Summary

Life would be much simpler if we received a warning before it changed forever. An alarm to alert us when that first seemingly random event of Chaos Theory occurred. That way we’d know to prepare for its butterfly effect. If only humans had that luxury. Maybe I would’ve been able to prepare myself. For her.

Inspired by/based on the book “Night Owl” by M. Pierce.

Notes

Thanks so much to wheneverdeen for the initial idea that sparked this story. It was both a blessing and a curse.

Life would be much simpler if we received a warning before it changed forever. An alarm to alert us when that first seemingly random event of Chaos Theory occurred. That way we’d know to prepare for its butterfly effect. If only humans had that luxury. Maybe I would’ve been able to prepare myself. For her.

sagittaria12: Did you get a chance to read the new pages I posted?
thegratefulbread: I did. So this girl lives in hell, I take it?
sagittaria12: lol I can’t imagine a post-apocalyptic United States as anything but hellish.
She was brand new to the District 12 Writing Forum when we first met. She’d just registered the same morning she made her first post and her screen name had caught my eye immediately. *Sagittaria.* She was in search of a working partner; an illustrator for the graphic novel she was planning on writing. I didn’t collaborate. I’d never even considered it an option until I saw her post. But within five minutes I’d found myself attaching a few old sketches that’d been sitting on my computer’s hard drive for years into a private message for her eyes only. I signed off with one sentence: “I’ll illustrate for you. Let me know if you’re interested.”

**thegratefulbread:** I guess it wouldn’t be. When do you need the sketches of the meadow?

**sagittaria12:** Whenever you have time to get them done. Btw I loved the sketches you did of the rock ledge and the valley.

**thegratefulbread:** lol is this your way of telling me to start the final drawings for them?

She answered my private message ten minutes later with the details of what she was working on. It was just for fun. She wasn’t looking to publish, and there’d be no compensation. The ball was in my court after that. I took her up on her offer of *fun* and collaboration began almost immediately. Anonymously, with the exception of one detail -- our ages. She was twenty-seven to my twenty-eight, a relief since neither one of us were eager to find ourselves working with a minor.

But beyond that? No names, no personal details. The only thing connecting us was a Google Drive account that was created specifically for the work we’d do. We both had the password and everything we worked on was stored there for us to look through at any time. There was no need for any other details. At least that’s what we told ourselves in the beginning.

**sagittaria12:** Do I seem like the type to bark orders?

**thegratefulbread:** I don’t know. But I bet you have some fire in you.

**sagittaria12:** Ha! In that case, do those drawings for me NOW… if you don’t mind.

**thegratefulbread:** lol very intimidating!

**sagittaria12:** What? Was that not vocal enough for you or something? lol

I scrubbed a hand down my face, willing myself away from using her question as an opportunity to ask her about herself.

**thegratefulbread:** I’ll do them tomorrow.

**sagittaria12:** Cause you’d do anything for me, right?

It was moments of conversation like those that put the first fissures in our agreement to stay anonymous. A joke that alluded to something between us that resembled a friendship, an offhand remark that pushed that allusion even further than that. Some nights I ached to ask her to tell me something about herself. Her favorite color, what music she listened to while she wrote. She was right. Anything. Even that early on. I’d do anything.

**thegratefulbread:** I guess that depends on what you’re about to ask me.

**sagittaria12:** How did you know I was going to ask you something? You don’t miss anything, do you?

*Not when it comes to you.*

**thegratefulbread:** Just a hunch.

**sagittaria12:** Ok. Well… I’m adding another character to the story. A boy.

**thegratefulbread:** A boy other than this friend the girl talks about?
sagittaria12: Yes, a second boy. I’ll be introducing him soon, so I wanted you to know...

thegratefulbread: And?

sagittaria12: And I don’t really have a picture of him in my head. He’s faceless to me right now. I was hoping you could take some artistic liberties and draw him for me.

thegratefulbread: You trust me to do that?

sagittaria12: Of course I do. I’ll probably need sketches of him and the girl soon, so I was thinking we should really discuss what the girl looks like tonight, too.

Right there. That’s when the alarm should’ve sounded. Something to let me know the innocent, anonymous collaboration things started out as would never quite be innocent, or anonymous, again.

thegratefulbread: The floor is yours, Duck Potato.

sagittaria12: You did not!

thegratefulbread: What?

sagittaria12: You Googled my screen name!

thegratefulbread: There’s no rule against that, is there?

sagittaria12: Well… not technically.

thegratefulbread: Then no harm, no foul. Now, back to your graphic novel. What does the girl look like?

Three dots flashed on the screen and disappeared. For a moment, I’d thought maybe she was mad at me for Googling her screen name. We hadn’t created a rule against that, but maybe it was supposed to be a given. Then, just as I was about to send her a message of apology, her response popped on my screen.

sagittaria12: She’s small, just over five feet tall. Skinny, but strong considering how petite she is. Olive skin, black hair that’s straight as a pin and usually worn in a braid, and gray eyes. Not light blue, but actually gray. Like steel. Commit this to your memory. You need to know all of this like the back of your hand.

thegratefulbread: Noted. Anything else, boss?

sagittaria12: I don’t want to see any sketches where she has an abnormally large chest for her size.

thegratefulbread: You want her to be proportioned.

sagittaria12: I mean it. Her chest is small, too and there’s nothing wrong with that.

thegratefulbread: I didn’t say there was.

sagittaria12: Good. Because this is non-negotiable. I can’t change myself, so neither can she. I’m sick and tired of seeing drawings of women in graphic novels where they’re petite everywhere but their chests. It doesn’t exactly encourage us smaller girls to feel good about ourselves.

My hands were shaking while they hovered over my keyboard. I read her message over again. Once, twice, and a third time, just to be sure. After the third re-read, there was no doubt in my mind. She’d just described herself. The details she’d shared with me about the main character of her story were also characteristics that she possessed. And that’s when it hit me.

He’s faceless to me right now. I was hoping you could take some artistic liberties and draw him for me.

She wanted to know what I looked like, too.

thegratefulbread: I will sketch her exactly how you told me to. Trust me?

sagittaria12: I trust you.
the gratefullybread: When do you need these by?
sagittaria12: As soon as possible. The drawing of the boy especially.
the gratefullybread: No sketch of him first?
sagittaria12: No. Just draw him, color it, and upload it. I trust you, remember?
the gratefullybread: How does two days sound? For both the sketch of the girl and the drawing of the boy.
sagittaria12: I can deal with that. Should I let you go? So you can get started?

I wanted to say no. Tell me more about the girl. But she was right. If I wanted to get a sketch and full drawing done in two days, I needed to start right away.

the gratefullybread: Probably a good idea. I don’t want to keep you waiting.

We said our goodbyes that night knowing something had changed between us. Our words held something more. A deliberate evasion of the devious way we were breaking our rules, and a sizzling intensity born from that truth.

I tried hard to work on that sketch that night. Countless times I put pencil to paper, lightly dragging the graphite tip down the page in hopes that something resembling a person would appear. But I knew she’d described herself to me that night, and I found it impossible to associate it with anything but her. Sagittaria. Duck Potato. I didn’t even know her name yet.

The image of her in my mind was clear as a bell, though, and my cock stirred in my pants at the mere idea of her. And I felt like a creep for it. I tried to ignore it, tried to focus on the work I needed to be doing for her, but my body had other ideas. My erection throbbed painfully, refusing to let me focus on anything but how fucking aroused I was.

Slowly, almost shamefully, I slid my sweat pants and boxer briefs down past the curve of my ass and pulled my cock out. I thought of her, sitting in front of her computer, a serious look affixed to her face while she typed out her description to me, cleverly breaking our rule. I worked my hand up and down the warm shaft in slow, measured strokes imagining my hands covering the modest breasts she was so eager to defend. Kneading the soft mounds that I guessed would fit perfectly in my hands, tonguing a hardened nipple slowly, teasingly, and blowing gently on the wetness. I pictured goosebumps. I saw them so clearly, rising to her skin with each quick puff of breath across the taut nub, a soft moan rumbling through her chest even though I’d never heard her voice. It didn’t matter. I hadn’t told her my name either, but I could still hear it falling from her lips in a soft and breathy timbre. And that was my undoing. I leaned back in my chair and watched myself come in thick spurts against my stomach.

The guilt set in before I’d even wiped the come from my skin. Was that what two years without a date did to a person? I wasn’t sure then and I’m still not sure now. All I knew was that I’d made myself come thinking of a complete stranger I’d met on the internet. And I hadn’t come that hard in years.

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sagittaria12: How do you do it?
the gratefullybread: Do what?
sagittaria12: Draw everything so perfectly.

I knew what she was asking. How had I drawn her so perfectly? If I had an answer for her, I would’ve told her. But the truth was, I didn’t know the answer, either. And to make matters worse, it felt like shit talking to her after what I’d done thinking about her two nights before.
Luckily we were still only communicating through the written word then. Words, I could handle. Manipulate them in a way that would never clue her into even an ounce of the shame that I’d been feeling since the euphoria of getting off faded that night.

thegratefulbread: That’s not true. If I drew everything perfectly we wouldn’t be having trouble getting this scenery drawn the way you’re envisioning it.
sagittaria12: That just needs a little tweaking. Speaking of which.... I have a question for you.
thegratefulbread: What do you need me to draw now?

She’d skirted the topic of my drawing of “the boy” completely, and every thought as to why passed through my mind at lightening speed. The obvious thought was that maybe she hadn’t looked at it yet. But what if it was worse than that? What if I’d somehow read her wrong and she wasn’t asking to see me at all? Words, as easy as they were to manipulate, were just as easy to misinterpret.
	sagittaria12: It’s nothing I want you to draw. Just something I was wondering...

The worst possible thought crossed my mind then. Maybe I’d read her perfectly, but I just wasn’t what she was hoping for.

thegratefulbread: What is it?
sagittaria12: You can say no if you want.
thegratefulbread: Just tell me.

It was a good three minutes before she even started typing. But once she started, the messages popped on my screen fast and furious.

sagittaria12: We should meet.
sagittaria12: I know it goes against everything we agreed on in the beginning but I thought it might be easier.
sagittaria12: We can’t seem to get on the same page about the scenery this way. So I thought… I don’t know.
sagittaria12: I thought if we could talk in person it might be easier.

I knew immediately what she was up to. It was no longer a question of whether or not she’d seen the drawing. She’d seen it. Now she wanted to see how accurate it was.

thegratefulbread: Do you really think that’s necessary?

I wouldn’t let myself agree too quickly. Lord knows I’d wanted to, though. I told myself a little hesitation was a good thing. It’d tell her that I took my time with my decision and that I agreed because it was important to me. All true, except for the part about taking my time with my decision. I’d made it as soon as I’d read her suggestion.

sagittaria12: I think it might be. It’d probably save time. So you wouldn’t be sketching so much.
sagittaria12: And getting sick of me.
sagittaria12: And quitting the project.
sagittaria12: I don’t want you to think I’m asking too much of you or anything. I’d hate for it to come to that.
sagittaria12: Collaborating with you has been really nice.
sagittaria12: Like I said.. you can say no. I just thought I’d throw the idea out there.

One rebuff was going to have to be enough.
thegratefulbread: Alright.
sagittaria12: Really?
thegratefulbread: Sure. I don’t want you to get sick of me and my shortcomings as an artist either.
thegratefulbread: Let’s make this work.
sagittaria12: It has to be in public first though. You know... just in case you’re a murderer.
thegratefulbread: lol well, what if you’re a murderer?
sagittaria12: All the more reason to meet in public.

And just like that, it’d started. The beginning of the end.

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I’m not sure what I was thinking when I agreed to meet her at Starbucks on a Saturday afternoon. When I walked in, I felt my stomach lurch at the sight of patrons from one wall to the other, the melodic buzzing of their whispered conversations drifting through the stagnant air.

When I’d asked her what she looked like so I knew who I’d be meeting, her response was coy. I have a green cover on my laptop. But I’d been playing the game with her long enough by that point to know what she really meant -- You’ve drawn me, now I want you to find me.

A nervous sweat broke out across my forehead. The longer I stood at the front of that store, the more exposed I’d felt. As if giving everyone a chance to look at me, they’d see right through me and know everything about me. What I was hiding, where I’d come from, who I’d been. Years of therapy still hadn’t taught me how not to be suspicious of people, and I’m not sure that it ever will, which made the whole meeting a stranger from the Internet thing rather ironic. Me, the guy the hid himself from the world, agreeing to meet up with a woman I’d never properly seen before. I scolded myself and forced my legs to continue walking.

There was green everywhere. Every cup of coffee had green on them and the baristas aprons were green. It was on shirts, on shoes, on computer bags. There were even a few green laptops. But in the end there was only one computer with a green cover over its silver base, and it sat in a far corner of the store in front of woman who scowled down at the screen as she typed, frowned, and backspaced.

She must be writing, I thought, smiling as I took in her features. A petite frame that was almost completely hidden behind her laptop, dark locks plaited down her back. I focused on the way a glimmer of afternoon sun had snuck in between the window blinds and cast a yellow glow across the left side of her body. Her olive skin looked smooth and warm under the glowing rays. The only thing I couldn’t quite make out were her eyes. It was impossible to see them when they were narrowed threateningly at her laptop screen. It took me clearing my throat to get my first glimpse of those eyes, gray as smoke, wide open, and suddenly roving my face.

I inhaled deeply through my nose and on the exhale, mentally pleaded with my body not to betray me. A spontaneous erection during introductions would’ve been the first way to ruin the entire thing. I don’t know if my body actually listened to me that day or if I was just too anxious to be aroused, but whatever it was I was thankful that I held it together while those curious eyes sized me up.

It was like the girl I’d sketched had leapt off of my page and into the real world. The corner of my lip quirked up reflexively knowing that the drawing of the boy with messy blond hair and blue eyes in my portfolio bag probably had her thinking the same of me.

“Sagittaria?”
“The grateful bread?”

“Please.” I sucked in air through my teeth, making a pained sound as I extended my hand toward her. “Don’t say that out loud ever again. It’s Peeta.”

I noticed her hesitate. A quick flit of her eyes away from me and down to the floor, as though it’d finally dawned on her that she was meeting a stranger from the internet.

“Katniss,” she returned, finally slipping a small, rough hand into mine. Her eyes flitted away a second time and landed on my portfolio bag. “You don’t have a hatchet in that bag, do you?”

“A machete, actually,” I replied, lifting to bag to eye level. “My hatchet was becoming too noticeable.”

I caught her smile. Just the left side of her lush mouth twisting up for the briefest second, but it was gone just as quickly as it’d come on, and she was motioning for me to sit down across from her.

“Not a whole lot of room here,” I observed, attempting to get my bag to balance on the sliver of table that wasn’t taken up by Katniss’ laptop.

Katniss. It was nice to finally have her name. It sounded familiar to me, but I couldn’t put together why then. I wanted to repeat it, hear how it rolled off my tongue, feel it on my lips. But we were still swimming through murky waters around each other, and I didn’t think saying her name repeatedly would’ve gotten me many positive check marks on her “Am I In Danger?” report card.

“I didn’t think this through very well, did I?” She sighed and scrambled to try and make room for me, awkwardly positioning her laptop at the edge of the table and leaning forward to keep it from toppling over the edge. “I wanted the most public place. You know… to be safe.”

“I take it you’ve never met anyone from the internet before?” I asked. She shook her head dramatically and crinkled her nose like the thought of it alone was preposterous. I unzipped my portfolio bag and pulled out some sketches, slapping them down in the small space between us. “Well, I haven’t either. So if it’s any consolation, I’m probably just as nervous as you are right now.”

Probably even more so, but I wasn’t going to tell her that. She’d want to know why. I may have agreed to meet her that day, but I hadn’t agreed to tell her my life story.

“Here,” she offered, finally sliding her laptop off the table entirely. She set it down on her lap and held onto it with one hand. It couldn’t possibly have been comfortable, but in that small corner of the store with anxiety and worry droning between us, I knew comfort wasn’t something either of us were going to find that afternoon. “I was just writing a little something but I’m done now. Can we get started?”

She was rushing it. Like the last place she wanted to be was sitting at that small table with me. If I didn’t feel the same way, I might have been offended. It wasn’t her. Being around her was nice. Very nice. But the small space, the people. I couldn’t have enjoyed myself if I tried.

“All right. Well, I guess I just need you to show me which parts of the sketch aren’t working for you and tell me what I need to do to fix them.”

I pushed the sketch in her direction, silently giving her permission to critique it.

“This is going to sound stupid since they aren’t colored, but it feels too bright,” she started,
“This is going to sound stupid since they aren’t colored, but it feels too bright,” she started, smoothing the pads of her fingers over an open area of trees in the background of the sketch. “The trees should be more abundant here.” Her fingers danced over the spot as she talked about it. “And right in line with the houses. There should be a few more houses too. Run down, rotting out, so everything feels hopeless. Suffocating, I guess.”

“Oppressive,” I said, noticing her nod out of the corner of my eye. “And you still want coal dust from the mines blanketing the surfaces, right?”

“Yes!” She confirmed. “That’s essential.”

I got to work quickly and quietly with Katniss at my side watching my every move. I erased a few houses to fix the trees, and re-sketched the foreground, ensuring the houses were dilapidated just enough before starting to shade the surfaces to give the illusion of coal dust.

“Do you write, Peeta?”

Tension coiled through my body hearing that question, and she noticed.

“I only asked because you replied to me on writing forum,” Katniss explained, an edge of apology in her voice. “Why else would someone be there if they didn’t write? I figured I just lucked out finding someone that writes and draws.”

“Yeah, I write,” I answered tersely, keeping my eyes on my sketch. “Since I was a kid.”

“Wow. I’ve only been writing for about a year,” she admitted. “Which is probably obvious.”

“You’re good,” I told her, finally finding it in myself to look at her just in time for her to look away from me. “What made you start writing?”

She shrugged. “Life, I guess.”

“So it’s cathartic for you,” I noted. “Like therapy without the bill.”

“Something like that,” she laughed. “And maybe a little like playing God. A change here, a better decision there, and everything’s different. How about you? Why do you write?”

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“An escape,” I said. “It doesn’t matter what’s going on in my life, I can always immerse myself in a story I’m writing and take myself away for a little while. It’s not good for me to be in the now all the time.”

“Is it good for any of us?” She asked. Her eyes came back to my face and I saw them moving, the way a person’s eyes would when they’re reading and I knew she was studying my face.

I knew she didn’t mean to, but her stares were shrinking me. Backing me into a corner, waiting for me to start fighting. How could a single pair of eyes feel like hundreds? Between the topic of my writing and the bustling store, I knew if I didn’t move the conversation back to her own writing soon, I’d clam up completely and push her away just when she was getting close.

“Since we’re talking about writing, do you mind if I ask you something about your story?”

“I guess I won’t know unless you ask it,” she shrugged.

“What’s the deal with the girl’s friend?” I asked, dropping my pencil down on top of my sketch.

“What do you mean?” She tilted her head at me, clearly not picking up on what I was asking.
“I mean, does he have feelings for the girl? Is he just a best friend?” I watched Katniss anxiously grab for her laptop and slid it back onto the table, covering the half of my sketch that wasn’t being worked on. “What’s going on there?”

“It’s not going to happen until the middle section of the story, but he has feelings for her,” Katniss admitted opening the lid of her laptop and staring down at the screen as if it’d give her all the answers. “But she’s not really sure how she feels about him in return.”

“Really?” I pressed, knowing I probably shouldn’t have. “Did you consider keeping him as just a friend? Keeping it platonic?”

“Why?”

“The friend with a crush thing is just…” I paused, contemplating if I should even finish my sentence, but the look on her eyes, that were back on me again, told me that if I didn’t, she’d force it out of me. “Don’t you think it’s a little overdone?”

“Overdone? Something that happens all the time in the real world can’t be overdone,” she said. “Friends fall for friends all the time. Would you tell them it’s overdone?”

She’d taken it far more personally than I’d hoped she would. At the time, I just assumed it was because she was so new to writing that she hadn’t quite learned how to take constructive criticism yet, so I dropped it. Shrugged it off and refocused her attention on the sketch between us. I hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings, but I clearly had and that was the last thing I wanted hanging between us.

“How’s it looking now?” I asked, slipping the page out from under her laptop. “A little more like what you were imagining?”

I watched the anger melt from those steely gray eyes when they took in the sketch in front of her. Full lips that were downturned just a minute before lifted back into neutral territory as she nodded to herself.

“It’s perfect now,” she crooned, sliding the page back to me. I was rewarded with a smile. A real smile that stretched her lips taut and crinkled the corners of her eyes. I hadn’t even realized I was smiling too until the apples of my cheeks started feeling sore. I wondered how long we’d been sitting there beaming at each other. My smile dropped and my eyes followed, suddenly finding an intense interest in my hands fidgeting nervously in my lap.

“I uh…” she cleared her throat, scrambling to open her laptop and hide behind it. “I haven’t written this next part yet, but I wanted to give you a rundown of what’s going on so maybe you could start on those sketches while you waited for me to write it. It’s pretty intense.”

“Alright.” I said, pulling out a blank sheet of paper to take notes. “Tell me all about it.”

And she did. She told me of the starting moments of the barbaric games the girl and the boy were now part of. The sixty agonizing seconds on a platform that’d explode if you dared try to move away from it before it hit zero, and the bloodbath that followed. Where eleven of the twenty-four unwilling participants were slain before they’d even had a chance to prepare themselves.

“I’ll start writing those scenes tonight and upload them to our drive as soon as they’re done.” She closed the lid of her computer and swiftly grabbed for the bag. I took it as her way of telling me, “We’re done now.”

I followed suit, happy to leave that stuffy store but not quite ready to say goodbye to Katniss. I slipped my papers back into my portfolio bag and rose from my seat, careful to stay close to her as
she headed to the door and toward the parking lot.

“Where’d you park? She asked, blocking the sun from her eyes and searching as though she knew what my car looked like.

“All the way over on the other side,” I said. “And it took me ten minutes to even find that spot.”

“Ouch, I’m really sorry,” she cringed. “Starbucks was a really bad idea. It was hard to even concentrate or get comfortable with that many people in there.”

I saw my chance to keep her around then and took it.

“I’m not sure if I passed your “He’s not a murderer test” yet,” I started, reaching up to rub the back of my neck nervously. “But you could always come to my place next time. I have a lot more space to spread out these sketches and drawings so you can look at them all at once.”

She stared at me a lot longer than I would’ve liked her to. So long that I began to think that she didn’t want to see me again. I shrank for a different reason that time. I’d assumed she wanted to get together again, so the thought that she may not want to somehow hurt far more than I ever expected it to. How could I be hurt by something that wasn’t even supposed to happen in the first place?

“That sounds like a better idea,” she finally agreed, nodding resolutely. It was more to herself than to me, like she’d spent the time staring at me trying to convince herself to do it again. And somehow that hurt even more than the thought of her not wanting to see me again at all.

We lingered in that parking lot far longer than was necessary, like she didn’t want to be the first one to leave. Or in my case, I was hoping for another smile and was reluctant to go until I saw one.

“So which do you prefer?” I started, hoping my question would have the intended results. “Sagittaria or Duck Potato?”

Success! Pink lips pursed in irritation and quickly lifted into that smile again.

“Stop calling me that!” she laughed, already sounding much more relaxed than she had in the store. “Katniss. You can call me Katniss.”

“Alright, Katniss,” I smirked, taking a few tentative steps toward her. “Will I see you online tonight?”

“Yeah,” she said, lifting her eyes to my face and making me aware of just how close I’d moved in. I was just about to take a step back when I felt her hand on my forearm. “I’m sorry again for picking such a rendezvous spot.”

My breath hitched and I hoped she didn’t notice. Her smile, her closeness, the use of the word rendezvous. My mind had kicked into overdrive, and I wanted nothing more than to kiss her that very first day.

“It’s not your fault,” I assured her. Noticing how weak my voice sounded, I took a breath before finishing my sentence. “You were just being careful.”

“It’ll be better next time,” she said, like it was a promise. And maybe I was imagining things, but I swear I felt her hand move to caress the skin of my forearm. “Talk to you tonight?”

“I’ll be there.”
I can barely remember the smile Katniss had on her face the first time she came over. In hindsight, I wish I’d let her hold it longer. I should’ve given her time to linger in the doorway a few extra seconds as she swung the bag of bagels she brought in front of my eyes like a pendulum. If I’d known then that how long she stood at my front door wouldn’t have made a difference in anything that happened, that I’d end up screwing it up anyway, I would’ve let her stand there with that cheshire grin far longer than I did. I may have even given her one in return.

Instead, I urged her into the house too abruptly, scanning the street over her shoulder for prying eyes and when I turned around to face her, that smile was gone. Replaced by a searching glare that told me she did not appreciate my urgency.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to push you. I’ve just.. I’ve had a few altercations out here so I’m probably a little more paranoid than I should be.”

“Altercations?”

“They were just shouting matches. It’s fine. Nothing serious.” I assured her. “A few shouting matches, they got a little physical. It’s fine.”

“It doesn’t sound fine if it happened more than once,” Katniss admonished. “Who would want to deal with that? Why not just move?”

“Because this is my home. Nobody’s going to push me out of here. Come on,” I grumbled, already unhappy with where the evening was going. Whatever had sparked between us at the end of our first meeting seemed to have remained in that parking lot instead of coming with us. “We can work in the living room.”

She stayed a few paces behind me as we strode up the hall, the tension between us palpable. I half-expected to hear her call out that she was just going to go home and write instead, maybe even let me know that I was different online and I wasn’t the person she’d gotten to know during our weeks of anonymous chatting. I’m sure she was wondering what happened to that patient, more relaxed person, because the man I was in person wasn’t him.

“That carpet is too white for me to go traipsing over it with my sneakers on,” she said toeing off her shoes in front of the living room’s French doors.

“It’s just a carpet,” I shrugged, quirking an eyebrow when I noticed the green polka dotted socks on her feet. I almost pointed them out and probably would have if I hadn’t been worrying about saying the wrong thing and sending her scurrying away. It was the crinkling of the bag of bagels in her hand that gave me a chance to diffuse some of the tension. “Do you want me to take those?”

“I mean.. yeah if you want them.” She thrust the bag into my chest hurriedly. “I got them for you. Blueberry, and there’s cream cheese in there too. That’s what you said you liked, right?”

That time, I found the smile that I’d missed giving her at the door. Two nights before while chatting with her, I’d mentioned my love of blueberry bagels with cream cheese after she’d told me about her love of Dr. Pepper.

“Great minds think alike, I guess,” I said, moving my head in the direction of the kitchen. “Because there’s a case of Dr. Pepper in my fridge for you.”

I swear I saw her mood shift right in front of my face. Hard eyes softened, her jaw relaxed, and her shoulders deflated. She wasn’t on the defensive side anymore and I took it as an opportunity to
show her into the living room and ensure she made herself comfortable while I got her a soda and napkins for the bagels.

Who would’ve thought that something as simple as bagels and Dr. Pepper could eliminate the negative precedent my uncomfortable greeting at the door had set? But I was grateful for it and I promised myself I would stay in the moment with Katniss and not let my thoughts stray to who may be outside watching.

She was much more at ease after that, stretching out on my living room floor with a binder, the can of Dr. Pepper I’d brought her, and one of my bagels, slathered with cream cheese and half eaten on a napkin beside her. She looked over my sketches of the boy and the girl hiding out in a cave, making humming sounds to herself like she was appraising their accuracy.

“They should be a little closer in these three,” she said, pointing to the last half of six sketches. “Other than that, they’re perfect. They look comfortable together. Happy. That’s important.”

“I can fix them now if you want,” I said, grabbing for the three pages. “While you’re still here.”

“No, don’t do it yet,” she said, flipping through the pages of the binder and slapping a green Post-It Tab on one of the pages. She smiled mischievously. “I finished the first part of the story,” she added in a sing-song voice. “And I want you to finish reading first. Then we can worry about the sketches.” She pointed to the green tab marking her page. “That’s where the new stuff begins.”

“Yes,” she admitted. “And judging by the color of that Dodge Charger parked in your driveway, I’d say orange was your favorite.”

“You got me,” I smiled and turned my attention to the pages in front of me and started reading.

The girl and boy’s time in the cave continued even further, and I stole a few glances at Katniss as I soaked up the new information. She sat cross-legged on the floor, swaying back and forth like she was nervous about something. I found out quickly what it was.

“Oh no way!” I bellowed, looking up to Katniss. “She’s kissing him? I mean, I know the mentor hinted that she should, but she’s actually doing it?”

“Were you not expecting her to?” she asked. Her question was a genuine one. She scooted closer to me on the floor and looked at me expectantly, waiting for my answer.

“Honestly, I wasn’t sure what was going to happen,” I said. “The boy has a crush on her, he made that clear and he was trying to protect her the whole time. There are feelings on his end. But I really couldn’t get much of a read on her. She’s a very unreliable narrator.” I stopped, making note of the look she was giving me, like she was about to take my words personally again. “I meant that in a good way. She’s got this great internal struggle going on right now.”

“Yeah, she does.” Her eyes darted away from my face. “She can’t even get a good read on herself at the moment.”

There was something in her voice then. Something in the way she avoided my gaze that told me she was no longer talking about the girl in her story anymore. We were playing our game again.

“She’s not sure if she has feelings for the boy?” I asked, deciding to play along. Talk to her through her character. If that was how she was willing to make her desires known, I was willing to indulge her.
“She just wasn’t expecting him to mean so much to her,” she murmured. “And so quickly.” She pulled her knees up, hugging them against her chest.

“Maybe she’s thinking too much.” I swallowed thickly, scooting over to close what little space was left between us. “Maybe she should just kiss him now and worry about what it means later.”

“She will,” Katniss assured me, sounding far less guarded than she had seconds before. “You still have a lot more to read.”

She was pulling back. Taking away the hints she’d just given me about everything and retreating into her story where it was easier for her to control things. Where she could play God again, just like she said she liked to do.

“I’m not talking about the story right now,” I said firmly. “And I know you weren’t either a minute ago.”

There was no denial from her. Just her eyes back on mine, stormy and dark. Burning me from the inside out and scorching away any restraint I had left.

“Go on,” I dared her. “Kiss me.”

Where I expected hesitation, there wasn’t a second of it. She must have needed to hear me say it, because she launched herself toward me, knocking her binder from my hands and burying her fingers in my hair to pull my lips to hers. She didn’t even waver when I responded, positioning my body so my hands could cup her jaw to deepen the kiss.

I still remember how she tasted that night when she opened her mouth to me. The sweetness of her Dr. Pepper still lingering, she sighed into my mouth and fisted my hair when I sucked on her tongue. In all those nights I shamefully took myself in hand and made myself come thinking of her, I never imagined it like that. In my living room, our sock clad feet sliding across the carpet, desperately trying to find purchase while our bodies twisted and turned together, and after only the second time seeing each other in person. It felt insane, it felt implausible, but not once did it feel wrong.

I could’ve kissed her all night if she hadn’t pulled away and shut down. Her swollen lips were parted and her breaths came out in sharp puffs as she moved to gather the contents that spilled from her binder.

“Uh... think we got a little sidetracked,” she said, offering the pages back to me and telling me without words that our moment had passed and it was time to get back to work.

“Alright,” I breathed, failing to give her an encouraging smile. “Let’s see how you ended this first part.”

A hush fell over the room while I read the last moments of her story. A final showdown with a hulking boy that ended in him being eaten by a pack of mutated animals akin to rabid dogs. A
deceptive rule change in the end that had the girl and boy on the verge of suicide before the game makers stopped them. A stunt that likely wouldn’t go unpunished as the story moved forward. The rest was a whirlwind. The boy almost died, the girl refused to leave his side, and in the end they were paraded around like a couple in love despite the girl’s refusal to even think about how she really felt. The first part of the story ended with the boy finding out that most of the girl’s affections to him had been staged, and a final line from the girl that made it clear their relationship wasn’t over.

“Wow,” I breathed. “You’ve definitely mastered the art of the cliffhanger.”

“So you liked it?” She asked.

“I loved it…”

I wouldn’t lie to her about her story. I did love it, but there was part of me that was left confused after reading it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Does she really not have any feelings for the boy?”

“I told you, she’s confused.”

“Yeah, but I thought…” I shut my mouth, realizing how stupid I was sounding. “Nevermind.”

What did I think? That just because we’d kissed once it cleared up any confusion she may have had over what she was feeling? And it’d changed her mind so wholly that she’d be compelled to change her entire story?

“You want me to change the ending, don’t you?” she asked, not missing a beat. “Well that’s not going to happen. I’m writing this story, not you.”

“It just seemed to me that you were modeling it after… us,” I said, urging her to talk to me.

“Describing yourself as the girl, asking me to draw myself as the boy. How am I supposed to feel when you kiss me and then I read that she may or may not have feelings for him?”

Small hands angrily grabbed my collar with a strength I never would’ve guessed she had and pulled me toward her. One hand let go and traveled upward, stopping at my cheek. She cupped it gently before gingerly dragging her nails across the skin as her lips met mine for the second time.

She kissed me with purpose. Her tongue dipping into my mouth and drawing a groan out of me that only fueled her hunger. I felt a hand moving, sliding down my chest and a palm grazing my stomach before fingers curled around my belt.

“This is real,” she whispered, her soft lips brushing against mine. “But you confuse me, Peeta. I barely know you and I shouldn’t want this and yet… I still do.”

“I want it too,” I croaked, gasping when her palm pressed against my erection. It was like she’d lit a fire under me and I responded quickly, thrusting my body forward and pinning her against the carpet.

A shocked laugh erupted from her throat as her legs wrapped around me, locking me in place.

“Then let me feel how much you want it,” she challenged. For someone who talked about how much I confused her, she wasn’t doing a bad job of being confusing herself.
I gripped her wrists in one of my hands, immobilizing them above her head, and with the other I held my body up just enough to drop my hips down and grind my erection against her. Her legs tightened around me even further, urging me to continue, but we’d gone far enough for one night. I moved off of her, pulling her up to sit in front of me.

“Think about that when you go home tonight,” I instructed, standing up and gathering my sketches. That night, it was my turn to tell her we were done working.

*****

“Peeta!”

“Madge,” I gritted out, pacing the length of my office. I stopped to peer out the window and through the small sliver of blinds I saw it was still there. The Red Audi carefully parked in front of a house four down from mine. Far enough away to not seem suspicious, but close enough to keep an eye on me. “It’s not really a good time right now.”


“How’d you guess?” I said dryly. “It’s been there all morning.”

To be honest, I was glad she called when she did. Madge Undersee may have been my literary agent first and foremost, but she was also a friend. One of the two people in District 12 that knew everything about me.

“Call the fucking cops!” she barked. “This is bullshit, Peeta.”

“I know it’s bullshit,” I said, snapping the blinds shut and throwing my body down into my desk chair. “But how many times am I going to call the cops and get no action on this?”

“Fine. In that case, I don’t want to talk to Peeta Mellark anymore,” Madge said, easily switching from friend to stern agent. “Let me talk to P. Matthews.”

“Jesus, Madge. You treat this like it’s a split personality,” I groused. “It’s just a pen name.”

“A pen name that you refuse to have linked to your real identity in any way,” she reminded me. “I know Peeta Mellark doesn’t have any pages for me, but does bestselling author P. Matthews have any for me?”

“No,” I snapped. “I don’t.”

From as far back as I could remember I’d wanted to be a writer. But in my mind being a writer was not the same as being an author and I knew from a young age that I wanted nothing to do with the sort of attention being an author would bring. Authors had fans. Fans who’d manage to learn things they should never be privy to. My father’s death, my mother’s battle with alcoholism, my own battle with the same disease.

It was easier to stay hidden. I could write and keep my privacy. And even after my first book shot to number one within its first month of release, I knew staying unknown was the only way I could continue to write.

Madge sighed. “Peeta, I need pages from you,” she said. “Deadlines still apply to you. Astronomical success or not.”

There weren’t many people that knew the truth. Madge, my two older brothers, my therapist, my AA sponsor, and my ex, Delly. The list was short and I intended to keep it that way. Telling
Katniss was not an option.

“You think I don’t know that?” I snapped. “If I had pages, I’d send them, but I’m looking at a blank screen right now.”

I couldn’t tell her the truth of course. Sorry, Madge. I was a little busy falling for a stranger and drawing pictures for her to worry about writing the book you’re trying to push.

“Just try to get something to me soon, Peeta,” Madge sighed. “And call the cops on that bitch!”

I laughed and ended the call, turning back to the unwritten chapter on my computer screen just long enough to shut off the monitor and walk away.

*****

“So… you work at Gander Mountain?”

“What?”

I pointed at Katniss’ top half, wiggling my finger around to call attention to the green and khaki colored vest she wore, the words Gander Mtn. embroidered on the front.

“Gander Mountain uniform?” I questioned with a knowing smile. “Unless you just like to wear that when you’re out visiting people?”

“Shit,” she huffed, shrugging out of the vest and shoving it into the sleeve of her jacket. “I was supposed to take that off before I got out of my car. Wasn’t exactly thinking clearly on my way here, though.”

I ignored the last half of her sentence, knowing full well what she meant. We’d hardly talked since those kisses on my living room floor. She was working a lot, she’d said. And when she wasn’t working she claimed to be writing.

She was clever, though. After that night in my living room she stopped uploading her new writing to our drive. I checked for it countless times through the day, but everything there was stuff I’d already read. Even without telling me she’d stopped, she somehow knew that I’d stop uploading my sketches, too. And just like that, she’d effectively created a reason for us to have to see each other again.

Not that she needed an excuse. She could’ve come over just to drink the rest of the Dr. Pepper, if she’d wanted. She could’ve knocked on my door at three in the morning and asked me to grind my cock against middle again and I would’ve done it. Happily. No questions asked.

I longed to ask her what she did after she went home that night. I wanted to know if she’d thought of me, like I told her to. If she’d made herself come thinking about what we did. What we could have done. What we could still do. But it’d have to wait.

“How long have you worked there?” I asked, waving for her to follow me to the kitchen.

“About four years,” she said, smiling when I handed her a Dr. Pepper.

“I’ve never actually been in there,” I admitted, like I’d done her some kind of disservice by not going there. I idled in front of the fridge, trying to find something to take out to eat. I didn’t have much to offer. “I used to go into that shopping plaza a lot, but I never ventured into that particular store. You like Peeps?”
“Peeps?” she asked, crinkling her nose the way she did when she was confused.

“You know, the marshmallow chicks?” I said, holding up a cold, unopened box of the confections. “I have some. Got them in pink and yellow. They all taste the same to me though.”

“Oh!” She shook her head, pursing her lips together to stifle a laugh. “I’m fine with just the soda. Thanks, though.”

In the living room, I already had all of my work spread out across the floor, lined up meticulously in the order I drew them. They were all drawings, completed and colored and ready to go. While Katniss circled around them, taking in my work I spoke softly, letting her stay in the moment.

“We weren’t talking a whole lot. Not nearly enough to get a chance to discuss any sketches,” I said, veering off and plopping down on the couch. My eyes stayed glued on her face as she continued her appraisal. “So I went ahead and turned them all into final drawings. I wasn’t sure if the drawings of the doctors working on the boy after the games were too graphic, but if they are I can redo them.”

“They’re perfect,” she said, squatting down in front of the drawings in question. “Absolutely perfect. And I’m sorry I was a little distant the last two weeks.”

“It’s fine,” I answered, trying to sound nonchalant.

“I really was working a lot,” she explained, motioning to where her jacket hung with her work vest stuffed in the pocket. “But I also really needed to get a lot of writing done and talking to you well.. it’s great. But you distract me.”

She followed it with a smile that said, “You distract me in a good way” and ambled out of the room, returning a second later with her bag. It was an assumption on my part, but it seemed like she carried it everywhere. All three times I’d seen her, she had it.

I pointed to her bag with my chin. “There better be something for me to read in there.”

Without a word, she pulled out that familiar green binder and handed it over to me, almost bouncing on her heels as she did it. She looks excited, proud of herself.

“There’s a lot there,” she said. “Probably twenty percent of the second part of the story.”

“Sit next to me while I read?” I asked, wrapping my fingers around her wrist and gently pulling her down onto the couch with me.

She settled in, curling her legs up under her, nursing the can of Dr. Pepper I’d given her while I soaked up her words. I appreciated the way she stayed silent as I read. Even though she was probably itching to add a verbal note to a scene or drop a comment to protect herself from criticism, she did none of it. She just watched me read with nervous, jittery movements.

The girl and boy’s relationship at the beginning of the second part of the story was strained, but that was putting it nicely. To be blunt, it was non-existent. Avoidant. And just like Katniss said the first time that we met, the girl’s friend decided that he had feelings for her, too, only adding to her confusion.

And suddenly the boy and girl were thrust together again on a tour across the country as co-winners of the games they’d competed in six months earlier. The girl was plagued by nightmares that the boy responded to, waking her to calm her down and then climbing into bed with her, a process that quickly became routine for them on the tour.
But then there was a shift in the story. The sleeping arrangements weren’t just for comfort from nightmares anymore and hands began to roam followed by deep and lingering kisses that stifled moans as clothing was shed.

“Wait..” I say, frowning at the page. “Are they about to have sex?”

The girl climbed on top of the boy, his hand on her hip to keep her steady as she slowly positioned his erection at her center.

I shook my head. “I can’t draw this, Katniss.”

Her face fell immediately. “Why not?”

“First off, they’re sixteen years old,” I reminded her. “I’m not going to draw sixteen year olds having sex.”

Any hope I had of her buying that as the main reason I wouldn’t do it was lost when she scoffed and rolled her eyes.

“Like you’ve been drawing them as sixteen year olds,” she said. It was the first time either one of us acknowledged that neither one of the drawings of these two characters looked anywhere near to the sixteen years old they were supposed to be. “Why not tell me the real reason you won’t do it?”

I didn’t want to. I’d tried discussing plot points in her story before and she didn’t take kindly to it either time. But she’d left me no choice.

“It just doesn’t work at this point in the story,” I told her. “She was just telling him she didn’t actually have feelings for him and they ignored each other for six months and now they’re having sex?”

“She never actually told him she didn’t have feelings for him,” she corrected me.

“She never said she did either, though.”

“So are you trying to tell me that they have to have some heart to heart before they can have sex?” she retorted, sounding incredulous.

“Of course not,” I said. “That’s unrealistic. But do you really want a sex scene right there or are you writing it because you thought that’s what I’d like to read?”

She balked. That’s exactly what she was trying to do.

My next question was gentler. “What made you feel like there should be a sex scene there?”

“They’re young, sleeping closely, going through a lot together.” She ended her grocery list of reasons, very weak reasons, with a simple shrug.

“You don’t really have a reason, do you?” I asked. “Did you write that because you thought I’d want to read it?”

“I guess that was part of it,” she admitted. “I felt bad about refusing to change the ending of the first part.”

“Don’t,” I said. “You’re writing the story, remember? Ask yourself this. Do you have room in your plot to tack on the consequences of an intimate relationship this early in the story?”
I could see her thinking about it, sucking on her teeth thoughtfully while plucking at the tab on her can of Dr. Pepper.

“I don’t,” she finally said.

“Then it’s probably not the right time for it,” I told her, watching as she rummaged through her bag and produced a red pen.

With the binder still in my lap, she leaned forward and flipped through the pages to find the beginning of the sex scene. Red marked the page, single lines through sentences at first and then larger. Huge, red X’s across entire pages, eliminating the scene from the story.

“Do you always need a reason to justify sex?” she huffed, dropping her pen down on the binder dramatically.

For a moment, I thought her question was about writing. A request to share techniques with each other. But the darkness in her eyes, the half lidded gaze that I found staring back at me when I pulled my eyes from an angry, red X on her page told me that she was setting out bait. Bait that I was eager to take.

“Only when I’m writing it,” I muttered.

She was so present. So near. I could feel the warmth of her breath fanning across my face, the rise and fall of her shoulder where it was pressed against mine.

“Sex doesn’t always have to make sense, you know.” She moved then, reaching back to set her can of Dr. Pepper on the end table. With her hand free, it found my cheek and I turned my head to press a kiss to her palm.

“No,” I agreed, shutting my eyes when her fingers laced through my hair, her short nails dragging across my scalp. I was losing control but I managed to croak out another question. “But is that something you want to complicate the relationship with?”

“Are we still talking about the story?” she returned.

We weren’t and she knew it. I opened my eyes to find her face inches from mine, her pink lips parted invitingly. I moved in one fluid motion, discarding the binder on the other side of the couch and pulling Katniss onto my lap easily. All conversation ceased.

Our mouths found each other with crushing pressure, igniting a flame that started where our lips met and quickly spread uncontrollably.

I don’t know how long we were twisted together on that couch. It may have been minutes, it may have been hours. I was too busy reveling in that same Dr. Pepper sweetness on her tongue, too focused on sliding my hand underneath her shirt and across her warm belly to pay attention to the seconds ticking by. My fingers slipped under the bottom edge of her bra, the tips skimming over the small swell of her breast as I pushed the material up, leaving her bare under her shirt.

“That night you told me what you looked like,” I said, growling when her fingers tightened in my hair. “I thought about doing this to you.” She let out a sigh in response to my confession. “Do you like that? Knowing I thought about you like this that night?”

A nod was all she gave me.

My hand covered her breast, just like I imagined it would. I squeezed it and flicked my thumb over the hard nipple. “Take off your shirt.”
My scalp throbbed where her fists had been pulling my hair, and I still felt their absence when those fists were gone, curling around the fabric of her t-shirt immediately, shucking it off quickly.

I hummed my admiration and drifted my hands up her stomach and with her breasts now fully exposed to me, I took one in each hand and squeezed. She arched her back, pressing the soft mounds further into my eager grip and offering up her stiff, dusky nipples. My mouth closed around one, flicking my tongue over the knot repeatedly and then sucking, pulling it with me as I moved my head back, letting it go with a loud pop.

Then, just like I thought about that night she first described herself to me, I blew a cool rush of air against the moist nipple. Her hands moved back through my hair, her fingers linking together at the base of my skull as she shuddered and dropped her head down to rest her forehead against mine.

“I’m going to stand up,” I told her, pressing a kiss to her cheek. “Wrap your legs around me and hold on tight.”

She clung to me, her tight nipples pressing into my chest, while I rose from the couch and sidestepped my drawings. I steered us both to the stairs and up to my bedroom and kissed her again once we’d crossed the threshold and came to a stop at the side of my bed.

“Let go,” I coaxed, smoothing my hands down her denim covered thighs.

I felt her body go slack against mine and I held her arms as she slid down slowly onto my bed. Once she was there, I reached for her bra, freeing it from where it’d bunched up near her throat and then stripped my own shirt off.

I climbed onto my bed, forcing Katniss back as I crawled toward her on my knees until her head was flush with a pillow.

“Lie back,” I hummed, dropping my hands to her hips. “I want to take your pants off.”

Her eyes watched my fingers closely, gripping the band of her jeans, popping the button with ease, and then pulling.

“Ass up,” I told her. She wiggled her hips and rose off the bed, allowing me to pull the garment down her her legs, taking her socks off with them.

As I moved to take my pants off, Katniss sat up, settling into a cross-legged position in front of me as her small hand covered mine on top of my belt.

“Let me,” she said, undoing the buckle without hesitation while I knelt in front of her. She pushed my pants down, making sure to run her hands over my ass as she lowered them further.

I kicked them off with urgency and crawled back over to her. She uncurled her body as I approached, going back to lying down when my body covered hers and pressed her into the mattress. All that separated us from each other then was our underwear. I snaked my hand down between us, pressing the palm of my hand against the damp heat between her legs.

“I want you to rub your clit,” I murmured, running two fingers over her cloth covered folds, eliciting a moan. “Will you do that for me?”

“What are you going to do for me?” she challenged, quirking an eyebrow in question.

I smiled. “Watch at my hand.”
Curious eyes found the hand I'd raised and she followed it, watching as I moved it down my stomach and to the front of my boxer briefs. I gripped my cock, smoothing the fabric of my underwear down while I rubbed myself. Her eyes grew wide, hungry, and followed every stroke.

"Take off your underwear," I said. "Then I’ll take off mine."

Her eyes didn’t leave my hand once, and I didn’t deny her a show. While she shimmied out of her underwear, I continued to stroke myself, squeezing my shaft so the shape and length of my cock could easily be seen, even letting a moan slip out when the fabric brushed the sensitive head.

I waited until her hand had slipped between her legs to stop. You couldn’t have pulled her eyes away from my hand if you tried. I tugged at my boxer briefs, dragging the soft texture down my length with agonizing slowness, and with one final move, my cock sprang free. I gave myself a few more strokes and then tilted my head toward Katniss’ hand pressed against her middle.

"Show me how you make yourself come," I instructed, continuing to stroke myself. "Then I want to taste you."

I sat back on my haunches, giving her full view of my cock as two fingers slid between her folds, gathering her arousal before she settled on her clit. Her focus stayed on my erection the entire time. She worked herself into panting moans, her toes curling the closer she got to orgasm. In return, I smoothed my hand up and down my length slowly, with short, calculated strokes, denying myself full pleasure so I wouldn’t come before I could be inside of her.

Her moans were growing louder, breathes coming out in shaking gasps. She clamped her mouth shut, fighting to stifle herself.

"Don’t," I said gruffly, letting go of my cock long enough to lean forward and take her nipple into my mouth, nipping and sucking on it just hard enough to make her whimper before making my way up to her mouth. After taking her bottom lip between my teeth and ending it with a kiss, I continued. "I want to hear you."

Her mouth fell open then, allowing the melody of her pleasure to drift through the room. And soon, her breaths were short and deep, ending on an exhale that held the shuddering cries of her orgasm.

I watched her come down from it, watched her breasts rise and fall, rapidly at first but then slower and slower as the air returned to her lungs. It was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. She was the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen. And I had to taste her.

My hand brushed against her knee, getting her attention.

"May I?" I asked, moving my eyes to her center.

She hummed her affirmation, spreading her legs for me as I slid down onto my stomach and settled in front of her. I started with one finger, dipping it into her. So wet. A second finger moved to spread her folds and I wasted no time sliding my tongue through her wet heat, being careful not to hit her clit too soon. All I needed at that moment was to taste her sweetness, get an idea of what it’d be like to make her come with my mouth. I could’ve stayed there all night, lapping at her wetness, kissing her swollen lips, and slowly working her into another orgasm. But my cock was throbbing, aching to be inside of her.

I forced myself to move from between her legs and reached over to my bedside table, pulling open the drawer to find a condom. Once the foil packet was secured in my fingers I showed it to her, noting her nod of approval. I tore the packet open and rolled the condom down my length,
pinching the tip as I moved toward her on my knees and dropped down, holding myself up with my arms on each side of her.

My lips pressed against hers and I positioned the head of my cock at her entrance, pushing my hips forward and advancing slowly. Her hands clutched my sides hard as I slid in further and she stretched to accommodate me until I was completely buried inside of her. I watched her to see how to proceed. I pulled back out slowly, then back in a little faster, again and again, letting her get used to the feeling of my cock inside her.

Soon her legs were wrapped around my waist, her signal that she wanted more.

“Deeper?” I asked, pressing my forehead to hers.

“Mmmhmmmm.” She locked her ankles together and drew me to her, egging me on.

I started driving into her repeatedly then, dropping down onto my forearms so I could dip my head down to reach her breast. I kissed and sucked on the soft mound, feeling it bounce against my mouth as I plunged into her.

“I want to feel you come,” I panted into her skin, feeling powerless against the captivating sounds of our skin slapping together and the gentle pops and sucks my mouth made against her breast. “What do you need me to do?”

“Rub my clit,” she moaned, those fingers burying themselves into my hair again as she arched her back. My tongue found her nipple and I gave it a hard suck before releasing it with a gasp when Katniss deliberately clenched her walls around my cock.

Removing one hand from the bed, I shifted all of my weight onto one side in order to keep myself from falling on top of her and found her clit. I rubbed her in the same hurried pace of my thrusts, not stopping until she forced me down on top of her, her arms enveloping my torso, fingers digging into my shoulder blades. She shouted my name and her walls spasmed around my cock, pulsing with each wave her orgasm.

I eased my hand out from between us and slowed my pace, feeling my balls tighten and that familiar prickling gathering in my lower abdomen. If my body pressed against Katniss’ was hurting her, she didn’t say it. I continued to move inside of her with languid strokes, damp skin unsticking when I withdrew only to be fused together again when I plunged back in. She was staring right into my eyes when I came and it was impossible not to feel completely exposed to her as I pulsed inside her and filled the condom. I would have told her my deepest secrets if she’d asked for them. She’d gotten a glimpse at all of me that night, even if neither one of us realized it at the time.

After a few minutes, I rolled off of her and slid out of bed, taking an extra second to find my footing on legs that were still locked in post-coital paralysis. As I pulled the condom from my softening cock, I caught Katniss staring.

“I’m just going to watch you for a little bit,” she said from where she was lying, one arm propped against the side of her head.

“Have fun watching me throw away a condom,” I laughed, walking across the room and depositing the prophylactic into the trash can.

She didn’t get to look long. As soon as the condom was out of my fingers I jumped back onto the bed, scooping her up in my arms and pulling her against my chest.

“You should stay here tonight,” I offered. I had no real reason for suggesting it besides wanting to
keep her naked as long as possible, but she seemed to be considering it. “We could order a pizza, watch a movie.”

Have sex a few more times.

“I suppose I could,” she replied, tapping her chin. “This bed is pretty comfortable, and my shirt is all the way downstairs.”

“Perfect,” I smiled, reaching for the TV remote on the bedside table. “You just have to tell me what you like on your pizza.”

*****

“I’m surprised you didn’t try to add another sex scene in here,” I said, flipping to the next page in Katniss’ binder.

The girl and boy were sent back into the games. An arena full of water, surrounded by jungle, where each hour brought new horrors upon them and their allies. That night, she shared the last moments of the second part of the story with me. A rare, quiet moment where the girl and boy found themselves alone on the beach had them speaking candidly, telling each other a few truths about their feelings, and ending it with a kiss that for once wasn’t for the cameras that surrounded them. A kiss that escalated to the point where the girl really felt a need to carry it further, until a strike of lightning drove them apart and an allie found them tangled together.

Katniss sat next to me on my bed, my robe pulled over her naked body. In front of her was a stack of my drawings. Everything I’d completed up to that point. She flipped through them slowly, examining every last detail. It was a routine that’d become familiar since she first stayed over a few weeks earlier.

I stayed under the covers, not at all eager to put my clothes back on. We were nowhere near done with each other. The night was still young, our bodies only temporarily sated. She’d used her mouth on me for the first time that night, and even now I could still feel her warm lips enveloping me if I close my eyes and let my mind go back to that moment. She was thorough, even when she was still unfamiliar with my cock. Holding the underside of my shaft flat against her palm while she kissed every inch of me and wet my cock with her tongue. I could’ve come from that alone, but it was her mouth and hands together that did me in. She bobbed up and down on my erection and used those small hands in a way that made it impossible to tell where her mouth ended and her hands began, and when I came, her eyes would not leave mine as I pumped into her mouth.

I’d needed a break from that mouth, just for a moment. That’s when she told me she’d finished the second part of the story and ran from the room to get her bag, swiping my robe off the hook on the door as she went.

“If it wasn’t the right time before, it definitely isn’t the right time now,” she said. She noticed me narrow my eyes at her. “Just keep reading, you’ll see what I mean.” She rose from the bed and made for the bathroom, leaving me alone in bed reading.

“You’re evil!” I called out, settling back against my headboard. “What did you do?!”

Her muffled voice floated from under the door. “Just keep reading!”

The last moments of the second book were even more of a blur than the first. Chaos, confusion, and the arena exploding. The culprit? The girl shooting an electrified arrow straight into the force field surrounding them. In the end, the girl woke to find that in the chaos, not only had the boy been captured by the very government that forced them back into the area in the first place, but
they bombed her home, leveling it beyond recognition.

With Katniss back in bed with me, her body curled into mine and her head resting on my shoulder, I sat staring at the final page of the binder, trying to find something to say. She’d bowled me over.

“She does have feelings for the boy,” I finally managed to say.

“Of course she does,” she muttered, closing the binder and pulling it from my hands. “Always did, really.”

“Yeah?” I asked, falling into our familiar routine of talking about our own relationship through the characters.

“She’s not the best when it comes to emotions,” she said. “But the feelings were always there, long before she ever wanted to acknowledge them. But she knows now.”

“And just when she’s getting ready to admit it, he’s taken from her,” I said. “You really are evil.”

“Well I couldn’t exactly make it easy for them,” she laughed, lazily dragging her fingers across my stomach and watching it roll under her touch. “They still have the third part of the story to get through.”

“Well I still think you’re evil. First he has to have his leg amputated, then he hits a forcefield and dies, and now this? You’re evil.” I said, smiling as I rolled over and pinning her to the mattress. I gave her a kiss that left her panting and moved downward, untying the robe as I got between her thighs. I wanted to take it slow, tease her with kisses along her thighs, bury my nose in her curls, and when I’d made her wait long enough, lick every inch of her I could reach.

My phone had other plans.

The ringing sliced through the room, effectively killing the moment. I shot up and swiped the phone from the bedside table to see Madge’s name on the screen. I rolled my eyes, knowing better than to ignore her. She’d just keep calling and when she gave that up, she’d just come over. I answered the call.

“Hello, Madge,” I deadpanned, turning to Katniss, who was already giving me a look, and whispering, “Literary agent.”

“Do you have someone there with you Peeta?”

“Yeah, I’m a little busy right now,” I huffed.

“A little busy not writing,” she deduced. “Is this why I haven’t gotten any pages from you in weeks?”

“That’d be why,” I said shortly. “I’m working on it though.”

A lie. I hadn’t been working on my book at all, too busy working with Katniss to care about it. Too busy sleeping with Katniss. Waking up next to Katniss. Living in a bubble where nothing mattered but Katniss. And I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

“I still need pages, Romeo,” Madge said, a scolding, motherly tone to her voice.

“And you’ll have them by the end of the week.”
I didn’t bother saying goodbye. I ended the call and flung my phone across the bed.

“Are you trying to write a book?” Katniss asked.

“Writing?” I laughed. “Not really. It’s more like staring at a blank page and a taunting, blinking cursor. Madge is hounding me for more pages, but I don’t have any for her.”

“Maybe I should go,” Katniss said, turning away from me and pulling my robe closed. She looked guilty, like she knew that she was the cause of my writer’s block. “Give you a little time to get some work done on your own stuff for a change. I’ve been demanding so much of your time.”

“Hey, hey,” I said reaching out, to keep her from leaving the bed. “This isn’t your fault. I’m the one that isn’t doing the writing. I’m just blocked right now, and writing that story isn’t where my mind wants to be right now.”

“Still,” she argued, sad eyes darting away from my face. “You should’ve told me.”

I could hear the hurt in her voice no matter how badly she tried to cover it up.

“It’s not important,” I lied.

“You getting published isn’t important?” She scoffed. “I refuse to feel responsible for you not getting any writing done.”

“You’re not.” Another lie.

“You need some space to work right now, Peeta. And I need to get the third part of my story started, anyway.” She ran her hand from my cheek down to my chest, settling there. “We’ve been spending too much time together.”

“You running out on me?” I managed to give the question a joking tone, but it really did feel like something was ending. And in a way, it was. I just didn’t have the forethought to see any of it coming.

“Never,” she assured me, pressing a hand to my cheek. “Just a breather for a few weeks so we can get some work done. This is a good break. Productive.”

“A few weeks?” I gaped.

“It’s a healthy break,” she said. “I don’t want your agent coming after me when you don’t send her pages.”

I could’ve killed Madge for calling when she did. She hadn’t even met Katniss and she was already driving her away. She wasn’t too kind to Delly, either.

“Fine. Two weeks from today--”

“Three.”

“Fine,” I repeated with a grumble. “Three weeks from today, let me take you out to dinner. A proper date.”

“I’d like that,” she said with a nod, rising from the bed and retrieving her clothes. “We’ll make a celebration of it. Celebrate you getting your lazy ass to work.”

She dodged the pillow I tossed at her.
“Call me in a week?” I asked, already feeling empty without her in my bed. “Check in?”

“Only if you’re getting work done,” she said. “If you’re not, I won’t call.”

“I knew it,” I gasped, shooting up from the bed dramatically. “You are evil.”

She approached me slowly, a sadness in her eyes that she couldn’t hide any better than the disappointment over me not telling her I was writing a book. And I knew then that no matter what she said, no matter how much sense it made in the end, there was still a punishment for not being open with her.

“Get to work,” she whispered, leaning down and giving me a kiss far too chaste for me to live on for three weeks. And then she left me alone with my thoughts and a half written book I had no desire to finish.

*****

My stomach twisted at the sight of Katniss’ blue Chevy Cruze slowing to a stop in front of my house. She took her time getting out, finally exiting the car a few minutes later, her now trademark backpack in one hand, full and puffing with what was likely her green binder and clothing more comfortable than the white blouse and sleek, black pants she had on.

Grinning until my face hurt, I threw the front door open as soon as she approached, wrapping my fingers around her wrists and pulling her in. Not in paranoia this time, but because of the panging need to have her body near me.

Small arms wrapped around my neck like a vice, and I knew she felt that need, too. She curled her legs up behind her when I lifted her from the ground. Three weeks. Not long enough to forget, but more than long enough to make us feel insane with want.

“I should’ve made the reservations for later,” I murmured into her hair, which for once wasn’t tied back and was left to hang freely over her shoulders. “I’m not ready to let go of you, yet.”

Soft lips pressed hard against my temple. “We have all night,” she whispered, a soft sigh of desire vibrating her throat as my hands ran up and down her back.

We left the house hand in hand, fingers laced together tightly, as if the act of letting go would make one of us disappear. Even as I opened my car door for her and was forced to drop that hand, it quickly found the small of her back, guiding her forward before she slipped inside.

It was after I’d closed the car door and looked up that I noticed the Red Audi parked up the street again. Anger bubbled deep within my gut instantly. I was tired of the games, tired of the harassment, and most of all, tired of nothing being done about it. I smirked in the direction of the car and shook my head, taking even strides around my car to the driver’s side, and before I pulled open the door and got in, I sent a wave in the car’s direction.

I refused to let her ruin my first night with Katniss in weeks. Our first time out together as a couple. For all I cared, she could’ve sat there pathetically in her car all night while I was gone. It wasn’t me that was wasting my time.

I brought her to my favorite restaurant. A little Italian place that I still swear was the best kept secret in District 12. We were seated in a far corner of the room, just as I’d requested, a spot where I could watch everyone. A spot where I could ensure that nobody was secretly watching me.

“Should I ask you the obvious question yet?” Katniss said, setting her glass of Riesling down on the table.
“Which question is that?” I raised my eyebrows in question. She may have thought what she was about to ask was obvious, but it wasn’t to me.

“Did you send any pages to your…” she fluttered her hand in the air like she was trying to pull the next words out of thin air. “What was her name again? Mae?”

“Madge?” I laughed, stealing a sip of my water. “She got her pages. Now she’ll stop hounding me until she needs more.”

“You’re really writing a book.” She sounded far away, her voice dreamy and tranquil. “Promise you’ll remember me when you reach the top of the bestseller list?”

“I have no plans to forget you,” I said, reaching out across the table and taking her hand. “I don’t think I could if I tried.”

After that, I banned the topic of writing for the duration of our dinner. I had no interest in ending our evening prematurely by working myself into a panic attack over what I hadn’t been telling her. I wanted to tell her the truth. The whole truth. That I was in love with her and I’d been keeping a lot from her that she had a right to know. But I’d made that mistake before when I told Delly and I was only trying to convince myself I was in love with her. I trusted her more than anyone I’d ever known and she never gave me any reason to believe she’d hang my secrets over my head like a guillotine if I broke things off with her. But she was out there, the loose cannon who knew all of my secrets.

I didn’t start feeling calm again until we’d gotten back to my place and I had Katniss naked in my lap, her wandering hands touching every bit of my skin she could reach as she rode me to completion on my couch.

“Thank you.”

“Hmm?” I’d barely heard her over the low hum of the television.

She laid with her feet in my lap on the couch, her clothes freshly changed, the old garments strewn across my living room floor.

“Thank you for all the work you’ve been doing with my story,” she elaborated. “I don’t think I realized when I had the idea for it that it’d be so much work.”

“It’s been fun, though,” I told her. “Helping you bring everything to life.”

She flashed me a lazy smile. “I brought what I have written for the last part.”

“And you haven’t let me read it yet?” I asked, feigning offense.

“I didn’t want to interrupt our night together by making you read my story,” she said.

“I’ll always want to read it,” I said. “As long as you’re offering.”

“Yeah?” she sat up then, like she’d been waiting all night to tell me she had more for me to read.

“Yeah,” I smiled. “Go get it.”

She watched TV as I read her new pages, but from time to time I’d catch her glancing over at me, trying to gauge my reactions. That last part started off a lot slower than the others. The girl, by that point, was so consumed by PTSD she could barely function and in an entirely new setting. An hidden, underground city that was planning a revolution for years that they needed her to be the
face of. The boy, who’d been taken captive, was scarce in the pages she’d written in our time apart and his absence was making the girl even more despondent. The only person she seemed to be able to connect with anymore was her young sister. The one who was originally called to participate in the games that the girl volunteered for.

When I finished reading I closed the binder, clearing my throat to get Katniss’ attention.

“Well?” she asked, sitting up. “Is it ok so far? I know it’s different and a little slower than the other but--”

“It’s good,” I assured her. “I like the slower pace. And I like that you understand that after the horrors that girl has seen, she wouldn’t be ok.”

I stopped myself there. But by then it was like she knew when there was something about the story that I wasn’t addressing.

“There’s more though,” she said, searching my face. “You want to say something else. What is it?”

“You know the little sister is going to have to die, right?” I blurted it out quickly, prepared for her to ask me why, but the question never came.

I felt her legs go rigid in my lap, saw her face pale as soon as the question was out of my mouth and I knew without her having to tell me otherwise.

“You were going to keep her alive…” I said, almost cringing. “You had no plans to kill--”

“Stop!” She jumped off the couch so quickly you would’ve thought someone had set it on fire. “Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that again!”

I held my hands up in front of me. “I’m sorry,” I pleaded as I stood, taking a stride over to where she stood with her arms crossed over her chest. “I was just trying to help…”

“That’s the problem!” She yelled, turning away from me. “You keep trying to change my story when I didn’t ask you for help! I’m the one writing this story!”

“That’s the problem!” She yelled, turning away from me. “You keep trying to change my story when I didn’t ask you for help! I’m the one writing this story!”

“Then why’d you write a sex scene for me?” I shot back.

“That was for us,” she mumbled.

“For us,” I repeated, the words feeling like cotton in my mouth. And all at once I couldn’t take it anymore. Her back and forth, her refusal to accept my suggests. It’d worn thin. “Because the only way you could talk about how you felt about me was through the characters. You wanted to have sex with me so you had to write it in the story to tell me. Like we hadn’t almost been there all on our own.”

“It was easier that way!” She screamed, her voice taking on an unnatural pitch.

“I was right here, Katniss!” I motioned between us with my hands. “I wanted to hear it from you, not some character in your story!”

“But you had no problem fucking me that night, did you?” She spit. “Or keeping me in your bed for as long as you could.”

“I want you any way I can have you,” I shot back. “Even if I have to learn how you feel through some story you’re writing. I was hoping that one day you’d be able to talk to me. Is it a crime that
I just want to be with you? Be near you? Isn’t that what happens when you love someone?”

I saw her freeze at my words, but her eyes never soften. They stayed hard and cold.

“If you loved me you wouldn’t try to change my story.”

I threw my hands in the air. “You wanted me to read your story and then you asked me what I thought, but I’m not allowed to give you any constructive, honest feedback? If that’s the case then you should’ve told me about that rule ahead of time. Don’t give me any suggestions just kiss my ass.”

“I listened to your feedback!” She seethed. “Don’t act like I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you listened and then argued with me about it,” I scoffed. “The only time you took my feedback into account was when you knew I’d caught you writing something to appease me.”

“Some things I just can’t change,” she answered, her voice smaller than it’d been since the whole fight started.

“It’s just a story, Katniss.” I moved around to face her, settling my hands down on her shoulders gently. “It’s just a character death.”

“I said STOP!” she was hyperventilating then, trashing out from under my hands and pacing the room, whispering, “She won’t die again. I won’t let her.”

“Katniss?”

The second my hand touched her arm she was swinging at me. Her scream was ear piercing, and I felt my heart breaking. Not for me. For her. I had no idea what was going on and I had no idea how to help her. Instead, I stood stock still as she tore through the living room, picking up her clothes and binder and stuffing them into her bag.

“You probably shouldn’t be driving right no--”

“Don’t,” she hissed, a fresh batch of tears gathering in her eyes. “Don’t you ever say a word to me about my sister again.”

“Your sister? Katniss, wait!” I jogged for the door, but she was already outside. “Katniss!”

“Leave me alone, Peeta!” she stormed toward her car, throwing open the door. “I don’t need your help anymore.”

And then she was gone.

I started calling her the minute her car sped off down the street. I knew she wouldn’t answer then, but I hoped that if she saw I was calling, eventually she’d pick up and talk to me.

After a week with no answer, I started adding texts and offline instant messages into the mix. Calling once before texting or IM’ing my pleas for her to pick up her phone a little while later. She ignored both.

In a final, desperate moment, two weeks after she stormed out of my house, I contemplated going to see her at work. But having been on the receiving end of similar ambushes, I decided that was the worst possible way to try to get Katniss to talk to me.

My comments hurt her more than I realized at the time. And not just the one about the sister; her
sister. I kept repeating her words. *Don’t you ever say a word to me about my sister again.* It still didn’t make sense. Not once had she mentioned a sister to me. Then again, she hadn’t told me much of anything about her at all, just as I hadn’t told her much about myself.

All at once the entire thing felt foolish and I wondered then how long we would’ve tried to carry on as normal, pretending that the fact that we didn’t even know each other wouldn’t at some point standing in our way. And I knew then that I had to do something to understand.

It felt intrusive, even hypocritical considering how fiercely I wanted my privacy, but I had to know. And a quick Google search for *Everdeen Obituary “Katniss”* gave me an answer within seconds.

The online archive of District 12’s local newspaper gave me all of the information I was looking for. Primrose Everdeen, thirteen years old, killed in an accident just before Christmas 2005, when Katniss was seventeen years old.

Seventeen. The same age as the girl going into the final leg of the story she was writing. Something clicked at that moment. Her name. Katniss. I’d seen it before, I knew it the moment she’d said it to me, but until that night, I hadn’t stopped long enough to think about where I’d seen it before. A second Google search, this time for *Sagittaria*, brought me right to it. I’d seen it the night I looked up the meaning of her screen name, hidden between other common names of a plant I’d only half-heartedly read about.

She’d been writing about herself the entire time. Weaving a story flecked with so many aspects of her personal life that it was impossible to decide which parts were real and which were not real. A story I was never supposed to be part of. That’s why her creation of the boy came later. An unexpected twist in a story she was writing for her sister. To save her sister. That’s what she meant when she told me that writing was cathartic for her. Her idea of playing God had become so real to her that she couldn’t possibly think about that outside of the world she’d created, her sister was still gone. And it was me that reminded her of that harsh truth.

I had to call her again. Apologize for what I’d said in my ignorance, even if I had to apologize to the empty void of her voicemail. I’d leave her alone after that and let her decide if she wanted to accept the apology.

The shrill ring of my phone and Madge’s name on the display stopped me from making that call. My anger drove me to answer the call, fully planning to give Madge an earful.

“Peeta…”

“Now it *not* the time, Madge,” I barked, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I’ll send you your damn pages in the morning.”

“Peeta!” Madge’s usual, impervious tone had been replaced by something more urgent. “We have a situation.”

“What is it, Madge?”

“You need to go to thehobchatter.com immediately,” she muttered. “And stay calm.”

I kept her on the line, cradling my phone between my ear and shoulder while I pulled up the webpage. Immediately, I saw the situation.

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*P. MATTHEWS UNMASKED! AN ANONYMOUS SOURCE HAS REVEALED THAT DISTRICT 12 RESIDENT PEETA MELLARK HAS BEEN PENNING NOVELS UNDER*
A few details was an understatement. It was all there. Every last bit of my life that I’d tried to bury was on display right in front of my eyes.

Peeta Mellark, 28, was born in Schenectady, NY. The third son of Randal and Faye Mellark. Randal, an ambitious baker, gave his all to the betterment of the bakery passed down to him from his father. His untimely death when Peeta was just 5 years old left Faye to raise three young boys alone, until a routine traffic stop when Peeta was 10 landed Faye in prison for driving under the influence. The case brought against her revealed a history of alcohol abuse and the boys were taken from her, placing Peeta and his two older brothers in the care of Randal’s brother William and his wife Deborah.

Then, at just 22 years old, Peeta checked himself into rehab, his own alcohol abuse threatening to end his life before it even started.

“It’s sad to think about,” our source said. “To know that Peeta battles the same demon his mother still does. That’s why he moved to District 12. He wanted to run away from that devil on his shoulder that constantly told him to take a drink.”

It was then that Peeta started writing his first novel, “Escaping Time” which spent a year on the New York Times’ Best Seller List and peaked at number 1 just a month after its release.

I couldn’t read anymore. I hung up the phone, throwing it onto my desk with a loud bang and jumped from my chair. There was only one person who could’ve repeated word for word what I told them about why I moved to District 12. Delly Cartwright.

The house was suddenly too bright. Running from room to room, I pulled all the blinds shut, stopping at my front window to peer outside. Of course, Delly’s red Audi was nowhere to be found. She didn’t need to monitor my movements anymore. She’d done what she was threatening to do from the moment I broke up with her. Waving to her the night I took Katniss out was a mistake. I knew that, but at the time I didn’t care.

I felt it bubbling through my veins. That urge to run to the liquor store. The one I’d sat outside for hours at a time when I first moved to District 12, willing myself to stay away, reminding myself what I’d overcome just to be able to live on my own. But that time I wasn’t planning to just sit outside and look at the store. I was planning on going in and buying the first bottle of Whiskey my eyes landed on. The only thing that saved me from it was my refusal to leave the house. News traveled fast in town and they’d be on me in seconds if I dared show my face.

It was a blessing in disguise, even if it didn’t feel like it then. Not when the one thing I’d tried to avoid, the privacy I’d tried to protect, had turn to dust in my hands.

My phone rang again and I bounded for it, grabbing it and getting ready to hurl it at the wall when I saw her name. Katniss.

“Hello?” My voice came out feeble. Defeated.

“When were you planning on telling me?”

Her words pricked at my skin and I responded appropriately.

“Right around the time you told me that you were using real people as pawns in your story,” I snapped. Her silence only made me angrier. “Do you have a best friend over there that you’re
kissing when you leave my bed, too?”

“Leave Gale out of this,” she mumbled.

“Gale? So he has a name.” I laughed, but there was no humor in it. “You with him, too?”

“Don’t you dare turn this around on me,” she seethed. “That’s not true and you know it.”

“Do I?” I paced the room, grabbing a fist full of my hair as I moved. “You’ve blurred the lines between what’s real and not real so completely that I’m not sure which is which anymore.”

“We aren’t talking about me!” she bellowed. “We’re talking about you not having the balls to tell me who you were, even after we…”

“After we what, Katniss?” I prodded. “Wasthere a we? Was that even real?”

“Yes,” she choked out, her voice a mere whisper compared to the shouts just seconds before. “We were the most real thing to come out of this whole mess.”

My anger had reached fever pitch, the need for a drink making me think of nothing but the smooth burn behind a long pull straight from the bottle.

“So real that we couldn’t even tell each other the truth about ourselves,” I sneered, disgusted with the both of us. I hung up the phone, chucking it across the room at last. It sailed through the air, shattering as soon as it hit the wall.

With my phone broken, I didn’t have to hear the incessant ringing while people tried to get in touch with me. I was sure that the exposé was everywhere by that time, picked up by every news outlet across the country. Not having to hear that ringing was a good thing. I wouldn’t hear their anger, their apologies and the pep talks where they’d tell me, “This is a good thing, Peeta! You’ll just have to adjust to your life being in the spotlight!”

While I read the piece written about me, I’d heard Madge mutter something like, “Don’t worry. We can handle this.” Maybe she could handle it, but I couldn’t. She’d been waiting for something like that to happen while I did everything I could to ensure it didn’t.

It was easier for others to say those things. They weren’t the ones left exposed. They wouldn’t be the ones being scrutinized. Not even Madge. That’d be me. Every move I made. And now that the world knew, everyone would be waiting for me to fall off the wagon, and the craving for a drink was growing by the minute, along with my anger.

I’d been a little too harsh with Katniss. Who hadn’t used aspects of their own life when writing before? I certainly wasn’t innocent of it. It was a very good story and it was ruined. Because of me.

The exposé was still idling on my computer screen, my name, my real name, Peeta Mellark, in large, white print on a black background. It was taunting me, daring me to read it again. Instead, I exited out of the page and pulled up the Google Drive account I shared with Katniss. Suddenly I ached for it to be that simple again. I dove into the earliest documents she’d uploaded, the first ones she offered to anyone willing to illustrated her story.

It was just Katniss and her friend then. Gale, she’d said his name was. I wondered if she’d planned for the story to be about the two of them before she met me. Was it supposed to be the two of them curled up together on that train?

My heart felt like it’d stopped when I reached the scene where she added me. A paragraph I
hadn’t seen before, so simple and raw, jumped out at me.

“I watch him as he makes his way towards the stage. Medium height, stocky build, ashy blond hair that falls in waves over his forehead. The shock of the moment is registering on his face, you can see his struggle to remain emotionless, but his blue eyes show the alarm I’ve seen so often in prey.”

She’d been writing something that day in Starbucks. I’d watched her face contort back and forth from a frown to a scowl as I walked toward her and I knew right away that small addition to a scene I’d already read was the passage she was concentrating so hard on.

It was all from Katniss’ heart. Everything. Her confusion over her feelings for me, the intimacy, the tension between her and Gale, because I was never supposed to come along and ruin some sort of unspoken assumption there was about them being together.

I’d fit in it perfectly when I’d come and flipped her plans on its head. Any confusion she had, any changes she wanted to make, she wrote them into the story as a way to cope with it all and for the first time I saw the story for what it was originally intended to be -- Katniss’ attempt at staving off the tragic death of her sister that she loved more than life itself. And I’d gotten angry with her for it.

All at once I felt like an asshole for it. If there was ever any chance of her forgiving me for not telling her who I really was, I’d blown it when I’d found her weakness and pounced on it. My feet carried me through the house without thought and soon I was furiously tearing through a closet and grabbing at an oversized coat and dark knit hat that were far too warm to wear, and slapping a pair of sunglasses over my face before fleeing my house, getting in my car, and peeling off towards town.

It was like I was on autopilot, making that familiar drive to the shopping plaza I’d spent so much time in when I first moved to District 12. Back then, I’d sit there for hours, staring at the liquor store, wanting so badly to go in and buy every bottle of whiskey they had. I always managed to talk myself out of it, knowing that even one sip of the stuff would send me straight into a relapse.

I didn’t even try to talk myself out of it that day. I was out of my car and in the liquor store without so much as a contemplation over whether or not it would be a good idea. I didn’t care. Two bottles. I told myself that’s all I needed. There was a moment that I tried to convince myself that it was just to take the edge off, but I knew that two bottles would be more than enough to get blackout drunk. My preferred state before rehab.

Armed with two bottles of the first Kentucky Straight Rye I could find, I swiftly moved to the counter, keeping my head down and paying with cash so nobody would see my name on any of my cards. It was doubtful anyone in that store had heard anything about Peeta Mellark, but the minute you let yourself get too comfortable is the minute it’s taken from you, so I was careful. And they knew better than to card me.

I tore out of the store with my mumbled thank you still hanging in the air and darted across the parking lot, head down, focusing on nothing but the pounding of my feet against the pavement. I was stopped by a small figured crashing straight into my chest, and in my haste to steady myself and ensure they didn’t fall, my bag slipped from my grasp, hitting the ground and shattering instantly.

“You should watch where you’re going!” I gritted out, watching the spot of amber liquid grow larger around my feet. I was already planning on turning back around and going right back into the store when I heard that voice.
“Maybe you should watch where you’re walking!”

“Katniss?”

Sharp features contorted and she took a step closer, looking between me and the broken bottles on the ground. I saw her eyes widen, realizing it was me under all the heavy clothing. It was a look that I never wanted to see again. One of shock, one of pity. It seemed to snap me out of the trance I was in. Immediately I realized how badly I’d been sweating, how sharp and shallow my breathing had been, and the frantic beating of my heart threatening to pounding straight out of my chest.

“What are you doing here?” I muttered, doing my best to avoid her merciful gaze.

“Picking up my friend,” she returned innocently. “He works with me.”

I looked up at the large Gander Mountain sign to my left like it was the first time I’d seen it. Like I hadn’t spent many wasted hours in that parking lot staring at all the shops that surrounded the liquor store.

She didn’t have to ask me what I was doing there. The broken glass that littered the ground told her. But she still stared as though she was waiting for me to say something. Maybe she wanted an apology for what I’d said to her, I don’t know. But the longer we stood there the more nervous I became, shifting my weight anxiously from leg to leg.

“Go to your car,” she said tersely. “Wait for me. Don’t leave. I’ll be right back.”

We parted ways. Me, to my car to hunker down and hide and her, into the store. I don’t know how long she was gone, but before I knew it she was opening the passenger side door, throwing her backpack down on the floor, and sliding in next to me.

“Alright,” she breathed, turning to me. “I gave Gale my car keys and told him to drive it home. I’m going with you.”

I said nothing. Did nothing. All I could hear was his name. Her voice saying his name. It bounced from side to side in my mind. And I didn’t have to say a word for her to know.

“He knows there’s nothing between him and I,” she said. “He knows about you. Well… he knows I’ve been seeing someone, but we’re still friends, Peeta. That isn’t going to change.”

And still, I said nothing.

“Were you planning on drinking that whiskey?” she asked. It was a ridiculous question with an obvious answer, but I could tell she was desperate for me to speak.

“Well I wasn’t planning to put it on display in my non-existent liquor cabinet,” I returned.

“There, Katniss. I responded. Are you happy now?”

She nodded, as if she was saying yes to my inner monologue.

“So what do we do about this?” She pressed, swiping the sunglasses from my face. “Do you go to meetings? Do you call someone?”

“There is no we in this,” I snapped, grabbing my sunglasses from her and pushing them back onto my face. “This is my issue, and I don’t need you here pitying me.”
“Why don’t you stop treating me like I did something wrong here?” she snapped. “I’m here because I want to be. Not because I pity you or feel guilty for anything I’ve done. I won’t apologize for that. Don’t you dare try to sit there and tell me you haven’t put yourself into any of your books. I’ve read them. I know you’d be lying to me. Now…” she turned to me and slipped the sunglasses from my face a second time. Hard, gray eyes stared me down. “Is there someone you can call?”

“I can’t call anyone,” I said honestly. “I broke my phone.”

But she wasn’t giving up that easily.

“Then use mine,” she grumbled, fishing it from her pocket and throwing it on my lap. “Do you know the number?”

Of course I did. I’ll never forget those ten digits. I’d used them many times during my recovery. Those hours whittled away in that very parking lot, begging for help. For someone to take away the cravings that were so strong in me. And I was about to make the same call again. Nodding, I grabbed Katniss’ phone and dialed the number from memory.

“Hello?”

I sighed in relief when I heard his voice. That gruff and weathered tone that had at one time been the only thing tethering me to sobriety.

“Haymitch…” I said it like a plea. The way a person would when there was a gun to their head and they begged for their life to be spared.

“Peeta,” Haymitch returned coolly. “I’ve been expecting your call.”

There was a meeting at eight at the old Methodist church, he’d told me. Same place as it’d been when I attended regularly. The words floated around in my mind somewhere, but I hung on tightest to what he said before he ended the call. “Remember, you’re anonymous there. No matter what you might think.”

I knew what he meant, of course, because anyone could see the pictures posted and know immediately that it was me. But there, it didn’t matter. To everyone there, I was just like them and what I did outside of those minutes wasn’t something they cared about.

“Let’s go to the meeting,” Katniss urged, motioning to the steering wheel with her head.

I shook my head. “You can’t attend unless you’re in the program.”

“Then I’ll wait in the car for you,” she said. I opened my mouth to object, but she was talking before I could get a word out. “And don’t say anything about pity again. If I pitied you I would have let you go back into that liquor store and wished you a good life. I don’t pity you. I’m pissed off at you and I don’t like you very much right now, but I don’t pity you and I don’t want to watch you do this.”

I could have told her that she didn’t have to then. Kicked her out of my car and gone back into the store, but I didn’t. I believed her when she said she didn’t pity me. So I drove, instead. Silently. With a very ansty Katniss who kept taking deep breaths, like she was prepping to say something, sitting next to me.

I, on the other hand, refused to speak. Not until I cleared my head. The craving to take a drink was mingling too well with my anger and my words would’ve come out bitter and hurtful. I would’ve sounded like my mother. I refused to speak to Katniss that way again.
“Are you sure you want to wait out here?” I asked, killing the ignition and dropping my keys into Katniss’ waiting hand. “It might be a while.”

She shrugged like it was no big deal. “Sure. I’ll just play some games on my phone while I wait.”

“Alright..” Who was this beautiful, strange woman? “Well, there’s a car charger in the center console. Feel free to charge the phone if you need to.”

Haymitch was waiting for me by the door, his eyes softening in relief, something he only did if he was truly scared, when he noticed me. I did not hesitate to walk straight into his outstretched arms.

“How do you need to talk tonight?” he asked.

All I could manage was a nod, but his arm was around me. A fatherly gesture that I was unfamiliar with until I’d met Haymitch. My uncle wasn’t an affectionate man, and I can’t remember if my father ever was. But soon I was up at the front of the room, looking down at the dozens of faces that showed the same expression I’d seen on my own face many times. Bleary eyes that hid horrors and the invisible demons perched on their shoulders, telling them they’d never succeed there.

My story started off with me telling them that all it takes is one day for those cravings to return. I’d been sober for seven years before that day but those years didn’t matter. Anyone can feel that craving. As harsh as it may have sounded coming out of my mouth, it may have been the most helpful thing those people could’ve heard. It told them they weren’t damaged if they had a craving and a craving was not a relapse. I thought far too many times I’d failed when I had a craving, and I didn’t want those people in that room with me that night to ever think that about themselves.

I told them how running into Katniss had probably have saved my life. It’d only happened an hour ago, but I was already thinking of the horrible things that could’ve happened if I got a taste of that whiskey I’d bought.

“Thank you for picking up your phone,” I said to Haymitch once the meeting had finished. “I broke mine.”

Haymitch nodded knowingly and slapped my shoulder. “You have my number,” he said. That gravelly tone of his, one that I hated at one point, was like home to me that night. “Use it. Seven years, Peeta. Do you have a support system in place?”

The thought of Katniss sitting in my car waiting for me had me nodding.

“Yeah,” I said, grabbing Haymitch’s outstretched hand and giving it a rough shake. “Yeah, I think I do.”

She smiled at me when I got back into the car, and just seeing those lips quirked up again made me feel like maybe I could actually do it. Maybe I could get through it.

“Do you want to go somewhere and talk?” I asked, pulling out of the church’s parking lot. “Get a coffee or some food?”

“You can’t go anywhere right now. I saw how anxious it made you to even stand in a parking lot with a parka and winter hat on,” she said, shaking her head. “Speaking of which, will you take that shit off now?”

She swiped the knit hat from my head, frowning at the sweaty mass of curls flattened to my head.
I shrugged at her sheepishly and allowed her to help me out of my coat.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” I said.

“Well I think we can both agree that you weren’t making very good decisions at the time,” she replied, throwing the offending garments in the back seat. “Where are we going?”

“I was just going to drive around for a little bit. Talk in here, since we can’t go anywhere,” I said, suddenly realizing that she may not want to drive around with me at all. “Unless you wanted me to take you home?”

“Is your place suddenly off limits?”

“No.” I paused, both dumbfounded and grateful that she wanted to go home with me. “But I didn’t want to assume…”

“Let’s go.”

My gratitude that she’d wanted to go home with me turned into full on dependency when I pulled onto my street and noticed the crowd gathered outside of my house. Some were taking pictures, others sat on the tree lawn just waiting. Waiting for me.

“We’ll go through the back,” I said. “Nobody can get in without unlocking the gate. Unless they want trespassing charges filed against them.”

“Are you sure?” Katniss asked, looking behind her as I took a sharp turn and back tracked.

“Positive,” I assured her. “But I want to put my coat and hat back on.”

She helped me slip my arm into the coat and shoved the hat over my head while I navigated the back road that led to the back driveway. Other than the addition I’d made to keep my backyard off limits, my home was modest. No gated communities, nothing to really keep me from people and at the time I preferred it that way, I had no interest in moving, because then Delly would have won. She would have scared me right out of the first home I’d ever bought and severed the roots I’d laid down that, for the first time, I wanted to keep buried there. But not even my own stubbornness could save me anymore.

Nobody noticed us sneak into the house. A few looked as we walked up the sidewalk, but with my coat and hat on, nobody cared. And they didn’t know Katniss, so they didn’t have any reason to connect her to me at all.

I wouldn’t turn on a single light in the house. If they saw a light flicker, they’d know I was home. Instead, we stood in the dark kitchen, unsure of what to do. I felt the knit hat being swiped from my head again and then small fingers raking through the sweat damp hair, trying to put some life back into my curls as I slipped out of my coat and left it lying in a heap on the floor.

“Come on,” she whispered, taking my hand.

We climbed the stairs to my bedroom without another word, soundlessly stripping down to our underwear when we got there. I got into bed first, patting the empty space next to me and seeing Katniss hesitate. She was worried, I could tell. About what, I wasn’t sure, but after a second of swaying in her spot she relented and slipped into bed next to me.

I pulled the covers up over us like a cocoon, our safe haven from the outside world. At least for the night.
“Why didn’t you just tell me what happened to your sister?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. “I never would’ve suggested what I did.”

“IT never quite felt like the right time to tell you,” she said. “I’d put so much emphasis on building up our story that I had no idea how to tell you. I didn’t want you to think less of my storytelling if you knew why I was writing it.”

“No,” I shook my head, scooting closer to her. “I never would have thought that. Every writer has done that at one time. Written about their life but changing things just enough so the outcome would be different. You didn’t do anything millions of others haven’t done before. It was cathartic for you, you told me that. I just wish I’d known why.”

“I just thought that I could save her this time,” she said sadly. Reluctantly, I opened my arms to her, sighing in relief when she slid herself over to meet them. “I thought if I wrote it in a different way I could keep her from the fire, have more control over where she went. Maybe it would have made up for me not telling her not to go. Not with those kids.”

“Where’d she go?” I asked gently.

“To the train tracks,” she started, her voice low and pained. “They liked the rush of the wind when the trains rode by. It was something a lot of the kids did, but our father always said never to go there.”

“And you dad,” I said, recalling the story. “Is he?”

“Gone?” Katniss nodded. “When I was eleven. But there was nothing I could do to save him. Not even through writing. His story is set in stone. I thought it would be different for her.”

“What happened to your sister that day?” I asked. “Unless you don’t want to talk about it…”

“No,” Katniss breathed, her chest rising. “I have to. They were at the tracks, waiting on the small path of grass between the tracks and the brush when the trains came by. A gas tanker derailed, right in front of them and they couldn’t get away in time. None of them. A few were crushed, but Prim managed to run far enough to avoid it, but it exploded and there was no way she would have been able to outrun it. It swallowed her whole.”

“I’m so sorry, Katniss.” I kissed her cheek, wet from tears, knowing that there were about a dozen things I was really apologizing for, and she knew it.

“So am I.” I nodded, letting her know that was enough for me. “Why didn’t you want any recognition for your writing?”

“Fame only brings trouble,” I said. “Too much temptation, too many ways for my mother to sneak back into my life and try to benefit from my success. I just wanted to write. I wanted to tell stories and allow people to get lost in the worlds I created, the same way I did. I didn’t want the fame that’d come with that. I still don’t, but now that it’s out there, I’m going to have to figure out how to deal with it.”

“How long have you been in recovery?” Her hand smoothed down my chest, stopped near my navel.

“Seven years,” I said. “I took my first drink at fifteen and by twenty-two I was being rushed to the hospital to have my stomach pumped. The day after I got out of there I went to rehab, and the day I left there I came here and started writing under my pen name, hell bent on staying anonymous.”

“And it was working for you,” she said. I nodded. “How many people know?”
“Not many. Madge, my brothers, my therapist, my AA sponsor, and…”

“The one that revealed who you were.”

“Delly,” I confirmed. “My ex. I ended things with her two years ago.”

“Why do you think she’d say something now?” she asked.

“You.” I said it so simply, like it didn’t even matter. But it did. It mattered a lot. “She’s not above sitting outside the house waiting.”

“Was she the cause of those altercations you mentioned?” I nodded. “Why not get a restraining order?”

I laughed. “I’ve lost count of how many times I tried to do that, but her father is a judge. A well respected one District 12. All of my cases were dismissed.”

“That’s crooked,” Katniss said, almost angrily.

“Of course it’s crooked,” I agreed. “But everyone covered for him.”

“Should I be worried?”

“No, no. She wouldn’t do anything to you. It’s me she wants to ruin.”

“Why?”

“I was never really in love with her,” I started, dragging a hand through my hair. “She was in love with me, though. We were friends. She was one of the first people I met when I moved here and she felt safe. We were together for five years before I realized that was the only reason I was with her and I broke things off.”

“It can be confusing,” Katniss said. “To understand if you love someone or if you just feel an obligation to stick with them.”

“Now that I look back on it I can see that I wasn’t in love,” I said. “The way I loved her was nothing like the way I love you.”

“You felt platonic love for her,” Katniss said, like she understood. And I’m sure she did. I refused to say his name in my bedroom, but she’d felt that way about a friend too before. “Because she was your friend.”

“Yes. And now I just want her to leave me alone,” I muttered. “She reacted so badly to my honesty and now I don’t know what to do. How to get her to stop.”

“Shhh,” Katniss cooed, smoothing her hand down my cheek. “We’ll worry about that later. Let’s not think about it now.”

“You’re going to help me?” I asked. “You don’t even like me.”

“I don’t have to like you to love you,” she murmured.

Her words hit me like brick.

“You love me?” I whispered.
“Yes,” Katniss said resolutely. Like she’d decided it and it had to be known. “Which is crazy considering I hardly know you.”

“T’m sorry you fell in love with a mess like me,” I said.

“We’re all a mess,” she said. “I’m not sorry that I love you. But I do want you to be ok. And that means more meetings, and a plan to deal with all of this. No more hiding.”

I nodded. “No more hiding,” I repeated, pressing my lips to hers. “I can do that.”

“And I’m not going anywhere this time,” she promised. “You’re stuck with me now.”

*****

I woke hours later with Katniss in my arms, her face content, her breathing even. But on the bedside table next to me, I noticed it. The green binder. It went everywhere with her, so I wasn’t surprised to see it, just surprised that she’d somehow found it in her to write after what I’d said to her. I grabbed it on my way down to my office and read it by the dim light of my computer screen.

The sister died anyway, despite how badly Katniss wanted to save her. I felt a pang of guilt, knowing that it was because of me that the story took the turn Katniss never wanted it to. But in the margin of the page I noticed her slanted scrawl.

“Her story is set in stone, too.”

The boy and the girl -- Katniss and Peeta -- found each other again. Over time, they grew back together, falling in love all over again and during a powerful evening, where the nightmares plagued the girl, she found comfort in the boys arms. And with his lips. The sex scene was there, but vague. Told in a way that made it clear what was happening, but leaving out all of the details, and when they finished, the boy asked the girl if she loved him, and finally, she told him that she did.

A smile rose to my face as I thought of Katniss upstairs asleep in my bed. Turning to my computer, I opened up a fresh Word document, not caring about the book I should’ve been writing, or the deadlines looming ever closer. I set my fingers down on the keyboard, and started typing…

“Life would be much simpler if we received a warning before it changed forever. An alarm to alert us when that first seemingly random event of Chaos Theory occurred. That way we’d know to prepare for its butterfly effect. If only humans had that luxury. Maybe I would’ve been able to prepare myself. For her.”

THE END

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