Good Boy - Bad Girl

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Summary

Katniss' fresh start in a small town is over before it begins. As she struggles with the stigma of a bad reputation in her new high school, she fights her desire to get to know Mr. Perfect and Popular Peeta Mellark.

Notes

Hi All, here is a multichapter work which will probably be my most involved since the Kitty Ranch. I started this for November's Nanowrimo and finally have the time to work on it. This story will definitely not be a fluff piece. I hope you enjoy it! Also, you can follow me on tumblr at dianaflynn22.
Prologue - Familiar Faces

Nothing can break me from my troubled sleep. Not the car swaying on the slick road, the lightning streaking across the sky, or the wind howling through the old windows. My nightmares continue their hold on me. The smell, the weight keeping me down, the laughter in the background, it all trapped me in a dark place I don’t want to be. If only I could open my eyes.

“Katniss! Wake up!” Her sweet voice is like crumbs leading the way home and finally I pry my sticky eyes open and start focusing on the world around me. My head is in the lap of my little sister. Her face is filled with concern, making her look much older than her 14 years.

“Are you okay Katniss? You were whimpering in you sleep again,” she asks, stroking my hair out of my face.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a bad dream that’s all. It’s this weird rain in August. How the hell does that happen.” I sit up shakily, unsuccessfully try to give her a smile before sliding to the other side of the car. I tuck my legs underneath me and lean my head against the window, staring at the raindrops streak horizontally across the window.

“I guess because we are in Washington, not California anymore,” she says lightly. My sister’s hand hovers at the corner of my eye for a moment before she puts it in her lap. Ever defiant when it comes to my attempts to pull away, she mirrors my position and her legs jut out enough so her feet touch mine. I let our bare feet intertwine and relax a little. She is the only one who really knows how to handle me these days.

“Katniss, put your seatbelt on.” My mother says looking at me through the rearview mirror. I’m not up to her attempts at motherhood though so I just give her a scowl before I settle my head back against the window.

“Where are we anyway?” I ask looking at no one.

“We’re almost there girls! Our new home. Just a few more minutes.” I can hear the strain in my mother’s voice as she tries to sound cheery. She is really trying, but it is just too damn late. At least for me anyway, so I close my eyes and this time try not to fall back asleep. Prim and mother start chatting about how exciting it is to move, wonder what their new town will be like, chattering on and on. I know they are trying to convince me this new start will be a good thing but I don’t care. Just as long as I am far away from my old home. But this will not change how people see me or how I feel about myself. It is just a temporary escape.

The car slows down and turns, indicating that we are pulling off the highway. I open my eyes then start looking at the quaint beach town that is our new home. My mother is familiar with this town since she grew up here and she navigates the neighborhoods easily. Prim sits up straight, looking right and left at everything we pass, obviously excited. I don’t know how she can be so optimistic since she had to leave all her friends behind, but when she turns to me with a big smile, this time I give her a real one. Small for sure, but it’s enough for her and she squeezes my hand which makes my smile becomes a little bigger. She has that effect on me.

We turn onto a small quiet cul de sac where the houses are all somewhat rundown, unassuming but somewhat charming. We pull into the house at the end of the block. With peeling paint, a sagging porch, and the lawn more dirt than grass it is the probably the most in need of repair, but it is still the largest one. There are forgotten toys scattered in the front, and a rambling primrose bush that cheers up the place. This is my new home I realize, I won’t be going back and my heart is a little lighter at the thought.
Once the car comes to a stop, a girl and boy run out and circle our car, bouncing as they try to look in. Their mother comes out with her son, a boy Prim’s age, looking tired but a warm smile lights her face. My mother and sister leave the car quickly ready to get out after our long drive. The other woman gives my mother a large hug, not caring for a moment how wet it is outside. I am more slow to leave the car, but it’s just because I’m not ready to be around so many people at once. But I do anyway and once I get into earshot I hear my mother saying lowly, “Thanks for taking us in. I don’t know what we would have done if you said no.” My mother is enveloped in a warm hug with an “of course” and guilt threatens to pummel me.

“Come out of the rain everyone! We can get your things later.” They all run in, but again I take my time, letting myself get cold. It feels good on my skin, it makes me feel more than just the numbness that has taken over since I’ve gotten out.

“Come on Katniss I want to introduce you to everyone,” my mother says as I step into the entryway. Although I know all of them from when I was younger, my mother still introduces her friend Hazelle along with her six year old daughter Posy and her two sons Vic and Rory. “We’re only missing Gale, he’s at Stanford correct? Do you remember playing with Gale when you were kids Katniss?” my mom asks cheerfully.

“Of course I do mom,” I snap out causing everyone to shift uneasily at my foul mood. I’ve only been here for five minutes and already I’ve made it awkward.

“Well I made some stew for everyone. Why don’t we go to the dining room and eat.” Hazelle says, trying to keep things bright. We all follow her to the dining room where bowls and bread have already been set out for everyone. I sit at the chair closest to the door and tell myself I can stick this out. Hazelle starts to ask how the trip went so Prim and mom take their turns talking animatedly. I sit and quietly try to eat the food put before me, but everything feels like it sticks in my throat. The only thing that seems to go down is the fresh sourdough bread, it’s warm smell makes me relax despite myself.

“So Billy said that his mom told him that you are a bad girl. Is that true?” I look up startled to see Posy looking innocently at me as everyone else stops in alarm. I look over at Prim and her eyes plead for me to calm down, but I know what this means. Gossip has already followed me to this new place before I even started. There is no escaping it. There will be no fresh start for me, I’m not that lucky.

“I’m… I’m going to explore a bit, “ I say pushing my chair back harshly, trying to restrain the anger at my situation.

“Katniss, please, stay inside. I’m sure it’s nothing,” my mother asks fruitlessly, but I just flip her off, not caring that the children are witnessing and I fly out the door.

I don’t know where I’m going, all I know is I walk and walk until I have no sense of where I am. Then I hear yells and crunches with cheers, whistles, and shouts intermingling in between. It’s the sound that is distinctly high school. I turn down the street where the noise is coming from, and soon enough I am coming on a big field surrounded by a chain linked fence. In front of me is a high school football team practicing in the rain. A Catholic high school I realize and I shudder. Their coach is barking orders while parents are looking on from the sideline under umbrellas. I don’t know why I stay and watch, I don’t even like football, especially the high school kind. It represents everything I hate. These boys don’t have to use their brains to get the good stuff out of life, they just have to pummel each other. The girls they date don’t have to work hard to succeed, they just have to look pretty while shaking their pom poms. But here I am leaning against the fence as I watch them struggle in the thick mud, not complaining as they are ordered to do drill
after drill.

I’m transfixed, I can’t stop staring especially at the quarterback. He has his helmet on so I can’t see what he looks like, but despite his short stature he has a commanding presence on the field, his tight muscles rippling, as he barks orders before tossing the ball. I can already tell this boy must be a clear leader in school if he is anything like he is on the field. Eventually a whistle indicates a break and all the players gather to the right of me at the benches. He pulls off his helmet and bright curls shake free, shining brightly despite the dampened grey skies. His smile is even brighter, and eyes crinkle with joy as he laughs at something one of the other boys joke about. There is something in that laugh that reaches deep down in me, and I instantly hate him. He sounds lighthearted, without a care in the world. He probably just smiles and gets everything he wants out of life. He is Mr. Perfect All American Boy and I want nothing to do with the likes of him.

It’s almost like he could read my thoughts because he whips his heads towards me suddenly, searching, and our eyes make contact before I can even react. Even from this distance I can see they are a blue more intense than my own sister’s eyes. The kind of color you only see in travel magazines in sparkling tropical oceans that you want to dive in. They squint, no they pierce through me, like he is surveying everything that I am inside and out. I don’t like it at all. But I am surprised to see a depth in those eyes that says “I am more than what you think I am.” I shake my head slightly, knowing I must be imagining things, and by that time I look up again he is back to talking to his friend. The whistle blows indicating that break is over. He runs past me, helmet in hand and just as I am about to turn away he looks over at me and gives me a small sly smile before winking. It’s so fast I want to say I was imagining it but I know I was not. Fuck him though and the games he is so obviously used to playing. I turn the way I had come and leave the sounds of high school football behind.

I find the house again easily and everyone is settled in the living room. Prim immediately comes and hugs me, but with a crease in her brow that says she is upset with me too. So I kiss her head and apologize to her softly. I ask Hazelle if it’s alright if I take a shower, and she leads me to a bathroom on the second floor and provides towels for me to use. I stand under the hot water a long time until my skin tingles in relief as it thaws. The shower is the one place where my brain stops working on overdrive, and I can just be for a moment. But tonight, there is one image that won’t stop invading my mind. That boy, that damn football player with his stupid smirk and wink replays over and over in my head. And I know that image will follow me to bed tonight.
"You got to be fucking with me." I stare down at every man's porn fantasy, willing the atrocity to be burned just from my stare.

"Katniss, language. You won't be able to get away with that vulgarity at your new school." My mother looks frustrated and almost angry at me. I'm not used to her being so engaged in my life, but fuck her, it's too late.

"Well that doesn't mean I won't try mother," I say with a scoff and a roll of the eyes as I pick one of the offending materials up. It's a blue green plaid pleated skirt. There is also a white blouse, tie, knee high white socks, and shoes. Oxfords shoes. My mother had signed me up to go to a Catholic school.

"Katniss, can you please just put it on. We're going to be late for the meeting if we don't leave in 10 minutes." Her voice is tired with defeat, and she doesn't even bother to wait for my answer before she leaves. She knows it'll just mean more arguments otherwise.

"Katniss do you have to argue with mom all the time." I turn around to see my sister leaning against our bedroom door. She is already dressed in her school uniform, her hair plaited in a braid similar to the one I always wear. She looks so sweet and innocent despite the disapproval written on her face, that I can't help but smile.

"Turn around little duck, your tail is showing." She rolls her eyes at me but she obeys anyway. Once I'm done, she waits patiently as I fix the bottom of her braid and smooth out the fly-aways.

"Look Prim," I finally say. "I'm just not used to mom being checked in okay? Especially since she checked in too damn late." I say the last part softly and I turn away from Prim before I see the sad look in her eyes. I shed my clothes and start putting on the offending garment, already done with this conversation.

"She's trying Katniss and she's sorry," she says softly to my back. "Just try and give her a chance. Please? For me?" I turn around and give her a small nod. Her shoulders sag in relief and she attacks me with a hug before I can shy away. I forgot how good it felt having her little arms around so I hug her back and we stand there for a couple minutes in peaceful silence.

"Come on girls, it's time to go!" We hear our mother yell from downstairs. Prim reluctantly lets me go knowing these moments are rare and I throw on the uniform quickly.

"So how do I look Prim? Like I'm a sweet innocent good girl?" I say turning around for her, my metal bangles clang slightly as I do.

She just shakes her head with a knowing smirk on her face. "No you still look like trouble."

I don't know what I was exactly expecting in the principal of the school. But the sweet, grandma-like nun smiling benevolently at me is not it. If her hair was exposed I'm sure it would be as silver as her eyebrows, but it's tucked tightly under her head cloth. Or habit, or whatever they call it. She stands up once we step into her office, and moves rather quickly for an old lady. She hugs my mother tightly, telling her how good it is to see her before she turns to Prim and I.
"Welcome Katniss and Prim to Sacred Heart Preparatory School. It's good to finally meet you both. I've heard so much about you from your mother," she says sincerely, shaking our hands. Her own hand is weathered and marked with age, but surprisingly strong and emanates comfort. "I'm Reverend Mother Thomasina, principal of St. Francis. But all the students call me Mother Sae, my birth name. I'd like you to do so as well. Now come and sit. I just wanted to get to know you both before school starts."

She starts by asking us more about ourselves, sticking to the safe topics like what interests we have in school and any extra-curricular activities. Prim does most of the talking including filling in for me, and if it bothers the nun, she doesn't show it. She then starts to rattle off all the features of the school. It seems pretty state of the art with a pool, gym, and even archery field. It seems like the well-off residents of this town made sure that the school was provided everything the students could possibly desire whether it was necessary or not. Now I have to wonder how my mother can pay for us to attend this clearly expensive school when we can't even afford our own place, relying on the Hawthornes for almost everything. The question bursts of my mouth before I can stop it so of course it comes out a little too sharply. My mother gives me a stern look but Mother Sae just waves it off.

"Well of course your mother gets a discount for being the school nurse. But we also have various scholarships available to help cover the rest. And of course with your situation Katniss, we wanted to provide you with the best possible." I push my chair back harshly, knocking it over in the process. Fuck this shit, and I say so out loud too. I am nobody's charity case and I don't need her pity. Making my way to the door, but a strong firm voice stops me.

"Now Ms. Everdeen you will stop right there. We are not finished yet. Pick up your chair and sit back down." I turn around almost like she compelled me to move with her quiet yet stern voice. Her face is still placid but her eyes have a stubborn strength that holds me in place. "Claire and Prim please leave Katniss and myself for a moment alone?" They both nod their heads, obviously shocked and too surprised to speak, scraping their chairs loudly in their haste to quickly get out the door.

I do as she orders but I cross my arms stubbornly and start to pick at the black paint peeling off of my nails. I know her eyes are on me and it feels like she sees straight through me. It is so unsettling I can't help but fidget, my leg bouncing in front of me. I don't know what about this woman compels me to stay when I would usually be halfway home by now. "Well on with it?" I throw out impatiently.

She clasps her hands on her desk and leans forward, her face still completely calm. "Your mother told me what happened to you Katniss. Don't blame her, she couldn't help it. Claire has never kept anything from me in her life." She pauses waiting for my full attention and when I look up at her she says, “And so I believe her even though no one else does. I know you are a good girl." My shoulders start to relax a little when I see the unflinching truth in her eyes. It's been a long time since anybody has believed anything concerning me was good.

"What does it matter? People are already gossiping about me. I haven't been here for two days and it's already followed me." I can't help but burst out because it's true. The damage is already done. Hazelle has sworn she hasn't said anything, but parents have been talking, which also means so are their kids.

"Look, I can't help what happens out there; what others say. But you have a second chance here. Don't let it slip you by just because you’re angry. The school board and parents association did not want to allow you admittance into the school. As a show of faith that you are becoming a responsible person, I made a bargain that you will work for me after school. I expect you to be here everyday after school at 3 pm sharp. If you aren't here promptly, I will hunt you down, drag
you by your ear in front of the entire school and bring you back to the office. Got it?"

She does not blink once at her threat, and I swallow hard at the truth. "Yes Mother Sae." I reply reluctantly.

"And Katniss, don't expect you will get expelled that easily. So do us both a favor and try not to work so hard to do so, okay? I am here for you even if you don't like it. Don't forget that. So do we have an understanding?"

This entire, sometimes frightening speech was said completely calmly, with a sternness in her voice that brokered no argument. So all I do is grunt out a yes, but that is enough for her because her smile is back fully on her face.

"Lovely, now let's get your sister and mother back. I'm afraid that prior commitments keep me from giving you a tour of the school, but I have a lovely volunteer for the task. Your class president Peeta Mellark, such a sweet boy, is helping us with school prep when he's not at football practice. And he has agreed to show you around. Good to know the lay of the land before the start of school right?" She chuckles to herself before lifting off her chair with a slight groan.

I get up to follow her out of the office, barely able to keep up with her brisk walk. My mother and sister look up nervously as they see us approach them, but her cheerful demeanor relaxes them quickly. She motions us to follow her, as she weaves through the winding school hallways until we come to double doors. When she pushes them open it reveals a library that makes my mouth water a bit when I look around. It is is a massive place, shiny and neat and I know that I can spend my days hiding out here, away from the other students. She calls out this Peeta guy’s name, and a male voice answers back with a too cheery "yes" before he comes into view from behind a stack of books.

My mouth practically falls open when I realize that this "sweet boy" she has spoken so highly of is the very quarterback I saw practicing in the rain two days ago. He has to be the most perfect, virtuous boy I have ever seen. Even out of uniform, not barking orders to his team, he still has a commanding bearing despite the fact he is only half a head taller than me. Up close and cleaned up, his face is worthy of Prince Charming handsome with his strong jaw, slightly aquiline nose, and sprinkle of freckles. Like we are, he is wearing his perfectly pressed school uniform despite the fact that school hasn't officially started yet. His blond curly hair is combed back neatly, not a single hair out of place and his smile is so disarming I can see even my mother's face cracks in a rare smile. I can’t help the rage that simmers in my gut that he should be graced with something that she no longer gives me. Even before I got in trouble I could never get her to smile warmly at me.

"Hi Mother Sae, are these the lovely women I'm supposed to guide around the school?" He asks wiping his hands on his thighs. His eyes pass mine quickly and there is not a glint of recognition that I am the girl he winked at in the rain; just a pleasant smile on his face.

"Yes Peeta. Thanks so much for doing this. This is Claire Everdeen and her daughters Katniss and Prim. Prim will be a freshman and Katniss is a senior like you." My mother nods her head shyly at him, my sister blushes, as he shakes their hands. My frown deepens, not that he seems to care when he comes towards me. He offers his hand and I stare at it, but he firmly holds it towards me, eyes not wavering. I feel a nudge that is Prim indicating silently that I am being rude, so I finally offer my hand. The world seems to pinpoint where skin touches on skin. His rough large hand encompassing my small soft one. My skin feels like bees wings are beating against it and I don't like it one bit. His thumb flicks over my hand only slightly, but it is enough for me to jerk it away. It doesn't look like it was on purpose though as he turns to Sister Sae without sparing a glance at my reaction. In fact he wipes his hand against pants. He probably was disgusted he had to touch the freak; and I clench my fist at the thought he'll probably laugh with his friends about it later.
"Now show them everything you can, but go home when you're done. You have helped us long enough today. It was good seeing you again Claire. Katniss, Prim I look forward to seeing you both in school next week. God bless." With that she is out the door again, and I am relieved I won't have to deal with that crazy women's presence any longer. But the relief is brief when I turn to see the angelic looking boy waiting for me expectantly, and even though I don't know him, I know I don't want to be around him. This day can't be over soon enough.

"Shall we get started," he says indicating the door, my mother and sister agreeing in unison.

We spend an hour with Peeta as he guides us through the entire school. It is fancier than I even suspected. It seems like the affluent patrons made sure their children have everything they need. I'm surprised it doesn't have an equestrian center. He's at ease as he rattles off facts in an upbeat manner while my mother and sister follow in rapt attention. I feel like a dark cloud, trailing behind them, barely paying attention to what is being said. Now I understand the term gilded cage as I look at the place I will be trapped in for a year. If I don't get kicked out before graduation. God, how I hope to be kicked out before graduation.

There is one room that almost makes me smile though, that makes my heart feel like a rush of fresh air has gone through it. It's the music room, filled with every instrument you can imagine, a small stage and a beautiful Steinway grand piano. It's been over a year since I've put my hand to one and my finger itches to touch it and it draws me in like a siren song. But as my finger barely slides on the wood, other memories overtake me and I pull away.

"Do you play?" This is the first time the boy has addressed me directly, his blue eyes sparkling hypnotically.

"No." I say roughly.

"But Katniss..." my sister starts to say overhearing us, but she stops when she sees the look in my eyes. Peeta looks between the two of us curiously, almost amused.

"No I don't play," I reiterate firmly.

"Well I encourage you to both take classes. Professor Cinna is a very fine teacher, although he hasn't found me to have any talent at all," he answers with a small knowing smirk sneaking on to his face.

"Let's move on from here. Isn't there a pool? Prim has been curious about joining the swim team," my mother rattles off nervously, rushing out of the room before I say anything else.

"This way," Peeta says, touching my back to push me forward while he points at a door with his other hand. There it is again, that finger flick, on the ridge of my spine. So slight if I were to say anything he could easily deny it. I find myself bowing my back slightly to get closer to his hand, but I quickly realize what I'm doing and step away from him. I don't like to be touched, Prim being the only one who can get close, so I don't like how my body is responding to this stranger. Why did I bend into his hand like that?

The rest of the tour has no further incidence and I am relieved when we find ourselves back where we began at the start. The school is amazing, but that doesn't matter. It's walls will hold the same people I've always had to deal with. The same people who will hate me just for being different.

"Thank you so much for showing us around," my mother says to Peeta. "It's nice to know good boys like you will be in her school. Isn't that right Katniss?"

"Sure mom," I say trying not to roll my eyes, and cross my arms tightly across my body.
"Well either of your girls can come to me if they need anything, anytime they want Mrs. Everdeen," Peeta answers, shaking her hand. His smile never wavered once, no matter what snarky comment I threw at him. It's kind of creepy.

"That's great, isn't it girls?" She answers a little too brightly. My sister, ever the moderator agrees while I don't bother to reply. Peeta tells us again that it was nice to meet us and we finally part ways. We are are just getting to the exit when I hear his voice stretch out.

"Katniss did you drop this?" I grab my collar and don't feel the familiar weight and I start to panic. I look and there in his hand is my mockingjay pin, my talisman, the one thing that keeps me grounded.

I rush back to him quickly and his hand holds out my pin for me to take. The moment my hand touches his, his fingers close around mine, holding me there fast. That feeling is back at the touch of the rough skin, that buzz of energy that makes my skin crawl. His grip is strong and he doesn't let me slip my hand away despite the fact I'm tugging.

"It was nice meeting you Katniss who doesn't pay the piano." His face is amused and flickers with a mischievousness I haven't seen before. At this I yank my hand out of his and wipe it on the back of my skirt before fastening my pin back on. I quickly glance at my family to see if they saw our strange interaction but they are preoccupied looking at some trophies. Turning back to Peeta, he just shakes his head before the sweet smile comes back on, the one that says he has never done anything bad in his life.

"I guess I'll be seeing you around school Katniss."

"Don't hold your breath," I spit out, before turning on my heel and walk as fast as I can to the exit. I make the mistake of looking back one more time before we leave. He gives me a wink so fast I almost miss it. He is far away so I could be imagining it, but I know I'm not. It's the same one I saw in the field yesterday that says, yes he does remember me from before. But before I can even flip him off, he's turned around and walked out the opposite door.

I'm so livid I can't move from my spot. How fucking dare he mock me. What the hell is his game. I want to march over there, pin him against the wall and tell him just that.

"Come on Katniss, I need to help Hazelle with dinner." I blink at my mom remembering that there are actually people I am with and turn to follow her. Fuck this Peeta Mellark. I know one person I am going to make sure I am on the opposite side of campus at all times from.

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My leg hasn't stopped jiggling since I got into mom's old buick. There is nothing like the first day of school in a new town, wearing a stupid uniform to remind me how much I hate change. No, I don't hate it, I despise it. I almost prefer to be back in the hell that I was in last year than deal with high school life again. Catholic high school no less.

I look down at Prim and she almost looks green, her hands twisting the edge of her skirt tightly. I instantly feel guilty remembering that if it wasn't for me, she'd probably be excited about heading off to school. She would be meeting up with her friends instead of having to make new ones.

"Are you okay Little Duck?" I ask quietly putting my hand over hers. She looks up at me and smiles, surprised and happy that I initiated the contact, turning her hand over to lock it with mine.
"Yeah, but it's first day jitters and all. I know it'll be okay. And you Katniss? How are you doing?" I just shrug. What is there to say? It's not like I'll be skipping around with the popular kids. I'll be lucky if I'm just left to myself.

"It'll be fine I guess. Maybe it'll be better," I say, trying to be optimistic for her sake. She takes it though, nodding enthusiastically.

"Yeah," She says with her sweet smile, but it turns a little sad. "Maybe I'll have better friends this time."

"What are you talking about, I thought you loved your friends." Her eyes lower and she blushes, like she is ashamed. And I realize maybe they weren't so good to her once I got in trouble.

"I'm sorry Prim," I say regretfully, squeezing her hand. She uses her other one to wave me off.

"Don't worry about me. I'm better finding out now what type of people they are. I'm sure I'll find better friends to hang out with. And you can too Katniss." I try not to scowl at that. There is very little chance of me making any friends.

"Can you at least try?" She pleads with me.

"Alright, I'll try. I promise." Her smile lights up the car and I vow that I will at least make an effort, for her. All I need to do is drag her down more than I already have.

The sound of the school hits me before the car even slows down. Enthusiastic screechy girls, low tremble of guys greeting each other, and teachers barking orders all intermingle and twist my gut into a knot.

"Okay girls, we're here!" My mom says, pulling into her staff parking spot.

"I wish Rory came here too, at least that means I'd have one friend here." Prim says sadly as she steps out. I'll have to keep an eye on those two. They both had pink tinged cheeks this morning at the breakfast table, before Hazelle drove him to the public school.

My mom wishes us both good luck, giving Prim a hug and me a nod of the head, asking me to be safe when I take the bus home, since I'll be staying after school. I try not to scowl and answer reluctantly that I will, before she walks to nurses office, leaving us on our own. I quickly look around at all the students milling around us and it is amazing how you can already tell their social status despite the fact they are wearing the same thing.

There is a group of popular girls sitting on a low wall. They still have the shortest skirts, the most makeup and haughty expressions permanently etched on their faces. A group of geeks huddle underneath a tree looking at one of their ipads. I survey all my peers as they pass me, and I can tell immediately what rung they are on the social ladder. I'm not one to judge because I would be at the bottom even if I cared where I was on the school hierarchy. I hear some deep laughs to my left and see what is obviously the jock guys. If their tightly muscled confident bodies didn't give them away, than it was the person in the center that does. There stands Peeta, a large smile on his face as he is making sweeping gestures in a story he is telling, the crowd around him obvious eating it up.

His eyes pass mine as he is talking and there is no look of recognition. Not a little bit. I can feel a flush of anger and embarrassment role through my body. I don't know why I'd expect he'd actually acknowledge my presence, or why it would even matter to me if he did.

"Come on Prim, let's get our schedule before we become late," I say to Prim, waving my hand in her face. She is obviously just staring at everyone passing by like me and just nods her head.
before we dive into the fray.

Now I'm grateful that we had the tour of the school before today. It's not easy weaving through the many chatting students completely oblivious to the two new kids, but we manage to make our way back to the administrative office. There we get our syllabus and then it's time for us to separate. I probably won't see her until I get home because I have to work for Mother Sae after class and we have different lunch periods, not that I would want to drag her down anyway.

"Good luck today Katniss," Prim says giving me a quick hug before she hurries off. The bell rings, startling me and I get pissed at myself for wishing my sister was at my side. Fuck it, I don't need someone four years younger than myself to hold my hand.

With renewed surliness I look down at my syllabus to see my first class is Homeroom. I stuff the offending paper in my pocket and start to make my way to class, ready to get the day over with. But I haven't memorized the layout of the school as well as I thought I did, realizing I have no idea where I should be. Students rush passed me, some looking annoyed as they knock my bag or shoulder as I stand in their way and I try not to lose my cool at my total incompetence.

"Is someone lost?" I hear over my shoulder, the familiar voice causing the hair on my neck to prickle. I turn around and sure enough there is Peeta, that playful smirk on his face, the only one he's graced me with when he is talking to me.

"I'm fine," I growl, trying to push past him but he puts his hand on my arm to stop me. I jerk away immediately wrapping my arms tightly around myself and he holds his hands up to pacify me.

"Sorry Everdeen. I'm just here to help. We have maybe 3 minutes to get to class, so cough up that piece of paper of yours." He opens his hand to me and waits, his mouth set in a stubborn line that says he is not budging.

I reluctantly pull out the crumpled paper and shove it in his hand, taking a step back so he's not close to me. He pulls it open with a bemused smile and it turns into a chuckle as he shakes his head from what he reads on the paper.

"Well it's your lucky day, because we have homeroom together."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," I mutter, eyeing him like he's the devil himself. My reaction just makes him shake his head again, his eyes crinkle with mirth at the situation he's obviously enjoying.

"You know the sisters will skin you alive for talking like that. Now come on, before we're late," he says suddenly all business.

He doesn't give me a chance to respond and he starts walking quickly. He obviously takes the threat of being late seriously, as he speeds down the hall, not even trying to make any conversation. I sure as hell don't like small talk, so I just do my best to keep up with him.

When we finally reach the door, he puts his hand on the door knob but doesn't open it, instead turning to me.

"You don't like me do you?" He asks straightforwardly. He looks generally curious, not an ounce of hurt in his gaze.

"I don't like anybody except my sister," I answer honestly. He bites his lip and nods his head, like I've revealed something of deep value that he has to consider. This boy is so... strange.

"Fair enough," he finally says before opening the door and stepping aside so I can walk in first.
What I can tell is going to be his usual M.O. is that I am no longer there once we're around other people around. His smile is wide and easy as he sees a friend of his and they clasp hands in greeting. Two girls follow next with sweet greetings of "Peeta!" and he is soon the center of attention yet again.

Whatever. I plop myself at the back of the classroom, and pull out the novel I'm reading, tuning out the world until the teacher is ready to start class.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. For once I am a few chapters ahead so I hope to post another chapter by next week. Let me know what you think! I love reading your comments.
"Stupid fucking locker." I bang at it painfully hard wishing I had a sledgehammer to punish it for refusing to open. It's my lunch period and hell if I'm going to walk around with a pile of books during my free period. I bang my head against it in frustration and pound it with my fist for what feels like the hundredth time and somehow it finally gives way. I crow in triumph, stuffing everything in and pull out an apple to fill my protesting stomach. I've just taken a large satisfying bite when I hear footsteps approach me.

"Heard there was a new fine piece of ass coming to this school. But I didn't think it would be this fine." I turn around to see a boy with mousy brown hair and equally dull eyes giving me the up down. The sweet juicy apple I was previously enjoying goes down my throat hard.

"Seriously?" I say slamming my locker shut. "Do you really think you can get anywhere with a crap line like that?" I have been dealing with this all damn day. Either it's cheesy ass lines or suggestive looks that make my skin crawl. You'd think that this was an all boys school or something. I don't know why the hell they need to bother me, it's not like I'm anything to look at. So I assume it's pure boredom and it's pissing me off because it almost makes me miss my interactions with Peeta in comparison. Almost.

"Cunt. I was only giving a compliment," he snaps back but I only stare at him coldly. Like I give a shit about any name he throws at me.

"Do you suck your dick with that mouth? Now run along," I say dismissively. He clenches his fists at his sides, and leans forward, snorting so hard like a bull, hair flies away from my face. But I don't flinch because I've put up with way worse than him.

"Leave off Marvel." A stern voice comes behind me and I turn around to see Peeta standing there, leaning against a locker, arms crossed. Everything about his body says relaxed except a tight muscle twitching in his jaw. For a moment they have a silent staring contest until Marvel backs off quickly.

"Whatever man, she's just another crazy bitch anyway," he says abruptly, turning on his heel and going in the opposite direction. It's clear by how fast he backed off who the alpha in the school is. Not that I am impressed with sword fighting.

"I can take care of myself," I tell him turning sharply to Peeta.

He just laughs and shakes his head at me, running his fingers through his curly hair. "You know you're a piece of work. Why am I not surprised that's your reaction."

"Well then maybe you should leave me alone then. I don't want or need your help. Ever." I snap back as I try to walk away, but his solid body is in my way, not close enough to be threatening, but still intimidating in an unexpected way. My nostrils flare in anger but unfortunately I'm so close to him I also take in his distinctive musk, a heady smell like freshly baked bread that makes my head swim and clouds my thoughts.

"Aren't you even going to say thank you," he asks, his voice stern like a teacher, and it brings me to my senses.

"Why should I want to thank someone who is no better than Marvel," I say sweeping my eyes up
I was intending on heading to the library but now I really just need a cigarette, badly. I remember that there is a gap between one of the far buildings and a shed that looked promising for privacy so I make my way there as fast as possible. Just as I hoped, the spot is completely empty, not even a student walking past it, so I lean against the building wall, then slide down until my bottom hits the floor with a thud. I pull out a cigarette and light it, hoping the smell will fade before the end of the day so Prim doesn't find out. God it feels good.

"Who the hell are you?" A female voice accuses, just as I let out a long breath of smoky air. I turn to see a girl, skirt ridiculously short, hip popped to the side, spiky brown hair, black nails that are perfect unlike my chipped ones and a bad attitude written all over her face.

"New girl," I answer evasively, taking another drag of my cigarette.

"Shit can I have one of those?" she asks plopping down next to me, and I just nod and hand her my box. We smoke in silence before we're both done, and she offers me her hand.

"Names Johanna Mason," she says.

"Katniss Everdeen," I answer, taking her hand and shaking back quickly.

"Nice to meet you Everdeen. You look like you're going to cause a hell of a lot of trouble at this school. I can already tell. I like that."

"Isn't that the pot calling kettle black?" I say with a smirk. I barely know this girl, but already I'm liking her despite myself.

"Damn straight. Now come and join me for lunch because my girlfriend's going to lose her shit."

"Girlfriend? They allow that here?"

"Hell no, but that doesn't stop us. Although it does helps that she has a rich daddy and mommy who doesn't mind that she likes pussy," she says slapping her hands on her thighs before getting up.

"So are you going to come and meet the love of my life?" she asks dryly but I see a light in her eyes and somehow I know she's trying to hide how sincere she is.

“Maybe next time.” I answer, just not ready to be social. She just shrugs at me before turning and strolling away. I spend the rest of my break comfortable in my hiding spot, listening to the other students who actually have friends pass by me.

The bell rings and it's back to pretending I care about my classes, participating just enough so I'm not noticed. The first day ends faster than I expect and I find myself facing Mother Sae’s office for my first evening of “volunteering” with her. When I enter her office reluctantly, she is just as brisk and cheerful as ever as she promptly puts me to work.
I wasn’t sure what to expect going in there but I actually spend the day helping her decipher several computer programs and lord, she needs a lot of help. A lot. Computer illiterate would be an understatement, but she is self-deprecating about her inability to do basic functions besides looking at her email, keeping the atmosphere light. I'm quickly learning what a complex woman she is. She is a sweet nun sure, but she is also pretty funny with a sharp wit to match. I hate to admit it, but at times she almost made me smile. The thing I admire about her most is that she does not push me. She doesn't use this as an excuse to be a therapy session and pick my brain. She does most of the talking but when I do talk she takes the time to listen. These days spent after school might not be such a terrible thing after all.

By the time the second Thursday has hit, I have become pretty comfortable with my pattern of loneliness. Nobody bothers me, and I definitely don't bother them. I no longer exist to even Peeta, which is fine by me. The only thing to disturb my solitude is Johanna coming to snag a smoke from me at lunch before she meets her girlfriend. Sometimes we talk but mostly we just sit in easy silence. Every time she has asked me to join her and every time I've answer "No thanks".

But today, Johanna gives me a scathing looks and says, “Come on brainless, suck it up for once and meet my people,” before she walks out into the bright sunshine, looking back to see if I decided to follow her. With a deep sigh, I get up, brush myself off, and head after her, not really sure why. What the hell. Only a couple weeks into school and I may have just made a friend. Who knew.

"You know you're hanging out with a dike right? I guess that's why you didn't want to take up my offer," Marvel says, breathing down my neck the moment I enter the cafeteria with Johanna. Wow, he's still holding on to the locker incident? It's like he's been waiting for me to enter the cafeteria this whole time just to say something stupid. And oh joy! He has two more meatheads with him. One cackles, while the other, a tall blonde boy with chilling blue eyes just gives me a smile that is not any way close to warm, and I can feel a shiver go up my spine.

"Oooh... I'm so hurt Marvel that you would call me that. I'm rethinking everything now because of your very astute name-calling," Joanna says stepping up to him with feigned regret. She then gives him a wicked look, the old up and down glance, stunning him for a moment. "Too bad I've heard what a little dick you have otherwise I'd make an exception."

She says this loud enough that others around them hear her and breakout in laughter, including his friends. I smirk at this strange girl, who winks back at me as we weave our way through the cafeteria ignoring the expletives that are being thrown at our backs. I'm liking her more and more.

"What a dork," she mumbles to herself but she says it with obvious affection. When we get to the table, she leans down and kisses the girl, flicking her tongue in her mouth slightly, not concerned at all about the obvious disapproving stares.

"Ugh, you've been smoking. You know I hate that," the blonde girl says with a pout, pushing Johanna away. "Who's the new girl? Have you found my replacement already?"

"Whatever. You know there is no replacing you baby," is Johanna's reply, plopping down next to her, swing her arm around her shoulders. "Everyone this is Katniss Everdeen. Katniss this is everyone. Now sit your ass down, you're starting to look like a loser."
"Hi Katniss," they all say drily in unison, like they are at group therapy. I have somehow found myself amongst a group of assholes. The type of people who don't care about school hierarchy therefore they are not at the bottom of the totem pole, but they definitely aren't at the top. I can already tell they don't give fuck and do their own thing. How did I get so damn lucky?

I give a bright Stepford Wife worthy smile and wave before letting it settle down back into it's usual scowl and plop down across Joanna and Delly, next to the waif girl who is just blinking at me like an owl.

Delly slides her legs into the table and leans towards me, her breasts barely being contained by her school uniform. "What my rude girlfriend should have said is that I'm Delly, Johanna's girlfriend. This is Annie and Darius." The other two give me genuine waves this time and we all start settling into our lunch.

"So everyone's talking about you," Delly says turning her head right and left to see if anybody is listening. I follow her eyes and sure enough there are a lot of people looking our way, and I'm pretty sure it's not just because of the two girls who were just kissing. "Word has it that you're bad news. So what's your story?"

"I apologize for my friend. She is like a highly excitable puppy and this is a small town where nothing happens," Annie replies softly, but loud enough that Delly can still hear.

"Yeah, it's like Johanna just handed her a gift by bringing you here," adds Darius in which Delly flips him off.

I just shrug, not ready for the third degree. "New town, new school, that's it." I answer tersely.

Darius barks a laugh, which is kinda gross since he had previously taken a big bite of his egg sandwich so food goes flying everywhere and Annie shoves him away. "Delly, this one's going to be more difficult than your girlfriend. Maybe you'll have to work your magic on her too," he says with a wink.

"Sorry that's not my thing." I answer pulling out an apple out of my bag and taking a bite out of it.

"But... you don't mind do you?" Delly says suddenly shifting in her seat uncomfortably and Johanna tightens her grip on her shoulders. "Because it's not easy for us being in a Catholic school and all."

"Nah, I have no issues, besides it's something you get used to seeing in juvie." It just slips out without me even intending too. I wanted to assure her so badly I didn't even think about it. More food plops out of Darius's open mouth as the other girls just stare at me for a moment and I start looking for the nearest exit.

"Shit howdy, you're serious aren't you?" Johanna finally says, and slaps her knee in obvious glee. "I guess the rumors about you being bad are true. Well you are definitely going to be a great addition to our group." I try to relax again, even though my heart is beating so hard. There seems to be general agreement amongst them that it is no issue for them and that puts me at ease. One secret at least doesn't matter with this group.

"So what did you do?" Annie asks softly.

I just shrug and dig into my bag for my sandwich. "Nothing where I deserved to be stuck there." It's enough they know I went in, it's too much for them to know why I went in.

"But..." Delly is about to say but her girlfriend turns her head and gives her a hard kiss on the lips
stopping her.

"Leave it alone honey. She's already said more than she meant to." She then turns around to me, her eyes flashing dangerously. "Your shit is your shit. The four of us don't care about that. Not that everyone else will be as easygoing but at least you don't have to worry about us."

"Thanks," I say softly, overwhelmed for a moment. I was ready to eat alone for the rest of the school year, counting down the days until I graduated, but here I am with people who are kind of okay.

"Well at least let me tell her who's who here," Delly says exasperated.

"Go ahead, fly free little one. While you do that I'll just let my eyes and ears bleed from hearing the stupid chisme."

Delly just rolls her eyes and leans into me saying, "Okay let's get started." And then it's me who feels like my ears will bleed as she goes into exact detail on every group. Darius, Annie and Jo have obviously checked out and start their own conversation while she's pointing everyone out. There are the AP track kids who are intense yet popular, the Tech & AV kids who are equally smart but very low on the totem, the usual jocks and cheerleaders, emo goth kids, on and on she rattles endlessly. I try my best not to look like I'm going to choke her.

Delly is just going into how you don't want to mess with the Russian mafia when my neck prickles and I just know he is there. Sure enough I turn around and there Peeta stands right behind me, hands tucked into his pockets, smiling down at Delly.

"Hey Delly, how's it going? Joanna, Annie Darius." He nods to each. Johanna barely acknowledges him with a lifted eyebrow.

"Great Peeta! How's it been going?"

He just shrugs before saying, "Okay so far. Getting used to being back. Getting used to football again."

"Gah, I know. I'm not ready to be hefting skinny bitches into the air to cheer you guys on." He lets out a deep earthy laugh that makes me crumple my sandwich bag into my tight fist.

"Well I'm joining the guys, I'll see you later." He waves at all of them before he saunters off.

I practically jump out of my seat when Delly slaps her hands hard on the table, making people nearest us turn and stare at us. "So you obviously met Peeta already," she says conspiratorially.

"He says hi to everyone Katniss. I mean everyone. Even that girl over there who's skirt is always tucked in her underwear and loses her pencil in her hair. But he didn't even acknowledge your existence when he came over, the new girl. That means you've done something to piss him off. Impressive. He never loses his cool. Ever. I should know, we've practically known each other since the cradle."

Johanna snorts at this, finally breaking her glare from his table. "He's a big fat fake, that's what he
is Delly. And don't deny it."

"He's really nice!" She protests. "Everyone loves him."

"That means shit Delly. He just knows how to fool everyone."

But Delly chin is set and she shakes her head, pulling away from her girlfriend. "I know better Johanna, you can't tell me any different."

The table becomes uncomfortable since no one is willing to break the couples glaring contest. Darius mutters "girls". and digs out a science fiction book, burying his nose into it while Annie pulls out her phone and starts texting, leaving me on my own.

"So tell me who are those girls over there," I say attempting to break the tense silence.

Delly visibly softens and she licks her lips before breaking eye contact with Johanna, leaning in again. "Well that's Clove, Glimmer, Cashmere and Enobaria. They are as terrible as their names are. I think we can all agree on that." Johanna's mouth twitches into a smile and she leans her head against her girlfriend's shoulder. A silent apology. The rest of the lunch is uneventful as she finishes her school gossip and we move on to better topics like what I should expect from this town, newswflash it's boring, and the best places to get a burger. I also silently make a note to myself not to ever mention Peeta in their company, not that it will be a hard thing to do. I don't intend for him to consume any part of my life.

The bell rings indicating lunch and we all get up, packing our things except Darius who is still engrossed in his book, and completely zone out about what’s happening in the world around him.

"Now I expect you all to be at the first pep rally and football game on Friday. This means you too Darius," says Delly, pulling his book away so he could pay attention to her.

"But Delly..."

"No buts, I don't care if you all hate school spirit and football. You are cheering me on okay? This includes you too Katniss. I can see it, you a dark cloud who avoids all things school related, but I don't care. At least it will give you all an opportunity to make fun of everyone at once."

Johanna shrugs indifferently when I look at her for support. "Hey if I don't go, I don't get laid so I gotta go."

Delly is right, I have never participated in any school activities in my life. And the idea of being trapped with all the students around me being happy about a stupid game sounds more like a device for torture. But I see her stubborn face, she is determined and the others are looking at me expectantly to say yes. Since I just met these people, they seem kind of cool, and most importantly don't mind my surly attitude I might as well go. Anyway Prim will be excited that I'm actually participating in something.

"Sure, whatever," I answer shrugging my shoulders.

"That's the spirit Everdeen! You get to see my girlfriend shake her tits. Believe me she does it better than anybody on that squad. Because hers are the biggest. A guaranteed good time." Delly blushes at her girlfriend’s compliment and shakes her head enthusiastically in agreement. These people are so weird.

I'm just throwing my leftovers into the trash when I feel a big hand go up my skirt and grab my ass handly. I would like to say I turned around fast and punched the person in the face but I'm frozen, suddenly turning hot and clammy, clutching my stupid trash like it could transport me away. I want to throw up and I have to shake my head so I won't go 'there'.
"Damn I knew your ass would be find under that skirt," was a very familiar and unpleasant voice panting in my ear.

"Leave her alone Marvel!" I finally turn my head to see Delly with her small hands push him hard in the chest and he stumbles back. But he just laughs and takes a step back, his friend Cato chuckles behind him. We've gathered a few curious lookers and I'm reminded why I like to be alone at lunch. I hate myself even more for seeing if Peeta is watching, and I find him at the doorway, fists clutched at this sides. I feel like he wants to intervene again but I shake my head imperceptibly, and I see his mouth tighten, before he walks out, his buddies following him.

"What Delly you don't want a three-way? I would ask that crazy bitch of yours too but, well, she's crazy." With that Johanna throws the rest of her apple at him and it hits him right smack in the the middle of the forehead, causing a lot of oooh's. He just laughs and walks away unbothered when we hear, "Johanna! Principal's office now!," coming from Sister Alma. I hate that woman, she obviously saw what happened. Johanna just gives a dramatic bow before following the sister.

"Come on Katniss, let's go to class," Delly says linking her arm with mine, her head held high while Annie and Darius stand on either side of us. My slow brain starts to work again and we walk out of the lunch room. I think the days of me sitting by myself are over whether I like it or not.

I rush back to my locker I and I try to catch my breath while struggling to work the combo. I look over and see a huge dent in the locker next to mine that wasn’t there before, Peeta’s locker. My heart beats a little faster but I shake my head, telling myself I must have just not noticed it before now, so I pull my books out and hurry to my next class, adding one more thing on my list of crappy things to forget.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks always to by beta demona424. Peeta and Katniss' lives will get more entwined here on out! I look forward to reading your comments. :) Please follow me on tumblr at dianaflynn22!
I thought I could make it at least two weeks before being sent to the principal's office. One damn day where people weren't watching me make the walk of shame out of a classroom, but that of course is not how my life goes. I've never been that lucky. Even before I got into trouble in my last school I had to live with a bad reputation, although I rarely did anything to deserve it.

I couldn't get over what happened in the cafeteria, my thoughts dragging me into a dark place I desperately wanted to leave so I ended up taking a moment to have a smoke. When I finally got to class almost everybody was already there. But they weren't the fidgeting students you would expect. There was an unease to the class I didn't feel in any of the others. Everyone in there was completely silent, scared even. Then I looked to the front and I could see why. The sister behind the desk looked like she had the wrath of god, full of anger and fury. She watched everyone file in with a sharp eye, her expression saying, "Don't fuck with me today." My eyes said, "I don't care."

Since I'm late to class of course there is only one desk left, up in the very front, next to the person I would least like to sit next to - Peeta Mellark. I've been trying my best to be at the furthest spot from him at all times, but my luck has run out. Even as I hope he doesn't pay any attention to me I can't help but slide my eyes towards him. He's bent forward his arm protectively around a piece of paper he's furiously sketching on, completely engrossed in his work. I inwardly groan as I walk up to the front, feeling 30 pairs of eyes following me, including the teacher. It's not until I plop my backpack on my desk does he turn up from whatever he's doodling, stuffing it into his binder and looking up at me. His smile is wide and easy, the same one I've seen him give everyone.

"So we meet again. How's your day going Katniss?" He asks as I slide into my desk.

"Fine," I say dragging out my textbook, trying not to look at him.

He chuckles next to me. "I think the proper way to reply is 'Fine. And how was your day Peeta? Which I would respond with, 'Great except for the fact the new girl hasn't been nice to me despite my best efforts'."

"It's not my job to be nice to you Peeta Mellark. So Fuck - the - hell - off." I say slowly and clearly so he understands me.

His jaw tightens and his eyes turn cold, which I would be pleased about except for the body which is suddenly looming over me. I look up to see the white and red blotchy face of my teacher.

"Katniss Everdeen. The Reverend Mother said to give you a chance, but I can already see you are one to keep an eye out. Being so late is unacceptable and so is using foul language. Principal's office, after my class. I am not giving you the satisfaction of skipping out of a lesson. You need it." Sister Alma's harsh tone left no room for argument, I wouldn't have bothered a reply anyway. She hasn't liked me since the first day of class, despite the fact I've been able to answer all her questions correctly. And I know this will not change for the rest of the year. I can feel my face turn red at the "ooohs" echoing in the classroom at her words. I can't even look at Peeta, I'm so mad, but I'm sure he would have a smug face if he wasn't so busy looking like the perfect student.

The nun gets the students to focus on her and thus proceeds a long drawn-out hour of torture that is calculus. Once the final bell rings, I pick up my things, not looking at anybody as I leave the class first. I'm so pissed because I was supposed to head to the damn principal's office anyway.
after my last class. But because of what happened with Peeta, now it appears to everyone, including him, that it's because I'm in trouble. The stern looking secretary obviously must have been communicated what I've done because she just gives me a disapproving look over her glasses and orders me to sit on a chair before I am able to say anything. I take that time to text Prim that I hope she has a safe trip home, then I spend the rest of the time just staring at the carpet pattern, ready to get this over.

"The Reverend Mother will see you now," I hear after a few minutes as she points a severe finger towards the principal's door.

I push the door open, and take a deep breath before I step in, ready for her to lay into me. But to my surprise, the woman sitting behind her large desk who looks up from a pile of papers on her desk is smiling almost serenely as usual.

"Ahh Katniss, please sit, we have some things to discuss." She turns to her computer and types something furiously, no longer acknowledging I am there when I slide in a chair on the other side of her large battered oak desk. I try not to fidget as she presses return in satisfaction before returning to me and clasps her hands in front of her.

"So I've seen you've already had a run in with Sister Alma?" she says, an eyebrow lifted at me.

I just nod my head, not ready to implicate myself any further.

"Katniss I need you to not throw those expletives around school. A Catholic school may I remind you. It's been reported that you've been using those words rather profusely. Now I know with the people you've been around recently that has been the norm, but you are no longer there and you have to abide by our rules. Got it?"

"Yes Reverend Mother," I answer hanging my head.

"Good. Since I'm already forcing you to stay after school I am letting you off with a only verbal warning. But I better not hear that you've used those words again." She takes a deep breath, like she got that over with before leaning towards me. "But between you and me, it was bound to happen. Sister Alma has her knickers in a twist, not that it's proper of me to say it. So please keep that in mind when dealing with her because she will not be easy on you."

I fight my smile as I nod my head. I hate to admit it, but she's not bad, in fact she is kind of okay.

"Okay, let's get you to work!"

I don't get out of Mother Sae's office until late, like almost time for dinner late. She had made some tea and served me some indescribable stew of her own invention while I became the reluctant listener to the plans of a garden she is planting. I've lived in a city all my life. What do I care about stupid herbs?

I'm grumbling to myself, not ready to make the long trek home on foot when I hear them. I look up to see the football players all leaving the locker room, apparently happy with themselves for beating their heads against each other all afternoon. God I can't stand them. Peeta is getting into an open black Jeep Wrangler Limited. It makes me irrationally mad, because that has always been my dream car, something I can never hope of owning. But there he laughing at something a teammate is yelling at him as he jumps in. And then I see the idiot I currently hate the most - Marvel. He reminds me of a hyena - mindless viciousness with an awful teeth-grinding laugh. He gets into a red BMW, which I can only assume that his daddy gave him.

Clove is just about to pop into the passenger side and sees me, a vicious smile curling on her face...
before she bends down to say something to Marvel. His head pops out and he yells out, "Stop staring at us weirdo! I wouldn't touch you if you paid me!" before they both start cackling. I wish I could say I gave back a witty retort, but they are hopping into his car and tearing out of the parking lot before any words can form. I realize I do must look like a weirdo just standing there, my hair wild around my dark face, clutching the straps of my ragged backpack as their expensive cars pull out the lot so I take a shaky breath and start walking again, my brain black with rage. And my feet have a purpose which is not towards home. It's towards the gym.

I pull on the door of the boys locker room and it gives just a small squeak of it's hinges. I look around one more time before I squeeze in and shut the door silently. The rational part of my brain that says what I'm doing is stupid is too small compared to the thunder of anger in my head. All I see are two distinct faces and I need to do something, anything to make them go away.

My nose twists at the very strong smell of boy musk and sweat that has invaded the room for years, warning that this is an absolutely no girls zone. But I walk in deeper, reading the names on each of the lockers. Conveniently the two I am looking for are right next to each other - Richard "Marvel" Thomson and Peeta Mellark. I quickly look around before I put my ear to Marvel's locker and hear the click of the combination numbers, coming out triumphant when it opens. I stare at his football gear hanging there a moment, deciding what I want to do and can only think of one truly disgusting act that would match how he made me feel. So I pull off my panties, hang it on my shoulder and prepare to pee in his helmet.

"What the fuck am I doing?" My words ring out in the empty locker room. I'm just positioning the helmet under me, my shirt clutched in my other hand, when sense smacks me in the back of the head. I'm not some juvenile jock. That is not who I am, a person who fucking pees in a helmet. There has to be another, more mature way to get back at Marvel. As for Peeta, I just have to block him from getting underneath my skin, people would think I was crazy if they knew how much he bothers me when he's done nothing. Not really. Ugh, I want to be juvenile.

I regretfully put the helmet back and just click it closed when I hear the door open. Shit. The janitor. Luckily there is no direct view of the locker from the main door, so I quietly as possible head towards the back, hoping there is a door back there or I can make a loop around to sneak around the person. But that tread I hear coming my way, it's a certain heavy gait that tethers me to the ground. I know the sound of the feet causing that thump on the floor. And I hate that I know exactly who it is. Peeta.

I listen intently and hear a locker being opened so I figure he must have forgotten something. I turn back where I came from and cautiously peep my head around the locker to see if I can sneak behind him, but it's not his locker he's opening. It's Marvel's. And I'm stunned as I see him about to do exactly what I had almost done not 2 minutes before, pull out Marvel's helmet. There is the distinct sound of a zipper being pulled down before I see IT. I don't want to stare at him but I have a perfect view and my eyes are locked wide open on him. From what I can see, he has absolutely nothing to be ashamed about. But Peeta doesn't stop himself like I did, he's doing what I decided was too juvenile to do, pissing into Marvel's helmet. The prick just has to whip it out, piss and be done. He starts tucking himself back into his pants breaking me out of my trance. Fuck, it's so much easier for a boy.

"Ha! I knew you weren't that perfect. I knew you were faking it!" I clamp my hand over my mouth, but it's too late, the accusatory words seeming to bounce off of every metal locker. Peeta's head snaps towards my direction as I lean against a locker, hoping fruitlessly to disappear.

"Katinss? Is that you?" He queries, almost taunts, as the zipper goes up and the locker is snap shut. That tiny note in his voice gets to me. That small cadence that is just ready to mock me, and it is what I need to push down my mortification and tap into my anger. So I walk around the
corner, wagging my finger like one of the old nuns.

"What the hell are you doing Peeta? Pissing in your teammate's helmet? I knew this whole thing you have going is a lie! I knew you are not the perfect Mr. Goody Two-Shoes you are pretending to be!"

I'm satisfied to see Peeta's ears getting red. From anger or embarrassment I'm not sure because he is so good at hiding his facial expressions, but getting a physical reaction out him is so satisfying. Then there is something in his eyes, that makes me step back, but at the same time it's directly tethered below my abdomen where I don't want it to be. My fingers fidget by my sides, itchy and sweaty.

“I have my reasons which is no business of yours. And what are you doing in the boys locker room Katniss Everdeen?” He says taking a step forward. He looks like he is fresh from a shower, his curly hair slicked back from the water except for one rebel curl dangling down his forehead. I notice beads of moisture gathering at the dip of his collarbone. And the the smell of peppermint soap mixes pleasantly with his own natural musk, and I want to lean in closer, but instead I twist my nose out of disgust, mostly at myself for noticing so many of these details.

“None of your business Peeta Mellark,” I answer emphasizing every syllable of his name. He steps closer and my back hits a locker behind me as I step back again. His hand reaches for me and I freeze in anticipation. And to my horror he picks what I forgot was on my shoulder.

“Well obviously up to no good if you don’t have these on,” he says dangling my panties in front of my face. I try to snatch it back but he lifts his hand above my head and out of my reach, as if he's holding onto what is left of the shreds of dignity. “Well Katniss, what are you doing in the boys locker room?”

“I told you it was none of your business,” I answer through clenched teeth. I'm debating if I can be quick enough to snatch my panties back, but he seems to be two steps ahead of me because he stuffs it in his back pocket, a challenge in his eye for me to take it. Well shit.

Well I’m not playing that game. This room is too small, too hot. I push past Peeta and he puts his hand on my shoulder to stop me, but I turn and shake him off, knowing my eyes look more frightened than the angry glare I'd rather have. I'm surprised he gives up so easily, hands up in surrender, and his eyes almost apologetic. I turn away from him and push through the door. He jogs up next to me, easily keeping up.

“Well don't I take a guess about what you were up to in there Katniss,” he says as we burst out of the building. I try to ignore him, and my panties in his pocket as I head out of school as quickly as my short legs allow. "You know I’m betting you had the same agenda as me. Some revenge on Marvel via your own pee techniques. Probably my name was next on your shit list?” I halt and turn to him surprised he guessed.

“How did you… I mean…” I stumble.

“You and me, we look worlds apart, but we are not so different from each other.” He gently takes the tip of my braid between his fingers so as not to touch me, and leans close enough so I can feel his breath brush my ear. “I see it in you. We’ve both learned the hard way that people don’t deserve to know what we really are inside.”

“You don’t know anything about me Peeta,” I stammer out, shaken by his words and the proximity of his body. He just shrugs.

“I can be your friend if you want it,” he says simply. And I’m surprised at the surprising softness
that has entered his voice.

I don’t even know what to say to him but then I get a reprieve in the name of Mother Sae. “Oh Katniss and Peeta you both are still here. It’s getting late children, you should be home by now!”

It's amazing seeing that switch turn on. Peeta is right back to the boy scout, hand behind his back, and pleasing smile on in face.

“Oh don’t worry Mother, we are heading home right now. I was just about to give Katniss a ride.” I can feel my neck crack sharply at how fast I turn my head in his direction. I agreed to no such thing, because no good can come from being in an enclosed space with him.

“Oh good, I was worried about Katniss going home alone on the bus so late in the evening. Can you do me a favor and take her home every night? I don’t like her wandering the streets with who knows what is out there.” She smiles so sweetly at me, I can’t shake my head in a firm and complete no, as much as I want to. She knows it is no use telling her that Panem is a small Washington town and everyone is in their homes by 8 pm, nothing is going to happen to me besides a long boring trip home.

“Oh of course I can Mother, it would be my pleasure,” he answers, hands tucked in his pockets, practically bouncing on his toes as he looks like some sort of 50’s teen idol.

“Well isn’t this fortunate Katniss? And Peeta you are such a good boy. I wish I could make carbon copies of you.” I just nod my head numbly at this sweet lady. I snap back at every single person, including my sister, but this woman with her crinkled bright eyes somehow makes me stop, full of steel and warmth all at once.

So I find myself walking to his car, Mother Sae watching us and I don’t know how I feel right now. Angry, nervous, out of control, confused; including a multiple other emotions that has me shutting down as he opens the door for me to his brand new Jeep Wrangler and closes it like a gentleman. To my relief and surprise he doesn’t try to make conversation, but I feel his smile may be a little too smug as he gives me a side-glance.

The silence continues in the car and as it stretches I become more anxious, but I am too stubborn to break it. I can see his eye sliding on my knee as it starts bouncing, but he seems to be opposite of me, content with the silence not even turning on the radio, which kind of pisses me off. But we are minutes from my house when he finally, to my surprise, speaks up.

“You're not one for idle chit chat are you,” he says with with a chuckle. Where I am tense and nervous, he is the opposite of me right now, relaxed and at ease. Obviously the one in control of the situation. “God why is it so difficult to talk to you? You're the most difficult person who I've ever had to deal with.”

“And what do I owe you Peeta Mellark? I don’t need to kiss your ass like everyone else does.” I snap back, barely admitting to myself that it hurt that Mr. Congeniality finds that I'm "hard to deal with” when he seems to get along so easily with everyone else.

“Well maybe if you chipped down some of that wall of yours maybe…” he starts to say as he pulls into my driveway.

“Your one to talk,” I interrupt, done with conversation and frustrated with how it escalated so quickly. “You have a wall of false perfection around you. At least mine is honest.”

“Bullshit. There is nothing honest with the way you act around people. Don’t think I’m blind,” he
snaps back. His face blotchy, his voice low and rough tells me this, trying to control his emotions. I am the opposite of him, never holding back, and I’m ready to just let loose on him, but I opt to just get the hell out of the car, struggling to get off my seatbelt.

"Look Katniss, don’t leave yet," he pleads and I stop with my hand on the handle, not understanding what hold he has on me that I haven’t run away yet like I usually do. “Katniss I. I'm sorry you got in trouble with Sister Alma early today. I hope Mother Sae didn't come down too hard on you." I study him carefully, a little whiplashed at the unexpected apology. He frustrates me and intrigues me, but right now he's biting his lip as he looks down at me expectantly, almost anxiously. I want to give a snarky comment back, but I just don't have the heart when he looks so uneasy.

"I'm fine. Whatever. I've been through worse," I finally say relenting, my anger reluctantly waning.

"Good," he says, visibly relaxing. "Well don't let assholes like Alma and me get you in trouble."

"So you are admitting you’re an asshole then? I thought good boys like you couldn't be assholes.” He bends forward and so close I find myself leaning towards him too.

"Shh...nobody else knows that. So let my secret asshole status be between us okay?" He gives me a wink and a smirk that I've never seen before and it’s decidedly wicked. I pull back not liking one bit the way the heat travels through my body starting from my center and how my legs tighten together, all because of that smirk.

"Don't worry I wouldn't want to soil your reputation," I bite back. His smile wavers a bit before it is stronger than ever.

“And I won’t tell anyone you were in the boys locker room tonight,” he replies simply.

Was that a threat or a promise? I shake my head and click open the door. “Good, otherwise you never know what I have up my sleeve when it comes to you.”

“Looking forward to it Everdeen,” he says, and a smile quirks my lip reluctantly. So I just shake my head at him, before closing the door behind me and running for the house, afraid to look back.

It’s not until I’m lying in bed hours later, my sister’s soft breaths in the bed next to me that I realize I forgot to ask him why he needed to piss in Marvel's helmet. And how the hell did he know where my house was? And fuck, how am I ever going to get back my underwear?

____________________

"So how was your day Little Duck?"

"Katniss, don't call me that in school," Prim says rolling her eyes as she looks up from the books she’s neatly spread out on the coffee table. Rory is completely passed out on the couch behind her, drool glistening at the edge of his open mouth.

"Whatever, can you just answer the question?" I say impatiently through gritted teeth.

She gives me a shy smile as she shrugs her shoulder. "It was pretty cool. I met this girl named Rue who already wants to be my study partner. We are going to meet tomorrow after school and talk about our first assignment. Would that be ok?"
"Sure thing Prim," I answer emphasizing her name while scruffing up her hair. She rolls her eyes but a smile is there too. "I would like to meet her tomorrow so I can put a face to a name though."

"Okay Katniss!" she pauses then adds hesitantly. “Oh and I saw Peeta, he was real nice and said hello to me even though he was hanging out with all his friends. I think that kind of gave me cred. Entering school that first day, I was kinda scared but his smile was so friendly it made me feel loads better. I’m already liking it here. Well except for the whole prayer at homeroom thing.” She sticks out her tongue and I give a little chuckle.

"Well I’m glad.” I look around to see if anybody will hear us but Rory is snoring softly, the clanking in the kitchen indicates where Hazelle is, and the other two kids are playing out back. I’m sure our mother is lying down in her room, since that’s where she always seems to be when she’s not working.

I’ve tried to push it down but I feel like it’s time to get some guilt that's been weighing heavily on me off my chest.

"Prim I'm sorry you had to move because of me and change your whole life. I don't know if I've told you yet, but thank you.. you know... for being there for me and all," I say softly.

Prim stands up quickly and takes my hand, squeezing it while giving me one of her sweet smiles.

"Of course! You're my big sister. Besides you've been there for me, you know, with dad, and everything. I don't know if I could have gotten through it without you.” She bites her lip, a clear indication she is worried about the next thing she is going to say. “So how about you? How do you like our new school?” I just shrug, but I can feel a corner pull at the side of my face.

"It's going alright. I met some cool people too. Now don’t look surprised that I can actually make some friends.” Prim’s eyebrows are almost hidden in her forehead that I am actually talking to people.

“Maybe I should meet them to make sure they're alright.” I can’t help but scowl at this statement but her eyes tell me she is completely serious.

"What do you mean by that?"

"It just means that I have more cause to worry about you than the other way around.” Our light conversation has suddenly been sucked away just like that. The smile is gone from her face as she challenges me with a rare stare down. She’s grown up so much since I was gone, and now I am just realizing the trust went along with it.

“Hey is dinner ready?" We both turn around to see a sleepy Rory rubbing his eyes, completely oblivious to the tension in the room.

“I’m going out,” I say turning on my heel.

“But you just got home, Katniss please…” but I don’t hear the rest as I rush out. I just blindly walk as far away from that house as I can.

I don’t care what direction I go as I wander around the small damp lifeless town, just as long as it’s as far away from that house as possible. Sometimes I wish I could just keep on going and never come back. Nobody would miss me, including Prim. Maybe they would even be relieved. When I finally start paying attention to my surroundings, I find myself at a small park surrounded by large grand houses. A few people are out letting their purebred dogs run around them, but nobody is paying attention to the sullen girl walking past.
I curl up on a bench, putting my chin on my knees and stare at nothing, trying to feel nothing. A Jaguar pulls up to one of the ivy covered brick houses. A stocky man steps out, opening the trunk to pull out a luggage bag. There is something familiar about him that has me taking notice. The door to his house, actually more like mansion, opens spilling out a warm light. Peeta comes out, bounding down the steps, looking neat in slacks and a crew neck sweater and the light reflecting on his hair like a halo. Of course the man looked familiar, he’s an older version of his son. Peeta's smile beams all the way to where I am sitting as he embraces his father in a hug. It is such a pure radiating smile of happiness it makes me reconsider what I thought about him. Maybe I’m just too ruined to see the good in people anymore, I'm just looking for something not there.

They walk back in, his father’s arm around his son, closing the door and taking the warmth with them. I fold my body tight on the bench and go back to staring at nothing. But this time my brain can't stop thinking of Peeta, of all he has. He's never had to fight for anything in his life. He's never had to keep a family afloat after his father's death, or watch his mother whither away. He never went to juvenile hall for stabbing a teacher. I want to hold on to the hate I felt earlier towards him, but all I feel is old and tired. I get up and walk away, not sure where I'm going next.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone who gave great comments last chapter. I appreciate your involvement and I hope you keep liking where this story goes. And I promise it heats up from here on out. FYI, the chapters names are mostly meaningless, pulled from 90's music lyrics. Come find me on tumblr: dianaflynn22.
"Hey Katniss! Katniss can I ask you something?"

I turn around to find a gangly pimple faced boy jogging up to me.

"What do you want," I ask, protectively clutching my books closer to my chest. He stops uncomfortably close to me and I shift as far as possible away from him.

He sheepishly smiles, sweeping his shaggy hair out of his eyes. "I just wanted to know if...if you'd go on a date with me." My mouth just hangs open for a moment before he continues. "That is if you don't stab me on the date." He then starts laughing hysterically, bounding away to a group of guys who slap him on the back proudly and give him high fives, their laughter echoing loudly in the hallway.

There is no comeback worth it so I just flip them off before walking away, trying not to show how much their cruelty bothers me. The taunts, the whispers, the looks have been building over the week. My secret is now just the latest gossip as it spreads from lips to ears over and over. I knew it was a matter of time but I always held the small hope that maybe I would be left alone.

Fear is burning inside me that Prim is getting heat too but I wouldn’t know because we are barely on speaking terms, both of us still hurt with more than what was said that night. Lately our only communications have been the occasional nod to each other when we pass by each other. And I haven’t had the courage to break our stand off.

I want to just skip school and say fuck it but I made my sister a promise, the only thing she's really asked of me. It seems like such a simple request. For me to stick it out, finish school and graduate. Right now it feels impossible. But even if I'm still mad at her, she is the only one who has stuck by me through everything, who has had faith in me, so I intend to keep that promise. So the only thing to do is to take a deep breath, hold my head up high and send a scowl of warning to anyone who dares look at me.

"Shit Howdy Everdeen," I turn around to see Darius, loping towards me. He has a goofy smile on his face, and bloodshot eyes, a clear sign he is already stoned. Considering how this day is going, I'll have to ask him for some later.

"People can’t stop talking about how you are some crazy 'delinquent.' It's blowing up! Are you okay?" The last part was obviously an afterthought because he seems to be having too much fun with all this, but I choose to ignore it and get to my burning question.

“Have any of you been gossiping about what I told you?” My voice is a harsh whisper as we make our way down the hall.

My tone doesn’t seem to bother him. He just swings an arm around me, which I promptly step away from.

“Us. Nah. Not worth any of our time. Jo especially. And Delly may be flighty but she is good people. Besides, it’s not like you told us like basically anything. Especially all the juicy details like what everyone is talking about. Did you really stab a teacher with scissors?”

Shit. I just nod my head yes, not wanting to talk about it. A lump heavy in my throat that accurate
details are out there. “So...are you guys still okay hanging out with me?”

"Yeah, whatever. It's not like I have some crazy reputation to lose. And girls think you are the shit. No way in hell are they losing someone interesting like you in this boring ass town. So don't worry about it." I can feel my shoulders loosen a bit at his direct statement. I've always been a loner, even before I started getting in trouble so it surprises even me that I'm already getting attached to these four people.

"Thanks Darius," I answer softly.

“Crazy Bitch!” echos down the hall towards me and it’s hard to keep my head up when people around me snicker.

"Look in the damn mirror!" Darius yells back.

Darius follows me all the way to class. I try to tell him I’m okay but he waves me off, saying it’s in his direction as well. Somehow I think it’s not.

“It’s okay Darius, really,” I try to tell him, but he insists and I’m glad he does. Besides Prim, it’s been a long time since someone has willingly walked by my side. And I hope he is right about the girls, it’s been just such a long time since I’ve had friends. And none who have stuck by me.

When we get to my class, he smiles proudly like he’s gotten us through a war zone safely and it pulls a small smile on my own face.

“Here,” he says offering me a pack of bubble gum. “It's good for when I get all twitchy and shit. Besides when someone really bothers you, you can throw it in his hair and damn crap can get nasty!” I try not to but a small laugh escapes my lips at the look of glee on his face and he genuinely looks like this is a good idea.

“Alright Darius. I'll keep that in consideration,” I answer as I still struggle with the smile on my face.

Just as I’m about to turn into class, Peeta pushes past us to get into class and his shoulder hits Darius’ hard enough to unbalance him a bit. Peeta mumbles a curt apology in an oblivious Darius’ but I can’t help but notice that he looks pissed about something. Not even once looking in my direction. I have no time or energy to figure out what crawled up Mr. Sunshine’s cranky ass.

“So are you still up to the rally and game today?” He asks reminding me that he’s still here.

“Oh, nah, I don’t think so. Jo and Delly will just have to live with the disappointment.” Darius just shrugs, not fighting it and gives me a sympathetic pat on the shoulder before he bounds off to his own class.

I turn into my classroom, taking in a deep sigh as I see all eyes turned on me, all except one. Peeta is hunched over his pad again, sketching furiously like it’s the most important thing in the world. I on the other hand might as well not exist, he doesn't even glance my way. I am not surprised.

Now that the word is out I doubt Mr. Perfect would want to be caught even looking my way.

I predict our car rides will be super fun now, in the not at all way. If he even still wants to offer me a ride, which pretty doubtful at this point. As it is, considering my continual silence the three times he has dropped me home has been awkward at best. This is a perfect opportunity for him to say the experiment is over and finally excuse himself from my life. Maybe my secrets coming out is a good thing if I don’t have to be in the close proximity of Peeta anymore.

I head to the back of the class again and have barely settled into my seat when the teacher comes
in and tells me to report to the principal's office immediately. More stares, whispers and scornful laughter follow me as I try and keep me expression as still as stone. This is going to be a long year if this morning is any indication.

It's not surprising that my guard is up when I enter Mother Sae's office. During the day I've seen scorn, mockery, disgust, and at the best pity. I don't expect to find any better with her so when I'm met with a soft expression of understanding and affection, it nearly brings me to tears. And it's exactly what I don't want or need. So I clutch my satchel and try to contain my emotions as best as I can, but I don't feel like I'm fooling her.

She doesn't try to push me though. All she wanted to do is apologize for the rumors going around. I know she means well but I wish she had waited to tell me this after school during our usual meeting. She is trying to assure me that the teachers know of the situation and will try to diffuse it. That's a big fat joke. When have teachers ever been able to help us from tormenting each other. I don't look up at her the entire time she talks, just nodding my head because I just can't see the 'sorry' in her eyes. Sorrys don't help. Sorrys never stopped the shit that's happened in my life.

The rest of the morning drags slowly, the taunts bounce off me, an old broken record I've had to endure before. Once the lunch bell rings, with quick desperate steps I head to that dark corner I found when I first got here, a safe haven between a wall and a shed. I throw down my messenger bag and nestle against the wall, immediately starting to light a cigarette. I'm practically shaking thinking of having one. The hell with stopping for my health.

A shadow crosses over my hand just as my lighter finally has a flickering flame. "If you are asking me to go to the rally, it's not happening. I'm not in the mood right now Johanna for hero worship," I say around my cigarette, not looking up as I see it's tip start to glow.

"Well I didn't know you considered me a hero, Everdeen so I'm blushing." My neck practically cracks as I whip my head up to see Peeta standing over me. How did I not realize with those elephant steps of his that it was him approaching?

"What the hell are you doing here?" I ask, trying not to cringe at the octave my voice goes up. He just shakes his head at me as he manages to wedge himself in the tight spot next to me. I almost want to laugh at the absurdity of his muscular body folding up in the small awkward space.

"Seriously, what the hell do you want?" I ask again. Still ignoring my questions he plucks my cigarette from my mouth and tosses it to the side.

"Those make you smell like shit and can kill you," he answers matter of factly.

"Well fuck you. What ever made you think I'd listen to you? We're not even friends. Don't you have a stupid rally to go to instead of bothering me?" My sanctuary feels like a trap and I just want out of here but he's blocking my escape route, and by the way he spreads his legs out, he knows it.

"Yes, in fact I do have a 'stupid rally' to go to, right now actually. But I have more important business at the moment." He looks too cocky for his own good right now, like he's holding a secret and it's pissing me the fuck off.

"And what is this important business?" I start pulling out another cigarette but he takes the box and stuffs it in his back pocket.

"Making sure that beautiful scowl of yours is there at the rally."

A weird noise between a laugh and a scoff comes out of my throat, which makes him smile,
almost fondly and I want to smack it off his face.

“And why the hell is that? You don’t really care if I’m there do you?”

“Well what if I do care,” he argues, looking defiant. I shake my head in disbelief, at this point it’s just insulting that he would lie so boldly to my face. “You can’t tell me that you care and ever expect me to believe you. Boys like you don’t give a shit.” My voice is shaking with anger now. I hate that in the short time we’ve known each other he just gets under my skin in a way no other person can.

His eyes darken with contained anger and he leans into me. “And what sort of boy do you think I am?” He asks gruffly.

So I open my mouth and tell him, and once I start I can’t stop. “You are that popular boy! The one who can’t be seen in any other way except perfect. You are all about how others see you, not about how you really are on the inside. If I said hello to you in the hallway you may barely acknowledge me but you would call me freak behind my back. I’ve seen your type over and over again. Every one worse than the last. So don’t tell me you actually care. Don’t you dare. Because I learned the hard way that people never do.

For once he’s stunned speechless as he clearly searches for any words, just staring at me, mouth agape. Well if I didn’t discourage him before to leave me alone, this will certainly do it.

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“So I open my mouth and tell him, and once I start I can’t stop. “You are that popular boy! The one who can’t be seen in any other way except perfect. You are all about how others see you, not about how you really are on the inside. If I said hello to you in the hallway you may barely acknowledge me but you would call me freak behind my back. I’ve seen your type over and over again. Every one worse than the last. So don’t tell me you actually care. Don’t you dare. Because I learned the hard way that people never do.

For once he’s stunned speechless as he clearly searches for any words, just staring at me, mouth agape. Well if I didn’t discourage him before to leave me alone, this will certainly do it.
“You should really come to the rally and game Katniss. Don’t hide,” he says with surprising sincerity. “And you don’t know as much about me as you think you do.” My only response is to yank my bag from him and walk away, resisting the urge to look back to see his reaction, repeating to myself that he is not to be trusted.

“And if you come to the game, I’ll give you back your panties!” He yells out. I stop for a moment before stomping on. I. HATE. HIM.

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My intention was to finish my lunch hideout in a quiet corner of the library but to get there I have to walk past what I consider to be the mouth of hell, the high school pep rally. Exactly where I don’t want to be. It's being held in the open concrete amphitheatre which of course amplifies the excited screams to an obnoxious degree, a physical barrier that feels like it’s actually pushing me back from walking forward. I survey the area, trying to find the right path through the people laughing and screaming at two boys running around in cheerleading outfits. Just as I steel myself to walk through I feel a hand on my shoulder and turn around to see Jo smirking at me.

“Well it’s about time you showed up Brainless. And I am so ignoring that look that says you were just about to hightail it out of here.”

She proceeds to grab the back of my shirt and drag me around like I’m her puppet until she finds Darius and Annie hanging out under a shaded tree. They greet me with their usually cheery if vague smiles indicating they probably snuck some weed at some point. I plop down next to Annie and sit nervously for a couple minutes. Eventually I find my muscles loosening as I realize that more people are interested in what's going on in the amphitheater right now, and not me.

On stage one boy trips the other, exposing his cheerleading spankies which say "Go Wildcats" written across it. I start to chuckle, but more at Anne and Darius who are in tears laughing at the antics, rather than what's happening on stage. Obviously the "medicinal help" makes this lame skit comedic genius to them. I scan the crowd and see my sister whispering and giggling with a mocha skinned girl her age. This must be the girl Rue she was gushing about. It's good to see her happy and it lifts a weight off my chest, but I can’t help but wonder how much my own issues are weighing her down. If I didn’t exist I could see her being the most popular girl in school.

I'm starting to think it wasn't a bad idea that Peeta drove me out of my hiding place. For the first time all day no one is looking at me, and I feel less alone being around my new friends who by miracle seem to not care about my past. I'm just starting to relax, my spine molding to the back of the tree, when I feel a sudden prickle at the back of my neck. I look around, trying to figure out what is making me so uneasy, and of course all the way at the front, where the action is, I see his searing blue eyes directed on me.

While I had been distracted, Peeta had snuck into where the other football players sat, to the right of the stage on the concrete steps. Each of them greet him with lots of hand clasps and slaps on the back, obviously the popular and respected guy in the group. I'm as far back as can be so my distance from him should mean that I stand out as much as one corn in a maize field. But, no, his gaze is as intense as a bright glimmer of light reflecting on a wave. I close my eyes, and lean further into the tree trying not to remember how good his lips felt on mine. ‘It meant nothing,’ I tell myself over and over again. Jo nudges me, saying something about Delly being on stage so I open my eyes again. They immediately tug towards his, but he is chatting with his teammate, and I can't help but think I was just imagining earlier. I’m sure it meant nothing to him either. I see the guys
laugh at something he says and my stomach clenches in fear. He’s probably making fun of me right now. But he doesn’t point at me, and they don’t look over at where I’m sitting so I tell myself to just calm the fuck down.

I try to ignore the boy as best as I can and attempt to focus on the stage towards the cheerleading routine. I ignore his curly blonde hair, obviously run through by his fingers, I ignore his proud chest fitting perfectly in his jersey, and I ignore his easy smile that never wavers as the rally stretches on. Obviously I'm failing, and I feel uneasiness settle in my chest because I've always been able to shut things out. I have to keep reminding myself that he is a fake, this is not a real person in front of me but just another person who is ambitious, self-involved and wants to be popular. By the time the cheerleaders finish their routine all the boys tongues are practically hanging out, and Johanna has a smug satisfied smile on her face. Peeta bounds on stage to cheers louder than ever before. He waves everyone off, almost bashfully before taking the mic from the class announcer Cesar.

"Hey everyone, are you having fun?" His voice rings out and a resounding "yes" is bounced back.

"Awesome. So I want to let you know that the first game of the season is dedicated to some very amazing people at the school." He motions to some people in the crowd and when they come on the stage and start waving I realize they are not students from our school but kids with mental disabilities.

"Profits from the game will go The Aurelius School that is just down the street from us."

"Yeah the Retard House!" A deep male voice rings out. It's hard not to recognize it as Marvel's.

"What the hell did you just say?" Peeta's voice is so hard, so sharp like the edge of a deadly blade, that practically all the school hushes down at once. I've never seen anything like it and I find myself sitting up straighter. Even Darius and Annie stop giggling and look sober.

"Who thinks making fun of others is cool?" He yells out, and the silence pervades. One boy next to him whimpers. It’s a small sound that no one would normally hear, but in the silence it ripples through the crowd, and my hand twitches to comfort him. It almost feels like I’m a puppet master as I see Peeta rub the boys back in the exact motion that I wanted to.

"Now, who thinks that calling another person a retard is bullying," he continues. “Let's do a thumbs down to that." Cheers erupt as everyone starts waving their thumbs down, and then his smile returns. At this point, I’m clinging on so tightly to resist any feelings for him, I don’t know why but I don’t want to let it go, I just can’t. But seeing him smile at the special needs kids next to him, I have to say he is actually being sincere, and it makes it impossibly hard. I also have to admit that I am impressed by how he can control the crowd. They absolutely love him. He has so much influence in the school, I’m curious to know what it would be like to be on his bad side.

"So as, I was saying," he continues once the cheers die down, finishing his planned speech on how the school will benefit from the game, and the other ways that everyone can help. That easy smile is back on his face, obviously winning over everyone. I can’t help but scoff at some girly screams that come out from the crowd as he waves at the group before bouncing off stage with the kids. I look over at Johanna who does the universal sign of “wanker,” causing me to chuckle.

I’m shaking my head at her, and look back to the front, where I find his eyes looking straight in my direction. A small smile plays on his lips and he makes a small motion of what Johanna just did, indicating he just saw us. So I decide to flip him off, causing him to clutch his heart dramatically before laughing. His teammate nudges him and says something that causes him to turn away but I see him still chuckling slightly. Asshole.
"I’m picking you up at 5pm. No arguments." I sigh as I tuck my cellphone away. Jo will not take no for an answer about going to the football game. Even Sister Sae let me free from helping her out so I could make the game. When she said “I’ll see you there,” it almost felt like a demand. Although maybe it was her own enthusiasm to go to the game, but I’m afraid to test it out. There goes my flawless record of never attending a sports event.

I plod up the stairs to the Hawthorne house and open the door, throwing my bag on the corner. But what I see before makes my heart stop. Prim is on the couch crying softly as Rory has his arm around her.

"What did you do to her?” I say rushing towards him.

“I didn’t do anything!” he answered defensively putting his hands up in alarm. My sister looks up at me with red eyes and for a moment I think she is just going to continue the silent treatment, huff out of the room and lock me out of the bedroom we share. But to my surprise she get’s up and hugs me tightly, her head nestling in my shoulder.

“What’s wrong Little Duck” I ask gently stroking her silky bright blonde hair. I give Rory a look which he understands to leave the room, and I guide her back onto the couch.

“It’s Rue…” she manages to say wiping her eyes, and I try to hide my confusion. I just saw them at the rally and they looked perfectly fine, more than fine.

I continue to stroke her hair as she pulls herself together. Her head is on my shoulder in a way it hasn’t been since she was little and our lives were simpler.

“Please tell me, what’s going on?” I plead and she lifts her head, her eyes flashing with guilt.

“Rue’s mom found out about you getting in trouble. She doesn’t want us hanging out with each other anymore.” I feel like the world has bottomed out for a minute and I can’t breathe. I can’t seem to stop hurting my family and I don’t know how to make it better.

Prim pulls back but grabs my hands, seeing the change in my demeanor. She yanks at them insistently until I look into her sincere blue eyes.

“You have to know Katniss. I’ve been defending you when people say something. I’m not ashamed of you. I think you are the bravest person in the world. I know who you truly. Even if we do argue from time to time. So don’t worry about me. I’m going to be ok.”

“Aren’t I supposed to be making you feel better?” I reasoned, shaking my head a bit. She wipes her eyes and snuggles up to me again so I have to wrap my arm around her small frame.

“I don’t want to fight anymore. Having you here with me makes me again makes me feel better. Please don’t go away again.”

“Well I don’t intend to go back to juvie, that’s for sure,” I say stroking her hair.

“You know what I mean Katniss,” she retorts. Her words are loaded, and I don’t answer and she doesn’t expect one. But neither of us pulls away, which is start.

Our moment is broken up when Posy and Vic come running into the living room, arguing about some video game they are about to play. Rory comes behind, eyes guilty for not being able to hold them back, but I give him a smile which instantly relaxes him.
“Prim, are we still going to the game? It should be starting any minute now,” he asks.

“Oh gosh, I am a mess. Hold on while I go upstairs. Katniss are you coming with us?”

Resigned to the fact I can’t get away from it I tell her yes, and she lets out a squee of happiness, and the joy lightens my heart.

She turns to go up to our bedroom but I grab her hand, stopping her.

“We’ll figure this out, okay. I’ll think of something. I’ll make it better.” And my heart hurts with how much I want this to be true.

She gives me a bright and hopeful smile and squeezes my hand before running up the stairs. I follow more slowly behind her, thoughts spinning in my head. With relief I change out of my stupid uniform and into a black shirt, jeans, and my trusty leather boots. That is the one thing I miss the most wearing my stupid school uniform, it’s not being able to wear them, which I did, almost every day. Prim is a whirlwind of clothes and makeup around me but stops when she see’s what I’m wearing.

“Katniss aren’t you going to put on our school colors?” Her eyes are set with a stubbornness that says she is more telling me than asking. Before I can even answer she shakes her head in exasperation and rifles through her dresser until she crows in triumph. She tosses a tank at my head that I easily catch. I turn over the little fabric, royal blue with gold edging, the exact colors of our high school.

“I’m not wearing this scrap of cloth.” I say not bothering to hide my look of disgust.

She just rolls her eyes at me, and plops on her bed tiredly. “God forbid you wear something that shows you have breasts. Just put it on so that we can go.”

I almost want to laugh at the stubborn look on her face, she looks so much like me. It’s not worth pissing her off over a tank top when we’re on good terms again, so I just give her my best scowl and turn around so that I can change my top. I fix my braid, making it more intricate than I usually do, weaving my hair from behind my left ear until it sweeps around the back of my head and lays over my right shoulder. I assess at myself in the mirror having full knowledge I don’t look pretty compared to the popular girls in the school. And despite feeling exposed on top, I feel like I look like myself for the very first time in ages.

“Now was that so terrible? Look, you even have boobs, who knew?” My sister teases, standing behind me, and wrapping her arms around my shoulders, as we both look at me in the mirror.

“Well let’s get this over with then,” I answer rolling my eyes. It is amazing this is the same girl that was crying so hard not an hour ago. I’ve always admired her ability to pick herself and remain positive no matter what.

Hazelle pops her head in the room to let us know the game was starting soon, so we hustle out of the house on the urgent insistence of my sister. Too soon we were all piling into Hazelle’s minivan. All. Of. Us. After Vic and Poppy whined that they wanted to go to the game too it becomes a “family trip.” It’s a cheerful group and I find myself smiling at the family antics despite myself. I definitely won’t be winning any popularity contests rolling up in the beat up old Dodge caravan with the Hawthorne clan, but when did I ever care to win one? Besides, it’s actually kind of nice.

When we get there, the sound of screaming voices in the field is overwhelming, a physical force that pushes me back and makes me want to walk in the opposite direction. But I’m given no
choice when Prim links her arms with mine and smiles sweetly, as I see understanding glisten in her eyes and pulls me through. We are so late the game is already halfway through the first quarter. I walk up the bleachers and nearly trip looking up at the scoreboard and discover we’re already down 0 and 10. I’m trying to tell myself that I don’t care, that it’s just a stupid game, but it’s not working. As I look down at our offense ready to go on the field, I realize I not only want our team to win, but I want Peeta to win.

“There you are brainless, it’s about time you got your ass here,” Johanna yells up to me over the noise, flicking my leg.

I jump realizing I was about go right past her and didn’t see her in the isle. I wave Prim on to join the Hawthornes a few aisle up the bleachers as I plop next to Jo, and ignore the fact that she presses her lips at me.

“Is that your sister,” Annie asks next to her, large green eyes looking up. Darius on her other side, his head stuck deep into his trash science fiction book.

“Yup,” I answer simply, eyes already pulling towards the stocky quarterback in our school colors.

“What’s up her ass by the way? She’s giving us the death glare,” Jo says, not sounding like she really cares that much what the answer is.

“She can tell that you ain’t nothing but trouble,” I answer, and she just snorts, nodding her head like it’s true. I look back to see that Prim is no longer looking down at us but her eyes are tracked to her friend Rue who is sitting with two other girls. Her shoulders slump slightly in dejection as she looks at them, and Rue posture is almost the exact mirror. Feeling helpless, I can’t face my sister’s misery anymore so I turn my head to the football field. I just pray that I can fix it.

I focus just in time to see our coach yell time out after Peeta is nearly sacked, throwing the ball away just in time. Johanna shakes her head at the action and I tuck my hands underneath my legs to stop the urge to bite my nails as disappointment sweeps through the restless crowd.

“I don’t know what the hell is up with Mellark tonight. He hasn’t been able to get a play going this entire quarter. This season is going to suck if he can’t get his act together. At least my girlfriend will always look good in her cheerleading uniform. I mean look at her ta tas jiggling.”

As much as I would like to admire Delly’s “ta tas jiggling”, I can’t tear my eyes away from Peeta as he runs across the field to meet with his coach. With all the noise around me I can’t hear what is being said, but it’s clear that the coach is completely irate as he screams endlessly, spit flying into Peeta’s face. Every word emphasized with a hard poke to his chest. Peeta seems to absorb it all stoically, grimly nodding his head at the lashing words. But for the briefest moment I see him crack, I see the pain and disappoint flash across his face, even from this distance. I don’t even know if anybody else saw it. And for the first time since I’ve met Peeta, the frustrating self assured boy who is everything I am not, I see myself reflected in him and it makes me want to throw up. The whistle blows indicating that the timeout is over and Peeta finally breaks away, but just as he is about to run back on the field, he scans the bleachers. It’s probably my imagination but it feels like our eyes catch and I give him a small smile that struggles to stay on my face. He returns a large blinding one, and any bit of pain I saw him struggle with is gone, and he is back to the too-perfect boy I know.

“Did you see that Clove, he smiled at me. I’m sure he wants to get back together,” I hear a voice declare two rows in front of me, and I realize it’s Glimmer. I shake my head and realize I was absurd to think that Peeta was looking for me in the bleachers. He likes fucking with me, that’s all. What happened at lunch meant nothing. I have to repeat it to myself over and over. I can’t let myself slip.
The crowd screams and rises to their feet, breaking me from my thoughts, as Peeta throws a pass that is caught 30 yards down field, and the wide receiver is untouchable as he makes a touchdown.

“It’s about damn time!” Johanna screams as she claps, completely absorbed by the game. Even Annie and Darius are cheering, completely involved now. He is perfect the rest of the night. Making spectacular play after play. Gone is the unassured player that started this game and I can’t help but admire how he was able to turn it around. And I really hate to admit it, but I was actually having a pretty good time hanging out, watching our team win. Completely mesmerized by the quarterback I wish I could get out of my mind.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! I will try to update faster but at least you had a nice chunky chapter to read. Also follow me at tumbler at dianaflynn22.
I never went to football games in my old high school. There was never time to fit something I considered so pointless. Now my first high school game is finally over, and I’m afraid to admit that even though I didn’t want to come tonight, I actually had fun. Everyone screaming and cheering together, seeing our team win, the elation afterwards, this was all something I’d never experienced. Although, I wouldn’t say I screamed my head off like everyone else, more like internally cheered. But having Jo scream aggressively next to me and laughing along with Annie and Darius was a nice way to forget all the shit floating around for awhile.

A smile is threatening to take over my face as I watch Peeta’s team mates crush around him. The entire football field is thundering with his name as people fight to congratulate him, slapping him on the back after his obvious (even to me) stellar performance. I want to tap into my constant distrust of him, remind myself that he is as fake as the rest of them. But at this moment, seeing the pure joy on his face, I am having a hard time of it.

“Look at that hero worship down there,” Jo complains next to me shaking her head. “No wonder he can do no wrong in the school. He’s got half the panties in the stadium wet. Hell, he’s got your panties wet.

“What are you even talking about?” She gives me a glare that says I know exactly what she’s talking about.

“I see how you look at him. Like every other over sexed girl in this stadium. God Brainless, I can’t believe you of all people would fall for it, like all those suckers. Should have known it was dangerous to bring you here tonight,” she adds with a bark of a laugh.

“I see how you look at him. Like every other over sexed girl in this stadium. God Brainless, I can’t believe you of all people would fall for it, like all those suckers. Should have known it was dangerous to bring you here tonight,” she adds with a bark of a laugh.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I mumble, crossing my arms. But I do know what she’s talking about. Wasn’t I just smiling down at him like an idiot a minute ago? I’m staring down at the scene with different eyes now, watching how people want to touch Peeta the hero. How do you survive as a person when you are treated like that? How could he not have an ego the size of Texas.

“Hey, we’re headed to Finnick’s place to hang out. Want to come?” Annie asks, interrupting my disturbingly obsessive trance on the activity down on the field. When I do focus on her, I stare at her dumbly, completely caught on the fact that sweet but strange Annie has a boyfriend.

“Come on Kat, we got you out this far, you might as well go all the way. Finnick’s place is sweet too. A bungalow overlooking the ocean and he always provides plenty of booze and weed.

“Finnick’s place is awesome!” Darius booms out.

They all look at me expectantly, while I peer behind me to see Prim laughing at something Rory is telling her with great arm movement. But with regret I decide I should head home instead of going to a party, just to confirm to her that I am not returning to old habits.
“Sorry guys, I’m beat and just want to go home.”

“Well it’s your loss. Text me if you change your mind. Now there is a busty blonde I have to congratulate on her great bouncing skills.” Jo wiggles her brows before leading the way for them to exit the bleachers. She pushes her way through the crowds of enthusiastic teens trying to leave causing a wake of protests in her path.

I settle back down on the bench, seeing that Prim and the Hawthornes are taking their time in leaving. It’s not worth making my way up to them especially against the tide of increasingly annoying people. This decision is one I soon really regret when the distinctly snide voice of Glimmer rings out in front of me.

“I can’t believe they let her in this school,” she sneers to Clove, both their pretty faces twisted in disgust. “My mother is irate. She says she pays too much for me to have a good education in a safe school to allow an ‘incarcerated delinquent’ in. She’s terrified something will happen to me, especially after I described how crazy she looks. She’s already lodged a complaint to Sister Sae and the school board. If she has her way, that bitch will be out within a week and her sister too.”

The two of them rise from their seats, Glimmer delicately smoothing down her skirt before she looks over at me, just a quick flash attached to a smug smile that says she knows I heard every bitchy world. “Come on, let’s go congratulate Peeta. We need to get my house before everyone else does. Daddy gave me plenty of money to get whatever I want for the party.”

“Does that include Peeta?” Clove dryly remarks. “If I have my way…” Glimmer remarks, making her hand into a fist and moving it like she was giving a blow job. They both start cackling but what is said next is beyond my earshot as they make their way down.

“Katniss are you ready to...what’s wrong?” I feel a warm hand on my shoulder and I look up to see the concerned bright blue eyes of my sister. I didn’t even realize that she had come up to me, or that my hands were closed so tight, half moon prints were left in my fleshy palms by my own short nails.

“Oh it’s nothing,” I answer standing up and basically shrugging her off. I close my face down to any emotions I might betray to her. “Nothing I can’t handle, so don’t worry about it.”

Her face unfortunately says she’s going to worry about it. “Katniss, Hazelle was going to take us to the dinner to get some ice cream. Do you want to come?”

“Umm, I can’t. I’m going to a party that Joanna invited me to. So don’t wait up okay?”

She furrows her brows, but nods her head anyway. She knows when I set my mind, there is no changing it. “Just be careful okay.”

“Of course, Little Duck.” I give her a peck on the forehead and wave bye to the others before she can say anything else, practically jogging down the bleacher stairs. God how I need to get away from my brain for a moment.

I weave through the crowd, looking for my friends, and realize if I don’t find them than I’ll be stuck. I just can’t go back to Hazelle’s right now. I reach the parking lot and thank god for Darius red hair, shining brightly under the parking lot lights. I break into a run as I see them all pile into Delly’s car, and call out their names. Jo’s head pop’s up and a satisfied grin spreads on her face.

“Well it’s about time you made it,” she triumphantly exclaims.
The crunch of gravel under tire wheels brings my head up. I was so lost in my head I wasn’t paying any attention to the twists and turns of the road. If I wanted to head home on my own I would have no idea how to get there. But as I take in the much anticipated bungalow, I don’t think I’ll have to worry about that. I don’t have to step inside for me to know this is a welcoming place. From the outside the house is modest but has large windows emitting a warm glow from the multiple lights inside. A roomy porch reaches from one end to the other, with worn chairs already occupied by people lounging and gossiping. It’s too dark to take in the view, but I can hear the crashing of the ocean behind the house.

“You’re going to love it here Kat,” Darius says catching my attention as the girls start walking up the driveway, arms all linked. “It’s totally secluded so we never get bothered by the police. And Finnick is a great guy.” He says waggling his eyebrows. I just nod my head as I see the door open, and a ridiculously handsome man stepping out, an angelic halo forming around his bronze hair from the light flooding from the doorway.

Annie gives an uncharacteristic squeal before running ahead and jumping into his arms, kissing him all over his face.

“Ugh, the only part I hate about Finnick’s place is how damn cutesy they are. Come on Brainless, I need a beer.” Johanna says next to me before grabbing Delly’s hand and dragging her past the couple without acknowledging them. But when I pass, I get a roguish smile from this Finnick guy as he puts down Annie.

“So who’s the new girl?” He asks as his dimples coming into full on display. This man I can tell loves to use his charm.

“This is the girl I was talking about Finny. This is Katniss. Finny and I have been together for two years now. He puts up with my crazy ways.” She looks up adoringly at him and I want to heave a little, especially as he looks down at her with an utter look of devotion on his face.

“There is nothing crazy about you. Anyway, nice to meet you Katniss. I’ve heard so much about you,” he says turning to me, and there is something in that cocky smirk of his that says he’s holding back. “Anyway, come on in. I’m sure Johanna is already making herself comfortable.”

He opens the door for the rest of us, and I am immediately hit with the sound of some EDM music but I’m not versed enough to know who the DJ is. The living room is large and shabby but still clean and inviting. There are some warm almost hippy touches that I suspect to be the work of Annie. People are scattered everywhere; some are dancing in a corner while everyone else is chatting, drinking and smoking. It’s not exactly the crazy party vibe I imagine high school parties to be so it puts me a little bit more at ease.

“Come on, get comfortable and I’ll get you a drink, you look tense as hell.” Finnick says with a slight smirk on his lips. I fight the need to glare at him, pointing out the obvious.

“Yes, Katniss, everyone here is cool.” Annie joins in, pulling me towards a big soft brown couch that Johanna and Delly are already snuggled in a corner of. Delly’s showing considerable thigh in her tiny cheerleading outfit especially since her leg is swung over Jo’s who is chugging down a beer, her other hand resting comfortably on her girlfriend’s leg. The two girls sitting next to them see Annie approaching and immediately get up to give her room without question.

“So who are all these people?” I ask as I sink into the couch, not recognizing anybody around me. I’m not one to really pay attention but none of them look like they go to our school.

“They are all Finnick’s high school buddies,” Jo answers, pulling a can of beer from the table and tossing it to me. I immediately pull the tab, and feel relief as the bitter cool drink slides down my
throat. “He goes to the neighboring public school, the bastard. What I wouldn’t give not to go to our snooty holier than thou school.”

“Hey it’s not that bad!” Delly protests. Johanna rolls her eyes, answer enough about how she feels.

“Yeah it is,” Finnick says plopping down on the coffee table in front of us. He pulls Annie’s hands to him and kisses the top of each, making her come alive in a way I have never seen before. “You should try the public school some time. The kids are much cooler,” he says with a charming wink that impresses none of us girls, especially Jo.

“He’s their star swimmer you know,” Annie announces proudly. “None of our athletes can beat him in the pool.”

“Well they are a bunch of lazy pricks,” he declares and Jo chuckles giving a cheers to that. Delly pouts, but doesn’t say anything but Jo appeases her with a quick peck on the lips that brings out a smile.

“And he does this without his parents being around too,” Annie continues, oblivious to the frown that has developed on her boyfriends face.

“So tell me about the game, he says quickly recovering and turning his megawatt smile on again.

Quickly conversations dissolve into smaller groups, namely the couples intensely focusing in on each other and my idea of a good time is not being stuck between two lusty couples. So I pull myself up from the too soft couch, pick up another beer and awkwardly wander around the house, feeling disconnected to everyone who is having a good time. I eventually find my way down to the basement and discover Darius sitting Indian style smoking out of a large bong that is as cloudy as his eyes are. He smiles widely when he sees me and offers for me to join him. Now that is what I need.

I mirror Darius’ position and take a hit for myself. The world softens as it’s passed around and around and I can feel the relief of my brain stopping and finally the chaotic swirling thoughts dissipate. Time blurs, everything blurs and soon I am laughing at something that Darius has said that doesn’t make sense to either of us, so I barely pay attention to the feet clomping down the stairs.

It’s Darius who notices him first, his face breaking into the same hazy smile that greeted me. “Here’s the conquering hero!” He exclaims lifting up the bong. I crane my neck and my own smile fades as I look up to see the thick stocky body of Peeta Mellark. He looks just as unhappy to see me though, his lips set in a firm line.

“Aren’t you supposed to be somewhere else getting your dick sucked by Glimmer?” I blurt out. His frown only deepens as he turns to Darius.

“Darius how much have you given her?”

“Hey Peeta!” Darius answers like he just noticed him and offers him the bong.

“Hey,” I say getting up and waving my hand in front of his face. “I’m right here, you can ask me yourself. And the answer is none of your goddamn business.” Peeta looks even more like a disapproving dad and I want to giggle at the absurdity of it. He looks so absurd with those perfect lips pressed together, his curly hair still damp from a shower, and his piercing blue eyes staring down at me. I need some air.

I push past him and grip the railing hard as I make my way back upstairs. The living room feels
confining and is completely stifling since the entire house is now crammed with people partying. Jo and Delly are nowhere to be seen so I keep pushing past until I find my way to the sliding door in the back that promises “outside.”

Just as I am pulling open the door, I feel a hand on my arm and I turn around exasperated.

“Wait Katniss, please. I just want to talk to you,” Peeta pleads squeezing my elbow slightly. I slide away from his touch, gripping the handle I’m still holding.

“What is there even to talk about? You shouldn’t even be here.”

“And why not?” He says crossing his arms, a challenging look on his face.

“But before I even can formulate a good response there is a shriek that has Peeta’s name mixed in there. Before I can even blink a girl has thrown her arms around Peeta, her ample bust pressed into his chest. While he greets “Leevy” with a warm smile, his eyes still flicker to mine with conflict.

“Obviously I’m mistaken,” I answer, taking the opportunity of the girl trying to start a conversation with him to escape, doing my best to ignore how both her eyes and his track me.

I squeeze through the narrowly opened door and gasp as cold salty fresh air sweeps past me. It’s a modest sized balcony, with people scattered about in small groups chatting. I see Annie and Finnick leaning against the railing in what looks like an intense conversation, and I’m not too keen for them to see me. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see to my left a narrow barely hanging on metal spiral staircase, and I take the opportunity to climb it.

At the top is the entire flat roof and to my happiness it’s completely deserted except for a couple of lounge chairs. Better than that, it has the most breathtaking view of the entire area. The heavy full moon gives delicate details of the trees to the east of me, and sparkles like jewels on the peaks of the waves. I lean against the railing and close my eyes, enjoying the fresh salty sea air ignoring everything below me. The minutes stretch and I finally find myself relaxing.

“But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east and Juliet is the sun!” My eyes open in confusion and there is Peeta, half way up stairs, arms reaching up to me with laughter written all over his face.

“Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, who is already sick and pale with grief that thou her maid art far more fair than she.”

“Peeta what are you doing.” I say scanning down to see if anyone is watching. And yes, there are some curious onlookers.

“She speaks! O, speak again, bright angel, for thou art as glorious to this night.”

“Get up here!”

“That is not the line, but gladly M’lady.” I am such a mixture of frustration and amusement that my face is a battle of expression. I’m sure I look crazy.

He bounces up the creaking stairs and my heart lurches for a moment in fear that it will break and he will fall. But he makes it up, his eyes twinkle down at me and I just have to shake my head at him.

After his brazen act, he just stares at me, and we let silence fall between us as the muffled sound of the party intermixed with the crashing waves dances around us. I’m waiting for him to talk first, to
see what is coming out of his mouth next. I shiver slightly and that seems to break him of whatever trance he’s in and he pulls off his letterman jacket and sweeps it around my shoulders.

“You looked cold,” he says with a casual shrug.

“I just don’t get you.” I answer, reluctantly putting my arms into the sleeves. It still radiates his warmth and it does feel good. And smells good. Like fresh soap, dill, and...Peeta

“What is there to get?” He answers looking honestly confused. In my head I’m running through his dual nature of sweet boy and perfect all-star, but then the subtle ways he acts towards me says he ain’t no angel. He’s a mystery and I know he’s holding back from showing all of himself, because I’m exactly the same way. But I don’t know how to say all that, so I just give up and switch to another question.

“What are you doing here?”

“You mean not getting my dick sucked by Glimmer?” He challenges, eyes unflinching as he stares me down. My cheeks heat at this words, the image of the act suddenly popping in my head.

“God, you’re gross.” I say trying to move around him, but he’s quick and is front of me again.

“What, are you the only one who can say the word dick?”

“Stop saying that,” I snap, feeling my face totally aflame now.

“What? Di…” But before he can finish I slap my hand over his mouth. His impish eyes combat my own glare as we battle silently for a minute. I can feel lips pressed against my palm while his pupils dilate and suddenly my arm feels weak.

“Forget it.” I release his mouth and finally move past him, heading straight for the stairs. I just have my hand on the railing, when his determined voice reaches my ears.

“Why are you always either avoiding me or running away from me Katniss?”

“I’m not running away. I’m going home,” I say whipping around. But the act makes my head spin, and Peeta’s eyes pop as it looks for a moment I might tumble down. But he is there, his reflexes lightning fast as he grabs my shoulders and pulls me towards him. My head feels heavy and I lean it against his chest, feeling his strong heartbeat steady me in return.

“Shit. I’m too fucked up to go home. I can’t let Prim see me like this.” Peeta’s arms tighten around my shoulders and he shifts around so that he could lead me further onto the roof and away from the edge.

“Come on, let’s sit down,” he orders guiding me down to a plush lounge chair that is just enough room for two. Maybe it’s me, maybe it’s him, but we don’t sit down, more like lay down. He curls me into his body and I find my head on his chest and my bare leg touching his own. Usually I would just push him away, but he feels so warm and secure. There is a short list of only one person I trust in this world but at this moment I feel like I can add a second person to that list.

“I don’t know why I do this. Well I guess I do know. I just don’t know how to stop it. How to make my brain stop thinking. To stop remembering. It’s just an easy way to escape. I am probably making no sense to you right now.” Too much pot, too much alcohol and now too much confessing to Peeta. I know I am going to regret this is the morning. But then I feel a calloused hand on my cheek, softly insisting that I look up at him. His face is so close to mine, I can feel his gentle breath on my forehead. And his bright eyes on mine takes my breath away.
“No I get it. I really do.”

“But you don’t take shit. I can tell. You don’t like the loss of control.”

He chuckles at me before kissing me on the forehead. “Hey pot,” he says softly. I’m too relaxed to fight or protest. He pulls back and shakes his head at me. “How do you know me more than anybody else? You drive me crazy. But let’s just say that I find other ways to… escape too. So yeah, I get it.”

The hairs on his legs are soft and tickles my own bare leg and I can’t help but rub my own calf against his.

“Katniss, what are you doing?” Peeta says, his voice husky. I just shrug, not giving him answer.

“Well quit it,” he says gruffly, his voice a little shaky. My response is to track my hand laying on his chest down until I find the gap where his shirt pulls up and start to tickle his warm belly. He let’s out a chuckle before his strong hand grabs mine. In a flash I’m on my back, my wrists pinned over my head and his leg pressed between my thighs.

He leans so close that our nose are just almost touching. “Katniss, I told you to quit it,” he growls before his mouth descends on mine. I can’t help myself, my inhibitions are too far gone, and I greedily accept his offer. My mouth opens, welcoming his insistent tongue, sucking it in further. He tastes so damn good. I can feel his pelvis press strongly into mine, the feeling of his hardness making me groan.

He unexpectedly pulls back and looks at me deeply for a long moment. “I’m sorry,” he says panting softly. He returns to lying on his back, pulling me tight to him like I might escape. He’s probably right. As I struggle to figure out what the hell happened… again, we stare up at the stars, twinkling above.

“Why’d you stop?” I finally ask trying to calm the fire that he stoked in me. Trying to quell the hurt that wants to build.

“Because I want this to be real.” My cloudy mind doesn’t understand what he means by that, and before I can ask further I gasp when I see a falling star flash through the sky.

“Make a wish Katniss,” he murmurs softly into the shell of my ear, and I do. Nothing else is said between us and soon my eyes are too heavy to remain open.
I hate those mornings when you wake up in a new place and for one moment everything looks topsy-turvy, the world is upside down on its axis and nothing makes sense whatsoever. That feeling of disorientation is overwhelming as I try to pry my eyes open while a rhythmic beat pounds straight from my head that spells my doom.

Through blurry eyes the weak blue tinted light registers along with the feeling of damp air against my skin and I realize that it’s already dawn. From my angle all I can see is a low wall and the flat grey sky above. Head too heavy to move, the lack of details in front of me is disorienting since I’m not sure where the hell I am. As I try to pull the pieces of last night together a shiver runs down my body when I become aware that I am also pinned down by a heavy weight across my arm. It’s an oddly comforting feeling, especially with the cool air paving a path of raised bumps on exposed pieces of my skin. With tendrils of sleep calling me to close my eyes again, I automatically snuggle in closer to the warmth emanating at my back until I realize what exactly it is that is protecting me from the cold. Namely Peeta’s very muscular arm which is intimately holding me close to his body. My eyes focus on freckles that spread across his creamy skin. I’m ashamed to admit that I’ve memorized the details of those freckles while he was driving so I know it’s him without turning around. His chest presses my back, knees tucked perfectly behind mind, and his check nestled in the crook of my neck making us a perfect little spoon.

As Peeta’s steady breath moves the tendrils at the nape of my neck, I don’t even move a pinkie as I slowly weave together what happened last night. When my brain starts filling in the blanks, I’m first hit with the overwhelming claustrophobia of feeling trapped in this small town and self loathing for the demons I’ve brought with me. After that all the details from the previous night’s events quickly fall into place that brought me here to this roof and the boy laying behind me. The push and pull we have with each other is driving me crazy and I’m afraid of what we might potentially mean to each other. I keep trying to push him away, fight that irresistible draw he has on me but I’m exhausted. Right now I’m tired of fighting him.

So I should pull away, maybe even see if I can leave before he wakes up, but in his arms I feel more content and secure than I have in a long time. There is no overthinking it when my head and heart hurt so much. I just need a little more time with this feeling... this fragile feeling of peace. I think it’s more disorienting feeling so safe and yet so lost at the same time than it was waking up hungover.

Peeta expels another deep breath and pulls me closer to him and then I feel... him. It’s thick and hard, and nestled perfectly against my ass. My heart beats exponentially faster as my flight instinct finally kicks in. So rather than quietly slipping out of his arms like I should, I more like leap out and scramble to the end of the large lounge chair that we are on, wrapping my arms around my knees protectively so I take up as little space as possible.
Peeta’s eyes blink open, revealing their stunning blue as he slowly becomes awake. He reaches out where I was but when he finds only empty space, his eyes pop open in full awareness.

Quickly finding me, he gives a sleepy smile that is more sexy than it should be. “Good morning Katniss,” he greets while sitting up, scrubbing the unruly curls on top of his head. “Thanks for keeping me warm last night.”

“Don’t make a habit of it,” I snipe out automatically and he just shakes his head at me in disapproval.

“I thought we got past all that finally. Or let me guess, you don’t remember,” he says with clear disappointment.

“Don’t worry. I remember,” I mumble, having a difficult time looking at him.

He gives out a long sigh, messing his curls even more as his fingers run through his hair aggressively. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him this disheveled, even when playing football.

“I just want to get to know you Katniss. Is that so difficult for you? Are you too popular to be around me?” He pierces me with his eyes, a look of deep frustration and want in them that takes my breath away.

“That’s fresh coming from the jock who has never had to struggle in his life,” I answer but I instantly regret lashing out. I try to gather strength around my next words, hoping that I can believe in them and make him believe me too. “Look, I’m sorry Peeta, but whatever this is between us just won’t work. We are in two totally different worlds. And I don’t know why you would even want me in yours.”

“That cliche excuse? Come on Katniss, you’re better than that. I can think of so many reasons in favor of us working. But why don’t you tell me exactly why not.” Peeta sits up straight, crossing his legs seemingly in a relaxed position. But his eyes are challenging me and his hands clench over his knees in a way that says he is anything but calm.

All my rational excuses leave me as he stares me down. The previously cool blue of the fresh morning is giving way to a yellow warmth with the rising sun. It’s rays softly bounce off Peeta’s chaotic curls and his eyes look brighter than I’ve ever seen them, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a
color like it. He doesn’t even have to speak for him to start breaking down my walls.

Not that I’m going to stop trying to refortify them with anger. “I don't know why you want to know me more. Get in my pants is the obvious reason. Or maybe you’re just some weirdo who likes the challenge of seeing if you can get everyone in the world to like you,” I lash out while pulling myself into a tighter ball.

He doesn’t say anything for a moment and it’s deathly quiet. I can’t make eye contact with him so instead I look at the rise and fall of his chest. After a long moment, I see his body slowly inch forward, his arm rises and his fingers carefully move my chin up so that he can catch my gaze looking at me with eyes that have seemed to have gone ten degrees colder.

“I resent that you would think that of me Katniss. Obviously I gave your observational skills more credit than you deserve.” He says this slowly, methodically, but it feels like a quick slap to the face.

I shake my head, trying to get him out of it and take a dry swallow that does nothing to help the lump in my throat before I try to convince him. “I shouldn't have said that. But Peeta, it’s not about you. Or us. It’s me. I’m sure I don’t even have to tell you what rumors are going around about me. I’m sure there are plenty of girls who will be happy to give you the dirty details. And I’m not an unjustly accused saint. If I want Prim to have any chance of a normal social life I have to leave the school. I’ve only been here a short time and I’ve done enough damage. We can’t move again but I can go to the public school,” I say with as much force as I can.

“What? Wait? You can’t just give up and leave,” he says. He grabs my hands before I can even react and holds them tightly. “What if I can make it better for you?”

“And how can you possibly do that?” I ask narrowing my eyes.

His face transforms into the captivating popular jock I’m used to as he gives me the most charming smile, the kind that can melt the knickers off a nun, before he snaps it off again like switching off a light. In a brief moment he’s made his point with what type of influence he has without saying a word. “What’s the point of being the captain of the football team and class president if I can’t influence some students and parents?” he answers confidently.

I give a very unfeminine snort as I yank my hands away harshly and stand up so he can’t do it again. “No Peeta. I am not going to let you come on your white horse to save me. I can’t owe a person that much. I’ll never owe another person again. I can figure things out on my own. Leaving the school is the simplest and best solution.”
He gets up and stalks toward me, determination written all over his face. I move back but find the limited space of the roof brings me quickly to the edge. He reaches out like he is going to touch my cheek but ends up running his hands through his hair in exasperation before crossing his arms.

“You are the most stubborn person I have ever met Katniss. You wouldn’t owe me anything.” He turns his head down like he is trying to collect his thoughts, before looking back at me with determination. “Maybe we can strike a bargain then. Let me help you in exchange for your cooperation.”

“And what sort of cooperation are you expecting from me?” I hiss out. “Am I supposed to be your slut or whatever.” He turns red for once in life, completely embarrassed and uncomfortable.

“Goddamn Katniss, no! That’s not what I’m talking about!”

“Well, what else would a boy like you want with a girl like me?” His eyes soften and his hand comes up so carefully, already so familiar with how I will react, and gently cups my face. I stiffen, prepared to bolt, but his thumb flicks softly on my cheek and I can’t help but lean into it.

“I just want to get past a few of those icy layers and spend time with you, get to know you better. And making your life easier is just a bonus. But obviously everything with you has to be a trade because you just can’t let me give you something. So if that makes you feel better then let’s call it a damn trade. You hang out with me and I will try and get the parents to ease up on your sister. Does that work for you?” The last part he says slowly, obviously trying to hold on to the little patience he has left with me.

I give a chuckle that sounds sad in my ears. “You can’t make my life easier Peeta.” The birds start singing their morning song and he just considers me calmly as he waits for me to continue. But I don’t know what to say. I shouldn’t be letting him in. But if it’s a bargain, is it letting him in?

“Why do you want to know me better?” I ask softly even if there is a tinge of frustration there.

“Can I try something?” He asks. All I can do is nod my head and he bends forward until his nose almost touches mine. My breast is heaving so hard it now starts press against his. He stops for a second and when he sees no protest from me, he continues until his lips softly touch mine. He slowly rubs them against my own like he just wants to feel the shape of my own. I rushed our first kiss and was too drunk this last time so I had not realize how soft his lips actually are even if slightly chapped but the feel of them causes my skin to tingle.
But then he pulls back, not taking it any deeper, and a lazy smile spread on his face like he’s Darius after he’s taken a large hit. He rubs my top lip with his thumb and my tongue instinctively juts out to lick the pad. He expels his breath shakily, like he can barely contain himself. I realize I can feel him hard and hot against my stomach and this time I don’t feel like pulling away. The ache is so intense in my thighs I can barely stand it. How is he able to wreck me so, with barely a touch?

“What was that for?” I finally manage to ask, licking his taste on my lips.

“Well you’ve always been the instigator Katniss Everdeen. So I thought it was my turn for once,” he says, lifting an eyebrow and I can feel a scowl form on my face.

The crisp morning air suddenly rushes between us as he steps away. “Just think about my offer, he says as he steps towards the ladder.

“I hardly call that an offer!” I yell back and he just shakes his head, starting to make his way down until I see his blond mop disappear. I can barely move my limbs since they feel like lead.

“There is no way I am agreeing to spending more time with him,” I mumble to myself. I flop back down on the lounge chair, feeling like a crazy person talking to myself, amongst other reasons. Maybe it’s just the hangover. It will be so much easier to push him away once my head clears.

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It’s not until the sun’s rays are truly invading my eyelids that I reluctantly open my eyes again and leave the sanctuary of the roof. I actually didn’t realize I had dozed off again, or maybe I should consider it my brain shutting down. It must be at least an hour since Peeta left me.

As I softly pad through the house, I’m afraid at any moment Peeta is going to pop out, but it’s quiet. Just bodies of party-goers who never left like me strewn around the room. I finally make it to the front porch and freedom hoping maybe I’ll make it home before Prim wakes up.

“Trying to sneak out huh?” I leap in a completely undignified way at the sudden voice before turning around to see Johanna sitting casually on the porch swing. One of her legs is propped up next to her, the arm leaning against it holds a smoldering cigarette. As she scrutinizes me she takes a long draw of her cigarette, the smoke curling around her.
“Shit Jo, you scared me,” I answer feeling my heart pound. I walk up to her and pluck her cigarette to take my own drag, just to calm myself down.

“He left an hour ago. But I bet you know that already,” she states.

“Who? Darius?” I try to sound as clueless as possible but the scoff that comes out from her says I’m not fooling anyone.

“Peeta left an hour ago Brainless. But you know that already since you spent the entire night with him.”

“Nothing happened Jo, we just passed out on the roof.” I can hear how annoyed my voice sounds but it only makes her narrow her eyes even more at me.

“Just watch it with him ok Brainless? Don’t become another swooning fan and get hurt.”

“Whatever. Nothing is going on with him so you don’t have to worry.” I don’t even know why I’m lying to her, or why she cares but this is something I have to figure out on my own.

She scoffs, obviously not believing what I say. “Sure, you just keeping tell yourself that.”

“Whatever. I’ll see you at school.” I turn around, not waiting for her reply and leave as fast I can.

The walk is long, and I get turned around a few times before I figure out where I am. As a result, my hopes of getting home before anyone is awake obviously was pure fantasy because, as I approach the house, I can already hear the piercing screams of kids running before I even go up the steps. The door opens with a bang followed by Vic and Pansy rushing out past me as they barrel towards the tire swing hanging from the tree. I catch the door before it can slam shut and step in. There on the old fading brown couch facing the door is my sister. She looks up from her book with the facial expression of a mom waiting all night for her kid. I inwardly sigh, gathering my patience as I approach her cautiously before kicking off her legs and plopping on the couch next to her.

“Hey Little Duck.” I say as casually as possible. She peers over her book with relief, aggravation, and concern all flashing in those innocent blue eyes of hers.
“Hey Katniss, how was your night?” There is an uptick in her voice as she tries to sound casual herself, as she returns to reading her book and my heart hurts a little.

“I’m sorry Prim, I shouldn’t have run out like that.” I apologize as I reach out and rub her ankle

“Why did you? You looked like the Hounds of Hades were after you,” she retorts finally putting the book down.

“You’re so damn smart,” Is my only answer as I chuckle at her choice of words.

“You are too Katniss. And so talented. You could be successful again if you tried,” She pleads. But I can’t answer her so we sit in silence for a moment as we listen to the kids screaming in joy outside, and Hazelle’s vacuum moving upstairs.

“Look, I didn’t go anywhere bad this time I promise.” I finally answer. She gives me a side look that says she doesn’t believe me after years of me lying to her. “Peeta was there,” I blurt out and she visibly relaxes.

“Oh that’s good Katniss! I know he’ll watch after you. He’s been so good to me at school! He even says hi to me in the hallways even though I’m just a freshman,” she exclaims, obvious stars in her eyes. She doesn’t have to know he wasn’t at a typical high school party or the fact he’s not the perfect human everyone thinks he is. It’s just nice to see she’s not so worried for a moment.

“So did you enjoy the game?”

“Yeah,” she said without any enthusiasm. “I just wish…” but she leaves it hanging.

“You wish you could have spent it with Rue?” Her eyes start to shimmer with tears she has probably been holding back all night.

“It’s going to work out Prim, I know it.” I answer, taking her hand. But she pulls away and wipes her eyes quickly, before getting up.
“I’m going to catch up on homework ok? I’ll talk to you later.” With slow defeated steps she walks up the creaky stairs to our room and closes the door softly. So much for my stellar pep talk. Once again life has proven to me how much I suck at comforting people. I know she likes school and all but not so much that she’d want to do it on a Saturday morning.

I click on the TV to numb my brain and just lay slumped on the couch feeling defeated for awhile, not knowing what to do with myself. The silence is broken by the deep grumble of my stomach reminding me I haven’t eaten in a long time. I don’t even remember my last meal. I pull myself off the deep worn out couch and head to the kitchen. I’m just at the entryway when the intense low voices of my mother and Hazelle drift towards me.

“The parents are pressuring Sister Sae to let me go. They are worried that I’ll be a bad influence with the kids if I have a daughter like Katniss. I don’t know what I’m going to do Hazelle if I get fired. We are barely making it as it is right now, especially after all our legal debts.” There is an urgency in my mother’s voice I haven’t heard in a long time.

“It’ll be okay Lily. I’m here for the three of you no matter what happens. And Gale wanted to make sure the money he is sending home is helping you out too.”

“I don’t want to take your money Hazelle. I’m hoping it won’t come to that. I just wish…” My mom voice cracks and I hear a deep intake of breath like she is trying to control herself. “I just hate what I became after Robert’s death. If I wasn’t so caught up in my own mourning I would have seen what was happening to Katniss. I could have seen the signs before it was too late. “That is all she can get out before she starts to sob.

Hunger is the last thing on my mind now. My old friend, my flight instinct, nudges me to flee again and I quietly back away and leave the stifling house. My chest is so tight with the rush of many mixed emotions I don’t know where to start, where to go. So I blindly walk with no realization of where I’m going. Time and distance have no meaning, I’m so caught in my daze. I vaguely hear a horn blaring at me and turn around the corner to get away from the obnoxious sound before I hear the screeching of wheels, like someone is turning around. Just as I am about to cross a sidewalk a car slams on its brakes in front of me, only then does reality come back to me and I really pay attention to what’s around me. I’m in Peeta’s neighborhood. Not only that, it’s his beautiful gleaming Jeep in stopped front of me. His head dips down to look out the passenger window, eyes filled with concern.

“Hey Katniss, are you alright?” I shake my head no, before realizing what I’m doing and switch to nodding yes.

“No I’m okay Peeta. I’m just taking a walk,” I answer with a smile that fools no one.
He unlocks his passenger door and pushes it open for me. “Hey why don’t you come in. I was just about to get out of here for a bit.”

“No, I’m fine,” I say tersely and start walking again. I practically jump when I see Peeta bound next to me. I turn to find his car door wide open and the engine still running.

“You know someone might steal your car,” I say without stopping.

He just laughs and shrugs his shoulder. “That would certainly make news in this little town. Nothing happens here. Come on Katniss, stop.” He puts his hand gently on me, which in itself makes me pause. I’m not used to gentleness, it’s been so long.

“Let’s get out of here. Just spend some time with me,” he pleads. Damn those cornflower blue eyes, their beautiful sincerity practically hypnotizes me.

“Fine,” I growl, trying to stuff away the sharp twist in my gut that always happens when Peeta is near me. “But I’m driving.” Hell if I’m going to miss out driving his shiny new black jeep.

“Can you drive stick?” When I just give him that stare that says “of course I can,” he grins widely. “Well by all means, after you, as long as you can listen to instructions.”

He holds the door open for me and I try to ignore what a gentleman he is. When he closes it once I’m in, I throw him a scowl and squash down the feeling that I’m being a dick, but I can’t help myself. It’s not his fault, that I’m so confused right now. Actually I take it back, Peeta definitely adds confusion to an already difficult situation. Peeta hops into the passenger’s seat looking proud and happy, so basically the very opposite of me. The smile he gives me is warm and hopeful, like I actually was nice to him or something.

“So where are you taking me?” I don’t bother to wait for his answer as I take off, screeching down the neighborhood street like we’re on a Nascar track and my smile grows as his quickly dims. Peeta’s hand grips tightly the door handle as I turn a corner tightly and I swear to god half the wheels lift up. And I laugh. For the first time in over a year I actually laugh.

“I’m glad you find near death experiences so amusing,” he quips dryly.
“Did I ever tell you I was detained by the police for speeding without a license?”

“You don’t have your license?” He asks in a high pitched voice I’ve never heard from him.

“Not then I didn’t,” I say with a wink. “Don’t like the loss of control do you Mr. Popular.” Peeta just huffs and shakes his head.

“Losing control has never worked well for me.” I glance over at him and the grim expression he’s taken on shows he’s deadly serious. A smile spreads on my face that I can’t stop. I know it’s probably pretty obnoxious, very similar to his how damn knowing smirks he constantly wears. But for the first time I feel like I am in control and he’s not. This is just too good. So I gas up.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone who is still interested in this story for sticking around. The muse has been difficult recently, but the good news is that another chapter is already finished so I will be publishing that in the new year. Your comments and feedback are always welcome.

Happy Holidays fellow Everlarkers!
“Are you ready know where we’re going Steve McQueen?”

“Who?” He just shakes his head in disappointment, and shifts in his seat like he’s trying to relax. I can tell by the death grip he has on his armrest, it’s not working. We’ve been driving up the coast for about 15 minutes, and I don’t think he’s appreciating how I’ve been flying down the streets and taking some of the hairpin turns.

“Okay, next time we do this, it’s a movie night, my house. Popcorn. Now can you please head towards the highway,” he grumbles, completely unsuccessful at hiding his unease.

“Just relax, you can trust me,” I say but he catches the evil glint in my eye and he flips me the finger while also using it to point me in the right direction. “Now where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise. It’ll take awhile to get there. But it’s worth it. I promise,” he answers enigmatically and I try to contain my frustration that he won’t tell me his mysterious destination.

“I don’t know why I’m trusting you. You could be kidnapping me for all I know.”

He snorts at that. “It would require you not to be in total control of my car right now. Just trust me.”

“Unlikely,” I mutter under my breath.

“Well I guess since we have some time we should talk about the deep stuff,” Peeta replies, completely ignoring me. His head is leaning against the headrest, left arm on the middle consul and he looks at me with an intensity that way that makes me squirm in my seat. His eyes flick down, and I know he’s noticed.

“The deep stuff?” I squeak out my heart picking up the beat. I again wonder how he can so quickly turn the tables so that I’m off-kilter again instead of him.

“Katniss Everdeen…” he stares with a dramatic pause. I keep one eye on the road and one eye on him as I wait, about to tell him to just spill it. “What is your favorite color?”

I laugh and shake my head at how ridiculous he is. “Now that is too personal Peeta Mellark. You have to get to know me better before I reveal such private knowledge,” I answer.

“I intend to Katniss Everdeen,” he replies, sounding completely sincere. The car is intensely quiet for a moment, and I don’t know how to break it, but as usual, Peeta does.

“So at least tell me your favorite ice cream flavor.”

“Oh well, I guess I can let you in on that secret. It’s chocolate malted crunch.” He raises his eyebrow in skepticism at my ice cream choice and soon we are arguing over which flavors we like, both ultimately agreeing that rocky road is to be avoided all cost. And the conversation easily spins from there. We talk about nothing serious, only odd habits, likes and dislikes, but still, I’m surprised how the conversation flows so easily.

“How can you sleep with the windows open? All of them?” He just shrugs as he finally points me
to an exit to take. We are so far from the town now, only the sporadic house dot in between the tall pine trees.

“I just feel confined I guess. I don’t feel like I can sleep unless I feel some fresh air.”

“I get it. As long as I’m in a layer of thick blankets,” I say and we both chuckle.

“Is that invitation Katniss?” He asks, a smile on his lips. “Don’t worry I have enough body heat to keep you warm.” I hit him on the chest, but he grabs my hand and holds it between us on the console for a few seconds then squeezes it before he slowly let’s go, his fingers lingering on mine. I put both hands on the wheel and remind myself I need both of them to drive, especially a stick shift, but my heart is racing so hard that it makes it hard to concentrate.

“So where are you taking me Mr. Mellark?” I ask, my voice a little too high.

“You’ll see. We’re almost there anyway. Just turn right up that road, and swing a left at the first driveway you see.”

The driveway ends up being more of a small road that takes us at least another half mile. But when we reach the end, my breath catches at the sight before me. It’s a modern lake house all glass, steel and sharp lines nestled amongst the towering pine trees. It’s a good thing there are no other houses around because there are no curtains or shades anywhere to be seen on the windows. But the lake behind it, damn, it is so beautiful I find myself at a loss for words. It is not very large but it sparkles with a quiet beauty that calls to me, reminding me of my own lake and quiet moments with my dad that’s so very far away now.

“What is this place?” I ask as we finally get out of the car, not being able to hide the awe in my voice.

“It’s my families cabin. More like my dad’s private retreat,” he answers, coming around to take my hand, pulling me forward. “I figured, you’d like to get away for a bit.”

“That’s an understatement.” I say more to myself.

“Well come on, let me give you the tour.”

The place was truly even more incredible from the inside than it was from the outside. The modern furniture was gleaming without a speck of dust and looked like it was practically new. The floors were shiny brushed cement floors, and it had a large grand piano that was next to the large floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the lake. No doubt this place must cost a fortune. I’m pretty sure my mouth is open stupidly as I took a look around.

“Yeah, my dad spent a lot on it,” Peeta says sheepishly, rubbing his neck. I didn’t even realize I had said the last part, and I can’t understand why he’s so embarrassed about it. I open the sliding doors and walk down stone steps to the updated dock, hearing Peeta’s heavy tread follow more slowly behind me. The late afternoon sun sparkles on the calm water, calling to me.

“Come on, I’m dying to go into the water.” I am vibrating with excitement as I tug on his arm, pulling him near the end of the dock. It bobs slightly with the movement of the water, and I notice his too wide stance, like he might fall over any moment if his feet aren’t solidly planted.

“But the water is going to be cold,” he points out with a slight whine, and I look at him incredulously.

“Then why did you bring me here in the first place?”
“To look at the view?” He answers, his voice taking a slight pitch up. I take in his flushed face as he stares off and looks at anything except for me. There can only be two reason for the expression on his face, I’m choosing the more innocent option.

“You can’t swim can you?” His only answer is to hang his head in shame, and I almost want to laugh at the realization that there is actually something practically perfect Peeta can’t do.

“I just… we never had the time…” He stumbles and my heart warms at how awkward he is for the first time since I met him.

“Come on,” I command, yanking my top over my head and exposing my simple white bra. “We can just wade, no swimming required. But no matter what you decide, I’m getting in that water.” My jeans follow next and laughter bubbles in my throat as I watch his adam's apple bob up and down. I turn around, and dive into the water, pulling myself deeper so I am encompassed for a moment in the dark alien world of the lake. And damn the water is freezing, but I feel more awake then I have in a long time in just those few seconds I’m under.

When my head bobs up, I see Peeta crouched at the end of the pier, relief spreading on his face as he sees me.

“Damn it Katniss, that scared the shit out of me when you didn’t come up.” As an answer, I do some back strokes and spit water up like a spout.

“Don’t worry about me. The water is fine,” I say as I swim slowly back to the dock. Peeta looks like an awkward concerned puppy, and this just energizes me. I always love it when I have an edge over him, which if I’m honest, is rare. “Well are you coming in?”

I push off again and do the backstroke a bit while still keeping an eye on him. Suddenly his face firms in resolution and he quickly turns to walk off the dock. At first I think I’ve pushed him to far and that he’s going back to the house but instead he takes the steps to the shore and only stops when he’s at the water’s edge.

He’s stands there staring at me a little too long and a little too still, so a shiver passes up my spine that has nothing to do with the water. Even though he stands there a bit hesitantly, there is an intensity in his eyes that lets me know I’m totally in for it. I’m just trying to figure out my next move when suddenly he yanks off his shirt and pulls down his shorts, throwing them both in a messy clump into the sand. Oh, but it’s not only his shorts he took off, he pulled down...

“Katniss!” Peeta yells rushing into the water. If I wasn’t trying to wade properly again and breathe correctly I’d laugh at the boy who can’t swim trying to gallantly rescue me stark naked. But somehow I manage to collect myself rather quickly and swim towards him in fear he might actually drown himself.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I manage to get out when I get close enough that my feet touch the bottom of the squishy lake floor. I wade over awkwardly to him and when I’m close enough I put a hand on his shoulder. “You can’t swim Peeta. What the hell were you thinking?”

He puts both hands on my waist, pulling me closer, but thankfully not close enough to feel ‘It’. “I was thinking I didn’t want you to drown,” he says.

“Well maybe you should learn to swim first… with some trunks on.”
“Does nudity bother the always cool and aloof Katniss Everdeen? Why I think you actually might be blushing,” he exclaims with a gleeful smirk. I slap water at him as he wiggles his pelvis at me and my blush deepens. Thankfully his wiggle parts are under water, otherwise I might just combust from embarrassment or excitement, I’m not sure. But I don’t get a chance to think over it too long because he starts slapping water back at me until we are furiously smacking each other as fast as we can.

“I surrender!” He finally declares, as I try to catch my own breath from laughing so hard. As I’m clearing my eyes I feel his large hand capture my waist as he pulls me forward and my breath catches in my throat. I don’t notice his other hand moving until he’s pushing my hair from my face. His fingers stall on my cheek and all I can focus on is genuinely happy face as everything fades away. I can’t resist the magnetic pull of his lips and we lean towards each other until our lips touch. Although it’s quick, it’s soft and more heartfelt than we’ve ever shared. I can feel my heart stutter in anticipation of more.

“Maybe you should teach me to swim sometime,” he says softly. Somehow I have gravitated even closer to him until my body is just a whisper away from his. Our arms wrap tighter around each other as he pulls me completely against him, and the feel of his stomach breathing in and out, pushing my own sends tiny fissures of heat running through my limbs causing my legs to wobble with weakness. I wet my lips and he licks his in response. Silence seems to encompass us as we get caught in each other’s stare. But when he shivers violently, the spell we’re under breaks and the sights and sounds of the world come crashing around us.

“Shit Katniss, it’s freezing in here. How can you even stand it,” he laughs, and I can’t fight the smile that breaks out on my face in reply.

I shrug, sliding my hands down to rub them up and down his arms. I think I’m more successful at making myself warm than him and the yearning in his eyes is too intense, so I pull away quickly and try to ignore the disappointed look on his face. “I had a lake of my own to swim in. A cabin too, but not as fancy as yours.”

“Well I wouldn’t call this mine. Nothing is ever mine,” he says, his tone laced with bitterness. “But it is a good escape when I can get it.” He steps closer to me, and my eyes follow the slow trail of water sliding down his chest. He looks so delicious and completely dangerous.

“Come on I can see that you are quickly turning blue,” I mumble a little shakily as I slide past him and wade out of the water. I try desperately not to look back because I know I’ll find some ridiculous live Abercrombie ad behind me. His loud clumsy steps follow my quiet ones and all I can hope for is that he put his boxers back on.

But no matter how hard I try, I can’t resist the temptation to slide my eyes back, and I quickly get my answer to whether he’s wearing boxers, which is a definite no when I get an eye full all that is Peeta. I snap my head back forward so fast my neck cracks and I’m pretty sure I gave myself whiplash. Of course he didn’t bother to put anything back on and his clothes are crumpled in his hand. Body relaxed, with a lazy smile on his face, Peeta looks like he doesn’t have a care in the world. And good lord, he is… too much.

When we enter the cabin, I can feel an awkwardness settle in. It probably doesn’t help that I can’t look at him. I don’t even know what to do with myself as I stand stupidly in the middle of the living area.

“Hey let me get us some towels. I’ll just be a minute,” he says and makes his way towards what I suppose is the bathroom. My eyes can’t help but stay transfixed on his perfect bubble butt until it disappears from view. Damn it, why is he doing this to me?
I shiver as I stand in the large expanse of the living room, and hug my arms to myself as I look around. I roll my eyes at my stupidity when I realize that I left my own clothes on the deck. So while he’s in the bathroom I make my way back to the door, only for a large black gleaming mass to catch the corner of my eye, stopping me cold. He has a grand piano. For so long I have put on blinders to those instruments with 88 keys that I barely noticed that it stood there in the corner when I first came in. But now in the silence, surrounded by this contradiction of steel, glass and nature, it’s the only thing that seems real.

I pad softly to the waiting beast and sit on the bench. Reverently I open the the lid and softly run my fingers across the keys, just enough to feel the cold lacquer on my skin, but not enough to play a note.

“Do you know how to play?” I jump slightly and turn around to see Peeta behind me. I was so lost for a moment I didn’t even notice him come back. I don’t know if I’m relieved or disappointed to see him wearing a big fluffy robe. I then notice he is holding a similar robe in his hand and I am grateful when he approaches and puts it over my shoulders. I pull my arms through it and give a soft sigh, I didn’t even realize how cold i was until I was surrounded by it’s warmth.

“I play a little too. I had countless lessons,” Peeta says as he runs his own fingers on the keys. “My father was just happy that I liked playing football, but my mother wanted me to be more cultured. It wasn’t enough for her to that I threw the pigskin around. All the money she spent, and I’m only ‘adequate’ at it.”

“Will you play for me?” I ask.

“Sure,” he answers, with a flush of pink on his neck. He rifles through the music on the piano before picking a page. I’m too busy looking at the deep concentration on his face to notice what music he picked. He settles his hands on the keys carefully, taking a deep breath and playing a quick riff before settling down to a sweet melody I recognize it immediately as Chopin’s waltz op 64 no 2. I never realized how graceful his fingers are for a football player. They stretch nimbly as they reach the keys, strong and sure, a sign of the years of practice he must have had. And he’s wrong about his playing. He’s more than adequate. He’s really good.

For a moment the world and all my worries melt away as the music surrounds me. I’ve always loved Chopin, his music has a way of transporting me away from my dark thoughts and worries. I can taste the bitterness in my mouth that his music has been stolen away from me and I have to work to swallow my resentment. Before I know what I’m doing, my hands join him and my fingers are gliding gracefully along the piano keys along with him. Years of practice and instinct takes over. It’s been so long since I even got near a piano yet it feels like no time at all as I let the music take me over. I don’t need to once glance at the sheet music as I let my fingers fly. As the piece ends I can feel the slow slip of tears down my cheek. The dam has been broken and there is no stopping it. I move to his Fantasie Impromptu and my heart hurts painfully from the rush of emotions I feel being channeled directly onto the keys.

At first I think it’s my wet hair dripping so fiercely down on my hands as they move across the keyboard, but then I realize I’m my tears are flowing fast and hard. It doesn’t stop me though, I need to finish this. And when I do, I put my face in my hands, trying to control the sobs that want to burst out. I’m overwhelmed with so many emotions crashing into each other right now, but embarrassment is high on the list. After stuffing my emotions for so long, I’ve just lost control in front of the one person who’s so dangerous, Peeta Mellark. How can he not think I’m a complete mess and a freak. I’m sure he’ll want to haul my ass into the car and take me home as fast as
I turn myself away from him, trying to spare whatever dignity I have left, but then I feel the warmth of his large hand gently touch my back. He starts rubbing it in long swoops, infusing my body with comfort.

“Katniss…” he says carefully.

I look up and he smiles softly at me. “I’m sorry,” is all I’m able to get out.

“For what? You were amazing. I’m mean… wow, you blew my playing out of the water.” He pauses, like he is considering his next words carefully. “Why don’t you play?” He finally asks. I bite my lip hard, debating if I should tell him. I barely know him, and usually I wouldn’t trust someone like him as far as I can throw him. But Peeta’s different somehow. He’s open in a way I’ve never seen before. So for once I decide to be open myself and I just let the words out.

“I’m sure you’ve heard about me stabbing a teacher with scissors.” He nods his head, and I can tell he’s holding his breath. “It’s true. He was my piano teacher. He was harsh. Beyond harsh, he was a sadist. I was never good enough, and he seemed to take gleeful joy in being painfully cruel to me. But somehow beyond all that, I still I trusted him, and the days he was satisfied with my playing were the happiest moments of my life. Fuck I was so pathetic. Well, one day he finally pushed me too far, and he got scissors in his thigh and I swore I would never play again.”

Thinking about the consequences of what I did is too much for me, and I can’t confess anymore. I look down at the piano, not wanting to see his reaction. I never can seem to get any words out right, and I fear I didn’t come close to conveying what happened properly. I play a small silly tune to distract myself, and his hand comes down to stop my agitated movements. I just stare at the freckles on the back of his hand, hypnotized at imaginary patterns. “There are many words I would call you Katniss, but pathetic is not one of them.” I look up at him, and there is a deep emotion in his eyes that’s hard for me to pin down but says he understands me. “I’m sure the bastard deserved it. And I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

His hand moves to my face and he softly wipes more tears that I didn’t realize had fallen. His touch on my cheek feels like it reaches deep into me, giving a comfort I have never felt before. I lick my lips, tasting the salty liquid on them and he takes a sharp intake of breath. I think we both reach for each other at the same time because I have no idea who moves first. The kiss is slow and sweet. It’s more exploratory as our lips softly touch each others, gently pressing more out of comfort than heat. He pulls back and licks his lips, tasting the moisture.

We are so close, I can see his eyes dilate, a thin rim of blue around dark pupils. I wonder if my eyes look the same except with silver shining brightly. That is my last thought before I pull him towards me by his robe, and our kisses turn rougher, more urgent, each demanding as much as taking. I whimper in frustration at our odd angel and I climb into his lap. He eagerly pulls me towards him, clutching my ass roughly in a strong grip that pressing me down until I can feel his need pushing up against my groin.

“Peeta…” Is all I manage to whimper in his ears as we both simultaneously push each others robes off, needing to feel more of each other’s skin. I can’t tell if I’m disappointed to see that he put some boxer briefs on, but the answer evaporates as he bends towards my neck and sucks on on the delicate skin there.

“You taste so good Katniss,” he groans, leaving small kisses along the column of my neck. There are no words on my end, only whimpers and sighs. I grip his shoulders tightly as his hands move to my waist and I realize I am rocking into his hardness, needing to feel that pressure against my needy clit. I can’t control myself as wetness seeps through my panties, probably leaving its mark.
on his own boxers.

“Yes Katniss,” he hisses back as he ruts against me too. Our eyes become fixed on each other as we continue our desperate rocking movements against each other. Heat flows through my body as it starts to quiver until I gasp from the overwhelming pleasure. My head snaps back as it courses through me and Peeta pulls me even tighter against him, thrusting up into me as he seeks his own pleasure. As the last pulses diminish, I fall limp in his arms as he throbs between my legs, his own pleasure expressed in a long groan. I lay my head on his shoulder, hands flat against his wide shoulder blades as I try to regain my breath, feeling his heart thunder against mine.

As Peeta starts to sloppily kiss my neck again, I look up to find the sun setting behind the trees of the lake. “Peeta, I don’t want to go home yet,” I say pulling back.

“Well, let’s don’t then,” he answers simply. I feel him lift me up, and I automatically wrap my legs tightly around his narrow hips as he carries me up the stairs to a bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience, I am going to try and update faster so you can always hold my feet to the flame on it.

The two Chopin pieces Everlark played were:
Waltz op 64 no 2 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOcryGEw1NY
Fantasie Impromptu - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBA-38mzabs

Comments as usual are always welcome.
What if I say I'm not like the others?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Katniss…” The whisper of my name tickles my ear before lips touches my temple then flutters down again and again. His kisses are impossibly gentle, like two soft petals caressing my skin as he makes his way down my face until he lands behind by ear. He pauses there sucking deeper, and I know when I check later, he will have left his mark. His body is pressed on top of me, our legs intertwine as his mouth finally moves over to mine, tongues tangling before we both move on to other corners and curves to kiss and explore. This moment feels like everything, from the heave of his belly into my own, to the way his calloused fingers slide down by skin. Just these simple touches cause my panties to dampen but as he presses his arousal harder into the juncture of my thighs I become uncomfortably wet.

Peeta should come with a warning label - may cause amnesia from reality. Because deep down there is a practical part of me screaming that this is too much, that I need to push him far away. This moment with him is too intimate, I’ve let him get to close and I feel my walls crumbling around me. So instead of pushing Peeta away, I’ve pushed that realistic voice into a small corner of my brain and locked the door.

“Can I touch you?” He whispers in my ear, his hand sliding down and squeezing my hip. I can feel a blush from the tips of my earlobes down to breasts but despite my shyness, I bite my lip and give a small nod. He takes just one thick finger and gently but persistently presses into my moist panties, and into my slit. A fissure of lightning flits through my abdomen and I clench his shoulders, letting out his name in a shaky breath.

“That’s it baby,” he breathes into my ear, his finger exploring further, just barely grazing my clit but it’s enough that I can feel my muscles tightening in pleasure. As the pants of our breaths quicken, my eyes tightly close as I feel Peeta rub against my thigh for relief, grunting in heated frustration. He pushes my panties aside in impatience, and finally his finger finds my clit, rubbing it hard until I writhe uncontrollably underneath him. I gasp desperately for breath as my whole body freezes, overtaken by the sweet rush of an orgasm. I’m pretty sure that my fingers will leave indents in his flesh I held on so tightly. I open my eyes and see Peeta, is locked up in his own orgasm, his pelvis slightly pulsing against me before he collapses on top of me. Through the bliss, I can feel small pricklings of doubt starting to seep up, and I swallow hard to push it down. Just barely more than dry humping and we both came so quickly. I didn’t know that was even possible.

Peeta pulls away slightly, giving us both a break as we try and catch our breath. His hand is drawn to my face, thumbing rubbing along my cheekbone as he considers me with a quizzical expression. “God Katniss, you make me forget what is right and wrong,” he says softly.

“Am I ‘wrong’?” I ask feeling a small ache in my chest grow, which I’m sadly too used to. Our activity has made me sluggish and slow to anger though. I know most people wouldn’t be able to tell, but at this moment, he is more open and vulnerable than I’ve ever known him. So I push my own insecurities aside for the chance to peel off another layer from a very complicated boy; revealing the inner workings of someone who I know has so much turbulence under a seemingly calm exterior.

“That's what they tell me about you,” he answers simply before pulling off of me and laying next to me on the large bed. He stares up at the ceiling like his brain is pulling him at hyper speed away from me.
I lift myself onto my right elbow and start to map the freckles splattered on his cheeks and nose with my forefinger. He turns his heads toward me and he cracks a crooked smile, a sign he’s coming back to me from where he was lost.

“And so you believe ‘them’ whoever ‘them’ are,” I ask, wincing slightly at my awkward phrasing. He suddenly turns back to me, and his hand reaches for my neck, pulling me down with a quick intensity that takes my breath away so that he can kiss and lick his way into my mouth, leaving me useless to any coherent thought, especially the question I’ve just asked.

When he pulls back I’m struggling to control my breathing so I almost miss the simple “no” he gives me. It takes me a moment to realize he is actually answering my question. I can feel an intense pressure release from my chest and I have to turn away my head so he doesn’t see the tears pooling in my eyes at the emotions I’m unwilling to describe. It’s then that I realize how exhausted I really am. All I want to do is curl up into a ball and sleep for years. Without warning Peeta stiffens next to me, and lifts up suddenly to reach across me to grab his phone lying on the bed stand next to me.

“Shit,” he mumbles after he clicks on the phone. Peeta suddenly becomes a flurry of movement, jumping off the bed so quickly it startles me as he goes to a dresser to pull out some underpants. I sit on the bed, blankets pulled up as I see him switch out his soiled ones with a fresh pair. What just happened?

“Sorry Katniss, I got to get back in town,” he answer my silent question.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” and I realize I must have said that out loud.

Peeta stops suddenly and looks at me, his face softening as he licks his lips. “Fuck you’re hot when you’re angry. God I just want to stay here.” He comes to the bed and wraps his hand behind my slim neck so that he bring my mouth to his. And damn what a kiss. A kiss that tinges all the way to my toes and makes me forget why I was getting angry. His tongue pries open my mouth, swirling around my own, reaching further and deeper than I’ve ever been kissed before until he eventually pulls back leaving me gasping for breath. We stare at each other for a moment before he sighs deeply.

“I hate to ask this, but can you get dress so we can go?” I clutch the blankets tighter around me as I lean against the headboard feeling very stubborn.

“What’s going on Peeta?” I more accuse than ask, my eyes unforgiving as I find there is no longer arousal but guilt and anxiousness written on his face.

He plops down heavily making me bounce up slightly, and takes one clenched hand, which I reluctantly relax when his thumb moves softly over it. “I’m sorry Katniss, It’s just my dad's going to be home in a few hours. I need to be there when he is.”

“Fine, whatever,” I say getting up and walking straight through the bedroom door. I resist the urge to look back as I go hunting for my clothes. My barely contained anger turns to frustration when I realize my clothes are still outside, and I practically slam open the sliding door in my quest to get them. It is not until I have my clothes clumped in my hands, shivering from the brisk wind that I stop and think about my reaction. I’m angry because I feel humiliated. Peeta obviously is rethinking this thing between us, if he needs to use such a flimsy excuse of his dad to stop what is happening. I just want to be home now. But then I realize I really don’t have one.

My body freezes for a different reason when I feel his large hands land on my shoulders. He begins squeezing my shoulders, and despite my irritation I can feel the muscles loosen. He pulls
away slightly then he grabs my left hand and before I can protest he’s putting it through a sleeve of a soft zip up jacket. He repeats the move on my other hand, pulls the jacket all the way onto my shoulders and zips me up from behind before continuing to rub my shoulders to get warmth back in me.

“Sorry Katniss, I’m shit at this,” Peeta’s voice rumbles behind me.

“What? Bribing a girl to hang out with him.” He huffs in frustration, and turns me around. His hands slide down and surround my waist, pulling me towards him. But stubborn person that I am, my arms remain tightly crossed in front of me, keeping that delicate barrier.

“Look, forget the deal. It was a dumb idea. I was just trying to hang out with you, on your terms.” A humorless laugh escapes him as his fingers thrum softly on my sides. “But I guess I don’t even know what those terms are.”

“So is this our only time then?” I ask, afraid of a seeing an expression of relief on his face but instead he gives a pained one. He pulls me tighter to him, and I reluctantly release my arms wrapping them around Peeta’s slim waist.

“Do you want this to be the last time?” He asks me, his forehead furrowing in concern. “Look, the last thing I want is for you to feel coerced into anything. You have to want this too Katniss.”

I don’t know why being with me is so important at the moment. He can have anyone in the school and yet he’s holding me. Sure he seems annoyed at me, but because he still wants me. I just don’t get him.

“Ok’” I answer. He lifts his head up, eyes narrowing on me.

“Ok?”

“Ok. We can hang out and...and...more.” A smile spreads across his face, more sincere than I’ve ever seen it. “But we can’t be public,” I blur out. His smile fades and he hefts a heavy sigh in resignation.

“I know. I don’t think it’s a good idea either. At least not in school.” A flicker of disappointment burns at his answer even though it was my suggestion. I don’t know what I had been expecting. I douse that little flicker and give him a tentative smile.

It makes sense really, not wanting to compromise his popularity his final year of school. He shouldn’t ruin a good thing just for me. The air is tense and we both shift uncomfortably, neither knowing what our next move should be. We are saved from further awkward silence when my stomach makes a deep growl that has us both cracking real smiles.

“When’s the last time you’ve eaten?” He asks, looking down at my belly like it’ll tell him the answer. I shrug realizing it was probably sometime yesterday. I’ve been used to not eating for long periods throughout my life so I’ve largely learned to ignore hunger pangs.

He pulls back from me, and offers his hand, which I take, enjoying it’s encompassing warmth.

“Well let’s grab some burgers then on the way back.” I pick up my clothes again, and we head back to the house, trying to sort through my many emotions of our ever evolving relationship. Mostly I feel like I’m walking on the ledge of a cliff, terrified but thrilled at the same time.

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The bell rings piercingly, startling me in my spot, poised at the school entrance, hesitant to move forward like it’s the first day of school. Fuck, it really does feel like the first day of school. It’s
Peeta who’s done this to me. He’s just standing there on the top of the stairs, laughing at something one of his buddies is telling him. He looks easy and confident like always, like his life hasn’t changed in anyway. I feel like my life went into a permanent pivot yesterday, my lips still bruised from his kisses, a reminder of what happened. And now I’m sort of pissed at how confident, chill, and normal he looks, like nothing ever happened. Oh my god, I made out with Peeta this weekend.

“Come on Katniss, we’re going to be late,” my sister says, rushing past me, not even giving me a single glance. Her books are clutched to her chest tightly and there is a look of purpose on her face I don’t have time to interpret. I hear a double honk and look back to see Hazelle motioning me to go into the school before she starts to pull away. I turn around to immediately slam into a hard body.

“Hey watch it,” I growl out pushing back and I look up into a black collar with a white strip in it. My eyes track up into steel grey eyes shining from a disheveled face and I realize I just slammed into the resident priest I’ve managed to avoid since the start of school. Besides his costume, nothing about him is exactly priestly from his lanky blonde hair to his permanent five o’clock shadow.

“Hey, you might want to watch it yourself sweetheart,” he grumbles, his sharp eyes sweeping quickly up and down. I lift my chin in defiance and he just lets out a rusty laugh that sounds like it hasn’t been used in a long time. “You know you’re not as tough as you pretend to be. Now get to class before I have to send you to detention.” He walks past me without a further glance and he’s left me defensive and annoyed at our encounter. Who the hell does he think he is?

Shaking my head, I look around and realize there are only a couple of students in the hallway running to their homerooms and I take flight, realizing that I’m really really late now and I can’t afford to have get into any more trouble, no matter how small. I barely squeeze in the door when the final bell rings. Ms. Trinket, looks at me over her bejeweled glasses, saying my name loudly, ticking off her clipboard that I’m here, before she inclines her head to the empty seat next to Peeta. His perfectly coiffed blond hair is bent over a paper he’s furiously scribbling on again. His concentration is so deep, I’m actually surprised when he looks up and gives me a smirk. It should irritate me, that smug little turn of his lip, but it makes me antsy instead. My cheeks feel hot and I’m inwardly girly in a way I haven’t felt since I wore two pigtails and twirled in my favorite read dress. It drives me crazy that the irritation I was holding around me like a shield this morning falls away when I see that dimple come out in his cheek. And by the increasingly smug look on his face he knows it too.

“Peeta…” I hear a whine on the other side and I see Glimmer flash a glare at me before he turns his head her way. “Did you figure out the last chemistry problem last night? I had such a tough time.” He replies “Sure” and I’m positive he has a devastating smile by the look on her face before he bends forward and points out details on her paper.

“Katniss…” I look up to find Miss Trinket towering over me. She’s not very tall, but with her sharp heels it gives her significant height. How she gets away with it along with her small but highly colorful skirts, high hairsprayed hair and loads of makeup with the nuns, I have no idea. “The principal wants to see you,” she finishes. The sound of Ooo’s from the other students follow, and Peeta looks at me with curiosity in his eyes.

“Hurry up now, we don’t have all day,” she says impatiently tapping her foot. I never had a chance to pull out one book so I sling my raggedy backpack on, and barely keep up as she briskly leaves the room and tromps down the hall.
“Why do I need an escort,” I huff out sounding more out of breath than I mean to.

“Do I really have to answer that question my dear. You have to earn trust. Not expect it from the get go. Now stop dawdling.”

I throw a scathing glare her way, which she completely ignores, turning an abrupt left when we reach the principal's suite. She opens the door for me, and motions me impatiently through as the receptionist peers at me above her glasses. “Hi Effie,” she says with a bright smile as I’m shoved in. “Mother Sae is waiting for you. You can go right in,” she says to me in a decidedly colder tone before typing something rapidly on her computer.

“I expect you back in class promptly when you’re done here.” I hear Effie say as I twist the doorknob, a sudden fear twisting my gut.

When I enter I am frozen in place when I see not only Mother Sae, but also my mother and that damn priest I bumped into. I know that smile on Mother Sae’s face. It’s the expression she gets when she’s about to tell me something important. My mother hands are twisted in her skirt, but she has a determined look I haven’t seen in a long time. The priest looks like he is ready to take a drink. Why didn’t I skip school today?

“What the hell is this?”

“Now none of that,” Sister answers calmly, taking off her reading glasses. “Please sit down next to your mother.”

I plop down, leaning my elbows on my knees and stare down at the faded floral pattern between them. If there is one thing I hate more than anything, it’s being cornered.

“She’s a fun one,” the barely presentable priest grumbles out.

Mother Sae, in her wisdom ignores him. “Katniss, first off, I want you to know you are not in trouble. We’ve only called you in because your mother is concerned about you and I feel it is my responsibility to intervene.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, just barely seeing my mother’s hand reach for my knee. But unsurprisingly, I never feel her touch since she always chickens out.

Katniss, please look at Mother Sae when she is talking to you.” Her voice is soft but so firm it surprises me enough to look up at her. Her eyes are unbelievable blue, lighter than Peeta’s, but brightened with unshed tears that twist my gut with guilt. She must see something in my expression because this time she does take my hand and I surprise myself by not pulling away.

“I’m just worried about you Katniss. You were gone all weekend and I didn’t know where you were. And you don’t talk to anyone, not even your sister.” She stops and swallows hard, looking down at our clasped hands and I feel a lump in my throat.

“I’m fine mom,” I manage to say, images of what I did with Peeta running through my head. The lake, his body, the piano...

“I just see the patterns and I’m worried,” she continues, breaking me from my thoughts. “I don’t know what to do anymore to help you,”

There is deep silence in the room and I look up to find Sae and the priest are just staring, observing our interactions.
“So what’s with the priest?” I ask in a pathetic attempt to turn the attention away from myself.

“T’m going to counsel you sweetheart,” he answers dryly.

“But he’s a priest,” I declare flatly. How the hell is he qualified to be a counselor?

“Great observation skills,” he quips dryly. “But I’m also a certified counselor. So lucky you, you’re stuck with me.”

“Aren’t we all,” Sae mumbles rolling her eyes and a smirk fights its way onto my face.

“Well then, now that it’s all settled, you need to get back to class. Starting on Friday, I expect you to meet with Father Abernathy every Friday morning in lieu of homeroom. Does that sound good?”

She looks at me expectantly and there is something about that nun that I don’t want to disappoint. I look over at my mother, and her eyes hopeful for the first time in a long time and I’m doomed.

“Fine,” I answer, crossing my arms knowing that there is no use arguing with her.

“Excellent!” Mother Sae exclaims a little too excitedly, like I answered with the enthusiasm of a cheerleader. “Lily, if you can make time once a month to meet as well, I think that would be best.”

“Of course,” she answers, her voice soft and tentative. Her hand comes back down on my knee and my muscles jumps a little bit, still so unused to her touch.

“Well off you go then, back to class with you,” Sae orders, putting her glasses back on and shooing me.

Father Abernathy also stands up, staring down at me. He looks grumpy, completely put out, and ready to make my high school life much more difficult.

“Let’s take a walk,” he says, turning towards the door before I can even respond. I sigh before pushing myself up giving my mom a nod before I follow him.

“So sweetheart, you’ve been stressing everyone out. For more than this year I’ve gathered,” he says when I catch up to him.

“It’s Katniss, not ‘sweetheart’,” I grunt out. He just waves his hand dismissively before continuing.

“I’m not expecting touchy feely emotions or crying shit like that during our conversations. But I do expect you to be open and respectful. And I will be so in return.”

I snort, ready to give a quip about his language being inappropriate for a priest, when he puts his hand out to silence me. Unexpectedly I see sympathy on his face.

“You’re not the bad kid people think you are. Hell, what you probably think you are. You just got a bad rub of it. But it’s up to you to make things better, not anyone else. So Friday morning come with an open mind. Got it?”

I just shrug with a small “fine” thrown in and that seems enough to satisfy him.

“Now get back to class,” he orders before turning around and leaving me without so much as a goodbye. I feel like this will be a pattern. Fuck my life.

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This day feels like it’s doomed to go just as bad the rest of the day as it did in the morning. Every
teacher seems to have a steel eye on me, glaring like they were waiting for me to go postal or something. But even worse were the few teachers that gave me sympathetic glances that were so sweetly sincere I felt like it would give me a cavity. All I want to do is go into my quiet hiding spot and decompress by myself, but Jo must have sensed it because because there she was, waiting for me at my classroom door just as we are let out for lunch.

“Jo, the day has been rough enough without you giving me shit, I can’t deal with you being my mom too.” I barely lift my head from the scratched cafeteria table, just having endured an onslaught of words from my new friend when we barely sat down to eat.

“Mom! How am I in any way your damn mother, I haven’t checked out of your life,” Jo practically screeches, causing people to turn towards our tables.

“No fair Jo,” Anne frowns in disapproval at her friend while my only response is lift my head off the table so I can flip her off.

Jo, stubborn as ever, just gives me a hardened look. I should never have confessed to her about my relationship with my mom. Tense silence swallows our table as Darius and Annie’s eye ping pong between the the two of us. I wish Delta was here to temper her confrontational girlfriend but she’s with Peeta and his friends right now, blending in a way the rest of never will...or even want to. I can’t help but look over at Peeta sitting at his table, laughing at something Delta has just said and it just compounds my feeling of loneliness.

“Whatever, I’m out of here, I say pushing myself up. Jo’s hand clamps down on mine, preventing me from leaving as she locks me in with her deep brown eyes.

“I just want you to be careful with Peeta, okay? There are a whole lotta unpleasant surprises hidden in that pretty package. I like the kid, don’t get me wrong, but you’re not half bad and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“What surprises Jo!? You still haven’t told me anything concrete.” I narrow my eyes at her, but she is not one to back down.

“I’ve known him a long time Katniss. Just trust me on this.”

“I don’t trust anyone, not anymore. And I can take care of myself,” I answer yanking my hand from under hers.

“I know that Kat,” she says with surprising sincerity. “That’s why I’m telling you.”

“Jo, you’ve told me absolutely nothing,” I don’t know what else to say so I just walk out, needing some space from everyone. I pass Peeta’s pack on my way out and I can feel Peeta’s eyes track me, even though I don’t dare look over. It unnerves me that I know this. I always know when he’s looking at me, and I’m sure it goes the same way for him. I’m sure Jo is right, but an ache burns in my chest thinking of stopping whatever it is I have with Peeta right now.

But what I see in the courtyard stops me flat; Prim and Rue chatting together with some other kids, and they are laughing. It’s like there was no strife between them at all. What could have happened in such a short time that they are friends again? I just shake my head and move on but my heart is a little lighter. At least something right is happening today.

I stretch my neck, trying to rub the creak that’s developed from bending down so long but it does little to help. Today Mother Sae had me out in her garden pulling weeds. One look at me with her hawkish eyes as I walked defeatedly through her door and she quickly concluded that my time
was best spent not at a desk but outside in the fresh air of the garden. And although I’m reluctant to admit it, it did feel good having the monotonous yet strenuous task of pulling all the weeds from her woefully ignored garden. As I focused on my work, I didn’t have to talk to anyone or think about anything. I could just let my mind go blank and feel the earth beneath my fingers as I yanked and pulled my frustrations away. I had worked so long, by the time I was finished, everyone was gone. It felt so good stepping out of that building with no one in sight, no one whispering behind my back, no one giving me suspicious glares or condescending glances.

The sun is setting, filled with oranges, purple and pinks that take my breath away and I just breathe in the magic of the hour. I hear him first before anything, that familiar heavy stride, it’s then when I notice his Jeep at the end of the parking lot. I don’t turn from the changing sky because I know he’s headed straight for me and I’m not ready to face him yet. He stops just behind me and doesn’t say a word but soon his strong fingers push away my own and start working on the knots in my shoulder I was trying to loosen. I sigh from the pleasure, leaning against him, and inhaling his fresh spicy scent from the shower he’s just taken.

“Tough day?” he asks into my ear, and I can’t help but lean into his strong frame even further.

“You don’t even know.” I groan out.

“Oh I have some idea,” he says with a small chuckle.

“Really now.” I turn towards him with a suspicious glance and a quirk of my eyebrow. He twists my shoulders so I’m facing forward again and he continues to work out my knots.

“Well Ms. Trinket likes to gossip with me after class.”

“Well that’s splendid.” God I don’t even want to know what she told Peeta, or potentially others.

“Come on, let me drive you somewhere. I can find ways to help you to relax.” I can practically see the smirk on his face.

“Ugh, that was cheesy Peeta, I answer elbowing him hard the ribs. He gives a small “oof” before grabbing me around the waist and lifting me up.

“What are you doing?!” I practically screech as he waddles with me in his arms, swinging my legs like they are a fulcrum.

“I’m walking you to my car m’lady,” he says with an affected accent.

“I can use my own two legs to walk,” I answer, pressing down on his arms to no avail, only making him laugh harder, so I give up and cross my arms tightly until he gets me to his car. He gently turns me around and his eyes are sparkling with such merriment my trusty scowl breaks as I fight the smile on my face.

“You’re ridiculous,” I manage to say, before he pulls me in and kisses me hard on the mouth.

“I know,” he finally answers after he pulls back slightly. I scan the parking lot and see that it’s still empty and sigh relief.

“We can’t make out in our Catholic school parking lot,” I say firmly as I push him slightly away from me. Not that it would matter if someone was actually around. Pink spreads through his face as he rubs the back of his neck. His breath starts slowing in an obvious sign he is trying to calm himself down.

“Where do you want to go Katniss?” He asks like nothing has happened before opening up the
front passenger door like a gentleman. I shake my head and can’t fight the smile that he can make a 180 so quickly.

“I’m sorry Peeta, I have to go home. I promised my mother I wouldn’t be late and I definitely don’t need another meeting in Mother Sae’s office.” He nods his head without asking any questions and hops into the car on the other side as I slide into my own seat.

The drive is silent, the heat simmering between us before now gone, and I try to ignore the burn in chest at the slight regret for slowing him down. I didn’t want to slow down and that’s the problem. We are both in our own worlds as he drives and my skin starts to feel itchy from the questions emerging from the back of my own mind. I can’t shut up Jo’s voice cautioning me from starting anything with him. I look over at him, his teeth biting down on his lip as he concentrates on the road, damp hair curling wildly and cheeks still pink from earlier. He looks like an angel, and I know he’s not at all. I know Jo’s words are a manifestation of my own protective walls telling me to keep people like him out.

Before we get to the house he suddenly pulls over and he turns serious eyes on me.

“What’s going on Peeta?” Immediately pops out of my mouth.

“Now don’t be pissed,” he says putting a hand up. Oh those four words, how can I not put a wall of defense up when he says something like that. “I know you don’t like me interfering in your life but it just happened.”

“What happened Peeta.” He rubs the back of his neck, a habit I am quickly learning is a sign of nervousness. And then he just let’s it out… fast.

“I was with my dad at a party with his business associates, and Rue’s parents were there. I got to talking and mentioned how great Prim was and completely talked her up. So that’s why they consented to letting them hang out again.”

He bites his lip, looking expectantly at me and a little frightened, as I sit in silence processing his word vomit. The picture of Prim today pops into my mind, seeing her smiling and chatting with Rue. The one bright spot in this whole miserable day was seeing her happy in that moment. And I also reflect on Peeta stopping in the parking lot when I asked him too. He could have kept pressing me, but he didn’t. Damn it, that boy likes to challenge me, but not where it really counts. All of Jo’s words and those damn walls crumble as I look into those soft pleading blue eyes of his.

I lunge towards Peeta, grabbing him by the shirt, and press my lips hard on him. He’s stiff from surprise but quickly responds, pulling me awkwardly in his Jeep so that we can be as close as possible with the armrest between us. But neither of us care as our lips move urgently against each other and our kisses increase in intensity. Peeta’s insistent tongue pries my mouth open, while I run my fingers through his soft hair. I finally pull away to catch my breath and he has the goofiest grin on his face, relief evident.

“So I take it you’re okay with it?” He asks nipping at my neck.

“Yes,” I huff out before pushing him back. “But don’t interfere with my life again without telling me first, got it?” He nods his head, trying to look serious before he gives up and starts kissing my neck again, gently traveling up with gentle kisses before I grow impatient, and seek out his lips again with my own.

God help me, he makes me forget all my doubts. I want to trust Peeta so much it hurts but caring about Peeta is completely terrifying. I’m always walking on that cliff’s edge. But I can’t stop what’s happening between us, and for once, I don’t want to.
Thanks everyone for hanging in there! We are roughly half way there so buckle in, it's going to be a bumpy ride. And as always, comments are appreciated.

Tumblr: dianaflynn22.
I bang my stupid locker in frustration, failing to open it for the third time and wince at the sharp pain that shoots through my hand. My window of time is short so of course it chooses now not to cooperate with me.

“Shouldn’t you know by now? Gentle strokes always gets the job done.”

I look over to see Jo smirking at me, arms crossed as she leans against some lockers and obviously holding in her laughter.

I roll my eyes, not hiding the disgust on my face. “Does everything have to be a sexual innuendo with you?” I ask, but I really don’t want the answer.

It definitely hasn’t been a good morning. Hazelle had to take Pansy to the doctor so I was forced to take the bus which of course was late. When I entered the school, my backpack was immediately thrown into the garbage, courtesy of the always lovely Cato and Marvel. And now I’ve been struggling with my locker for the last five minutes with no luck and only mounting frustration. I try one more time, turning my back completely towards Jo so I don’t have to see that stupid smirk. This time with a deep breath and a loads more patience I finally hear that beautiful click that says I’ve succeeded.

“That’s a gift,” she says breezily, like her mere presence magically opened it. Before I can stop her, she bends down to pick up a paper that has fluttered down to the ground. “And look at this, a note that looks like it was written by a boy…” Her face takes on an appearance of a cat who just cornered a mouse, and cold dread pools in my stomach.

I try to grab it, abandoning my books to the ground, but she steps back and holds it out of reach. She’s already a long limbed girl, and her dress code inappropriate platform boots add at least 4 inches, so of course I’m at a complete disadvantage with my shorty frame.

“It’s not a note from a boy,” I lie.

She rolls her eyes, obviously not buying it. “Yeah because girls have chicken scratch like this. And who besides yours truly would actually leave you a note. So try again loser,” she laughs. “I also know the jackass who’s handwriting this belongs to. I take it this is his lame attempt as an apology for homecoming. What, no Hallmark card?”

That “H” Word sends prickles down my spine like I’m a porcupine ready to attack. I give up my sad attempt to get back the paper, ready to throw her and it down the stairs. I don’t want to know what he’s going to say anyway. I bend down and cram my books into my bag intent on leaving.

Homecoming wasn’t really a big deal anyway. We made it clear to each other that we weren’t really a thing. What the hell did it matter if Mr. Homecoming King took Glimmer to the dance and they looked like the perfect Golden Couple. Okay so he didn’t technically take her as a couple; they went in a big group, but still, everybody assumed they were together anyway. Especially since she was crowned Homecoming Queen.

Staring down at the crumpled paper, I find myself shaking and I finally had to admit to myself that it stung a bit. Especially since he didn’t come see me at Finnick’s house that night. He always came after he has been with THEM so we could fool around. But this time, it’s hard not to feel
“Hello Brainless… Do you want this or not?” Joanna waves the note in front of my face. I had been so stuck in my head I have no idea how long she’s been doing it.

“Not,” I answer pushing past her, but she grabs my arm and deftly stuffs the offending piece of paper down my shirt and snugly into my bra.

“I told you to be careful with him,” she says before settling her messenger back more comfortably on her shoulder, apparently ready to take off.

“But you won’t tell me why!” I practically plead as she is about to turn the corner.

“But not my story to tell,” she yells over her shoulder. Just then the bell rings and I mutter “shit” and start running in the opposite direction that she’s going.

All I need is to be late for my meeting with Father Abernathy. It’s been over a month since we’ve started our counseling sessions and I still don’t know why the hell I’m there. He doesn’t push me to say anything and mostly sleeps on his couch while I sit there defiantly staring at nothing. I’d call it a victory if he didn't give me a smug look at the end of each session with a “See you next time sweetheart.” I can’t stand the old bastard.

The final bell rings just as I’m about to push the door open and I close my eyes for a moment in frustration, before shoving it open.

“You’re late,” he states, looking at me from over his coffee cup. Surprisingly he’s seated behind his desk for once. “You’re racking them up. I think you need detention.”

“What!? I was barely behind the bell!” I stutter out, feeling my face turn red.

“Yeah well, it’s time you learned your lesson and all that. Room 201, after school.” I squint suspiciously at him. He’s never cared about timeliness, and doesn’t seem to now.

“I’m already seeing Mother Sae every day after school so I can’t make it. Too bad,” I answer, shrugging my shoulders and plopping in the chair facing him, swinging one leg over the arm.

“Oh she’ll approve of this, don’t stress about it sweetheart,” he answers, looking entirely too smug.

“What game are you playing?” I more accuse then ask. He just shrugs and makes his way to his saggy couch and slumps down on it.

“I don’t know what you are talking about sweetheart. I’m only being the disciplinarian I’m supposed to me. So sit down, we’ve got an hour to kill. Let’s get this rolling.” I just cross my arms and stare him down without a response.

“What shall we not talk about today?” He asks more to himself, and I still don’t respond. It’s a dance we’ve become well used to.

“What can I not talk about?” He asks more to himself, and I still don’t respond. It’s a dance we’ve become well used to.

“Hmmm, maybe we should talk about how you hate your sister.” I open my mouth to protest before I see that challenge in his eyes so I shut it and slump back down in defeat.

“You know I don’t hate her.” I reluctantly say. I just can’t have vile words out there like its the truth.

“No, I don’t know you don’t hate your sister. I know nothing at all. So I’m assuming you hate her
based on the fact that you A) never talk about her B) don’t hang around her at school and C) you hate just about everyone. Am I wrong?”

Like usual the silence stretches between us but this time something has changed. This time he really wants an answer from me and his eyes are clear of their usual apathetic haze. His will is more stubborn than mine today and I huff in frustration.

“She doesn’t deserve me as a sister. That’s why I stay away,” I reluctantly blurt out.

“And why is that?”

“Because she is everything good and sweet that I’m not. She doesn’t fuck up like I do. She lost her entire life because of me and yet she still doesn’t hate me for it. She deserves a sister she can be proud of. And I’m not that by a long stretch. So I stay out of her way so I can cause the least damage as possible.” Fuck, it was like the damn floodgates were opening.

If a person could sink into their chair until they disappeared, I wish that would be me. Silence stretches again and I’m resolved to say nothing else. But as the clock ticks loudly and he waits patiently, my nerves fray.

“Well say something,” I burst out.

His eyes look sharply at me, even if everything else about him is relaxed and at ease. “I’m not going to say you deserve your sister’s love. Again, I don’t know you enough. But maybe you should start doing the things she’ll be proud of, if that's obviously so important to you.”

“Some decisions are out of your control,” I mutter defiantly.

“Like stabbing a teacher?” He challenges, but then immediately he waves his hand, brushing away an answer I wasn’t going to give anyway. “I’m not talking about the past. I’m talking about what you can do now.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re in a new town, new friends, new school, all that shit. Maybe you should give yourself a chance to be new you, at least an improved you.”

“Not when your past follows you,” I mutter.

He just shrugs like it doesn’t matter. I stare at this man, trying to puzzle out if he actually cares or not about me or if this is just another sick game played by an asshole adult.

“So tell me about this sister of yours, what makes her so special?” I want to shut him out, not give in to his obvious attempts to get more out of me. But I never actually get the opportunity to talk about Prim, to brag about her. So before I can stop myself I am just going off on everything I love about her. I am recalling when she was a little baby, a determined toddler and a focused child. I realize all the good memories of my life are wrapped up in that petite loving blonde girl.

The bell rings and it startles me to an abrupt stop. I hadn't realized I'd been talking so long.

Father Abernathy gives me a knowing look but doesn't say anything.

“I better go,” I say awkwardly as I push myself up.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want to be late for another class. More detention would just be awful. Mr. Blake’s office after school, be there.
He gets up himself and moves to his desk, not giving me another look. And that is pretty much the end of my session.

I numbly go from class to class bouncing between what Abernathy said and berating myself for actually revealing so much stuff. I feel like if I was playing a chess match with Father Abernathy, he’d be two moves ahead of me. It’s not until the bell rings for lunch and I scratch my chest absentmindedly as I get up out of my seat that I realize the stupid paper note is still stuck in my bra. I finally open it and read in Peeta’s scrawling handwriting,

“I’m sorry. Please meet me at our spot at lunch. -P” That’s it. I roll my eyes at the short amount of words, but I head over there anyway.

The library is virtually empty when I walk in. It’s not like stacks of dusty books full of more learning is a popular hangout spot on the best of days, but on a sunny beautiful day like today, not even the bookworms want to be inside. So besides myself, and the librarian typing away at her desk; there are only two of the most dedicated students, Beetee and Wiress whispering to each other in the corner. That’s it, no other studious students in sight. And I’m not exactly going to be reading.

I don’t dare look up at the librarian Mrs. Cecelia as I head to the back aisles, weaving through them until I get to an isolated spot nobody dares to go to - the religious history and theology section. It’s a beautiful corner that’s quiet, has sun streaming down from a glass stained skylight and a perfect place to take a nap. But I didn’t come for a nap either.

“Hey Kat,” Peeta looks up at me from his spot on the ground, giving me one if his most charming and artificial smiles. The kind of smile I really hate. He’s sitting against a wall, legs split wide, his arms on his knees. His hair is going in all directions, the bags under his eyes are heavy, and that smile looks ready to crack. This is not a good day for him, and I can practically see the pressure he is under is physically bowing him.

Impulse takes over and I crawl between his legs, curling my head onto his chest. One of his hands start running through my hair, releasing the tight braid while his other entangles my hand and I hear him let out a big breath like he’s been holding it all day.

“Bad day?” I ask, breathing in his spicy scent, enjoying his warmth surrounding me and pushing away all the reasons why I was pissed to begin with.

He gives a dry chuckle. “Bad life,” he states. I look up into those deep ocean blue eyes and see he is dead serious, and a frown forms on my face.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I’d rather not.” His eyes burn with intensity before he dips down to give me a deep, almost bruising kiss. His tongue is insistent as it breaks the seal of my mouth, and I moan, allowing him to go deeper. He is in complete control as he invades over and over again. All I can do is hold on to his shirt, pulling it tightly as I try not to get completely lost in him.

He finally breaks away and our heavy pants wash against each other. It’s hard to catch my breath, and I feel like I just finished a triathlon. It takes a moment before he speaks again. “There are so many things I’d rather do than talk about what’s not important,” he says with a sly smile on his face and I only partially believe him. I highly doubt what’s bothering him is not important.

“Anyway,” he continues, pulling me closer and starts to nibble my neck. I wiggle slightly at the
fissures of heat running straight down to my thighs and I do my best to repress any uncharacteristic giggles. The horror. “I need to find a way to apologize to you for homecoming.”

I push him back with that cold dose of water and look at him hard. “You think a few kisses count as an apology? This will never count as an apology. Anyway it doesn’t matter. It’s not like we are committed to each other or anything. So whatever.” Okay it’s more than ‘whatever’ but he doesn’t have to know that. And my feelings are nothing I want to talk about. Especially since he’s so unwilling to share his own.

Now it’s his turn to look at me with a disbelieving expression as he shakes his head. “I should have at least warned you I’d be going with her. That was a jerk move. So I need to apologize anyway. No matter what you say.”

“Ok” I say with a shrug, looking at our clasped hands. He lets go of my hand to push up my chin so I have to look at him.

“I’m sorry,” he says so sincerely it’s captivating. “I wish I was a different person for you.”

I nod my head, the knot in my throat making it difficult to speak. “I understand,” I answer even if it’s not quite true. He looks like he is about to say something more, but I shut him up with my own deep kiss. I run my hands through his riot of curls, as I rise over him, crawling onto the top of his lap. When he moans my name, I know I’m successful in making him forget anything he was going to say.

It’s risky what we are doing in the library, we could get caught any time, but I can’t stop myself. I am on the lap of my not really boyfriend, in a religious section, basically dry humping him. His fingers press sharply in my ass as my hands are tug his hair while we both try not to make any noise. It is the hottest thing I’ve ever done in my life. Peeta clouds my brain until I don’t know up from down. All I know is that I never want to stop what we are doing. And I have a feeling if we talk, then us as we stand now will stop being.

The bell rings indicating it’s the end of lunch and we both softly groan in disappointment. I get up first, and offer him a hand to pull him up. I roll my eyes and can’t hide my smirk as he pulls a comb out of his pocket to smooth down his curls to be the perfect hair I’m used to seeing, at least when I’m not wrecking havoc to it. The bastard just winks at me before sliding his comb in his pocket again.

“So I’ll drive you home after game practice?” He asks while he runs his index finger up and down my collar bone.

“Of course,” I reply before giving a big groan. “I forgot I got detention today from Father Abernathy. Can you believe it? I was only a little late.”

“You get detention? Never!” He says in mock shock. I slap him hard on the arm and he backs away, hands up in surrender.

“Shut it. Anyway, the time I leave shouldn’t be any different, but wait for me okay, just in case I’m late?”

“Sure thing,” he answers, giving me a soft kiss on the lips. “See you after class!” He waves as he jogs away and I let him go, waiting a half minute so I don’t look like I’ve just met him in the stacks to make out.

I suddenly realize that I am going to be late to another class yet again and I make a break for it. Just as I exit the library I slam into a body that immediately pushes me back and sends me crashing
“Watch it loser.” I look up to see Glimmer glaring down at me in disgust as she swipes down her pristine uniform. “I still can’t believe they let garbage like you in this school.”

I get up slowly, trying not to lose my temper. I don’t need to get in anymore trouble. Just as I’ve fully straightened I see her staring over my shoulder. I turn around and see Peeta’s bright blond hair go around the corner of the building. She turns to me and squints her eyes suspiciously.

“Don’t even think about trying for what’s out of your league,” she says in a low dangerous voice.

“I don’t know what your talking about Glimmer.” But I just can’t stop my my mouth from running. “I don’t have to try like some people.” I brush past her, making sure not to touch her, and don’t look back. That bitch.

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I just stare at the room number as dread pools in my stomach, knowing I should have opened the door five minutes ago, but I just can’t do it. It’s the music room. I can’t believe Abernathy sent me to the goddamn music room.

The door opens abruptly in front of me, and I jump back. My eyes feel as wide as saucers while I take in probably the coolest person I have ever seen. Just all of him is pretty damn awesome. From his perfect close cropped Afro, his golden skin, how he’s dressed in black from his shirt to his leather pants, snakeskin boots, all the way to the multiple studs in his ears and to top it all off gold eyeliner. This man looks like he should be on a music stage not teaching in a Catholic school. He pretty much looks nothing like my previous piano coach, which is at least helpful in easing my nerves.

“You must be Katniss,” he says. I blink realizing he is talking to me and has his hand out to shake it. My brain slowly starts working again and I give him mine. His is warm, slightly calloused but comforting and for some odd reason I immediately want to trust him.

“I’m Cinna Blake, but you can just call me Cinna. Come on in,” he says nodding his head towards the entrance before walking in with a confident swagger.

I follow slowly, feeling my legs stiffen at the site of the grand piano featured prominently on the center of a small stage.

“So I heard you can play,” he says while picking up sheet music scattered around the room.

“You don’t expect me to, do you?” I blurt out in a panic.

He gives an easy laugh as he walks over to a desk with an insane amount of paper stacked up high. “No. This is detention remember?” He indicates for me to walk over and picks up part of the stack. “These compositions have been piling up over the years and need to be sorted. Take these post-it notes too. If the work is incomplete, write so on the paper. Feel free to make yourself comfortable wherever you wish.”

I blink at him, completely in disbelief at the easy job I was just handed. I thought I would be scraping gum from underneath desks or writing a stupid essay on the error of my ways. I say “okay…” mostly under my breath and head to the bottoms steps of the tiny stage. I want to make sure I can leave in plenty of time to see some of Peeta’s practice before it’s over so I get to work with a focused intensity.

It’s a headache for sure, but I quickly find an easy way to organize and sort. I’m familiar with a
good two thirds of what’s in front of me and the notes fill my head as they float past me, each setting off memories, good and bad.

The once quiet room is suddenly filled with music and I look up to see Mr. Blake… Cinna on the piano. He plays beautifully, his long slim fingers practically floating over the keys but my teeth are set on edge by the fact his playing is hindered by the slightly out of tune piano. Most people wouldn’t notice, but I unfortunately can. Each wrong note makes the muscle in the back of my neck twist tighter and tighter.

“Stop!” I suddenly yell, startling even myself. He just looks up with a raised eyebrow. “Sorry but your piano is out of tune. It’s driving me crazy,” I spit out suddenly and probably impatiently.

“We only get this tuned once a year, if that, what with our budget. But it’s mostly in tune right now.” I huff at that and get up, scattering the papers I had on my lap. “Do you have any equipment to tune the piano?” He looks perplexed and amused by me but still points to an old cabinet in the corner where I find a bag with a tuning piano lever, electronic chromatic tuner and mutes. They are old, very old, but the they’ll do.

I chuck the tuner, proceed to open up the grand piano and start to work. Cinna helps by hitting the keys I instruct, and soon I am completely wrapped up in what I’m doing. Every time I catch a glimpse of his face, I can see he’s becoming impressed but I try to ignore the building sense of pride and not to look up too much as I continue my work. When I’m done I start wiping the piano down with a soft cloth in the bag as Cinna starts playing a random tune.

“Katniss, this is amazing. You have perfect pitch.”

I just shrug, continuing to wipe the grand piano carefully. Being able to hear a correct note has never done me any good. Pretty much the opposite. “My father used to tune pianos on the weekends. Didn’t pay him much but he love’d to do it. When I was little he used to take me with him. I would lay under the piano listening to him tune it while I read or drew. Anyway, soon enough I was helping him, and he used to say he didn’t need a tuner when he had his mockingjay.”

“Do you play as well?”

“Yes, he taught me that as well.” I can’t help but answer with pride. “He could sing beautifully too. Mom would say the birds would stop to hear him sing.”

“I bet you play as good as you tune. Why don’t you join one of our classes? We could use someone like you.” I just shake my head and give a small ‘no thank you’, before moving to the stack of papers. He smiles gently me with curious understand but not at all looking upset at my answer.

“Well feel free to use the piano if you’d like. I’m usually here late too.”

“Maybe.” Is all I can answer, too many emotions warring inside of me to give any more than that.

“Katniss…” he says gently and I look up with a wary eye. “I think detention was up an hour ago.” Oh shit! Where did the time go? I leap up, and grab my bag, rushing towards the door with a hurried thanks to Cinna.

There is no way Peeta is still waiting for me and I start mentally trying to figure out the bus route. I head towards the parking lot anyway, even though it’s a long shot, but when I emerge, there sits his Jeep, one of the last remaining cars there, parked at the end of the lot. I jog up to it, hugging my arms to my body in the chill air and approach the driver side window. I peek in, and find him
sound asleep and softly snoring. I take a moment to contemplate his angelic features, rarely getting the chance to take in all the details. I focus on the light freckles on his cheeks, the long blond lashes that flutter slightly but I frown when I see the heavy bags underneath his eyes. Even asleep he looks like he is carrying a weight on his shoulders.

I decide that I’ve looked like a creeper long enough and softly tap the window. He startles awake but smiles in that sweet way that makes my heart stutter when he see’s me.

He opens the door, and immediately folds me in his arms when he steps out. “Hey, you’re out of detention, how did it go?” He asks, nose burying in to my hair.

My own heads nestles in the crook of his neck and I enjoy his fresh from the shower scent. “It went okay. Better than I expected. How about you? Ready for the big game?”

He just shrugs, the corners of his mouth tightening a little bit. “Let’s get you home before your mom worries,” he finally answers. I don’t want to push him so I just get into the car and he peels out of the parking lot with the screech of tires.

We don’t talk while he drives, a weird weight hanging over us, but he takes my hand and kisses it at every stop, and it gives me a warmth, a feeling that he doesn’t want to let go. But the ride is too short and soon he pulls up to Hazelle’s house, he pulls away and I’m suddenly so cold. I wish it felt like my home but I still feel like an intruder crashing where I don’t belong.

‘Good luck tomorrow Peeta. Whatever the result, I’m sure you’ll do great.” I wince inwardly at that cheesy well wish, but I might not see him before the game and I needed to tell him something.

“Thanks Katniss,” he replies, squeezing my hand before giving me a quick peck on the cheek. I look over quickly to the house to see if anybody is looking and to my relief it’s quiet.

I squeeze his hand back tightly before letting go. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” I leave and walk back to the house but can’t help but take a look back briefly to see him peeling away. I feel a heaviness in my chest and a restlessness in my limbs. Something is wrong.

My hand hovers over the doorknob as laughter floats from inside the house. All it would take is one simple turn of my wrist and I’d be inside the warm cheerful home. But suddenly my feet are taking me in the opposite direction, no thoughts in my head, as I run in the direction of Peeta’s house; and I don’t stop until I get there.

I reach his house in hardly no time and I grip the painful stitch in my side, trying to catch my breath while I quietly approach his living room window. I hear a woman screeching before I even get a chance to look in and my heart drops as I finally take in the scene. Peeta’s head is hanging down, his shoulders slumped in defeat as a tiny woman screams in his face. The drink she holds in her hand sloshes around dangerously in her glass as she gestures wildly and it’s clear to that she’s beyond inebriated.

“Why are you so damn late! Don’t make excuses about football practice because I know what time it ends. I am not an idiot. Are you meeting some slut after school. I bet that’s it. You’re nothing like your brothers. You’re completely worthless.” I flinch as she slaps his face but Peeta on the other hand doesn’t react, not even to touch his face where a red mark starts to shine.

“Now go up to your room. No dinner for you. I don’t want you to be around when your father gets home. Go.”

“Yes ma’am,” he answers quietly before making his way up the stairs. I pull away and walk around the side of the house where I see a light turn on. There is a trellis that leads up to that
window and I don’t even have to think about my next move and I climb it with ease. This is nothing like climbing the trees at home. I look in and to my relief I find Peeta on his bed. He is sitting with his head in his hands, and I feel the pull to comfort him, so I tap on the window. At first there is no reaction so I tap again, and finally his head pops up.

Curious eyes widen with realization when he sees me but he jumps up and opens the window, immediately grabbing me under the arms and hauling me in.

“Katniss what are you doing here?” He asks in an anxious whisper while examining me. “Are you okay?” I can’t believe he is the one asking me that.

“Yeah I’m okay,” I reply, walking over to his bed and plopping down hard. “I just missed you already.” His mouth upturns in amusement, and my heart does that flutter again. I can’t believe I’ve turned into such a damn sap who just wants to make him feel better.

“Oh really? After like twenty minutes you’ve missed me.”

‘Yep,” I say with a pop of my lips as I climb back further on the bed, lying back casually. The relief on his face practically breaks my heart. The hope in his eyes makes the scolding I know will get when I return home worth it. Peeta crawls on top of me and I wrap my legs around his waist as my hands rub up and down his tight back, trying to soothe him without words because I don’t even know what to say about what I just saw. Peeta nuzzles the nape of my neck, kissing softly as little grunts of pleasure release from him. He suddenly lifts up, looking at me with serious eyes, the kind that speaks volumes.

“I missed you too Katniss.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for sticking with this story! It gets a little rough after this, but it will always be HEA for these two. Follow me on tumblr at dianaflynn22 and please let me know what you think.
“Stop it Peeta!” I shriek in the most undignified manner, but I can’t help myself. I wiggle and turn trying to break away but Peeta must have been a wrestler in a former life because he has this uncanny ability to pin me down and keep me from escaping. And I’m usually pretty good at getting away but this time I’m firmly stuck. So unfortunately I’m forced to try and ignore the questionable stains on Finnick’s old couch while I’m pinned on my stomach.

“I’m not stopping until you say it!” He orders, his nimble fingers going straight for my sensitive squishy sides. I laugh hard as I twist away, but there is no luck for me since his entire body presses down.

“Say it Katniss!”

“Alright, alright. Peeta Mellark is a king amongst men!” I yell out and hear cheers behind me. I have just lost an epic battle of beer pong at yet another of Finnick’s parties. I blame it on playing with a very unaggressive Annie. Maybe it was because she thought that the stakes weren’t too high. All those dumb idiots wanted from us if they won was to tell everyone in the room that they were “gods amongst men.” Being the sore loser I am, I refused.

“Ahhh you guys are so cute, you should date.” Annie responds dreamily causing us to both snap our heads up towards her as we stop cold. Finnick and Johanna both snort in sync, Delly gets a hopeful look in her yes and Darius just asks where the pipe went.

We both pull away carefully, and I’m too busy trying to look unphased to see if he is doing the same thing. Mostly I’m avoiding what is most likely a scornful look coming from Jo.

“On that note, I’m taking a breather,” I declare before climbing the stairs out of the suddenly stuffy basement, not looking at any of their faces. Actually it’s good timing because not only can I avoid that awkwardness but I also really have to pee.

I weave through the usual crowd, giving small smiles to Finnick’s friends I’m starting to get comfortable with. When business is done I have no urge to go back down to the basement and face everyone’s knowing looks. Besides that, it’s too loud and my head could use some clearing, so I make my way up to the rooftop, now my favorite place. I curl up and look at the puffy clouds slowly rambling across the inky sky, sometimes covering the full moon before it pops back out bright and luminous again.

“I should have known you’d be here.” I feel a soft jacket land on me, emanating warmth and I curl it around me, sniffing at the spicy scent.

“Well you should know since we always meet up here whenever Finnick has a party, which is like every week.” I answer and look up to see Peeta smiling down at me.

“Move over, the king amongst men needs to lay down.”

I can’t help but snort. “Yeah, king of bullshit maybe,” I reply but I move over anyways. As he settles down I rest my head on his chest and we both stare up at the stars in companionable silence while his fingers run up and down my arm.

“Katniss, I’m… do you think…” I crane my head up and see his face pinched with worry.
“What?” I prod and he lets out a big sigh, taking hold of my hand.

“I’m just worried about the big game. I mean a lot’s riding on it you know? I can’t fail Katniss.”

I’m not used to seeing his cracks. He has a hard time showing them to even me in these quiet little moments. I catch small glimpses but that’s it. So this confession stuns me for a minute. I finally lift myself up so I can straddle his thighs. I rub his shoulders and chest feeling the tension ease slightly before I kiss him on the nose.

“You’ve got this Peeta,” I say with a firm nod of the head. “And hey, if you screw up you can be comforted by the fact that you are still the prettiest boy in town.” He laughs at that, his stomach bouncing me up before he turns us around in a blink and this time he is straddling me.

“Unfortunately, I think Finnick has that title,” he quips. I shrug before pulling him down to kiss his soft lips.

“I believe in you Peeta,” I say sincerely and it’s reflected in his easier smile.

“My own private cheerleader,” he says softly before returning the kiss, this time deeper. His hands slide up my stomach until he cups my breasts. He raises an eyebrow when he realizes I’m not wearing a bra before his thumbs circle my nipples softly.

“Peeta…” I pant as my own hands slide up his expansive back. My legs open so his can fall between mine. No more words are spoken as he continues to kiss me softly, our heated bodies rubbing against each other as I suck his tongue into my mouth. He hums like he is tasting the best thing in the world.

He moves to my cheek, my neck, my clavicle; tenderly exploring me before moving back to my lips. Time always seems to be lost when it’s just the two of us. Eventually, lips tender from the length of time we kissed, we break apart and catch our breaths. This is the farthest we’ve ever gotten with each other - fooling around. He never pushes for more and I’m not ready to give him more. But somehow this seems to be enough for him. My head lays on his chest as we look up at the stars, his hand slowly sliding up and down my arm until we both fall asleep.

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The next morning I wake up with a start and realize Peeta’s spot is empty and cold. I rub my arms in the brisk morning trying to stuff the feeling of abandonment. I climb down the stairs, rubbing my arms and realize his jacket is still on me.

I climb down the stairs and immediately hear hushed voices talking harshly to each other coming from the kitchen. I slip through the sliding door which is slightly open and cautiously approach the sound.

I practically hold my breath when I realize it is Jo and Peeta sitting at a kitchen table.

“What the fuck are you trying to do with her?” Johanna demands, leaning forward, hands firmly planted on the table. She looks angrier than I’ve ever seen her.

“What do you mean?” Asks Peeta casually but I can see by his tense shoulders he’s most likely as pissed as she is.

“I’m not blind. Hell we all can see it. Like we can’t tell you’ve been sneaking away with her after
“You don’t think I deserve to be with her,” he says flatly.

She visibly softens and puts her hand on his shoulder. “I don’t mean that and you know it. But she’s fucked up Peeta,” And boy that’s like a punch in the gut. It takes all my will not to make a sound. “She’s fucked up like us. Like knows like. And I can see she’s struggling to be better. And she doesn’t need your brand of fucked up to bring her down.”

He sighs, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “What do you expect me to do Jo. Dump her?”

She sighs in exasperation but touches his shoulder affectionately. My heart beats faster as my mind practically short circuits as I’m faced with the reality of the deep level of their relationship, something that never even occurred to me. “Of course not,” Jo says. “That’s like the opposite of what I was talking about. Just... don’t do what you always do? Be careful with her. She’s not like other girls Peeta. She’s not like Glimmer who will yo yo back to you at one glance of your pretty blue eyes.”

Peeta gives her a wry sarcastic smile, one that I’ve never seen on his face before. There is a deep understanding between these two that goes beyond high school acquaintance. Jo knocks into his shoulder before both their chairs scrape the floor as they get up. I hop back out the the sliding door and behind a wall, hoping they won’t see me.

“And you’re allowed...” but I can’t catch the rest of what she was going to say because they take their conversation farther away from me. I hold my thoughts as much I do my breath, listening carefully to see they are truly gone.

My heart is beating wildly as I try to process all this fragmented information. Where do I even start? First off it’s hard not to feel the slight sting of betrayal that Peeta is obviously keeping things from me, when I’ve shared so much with him. Sure, not everything but I really haven’t gotten anything from him at all. But Jo and him share something big that I had no clue even existed. And fuck Jo, why hasn’t she told me anything? I don’t even want to think about the fact maybe she’s not my friend. Just someone who has been protecting her friend all along.

And I’m pissed that they think I’m a some porcelain doll ready to break at any moment. Who are they to decide if I’m breakable? And fuck Peeta for so easily telling Jo that he can break up with me. I start to pace back and forth, getting angrier by the moment.

I stop suddenly when I hear heavy steps coming up - very familiar heavy steps. The sliding door is pushed wider and I practically jump in alert as Peeta steps out. His eyes widen in surprise, obviously not expecting me there.

“Hey Katniss, I was just about to come back up,” he says giving me an uneasy smile. He walks towards me looking awkward in a way I’m not used to. “I didn’t expect you to be up yet.”

I just shrug, wrapping my arms around myself and the cold air swirls around us. “I have to get home before Prim misses me.”

“I have to get home before Prim misses me.”

“Are you okay? You don’t look good,” he says hesitantly. I just shrug again not knowing what to say.

“Probably just a morning after too much pot and alcohol,” I finally answer and I can’t hold back the shiver that courses through my body. Peeta is next to me in a second, wrapping his letterman jacket tighter around me before hugging me to him.

“Hey, you’d tell me if something was up with you too, right?” I hesitantly ask as I rub my cheek
on his chest.

“Sure, of course,” he answers, but I don’t believe him. I don’t know how to confront him. I wish he would just tell me what’s going on instead of pushing him, but I’m a coward.

“What are we doing Peeta?” I ask instead.

“Having fun?” It’s supposed to be a joke but it falls painfully flat. I try to pull away but he holds me tighter.

I give up and lean deeper into his chest, feeling his arms tighten. I should push him, I know I should. Our communication skills with each other clearly suck. I just have so little time with him, I don’t want to think about it right now. “I’m tired Peeta and I need to get home.” I answer before reluctantly pulling off his jacket and putting it in his hand. “I’ll see you at school, okay?” My words feel wrong in my ears, mocking me with the fact that we barely acknowledge each other unless we are making out in some corner. But I kiss him on the cheek and leave before he has a chance to respond or think about offering me a ride home.

As I walk down the front porch steps, Jo is there on the porch swing and gives me a mock salute as I leave. I just flip her off, knowing it won’t even bother her.

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“So tell me about this boy Peeta.” My head snaps up sharply as Haymitch peers down at me with a hidden look. And yes I actually call him by his given name, what of it, it’s more fitting for his grumpy personality than Father Abernathy.

“How do you know about him?” Okay maybe my reaction should have been a little cooler like - “Oh that overrated football guy everyone is in love with?” - but I was caught by surprise and pretty much confirmed what he was trying to get from me. He squints more.

“Nothing’s going on,” is my second brilliant reply. How does even he know about Peeta? We are so careful at school. Hell, he barely acknowledges my existence.

“I have eyes you know, although everybody else in this esteemed school seems to be stupid and blind.”

“We’re just fooling around. It’s nothing,” I answer, closing myself in to a tight ball on the worn leather chair I’m sitting on.

“What does it matter to you anyway?” The scathing look he gives me says he thinks I sound stupid and I can’t say I disagree with him. Why can’t I just shut up?

“You are not the fooling around type sweetheart,” he challenges and I can feel my cheeks turn bright red. “Okay let me take this from another angle. Why are you ‘fooling around’ with him? How does he make you feel?”

Safe. Happy. Content. Myself. Confused. All words that get my heart pounding and make me want to run. But I just shrug. “Nothing. It’s not a big deal.” I’m trying to brush him off but again I’m a complete word failure so I get another skeptical look from Haymitch.

“What does it matter anyway if I’m seeing him?” I blurt out, nervously starting to tug at a loose string on my converse.
He sighs, like I’m the biggest burden in his life, scrubs his stubble then leans forward. “Katniss, I’m going to be straight with you. You are not a regular teen. You’ve been through a lot of shit in your short life. You may want to hold off being with a kid who hasn’t seen what you have. Prancing around this school like one of those girls who acts like a pimple is the coming of the next great depression does not suit you. And you know it. So you may want to step back from ‘fooling around.’

“What if I want to be just like them? Actually be normal. Have the regular high school experience that was robbed from me. Why can’t I…” but my voice breaks in a desperation that twists my stomach.

His expression softens for a brief moment and somehow that’s even worse. “It’s too late for that. You’d be faking it and we both know you’re terrible at it. But it’s not too late for you to be the real you. Look, I can help you, but you have to stop pushing me away so damn much.”

I shake my head but it does little to clear his words filling my head, and he continues anyway, like he’s expecting this response.

“Look I want you to work more with Cinna after school on Mondays and Wednesdays.

I finally look up at him, surprised at the fast turn in conversation.


“Was he that terrible?”

“No!” I protest. “He’s okay.”

“So you liked him.”

“I guess,” I reluctantly reply.

“I guess,” I reluctantly reply.

“Well then I don’t see a problem. Until I see a problem, you stick to this schedule. Or Mother Sae will do some of her own type of convincing.”

I cringe because no matter how sweet that old woman seems, she is so damn stubborn and will get her way. So basically I have no choice. My mouth flaps as I try to say anything that can stop this when the bell suddenly rings.

“Alright. That’s settled. Get out of here,” he orders, and I can’t get out of there fast enough.

I make it through my next classes paying barely any attention on what’s going on. Even Sister Coin’s snide remarks can’t get a rise out of me. When break period finally arrives I’m still in my head as I walk through the hallways, not caring about what’s happening around me. All I want to do is escape, but that’s not an option for me either so I find myself sitting under a tree on a patch of grass as I sort through the words Haymitch has dumped on me.

The timing is a little to perfect in what he said about Peeta to what I heard at the party. What the hell am I doing with him anyway? I’m playing a dangerous game with a popular boy all because he makes me forget for one moment what it’s really like to be me. Between the two of us, I’m the one most likely to be burned. But I don’t want to be the one who says stop either.

“Hey big sis. Are you okay?” I blink up at the soft familiar voice to find Prim peering down at me with concern on her face. It feels like eons since we’ve interacted. Our lives feel like they’ve increasingly been taking separate pathways. And I realize I’ve stopped seeing her as the little sister I need to take care of rather but instead she’s become the always disappointed mother.
“I’m fine Little Duck,” giving a sad attempt at a smile as she sits down next to me. And there is that pressed look which means “I’m not that little girl anymore.”

I put up my hand in defense. “I know, I know. You are in high school now and I shouldn’t call you that. So sue a big sister who can’t get out of old habits.” A small silence descends as she sits next to me but it’s unexpectedly not tense. “So it looks like it’s going well with Rue?” I ask, trying to keep the conversation away from me.

She visibly softens and nods her head enthusiastically. “I’m invited to stay at her house after the big game. She lives in Victor Village. She has a pool and everything!”

“That’s great! I’ll have to ask her about that.” I answer, and I mean it. My family’s whole life was upheaved because of me and my mom was forced to take a lower paying job just so we could survive. If she could become a full time nurse at the hospital again, not only would it help us live independently, maybe it could help some of the wounds that have formed.

Prim’s face suddenly turns serious again as she leans her head against my shoulder. “Katniss, you’d tell me if something was bothering you, right? You won’t let that happen again will you?”

I wrap my arm around her delicate shoulders and give a hard throated “Yes, of course.” But I don’t even believe myself.

“You always are,” I reply, but I don’t let her go knowing these precious moment’s of truce between us are rare.

“So tell me more about this amazing Rue person.” I say, jostling her a little and getting a small smile. Thankfully she starts to chatter on about her best friend and there is no more tough conversations the rest of our time together as we eat our lunch, and for a brief moment everything is okay.

“You’re ready to head out?” Peeta’s sitting on the parking lot ground, leaning heavily against his car, eyes almost slanted shut and looking barely conscious. He nods tiredly and I run my fingers through his wet curls. He’s been busting his ass for the big game on Saturday but I don’t know how it does him or the team good to be run ragged the day before.

“Come on, give me your keys,” I order as I put my hand out. He finally opens his eyes then, with a quirk on his lips.

“You driving me home Miss Everdeen?”

“I sure am. I can walk home from there. You’re too tired to drive.” I answer, pushing my hand to him impatiently.

“Well, I didn’t know you cared,” he says with a small groan as he pushes himself up off the
ground.

“Well I do care about getting home safely,” I quip and he gives me a pained look which is a little too authentic. I shake it off because he has to know I’m kidding right?

No more is said when he hands me over the keys and we each get into the car. This time I don’t peel out, but take it easy and he practically falls asleep again. It doesn’t take long before we are at the gate of “Victor Village”.

“Hey, your home.” I say softly. He huffs a little, his hand going over mine and he smiles before opening his eyes

“Thanks Katniss for driving me home. Do you want to maybe come in? I mean no one’s here,” he asks biting his lip expectantly.

“Sure,” I answer pleased that he wants me to come into his house. I’ve only been in his room from basically breaking in, so it feels kind of like a step actually going in through a real door. I totally ignore the fact that I should really be going home and maybe even taking a step back from Peeta. But the smile on his face is worth it as he hits the gate button.

It’s not until we pull up to his garage that I am reminded how rich his family really is. There is room enough for four cars but now there is only a Jaguar gleaming perfectly in one of the spots. It doesn’t get much better after that. Everything is just so perfectly placed. It’s all just looks expensive and cold. You can’t just flop on the couch to watch TV. Hell there isn’t even a TV in the front room, they probably have their own movie theater! I’m anxious just to go straight to his room and somewhere that doesn’t bring a shiver up my spine. It’s not much better, but there’s something about it that says “Peeta” which is warm and comfortable. It’s a relief when we step into his room and it gives me a new-found appreciation of Hazelle’s loud worn old house.

“So what do you want to do?” I say throwing my bag on the ground. I pull off my shirt, and he gives me a sloppy and slightly wicked smile before pulling off his own shirt. He pushes my back against the door and squeezes my hips tightly with his fingertips. Peeta stares at me with those clear blue eyes of his for a moment, but then he does something unexpected, he just pulls me in for a hug. His head nestles in the nape of my neck as he holds me tightly while he lets out a big sigh.

I push Peeta back just to take a good look at him and I see the bags under his eyes, a weariness that is more than just too many hours of football practice.

“Hey are you alright?” I ask running a hand through his hair. His pushes his head into my palm before pulling back even more, but keeping his hands still on my hips.

“Yeah, I’m just tired,” he answers, looking slightly ashamed. I don’t say anything as I unbuckle his pants and he takes the hint and pulls them off along with his shoes. I take off my own plaid skirt and chucks before I pull him towards the bed.

There are questions in his eyes but he is obedient as I make him crawl under the blankets and follow him. But I don’t attempt to kiss him, I just put my head on his shoulder, wrapping a leg over his and taking his free hand. I’m not sure what’s motivating me, but it feels right and I need this just as much.

I listen to the wind rustling through tree at his window, the branches scraping against the pane of glass as I feel his lips brush softly on my forehead.

“I’m really stressed about the game Katniss,” he finally says. “Our team has never done so well and recruiters are going to be there. This is my chance to actually show my parents that… that
their hard work has paid off. And I don’t want to disappoint them or the school. I just wish I didn’t care about all this stupid shit like you don’t. That I could do whatever I want.”

My leg twitches at his words, but he doesn’t seem to notice as he settles a little deeper into the bed. I don’t know what to say about that. Does he really not think I care at all? Is this why he’s with me? Because I won’t care when he decides to go?

“‘You’re going to do great Peeta. There is no way you won’t be. And they’ll love you no matter what,’” I end up answering. I cringe inwardly because I feel like I sound cliche but I don’t know what else to say that would be better.

He kind of scoffs at that though. “They only care how well I perform, not who I am. That’s why I like you Katniss. You don’t care what I do.” The last words are almost mumbled and then I realize with the silence that follows along with his heavy breathing that he has fallen asleep.

I bite on my lip as I feel his hand lose his grip on mine. “But I do care about you Peeta.” I whisper, knowing he won’t hear it and realizing deep in my heart I really do mean it. I care about this boy more than I ever thought I could care about anyone besides my sister and chest throbs painfully because of it. My only answer is a soft puff of air on my forehead from a boy sound asleep but it’s for the best because I’m not nearly ready for that answer anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Surprise and update! This chapter was supposed to have much more, but I was forced to split it in two. Apologies to all who are still reading this story. I will try to not take so long, but thanks to all who have stuck through. Let me all know what you think.

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