Kindergarten

by Hey_You

Summary

Katniss and Peeta meet in kindergarten and develop a relationship that will last a life time. Modern day AU. Rated for teens initially, although the rating will change as the story develops. This work contains depictions of child abuse which may be difficult for some to read.

Notes

I decided to repost this due to requests. Thanks for reading and enjoy!
The Hunger Games characters are the property of Suzanne Collins.
Katniss bit her lip as she approached the room. She clung tightly to her father's hand, she didn't like new experiences, and kindergarten was most definitely a new experience for her. Her parents had been preparing her all summer for school, and at first she was excited. Now, however, she saw it as a colossal waste of time as she already knew everything they planned to teach her.

"Daddy?" The dark-haired, olive-skinned man looked down at his beautiful little daughter, his pride and joy. "I'm pretty sure I don't need kindergarten." She made a face as she said the word. "I know my alphabet, I can sing it for you." And so she did. In spite of the fact that she was barely past the toddler stage, she carried the tune perfectly and enunciated every letter.

Her father smiled at her. "You will learn more than your letters, Kitten."

"I know my numbers to one hundred, and I can write my letters and numbers, and my name. My whole name," she emphasized that because apparently other kindergartners were hard pressed to write even their first names. Her teacher had said so when she visited their house two weeks ago. "And I can read my one and two books. I know a lot about plants and animals, and ... ."

But her father was unmoved. "Kitten, you have to go to kindergarten, and I'm sure you will make a lot of friends, sweetheart. At the word "friends," Katniss wrinkled her nose.

"I don't need friends, Daddy. I have you and Mommy, and Primmy." At that moment, her father realized just how sheltered his little girl was and knew that it was time for her to begin exploring a new world.

"Now Kitten, Daddy and Mommy love you very much." He hugged her close. "We would never have you do anything that wasn't good for you, would we?" She shook her head "no" and he continued, "School will be good for you, you'll see. Now, I want you to be a big girl and go inside and meet your teacher." She nodded. She would not allow the tears to spill as she hugged her dad goodbye. Over his shoulder, she noticed a little boy with blonde hair standing with his father.

Reluctantly, she moved inside the classroom. "Good morning, Miss Katniss. Your cubby is right here and you can put your sweater and backpack in there, then find a place at one of the tables." Katniss nodded, resigned that kindergarten was her fate. After putting her stuff away, she moved to one of the tables with tiny chairs. She refused to sit down as she watched the door.

The little blonde boy was inside and Miss Trinket was greeting him. Evidently, his name was Mr. Peeta. He too had a backpack, but a jacket instead of a sweater and a baseball cap that when he removed it, revealed a wild mass of curls. Self-consciously, he pressed a hand to his head, and turned around to walk toward the tables. He was wearing blue shorts and a white polo shirt, and had a nasty scrape on one knee.

Peeta moved to the table and stood opposite Katniss. He put his arms on the table and leaned forward. He was intrigued by the dark-haired girl with two braids. She was wearing a red plaid dress and had eyes that looked like silvery pools. He was mesmerized by her.

Katniss, on the other hand, was stubbornly attempting to ignore the little boy whose hair reminded her of a dandelion. Not the yellow kind, but rather the white ones ready to blow away in the wind. His hair was white and his curls were messily askew on top his head. He was hard to ignore though. His eyes were the color of the sky, and his skin was lightly tanned but slightly pink as
well. Almost like his mother scrubbed him too hard at bath time.

"Whatcha doin'?" He asked.

"Cutting paper," Katniss said, offering as little information as possible. She wondered though, how this boy was so obtuse that he couldn't tell what she was doing simply by looking. Paper, scissors, cutting. Simple.

"I can see that," he laughed. "But why?"

Katniss eyed him now. He sure was nosy. "Why is a different question than what. But I'm cutting paper because I want to."

The answer satisfied Peeta, who decided that he liked this stubborn, outspoken little girl with the braids. "Peeta Mellark," he said as he held out his hand for her to shake. It was such an unexpected gesture, that Katniss was taken aback.

Finally, she reached forward, "Katniss Everdeen," and shook his hand before going back to her paper cutting. He continued to watch her carefully.

"You sure are awful pretty."

Katniss rolled her eyes. "Awful and pretty don't belong in the same sentence do they? I mean something that is, awful is not good. So you said, I'm bad pretty."

Peeta was unsure whether Katniss was right or not about the use of "awful" in his sentence. His father used it all the time when describing something good. "This roll is awful good." "My car is awful shiny." He decided not to contradict her.

"Is that your real hair," she blurted out.

Self-consciously he moved his hand to his head and smoothed the curls. His hair was his achilles heel. "Yes," he said a little indignantly. "Is your hair real?" He wasn't being rude, he just figured it was a fair question given that she asked him first.

She narrowed her eyes at him, "Yes!"

"Katniss, is that where you want to sit?" Miss Trinket questioned. Katniss shrugged but Miss Trinket took it as an affirmative and placed a piece of colored tape with Katniss's name on it to mark her place. Upon seeing that, Peeta moved quickly to the chair exactly opposite of Katniss.

"I will sit here, Miss Trinket." Katniss did not acknowledge his choice.

More kids entered the room, and Peeta was happy to know that he had staked his claim, but now worried that someone else might stake their claim on her friendship. A little girl with blonde hair and blue eyes wandered over and invited her to play dolls, but Katniss wrinkled her nose before politely telling her, "no thank you."

Katniss now had quite a pile of small pieces of paper in front of her, and had yet to sit down. The classroom was filling up, and several little boys had stopped to try to interest Peeta in playing with the many little boy toys around the room.

"My dad is a baker," Peeta said, trying to make conversation with the quiet girl.
Katniss wasn't sure she wanted to talk to him, but felt compelled to tout her own father's job. "My
dad is a superintendant." She knew she mispronounced it and defiantly tossed her braids daring
Peeta to correct her. But he didn't, so she continued. "It's a very important job in the mines."

"Wow," said Peeta, duly impressed. "Katniss?" She looked up from her work. "Will you be my
friend?"

She considered him for several seconds before shrugging dramatically, "I suppose. But you know,
you'll probably find someone you like more, so you know, I won't be upset if you find another
friend."

He immediately exhaled and then shook his head, "Oh no, Katniss, you will be my friend
forever."

So it seemed. That first day set the tone for the rest of the year. At lunch, Peeta opened his bag to
discover a sandwich, small bag of chips and a brownie. When he pulled out the brownie he knew
two things: 1.) His dad packed his lunch because his mom would never include a brownie; and,
2.) He was going to share his brownie with Katniss.

Her lunch was plain and simple: a bologna sandwich, crackers and an orange. Katniss's eyes
widened in surprise when she saw the brownie. She couldn't suppress a little jealousy. Both
devoured their sandwiches quickly. Peeta traded his chips for her crackers. Then he reached for
the brownie.

"Would you like a bite?" he asked with a lopsided grin.

She shook her head no quickly. "I'm not supposed to take anything from strangers."

Peeta's guffaw was quite loud and gained the attention of kids at surrounding tables, one of them
being his regular playmate, Delly Cartwright. "I'm not a stranger, Katniss, I'm your friend,
remember?" With that he passed the brownie across to her. She took a bite and handed it back.
His next action, shocked her to her core. He took a bite right where she had taken her bite. Never
before had she seen anyone so derelict of his own personal safety to risk someone else's germs.
She didn't say anything.

Katniss did however, hear a slight gasp from a neighboring table. She didn't bother to look, but if
she would have, she would have noticed Delly looking at them with an angry little scowl.
Together, they finished the brownie. Katniss carefully biting a fresh spot, and Peeta following her
with a bite in the same place.

After lunch, they played together, sliding down the slide, swinging on the swings, and crossing
the monkey bars. Peeta was impressed by her strength and her abilities, but more impressed by the
light pink underwear that were exposed while she crossed the bars.

Nap time followed. Peeta got out his hand-me-down, blue and red nap mat, and folded it out.
Katniss, who by now realized that she might as well get used to the idea of a friend, spread out her
brand new dark green rug right next to his mat. He grinned his lop-sided grin at her, and she
smiled back.

An hour later, she sang an old mountain song in music, and noticed that her new friend listened
more intently than the rest of her classmates. When it was over, he enthusiastically clapped his
hands together.
"Bye, Peeta," said Katniss as they prepared to go their separate ways. Her mother was there with her little sister to pick her up. Peeta's older brothers were there to walk him home.

"Bye, Katniss! See you tomorrow!" He waved enthusiastically in her direction before heading for home.
"Hi, Katniss," Peeta shouted, as he walked to his cubby, his free arm making a wide sweeping arc in way of a greeting.

"Hello, Peeta," she greeted from her position at the end of their table. Once again, she held a scissors in her hand and a piece of paper in the other.

Peeta struggled to free a large tablet from his backpack before joining her. Today, he wore blue jeans and a red and white striped t-shirt. Katniss wore a light blue dress.

He set the tablet down in front of him and reached for the communal crayons in the center of table. Peeta took care to select an orange and green from the mix, sorting through until he found the right shade of green.

"What's that?" questioned Katniss, nodding to his tablet.

"My sketchbook," Peeta answered, glancing at the scissors and paper in her hands.

He sat down and carefully began outlining a kitten on his paper. In spite of herself, Katniss sat down on her chair, forgetting her cutting.

After several minutes, Peeta had a good likeness of a kitten with green eyes. "You're a good drawer," she complimented.

"Thanks," Peeta mumbled, running a hand through his hair. Obviously, compliments were not his "thing."

Miss Trinket stood to the side and watched her first arrivals. Unlike most of her students, Katniss and Peeta were very studious and independent. They were well mannered and seemed quite mature for their age.

Just then Storm Cato hustled into the room, flinging his backpack in the general direction of his cubby. Right on his heels was Dallas Marvel, the banker's son and worst hellion around. Dallas spent the day terrorizing most of the little girls as he sang a rhyme and lifted their skirts. Two days into the school year, and Miss Trinket was already making plans to separate the boys the following year.

Storm made his way around the room, arms spread wide and making loud airplane noises. Meanwhile, Dallas was already in his mini-terrorist mood, grabbing little girls and tickling their sides. "Dallas," she began to admonish just as little Julia Glimmer made a tearful entrance. Her attention drawn to Julia, Miss Trinket missed the initial part of Dallas's assault, but most definitely caught the middle and end result.
"I see London, I see France," he called out, and Miss Trinket knew what's coming just not whose. "I see Catpiss's underpants." If Dallas Marvel assumed his actions were funny, he should have considered his would-be victim first. Before he even had a chance to pull up her skirt, Katniss whirled on him, hand balled in a fist and hit him squarely in the mouth. It would be the last time Dallas ever uttered that little rhyme again at least with a full set of teeth.

He quickly grabbed his mouth as blood poured between his fingers, a shocked expression on his face. His teeth were already loose. So loose, in fact, that was another favorite way he had of terrorizing the little girls, by flicking his teeth outward with his tongue. Well, he won't be doing that anymore either, thought Effie with a smirk.

"You listen here you dumb boy," Katniss spit out, "If you ever do that again, I will personally ....," but she didn't finish because Peeta had already seen his lady in distress and was marching around the corner of the table with both hands balled into fists.

"I've got this," he said stepping in between Katniss and Dallas. "How would you like it if I pulled down your pants and showed everyone your underwear?" he started, getting right in Dallas's face. Even with his hair on end, Peeta was a good two inches shorter than the other boy, but he did not back down. Dallas gaped at him. "You have one chance," he held up his stubby little index finger, "to apologize to her and promise never to do that again."

Peeta stepped to the side, his little hands gripping his hips as he looked expectantly at Dallas. "Th-thorry," Dallas blurted. "I-I-I won't do it again." He fled to the little bathroom in the corner with Miss Trinket following. She knew that Katniss deserved some sort of ... reward, she grinned to herself, deciding not to pursue any type of punishment for Katniss punching him in the mouth; although, she would talk to her later about her aggressive behavior.

Later, during circle time, Katniss and Peeta sat quietly beside each other. Miss Trinket was handing out jobs for the week, and she made a quick decision. The situation this morning had elevated Katniss into a class leader, and Peeta had earned their respect by his peaceful intervention.

"Now boys and girls, the final two jobs are the most important in the classroom ... line leaders and milk retrievers for the first two weeks of school: Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mellark. Dallas openly scoffed their appointment until Peeta glanced in his direction. He closed his mouth.

The morning passed quickly and soon it was snack time. Miss Trinket quickly took down the milk counts and relayed them to Katniss and Peeta. They moved to the hallway and waited for the remaining five rooms to send their milk retrievers out. The paraprofessional shepherded them down the hallway with Katniss and Peeta taking the lead. Part way, Peeta extended his hand to Katniss and she took it.

His brow was furrowed in concentration and when they arrived at the cooler, Katniss looked at him expectantly as they grabbed a crate. "Do you remember the count?"

He nodded quickly, "Six, two percent; five skim; eight chocolate. I asked for two percent." Katniss nodded as she counted out the proper number of cartons for each type.

"Me too."

"Tomorrow, I might try chocolate," Peeta said as she counted the brown cartons, and nodded. "I don't get chocolate milk too often."
Katniss looked up quickly, "Me either."

Once the milk was counted, Peeta and Katniss stood together waiting for the other kids to finish their counting. At one point, they exchanged an exasperated look. Retrieving milk was an important job and their silly counterparts couldn't even remember the simple counts!

Finally, they headed back and everyone already had their snacks on the table. The milk was distributed, and Katniss sat down. Peeta moved to his lunch bag and pulled out a small container. "My dad sent this for us to share," he popped the plastic cover off revealing a roll with white frosting. "It's a raspberry danish. I'm not big enough yet to eat a whole one, so we can split it." Without further adieu, he broke the roll in half with his fingers, and handed the larger half to her.

Yes, Katniss knew she could get used to having a friend.

Later, just as nap time was about to begin, Peeta looked around and noticed that Darius Johnson was laying on the cold tile without the benefit of a mat. He looked at Katniss's rug, and made a quick decision, folding up his own mat, and walking to where Darius lay. "Here, you can borrow my mat."

"What'll you do?" Darius questioned.

"I'll share with Katniss," Peeta said with certainty and in complete innocence.

Miss Trinket observed the whole incident but said nothing. Then, she watched as Peeta moved back toward Katniss and bent low and whispered to her. She didn't hesitate as she flipped to her side and made her way to the edge of her rug. Peeta quickly lay down behind her and pressed his chest to her back. Miss Trinket's brows shot to her hairline as she realized that two, five-year-olds were essentially spooning in her classroom.

Later, years later in fact, Peeta and Katniss would laugh and tease one another about this early spooning experience while they were now spooning for real. At the time, though, it was purely an innocent act. The little boy's heart was comforted that there was someone in his life who shared even her brand new nap time rug with him.

Miss Trinket's face colored and she wondered how she would explain the incident if an administrator walked in, but she couldn't help but think there was something special about their innocent friendship. In spite of the fact that Katniss obviously needed no protection, Peeta was there for her.

During gym, Katniss's limits of protectiveness regarding Peeta were tested. Dallas Marvel had been comforted that morning. His teeth were found and wrapped up for the tooth fairy, and Miss Trinket had suggested in a "nice way" that he might want to tell his parents that it his teeth were merely ready to come out instead of being knocked out. Dallas had eyed her suspiciously until she mentioned that it was, after all, a girl who knocked them out. At that, he nodded vigorously and agreed that losing his teeth naturally was favorable to losing them at the hands of a girl.

Dallas, however, was still a bit peeved at Peeta. So, when the instructor ordered them into a circle for a round of "Duck, Duck, Goose," Dallas decided to seek his revenge, and did not have to wait long to do it. Second round, little Madge Undersee chose Peeta, and he leapt to his feet and was running fast around the circle, when suddenly he fell hard to the floor. His chin hit the boards and split wide open, and to make matters worse, he bit his tongue. There was way more blood than when Dallas's teeth were knocked out.
While the others stood around in horror as Peeta lay there fighting tears, Katniss at his side rubbing his back, Dallas snickered. His mirth did not go unnoticed by Katniss, who was asked to help Peeta back to the nurse’s office. They met Miss Trinket outside the room, and she was stunned by Peeta’s appearance. "It was Dallas, Miss Trinket. He tripped Peeta and made him fall.” They continued on to the nurse’s office, and Peeta’s dad was called to take him to the ER for stitches. She held his hand while they waited for his dad.

Katniss arrived back in class just as they were about to go out for their final recess. Katniss Everdeen did not shrink from her laughing, bullying classmate who asked how her "little girlfriend" was doing. Once outside, she watched as Dallas and Storm Cato took off for the section of the playground reserved for older kids.

Even after reviewing the tapes, no one knew exactly how it happened but Katniss managed to separate the two boys. Soon the paraprofessional came running when she heard panicked screams coming from the large jungle gym apparatus. Dallas had somehow made it into the large hoop like contraption at the top of the pole, and was crying and screaming as Katniss stood at the bottom.

When they finally retrieved him, he was not hurt but his hysterics continued until Katniss walked over and whispered to him. "You will never hurt Peeta again, will you." It was a statement, not a question. He nodded his head quickly. Then even quieter, "I guess we know who the little girl is now, don't we?" She walked away. He immediately swallowed his tears and would not say how exactly he found himself perched precariously eight feet above the playground but it had something to with bows and arrows and ... .

For many years, Dallas made good on his promise not to hurt Peeta again, but all good things must come to an end. But that's a story for another day.

That afternoon, as they left the school, Katniss felt oddly lonely as she didn't have Peeta to say goodbye to.
Katniss stood anxiously at the table waiting for Peeta the next day. She looked at the clock, and while she could not tell time yet, she knew it was later than usual for his arrival. She was worried.

Storm Cato had arrived and offered her a wide berth as he walked to the toys and played in the most subdued manner to date. There was no sign of Dallas Marvel yet. She glanced around studying the other children knowing that Peeta was not among them but trying to gauge how soon class would start.

Just then Peeta appeared in the doorway, and Katniss could not contain herself. In an odd show of emotion, she ran to him and engulfed him in a huge hug. He hugged her back, and then she withdrew to see the bandage on his chin and the bruise under his lip.

"Now I see why you didn't want to stay at home, Peeta," his father said gently, smiling at him.

Peeta peeked at his dad and gave him a lopsided grin before he took Katniss's hand and walked to his cubby. The other kids scrambled around asking all kinds of questions which he brushed off as he made his way to his chair at their table. Eventually, the cut would heal and years later, Katniss would kiss it remembering the first mishap of their long relationship.

Miss Trinket moved over and spoke in low tones with Peeta's father. She told him how protective Katniss and Peeta were of each other, and how Katniss had managed to put some fear in Dallas on the playground and she had a feeling that the boy wouldn't bother Peeta again.

Dallas's father arrived with Dallas in tow mid-morning. He asked to speak to Miss Trinket and demanded to know what Katniss had done to his son the day before. Dallas was not speaking, and Katniss just shrugged as if the detail was lost to her forever.

It was a meeker, milder Dallas in class from that day forward. Days passed into weeks and soon Halloween was upon them.

"Now class, next Friday, we will have our Halloween party, and you can invite one parent and your younger siblings. Everyone can bring a costume," Miss Trinket told the circle of kids.

Katniss was excited because her mom was already working on her costume. She was going to be Katwoman, and she couldn't wait. During snack time she asked Peeta what he would be for Halloween.

Peeta shrugged, hoping that Katniss would drop it. Just the night before, his mother came home with a costume cackling like Cruella DeVille, "Look Peeta, I found you a perfect costume to go with that wild mess of hair. You're going to be a lamb! It's perfect!" His mother never did him any favors so when he looked at the plastic bag, his heart sunk. Pictured wearing the costume was a little girl. It was a girl's costume. He was a boy! Not a girl!

"What's wrong, Peeta?" Katniss asked attuned to her little friend's demeanor. He moved close and
cupped his hand and whispered, "Mother got me a girl's costume." Some might have laughed, but she could see the distress on his face.

She bit her lip in concentration and was quiet most of the day until the afternoon recess when the solution came to her. "Peeta, would you like to be Batman for Halloween?" Peeta's eyes lit up at once, but then dimmed after he realized that he could never ask his mother for that. "Don't worry, Peeta, you are going to be Batman this year." He had no reason to doubt her because she had never let him down.

That afternoon as she walked home with her mother, she explained his dilemma and begged her mother to sew a costume for Peeta too. Mrs. Everdeen was a bit reluctant, but then she finally agreed to see what his father might say on Monday.

Instead of her dad walking her to school Monday morning, it was her mom and they waited for Peeta and his father to arrive. It only took a few minutes.

"John," Katniss's mother greeted Mr. Mellark.

"Jen," he greeted her back.

"Katniss mentioned that Peeta might like a Batman costume for Halloween." Mr. Mellark's eyes flitted down to Peeta, who was looking imploringly at him.

"I thought you had a costume, Peeta?"

He scuffed his foot on the tile. "I do, but Dad, it's a girl's costume. I can't wear a girl's costume."

"But your mother wouldn't be happy if I went out and bought you a new costume, Peeta." His tone carried a slight warning with it, and Peeta knew it was lost. He would be a lamb for Halloween.

"John," Mrs. Everdeen reached out her hand and touched it arm. He stiffened, just slightly. "I made Katniss's costume. She's going to be Katwoman."

"With a 'K','" Katniss interjected, "Katwoman with a 'K'." Mr. Mellark couldn't help but smile.

"The pattern came with Batman included," Mr. Mellark raised an eyebrow. "All I need are a few measurements and some gray material. I have plenty of black left over from Katniss's costume and the Batman emblem for his chest. If you are coming to the party on Friday, I could bring it to school with me."

"Yes, I'm coming." He did not want to admit it but his wife would never take time out of her day for it. Not for Peeta. He could see what she was hoping to do, and if truth be told, he wanted to help little Peeta out too. "Okay. You have enough time for this?"

"Yes, it doesn't take me long." He fished in his wallet and handed her thirty dollars. She handed him back a twenty.

"No, Jen. Keep it for your time."

"There's no need."

"Yes, there is."

"All right. Peeta, let's go in and get your measurements, shall we?"
Peeta could hardly believe it and wanted to hug Mrs. Everdeen or his father, but most of all Katniss, so he did. Squeezing her tight. She just laughed at him and hugged him back. Mrs. Everdeen was somewhat shocked by the demonstration because Katniss wouldn't even hug her grandparents.

They walked inside and Mrs. Everdeen checked the tag on his shirt. "Great! You're a 5T, same as Katniss. Staying right with the clothes size for your age group." He grinned because it gave him something more in common with Katniss. She proceeded to measure his head, neck, waist, and then... he flushed with embarrassment as she held the tape measure at his crotch and measured down his leg. He figured it must be okay though since his dad was right there.

The day of the party arrived and Peeta was extra nervous because his mom shoveled the lamb into his backpack. There was something in the way she did it that made Peeta realize that she hoped the other kids would tease him.

His father took his hand and led them to school. His backpack suddenly weighed a ton. There was no Batman costume waiting for him at school. In fact, Katniss never mentioned it but showed him her costume instead. He started to panic a bit, but then decided that it was one day, and he would just have to get used to the idea of being a lamb.

During nap time, though, Mrs. Everdeen arrived. She gasped slightly when she saw Katniss and Peeta curled together on her rug, but decided that it was all innocent. She knelt down, "Peeta, come with me." He was surprised to see her standing there, a coat hanger covered by a garbage bag in one hand.

They went into the little bathroom, and she revealed the costume to him. His little mouth dropped open in amazement. It was the best costume ever. It was a perfect replica, and Mrs. Everdeen had sewn some padding into the chest and front to give the appearance of abs. There was more in the arms to give him extra muscle there as well.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!"

"We need to try it on to make sure it fits." He quickly undressed and she helped him into the suit. It fit perfectly. Tailor-made just for him. She quickly closed the velcro and slipped his shoes back on and covered them with the cloth boots she made, and then fit the mask on. He was indeed, a pint-sized Batman.

They could hear the other kids milling outside the room and knew they were heading down to the larger washrooms to dress for the party. "Wait here, I'm going to get Katniss."

"Oh Peeta, you look incredible!" He grinned and blushed, the color rising and contrasting with the black mask. Peeta stepped out while Katniss dressed and Miss Trinket whistled at him. "My Peeta, you make such a handsome Batman." His cheeks had just recovered from Katniss's compliment, when he felt the color rise once more.

Katniss came out of the bathroom after a few minutes, and Peeta let out a loud breath. "You're the best Katwoman ever," he said, trying to convey he was using a "K" instead of a "C".

"Thanks," she murmured before taking his outstretched hand.

His father arrived a few minutes later with a tray full of cupcakes. No one would ever know the fight he had with his wife just before leaving the bakery. "It was only fair," he reasoned to himself, "we supplied cupcakes for the older boys. We will supply them for Peeta as well."

He gasped in surprise when he saw his little boy running toward him giggling and laughing. He
set the cupcakes down and lifted him above his head. Peeta was the sunniest of his three boys, never failing to smile. But he also had the toughest road with his mother. He was happy to see his little boy so carefree and happy. Peeta wiggled out of his arms, and dragged him by the hand to see Katniss,

"Dad, you remember Katniss," he introduced her and his dad wondered how he could ever forget the beautiful little girl. "She's Katwoman!"

"With a 'K'!" his dad smiled, causing both little ones to beam with pride.

Between the costume and cupcakes, Peeta was the hit of the party, but he never left Katniss's side despite the many offers from the others to play with them. Katniss and Peeta made a Jack-o-lantern together. Both parents laughed as they reached in and pulled out the "guts" as Katniss called the seeds.

Mr. Mellark was quiet as he watched the little ones each take a different flavor of cupcake and then share with one another. His eyes met Jen's and he wondered if she was thinking the same thing. He felt like he was looking into the future when he watched the two little ones interact. He knew instinctively that one way or another Katniss and Peeta would always be part of each other's life.

When the party was over, Peeta reluctantly began to take off the costume that had won him "Best Male Costume - Kindergarten." The female winner was of course, Katniss, and they received their trophies in front of the school.

"He can take the costume home, John."

"I'm afraid not. His mother ... ." She nodded sympathetically.

"What about tonight? What will he wear trick or treating?"

John was embarrassed. "He won't be going. His mother is taking the older two boys to a party, and I have to hand out candy." Peeta bit his lip. He had never gone trick or treating.

"Nonsense! Katniss and I will stop by and pick him up at five this afternoon. I'll bring the costume and he can go trick or treating with us." Peeta's heart beat wildly as he hoped this might finally be the year, and with Katniss too!

His father looked reluctant at first, but then the hopeful look on Peeta's face got to him, and he nodded. There were plenty of places to hide the candy.

And so it was. Peeta joined Katniss trick or treating. It became a tradition for the next several years. He kept the candy hidden, and his mother never knew.

When the night was over, Mrs. Everdeen took the costume from Peeta and hung it at the back of her closet. It remained undisturbed for several years until a teenaged Peeta removed it while helping the Everdeens pack to move to a different house.

He removed it from the plastic bag and ran his fingers across the fake abs. A small smile graced his lips as a wave of nostalgia passed over him. In that moment, he wished that he could go back in time to the little boy super hero of yesteryear and magically transport Katniss through all the tough times.
"Okay, now Peeta's my husband and Katniss, you are our baby," Delly said authoritatively, as the cold November wind chased the remnants of leaves across the playground.

"I don't want to be your baby," Katniss nearly spit in Delly's face.

Peeta eyed Katniss worriedly. Trying to keep two women happy was not easy. In truth though, Peeta was only trying to appease Delly by playing with both her and Katniss during recess. In reality, he would much rather have played with only Katniss at school, but Delly had made such a fuss one day after school, that he really felt like he had no choice.

He exhaled loudly, considered the dilemma and moved forward with his solution. "Both of you can be my wives," he announced calmly and looked between the two of them, seeing nothing of a happy resolution based on their faces.

Delly was, to be honest, mortified by this development, while Katniss looked unimpressed. "I would never share my husband with someone else," said Katniss with finality.

"Well, that's good because, Peeta, you can't have two wives," Delly cut in indignantly. "You have to choose."

Peeta squirmed uncomfortably. In his heart he knew his choice, his only choice, but he hated to hurt anyone and he was sure voicing his preference was going to hurt one of his friends. On the other hand, Delly insisted ... so. "I choose Katniss then because we are going to get married when we grow up." He looked at Katniss with a tiny smile. Delly gasped.

But Katniss's reaction totally caught Peeta off guard, "Peeta, that's nice but I won't ever get married, so I don't want to be your wife." Peeta's eyes filled with tears as he realized that Katniss had rejected his marriage proposal. At the age of five, his life was in shambles. Seeing his reaction though, Katniss plowed forward, "But you and me can live together when we grow up, Peeta." The suggestion was pure innocence and Peeta brightened considerably.

Delly, however, had endured one shock too many during that recess. First she was part of Peeta's "two wife plan," and then she was rejected outright by him. But now ... now, Katniss announced her plans for the future. Delly's face had grown redder and redder during the conversation, and now her anger boiled over. "You can't live together because living together is a sin. I know!"

Katniss looked at Delly and slowly blinked. Peeta could feel the tears about to return because Delly was likely much more up on current sins than he was. Finally, Katniss said, "Who says?" It was not her best comeback but it was enough. Katniss wasn't at all sure why two friends living together would be classified as a sin in anyone's book.

"Says my mother!" Delly retorted with a vengeance. Her parents had pretty strict views of
marriage. "My auntie Mags is living with her boyfriend and my mom always says that she is living in sin." The last bit came off quite stinging.

"Well, we are going to anyway!" Katniss volleyed back as Peeta became just a spectator in the conversation. "Peeta and I are going to live together in a cabin that my father built in the woods, and eat brownies and cupcakes everyday." Peeta liked that plan.

'You can't," replied a resolute Delly.

"Why is living together a sin?" Katniss questioned wanting to get to the bottom of the matter. She knew of grownups living together who were not married, and sin had never been part of the equation.

"Ummm," Delly was stumped and then she remembered something her mother said about her aunt sharing her bed with Ben Brutus before marriage. "Because you are not supposed to share a bed before marriage."

"Oh," Katniss tossed her braids as if the information was inconsequential to their case, "It's okay then. We won't be sharing a bed. Peeta will sleep in the bottom bunk and I will sleep in the top bunk. Just like me and Prim." A few years later, Peeta might find the arrangement frustrating, but for now he was happy with it. He could take the bottom bunk, share brownies and cupcakes, maybe some rolls and cheese buns, with Katniss, and they could live together in a cabin in the woods.

Delly was a bit confused however, wondering if bunk beds were some kind of loophole. She planned to ask her mother and report back to them on whether it was still a sin.

She forgot, however, to ask her mother. And apparently years later, either Peeta and Katniss forgot about the sin part or simply no longer cared, because they did indeed live together without the benefits of bunk beds.

But for now, Peeta's little boy heart was much happier than ever before because Katniss had confirmed what he had hoped: they would have a long and happy future together.

Although, during nap time, Peeta did feel a few butterflies as he laid down beside Katniss on her rug. He had never consciously "sinned" before but now ... he was genuinely worried. Katniss read his fears and turned just enough to whisper over her shoulder, "This is a rug, Peeta, not a bed." Relieved, he wrapped his little arm around her and pulled her close.

Later, the class marched up to music where they were in for a surprise. "Boy and girls, it's nearly Thanksgiving and what comes after Thanksgiving?

"Christmas," the excited children called in unison.

"That's right and that means, it's time to start preparing for the program in December. Each of you will have a part, and all kindergarten classes will perform together. Now, this year's little skit will include Mrs. Claus, who will sing several songs, and of course, a Mr. Claus, who will mainly have to act without speaking. We will have toy soldiers," she pointed to costumes around the room, "trees, elves, ornaments, etcetera."

The kids listened in rapt attention. All the little girls wanted to be Mrs. Claus, with the exception of Katniss, who really couldn't care less about the size of her role. Or, at least that was the impression she wanted to leave. Peeta hoped he would be a toy soldier, but feared because of his size, he would be an elf instead.
"So today, we will have tryouts for the part of Mrs. Claus, and some other roles. Little Clove Maxwell promptly stood up and moved to the front of the room. "Oh, Clove, you want to try out? All right, let's try, 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas.' You know the words, right? She did know the words. In fact, she knew them well. She belted them out at the top of her lungs in her off key voice making some of the kids cringe in response. Peeta wanted to plug his ears but didn't because he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

A half verse in and Mrs. Seeder held up her hand, "Thank you, Clove that was ... so uniquely you." Clove beamed happily feeling that the role of Mrs. Claus was within reach. One by one little girls and boys tried out for the singing roles but Katniss sat in her chair just watching the entire process. Mrs. Seeder knew that the only little girl in kindergarten with the voice to carry the role was Katniss, and was disappointed that she did not try out.

It was nearing the end of class, when Mrs. Seeder noticed Peeta nudge Katniss. A brief whispered conversation took place between them. It appeared that Peeta was urging Katniss to tryout but she seemed reluctant. Finally, Mrs. Seeder intervened, "Katniss, you are the only girl who has not tried out, please step up and sing for us."

Katniss walked to the front, waited for the intro, and then sang the entire song in perfect pitch. When she finished, the kids clapped, but it was little Peeta who was on his feet literally cheering for his friend. Mrs. Seeder smiled and knew immediately that only one little boy would make the perfect counterpart to Katniss's Mrs. Claus.

She cleared her throat, "Okay, boys and girls, I have selected the following children to play these roles: Ornaments: Dallas, Storm, Courtney, Julia, DeMarco and Clove; Trees: Jayden, Thom and Katie; Toy Soldiers: Sam, Santana, Levi, Trish, Kelsey and Bo (Peeta was disappointed because he knew that only elves remained); Elf: Madge, you will be singing." Peeta was shocked that he was not even good enough for a small role. "Katniss, you will be Mrs. Claus." Katniss nodded curtly, and the other little girls looked on with a bit of jealousy. "Finally, Peeta," he looked up wondering what role could possibly be left, "you will be our Santa Claus."

The children gasped in surprise. Even Peeta was shocked but he did his best to hide that fact and follow Katniss's example. He nodded once quickly.

"Now children, your roles are a huge responsibility. Each of you is important to the success of our skit. There will be many other children joining in with some of the roles. Each of you will be expected to put in a lot of time and effort to make this enjoyable for your parents and other family members. Katniss, you have a lot of songs to learn and Peeta, you have learn all your actions, so this will be a lot of work for you two." They nodded gravely.

Inside, Katniss was incredibly relieved. Truth be told, she had wanted the role of Mrs. Claus, but was worried who would play Santa. She didn't want to have to hold any old boy's hand and she was almost sure there would be hand holding as they were, after all, married. Peeta would make a great Santa, she reasoned. He did have rosy cheeks and sparkling blue eyes, and of course, his tummy was a little rounder than some of the boys. But most of all, she just knew he would be a great Santa because he was Peeta.

Peeta, on the other hand, was grateful, that Katniss, if only for the Christmas program, would be his wife.

Mrs. Everdeen was waiting right outside the door for Katniss, as the class walked out. "Mama, guess what? I will be Mrs. Claus for the Christmas program, and Peeta will be Santa." Peeta
smiled crookedly at Mrs. Everdeen, his cheeks turning a beautiful shade of pink.

"Well, I'm very proud of you both!" She hugged Katniss, and on impulse, pulled Peeta close. As she did so, she heard a soft sigh. She didn't realize but Peeta had never been on the receiving end of a hug from a mother figure. He liked it and didn't want to let let go. Through the course of her lifetime, Mrs. Everdeen would have occasion to hug Peeta many more times, each time she always made note of the tiny sigh that accompanied it.
It had started out as a slight urgency but was now approaching emergency levels. Peeta fidgeted. He shifted from one foot to the other. He bounced up and down. He was within a minute of clutching himself desperately.

Katniss noticed her little friend's nervous movements. "What's wrong, Peeta?"

He looked at her in agony. "I have to go potty," he said almost in a squeak.

"Oh," said Katniss, relieved that was all it was, "well go then!"

"But we're all lined up to go to the gym."

"Then you better be quick! You don't want to pee your pants in front of everyone."

His eyes widened. He most certainly did not want to pee his pants in front of everyone. Most especially, he did not want to pee them in front of his mother. She had a tendency to become exceptionally angry when those types of accidents happened.

Peeta eyed Miss Trinket and then bolted for the little bathroom a few feet away. Once inside, however, he discovered that it was nearly impossible to go potty when you were Santa. Desperately, he searched for the fly of his pants.

"Where's Peeta?" questioned Miss Trinket

"He had to pee," Katniss announced, thinking nothing of it because everyone had to pee at some point.

"Peeeeeee-tea," Storm's voice rang out in the ornament section.

Katniss turned quickly, if there was one thing she would not tolerate, it was someone picking on her best friend. "Knock it off," she warned, narrowing her eyes at him. The smile disappeared from his face. Ever since the incident with Dallas Marvel, no one messed with Katniss.

"Miss Trinket?" Peeta's voice sounded panicked. "I need some help."

"Right," said Mrs. Everdeen, knowing immediately what his problem was. She moved to the door and quickly entered. He was surprised to see her. "Peeta, I'm going to release the suspenders and then you will be able to go. When you are done, just call for me." He nodded.
Two minutes later, he was back in line much calmer. Peeta was once again the picture of concentration.

"All right now, class, we are going to go to the gym. Everyone take your places and wait quietly. Now let's all zip our lips before we go into the hallway." Eighteen little hands reached for their mouths and made zipping motions. Peeta reached across to clasp Katniss’s hand, as they led the group to the gym.

The gymnasium was packed with parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings. The bleachers were shoulder-to-shoulder. Mr. Everdeen was in the second row, holding little Primrose on his lap. He pointed Katniss out to the little girl who squealed with delight. Katniss heard the squeal and quickly located them, offering a small wave. After the children were settled, Mrs. Everdeen, who was in charge of costumes, quickly made her way to sit with her family.

Peeta scanned the crowd row by row, looking for his dad. He knew his dad would be there for sure, but his mother might be a no show, not that it mattered to Peeta. Finally, he located them near the top of the bleachers, his dad smiled widely at him and Peeta raised his fingers to wave just before he caught the grimace from his mother and dropped his hand.

Mrs. Seeder took her place to introduce the program. "Without further adieu, 'Christmas with the Claus's,' starring Miss Katniss Everdeen as Mrs. Claus and Peeta Mellark as Santa!" The crowd cheered enthusiastically.

Mr. and Mrs. Everdeen had never been prouder of their little daughter as she tackled each song managing to not only maintain perfect pitch, but never forget a word! It was Peeta, though, who stole the show as he looked with such adoration at Mrs. Claus. Many in the audience wondered how the boy learned to act so well.

Throughout the performance, he reacted perfectly to little Katniss, and she seemed to be singing just to him. When it called for him to rub his belly, he did so with gusto, making the audience laugh out loud. But it was the fact that each time a song ended, Santa was the first to clap that made him so endearing. People were cheering the jubilant little Santa who led the applause for the talented Mrs. Claus.

Only one person sat grimly in the bleachers refusing even a single clap. Midway through the performance, Cynthia Mellark whispered to John. "He's making a fool of himself." Her comment caught him off guard. It was the tone more than the actual words, and fear gripped his heart. He couldn't let this end badly for his little Peeta.

"Mmmmm," he answered struggling to maintain an even tone. "I'm guessing the bakery is going to be busy tomorrow. Good PR for us I think."

Cynthia looked incredulous. "PR? Don't be ridiculous."

"Look at them Cynthia, they love him, and his name is right there in the program, 'Peeta Mellark.' There's only one Mellark family in town and we own the bakery, so ... ."

She looked doubtful but acquiesced. "We'll see." As it turned out, Mr. Mellark was absolutely correct and people streamed through the bakery for days congratulating him on his little son's show stealing performance. Not one of the well wishers left without purchasing something. So good was business following the program, that he found himself baking new batches of most everything all day long just to keep ahead of the demand.

There was only one sour note during the entire program and that was the galloping departure of one of the ornaments as he made his way out of the gym to the nearest restroom.
At the end of the play, Mrs. Claus leaned in and gently pulled down Santa's beard and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Peeta's grin was unmistakable as his cheeks blossomed a brilliant shade of red.

When the program was finished the children posed for photos. Peeta held tight to Katniss's hand as the flashes flickered around him. He smiled broadly. At one point the photographer from the newspaper asked Katniss to recreate the kiss on Peeta's cheek. She blushed slightly but turned and tugged his beard to give her better access to his cheek. His cheeks flamed even a little brighter at the gesture.

A few days later, their photo graced the front page of the newspaper with the cutline, "Tiny Santa enjoys kisses from the missus!" Mrs. Everdeen carefully cut the photo out and tacked it into the leather-bound scrapbook inscribed with Katniss's name. Mrs. Mellark, on the other hand, used the paper to wrap some chicken skin in before throwing it in the dumpster.

More than a dozen years later, people chuckled over the photo as they looked at Katniss's book during the shared graduation party for Peeta and Katniss. Peeta did not have a similar book of mementos in his own name, but it didn't matter because somewhere along the line, Katniss's book had become his as well.

Mrs. Mellark got tired of waiting for Peeta, and took the older boys home with her, leaving John to collect him. It was just as well, because this was the last opportunity before Christmas break for Peeta to give Katniss the gift he had purchased for her.

Finally, the photos were finished and Miss Trinket led the children back to her classroom. It was not lost on either the Everdeens or Mr. Mellark, that the two small children leading the lines back to class tightly held one another's hand. While John and Jen were accustomed to it, this marked the first time that Blake Everdeen had witnessed it. Though innocent, something tugged inside of him, almost a foreshadowing that the little blonde boy would be something of a fixture in his daughter's life. He looked at Jen with raised eyebrows, and she smiled gently in return. "She could do worse, Blake," she whispered quietly.

The room was ablaze with activity as parents helped their youngsters out of their costumes. Peeta and Katniss had to change in the small bathroom. Like a gentlemen, Peeta let Katniss go first. Mrs. Everdeen helped her oldest daughter out of her costume as Katniss chattered away extolling the virtues of one particular Santa Claus. "And did you see, Mom, he was perfect when I sang 'Tummy like a bowl full of jelly!'" Katniss was more excited for Peeta's performance than her very own.

"Did you bring it?" Mrs. Everdeen inquired. Katniss nodded quickly, a light blush coloring her cheeks. "Well, you will want to give it to him before you leave tonight because you won't see him for nearly two weeks." Katniss nodded again before exiting the bathroom so Peeta could change.

Mrs. Everdeen removed the red velvet cap from his sweaty blonde curls and fluffed them slightly causing a small grin to play across his face. Her heart ached for the little boy who so needed the touch of a gentle hand. "Does your mom brush your hair, Peeta?" she asked as he unbuttoned the jacket.

"Ummm, no. I brush it myself or sometimes my dad does," he answered in almost an apologetic tone.

"Well you do a very good job. I love your curls."

He blushed deeply. "Thanks," he mumbled not wanting to meet her eyes.
Once he was dressed he hurried out to where his father was talking with Katniss's dad. She was holding her dad's hand listening to the somewhat strained conversation between the two men.

"Katniss," Peeta said quietly, "come with me." She followed him to his cubby. "I've got something for you. He took out the little not so neatly wrapped box and handed it to her. Wrapping gifts was something he had not yet mastered. She took the box and studied his eyes carefully. The four remaining adults in the room stood by and watched.

"I've got something for you too." If possible his eyes brightened even more until they became somewhat troubled when he realized the present from her was substantially larger than the one he gave her. He took it from her and they both opened their gifts together.

"Oh, Peeta," Katniss exclaimed as she opened the box revealing a tiny locket inside.

"Do you like it?" Peeta asked, a tinge of worry in his voice.

"I love it!" She removed it from the box and opened it to reveal the little picture of her and Peeta which made her grin.

"Look at the back," he pressed, his grin consuming his face. She did and after she read the inscription, she hugged him quickly.

"Will you help me put it on?" Peeta nodded but was unsure of just what to do. He had never helped a girl with anything this delicate. Katniss pulled her braids out of the way. He unclasped it and moved behind her to put it around her neck. Then with all the concentration he could muster as demonstrated by his tongue peaking out of the corner of his mouth, he managed to get his stubby little fingers to refasten the necklace.

"Now finish opening your present." He did and found a beautiful handmade leather case, and inside was a set of professional colored pencils. Peeta knew they were expensive and gasped out loud.

Almost at once, he enveloped her in a big hug, "Oh thank you, Katniss. I don't need to use crayons anymore."

She grinned at him. "My dad made the case from the hide of deer he got hunting this fall. It even has your name on it!" It was the best present in the world. Peeta didn't even care if he got another present or not.

The adults stood to the side. Blake Everdeen shook his head, "Looks like I'm going to need a shotgun for that one when he gets older," he joked.

"Well they're little yet," said John, his voice trailing off.

"Now you two leave them alone," Jen chided. "If it's meant to be, none of us should get in their way. You can't deny the bond they already have."

Soon both little ones were dressed to leave. They thanked each other for their gifts once again.

"Bye Peeta, only eleven days! Merry Christmas!"

"Bye Katniss, Merry Christmas. I'll miss you!" One last hug and they parted ways.

John walked alongside the skipping Peeta. He loved how happy and lighthearted his little boy was that evening. "You did a good job tonight, Peeta."
"Thanks, Dad, but it was all Katniss." They entered the bakery and Mrs. Mellark was in a foul mood. She noticed the leather pouch in his hand immediately and took it from him. Peeta cried out in alarm and John tried to calm his wife as she tossed his present in the trash. Peeta's heart felt like it was going to break. She ordered him upstairs, and the tears fell freely all the way.

Peeta climbed into bed not even bothering to change clothes. The tears fell and sobs wracked his little body. He couldn't sleep. He heard the argument between his parents. Finally, the door opened a crack, and his dad stood in the doorway.

"Peeta?" He could hear the sniffles. "Peeta, here you go." He handed the leather pouch to him.

Peeta's eyes widened in surprise, "How?" He took it and clutched it to his chest.

"Never mind, Peeta, just make sure you keep track of it, okay? Don't leave it laying around." Peeta nodded.

"Thanks, Daddy." John hugged his little boy closer. Truth to tell, John would have left Cynthia if not for Peeta. He had to stay and protect him as much as possible.

Peeta tucked the case under his pillow and fell asleep, dreaming of Mrs. Claus and her brand new necklace.

Over the years, Peeta used those colored pencils as he produced sketch after sketch of a certain little girl with braids. Eventually, they were worn down and did not fit in his larger hands well so he retired them. He continued to use the case though. Peeta remembered the pencils one day while he was sitting with his little daughter on his lap, a crayon gripped in her little fist. He found the box in his and Katniss's closet and discovered that his colored pencils were a perfect fit for little girl.

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