Blowout

by annieoakley1

Summary

“You’re fifteen years younger than I am. I’m your boss. I’m technically your father’s boss. There’s a pretty significant power imbalance here, Katniss. How do you think your parents would feel if we were together? What do you think everyone would assume?” Everlark. Modern Day AU.
Part 1

The blowout was the cherry on top of a shit sundae that was Katniss’s post-collegiate life. One moment she was trying to keep her composure, then suddenly she was trying to maintain control of her car as it careened wildly into the other lane. Not just a flat tire, which she could easily fix on her own thanks to her father’s tutelage, but a blowout— a rapid loss of pressure leading to an explosion that had the ability to destroy her if she didn’t keep her head straight.

How apt it happened now. How perfect a parallel it was to her relationship with Gale. Although, she mused (with shaky hands still clenching the steering wheel as her heart continued to race down the interstate) it wasn’t the loss of pressure but the sudden overabundance of it causing their explosion tonight.

Deep breath, she told herself. Take a deep, calming breath. Her eyes fell shut as she concentrated on the slow inhales and exhales, then popped open when she heard the insistent tapping on her window.

“Are you okay?”

She pressed down on the power button and met the eyes of her Good Samaritan, who also happened to be a familiar face. While she’d only met Peeta a couple times in passing—he was a friend of her father’s—there was something about him that struck her enough to remember him.

“Katniss,” he said with a sigh as he recognized her immediately. “Do you want me to call your dad?”

She managed a firm no before dissolving into tears. “Don’t call him,” she begged as he opened her car door to help her out. Her father didn’t need to see her like this, a sobbing wreck all broken up over a break-up. How embarrassing.

“It’s been a bad night,” she admitted as Peeta repeated his first question. His concern for her was visible, and she didn’t shrug off his touch as he clapped her shoulder and squeezed affectionately.

“Sounds like you need a drink,” he said after the story of her fight with Gale came tumbling out. Then he teased, “You’re 21, right?”

She straightened her shoulders and scowled. “I’m 22. And a half.”

He laughed at that and she scowled harder, but she allowed him to call a tow truck for her, and then he walked her to his car and held the door open for her, too.

At the bar, she learned a little more about Peeta Mellark as she nursed her glass of white wine. She learned that he ordered his drink by requesting their best beer on tap. She learned that he wasn’t actually a coal miner, but a mine safety engineer. And she learned that despite being a couple years younger than her father, they had the same lame sense of humor that Katniss rolled her eyes at but secretly loved.

“Got any kids?” she asked as the conversation started to dwindle.

“Nope,” he answered simply.

She was surprised. “Really?”

“Never been married, either. I’m a spinster.”
She took another delicate sip of her wine. “Well, I’m never getting married, so I guess I’ll be a spinster, too.”

He picked up on the bitterness behind her comment, and he swiveled on his bar stool to face her. “Want to talk about it?” he asked, probing gently.

The weird thing was, she kind of did. But no way was she going to admit that she and Gale got into a massive fight because she didn’t want to give him a blow job, and how that escalated into another fight that ended with him ending it.

“Not really.”

She was hungry, though. She thought about telling him that but then imagined he’d reply with, “Well hello, Hungry. I’m Peeta. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Want to split some crab cakes?” she asked instead.

“Absolutely.”

They chatted some more as they ate and she finished her wine, and then he drove her home, where he stopped in to talk with her father as she lingered in the kitchen.

“You okay, sweetie?” her father asked after Peeta left. He only knew about the blowout, not the breakup, but she was already feeling a little better about both.

“Yeah, Dad. I’m okay.”

Katniss didn’t have many ways to fill her time outside of looking for a teaching position and tending to things around her childhood home. Her parents were being incredibly supportive of her, both financially and emotionally, but sometimes she really just needed to get out of that house.

With limited options in her small town, she often headed to the mall, where she could wander around for hours without drawing much attention to herself. These weekly dates alone were becoming part of her routine, and she always ended her trip with a soft pretzel before stopping at her favorite store, an art supply/craft shop near the main entrance.

Before Prim left for college, she’d raised a brow when Katniss pulled her into The Art Box for the first time. But Prim was off to a fresh start across the country, with a whole world of possibilities open to her, and all Katniss had was a degree and anemic resume, so planning how she would decorate her classroom after she secured a teaching job was one of the few things that made her happy.

That was three months ago and planning was still all she had.

“Hey.”

She turned immediately at the sound of his voice, and he smiled kindly at her as he shifted the small basket filled with watercolors from one hand to the other.

“Hi,” she replied as she took a step back from the inspirational posters. “Working on a new project?”

It was easy to talk to Peeta, and they now chatted amicably on the few occasions they ran into each other. She knew he painted as a hobby, just as he knew that she liked to hit up the outdoor
archery range when the weather was decent.

“Not really, just replenishing the supplies while I’m in the area. What are you up to?”

“Just… daydreaming, I guess,” she sighed. He’d already heard her voice her frustrations about finding a job, and she was sure her father also kept him up-to-date about it as well. She seemed to lack all of the connections now necessary to get a teaching position, and she was starting to feel like she’d never get a classroom of her own.

His brow furrowed as he looked over her shoulder to see what she was browsing. “You should pick something,” he said. “Your starter piece. Maybe it’ll be good luck for you.”

Luck didn’t exist, she wanted to say. It was all about who you know, and she didn’t know anyone. But before she could snort derisively at his suggestion, he smiled charmingly again. “Come on, it’s on me.”

“You don’t have to do that, Peeta.”

She liked that she could call him Peeta. It didn’t feel weird, or somehow disrespectful.

“I want to. So what will it be? Einstein sticking out his tongue or the ‘Hang in there!’ kitten?”

She thought for a moment before shyly reaching for a world map.

“Another classic,” he said with a nod. They walked to the checkout together, and she thanked him again before they parted ways at the Orange Julius.

“I’m sure I’ll see you around,” he smiled again before leaving, and as she tucked the poster under her arm, she hoped it wouldn’t be too long before their paths crossed again.

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“I need a job,” she told her father for the millionth time.

“You need some money?” he asked, absently fishing for his wallet to pull out a twenty.

“No, Dad,” she sighed, exasperated. “I mean, yeah, but not, like, an allowance. I need a salary. I need an actual paycheck.”

“You’ll get there, Kitty,” he told her as he went back to his newspaper. “You’ve got the rest of your life to work. Why don’t you try to enjoy your time off while you can?”

He wasn’t getting it. She graduated college nearly six months ago. “I applied at a few stores today,” she admitted.

He lowered the paper to eye her warily. “I thought we agreed that you’d wait for a teaching job? Your mom can always use your help around here. And if you need some money, just ask.”

She bit back a not-so-grateful response. Her parents were being really great with her, and she knew they liked that they were now in a position to take care of her without sacrifice. There were some lean years growing up, before Katniss’s mother graduated from nursing school and prior to her dad’s promotion in the mines. Her parents had her right out of high school and they struggled for everything, and she knew they didn’t want her to have to do the same.

But she wanted to do it on her own. She wanted her grades and boards to mean something, even if it was just a callback at the local grocery store.
“I want to be able to support myself.”

“Well, you can’t do that on minimum wage, Katniss.”

The truthfulness of that statement was doubly annoying. “I know. But it’s a start at least. I think it’ll be good for me to get out there.”

He heaved a sigh as he dropped his paper onto the table, and she was sure he was going to lecture her again. Instead, he paused thoughtfully before relaxing back in his chair. “I think Peeta’s office is looking for a secretary. At least you’d make some more money there. I’ll give him a call tonight.”

Something about that thrilled her, and deep down she knew it wasn’t just the prospect of employment.

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“Sounds like you’ve got a crush on him,” Madge stated before cracking her gum, and Katniss winced as the obnoxious sound reverberated over the phone line.

She responded immediately with an indignant, “Do not!” Then she realized how damn childish they both sounded, and she rolled over on her back and stared up her bedroom ceiling in frustration.

“Maybe it would be good for you, you know. Things didn’t work out with Gale, so maybe it’s time to put yourself out there again.”

“He’s fourteen years older than I am.” It was a simple, factual statement, but she said it with a resigned sigh. “And he’s technically my boss now, and friends with my father. It couldn’t be more inappropriate.”

“Sure it could. But he’s not married, and he sounds nice, and you definitely think he’s cute.”

She never said that.

“And,” Madge continued. “There’s something really hot and forbidden about it. Oh! And I bet he would be super into it. Men love younger girls.

“He’d probably be pretty thankful. Mature, and experienced, and thankful.”

“I gotta go, Madge,” Katniss said. She didn’t wait for a reply before disconnecting the call, and as her thumb hovered over the screen, she realized how pathetic she was. These were supposed to be the best years of her life, but she was spending them in her childhood home, gossiping with her only friend on a cell phone her parents still paid for.

She needed an out, and she hoped the new job at the mines would be it.

Peeta’s “office” was a double-wide with three separate rooms. Her desk was in the main area, just off his door, and she was disappointed to find out how little time he actually spent there.

But when they were done at that site, they’d hitch the trailer and drive off to the next one. For once she was gainfully employed, and the stability the job offered meant everything to her now.

Peeta’s presence, scarce as it might be, was just a bonus.

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“You were in the Air Force?”

He nodded as he leaned further back on the sofa that was in the corner of his office. They were in the middle of a conversation about his family when he dropped that bomb, and her eyes darted around the space for evidence, particularly the pictorial kind, because the idea of Peeta in a flight suit was definitely intriguing. But he didn’t have any photographs of himself. He didn’t have any photographs at all.

“How do you go from that to…this?” she asked curiously, her eyes back on him.

“I guess I just fell into it like half the other guys who end up in the mines around here.”

But most of the miners she knew did it because they didn’t have much of a choice; it was really one of the only ways to make a good living in their small town. Peeta, however, came from money. Apparently a lot of it, from what she discerned while on the job. Miners gossiped. They also seemed to resent Peeta, too, even though he was kind as could be to everyone he came across. Her father seemed to be one of his few work friends.

She caught sight of one of his paintings hanging on the wall, and her train of thought switched tracks. “You remind me of Prim. You can do anything and you’re good at everything.”

He laughed lightly as he shook his head. “Far from it.”

She didn’t believe that for a minute, but before she had the chance to call him out on it, he sat forward and fixed his eyes on her, openly staring at her until she shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit, Katniss,” he finally said. “There isn’t a coal miner in the county who hasn’t heard all about how smart and amazing you are.”

“That’s just my dad being a dad,” she said with an eye roll.

“Not all parents think their children hang the moon. Besides, I’ve gotten to know you a little better the last few weeks, and he’s not exaggerating.”

She didn’t believe that for a minute, either, and she didn’t want to talk about herself, so she skillfully spun the conversation back around to Peeta. “So you got to travel a lot. Which place was your favorite?”

A slow smile spread across his face as he considered it. “Probably Italy.”

That sounded wonderful, she thought. Beautiful countryside, delicious food. “I haven’t even left the country yet,” she admitted.

“You’ve still got plenty of time for that.”

“I guess,” she grumbled as she picked at the remnants of her lunch. Last week, Peeta strolled into his office while she was eating a microwave dinner at her desk, and he seemed surprised that she wasn’t having lunch on the site with her father. After she explained that they shared enough meals together at home, he asked her to join him in his office. It’s been a date every day since.

“If you could go anywhere, where would you go?”

She had just allowed herself to consider it when they were interrupted by a loud knock at the front door. Peeta hefted himself out of his seat to answer it, motioning for Katniss to continue with her lunch. When he returned a moment later, Gale Hawthorne was trailing behind him, and Katniss’s eyes widened as she wiped at her face with the back of her hand.
“Hey, Catnip.”

“What are you doing here?” She hadn’t meant for it to come out as harshly as it did.

“Just had lunch with my dad. He told me you were working here now, so I wanted to drop by and say hello.”

She sat her plate down on the coffee table as Peeta excused himself, and after he was gone, she managed a half-hearted ‘hello’ in response.

Everyone thought she was so upset about the break up, that she was heartsick because she was in love with Gale and it didn’t work out. But the truth was that it was the loss of their friendship that hurt her, and a romantic entanglement was always something she could have done without as far as they were concerned. He wanted to explore their relationship, though, and she had gone along with it just to make her best friend happy.

A lot of good that had done.

“I better get back to work,” she said, standing and brushing past him. “Tell your dad I said hi.”

Peeta must have left the trailer to tend to something else because there was no sign of him as she made her way back to her desk. Gale left quickly after that, mumbling a hurried farewell as he failed to meet her eyes.

She trudged through the rest of her workday in a bad mood, the lightness she felt during lunch with Peeta now long gone. As upset as Gale’s visit left her, it was the fact that he disrupted her alone time with Peeta that angered her most.

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A couple days later, she was working diligently when Peeta rushed out of his office and breezed past her without acknowledgement. She watched as the door slammed shut behind him, and she tried to shake off the hurt and get back to the report she was typing up on his behalf. At lunch time, she ate alone at her desk again.

About three hours later, he returned with her father. Katniss saw the cast on her dad’s foot before he was fully in the trailer, and she jumped out of her seat to help him, even though Peeta was handling it fine on his own. “What happened?” she asked worriedly.

“Oh, some very dangerous mining stuff is all,” he smiled as they walked him to Peeta’s couch. As he put a little too much weight on his injured leg, the grin turned into a grimace.

“Your dad slipped on some ice in the parking lot,” Peeta answered.

“Hey now! I thought we agreed to come up with a better story than that.”

“Sorry, Jack. Katniss, it was a bear attack.”

“Is it broken?” she asked, ignoring their jokes.

“Yeah, but it’s a not that bad, sweetie. I’ll be back on both feet in a few weeks.”

It was a flimsy reassurance, but she allowed it. Peeta drove her father home that day, and Katniss rode behind him in her dad’s car. When they were in the living room of their house, as her mother fussed over her dad’s injury, Peeta gently squeezed her hand and promised to pick her up for work in the morning so she could retrieve her car.
“Or you could take the day off and spend it with your dad,” he added as they both looked on while her parents bickered mildly. “I won’t tell the boss.”

Across the room, her father smiled and pulled her mother down to him, finally shutting her up with a soft kiss. She and Peeta averted their eyes.

“I think my mom has everything under control,” Katniss said. “So I guess I’ll see you in the morning?”

“Looking forward to it,” he admitted as she saw him out. She softly thanked him again for all his assistance with her father, and they lingered at the front door until she shyly retreated.

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Snow often hit their area the hardest in late February, and that year was no exception. Katniss woke one Monday morning to nearly a foot of accumulation. She groaned when she realized she and her mother would be snowed in, so she threw the covers off and bundled up, planning on tackling the shoveling duties since her father was still on the mend.

The sound of a shovel scrapping against the uncovered pavement caught her attention as she zipped up her coat. Her mother was still getting ready for work, and Prim wasn’t due home from college until her spring break the following month. She slipped on her boots and headed out through the kitchen side door, and she tried to contain her smile when she saw Peeta in their driveway.

“What are you doing?” she asked, rushing out to greet him. His cheeks were pink from the frost, and he looked adorable in a dark ski cap with the soft waves of his blond hair peeking out from beneath.

“Hey!” he responded cheerfully before returning to his work. “I didn’t want your cars to be stuck in the garage. Figured I’d make myself useful.”

“I could have done it, you know.”

He grinned as he continued to clear the snow. “Oh, I have no doubt about that.”

They were interrupted by her mother, who thanked him gleefully when she came outside. “I was just about to call off,” she admitted before heading inside to make breakfast. She invited Peeta to stay, but he politely declined, noting that he had to be at work soon.

“Me too,” Katniss said with a sigh, already dreading the commute.

“Why don’t you ride with me again?” he asked. Both Peeta and her mother had SUVs, but Katniss’s small sedan wouldn’t navigate as well in these conditions. She accepted gratefully, and then rushed inside to get ready in record time.

Peeta was having coffee with her mother in the kitchen when she returned, and they left quickly to head to the site. “Thanks again,” she said as she buckled the safety belt in the front seat of his Chevrolet Tahoe. “I hate snow, so you saved my morning.”

“I’m glad.”

She asked about his weekend, which he called “uneventful” and she admitted hers was as well.

“So no hot dates?” he asked, and she laughed caustically.
“Yeah, right.”

“I, uh, actually thought you and Gale might have worked things out,” he said, his eyes trained on the icy road ahead.

“There’s nothing to work out,” she replied.

Peeta shook his head as he seemed to consider something. “That kid’s going to regret it.”

She shrugged absently as she looked out her window at the passing snowy scenery. “I’m sure he’s already moved on.”

“Multiple times,” she added, sharing a smile with Peeta.

“Probably just trying to cope with the pain of losing you.”

“He’s the one who ended things,” she said with yet another shrug.

“Are you still upset about that?” he wondered, and she confessed that it was only the loss of their friendship that really bothered her.

“Maybe I’m just not meant to have a love life.”

He laughed softly, his full attention seemingly back on the road. “If I were about 15 years younger, I’d be investing a lot of time in proving you wrong about that.”

She raised a brow at that comment. “Really?”

“I like to think so. Truth is, I’d probably be too nervous to ever ask you out.”

He looked over at her with a smile then, and something about the look in his eyes told her that he wasn’t just saying all this to make her feel better about anything.

The idea that he could possibly be attracted to her did things to her body that she wasn’t prepared for, and she squirmed in her seat for the rest of the drive.

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As the snowfall melted, her father’s injury slowly healed. But he wasn’t quite ready to go back to work, and he was driving her and her mother crazy with his cabin fever. When Peeta called one Saturday for help with an electrical issue at his house, her dad was on his (still shaky) feet a second later, ready to be on his way. He asked Katniss if she wanted to tag along, and she didn’t hesitate before agreeing.

They pulled up to a nice sized two-story stone house across the town, and Katniss felt suddenly shy as she trailed behind her father up Peeta’s walkway. There was still so much she wanted to know about Peeta, even as they learned plenty about each other during their workdays together.

“Hey, thanks for stopping by,” Peeta said as he opened his front door to them. His smile widened when he saw Katniss, and he invited them both inside.

He led her father to a guestroom upstairs, explaining that he finally got around to replacing the switches in the back bedroom when he ran into trouble. She tuned them out as they discussed the wiring, and her eyes roamed the empty space, bored by the lack of information it presented.

As they were immersed in their work, Katniss felt free to roam the hallway outside. It was sparsely decorated, and in many ways it was obvious that the house belonged to a bachelor, but there was
also something very quaint about his home. There weren’t many photos lining the walls, but there were the occasional pieces of his art that he must have liked well enough to display here. She admired each one as she passed it.

There was an updated bathroom the next door down, and another small bedroom past that. The door at the end of the hall was cracked open, and she could barely make out the bed off to the side of the room. It must be where Peeta slept, she realized. His bedroom. If she were bolder, she’d explore it while they were preoccupied, but she respected his privacy enough for it to trump her curiosity.

She returned to the other bedroom, her absence missed. Apparently her father figured out the issue pretty quickly, and he was ribbing Peeta for failing to see it. She knew her dad didn’t have a mean bone in his body, but he wasn’t picking up on the way Peeta wasn’t quite in on the teasing about his masculinity. Coupling this with a few offhand comments he’d made to her about his family before, Katniss realized it was probably something he was sensitive about.

“Guess I have to turn in my man card now,” he said lightly, but his smile wasn’t reaching his eyes.

“We’ll collect it at the next meeting,” her dad chuckled. He turned back to Katniss as he rolled up his sleeves. “Ready to hit the road, Kid?”

Not really, she thought. It’d be another boring Saturday at home with her parents. Katniss was actually just as eager for her father to heal as he was, because as much as she loved them, she preferred it when they were always out and about with their own lives, and she was afforded some privacy and time alone. “Yeah, okay.”

“Thanks for coming over,” Peeta told them at the door, but Katniss’s attention was focused on the tops of her shoes peeking out from beneath the hem of her jeans. She mumbled a quick goodbye, and followed her father back to the car.

Later that evening, her phone buzzed with a text notification, and she was surprised to see it was from Peeta. They texted occasionally before, but not often.

Peeta: Everything okay?

He must have picked up on her attitude that afternoon. Not surprising. He was always strangely perceptive of her feelings.

Katniss: I’m alright. Just bored.

And frustrated, but that went without saying. Peeta was on the receiving end of many of her rants about her ongoing search for a teaching job. It was another thing that she had to dwell on during nights in with her parents.

Before he had a chance to reply, she quickly typed out an apology for her father’s offhand comment earlier. He has a lame sense of humor, she said.

Peeta: No worries. I know he didn’t mean anything by it.

Katniss thought deliberately about her next reply before writing, I think you can keep your man card. Being a former fighter pilot and all.

Peeta: A cookie-baking and flower-painting former fighter pilot. He added a winking emoticon at the end and she resisted the urge to tease him for that.

Katniss: So what are your plans for the night?
Peeta: Don’t have any.

Peeta: Maybe I’ll bake some cookies or paint some flowers, not sure yet.

Katniss: I don’t know how you don’t have any plans. I saw your satellite dish today.

Peeta: Fan of premium channels, are we?

Katniss: I wouldn’t know. My dad is a firm believer in basic cable.

Peeta: Feel free to stop by some time and see how the other half lives.

She invited herself over the next Friday night.

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For every night she spent on his couch, the space between them seemed to decrease by an inch or so.

When they were only half a cushion apart, she brought up her bare feet to curl under her body, and the heel of her foot brushed the outside of his thigh, but she pretended she didn’t notice.

The following week, he draped his arm over the back of the sofa, and she leaned in ever so slightly.

She was sure he was feeling it, too. Whatever this was between them, it had to be somewhat mutual. So she continued to move closer until there was barely any breathing room between their bodies. One of her friends in college once told her that she thought too much, that she should just act every once in awhile. Peeta was freezing up next to her, that she could feel, but she didn’t want to over think this, too.

So she kissed him. It wasn’t a smooth, fluid motion. She stumbled a bit as she turned to press herself against him, and her lips missed at first, landing more at the corner of his mouth. But she corrected it quickly, her nose slightly bumping his as their lips pressed together.

Then he was kissing her back, eagerly wrapping his arms around her to pull her more firmly against him as his mouth moved with hers. It deepened quickly, her lips parting to offer more of herself. He moaned softly deep in the back of his throat, and she sighed, too. He was really kissing her back, and she wanted nothing more than to give into the temptation and slip her tongue against his so she could taste the inside of his sweet mouth.

But then it was over as quickly as it began, and he was gently pushing her away. “Katniss, stop. We can’t. I’m sorry.”

She blinked, dumbfounded. But he kissed her back. He wanted her, too. She’d been so sure.

“We can’t,” he repeated again, and it almost seemed like he was lecturing himself as much as her.

She scrambled out of her seat and rushed to the door, slipping her shoes on as she tried to hide her mortification. “I should go.”

“You don’t have to. We should talk about this.”

“No, I should go.”

He raced after her, jogging behind as she escaped onto his front porch. “Will I see you Monday?”
“Of course,” she answered. She still needed her job, after all.

His shoulders sagged slightly as he exhaled. “I’m sorry, Katniss.”

She didn’t want to hear it. She just wanted to get to her car.

And this was exactly why she liked to over think things.

“Bye,” he called out pathetically, but she didn’t reply as she started up her engine.

The house was dark when she arrived home. Her parents were out on a date-night and Prim wasn’t due home for the summer for several more weeks. She climbed the stairs slowly and stripped down to underwear before climbing into bed. The streetlights outside filtered through her blinds and cast shadows across her ceiling, and she stared up at them as she tried to think of anything but Peeta.

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It was awkward now at work. He smiled softly at her that Monday morning and offered up a hello, but she only nodded an acknowledgment before settling in at her desk. During lunch, she pointedly pulled out a brown paper bag while finishing up a report for Peeta, and she hoped that was a flash of hurt that crossed his face before he covered it.

Things were tense for the rest of the week until that Friday, when she arrived in the morning to find a box of cupcakes waiting on her desk. Peeta’s office door was shut as she slowly lifted the white cardboard top.

The first three had ‘Happy Birthday Katniss’ piped on the top of a bed of icing and surrounded by delicate sugar flowers. The bottom three were a little sloppy, which made her smile. “Please have lunch with me today?” they asked, and she knew she would agree.

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“Can I talk to you in my office when you get a moment?” he asked a few weeks later, and she was a little put off by how serious he sounded.

“Yeah, I just have to make a couple calls first.”

He nodded before heading back, shutting the door behind him, and she worried her lip as she finished up the last of her work.

It felt odd to knock on his door, but she did, and he beckoned her inside. “Is something wrong?”

“You know how you’re always complaining that you need to have connections to get a teaching job around here?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I guess now would be a good time to mention I have connections.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, sitting in the chair across from his desk.

“I never mentioned it before because they didn’t have any positions open, but one of my childhood friends is the principal at the Springfield middle school. I asked her to let me know if they were ever hiring, and she called this morning. One of the sixth grade teachers is moving and she needs a replacement for the fall.”
Katniss was literally on the edge of her seat now as she waited for him to continue. “She knows about you, and she wants to meet with you sometime next week,”

“For real?” Katniss grinned, unable to contain her excitement. “I have an interview?”

Her enthusiasm seemed to be contagious as he smiled just as widely. “You’ve got an interview.”

“Thank you so much, Peeta. There’s no way I would have gotten it without you.”

“No need to thank me. I just told her about you, but you’re going to be the one who seals the deal, Katniss.”

She wanted to enjoy the moment for as long as possible before the nerves set in, but then a troublesome thought crossed her mind, and her smile fell. “Peeta, did you do this because… because of what happened last month? I mean, do you want me to leave this job because of it.”

“No,” he stated emphatically, the worry because she assumed that now etched in his features. “Not at all, Katniss. I’d hate to lose you here, you’ve got to know that. I’ll miss you like crazy if you get this job.”

“It’s a big if.”

“It’s really not,” he replied, sliding a piece of paper across his desk. “Here’s her number. You can take off any time you want.”

“Thank you,” she repeated as she accepted it. “And for what it’s worth, I’m really sorry for what I did.”

She was at the door when he called her name again. “Yeah?”

“I’m not,” is all he said, and her brow furrowed in confusion as she made her way back to her desk.

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Delly Cartwright was incredibly nice to her, and she made Katniss’s first interview about a hundred times less stressful by being so friendly and happy. They talked for a couple hours, discussing at length Katniss’s teaching methods and goals. At the end of the interview, Delly offered her the position, and Katniss had to ask her to repeat it because she was sure she didn’t hear right.

It was her first instinct to drive back to their office, and she hoped that Peeta would actually be in his office for once instead of somewhere on the site. As she pulled into her parking space, she spotted him several yards away, orange mining helmet still on as he spoke to a coal miner. She waited in her car until they finished their discussion, and once the other man was gone, she got out and chased after him. On the way over, she thought about pretending it hadn’t gone well, then surprising him with the news. But that was all forgotten as she got closer and called out after him. He turned around at the sound of his name, and she rushed to him, wrapping her arms around him in a fierce hug that he eagerly returned. “I got it!”

He lifted her off her feet, spinning them slowly as his arms tightened around her. “I knew you’d do fantastic.”

It felt like a long while before he set her back down, and still she didn’t want to let go of him. If there were any of her father’s coworkers around, though, it would look suspicious, and that
realization was the only thing that gave her the willpower to pull away.

“C’mon, let’s order a celebratory lunch,” he said, taking her hand in his and leading her to the trailer. It felt so good that she didn’t ever want to let go, and she didn’t give a damn about who saw them in that moment.

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One of the best things about her new teaching position was that it didn’t start until the end of the summer, so she was still able to work with Peeta until school began. She still thought about the kiss they shared, still wondered what would have happened had he not stopped it, but it was enough to spend her weekdays with him. Then, after what felt like some sort of probationary period on both their parts, she began visiting him at home again.

There were still moments where Katniss felt like the attraction was too much to ignore. The times where their laughter would trail off, their eyes would meet, and she’d remember just what it felt like to have his lips pressed against hers. But he was always the one to break the spell first, and she would be left staring after his retreating form as he escaped behind his office door.

She could never quite figure him out. There were plenty of times when she could have sworn he was flirting with her, and some of the looks he sent her way shot straight to her core. She was so grateful that Prim was home for the summer, because the more time spent with her little sister meant less time with Peeta, and it saved her sanity. He hadn’t even crossed her mind since she said goodbye to him at work that afternoon.

That didn’t stop her from feeling like someone had punched her in the gut when she saw him and a nondescript blonde woman seated across from each other at the restaurant. As the waiter led her family to their table, she tried not to stare their way.

It felt like the words on the menu were blurring together as her parents and Prim talked about their day. She stayed quiet, pretending to peruse the entrees, when her mother mentioned Peeta’s name.

“Oh, I didn’t know they were coming here!” she said with a light laugh. “Should we go say hi?”

“They’re on a date, Millie!” her father replied.

Another punch. There went that small shred of hope that it wasn’t how it looked. Katniss lowered the menu in time to see her mother smiling brightly as she waved over at their table, and she turned her head to find the blonde waving back, smiling just as wide.

“Do you know her?” she asked her mother, hoping her voice wasn’t as quivery as it sounded in her head.

“We work together. I played matchmaker.” Katniss scowled at her mother’s sly smile, and though she knew she had no reason to really be angry with her, she still was.

She looked over at their table again, and her eyes locked with Peeta’s before she averted her gaze.

“What are you gonna get, Kitty?” her father asked her as she folded her menu closed.

“I’m not really hungry right now,” she said, and her father laughed.

“Alert the presses! Katniss Everdeen is full.”

Dinner was hell, and she wondered if either of her parents noticed how often her head was turned in the other direction as she tried to gauge Peeta’s interest in her mother’s coworker. Sometimes
he’d look up and catch her, and he’d hold the stare for several moments before resuming conversation with his date.

While her mother and father didn’t catch it, Prim did, and Katniss knew there would be questions later.

Peeta and the woman stood to leave just as her family’s food arrived, and Katniss forced her attention to the small cup of lamb stew she’d ordered. There was no way she would be able to touch it now.

“I’ll see you Monday, Millie!” the woman said as they stopped by on their way out.

“I guess I’ll see you on Monday,” Peeta told her father as Katniss looked on. “And I’ll definitely see you,” he said to Katniss, smiling as if everything was absolutely fine.

She didn’t respond. Couldn’t if she wanted to. They left and her stew grew cold.

“I think I’m going to turn in early tonight,” she said later that evening after they returned home. She’d tried to distract herself by sitting down to watch a movie with them, but all she could do was wonder if Peeta and the woman were still together, and if they were, what they were doing.

Prim shot her a look as she rose from the couch, and she returned it with one that said, We’ll talk later.

“Are you getting sick, honey?” her mother asked.

“No,” she answered tersely before tromping up the stairs.

Sleep eluded her, and the heavy silence in her room allowed her mind to race more. Not able to take another moment of it, she reached for her phone on the nightstand and quickly typed out a message.

Katniss: Hey. What are you up to tonight?

She waited for several minutes that felt like an eternity before her phone buzzed with a reply.

Gale: Spending some time with Posy. You?

As they bounced texts back and forth, she could read into his confusion over her sudden renewed interest, but she refused to feel guilty over it. They made plans to meet after his baby sister was in bed, so at nine o’clock, she crept back down the steps and out the backdoor without her family noticing.

He tasted the same (different from Peeta) and he felt the same (different from Peeta). As her hands slipped between them to brush the persistent bulge in his jeans, he broke their fevered kiss.

“Okay, Catnip, what the hell has gotten into you?”

It wasn’t said with the same hopeful yet breathless voice he used earlier after she’d pounced. Now he was just suspicious, and she realized he had every reason to be. In their one hour together, they’d already gone further than they had in the one month they dated.

She tried to shut him up with her lips, but he wasn’t having it. He knew her too damn well. He knew just how terrible and selfish she could be.
They fought, and the chasm she felt between them before breached out into an unfixable abyss. After he dropped her off at the end of her block, she turned around to walk the length of her street several times before finally heading back.

Her parents and Prim were in bed by the time she returned, and she was grateful for that at least. She tossed and turned for most of the night until falling into a fitful sleep, and when she woke around noon, her mother was at the foot of her bed, her face etched with concern.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, reaching to press her palm to Katniss’s forehead.

“I’m fine,” she growled as she slipped out from under the covers and began padding to the bathroom.

She somehow woke in a worse mood than when she went to bed, and she didn’t want to keep taking it out on her mother, or anyone else. It wasn’t their fault that Peeta messed with her head.

No, it was his fault. And she wasn’t going to take it anymore.

* *

There was a priceless look of surprise when he opened his door and found her on his front porch. She didn’t return his confused hello as she brushed past him and into his house.

All the bad feelings she’d been harboring since that night he turned her down came tumbling out. She wanted to know why he did it, why he led her on only to rebuff the advances. Why he looked at her the way he did and then refused to meet her eyes. She couldn’t have been imagining it all this time. As fantastical as it sounded, she knew he felt it, too. He had to.

“Nothing can happen between us, Katniss,” he answered flatly, and her fists clenched in frustration.

“Don’t treat me like a child.”

“Then don’t act like one!” he snapped back.

She felt her throat tightening with the threat of tears, but she didn’t want to cry in front of him and prove his point further. “I have five weeks left on the job,” she said quietly after recollecting herself. “Then I’m done. That’s it. We won’t see each other anymore.”

His face was solemn as he nodded in agreement. “It’s probably for the best.”

“I just want you to know that I don’t appreciate the mixed signals,” she said. “And you know you do it.”

He muttered an apology, but it fell on deaf ears as her eyes landed on the thin scarf draped over the back of his couch. She recognized it instantly, and she could still picture it wrapped stylishly around the blonde’s long neck.

“You brought her back here,” she said absently as she tried to wrap her mind around it. It was exactly what she feared, and it hurt just as bad as she imagined it would. But the worst of it was the part of her still holding out that little bit of hope.

Maybe she just stopped in for a few minutes, it said. Maybe it doesn’t mean what you think it does.

“Just tell me,” she asked. “I can’t keep doing this, so just tell me.”
“I slept with her,” he admitted quietly. “Is that what you want to hear?”

“All I want to hear is the truth.”

He scoffed before his mouth twisted in a sardonic smile. “Fine. I fucked her and thought about you the entire time. There’s the truth. Feel better?”

“How is that supposed to make me feel better?” she yelled once she shook herself out of her stunned silence. “It’s like you’re playing a game with me or something.”

He sighed in defeat. “I don’t want to do this to you, Katniss. I’m sorry. You asked for an honest answer, and there it is.

“And here’s another confession- I asked your mother to set me up because I know I need to forget about you. Lee is someone I should want. Someone I’m allowed to have feelings for. You’re not.”

“That’s bullshit, too,” she replied. “We’re not Romeo and Juliet. I might still be figuring things out, but I am an adult.”

“You’re fifteen years younger than I am. I’m your boss. I’m technically your father’s boss. There’s a pretty significant power imbalance here, Katniss. How do you think your parents would feel if we were together? What do you think everyone would assume?”

“I don’t understand why you care so much about what other people think.”

“I care because I don’t want it to have any impact on you! And I don’t understand why you don’t assume the same things everyone else would.”

“Because I know you better than that, okay? And I feel the same way about you.”

“Please don’t say that,” he pleaded.

“It’s the truth. I care about you more every day I spend with you. The more I get to know you, the more I-”

She was cut short by his mouth on hers, and all the fight inside of her seeped out as she sagged against him, clutching at his strong shoulders while deepening the kiss.

He wasn’t pulling away this time, and as his lips moved confidently with her own, she knew they were both in too deep now for their own good. She could have taken the out he offered, could have left broken-hearted but angry. But that wasn’t the path she wanted to take.

This time, she stopped the kiss, gently pushing off his chest and stumbling back as he blinked in surprise. “I think you need to wash Lee’s smell off of you before we talk about this,” she told him firmly. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

The more Katniss learned about herself, the more she realized that power imbalance wouldn’t be as significant as he thought.

TBC
"I talked to Leeann," her mother announced over breakfast the following Monday. "Peeta called her last night to tell her that he didn’t think things would work out between them.

Katniss shoveled more Cheerios into her mouth, chewing slowly as she watched her dad raise a brow from behind the morning paper. Her mother carried on as if Katniss wasn’t in the room. To her parents, she was still just a child with her cereal, unconcerned with anything the adults might be discussing at the table.

As a little girl, she’d take her bowl into the living room and watch cartoons while they finished their coffee, and then they’d call for her when it was time to catch the bus. As a 23-year-old college graduate still living at home, she stayed in the kitchen and listened intently, slurping the milk off her spoon as her eyes darted from her mother to father. Her mother, hand cocked on her hip as she gave him The Look. Her father, more interested in the article he was reading than whatever was happening with his wife’s friend from work.

But as he processed the involvement of his friend from work, his interest piqued noticeably. "That’s too bad. I thought they looked good together."

She looked back down at her cereal, loudly scraping the spoon against the bottom of the bowl as her mother moved around the kitchen. "Oh please," she said as she filled her travel mug. "He slept with her and then ended it the next day."

Katniss coughed loudly, covering her mouth as she choked down the rest of her food. The action caught her parents’ attention, and they eyed her with concern as she patted her chest to recover. "I’m fine," she said, waving them off.

Her father turned the page of the newspaper and shook his head. "That doesn’t sound like Peeta."

Seeming reluctant to press the issue with their daughter present, her mother plastered on a smile and took a seat in the closest chair. But Katniss knew her dad would be hearing all the details of the phone call when they were alone again.

"So school starts next month," her mom said. "I was thinking we could go to the mall this weekend and get you some clothes."

"You realize I’ll be attending as a teacher and not a student, right?"

"Yes, Silly," she answered with a playful eyeroll. "Which is exactly why you need a new wardrobe. It’ll be fun."

There wasn’t really anything fun about the idea of spending a day shopping and preening with her mother-that was more Prim’s scene than Katniss’s- but she did need new clothes for work, and she knew it’d please both of her parents to agree to a Girls’ Day Out at the mall. "Okay."

"Good!" her mom beamed, rising from her seat to gather her things for the hospital. "We’ll make a whole day of it." She left soon after, and Katniss caught her dad’s amused smile before he ducked his head back behind the paper.

"Shouldn’t you be leaving for work, too?" she asked.
“Shouldn’t you be leaving for work?” he volleyed back.

She loved him. Really. But it’d be an outright lie to say she wasn’t counting down the days until they no longer worked at the same place so they could stop doing this every single morning.

“C’mon, you’re only working there for a couple more weeks. You can drive in with me today.”

“I get off at 5,” she began to protest, but her father was already standing, grabbing his lunchbox and coffee and not giving her the chance to decline.

She reached for her bag and followed behind him as he left through the door connected to the garage. “I’m sure Peeta will drop you off,” he said as he hit the keyless entry button. Katniss sighed as she hefted herself up into his truck and pulled the seat belt on, and her father laughed at her show of distress. “On second thought, you might want to keep him away from your mom,” he added.

“I guess this is what happens when you set people up,” she said, at a loss for anything else to add. She hoped her father would drop it like her mother had, but Peeta came up again once they were out of the driveway.

“I’m sure it’s all a misunderstanding,” he said. “Peeta’s a good guy. He takes a lot of heckling at the mines, but he’s the only one who really looks out for us.”

“He’s nice,” she added lamely, staring out the window as they pulled onto the main road.

“I’m glad you got the job there. I know we don’t really see each other, but I like knowing you’re nearby.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“But now you’re leaving and you’ll be a teacher.” He sighed loudly. “You’re all grown up.”

“Dad-”

“I want you to know that it means a lot to your mother when you spend some time with her,” he said.

“I know.”

“And the only thing that got us through seeing Prim off to school was having you back.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be making good money at the school, Kitty, and I’m sure you’re already thinking about moving out-”

“Dad-” she tried again, unsuccessfully.

“All I’m saying is that we’d love for you to stay home a couple more years. You can save up, we’ll give you your space...I think it’s a good option, and I really want you to consider it.”

She looked over at her father and really looked at him. His black hair, the same color as her own, but peppered with grey. His long, straight nose, the only feature of his that Prim seemed to inherit. She couldn’t look into his eyes because they were trained straight ahead, but she knew their color, and she knew the slight wrinkles at their corners, the badges he earned by not only working incredibly hard his entire life, but for never missing the chance to smile and laugh whenever the
opportunity arose.

She wanted to tell him that it’d be good for them to finally have an empty nest, that her parents were far too young to be acting as old as they do, but then he glanced over at her and grinned, his weary grey eyes lighting up, and those wrinkles—probably unnoticeable to others—became a little more pronounced.

Not very many people were lucky enough to have parents like hers, so she smiled back at him, her mind already made up. “Who’s going to say no to free rent?”

~*~

Any nervousness about what the dynamic would be like with Peeta that day was unfounded, because she didn’t even see him until it was near the end of her shift. She was looking out her office window when she noticed him outside, pacing the length of the trailer as he talked on his phone. After gathering up her things, she met him near the front. ‘Just a minute,’ he mouthed to her, and she nodded, taking a seat on the office steps.

It was a scorching early August day, and she tipped her head back and basked in the sun as he continued his discussion about methane gas monitors. The warmth bathing her face was incredibly nice, and her eyes fell shut as she blocked out everything else. Only when she felt his shadow cast over her did she slowly open them, and she blinked back in surprise at his extended hand. “Ready to get out of here?” he asked.

On the way to his car, Peeta spotted one of the miners from the morning crew heading out as well. “Hey Thom,” he said, and the man stopped but didn’t say anything. “Don’t forget your handheld tomorrow.”

“Yeah.”

He started walking away again, but Peeta called out, “You can let everyone know I’ll be making rounds.” Thom’s jaw tightened, but he nodded before continuing on his way.

“We’re BFFs,” Peeta said when they were in the car.

She laughed lightly as she adjusted her seat. “I could tell.”

“So…” He slapped his hands against the steering wheel and glanced over at her, smiling sheepishly. “Excited about the new job?”

Is this what they were going to do? She wondered if he was purposefully being evasive, or if he just didn’t know what else to say, which is how she felt. So she played along, telling him that she was more nervous than anything, and that she didn’t know quite what to expect from the kids or other teachers.

“I think the kids will like you,” he said thoughtfully. “I’m sure a lot of 12-year-old boys will be falling in love for the first time this year.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, not sure why he was going back to flirting so quickly but still inexplicably happy by his comment. “What are we doing, Peeta?”

“I really don’t know,” he sighed. “But I do know I can’t stop thinking about you, and I’m already
dreading not being able to see you every day.”

“Well, that’s how I feel, too.”

“Katniss, whatever happens between us...I’m going to need you to be the one who calls the shots here. I just don’t feel comfortable doing it.”

“So it’s completely up to me to set the pace?” she asked incredulously. But as she considered it, she realized the idea appealed to her.

“Yes, at first anyway. I’m sorry to put it all on you, but I don’t want to push too hard, or maybe not hard enough, and offend you. Until we figure this out-”

“I’m fine with that, Peeta,” she replied.

“Just know I’ll happily go along with whatever you want.”

She didn’t say anything else as she mulled over some things for the rest of the drive. As he was pulling onto her street, she came to a solid conclusion: “I want to try this, but I don’t think anything should happen while I still work with you.”

He genuinely looked relieved at that, and he nodded in agreement as she considered the next move.

“I also don’t think anyone else should know what’s going on between us until we’re sure, too.”

There was a flash of doubt visible at that declaration, but Katniss wasn’t going to back down on this particular point. “Including your parents?”

“Especially my parents,” she said.

“Okay.”

“Maybe I could come over after my last day?” she asked. “And we can start...figuring things out?”

He smiled shyly as his fingers looped around his steering wheel. “I’ll make you dinner.”

“I’d like that.”

“So it’s a date?”

“Is it?”

“Only if you say so,” he amended as his eyes lingered on her.

They shared another look before Katniss opened up the car door and stepped one foot out onto the sidewalk. “It’s a date.”

It didn’t seem like he was trying to hide the fact that he was openly staring at her now, and the intensity of his gaze got her heart pumping a little harder. “Bye, Katniss.”

“Bye,” she replied coolly, slamming the door shut behind her and walking quickly to her front door. She didn’t hear his engine rev up again until she was inside, where she found Prim on the recliner, lazily scrolling on her phone.

“He’s definitely cute,” she said as Katniss hung up her bag.
“Peeta?” she asked. “He’s okay. Hey, you want to order pizza for dinner?”

~*~

“We’re going to do a head-to-toe makeover, starting with our toes!” her mom announced Saturday morning, practically dragging Katniss out of the house around 7 a.m. It began with breakfast at a diner, and then they went out of town to her favorite salon for pedicures. Katniss hated to have her feet touched, but she tolerated it for her mom, who looked to be having the time of her life.

After her heels were soft and silky smooth, she was asked to pick a polish. She selected the same shade her mother favored, if only because she didn’t really care what color they went with, but her mom took it as a compliment and wiggled her coral-colored toes happily.

The next agenda was shoe shopping. It took a lot to dissuade her, but Katniss was finally able to convince her mother to stay away from any store with ‘designer’ in the name. “How about Payless?” she asked, hoping her mom would opt for the cheapest route. “You’ll pay less.”

After being met with a firm no on that one, they compromised by stopping at a Famous Footwear in the plaza near the mall. The banner outside advertised Buy One, Get One Half Off for the entire store, and that was the singular reason Katniss kept looking beyond the pair of black kitten heels she grabbed first.

“How about these?” her mom asked, holding up a pair of nude pumps.

“Those don’t look very comfortable.”

“What if we found a smaller heel? I heard this color is all the style right now.”

“I’d rather just get a pair of Oxfords,” she admitted.

“We can get those, too! Honestly, Kat, you’re a grown woman now and you need more shoes. You can’t keep wearing sneakers or that one pair of boots forever.”

“And I’m getting Oxfords!” she said defensively, holding up the first pair she saw.

“Please,” her mother pleaded, “just let me do this for you. I used to do this with Prim all the time. Let me spoil you, just once.”

Prim, undoubtedly, would be the best buffer in this situation, but they had dropped her off at the airport the night before. There was no way Katniss was getting out of this one, so she relented with a sigh. “Okay, let’s try to find a shorter heel.”

This thrilled her mother, who wrapped her tightly in a one-armed hug, her other hand still clutching the pair of pumps she favored. That was the moment Katniss decided that she’d go along with it all if it really made her mom this happy.

They picked out pairs of peep toes, pointed toes, and rounded toes in a variety of colors. Her mother tried to talk her into high heels, but Katniss knew it was a lost cause, so she picked flats instead. Before they made their way to the checkout, she was caught admiring a pair of dark brown riding boots on display, and her mother begged to buy those, too. Her argument that her mother really didn’t have to was half-hearted at best. Still, she couldn’t stand to see the total, so she hovered near the socks while her mother paid the cashier.
Once they were back outside, bogged down by bags filled with shoeboxes, Katniss suggested a Starbucks run. She didn’t care for coffee, but she knew how much her mother loved the stuff, and she thought the woman might nearly break out into tears when Katniss ordered her favorite without even having to ask for a reminder, then insisted this was her treat.

After her mother was sufficiently caffeinated, they headed to the mall, where they spent hours going from store to store in search of clothing they both could agree on. Katniss preferred the simple print blouses and cotton blend slacks, while her mom was all about tailored blazers and pencil skirts. Compromise was the word of the day, so she ended up with plenty of pieces in her mother’s taste.

But she drew the line at fine jewelry. “Absolutely not,” she said when her mother asked her opinion on pearls.

“Just a necklace to pull your outfit together. I’m not going to pick out anything gaudy.”

“I don’t want a necklace.”

“Stud earrings?”

“Please no.”

“You have to accessorize!” her mother said in exasperation.

But anything in the glass case was off-limits. She’d already felt too guilty about how much money her parents were shelling out on this trip, and she wasn’t going to add to the total any more than she absolutely had to. If she had to get accessories, they would be the ones dangling on racks in the middle of the aisle, and they’d be on sale.

“What else do you need?” her mother asked, more to herself than to Katniss, who was holding an armful of cardigans and button-ups.

“I think I’ve got plenty already.”

“It’s only noon! Let’s hit the food court for some lunch and then we’ll decide where to go next.”

They ate Chinese food while her mom told stories about work and reminisced over similar shopping trips with Prim. It was comfortable conversation, even if Katniss didn’t add much to it, and she was surprised to realize that she was actually having fun at the mall with her mother.

As Katniss twirled lo mein around her fork, her mother reached across the table and gently tugged at her braid. “What do you think about a haircut?”

“You think I need a haircut?”

“I don’t think a trim would hurt. Or you could go a little crazy and take off a few inches.”

If there was a look of hurt that flashed across her face, her mother didn’t miss it. “I think you’re beautiful how you are. I just thought you might be up for a little change.”

So she thought about it as she finished her food, weighing the importance of hair in light of all the other changes occurring in her life. “Okay.”

At the salon, a woman with bright pink highlights tried to talk her into an inverted bob and a dye job, but that felt too drastic. She sought her mother’s advice instead, and that was to take about three inches off her waist length hair while adding long layers and side swept bangs.
She looked like a new person after, and for once she felt as pretty as her mother insisted she was. It reinvigorated her, helping her power through an hour in The Limited and a particularly expensive stop at a leather store, where she was gifted with an amazing messenger bag in lieu of the briefcase her mother imagined.

The leather shop also happened to be across from The Art Box, and Katniss shyly asked if they could stop in to look at things for her classroom. The last time she was there, Peeta had bought her the world map- her starter piece, he’d called it- and she was excited to pick out other things to go with it.

They were browsing when her mother’s cell buzzed, and she looked at the display and sighed. “It’s the hospital,” she explained before answering. She moved to the next aisle, but Katniss could still hear every word she said in the otherwise empty store.

“Isn’t there anyone else? I have plans with my daughter.”
“But I’m not on call until next week.”
“I really don’t care about the double time, Mary Jo.”
“Okay. Yeah, it’s fine. I’ll be there in an hour.”

“She’ll be there in an hour,” she said as she rounded the corner. “I’m so sorry but-”

“It’s fine!”

“No it’s not,” she said, brushing Katniss’s professionally styled hair off her shoulder. “You’re having fun in here.”

There were bundles of multi-colored construction paper on the nearest shelf, and Katniss feigned a particular interest in them as she shrugged. Prim may have had weekly shopping excursions with their mom, but this was the first time Katniss had done it since she was in junior high and she was dragged to Sears for the summer sale.

“Take this,” she said, handing her credit card to Katniss. “Get whatever you want in here, and stop by Macy’s and get some new underwear, too.”

“Mom.”

“Call your dad when you’re done,” she said, taking the shopping bags from Katniss’s hands. “I had a lot of fun today.”

“Me, too,” she admitted, and when they hugged, she held on a little longer than she normally did. “Thank you so much for everything.”

Her mother kissed her on the forehead and told her she loved her, and after she left the store, Katniss slipped the credit card in her back pocket and looked around, not sure where to even begin.

Twenty minutes later, with a heavy The Art Box tote in hand, Katniss made her way to another department store. She found the intimates section and went straight for the underwear table. Panties were four pairs for $20, so she grabbed eight in her size, not caring much about the colors or designs. Then, after having a hell of time finding anything in 32A, she gave up her bra search and set off for the checkout.

But something caught her attention on the way, and she slowed as she neared the mannequin, her eyes drawn to the dress. There weren’t very many clothes Katniss admired, but there was something about this one that held her interest. The black chiffon skirt was knee length, and the
top half included a silver beaded bodice with a sweetheart neckline. It was far too formal for the classroom, but Katniss didn’t own any nice dresses. On the rare occasion she ever needed one, she’d borrow from Prim or her mother’s closet, but she never dreamed of shopping for one herself.

They had her size, so she took it to the dressing room just to satisfy her curiosity. When she slipped it on and stared back at her reflection in the full-length mirror, she knew she’d buy it. She had no idea where she’d wear it, but she wanted it too badly to pass it up.

It didn’t feel right to have her mother pay for such an impulse buy, so she put the dress and panties on her own credit card, with its $600 limit and a Cardmember Since date of that year.

Her father was waiting in the parking lot for her by the time she got her bras at Forever 21 and a soft pretzel at Auntie Anne’s. After she slid into his truck, she noticed he was dressed up in a white polo and pressed khaki colored slacks. “Where were you?” she asked instead of returning his hello.

“Golfing,” he said as he pulled into gear.

“Since when do you golf?”

He laughed. “Since I got a buddy with a country club membership.”

“I didn’t realize miners were so highbrow.”

“Oh yes, we’re very refined,” he said, lifting his chin.

“I thought you said golf was a rich man’s game?”

“It is,” he smiled. “Which is why I only play with Peeta. But he couldn’t make it today, so I spent a few hours on the greens myself.”

“Did you have fun?” she asked, adjusting the shopping bags at her feet so she wasn’t crushing anything particularly delicate, like a beaded bodice. She wanted to ask why Peeta bailed, but it didn’t feel like her place.

“Yeah, I had a lot of fun. I heard you had fun today, too.”

“It was really nice,” she confessed.

They chatted some more during the drive, and she tried not to dwell on how much easier it was to talk to her dad than her mother. They had a good time together today, and that counted for something.

Once they were home and all of her purchases were neatly put away, she crawled into bed with her phone. She didn’t have any missed calls or texts, which was typical, but she had a habit of checking regularly. Peeta’s name was highlighted in her nearly empty contacts folder, and her finger hovered above it until she gave in.

Katniss: Are you alright? I heard you couldn’t make it golfing today

He texted back about a minute later, and she appreciated that he didn’t seem to think he should play it cool with the timing of his replies; when she first started dating Gale, he seemed to implement a minimum one hour wait.

Peeta: I’m fine, just wasn’t feeling well earlier
Peeta: How was the big shopping trip?
Katniss: *It was good. We had fun*
Katniss: *And I might have chopped off all my hair*

Peeta: *Whoa, really?*

Katniss: *Well, no. They just took some length off. But it looks really different*

Peeta: *Send pics?*
Peeta: *That is officially the first time I ever texted that*
Peeta: *I feel like I just hit a millennials milestone*

She smiled as she settled back against her headboard and thought about her next move. Selfies were not really her thing, but the salon styling wasn’t going to hold past tonight. So she moved to her dresser mirror and primped for a moment until she was satisfied it still looked good. Getting a photo where she wasn’t making an absolutely ridiculous face was another feat altogether. She ended up turning her head away from the camera so the focus was solely on her hair, and when she was finally satisfied with the quality, she sent it to him.

Peeta: *So does ‘send pics’ always sound sleazy?*
Peeta: *You don’t have to send a pic*

She read over the messages he sent while she was taking photos, relieved that he seemed to be just as bad at this part as she was. He always seemed so self-assured at work, almost intimidatingly so, and that definitely made her more appreciative of this side to him.

Peeta: *Oh*

He just got the pic, so she waited anxiously for his next reply, which came a few beats later.

Peeta: *You look beautiful*

She knew it was just a photo of her hair, but the compliment still made her feel like a giddy schoolgirl.

Katniss: *It’ll probably be back in a braid Monday morning*

Peeta: *Nothing wrong with that. I’m a fan of the braid*
Peeta: *It’s very you*

She shot off a quick thanks, then changed the subject, asking him what he was up to. He told her he was lounging around and eating a pizza, something that sounded wholly appealing to her at the moment. She took a chance with her next message, hesitating a long minute before finally giving in.

Katniss: *Send pics*

A photo of an open pizza box on his coffee table appeared in their string of messages, and she laughed.

Katniss: *Very hot*

Peeta: *Not really, I let it cool*

She laughed again; her first foray into flirting through texts didn’t seem all that successful, but that didn’t bother her. Something about Peeta both calmed and excited her, and she wanted more, but she wasn’t fraught with insecurities over how to get it, or worrying over what would happen if she
did. Knowing that he felt the same way about her was freeing, so she didn’t have the need to search for hidden meanings behind every interaction. That used to exhaust her when it came to Gale, and she had approached things with Peeta the same way at first as well. But not anymore. Not now that she was the designated driver in this situation.

Katniss: *It’s always safety first with you*

Peeta: *Ha, exactly*

She stifled a yawn, feeling the full effects now of her 6 a.m. Saturday wake-up call.

Katniss: *It’s been a really long day, I’ve got to get some sleep*  
Katniss: *See you Monday?*

Peeta: *See you Monday*  
Peeta: *It’s our last Monday at work you know...*  
Peeta: *Sweet dreams, Katniss*

She texted back a good night, then set her phone on her nightstand. By the time she changed into her sleep shirt, and washed her face and brushed her teeth, it was only 9 p.m. and still light outside.

After closing her blinds, she crawled into bed and thought about next Saturday, the one she’d be spending with Peeta. She hadn’t decided yet how far she’d take things that night, but she was at least confident she wouldn’t be home at this hour, let alone almost asleep.

~*~

Her last week at work should have been uneventful; she had one measly stack of reports to write up, and since Peeta had taken back the reigns, very little data entry to worry about. She anticipated, as her dad called it, smooth sailing.

Wednesday, however, turned out to be chaotic. Peeta had a long-running concern that several miners were tampering with their handheld methane monitors, and he had taken to the mine to investigate levels himself, tracking the percentages as he moved closer to the portal, then comparing it to the numbers from the workers’ detectors and machinery. Early that morning, he stormed into the trailer and went straight back to his office, slamming the door behind him without a word said.

She went back to typing, only occasionally glancing over at the door in concern. He emerged about half an hour later, telling her, “I’ll be back in a few minutes,” before leaving again.

When he finally returned, he propped himself up on the edge of her desk, his arms folded against his broad chest and feet crossed at the ankles. “How do you feel about heading out early?”

“I can stay-”

“You should go.”

“What’s going on?” she asked suspiciously. Outside, several coal miners were roaming the lot when they should have been deep underground at this hour. She kept an eye open for her father, a foreman with another crew, but so far he hadn’t made an appearance. “Did you shut it down?”
“We did,” he confirmed, tipping his head back and exhaling lightly.

Having grown up listening to her father’s work stories as he relayed them to her mother, Katniss knew what a hardship it was for the mine to cease operation, even if it was a matter of worker safety. There was a constant pressure from the higher-ups to run coal at any cost, and that reverberated down the line, making the workers weary of any perceived threat to their livelihoods. Her dad was one of the few who knew it wasn’t worth the loss of life or limb to pad the pockets of the wealthy owners, but Peeta would surely be at battle with most of the crew when it came to this decision.

“Well, I’m here for two more days. What can I do to help?”

He was going to play her off; she could tell by the way his fingertips tapped against his biceps while he avoided her eyes. “Enjoy your last two days at home? With pay, of course.”

That meant it was going to get messy and he didn’t want her around to see it. It seemed noble, but she felt a little annoyed that he thought she couldn’t handle whatever went down. Snow, the president of the mining company, didn’t intimidate her.

“You’re sure you don’t want me to stick around?” she asked again.

He shook his head fervently. “Oh no, I definitely want you around. But it’s probably for the best if you’re not.”

“Okay,” she acquiesced, gathering her bag to pack up her small office space. “Are we still on for Saturday?”

He smiled shyly as he reached over to help her clear her desk. “I wouldn’t miss that for anything.”

After he apologized again, because apparently this wasn’t all how he envisioned her final day at work going, she punched her timecard for the last time, and placed it in the box next to his door. “I guess I’m officially no longer your employee.”

“It’s a sad day,” he told her, looking anything but sad.

She hitched her bag over her shoulder and moved in, standing so close that the top of her shoes were nearly touching his work boots. “I’m glad you’re here, Peeta,” she said just before rising up on her toes. The kiss was chaste at best, just a soft but full peck on his slightly parted lips. “Don’t let anyone give you a hard time.”

He stayed frozen in place while she walked out, and she wondered if he was counting down the seconds until Saturday night just as she was.

~*~

With little planned for the rest of her week off before the school year began, Katniss was left alone with her thoughts. She told herself she wouldn’t overthink things with Peeta, but that’s exactly what she found herself doing, dwelling on their relationship and the steps she wanted to take in specific order, weighing the moves like it was a game of chess.

Old anxieties resurfaced, cropping up right next to classic standbys like insecurity and self-doubt. She was a mess by Saturday afternoon, eyeing the clock every thirty seconds while berating
herself for her nerves.

So she preoccupied herself with getting ready. Having already spent many evenings at Peeta’s house, she didn’t really feel the need to dress up, but she also didn’t want to arrive in her usual attire of an old, soft t-shirt and lived-in jeans.

She picked a new outfit purchased during the shopping trip with her mom, one that she thought was a little too casual for work but considerably nicer than anything she usually wore. Then the real deliberation began- what to wear underneath it.

That’s what mattered the most, she decided. She still didn’t know how far things would go tonight, and there was a chance he wouldn’t see even a hint of her underwear...but there was also the very real possibility he would, and if it happened, it wasn’t going to be the pair of Hanes high cut briefs she had on.

The bikini style she bought were a vast improvement, so she plucked a pair of black ones from her top drawer and set off to take a shower. While deep conditioning her hair, she lathered up a loofah with coconut scented soap and scrubbed every inch of her body. Then she shaved her legs to the top of her thighs, which she hated to do, before standing under the steaming hot stream of water until the suds ran clear.

Not nearly enough time passed while she dried her hair and dressed, so she was ready well before she needed to be. Deciding that she’d just show up at his place early, she crept down the stairs, hoping to avoid a run in with her parents.

They were in the kitchen cooking together, talking and laughing while she chopped and he stirred, and just as Katniss was about to reach for her keys hanging on the hook near the front door, her mother called out to her, beckoning her into the other room to say goodbye.

“Where are you going?” she asked, eyeing the outfit she helped pick out the week before.

“Out with Madge,” Katniss replied readily. “We’re going to see some college friends out of town. If it gets too late, I’ll probably just stay at her place for the night.” It was a well-rehearsed lie, one she’d been practicing since Peeta invited her over.

“Oh. Well, have fun.”

“Drive safe,” her father added. He seemed to be in a good mood, and she hadn’t heard any murmurings about work from him since the mine closed on Wednesday. Until the ventilation systems brought down the levels of methane, he’d be spending most of his workdays at home. “We’ll have plenty of leftovers if you’re hungry tonight.”

“What are you making?” Katniss asked, peering into the skillet.

“Chicken romano and pasta. It’ll be done soon if you want some.”

“That’s alright,” she told her mom, inching back out of the room to make her escape. “We’re going to a restaurant.”

They said goodbye again, and she watched them quietly for a moment before turning away. She considered telling them that they should go out and have some fun, too, but they were consummate homebodies so it’d just be a waste of breath.

“See you tomorrow,” she added before darting into the living room and out the front door.

The sun was bright and hot as she made her way to her car, and she shielded her eyes with her
hand as she slipped into the driver’s seat and pulled away from the curb. Peeta lived on the other side of town, and she hit every red light along the way but still pulled up to his house about 30 minutes early. She combed her fingers through her loose hair as she walked up the pathway and tried to harness some self-confidence.

He seemed surprised she was already at his door, but he smiled brightly as he motioned her inside, and she relaxed a little when she noticed he was wearing an apron. “Still slaving away in the kitchen?”

“Been at it all day. Who knew Chef Boyardee was so complicated?” He was already untying the apron strings to pull it off, and that’s when she realized how nice he looked, wearing pressed slacks with a dress shirt and tie. She was in black skinny jeans and an olive green tie-waist top with a deep V-neck, and she felt woefully casual standing next to him.

“You look really nice,” she said pathetically.

“So do you,” he told her with a soft sigh. “I mean, you look beautiful.”

His hesitance always seemed to motivate her, and she reached out to playfully tug at his tie. “I like your shirt.”

The sleeves of his crisp white button-down were already rolled to his elbows, but he pushed them up further, tapping his long fingers against his forearms nervously. “If I can go an hour without spilling anything on it, it’ll be a new record.”

She followed him into the large kitchen, where he poured her a glass of red wine while she gawked at the industrial stovetop, with a pot on every burner. “It smells amazing in here.”

“Do you like beef bourguignon?” he asked as he pulled on a pair of oven mitts.

“Never had it before.”

“I noticed you were eating stew at the restaurant—”

“Lamb stew,” she grinned, loving that he made note of what she ordered while he was on a date with another woman.

He whistled. “Damn. I was way off.”

She took a sip of the wine as he removed the cast iron kettle from the oven, and while he finished preparing the other dishes, she took a seat at the dining table, admiring him as he worked. The place settings were beautiful, with two sets of three stacked square plates and a folded red linen napkin on top. The two long taper candles were already lit, and in the center was a single rose, yellow with red tips.

“This has to be fancier than any restaurant in the county,” she said in awe, and he laughed from the other side of the kitchen.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t go out tonight,” he admitted as he brought over a loaf of bread and the butter dish. “I’d like to take you to the fanciest restaurant in the county, but…”

“I know.”

He got back to work as she looked around the kitchen, a room he once told her he spent a year renovating. She knew next to nothing about home improvement, and she wouldn’t be able to correctly name the style if her life depended on it, but she was still able to appreciate its beauty,
from the rich woods to the ceramic tile backsplash. There were two lantern style light fixtures hanging above the table, and she decided she liked those, too.

“This is amazing,” she told him as he carried the food over. “You didn’t have to do all this.”

“I wanted to.”

She took the smallest square plate from the setting for her mixed greens salad as he sat down across from her. “The bread’s warm, too.”

“You can’t have a decent meal without freshly baked bread.”

“I think most of my dates have been at the drive-thru, so you could have gotten away without it.”

“Really?” he asked, spooning some new potatoes onto his plate. “Drive-thrus?”

She shrugged as she chewed, and he watched her closely as he waited for an actual answer.

“Broke college students. Dollar menus. You know.”

Or maybe he didn’t, if he came from money. He took a bite of his food, and she debated over what to say next. Fortunately, he was the one to break the silence. “Katniss, there’s something I want you to know.”

She set down her silverware just as he had and waited with trepidation for him to continue.

“I just wanted to tell you that I’ve never been with someone significantly younger than me before. Maybe a couple years, but nothing like this. I mean, fifteen years is-”

“Fourteen,” she interrupted, since there was no sense in trying to make it sound worse than it already was.

“Fifteen,” he corrected again. “My birthday was in June.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

He laughed. “That doesn’t matter. What I’m trying to say is that I’m not attracted to you because you’re younger.”

“You’re not?”

“No,” he said earnestly. “The way I feel has everything to do with you and nothing to do with your age. If anything, that was a huge deterrent. I don’t want you to think that I’m some sort of playboy seeking out young girls.”

“I never thought that.”

“I’m glad,” he said. “But I still wanted to tell you. I don’t really know what you’ve heard about me, and a lot of people make assumptions, and you never have to. You can ask me anything.”

She quietly filled her plate with beef bourguignon and honey-glazed carrots as she contemplated where she’d take that. When she decided, she put down her fork again and locked eyes with him. “What did you tell Leeann?”

His brows rose in surprise as he chewed. “So we’re going right to that huh?”

“Is there really any point in putting it off?”
“No, you’re right.” He took a drink of wine, swallowing the rest of his food down with it. “I called her after you were here, and I told her I was sorry, but I couldn’t see her again. I said that I was trying to work through my feelings for someone else, and I decided I wasn’t ready to see other people yet. I also told her I hoped I hadn’t led her on, and in my defense, I don’t think I did.”

That she was skeptical about. “You don’t think sleeping with someone is leading them on?”

“It was just sex, Katniss,” he replied diplomatically. “We never talked about a second date. We were both lonely and it’d been awhile and—”

“Spare me the details,” she said with a raised hand.

“Is this going to be something you can get past? Because I’m sorry it happened, but I can’t take it back.”

The seemed to be shifting the balance in Peeta’s favor again, starting with his flippant statement about just sex. She was a virgin. In reality, she was inexperienced by all standards. The thing with Leeann didn’t faze her anymore, and she was confident she could get past it completely. But it wasn’t just Leeann in his past. He had years on her in every way.

“I’m already over it,” she said before sipping her wine. “And you apologized to her, right?”

“Profusely.”

“Well, then that’s that.”

He was about to take another bite of food when she asked her next question: “How many women have you been with?”

His fork froze midair, his mouth gaping open as he blinked back at her.

“You said you don’t want me to make any assumptions, so I’m asking. How many women have you been with?”

“Wow, you’re not pulling any punches tonight.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I know it’s not really any of my business.”

“Twelve,” he answered simply.

“Twelve?”

“Yeah. Twelve. I was 19 the first time. There were a few one night stands, but most of them were semi-serious girlfriends.”

“Oh.”

“So,” he began cautiously. “How do you feel about that?”

“I guess I thought it’d be higher?” She stabbed a mushroom with her fork and dragged it along her plate while going over the number again. “It doesn’t really matter though, does it?”

“It really doesn’t,” he agreed.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, and she watched him from across the table as she tore off a small piece of bread and slathered it with butter. “You know, you can ask me stuff, too.”
Her number was a big fat zero, and she didn’t want to divulge that just yet, but it was only fair.

His eyes met hers as he chewed slowly. “Alright,” he finally said, and she braced herself. “What’s your favorite color?”

“And you thought I wasn’t pulling any punches.”

He took a piece of bread for himself and smiled back at her. “I ask the hard hitting questions.”

“Green. What’s yours?”

“Oh, I don’t know if I’m ready to share that with you yet,” he told her seriously, and she flung her piece of bread across the table, hitting him square in the chest.

He dabbed at the small butter stain on his shirt and laughed. “Hey, I was just about to beat my record!”

As they relaxed, the conversation started to flow more easily. He didn’t bring up her parents and she didn’t bring up work, but he asked her about her lesson planning, and he listened, really listened, as she talked. No one else, not even her family, took such an interest in her work before. But Peeta was alert and responsive- asking questions, proposing ideas- and it made her incredibly happy to be spending this time with him.

Katniss continued to talk throughout the meal until their food grew cold, and then she was insistent in her offer to help him clean up after. They worked together, side-by-side, as she asked about the renovation. To her surprise, she was just as absorbed by his words as he seemed to be by hers, and it wasn’t because she had a particular fascination with home improvement. It was picturing Peeta diligently undertaking each room until it met his vision that got her.

After the table was cleared and the dishwasher loaded, he disappeared into the den, emerging a few minutes later with a couple photo albums under his arm. “Befores and afters,” he said proudly.

She pulled out the chair next to his once he sat down, inching it along the hardwood floor to get as close to him as possible.

“Wow, I didn’t realize how much work you actually did,” she said as he turned the page. Her chin was resting comfortably on his shoulder now, her arm looped through his.

“It was definitely a fixer-upper,” he agreed. “I bought it when I moved here, and I only finished the last big project about six months ago.” He squinted adorably, his lips puckering as he tried to recall something. “That’s about three years worth of work.”

“Now you’re done and you can finally enjoy it.”

“Or I can buy another dump and do it all over again,” he laughed. “That was the original plan.”

As they looked through the photos, she mentioned that it must have cost a fortune to do all of this. She winced right as she said it, embarrassed that he might think she was hung up on his money.

Her sudden quietness got his attention, and he reminded her that if there was something on her mind, she had carte blanche to ask him anything. “Go ahead,” he prodded with gentle nudge of his elbow.

“I’ve just overheard some things at work.”
“Like what?”

“That your parents were rich,” she said simply.

“Ah. Well, that’s not exactly true. My parents weren’t really rich. My grandparents were the ones with a lot of money.”

“Oh.”

“My mother had a falling out with them when she was younger, and they basically disowned her. Then she married my dad and they started a family. I never knew them.”

“Some of the miners act like you’re a Rockefeller, you know,” she teased.

He laughed again. “So I’ve heard.”

She turned to the next page, one that featured the guest bath upstairs.

“They died about ten years ago,” he added. “Left most of their money to me and my brothers.” Somberness transformed into a smile. “And that nearly drove my mother insane.”

He continued going through the album, and she nuzzled further into the crook of his neck. But as he talked, her focus drifted away from his words and onto his large hands. His fingernails were neatly trimmed and filed, and it reminded her that very few guys her own age seemed to pay such close attention to their grooming.

Her eyes moved up along his thick arms, and then she slightly turned her head to take in his profile. She’d be willing to bet that Peeta had a bit of a babyface throughout most of his twenties. He could still easily pass for a few years younger than he was, but his features were a little too chiseled now to be mistaken for youth.

While he had some very faint lines near his eyes, they didn’t compare to her father’s. Her dad, who started putting in 60 hours a week at the mines the day after high school graduation, always looked angular and sharp. Peeta got to join the airforce and then go off to college, while her father went from supporting one family to another. It wasn’t fair to compare them, she knew, but there was a relief in their differences.

It was harder not to compare him to Gale, who never talked this much and this enthusiastically, or looked over at her shyly before surprising her with a gentle kiss full on the lips.

It caught her off guard at first, but her eyes fell shut just as he pulled back, his nose gently bumping hers along the way.

“How about dessert?” he asked, and she blinked back at him stupidly, barely managing a nod.

To her extreme disappointment, he meant it literally. It was good though (the peach cobbler and the interruption) because it allowed her to get her bearings back. She still hadn’t decided how far they were going to go tonight, but they were off to one hell of a slow start.

The kiss, sweet as it was, spurred her on, so she pushed away her plate after a few bites and suggested they go into the living room. He rose up from his seat to follow her, happily going along with it just as he said he would.

Her kiss was harder, taking him off balance just as they neared the couch. He fell backwards onto the cushions, taking her with him. She straddled his lap as he gripped her by the waist, and her lips parted with a soft sigh.
She unknotted his tie, her mouth still moulded with his, and then slipped it off him before blindly throwing it aside.

“We don’t have to rush into anything,” he said breathlessly after breaking the kiss. “It’s only our first date.”

“You wanted me to set the pace,” she reminded him. She trailed her finger down his chest, stopping at the faint stain from the butter and tapping it impatiently. “You should take this off.”

He settled back against the cushions and began unbuttoning his shirt, his eyes locked with hers the entire time. Katniss’s mind was a scrambled mess as he leaned forward to slip it off.

“You’re clean, right?” she asked quickly, since it seemed like an appropriate time to bring it up. “I mean, safety first and all.” Her fingers bunched the soft cotton of his undershirt to steady herself.

“Yeah,” he laughed, pausing for just a moment before repositioning himself on the sofa. The shift had her settled more fully on his lap, and despite their layers of clothing and her absolute naivety, she still felt him hard beneath her.

“And I’m not on anything,” she blurted out next. “At least not yet. So we have to be careful.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” he responded, absently playing with the ties of her shirt.

“What do you mean?”

“Um, I had a vasectomy a few years ago,” he seemed embarrassed to admit. “So at least that’s taken care of, right?”

“Why?” she asked with confusion.

“Why not? I decided I wasn’t going to have kids, so it was just an extra precaution. I still use condoms.”

She shut up the part of her that wanted to ask why he didn’t want children and fully committed to moving this along. When she slipped her hand between them, rubbing him deliberately through his pants, it meant that she’d gone as far with Peeta in three hours as she had with Gale in three months.

She tugged at his undershirt, wordlessly telling him she wanted that off too, and he hesitated for a moment before pulling it over his head. Not that he had any reason to be insecure; he might not have been cut like a 20-year-old male model, but he was defined and strong, and she decided right then that this was her ideal.

“Must have left my six pack abs upstairs,” he laughed nervously as she explored his bare skin.

“That’s okay, I forgot my C-cup at home, too.”

His smile widened as her open palms spread across his flat stomach, and he stared at her with a breathtaking reverence. “Hey, before we do anything else, tell me when I can see you again.”

“Same time, same place next Saturday?” she offered.

He lowered her to the couch, settling on top of her. “Deal.”

They were each patient with the kisses, alternating between languid and lively as they explored one another. His hand was under her shirt, splayed against her ribcage, and her breath stilled as
she waited for him to move upward. Instead, his lips trailed from her mouth to her jaw, and then
down to her neck, where he pushed back her hair and worked over her pulsepoint. It felt so
impossibly good that she knew she wouldn’t stop anything at this point.

“Touch me,” she begged when his mouth moved back to the corner of hers. He balanced himself
above her by his elbow, peppering kisses everywhere he could reach as his hand slipped out from
under her shirt. She mewed in disappointment just as it moved to her neckline, pushing the
material aside for easier access. She hadn’t bothered with a bra, and he groaned at the sight of her
bare breast as his head dipped down.

“You’re perfect,” he said before his mouth covered her dark nipple, and she gripped his hair,
holding him tightly against her to stop him from stopping.

As she raised her hips to meet his, undulating against him to keep him hard and panting, she felt a
buzz beneath her, and it took a minute to realize it was her phone in her back pocket.

She pushed Peeta off of her, and he stopped in a daze as she sat up to retrieve it. It was her dad,
which is exactly what she feared, and she motioned for Peeta to be quiet before answering.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Kitty. Sorry to bother you. Are you having fun?”

Peeta’s face flushed as she stared back at him, and she pulled her shirt over to cover her breast.

“You’re all grown up. But if you’re going to spend the night at Madge’s, can you call
to let us know?”

The room was quiet enough for Peeta to hear the entirety of their conversation, and he shifted
uncomfortably as they talked. “I’m not going to spend the night,” she snapped back, cursing
herself for answering the call. But if she hadn’t, they might have reached out Madge at some
point, and that would’ve been a disaster.

“You don’t have to get upset,” he said dismissively. “Stay, if you want.”

“I’ll be home soon,” she said, disconnecting the call. “I’m sorry, Peeta.”

“Yeah, yeah. You’re all grown up. But if you’re going to spend the night at Madge’s, can you call
to let us know?”

The room was quiet enough for Peeta to hear the entirety of their conversation, and he shifted
uncomfortably as they talked. “I’m not going to spend the night,” she snapped back, cursing
herself for answering the call. But if she hadn’t, they might have reached out Madge at some
point, and that would’ve been a disaster.

“You don’t have to get upset,” he said dismissively. “Stay, if you want.”

“I’ll be home soon,” she said, disconnecting the call. “I’m sorry, Peeta.”

“It’s okay,” he told her, reaching over to kiss her on the cheek.

She slipped her shoes on at the door as he pulled on his shirt, and he followed her out, getting in
one more kiss on the front porch. “I’d like to hear about your first day when you get a chance,” he
added.

“I’ll call you Monday night,” she promised.

She cooled off some by the time she got home, but the sight of her parents on the couch, and the
oblivious way they greeted her after ruining her evening, made her trudge upstairs after a terse,
“Goodnight.”

She locked the door behind her and sat on her bed, debating whether or not to text Peeta. She
decided while plaiting her hair into a messy braid, and after checking to make sure the door was
definitely locked, she leaned back against the headboard and pulled off her shirt.

Katniss: *In case you need some help finishing what we started…*

She sent a picture next, a closeup of her bare breasts with her braid spilling over her shoulder. Then she shut off the phone and turned off the light, and as her fingers dipped into her underwear, she imagined him wrapping his hand around his hard cock while he stared at the photo.

Next Saturday couldn’t come soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, after reworking a lot of this, I've got it at about 5 or 6 chapters now. That's it, I promise! And I'll start to earn that E rating with the next part. I really appreciate your patience with my updates!

My new tumblr url is everlarkeologist if you ever want to stop by. Thanks for reading!
Nothing could have prepared Katniss for that first week of teaching. She felt overwhelmed and exhausted at the end of each school day, but the satisfaction her job brought her was immeasurable. Peeta sent encouraging texts nearly every night, and it made her desperate for
Saturday just so she could see him again.

The topless photo she’d sent him was apparently very appreciated, but it was never reciprocated. Emboldened by his sweet messages and the excitement over seeing him soon, she sent another pic as she got ready for their date, writing, *Can’t wait for tonight* along with an over-the-shoulder mirror shot of her in her underwear. There was a time when she’d never consider doing anything like that, but if Peeta liked it (and he most certainly *did*) and she liked doing it, then she was going to have fun with it.

She finished getting dressed, deciding to wear a simple long sleeve boatneck tee with leggings over her lacy new bra and panty set. Since she had another hour before she had to leave, she went downstairs to finish grading papers. Both of her parents were working that weekend, which meant she had the house to herself, and she cherished the rare time alone. If she could sneak away to Peeta’s before they got back, she’d also get out of lying again about her whereabouts.

As she drove to his house, she wondered if he got the text and- if he did- what he thought about it. She got her answer a few minutes later when he opened his front door and pulled her inside before she even had the chance to knock. He spun her around once before pressing her against the wall. “Hi,” he said, licking his lips and eyeing her hungrily.

Oh he got the pic.

“Hi,” she returned, leaning in to try to kiss him. But he pulled back, denying her permission and leaving her confused.

“You know, I was in meetings *all day.*”

“Were you?” she asked with slight disinterest, teasing him.

“Yes. In a room full of foremen.”

She tried to kiss him again but he still wasn’t allowing it, and her head dropped back against the wall as she sighed in frustration. “Sounds fun.”

“Fun isn’t exactly the word I’d use,” he replied. “Especially when certain texts messages made things very, uh, *hard.*”

“Hard?” she questioned innocently. “Whatever do you mean?”

He didn’t answer her, and she wanted him to pin his hips to hers to show her exactly what he meant, but he was still holding her at a frustrating distance. “Serves you right for looking at your phone while you were in a meeting,” she said.

“It was an innocent game of Candy Crush until your message.”

She shyly averted her eyes, dropping the pretense of playing around to ask, “Do you want me to stop sending them?”

“Never,” he answered, finally giving her a kiss- a surprisingly tender one considering their conversation about sexting. She gripped his shoulders and moaned softly against his mouth. They hadn’t been together for long at all, but somehow she already relied on this more than she probably should.

“You’re beautiful,” he told her after, looking her up and down appreciatively.

She brushed off the compliment over her totally casual outfit. “If we’re hanging out here, I thought
I should be comfortable.”

“Did you want to go out somewhere?”

She walked past him and headed to the couch, actually looking forward to a relaxing night in with Peeta. “We can’t go anywhere,” she said as she sat down.

“Sure we can. We could go out of town.”

He picked up on her unenthusiasm and decided to let the subject drop. “Or we’ll stay in. What did you want to do?”

She wanted takeout and to cuddle on his overstuffed couch, maybe with a nap at some point. And she wanted to end the night with an orgasm. She was about to tell him her meticulous plan when his phone rang, and he grabbed it off the side table, his eyebrows raising when he saw the caller ID. “It’s Delly,” he told her.

She told him to answer it, inexplicably nervous even though it probably had nothing to do with her.

“Hey, Del. What’s up?”

She tried not to eavesdrop, despite the temptation to hear if her name came up. Delly’s soft voice was further muffled by the phone anyway, so she decided to play it cool and picked up the remote to scroll through the channel guide as Peeta talked.

“How’s that working out so far?” she heard Peeta ask, and when she glanced up, he was looking right at her with a big smile.

“Yeah, she’s the best,” he continued, his eyes still locked on hers. “It was hard to give her up.”

Katniss realized she was holding her breath, her heart thrumming as Delly went on about her. Peeta wrapped up the conversation with some well wishes and the promise to get together soon, and then he ended the call, his smile as wide as ever. “She loves you. Said you’re a perfect fit at the school and you did an amazing job in your first week.”

“Really?” Katniss asked, trying to contain her excitement. “I mean, it’s still early yet, but she really likes me so far?”

“She called just to thank me for sending you her way. She’s definitely impressed with you so far.” He sat down next to her and squeezed her leg right above her knee. “We should celebrate.”

“With Chinese food,” she told him, still insisting they stay in.

“Okay,” he laughed. “I’ll call.”

He left the room to find the number and takeout menu in the kitchen, and she followed him, suddenly hungry for something else. She watched him as he grabbed the paper out of drawer and flipped through it. “So what are you in the mood for?” he asked without looking up.

Decided, she took the menu from him and tossed it aside, then ran her hands down the front of his plaid shirt. “Let’s go upstairs.”

She took his hand, leading him to the staircase, and he followed her without argument. The silence gave her a chance to collect her thoughts. What was her plan here? Was she really going to lose her virginity now?
As they got closer to their destination, she was losing some of her bawdiness, which he seemed to notice. “We don’t have to rush into anything,” he told her as they stood in front of his bedroom door. “I’m not expecting anything from you.”

“But you wanted me to set the pace,” she reminded him. “What if this is my speed?”

He opened the bedroom door, letting the heavy oak slowly swing back to reveal his bedroom. “If you’re comfortable, I’m comfortable.”

She strolled in ahead of him, climbing onto his bed and beckoning him to follow her. They weren’t going all the way tonight, she decided. But she definitely wanted something to happen. She kicked off her shoes and settled against his pillows, and he moved on top of her, hovering uneasily above her without actually pressing his body to hers. She stretched to kiss him, just to get them started. It was an issue that he wanted her to call all the shots, but she needed him to take command in order to get her confidence going.

Her eyes drifted closed as their lips moved together, and then his tongue was hesitantly slipping into her mouth. She explored the planes of his body, gently and slowly, her palms sliding against anything within her reach. She had to lean up ever so slightly to gain access to the small of his back, but then she was rewarded with a handful of his firm backside as she moved downwards.

They stayed just like that, indulging in a lazy make out for awhile until it was no longer enough for her. “Talk to me,” she begged suddenly as she tore her mouth off his. “I need you to talk.”

He licked his lips, tasting the remnants of her kiss, and asked, “What do you want?”

Her sexual frustration was mounting, which made her sigh in annoyance. “For you to talk!”

“I got that,” he said with a light laugh, further infuriating her. “What else do you want? What do you like?”

So he needed her to talk to give him an idea of what to say. But that was a block for her. “I don’t know,” she admitted with defeat. “I really don’t know.” It was all going to come up sooner or later, so she squeezed her eyes shut and blurted out the next truth: “I’ve never done this before.”

“No?” he asked softly, freezing up for a moment at the revelation. She opened her eyes so she could watch him, carefully observing his reaction. A part of her thought that he’d love the idea of being her first, that most men wanted the young virgin in their bed. But maybe that’s not what he signed up for here. Maybe he was looking for the sexually adventurous minx who could keep up with him in bed.

He kissed her forehead, then leaned back on his heels to study her. “Did Gale ever go down on you?” he asked.

“No.”

“Did you want him to?”

She thought about it, then shook her head. “No. Not Gale.”

He rose back up on his knees, hooking his hands under hers to slide her further down the mattress. “Will you let me?” he practically begged.

“No?” she asked incredulously.

“It doesn’t have to be now. But I want to someday. You have no idea how much I’ve thought
about it, Katniss.”

She leaned forward, yanking at the hem of her shirt to pull it off. “Keep going,” she told him, reaching behind her now to unhook her bra.

He started to unbutton his shirt, his eyes locked with hers. “I can’t wait to taste you. I’ve gotten off so many times just thinking about your thighs locked around my head.”

She would have been absolutely mortified if Gale ever talked to her like this, but with Peeta, she only wanted more. She clawed at the waistband of her leggings, desperate to remove her damp underwear so she could spread her legs for him. He helped her peel them off, taking her panties with them, and then he stared down at her, awed.

“Touch me,” she begged, slipping his plaid shirt off his shoulders so he was bare chested, too.

His hand settled over her pubic bone, nearly spanning the width of her hips. She loved how much bigger he was than her. How much stronger he was. And, truthfully, how much older he was. He was a man and he was going to know how to touch her, and the thought of it alone had her keening, her hips rising up off the bed to silently urge him on.

“You’re so warm and wet,” he said as his fingers trailed down and caressed her clit. “Just what I want. I need a picture of this, right now. You naked in my bed, ready and waiting for my touch.”

“Take one,” she said quickly, flexing her foot against his thick thigh to feel the outline of his phone in his pants pocket. “Do it.”

He grabbed for the phone with his other hand, and she tilted her head back and closed her eyes as he snapped a few photos. “I love the ones you’ve sent me,” he told her. “It drives me crazy. I came so hard just looking at it, imagining you touching yourself, too.”

“I was,” she gasped as his fingers brushed over her again.

“Guide my hand,” he commanded. “Show me how you touch yourself.”

She did as she was told, biting her lip as his fingers explored her. She moaned blissfully as his thumb rubbed back and forth against her clit, and then his finger was inching inside of her too, and it felt like every nerve ending in her body was concentrated to that one spot between her legs. The pleasure was so intense, mounting higher as his hand moved faster, and she knew it was going to happen, that for the first time in her life she was going to come to someone else’s touch.

“Peeta,” she cried out, blindingly feeling for his cock as she arched her back. He led her hand to him, and she squeezed him through the denim, but it wasn’t enough to satisfy her. They worked his zipper down together, and then her hand was wrapped around him.

He was so big and smooth and hot, and even her inexperienced fumbling was enough to bring him to the brink. She cried out again, desperate to train her slippery hand into a rhythm for him, and then she was coming, her whole body nearly rising off the mattress as she gushed all over his fingers.

Spent, and too busy focusing on the spasms shaking her own body, her hand went limp just as he took over. She watched as he stroked himself, and then he was calling her name as he finished, shooting streams of hot release between her breasts and over her belly.

She squealed in surprise and delight as he panted above her, and then she ran her finger over the pool of cum dripping near her nipple, examining it with curiosity. It made her skin tingle everywhere it touched her, and she even wondered-briefly- what it would taste like.
She looked up when she heard the sound of the iPhone’s camera going off again, and then Peeta tossed his phone onto the nightstand and settled next to her. He was going to clean her off with a tissue, but she stopped him. “Not yet.”

Katniss nestled against him, satiated and sleepy, and she thought she heard a contented sigh from Peeta as he snuggled up with her. They had to stop themselves from falling asleep.

When they finally did clean up, Katniss realised there was some blood on Peeta’s fingers and a streak of it on the inside of her thigh. “Are you alright?” he asked, pressing a kiss to the side of her head.

Any pain or discomfort was the last thing on her mind. She was already thinking about next week, about doing this again, about going further. “Never better,” she answered honestly, a satisfied smile stretching across her face.

xxXXxx

“Can you cover for me?”

“Sure,” Madge replied, and Katniss flipped over onto her back to stare up at her ceiling.

“I mean...for the whole weekend?”

If she could see Madge right now, she was sure her eyebrows would be up to her hairline. “The whole weekend?”

The last few weeks with Peeta have been blissful to say the least, but they’ve been at a bit of a standstill in the bedroom. She wanted that to change this weekend, when she planned on being locked in his house from Friday night to Sunday evening. But for that to happen, Madge would need to be in on the plan this time.

“Things must be getting serious,” her friend said. “Are you going to tell your parents soon?”

“Not yet,” Katniss quickly told her. Truthfully, she didn’t know when they’d reveal their relationship, but it wouldn’t be any time soon. Not if the mere thought of it still made her a nervous mess.

Madge was the only one who knew about them, and consequently she had to hear everything. Now Katniss was actually thankful that one of her oldest friends changed so much in college, since Old Madge never would’ve been able to stand hearing all the sordid details. But then again, Old Katniss never would’ve told them.

“Katniss,” she said, sounding eerily like Old Madge there for a minute. “You’re being careful, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you’re moving kind of fast, and he’s so much older…”

Katniss was growing annoyed with the implications. “I thought you were all for this?”

“I am. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”
“Peeta wouldn’t do that.”

Madge sounded doubtful. “I’ve seen it before, though. And when you’re doing things like sending pictures and filming things—”

Katniss did not have the need or want (or time) to hear a lecture now. Especially not from someone like Madge. “I gotta go, Madge. I’m sorry, but I’ve got a lesson plan to work on.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She dreaded asking the next question again, but she needed to know. “Will you still cover for me?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

Katniss pulled the phone back to sigh heavily. Madge was a really good friend, and that’s one thing about her that never changed. “I’ll be careful,” she promised.

xxXXxx

“We’re going out,” Peeta announced the following Friday, and Katniss soured instantly, not only because of the risk it imposed, but because of all her plans to stay in.

“We can’t go out,” she answered diplomatically.

“We’ll go to Louisville. Dinner and a movie.”

She was incredulous. “You want to drive nearly an hour each way just to go to the movies?”

“Katniss, I don’t want you to be holed up here every weekend. It’s not fair to you. You deserve a date.”

She didn’t want to argue with such a sweet gesture, so she conceded. Besides, there’d still be plenty of time to be with him, since her parents thought she was going out of town with Madge for the entire weekend.

They talked nonstop during the drive, but it wasn’t stilted conversation to fill uncomfortable silence. He had a genuine interest in her work, and when he asked her about it, she found that she liked to tell him everything there was to say. When it came to anyone else asking about school, she turned into a sullen teenager again, muttering that it was fine. But Peeta got the detailed rundown every time.

“How’re things at the mines now?” she asked tentatively when they were almost at the restaurant.

The mine Peeta closed in late August reopened last week after some safety concerns were addressed, but neither Peeta or her father were talking much about it. He seemed reluctant to talk about it now, but he admitted that things were still tense with the miners and owners.

She hoped he would confide in her more later, but she didn’t want to press him now. He seemed determined to make this a nice date for her, picking a popular restaurant after she begged him not to choose something too upscale. As the waiter led them to their table, Peeta guided her by pressing his hand to the small of her back. She loved the intimacy of it, that no one who saw them
would doubt they were a couple, and it felt great to know they didn’t have to hide. At least not for tonight.

He had her laughing throughout the meal with stories from college and the Air Force, and during dessert, he reached across the table to hold her hand. He didn’t let go of it until after they left and he had to open the car door for her.

“Hope you saved room for popcorn,” he told her while they waited in line to buy their movie tickets. She deftly intercepted him as he tried to hand his credit card to the box office clerk, stating that he got dinner so she wanted to pay for this. If it was important to him for her to know he wasn’t just in this for sex, then it was just as important to her to prove she wasn’t in it for money. Peeta told her he wanted to pay, but she smugly said she had it. Then the clerk informed her that the twenty she just handed over didn’t cover it.

“Twenty-two dollars for two movie tickets?” she barked after paying the balance. “That’s absolutely ridiculous.”

Peeta only laughed. “Wait until you see the concession prices, Grandpa.”

“Shouldn’t that be my pet name for you?” she returned coolly, but he only laughed again.

“Oh, you are going to get it later for that.”

“Promise?” she asked mischievously. The look he gave her after was anything but humorous, his answer an imperceptible nod.

“Peeta?” The spell was broken by another voice, and they turned around to see an older man walking towards them. Katniss watched as Peeta put on his best game face, smiling kindly and extending his hand.

“Mitchell. How’ve you been?”

“Oh, can’t complain much. You?”

“Good. Thanks.”

It was an awkward moment of silence as Mitchell looked over at Katniss and waited a beat for the introduction. “Uh, Mitchell, this is Katniss, my girlfriend.”

She could only hope she schooled her features enough so the shock didn’t show, and she took Mitchell’s hand, a smile frozen on her face. “Nice to meet you.”

“Mitchell and I used to work in District 3 together,” Peeta explained.

“Yeah, what I like to call The Dark Days,” Mitchell laughed. “Peeta, you must be doing better than good if you have this lovely lady in your life.” He winked at her, a literal wink, and then said something about the movie starting soon. “It was nice to meet you, Katniss. Peeta, good running into you again.”

As soon as he was out of sight, walking away with a noticeable limp, Katniss’s mouth dropped open in surprise. “Peeta.”

“I’m so sorry,” he groaned. “I panicked and the only thing I could think of was the truth.”

“He’s a miner? What if he knows my dad?”
“Mitchell hasn’t worked in the mines for years,” he placated. “Not since he got injured. I doubt he knows your dad.”

She believed him. The alternative was to panic and that would suck all the enjoyment out of what they were doing. But as she let go of the worry, it occurred to her that he made a very bold declaration. “So I’m your girlfriend?” She hoped that sounded annoyed and not hopeful, like it sounded in her head.

“That’s your call, Katniss, not mine. I’m sorry I said it like that.”

She waited a beat before relaxing, smiling to set him at ease. “Whatever. Like you said, it’s the truth.”

That modest agreement seemed to send him over the moon, if his returning smile was any indication, but he recovered enough to order their popcorn and drinks. “My treat,” he told her. “For my girlfriend.”

“You’re treat because I’m not about to spend $11 on popcorn,” she returned, but there was no denying her giddiness either.

They agreed to see Everest, a new Jake Gyllenhaal movie opening that night. It was intense, with many scenes that had her burying her face against his shoulder. But at some point he took her hand again, and from that moment on, that was all she could think about. With a new relationship status, her hand in his was everything. His warmth encasing her, the feel of his thumb brushing against her palm...it was turning her on more than anything else ever had, and considering their time together so far, that was really saying something. She pulled him in for a kiss at one point, hoping no one in the dark theater would happen to look over at them in that moment, but it did nothing to quench her need.

Her grip on him tightened, her own fingers roughly tracing patterns along his skin just to keep her from climbing into his lap. The movie could not end soon enough, and when the end credits rolled and the lights came back up, she closed her eyes in thanks.

“Let’s get out of here,” she said, desperate to get him alone. They had an excruciatingly long drive ahead of them.

He didn’t make any move to get up. “I need a minute,” he said, motioning discreetly to his lap.

When he was finally under control, they nearly raced back to his car, and as soon as the doors were closed, they were on each other, panting hard between rough kisses. “I don’t know how I’m going to drive home like this,” he said against the corner of her mouth. “I could cut glass right now.”

She pulled back to stare at him with hooded eyes. “Want to get a room somewhere?”

“You’d allow that?” he asked, equal parts shocked and thrilled.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I can’t wait another hour to be all alone with you.”

He started the car and searched for nearby hotels on his phone. When he found one he was satisfied with, he set off in its direction, steering with one hand while his other stayed with Katniss.

The hotel he drove to was massive, and she was wide-eyed as he led her to the main entrance. “I love this time of year,” he said, inhaling the warm September air. “Fall’s my favorite season.”
“Yeah?”

“And orange is my favorite color,” he added. “I guess you should know that now, since you’re officially my girlfriend and all.”

They were still smiling by the time they reached the lobby, where Peeta asked for the nicest room available. She didn’t protest as he paid, sure she couldn’t afford it even if she wanted to. There were lots of people milling about, and she wondered if anyone was watching them, noticing the way they couldn’t seem to let go of each other, the fact that they didn’t have any luggage. There was no hiding the reason they were there.

They got the corner suite, a massive room with a sitting area. She could have spent an hour exploring every detail if she wasn’t so preoccupied with Peeta. “I always wanted to come here,” he told her, pulling her in for another kiss. “I wanted to see the museum, the art. Now I couldn’t care less about any of that because you’re here with me.”

She was never so turned on in her life, and she thought she might come the second he touched her, if it even took that much. He had her on the bed in seconds, trying to be patient while he undressed her when he probably wanted to tear off her clothes just as badly as she wanted him to.

“Peeta,” she whispered as she tugged off his shirt. “Will you...will you, um..”

“What?” he asked tenderly, dropping kisses all over her face.

How could she expect to get it, let alone enjoy it, if she couldn’t even say it? She braced herself, letting lust win out over modesty. “Go down on me,” she said. “Please.”

She always thought that men must think of it as a chore to go down on their partner. That’s how she viewed it. But Peeta couldn’t have been more thrilled by the request, and he patiently positioned her on the bed - her hair fanned out against the pillows, another pillow under her hips, her legs splayed open invitingly.

He took his time with soft kisses and touches, and she wondered how he could maintain so much control when she thought he wanted it just as badly as she did. The first dip of his head between thighs, the first long lick over her clit, and she was arching off the bed and crying out, already addicted to the feeling.

He kept his eyes on her as his mouth worked her over, and she alternated between clawing at him and fisting the bedsheets. She was panting and moaning loudly, something he’d encouraged the last few weeks when they were in his bed and she was riding his hand.

“You taste incredible,” he said, finally coming up for air to pepper kisses on the inside of her thighs. “And you get so wet for me.”

“Do you really like doing it?” she asked as she scratched at his shoulders. It seemed too good to be true, the idea that he’d enjoy something so centered on her pleasure.

“Oh Katniss,” he breathed. “I could do this forever.” His tongue darted out again to flick against her, and she would’ve bucked her hips into his face if he didn’t have her pinned down. “I’ll do this whenever you want,” he added. “Just ask.”

She dug her heels into his back as he moved faster, and then it was happening suddenly and she was crying out, but it was the longest orgasm she ever experienced, a neverending peak that had tears rolling down her face with every shake of her body. She could feel his arm jerking back and forth as he touched himself. “Where do you want me to come?” he asked as he stroked his cock.
Katniss brushed her hair off her shoulders and thrust out her chest. Precum coated her skin, leaving a sticky trail as he slid between her breasts, which she pressed together for him. It didn’t take him long to finish that way, and she licked her lips as she watched him spill onto her.

He moved back down to lap at her again, and it was too much, she was too sensitive. She pushed away his head, twisting her body out from him, but he held her firmly in place and kept his mouth on her. Then she was coming for a second time, a pleasure she didn’t know was possible for her, and now she was holding his head down to her, risking suffocating him with her thighs.

He was laughing and she was still panting when he finally untangled her legs from around him. “Like that?” he asked smugly.

When she kissed him, she could taste herself on his tongue, and it only excited her more. But then a thought struck her and seemed to suck all the joy out of the moment. Peeta noticed it immediately. “Hey, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said. “It’s stupid.”

“No it’s not. What is it?”

“It’s just...you’ve done that before, huh?” Yes, when she said it, it sounded just as stupid as she thought it would.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “But I’ve never done it with you before. That’s all that counts, right?”

She wished she could brush it off that easily, but it still bothered her. “Is there anything you haven’t done?” she asked hopefully as she grabbed some tissues to dab her chest clean. He was going to be so many of her firsts. It only felt fair to share at least one experience together like that.

“I’ve been having sex for nearly 20 years,” he explained gently. “There’s really not much I didn’t try.” He took her hand and laced his fingers with hers. “But that doesn’t have anything to do with us. Any first with you is far more important to me.”

She was about to say something when the bedside phone rang. They shared a look of surprise before he answered, and Katniss could’ve sworn her heart stopped in worry. Who knew they were there?

“Hello? Oh, okay. My apologies. I was watching a movie and the volume must’ve been up too high. It won’t happen again. Thank you.”

“What was that about?” Katniss asked as soon as he disconnected.

He grinned. “You were a little loud there, sweetheart.”

She dropped her head back on the pillow, throwing her arm over her face in mortification. So half the hotel probably heard her coming. Great.

She didn’t stay embarrassed for long though. What was the point? As she thought about it more, it even started to appeal to her. In fact, she liked the idea that strangers heard her with Peeta. It bordered on kinky, and no harm was done.

“So has that ever happened before?” she asked hopefully.

“Nope. You’re my first disturbance call.”

She pulled him down beside her and curled into his side, loving the way they fit together and how
at peace she felt in his arms. “Good.”

xxXxx

Their weekend in Louisville-Peeta booked the room for another night as soon as she revealed her arrangement to stay with him- set a precedent for their time together. Her parents must have heard every excuse imaginable as to why she disappeared every Friday night and reemerged Sunday evening. Madge was a saint for continuing to go along with it.

“We should do something together this weekend,” her father said pointedly one morning over breakfast. “You don’t have any plans yet, do you Kitty?”

She felt guilty, so she shook her head no. He asked if she had anything in mind for them to do, and again she shook her head.

Later, after grading her first exams, she sent a text to Peeta explaining the weekend disruption. Her ringtone blared a few minutes later, and she answered his call with a disappointed sigh.

“It’s okay,” he appeased. “We’ll figure something out.”

She was thankful that he didn’t bring up the obvious: revealing their relationship to her parents. She just wasn’t ready yet, and he seemed to sense that.

She was testing out the waters though, telling fellow teachers that she was seeing someone when they inquired about her social life. “It’s a new relationship,” she had told Johanna, the PE teacher who, frankly, scared her.

“Ah, so you’re still in that fucking-each-other’s-brains-out stage,” Johanna replied, showing no regard to the fact that they were in the teachers’ lounge. “That’s the best.”

“Oh, I guess.”

“I could tell. You got that sexually satisfied glow going on. Totally dicktimized.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, addicked. Acockoholic.”

After convincing herself there was no glow and her parents’ were still oblivious (and after starting to eat lunch in her classroom), Katniss realized that Johanna was right. She was addicked. And knowing she couldn’t spend Saturday night sitting on Peeta’s face was a heartbreak.

“So what are you going to do?” she asked him now, still dwelling in her depression.

“I don’t know. There’s a home remodel expo in the city this weekend. I’ll probably go to that Saturday afternoon.”

The next morning, when she spotted the ad for that expo in the newspaper her father was reading, she hurried to point it out. “You’ve wanted to do some work around here for years now,” she told him. “Mom would love an updated kitchen.”

“You want to go to the expo?” he asked doubtfully.

“Sure. Why not?”
Oh, she was completely dicktimized. No doubt about it. Saturday afternoon, as they made their way through rows of vendors, Katniss kept her eyes peeled for Peeta. She scanned the crowd as her mother talked to a blinds salesman at one table while at another, a woman shilling gutter guards flirted with her always-oblivious father. She wondered if Peeta stopped this way yet, if he got the same husky voice and finely manicured hand on his forearm. He better not have,

She separated from her parents, feigning a trip to the snack bar, and set off in search of him. The large convention center was packed with people, but she was confident in her ability to pick him out of a crowd. And she did just that a few minutes later, miraculously spotting him in the landscaping section as he talked happily with a little old man wearing a green vest.

Symptoms of addicktion had to include rapid heartbeat and lightheadedness. It was how she felt now any time she was around him, and she had to fight the urge to run up to him and make her presence known.

Instead, she actually went the snack bar, begrudgingly buying a $4 bottle of water to drink. Now that she knew Peeta was here, she just had to bide her time to run into him. Just seeing him and being able to talk to him for a little bit would save this weekend from being a total wash.

She saw him again later in the same section her parents stopped by earlier, but a look around now told her they moved on to somewhere else. Peeta returned the flirty gutter-guard girl’s smile, but politely told her he wasn’t interested. When he got to the end of the row, near the long hallway leading to the restrooms, she saw her chance and took it.

He was just about to grab a pamphlet off the table when she took him by the hand and pulled him into hallway. “Hi,” she said, spinning him around to press him against the wall. She kissed him before he had the chance to say anything back, and as much as she wanted to deepen the kiss and stay wrapped in his arms, they couldn’t risk it.

“What are you doing here?” he asked happily.

“I’m here with my parents,” she confessed. “But I really wanted to see you.”

“Yeah?” He tucked a piece of her hair behind her hair and smiled tenderly. “I’m glad. I’ve missed you.”

She looked back to make sure the coast was clear, then indulged in another kiss. “I’ve missed you, too.”

“Having fun?”

“It’s not bad. Think I might try to convince my dad to put in a jetted tub now.”

“You know,” he said, moving in even closer and possessively gripping her waist, “I have a jetted tub.”

He kissed her again, a quick but sweet kiss flush on the mouth. “How did I not know this?”

“You’ll have to come over soon to see it. It’s huge.”

She felt warm all over, hot enough to want another $4 bottle of water. “Give me some time and I’ll figure something out.”

“Tonight?” he asked hopefully.

“Yeah.”
They separated reluctantly so Katniss could track down her parents. She was desperately trying to think up a reason to leave them tonight so she could spend her evening with Peeta when they called out to her. “There you are!” her father exclaimed. “We were worried we lost you.”

“Sweetie, you should see these cabinets I picked out. They’re gorgeous.” She listened to her mom prattle on about the new kitchen as they walked together, and then her father was saying, “Hey, look who it is!”

Peeta waved their way before walking over, and she was in awe of how cool he appeared while she felt totally rattled. “Hi Jack. Hi Millie,” he said, then his eyes landed on her. “Katniss. How’s the new job going?”

“It’s fine, thanks,” she said, proud of herself for pulling off the same flippancy she had with nearly everyone else.

While her father talked with Peeta, Katniss couldn’t help but notice that her mother still seemed a bit standoffish with him. It frustrated her. It’d been over three months since his date with her coworker.

“Mom?” she said, pulling her aside. “Some other teachers are getting together tonight for dinner and they invited me along.”

It was important that she didn’t ask. She wasn’t a child anymore, and she didn’t need their permission to go out. She waited for her mother’s reply, growing worried that she’d try to be difficult about it. Instead, she smiled. “I think it’s nice that you’re getting along with everyone at work.”

That sealed the deal, and after tearing her father away from Peeta—who she covertly texted to say she’d see him tonight—she and her parents explored the rest of the expo together. It was actually fun to spend that time with them, and she appreciated how relaxed and happy they were together as they planned some of their remodeling projects. It always bothered Katniss that they had to grow up so fast and sacrifice so much for her and Prim. Her parents were still young, and she thought it was about time they started living more for themselves and each other.

The rest of the day flew by, and she got to Peeta’s just before seven. He’d given her a key a couple weeks earlier, which she used now to let herself in. He wasn’t anywhere on the first floor, so she climbed the stairs in search of him, sure she’d find him in the master bath, probably planning a party in the spa tub she never noticed before.

She was right. He was sitting on the edge of the tub, leaning against the ceramic tile backsplash as he waited for it to fill with water. Candles were lit, the recessed lighting was dimmed to a setting probably called ‘romantic’, and he had two glasses of wine waiting for them. It was the most overt love scene imaginable, bordering on cheesy, but she loved it because it was Peeta’s doing.

He hadn’t heard her yet over the sound of running water, so she started to undress. After slipping off her shirt, she whipped it in his direction and laughed at him for startling as it landed next to him.

“Hey,” he said brightly as he turned to look at her. “You made it.” He was always so happy to see her, and it didn’t matter if it’d been a week or a minute since the last time her saw her; every time he looked at her, his eyes shone with adoration and longing.

She suppressed a smile and twisted her hair up into a messy bun. The night looked promising already. “I made it.”
“This was going to be the trial run to make sure the tub still worked, but since you’re already here…” He smiled wide as he shucked off his own shirt, and she laughed as she rolled her eyes.

“You don’t even use it?”

“Uh, no,” he answered as if it were obvious. He probably just put it in because it was expensive and expected for an opulent master bath. Sometimes the money issue seemed like a more significant gap than their notable age difference.

But then another thought struck her as she slid down across from him and into the hot water, running her toes up his legs while a slow smile spread across her face. “Am I the first one to join you in here then?”

“You are,” he said, grabbing one of her feet and rubbing her heel. “Happy now?”

She laid her head back on the towel he had for her and sighed as he massaged the sole of her foot. The tub was oversized but still a tight fit for two people, which meant half her lower body was basically in his lap.Feeling him against her like this wasn’t something she’d complain about. “Very.”

Peeta used the remote to turn on the air jets, which worked fine despite their lack of use, and then added some bubble bath to the water. If she was in it for relaxation, she could fall asleep right there. But that was not where her interests lay.

She examined the bottle he used—something he probably picked up on the way home, already planning for the night’s activities as soon as he got her text. ‘Sensual’ it declared. A jasmine and vanilla scented body wash and foam bath, designed to heighten your senses. She sat up on her knees in the tub, pouring some in the palm of her hand. She didn’t touch Peeta, though. Instead, she lathered herself up, watching victoriously as it had the desired effect on him.

Katniss thought her body was utterly unremarkable. With small breasts and a thin frame, she lacked all the curves that others were supposed to find so appealing. Yet Peeta treated her like a goddess, as if she was some dynamic sexual being he couldn’t get enough of, all despite being with a dozen other women who probably had everything she did not.

She straddled him as she continued to run her soapy hands across her skin, feeling him hard against her. He didn’t seem in any rush to proceed as he tucked a damp tendril of hair behind her ear and then cupped her cheek in his hand.

“Do you want to fuck me?” she asked in a low voice, leaning in close to his face.

“Desperately.”

Her fingertips danced along his shoulders and down his slick chest. He once adorably admitted to her that he’d been hitting the gym regularly since she came along, trying to keep up with her youth. It showed in his hard, defined arms most.

She was momentarily lost in her thoughts again until he spoke, asking her what she wanted. “You,” she replied easily, rocking her hips. He was throbbing against her, and the pressure on her clit felt amazing as she moved back and forth.

“There’s still a lot of other things for us to try first,” he told her huskily. “I want to try so many things with you.”

“Mm, me too.”
“I want to try something I’ve never done before,” he continued. That appealed to her immediately, and she mewed her consent as she rocked faster. He turned them around, causing water to slosh over the side of the tub, and began kissing a trail down her back. She gripped the edge as she arched against his mouth, and his hand kneaded her backside before seeking other spots. When his fingertips brushed a spot he never sought out before, she tensed up, sensing what he had in mind. She wasn’t exactly opposed to it, but it’d probably hurt. She knew that much about it.

His lips were on the small of her back as she leaned over further to give him better access, and he lapped at the rivulets of water cascading down her skin. Then he nibbled, his teeth grazing gently at first, then harder. There were teasing bites over the slope of her hip before he returned the attention to her rear.

He spread her wide open for him, and she would’ve let him do anything to her in that moment, pain be damned. “If you don’t like it, tell me and I’ll stop,” he said, and she nodded eagerly, waiting for him to continue.

It wasn’t his cock or even his fingers that she felt against her though, and as his tongue touched her there of all places, she cried out. Not in pain, or surprise, or maybe even outrage, but in sheer pleasure. He never did this before, he had said, but he wanted to do it to her, and there wasn’t any hesitation with his mouth. “Peeta,” she keened, already desperate to come.

She rested her forehead against the cool ceramic tile to focus on that feeling of buildup. Her only jarring moment was when Peeta repositioned her, aligning her knees where he wanted them. She stirred out of her stupor to realize what he was doing just as the pulsating water hit her, and he dipped his head under the surface so he could continue with what he’d been doing. The combination of the two sensations were so overpowering and intense that she climaxed almost instantly, crying out as she reached behind her to grip his hair, holding him in place as she rode the jet.

“I love you,” she thought as she collapsed in his arms. ‘I love you, I love you, I love you.’ Thankfully she wasn’t stupid enough to say it. But to show her appreciation, she brushed the wet waves off his forehead and apologized for nearly drowning him. He laughed breathlessly, holding her tighter against his slick chest.

She was supposed to be having dinner with coworkers, and that severely limited their time together. In his room, she dropped to her knees in front of him, telling him how she never wanted to do this for Gale but she thought all the time about doing it for him. She wrapped her hand around him, timidly asking him to guide her.

He showed her how to hold him while using her mouth, where to run her tongue along his shaft, what kind of pressure he liked. “Can you take more?” he asked once he slipped past her lips, his fingers trembling as they massaged her scalp.

She nodded with wide eyes, and her nails dug into his firm backside as he hit her throat. She gagged once and then pulled off, not wanting to embarrass herself again like that, but he didn’t even seem to notice. The time in the tub already had him so worked up that this was proving easier than she imagined.

“Yeah, just like that,” he said, thrusting very slowly with what must have taken extreme self-control. Then he told her he wanted it faster as his hands tangled in her hair, and soon he was saying he was close. “Oh fuck, Katniss,” he muttered. “Take it. Swallow.”

She pumped her hand harder, nodding quickly as she readied herself. Her eyes squeezed shut with the first spurt, then the second. She coughed and choked- which she tried to hide- and that left her
ill-prepared for the rest that dribbled down her chin and onto her chest.

“Are you okay?” he panted with concern. He wiped her dripping mouth with his thumb, an apology already brewing in his eyes, but she didn’t want it.

"I liked it. Really." She took pride in how spent he seemed, finally understanding why he enjoyed it so much with her. It was a special kind of power to make someone else feel so amazing.

After cleaning up, during which she jokingly told him he had to brush his teeth (he made no such demands from her), he beckoned her to lie down with him. She hesitated, knowing her parents were expecting her home at a reasonable hour, but ultimately relented. Probably because she wanted it, too.

"So you're a fan of the jetted tub?" he asked, lazily brushing his fingers up and down her back. She nuzzled against the crook of his neck, sighing in contentment, which he took as confirmation.

Willing herself to not fall asleep, she asked him if he had fun at the expo, and he laughed lightly and confirmed that he did. "I really think it might be time to sell this place and find a new project," he added.

"Mmhmm."

"I'm thinking about looking outside of Lexington," he said.

"Mmm." How did he seem so awake yet she felt exhausted?

She could pass out right there and then, snuggled against his chest, but he went on about what he was looking for, asking her what she thought, and seeming unsatisfied by her short, noncommittal answers. But what was important to her, he pressed. A big backyard, maybe?

"What's it matter, Peeta?" she asked drowsily. "It's your house." She realized she had to go, that if she waited any longer, it probably wouldn't be safe to drive home.

"Stay," he said as she moved to leave. He wrapped his arm around her waist, pulling her back, but she pried him off.

"I can't."

He gave her a hurt puppy look that she didn't really buy as she hurried to dress. "I'll call you later," she said on her way out. He didn't look placated, but she had to go right then if she wasn't going to arouse her parents' suspicion. She crawled toward him to kiss him goodbye, and he quickly turned his head so she caught his cheek.

She rolled her eyes, not here for his dramatics. "Bye."

He didn't say anything as she rushed off.

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She wanted Peeta over for Thanksgiving dinner, and it was as simple as that. When she asked
what his plans were for the day, he shrugged it off, saying he wasn't really sure. If he didn't have any family to visit, then there was no way she would allow him to be at home alone for the holiday.

But before she could go to work on Peeta to convince him to accept her invitation, she had to secure her mother's permission to extend it. And that was another matter altogether, as the woman still held a grudge over the setup gone bad.

Katniss's first approach was sweetness, an almost unnatural state for her, especially when it came to dealing with her mom. She fabricated a sob story about running into Peeta at the store, and how small talk revealed that he didn't have anywhere to go for Thanksgiving! Isn't that so unbelievably sad?

Her mother remained unmoved. "I'm sure he has friends or girlfriends to see."

Katniss bit back a few choice words, reminding herself to stay sweet. "I really don't think so."

"We can't have him here," her mother declared.

Forget sweetness then. "Why not?"

"Because, Katniss."

She still talked to her as if she was a child, which was infuriating. She might as well have said, 'Because I said so.'

Then it was on to her backup plan, she decided. Guilt.

"Peeta gave me my first job," Katniss reminded her, batting away the dirty thoughts about the other firsts he also gave her. "He's the reason I have a teaching position right now, too. And he's friends with dad! So what...we can't have him over for dinner?"

"It'd be too awkward for me," her mother said. Katniss bitterly wondered if she should get her mother pearls for Christmas so she'd have something to sanctimoniously clutch at times like this.

Her third and final option was her favorite anyway: defiance. "Well I already invited him. You're not going to make me uninvite him, are you?"

Her mother's pursed lips were the first sign of defeat. "No, I won't make you uninvite him."

Katniss assumed the conversation would end there, but then her mother added, "Is there anyone else you'd like to invite?" But it was said kindly and genuinely, a perplexing difference.

"No."

"Really?" Her mother looked doubtful. "But what about Madge?"

"Why would I invite Madge?"

"It's not a preposterous idea, Katniss! You spend nearly all your free time with her."

"She probably has plans with her family," she said.
Still her mother persisted. "Maybe she can stop by after. Or how about Christmas? Have you discussed that yet?"

Katniss was growing more confused. "Uh, we haven't talked about it?"

Her mother's already delicate features softened further as she pitifully studied her. "Honey, I know the Undersees are rather conservative," she said. "But I want you to know—and this is something your father and I've already discussed—that you and Madge are welcome here any time." She moved around the counter to wrap her up in a one-armed hug, and then she dropped a gentle kiss on her forehead. "We love you, and we 100% accept you and support you."

Oh.

She may be currently practicing the fine art of duplicity, but it still came as a shock to realize how little her parents knew about her now. "We're not together!" she said. "I'm not gay."

Her mother seemed clueless about what to say or do next, and Katniss sighed as she grabbed her messenger bag off the countertop. She didn't know what to say or do, either, and she had to be at work soon. And it wasn't as if she could be upset, not when her parents were prepared to be so supportive.

"I have to go," she told her. "But thank you for letting Peeta come to Thanksgiving."

Her mother seemed embarrassed as she stared down into her coffee. "Have a good day."

She didn't. She had a terrible day. Sometimes she felt totally helpless as a teacher, especially when she saw her students struggling for their basic needs. How could she expect a twelve year-old to focus on the reading assignment when she knew he was hungry? Was she supposed to scold a young girl for not having a pencil when the shoes she wore were falling apart?

Fed up with the system that failed these children at every level, Katniss drove straight to a Target after work and spent nearly her entire week's paycheck on snacks and supplies. She thought about games she could devise for the next unit, maybe a classroom variation of Jeopardy. Something, anything, fun and different to help them learn. She'd give them their new notebooks, pencils and treats in hopes that it cheered them all up, even if it was only for the period.

She went to Peeta's after, but he was in a lousy mood, too. She led him upstairs, saying that they could be miserable together. As he sprawled out on the bed, she straddled his backside and rubbed his tense shoulders. Normally he was the one giving her the massages, but he looked even more put out today than she felt.

"How am I supposed to do my job when they keep doing things like?" he said as she worked the knots in his back. "How am I supposed to keep them safe?"

"Why do they do it?"

"Because the more coal they run, the more money made. At most it's double time for them, but it means hundreds of thousands of dollars for the pricks in suits."

"They have to know it's not worth it," she said.

"No one ever thinks bad things will happen to them," he told her. "And then it's too late when it does."
She always hated the mines, but now she could barely stand the idea of Peeta and her father there, working in those conditions, always a hairbreadth away from danger.

"When there's an accident, there might be a shakeup, but nothing ever really changes," he continued. "The fines are nothing compared to the profits. They never pay the fines anyway. And no one cares.

"No one cares until a few dozen men die in one go. Then they all care a whole lot, and they push around their papers and talk big. But time passes, and the proposals get buried by bureaucracy, and it all starts again."

She leaned forward to hug him, her cheek pressed between his shoulder blades as a rush of affection struck her. He cared; he cared so much, and when it came down to it, she completely trusted him with her father's life. "I'm sorry you had a bad day," she told him.

Peeta reached for her hand, turning it over to kiss her palm. "I'm sorry you had a bad day, too." Then he groaned, saying, "We need a vacation."

"Mmm, that'd be nice."

"You got your passport?"

"Of course not."

He laughed. "You better get a passport."

Knowing there was no time like the present, she came right out and invited him to Thanksgiving; when she sensed his hesitation, she added that they needed to build up to the revelation of their relationship, and that this could be considered a start to that.

She smiled in victory when he asked what she wanted him to bring. As she massaged his muscles again, she could feel the tension already dissipating.

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"That must be Peeta," her mother as she basted the turkey. Katniss had her arms full, and she cast a helpless glance over at Prim.

The doorbell rang again. "Honey, can you get that?" she asked impatiently, shutting the oven door.

Prim raced over to take the plates and silverware from her sister, and Katniss smiled gratefully. "I'll get it," she said.

Before letting him in, she tugged at her auburn skirt, trying to smooth its nonexistent wrinkles, and fluffed her hair. If her mother wasn't so preoccupied with cooking and her father distracted by a football game, surely they would notice how nervous she seemed, how much effort she'd put into her appearance.

"Hi," she said breathlessly as she opened the door. Peeta smiled at the sight of her, looking
relieved that she was the one to greet him. She reached to take some of the many bags from him, wondering what he could have possibly brought so much of. "You know my mom's cooking, right?"

"You told me to bring dessert."

"A dessert," she corrected. It looked like he had an entire bakery collection with him, and she worried if her mother, determined to stay annoyed, would take it as a slight.

She led him into the kitchen, where he greeted her mother nervously and received a cool hello in return. Katniss threw him a warning look. She was already frazzled, but he couldn't be. She was relying on him to be the one keeping it together.

"Can I help you with anything?" he asked, acting like an eager-to-please child.

"I think we've got it all under control. Jack's in the family room watching the Bengals game. You should join him."

Peeta looked like he was about to protest, but Katniss intervened, thanking him for the desserts and motioning him out of the room when her mother wasn't looking. He sulked away without an argument.

Katniss got to work unloading the bags as her mother finished up dinner. Peeta'd brought five different pies, a red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting, dinner rolls and two bottles of wine.

"Who's he trying to impress?" her mother sneered.

You, she thought bitterly. "Be nice."

Her mother plastered on a smile as she carried the turkey into the dining room. "Of course."

Prim was the saving grace at dinner, talking a mile a minute about classes and her part-time job, saving them all from suffocating in awkward silence. Peeta kept her going, asking her plenty of questions and seeming genuinely interested in the responses. Her mother was still cold, and her father surprisingly quiet. Obviously whatever was happening at work was causing tension here, too.

As the table was being cleared and after Peeta's offer to help was rebuffed, he turned to her father and asked to speak with him privately. Katniss tensed, her hand hovering over a gravy boat as her eyes darted between the two men. Her father told Peeta to join him in the living room, and Peeta didn't look at her as he moved past to follow him.

She put the dishes she'd gathered back down and went after them, slipping down the hallway unnoticed. She stood outside the archway to listen in, and they were speaking in harsh, low voices.

“I don’t think you understand how serious this is,” she heard Peeta say.

“I’ve been there for nearly 25 years. Give me a little credit.”

“What’s going on?” she asked, walking into the room to reveal herself.

“It’s nothing, Kitty,” her father said.
Peeta looked pissed off, his hands on his hips as he glared at her dad. “Actually, Jack, why don’t you enlighten Katniss. If it’s not an issue, she’ll have no reason to worry. Right?”

She looked from Peeta to her father, waiting for one of them to say something else. “What’s he talking about?”

Her father just shook his head, averting his eyes.

“Someone’s bridging methane detectors,” Peeta explained.

“What do you mean?”

“There are monitors mounted on all the continuous miners,” he said, referencing the massive pieces of machinery they use to run coal. “They’re designed to give off a warning when dangerous concentrations of methane gas are detected. That signal automatically shuts down the machine.

“Someone’s been getting into the boxes and rewiring them to stop them from turning off the machines,” he continued. “Someone who knows how to circumvent devices. Someone with a good working knowledge of electrical systems.”

She looked to her father, knowing immediately what Peeta was getting at. “Dad?”

His silence was his admission of guilt, and Katniss was livid. “What are you thinking? Why would you do something so stupid?”

“Katniss…”

“No! I don’t want to hear your excuses,” she said.

“If I don’t do it, someone else will. Someone who isn’t nearly as careful as I am. I still keep a methane detector on me, Katniss. If I don’t think it’s safe, I stop them.”

“You’re 30 feet behind the face, Jack. It could be building up methane and you won’t know until the explosion!” Peeta yelled. “It’s a violation of nearly every safety practice in the books. You’d be prosecuted if MSHA found out about it.”

“Peeta,” she said, glaring at him. “Calm down.”

His jaw flexed in frustration, but he heeded her advice. “Look, I understand that they’re putting pressure on everyone to increase production. But what they’re asking of you is illegal. This needs to be reported and it needs to be addressed. It’s a catastrophe waiting to happen.”

“No one’s gonna stand up to Snow, Peeta,” her father told him. “If we don’t do what he wants, we’re fired. Then what? Are we supposed to go work at the Piggly Wiggly?”

“Fine then,” Peeta said. “Allow me to rephrase it: you’ve got one week to fix the detectors and warn everyone else that they’re being watched. I’m going to the safety directors with my concerns and my evidence, and if you do this again, I’m giving them your name.”

Peeta grabbed his coat off the hanger and stopped in front of Katniss. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. Once he was gone, her father looked to her. “Kitty-”

She walked away, shaking her head in disappointment. “Don’t.”
Optimistic was never a word to describe Katniss, but in the following weeks she searched for the silver lining in everything. Desperate but clueless, she decided the best course of action was to prepare for the worst but hope for the best.

And a part of preparing was convincing Peeta to attend the mine’s annual Christmas party at the Sheraton. It was always the social event of the year, a black tie affair that gave the miners and their families something to look forward to.

Katniss didn’t always go, but she attended the previous year since she was a new hire as Peeta’s secretary. She actually spent most of that night talking to him, and they even danced together once. No one batted an eyelash then. Would they this time?

But Peeta didn’t even want to go now. There was a lot of animosity at work, he said. The miners were abiding by all the rules at the moment, but everyone knew he was a potential whistleblower, and they thought he was a threat to their livelihoods. They didn’t trust him.

Her own father was wary of him now, too. Peeta had apologized to them both separately, explaining to Katniss that he had no intention of confronting her father like that on Thanksgiving day, but when the man admitted he was the one behind the wiring, destroying Peeta’s hope it’d been an electrician, he lost it.

Katniss accepted the apology. Her father did not. And now it felt like it would never be a right time to come clean about the relationship.

But Katniss had a dress, a room reservation, and a plan. It wasn’t a very good plan, she conceded. But at the moment, it was the best she could come up with. The idea was that she wanted to be with Peeta. To really be with him. She never romanticized her virginity before, but now she saw the loss of it as a symbolic gesture, one that said she trusted him, and that she was committed to him despite whatever odds they faced.

So she was going to spend the night with him in the room she rented at the Sheraton, and when she returned home the next day to undoubtedly be confronted by her parents, she was going to do something she’d rarely done in the four months since this all started: tell the truth.

It’d be hell at first, no doubt about that. But there’d be nowhere to go from there but up. It would take time, but someday her parents would realize that there was nothing cloying or devious about Peeta, who was kind and good and just. To put it simply, she loved him, and he was going to be around for awhile. Her parents had to accept that, and eventually everything wonderful about Peeta would win them over.

The night of the party, Katniss took her time getting ready so she’d have to drive separately from her parents, which was part of her plan. They told her they’d see her there, then said goodbye to Prim, who chose to stay in.

Prim helped her get ready by styling her hair in a half up, half down twisted crown braid, after Katniss dressed in the silver bodiced gown she bought a few months ago. She was already losing confidence at this point, her stomach upset by nerves, and Prim gave her a reassuring hug on her way out.

The ballroom at the Sheraton was decorated tastefully, with thousands of clear twinkle lights draped over every beam and arch. Katniss’s eyes scanned the room first for Peeta, and then for her parents. Her mother and father were at a table in the far corner, but Peeta was nowhere to be found.
She sat with her mother and father for awhile before excusing herself, saying she wanted to catch up with a few people she used to work with. That should have been their first clue that she was up to something, since Katniss never sought out anyone for small talk, but they didn’t seem to think anything was amiss. She made her way across the expansive dance floor and back over to hors d’oeuvres table, still searching for Peeta. Giving up, she started to fill a small plate with appetizers even though she wasn’t hungry.

“Dance with me?”

His lips were dangerously close to the shell of her ear as he spoke. She set the plate back down and accepted his hand. The DJ was playing an older slow song she didn’t recognize, and other couples were filtering out onto the floor to take advantage of the break from Christmas carols. She rested her hands on his shoulders as he held her hips, and she frantically wondered if anyone was watching them.

“I was worried you weren’t going to show,” she admitted.

He smiled, his eyes lingering far too long to just be considered friendly. “You think I’d ditch you?”

“No. But I know it’s hard for you to be here.” She really did feel terrible about forcing him to a party where he didn’t feel wanted, and suddenly every part of her plan sounded awful. They could be at his house instead, alone right now and still together tonight, but revealing their relationship at their own pace.

“It’s okay,” he told her. “I had a good meeting with a few officials earlier. I feel better about some things now.”

“Good,” she smiled. “If you feel better, I feel better.” She’d told him in the weeks following Thanksgiving that she was proud he stood his ground to keep his workers safe, that everyone else would come around, too. He wasn’t so confident about that, but he seemed appreciative of her support.

“You look beautiful,” he said, his fingers gripping her tighter.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her parents moving onto the dance floor, and she instinctively stepped back from Peeta to create a respectable distance between them. “And you look very dapper,” she said, obviously distracted.

Peeta followed her eyes, about to say something when she grabbed the lapels of his tuxedo jacket. “Meet me in the lobby.”

She stepped away mid-song, leaving Peeta flummoxed as she hurried toward the entrance like a modern-day Cinderella. Her parents were focused on each other, and it didn’t look like they spared her so much as a glance on her way out.

In the lobby, she amended her itinerary. She wouldn’t spend the night with Peeta in the hotel, and she definitely was not going to come clean to her parents (it was too soon, she reasoned, and it’d end too badly right now) but she’d take him to the room she rented and do everything else she’d been thinking about. Retaining the best parts, removing the worst...now that was an infallible plan.

The reprieve she allowed herself was an instant fix for her nerves, and as Peeta crossed the room to meet her, she was back to her old self, that version of Katniss he always roused awake.

She wanted to slowly remove every article of the tuxedo, to hold his head down between her legs as he got her ready for him. And, most desperately, she wanted to finally know what it was like to
have him inside of her. She imagined him hovering above her as he rocked his hips into hers. She
imagined him below her as he showed her how to ride him. She imagined him behind her as he
thrust in and out so hard that she fell forward on the mattress.

“I got us a room tonight,” she told him, leading him by the hand to the elevators.

“Katniss—”

Her lips were on his as soon as the doors closed, and he gave in instantly to pull her tight against
him. Inside the room, he watched hungrily as she slipped out of her dress, but hesitated again as
her hand moved to his zipper.

They didn’t have all night, she reminded him as he tried to rebuff her advances. There was no way
she could come up with a believable story now just to spend the night with him.

“We need to talk about that,” he said gently as he extracted himself from her hold. “Katniss, how
much longer are we going to do this?”

That was not something she wanted to discuss right now. “That doesn’t matter,” she said. “Touch
me.”

He pushed away her hand again. “It does matter.”

Again, she ignored him. Nothing would ruin the mood like facing things she wanted to forget.
“Go down on me?” she begged. He never denied her that before, but he wasn’t giving in so easily
now. She sat on the edge of the bed and took his hand again, pulling him closer. The sexiness was
seeping out of the moment quickly, so she tried to replicate the confidence he seemed to have
effortlessly. “Make me come. I need to come.”

“Are your fingers broken?” he asked coldly, stepping away. “Do it yourself.”

Under different circumstances, that might be seen as an invitation to spice things up, and she’d do
just that as he watched. But he was walking out, looking back at her angrily as he fixed his tie.

“What the hell is your problem?” she snapped. She picked up her dress to hold it against her,
hating how he could make her feel like a child with one stern look.

He turned around, marching determinedly toward her, his palms up in frustration. “I am in love
with you,” he said, his voice breaking. “And I’m tired of being treated like your dirty little secret.
This isn’t an affair, Katniss.”

She didn’t say anything as she slipped the dress over her head, lifting up to tug at the skirt. She
didn’t know what to say. An ‘I love you, too’ and a promise that it wouldn’t be this way forever
was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t do it. She just couldn’t say it.

“You don’t see any kind of future with me, do you?” he asked sadly. “I’m just the guy who gets
you off.”

She was still trying to process that first question- wondering what he wanted in the long-term, if
his plans would align with hers- when he made the second statement that got her blood boiling.
“That’s what you think?”

“What else am I supposed to think?” he yelled. “Look at how you treat me.”

She slipped her heels back on as she tried to think of her defense, but she was so maddeningly
incompetent when it came to words. “Are we going to keep hiding this forever?” he asked
beseeingly, kneeling in front of her now.

God, why did this all make her feel so sick? Why couldn’t she just say what she needed to say to fix this?

He stood up, backing away like a threatened animal. “You never planned on telling anyone about us, did you?”

That’s not true, she wanted to say. She could tell him about her original version of tonight, the one with a scenario that went nothing like this…

“You don’t want to tell your parents about me,” he continued. “Just say it.”

“That’s not true,” she managed pathetically, not even able to look him in the eye.

He obviously didn’t believe her. “Really? Then we’re going to tell them?”

She turned away, her head down in shame. “Just say it,” he repeated. “Say it!”

“I don’t want to tell my parents,” she whispered, wiping away her tears. All the other things that went with it- the excuses, the addendums, the promises- stayed unspoken.

“Then I can’t do this anymore.”

She jumped as the door slammed behind him, and then she curled onto her side, crying loudly in the quiet room.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to loving-mellark for the banner. I'm everlarkeologist on tumblr so please feel free to say hi. Thank you for reading!
It snowed on Christmas Eve, and Katniss spent an hour staring out her bedroom window at the falling flakes until Prim—impatient as a child now that it was time to open presents—called her to the living room. Her parents were cleaning up in the kitchen after dinner, and the girls were supposed to wait by the tree for their gift giving tradition.

Katniss spent a considerable amount of money on her family this year, now that she finally had an income to support it. She’d been so excited to see their reactions to their gifts since she bought them, daydreaming about the looks on their faces as they opened everything, but then the Christmas party happened and now it felt impossible to be happy about anything.

She got her father a pocket watch, one like her grandfather had a long time ago. For her mother, she bought a cashmere sweater that she saw her admiring on their shopping trip a few months back. Prim’s gift was definitely the most expensive of all. It was an MacBook Pro, meant to replace the old laptop Katniss passed down to her after graduating.

When her sister opened it, she screamed with joy and jumped in Katniss’s lap, wrapping her in a back-breaking hug. It was the first time Katniss had smiled in nearly a week. But it slipped from her face as soon as Prim curled up on the couch to set it up. Her mother volunteered to clean up the wrapping paper strewn around the room, and her father offered to help Prim with her new computer, the technological equivalent to a water boy showing the star quarterback how to throw.

Katniss took her presents up to her room to put them away. After everything was in its place, she grabbed the bag of wrapped gifts from her closet and laced up her boots. It was still snowing outside, so she pulled a sweatshirt on for extra warmth, then she went downstairs to sneak away while her family was preoccupied.

“Where are you going?” her mother asked, stopping Katniss before she had the chance to grab her coat.

“Just out for a little bit. I have some presents for friends.”

“No, it’s getting too bad out. You can give them their gifts another time.”

_No?_ Katniss raised her brows, readying for a fight. “Are you serious?”

Her mother acted oblivious to her annoyance, moving around her to place the trash bag near the front door. “What?”

“I’m not a child,” she balked.

“You’re _my_ child,” she replied, smiling sweetly, again missing how much this seemed to upset her daughter.

Katniss grabbed her coat and edged past her mother, defiantly lifting her chin to announce she would be back later. Outside, she determined that the weather was fine to drive in, so she put the bag of gifts in her backseat and scraped the thin blanket of snow off her car windows.

Her destination was a few miles away, in one of the poorest sections of their town. She’d gotten
the home address from the school’s secretary, which was probably stepping outside the lines as a teacher. But this was Christmas, and Katniss couldn’t stand the thought of this girl having nothing.

Madilyn was 12-years-old, and so much smarter than her grades reflected. Katniss always knew the girl’s parents were probably struggling financially. It showed in her thrift shop clothes, her tattered old bookbag, and the bare minimum of supplies she had to begin the school year. Madilyn was quiet and shy, ignored by the other kids when they weren’t teasing her for her weight or her outfit. Katniss tried to treat all of her students equally, but she paid special attention to Madilyn from the start because of the odds already stacked against her.

And she started looking closer during the last week of school before the holiday break, when Katniss asked her 7th period class to share any special Christmas plans. Madilyn surprised her by raising her hand, and she timidly—yet with a hint of pride—offered that she and her mother might get a tree this year. After that moment, Katniss took note of everything she could about Madilyn, from the size of the old sweater draped over the back of her chair, to the number on the worn soles of the bottom of her shoes when she stretched her legs under her desk.

Now she drove to the trailer park, finding Madilyn’s address on a single-wide in disrepair. Katniss parked her car as far away from it as she could, and she trudged through the snow to take the bag of items she’d bought for her to the door. She left it on the cinder block and knocked, then ran off to hide behind a nearby tree. Madilyn opened the door a few seconds later, and after looking around and spotting the bag, she took it inside with her.

Satisfied she successfully got a few things to her while keeping her anonymity, Katniss went back to her car and headed home. But her curiosity got the best of her on the way, and she changed direction to drive to Peeta’s.

She switched off her headlights as she turned onto his street, and then she parked across from his house and craned her neck to find any sign of him through the windows. After a few minutes, the light that was on in the living room turned off, and then a second later the kitchen light switched on. She finally saw Peeta when he stopped in front of the window that was above the sink, and she watched him as he took a drink of water before walking away and shutting off the light.

Katniss thought she took Gale’s breakup badly, but she was pretty much over that the next day. Now this was agony. Peeta hadn’t made any attempt to contact her in the last week, and she’d been too much of a coward to reach out to him. Yet she thought of him constantly, always wondering what he was doing, who he was with, if he was thinking of her, too.

She tried to put him out of her mind, but nothing worked. She asked herself repeatedly what kind of future she thought she could have with him, aside from sex and traveling. He promised her the world, but the globetrotting would have to grow old after awhile.

He couldn’t give her kids.

And she wanted them. Something she could admit to herself now was that-someday—she’d like to be a mother. This Christmas might suck, but she had far too many fond memories of holidays with her family to ever want to give that up in the future. Surrounding yourself with people you love...that was what made life worthwhile.

She stared back at the dark window and thought of Peeta, who was probably off to bed and it wasn’t even 10 p.m. yet. As upset as she was with the way things ended between them, and as frustrated as she felt by the way he seemed to cut her completely out of his life, it hurt to realize that he’d probably spend Christmas all alone.

God, why was the the mushiest side of her always in control when it came to Peeta? Even when
she wanted to be pissed about something, the fondness won out. Everything about their relationship stirred emotions inside of her that she once thought she might be incapable of feeling.

Madge was one of the only people who knew about what happened between them, and that meant her poor friend had to be the one to console her now. But Madge didn’t know Peeta, and that meant she didn’t fully understand how to help her. When Katniss told her what happened, Madge’s first question was about the texts, pictures and recordings. “Oh my god, did he erase them?” she worried. “You don’t think he’d use them against you, do you?”

The thought never even entered her mind, which probably meant she was being stupidly naive to boot. Madge had a horror story about a friend who was seeing her college professor, and after the man ended their relationship, he posted the nude photos she’d sent him on some porn site. Someone found out her name and linked them to her, and her life had been a nightmare since.

Katniss’s own career could end in a heartbeat if Peeta was that kind of person. He had plenty of photos of just her, pictures so tawdry and indecent that she might never work as a teacher again if they got out. All he’d have to do is alert Delly to their existence, maybe show her the one of her topless and licking the cum from the corner of her mouth, and she’d be done.

Well, maybe she had considered it, the ramifications if he was that guy. But it wasn’t something she lost any sleep over because she ultimately she knew he wasn’t that guy.

He was a good one, smart and sweet and funny, and so wonderful with her up until the moment she blew it. All she had to say something like, “Yes, I will tell them about us someday, I just have to figure out how to do it.” All she had to do was ask him for more time and patience with her and then they could have continued on as they were. Maybe they’d be together right this minute if she found it in her to say that.

But she didn’t, and now her present for him was hidden under her bed, and he was probably trying to sleep just to end the day.

She took her phone from her pocket and started sending the message before she lost her nerve. She didn’t want to make the first move, but more than that, she didn’t want him to think no one was thinking about him today.

‘Merry Christmas, Peeta.’

He returned the message mere seconds later, and she sighed in relief.

‘Merry Christmas, Katniss.’

It was only when she was pulling her car back onto the street that she noticed the real estate sign in his front yard.

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The Christmas snow turned into a full-fledged winter storm in the following days, holing Katniss up in the house for most of her break. She was hoping for at least a two-hour delay on their first day back at school, but most of the snow had been cleared by then and they stayed on schedule.

Her body wasn't on schedule, though. She slept in 20 minutes past her alarm and had to skip breakfast in her race to get ready. Her mother offered her a travel mug of coffee on her way out,
which she always did even though Katniss hated coffee. Now she was so desperate for a pick-me-up that she took it. On the way to her car, while juggling the mug and a boxful of reports she graded over break, she nearly slipped on a patch of ice in the driveway. The conditions were worse than she thought; they really should have had a delay.

She decided not to fuss with the coffee so she could focus her attention on the road. She was always a nervous drive in bad weather, but especially so when it was icy. She almost made it to the school without incident, but a few blocks away, two cars were pulled off the road after their own fender-bender. Katniss slowed as she passed, but it was a slick spot, and she slid across the line, just barely missing the front end of the first car.

That was the last thing she remembered. When she woke up, she was in bed. Her head was killing her, the pressure so intense that she immediately wished she could just fall back asleep to avoid it, and she couldn't move her left arm.

Her mother was at her side in an instant. “Don’t move too much.”

Katniss tried to look around without turning her throbbing head. They were in a hospital room, she realized. The last thing she remembered was driving to work, but now it was dark outside. “What happened?”

“You were in an accident on the way to school this morning. A delivery van slid into your lane and pinned you against a telephone pole. Do you remember any of that?”

“No,” she said, closing her eyes to escape the harsh fluorescent lighting.

She didn’t want to deal with her mother the nurse, the non-mother nurses, or the doctor who came in and asked her a series of questions while he probed and prodded her. She was diagnosed with a moderate concussion, broken arm, and dislocated shoulder, and the last thing she wanted to hear was the last thing the doctor said to her: “You’ll be staying here for a few days.”

Her mother kept vigil at her bedside, and her father visited after the doctor left. He had tears in his eyes as he kissed her forehead, telling her he’d never been so scared in his life as he was when the police called.

While she was thankful to have her family there, all she wanted to do was turn off the lights and get some rest. But when she heard her father mention Peeta, sleep was the last thing on her mind. She listened closely as she pretended to be unaware of her parents conversation, but Peeta didn’t come up again. Hours passed as she floated in and out of consciousness. If she didn’t wake on her own, usually disturbed by her mother chatting on her phone or with a colleague, then a nurse was rousing her to check in. She wanted to go home, but they said they had to monitor her. “Try to get some rest,” everyone would tell her. As if she could do anything else.

“Is dad at work?” she asked her mother the next morning when she came to check in before starting her shift.

“He is. Do you want him here instead?” she asked, fluffing Katniss’s pillow.

“No, that’s okay.”

“Well, I’ll be on the next floor if you need me. And if you want your dad for anything, give him a call. He said he would keep his phone on him.”

She rubbed her aching forehead and wondered if it was too early to ask the nurse for more pain
medication. “I’m sure his reception is excellent.”

“Actually, Peeta pulled him to work on a project so he’d be above ground in case we need to get ahold of him.”

All it took was another mention of his name to get her going again. Pathetic. “Really? That was nice.”

“It was pretty nice,” her mother agreed fondly, which both confused and infuriated Katniss. Now she was going to soften up?

Deciding to press the issue, Katniss followed up with, “Well, Peeta’s really nice.” She could imagine Madge saying, ‘No chill. Absolutely no chill.’ How did her mother not pick up on it?

“I guess he’s not so bad,” she agreed with a smile, clueless as ever. She leaned down to kiss Katniss’s cheek, but Katniss grabbed her hand and refused to let go.

“Mom,” she said. “You need to talk to dad. About stuff at the mines.”

Her mother’s brow furrowed in concern. “What’s wrong, honey?”

“Just...talk to dad. Make sure he’s being smart and not risking anything for his job.”

Her mother had to start her shift and couldn’t delve in with questions, so she squeezed Katniss’s hand and told her to not worry about anything but getting better. “Rest,” she commanded.

After the doctor checked up on her and she ate a mediocre hospital breakfast, Katniss decided to do just that. She fell into a fitful sleep, stirring every few minutes because of her aching arm or throbbing head. And the room was too bright, with sunlight streaming through the blinds even though it was a frigid January day.

Around noon, just as she was about to nod off again, she heard the lunch cart wheeling into her room. The flowers- a large vaseful of yellow Asiatic lilies with purple iris and green foliage- caught her eye immediately. The woman who brought her the food placed the glass vase near her bedside before setting the tray of food in front of her. “These were out there all morning for you,” she said cheerfully, handing the card over to Katniss.

“Thank you,” she quietly said, waiting until the woman left to open it.

She already received arrangements from Delly and the school, a teddy bear from Madge and, surprisingly, a bouquet from Gale. Who else was there to send her flowers? She felt her hopes rising up as she slid the card out of the envelope. It wasn’t his writing, but she figured it wouldn’t be if he arranged for a florist to send it.

Katniss,

Thinking of you and hoping for a speedy recovery.

All my best,
Peeta Mellark

It was the most generic get well message imaginable. There wasn’t any point in trying to decipher hidden messages or feelings from it because there were none. He even signed his full name, the height of formality.

Well, what did you expect? she asked herself. He couldn’t exactly make any grand declarations of
love on a card anyone could see. Beside that, whatever was going on between them was over now, so maybe the way he felt about her changed, too.

She wiped at her damp eyes and tried to find a comfortable position in the hard hospital bed, and when the nurse came in, she begged for something to help her to sleep. She had to get over him somehow. But she foresaw a slow and painful recovery, and she knew her broken bones would mend much faster than her heart.

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He showed up an hour later, standing in the doorway helplessly, waiting for the invite in. She wasn’t sure if he was really there or a drug-induced hallucination, so she reached out for him, imagining his figure dissolving like mist before they could touch.

He walked toward her and brushed his fingers against her outstretched hand. “Hi,” he said thickly. She closed her eyes, loving the sound of his voice. It had such a deep, warm timbre. She could listen to him talk forever.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

Her pull to him was stronger than the morphine, and she felt more lucid as he neared. “Like I was hit by a truck,” she said.

“Delivery van,” he corrected with a sigh. “I, uh, went down to get your dad after the police called. And he was a mess, so I drove him here. Not sure how I did it, since I was a mess, too.”

“You were?”

“I’ve never been so scared in my life.” Something in him broke and he gave in, wrapping his hand around hers and not letting go. “I saw your car, after. And you were still in the ER and I didn’t know how you were-”

“Shh,” she said, rubbing the back of his large hand and reveling in the feel of his skin against hers again. “I’m okay. I’ll be fine.”

She’d seen Peeta in tense situations before, and she knew he had a keen ability to stay cool and collected in even the most extreme conditions. He must have managed just that in front of her parents, or else they would have known there was something between them that far extended a normal fondness he might have for her as a family friend or former employee.

So he kept it together for her father, but inside he was unraveling. She knew it now as she felt his normally steady hand trembling beneath hers. And as sick as it was, a part of her was happy he felt this way because it meant he still cared.

He leaned down to ever so gently kiss her forehead, and then he stayed there for a minute, his face inches from hers as he seemed to be soaking in the moment and committing it to memory. She wanted to close the distance with a kiss, but she knew it wasn’t the time or place. Not now, when he needed to head back to the mines after taking a late lunch to visit her. Not here, where her mother was finishing up her shift and there was a scorned ex roaming this very floor.
He pulled back and said he should get going, and she promised to give him a call once she was home. As he lingered at her bedside, well after saying goodbye, she gave in first and reached for him with her good arm. Their kiss was soft and brief, but it did more to make her feel better than the strongest of medications had.

And after he left, she slept peacefully for the first time since her accident.

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She thought she’d be happy to be out of the hospital and back home, but she only traded one confinement for another. In her room, on her bed, she passed the days sleeping away the pain. When she was awake, her thoughts raced, which did nothing to make her head feel any better. Everyone said the same thing to her, time and again—don’t worry about anything but getting well. But with zero distractions, it was impossible to not dwell on all her concerns, from missing so much work to finding another car.

She passed time by texting Peeta, who was off in Arlington for a business trip, and occasionally talking to Madge and Prim on the phone. Still, she was bored out of her scrambled mind for much of her recovery time.

A few days after her return, Gale Hawthorne darkened her doorstep to visit. Her father let him in and probably spent a good forty-five minutes talking to him himself before leading him upstairs to Katniss, who was actually happy to see him because she was just that desperate.

He looked good, she realized as she watched him settle in her desk chair. He was wearing a dark sweater that hugged his long, lean frame, and as her eyes roamed over him in appreciation, she realized Peeta flipped a switch on inside of her and now she was reacting to any non-related male emanating a manliness that she was so attracted to in him. Even her ex.

Thankfully he maintained a safe distance across the room, and they traded small talk about how she was feeling and what was new in his life. She thanked him for stopping by, and he asked if she had many visitors. Katniss knew Gale well enough to know what a comment like that meant, that he was still holding on to his (right) suspicion that there was another guy. She responded with a curt no and swiftly changed the subject to his family.

As he caught her up on Rory, Vick, and Posy, he spotted her phone on the desk and picked it up. “Katniss Everdeen splurged on a 6s?” She tensed up as he turned it over in his hands and examined it.

“Come on, put it down.”

He ignored her and pressed his thumb to the Touch ID, and Katniss held her breath even though she knew he wouldn’t unlock it. “You like it?” he asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” she said, crossing over to him to swipe it out of his hands.

He glared up at her, annoyed. “What’s your problem?”

She sat back down on the bed and held the phone protectively against her. “Grow up, Gale.”

“Something you don’t want me to see?” he asked, and she must have done something to indicate that he was right on the mark, because his eyes narrowed as he shook his head with disgust. “I
guess the phone isn’t the only thing different about you.”

She flinched under his scrutiny, but he didn’t let it go. “What’s on it, Katniss?”

“You should probably go.”

Surprisingly enough, he listened, but he stopped at the door and threw her a dirty look, one tinged with a sadness she didn’t miss. “Don’t be stupid, Catnip,” he said before leaving.

Once he was gone, she unlocked her phone and scrolled through the last messages from Peeta. Although they were dancing around reconciliation, these texts were innocent enough. But the old photos and texts she never had the heart to delete were another story.

She closed her eyes, willing away the headache that was brewing. She wasn’t sure what triggered it—her injury, or the realization that when this came out, it wasn’t just her parents’ reactions she’d have to worry about.

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“I’m cleared to go back to work in two weeks.”

“Hey, that’s great. But what about the car situation?”

“Well, I get a rental through my insurance. I’ll start looking for something to buy once I get settled back at work. That’s what I’m most concerned about now.”

“That’s understandable.” She could hear a horn blaring in the background, and she imagined a line of cars pulled up along the curb just outside the airport. “How do you feel about driving?” he continued.

She never considered that, but the thought of being behind the wheel again soon didn’t really faze her. “I think it’ll be fine,” she answered honestly, adding, “I could have picked you up if you asked.”

“And you’re crazy if you think I’d do that.”

She sighed into the phone, ready to crawl out of her own skin. “At least it’d get me out of the house.”

“I could pick you up,” he offered casually, and she had to carefully consider it because she wasn’t sure she could trust herself around him right now. She’d spent an hour the night before trying to make herself feel half as good as he used to, nearly spraining her uninjured arm before giving up in frustration. How was she going to behave herself if she was near him? Her tenuous self-control would surely lapse as soon as she saw him, felt the heat of his body, smelled the spicy hint of his cologne.

If they were going to rebuild what they had between them, then she had to make two things abundantly clear: that she was in it for the long run and that her interest in him extended far beyond the bedroom. That might be difficult to do if she pounced on him as soon as they were alone.

“You sure you’re up for some company?” she asked. “Not too jet-lagged?”

“I was on the plane for an hour, Katniss.”
She pursed her lips in deep thought, and convinced herself that she could behave. “I’d really like to see you if that’s okay.”

“More than okay,” he said. “I’m almost at my car, so I’ll be there in about an hour.”

She heard the beep from his key fob as she agreed, and then she let him go so he could start the drive home. Now she had an hour to get herself under control, but that didn’t seem like nearly enough time to do it.

Her offer to drive to the airport was a bluff, not only because she didn’t get the rental car yet but also because she was ordered to keep her sling on through the weekend. That made getting ready more difficult, so she went against her doctor’s advice and slipped it off just so she could take a bath and get dressed.

By the time his Tahoe rolled up in front of her house, she’d committed herself to having The Talk with him tonight. During The Talk, she’d admit that he was the one person she couldn’t stop thinking about, that her feelings for him were deeper than she realized. She wanted to be with him again, any fallouts that might occur after they go public with their relationship would be a small price to pay if it meant she could be with him.

It was a carefully rehearsed speech, heartfelt in its grand declarations, but every word she planned on saying went right out of her head as soon as she opened the passenger door and saw that he was wearing a grey suit. She slid into her seat and tried to buckle up, hoping she could keep her hands to herself long enough to say how she felt, sexy suit and tie be damned.

“How long do you have to wear the sling for?” he asked, reaching over to fasten the seatbelt for her. She could smell his cologne, and when his fingers brushed against her thigh as the safety belt clicked into place, she shut her eyes in pleasure. No way was she going to last for very much longer.

“Uh, until I go back to work. How was your trip?”

It didn’t seem like something he wanted to discuss in great detail, but they talked about it until they reached his home across town. The realtor sign was still in the front yard, but she didn’t ask about it as he grabbed his luggage from the backseat before following her up the walkway to his porch.

“Want a drink?” he asked, putting his bag down by the front door.

“Sure.”

He led her into the kitchen, and she took a seat at the table while he poured her a glass of her favorite wine. As he sat across from her with a bottle of beer, she tried to remember the first part of her speech, but nothing came to her.

“Katniss,” he finally said, pushing the beer away from him and looking to her. “Where do you want to go from here?”

So he beat her to it, initiating The Talk first. Now if only she could recall how this was supposed to go. She was pretty sure that asking him what he wanted instead of confessing her own feelings deviated from the original plan. But maybe it shouldn’t have been rehearsed to begin with. The words should come naturally, spontaneously. They shouldn’t be memorized.

She stared down into her wine glass and tried to harness the gumption to do it, to say the only thing running through her head in that moment.
“I want to be with you.”

He beat her to it, saying the exact thing she was thinking before she even had the chance to open her mouth.

“I’m crazy about you, Katniss. When I thought something happened to you, it was the worst moment of my life. All I could think about.”

“Peeta, stop,” she interrupted, shutting him up immediately. It wasn’t fair to let him pour his heart out again. He already did that when things ended between them, when she was too stupid to say what she felt instead of letting him walk out. “It’s my turn. I’ve got things I want to say to you, too.” If only she could remember what it was.

The persistent dull throb in her head sharpened enough to distract her. He watched in concern as she rubbed her aching temples, and his expression transformed into pity. “We don’t have to do this now,” he said.

“No,” she groaned, frustrated with herself. “I want to. I want to be with you too, Peeta. And not for the reason you think.” She was awful at this whole expressing feelings deal, but she needed him to know that he was constantly on her mind, that she was happiest when they were together. “I don’t care about the sex stuff.”

He raised his brows at that, and she gently shook her head, flustered. “Well, I do. But that’s not all I care about. I don’t want you to think I’m in this just to get off.”

“I was upset when I said that-”

“But you meant it, right? Because that’s how I made you feel. So let’s start over. We can stay on first base for as long as it takes.”

“First base?” he asked doubtfully.

“For as long as it takes,” she repeated. Reluctantly, she broached the next topic. The real heart of the issue. “I’ll tell them, Peeta. My parents. I will tell them about us.”

He gave her a sweet, shy smile before he stood up. “You’ve got enough on your mind right now,” he told her, coming around the table to take her hand. “Come on, let’s lie down.” He led her back into the living room, and she stretched out on the couch as he loosened his tie and rolled up his shirt sleeves. He motioned for her to rest her head in his lap after he sat down, and it was a testament to how much pain she was in that the move didn’t trigger a single salacious thought. As she shut her eyes, he rubbed soothing circles along the back of her neck, and she sighed in contentment as the pain slowly began to ebb.

He regretfully roused her awake a few hours later; it was dark outside and her parents would be returning from work soon. Some reunion this was, she thought with annoyance. The most excitement she had this evening was a nap. She looked him over again, running her hand down his tie and taking perverse pleasure in the feel of his hard chest beneath her palm. He laughed at her slip and offered his hand to help her up. “We’ll make a date for the next time you feel up to it,” Peeta said to appease her. “You, me and this couch.”

That didn’t sound nearly as appealing now that she took a vow of celibacy, but with him in the equation, it was something to look forward to.
The lingering effects of her concussion started to subside in early spring, and her arm was healing nicely, so she traded in the hard cast for a more manageable brace. But her shoulder continued to be a problem, and her physical therapist wanted her back in her sling to discourage her from overusing it.

After her weekly PT session, she decided to go straight to Peeta’s, using the key he’d given her months ago to let herself in. The sling hindered her mobility, but she was set on making dinner for him, so she scrounged around in his cabinets and fridge for ideas. Steak and baked potatoes sounded easy enough, and after the potatoes were in the oven and the meat was marinating, she graded that afternoon’s pop quizzes to pass the time until Peeta got off work. Bored- and stubborn to a fault- she opted to make a salad to go along with their dinner, sling be damned. It wasn’t easy to chop up the vegetables with one arm mostly immobilized, but she managed through the pain.

As she was putting everything into a bowl, she heard Peeta pulling into the driveway, so she cheated and slipped her arm out of the sling just long enough to throw the salad together and clean off the chopping block.

“Mmm, hello,” he said, coming up behind her to nuzzle her neck as she put the steaks under the broiler. “Now this is a nice surprise.” He softly kissed the outer shell of her ear, earning a smile from her as she worked, but the kisses stopped as his fingers slipped under the top strap of her sling. “You have to wear this again?”

“Doctor’s orders.”

“Then you probably shouldn’t be moving around so much,” he scolded, leading her away from the stove.

She thought he’d take over the cooking. Instead, he returned to kissing her, fixing his lips to the spot right below her ear, a move that always got her going. She craned her neck to encourage him, emboldened by the feel of him hard against her backside. When one of his hands dipped underneath the hem of her pencil skirt, she grabbed onto the countertop to steady her shaking legs.

The valiant effort to stay chaste had wavered considerably in the past few weeks. She ended most of their evenings together by breathlessly telling him to think of her later because she would be thinking about him. One night, after a series of languid kisses that had her panting into his open mouth, saying that seemed to break him. He pushed her against the front door and kneeled in front of her, pinning her with a hard stare as he wordlessly slipped off her shoes, jeans and underwear. He went down on her for nearly half an hour, holding her up by her hips as she draped her legs over his shoulders and gripped his hair with both hands. She came so hard that it triggered another headache, the first one she had that week, and he whispered his apology as he pressed his wet mouth to the smooth skin below her belly button.

“I missed you,” he said to her now, his hand moving up from between her thighs to her breast.

Her willpower, whatever vestige of it remained, flew out the window. “Me too.”

He pulled away from her long enough to turn off the oven and broiler, and then he scooped her up in his arms, careful not to grip her injured side. She wrapped her free arm around his neck and initiated another round of kisses as he carried her upstairs, and she knew from his delicate but deliberate touches that tonight was a turning point.

After putting her on his bed, he helped her take off the sling- a much less bulky model than the
After putting her on his bed, he helped her take off the sling—a much less bulky model than the one she was fitted with at the hospital—and then he unbuttoned her blouse. She was never so nervous in her life as she was in that moment; every touch was meaningful, every caress of newly bared skin reverent. It wasn’t a race to come. It was a way to tell each other how they felt without words.

"I thought about you all day," he whispered as he caressed her cheek. "Hoping to talk to you tonight. Wishing I could see you. And on my way back from work, I thought about how amazing it would be to come home to you.

"I walk in, and there you are. And it's like, instantly, everything is okay."

She pressed her forehead to his, her eyes closed. "I want to be with you tonight."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

They kissed as they continued to undress each other, their soft breaths punctuated by her occasional whimpers of pain when she bumped her sore shoulder. Trying her best to not move it, she held her injured arm against her ribs as he positioned her above him. He took her good hand and laced their fingers together as she straddled his hips, and then he guided her slowly down onto him for the first time.

It didn’t hurt as much as she expected it would. All those nights exploring her with his fingers must have prepared her for this. But as she eased lower, taking more of him, there was an uncomfortable stinging that delayed any pleasure.

Not for Peeta, though. He licked his lips then bit back a moan as she started to move up and down. “Like this,” he said, holding her by the hips to show her how to rock against him in a steady rhythm. “Is that good?”

She nodded, but the pain was getting more pronounced and she felt utterly vulnerable like this, despite being on top of him. He gauged her reactions, visibly reluctant to do anything to cause discomfort. “Let’s try it this way,” he suggested, very gently repositioning them so he was above her. He held himself up to keep from touching her hurt arm, and then he slowly pulled back to give her a chance to recover.

She never wished for full use of both hands more than she did in that moment, when all she wanted to do was embrace him tightly, her body fully pressed against his. It wasn’t just a sexual, insatiable need to be near him. It wasn’t about reaching the climax. It was so much more than that, but again the words to describe it escaped her.

It was embarrassing how emotional it made her. He dipped his head to kiss her, slow and sweet, and she sighed against his mouth.

He watched her closely, so focused on her that she felt even more naked than she was. “You’re crying,” he said softly, brushing away a tear with the tip of his nose.

“I’m okay,” she promised, but he looked doubtful. “I just feel really close to you right now.”

His expression softened, and three words—three dangerous words—were at the tip of her tongue. Instead of uttering them, she raised her hips to meet his light thrusts and urged him to speed up.

She wrapped her legs around him as tight as she could, her entire body taut as he moved harder. He gasped her name before coming, and she closed her eyes to try to escape a moment that was so intensely intimate that it frightened her.
After, he breathlessly asked her if she was alright. She said she was, and as she slowly trailed her fingers up and down his back, she realized it was the truth. There wasn’t anything to be scared of here. Not with his warm weight on top of her, their bare skin burning together.

She waited until they were redressed and downstairs. As he took over the final touches for dinner, she came behind him, wrapping her good arm around him and pressing her lips to a spot between his shoulder blades. The words were muffled by the soft cotton of his shirt, but he still heard them loud and clear.

“I love you.”

The look on his face when he spun around was entirely worth it. He smiled until his lips met hers, but he knocked her shoulder with his as he wrapped her in his arms, and she yelped. "I'm sorry," he said, dropping a kiss on her nose. She laughed, the pain already subsiding.

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She answered her phone to hear, “I’ve got a problem.”

“What’s that?” she asked casually. Peeta sounded as happy-go-lucky as ever, so genuine concern didn’t seem necessary.

“The house sold.”

“And that’s a problem because?”

“Because now I’ve got 30 days to find a new place to live, buy it, and move in.”

“Ah,” she laughed. “That is a problem. Sucks for you.” He told her awhile ago that he listed the house on a whim, sure it would take many months to sell anywhere near his asking price, which would provide ample time for him to find a new fixer-upper to take on. Katniss thought it sounded like a bad idea then, and now that she was proven right, it was too hard to resist gloating. “I told you so.”

But she wasn't completely heartless, so she offered to help him out. They made plans to spend their Saturday together looking at houses, which spurred Katniss to have a real estate conversation of her own with her parents.

“I think it’s time I start looking at apartments,” she told them over dinner. Actually, she thought it was long-overdue. Now that she was back at work and had a decent settlement check from the insurance company, there didn’t seem to be any logical reason to put it off any longer.

“You don’t want to move out,” her father said dismissively, her mother echoing him.

“I know you fear an empty nest, but it’d be good for you. It’d be good for all of us.”

“Costs add up, Kitten. You should be happy that you don’t have to worry about rent and living expenses.”

It wasn’t going to be an open dialogue there, so she let them think it was a settled issue and continued eating in withering silence. When she was alone with Peeta, driving to the meet the real
continued eating in withering silence. When she was alone with Peeta, driving to meet the real estate agent at the first house on their list, she broached the topic with him.

“It makes sense for me to find my own place, right?”

His relief was palpable. “Most definitely.”

“I’ll be 24 in a couple weeks, and I have a good, steady job.”

“All that aside, there’s another issue, Katniss,” he said with a derisive laugh. “Let’s be honest here- your parents, while incredible people, are more than a little overbearing.”

He looked over at her guiltily after he said her, probably waiting for her to get upset. While her first instinct was to always defend them, she couldn’t really deny the truth to his words. “I know,” she sighed.

“My parents are about as hands-off as you can get, so I’m glad you’ve got a family who cares so much.”

“I know,” she repeated. “I just hate all the sneaking around and lying. But when we tell them about us...it’s going to be bad.” It was always going to be bad. There was never a scenario where her parents would be understanding or accepting of her relationship with a man 15 years her senior; especially one they considered a close friend.

“So maybe it’s a good idea to establish a little distance first,” he suggested. “Remind them that you’re an adult and you’re taking care of yourself and making your own decisions.”

“Yeah, I think that’s exactly what I need to do.” They pulled in front of a large split-level with a for sale sign in the front yard. “But let’s focus on getting a place for you first.”

The house wasn’t what she was expecting at all. Peeta claimed to want a fixer-upper to make his own, but this one was as new and cookie-cutter as it got. The same shade of siding as every house on the block, and inside a generic open layout with no imagination or character. “What do you think?” he asked her, and she was surprised that he didn’t rule it out immediately himself.

“It’s awful.”

He looked over at the realtor and shrugged. “Guess we’re done here. We’ll see you at the next one.”

And the next one was the first one’s complete opposite. “Isn’t there a happy medium between yuppie dream home and old crack den?” she asked, eyeing the scary looking two-story from the car.

“Let’s look inside,” he laughed.

It was on a massive lot, no nearby neighbors to worry about, so the privacy would be nice, and it was within walking distance from the school. But it looked to be a complete rehaul otherwise, and she couldn’t imagine the energy and money it would take to transform it. Ripping out all the putrid, rust-colored shag carpet would be a feat in itself.

She knew Peeta liked it, though. He clearly saw something in it she didn’t, and when he looked to her for her opinion, puppy eyes wide and hopeful, she wasn’t sure what to say. “I toyed with the idea of getting something more move-in ready this time,” he said. “But look at all the potential here.”

“Potential?”
He walked into another room, investigating the floors and ceiling. “Yeah. This isn’t a load bearing wall,” he said, bumping his fist against the chipped paint. “I could knock it out to expand the kitchen.”

She followed him into what she assumed was the living room. “And we could put in a window here, centered with an entire wall of built-ins.”

_We_. Something about the way he said it made her think he wasn’t talking about contractors. She wondered if he was already considering it, the idea that his place could become her place. That this house would be theirs.

“Well?”

She looked around and tried to picture it. “I think it could work.”

**xxXXxx**

She heard that sex would change things, but she wasn’t prepared for how much it changed her. It was more than a craving; it was an intense hunger that she had to satisfy just so she could function normally again.

Nights with Peeta were rare, so when the opportunity presented itself, she wasn’t about to give it up. She dodged her parents throughout week, then left a note on Friday informing them she had plans and she’d see them Monday. She was purposefully vague because she was tired of the lies, but she still wasn’t ready to admit the truth.

The plan was to help him pack. He only had two weeks now before closing, but he’d been too busy at work to even start the process. Yet packing was the last thing on her mind as she waited for him to get home. She took a couple cookbooks from the kitchen shelf and threw them into a labeled box, but it was a half-hearted effort, one she stopped as soon as she heard Peeta at the door.

She greeted him with a passionate kiss, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders and pressing herself firmly against him. “Fuck me,” she said after breaking the kiss. She took his hand and moved it under her navy skater skirt, and he didn’t hesitate to slip his fingers beneath her underwear to feel her.

“Jesus,” he groaned when he felt how wet she was for him. The anticipation was killing her as he moved his slick fingers to the inside of her thigh to nudge her legs further apart. What she wanted, what she thought about all day, was him inside of her. She reached back to cup him through his pants, satisfied by how quickly he got hard for her every time, but she didn’t want to rush anything tonight. There were things she wanted to try and she wanted to take her time doing it.

She untangled herself from him to lead him upstairs, where she shucked his shirt at the foot of the bed to savor the feel of his hard chest. Every time he tried to touch her again, she lowered his hands back to his sides. “Not yet.”

She unbuttoned her top and slipped it off her shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. Then she instructed him to lie down with his arms outstretched. She already had two ties ready at the bedside, and he looked over at them with a raised brow.

“Have you ever done anything like this?” she asked, straddling him.
“Can’t say I have.”

She took one of the ties and bound his wrist, then she secured the other end to the headboard post. “Okay?” she asked, letting him test it.

His muscles flexed as he tried move his arm down, and she was satisfied that the knot would hold. She repeated the same technique on the other side, and he snickered when she declared that he couldn't get away now.

“I learned to tie knots from the best,” she told him confidently. “You’re not going anywhere.”

“We’ll see about that.”

She rocked back, circling her hips to rub her damp underwear against his jeans. She was so turned on by this point that she was already close to coming. “Don’t move,” she commanded when he tried to lift up. She pressed his body down with all her weight, using quick and sharp jerks to hit her clit and putting on a real show with her moaning.

“Fuck, Katniss. Let me touch you,” he begged as she slowed down and cupped her breasts.

She ignored him as she caressed her nipples, but her own hands weren't as good as his. While he was very adept at touching her in just the right place at the right time to make her fall apart instantly, Katniss wasn’t able to get herself off without a lot of effort. But that didn't mean she couldn’t make him think she was doing just fine on her own now.

She arched her back and tensed up, crying out in an elaborate act that he didn’t seem to buy anyway. “If you want to come, untie me,” he told her.

"You're awfully cocky," she said, grinding down again. "Especially for someone at my mercy."

"I could get out of this any time," he scoffed. "But I want to see what you've got planned."

She smiled seductively as she trailed her index finger along his jaw and then over his lips. "Stop talking."

"Make me," he challenged.

She laughed as she moved off him and pulled down her panties, which she rolled into a small ball and then shoved into his mouth. He didn't put up any fight, and she settled next to him, victorious. "So what were you saying again?" He shook his head, clearly amused by her antics.

Now that she was back in control and he couldn't say anything to distract her, she allowed herself the pleasure of touching him. She started by rubbing his shoulders, which were broad and strong and one of her favorite parts of his body, and then she slid her hands down his equally impressive chest and stomach to pop open the top button of his jeans.

He was rock hard and ready, and she took her sweet time running her tongue over his length. Sticky strands of precum caught on her lips and chin, and she licked them away as she kept her eyes locked with his. Peeta usually talked her through this, something he couldn't do now that he was basically bound and gagged, but her confidence was there and she well remembered everything he ever told her about blowjobs. She worked him to the edge by using her mouth and hand in tandem, delighting in how easy it was to bring him to the precipice.

But she couldn't let him finish just yet. Every time he tensed and lifted up, pleasured moans muffled by her lacy thong, she pulled off and reprimanded him. "Haven't you heard about delayed gratification?"
He was clearly getting frustrated, almost angry over the denial she clearly reveled in, and after the third time she did it, he effortlessly spit out the panties and glared at her. "Come up here," he commanded. "Wrap your legs around my head."

"No." She fanned out her skirt around his torso as she sat back down on his stomach. He whimpered when he felt her wet and warm on his skin, and he repeated for her to untie him, which she again refused.

She admired him again from her position above him, in awe of his arms as he lightly flexed against the restraints. "Mm, this feels good, doesn't it?" she teased as she rubbed herself against his cock.

He couldn't take it anymore, and he yanked at the ties, almost effortlessly tearing them from the posts and catching her completely by surprise. She was too turned on and impressed by his brute strength to put up a protest when he flipped her over and lifted her skirt, plunging into her with one thrust. "I'll be nicer to you than you were to me," he growled in her ear.

He massaged the curve of her backside as he slid in and out of her, and she cried out, sure she could finish this way if he kept it up. "Don't stop," she begged, gripping the blankets and arching against him. He didn't. He moved faster and deeper, grazing a spot inside of her that drove her crazy.

"Wait for me," he told her, hoping to come together. His steady and sure movements grew jerky and desperate, and she clenched around him as he finally let go.

"Yes, yes, yes," she muttered, her arms and legs still trembling as he gently rocked his hips with hers a few more times. They were both breathless as he slipped from her body and curled around her, and she shut her eyes, exhausted.

"Hey, wake up," he laughed, draping his arm over her and pulling her closer. "Don't deny me the afterglow cuddle."

She mumbled that she wasn't falling asleep, but she easily could. It was something Peeta always teased her about, how quickly she was out after she came.

Sated and sleepy, she rolled over to position her head against the crook of his neck, which seemed to be shaped specifically for her. She loved drifting off while in his arms, and she nuzzled against him and sighed happily. "You know what I love about you?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"Well, many things, actually. Everything, if you want to get technical. But I really love that you're just a big softie underneath it all."

"I'm not soft," she protested lazily, eyes still shut.

"Oh, yes you are."

She smiled as she felt him brushing back her hair. "You're the most incredible person I've ever known," he continued. "And I've never been happier."

"Mm, me too," she said, starting to drift off again. His chest rumbled with his soft laughter, but she was too tired to care. He said something else to her, something whispered so softly she didn't quite catch it, and then she was out.
He gently shook her awake before dawn, whispering calmly in her ear that he had to go, that there was an accident at a mining site in another city and they were calling for help. She was still disoriented from sleep, barely processing anything he said. “Wait,” she told him, frantic once she realized he was leaving. She was selfish to a fault and she didn’t want him anywhere near danger, so she tugged at his hand as he tried to button his shirt. “Where will you be?”

“Central City,” he said, pressing a kiss to her palm before moving away to retrieve his work boots. “Go back to sleep.”

“Will you call me?” she asked pathetically. She couldn’t ask him to stay, and he would still have to go even if she did, but she didn’t want to say goodbye.

He promised he would, then he gave her a kiss before he went. “I love you.”

They said it to each regularly now, but she wished he didn’t say it just then. He could save it for when he came back. “Love you, too,” she said glumly, flopping back on the bed as he left the room.

There was no way she was going to be able to sleep, so she stared at the ceiling until the sun came up, then she harnessed the will to start the day. In the kitchen, she reheated some leftovers and took them into the living room, where she turned on the television for background noise. CNN was on, a bright red banner on the top of the screen declaring breaking news. She leaned forward, her food forgotten as she watched the update on the mining explosion in a nearby county. Thirty four men were trapped and workers were racing the clock to get to them.

She turned it off and stood up, nervous energy coursing through her that she needed to work off. There was also a dull ache in her lower back that she tried to massage before she started packing, but it didn’t help. As she was wrapping up glassware in the kitchen, the cramping started, and she cursed her body and its terrible timing. She rummaged through her bag for a tampon then checked her phone in case there was a missed call from Peeta. The only alert she had was a text from her mother asking if everything was okay, and she ignored it, annoyed.

The pain became unbearable a few hours later, when she was trying to box up books in Peeta’s den. Realizing she couldn’t take it much longer, she grabbed Peeta’s nearby laptop to look up information about mixing Midol with her Tropol. The browser was open to a search for a Dr. Daniel Aurelius. It looked like Peeta already clicked on all the top links, including one for a clinic outside of Louisville. The page blurb mentioned frequently asked questions for reverse vasectomies. Curious now, she opened up the history tab. All the recent searches were about the procedure, the clinic, and Dr. Aurelius, a renowned urologist with the highest success rate in the state.

She didn't want to assume anything, and a part of her felt like she was invading his privacy by delving into the searches like that, so she opened a new tab, googled the question she meant to ask in the first place, and then put everything about reverse vasectomies out of her head.

Hours passed and her cramps were getting worse despite the medicine, and he still hadn't called
her. She put the scant energy she had into packing, and she made huge progress by late evening, when her phone finally dinged. It was a text message saying he was on his way home now and he'd see her in about 45 minutes, and she read it no less than a dozen times until his car pulled into the driveway.

Peeta barely had his foot in the door before she launched herself into his arms. He stumbled backwards, holding on to her just as tightly as she held him. After a few minutes enjoying their embrace, he set her back on her feet and looked around the room. Nearly all of his belongings were carefully packed away in labeled boxes that were neatly stacked in every corner. "Katniss," he sighed. "Thank you. You didn't have to do all of this."

"It kept me preoccupied," she said with a shrug. "So what happened?"

He sat on the edge of the couch and ran his hands through his thick hair, his exhaustion evident. "Well, they're calling it a miracle. Only three men were killed, and the others were rescued in less than 10 hours. All very unexciting. Most of the reporters left before everyone was above ground."

She sat next to him and rubbed his back. "I'm sorry."

"I quit."

"What?"

"I quit," he repeated with a sigh. "I made the call on the way home. I'm done working for the mines."

"But why? What are you going to do now?"

He stood up and walked to the kitchen, conversationally asking if she was hungry. But she wanted answers, not food. Quitting a job, ending an entire career, seemed like a pretty big decision, and she wasn't sure he thought it through. He certainly never discussed it with her. And apparently there were quiet a few big decisions he wasn't discussing with her.

"There's a job waiting for me in Lexington," he explained as he reheated some pasta.

"What kind of job?" she asked skeptically. Lexington was 45 minutes away and he just bought a house on the other side of town, but the most infuriating thing about all of this was how casually he was acting. He explained that he knew a lot of people at the Mine Safety and Health Administration, that they wanted him to work for them for years. "So now I am," he said, twirling some noodles on his fork.

"And what are you going to do at MSHA?" she prodded as he chewed.

He smiled. "Well, you know all those multi-millionaires who try to make men like your dad feel grateful for earning a living wage doing work that could kill them?" She didn't bother answering. "I'm going to take them down."

"Obviously your thrilled with that prospect."

"No," he corrected. "What I'm thrilled about is the vacation I'm going to treat myself to in the mean time. You did get your passport, right?"

She started to protest immediately. Not only did she have another three weeks left in the school year, but her parents were taking the next two weeks off together themselves. There'd be no way she could leave the country with him, even if she didn't have to work. But he assured her he had a plan in place. All he needed her to do was pack a bag for next weekend, and he'd pick her up at
the school on Friday and have her back in time for first period on Monday.

"Why would I need my passport for a weekend trip? Where are we going to go? Canada?"

xxxXxxx

"Montreal is beautiful," he promised her, hitching her bag over his shoulder on the way to his Tahoe. She decided to go with it, but truthfully she'd rather be on the vacation her parents were enjoying right now in the Bahamas. Peeta arranged it all, claiming he had a timeshare on the beach they could have for free, saying that they deserved the honeymoon they never got. It was an elaborate ruse just to get Katniss alone for the week and by some chance it worked.

She was expecting him to drive them to the airport in Louisville, but they ended up at a small private one not too far from them. "I thought it might be kind of fun to play pilot," he told on their way to a small four-seat Cessna. "But if you don't feel comfortable with it, there's a flight leaving Louisville in two hours."

"You're going to fly the plane?" she asked with a laugh. She loved him to pieces, but this felt like it was straight out of a cheesy romance novel. And it was also terrifying. She was far from an expert traveler, but she heard about plenty of accidents with tiny commuter planes just like this. "You know, if we crash, my parents are probably going to find out about us."

"Well, the good news there is that if we crash in this, our chances of survival aren't very good." He laughed at her expression and tossed her bag in the back. "I'm kidding. And I promise you're safe with me."

There were about a million dials, gauges and buttons on the instrument panel, and she looked over at him with wide eyes as she buckled herself in. "You're sure you know how to do this?"

"I think I remember most if it." He squeezed her knee as he laughed again. "Just another joke. Yes, I know what I'm doing. I took this very plane out a couple weeks ago for a refresher."

"You didn't tell me that," she grumbled.

"That's sort of how surprises work, sweetheart."

She shut up quick to let him concentrate, and she held her breath as they took off. "Relax," he said when they were in the air, grinning when he looked over at her.

"Keep your eyes on the road! Sky! Whatever."

But it didn't take her long to start enjoying herself. Watching him in full pilot mode was actually very exciting once she learned to appreciate it. He really did know what he was doing, and he looked damn good doing it, too.

And the admiration didn't stop in the plane. Every moment during their weekend together had her falling in love with him a little more. They stayed in bed at the hotel all day Saturday, despite his protests. He wanted to show her around, wanted for her to see the city, but she only wanted to be with him.

"Hey, I have something I want to talk to you about," he said as she cuddled up next to him after their last tryst.
"Hmm?"

"You're not falling asleep, are you?"

"No. Go ahead."

"Okay," he said, acting uncharacteristically nervous. "Well, I've been thinking a lot lately about the future. Unfortunately I made some decisions long before you were in the picture, and because of those choices, we have to have this discussion now instead of later. I'm sorry about that."

"This is about your vasectomy," she said knowingly. His web search history affirmed it, but she let him think she was just that insightful.

"Yeah."

"Okay. So what did you want to talk about?"

"Do you want kids someday?" he asked, closely watching her.

Honesty was the only way to go here. "I think so."

He seemed to tense up as he looked away, and she tried to fight her mounting disappointment. "I understand that you don't," she told him. "And I don't know what to do about that, but I don't want things to change between us because of it."

"Katniss," he said softly, cupping her face in his hand. "You know you've got carte blanche to ask me anything, and there was one thing you never seemed to question. You always want to know if I've done something before, and you don't even realize that everything is a first for me here because it's with you and that's all that matters.

"You want to know something I never did before you came along?"

"What?" she whispered.

"Felt like this. Fell in love." He pressed his forehead to hers and exhaled. "I want it all with you. Everything."

It might not work, he warned her. And he'd have to do it as soon as possible to increase the chance it would. He asked her what she thought, and she didn't hesitate to tell him that she wanted him to do it.

This time he fell asleep first, and as she lay in his arms and thought about the future, she realized that now she wasn't scared of anything but the possibility of ever losing him. So she untangled herself from his body and grabbed her phone off the nearby dresser to take it into the bathroom with her.

Her mother's phone went straight to voice mail, and she bit her lip as she waited for the beep. "Hi mom," she said, her voice shockingly steady. "I hope you guys are having fun. I just wanted to check in and let you know I'm good."

"When you get home, we should talk. I've got something I want to tell you. It's...it's not a bad thing. And I hope you won't think that it is. Because I'm happy. I'm really happy."

"So when you guys get back, maybe we can have dinner together. You and me...and Peeta. And we'll talk."
"Okay, well, have fun and be safe. Love you. Bye."

There was no going back now, but she didn’t want to go back anyway. She only wanted to move forward.

Chapter End Notes

Only one more to go! Thank you so much to everyone who is reading and reviewing. I'm sorry I haven't had a chance yet to reply to your comments, but it means so much to hear your thoughts and I promise I'll try to respond soon. You can also find me on tumblr as everlarkeologist.

Hugs to you all!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!