### Summary

It's July.
The interns are clueless, Katniss is distracted and Peeta Mellark WILL NOT go away.

Blondes, it seems, will be the death of Gale Hawthorne.
AN: This started because Greenwool wanted a Peeta/Gale interaction. It was supposed to be a one shot and it got completely out of hand.

And...Gale is kind of a douche bag for a chunk of this. BUT, it serves a purpose. He's on a growth spurt ;)

~*~

He's just about to nod off when his pager starts blaring. He rubs his eyes blearily, squinting at the numbers flashing on the fluorescent screen.

Sonofabitch.

The fucking ER resident is trying to make him suicidal.

He's already admitted eight patients and transferred two from the ICU, and it's only 2:37 in the morning. He answers the page, only to listen to a new intern give him conflicting information about a woman with abdominal pain. The intern doesn't know the patient's name or age, and has no idea what room she's in. Peeta hates July. The interns have no freaking idea what they're doing, and in the time it would take him to extract the basic information he should have before going to see a patient, he could be done with the admission. He's sent his own interns to bed. After 2 am their cognitive skills drop so precipitously they aren't much help to him, and he wants them to make sense when they present the cases in the morning to the attending. Of course his kindness is repaid by a new admission right after his helped is dismissed.

He doesn't bother fixing his mussed hair, doesn't care about his dragon breath; he just fumbles with the fleece North Face zipper vest and heads for the stairs to the emergency room. It takes him fifteen minutes to find the patient that the intern told him about, but only five to realize what her problem is.

Tenderness in the right upper quadrant.

Positive Murphy's sign

An ultrasound showing gallstones and fluid around the gallbladder

She has cholecystitis. She needs surgery.

By now he's that crispy kind of irritable that puts a mean edge to his usually calm demeanor. He tries to talk himself down as he storms into the doctors' work room, ready to chew out the intern (what was his name? Damien? David?) but is still twitching with irritation when he pushes open the door.

"Who is taking care of Mrs Jojola and why on earth isn't she being seen by a surgeon?"

In the morning he'll regret his tone, but he's had it tonight. Between the the post-op fever he's taking from ENT and the ortho hip fracture he's babysitting because - despite requiring ridiculous board scores to get in - ortho residents seem to actively forget how to manage basic medical problems as soon as they enter their residency, he's done cleaning up surgical messes.

He's expecting a sniveling red eyed intern. Instead he's face to face with Katniss Everdeen.

Why hadn't he brushed his teeth? Altoids, he needs altoids….

"Peeta?" she asks. Her eyes are slightly puffy but her face hasn't gotten that pinched look like it does towards the end of a shift. She must be fresh on for the night. She does that lip-twitch-almost-smile when she sees him that never fails to make his heart go into atrial flutter. Her face is completely makeup free, her hair in a no-nonsense braid, and her scrubs have that soft worn look to them like they're on about day three of use.

She is perfect. He understands now why people once and still worship the moon.

She's also talking, and by the annoyed look precipitating on her brow, he suspects she's been speaking for sometime while he contemplates her perfection.

"I'm sorry, what did you say? I'm reaching that time of the night when I start to see green fairies."

She looks at him dubiously, but repeats, "Are you here for the lady in room 22? With the belly pain? Darius gave me a really garbled sign out and I'm trying to organize my patient list."

Altoids, where can I get altoids?

"Yeah, gotta love the newbies. In a few months they'll be rock stars but right now they don't know which direction their heads should be facing."

She nods sympathetically, while looking over her signout sheet. "I hear ya. Now what's wrong with Mrs Jojola?"

"Right upper quad tenderness, positive Murphy, ultrasound with gallstones. I think it's cholecystitis and she needs a surgical consult."

Katniss has already pulled up a chair to a computer and is looking over the patient's labs. This is what he loves about her. She checks everything and instead of arguing or turfing, she investigates to see if what he's saying is true and if he missed anything. When she first started doing this he
despised it. He thought she didn't trust him or was doubting his clinical skills, but over the last two
years he's come to rely on her thoroughness, something many of her ER colleagues weren't
known for. After all, when you have to see a waiting room with fifty patients in it, you can't dig
up every last detail of the patient's medical history. But Katniss is both comprehensive and fast;
moments later she says, "Hmm...I see your point. Let me lay hands on her and if our exams match
I'll give surgery a call. You mind sticking around down here, so in case they've got questions I
won't have to call you again?"

"Call me, please dear God, call me.

"Sure. I've got other people down here waiting for beds, lemme start pre-rounding before the
morning sign out."

She nods distractedly and he goes to another workstation to check the lab results of the other
patients he admitted overnight. She comes back a few minutes later and gives him the thumbs up
sign, immediately sits down, and starts dialing numbers. A moment later in the background he
hears her voice getting more and more agitated.

"I don't care if your intern - with her whole 9 days of experience - tells you it's not surgical. Get
down here and examine the patient!" she hisses before she slams the phone down.

"Everything ok over there?" he calls out across the work room.

"Yeah," she mutters. "Just Gale's 2nd on call. Sometimes it's great having grown up with the chief
resident and sometimes it's a pain in the ass."

Peeta feels his heart sink. Gale Hawthorne is by far the best surgical resident currently in their
program. He watched him once ligate three bleeding vessels in a trauma patient who was in the
ER while waiting for the surgical attending to make it into the resus room from the OR. He'd
never seen anyone tie knots like that, with such rapid precision and some kind of super-human
focus. If anyone he loved needed surgery, he'd want Gale to do it. But, Hawthorne was a dick of a
human being to work with and he openly looked down on medical residents. He also was the
High King of blocking patients and there was no way he'd take Mrs Jojola without a fight. He
looks at his watch. 3:25am.

Sonofabitch.

He tries not to focus on this and instead covertly glances at Katniss while he edits the notes he
dictated earlier.

"So, how's the shift? It's so crazy with the new interns right?"

"Great. Now he's talking gibberish

If she's annoyed she doesn't show it. Her fingers flying across the keyboard, she answers, "July is
always hard, but the intern I'm on with is actually really good. She's from Eritrea I think? Really
sweet and smart. She's got great clinical judgement, so I wonder if she was already a doctor in her
home country."

She pauses for a moment eyeing Peeta carefully.

"She asked me if she could wear her head scarf the first day. I was so upset she felt like she
needed to ask. I mean we're in a America!? The point is you're free to do what you want right?
Ugh, sorry for ranting. Her name's Ru by the way. It's short for -hold on, I wrote it down-
Ruwaida. Anyway, if you see her, be nice ok?"

Peeta flashes her a deep smile. It's the most he's ever heard her talk.

"I'm always nice," he says jovially. "Especially to interns. That's why I'm down here admitting
and the kids are in the call rooms sleeping."

She rolls her eyes at him, but smiles. "How are they gonna learn critical thinking and decision
making in bed? They need to learn how to convince surgery to take a patient," she comments.

"They'll have plenty of time for that," he mutters, noting new labs showing a decreasing lactate in
his cellulitis patient. "I just want them to be able to present in the morning coherently. Besides I
have to wake them up to pre round in about an hour. Boy did we get slammed tonight. Eight and
two transfers. I just want them to be coherent. Besides I have to wake them up to pre round in about an hour. Boy did we get slammed tonight. Eight and two transfers. I just want them to go home, eat an almond danish and drink a cup of tea while I let the
Avett Brothers put me to bed."

Katniss throws her head back in whispered moan. The sound makes Peeta's spine tingle. He is
sure song birds would stop to listen to her.

"Mmm, that sounds so good! Almond danish...reminds me of this place I used to go as a kid.
During the holidays sometimes my parents would take me and my sister into this ugly college
town called Twelve Peaks that was about an hour away from us. The people there were awful, but
there was this one bakery with the sweetest owner. They made the best pastry I have ever tasted.
And their cheese buns...they were this buttery biscuit with sharp cheddar. I think I used to spend
the whole year waiting to take that trip."

Peeta stared at her flabbergasted while her eyes remained closed, clearly enjoying a happy
memory. He had been crushing on Katniss Everdeen for longer than he cared to remember and
now he finds she has lived an hour away from him growing up? How had he not seen her?

He spent the holidays with his mother's parents in Florida, while his dad ran the bakery. But surely
one year... a vague memory of a girl with two braids and plaid dress skits through his mind, but
he's not sure it's her.

"Emm's."
She looked up confused.

“Huh?”

“Emm’s Bakery?”

“Oh my god, have you been there?!”

“Yeah…”

“Those cheese buns…what I wouldn’t give for one.”

Peeta rubs his sleep deprived eyes. This feels like a dream. Is he dreaming?

“Maybe you can get the buns without going to the bakery.”

“Sounds like trying to get free milk without buying the cow.”

They both look up and see Gale Hawthorne saunter into the doctors’ room, surgical cap still on and a mask dangling around his neck. He has a smirk on his face but his eyes are rimmed with red; it must be a tough night for him too. Katniss shoots him a glare and says, “Just reminiscing about Emm’s.”

“What, that bakery at Twelve Sneaks? I have no idea how you can have fond memories of that place. Never seen so many condescending people in one area.”

“You’re too forgiving, Catnip. I’d rather starve than put up with those snobby hipsters.”

And just like that the temperature drops ten degrees in the room. Katniss goes completely quiet even though she was open and chatty only moments before and Gale, his bravado gone, suddenly seems vague and uncomfortable.

“Camping this weekend?” he asks her shoulder, after a few moments of awkward silence.

“I don’t know what my shifts look like,” she mutters, and then she leaves without another word.

Peeta has no idea what’s transpired. Something seems off, but Katniss is gone and before he can observe Gale any further, he’s gone too, presumably to examine Mrs Jojola. What a weird interaction, he thinks. Nice to know how they felt about his hometown, too. Well at least she liked his cheese buns. He thinks about how he can bring them to her. Clearly sometime when Gale isn’t there to ruin the moment.

With a sigh, he goes to check on his old admissions. What a strange night.

~*~

Peeta’s still in the doctors’ room dictating H&Ps when Gale comes in looking around, presumably for Katniss.

“Hey blondie, you seen Catnip anywhere?”

Peeta cringes. He hates that Gale has a penchant for nicknames and he really hates that the one he has for Katniss Everdeen has apparently been around since childhood. He saw her correct an attending once for calling her Kat, but Gale got to call her Catnip all the time.

Jerk.

“I think she’s seeing a guy in resus. Are you looking for her to talk about Mrs Jojola? Cus I can pass on a message.”

“Jojola? Is that the lady in 22? Did she consult medicine too?”

Peeta nods in affirmation.

“Yeah, we’re not taking her.”

Peeta whoots around in his chair, shocked.

“Whaddya mean you’re not taking her? She’s got cholecystitis! She needs surgery!”

Gale folds his arms defensively across his chest.

“She might have cholecystitis. But she’s got elevated liver enzymes. Maybe it’s hepatitis.”

“Her hep panel's negative.”

“Maybe it’s autoimmune, or cryptogenic.”

Peeta rolls his eyes. “Dude, she’s had belly pain for three days, not three months. She’s got gallstones and a Murphy’s. It’s cholecystitis, this isn’t rocket science!”

“Thank god or you’d be screwed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look, I know how to diagnose cholecystitis. I also know this could be medical. You admit her, you prove she needs surgery then I’ll take her.”
"So I just need to do all the leg work and after the patient has been in pain for another 2 days and hates me, you can swoop in, take her gallbladder out like she needs to have done today, and be the hero?"

"Is that what this is about? You wanna be a hero, blondie?"

"For God's sake, I have a name, Hawthorne! Use it!"

"I'm not taking her unless you can prove it's a chole."

"Are you kidding me? You want me to read her ultrasound report to you?"

Gale's starting to get red in the face, but Peeta doesn't care. It's 4:30 in the morning and his shift ends in an hour. The fuck if he's gonna spend the end of his night admitting a surgical patient.

"Look. I'm the surgeon. I determine if someone needs a surgery and until you can prove she doesn't have any other medical prob-"

"Gale, are you blocking Mrs Jojola?"

Gale visibly slumps at Katniss' voice but his face remains defiant.

"Catnip…"

"Don't call me that at work," she snaps. "And really Gale? She's got cholecystitis. Even Ru could diagnose that."

"Yeah, but other things cause right upper quad pain and her liver enzymes are high…"

"Yeah, thanks Gale, I can read labs. Fine. I'm getting a HIDA scan. If it's positive, she's going to surgery."

And with that she storms out of the room. Peeta watches her in awe, marveling at the pain in his chest left by his heart clearly leaving with her. But his rosy sentiments end abruptly when he sees the icy stare Gale is leveling him with.

"You know, whatever. By the time the HIDA is done, I'll be off shift and the next sucker can admit her."

Peeta openly rolls his eyes and turns away from him. It's something everyone has thought at one time or another during residency but no actually says it out loud. God. He almost feels sorry for Hawthorne. Almost. He expects Gale to leave, but the taller man doesn't; instead he paces around the doctors' room like a caged panther. Peeta ignores him and goes back to ordering AM labs when they both hear the overhead announcement 'paging Dr Heart, ICU bed 7'. Someone in the ICU is crashing. They both turn at the same time in an instinctive check to see if either of them is on call for hospital crash codes. When neither of them run to join the fray of trampling feet in the hallway, they both shrug and go about their work. After a few minutes Gale has finally slumped into a chair and is clicking through an electronic medical record when a slight girl with dark skin and a headscarf bursts into the room. He's sure she must be a young adult but her face is so youthful, she looks about twelve.

"I need help! Katniss is doing CPR on a patient in the resuscitation room alone!"

Once the word CPR leaves her lips, both men are up and running down the hall.

"Call a code!" shouts Gale behind his back.

"What?!” she squeaks, running hard to keep up with them.

"Sonofabitch, fucking interns-"

Peeta cuts through his litany and shouts, "Stop running, grab a hospital phone and dial 2222, then come find us!"

Both men then sharply turn the corner and find Katniss on a hospital bed straddling a man, doing chest compressions. Peeta dawns gloves and is by the bedside immediately. When he glances up, he sees Gale grabbing the crash cart and setting up for an intubation.


"Don't sweat it, you're a rock star. Ok, ready to switch out? One. Two. Three." Her hands come off the patient the minute his touch down and he takes over doing compressions, humming "Stayin Alive" under his breath.

Katniss jumps off the bed, wipes her brow and starts shouting orders.

"I'm running this code. Gale, you're airway. Peeta, chest compressions. Peeta you're keeping this man alive right now, so no heroics, tell me when you're getting tired and I'll switch you out with someone. Did Ru call a code?"

"Yeah, but someone's crashing in the ICU so we'll be short staffed," answers Gale. He's holding a mask over the patient's mouth and nose, but not bagging, waiting for Peeta to finish two minutes of compressions.

A moment later, two nurses and a respiratory therapist burst into the resus room with Ru hot on their heels. The room is suddenly loud and throbbing as staff start peaking in to look at what's happening.

"I. NEED. QUIET," she barks. "You, in red, his IV is on the left, you're pushing the meds. You, in blue start another IV and try and get labs. He's a 62 yr old male with diabetes and came in with
pneumonia. We're 1:45 seconds in - did you write that down Ru? You're gonna keep time. Whenever I give an order you write down what I said and the time I said it. Got it?"

Ru nods rapidly, eyes wide as saucers, clearly terrified, but begins scribbling quickly on a clipboard.

Katniss turns to the group and makes eye contact with Gale.

"Ok, in five seconds Peeta's gonna stop compressions, Gale. I want you ready to check for a pulse. If it's not there, we'll push epinephrine and consider a shock depending on the rhythm. Think you can intubate?"

"I'm ready, as long as we time it right. Peeta!"

Peeta doesn't look up from his compression, but nods. "Say the word Katniss, we'll make it happen."


Peeta's hands come off the patient's chest and Katniss' eyes fly to the monitor while Gale feels for a pulse. There is complete silence while they wait for the artifact from Peeta's compressions to clear. In a moment they see fine fibrillations on the monitor that are almost like a flat line.

"I got nothing," says Gale.

"Push the Epi, no shock" Katniss orders. "Ready to intubate?"

They all nod and a moment later Gale has the man's head extended and his mouth cranked open as he pushes the tube in. A CO2 check confirms tracheal placement and then, Katniss orders more compressions.

The respiratory therapist connects the man to a ventilator and Gale comes over behind Peeta, while Katniss checks to make sure Ru is keeping time.

"Hey, man, how are the arms? Ready to switch?"

Peeta nods gratefully.

"Ok, Three. Two. One."

Their hands switch off seamlessly and Gale begins a fresh set of chest compressions.

"Peeta run those blood samples through the iStat and see if we can get labs. Also, check a blood sugar, he's a diabetic. Rest your arms, I want you ready to take over compressions after this next cycle."

Peeta grabs the blood samples drawn from a nurse, who now has his hand on the patient's neck ready for a pulse check. The iStat only shows the patient is hypoxic but nothing else. Peeta stretches then goes to stand behind Gale as they prepare for another switch off. He's a little amazed. Codes are usually messy, loud and disorganized, but Katniss is keeping it incredibly clean.

After the third round of compressions, when Peeta's hands come of the patient, the monitor shows coarse almost saw tooth waves and Katniss immediately calls for an electric shock. Everyone stands back from the bed while the adhesive shock pads come alive and delivery electricity. Gale immediately resumes chest compression and they wait anxiously for the two minutes necessary before they can check and see if the shock worked.

"Two minutes," says Ru, her eyes glued to her clipboard.

"Pulse check," orders Katniss.

Gale's hands come off the patient and Peeta steps in his place just as they see the even steady rhythm of a electrical heartbeat on the monitor.

"The monitor means nothing without a pulse," she states. "Pulse check."

"I gotta pulse!" says the nurse at the head of the patient.

Without pausing she orders, "Peeta, confirm."

Peeta steps forward and feels for the femoral pulse in the patient's groin, "Pulse confirmed. Eighty beats per minute. Good job Katniss."

Gale squeezes her shoulder roughly, as the ICU attending appears from the shadows of the resus room to take over transporting the patient to intensive care. She seems dazed as people thump her back, and murmur things like 'solid' and 'good code' to her. They all stand around in a trance, staring at the floor and each other, as the patient is wheeled away.

Peeta seems to wake up first. He looks at his watch and it's 5:30am, almost time for rounds. He texts his interns and tell them he was in a code and that he'll be up shortly. Then he looks at Katniss and Gale.

"Think we earned ourselves some coffee? Maybe a subpar but non snooty danish from the coffee cart?"

Katniss perks up immediately.

"Tea for me."

Gale shoves his hands in his pockets. "I want a cigarette. But yeah, let's get some coffee."
“God, don’t be gross,” grumbles Katniss. “And you’re taking Mrs J in room 22.”

“If the HIDA scan is positive,” he mutters.

“When it’s positive,” retorts Peeta over Katniss’ shoulder.

“Hey. Internist. The doctors that do actual procedures are talking.”

“God, Gale,” moans Katniss, “can you not be a douche for five whole seconds?”

“There is a direct correlation between my level doucheness and the success of my surgeries.”

Peeta scowls at him. “You must have a perfect record.”

Katniss groans loudly. “Now I need a cigarette. Come on Ru,” she calls. The girl looks up, stunned, as Katniss beckons her and the guys wait, shooting each other death glares.

“Welcome to the team.”

~*~

AN: This is the only part that will be in Peeta’s POV. The rest is all Gale. And I LOVE new interns :D
Katniss has just driven up in her beat up Subaru with the biggest shit eating grin I've ever seen and it takes me about ten seconds to figure out why.

Peeta FUCKING Mellark is next to her in the car.

AN: So...Warning: Gale is a kind of an asshole in this lol, but it's a process. He's on a growth spurt :)

The rest of this story is going to be told from Gale's POV. He's...struggling with some stuff so go easy on him ;).

Katniss has just driven up in her beat up Subaru with the biggest shit eating grin I've ever seen and it takes me about ten seconds to figure out why.

Peeta FUCKING Mellark is next to her in the car.

Fuck. My. Life.

I thought it was odd how cheerful she seemed when she called and said we were on for a weekend camping trip. Was I game? Of course I was game. I wanted things to get back to normal since she was still freezing me out over the whole 'starving' comment about Twelve Sneaks, (fucking hate that place) and - yes - I know I deserved it, but it was nothing a camping trip couldn't cure.

Unless she brought wet behind the ears, never seen a pinecone before, Peeta-Fucking-Golden-Boy-Mellark along.

Without telling me.

She's fucking with my brain.

"Hi Gale!" she calls, waving. She is so fucking pleased with herself.

"Hawthorne! Nice to see you!" he calls out.

Liar.

"Katniss said this place was gorgeous and boy was she right."

Mellark turns to look at her with that dopey lovesick puppy face and I fight the urge to vomit.

"Well, this is a surprise, Blondie. Have you ever seen a forest before?"

Katniss shoots me a death glare, which I ignore. She's out of her mind if she expects me to play nice. Blondie flushes (pussy) and says, "I mean yeah. But, I've never been camping before. And then medical school and all..."

"Uh huh," I say as condescending as possible. "Well there's no time like the present to learn basic survival skills. You know how to pitch your tent?"

I look behind him at the gear he's hauling out of Katniss' car. All of it is sparkly and fresh from REI. I tally five hundred bucks worth of shit that he doesn't have the faintest idea what to do with. There was a time I would have sold a sibling to own what he's got and even though I know, with the job I have lined up at Methodist, I'll make more in a year than he'll make in a decade, I'm bitter that he can afford this now on a resident's salary.

Fucking rich kid prick.

He carries over an REI camp dome and I watch him actually pull out the instruction manual. I haven't seen an instruction manual for camping equipment in over two decades and I don't try to hide my utter disgust. Katniss even blushes, embarrassed for him obviously, as he stretches this way and that and starts to unfold and line up the poles. I laugh openly when he tries to stake a curved pole down and it flies up and hits him in the face. Katniss is glaring so hard I expect her eyeballs to start bleeding, but I don't give a fuck. If she's gonna bring a guy with her on our camping trip - a guy who belongs in a spa no less - then I'm gonna enjoy watching him make a fool of himself.

Finally she gets up and throws him a bone, showing him the double cross he's missed that's messing with his alignment (I could see it from across the campsite, but whatever). I'm enjoying watching him squirm while she explains basic tent assembly (first lay out all your pieces, then spread out your base. Then assemble your poles) but I get annoyed as I see how she hovers over him and he leans into her with the excuse of listening carefully. The little shit is loving this. Only he could make being a hapless buffoon work to his advantage.

The tent is eventually up, and Katniss reemerges as she unloads his stuff around him. When I see a
camp stove and kerosene bottles next to his tent, I roll my eyes to the heavens.

"For god's sake we're supposed to be camping, not opening a hotel! Why does he have a stove? And please tell me he brought pots and pans. Is there a microwave in the back that I'm missing?"

Katniss shoots me a withering glance before saying, "We're doing stuff a little different this time. It doesn't hurt to change things up."

I openly gape at her. Who is this girl and where is my best friend? Katniss detests change. What? One lameass car ride with Golden Boy and she's a different person?

I don't think I could get more annoyed.

"Hey Katniss, I brought you something."

Peeta's fiddling around with some kind of tin. He's shuffling his feet awkwardly and his face is flushed. Katniss looks up, her bottom lip caught between her teeth and I watch as he extends the tin to her. Her face literally melts when she sees four fluffy looking biscuits that smell fucking heavenly even from over here.

"Cheese buns?! From Em's?! How on earth did you manage this? How did you even remember?!"

Apparently I can get more annoyed.

Peeta looks quickly towards me before he gets a determined look on his face. Dear god, now what?

"So...I actually made these," Peeta states. "Em's...It's actually M's, like the letter. For Mellark. My family's owned that bakery for like three generations."

The sky opens above me and the angels start to sing.

"You're from Twelve Sneaks?!" I say in disbelief. I will never let him live this down. I can ignore Katniss' staring at him like he's the fucking Messiah for the chance to rub in his face what I always suspected: that he's the offspring of some yuppy snob family from some pretentious hipster town. A town that made our kind feel like yesterday's garbage.

Oh this is fucking brilliant.

"Well THAT explains a lot," I add, my voice dripping with disgust.

Katniss looks over at me briefly before sighing in defeat and pulling at a biscuit. She knows better than try and pacify me on this one and settles on eating her cheese bun with just the right amount of gusto to make Golden Boy's eyes widen. There's a part of me that's pissed off that Mellark did exactly the right thing: feeding my feral best friend sentimental food in an attempt to win her heart, but I'm more fixated on my confirmed belief that he's a genetically predisposed prick.

I debate between immediately attacking him with this knowledge but decide to save it for later. Instead I stand and stretch to my full height (I got at least 4 inches on GB) and mutter, "Ok, well, as riveting as your life story is, I'm going to try and catch dinner. You coming Catnip?"

She's still staring at GB, who is eating a cheese bun. She seems fixated on him mouth. Gross.

"I'll come in a bit," she mumbles.

I roll my eyes skywards and gather my gear. Fuck my life.

Half an hour later, Katniss still hasn't found me on the trail. The day is off kilter cus I'm setting snares, but by setting up this late in the morning I doubt we'll have anything for dinner. I usually don't worry because Catnip is with me, carrying a bow and snagging supper so my catches can be breakfast or lunch for tomorrow, but honestly I have no idea what's going on now. I don't know why she brought Golden Boy. Was it just to fuck with my head? Suddenly I wonder what the two of them are doing back our camp and I'm storming down the path, furious. It's not like I haven't had my fair share of hook ups. It's not like I don't know she's had boyfriends before and will continue to have them. But I'll be damned if I'm gonna hunt dinner, by myself, while those two play house.

Twenty minutes later I stumble back to the campground. I'm not sure what I expected to find, but it's not Katniss frantically pulling on her braid while she throws her bag in the back of the beat up Subaru.

"Ok, Prim, I'm on my way. No, just hold on, I'll be there is a few hours, sweety. I know, I know...I mean I thought I had another mon-I'm getting the car loaded right now."

Half an hour later I find Katniss still hasn't found me on the trail. The day is off kilter cuz I'm setting snares, but by setting up this late in the morning I doubt we'll have anything for dinner. I usually don't worry because Catnip is with me, carrying a bow and snagging supper so my catches can be breakfast or lunch for tomorrow, but honestly I have no idea what's going on now. I don't know why she brought Golden Boy. Was it just to fuck with my head? Suddenly I wonder what the two of them are doing back our camp and I'm storming down the path, furious. It's not like I haven't had my fair share of hook ups. It's not like I don't know she's had boyfriends before and will continue to have them. But I'll be damned if I'm gonna hunt dinner, by myself, while those two play house.

I drop my gear and move to shove Mellark - who is hovering annoyingly close to her - out of the way when she whips around and throws her arms around my neck.

"Prim's in labor! Can you believe that it? She's a month early and Rory is frantic trying to get home..."

Her words barely register. While the two of us had toiled away in medical school our little siblings had run off together after barely finishing junior year in college. Rory was studying agriculture while Prim planned to go to vet school but they had 'a surprise' barely three months into their union. (Judging by the abject glee in their faces when they broke the news, the only ones surprised were Katniss and I). I can't believe the next generation of Hawthornes is on their way into the
world, but my wonder is cut short by Katniss' next words.

"Listen I have to get back to town to be there for the labor. They think since it's her first, I'll have

time to get there. Are you guys gonna be alright?!"

Peeta and I lock eyes in horror. Wait what? Did she think we were staying here?!

To his credit Golden Boy speaks up immediately. "Katniss, we'll come with you. Isn't Prim

married to Gale's brother? I'm sure he wants to be there when he becomes an uncle."

I nod empathetically, not quite ready to verbally express agreement with Mellark, but willing to

hop on his train of sentimental logic.

"There's no time!" she cries anxiously, already pulling into the drivers seat. "It will take an hour to

load up the trucks and I need to get to the hospital. Just stay here and finish up the trip."

She's backing down the dirt road and making a three-point turn when she calls out, "Try not to kill

each other?"

Then she's gone.

__________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

"What the fuck just happened?!"

I jump. Did Golden Boy just utter my own sentiments?

I look over at Peeta who has his body in some weird stance like he's expecting me to attack him.

He's smarter than I thought.

"Well," he says suddenly, "open your trunk."

I blink at him incredulously.

"Excuse me?"

"Open your trunk," he repeats, "so I can load my stuff in. We obviously aren't spending a

weekend out here."

He's right. I know he's right. In my head I'm planning how to fit my gear with his stuff in my old

Explorer even as I open my mouth and say, "What? Too fucking scared to spend a night in the

wilderness without Katniss to sing you to sleep?"

I cringe inwardly. The only thing I want to do is get the hell away from this guy. But I can't bring

myself to follow his lead even at dear personal cost.

"Are you serious? Look, my ride just took off in a dust cloud and you hate me. Can you please

quit being a dick for fifteen minutes and take me the fuck home?"

I smirk.

"Sure. Chickenshit."

I hear Mellark mutter sonofabitch under his breath before he throws his pack on the ground with a

thud.

"You know what? Fuck you, Hawthorne. Fine. Let's just spend the next 48 hrs driving each other

bat shit crazy. I don't give a damn."

"Fine."

"Fine."

The fuck was I doing? I'm so pissed off right now I need to expend an excessive amount of

energy quickly, but Mellark has stormed off to his tent so I can't pick a fight. Instead I pull out my

weather beaten map, find the steepest toughest trail, and head west. I'm gonna hike till my legs

give out and then I'm gonna make dipshit Mellark carry me home.

______________________________________________________________________________________________________________________________

I hike for three solid hours until the sun starts to hang low in the western sky and I realize that I

haven't eaten anything other than Cliff bars all day (having chosen not to partake in the 'cheese

buns' from earlier). Since I've been too upset to catch anything I had better get back so I can heat

up a can of soup over the campfire. About an hour into the hike back, I start to smell something

out of place and by the time I break into the campsite my stomach is trying to claw its way out of

my body towards whatever is wafting from Mellark's fucking camp stove.

I come back to find an impressive fire going complete with rock safety guards. Everything about

his camp set up is wrong, from the direction of the tent, to the ground lay out, to the way his

equipment is just sitting unprotected with no tarp in place, but the fucking cooking station looks

like something from Martha Stewart Living.

Not that I've ever seen that show. Magazine. Whatever.

Forming a half moon around the perfect campfire is a stone set up where he's got a grill in place

cooking sausages. Roasting in the banked up fire ashes are mounds of foil containing some other
delight, while Golden Boy himself is slicing what looks like bakery fresh bread rolls for the

sausages. There's a kerosene stove where a kettle is whistling and a cooler where I'm pretty sure
fucking artisan beer is floating amongst bags of ice.

When he sees I'm approaching, he throws me a sort of half grimace that I think is meant to be a smile.

"Just in time. I wasn't sure if you were going to be able bring in fresh meat, since Katniss told me in the car she does most of the hunting the first day, so I started grilling the sausages. The cabbage and potatoes are almost ready, just gimme a few."

I stare silently as he digs out the foil packages revealing roasted potatoes with onions and garlic clearly slathered in butter as well as roasted cabbage just singed on the edges. Ten minutes later the fucker is presenting me with the best meal I've ever had in the wilderness in my life. I'm starving, the food is ready and I expended a great deal of anger during my vicious hike, so I accept the plate with a humble, "You're going to make some lucky sonofabitch a great wife some day."

Like the golden boy he is, Peeta ignores me without so much as an eye roll and starts eating. I shovel food into my mouth like it's my last meal but I'm ready to rip into him when he cracks open a package of organic graham crackers and a moment later I see him setting up for smores. I ask him if he brought tampons and a curling iron too, but I want to kick myself when I smell the roasted marshmallows. I want some badly, but with my initial hunger sated I won't further humiliate myself by eating Mellark's smores. For a moment I imagine what it would have been like if Katniss was here and for the first time I'm glad she's gone. He had her with the cheesebuns, but if he had made smores for her I probably would have spent the night listening to her fuck him in his tent.

For a girl who's hard to get, she can be so fucking easy. For some guys at least.

Just thinking about that brings my earlier annoyance back full force and I open my mouth to shoot Mellark with a biting comment when he says, "So what's the deal with you and Katniss? Cus if you guys have some kind of best-friends-that-are-really-in-love-but-afraid-to-admit-it thing going on, just tell me now and I'll back off."

I nearly choke on my beer, becoming immediately guarded. Why would he think that?

"What did she say?"

I cringe as the words leave my mouth. I sound-something. Hopeful or needy or some other Mellarkesque trait I never want to be.

He doesn't make eye contact; he just stares at the fire and shakes his head. "She didn't, but you're obviously into her. Since you've known her forever, if you were somehow waiting to make a move, I can back off till you've worked it out. I've waited twelve years to talk to her what's another few years?"

I think he's shitting me, but his face has this creepy wistful thing going on that makes me want to slap him. Instead I scoff and mutter, "What twelve years? You've only been in residency for like three."

"We did undergrad together before med school. We had the same A and P class. She always sat in the back, never talked much. We had to real bitch of a professor, Snow was his name, and he thought Katniss was daydreaming. Said plenty of people fought to get in his class, he didn't need stranglers who were there to waste his time. Katniss stood up and recited every carpal and tarsal bone in order. Not a moment of hesitation. I was a goner.

"I went away to med school, didn't think I'd see her again. Then when residency started, there she was at orientation. I couldn't believe it. There's just something about her, something so-and she has no idea. The effect she has."

I snort and grab second beer. Pathetic sap. But yeah, he's right. And he's still talking.

"So if you've been pining after her since kindergarten or whenever you guys met and have some kinda plan, we can just agree to a truce and I'll back off. And you can stop thinking of ways to kill me on this fucking mountain."

"That's harsh Mellark," I mutter. "Pretty sure you can get yourself killed without my help."

He scoffs. "Really? How'd that bratwurst go down, mountain man? You done chugging my fancy ass beer? Did you even check to make sure the seal wasn't already broken?"

The idea of wet-behind-the-ears-Mellark hurting an ant, better yet me, is so hilarious we both chuckle. I doubt he could kill anyone, even if he was in an arena of murders vying for his blood.

"Well?" he pushes. "Fess up. You planning on proposing to her or what?"

"None of your goddamn business."

"I mean you can play coy, but I already know you like her. So it's just a matter of how much. Is it like 'she's the ex I can't get over?' or more 'she's the only woman to not drop her panties at my command and I'm fascinated'?"

The 'fuck you' I hiss at Mellark has just enough embarrassment that he's hooting and snickering like a goddamn jackal. I shoulda just kept my mouth shut.

"What's your Facebook status, Gale," he smirks. "It's complicated?"

I stare wordlessly at the fire while leisurely drinking my beer. I place the bottle just to my left and then lunge for the cocky sonofabitch who has gotten on my last nerve. I'm gonna snap his spine in half and make it look like a fucking accident.

I know I have a longer reach than him so I'm sloppy as I take a swing for his jaw. I expect him to
I flinch away. I want his hands up protecting his pretty face so I can get a good shot at his liver...

I swear I don't know how it happens. One second I'm taking an easy jab at his goddamn chiseled jaw and the next he's tackled my midsection and my feet are in a tangle. Before I know it, he's got my legs in some kinda hold with my right arm stretched and curved behind my back. He throws his weight back to the left of me and pain blossoms across my back and shoulder.

"You giants" he grunts, "Are so - umph - predictable. Never protect your legs. I'm a nice guy, but lunge at me again and I'll dislocate your goddamn shoulder."

I hem and haw a little but something about his grip makes me believe him. Finally I choke out an 'Alright' and he drops me like a rag doll.

"The fuck is wrong with you?" I hiss rubbing my shoulder, ignoring the fact that I jumped him first. He relaxes into his fold out chair which he sits up right again as if we hadn't just got into a drug out fight. Well. Attempted to anyways.

He ignores my accusation and throws me a bag of ice from the cooler that I throw right back at him. I aim for his head and hit dead on.

"Sonofabitch!" he howls and I think I've got him angry enough to maybe take me on again (I'll watch my fucking feet this time) when he says, "I already told you if you're planning to make a move I'll back off. What the fuck more do you want?"

I blink as we make eye contact, him rubbing his head, me rubbing my shoulder. What do I want? I want him to fall off a cliff, but as his words penetrate my skull I suddenly ask myself, why?

Cus it's not like I'm planning to make a move on Katniss, and it's not like I need him to step aside. If I want a girl, no fucking blonde baker boy is gonna get in my way. So why is the idea of him missing a leg so appealing to me?

"I can't believe you went for my shoulder you asshole. I'm a fucking surgeon. Why not just pound my hand with a rock?"

He rolls his eyes indignantly and scoffs. "I wouldn't have hurt you too bad. Besides, if your hands are important to you, learn to protect them better when you decide to pick fights with state wrestling champs."

I snicker and bite out, "Wrestling. Why am I not surprised? Well, while your type were prancing around in gay unitards, real people had to work to keep their families fed, pay for school and - you know - stay alive."

Peeta stares at the sky and sighs deeply. "I don't get you. You don't know shit about me. I mean nothing, other than the town that I'm from and that I grew up in a bakery. Where the fuck do you get off talking like you somehow have insider info into my life?"

I come up short for one second and consider this. What do I know about him? Nothing, not even what car he drives. I do know he has a shit ton of gear he bought for one camping trip. Expensive gear. Fuck it, I'm not changing my opinion of him. He can either afford all that shit which makes him a rich bitch or he can't which makes him a frivolous idiot. I detest both versions.

"I don't need to know more than I can figure out just by watching you walk across a room."

With that I stand up and walk to my tent, leaving Golden Boy to clean up our mess from dinner. Part of me hopes he does it wrong. The position of his tent should put him right in line for critters looking for food. I hope he gets bitten by a rabid squirrel.

It's the light that wakes me a few hours later. I'm shocked to see the fire is still going and scramble from my tent panicked that the city slicker asshole didn't put out the fire. To my shock he's still sitting in front of the fire, shivering like a leaf in March, rubbing his hands together over the flames. To his credit our campsite is totally clean with all the foodstuff stacked at his feet.

"The fuck is wrong with you Mellark?! Put out the goddamn fire!"

I've been out of my sleeping bag for two minutes and I'm already freezing; we're about 15,000 feet up and it can't be more than 35 degrees out not including the wind chill. Why the fuck isn't he in his tent? He looks up sheepishly and mutters something under of his breath.

"What?" I bark at him.

"Katniss took my sleeping bag. It was in her car. The tent is freezing."

"You've got to be kidding me. You don't have a sleeping bag?"

He shakes his head forlornly. My eyes narrow.

"Was your plan to share one with Katniss?"

Peeta's head jerks up astonished.

"What?! NO! God, what kind of tool-Isn't that more your scene?"

I'm not convinced this wasn't his ploy all along, but regardless, Katniss isn't here and the moron will freeze to death out here with no protection.

"Can I maybe sleep in your car?" he asks sheepishly.

"You're not running my car all night and turned off, you're not much better than in the tent." I
mutter. God I hate this fucker. I run through the options in my head and none of them are good. I'd pack up and just have us leave, but my snares are all up the mountainside and I can't just fucking leave them. We can't keep the fire going all night, he's sure to clunk out and I'm not paying the 100,000-dollar fines for starting a forest fire.

Fuck my life.

"Get in the tent," I bark at him.

He stares at me incredulously. I want to strangle him, but now I can't even imagine attempting to injure him without feeling a dull ache in my shoulder.

"Get. In. The. Tent," I repeat, my voice like a hammer. He looks behind me at my tent and starts shaking his head vehemently.

"You know, it's not that cold. It's like what 40-45 degrees? I'll be fine. I'll put the fire out. It'll be-"

"Look fucker, if I let you die of frostbite, Katniss is going to tear me a new asshole. I like my current asshole just fine, and I'm not in the mood to listen to her lecture me, or deal with your crying on the way home when your fingers fall off. So get in the fucking tent!"

His face looks torn as he stands slowly. He makes another round to make sure all the trash and food stuff is properly packed away and I pop open the Explorer so we can keep the garbage away from the critters. Then finally he climbs in my tent and I follow him shortly after.

We face each other warily, eyes narrowed mouths forming hard lines.

"You mention this to anyone," I mutter, "and I'm telling Katniss that you dissected a puppy in medical school."

To my delight Peeta blanches.

That's right Golden Boy. Be afraid.

the...
Chapter Summary

Did Peeta Mellark just call me Sunshine?

What fuck crazy alternative universe am I in?!!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The early morning sun hits my eyes and I crack a lid tentatively. I’m still groggy, but crazy warm considering how cold it got last night. And my nose is near a bunch of golden curls. In my sleep-addled brain, I try and think of what blonde I would bring camping (I don’t bring girls to my sanctuary) and can only think of that cute sorority sister from undergrad. She was quiet for a Panhel girl unless I had my hands on her, then the sounds she made drove me crazy. But she could read me like a freakin’ book and I remember running hard and fast away from those piercing eyes and her quiet little words. What stroke of luck has her back in my tent? And what the hell does she do for a living cuz her biceps are freaking huge…

“Gale, you really don’t wanna spoon me right now,” a very tired and very masculine voice rumbles.

I scream like a stuck pig, scrambling to the corner of my tent.

“The FUCK! Mother Fucking—!”

Of course Peeta Fucking Mellark doesn’t seem phased at all. He gets up, stretches and rubs his eyes with the heel of his hands.

“Good Morning, Sunshine. What? Did you think I was Katniss?”

No. I was not thinking of Katniss.

Did Peeta Mellark just call me Sunshine?

What fuck crazy alternative universe am I in?!!

I remember ordering him to my tent last night and feel mortified for being the one to wake up freaked out. He’s already leaving the tent, calling over his shoulder that he’s going to go wash up and then make breakfast.

I need to get some fucking air.

I slink off to pee and change, debating about whether I should just throw in the towel and go home or make Mellark stick it out another day. I haven’t been camping with guys since high school when us Seam boys would head to the woods to drink cheap beer and do target practice. Not that Mellark qualifies as a guy with his fancy-ass beer and his fucking bratwurst but— whatever, it’s different. Katniss and I hardly speak when we go on these trips. Mellark’s a talker. I wonder if they would have talked a lot, had Katniss not run off to go be an aunt.

Either way, I ignore him and grab my bag to go check my snare line. It’s a perfect morning, clear blue skies, warm sun and the temperature is back up to the sixties. I can almost pretend I’m here alone, with peace and space and freedom—

Why do I smell pancakes?

I scramble back to the campsite where I find Golden Boy has already got the campfire roaring, but now he has his little stove rigged up complete with a kerosene burner on which a small camping skillet is set up. In said skillet are golden discs of happiness.

Peeta Mellark is making me pancakes.

How the fuck are we having pancakes at 8 am on the side of the freaking mountain?!

“Shake and Pour!” he calls out cheerily, showing me the bottle of Bisquick he has produced from yet another supply bag. “Just add water. Cool right?”

I’m about to ask him if they come served with a dental dam when I hear the kettle whistling over his makeshift grill. Boiling water equals coffee. I’m pretty sure I have some instant mix in my old Explorer and my barbs will be sharper after we go on these trips. Mellark’s a talker. I wonder if they would have talked a lot, had Katniss not run off to go be an aunt.

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I want to hate him so badly. Really I do. But he’s making fresh coffee and he might take it away if I insult him.

Fuck my life.

He’s whistling (off key) and flipping the pancakes onto paper plates, slathering them with syrup from a jar and pushing a plate towards me. A second later I watch him put bacon in the pan and I’m completely lost for words. I’m pretty sure we are no longer camping and if the guys from back home saw this, my sexuality would be forever in question. But then he’s pouring the coffee into Styrofoam cups and all I can do is stare.

“Are you trying to come on to me?” I finally ask. I try to keep my face looking disgusted, but it
falls flat. I’m so hungry right now.

“Says the guy who tried to spoon me this morning,” he retorts and I really don’t have an answer to that so I shovel pancakes into my mouth.

I want to brood in silence but Golden Boy is apparently a morning person. He starts talking about the hospital (cus it’s not like we don’t fucking work there eighty hours a week, let’s definitely talk about it during our free time).

“So it’s your last year. Do you have a job lined up?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“Private or academic?”

“Private.”

He whistles in mock awe. “Going for the money, eh?”

I look up, giving him my very best Katniss-worthy death glare. I can see him scrambling for an apology but it gets out of his mouth I bark, “Yeah well, some of us have responsibilities, liking putting our siblings through college, prick. I got too much to take care of to ask kiss professors, teach med students and plead my way to tenure.”

“No man, that’s not--”

“I can totally see you doing that though. Living off your mommy and daddy’s money while the rest of slave away during residency, then picking up some brown nosing academic appointment so you can shmooze with big wigs and make med students write case reports with your name on them. Fucking douche bag.”

I watch the apology melt off his tongue and his voice gets tight as he mutters, “Again Hawthorne. You don’t know shit about me.”

I roll my eyes feeling down right nasty for no reason. This fucker brings out the worst in me.

“Oh I know what you’ll tell people. I’m not interested in money. I just want to be involved in the future of young doctors. I bet that line was in your personal statement. Tell me it wasn’t! Unless you’re going Ivy where you’re gonna get paid a ton any--”

“Yeah...that’s not exactly what IHS is looking for in a personal statement ,” he says. Then he gets up and starts collecting our breakfast things.

I blink. Indian Health Services?

Suddenly I feel warm around the neckline of my henley and I drop this conversation like a hot potato. I don’t want to know what Golden Boy has lined up after residency.

He’s storing our trash and folding up chairs; making our campsite look neat and tidy. His tent has been turned into a storage garage for our stuff and I notice the hatchet, netting, headlamps, fishing gear and walking sticks I saw laying around yesterday have all been neatly put away as well, soon to be followed by his extra kerosene bottles and the stove. I feel antsy and I’m not sure why. My skin is crawling and I wince every time I look at Mellark, who is starting to act fucking OCD with the way he is carefully sorting out everything. Before I understand what’s happening I hear myself saying, “Just scrub down the pans and put the trash in the car. Let’s go check the snare line.”

Did I just invite him to go hunting with me?

Mellark freezes and looks at me like I’m speaking Manchurian, but has enough sense not to ask questions. I watch him fish around in his tent for a minute before coming out with a carbon cork trekking pole while he smears sunscreen across his pink face, a can of bug spray tucked in his back pocket.

“Oh my god,” I moan. “Put your fucking walking stick away! I don’t wanna see it out again unless we are trekking the goddamn Alaskan tundra! And why don’t you exchange your bug spray with an extra bottle of water, you fucking pussy.”

“What about ticks?”

“What about them? Geez, you’re gonna be fine! Can we get a move on?”

He leaves the stick but keeps applying the bug spray, though he does get extra water. Ten minutes later we’re finally in the woods. I’m following my route with Mellark crashing behind me like a fucking elephant. Every creature in a ten mile radius has to know we’re here.

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dopey faced grin, there’s a rattlesnake about 4 inches from his boot.

Apparently stocky wrestling champs can forget to protect their feet too.

The snake is slithering on the ground but not striking. He needs to move away but if he jumps that snake will jump too.

“Mellark,” I whisper quietly.

The turn of his boot to face me sounds like a fucking avalanche and a moment later I hear the tell tale rattle.

Fuck.

“What is that noise—”

But the words are barely out of his mouth before he spots the snake and his face freezes in terror, mouth agape, eyes bulging.

Huh. He’s one of those silent screamers.

But then he moves, his feet clumsy with terror and I only have seconds to keep this trip from becoming a (far worse) tragedy, so without hesitating I coil back and lunge.

As we both go careening off the side of the trail, it occurs to me that when I wished I could push him off a cliff, this was not what I had in mind.

~*~

There’s a roll, branches in my face, rocks along my back and then a “thump” as I hit a relatively flat spot. I lay still, the wind knocked out of me, and shake my head blearily. A moment later I hear a groan and see Mellark pulling himself from the brambles. He cries out when he tries to stand and from my place on the ground I see he’s done something to his leg. He tries a few angles, and finally finds one where he can stand without wincing. I shift to get up but my back is on fire and I wish I had worn something other than a flimsy henley, which appears to have disintegrated on my trek down the side of the mountain.

“Gale? Gale, are you ok?” he calls out to me, limping towards the pile of limbs that is currently my body.

“Yeah,” I lie as I try to stand. I’ve got thorns everywhere, but the main problem is my back. It feels like someone tied me to a post and whipped the shit out of it.

“You’re snare stuff! Fuck! I’m sorry,” he moans, rubbing his eyes as he helps me up.

“Eh, most of it I made. Not too much money wasted. Let me figure out where we are.”

It looks like we rolled down the south side of the mountain. In this disaster of a camping trip this may be the one silver lining: the river is not far and there is a trail off the water bank.

I pull out a map and fish in my pocket for my dad’s compass. Thank god it’s still there. I fiddle with it for a sec and hand him the map showing him where we were on the trail and where we should be in relation to the river. Once we’ve got a direction, we fumble around for a bit, trying to find a way for me to support some of his weight without putting pressure on my back and then we’re limping/hobbling towards the river bank. There is no trail but we’re going over mostly rock beds so the path isn’t terrible. By my estimation we should only be a fifteen to twenty minute hike from the river, but with both of us injured it takes almost an hour before we hear the sound of rushing water. We break apart and try to rush towards the water’s edge, but it only takes two seconds to remember we are both essentially propping each other up. So instead we hobble/jog together and collapse on the bank in a pile of what I hope are manly grunts of joy and not schoolgirl giggles of hysteria.

Mellark drags his leg into the water and suddenly turns to me.

“Dude, let me see your back. We gotta get that shirt off of you.”

I back away from him, not anxious for his help. “Just worry about your busted leg, Golden Boy. I got this.”

To prove a point I move the take off my shirt and nearly pass out from the pain.

“Fuck!” I hiss as I fall to my knees.

Mellark is there in an instant, pushing me towards the water. I’m in no position to protest as he takes the torn edge of his flannel and rips it off, dunking it in the water and using it drench my back. Together we get my shirt off and he spends the next half an hour listening to me cuss every holy and unholy thing in my life while he works to get the rocks and dirt out of the mess of my back.

When he’s done I take a look at his leg. He’s got an impressively swollen left knee which I’m pretty sure is filled with blood. I suspect some busted ligaments, maybe a fracture in the tibial plateau.

“Definitely something in your joint is fucked,” I mutter. “But I don’t think we’ll have to amputate.”
He snorts unceremoniously while he wiggles his toes in the water.

“Your back is gonna need stitches. I have a suture kit in my car, not that that’s helpful in the slightest, since my car is back in town.”

I raise an eyebrow at him.

“What internist carries a suture kit? Do you even know how to pull a stitch?”

“An internist with four nieces who manage to get injured just by walking out the front door. And yes I know how to suture. I loved my surgical rotations.”

This is news. Most internists hate surgeons with a passion. Inferiority complex if you ask me. A lot of surgical specialties require crazy board scores to get in, though general surgery isn’t ridiculous. I wonder what his board scores were. I mean, he’s a good internist. When he’s consulted on patients of mine, he’s taken good care of them. But I can tell he’s got good hands, and if he liked surgery I wonder what stopped him from joining the dark side?

As if reading my thoughts he says, “My scores were ok, like 230s. And the surgery part was great, you felt so accomplished. Like when people asked how your day was you could say ‘I took out a gallbladder’, or ‘I resected a colon’. I actually really liked microsurgery. That stuff is amazing with those tiny little tools; like fixing watches only it’s someone’s hand. But you don’t really have time to talk to patients. You gotta rush through your notes so you can get to the OR and you gotta be in the OR all the time so you get good...I never really knew my patients at the end of the day. I need to be able to talk to people.”

I don’t hide my grimace. I hate talking to patients. I’d have done anesthesia if I didn’t need to use my hands constantly. I like my patients happily intubated until I’ve worked my magic and they can go home.

“I maintain that you can figure out everything you need to know about someone just by observing them,” I mutter.

Mellark nods his head thoughtfully and says, “I mean lots of times I’d agree. But sometimes you get distracted or you anchor on to a diagnosis...We had this guy. Came in over and over with alcoholic pancreatitis and had the worst and longest withdrawals. We just rolled our eyes; you know: how many drunks do we deal with in a week? Nobody asked him why he seemed determined to kill himself at 40.

Anyways, he was in for necrotizing pancreatitis with a million abdominal washouts and I got paged at night cus he was having a fit. We figured it was his alcohol withdrawal and I came up to assess him before ordering extra Ativan like he had gotten every night, but something seemed off. It was late for him to be withdrawing for one thing, he was already two weeks into his hospital stay. When I got there he was screaming, delirious, trying to swing at the nurse...Went up to help restrain him and I panicked and ended up throwing a cup of water in his face. And he woke up. He wasn’t withdrawing, he was having night terrors, which we were locking him into by giving him the freaking Ativan each night. I got the nurses out of the room and we got to talking...turns out he was in some summer camp when he was fourteen and a fire broke out in the cabins. 47 kids died, but he survived. He was dealing with crazy PTSD and miserable nightmares. I tried telling my attending, but he just said to let his PCP take care of it, like this guy was ever going to see a primary care doc. So I got my friend in psych to come see him inpatient. They started him on prazosin and trazadone. It wasn’t like he was cured or anything, but by the time I was off the rotation he could sleep at night. He said it was the first time in 25 years. I don’t know... that moment was way more gratifying than all the washouts I had done on his belly or all the necrotic tissue we had resected. Sometimes you just need to talk.”

During this whole story I’ve gotten progressively angrier. I don’t know why and I don’t care. I’m just fucking pissed.

“Look Golden Boy, talking is overrated. You don’t have to talk about everything! Sometimes you’ve just got to suck up your shit and fucking deal. That’s why Katniss is my best friend. She understands that you don’t have to talk about shit. If I had been on this trip with her we probably would have said about three sentences to each other and it would have been perfect. She knows talking doesn’t bring your dead parents back, or put your siblings through school or feed or clothe you.”

I don’t know why I’m yelling, but for some reason, conveying this is important. Only Mellark just hisses as he stands and tries to put weight on his leg experimentally.

“I don’t - think - you’re right about this. At least not all the time. I mean, I could be wrong. But I don’t think I am. I think Katniss needs to talk sometimes. Things have been better for her since—”

He snaps his mouth shut and I see red.

“Since what??”

“Look, never mind. I’m just saying talking can be good.”

“What the fuck are you saying, Mellark?! What’s going on with Katniss?”

“Nothing! Dude. Relax.”

“There’s not a damn thing you know about her that I don’t know better.”

I sound crazy. I feel crazy.

“Fine,” he shrugs. “That may be the case, but I’m still not talking about her without her here. So just drop it.”
My jaw is grinding so hard I’m sure I’m gonna crack a filling. Little piece of shit, indicating he knows anything about my Catnip. What the fuck ever. Suddenly I want to get laid, badly. Like I want this fucking trip to end so I can hit up the hot, red headed ICU nurse who gives me sex eyes every time I wander by. For some reason I had this idea that I was done with hook ups after residency. I have no idea what spawned that streak of nobleness but right now it seems ludicrous. Talking my ass. Her face materializes again, that sorority girl with her word-vomit inducing eyes and her too big ears (‘the better to hear you with my dear’ she’d say). Fuck that shit. Fuck her and fuck Mellark.

I don’t need to fucking talk.

We finally stand and limp down the river bank till we find the trailhead that will lead us back to the campsite. I wait a good half hour before I say, “So...you think you know Katniss.”

He snorts. “Katniss is not ‘knowable’.”

Diplomatic answer. He’s good.

“What’s her favorite band?”

“She says Wreck and Reference but it’s really the Eagles”

“What’s her favorite holiday?”

“Thanks giving.”

I’m starting easy, but I’ll trip him up.

“What’s her favorite ice cream flavor?”

“She hates ice cream, she’s lactose intolerant.”

“Why did she break up with her last boyfriend?”

“Cus she thought he might be racist and you two didn’t get along.”

Damn right blondie. Remember that.

“What’s her favorite color?”

“Mint Green.”

Aha.

“No...It’s dark green.”

“Oh actually she told me that used to be her favorite color in high school but for the last few years she’s been into mint green. She likes that she can’t tell if it’s green or blue.”

Time freezes. I’m too injured to attack him but if I don’t break something I’m going to implode.

Mellark continues, “Her favorite person in the world is Prim. Her favorite person that she doesn’t share blood with is you.”

That brings me to a literal standstill. This is something I’ve hoped over the years, even assumed in a rare brash moment, but to hear it on Golden Boy’s tongue is humbling.

So what do I say?

“How are you ok with this?”

Peeta turns around with his scratched up face and his gimp leg.

“What’s the alternative? Not have Katniss in my life at all?”

I’m stunned for a moment. I don’t understand this guy in the slightest.

“Look, Gale,” he continues, “I like Katniss. I have for a long long time. And if being with her means taking life-threatening trips to the wilderness, I’ll learn how to hunt. If it means a 45-minute commute while she does a fellowship, I’ll drive. If it means bonding with her chiseled, grade A douchebag of a best friend who will probably try and sabotage anything we get going, I’ll roll down a fucking mountain and spend the next six months on crutches. As long she wants me around, enjoys my company, and respects me, I’ll do the work.”

I don’t answer. I have nothing to say. He’s the perfect gentleman and I hate him.

~*~

We reach the campsite in silence in the late afternoon. We should be starving but both of us are too tired and dehydrated to think about food. We chug water and collapse by the tent. Mellark hasn’t said a word since his Oscar acceptance speech about Katniss earlier. I’m not -- comfortable. I don’t know why. I should feel fine. I got to push Mellark off a cliff and I’m Katniss’ favorite non-relative. True that I lost my snares, and our dinner, and my back is fucked up, but life could be much worse. I realize it’s too fucking quiet. Why is Mellark brooding?

I don’t like it so I start talking.
“I think it’s really lame that after pining for Catnip for over a decade you’d just step aside because somebody else maybe has designs on her. I mean, wow. That’s some soft-ass love if you’re willing to table it so fast.”

He opens his mouth to retort but then shuts it. Shaking his head he mutters, “You wouldn’t understand.”

I snort. Pussy.

Then he continues, “It’s just. What kind of person would I be if me being with her was more important than her being happy?”

Have I mentioned that I hate this fucker?

We’re quiet for a long time after that. Mellark hobbles off around sunset and I don’t ask where he’s going. He comes back at dusk looking like shit. I wonder what I look like? He has this tiredness that seems to reaches his bones.

“Lemme take a look at your leg,” I call.

He trudges over obediently, clearly resigned. He has some bad ass bruising trailing down his shin, and his knee is twice the size it’s supposed to be. He doesn’t ask to look at my back.

He starts limping around the campsite, loading things up. We are clearly in no shape to drive tonight but packing as much as possible will make for a quick getaway in the morning.

I think we’re both ready to go home.

I unlock the SUV and start loading what Mellark has packed. We have everything shy of essentials put away in no time. The temperature is dropping rapidly and we grudgingly set up a small campfire. Twenty minutes later Mellark throws a package of goldfish crackers and a granola bar my way, followed by a Styrofoam cup of hot chocolate.

I love hot chocolate. It’s like seriously my favorite hot beverage. I wonder if it’s another thing Katniss told him.

It’s the last straw to this fucked up night. I pick up my broken body and crawl into the tent. The last thing I think as I drift off to sleep is maybe the swelling will get worse and I’ll have to amputate his leg.

Nobody could blame me. I’d be saving his life.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Poor Gale! Just want to hug the boy, lol!

As always this belongs to Greenwool. When you’re done digesting the cotton candy I’m feeding you, go over to her page and get some pan seared salmon and caviar.
Are you fucking kidding me?

Chapter Summary

“I’m serious, Gale. Either get in the passenger side or I’m leaving you here until I come back with a fucking ambulance and the KKTV live action news helicopter.”

Suddenly Golden Boy, with his Pillsbury face and his stupid grin looks like a fucking sentinel from Hades. I can’t get my tongue to work right and my head feels like it’s gonna roll off my shoulders.

Fuck my life.

Chapter Notes

For Greenwool without whom none of this would exist. And who took the time to make this legible. <3. There aren't words, but you know that, right darling?

The first thing I register in the morning is I’ve sweat through my clothes. The next is that my body feels like it’s been rolled down a mountain.

Shit. I don’t know how I’m gonna drive.

I turn to wake up Mellark, because I’m fucking done with this trip and I cannot wait to get back on the road, but Golden Boy isn’t there. Huh. Why is it so warm in here then? Maybe he just left?

Maybe he’s making some kinda crazy breakfast? I mean if I got pancakes after a one night stand surely two night buys me like French toast or something.

Oddly, the thought of breakfast is not an appealing one. I’m not queasy, but I’ve got no appetite at all. The pounding headache isn’t helping; it feels like a jackhammer has taken residence in the base of my skull. My mouth is cotton-dry and my eyes are burning despite chugging what I thought was an impressive amount of water yesterday. I make a move to get up and the pain in my back flares like a fucking inferno. I don’t scream but my eyes water, and again I wonder how I’m gonna drive the two and half hours it takes to get home.

With some very ugly maneuvering I finally get myself to an upright position and stumble out of the tent. I’m shocked to see that the sun is high in the sky. How long did I sleep? The campsite is totally clear- apparently Golden Boy has been up for awhile and has literally packed everything except my tent, crash pad and sleeping bag as well as the bag with toiletries and a 3-gallon water jug.

Mellark is eating something from a Styrofoam cup. I see my ration of coffee and something else next to it beside him on the rocks he stacked up around the now extinguished campfire. As I wander blearily towards him, blinking in the sunlight, he tries and fails to smile and says, “Morning, Sunshine.”

It falls flat. He’s tried to clean up but he looks dirty, tired and sore. Bruises are blooming across his face from the tumble yesterday and his lip is busted. I take a look at his knee, which he has his khakis rolled over and it looks nasty. What the hell am I gonna tell Katniss?

I must say this last bit out loud ’cuz he answers, “That we fell off a cliff, when you were trying to save my life.”

He looks at me too, his nose scrunched and his mouth drawn into a look of concern. “How ya feeling Hawthorne? You look...tired.”

Just say it. Say I look like shit.
"And you look like death warmed over, Mellark."

He rolls his eyes. "Thanks," he says as he limps over to the water and tries to wash his face.

"There's oatmeal with cranberries, pecans and some maple syrup," he calls over his shoulder.

It should sound good, but the idea of food does nothing for me.

"Try and eat something, then I'm gonna take a look at your back," he says and I flinch. I put on a lightweight flannel button up last night, which is soaked with sweat; I don't wanna take it off. I don't want him touching it.

It's gonna hurt like a motherfucker.

I skip breakfast and sputter through the coffee. All too soon Mellark is easing my shirt off and hissing when he sees my back.

"Fuck. Dude. Fuck, we gotta get to a hospital."

He starts cleaning the crud off my back, which makes me spit cuss words through gritted teeth and snap at his muted apologies. He grips my shoulder to help me up right when he's finished, but jerks his hands back abruptly. He turns me around solemnly and lays a hand over my forehead.

"You're seriously burning up, man. I'd say 102 minimum. Some of those wounds look infected but you shouldn't have a fever this fast."

His words all sound vague and from far away. What is he talking about, fever?

"Come on, help me take down your tent. We gotta get stuff loaded up. When we get closer to the highway, I'll see if I can get the GPS to get us to a hospital."

"I'm f-fine."

Of course, at the moment my teeth start chattering. He looks at me, eyes narrow, and starts pulling the stakes out of the ground around my tent. I bark at him to leave my stuff alone, but my body feels like lead as I roll up the sleeping bag and try to figure out how I'm gonna fit the crash pad around all the stuff he's packed in my car. It's a tight squeeze but we finally have everything stored, though my Explorer feels like it's gonna burst at the seams. The passenger seat is almost touching the dash but I don't care since Golden Boy is short.

At least I don't until I feel him yank the keys out of my hands.

"What the fuck, man??"

"You are NOT driving."

"If you think you're driving my car, you are out of your goddamn mind!"

"If you think you are driving us when you can't put pressure on your back and you have a fever, you have no goddamn mind. This is not up for discussion. Get in the car."

"Like hell! Who the fuck put you in charge?"
“I’m serious, Gale. Either get in the passenger side or I’m leaving you here until I come back with a fucking ambulance and the KKTV live action news helicopter.”

Suddenly Golden Boy, with his Pillsbury face and his stupid grin looks like a fucking sentinel from Hades. I can’t get my tongue to work right and my head feels like it’s gonna roll off my shoulders.

Fuck my life.

Now thoroughly ticked off, I climb into the passenger seat while he checks to make sure we haven’t forgotten anything. I get my last smirk of the day when he has to move the seat up about four inches to reach the brake pedals, but minutes later I’m moaning on my side as we bounce along the dirt road leading us down from the camping ground. Mellark throws me some ibuprofen from what I can only assume is his makeup bag and I clamp my eyes shut so I don’t have to see his big white hands handling my baby.

~*~

I wake up slowly sometime later. My eyes feel unbelievably heavy and my mouth is sandpaper. There’s a jacket thrown over me but I’m shaking uncontrollably and when I look up, Golden Boy is driving, a gritty look on his face. My vision is kind of blurry like my eyes won’t adjust and it gives him this golden halo like a fucking angel.

“Do you have wings?”

He looks at me and doesn’t respond, just lays a cool hand on my forehead and then winces. I wonder why? I bet it’s his leg. Bet it hurts like a sonofabitch.

“But you don’t need your leg if you’ve got wings, right?” I say out loud.

He looks at me with a tight smile on his face and hits the accelerator. “Sure thing, buddy. Whatever you say.”

“How did we end up on this fucking disaster of a trip again?” I wonder out loud. ’Cuz I would never take a blonde camping. ’Cept maybe one. But not you.”

“Katniss ditched us remember, buddy? I was hoping to get a girlfriend, you were hoping to kick my ass… You kinda got your wish.”

I nod sleepily, but I feel really chatty. “You wanna date my Catnip, huh? I don’t know if she wants to date you. You know how you can tell though?”

He looks over to me with his eyebrow quirked. Ha. He looks like the Rock, only with blonde hair! That’s fucking hilarious.

I continue, “You can tell me when you kiss her. If you’re wondering, her lips really are as soft as they look. It only happened twice- Once when Vick ran away from home and once when Prim left for college. She wasn’t drunk, Mellark. She wasn’t, I promise. But she might as well have. Drunk I mean. She only kisses me when one of us is in pain. Not like even our pain, but like pain and thinking about someone else.

“See that’s why we don’t date. ’Cuz like, if I’m with a girl, I want her to be with me. You know like with me here.” - I point to my head - “She - she’s only with me when we’re not kissing. Not the other way round.”

Mellark keeps sneaking these looks at me and I can’t read his face. But I don’t really care about what he’s thinking.
“So pay attention when she kisses you. Because she’s gonna kiss you when she sees your busted leg. But she might kiss me when she see my fucked up back. She can be a good kisser. Or maybe she won’t kiss either of us. She’s gonna be so mad when she sees how fucked up we are, huh? But we didn’t get drunk or high or anything, did we?”

“No,” Mellark answers. “We didn’t. And it’s really not our fault that that rattle snake tried to attack me. I mean, what could you have done? Let the snake bite me?”

“Yeah, right? Like I mean I could have, but then she would have gotten really mad. And besides I didn’t want to have to lug your corpse down the mountain. That would have been such a drag. We totally should have brought some weed though! I can’t believe you remembered your pussy ass beer and didn’t bring any fucking weed.”

Mellark snorts. “Tell you what man, we survive this and I still have a leg to walk on, we’ll totally go camping again and I’ll score us some weed. And PBR, not my fancy beer.”

I stare at him deadpan. “Seriously Mellark? ‘Score us some weed’? Are you some kinda fucking nark? Have you ever packed a bowl in your life? Plus dude we’re in fucking Colorado, we can like buy it at the strip mall now. Ugh, you’re so pure.”

Mellark rolls his eyes, muttering about me being an asshole but I’m having trouble concentrating. I feel kinda fuzzy and high right now. Weird.

I try to get comfortable but my back is literally on fire so I can only lay on my side. I feel really heavy and the chills have subsided a bit. Begrudgingly I mutter, “Your beer wasn’t too bad. I mean it tasted fine. Good with the bratwurst. If you cook for Katniss, she’ll probably go out with you.”

Mellark laughs and I end up laughing with him.

“How come you never cooked for her then, Hawthorne?” he asks.

I think about this carefully. Why haven’t I? I mean beside the fact that I’d burn dinner and set the kitchen on fire.

“Don’t know. Guess there’s some stuff I just don’t do. Not even for Katniss Everdeen.”

Mellark makes me drink some water. I try to stay awake, try to watch and make sure he’s treating my baby right, but eventually the hum of the car is too much and I just fall asleep.

~*~

I wake up in a parking lot where someone in blue scrubs is tapping on the window. There’s a team of people outside my car apparently lead by Peeta Mellark in a wheelchair. What the fuck is going on?

I open the door, indignant that all these people are hovering around me, but I almost collapse and suddenly a bunch of hands start grabbing me. I flail and yell before Mellark’s voice cuts through the noise: “Everybody calm down.”

I look up at him blearily. What’s happening?

“Gale, you’ve got a crazy fever, your back is rotting off and I’m worried ‘cuz you didn’t use deet on the trip. Just get on the gurney, so somebody can look at your back ok?”
“This sucks,” I grumble.

“Yeah, I know.”

I lean on a tech and finally make it on the gurney. They wheel me into the resus bay and grudgingly I remove my shirt. A nurse touches my back and suddenly my whole body hurts with pain I’ve never felt the likes of: not when I got beat up with a two by four in middle school. Not when I was sick with the flu in undergrad. Not when my father died. I actually vomit.

But then someone comes with needles and their putting an IV in me. They draw a bunch of blood, but I hear someone in the background telling them to get me some fucking pain medicine. I don’t like that the ER nurses are wearing blue scrubs here; our nurses wear gray. I don’t know where I am, or if they know about my penicillin allergy or if the people in this hick hospital know what they’re doing. I finally get some pain medicine, but it’s scary because everything gets wavy and I feel out of control and Peeta Fukcing Mellark is the only person I know.

“Hey, hey GB. Golden Boy? You there?” I hear someone asking. I wonder who that pussy is ’cuz he sounds fucked up. “You’re gonna stay right?”

I pass out before I hear the answer.

~*~

It’s that fucking beeping noise that wakes me up. I swear these IV alarms are constant. How does anyone get any goddam sleep? I’ve been in surgery already I know because they woke me up to sign what I can only describe as dubious consent considering my 104 temp and the excessive amounts of morphine I was on. I guess an infected back wound and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever are not a great combo. I should have used the fucking bug spray. Then I was in and out for a while and woke in the night once in excruciating pain that was quickly assuaged by some dilaudid. I got a PCA and finally rested so now I open my eyes to see Katniss hunched in a chair, her face creased in a scowl while she fake sleeps.

“Catnip?” I croak.

Her eyes pop open, confirming my suspicions that she wasn’t sleeping. I don’t think after her dad she will ever sleep in a chair next to a hospital bed again.

“Hey,” she says. She looks exhausted.

“Girl or a boy?”

“Girl, Ivy.”

I roll my eyes. “Already, with the hippy names? Our parents were flower children, what’s their excuse?”

“I think Ivy’s pretty.”

“Of course she’s pretty. She’s a Hawthorne Everdeen hybrid. She’s gonna crush hearts. I can only imagine the legs I’ll have to break once she’s in middle school.”

It’s not what she meant, but we both laugh anyway. She shows me the 200 hundred pictures taken of our niece in the last 48 hrs. Prim and Rory already have her dressed head to toe in pink. I wonder how long it will take for Katniss to have her outfitted in hiking boots.
We settle into silence but it’s weird. Katniss keeps licking her lips and opening her mouth like she wants to say something. Probably the lecture I have waiting for me about taking a newbie on a dangerous hike and shoving him off a mountain.

“Just spit it out,” I finally grumble.

She sighs deeply and shifts uncomfortably in her chair. Silence we are good at; words between us is hard.

“Peeta told me about your trip. You guys...you managed to really do some damage.”

Despite everything I find myself chuckling, remembering his half hobble to the river’s edge.

“How is Golden Boy? He gonna lose that leg?”

That she doesn’t laugh makes me nervous and I sit up straighter in bed hissing at the friction on my back. But then I see she’s got this melty soft look on her face that embarrasses me.

“He gets to keep the leg,” she answers. “Torn ACL and MCL and tibia plateau fracture. He’s in surgery. He- he said you saved his life.”

I snort. Whatever. I don’t care. I did totally call his injury though.

“And ended his wrestling career,” I mutter. To my surprise she laughs; a sound that startles me.

“He told you about that?? He must have been trying to impress you.”

I blink uncomfortably. Clearly she hadn’t heard that part of the story. Well, what she didn’t know wouldn’t hurt me. That uncomfortable silence creeps up again and I wanna bang my head against the wall. What now?

“Anyways, he’s not planning on anymore wrestling. At least not - well -yeah. And anyway. Thanks. For keeping him alive.”

Her words sting and I don’t know why. I wanna talk about football, nanotechnology, Middle East politics, literally anything but this. Yet somehow I’m the one who says, “Why, Katniss? Why on earth did you leave him up there with me?”

Her cheeks flush and she can’t meet my eyes.

“I mean my baby sister was in labor! I couldn’t let her be alone…”

“Seriously? I mean how long would it have taken to pack up his stuff? Even my stuff? An hour? Hour and a half tops?”

She won’t look at me. She keeps looking at the door like she’s hoping a doctor will burst in and interrupt our talk, but I’m on a surgical service so I know that’s not gonna happen. Finally she swings her head around and says, “He rented a bunch of equipment. Stuff he wouldn’t get deposits back for. Stuff I told him to get and I didn’t want to waste his money. And. It’s just. He’s really...nice? And he’s - I don’t know - easy to talk to, you know?”

Fuck. Yes. Fine. I know.

“Anyway. I just wanted you to...Whatever.”
She shrugs and we don’t say anything else. Sometimes you don’t need words.

Her phone pings and she looks down hurriedly. “Oh, I guess he’s out of surgery. Lemme go check on him. I’ll see you later?”

I nod. She grabs her bag and swings out the door.

“Katniss!” I call suddenly. Her head bobs back in the doorway.

“He’s a terrible hunter. Moves like a blind rhinoceros. But he - um - makes good pancakes.”

She swallows thickly, nods once then scampers down the hall.

You don’t need words, but sometimes I guess, you might want them.

~*~

She doesn’t come back. As the pain in my back increases I replay our conversation and for some reason I think about her kissing me. This brings on a vague memory of talking to Mellark about kissing Katniss.

I shrug that thought aside. That can’t be right.

I press my PCA button and wait for that calm floaty feeling to hit me. What a weird day. I’m an uncle. Katniss is like - in something - with a stocky blonde guy. So weird. As I fall to sleep I hear Mellark’s voice saying ‘always’. Have no idea what that’s about.

Weird fucking day.

Chapter End Notes

So...in my original story this was supposed to end here, but I fell so badly in love with this Gale, I couldn’t just leave in alone in a hospital bed in no man’s land?!
So...more to come..
No fucking way

Chapter Summary

What the fuck just happened? I start pressing my PCA like a mad man even though I know it’s too soon and I’m locked out. Fuck. I need to feel numb. That is not real.
There is no way this is real.
Since when can I not tell real from not real?

Chapter Notes

For Greenwood, without whom this wouldn’t exist. Be sure to check out her page when you’re done here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

I wake up at 3 am in serious fucking pain. I always wait to see how long I can tolerate my burning skin and the aching in my muscles before I break. I like the challenge, but it means when I press my PCA button I need the fucking meds NOW, not in ten minutes. My pain pump isn’t doing anything and I press the call button three times in rapid succession. A grumpy nurse stomps in and changes out one of the canisters, then there’s the rush of morphine -finally- and I curl up in a ball waiting for the agony to end.

Why can I not get a cute nurse? I need a hook up so bad after this shit storm.

I’m still in a happy place when a new nurse comes in a few hours later to reload my basal morphine. This one is quiet and obviously trying to be non intrusive. She’s kinda cute from what I see of her profile and she reminds me of that sorority girl, only with darker hair. I’m probably too drugged to be suave, but I need petting so I slur, “Finally someone who doesn’t barge in and turn on fifty lights just to check vitals. You’re the first competent person I’ve seen in this hell hole.”

Yeah definitely not suave…

“Is that so?” she says quietly. She doesn’t turn around. I want her to face me, ‘cuz I’m not gonna be good with words, but if I can catch her eye, I’ll play the “injured patient” to the max.

“Can you check my back?” I ask hopefully. She chuckles and answers that the surgeons don’t like it when nurses remove their dressings. She’s right about that. I like her laugh and I find myself saying, “If you had blonde hair you’d remind me of this girl I dated in college. She was too spoiled for a job like yours, but she laughed just like you. She had these ears like yours that she was so ashamed of, I’m sure she had plastic surgery done on them as soon as she graduated.”

The nurse’s shoulders slump and she chuckles again softly, but it sounds sad. It’s so like that girl, it’s creepy.

“The better to hear you with my dear.”

...

No. Fucking. Way.

I did not just call Madge Undersee too spoiled for a job and make fun of her big ears.

But she turns and hits me with those piercing eyes and I’m praying to a god I don’t believe in that it’s the fucking morphine and I’m hallucinating.
“Nice to know what you really think of me, Gale,” she says.

Fuck. My. Life.

She’s looking at me like she expects me to say something. I don’t fucking say something. Come on, channel Golden Boy. What would Golden Boy say?

“She’s looking at me like she expects me to say something. I don’t fucking say something. Come on, channel Golden Boy. What would Golden Boy say?”

“I wanted a change,” she says. Then she turns and leaves.

What the fuck just happened? I start pressing my PCA like a mad man even though I know it’s too soon and I’m locked out. Fuck. I need to feel numb. That is not real. There is no way this is real.

Since when can I not tell real from not real?

~*~

I wake up to a fat nurse with smoker’s skin shoving 15 pills under my nose. She tells me curtly that my PCA is turned off and I’ve been switched to oxys. I - politely - ask her where Madge is and if she can ask her to come here.

She looks at me, confused.

“What?”

“Madge, the nurse from last night?”

“There’s nobody named Madge working on this floor.”

“Come on, she’s in her late twenties, blon- brown hair, blue eyes...She brought me some morphine?”

Now Nurse Ratchet is staring at me like I’m crazy.

“Seeder took care of you last night and she’s black. Looks like they didn’t stop that morphine a moment too soon, honey.”

I ask for Seeder but she’s gone and I’m being discharged if someone can drive me home. Katniss shows up with a pillbox (like I’m gonna take those) and a cane (fuck no). Apparently Golden Boy needs another few more post-op days but his brother is picking him up. As I hobble off the floor I try and look for her, but the nurses and techs are all either 19 with glitter nails or 45 going on 70. I ask for her again at the nurses’ station but I get nothing. No Madge works there.

Excellent. I’m fucking losing my mind.

I put it out of my head. I don’t argue with Katniss when she takes my keys and makes me ride shotgun.
Maybe that fucker Mellark has broken me.

When we get home, Katniss helps me up to my apartment and ignores the months worth of laundry that clutters my space. She scrunches her face with distaste when her shoes find carpet. She hates carpet. Every time she enters my apartment she grimaces.

We don’t say much as she drops me off with the promise of soup later. This may or may not happen. I’m pretty sure between work and our new niece, I’ll be lucky to see Katniss once a month.

Niece. I wanna hold her so bad. Ivy Hawthorne. I’ll make her a princess to rival Posy.

I’m imagining the castle tree house I’m gonna build her when Madge floats into my head. Princess. Did I really just imagine her in a morphine haze? The idea is so fucking creepy that I won’t take the oxys even though I know I’ll regret it later. Still. The better to hear you with my dear. It was her voice. Am I losing my mind?

I have too much time on my hands so I start surfing the web trying to find something on her. There’s not much after some high school cheerleading photos and brief mention of her in her state senator dad’s bio from 15 years ago.

A few hours of searching doesn’t tell me who I saw in the podunk hospital in bum-fucking middle of no where. Whatever. I’m bored. And hungry. And I don’t fucking care.

I finish the antibiotics when Golden Boy drops a hint to Katniss that not taking them ‘could be fatal’ (fucking internalist prick) and she goes ape shit on me. Then I’m back to working out and running. Soon I’m at work with a story I totally distort to my advantage about saving Mellark’s life, plus gnarly back scars that give me this whole Wolverine edge. Getting laid is easier than getting lunch in the hospital cafeteria where the food is free.

Life is good. I’m good. Posy’s paperwork for a full ride to MIT comes in and I surprise her with the powder-blue convertible Beetle I’ve seen posted on her Pinterest board for the last two years. She sobs louder than Ivy (and that girl has some LUNGS) and won’t stop hugging me. I am on top of the world.

~*~

When Thanksgiving comes around I notice that somehow Mellark, who has his own damn family, ends up at the Hawthorne-Everdeen table. Ma’s cooking and Peeta shows up covered in snow with two, yes two, flippin pies and a tray of something covered in a dishcloth. The tray turns out to be buttery flaky dinner rolls that Posy doesn’t shut up about.

Vick doesn’t bother to crawl into the house till almost ten o’clock and he smells like vodka. He’s nineteen and it’s not like I give shit but it makes Ma worried and I’ve told him to not make our mother worry for fuck’s sake. I don’t care if I was stoned continuously from ages 13-21, I knew how to fucking hide it. He flaunts it at her in a way that makes me want to beat the shit out of him. But before I can get my hands on his scrawny neck, he’s swinging Ivy into the air and blowing bubbles against her soft little tummy. Fucking prick. He knows I can’t interrupt him with the baby.

Vick’s home for the holidays and it makes me insane. I don’t care that he comes home wasted about three times a week. I don’t care that he won’t answer when we ask what’s happening at trade school and has he picked a vocation yet? I don’t care that he brings questionable girls around (unless Posy’s home, because I will not fucking tolerate that)

I care that he sleeps till noon and mooches off my mom and doesn’t even offer to pay fucking rent. When I was his age I had a scholarship to undergrad, I was working two jobs and paying to help feed his ass. And he just comes home from god-knows-where like he’s fucking entitled to use our mother’s water and electricity that she worked her fingers to the bone to get.
By New Years I’m wound bitterly tight and I have at least a weekly screaming match with him. If that wasn’t bad enough, Posy shows up at my door with her measly paycheck from the car wash and says she’ll pay her own car payments. I want to scream. Has everyone in my family lost their minds?

I’m already walking a fucking tight rope, so I call up Rory to ask him what I should do about Vick (Rory is so level headed. He gets frustrated with Vick without becoming homicidal. I don’t understand it, but I respect it.) He’s shooting down my idea of burning all the little prick’s clothing, when I hear Prim in the background reading to Princess Ivy.

“And Grandma, what big ears you have! The better to hear you with my dear…”

I hang up the phone. Rory tries calling me but I’ve already messaged Katniss and told her to meet me at our bar.

She’s finishing up an eight-hour shift and it’s a while before she shows. I don’t even blink when Mellark walks in after her. He’s just there all the freaking time and I’ve given up trying to question what he’s doing in my life. I didn’t decide to date him, I don’t know why I somehow keep getting saddled with him, but every time I voice these opinions someone starts yelling at me. So I’ve just accepted him, like you do terminal cancer.

Blondes, apparently, will be the death of me.

I’ll give him this, he can read people. He takes one look at me and scuttles off to get beer, leaving Katniss in my dreary company. She squeezes my shoulder and goes to set up the rack. Thank god for one fucking moment of normalcy.

Mellark brings the beer with an order of fish and chips and a plate of fried pickles for me. He’s kinda creepy like that. Like we never talk, but he always knows what I want to eat, when to hang out with me and Katniss, and when to read Medscape or whatever he does while we play pool.

A few beers later I’m feeling less - whatever I was before I got here. I ask Katniss about the fellowship she’s going for in critical care.

“Think about it, all the patients will be intubated,” she says. She hates talking to strangers, but she’s good at procedures. The ICU will be perfect for her. She should have done interventional radiology but she would have had to have left the state for fellowship and she wouldn’t leave Prim. Never mind that Prim ran off and got married the second Katniss started residency.

We talk a little about her leaving and that’s when I find out Mellark took a hospitalist job on the reservation so he’d be close to her. I should have guessed he’d find some way to not only be a brilliant boyfriend but also a fucking saint. Asshole. He slides into a booth next to Katniss, and I ignore how her jaw softens when she sees him. Katniss’s eyes are a dead stare, she gives nothing away through them. All her truths are in the set of her jaw. I wonder if Mellark knows this. Judging by the way he’s staring at her mouth I’d guess the answer is yes.

He asks her something about the match and they start talking about who’s matched where and what everyone’s plans are come July. I tune them out while I think about my next month. I’ve had an easy schedule these last few months, but that’s rapidly coming to a close. I go back to Trauma Surgery ICU nights at the beginning of February which gives me a scant three weeks to dispose of Vick, convince Posy to let me take care of her, and teach Ivy to cuss--

“Do you remember Cato?”

I look up at Katniss and realize she’s talking to me.

“Huh?”

“Cato, that big blonde frat boy from college? Wasn’t he a friend of yours?”
I roll my eyes. “Katniss, we’ve discussed this. People I supplied were not ‘friends’, they were business opportunities.” Mellark chuckles absently while Katniss scowls. “I didn’t keep track of them in college unless they owed me money and I certainly don’t remember them now.”

Katniss shakes her head. “I know, I know, but this guy I think you’d remember. He setup all the Alpha Epsilon Pi keggers?”

Ugh. I do remember him. Hated that fucker.

“Slime ball, lied constantly, never paid on time or the full amount. Yeah, I remember him. There are fewer people at Uni I hated less. Friend of yours, Mellark?”

To my surprise, Mellark’s face is dark.

“Hardly,” he mutters. “But, just your typical douche frat boy then? I guess that’s not too bad.”

“Oh, yeah,” I continue, “just your typical roofie dispensing, date raping, ’I have no idea how she got that black eye, but check out her crazy sexting pics’ douchebag. WHY are we talking about this guy again?”

I HATED guys like him in college. Like couldn’t stand them. Just thinking about him makes my skin crawl.

I look up and Mellark’s face is pale. Katniss has this uncomfortable set to her jaw and neither of them are looking at me.

“What?” I demand. Why are they both acting weird?

Katniss fiddles with the end of her braid. “Peeta thinks a friend of his might of have married him. Thinks, right? Maybe it’s a different guy.”

“I’d feel better if she hadn’t dropped off the face of Earth after the wedding announcement. Those last few years it was like Madge couldn’t catch a break.”

I freeze.

WHAT?

Play it cool.

“Who’s - ah - what did you say? Madge?”

Peeta waves his hand dismissively. “Just a girl I grew up with. We were in undergrad together, but she left junior year because of family stuff and then I lost touch with her when I hopped states for medical school. My brother said there was a wedding announcement a few years ago - which is weird, ’cuz she wasn’t really the wifey type, but no one’s really heard from her since. I think Rye said the guy on the announcement was called Cato and Katniss remembered the name, thought you might know him. Whatever. Maybe it’s not the same guy.”

Ok. Well I feel better now.

Much better.

I need to fucking kill something.
We all leave a little later. Everyone’s pretty down and none of us really want to talk.

~*~

Over the next few days I try to piece it all together. When I dated Madge, she was a sophomore studying liberal arts. I left for medical school the end of her sophomore year and right after that, she what? Left school and got married to a grade A asshole? What the fuck?! And then I see her - maybe - working as a nurse in some county hospital in the middle of nowhere?

Well there’s nothing I can do about. I gotta figure out what to do with Vick and Posy. Plus there’s work. Even on a weekend I gotta sign notes, and revise my Whipple’s technique...

That’s how I end up on the road again heading for fucking I-don’t-know-where. I’m not looking for her. I’m just going to see if I happen to run into her. Because I wouldn’t trust Cato with a cat I didn’t like, and if she’s still married to him I may need to give her the number of a good attorney. Cato was a fucking millionaire's son, so why would she have to work anyway? And why nursing? What happened to her music?

It takes me two hours to get to the shithole town with all the fucking snow (thank god I put new tires on the junk mobile). I crawl into a cheap motel at 3 am and pass out before I can ask myself what the fuck I think I’m doing. I wake up at 9 and feel terrible, but I take a shower in the mildew-ridden bathroom and head to the hospital. I spend the morning wandering around like a goddamn stalker, pretending to be a lost visitor so I can hang out around the nurses’ stations. I wanna ask about her, but I’m worried if she’s married, some random guy poking around at her workplace won’t go over well.

Of course I don’t see her. Because she probably doesn’t work here, and I’m pretty sure I’m fucking crazy. I should be home dealing with my own shit and instead I’m wandering around this toilet bowl. I ask a cute tech where a good place to eat is and she recommends a sandwich shop. On a spur, I ask if any place plays live music and she tells me about a little hippy cafe where the owner lets local musicians play the lunch hour. I head there. I’m gonna get my food - to go - and then I’m leaving and never coming back.

~*~

She’s there. She’s sitting at the bar area watching some guy play ‘Dreaming Again’ on a steel guitar. Her hair is lighter in the sunlight, but darker than I remember it. She’s wearing threadbare jeans and a grey sweater, her jacket draped over the back of the chair. She doesn’t look anything like she did in college and yet exactly the same.

Again. I have no plan. I pull myself onto a stool next to her and say, “You could play it better.”

She jumps as soon as the words leave my mouth and I know she’s recognized my voice before she whips around to look at me. She has utterly no guile. She can’t hide her shock and disbelief, and she looks totally lost for words.

I’m busy checking out her hands. No rings.

“So, Madge, howya been?”

Chapter End Notes

Finally! I wanted to put the first paragraph of this chapter in the end of the last one, but...I don’t know; I felt like Madge needed her own spotlight.

I wanted to clarify something about Gale and Peeta’s relationship. Peeta is a catalyst for Gale, someone who opens Gale’s eyes to several new concepts: change is not always bad, communication may be good for relationships, nice guys do not always finish last, and when you really want something you can put up with a lot of shit to
Gale is not the kind of person to openly accept these concepts, even to himself, but if you read between the lines, he’s accepting these principles in practice even as he riles against them. Just like he begrudgingly accepts Peeta in practice.

Chapter Summary

Goddamit. This is what happens when I’m in a two foot radius of this woman. For some reason I have this impulsive need to keep talking. I wonder if this is what it’s like to be Golden Boy, constantly mopping up your own verbal diarrhea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She just blinks at me. Then she tears up.

Ah shit.

Literally one sentence and I’ve already made her cry. I break into a cold sweat, as she immediately swings around on her stool and grabs a napkin. I watch her take a few deep breaths and then she turns around to face me with a watery smile that doesn’t reach her swollen eyes.

“Sorry, it’s just no one calls me that anymore. Caught me off guard.”

That explains a lot.

“What do people around here call you?” I ask.

She pushes her bangs out of her face. Her nails are short and color free. In college she always wore nail polish in pretty, girly colors.

“Margaret or Maggie,” she answers. “It’s ok, you don’t have to change. I miss being Madge sometimes.”

I knit my brows together. Darker hair, a new name, no wedding band…A myriad different scenarios flash through my mind- few of them pleasant.

OK. Calm the fuck down.

“Ah...that must be why everyone looked at me cross-eyed when I asked about you. I was starting to feel crazy. Thought the morphine had really gotten to me.”

Her eyes get hazy and she smiles as she tilts her head just so. It’s like seeing a freaking ghost.

“I was always good at supplying the painkillers,” she says.

We share an awkward chuckle. She was. It was why all her party friends dragged her along; she always came with pills: vicodin, oxys, even demerol sometimes. She didn’t take much that I remember, but she was always happy to pass around what she had. I never asked why or how she got them.

I should have though. Just one more thing to add to the list of stuff I wish I’d done differently with her.

Before I get lost I realize she’s talking.

“...usually on the peds floor. But Seeder had a kid emergency and had to run off for a bit so I
covered. No one else really knows me on that floor. And certainly not by Madge. Sorry if it was confusing.”

She used to do that. Apologize for stuff that wasn’t her fault.

“What are you doing here now? You didn’t roll down another mountain, did you?” she asks.

*Just checking to make sure you weren’t a pipe dream or married to a psychopath.*

“Just passing through.”

Her eyes narrow but she nods and takes a sip of her drink; hot chocolate with cinnamon. The smell is making me crazy. I watch her mouth touch the edge of the mug and her tongue lick the whip cream off her top lip.

I’m done.

She’s here, she’s looking - ok - and I’m not crazy. I don’t have to say another word.

“I was driving and when I passed by I thought, I wonder if I saw Madge Undersee or if I was ‘dreaming again’. So I looked for music in this godforsaken town and here you are. How did you end up here? And why aren’t you on the stage instead this fucker?”

Goddamnit. This is what happens when I’m in a two foot radius of this woman. For some reason I have this impulsive need to keep talking. I wonder if this is what it’s like to be Golden Boy, constantly mopping up your own verbal diarrhea.

“That ‘fucker’ - his name’s Morgan by the way - tries really hard, I’ll have you know. And sometimes it is me up there, but not at lunch hour.”

Not the answer I was interested in.

“What about you?” she says. “All I know is you got bit by a tick six months ago. What happened after you left for medical school? You have to be some kind of brain surgeon now.”

When I laugh it’s all teeth to hide my nerves. I try very hard not to remember med school.

Instead I shrug and reply, “Brain surgery’s boring.”

This time her smile reaches her eyes. “But some kind of surgeon, right?”

When I nod she says, “Let me guess. How many years has it been… Almost a decade? God, where does the time go? So you must be done with residency. It would have to be something fast pace in a field where people can’t argue with you… Ortho? Trauma?”

She gets animated as she digs deeper and deeper into me, all the while folding her napkin and finger combing her hair over her ears. She thinks she’s being funny, trying to recreate me from the memories she has of me at 22, but all I wanna do is kiss her just to shut her up. Am I so transparent?

Worse is how disgustingly excited I am to tell her everything. Fuck. Me.

“Trauma,” I blurt out. “I finish this year. Residency, that is. Just got a job at Methodist…”
“Seriously?” she gasps, but it’s not in disbelief. Her face is glowing.

I remember that look. It makes my palms sweat.

She tucks her hair behind her big ears (kindly saving me the trouble) and sucker punches me with a quiet smile.

“I always knew you’d do something amazing with your life.”

My throat closes. I really need to leave. Now. I did what I came to do and --

“Are you married?”

She tucks her hair behind her big ears (kindly saving me the trouble) and sucker punches me with a quiet smile.

“They filed for divorce years ago. We’re fine. You?” she asks.

Ok. So even if she was married to Mr Douchebag Wack Job, she isn’t now. No need for a lawyer. Not another word. Now I can leave.

“Not anymore? That’s a loaded answer. You know I’m gonna ask for the story, right?”

No fucking control…

She sighs and gives me another wistful smile, but it’s real. She is so real, it’s killing me.

“I do. But I have a class to teach. I gotta go, but I’ll see you around? Next time you’re ‘passing through’?”

She’s getting up and putting on her coat. It’s ugly. I mean seriously poop-brown-doesn’t-fit-right-ugly. Something she wouldn’t have touched with a stick in college. Of course she makes it cute, (everything she wears is) but the contrast is glaring.

“You’re still a texter, right?” she asks.

Ha. Back in the day it was not just one, but two shitty nokia that were always on silent. Someone had to make sure the kids were fed.

I nod dumbly and watch her take my phone out of my jacket pocket which is slung over a chair. Next thing I know she’s dialing her number in, returning my phone with a grin, then walking out the door.

“Text me, later,” she calls over her shoulder.

The words creep me out but I don’t know why.

After that I don’t have much to do. It’s Saturday in deadsville, all my own problems are still waiting for me on the other side of the county line and I have about 80 miles of driving to do
before another fucking winter storm dumps a foot of snow on the roads.

She had me pegged, almost as if it hadn't been a decade since we last spoke. And I have nothing on her. I always imagined her as a concert pianist for the New York Philharmonic. I mean she is a natural-born caregiver so I guess the nursing makes sense, but why in the middle of fucking nowhere?

Whatever. I've seen Madge and she's ok. She's not a concert pianist but also not sporting bruises. And she's single.

It's enough. It has to be.

—

I feel weird as I head towards the freeway. I keep trying to block out the conversation we had 'cuz I don’t understand it and I'm not interested in taking the time to figure it out. Instead I turn on Motorhead full blast, roll the windows down and drive 90 miles an hour.

....

'Text me later.'

She put on a yellow dress that morning. She crawled out of my bed and whispered those words in my ear, even though I was pretending to be asleep.

I got my acceptance letter to Wash U that afternoon. When I texted her, it was to say I was leaving. I think even added 'good luck'.

She texted back 'congratulations! :D'.

I never heard from her again.

....

I decide to call.

When she answers I say, “Just making sure you have my number.”

Then I hang up.

I have a busy week. It starts with calling Rory to tell him he has a week to either make Vick pay rent or go back to school. Then I cash Posy’s paychecks to a savings account I have opened in her name, the access to which will be her twentieth birthday present. I get the oil changed on my mom’s car, and then set to work tuning up the junk mobile: new spark plugs, shock absorbers, brake and transmission fluid.

It’s going to be getting a lot of miles.

Work feels strange. Nothing’s really changed; I have the same people I prefer to operate with, and the people I like to have lunch with, but everything feels different. I don’t have the patience to return the attention I get, and when I watch the interns talk down to the nurses, it makes me inferno-rage-angry. I love my job, love what I do, but by Friday I can’t wait to skid out of the
parking lot.

She calls me on the way home to say she’s working tonight, but Saturday The Devil Makes Three has a venue that’s about two hours away from both of us and do I want to come? It’s not what I want to do at all; I want to go some place quiet so we can talk and she can tell me about her life for the last decade, but I’m so surprised she called me I say yes anyway.

~*~

As I drive home Saturday night, my hands grip the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turn white. It’s not that we didn’t have a good time ‘cuz we did. But Madge is a different person when she’s around music, like something inside her catches fire and she’s just so...something. Wild and alive--Needless to say I’m not the only one who sees it and it makes me insane watching other people see her like that. I want her like that. I won’t be the guy who’s jealous that his not-girlfriend attracts attention. I want her out there dancing and singing at the top of her lungs, but seriously, it’d be easier if I got to take her home afterwards.

I decide this isn’t a good time to reacquaint with wanting Madge Unders--I realize I’m not even sure if that’s her name anymore. This is nuts. I start working the Trauma Surgery ICU in three weeks and I need to focus. This is not the time for distractions.

I call her just to make sure she got back to shitzville ok, but that turns into an hour conversation, because of course the band was amazing and yes I loved the cello and sure I’d love to hear her play, because yes I remember she used to. That’s how I find out she teaches private music lessons in between hospital shifts. And then I really want to hear her play an instrument at all again, but she just laughs and says that’s a third date kind of request. I hang up with beer plans for Wednesday and my pulse beating so loud in my ears I’m pretty sure I’ve got a fucking aneurysm.

I figure it’s only a few weeks and then I’ll be too busy to give a shit. It’s what I tell myself when we go out for drinks in a few days and make plans for more. I have this entire speech (that I refuse to text) prepared when I meet her at the music shop where she sometimes holds classes for the kids who don’t own instruments. (She rents things from the owner and sells her students sheet music and accessories.) I’m gonna take her to a movie, then I’m gonna tell her that though hanging out is nice, it’s probably better if we just maintain virtual contact ’cuz really I’m too busy for anything more.

I watch her sit at a piano next to a middle schooler who obviously has a crush on her while they both play that song that’s in the beginning of Ordinary People. After a bit, blushing like a fool, he whispers something in her ear. She throws her head back laughing, ruffles his curly brown hair, and then her fingers start flying across the keyboard. She’s playing this piece I remember from college. It was something she had a solo in once and she practiced it over and over while I worked on my chemistry lab. Of course I got nothing done. How could I do anything but watch her?

She looks up at me when she’s finished and smiles. It’s technically our third date.

~*~

Later that night I find myself driving back to my place once again white knuckling the steering wheel. I can’t catch my breath, or swallow saliva and my vision is blurry as I stare out the the windshield.

This has to stop. Seriously.

The evening started out great, if strange. I suggested we see a movie and she picked Mad Max. I was surprised; she used to watch stuff like the Notebook in college. When I asked her what happened to chick flicks she just answered, ”I guess I outgrew them.”

I don’t know why that made me jittery but it didn’t matter once the movie started. We watched Mad Max at the shittiest movie theater I’ve been in since college, but it was so good we could actually ignore the gum on the seat handles and sticky flooring (which I pray was soda).
She was seriously into this movie. Like you could tell, it went way beyond the action. And I was too, but it kept creeping up on me that it was high time for me to know what she’d been up to all these years.

The popcorn was stale and the butter had that kind of old/rancid flavor that ruined it. Afterwards we were both revved up and hungry and it was totally natural when she offered to make me some real popcorn at her place. By that time that itch in my brain from before may have been slightly overwhelmed by the scent of her hair that had been wafting up my nostrils for two hours. Yes ma’am, I wanted popcorn and whole hell of a lot more.

What I wanted was to see all the things I remember so clearly about her. The way she clawed her hair when she was frustrated and chewed her lips when she was excited. The way her nostrils flared when she was turned on. I don’t know what it was about the evening, but suddenly all the things she used to love and all the ways she loved them were on repeat in my brain.

There were other ways beside music to light a fire in her and I wanted to be responsible for that again. But mostly I just wanted to kiss her so perfect she’d forget how I texted her a break up message and left without so much as a forwarding address.

But first was popcorn and a spirited discussion about amputees, shaved heads and post apocalyptic humanity. At some point mid movie rant she leaned across to brush salt off my face. She was so close I could almost taste the mint chapstick she had on, but before I could do anything, she gave me some kind of solar eclipsing smile and said, “You and Posy have the exact same eyes. God, she must be ready for college now! Where is she going?”

That’s how I found myself three hours later with my head in Madge’s lap having what I can only describe as a seizure induced word vomit session. All I could think is this had to be side effect of the Rocky Spotted Mountain Fever. Because instead of making out with Madge, I was telling her about how proud I was of Posy’s mechanical engineering scholarship to MIT, how she and I practically rebuilt the engine on the Explorer to make it more fuel efficient, and how terrified I was of her being sexually harrassed in college.

Not the evening I anticipated.

I came to in a daze with no recollection how I ended up there, no idea what I was doing, and only one clear thought: I needed to fucking leave that house.

And the scariest part?

The fucking scariest part is the minute I ‘came to’, it was like she felt it because she paused, tilted her head to one side with one of those looks she conceal carries and said, “It’s getting late, you’d better head out so you’re not exhausted in the morning.”

I felt slapped. Even though I was scrambling for an excuse, any excuse, to get the fuck out of that apartment only nanoseconds before.

I needed to break something.

I stumbled out of her apartment like a goddamn drunk (dear god I wish my problem was alcohol), and fumbled my way to the car.

So here I am. Once again driving like a maniac (seems to be how ALL my interludes with that woman end) thinking what the fuck am I doing?!

I need to not be around this. I have work. I can’t afford distractions. Boards are coming up and I need to study. I just took a job in another city, I am not driving 80 miles a day, or even a week to be mind fuckinged without so much as kiss in return.

(Not that she refused. I just forgot to ask. How did I forget about the kiss? Sonofabitch.)
My course of action is clear. I’m just going to call her and---

I dial the number. Ten minutes later I have a date with her on Tuesday and fucking migraine.

I’m starting to remember why I used to text her so much.

---

The next week I feel like a fucking crazy person. I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, and the only place I’m sane at all is in the operating room where penetrating lung trauma and bleeding pulmonary vessels help me focus. My dictations go to shit, I have no interest in teaching the junior residents, I can’t study...I thought it was all Madge, but it becomes painfully obvious something is actually wrong with me.

The inability to control my thoughts, words and actions has me thinking this is all secondary to some kind nervous system invasive disease. I’m pretty sure this really is a delayed side effect of the Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever.

That’s the only reason I end up at his table.

I mean RMSF is an internal medicine disease. I need to speak to an internist about it.

---

Golden Boy looks shocked to see me when I plop down next to him in the cafeteria. I don’t know why; it’s totally normal for me to just sit down next to whoever has free seat. Besides. I’ve got internist-y problems.

“Gale?” he asks bewildered. “Um, Katniss is off today. She pulled a double last week, remember?”

No I do not remember. I have other things to think about. Like the side effects of the fucking tick disease he gave me. I tell him as much.

“I gave you? I offered you deet?! Besides, there are no ‘nerve side effects’ to Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Dude, what’s wrong? Are you sick?”

I roll my eyes. “Obviously I’m sick asshole. I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, and I can only concentrate when I operate. It all started with our stupid trip. Are you sure there’s no delayed post infectious state? I thought all tick diseases had chronic phases, you know, like Lyme?”

GB’s face hardens.

“There is no such thing as Chronic Lyme.”

“Yeah, yeah, so the IDSA wants us to believe—”

“Gale,” he cuts me off, “what is going on? You sound super stressed. What’s changed in your life man?”

“Hello, I’m a surgeon. I’m always stressed. We’re finishing residency, boards are around the corner...”
“Dude, let’s be real. You’ll pass your boards hungover with a blindfold on and you can do surgery in your sleep. Is the family ok? Is it Vick?”

I tap on the table restlessly. “No, no the family’s fine. I mean they drive me crazy, but they’re good. Vick is back at trade school paying his own damn rent, Posy has already rewired the stereo system in her car. Man if there is ever a zombie apocalypse, you want that girl by your side. She can take apart anything and make it better.”

Mellark smiles. “So I’ve heard. I actually love radios. I’m planning on taking a part on old 1970’s car radio, thinking of hitting up her expertise. But seriously, nothing else is going on? No one new in your life causing you trouble?”

My eyes narrow. “What? What do you mean? Who have you been talking to?”

He looks suspiciously innocent.

“No one. Which is odd. Usually by this time of the year I hear some intern either mooning over you or cussing you out. Plus you know, you’re never at the bar these days.”

“Look, it’s none of your fucking business where I am or who I’m spending my free time with. Besides, she is not the problem. I know exactly what I need to do with her.”

“Oh?” he asks, “and what would that be?”

“NOT that it’s any of your business, but I’m breaking up with her soon. Ish. Yes.”

Peeta is nodding at me with this sympathetic look that makes me want to slap him. For some reason I feel sick. Like physically ill. I hadn’t noticed it until this minute, but the food at this place gets worse and worse every year. I do like the idea of vomiting on Peeta Mellark though.

“Ah, I see,” the golden boy says.

The FUCK?!

“What do you mean, ‘ah I see’?! You see nothing, Mellark. You know nothing about me!”

He nods thoughtfully.

“That’s true, I don’t. But it sounds like you’ve got a parasite you need to get rid of, then you’ll feel better.”

WHO THE FUCK IS HE CALLING A PARASITE?!!

“Whoa, who are you--”

“This girl, I mean. Obviously she’s no good for you. I’ve seen you with girls, this is not normal. She must be a real piece of work.”

“You don’t know shit about this girl. Let’s start by clarifying, she’s no girl. And second, she is no fucking parasite. She’s a piece of work, but like a fucking Van Gogh you asshole!”

Lessons learned on the mountain are forgotten. I don’t care if he dislocates every joint in my body, I will rid him of all his perfect teeth.

“Say something else Mellark. Some one more GODDAMN thing and I’ll--”

Mellark holds his hands up in defeat, once again, complete innocence on his face.

“Whoa, relax! I’m done. But Gale, if she’s not crazy, not vapid, and not using you, why exactly are you breaking up with her ‘soonish’?”

I gape at him before my jaw snaps shut. I want to brush him off but since he’s acting so obtuse I figure I better spell it out for him. Ugh. It terrifies me that I like him better perfect.

I grumble, “Look, I start TSI in a week. You know what the ICU is like. I’m gonna be swamped, distracted and unavailable. It’s better to make a clean break now.”

He nods thoughtfully again like he’s working on a really complex problem. Wish he’d put as much thought into my tick disease.

“Yeah, I see the logic there. You could break up with her. Or you could switch your rotation. How many favors do people owe you? It wouldn’t be too hard to switch it for like June when people are trying to move, would it? Plus the botanical gardens are having the Winter Wonderland exhibit next month...It’s a good time to have a lighter schedule.”

Mellark is staring at his plate, shrugging his shoulders nonchalantly.

My mouth pinches in a thin tight line. Why does he make everything sound so simple?

“I still think the Spotted Fever is making me sick,” I bite out.

“Tell you what. You check out the botanical gardens and if you’re still feeling bad, I’ll run some lab tests on you.”

Suddenly the innocence is gone and he looks a lot like he did after I tapped out of our ‘wrestling match’.

I hate this fucker.

Chapter End Notes

AN: So you know how every chapter I dedicate to Greenwool? Not enough this time. She practically wrote this one, so really, if you enjoyed any part of this, that’s all her.

The response I’ve gotten for this story has been phenomenal and really brightened my days during some pretty overcast times. This chapter and the next are dealing with not quite as fun topics so probably not as funny, but hopefully satisfying. Thanks for reading!
You know what? Fuck this.

Chapter Summary

“Gale, I’ve done this half a dozen times already. I’ll be fine tomorrow. And you’ve been great, more than great. This weekend, ok?”

I can’t really talk so I nod dumbly.

Then she shuts the car door and drives off.

Chapter Notes

AN: Ok. This chapter isn’t funny. I had to finally tackle what happened to Madge over the last ten years and it would have been a disservice to try and make light of it. I missed messing with Gale’s head though

I can say I put a lot of work into trying to make this chapter just right. So hopefully that will make up a little for the lack of humor. I really really hope it works!

(As usual, all hail Greenwool: her ninja beta skills, her general awesomeness and being a wonderful person and friend)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I call in every favor I’ve accrued over the last five years and get my TSI month switched for outpatient day surgery. I spend March removing cysts from people’s asses and ripping out ingrowing toenails but I’ve got time to trek the 80+ miles that separate me from Madge.

The botanical gardens are a wild success.

We go three times. I don’t tell Mellark.

They do this display called the River of Lights where they cover the gardens in lanterns and build giant light sculptures. Every exhibit has Madge tugging on my sleeve and pointing. She whispers in my ear about the history behind the artwork done for the displays; I have no idea about half of what she’s saying but I like to hear her talk.

We’re walking to the parking lot one night when she stops and just stares up at the sky. I’m blowing into my hands to keep warm, not sure what’s got her attention, when she says, “I wonder what the stars look like now.”

I quirk an eyebrow at her and she kind of coughs and flushes but goes on, “I mean, think about it. The stars are so far away. It took thousands of years for that light to reach us. By now I bet a ton of them have burnt out.”

I stare up now too, startled. I guess I knew that but never really thought about it. Don’t know how she sees things like that.

She murmurs, “The sky looks breath taking, but it’s all in the past. What you see may not even exist anymore.”

I blink. I feel like I’m supposed to comment, but I’m not good at ‘saying something’, so I stuff my hands in my pockets and keep quiet. Does it matter what something used to be if what’s in front of you is perfect? I don’t know.

We’re almost back to the car when a random thought hits me.

“Well,” I start, “I wouldn’t think of it as a bunch of burnt out stars. There could be supernovas or nebulas...”
She stops walking, and just looks at me. I kind of stumble as I say, “I just mean, it’s like an old photograph. A baby picture. Maybe what’s coming is even better.”

I'm not actually sure that makes sense, but I guess it's not important because she walks over, pulls my head down and kisses me.

I'm pretty sure she'll be the death of me, but what a way to go.

~*~

She calls me one random Thursday afternoon and asks if I want to go bowling. I don't bowl, and can’t say it’s how I’d choose to spend a weeknight, but that doesn’t stop me from offering to pick her up at 7pm.

“Aw, thanks, but I got it. I’ll just meet you up there.”

She almost never lets me pick her up. In fact, the only time I've driven her anywhere was when we went to that movie theater that was so close to her place we could have walked if we weren’t running late.

I figure it’s not a big deal, but in my head I know the reason I usually refuse rides is because I want to make sure I have a fast getaway.

Does she need to get away from me?

I remind myself that she’s the one asking to hang out, not me, so this really isn’t the time to start getting worked up about shit. It just gets shoved into the Madge Mystery Box that occupies most of my brain.

~*~

We meet at the bowling alley that is on par with the crappy movie theater; scuffed lanes, cigarette smoke and the smell of too-many-times-used frying oil. But I forget all that when I see her bouncing on the balls of her feet, switching out her fuzzy pull-on boots (which I make a mental note, need replacing) for bowling shoes.

She looks giddy.

She flashes me a smile, and suddenly I find her in my arms giving me a fierce hug complete with head nuzzle.

Christmas is apparently being delivered early.

She pulls back to look at me and says, “It’s really good to see you.”

I ignore the heat radiating off my face and enjoy this moment for a sec. Madge never minded PDA in college but she was never very publically affectionate. This feels good.

She pulls away but drags me with her, turning back and smirking.

“Ready to get your ass kicked?”

Ha! A challenge? Oh babe, you have no idea what you’ve started.
Except I find out in about 15 minutes that Madge fucking rocks at bowling. I use my hands day in and day out, but this gives me no advantage. She doesn’t even waste time repositioning her hands or eyeing the lanes. She just grabs a ball and throws. I don’t know shit about bowling, but her form (and her anatomy) look pretty damn exceptional to me. In no time I’ve thrown my fifth gutter ball and she’s up 3 strikes. To my annoyance I remember Mellark’s take down on our camping trip. What is it with blondes kicking my ass these days?”

Despite the greasy smell, the nachos at this place are delicious and we chomp through a huge plate of them while she literally wipes the floor with me. Anyone else and I’d be fucking pissed at this point, but she just looks so damn thrilled right now it’s pretty hard to be irritated. She’s not even gloating, she just looks happy.

That’s why I ask, when I’m finally ready to admit utter defeat, “Where on earth did you learn to bowl like this? I mean geez! You’re a freaking Olympian!”

And all of sudden the glowing smile turns to glass.

It happens in a second. One moment she’s ecstatic, the next, fighting tears. My stomach hits my knees; what the fuck did I do now?!

I can see her trying to shake whatever it is off, but I don’t want that. I want her stop hiding things from me, and just fucking tell me what’s wrong. (I’d also like to possibly stop making her cry.)

I reach forward to pull her close but she jerks away when I try to touch her. It’s not the first time that’s happened, but it hits so hard today I feel light headed.

And then she’s trading in her bowling shoes and I guess we’re done for the evening, but I feel kind of sick and I just don’t understand--

She stops short at the door so suddenly I almost slam into her, then turns her head back and says, “Let’s take a walk.”

Um. Ok.

It was warm and kind of sweaty in the bowling alley but outside it’s still cold. We huddle in our jackets but don’t touch as we walk down the empty streets of her little town. I keep looking at her, waiting for something to happen, but all I see is her winter breath escaping the side of her jacket hoodie and hear the occasional sniffle.

I wait. It feels like a fucking eternity but she finally speaks.

“I need to stop having you drive all the way up here. And on a weekday! I should have come down--”

“I don’t mind.”

“Yeah, but seriously. It was fun at first, seeing how far you’d be willing to come to visit me, but now I just feel rude--”

“L. Don’t. Mind.”

Silence.

Our footsteps sound like Mellark in the woods.
Finally she says, “My mom taught me. She was like a champion bowler before she married my dad. Had trophies and everything; was part of a team. When I first left school and came home for her, we’d go 2 or 3 times a week.”

Ok. Literally the first time I’ve heard anything about her mother, except the occasional comment from way back when. It occurs to me that maybe in those days she was dropping hints, lines for me to pick up on, ask more questions. But I was preoccupied with family and scholarships, plus waiting for her to dump me for a frat boy.

Not gonna make that mistake again.

“Why didn’t your dad hire someone to take care of her?” I ask carefully.

She barks out a laugh that ricochets on the buildings lining the street.

“Oh he left. Mom’s problems cost him a re-election so he walked out. Isn’t there some Tracy Chapman song about this? It’s always a bad sign, when you start hearing your life in a Tracy Chapman song.”

Madge tries to laugh again but gives up and finally just says, “She was so unhappy. By that time she hated just about everything, even me I think. But she loved bowling. In the beginning she was strong enough to be good, but she just got so wasted. One day I beat her and I swear something in her broke.”

Her voice starts to get shaky and I’m not sure how much longer I can stand her being so far away from me.

“If I’d known it was that important I would have let her win.”

And suddenly she looks at me, tears stuck all over her lashes.

“You don’t mind right? That I won? I swear you can win every other game--”

But then I can’t stop myself and literally scoop her in my arms, ignoring the involuntary jump that happens too often before we touch.

“Madge, beat me at whatever you want, whenever you want, god. Just do whatever makes you happy…”

I don’t know what I say while she cries into my shoulder, I just need her to not be sad, to not worry about making me upset, especially over a fucking game.

And then she pulls back again, trying to fake laugh her way out of crying and wiping her eyes.

“She died. It’ll be six years today. I thought if I could just do something fun, just remember her when she was happy…”

She shaking again, pulling herself inward like a tight half ball, only she’s stuck because she’s standing. I wanna lie her down somewhere where she can curl as small as she wants and I can wrap myself around her, but we’re stuck on the corner of Lead and Coal and all I can do is hold her here and hope it’s good enough.

“I shouldn’t have called you. That was such a selfish thing to do…I just thought if I was with you I’d be able to stay happy--”
I want to hold her tighter but I’m scared I’ll hurt her. Or maybe shush her, but then again the last thing I want is for her to stop talking. What I really want is to take her home, but not to that shitty apartment.

We end up walking back to the parking lot of the bowling alley that’s now closed and I have to let her peel her body away to get to her car.

I stand over the driver side, and watch her fumble with her keys.

“Madge, why don’t I stay here tonight? I can sleep on the couch and be gone by morning--”

But she cuts me off, “We both have work tomorrow. Go home, Gale. Get some sleep. Maybe we can meet up this weekend?”

“Then come back to my place. Just tonight--”

“I have a 6 am shift. I couldn’t make it back in time.”

I want to scream. “Look, just let me stay--”

“Gale, I’ve done this half a dozen times already. I’ll be fine tomorrow. And you’ve been great, more than great. This weekend, ok?”

I can’t really talk so I nod dumbly.

Then she shuts the car door and drives off.

She told me not come home with her. She told me no.

I try to get in my car three times but my hands stop working. Finally I make it inside but I cannot get to the fucking freeway.

I spend the night on the curb outside her apartment. I don’t sleep till her lights turn off.

I wake up with a start at 6 am and see a styrofoam cup on the hood of my car. Scrambling out of the driver’s seat, I grab it.

Coffee mixed with hot chocolate.

~*~

It’s weeks before I work up the nerve to ask anything else. When I do it’s about her filthy rich father who thought it was ok to leave his 20 year daughter high and dry with a sick mother to fend for on her own. I can’t even begin to understand that. Even though Vick is a punkass ingrate I make sure he is always fed and clothed; have since I was twelve. How the fuck do you abandon your child? (This is why I never did pediatrics. If’d take about one child abuse case for me to be arrested for homicide.)

But one night we’re laying on the frosty grass of a dog park in town and she’s pointing out stars to me that I’ve never heard of. I remember it was her father who taught her astronomy from a fancy telescope on their roof and I ask her, “Do you ever hear from your dad?”
“Not anymore.” It’s the second time I’ve gotten this answer. But this time she doesn’t have a class to teach and I haven’t just shown up in her world with no warning. Now we’re sharing a bottle of wine while we watch the winter circle winking above us in the early evening sky.

I wait. If I push her I notice she distracts me, starts pulling away. But I’m learning if I’m patient, sometimes, she’ll say--

“After mom had hocked everything, including my instruments, and gotten arrested again, he showed up on a white horse and offered me an out. He’d make mom’s charges vanish, take care of the legal fees, pay for a fancy rehab for her, fix everything. All I had to do was marry the son of his largest campaign donor. I put up with his world for three years. But once I left I swore I’d never speak to him again. And I won’t. Not on his deathbed, not under court order, not at gunpoint. Never again.”

Then she crawls over my body and bites my bottom lip.

I want to stop her. I want her to tell me more, explain it all. But her mouth is insistent and it’s obvious, regardless of my desires, what hers are right now. If she wants this, I’ll give it to her. Then maybe she’ll be ok with telling me the rest, the stuff I need to hear...

But she doesn’t. That night is the last time she says anything about her past.

_~^~_

She does become more and more steadily imbedded into my present; drives down once a week or more, and leaves food at my doorstep after night calls. Sometimes she buys Ivy little handmade trinkets from the shitzville farmer’s market or finds garage sale tools for Posy. I discover she has a new appreciation for food of all kinds and we check out ever hole in the wall and dive bar across the miles that separate us. And of course music. She always had her stuff; classical, jazz and mopey alternative rock, but now she doesn’t bat an eyelash when we listen to metal, bobs her head to hip hop, and introduces me to techno and ambient chill. When I finally get to hear her play the cello again, it’s something haunting and sweet that sets my spine on fire. I ask her what it is, but she just says ‘Irish’, and smiles.

I relearn her body which is kind of insane, because I remember it like it was yesterday that she was nineteen and flawless. Now she’s twenty-eight and her body is different - everything is different - but the same kind of wonderful that brands all my memories of her. There are sounds I never thought I’d hear again that pour out of her mouth. It feels so fucking good that I think this is enough.

This is priceless.

Nothing else matters but that we’re here now.

_~^~_

At least until we meet at my bar one night only to have Katniss and Golden Boy show up.

Fuck my life.

I may have failed to mention to him that I’ve been seeing the girl he was worried about for months now. Her face lights up like a goddam Christmas tree when Mellark comes in and moments later they’re hugging and laughing like fucking twins separated at birth. It doesn’t help when he says, “Gale! You didn’t tell me Madge was ‘the girl’!”

She raises an eyebrow and mouths ‘the girl?’ to me, a clear question mark in her expression. I pretend to be preoccupied with chalking my cue. Of course Catnip hardly bats an eyelash as the two of them spend the evening huddled in a booth, catching up while we play pool. But it’s not like I can fucking concentrate, what with her talking a mile a minute to Golden Boy. I mean I don’t care or anything, she can talk to whoever she wants, I just wonder if he is getting the full
story, if he knows where she’s been and what’s happened to her since he’s so fucking easy to talk to.

What about me? Am I not easy to talk to?

I’m livid by the end of the evening. She tries to sidle up next to me when Katniss and I have finished our last round, but I can’t even sit down by this point. I don’t know what excuse I make when I leave; I just need to get the fuck away from them. But she follows me anyway.

“Gale? Gale! What’s going on? What on earth is your problem?!”

What is my problem?! Is she kidding me?!

I lose it.

“Why can’t you just tell me? You know every goddam thing about me, and you can’t tell me one fucking thing about you!”

She rolls her eyes, huffing a breath. “Get your head out of your ass. You know everything about me that’s important, more than anyone else on the fucking planet. There’s a part of my life that’s over. It’s dead, like an ischemic limb. You don’t linger over necrotic tissue, you amputate. Am I not right, Gale? Tell me I’m not right!”

“And Mellark? What about him? Is it okay for him to know?”

She shoots me a glare worthy of Katniss. “Get over yourself. You have no fucking idea what we were talking about; you were too busy hanging out with your best friend, who is a crazy-hot girl I happen to know you wanted to fuck in college. But do you see me throwing a hissy fit? No. Because I trust you and I expect you to give me the same fucking courtesy.”

She storms off a second later and before I can blink, I hear her tires skidding across the pavement.

It occurs to me, this is why she always drives.

~*~

I almost text her that night but I don’t.

Instead I show up at her apartment just as she’s leaving - she slams into my chest when she swings open the front door with muffled ‘umph’.

She can’t seem to make eye contact with me and I can tell she’s off kilter, which makes me relax. I’ve felt unhinged since the moment she walked into my hospital room. The asshole in me is glad at least now we’re both out of whack.

“Were you going somewhere?” I ask after she stumbles back into her living room, awkwardly offering me a seat at her kitchen table. Her place is sparse but clean. She takes off the poop-brown coat and throws it on the couch taking mine as well.

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“I’m out of hot chocolate. Was going to get some.”

Then we’re both sitting at her rickety kitchen table and I’m staring at the scratch marks on the metal top. I had so much to say in the car, words to apologize for being angry and stupid, and to try to make her understand that I need to know what happened to her, what she had to go through.
How I failed her.

But before I can speak she says, “Do you know why I didn’t say anything when you sent me that fucking awful text message that you were leaving?”

My eyes start to burn and I ball my fists.

She waits for answer.

Fuck this.

She’s gonna make me say it, make me tell her that she was too good to follow some poor kid across the country when there were mansions and concert halls beckoning. Yeah, all right. I knew that. And I’ll tell her just as soon as I remember how my mouth works--

“I knew I didn’t deserve you,” she says.

Wait, what?

She looks me straight in the eye. Doesn’t flinch. I try to remember if I’ve been drinking. I must be completely wasted. That’s the only thing that makes sense. Except we aren’t drinking.

“I always knew, you know. I knew you’d do something incredible with your life, be somebody all on your own, better than all the worthless assholes we used to hang around. So when you said you were going to Wash U, I thought I could ask… to come visit or help you move. But really what had I ever done in my pitiful self-indulgent life to deserve you? And sure it felt good - it felt so right - being with you, but how could you really ever respect someone like me? A silly little rich girl who wanted to play music for a living? So I thought, ok, it feels like someone’s ripping out my kidney. But it’s for the best.”

She tucks her hair behind her ears. I open my mouth ‘cuz I know I need to say something, but she’s taken my words. She can’t be serious right now.

“And then mom was so sick. Nursing was perfect because I needed to take care of her. I even thought, hey doctor’s needed nurses right? But I couldn’t save her. And when my father said he’d make my problems go away and all I had to do was marry that horrible excuse of a human being, I thought, what’s the worst that could happen? I’d be miserable? Lots of people are unhappy, why should I be privileged? What had I ever done to earn the right to be happy? So I thought, everything about this is wrong, but ok. It’s for the best.

“Then one day I watched our neighbor kick his dog in the stomach for peeing on the porch. I called an animal abuse hotline, had the dog removed from him before the week was out. And it occurred to me; maybe it was ok to want as much for myself as I wanted for the neighbor’s dog. It cost me a lot: I walked out of that door with literally nothing but the clothes on my back, but I was happy. And I thought - for the first time in my life - maybe, if I’m not hurting anyone, it’s ok to be happy.

“So I’m not sorry. I’m not sorry I let you go, I’m not sorry for a single fucking shitty thing that happened after that, and I don’t need you to be sorry for me either. Because we’re here now and I am finally finally brave enough to say what needs to be said.”

I need to get out of this room. I need to not look at her sleepy eyes and imagine bruises around them. I need to not be in a space where she’s telling me she didn’t deserve a two bit street dealer. I need to be anywhere else but here; maybe at Cato’s mansion where I can break every goddamn bone in his body or at her father’s so I can squeeze his windpipe until his fat lips turn blue. But I cannot be at her kitchen table for a second longer.

“I know you want to bolt,” she says, and I’m so fucking tired of her reading me like a magazine.
“That’s ok,” she adds. “But. I’m gonna tell you what I couldn’t tell you then. I want you to stay. I want you to figure out your shit, so you we can have something real this time. If you can do that, you won’t ever have to doubt that I want you - that I want this - ever again. And if you still have to leave then fine, but at least this time you know how I feel.”

I don’t even realize I’m standing. I’ve pushed the chair back and I’m leaning over the table. I can’t catch my breath. Why am I breathing so hard? And she’s just watching me. She has this look on her face and I don’t know what she’s thinking. Why don’t I ever know what she’s thinking?

I have to get out of this house.

On cue she stands and walks to the living room, returning with my jacket. I fucking hate that she thinks she knows everything about me.

“Where’s your coat?” I demanded.

She steps back confused. She looks totally lost.

About fucking time.

“You wanted hot chocolate, right? So let’s get some hot chocolate. Go get your coat.”

She’s still standing there, looking at me like I’m a unicorn. That’s right. I want to ask her how it feels, to be standing up when your life gets flipped upside down. I’d be the person to question: she does it to me every single fucking day.

Suddenly she’s scrambling to pull on her ugly coat and her fuzzy boots both of which I can’t wait to replace. I wait for her to get her keys and find our way down the stairs.

The cold night air hits me like a semi truck and it feels so good. I pull her under my arm as we battle the crazy wind and I’m ready. Ready for a hailstorm, a hurricane, for the fucking elements to give me their worst. My kitten is a lioness; I’m up for anything. We walk to a 7-Eleven and I buy hot chocolate that we drink in the cold, huddled together stamping our feet. I can’t go back to her apartment, because I need to sleep with her next to me and I won’t sleep in the same place where she told me she was treated worse than someone’s dog. I’ll have to kill something and I can’t hold her and kill at the same time. So I ask her to come home with me, even though home is an hour away and she’ll have to leave with just her wallet, cell phone and the clothes on her back. She chuckles at this and says it’s not the first time.

Not the first time, I think, but it will be the last.

She finally gets in my car. When we get home I make her dinner.

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I’m warm when I wake up, but I’d be warmer if I had a body under my arm. I take in the nylon walls that filter the sunlight and sink further into my sleeping bag. I blearily see a shock of blonde hair, but I look carefully: defined, but distinctly feminine biceps.

I always check first now.

Then I pull her gently under my arm. She mumbles a little then curls herself lazily into my side, snoring softly.
Madge is not a morning person.

It’s finally the smell of Golden Boy’s pancakes that wakes her up. She’s warm and ruffled; her hair is a rat’s nest and her eyes are puffy. She wordlessly drapes my flannel shirt from last night over her shoulders and pulls her hair into a messy bun, leaning forward to kiss me. Then she’s shimmying out of my tent asking Mellark where the syrup is.

She’s like the fucking sun.

I crawl out of the tent where I find Golden Boy flipping pancakes, while Katniss and Madge brush their teeth over by the water jugs. Mellark waves at me, a grin splitting his stupid face. He’s having a blast; Katniss finally has a break from fellowship and they couldn’t wait to get out of the city and into the mountains. Madge hadn’t ever been camping and I thought, why not?

I think we all needed to get to a higher elevation.

The kettle starts whistling (I’ve stopped asking why we have a whistling kettle for camping) and moments later I smell coffee. Katniss is loading up a plate and I watch Mellark sneak a quick kiss to her temple when he thinks I’m not watching. She tries hard not to smile, but her jaw just won’t listen. I’m expecting news from them any day now, but I’m not even sure they’d tell anyone. I wouldn’t be surprise if in a conversation one day it comes out they’ve been married for years and just not thought it was noteworthy. There’s something about them...I don’t know. Like marriage wouldn’t even be a big step, just the next logical progression, like brushing your teeth after you wake up.

Sometimes you just move forward.

Lips on my earlobe interrupt my thoughts.

“Coffee?” she says.

“Coffee sounds amazing,” I answer.

I love my life.

~Fin.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I’m so so sad to say goodbye to this AU! I had so much fun writing this, I hope you all enjoyed reading it. Sorry again that this last chapter was so serious, but then again…if anyone wants an epilogue, maybe I could make up for it…

Thank you so much to everyone who read, reviewed, and gave kudos. You guys are the driving force (that and Gale’s general stubbornness). I hope we’ll meet again soon!

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