmonies of the carols now softly playing.

"Hey, Thom Cat! I didn't even hear you come in. You won't believe what happened to Peeta today.” Delly sets the kettle down on a trivet and encircles Thom in a hug from behind.

"SunnyD, mon cher. Donne mon un p'tit bec, Beb?” He turns to kiss her fervently on the mouth, attacking her lips like a tiger pouncing on his prey and tangling his paws in her sunshine curls. It's times like these I wish I'd taken Spanish instead of French in high school. Their "little kisses” are never that. A couple minutes later, Delly lifts her leg, in what appears to be a move to straddle him, and that is where I draw the line. Vigorously clearing my throat, I bring the safari to an end.

"Gracious me, Peeta! I forgot you were here. Forgive us.” Delly apologizes, her cheeks the color of ripe, crisp apples. She apologizes every time they get carried away. Thom gives her round bottom a love pat as she moves to take her seat. She looks back over her shoulder at him and gives him a wicked smirk, a gesture I've come to recognize as promise of things to come.

Thank God they won't be next door tonight. Over the last two years, I've heard and seen more glimpses of my best friend's amorous side, and Thom's backside, than I care to admit. I can't handle much more of their mushy antics after the morning I've had.

Delly finally passes the plate of our prime sandwiches around. She and Thom each take a lemon-dijon egg salad sandwich with avocado and arugula on multigrain toast for their plates. I, however, go for my favorite: roasted pimento and cheese on pumpernickel. This sandwich is not your typical Friday staple, but a creamy mixture of sharp cheddar, pepper jack, and cream cheese, studded with chopped, fresh roasted pimento peppers and my homemade bread and butter pickles. It’s then bathed with just enough cayenne-paprika mayo to make it smooth. As if that combination was not scrumptious enough, my final ingredient, and what gives this culinary classic its kick, is a generous lashing of Texas Pete hot sauce.
"So I don't get it," Delly declares, "What's the big deal? When Prim's family comes back to visit, tell them it was all a misunderstanding."

"If it was that cut and dried, I wouldn't be sitting here asking for advice. Her grandmother fell out when she thought Prim had a fiancé. What do you think will happen if she finds out it was all a hoax?" I scrub my hand over my face, but it does little to relieve the building tension of the situation. "Prim's uncle said she has a heart condition, and apparently her mom has some sort of episodes, too. I don't know what. But if Mags dies from my hasty reveal, it will be on my head. Then how would Prim feel when she wakes up?"

"If he tells them now, he might as well just shoot grandma," Thom explains as he steals the leftover crusts from Delly's plate.

"Ok, then, go along with it," Delly suggests, grabbing a ginger bend and dunking it in her steaming cup of apple cider.

"Really, Dells? This is not one of those Hallmark channel rom coms you love to make Thom watch."

"No, I'm serious, Peeta. Hear me out. When she comes out of the coma, her family will be so overjoyed at her recovery, no one will care about your little ruse. They'll probably even thank you. Shoot, I'd be grateful."

"And what will Prim think?" I shake my head from side to side; there are not many options available. "I don't want her to wake up and realize she was a piece in someone's game. Even if it was all a massive accident."

Delly reaches for my hand across the table, and I reluctantly oblige. "Peeta, Prim has a good heart. It may even rival yours." Delly smiles then, giving my hand a squeeze. "She wouldn't wake up at the crack of dawn to go help sick kiddos if she didn't. If you explain the circumstances to her. I'm sure she would understand. You have her family's best interest at heart."

"And if Prim doesn't wake up, no one will ever know the difference." Leave it to Thom to pull out the macabre humor at the most inopportune times.

"Good grief, Thom! That's not helping!" Delly chastises, slapping Thom's shoulder in playful revulsion but still laughs.

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Long after the leftovers are repacked for Thom and Delly's trip, and I have filled my last remaining sketchbook with drawings of Prim in her ever-changing accessories for her young patients, I decide to head to the hospital in hopes of clearing my conscience and choosing my course of action. It's close to 10 p.m. by the time I park and make my way to her room. Prim is alone, save for the beeps of her many monitors.

I sit for a few minutes, but the change of scenery has done little to clear my foggy head. At a loss, I begin talking to her.

"Hi, Prim. It's Peeta, Peeta Mellark. The guy from the coffee shop. I'm so sorry about what
happened. If I had any idea you would fall on the tracks and end up in a coma on Christmas Eve, I
would have never shouted at those guys. I really like you, Prim, and when I saw them harassing
you, a switch in me flipped, and I had to do something to protect you. I didn't think, and now
you're here. And that's not the half of it. I know I couldn't even work up the nerve to ask you out,
but because of all of the confusion when you were brought in, your family now thinks we're
engaged."

I drop my head down into the cradle of my hands, scratching my scalp and pulling my hair in the
process. It will make me look feral and even more disheveled, but that is exactly how I feel in this
moment. Why am I even talking to this poor sweet woman who most likely doesn't give me
another thought after she picks up her breakfast? I can't answer this, but talking to someone, even
if they aren't actually listening, seems to be removing some of the stresses of the day. With this
realization I continue our one-sided conversation.

"It's hard for me to believe I'm sitting here with your family thinking we are engaged. Of course, if
you were awake, you would have told them, and I wouldn't be in this predicament. Not that I'm
blaming you! I'm sorry, Prim. Words usually come easily to me. I don't know what's wrong with
me, besides the obvious that is." I chuckle and the action makes me lighter.

"I wish I was more courageous and had taken you on a real date to my favorite little Italian joint,
Caesar's. I would have regaled you with my savage tales of growing up with two rowdy older
brothers while we wolfed down their fluffy breadsticks and a bottle of wine." When I close my
eyes I can almost taste the heady garlic and parmesan.

"Pranks were a huge competition in our house growing up. They were usually a lot of fun, unless
something broke in the process and Mother found out." I shake my head, remembering my
brothers and our teenage shenanigans, the train of thought bringing a genuine smile to my face
instead of the expected sorrow, and I welcome it happily. Now inspired, I continue.

"When our oldest brother got permission to go on his first date, my middle brother, Rye, and I
gave him so much crap. We teased and harassed him the whole week. Bannock had been
sneaking around after school with the florist's daughter, but he never had permission to use Dad's
truck to take her out. When they went on their first real date, Rye and I let the air out of one tire
while they ate." I can't suppress the laughter as my story goes on.

"Then we made a false report that Dad's truck had been stolen," I gasp and sputter. "And Sheriff
Cray ended up interrupting them doing God knows what up at the lookout. Poor Bannock. Cyndy
never did go out with him again. We were grounded from everything but wrestling practice for a
whole month, but years later Rye was still convinced it was worth it.

Lordy, we had a lot of fun. One summer Bannock and Rye convinced me to jump from the
second story of our house onto the trampoline, then into the pool. I broke my leg landing in the
shallow end. I couldn't participate in any more swim parties that summer, but I did get to have a
stool in the back of the bakery until the cast came off." I bet Gale and Katniss would never dare to
do things like that to you, I think.

Anyway, by the time our entrées arrived, I would have asked about your childhood and happily
listened to you share about your mostly congenial family, too. They sure are a spirited bunch.

Eventually, I would have told you how excited I am that Delly is getting married and will finally
be a part of a huge family like she has dreamed of for the majority of her life. Really though, I am
terrified for that to happen because then it will only be a short while before her new family will
take my place, and I will truly be alone. I just want someone to share my life with, to grow old
with." I voice my long hidden fear with strained wavering syllables. Boldly, I reach over to shelter
Prim's hand in mine.
"Do you believe in love at first sight?" I hazard. "I'd like to think so. Your brother mentioned you were a hopeless romantic. I'd like to think that you too were building your courage and hoping for me to reveal my feelings to you. Have you ever fallen in love with someone you've barely spoken to? Have you ever been so lonely you spent the night confusing a girl in a coma?" I release a pained exhale at the absurdity of it all. "No. I'm sure I was just one of many suitors in competition for a moment of your attention. And I'm afraid after this mess the odds will not be in my favor."

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It's Effie's trilling chatter that wakes me the next morning. I must have fallen asleep while pouring my heart out to Prim. She is followed by the same gaggle of family members as yesterday, minus her brother Gale, the quiet blonde he referred to as Madge, and the tall brunette with a pixie cut that arrived with Katniss. I'm pressing my palms to my eyes to help adjust to the streaming morning sunlight when I think I feel the weight of a hand on my shoulder. Mrs. Everdeen's touch is feather light, but I can already feel the crush of my guilt as more pleasant faces file in.

Early this morning, I finally came to a decision. Until I can figure out a way to gently break the news to Mrs. Everdeen, and be certain it won't send Mags or her on a downward spiral, I will have to go along with the charade.

"Peeta, dear, did you stay here all night?" Her gentle voice shows more compassion after one day than my own mother's ever did.

"Yes, ma'am," I confirm, standing and attempting to smooth out the wrinkles of my henley shirt. "I guess I fell asleep, and none of the nurses tried to wake me." I don't miss the scowl Katniss aims at me upon my explanation. Does this girl ever smile? "I should go get a shower and let y'all visit."

"Don't feel like you have to leave so soon, boy. It's Christmas, and we just got here." Haymitch moves closer to me and my anxiety rises, burning a trail up my chest and throat. "You got big plans with your family or something?"

"No, none really..."

"What?! Well, that just won't do, will it now? Christmas is a big big big deal for this family so you must join us for supper tonight. No arguments. We want you there with bells on. Give him one of your cards with the address, dear," Effie prompts Haymitch, giving his bicep a pinch, "and get his info too, so I can track him down if he tries to weasel his way out."

Though she winks at me in jest, I don't put it past her. Haymitch complies with her nagging, pulling an engraved leather wallet from the back of his jeans and retrieving a business card. He scribbles momentarily before handing it on to me. Haymitch's henscratch is almost indecipherable, but the branded font next to the embossed goose clearly reads "Aberdeen Furniture." Furniture? Well, that was one occupation I would have never guessed.

Card in hand, I say my goodbyes and mosey on my way.

While waiting on the elevator, a nurse catches up with me.

"Are you Dr. Everdeen's husband?"
"Fiance," I correct.

She offers me the cardboard box in her arms as the elevator dings, and the doors open.

"These are the personal items that were with Ms. Everdeen when she arrived."

When I turn to enter the elevator, I'm met by a petite young lady with sleek red hair and whiskey eyes. She wears the same shade of pink I’ve seen Prim in during the week.

"You're Prim's fiance? That sly little vixen! We eat lunch together everyday, and she didn't even mention it."

"It was very recent." At least that is the truth.

"Wait. Don't tell me she's still mad about that tattoo?! I told her she shouldn't get one just because she was there." This is news to me.

"Huh?" If she slowed down, I might be able to decipher what the hell she's rambling on about. My confusion is no road block, however, and she barrels onward.

"The duckling on her ass. Surely you've seen it if y'all are engaged. When I got this little guy," she raises the edge of her scrub top and pushes down her waistband an inch to reveal a tiny red fox above her protruding hip bone. "I simply asked her to go for moral support, but I should have called her a cab after her second Presbyterian. You should know she can't handle her Jack." I don't know this but voice my agreement anyway. The door to the elevator dings again, signaling its return and I step in this time.

"Prim's down in room 1312. Her family's there, and they'll be delighted to meet one of her coworkers." I tell her in hopes of making this run down.

"Fantastic, thanks! Oh! And Congratulations!" she says in farewell and the elevator doors seal in front of me.

Back at home, I begin baking. My impromptu sleepover postponed my typical Christmas feast. With Thom and Delly gone, I had pared it down significantly to a pineapple crusted ham we could all eat next week and only a couple of sides. The ham, mustard mashed potatoes, cheese buns, and asparagus stir up one of my earliest memories in the kitchen with my father: hollandaise sauce. One detail I refuse to forsake is the Mellarks' traditional Christmas bread pudding, made from the leftover zesty orange rolls from Christmas brunch. Fortunately, I made them last night in a last ditch effort to ease my boredom.

I hastily eat a small plate of my minimized feast for a late lunch, trying not to focus on my missing family, then gather the ingredients for the bread pudding I'm determined will be my supper. I freeze half of the remaining orange rolls and tear up the rest for my developing dessert. I still remember how Mother complained when Dad showed us how to rip them apart the first time my brothers and I helped him make it. In response, he just chuckled and smiled wider, saying the love put in by little hands was what made the pudding so delicious.

I debate staying home after the bread pudding cools, and I've made the accompanying brandy sauce, but shortly find myself cruising through east Dallas.

Stopping in front of a dandelion yellow 1920's bungalow, I see Haymitch through two of its pillars. Perched on the front porch swing, he's puffing a cigar. When he gave me Mrs. Everdeen's address and wrote to stay off Gaston, I figured they lived nearer the hospital, but this neighborhood? In the historic district of Victors Heights, 1500 square foot houses easily go for twice as much as their counterparts in the nearby suburbs.
I park and take a deep cleansing breath before grabbing the pan of bread pudding, jar of brandy sauce, and bag of cheese buns, and exit my truck. Let's do this.

"Hey boy!" Haymitch shouts as I climb the stairs. He pats the spot next to him on the swing, so I join him. "Glad you got to see me. You didn't have any family to spend the day with?" he jokes, gripping my shoulder. I turn to stone at the contact.

"No. No one left." This is something I can tell him that's real, so I carry on. "There was a fire at my family’s bakery a few years back. There were no survivors. I happened to still be down at A&M finishing a class project for the fall semester, otherwise I would have been there with them, helping with the holiday rush."

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Peeta." His use of my name conveys more candor than expected. "You know, the Everdeens are the kindest family I've met, north and south of the Mason-Dixon. James, Cicely's late husband, was my best friend. We played college ball at A&M and went into business together. After I lost my sweet Maysilee and daughter Moira, they didn't hesitate to take me under their wings. For a while there, I had the brown bottle flu and didn't think life was worth going on. But they didn't give up on me. They helped me moderate my drinking again and hauled me back and forth to a grief support group for months. A few years later, they introduced me to one of our new clients, who, lo and behold, was Effie. I would never let anyone hurt this family," he concludes, a sharp edge suddenly present in his gravelly voice.

"I wouldn't either," I instantly concur, meeting his stormy eyes.

The emerald green screen door swings open, and Katniss pops her head out. "Supper's about ready and so is Effie's eggnog," she says rolling her eyes. "And Haymitch, she said to leave that vile thing outside." She retreats back inside, and Haymitch snuffs out the smoldering cigar, balancing it on a flower box.

"I'd steer clear of the eggnog if I were you," he recommends, patting my back while guiding me through the threshold. "The kitchen's right through there."

Their Craftsman kitchen is dark wood with white granite counter tops. Katniss is rummaging through the refrigerator, her back turned to me. I set my contributions to the meal on the empty island and observe the ingredients gathered near the stove: a lemon, stick of butter, and ground black pepper. When Katniss pulls the eggs out, she grabs a small saucepan from the hanging rack it all clicks.

"Hollandaise," I exhale.

Katniss whips her head around to me, her thick braid swishing after her. "Good Lord, you scared me. Do what?"

"Sorry about that. Hollandaise sauce," I repeat self consciously, joining her next to the stove.

"How did you know that? What, are you allergic?" Katniss asks, twisting on the gas burner.

"No, no!" I clarify. "I've just made it most of my life. It reminds me of my Dad. I lost him and my family a while back."

"Really? I'm sorry." Katniss' brow creases, and her lips pull down in a consuming look of sympathy. Not a look of pity but of understanding and experience, I think.

Her focus has not shifted from me, so I feel the need to continue speaking. Words have always come easily to me. And I enjoy painting a story like the skilled strokes of an artist's vibrant, color-
filled brush on a blank canvas, layering and blending until the masterpiece is complete.

"I was in charge of the Hollandaise sauce for Christmas," I start. "At first, Dad would sit me up on the kitchen counter as he separated the eggs and juiced the lemon into a small sauce pan." I separate the eggs as we speak then Katniss takes over. "Every time, he seemed to be able to squeeze it exactly right so a little juice splashed me and sent me into a teetering fit of giggles. Then, after I slowly calmed back down, I would add the water and my real work, the whisking, would begin. It felt like I was whisking forever, but it was probably only about twenty strokes before my pudgy arms ached, and Dad took over whipping the yolks into golden, custardy ribbons. Once the pan was on the stove, I was instructed to chop the cold butter into little squares." I do the same while Katniss finishes with the yolks.

"My final addition, during those younger years, was the peppers. They were merely a couple pinches each, but in my mind the pearly white and fiery cayenne pepper were the dash of magical faerie dust that brought the finished dish to life." After I mention the different spices, Katniss frowns down at the black pepper then reaches for the cabinet to her left.

"I don't think we have any white pepper, but there's got to be some cayenne in here somewhere." Katniss shifts a few jars then pulls out the right ones. "So when did you move up from the hollandaise sous chef?" An actual smile plays on her full lips. It's the first I've seen out of her, and in that moment, she's radiant as the sun.

"As I got older, Dad delegated the eggs and juice portions to me, then later the constant beating which was required while the mixture was over heat as well. By the time I was ten, the operation had been turned over to me entirely, but my Dad still stood by to talk with me throughout the process."

"If you're such an accomplished chef, then maybe you could help Effie with her eggnog?" Katniss ventures.

"Oh yes please, Peeta! I don't know what happened this year," Effie implores as she enters the kitchen.

The way Katniss tightens her lips into a white line, suppressing the convivial smirk that was playing there seconds earlier, gives me the distinct feeling that whatever happened to the eggnog happens every year.

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We all are seated around a long table. Gale sits at the head, near Mags, and the brunette with short hair, whom they call Johanna, sits at the foot. Katniss and Madge flank me on either side, while Effie sits directly across from me with Haymitch to her left. An empty chair with a place setting is to Effie's left.

"Is someone missing?" I wonder. Apparently my question was audible because Mrs. Everdeen answers.

"No, dear. It's a plate for a stranger, just in case."


"It was a tradition from Gram's family growing up," Katniss breaks in. When my attention turns to
her, Katniss is blushing and ducks her head in embarrassment.

"Mags is my mother-in-law," Mrs. Everdeen volunteers.

"So have you ever had one, a stranger I mean?" I'm still facing Katniss, but Haymitch is the one who responds.

"That's how we got Effie to stick around." He wraps his arm around her, pulling her close enough for him to plant a loud kiss on top of her meticulously pinned curls.

"Haymitch?" Effie shrieks, patting her unmoved bouffant back into place. She huffs, raising her eyebrows to stare Haymitch down in annoyance, but he meets her for a beat, and the brilliant smile and giggle that overtakes her face proves the contrary.

"Alright, everyone. Grab hands," Mrs. Everdeen insists, and we all comply, though I see Katniss' reluctance. We both jolt at the static shock when our fingers meet.

Surprisingly, Gale is the one who says grace.

Mrs. Everdeen addresses me after the prayer. "Peeta, thank so much you for joining us tonight."

"Thank y'all for having me," I reciprocate. "Everything looks wonderful."

"Well, if Primrose can't be with us, I'm delighted that you could. And I can't wait to try the yummy treats you brought!" Mrs. Everdeen reaches into the adjacent basket to get a cheese bun. She passes the basket to Katniss who follows suit and then sends it around. At her first bite, Katniss moans and a chill runs down my back. What is wrong with me? I look at her, but her head is down, and she doesn't raise it to make eye contact.

The table is blanketed with food. And everyone, except me, is piling their floral china plates high while conversing lively. Instead, I take in my surroundings. Even with Delly dragging me home with her, I still consider my last family Christmas to be three years ago–the Christmas before the fire. There is a prime rib roast with oxtails, swimming in what smells like a red wine sauce, buttery fingerling potatoes and green beans, seared brussel sprouts with dried plums, pecans, and flecks of bacon, and blanched asparagus resting by the glistening boat of hollandaise sauce.

When supper is cleared away, we migrate to the living room to enjoy the already crackling fire. There is a majestic Douglas fir in the corner next to the stone fireplace, twinkling with colored lights and hand-printed baubles, strung with ribbons of popcorn and cranberries, and sprinkled with dainty crocheted snowflakes. A grand 10-point buck crowns the distressed wood mantle that is lined with knit stocking, each with a script name at the top. What year is it? I feel like I've just walked into a fucking Norman Rockwell painting. Even Mom's immaculate housekeeping and classic decorating with antiques is a dim comparison.

After everyone sprawls out on the various couches and chairs, Mrs. Everdeen produces a worn photo album. She settles in next to me on a couch, placing the leather covered book in my lap. Madge, to my right, is clapping and bouncing on her cushion, but Katniss groans and glowers at Gale when she recognizes it.

"I thought you would enjoy seeing some pictures of Prim growing up." Mrs. Everdeen says opening the album several pages in. "The first section here is all Gale and Katniss, before Prim was born."

"That would be great," I agree.

The first page Mrs. Everdeen lands on is devoted to Prim's birth. There is her swaddled in a
footprint blanket, pink and with thin, wispy blonde hair peeking out from her lavender knit hat. One of her mother, the spitting image of Prim today, holding the little bundle and looking up adoringly and a night-haired man that could only be her husband. The last photo on the page has the whole family. A five-year-old Gale with shaggy hair and two front teeth missing sits on one side of the Mrs. Everdeen's hospital bed, while a two- or three-year-old Katniss, in braided pigtails, is perched on the other.

The album is filled with milestones and accomplishments of all three children. Competitions, sports, scouts, recitals, holidays, and graduations are all documented, ending with what looks like Prim's graduation from Medical School.

As we close the album, Effie brings out individual cups of my bread pudding, steaming and drenched in brandy sauce.

"After this, it's time for presents, everyone," she announces, taking her tray of treats around the living room.

"Prim better hold onto you," Johanna states, licking her spoon clean in an uncomfortably suggestive way. "I'm two shakes away from stealing you for myself so I can eat this orgasmic greatness on a daily basis." Katniss grumbles, rolling her eyes, but no one else even acknowledges Johanna's remark. I get the impression her colorful commentary is commonplace.

"Umm, thank you?" I reply, not quite sure what the proper response to a statement like that is.

Once Effie has made her second pass and collects our dishes, Johanna gets up to play Santa. She passes out the knit stockings hung on the mantle, all except Prim's. Meanwhile, Mags pulls a project out of her purse, leans over, and adjusts her knitting needles to display, "Peeta," at the top of quarter complete stocking.

"Thank you," I tell her, and she nods and smiles, squeezing my arm in response.

I'm further surprised when Johanna presents me with a red felt, store-bought stocking. I had no expectation of being included in this portion of the evening, but apparently I was mistaken. Inside the stocking I find a pocket knife, block letters of my initials burned into the wood-grain handle.

"You can never have too many knives," Haymitch bellows, inspecting the 3.5-inch blade of his same stocking stuffer. "I should know."

Presents from Santa are handed out next. I receive a beautiful, baby blue scarf, similar to the one Prim was wearing the day of the accident. I think I know where the both of them came from, so I send my thanks to Mags. Instead of beaming in return, she shakes her head and points across the room to Katniss. When I turn to look at her, she quickly diverts her gaze to the present in her hands. She doesn't seem embarrassed but almost avoidant in her actions?

"Thank you, Katniss," I tell her. "It's perfect, matches my eyes." I hold the scarf next to my face to prove my point. She finally looks up at this.

"I know. I just wanted you to have something too, since Prim usually brings her gifts with her," Katniss explains, but it’s like she’s gauging my reaction to that detail.

I don’t have much time to read into her words before Effie interrupts my thoughts, asking how Prim and I met.

"What if he doesn't want to talk about?" Gale pipes up.

"We could all use a nice story after the last couple days," she persists.
"What ever happened to that other guy she met at Ripper’s?" Madge throws out.

Thankfully, I'm saved from answering by an outburst from Johanna. "What? That fuckboy Cato? Fuck him and the horse he came in on. Good riddance, I say."

"Sorry I asked," Madge backtracks, eyes wide and biting her bottom lip.

"No, I'm with you, Jo!" Katniss chimes in. "When Prim told me she caught him cheating on her, I seriously debated driving the hour to take my bow to him." At this I make a mental note never to cross these women.

"Okay ladies," Mrs. Everdeen attempts to calm the storm. "Let's not worry about that degenerate. Prim has Peeta now. And we know he is such a charming gentleman." She pats my arm affectionately, and I'm suddenly doubting my decision not to come clean to Prim's family.

"Come on and tell us, Peeta," Effie prods, but, given my train of thought, I'm momentarily confused by what exactly she is asking. Seeing my disorientation, she continues. "I'm certain it was love at first sight."

"Effie, cut the boy some slack," says Haymitch.

"What? I have a sixth sense when it comes to matters of the heart," she defends, nuzzling into Haymitch's shoulder. "Peeta, what first made you notice Prim?"

"Her laughter, smile..."

"You can thank four years of braces for that," Gale interrupts.

"... and her warm personality," I finish my thought.

"And how did y'all meet? What happened?" Effie badgers on, waving her hand in an impatient out with it motion.

I tell them how Prim came into my shop on her first day with her adorable scrubs and bow, how she made me feel things I hadn't since I lost my family, and that I thought there was an instant connection.

"After that day, I knew my life would never be the same," I say in conclusion. The ladies are all ahhing, well, except Johanna who's laughing and Katniss who wears a skeptical raised eyebrow. I look down to escape her scrutiny, and fiddling with my watch, I catch the time.

"I didn't realize it was so late," I hastily apologize, rubbing the back of my neck. "I should head on. I've got to open my coffee shop bright and early."

When I gather my things and get up, everyone else rises to walk me out. We exchange a round of goodbyes and well-wishes, and Katniss snatches the front door, opening it for me.

"Well, aren't you gonna kiss her?" Gale nods his head towards the door frame, chuckling to himself. Sure enough, there hangs a bunch of fresh mistletoe pinned up with a velvet red ribbon.

"Uhh..." I mutter.

"Really, Gale?" Katniss protests, nowhere near amused, a look of utter disgust blanketing her face.

"Tradition's tradition, and he is family now, Catnip," Gale goads, more than pleased at the rise he
is getting out of his little sister.

"Fine then. Let's just get it over with." Katniss grabs me by the neck, and before I can take a breath, her lips are colliding with mine.

There is an unanticipated force behind it. After the shock dissipates, I close my eyes, and it feels like no one else is in the room but us. I have not kissed many girls in my time, just Delly, my first childhood kiss, and a few girls during high school and college, but this kiss is already unlike any others I have ever experienced. Despite the sudden pressure, her lips are soft and warm, and I tentatively push back as well. The heat I thought I felt at the first sight of Prim is nothing compared to the blaze that now sears my body, radiating out from the place where her hand rests on my neck. I'm like a coal that has finally ignited and, now aflame, never wishes to be extinguished.

She pulls away hardly a second later, and I am breathless. Her eyes are dark as ash and her olive cheeks bear a faint pink hue, as though she was warned by the fire. Absentmindedly, she runs her finger over her plump bottom lip.

Her whisper of, "Welcome to the family" is all I comprehend before she shuts their door, and I'm left on the frigid porch to contemplate what just happened.

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