The Way We Were

by bubblegum1425

Summary

It's been four years since Katniss Everdeen saw or even spoke to her childhood best friend. But now Peeta Mellark has returned to their town of Panem, and life will never be the same. Can they find a way back to one another? Katniss is determined to try. But with hard truths and hidden secrets to confront, it's not going to be easy.

Notes

Author’s Note: The start of a new WIP! I didn’t intend to start a new one so soon, but the story bug for this one just kind of hit me, and Chapter 1 is the result! For anyone worried that because I’m starting this one, I will neglect my others, please don’t. I love writing in all my worlds and have no intention to stop :) 

This story is modern AU and if you’re wondering what the Panem of this new universe looks like, it’s modeled after the Hamptons. Just to give you a visual.

A big thank you goes to Solas Violetta for her awesome beta-ing skills, Titania522 for her always wonderful support, and nightlockinthecave for the banner she’s making for me for this story (that will be posted shortly).
Last note, there will be some minor Galeniss in this story, but please be assured that Everlark will always be end game in my stories…And that the endings to them will always be happy, even if the journey gets rough sometimes along the way.

Hope you enjoy, reviews are welcome, and thanks for reading!
Katniss

Katniss sighed loudly and glanced at the clock for fourth time in five minutes, her knee jiggling impatiently against the counter.

11:55

Almost there.

She looked around the store, scowling at the doily covered tables and poufy pink and green chairs scattered about the shop, Effie’s words from when she’d walked into work trilling in her head.

“Oh Katniss, darling! Today is going to be a big, big cleaning day! I’ll be closing the shop early tonight so that we can get everything done. It’ll be so fun!”

Katniss grimaced, wondering what random thing Effie was going to have her clean first. Her eyes halted on the rows of decorative plates covering the far wall of the shop. She bet the masterfully painted blue and white platters covered in scenes of a pastoral countryside would require some dusting.

11:57.

How long is it again until you can quit this nightmare?

She looked out the shop’s large plate glass window, staring longingly at the sprawling green lawn and stately trees of the well-kept park that lay across the street. It always looked beautiful but to someone who had been stuck inside a sweltering boutique since 5 this morning, Snow Park could practically be called paradise.

Katniss was so distracted by the bright sunlight filtering through the softly swaying leaves of a giant oak tree near the edge of the road that she almost failed to notice a man with slicked back brown hair and impeccably groomed goatee sauntering towards the shop.

Oh no.

Katniss looked frantically back up at the Hello Kitty! themed timepiece on the wall.

11:59

One minute. No way was she going to let a customer take away from her lunch time. It was her one hour of freedom from this blasted place until 5:30. Or later, if Effie’s threat about a big day of cleaning came to pass.

Katniss willed the man to look at her, but it wasn’t until he had placed his hand on the door knob that he noticed Katniss staring at him through the glass. He gave her a wide simpering smile, which Katniss met with her trademark scowl, deliberately trying to look as unpleasant as possible.

Open that door, buddy, and you’ll get your ass kicked, she tried to communicate to him silently.

And as the man’s smile slowly faltered under her gaze, and then dropped off his face altogether, a deep sense of satisfaction welled within her. Katniss had him running. There was no doubt now.
But for good measure, she quirked an eyebrow at him and glared daggers, daring him to come any further into the store. A shadow of fear passed across his face before he spun on his heels and quickly walked away.

Katniss looked back up at the clock once more and almost started laughing in her relief.

12:00

Made it.

As if to confirm her impending escape, Katniss heard the familiar clacking of Effie’s heels against the wooden floor as she made her way from her office to the storefront to relieve Katniss for her lunch break. Katniss let out a deep gust of air and braced herself for her boss’ entrance.

The woman walked into the main space with a look of happiness on her face that fell dramatically at the sight of the empty shop. She gasped loudly in obvious dismay. Katniss could barely contain her eye roll.

Effie Trinket was a forty-something year old woman who tried to maintain the look that she was in her twenties. Unsuccessfully.

Her hair was dyed a bright fake looking blonde, and she had more make-up on her face than Katniss had ever worn throughout all her life combined. Every necklace, bangle, and ring Effie wore always carefully coordinated with her expensive dresses and tailored suits. She never wore any shoes other than the six-inch stilettos she jammed her perfectly pedicured feet into. A clothing magazine was never far from her grasp, and her favorite topic of discussion was what Dior, Cinna, and a host of other fashion designers had put out for their summer collections.

And she was also the proud owner of Effie’s Effervescent Essentials & Boutique Coffee Shop. Or well her husband, Plutarch, was anyways.

Katniss knew for a fact that the store operated at a loss, judging by the record books she’d peeked at one day while grabbing something from the back room. It wasn’t surprising considering the ridiculously high hourly rate Effie paid her, not that Katniss ever felt obliged to tell her that. It was the only reason Katniss tolerated working here.

No, the fact was Plutarch let Effie have the shop as a way to keep her busy when he was away on his business trips and also to keep her somewhat out of his hair whenever he came home. Katniss could respect that. A little Effie went a long way.

“Oh, Katniss, dear. Have we really had no customers since the morning rush? I thought for sure that the buy 2 get 1 free special on the tea candles would have enticed some people to come in.” Effie trilled out in a high-pitched voice.

“Nope,” Katniss lied, avoiding Effie’s eyes. She was a terrible actress, and even someone as airheaded as Effie could often tell when she wasn’t being honest.

At least you’re good at keeping your thoughts hidden, Katniss reflected, repressing another eye roll as Effie rambled about the new mahogany tables she’d ordered that would shortly be replacing the perfectly adequate oak ones scattered throughout the room. Only two people had ever been able to discern her thoughts with ease, one of whom was her sister, Prim, while the other...Well, he has been gone a long time now so it doesn’t matter, she reminded herself sternly, trying to quickly end such a dangerous line of thinking. That path only led to pain. She looked back up at the clock.

12:03
Damn it.

Katniss narrowed her eyes at Effie, trying to determine the best place to interrupt her nattering while simultaneously being in awe of Effie’s ability to talk non-stop. It was a wonder the woman wasn’t turning blue from lack of oxygen. Katniss certainly didn’t see her taking any breaths…

“...I was thinking of redoing the counters in mahogany too. And perhaps the wood paneling. Of course, I would have to talk to Plutarch about all this, but I don’t see how he would mind. I mean mahogany is in this year after all. I think he’d understand. What do you think, Katniss?”

Katniss blinked in alarm. The only woods she liked giving an opinion on were the ones you could walk through. “Uh, I’m sure whatever you pick Plutarch will love. You have um, the best...taste?” Effie beamed at her praise, and Katniss sighed in relief that the woman didn’t want her thoughts on anything else. Overall, Effie was fairly sweet, sometimes even endearing, but she was just a little dense at times.

“Thank you, Katniss, my dear. You are just too kind,” Effie said, dabbing at her eye with a pink and white polka-dot handkerchief.

Katniss nodded. It was now or never. “Effie? Would you mind if I go to lunch now? It’s after twelve,” she asked bluntly.

Effie gasped. “Oh my! I’m so sorry. Look at me, prattling on like a ninny. Of course, you may go. Just remember to be back promptly at one please. Yesterday, you were late, and I know your parents raised you to have better manners.” Effie gave her a wide smile. “And manners are what matter the most, as my mother always said.”

She patted Katniss lightly on the arm in what Katniss assumed Effie thought was an affectionate way, but fortunately failed to notice the way Katniss stiffened at her touch. She didn’t appreciate being addressed like a five year old girl rather than the twenty-one year old woman she was.

“Alright, Effie. I’ll be back at one.” She whipped off her apron and rushed out the door without another word to her employer.

A light breeze hit her face, feeling refreshingly cool after the stifling, perfumed air of the shop. Sunlight beamed down from a bright blue cloudless sky. Children’s laughter floated over from where a dozen of them were capering around the playground. And not a hundred yards off, a group of people in varying colored work outfits were waving her over to an ornately carved white picnic table.

Katniss smiled slightly. If Effie only knew the way your parents actually raised you, maybe she’d forgive you being tardy a second day...Or maybe she’d still lecture you on bad manners.

Either way, Katniss was going to find out. She sprinted across the street to meet her friends.

XXXXX

“God, this summer is going to be awful; I can already tell. How can it only be May 21st and be this fucking hot out?” Johanna said, glaring around at the table like she expected everyone else to make it better.

“Jo, it’s like 80 degrees. It’s not that bad.” Finnick said with a laugh, his sea green eyes sparkling with amusement at the tiny dark-haired girl’s malicious facial expression.

“Says the guy who’ll be playing in his parent’s mansion the entire summer.” She punched him
hard in the arm. “Why is it you want to work with all of us poor people again? Don’t you have a college degree that you’re supposed to be using to find a real job right about now?”

“Hey now! Working as a lifeguard is a real job, and the parental unit left for a four month tour of Europe yesterday. It’s a burden having parents who don’t give two fucks about what you do,” Finn replied airily. He pointed at everyone around the bench. “All of you are expected to come to the parties I plan on holding. That goes for you, too, Madge,” he said, nodding at the mousy looking brown haired girl to his left. Madge blushed a wild shade of red at having been put on the spot, but she smiled timidly in acquiescence.

He then turned to Katniss with a wily grin. “And yes, that goes for you also, Kat. You can even bring Grumpy, and we’ll see if we can finally succeed in turning his frown upside down.” Katniss scowled at him. Finnick knew how much it pissed her off when he called Gale that, but Finnick only smiled wider at her deepened frown.

“This is the summer we’re all going to get you to live a little. There are still several spots open on the lifeguarding roster for Snow Beach.” Katniss started to shake her head to tell him no, but Finnick narrowed his eyes in disbelief. “You can’t tell me Trinket isn’t already driving you nuts. I think part of the reason my parents ran for the hills is that they didn’t want to sit through any more drinks at the club with her and Plutarch. There’s a reason she never keeps help for long. Jo, you lasted what, one day?”

“A half day.”

“So if Jo lasted a half day, the fact that Catnip has lasted there two weeks should be viewed as a minor miracle, right?”

They all whipped around at the sound of Gale’s familiar low rumbling voice and watched him make his way over to the picnic area. At over six-feet tall with short dark hair framing a handsome olive-toned face, Gale Hawthorne looked like he could be a male model. If that was, he ever dressed the part. But his green, grease stained t-shirt, ragged blue flannel over shirt, and faded hole-ridden jeans didn’t exactly portray the image. Only Finnick rivaled him in looks.

“And egos,” a wry voice in the back of Katniss’ head said.

Katniss almost snorted with laughter. Both the boys had very healthy egos. In fact, Katniss was convinced Finnick thought he was God’s gift to the female population at large. She still wasn’t exactly sure how she’d become friends with him.

“Yes, you do,” the same small voice said.

“Fuck off,” she told it, trying to ignore the lancing pain in her suddenly rapidly beating heart. She focused on Gale.

“She’s not that bad, Gale,” Katniss said, offering up a rare smile to her oldest friend, as he sat down to join the rest of them for lunch.

Their fathers had been best friends and had encouraged their children to be as well. And with Gale being only two years older than her, that friendship had indeed come easily. Gale was a good friend and often Katniss’ best support, watching over her and her sister like a protective older brother.

Though lately, Katniss mused, He’s also become your occasional fuckbuddy. So...really not so much like an older brother at all. She didn’t care though. They both knew nothing serious would ever come of it. There was simply a point where you knew too much about another person to
make something romantic work.

“Yeah, sure, Brainless,” Johanna said loudly, interrupting Katniss’ thoughts. “As long as you ignore the endless talks about who-gives-a-fuck-who-they-are fashion designers, discussions on which pastels coordinate best with the woodwork, and torture sessions where you dust endless rows of decorative kitten plates. Seriously, I’m surprised you lasted any longer than me with Miss Rainbows and Puppy Dogs given your oh-so-sunny personality.”

“Thanks, Jo,” Katniss grumbled, trying hard not to acknowledge the truth of Johanna’s words.

“Oh Katniss, I wish you would lifeguard with us,” Delly said from where she sat next to Finnick. The buxom blonde clapped her hands together. “They pay really well, and I bet if you talk to Haymitch, he’d give you the equivalent of what Miss Trinket is paying you.” Delly gave her a pleading look when she noticed the skeptical one on Katniss’ face. “Really. You might even be able to get him to take on Prim as a concession worker. That’s what Rory is doing, right Gale?” she said a little desperately.

“Yeah, he is. I bet Prim would like working there too,” Gale replied shortly. Katniss’ gave him a sharp look, and he had the grace to look a little guilty.

Delly continued with one last pitch. “It’s probably the last summer we’ll all be together now that most everyone has finished their degrees. It would be so great to be with each other every day. We haven’t all worked in the same place since we worked at Mellark’s Bakery in high school.”

A barely detectable frisson of tension ran through the group, and Katniss felt a hard lump in her throat at Delly’s mention of Mellark’s. She glanced around the table nervously and noticed how suddenly no one was looking at anyone else nor at the large blue and white storefront several doors down from where Effie’s shop lay. Katniss could almost taste the thick sadness that now hung in the air. Unable to come up with a reply to Delly’s words, she started picking at the chipping white paint on the picnic table.

Delly looked from face to face, her ever present smile faltering slightly. “Remember how much fun we all had?” she asked quietly.

After a lengthy awkward silence, Katniss finally answered, “Yeah, Dell. It was great. But a lot has changed.” She winced at the crestfallen look Delly gave her upon hearing her blunt words. She sighed. “I’ll think about ok?”

“Yay!” Delly exclaimed and grasped Katniss’ hands tightly in both of her own. “I know you’ll like it, K. It’ll be great! This will be great!!” Everyone, even Katniss, started laughing at Delly’s enthusiasm, and her presumption that Katniss was going to work there even though she’d just said she would just consider it.

The minutes passed in comfortable silence among the six of them after that. They’d all known each other since they were young, having attended grade school onward together. And though some of them hadn’t become friends until much later, they hadn’t stopped hanging out since.

Katniss supposed some people would find it pathetic that she had lived in Panem, a coastal town of about 50,000 known for its quaint shops, fine restaurants, first-class resorts, and white-sand beaches, her entire life. Or perhaps they would think she was a loser for still hanging mostly with her friends from high school. But Katniss didn’t make friends easily, and most of the people at the local college, Panem University, she had attended were snobby douchebags. At least in her opinion.

She, Gale, and Johanna were all from the Seam, the unseemly poor area on the far edge of town that the mostly uber-wealthy people of Panem liked to pretend didn’t exist, even though Seam
residents were often the ones who cut their perfectly landscaped lawns, cleaned their large pools, and even taught their children.

While Gale had a gotten a two year associate’s degree before apprenticing himself to the local car mechanic, Katniss and Jo had scrounged their way through four years of school with the aid of merit scholarships, low-income grants, and working long nights as receptionists for the residence halls. Just one week ago, Katniss had graduated with a degree in social work. Katniss supposed she should have felt more proud of herself during that graduation ceremony, but social work prospects in the town of Panem weren’t great. And unfortunately, she couldn’t move away until Prim graduated from high school next year.

Finnick, Madge, and Delly, on the other hand, were all from very wealthy families. Delly’s mother was a famous shoe designer, and her father was in hedge funds. Finnick’s father was the CEO of his own sportswear and equipment company, while his mother had once been a famous swimmer who now gave inspirational speeches across the country. And Madge’s father was one of the representatives to the Senate in the Capitol. Madge hardly ever saw him.

The three could have gone anywhere in the country for school, but much to Katniss’ surprise, they had all stuck around Panem instead. She could still remember Delly explaining how she was just a homebody, while Madge had blushingly told everyone that her father wanted to show the people how the Undersee family supported the local community. And Finnick had just said he didn’t give a fuck where he went. Katniss’ head still hurt just thinking about some of the antics he’d gotten up to while he attained his business degree.

Katniss was grateful for them, even if they didn’t always understand her. How could they really? Except for Gale, none of them had experienced any of the same tragedies life had thrown at her. But they were all supportive, nonetheless. Though they probably seemed like an odd sextet at first glance.

“With a missing seventh member,” the now cruel voice in the back of her head added.

Katniss pinched herself, disgusted that she was allowing so many thoughts of him to rise to the surface today. She was usually better about blocking out feelings she did not want to explore, and memories she did not want to relive. But tomorrow is the anniversary after all, Katniss thought, her sorrowful heart clenching painfully in her chest.

“Good fucking God, how much flour did Rye buy? I know the place is popular, but that’s just ridiculous,” Johanna’s barking voice said, crashing through Katniss’ thoughts.

They all swung around to watch a large white pick-up truck with a peeling “Mellark’s Family Bakery” logo plastered on its side stop at the red light near them. The bed of the vehicle was filled with boxes stacked to a dangerous height and precariously secured with some thin bungee cord. Judging by the constant teetering of the top row, Katniss guessed he had done a pretty poor job of tying them down.

“Hey Rye, next time leave some flour for the rest of us!” Finnick called out loudly towards the open window of the dark cab where Rye Mellark’s profile could just be seen. He gave them all a short wave, before gunning the engine as the light turned green.

“That can’t really all be flour can it, Finnick?” Delly asked as Rye pulled into one of the parking spaces in front of the bakery. Katniss looked back towards the table, as uninterested in the boxes as she was looking at the store. Her memories kept threatening to overwhelm her as it was.

“I don’t know, Dell. Your guess is as good as mine, and I haven’t talked to Rye in a long while. Maybe they’re doing another expansion,” Finnick said with a shrug, starting to turn away. But
then he froze, a look of awe crossing his face.

“Finnick? You ok?” Johanna asked. She waved a hand in front of Finnick’s face, but he didn’t seem to notice, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

Finally, he gasped out, “Did they hire someone new over there?” He pointed back towards the bakery, and everyone turned back around again to see what he was pointing at. It took a second for Katniss to figure out who Finn was pointing at, so short was the girl that he had noticed. But finally, Katniss caught sight of her as she walked around the truck to grab a box that Rye handed her from atop the pile.

She had long auburn hair that flowed past her shoulders, milk-white skin, and a very petite frame. While Katniss, too, was small, she had what most called a “sturdy” frame, given her fit muscular arms and legs toned through many days of hiking and hunting. But even from a distance, Katniss could see that this girl looked very dainty, almost to the point of being frail. And though Katniss couldn’t see her face clearly, she could easily see that the girl was very pretty. No wonder Finnick was mesmerized; he’d never been able to resist flirting with anyone. Katniss was just grateful he’d given up trying with her pretty much the day they had become friends.

“Or maybe she’s Rye’s new girlfriend. Ever think about that, Finnick?” Gale said with a mocking laugh. Finnick glared at him, while everyone else sighed. Though the two had been “friends” for years, they just tolerated each other more than anything else.

“No way Rye is capable of getting that sort of tail. Maybe Bannock, but he’s been up in the Capitol for two years now. Think Rich actually just made him the new CEO of the company, from what my dad said. And of course, Peeta--.” Finnick stopped talking abruptly; a brief flash of pain ran across his face, while the tension in the air thickened again. Finnick gave them all a guilty look. Katniss’ sucked in a breath, her heart racing, as she struggled to not let any of the turmoil she too was feeling show on her face. “Well, anyways, she has to be a new hire.” Finnick finally said with a strained smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“I’m sure you’ll let us know soon enough, if you’re dick is getting that hard just looking at her,” Johanna said amiably, picking at the spot of paint Katniss had loosened. She then gave Finnick a wicked looking grin. “Maybe she’ll even be the one to finally capture your heart and end your playboy ways for good.”

“Ha! As if, Jo. One woman is simply not enough for one guy.” He looked around at rest of them with a wide grin. “No offense meant, ladies.” Katniss rolled her eyes at him again while Delly started giggling. Madge blushed as usual.

“Nice, Finnick,” Gale said bluntly. He gave Katniss an oddly furtive look. Katniss raised her eyebrows at him, not understanding the look. But he looked away quickly once he noticed her staring at him, leaving Katniss in a state of complete bewilderment at his uncharacteristic reticence.

Finnick just shrugged at Gale, unusually quiet, and continued to watch Rye and the red-headed girl pull some boxes down from the truck. Johanna gave him an incredulous look before she turned to Katniss and asked--

“So are you going to come out with us tonight or is Squirt gonna take up your time?”

Katniss cringed internally. She never wanted to go to the bars very much, but she’d already told Gale that Prim was going to be sleeping over at her friend Rue’s house. She knew he’d call her out if she lied. “No, Prim is spending the night at a friend’s house. But seriously, Johanna, can’t we just stay in and hang out for once? When’s the last Friday we did that?” she almost whined.
Johanna gave her a look of disbelief. “Not since we were loser high schoolers who didn’t have fake I.D.s. And now that we have real I.D.s, I like to give mine a work-out. How else am I supposed to meet all the guys in this town?” Katniss huffed out a breath. Johanna was nearly as promiscuous as Finnick when it came right down to it. Johanna narrowed her eyes at Katniss’ expression. “Don’t get your panties in a bunch, Kat. This is the first weekend of the summer. It’s time to celebrate and get--”

The roar of the motorcycle drowned out the rest of Johanna’s words.

They all looked to the far side of the park where they could just make out a motorcycle turning the corner at the far light, it’s tail pipes glinting in the sun. Another roar echoed through the trees and sent a few startled birds flying into the air.

“Oy, the old biddies around here aren’t going to like the sound of that,” Finnick said, the rumbling noise of bike finally pulling his eyes away from the bakery.

“Or the younger biddies,” Katniss said with a laugh, pointing to where Effie had just poked her head out of her store, the scandalized expression on her face evident even from here. “If that guy isn’t careful, Thread is going to be after his ass for violating the noise ordinance.” She watched with mild interest as the motorcycle came to a stop at the red light Rye Mellark’s truck had halted at a few minutes before.

“OH MY GOD,” Gale suddenly said loudly, causing everyone to look at him in surprise. He looked at them sheepishly, but the overall awed expression on his face remained. “That’s a Vyrus C3 4VV. They can cost up over $100,000 dollars,” Gale said weakly. “Supercharged 1200 cc Ducati engine. 211 horsepower. Only 350 pounds. One of the world’s fastest production motorcycles. Perfect for racing. I’d give anything to own one or even--”

“Never mind that,” Johanna said, cutting off Gale’s rambling with a wave of her hand. “Where can I get me one of those?” she said, pointing at the motorcycle’s rider. Katniss hadn’t paid attention to him, but upon a closer look, she understood what Johanna meant. She couldn’t see the person’s face, covered as it was by a full helmet and completely black eye shield, but the motorcyclist’s body was something to behold.

He didn’t look particularly tall, but height had never been something Katniss cared about all that much. Her eyes ran over the blue, orange, and white plaid shirt he wore, her stomach fluttering wildly at the sprinkling of hair that could be seen covering his broad muscled chest where it peeked out from the top two buttons of his shirt that he’d left undone. He’d also rolled his sleeves up to just above his elbows, giving Katniss a good view of his well-developed biceps, which flexed as he moved to adjust something on the bike. Katniss guessed his abs would be just as glorious if they were visible. And when she looked further down his body, Katniss felt a sudden rush of heat between her legs.

The faded blue jeans he wore stretched over his powerful looking thighs and sinewy calves, his feet covered in scuffed brown leather work-boots. A silver chain attached at his belt looped to one of his back pockets, securing what Katniss assumed had to be his wallet. She leaned slightly to the left in what she hoped was a discrete way, trying to get a good look at his back side. But the proper angle was too far to achieve without being noticed. Seeming to hear her prayer, the rider leaned over the handlebars, allowing Katniss a spectacular view of the way his jeans molded to his perfectly sculpted ass. Her heart thrummed erratically at the sight of it.

Johanna let out a loud sigh of clear satisfaction. “They don’t make them like that in Panem. Sorry, boys,” she added, noticing the now sour expressions on the Gale’s and Finnick’s faces. Then, she gave Delly, Katniss, and Madge a wide grin. “Hope he’s staying around because I’d really like a taste of what he’s packin’.” Katniss looked away from her quickly, the tiny spark of anger she’d
felt at Johanna’s words flustering her.

Being possessive wasn’t like her. It’s not like she knew the guy. She hadn’t even seen his face! And if what Gale said was true about the extreme cost of the motorcycle, he was probably just some rich visitor to one of the local resorts. Those people were always here for the summer, gone come fall, with never a glance to spare at any of the locals in the meantime.

So when the rider pulled into the spot next to Rye Mellark’s truck, Katniss was very confused. It was so unlike resort guests to stop in town in the middle of the day. They were always too eager to get to the beaches.

She looked at everyone quizzically, but they only answered her with baffled looks of their own, staring at the driver as he turned off his bike. He didn’t take off his headgear right away, but instead sat there silently, his helmet upturned, seemingly staring at the bakery sign.

“Another new hire?” Finnick guessed.

Gale punched him lightly. “Yeah, sure, Finn. Because riding a motorcycle that costs 100 grand really screams that you need money,” he said sullenly.

“Maybe he wants to try the ‘original’ Mellark breads?” Delly said in a perplexed tone. But then she let out a large gasp of surprise as the motorcyclist finally removed his helmet.

Katniss felt Gale go rigid at her side, his eyes suddenly shining with poorly concealed anger. Finnick made a choking noise as the color drained from his face. Madge clasped both of her hands over her lips, and Johanna’s mouth fell wide open. A wave of dizziness rolled over Katniss, forcing her to clutch tightly to the wood of the bench to keep from falling off.

“Is that...” Madge trailed off, forgetting to complete her sentence out of sheer wonderment.

“That, that has to be,” Delly squeaked out, eyes wide with shock.

“No fucking way,” Johanna said, astonishment lacing her tone.

But if anyone said anything after that, Katniss didn’t hear it. She wasn’t listening anymore.

Even with his back turned to them, Katniss didn’t need anyone to tell her who that mop of wavy ash blonde hair belonged to. If anyone asked who that was, she would also be able to tell them the owner had a beautifully straight nose, a jawline so well defined it could probably cut glass, a crooked smile that made girls go weak at the knees, and eyes so blue the sky itself was undoubtedly jealous. Her heart started pounding so hard that she could barely breath.

If Gale was her oldest friend, this boy had once been her best friend. And her childhood love. The one Katniss hadn’t spoken to in three years, three hundred sixty-four days, nine hours, and twenty-seven minutes.

Peeta Mellark had finally come home.
Homecoming

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: I want to thank everyone for waiting so patiently for an update on this story. I know the gap was quite a long one, and I’m hopeful (after this very busy upcoming month) that there won’t be any more significant delays.

My next project is a one-shot (which will eventually become a 4 part ficlit) for the Prompts in Panem coming this following week. Look for it on Day 3! I hope everyone will check out all the other new works as well, as there are such wonderful authors in this Fandom. After that, I will be working on a new chapter of The Sun Thief, and then I will return to this story.

I need to thank my lovely betas, titania522/ct522 and Solas Violetta, for looking over this chapter for me. They are wonderful reviewers and even more wonderful friends. A third thank you goes to my friend, nightlockinthecave, for the awesome banner she made for this story. I’ve been sitting on it for weeks and am so excited that I can finally share it!

Thank you for reading and please review! I love hearing what readers think :)

~bubbles

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Peeta

Peeta Mellark gazed up at his family’s bakery from where he was sitting on his motorcycle, unable to contain his grimace at the sight of the weathered but cheerful sign hanging above the entranceway that read The Original Mellark’s Family Bakery. Underneath the faded blue letters a smaller white script merrily explained the store had been “Baking since 1863!” He exhaled a long sigh, only wishing he felt as happy about being at the bakery as the sign seemed to want him to be.

“Jesus Christ, Peeta! Don’t fucking dawdle,” Rye’s angry voice suddenly called out to him from somewhere beyond the open door. “Grab the boxes with the red tabs and get them inside. The rest of that shit is yours. We can’t be late or mom will have a conniption!” Peeta frowned at his brother’s words, even though he knew Rye was right.

Adelaide Mellark had never been one to abide lateness or any other behavior that she deemed “unsuitable.” Her rules and expectations were the law in the Mellark household, and her retributions for breaking them were usually severe. Peeta cringed as an onslaught of memories centering on a thousand different punishments meted out at his mother’s hands came into his head. He had always been the worst offender in her eyes, so much so, that Peeta had largely given up trying to please her years ago, but he still didn’t think it was a good idea to set his mother off the first night he’d been in Panem in four years.

He hopped off his seat and hauled down two large boxes from atop the truck, not bothering to check if the contents were fragile or not. Peeta didn’t care about baking in general but especially certainly not this place. He planned on avoiding it as much as possible while he was here.
“Where do you want them, Rye?” he asked as he walked inside, his breath catching in his throat at the sight of the shop.

Everything looked the same, from the giant carefully labeled chalk board on the wall listing the prices for different items as well as the day’s specials, to the large glass cases that displayed the bakery’s goods, to the polished marble countertop between them with two antique cash registers on either end. Peeta felt his heart constrict painfully and a small lump formed in his throat.

Rye strode out brusquely from behind the counter, snorting out a derisive laugh when he saw the look on Peeta’s face. “Dad and I have done a pretty good job with this place, haven’t we?” Rye said pointedly. Peeta nodded his head, knowing that what his brother was really trying to say that they didn’t need him to run the bakery. He lifted up the boxes in his arms.

“But where do these go?”

Rye gave him another sour look. “Stop showing off how much you can carry. Just put them in the back by the bins. Think you’d at least remember that, idiot.” Peeta watched as his brother stalked out the door to get more of the goods before he made his way to the back. He set the boxes down and let out another heavy sigh. Rye’s behavior wasn’t exactly surprising, even if it was a little disheartening.

Rye was three years older than him, and though they had never gotten along particularly well, their relationship had improved for a time during Peeta’s high school years. But it had quickly spoiled again when Peeta had announced he would be going to live in the city with their oldest brother, Bannock, four years ago.

They had spent the intervening time period in grim silence, stilted pleasantries during holiday visits aside. But ever since Peeta had announced he was moving back home from the Capitol, Rye had been lumbering around with poorly concealed rage. Why that was, Peeta wasn’t exactly sure, but he’d hoped Rye would come around once they got here. He’d at least grudgingly agreed to help Peeta move his things back to Mellark House. Judging by Rye’s behavior in the last few minutes, the thaw had been only temporary.

“Are you ok, Peeta? Rye says this is the last of it,” a soft voice asked him. He looked up to see Annie leaning against the doorframe with another box in her hands, her auburn hair a tangled mess, and her forest green eyes alight with concern.

Peeta ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Yeah. Rye’s just being...Well, Rye. Nothing surprising there.” Annie stacked her box on top of one of Peeta’s own before turning to give him a gentle hug.

“She’ll come around, you’ll see. I don’t think there’s a single person we know who doesn’t like you,” she said, letting go of him with a sweet smile.

“If only that were true,” Peeta laughed hollowly, helpless against the images now floating in his head. He saw his mother, his father, Rye, and... Peeta gritted his teeth and shook his head violently. He was not willing to relive those memories while the sun still shone in the sky. That lonely path, full of longing and rejection, was reserved for the deepest night, when he could use the darkness as a shield against pain, a cloak to protect him in the face of an uncaring family and shallow life.

“It’s going to be ok. I know it, Peeta.” He startled as Annie squeezed his arm lightly to bring him back to himself, and he gave her a pained smile for her trouble. It was astonishing to him that Annie could say that, given what she had been through.
“Yeah,” he answered without any enthusiasm. He wasn’t sure what else to say, but the sound of loud frantic car horn saved him from having to answer more. He glanced up at the clock and swore, “Shit, we are going to be late. Catch Rye; he’ll leave you if you don’t go now. I’ll lock up here.” Annie gave him a slightly frightened look.

“What about you?” she trembled.

Peeta just rolled his eyes. “It wouldn’t be a normal day if I didn’t disappoint Mom somehow. This is par for the course,” he said with a bitter laugh and shoved Annie towards the door.

Peeta brought his motorcycle to a screeching halt in front of his family’s mansion. He ripped off his helmet and let out a loud curse as he accidentally sent it flying into one of the fastidiously landscaped bushes that lined the entrance way. He jumped off the bike to search for it, sparing barely a glance at the four elegant white columns lining the front that were designed to give the house an Old World feel.

When Peeta was eight, his mother had decided that the modest house near the bakery that Mellarks had lived in as long as anyone could remember was unbefitting of their family’s wealth and status. Peeta’s father had acquiesced to her, as he always did, and Mellark House had been the result.

She had hired the best available architects to help her plan the place out, from its eight bedrooms and eleven baths, to the gracious balconies that overlooked the estate. The grand entrance opened to a cast bronze double staircase illuminated by a 19th Century stained-glass skylight. Any amenity one could think of had been included in the design, including a pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, tennis court, theater, gym, kitchens, bakery, and even a Koi pond. Sprawling lawns with carefully manicured flower beds, bushes, and trees abruptly gave way to a low cliff, where a hidden stair could be found that led to a private beach below.

The estate was truly a wonder of modern architecture, grand by design, beautiful and imposing in its excess. It was a white beacon amongst the greenery and blowing sands, a herald to all comers of what the Mellark family had wrought through their endeavors.

But for his part, Peeta found the place oppressive and sterile; he still missed the small but bright house of his early childhood days. The only hamlets in this mansion that Peeta had enjoyed were in the kitchens and bakery, along with his bedroom, the only room that was truly his own. Overall though, from the time they had moved there until the time he had left, Peeta had spent as much time as possible away from the place, forever fleeing the icy chill that emanated from its heart.

“You’re late, Peeta,” a biting voice snapped at him just as he pulled his headgear out from the underbrush. He looked up to meet his mother’s glacial blue eyes as she gazed down upon him. She wore a midnight-blue evening gown over her thin frame, and her straw-colored hair was drawn into a bun, accentuating the pinched look of distaste on her face. She crossed her arms over her chest to underscore her already obvious displeasure.

“I apologize,” he uttered in an even tone, knowing she would not listen to any explanation he gave. Peeta pressed his lips into a thin line against the criticism he knew was coming as his mother’s face hardened in anger.

“Since you have just returned to our home, I will grant you a pass this once. Your only punishment will be that no one is allowed to help you bring in that trunk of junk you had Rye bring home.” She gave a him a deadly glare, but Peeta did not react, his face arranged into an long-practiced expression of neutrality, the tightening of his fists the only hint that he was
disturbed by her words. “However, if you do not show up when you are expected to next time, you will not be allowed into the house until you have made amends.” He nodded his acquiescence, having learned long ago that fewer words were better when it came to his interactions with her. Peeta only wished she would have banned him from supper instead, but they both knew he would see that as a blessing.

He held in his breath as she scanned him up and down before turning to the door before adding “Change your clothing. You look terrible, and you know I taught you better. When you are presentable, you may eat dinner with your family. Your father, brother, and I are in the small dining room.”

Peeta watched after her, only exhaling when he was sure she was beyond hearing range. The fact that she did not mention Annie did not escape his notice.

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The hard-backed wooden chair creaked stiffly in protest as Peeta shifted uncomfortably in his seat and glanced surreptitiously around the table. Between his mother’s offended look and Rye’s glowering, the dinner was becoming horrendously awkward even by his family’s low standards. It was almost enough to make Peeta regret insisting that Annie join the meal.

After Peeta had changed into a dress shirt, slacks, and tie, he had immediately searched the cavernous house for Annie, rightly presuming that she had not been invited to dinner. She had, of course, protested that she had nothing appropriate to wear, but Peeta asserted that it wouldn’t matter. None of the family was that cold, he’d told her; they all knew what had happened to her belongings. But you were wrong, he thought.

Anger coursed through him again as he recalled the reception he and Annie had received upon walking into the elegant formal dining room.

Peeta’s mother had given Annie’s green summer dress and loose hand-knitted shawl a glance of disdain before she had stomped away to the table without a word. Her insulted expression had not left her face yet. Rye, of course, hadn’t even spared Annie a solitary look. He had only glared at Peeta, eyes blazing with clear anger at Peeta’s defiance of their mother’s will. Only his sallow-faced, slightly haggard looking father had greeted them both with a murmured welcome and weak embraces before shuffling to his seat. He hadn’t said a word since then, and Peeta was left to marvel, not for the first time, how a man so adept at running a massive food corporation quailed under his wife’s beady-eyed gaze. Peeta had directed Annie to the seat next to him and silence had ruled the table ever since.

Peeta reached a hand up to loosen his tie, only for his skin to stipple with goosebumps. He’d always had an innate ability to sense when his mother was watching him. He quickly lowered his arm and resumed playing with his Foie de Veau à la Lyonnaise, not even trying to hide that he hadn’t eaten any of it. The French chef the Mellarks had on retainer usually provided mostly edible meals, but Peeta drew the line at calf liver.

“How was the bakery today, Rye?” Peeta’s father suddenly asked in a mild voice, but Peeta still jumped. Even Rich Mellark’s soft tone sounded like a trumpet after the ceaseless quiet of the past hour.

“Fine,” his brother said bluntly. “There was a good rush in the morning, and then slow for the rest of the day. Hopefully, we won’t lose any customers who were upset I had to close early.” Peeta laughed before he could stop himself. “What’s so funny?” Rye asked, his brown eyes ablaze with light from the crystal chandelier above their heads.

Peeta gave him a crooked grin. “The bakery has been there over 150 years, Rye,” he explained.
“One day isn’t going to hurt anything. I think people get that our lives don’t revolve around bread all the time.”

“Just most of it,” his father said with an ironic laugh, his eyes twinkling with amusement. Peeta’s smirk widened; it was rare that he made his father smile, much less laugh.

“I hardly think that’s amusing, Richard. Rye is exactly right.”

Peeta’s grin faded as he watched his father crumble under the irritated look of his wife, bowing his head in deference to her, leading Peeta to grimace with exasperation. Some things never changed.

“I expect you to help Rye in the bakery this summer, Peeta. He will be interviewing candidates to run the bakery in preparation for when he leaves next year.” Peeta’s head snapped up in surprise, his body suddenly tense with anger. He didn’t like being reminded that his family thought him unworthy of running even one small aspect of their family’s business.

“I already told you and Dad that I didn’t want to work in the bakery, Mother. And Dad will be there anyways, as always.” He glanced at his father before quickly looking away, trying to ignore the desperate feeling of sadness welling inside him.

“What else are you going to do then? You refused to start in the MBA program even though Dean Crane graciously said he would allow you in. You wouldn’t do the internship with Senator Coin. You won’t even participate in any of the country club’s activities,” she snorted out. “I will not tolerate any of the unscrupulous behavior you demonstrated last month. I will not allow you to embarrass this family again.”

Peeta’s jaw clenched and he balled his hands into fists under the table, willing himself to keep his calm. If his refusal to do that was what embarrassed her, he really would have to find something to do this summer. His mother was undoubtedly going to try again. “I’ll find something to occupy my time,” he said in an even tone.

His mother snorted scornfully. “I demand you work. You will not be lazy just because you are home. And by the way, painting does not count. I think we’ve indulged that hobby long enough,” she said with an air of finality that Peeta didn’t bother to acknowledge, instead staring hard at the congealed meat on his plate.

“As for you, I expect better.” Peeta looked up in horror as he realized his mother was addressing Annie. He watched her shrink into her chair under his mother’s hateful gaze. “Those clothes are a disgrace, and I shudder to think what Rye’s Octavia would have thought of such an outfit. Between Peeta’s inability to arrive on time and your appearance, I just thank God we did not invite her over tonight as we had planned.” She paused to give Peeta a cold look before returning to look at Annie. “We are graciously allowing you to live here; act like you appreciate it. You may come from poor stock but even you should have better manners.”

“Y-yes, ma’am,” Annie whispered. Peeta could see she was shaking all over, her eyes filling to the brim with tears.

“Good. You are dismissed.”

Annie gave Peeta one terrified look before she fled out the entrance hall and towards the back doors. He watched her run past the windows, her small form flickering in the shadowy light of the torches that lined the pool, before he rose to follow after her, pausing only to address his mother.

“You remember what she lost in that fire, right Mother?” he asked her, her callousness shocking even to him. She stared up at him with black, unforgiving eyes.
“It’s no excuse.”

“Hey, you ok?” Peeta asked. He sat down next to Annie’s trembling form on the sand as she watched the waves roll upon the shore. He pretended not to see her wiping the tears from her cheeks, knowing she wouldn’t want him drawing attention to it. “Took me awhile to find you,” he asserted. Annie nodded but didn’t say anything more. Peeta didn’t really expect her to.

They both stared out over the water, bearing witness to the last orange-red rays of the sun as it slipped beneath the horizon. Peeta struggled not to think of other, happier, times he had spent on this beach, reminding himself of the likelihood that they would never happen again. He was sure there had been too many mistakes, too much pain.

“I’m glad you live on the ocean.” Peeta turned towards her as Annie’s timid voice broke him out of his reverie. “It reminds me of home,” she said with a small smile, which Peeta matched with one of his own.

“That was the only thing I was happy about when we moved here,” he answered. “Living in town was great, but you can’t beat being able to come down here for a getaway to clear your head,” he said with a sigh. Annie looked at him sadly.

“Is...is she always like that?”

“Always,” Peeta answered. He didn’t need Annie to specify who she was.

“It’s just...She was so sweet to me at the funeral,” lamented Annie.

Peeta snorted. “Well, that’s because she was out in public. She can’t have anyone outside the immediate family thinking she’s anything but perfect, now can she? As you witnessed at dinner, appearances are very important to mom,” he said sarcastically, but then he winked.

Annie gave him a questioning smile. “Why do you look happy about that?” Peeta grinned.

“Because lucky you, other than the horrible dinners we’ll have to be at occasionally ‘for appearance’s sake’, I guarantee she’ll ignore us. She likes to pretend I don’t exist as a general rule. You should have lived here my last year of high school. I think I can count on one hand, the times she spoke to me outside of the public sphere. I’d say it was our happiest year as mother and son,” he said, letting out a long sigh. “I am...so terribly sorry about the way she acted towards you though.”

Annie shook her head. “It’s not your fault. I’ll figure out a way to get the things she expects me to wear.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll pay for anything you need.”

“Won’t you get in trouble?” Annie looked at him worriedly, but Peeta just smirked.

“Nope. Not like my mother has made any of our money. Mom has her inheritance, of course, but other than that, it’s all Dad’s. I guessing Mom has tried to get him to cut me off when I don’t toe the family line, but she hasn’t succeeded yet,” he grinned. “She doesn’t have a reason to complain, really. I haven’t bought any of the ridiculous things Rye and Bannock did when they were allowed into their trust funds.”

Peeta smiled as Annie let out a laugh. “Does Rye still have the sailboat? Even though doesn’t like the ocean? I remember you telling me about it when he bought that.”
“Yeah. “Peeta nodded his head towards the dock a hundred yards away, where he could just make out a boat bobbing gently on the water. “I’m honestly not sure if he remembers that he owns it. I took it out more often than he ever did, though I’m certainly not the best sailor. You should have seen what my friend, Finnick, could—” Peeta cut himself off abruptly, pain erupting within him over his slip-up. He watched Annie’s brow furrow in confusion. “Well anyways,” he continued hastily. “I’m sure we can take it out this summer if that’s something you want to do. We have to get away from my mother some how,” he joked.

“You really think she would approve of you sailing all day when you could be participating in those country club activities?” Annie said with a playful nudge, earning a laugh from Peeta.

“Hah, yeah. Spending the entire summer playing cricket, golf and God knows what else with a bunch of snobby assholes while my mother tries to set me up with ‘girls of appropriate status.’ Think I’ll pass.”

Annie looked at him sympathetically. “She made it sound like you refusing to accompany that girl to that party was the worst thing you had ever done.”

“Eh…my ‘unscrupulous behavior’ last month is just one in a long line.” Peeta shrugged. “I think ‘you’ve embarrassed the family’ is her favorite line. Believe me when I say when I say tonight was one of her milder reactions. I’ve done far worse in her eyes.” Peeta scowled at his own words and the long-repressed memories that once again threatened to invade his mind.

“Like insisting that the presence of your poor cousin in your family’s home wouldn’t tarnish their reputations?” Annie said with an affectionate look. Peeta smiled at her.

“Even worse.”

Annie sighed. “I know.” She looked at him sorrowfully, prompting Peeta to look away, wishing to hide his pain.

They fell quiet as the darkness descended upon them, and a thousand glittering stars painted themselves across the sky. Peeta could hear the sea gently lapping onto the beach under the power of a balmy breeze. It ruffled Peeta’s hair and ghosted across his face, feeling like the heated caress of someone’s hand. He ran his own over the sand, still warm from the sun’s rays, and felt himself transported to a different time, when a different girl had sat beside him on these shores.

Peeta could still see her chocolate hair spread out like a halo around her head, her olive skin a stark contrast to the white sand beneath her. He could taste the salt from the water on her skin as his lips moved over her body. He could feel her, his skin even now tingling with the remembrance of her solid form moving in time with his, a sensuous dance meant only for them to share. And he heard her cries echoing in his ears as her arms wrapped around him, an anchor tethering him to the earth as their melded souls flew high.

Tears pricked at the edges of Peeta’s eyes, at the memory so sweet in recollection, and the knowledge that he would not have such a connection with another again. He knew that girl was long gone, and thus, it wasn’t good for Peeta to think about such things. At least, that’s what he told himself every day.

“What are we going to do?” Annie asked, breaking the silence. “Even if you do expect her to ignore us, I doubt it’ll go beyond her notice if we just go sailing everyday. I don’t think she’ll see that as work.” Peeta blew out a puff of air, attempting to drag himself from his melancholy. His mother’s demand from dinner rang in his ears, and he realized Annie was right. Even Peeta knew he could only get away with so much, and this was not a battle he felt like fighting.
He looked around, as though expecting the answer to jump up in front of him, and noticed a solitary twinkling light far down the beach, well past the Mellark’s property line. His eyes lit up with excitement. Haymitch. Peeta turned back to Annie with a broad smile on his face.

“How would you feel about doing something that technically meets Mom’s demands but would really piss her off? Annie looked at him warily.

“What do you have in mind?”


“This is the place?” Annie asked, confusion evident in her voice.

“Yep. I know it doesn’t look like much, but I promise it’s the best,” Peeta said happily. He looked around the crowded lot for a parking space, spotting one near the back, and pulled the truck into it. As they got out of the vehicle, Peeta looked up to study the large decrepit looking shack, noting with great satisfaction that nothing looked different.

Twinkling white Christmas lights wrapped around the rails and along the top of the porch, guarding several mismatched chairs scattered along the floor. The windows were hazy, so dirty in some places that the light emanating from within could not shine through. The thin wooden slats that made up the structure’s walls were splintered, bruised and beaten to a light grey color by the elements that occasionally battered the coastal town. The thatched roof had a hole on one side, and Peeta knew once he stepped inside that there would be a water-bucket in the corner. A ragged looking sign with The Mockingjay labeled on it in peeling gold letters swung slightly on its hinges as the wind came in from the beach. Peeta couldn’t help but grin as the sound of raucous laughter reached his ears.

His uncle’s bar was considered an eyesore by some in the community but many more liked its presence. The young frequented it because Haymitch was known for his laxity, within reason, when it came carding I.D.s. Older locals liked it because Haymitch kept his mouth shut when it came to their secrets. And tourists and other visitors were always drawn to the lively energy that radiated from within the building, no matter how rundown it looked. But what Peeta liked best about it was that it was one of the few places in Panem where a person’s wealth or status didn’t generally matter. All were welcomed with equal joy into the melting pot of humanity that congregated there. Peeta finally felt a little like he was home.

He looked at Annie and nodded his head towards the open door. “Come on. We need to catch Haymitch before he’s too far gone and goes to bed. Trust me when I say he is not a morning person.” Annie looked at him with a nervous expression.

“Thank you promise we won’t have to be here long?”

Peeta laughed loudly. “Yes. And as I told you on the way over here, Haymitch doesn’t put up with much. He’ll have cleared out the majority of the creeps by now, but if you really need to, just remember what I told you to do while we were in the truck,” he said with a wink.

“Ok,” Annie sighed softly, trailing along after Peeta as he walked through the door.

Peeta paused just as he passed the threshold, allowing the familiar scent of alcohol, sweat, and the sea to fill his nostrils. Various chairs and tables were scattered about the floor between the columns that held up the roof while several roomy booths lined the walls. A pair of pool tables ran along the back, illuminated by low-hanging light fixtures. The building was packed tonight, though Peeta could just make out a door in the corner that he knew would lead to Haymitch’s office. But he knew his uncle wouldn’t be there.
He squinted around, trying to find Haymitch’s straw-like hair amongst the crowd before he finally gave up, knowing whoever was bartending tonight would likely know where he was. “Come on,” he murmured to Annie, as they fought their way through the mass of bodies to the massive bar that covered one entire wall. It could never be said that Haymitch didn’t like his alcohol.

Peeta maneuvered into an empty space on the far end of the bar and waited for the bartender to make his way over to them, grinning when he saw Darius was working tonight. The thin man with flaming red hair had been his brother, Bannock’s friend when they were young, so Peeta knew him fairly well.

“What’ll it be for ya?” Darius asked lazily, barely sparing Peeta a glance before he transferred his gaze to Annie. Peeta couldn’t hold in his laugh, unsurprised at Darius’ disinterest in someone who wasn’t female.

“How about a Peacekeeper?”

“Are ya sure, mate?” Darius questioned, turning back towards Peeta’s way. “That’s like the cheapest beer on the planet. Gives you the worst hangover you can imagine and tastes like...Holy shit! Peeta!”

Peeta began to laugh as Darius’ mouth fell open, saying, “Well, I just thought I should get it to honor my first experience with beer. You and Bannock were ever so kind to get it for me.” Darius snorted with his own laugh.

“Served you and your punk-ass friends right. You were what, fourteen? I don’t think even Rye dared to ask us to get anything for him til he was sixteen.”

Peeta shrugged, laughing even harder at the memory, thankful that thinking of his friends didn’t hurt for once. “I learned that lesson well. I don’t think I got out of bed the next day, had to lie to my parents about catching the flu.”

“Ha, yeah. That was what I felt like the first time I had that crap too. Here’s some far less shitty beer. On the house.” Peeta nodded his thanks as Darius grabbed two bottles from under the counter and slid them Peeta’s way. He looked over Peeta curiously. “How’s Bannock been? Scratch that. How have you been? Rye comes in here all the time, but I haven’t heard him mention you. Last time you were in here, you were with--”

“Actually,” Peeta interrupted him hastily. “Have you seen my uncle? I wanted to say hello and let him know I was back in town.”

“Oh. Sure,” Darius replied, laughing again. “Sorry. Should have realized you’d want to see him. He’s over there.” Peeta followed Darius’ pointed finger to where Haymitch was seated at a table near the wall, observing his patrons with a keen eye.

“Some things never change, do they?” Peeta said with amusement.

“No, they do not,” Darius answered, but then a rather serious expression crept onto his face as he scanned Peeta’s own.. “But some things do,” he said slowly.

Peeta gave him a small smile but did not acknowledge Darius’ words beyond that. Instead, he beckoned Annie to follow him, and they made their way over to Haymitch’s location They reached the table just in time to witness Haymitch down some sort of amber liquid. “Hey, Uncle Haymitch,” he said, smiling down at one of the few people he knew cared about him.

Haymitch looked up at him with slight surprise, his longish blonde hair falling down to frame a
slightly haggard face covered in patchy scruff, his blue eyes bleary but focused, much to Peeta’s relief. “I was wondering when you’d turn up, boy. You’re brother has been in rare form tonight so I knew you must have gotten home.” Peeta followed Haymitch’s nod towards a table where Rye and a bunch of his friends were gathered. While the rest of the group was laughing and talking, he saw that Rye was just staring moodily at table, taking long swigs of his large beer. Peeta sighed heavily, pulled out a chair for Annie, and took a seat of his own.

“Think he’s just scared I’m going to try to take over the bakery,” Peeta said, not entirely believing his explanation. Haymitch bobbed his head thoughtfully, but his raised brows suggested to Peeta that he didn’t buy that either. His uncle was drunk half the time but underneath his shabby exterior, Peeta knew Haymitch was quite perceptive and shrewd. There was a reason The Mockingjay was still here after so many years. He decided it was time to switch the topic.

“This is Annie,” he said, smiling across the table at his cousin as she jumped in her chair. Peeta was sure she thought she’d been forgotten about, quiet as she liked to be.

“Well, missy, I’ve heard about you from Peeta. It’s nice to finally put a face to the name,” Haymitch said, extending a hand across the table. Annie took it timidly and offered up a tiny smile, which prompted Haymitch to let out a bark of laughter. “Don’t look at me like that; I don’t bite. You can think of me as your old, bitter uncle too. S’far as I’m concerned, we’re family.”

“Thank you, sir,” Annie said, her smile widening slightly, but there was a certain sadness to her expression. Peeta watched his uncle’s face soften as he too noticed her sorrowful eyes.

“I was sorry to hear about your parents, girl,” said Haymitch gruffly. “I only met them once, many years ago, but I remember they were good people. My brother-in-law and sister were wrong to shut them out like they did, though I’m sorry to say its not much of a surprise.” Haymitch laughed bitterly for a second and took another chug of his drink before continuing. “But if you need somethin,’ I’ll do what I can. This place is always open to you.”

Annie finally gave them a genuine smile, but Peeta could see the tears shining in her eyes. She excused herself to go to the restroom, and Peeta watched her go with a frown, his heart breaking for her over what she had lost.

“How much of a bitch was your mother to her tonight?” Haymitch asked him in a suddenly weary voice.

“Bad.” Peeta began to pick at a spot of paint on the table. “Mom’s going to crush her, Haymitch. Annie’s fragile right now, and she hasn’t experienced anything like Mom. Her mother actually loved her,” he said in a voice laced with worry. He looked up to find his uncle surveying him, an unfathomable look on his face. “You’re still running the beaches right? Let me and Annie guard for you this summer. I’m certified, and Annie grew up on the ocean. We won’t need a lot of training.”

“And how exactly does that improve the situation, Peeta?” Haymitch asked with some skepticism.

“Well, it gives us a legitimate excuse to leave the house on a daily basis and fulfills Mom’s demands that I work this summer. Add in the bonus that she will to be so pissed at me for working for you that she won’t have the energy to think about Annie, and we have a perfect recipe for success,” he shrugged.

Haymitch shook his head at him, laughing a little. “You’re one of a kind, kid. She’s probably gonna hunt me down and kill me for it, but sure, you both can be guards. Saves me the trouble of having to find three guards anyways. One roster position is a lot easier to fill.” He then gave Peeta
an oddly calculating look. “So no quitting on me.”

Peeta looked at him quizzically. “Why would I quit?”

Haymitch looked at him carefully for a second, his tankard hovering in mid-air, appearing as though he was assessing something but what that was, Peeta didn’t know. “Just remember this is a favor to you, nephew,” he said cantankerously. “Your word that you won’t quit?”

Peeta stared at him for a second, fully aware that Haymitch hadn’t answered his question, trying to understand the meaning behind his uncle’s words. But Haymitch was now busy chugging down his drink, and Peeta gleaned that the conversation was over. “Yeah, I promise,” he replied reluctantly. Peeta had the strange feeling that he was signing up for more than just life-guarding the often times tumultuous shores of Panem by agreeing to Haymitch’s request.

They sat in companionable silence after that, allowing Peeta’s mind to wander. He looked over the hazy room, his heart filled with a range of conflicting emotions.

The Mockingjay had always been a refuge when he was young, when the weight of his family’s expectations became too much to bear, back when he still tried to meet them. He remembered his first day here long ago, driven by fear of his mother’s wrath, for some crime he didn’t remember, to the very relative whose existence she vehemently denied. Haymitch had taken him in without a second thought that night, managing to stay sober for the occasion of meeting his nephew for the first time. And he’d driven him home the next day, staying at the gate just long enough to make sure Peeta got inside. Peeta didn’t know it at the time, but his mother likely would have called the police had she spotted Haymitch outside. She hated her brother that much.

Peeta tightened his hand around his bottle, recalling the anguish he felt when his mother had said he hadn’t been missed. He was only eight, and his family, particularly his mother, had still been the center of his world. The crushing heartbreak of her words had only been tempered by Peeta’s newfound determination to make her happy, to make them all happy. Peeta had never succeeded and had only given up that desire to please his family after it had cost him more than he ever could have imagined. He wasn’t the only one who had made mistakes, certainly, but he’d been the only one who’d left. Peeta bowed his head shamefully.

“P-please don’t. I-I have have a boyfriend! He’s right over t-there! S-s-stop.” Peeta startled as he heard Annie’s trembling voice reach his ears. He had told her what she could tell people tonight if she didn’t want to be approached.

Peeta looked up to see her standing several feet away in front of the bar’s largest table where it was tucked into a corner. She was pointing her finger towards him with a terrified look on her face as a balding overweight man who was easily twenty years older backed her up against the wall.

He sprung up out of his seat, as did Haymitch, hearing the older man mutter, “Ah, shit. I forgot we hadn’t kicked Cray out yet tonight. Fucking disgusting man.” Peeta reached Annie in two long strides and ripped the man off her.

“What the fuck?” the man cried out, shoving Peeta backwards into the table. He heard several drinks fall over, but he didn’t turn around to apologize, too angry to be bothered by some spilt beer.

“The believe the lady said no,” Peeta said, cold fury lacing his tone.

The man sneered at him, his chest puffing up like an adder that had been threatened. “That’s just what women say. They always want it, boy. I don’t think your girl is any different,” he taunted. Peeta stepped forward, his hands balling into fists, but before he was anywhere near the man, his
uncle slid in front of him and grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt.

“They always want it, eh?” Haymitch thundered. “Well, Cray, I’ll show you what I want.” Peeta’s mouth fell open as his uncle dragged Cray across the floor towards the door, the man’s arms and legs flailing about like he was drowning in the sea. At the threshold, he hoisted the man off his feet to throw him down the steps. “Stay the fuck out of my place, you bastard,” Haymitch called out loudly.

For a moment, the bar was completely silent as they all watched Haymitch turn around, but then wild cheers and clapping erupted from the crowd. Peeta watched as his uncle made his way back over to him and Annie, grimacing every time he got a slap on the back or someone shoved themselves in his path to shake his hand. It brought a smile to Peeta’s face. Though he was often in the spotlight, Haymitch never enjoyed it.

“T-thank you, Haymitch,” Annie said in a still shaking voice.

“Don’t worry about it, girl. Shoulda done it years ago,” Haymitch muttered, but Peeta saw that his eyes were soft as he looked at her. He turned to Peeta, saying, “You all right, boy?” Peeta was about to respond when he noticed Haymitch’s eyes light up with something akin to alarm, his gaze focused on something over Peeta’s shoulder.

Peeta turned around slowly and came to a dead halt, his heartbeat suddenly booming in his chest like a drum, at the sight before him. It was like he was staring at a past life. They were all there, sitting around the table… their table… Peeta now realized.

Johanna.

Finnick.

Delly.

Madge.

Gale.

And…

Katniss.

Peeta felt all the color drain from his face as he looked at her. She wore a yellow sundress, which clung to her frame, the top portion conforming to her breasts to reveal just a hint of cleavage. Her hair fell down in waves around her face, the angles of which had sharpened slightly with age. Her mouth was drawn into a scowl and her luminous grey eyes were a raging storm, but to Peeta, she was still the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He gasped as the tidal wave of pain that he’d tried to keep at bay for four years crashed through him, a thousand different memories of the times they’d spent together flooding his mind.

He was so stunned that he barely registered Johanna standing up, a full pitcher of beer in her hand. “So nice of you to finally come home, Bread Boy,” she said. Then, she emptied the entire container of liquid onto his head.

Chapter End Notes
Author’s Note: I will post pictures of the mansion Mellark House is modeled after on my tumblr, should anyone wish to see it. Hope you liked the chapter!
This is not Chapter 3! And I do sincerely apologize that it isn't. This drabble (which is about as long as a short one-shot) is actually something I just posted to my tumblr for the Everlark Drabble Challenge, but I decided to make it TWWW oriented. Specifically, it is a preview of well, the way Katniss and Peeta were before their long separation came about, and I hint of things to come. You all have waited so long that I thought I'd post this here as well, as an assurance that yes, I am still working on this story, and as thank you for your patience.

I was challenged by Titania522, and the prompt was "Don't Get Me Wrong."

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

16 years old

“You’re sure no one is home?” Katniss asked Peeta a little nervously. She’d been in the Mellark’s mansion many times, but she rarely felt comfortable unless they were in his room or down on the beach. It never ceased to amaze Katniss how different Peeta was from the rest of his family when it came to how he interacted with those of ‘lesser social status’...people like her.

Of Peeta’s family members, only Rye treated her like an actual human being, but he was busy with school these days and couldn’t really be bothered to talk to a little high school junior like herself. Bannock, on the rare occasions he came home from the Capitol, usually ignored her and Mr. Mellark rarely afforded her anything more than a nod. But Mrs. Mellark always glared at Katniss like she was a dangerous insect that she wished to stomp on. Peeta constantly reminded her that was how Adelaide Mellark looked at everyone, so much so that Katniss had stopped bringing it up to him years ago, but Katniss always got the feeling his mother’s animosity towards her ran deeper than simply general dislike.

Peeta nodded his head to reassure her. “Rye’s over at Panem with his friends. Dad is at the bakery, and then he has a conference call that he said would run late. Mom went up to the Capitol to see Bannock and do some shopping.” He smirked at her. “Like I told you the first four times you asked when we were at school.”

“I know, Peeta,” Katniss huffed out. “But I’d rather not have your mother make me feel like I’m some trampy Seam girl, whose only objective in life is to get her son’s money somehow.”

“Kat, we’ve been over this,” Peeta said calmly, bringing his hands up to cup her cheeks in his warm hands. He tilted her head upwards so that Katniss couldn’t avoid his piercing blue gaze, and her whole body began to tremble as he caressed her face. “Don’t believe anything my mother thinks. You’ve been my best friend since we were five years old; I know that’s not how you are. Last night was the best night of my entire life, and I’m not letting my mother or anyone else take that away from us.” He placed a gentle kiss on Katniss’ mouth that still somehow managed to spread such warmth through her body that Katniss felt like she was on fire. She let out a soft mewl of protestation when he pulled away only a second later, already missing the feel of his lips on her own. “Come on,” he said with a smile, entwining her hand in his own.

Katniss followed Peeta up the stairs to his bedroom, memories of the previous night flashing
through her mind. After so many years of loving him, too scared to confess her feelings for fear of losing him if he didn’t feel the same and of what his family might think if they were together, the dam had finally broken with Peeta’s confession. Now the only regret Katniss had was that they had wasted so much time already.

CRACK!

Katniss jumped, her thoughts shattering like the lamp that Peeta had just knocked off his desk onto the floor. She stared at him incredulously while Peeta looked at her sheepishly. “No one ever accused me of having the ability to move quietly, right?” he asked.

Katniss bit her lip to hold back a laugh as she swiftly moved across the room, quiet as a mouse, until she was standing only an inch from him. She placed her hands on his chest and felt his heart begin to pound beneath her fingertips. Katniss stretched up so that she could ghost her lips along the shell of his ear. “Nope,” she whispered. Then, Katniss pulled his mouth down to hers for an open-mouthed kiss.

Katniss ran her hands up into Peeta’s hair, loving the way his soft waves flowed between her fingers, while his own strong arms came up around her to hold Katniss tightly to him. Their tongues massaged each other, intertwining together in a sinuous erotic courtship. With each stroke, Katniss felt ribbons of heat lick through her body straight into her core, the sensations so powerful that she felt her knees begin to weaken under the onslaught.

Katniss had spent years dreaming of what doing this with Peeta would feel like and now that she had him, she knew even her wildest fantasies didn’t compare to the real thing. With each passing second, her desire for him for was stoked higher. Katniss ran one hand down Peeta’s body and cupped the bulge, obvious even through his stiff jeans.

Peeta pulled back from her with a gasp, but Katniss did not remove her hand. “Katniss, I don’t…” He trailed off with a groan and closed his eyes as Katniss began to stroke him, his chest began to rise and fall with growing rapidity as Katniss felt his cock swell under her ministrations. She increased the pace, and Peeta started to rock gently against her hand, but a moment later, he clasped her wrist in one of his own. Katniss looked up at him in confusion.

“I don’t expect anything, Katniss. I...you don’t have to do anything,” Peeta said, his blue eyes sincere even as their darkness betrayed his desire for her.

Katniss removed her hand from him and took a step back, almost laughing when she saw Peeta’s face fall before he ducked his head in attempt to hide his disappointment. Katniss ripped her shirt off over her head. “Look at me,” she demanded. Peeta raised his head, his eyes going wide when he saw what she had removed. Sure that he was now watching her, Katniss unbuttoned her jeans and slid out of them, thankful that today, she had decided to wear the one pair of pretty black lace panties she owned.

She glanced at Peeta, her stomach jolting under the hungry look now on his face. Katniss took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she wanted to do next. She knew what she wanted but going past this point with her best friend, for the first time, was always going to be a little daunting. “You ain’t seen nothing yet,” she said coyly in an attempt to hide what she was feeling.

She reached around to unclasp her bra, and then slowly shrugged it down her arms, never breaking eye contact with Peeta as she did so. Katniss felt her nipples harden in the cool air as she tossed the bra to the side, expecting Peeta to say something. But Peeta said nothing, his eyes sweeping up and down her body in studied silence.

But for Katniss, the quiet was too much to take, and she lowered her eyes to the floor, bringing
her arms up to shield her breasts from his gaze. She was suddenly certain, at least in her own head, that Glimmer or Clove or any number of other girls had offered this sight to him before her. And Katniss knew she was infinitely plain compared to any of them. She flinched when Peeta’s shoes came into her periphery.

“Kat, please look at me.” Peeta took her hands in his own and drew them away from her body. Katniss looked up at him in trepidation but found only warmth in his eyes. “I love you, Katniss. I’m so in love with you. And this…” he gestured up and down her body. “This is more than I ever thought I’d get with you. We don’t have to go any farther tonight if you don’t want to.” Katniss mouth fell open, thinking she should protest that this was something she desperately wanted, but her insecurities still held sway within her. “We don’t ever have to go any farther unless you’re ready. I’ll wait,” Peeta said with a determined smile.

Katniss sighed, feeling overwhelmed by his offer. Here they were, Katniss stripped down to her underwear......and Peeta was still giving her an out if she wanted it. It was a sign of how well her, understood her, but also just another in a long line of examples of his goodness. Katniss supposed, after knowing him for nearly twelve years, that it shouldn’t surprise her anymore when Peeta demonstrated his penchant for kindness, especially towards her, but it astounded her nonetheless. Katniss finally felt the dam of fears within her heart burst, and she felt as light as the seabirds that wheeled in the sky after a summer storm.

Katniss looked up at him and cupped his cheek in her hand. “I think I could live a hundred lifetimes and still never deserve you,” she whispered. Peeta turned his head slightly, so that her palm met his lips, which sent a hard thrill streaking towards her still throbbing center. But it wasn’t enough to distract Katniss away from seeing the questioning wonder in his eyes. It hurt a little, that he could still doubt her feelings even a miniscule amount, but given the position she’d been in last night, the catalyst for their confessions, it didn’t shock her that he still was struggling to accept that all of this was real.

Katniss ran her hands up his chest and began unbuttoning his shirt, smirking at the way Peeta’s eye kept widening the further down she worked. By the time Katniss finished and was pushing Peeta’s shirt off of him, his eyebrows had disappeared into the locks of hair that fell across his forehead. She smoothed the waves away before tenderly placing a kiss over his heart. She could feel it pounding erratically beneath her lips. “This is real, Peeta,” Katniss whispered as she placed kisses along his well-defined pecs. Peeta had always been toned but joining the wrestling team two years ago had wrought new changes to his body that Katniss was only now beginning to appreciate. “And this is real,” she said, boldly licking over one of his nipples.

“No,” Peeta breathed, his voice dripping with desire. Katniss glanced up at him, noticing the way his eyes continued to darken. She could feel the tension radiating from his body, his need for her evident in every labored breath he took. Katniss sucked gently on the nipple she had just licked over before pulling away one last time.

“Good. Now shut up and let me show you how sorry I am for what happened with Cato last night.”

Peeta opened his mouth, perhaps to protest that he’d already forgiven her for deliberately going out with the biggest jerk at Panem High, all in an attempt to make Peeta jealous, not to mention the
somewhat compromising position he’d found them in when he’d come to her rescue from said jerk, but the stern look on Katniss’ face promptly shut his mouth again. Katniss pushed Peeta up against the door to his bedroom and warned him with a scowl that he wasn’t to say another word. Peeta bobbed his head once to let Katniss know he’d understood her message.

Katniss began to place more wet kisses along Peeta’s torso, gradually sinking down to her knees as she worked her way down until her face was finally level with Peeta’s groin. She undid his belt buckle and button, and then slowly drew the zipper of his jeans, before working the pants down to the floor. Katniss ran her hands up and down his thighs before she again began to stroke his length, even more visible now through the thin material of his boxer briefs. She looked up at him a little nervously. The insinuation at what she wanted to do for him was unmistakable, given her position.

“You...you, ah, want...want to do that?” Peeta whispered in a hopeful but stunned tone, breaking his silent vow from before not to speak. But Katniss didn’t mind, too engrossed in the awed expression on his face as Katniss nodded her head yes. She dipped her fingers under the elastic waistband of his underwear and tugged them over his narrow hips so that they fell to join his pants on the floor.

Fully exposed, Peeta’s erection bobbed a little up and down, and it was Katniss’ turn to gasp. His was only the second dick Katniss had seen, not counting the random porn Johanna had brought up occasionally during sleepovers just to embarrass her, but she’d had enough exposure to know that his size was impressive.

“Everything ok?” Peeta laughed, but Katniss knew him too well for the undercurrent of worry in his voice to go undetected.

Katniss wrapped her hand around the base of him and squeezed him tightly. “Ohhhh,” Peeta groaned, thrusting involuntarily into her hand. Katniss began to pump him up and down, moving her hand up and over the head before moving back down his shaft.

“Does that feel good?” Katniss asked, running her free hand underneath him so that she could fondle him.

“Y-yes,” Peeta managed to stutter out, grimacing with pleasure, and Katniss could feel him trembling beneath her fingers. He rocked his hips in time with her strokes, but Katniss stilled, causing Peeta to give her a look of blissed confusion.

“I love you,” Katniss said. She could feel the flush rising in her cheeks. This wasn’t something she’d ever done before and only hoped the tips her rudimentary internet search earlier today had provided her would be enough for him. “Watch me.” She bit her lip for a second in an effort to quell her nerves before she pressed her swollen lips to the tip of his member and ran her tongue along his slit.

“Oh God,” Peeta moaned heavily and gripped the doorknob for support.

Katniss let go of him with a loud pop to run her hand along his cock again before pressing it flush with his stomach. She licked only the vein on the underside of his shaft, faint pride growing within as Peeta visibly shuddered from the sensation and his cock swelled even more in her hand.

More moans fell from his lips as Katniss kissed back up his shaft and swirled her tongue around his tip, lapping at the steady flow of pre-cum leaking from the head. “Katniss!” Peeta gasped. Katniss heard a soft thump as Peeta’s head fell back against the door, and his hands found their way into her hair to brush the tendrils that had fallen onto her face behind her ears. But then, he suddenly bucked into her mouth so abruptly that Katniss had to pull away. She looked up at him
with wide eyes.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to do that,” Peeta gasped, his chest heaving, his dilated pupils suggesting that he was already missing her mouth. “It’s just, you feel so good, and I’ve never...No one’s ever...” he trailed off into embarrassed silence. Katniss smiled. Her boy was so sweet.

She sheathed her teeth and slipped him back into her mouth, fitting in as much of him as she could without gagging. “Oh Katniss, yessss,” Peeta slurried out, sounding almost drunk with pleasure. Katniss almost smiled again, but she figured exposing her teeth would erase the now constant stream of moans falling from his lips quickly. She continued to slide him in and out of her mouth, pausing every couple of moments to lick up and down his shaft or swirl her tongue around his head. But when she brought both her hands up to begin working on him in conjunction with her mouth, Katniss felt Peeta’s fingers tighten around her hair.

“Katniss,” he hissed. “I’m not going to last mu--” He caught himself off abruptly, his breath hitching as Katniss hollowed her cheeks and started sucking on him in earnest. She increased the pace at which she was pumping him. She didn’t need him to tell her of the building pressure within his body. It was only too obvious in the way he was rocking gently into her mouth on shaking knees. Katniss glowed with her own pleasure at the thought the she could make Peeta feel this good.

“Kat, I’m going to come,” Peeta choked out. Katniss withdrew her mouth and watched as thick hot spurts of white liquid released from him, allowing the pearly strands to fall onto her chest and breasts. After he finished, Peeta slid down the door to land with a loud thump on the carpet, his breaths coming in short harsh bursts. He stared at Katniss with astonishment for a minute as his breathing slowed to a normal rate. “A-amazing. You’re amazing. That was incredible. I love you,” he finally whispered.

Katniss’ blushed again, the boldness she had summoned over the last few minutes now shocking to her. “I love you,” she said again, by way of explanation. Peeta smiled at her, affording Katniss the lazy grin she had only ever seen him use with her. It was the one that often suggested an inside joke, or shared secret, or just a mark of their strong friendship. But now that smile also reflected the love between them, a love that Katniss had no doubt was invincible, no matter what challenges they might face in the coming days, weeks, months...years. This moment felt like forever.

She watched as Peeta hopped up, kicking his pants and boxers the rest of the way off, before walking into his bathroom. Katniss heard the tap running, and when Peeta returned, he had a warm wash cloth, which he used to clean her tenderly. When he was done, Peeta tossed the cloth into his hamper and turned back to her with a flirtatious expression.

“Well what are we going to do with you?” Peeta smirked.

Katniss’ felt her whole body flush, unsure if what she was feeling was fear or excitement. “Peeta, I don’t…” she started to say, in echo of his words from earlier that evening, but Peeta didn’t give her the chance to finish. Instead, he hoisted her into his arms and carried her over to the bed and tossed her playfully onto it. Katniss stared up at him, observing the way his eyes were darkening yet again, and her heart began to race.

“Don’t get me wrong, sweetheart. I loved what you did...” Peeta said as hooked his fingers into the waistband of her panties and drug them down her legs. He pulled Katniss to the edge of the bed and spread her legs apart before kneeling down in front of her. Katniss could barely breath as she watched him lower his head towards her sex, and she suddenly felt as though her entire body was throbbing with need for him. Peeta smiled up at her and continued, “But you’ve been the subject of every fantasy I’ve ever had since I was 12, and I cannot tell you how long I’ve waited to taste you.”
Katniss cried out as Peeta’s mouth descended upon her, fervently hoping Peeta had been right about no one being home. But then Katniss couldn’t think at all anymore, with the exception of one word.

Always.

Chapter End Notes

The continuation of this scene, or at least what happened after, will likely make an appearance in The Way We Were, but I hope this was sufficient to whet your appetite. Please still review! I love hearing your thoughts and thank you again to everyone for being so patient. Special shout-out to PeetaBreadGirl for being such an awesome beta.

Chapter 3 will be on its way soon.
Author’s Note: I wish to thank everyone again for being so kindly patient in waiting for updates on this story. Real life kicked my butt for about two months straight, but I’m making it a goal to write more.

I recently posted a “drabble” for The Way We Were, which is now marked here as Interlude I. If you haven’t read it, please do! Every few chapters, I will be doing these to begin revealing more of what happened in the past to our favorite characters. Based on the comments I’ve received, I know many of you want to know. :) 

Thank you so much to my betas, ct522/titania522, solas violetta, and peetabreadgirl for their wonderful work. They not only catch my errors, but nudge me to get writing when I need one, and their enthusiasm keeps me motivated. C, A, and G, this chapter is dedicated to you all. Thanks for all the support.

Please review! And as always, thank you for reading.

Katniss

“He’s such a dick.”

Katniss glanced up from the beer label she’d been slowly peeling off her bottle at Johanna, thoroughly wishing her friend would just stop with the comments already. It was only making her and everyone else more miserable than they already felt, but Jo seemingly had failed to grasp that concept. She’d kept up a steady stream of them ever since Peeta had walked through The Mockingjay’s doors with that red-headed girl and failed to notice the group sitting at their table.

Katniss dropped her gaze back down to the mottled wood, glancing over the pockmarks and scratches, towards the center, where she knew the group’s names were carved. Katniss sighed. This table...The one they had spent nearly every Friday or Saturday night at in high school after Haymitch had gotten too tired to pretend he cared they weren’t of legal drinking age. The one they had spent countless nights laughing at, Peeta usually at the center of their merriment. Even now, Katniss was hard-pressed not to smile when she thought about the story of the eighty year-old bakery customer who had asked Peeta’s mother, of all people, for a cake shaped like a stripper.

“Asshole,” Johanna muttered darkly.

“God, Jo,” Finnick said in an exasperated voice. “Just give it a rest, will ya? We know he’s here, ok?” Katniss watched Finnick drain his pint, and then pour himself another from the several pitchers of beer scattered around the table. Katniss took another swig from her bottle. She couldn’t blame Finnick for wanting to drown his feelings with alcohol. It wasn’t like she wanted to deal with them either.

Peeta’s return had rendered them all speechless after their initial words of shock at lunch. All anyone had done after seeing that easily recognizable head of wavy blonde hair was stare mutely, watching as Peeta and the red-head unloaded boxes from Rye’s truck. Peeta hadn’t looked their
way once, not that anyone expected him to, but none of them had looked away until Peeta had sprinted down the steps and torn off on his motorcycle, presumably going back to Mellark House.

After that, they had stared at one another instead, no one quite knowing what to say, though it didn’t escape Katniss’ notice that her friends were mostly looking at her. But Katniss hadn’t cared, so consumed was she by the riptide of pain tearing through her heart. She had kept her feelings at bay for four years, but seeing Peeta again, even from a distance, was enough to break the dam of memories she’d put up in her mind. Katniss had clutched her stomach tightly as waves of nausea rolled over her, before she’d practically run off, saying she’d see them tonight.

It was a decision that Katniss had regretted the instant Peeta had walked through that door. The group had yet again fallen into a sullen silence, Johanna notwithstanding, and Katniss had spent the rest of the evening trying to stare at the table, her beer bottle, and anywhere else Peeta wasn’t. It was a task that had only been made harder when Peeta made his way over to his uncle’s table, which was just a few feet from Katniss’ own. His nearness, combined with Johanna’s near constant cursing, was enough to drive her crazy.

All Katniss wanted to do was go home and cuddle with Prim, nevermind the fact that her sister wasn’t even home tonight. Katniss downed the rest of her beer in one gulp.

“Slow down there, Catnip. We don’t wanna have to carry you out of here in front of bakerboy there,” Gale muttered out of the corner of his mouth. Katniss glared up at him.

“You’re not my babysitter, Gale,” she hissed quietly enough that the rest couldn’t hear, annoyance flaring within her. He’s made comments like this all night...caring ones...that Katniss didn’t know what to do with. Gale cared, yes, but he’d never been vocal about it, especially when it came to her. Their relationship had always been one of silent understanding.

Katniss grabbed another bottle from the ice bucket they’d gotten along with the pitchers, daring him to say anything. He raised his eyebrows but only shook his head. Katniss sighed with relief that he wasn’t saying anything more, even though a small part of her brain knew he was right.

She was drinking far more now than during their last several outings combined, made obvious by the way her vision was beginning to blur.

Her eyes swung back over towards Peeta and Haymitch for fifth time in five minutes, kicking herself internally for being unable to resist looking at him, just in time to see the red-headed girl get up from their table. Katniss gripped her bottle tighter in her hand, feeling her scowl deepen. You don’t care, she reminded herself, even as that same tiny annoying voice in the back of her head asked, But what if she’s his girlfriend? Katniss shook her head vigorously. This was a dangerous path of thinking, one she didn’t want to travel down, that she couldn’t afford to travel down.

“Well, doesn’t she look like a fucking fairy,” Johanna said, breaking the silence yet again. Katniss looked at her friend, grateful, for once, for Jo’s continued commentary, only to quickly realize Johanna was staring at her with narrowed eyes. Her face flushed, and she ducked her head back onto the table again.

“She’s just walking, Jo,” Finnick said in a defensive voice. They all looked at him in surprise.

It wasn’t like Finnick to pay attention to any girl longer than it took to get in her bed, much less look at one who wasn’t even aware of his existence. In fact, before Peeta’s arrival, he’d spent most of the night up at the bar, flirting with any and every girl that batted an eyelash at him. But Finnick didn’t seem to notice the group’s raised eyebrows and confused glances at each other. Instead, he was looking off in the direction the girl had taken with a glassy-eyed stare.
“Sure, Finnick,” Johanna grumbled, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, everyone. Why don’t we just go talk to him?” Delly suddenly said in a rather squeaky voice. She looked from one person to another, an imploring expression on her face, but when Delly reached Katniss, she only offered a shrug to the upset blonde. “He’s our friend,” she emphasized.

“Fuck that. How is he still our ‘friend’...” Johanna air-quoted, “...when we haven’t seen him in four years, and he made it more than clear when he--”

“P-please don’t. I-I have have a boyfriend! He’s right over t-there! S-s-stop,” a panicked high-pitched voice sounding out from right in front of them, interrupting Johanna’s rant.

They all looked up, startled to see the red-headed girl stepping backwards towards their table, away from the town letcher, a man called Cray. Katniss didn’t have to see the girl’s face to know she was terrified. Her trembling form was more than enough to give her away, and Katniss felt Finnick jerk into her in an attempt to move her to allow him to get around the table to help the girl.

“Katniss, move,” Finnick growled, but Katniss was frozen. She had followed the girl’s shaking finger to where it was pointing at Peeta, and it had paralyzed her. Katniss suddenly felt like she was drowning as she watched Peeta leap from his seat and stride over to rip Cray off the girl.

“What the fuck?” Cray yelled out. Katniss watched as he shoved Peeta back towards their table. Peeta knocked into it hard and sent several bottles, including her own, and a pitcher tumbling over, but he did not turn around. Katniss felt the foamy liquid spill onto her dress, but no one seemed to notice, much less move. Now everyone’s limbs seemed to have iced over, so struck were they by the scene playing out in front of them.

“I believe the lady said no,” Peeta uttered coldly. His back, still turned to them, was rigid with fury.

“That’s just what women say,” they heard Cray sneer. “They always want it, boy. I don’t think your girl is any different.”

Anger boiled within Katniss upon hearing that. Regardless of the conflict she felt at learning who this girl was, no one deserved to be spoken to like that. She began to rise from her seat, knowing she, Finnick, and likely Gale, would help Peeta take Cray out. But before she’d risen more than a few inches, Haymitch moved to stand in front of his nephew, violently grabbing Cray at his collar.

“They always want it, eh?” Haymitch growled. “Well, Cray, I’ll show you what I want.” She watched as Haymitch practically kicked Cray across the floor. When he reached the door, he lifted the man and bodily tossed him down the steps. Katniss’ mouth fell open. She wasn’t sure she’d ever seen Haymitch lift anything heavier than a beer glass, even though he was the owner of the bar, and would not have thought him capable of such strength. “Stay the fuck out of my place, you bastard,” Haymitch yelled after Cray’s retreating form.

After a moment of silence, the bar patrons erupted into raucous applause as Haymitch made his way back over towards their table. It was only then that Katniss realized Peeta and the girl were still standing in front of it. Katniss glanced around the table, only to see that everyone was staring at her again. She wondered what emotions her face was betraying.

“T-thank you, Haymitch,” the girl shuddered. Katniss could see she was twisting her hands together repeatedly.

“Don’t worry about it, girl. Shoulda done it years ago,” Haymitch said gruffly. But there was an
underlying gentleness to his voice that Katniss had seldom heard, a tone that the man had used only once with her, on a broken day nearly four years ago. She watched Haymitch shift to address Peeta, so that she could finally see his face over Peeta’s shoulder.

“You all right, boy?” he asked Peeta. But then his eyes swept over the table behind his nephew. Katniss could see him assess in a fast second Delly’s open mouth and Madge’s blush, Finnick’s sullen expression and Johanna’s angry grimace, Gale’s stone face, and finally, Katniss’ scowl. Alarm lit within Haymitch’s eyes as quick as a match will light dry kindling. She knew Peeta must have noticed because he jerked around, slowly, before coming to a rigid halt when he saw them sitting in front of him.

Katniss watched his eyes move over the group with a stunned expression on his face, his eyes a tumult of raw emotion. And when his eyes finally met with hers, his face visibly paled, and Katniss heard a small gasp escape from his lips. His chest began to heave, and he balled his hands into fists, while Katniss willed her expression to remain neutral. She would not give Peeta the benefit of knowing how much she’d missed him, not with the way they had parted, but neither could she look away from his gaze. However Peeta had imagined a reunion between them would take place, she could tell this was not the way he would have chosen.

She was so consumed by his stare that she failed to notice Johanna rise from her seat until her friend had moved to stand in front of Peeta, cutting Katniss off from him. She had to bite her lip to stay her cry of protest, but then she was completely distracted by what Johanna did next.

“So nice of you to finally come home, Bread Boy,” she said before emptying the beer pitcher onto his head, sending the scene into chaos.

“What the hell, Jo?,” Peeta yelled angrily, swiping his now sopping hair out of his eyes, as beer dripped from his clothing onto the floor.

“Peeta!” the girl cried out, her eyes wide with shock.

Meanwhile, Haymitch roared, “Not in my bar, girl!”

But Johanna ignored him and tossed another pitcher Peeta’s way, soaking what little dry fabric there was left before snorting, “You know my name Haymitch. I’ve been here... We’ve been here nearly every Friday night for over half a decade, which is far more than I can say for some people.” She swung back to glare at Peeta, who was staring at her. His furious expression melted away into one of regret at her speech, and Katniss could have sworn his eyes darted back towards her. Johanna balled her hands into fists before saying, “And I’m not Jo to you. Only my friends get to call me that.”

A thick quiet fell upon them all in the wake of Johanna’s words, the only sound the soft plinks of beer hitting the floor, while Peeta’s face morphed into an unreadable expression. His chest was heaving, his face flushed with embarrassment, but all he did was nod his acknowledgement of Johanna’s invectives. Katniss saw Jo’s eyes narrow, and Katniss understood why. Peeta had never been someone to back down from a challenge. Except when it comes to your mother and father, Katniss thought silently.

She jumped as she felt Gale’s arm suddenly come up around her shoulders and squeeze them. Katniss looked up at him in surprise. “Are you ok?” he whispered, his eyes filled with an emotion she did not understand. Katniss nodded her head, but then her eyes involuntarily flashed Peeta’s way. By the way Peeta’s jaw hardened almost imperceptibly, it appeared Gale’s action had not gone unnoticed. He opened his mouth to finally speak but a new voice broke the silence instead.

“That’s a really good look on you, Peet,” Rye laughed, coming up to stand next to Haymitch.
Katniss could see his eyes were clouded with drink. He clapped his uncle on the back. “Don’t you think so, Haymitch? I believe my parents would be proud.” Peeta closed his eyes for a second, as if to ward away some evil wraith, before he opened them again. Now, even his eyes were unfathomable. Peeta swallowed heavily and turned so that he could see his brother, a tense smile on his face.

“I’m sure mom would be thrilled,” Peeta said sarcastically. “Didn’t you tell her that you were going to be with Olivia tonight? I thought for sure that you’d want to spend time with her after all those hours you were in the bakery this week.” They all watched the laughter in Rye’s face die at Peeta’s question.

“She was busy tonight, Peet. And last I checked, you’ve never made our parents proud,” he said, a triumphant look forming on his face as Peeta’s flushed. “It’s amazing you still try at all.”

Katniss saw her own bewilderment at Rye’s bitter words reflected in the expressions of everyone else. For the most part, Peeta had gotten along best with Rye out of all the members of his family. At least, that was how it had once been, but the cruel enjoyment on Rye’s face at his brother’s discomfort suggested things had changed. Or perhaps Rye had always been that way and just hidden it, Katniss mused, reflecting on his treatment of her since Peeta had left. Since that time, Rye had shown her, at best, deliberate ignorance, and at worst, obvious anger. Katniss still had no idea what she was supposed to have done, considering Peeta had followed his parent’s wishes to the letter.

“Do I need to ask you to leave too, Rye?” Haymitch asked calmly but in a tone that suggested barely veiled disgust. Rye stepped back warily as Haymitch took a step closer to him.

“Haymitch, no. I’ll go.” Peeta placed a hand on his uncle’s arm to stop him. Katniss saw Haymitch’s eyebrows rise in obvious question, but Peeta just wiped his wet hair out of his eyes once more. He cast a glance at the group, and Katniss knew she wasn’t imagining it this time when Peeta’s gaze lingered on her for half a second longer than everyone else. He turned back to Haymitch with a half-smile on his face. “No one really needs me here,” he said, but Katniss did not detect any pity for himself in his voice. A strange urge to tell him not to go suddenly struck her, but she quickly suppressed it as Peeta turned to the red-headed girl. “Annie, you can stay or you can come with me, whichever you want,” he said in a gentle voice.

Annie. So her name is Annie.

Annie exhaled a musical laugh, which was surprisingly loud for someone with such a small frame. She gave everyone an appraising look before saying, “I don’t think there’s anyone here I want to get to know better except Haymitch. It was nice to meet you,” she said with a nod to the older man, and then turned to Peeta. “I’ll meet you at the truck.” She walked out the door.

Haymitch sighed. “Come on, boy. I’ll see you out the door,” but not before he pointed at Johanna and growled, “If you aren’t here when I return, you’ll never set foot in this place again.” Jo glared back at him, but she sat down again without protest. Peeta and Haymitch made their way to the door. Katniss watched them talk out of the corner of her eye before Peeta finally slipped outside without a backwards glance.

As soon as Peeta had gone, Haymitch stalked back behind the bar counter and produced a mop and bucket. Katniss couldn’t decide what surprised her more, the fact that Haymitch knew where his cleaning supplies were or that he owned them at all. He walked back over to their table and shoved the mop into Johanna’s hands.

“Well, that was fun,” he said sardonically. He pulled out a flask from his breast pocket and downed a large gulp. He waved his hand over the table and floor. “Clean this up.”
Johanna dunked the mop into the bucket viciously and gave him a violent look. “He deserved it.”

Haymitch met her glare calmly. “You think so?” he asked. Johanna opened her mouth to reply, but it was Finnick’s voice that answered him first.

“Yeah, I think so. In case you forgot, your nephew left all of us, including you! Didn’t come to school with all of us like he promised. Toed his family’s line when he said he wouldn’t...” Finnick was standing now, his hands balled into fists. “Disappeared without a word of explanation and ignored every attempt we ever made to talk to him. Abandoned us. Broke Kat’s--” Finnick abruptly cut himself off, a nervous look suddenly crossing his face. Katniss scowled at him, but didn’t say anything. Her tongue was still like lead in her mouth, as it had been all evening. Finnick gave her an apologetic grimace before finishing. “Well, it’s just clear that he never really cared about us at all.”

“That’s quite the litany of crimes,” Haymitch said with a surprising lack of argument, but a sad sort of smile crossed his face, like he knew far more than he was telling. He nodded down at the mess on the floor and repeated, “Clean this up.” He wandered away, leaving them in silence. It was clear no one knew what to say, but the sad looks of all her friends spurred Katniss into an action she hadn’t anticipated of herself.

“Haymitch, wait!” she called, stopping him just as he was about to go back into his office. He turned and watched her swiftly approach him with an almost amused expression on his face. He quirked his head at her as if to say “What?”

“Do you still have guard positions open for the summer?” Katniss asked. Haymitch’s eyebrows rose high on his forehead.

“Why do you want to know, sweetheart?” he asked.

Katniss rolled her eyes. “Because if there’s an open lifeguard position, I’d like the job. Obviously,” she huffed.

“Aren’t you already working at Miss Fancy High n’ Mighty’s?”

“Well, yeah but... wait, what?”

“You work for Effie Trinket.”

“You know who she is?” Katniss couldn’t even imagine how her wealthy, meticulously put together employer knew Haymitch.

Haymitch just rolled his eyes. “Tell you what I’ll do, sweetheart. I’ll give you my last open position, but I want a guarantee.”

“Guarantee?” Katniss asked, confused.

“You work for Effie Trinket.”

“You know who she is?” Katniss couldn’t even imagine how her wealthy, meticulously put together employer knew Haymitch.

Haymitch just rolled his eyes. “Tell you what I’ll do, sweetheart. I’ll give you my last open position, but I want a guarantee.”

“Guarantee?” Katniss asked, confused.

“There’s guarantees... You get the job. I’ll even pay you more than Effie. But you don’t get to quit. I’ve managed the beaches for twenty years, and it’s never stopped being a pain in my ass. Season starts in a week, and I only just managed to fill two of the other three open positions tonight.”

“Why the hell would I quit? I just said I wanted the job, but fine, I promise I won’t quit,” Katniss said, exasperated.

“Good. And you can bring that sister of yours along. I’m sure I can find something for her to do. She’ll like hanging out with that Hawthorne boy of hers anyways.” Katniss flinched. Prim’s
relationship with Rory was still something she had a hard time accepting.

“Last thing, sweetheart,” Haymitch said. Katniss stared at him warily, and he smirked at her expression. “Sometime, I’d like to hear about what happened between you and the boy four years ago. Whatever you’re friends may think, I think you and I both know there’s more to that story than they think.”

Katniss blanched in shock as Haymitch shut his office door.

“So you’re going to lifeguard, huh?” Gale asked her abruptly.

Katniss glanced over at Gale with minor annoyance that he had disturbed her peace. The two of them had come to Gale’s apartment over an hour ago and were watching TV in comfortable silence ever since.

“Yes,” Katniss replied shortly. Gale fell quiet again, but Katniss sensed he wasn’t done talking.

“But...why do you want to guard, Catnip?” he said. “I know it pays well but you’ve never shown interest in it before, and you certainly didn’t sound interested at lunch today.”

Katniss stared at him a moment, perplexed by Gale’s confusing interest in her employment. “Well, Delly’s right,” she finally said. “It’s probably the last time we’re all going to be together, and it’ll be nice for me to keep Prim close. Mean, you even said this morning that she would like working there. So what’s your issue?”

“It’s just...” Gale said slowly. He took a deep breath before staring at Katniss like she was a wounded animal caught in a trap.

Katniss punched him in the side of his arm. “Gale,” she said bluntly. “Just spit out what you want to say. You’ve never had any problems sharing things with me before, so why are you having difficulties now?”

Gale’s eyes slid away from hers for just a second, and Katniss wondered if he was hiding something. But then he met her gaze full-on, and she saw the fire blazing in his face. “Ok, Katniss,” he said in a candid tone. “You decide on the day he comes back to work for his uncle. And I’m just wondering if you’ve forgotten how badly he hurt you.” Katniss mouth fell open. Of all the things I expected to come out of Gale’s mouth, this hadn’t been it.

“Gale--” she started, but he gripped her arm lightly to stop her from speaking.

“I’m not finished, Katniss. You asked what I was thinking, remember?” he said with a smile that did not quite reach his eyes. “You were a shell when he left, Kat. For a while there, I think we were all worried we’d lose you. Pretty sure the only time Finnick and I have ever agreed on anything was when we decided we needed to break you out of your...depression,” he finished delicately. Katniss opened her mouth to speak, to protest, but a flash of red suddenly stole across her vision, rendering her mute. She felt Gale take her into his arms, whispering, “I know you had Prim, Kat. I know you weren’t going to leave her, but I can’t tell you how scared we were...how scared I was for you. It was like you were a totally different person in those first few months after he disappeared.”

Katniss pulled back a little and stared up at Gale, his eyes pleading for her to listen to him. Katniss gave him a small smile in an attempt to reassure him she was ok, even as she internally thought
that Gale had no idea what he was talking about. But then how could he? Katniss had never told anyone what had really happened between her and Peeta, and that wasn’t about to change now.

“I’m not going anywhere, Gale,” she whispered to him. “I’m going to stay right here and cause all kinds of trouble.” Gale smiled down at her, but then he sighed.

“You’re still going to work for Haymitch though, aren’t you?"

Katniss nodded. “He said he’d pay me more than Effie, and it will be nice that Prim will be close enough that I can keep an eye on her.”

“You don’t trust my brother?” Gale laughed.

Katniss shook her head more vigorously. “Nope. And besides, it’s not like P-P-Peeta…”she stumbled, feeling Gale’s arms grip her more tightly at the mention of her ex-best friend...her ex-boyfriend’s name. “Sorry,” Katniss mumbled. “It’s not like Peeta will be working for Haymitch anyways. You have no idea how much Adelaide hates her brother. I’m sure their family will have him working in the bakery or going to the country club or I don’t... don’t even know,” she finished, color flooding her face, embarrassed not only for her knowledge of the way the Mellark household functioned but also because of the pain that stabbed her heart at the thought they wouldn’t be working together.

“So... you don’t...care that he’s back?” Gale asked slowly.

Katniss thought of all the early morning baking lessons Peeta had given her, the dough and frosting fights she always instigated, and he always finished... the laughter...the happiness they’d felt during the many years they’d worked side by side in the bakery, long before they’d even started dating. Those were the good memories she clung to in her dreams, when she wasn’t consumed by nightmares, but she seldom visited them during the day. You don’t care, she reminded herself for the second time that night, but even as she thought that, she caught sight of the clock sitting on one of Gale’s tables.

12:01

Katniss heart dropped into her stomach, and the look on her face must have alarmed Gale because he heard call her name softly. “Katniss?” he asked, but by then Katniss was lost to another memory, in which a blonde-haired woman showed Katniss the truth, and a blonde-haired boy shattered her heart. Katniss could still feel the wind of that unusually cold spring day biting at her cheeks as she fled from that gargantuan house. Gale couldn’t possibly know, but today was the four year anniversary of the day Peeta Mellark had disappeared from her life. How ironic that he had chosen to return at this time, of all times.

“Katniss?” Gale asked again in a louder voice. Katniss looked up at Gale only to find his eyes laced with worry. She hated being the cause of his pain, and more importantly, she wanted to forget her own.

“No. I don’t care that he’s back,” she said rapidly in what even she knew was an unconvincing tone. To put an end to the discussion, which was making Katniss feel uncomfortable, she suddenly commanded him, “Gale, I want you to take me to bed now,” and set her jaw into a scowl that brooked no arguments. But she didn’t really need to. Gale had never protested the rare times she instigated this, and tonight was no different.

Gale picked her up and rapidly carried her to his bedroom, his grey eyes, so much like her own, darkening with desire. He set her down gently and stripped off his clothes before returning to climb on top of her, using his elbows to support his weight. He trailed kisses along her jaw while
he pulled the zipper that ran along the side of her dress down and tugged it over her body. Katniss almost sighed with relief that he seemed to have let the conversation drop in favor of this more carnal pleasure.

Sex with Gale was easy. He never demanded Katniss give any more of herself than was required and asked for no emotional investment. In fact, they rarely said anything at all to one another when they slept together. She clutched Gale’s head to her breast as he sucked on one dusky nipple, a hand coming up to fondle her her other breast, allowing his lips to wash her mind blank.

They both took what they needed, recognizing there was no reason to complicate things, no reason to bring on the emotional messiness that came from being in a relationship. A physical release was all that Katniss had ever craved with Gale, an escape from the stresses in her life, a way to forget the pain.

She moaned loudly as Gale spread her legs and thrust inside her, filling her, their foreplay soon over. Katniss set a rapid pulse, as she always did, craving her climax. Gale had occasionally tried to slow her down, but that was a kind of intimacy Katniss had only shared with one person, and could not bare to mete out again. Not with Gale. Not with anyone. For the next few minutes, only the mixed sounds of their heated breath filled the room.

“Oh God, Katniss,” she finally heard Gale mumble, his voice shaking in a way that told Katniss he was already close. She quickly snaked a hand down her torso to touch herself, wanting to reach her finish before Gale finished his, but Gale surprised her. “Here, let me,” he said breathlessly. Katniss tensed as he began to circle her clit with his fingers with practiced ease while he kissed her breasts in that way he knew she liked. She looked up into his stormy eyes, when a new color she hadn’t seen in long time flashed within them, causing her to gasp loudly.

Blue. A clear, crystal, sky blue.

Katniss cried out as her as her orgasm hit her, sending thunderous waves of pleasure through her entire body. It was the most powerful one she’d had in a long, long time, and Katniss felt Gale release into the condom, unable to repel the onslaught of her shuddering walls. He breathed heavily against her breast for a few moments before he finally rolled off her.

“That was...amazing,” he murmured contentedly.

But Katniss said nothing, too stunned to even react to the compliment. That color blue belonged to only one person. Katniss knew that, but she did not want to accept what her heart was trying to tell her. And it wasn’t until much later, when she was still lying awake, long after Gale had fallen asleep, his body turned away from her, that Katniss finally allowed her tears to fall.

XXXXX

“It’s really hot, isn’t it?” Delly said in a mildly put-out voice, swiping dispiritedly at her limp curls. Johanna, Madge, and Katniss exchanged amused glances.

Delly was sweet and fun, but she wasn’t always practical, a side effect of her fashion-conscious mother’s influence on her. So it hadn’t surprised them when she showed up for their pre-season lifeguard in-service day in full makeup and perfectly done-up hair. Katniss doubted she’d show up to work like that again.

“Here, Delly. You can use this,” Madge said. She pulled off one off her hair bands from her wrist and offered it to the Delly, whose expression immediately brightened.

“Thanks Madge!” she said enthusiastically. She looked around as she pulled up her hair into a bun
with a confused look on her face. “Shouldn’t Haymitch be here by now? It’s after 10, and he said to be here at 9:30.”

“If Haymitch has ever gotten up before 9:30, then I’m the God of the Sea,” Finnick said as he sat down beside them. The rest of them burst out laughing in agreement.

“Yeah, if that old drunk shows up before 11, we’ll be shocked. Right, Katniss?” Johanna asked, and Katniss, still laughing, nodded her agreement. She looked at the group of twenty or so people sitting scattered on the sand in front of the guard house, waiting for Haymitch to appear.

Most she didn’t know, as the majority were college kids from Panem U’s lower classes, like the two dark-haired guys who had introduced themselves as Mitchell and Holmes, or the bespectacled boy who called himself Beete. But a few she knew from high school, such as Thresh Davis, Marvel Lewis, and the Leeg twins. Surprisingly, even Cato Montgomery had shown up, bragging that his wealthy parents didn’t care what he did this summer, and that he had mainly taken the job to pick up chicks. Katniss had blushed profusely when he had arrived. The memory of the single horrific date they had gone on in highschool still loomed large in her mind, though Cato barely spared her a glance, giving no indication he remembered her at all.

She turned to her right and winked at Prim, who was sitting a few feet from her with Rory Hawthorne, and her good friend Rue Demak. True to his word, Haymitch had given her sister a job in the concession stand, where she would be working with Rue, Rory, and a few other high school-aged kids under the charge of an older woman named Sae. They only had to be here for this first day of training this week, in order to go over their roles when it came to emergencies. Katniss knew Prim would have loved to be on the beach instead, but Haymitch required his guards to have graduated high school in order to work Panem’s sometimes treacherous shore.

“So…Katniss,” Johanna suddenly whispered to her, tugging on her braid lightly to direct Katniss’ head back towards her. Katniss wrinkled her nose when she saw the penetrating expression Jo was giving her. Whenever Johanna gave her that look, usually questions she didn’t want to answer followed.

“Yes?” she asked reluctantly.

Johanna rolled her eyes. “Don’t give me that, Brainless. You were basically mute on Friday night, didn’t respond to any of my texts this weekend, and when I picked you and Prim up this morning, you wouldn’t look at me. So what’s going on? Spill it.”

“Nothing, Jo. I was just busy,” Katniss lied. Johanna’s derisive snort suggested she did not believe Katniss in the slightest. “I mean, I had to clean the house. It’s easier to do when Prim is at a friend’s, and then I had to inform Effie I was quitting. Do you know how hard it is to do that without Effie losing it?” Katniss said hastily. Johanna rolled her eyes again.

“You just tell the woman you’re quitting and don’t care how she feels about it! She’ll find someone new to help her easily. Effie pays well enough.” Johanna then narrowed her eyes at Katniss suspiciously. “And besides, according to Duck, you weren’t at the house when she stopped in on Saturday.” Katniss felt her stomach drop to the sand.

“I...I was there most of the time,” she said softly, hoping Johanna wouldn’t hear her, but she had no such luck as Johnna huffed out a loud puff of air.

“Yeah, sure...most... And where were you the rest of the time? Off with Gale? Letting our mechanic examine your parts, right?” Johanna said loudly.

Katniss’ face flooded with heat. “Can you be any more crude, Jo? Be quiet!” she hissed. But
Johanna wasn’t having any of it and fixed Katniss with a hard stare.

“What are you doing, Kat?” she asked. “I know you’ve been friends since you were little, and I know you’ve been sleeping together lately…” she hesitated. “But I’ve never heard you talk about wanting more from him. So I’m going to ask you again. What are you doing?”

Katniss glared at Johanna. It was none Johanna’s business what was going on between her and Gale. “Did I ever say I wanted more?” she said angrily. “I’m perfectly fine with what we are doing and so is he! And it’s not your concern.”

Johanna’s eyebrows raised with disbelief. “Sure, Katniss,” she said in an edgy voice. “But I’ve never seen you throw yourself at Gale quite as much as you did after we left The Mockingjay on Friday night, and I can’t help but think it wasn’t simply because you wanted Gale that much.”

Katniss set her jaw, trying to keep her face impassive, and willed herself not to slap her friend. Johanna was making her feel exactly the way Haymitch’s insinuation had on Friday. Well, fuck him. Fuck Johanna. And fuck anyone else who wanted to know. Katniss’ feelings, and who she slept with, were her own and weren’t something she was required to share with anyone. She was just about to tell Johanna that when Haymitch’s gruff voice stopped her.

“All right. Let’s get this started,” Haymitch grumbled tiredly as he approached his employees, his haggard face suggesting they had been right in that he hadn’t been awake long. He was accompanied by a tall man with dark skin who looked to be a few years older than the rest of the guards. Haymitch surveyed the group with mild distaste, but Katniss knew him too well to believe he really hated doing this. As he’d said at the bar, this was his twentieth year doing this. He waved them all to move closer to where he was standing.

“I’m Haymitch. Everyone already knows me,” he said bluntly before gesturing to the man at his side. “And this is Boggs. He’s your Head Guard, and the one you’ll be reporting to most often. If you need me during the workday…” He thumbed his finger in the direction of the building behind him. “I’ll be in the Guard House, but it better be something really important.” Katniss exchanged a look with her friends. They all knew what that was code for. She turned back to Haymitch just in time to catch him looking in their direction, a smirk on his face.

“Well, now that my introductions are over with, what say we get to know one another.” He nodded at Katniss. “Let’s start with you, sweetheart.” Katniss scowled at him, but Haymitch just crossed his arms, clearly waiting for her to say something.

Finally, she said, “I’m Katniss Everdeen.” Haymitch’s smirk widened.

“Uh-huh. And where is Katniss Everdeen from?”

Katniss stared daggers at him. “Panem. I’ve lived in Panem my whole life. You know that, Haymitch.”

“Indeed, I do,” he said, meeting Katniss’ stormy gaze without hesitation. Katniss scowl deepened, leading Haymitch to smirk again. “All right, Odair, you’re up next.”

Though she rarely acknowledged it, she and Haymitch were fairly alike in disposition, something that had always amused Peeta. After years of interaction, there was seldom a time that the older man didn’t seem to understand what was going on in her head. Katniss used to like that when she was younger, when she had thought of him as a sort-of surrogate father after her own had died, but lately, it was just a nuisance. She sighed and went back to listening to the introductions.

There were her friends: Johanna, Delly, Finnick, and Madge. The ones she had already
recognized from school: Cato, Marvel and Thresh, along with the twins, Maria and Megan Leegs.
Then, there were the three boys from Panem U she’d already met and the rest: Massala El Ramahi, Jessica Paylor, Wiress Cain, Cressida Berendt, and two brothers, Castor and Pollux Dioscuri. And of course, Rue, Prim, and Rory, along with a few other concession workers Katniss didn’t bother trying to remember the names of.

When they had finished, they all looked back up at Haymitch, only to find a rather perplexed look on his face. “There should be two more of--”

“Peeta Mellark. I’m from Panem,” he interrupted Haymitch.

Katniss felt her eyes widen, Peeta’s voice inducing an insidious sort of anxiety within her. Her heart pounded in her chest, shock lancing through her yet again for what felt like the hundredth time in the last few days.

“It’s not like Peeta will be working for Haymitch anyways.”

Katniss could barely register the hails of greeting from those who’d known him in high school, so loud was the echo of her words to Gale in her head. Only now, they were a hollow promise. She glanced at Haymitch suddenly, and though his eyes were on Peeta, she felt as though he had been watching her.

“What the fuck has he been doing?” Katniss heard Johanna say under her breath. Katniss looked at her confusedly but followed her gaze. A small involuntarily thrill stabbed at her core when she realized what Johanna was staring at.

Peeta was standing behind the group, his hair tousled and damp, as though he’d already been in the water. Katniss could see Annie standing behind him, but then she lost all track of her surroundings as she got her first good look at Peeta’s body in four years.

He did not have a shirt on, and the sunlight was glinting off the sprinkling of blonde hairs scattered over his well-defined chest, far more fit than it had ever looked in high school, even with all the wrestling he’d done. Katniss’ eyes slowly made their way down his torso to take in his abs, the narrow V of his hips, and the line of blonde hair that disappeared below his red swim trunks. Katniss followed the now invisible trail to the bulge visible at the apex of his thighs, remembering…remembering... Everything south of her belly caught fire. Katniss had to duck her head and squeeze her legs together to find relief. No. You can’t go there.

She looked up at Peeta’s face, only to find him standing with a hand-frozen in mid-wave. It was clear he’d caught sight of everyone he would be working with. She saw his eyes go to Haymitch even as a pink flush crept up his neck, something that Katniss knew happened when he was stressed.

“And who’s your friend, Peeta?” Haymitch asked. Katniss felt a rippling anger boil low in her stomach as she remembered Haymitch talking about his recently filled guard positions. She would not have taken this job if she’d known Peeta and Annie were the ones he’d hired, and Haymitch had to have known that when she asked.

“I’m Annie,” the beautiful red-haired girl said, stepping out from behind Peeta. She gave everyone a small smile. “I’m Peeta’s cousin, and I’m staying with his family for the summer, but I’m originally from the Capitol.”

Katniss’ head jerked up, and she exchanged a startled look with Johanna. His cousin? She…she wasn’t his girlfriend? But what had that been about at the bar then? Katniss’ heart flip-flopped painfully in her chest.
“Well, welcome Annie,” Haymitch said in a mild voice that contrasted sharply with the now conflicted expressions on so many of his employees’ faces. He clapped his hands loudly when he realized half of them weren’t paying attention to him, while Katniss watched Peeta and Annie sit down a few feet away out of the corner of her eye.

Haymitch rubbed a hand over his face. “All right, now that introductions are out of the way, I have something to say. After that, you can all have a break before we begin training.” He then glared at everyone, an intensity in his eyes Katniss wasn’t sure she’d seen before. “I’ve been doing this for twenty years,” he said slowly. “In that time, exactly one person has drowned on my watch. It’s going to stay that way,” he said furiously. “If the people on Panem’s Parks Board weren’t a bunch of cheap assholes, we’d hire professional lifeguards, but it is what it is. There’s a reason I only employ your age group.” They followed his finger as he pointed it out to the sea. “You’re not guarding the kiddie pool in a country club. You’re guarding the ocean. It’s large, it’s deceptive, and it’s unpredictable. Meanwhile, the people you’re going to be protecting are stupid.” He took a deep breath. “Therefore, while I don’t give a shit what you do during your breaks, when you’re on duty, you better be doing your fucking job. Any questions?” A smattering of quiet “no’s” punctuated the air, and Haymitch nodded with satisfaction.

“Good. Maybe you aren’t as big a bunch of idiots as I usually have to deal with. One last thing, and then you can take 20 minutes for yourselves.” He pointed far down the beach to a small dock near a large white fence that Katniss recognized as the one that marked the beginning of the Mellark’s property.

“We have several wave-runners to use this year. Two of you will be out using them at all times, making sure no one gets too far from the shore. With all the other crap Boggs needs to go over with you this week, there’s not gonna be time to go over how to use them if you haven’t used one before. But during your breaks, you can ask Peeta to teach you how to drive one if you so choose. His family donated them, simply out of the goodness of their hearts,” Haymitch finished, but Katniss detected the underlying sarcasm in his statement. She glanced at Peeta, whose mouth had now become a grim line.

Katniss wondered what had gone on for a brief second before she shoved the thought away, her anger at Peeta’s presence returning. She scrambled up after Haymitch without another word, resolutely ignoring Prim’s frantic waves for her to come over. She could postpone that interrogation until later.

She called out, “Hay--”

“Haymitch!” Peeta’s voice overlapped hers. She turned in disbelief, only to find him standing right next to her. His blue eyes were wide with apology and another emotion Katniss couldn’t fully define. Katniss scowled at him, and he looked back at her.

“Yes?” Haymitch asked, interrupting their staring contest.

Katniss gritted her teeth, deciding she was going to say exactly what she wanted, even though she felt Peeta’s electric gaze on her. “You lied to me, and I want to quit.”

Haymitch snorted. “Sweetheart, I did no such thing.”

“Fine. You omitted telling me some pretty important things. It’s the same difference,” she spat.

“Whatever you say, sweetheart.” He turned to Peeta. “I suppose you came up to say the same thing, right boy?” Katniss saw Peeta’s jaw set.

“I wouldn’t have asked for the job if you’d told me who else you’d hired, Uncle,” he said heavily.
Katniss flushed. It appeared Peeta didn’t want to be anywhere near her, or any of them, and she willfully ignored the knife-like sensation slicing through her chest.

Haymitch looked back and forth between the two of them before smirking once more. “Well, regardless of what I said, I believe both of you promised not to quit on me, and I’m going to hold you to that.” Katniss opened her mouth, a vehement reply on her tongue, but Haymitch waved his hand in dismissal. “You’re not going to find a better paying job, Katniss, and Peeta, I can guarantee I’m the only one in this town who will hire you without your mother’s approval.”

“That’s a pretty low argument, even for you, Haymitch,” Peeta said in a frustrated voice.

Haymitch looked between the two of them once more. “Doesn’t make it any less true, son. I expect you both to work together.” He began to walk away, but he did not leave without one last parting shot. “Brrr,” they heard him chuckle. “You two have got a lot of warming up to do before showtime.” Katniss felt Peeta’s eyes on her again as she watched Haymitch make his way up the stairs to the Guard House, finally turning to her former lover when she heard the door snap closed.

“Katniss, I...I wouldn’t have asked Haymitch for this, if I’d known you were going to be...” His voice trailed off, but Katniss did not miss the sadness in his eyes. For some reason, it made her all the more angry. So he didn’t want to work with her, did he?

“Don’t worry about it, Peeta. It’s not like we have to talk. I’ll be sure to stay away from you,” she said. Katniss walked off to join Johanna and others, failing to acknowledge her secret wish for him to come after her.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Ok! I know that was a bit of a brutal chapter, but stick with me! A thaw is coming; I promise. Please remember to read Interlude I, and please comment. I love reviews!
Hello!

I am sorry… I hope this doesn’t feel like a tease in that it isn’t a chapter update, but I didn’t know a better way to get a hold of readers of TWWW. I’ve gotten several PMs over the past month inquiring if this story has been abandoned, including a few not so nice ones, so I felt I had to write this to address them. Sorry if I’ve made anyone angry. I do hate going long periods of time between updates (my explanation is below). So first, I’d like to remind everyone that all fic writers have lives beyond what we do here, and that we do all of this for free, on our own time. So to the point:

TWW hasn’t been abandoned. I WILL complete all my stories because I hate abandoned ones as much as the next fic reader; that’s a promise.

That being said, I know this story has been slow in updating. Not sure if I’ve said it before (don’t believe I’ve put in on my profile), but I was a medical student (who just finished up school last month). Needless to say, dealing with graduation related things took up a lot of my time, and then these past weeks, I have been interviewing at perspective residencies around the country. It’s actually afforded me a decent amount of time to write, but I’ve had the worst luck in that I got quite sick this past week. When I wanted to write, usually my body said it was time to sleep…or cough up a lung, one of the two.

So…if you’ll bear with me a little while longer, I will have an update for you. I am writing the sequel to When You Wish Upon a Star for Prompts in Panem’s Holiday edition, and then I’ll turn my attention to TWWW. I didn’t quite realize how long it’s gone without an update, and I agree with everyone else. 3 months is a long time to wait.

If you have any questions or just want to talk to me (I love it when you do), send me a PM. I’m more than willing to chat. And I’ll just reiterate one last time…No story of mine is abandoned. All of them will be completed. I promise. Thanks for reading, as always.

-bubbles
Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Woo-hoo! I’ve pleased to (finally) present an update for this story. Apologies for taking so long on it, but I hope as always with these chapters, that it was worth the wait. And just a reminder… No stories of mine will ever be abandoned, but I thank you for waiting patiently between updates.

To my betas, Solas Violetta, titania522/ct522, and peetabreadgirl… Thank you for putting up with me, and my ridiculously long chapters. You never complain about their lengths and catch all my mistakes. Love to you all.

Please remember to review!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peeta

The rising sun beat down on Peeta’s exposed back as he cranked the wrench around in an effort to secure the loose bolt on the Waverunner, hoping his repairs would be enough to get the thing in working order. He sat back on his heels, wiping away the trickle of sweat that was running down from his forehead, wondering how the hell it was so hot even this early in the morning. Peeta stood up to survey his work.

The Waverunner stood erect, shining in the low morning rays of sunlight. Peeta had replaced the worn padded seat and burnished the hard plastic as best he could. A small slick of oily gunk spilled out from beneath the machine from what he’d wiped down off the propellers. Not bad. He unscrewed the cap on the gas tank and began to fill it from the red, plastic canister that Haymitch had given him. Peeta wasn’t much of a mechanic, but he’d learned a few things from taking care of his motorcycle, and the thought of needing to lug the vehicle to Beetee’s Repair Shop made him cringe. He knew who worked there. Peeta’s eyes flitted involuntarily down the beach, taking in the scene, wondering if Gale had dropped them off, before he managed to shut that line of thought down.

It was barely 8:30, but many of the guards had already arrived and were now picking trash up off the beach. The staff did their best to clean up the sand each night, but inevitably, things were missed, and Haymitch offered an extra 5 dollars per day to anyone, cashier, concession staff, or guard, willing to come the hour before Snow Beach officially opened at 9 to pick up the previous day’s garbage. It never ceased to amuse Peeta that a man who was so unabashedly slovenly in his personal life was so particular about the way the beaches looked.

He saw Annie wave at him far down the beach, beckoning him to come down where the others were, but Peeta only returned the wave with a small one of his own. He sighed and began pushing the Waverunner towards the water. It’s not that you don’t want to help the others, Peeta told himself. But Haymitch did say he wanted this fixed today, if at all possible. It’s not like he needed the money. The lie was almost good enough that Peeta could believe it.

“Mellark! What are you doin’ man? Bring that bad boy down here, so we can show off our uh...runners...for the babes as they COME!” Peeta snorted at Cato’s crude call and prayed that someone, anyone, else would be his partner out on the water today. It had been two weeks since
that initial training day, one week since they’d finished training, and six days since he’d really spoken to anyone besides Cato Montgomery, and Peeta was sick of it.

Haymitch hadn’t been kidding when he said two people had to be out patrolling the ocean at all times. It hadn’t taken long to figure out why as Peeta had rescued more than his fair share of kids, idiot teenagers, and even the occasional adult, who strayed too far out from the beach and slipped off the abrupt end of the sandbar, usually calling out in panic as the strong current began pulling them out to sea. But what Peeta hadn’t expected was that he and Cato would be the only ones to be doing the job, mainly because Cato was too dense to realize Peeta was the social pariah among their co-workers. It was definitely a position Peeta had never found himself in before, but the college kids had no idea who he was, other than that he was the son of one of the richest men in Panem, and those who did know him didn’t want anything to do with him.

He glanced down the beach again as he hopped on the old Waverunner to start it, taking in the small clusters of people separated out on the beach by no less than several yards and snorted again. Peeta felt like it was his first day of 9th grade again, when he’d walked into the cafeteria and discovered the “Rich Kids” and “The Seam Rats” already segregated onto their respective sides of the lunch room, only now there was the third college clique thrown in the mix.

The Panem U students were laughing about something near the guard house while Marvel Lewis and Cato held court with the concession workers, most of whom were bored rich kids from around the area whose parents had insisted “they give back to the community,” as Peeta had heard one girl say. Meanwhile, his old group of friends, along with a few of their other less wealthy high school classmates and Beetee, who seemed more comfortable around strangers than his own college peers, sat near the water. A flash of olive skin shone in the sunlight, and Peeta turned away, wishing, for a fleeting second, that he could do exactly what he’d done in 9th grade and show everyone there didn’t have to be these ridiculous petty divisions in their town, that it didn’t have to feel like people were living in different districts. Or rather different worlds, he thought, finally catching a glimpse of Annie, seemingly off dreaming as she walked alone on the beach. He looked at her sadly.

Annie had offered to give him a reprieve from Cato by going out with the goon, but Peeta had declined. Annie was the only relative of his besides Haymitch that actually liked him, and Peeta wanted to keep it that way. Plus, a small part of him had hoped his friends would have found it in their hearts to at least talk to her if Peeta wasn’t around. Peeta frowned. Judging by Annie’s isolation, he guessed he’d been wrong, though he wondered if a little of that was his cousin’s own doing. Annie clung to her protectors, not that Peeta could really blame her; she had only a very few, but he didn’t think having a few more friends could hurt her, especially not with the way she was being treated in the Mellark home.

A hot wave of anger flooded through Peeta’s body as he drove the Waverunner through the surf. Since that first dinner on the night he’d returned home, his mother had taken to ignoring Annie’s presence completely, even suggesting at one point that she might eat with the servants. If she’d suggested that to Peeta, he would have gladly taken up the offer, but he wanted his family to accept Annie as one of their own. She had no one left. He drove the vehicle in a far darker mood, one that did not match the bright morning light. Peeta couldn’t even summon the energy to look at anyone as he made his way over to the guardhouse for whatever Haymitch’s morning announcements would be, and when his uncle emerged several minutes later he kept his gaze focused on the sand.

“Mornin’ Tributes,’ Haymitch grumbled at them as he took large gulps of what Peeta hoped was just coffee. He received a few mumbled greetings back and one very cheerful “hello” from Prim. Haymitch didn’t seem surprised at his reception. “Summer season officially starts today,” he said gruffly. “The Capitol’s school districts finished up with school yesterday, so we’ll be seeing an
influx of people coming to their summer homes. Their kids are usually little shits who think they can do anything. I figure all of you can handle yourselves with them, but if you have trouble...’

Haymitch paused, and Peeta finally looked up at him, catching the mildly troubled look on the tired man’s face. He knew the kids Haymitch was talking about, the selfish entitled kids who didn’t acknowledge anyone who came from a family that made below seven figures a year. He’d been around them his entire life, and if Mom had her way, Peeta thought, grimacing, he’d eventually be marrying into one of their families, preferably one involved in politics. And soon. It made Peeta’s skin crawl.

 “…Boggs has your assignments for today,” Haymitch finished. Peeta realized he’d missed the entirety of Haymitch’s speech. He sighed and got up, preparing to retreat to the ocean, expecting Cato to follow shortly. It was going to be a long day.


Peeta heard Finnick give a soft cry of protest, but it was Marvel who whined, “Do I have to? I don’t want to go out there today.” Like a petulant toddler. Peeta tried to contain his laughter as Marvel quailed under Bogg’s severe eye and grabbed at the keys lying next to Cato’s hand. It was only then that Peeta realized where Finnick would have to get his set of keys from. He looked over at his former friend, but Finnick was refusing to meet his eye. Peeta’s stomach gave a nervous sort of lurch. This would be the first time he would be within five feet of Finn since he’d started this job.

After Boggs had finished talking, he got up and made his way over to where Finnick was storing things in the lockers along one wall of the guardhouse. “Here’s the key, Finn. I cleaned it up this morning, so it shouldn’t give you any trouble,” Peeta said, trying to sound as friendly as possible.

Finnick looked over at him, his sea green eyes blazing. “Only my friends get to call me Finn, Mellark, and while I appreciate that you fixed the Waverunner, it’s not like I couldn’t have done it myself. Been living on the ocean, using these things, my entire life, in case you’d forgotten, you know, in your long absence,” Finnick said, sarcasm dripping from every word. Peeta’s breath caught in his throat for just a second, the coldness of Finnick’s words shocking him, but not for nothing had he been the Capitol U champion in debate and speech, able to recover quickly no matter what his opponents threw at him.

He opened his mouth to say a sarcastic retort of his own, but the words, THIS IS YOUR FAULT, suddenly flashed through his head. He stared at Finnick, who was now quirking a brow at him with a confused look at Peeta’s lack of response. Peeta shoved the keys into Finnick’s hands. “Sorry, Odair,” was all he said before walking away, convinced that the flash of regret he thought he’d seen in Finnick’s eyes as he’d turned away hadn’t been real. He was walking towards the guard tower, wondering if Delly was going to be just as hostile, when a gruff familiar voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Well, that might have just been the most pathetic thing I’ve ever listened to, boy. You couldn’t come up with one response to Odair’s idiotic words. And here I thought you were supposed to be one Mellark that’s actually good with words.”

Peeta looked at Haymitch sharply. “That’d be my father,” he said sarcastically, though there was some truth to that statement. Haymitch snorted.

“The boy I know wouldn’t have let anyone speak to him that way, much less one of his friends.”
“He’s not my friend. If you were actually listening, I think you’d know he made that clear.” Haymitch rolled his eyes; he hated drama of any sort.

“Boy, if you’d been watching all of them troll around miserably for four years, like I have, you’d know that wasn’t true.” Peeta started laughing, skeptical to the point of utter disbelief, while Haymitch glared at him. “I wish you’d start acting like my favorite nephew again and not like someone hijacked him and replaced him with...you!” he growled at Peeta. He took an extra swig from his coffee cup. Definitely not coffee in there today, Peeta thought, his expression sobering, which Haymitch clearly took note.

“Don’t you dare go worrying about me, boy. You did that enough growing up, and I don’t need you to take care of me now.” Peeta didn’t say anything, letting his silence speak for him, as his stomach clenched again, remembering her rare, soft laughter as he stole a few loaves of bread from the bakery to give to Haymitch. He shook himself of the memory. She doesn’t love you. She never did. Stop it.

Peeta looked up to find Haymitch watching him, an oddly shrewd expression on his face that made Peeta feel uncomfortable.

“I’ll be gone soon enough, Haymitch,” Peeta said, feeling suddenly heartsick. “So you don’t have to be concerned about it.” At Peeta’s words, Haymitch looked frustrated.

“So what, Peeta, you’ll stay until your father dies, and then leave all over again?” he asked bluntly. Peeta jerked a step backwards, feeling like he’d been punched in the gut.

No one in his family talked about the final endpoint to which his father’s inoperable gastric cancer would lead, the one diagnosed only a few months ago but already rapidly stealing his life away.

His father quietly went about his work at the bakery or at home as he normally would while Rye worked hard to prepare for his move to the Capitol. Bannock called every Sunday to update his father on decisions the board had made. His mother continued to plan her parties and charity events while making sure to let Peeta know how much of a disgrace he was to the Mellark name. Nothing had changed in their family dynamics except...Well, he did ask you to come home, and he’s the reason you have this job.

Requesting that Peeta visit Panem wasn’t something had requested in the four previous years, instead preferring the peace the absence of his youngest son brought to Mellark Mansion. Out of sight and out of mind was the way Peeta’s entire family liked him best. But regardless of the way Richard Mellark hadn’t appeared to want Peeta around...the way his father still often ignored him even now that he was home...Peeta hadn’t been able to deny him his request. He still loved his father, though he was unsure the feeling had ever been mutual.

All those thoughts flashed in Peeta’s head as he responded to his uncle, “No one wants me here, Haymitch, except maybe you.” He sighed. “But as you just said, it’s not like you need me to take care of you. I need to get to work.” He trudged over to the guard tower and began climbing the stairs, wondering if this day could possibly get any worse.

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“Oh, Peeta, my parents will want you to come over sometime. It’s been so long since they’ve seen you, but they always ask about you. My mother said she saw your family in the Capitol two years ago when President Snow held his inaugural gala, but she said she didn’t see you them. I was supposed to go, but I ended up getting the flu and couldn’t go. Mom said it was beautiful in the President’s mansion though.”

“I was there,” Peeta said through gritted teeth. “I thought it was a little overwhelming.”
“Oh,” Delly said. Peeta glanced at her face and saw it fall a little, but Peeta decided not to tell her how appalled he’d been by his mother’s Great Uncle’s gala. Between the tables upon tables of food, most of which was destined to be thrown away, the extravagant decorations and entertainment, including two fire-eaters, and the full orchestra to provide music, Peeta had been hard-pressed to hide his disgust over the display. He’d had to listen to his mother tell everyone within earshot that while her two oldest sons would be taking over different aspects of the family business, Peeta had a heart for politics (apparently). He’d slipped away as quickly as he could, a thing, among many, that Adelaide Mellark had yet to forgive him for.

“I promise you didn’t miss much, Delly. Just a bunch of Capitol snobs trying to remind themselves how important they are...or at least how important they think they are. I spent most of the night hiding,” Peeta said, offering her a small smile. Delly started laughing.

“From some ladies desperate to catch a Mellark of their very own,” Delly teased, Peeta’s grin widened.

“Nah. Unless Clove and Glimmer count as ladies. They were there,” Peeta laughed back and pointing at the two girls, old high school classmates, who were laying on the beach, having returned home from the Capitol for the summer. Glimmer was the daughter of a ridiculously wealth diamond magnate, while Clove’s father had made his money in military development. Their daughters had never wanted for anything and acted like it. “You should have seen when Glimmer butted in to stop Clove from getting to dance with Gloss Richmond. When Clove sat down, I’m pretty sure she was trying to sharpen the butter knives...” Delly continued giggling.

For the first time since he’d been home, it felt as though things hadn’t changed, and he couldn’t help the warm affection for Delly bubbling inside him. He’d known her from the time they were babes in the cradle, and he’d forgotten how much he’d missed her friendly energy. Peeta didn’t quite know how to convey how grateful he was that she was still willing to talk to him.

“No they don’t count,” Delly laughed. “Though if Katniss had been there, she would have chased them off so you wouldn’t have had to hide.” Peeta gaped at her, unsure of what to say while a hard blush crept into Delly’s cheeks. “Sorry,” she whispered, falling silent.

Peeta quickly looked back out to the sea, saying nothing, and gripped the side of the Tower to steady himself. Katniss wouldn’t have cared, he thought dully, as he scanned the water, which was now peppered with beach-goers. Though he was pretty sure that was his fault too. He should have seen that truth years before he did. He had just seemed so real. He swept his eyes over the beach, noticing Johanna, Katniss, and the Leeg twins eating lunch. Annie was taking her break, but she was sitting over twenty yards away from them.

“Delly, do you want to take your lunch break now, and if you want to, could you do me a favor?” Peeta asked, knowing fully well he really had no right to do so but praying Delly would be amenable to him anyways.

“Yes?” Delly asked him, her cornflower eyes growing wider as she glanced over at him.

Peeta waved his hand, directing her eyes to where Annie was sitting. “I’m...I’m not expecting that anyone wants to talk to me, but Annie...” Peeta trailed off, trying to figure out how to phrase things without sharing anything Annie wouldn’t want him to say. Finally, he said, “She just...she needs some friends. I shouldn’t be her only friend. She needs girlfriends, I mean, friends who are girls,” Peeta stuttered. “And she...needs an escape. You know what my mother is like.” He realized how he was practically begging, but Peeta didn’t care.

“Annie?” Delly asked in surprise. Her eyes traveled over the lonely distance between Annie and the other girls. “She’s your cousin, right? How come I’d never heard of her before. I mean, we
grew up together Peeta. You’re like my brother.”

“I… She’s my cousin through dad’s side. His sister’s kid.” Delly’s eyes flew wide.

“Your dad had a sister? I thought he only had brothers. I remember them from your family’s Christmas parties,” she said in confusion. Peeta hesitated but decided Delly would know not to share what he was about to tell her.

“I didn’t know he did either, Dell. Annie’s mother was dad’s younger sister. She got pregnant with Annie out of wedlock, and then married the guy. He wasn’t…exactly what my grandparents wanted for her, and from what I found out, they basically disowned her out of shame.” Delly’s mouth dropped in shock.

“So what happened to her family? How did you find out she existed? Why is she living at Mellark House now?”

Peeta shrugged. “I’ve never claimed to come from a loving family; I’m not that great either,” he offered by way of explanation. He could tell Delly wasn’t satisfied, her eyes flashing in rare anger when Peeta disparaged himself, but he didn’t want to tell anymore of Annie’s story. It was hers to tell. “Just…don’t let Johanna scare her too much, ok? She’s strong, but frail at the same time. Please, Delly.”

Delly nodded her head, her blonde curls bouncing softly as she did. Peeta let out a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Dell.” He pointed to the stairs. “Have fun at lunch.” He turned back towards the water, reminding himself that he had a job to do. A quick sweep showed him that everything seemed to be ok, but he was so focused on his task that he almost missed Delly calling his name.

“Peeta…” Delly said, her voice so full of emotion that Peeta felt compelled to turn back to her. She cocked her head, staring at him for a moment, before she suddenly rushed in to give him a tight hug. “You are a good person,” she whispered fiercely into his ear. “I just think you’ve forgotten it.” She pulled back, an equally fierce expression on her face. “And I missed you, you know. We...we all did, and I know they’ll admit it someday. I just wish I knew why you…” She paused, examining the grim mask Peeta’s face had become, and thought better of her questioning. “It’s just going to take time, Peeta. So...so don’t...leave,” she finished, her last command uttered feebly.

Peeta gave her a weak sort of smile. It was all he could offer. With his past actions looming large in his head, not to mention Johanna’s beer reception, it wasn’t something he could believe, and he spent the rest of Delly’s break staring out at the ocean, pretending that his gaze wasn’t continuously drawn to the little group of women sitting in the shade of the guard tower, and trying to ignore a brown braid whipping around in the light sea breeze.

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“Peeta! Don’t drag sand into the house! If you’re going to work on that filthy beach, you may come in through the back and wash off in the pool house shower.” Peeta looked up at his mother as she glared down at him from the top of the stairs and shrugged. Long gone were the days when she could really intimidate him, especially about something as petty as clean floors. They both knew they were cleaned and waxed every other day so it wasn’t like any sand that did fall would remain there long. He spied several large stacks of envelopes on one of the side tables in the entrance hall.

“What are those for?” he asked, pointing at them. His mother followed his gaze and gave him a severe look.
“They are for the Mellark Family Annual Start-to-Summer Charity Gala. The majority of the families will be returning to Panem this week, and I wanted to have them out as soon as possible. It’s to be held in two weeks’ time.” Peeta was barely able to suppress his groan. He’d forgotten about his mother’s annual party, which also happened to be one of the biggest events held each year in Panem.

Whether invited to it or not, all the locals knew what it was. The fireworks display alone, shot out over the water from special barges hired for the event, brought people from all over the area down to the beach, but that lavish display was nothing compared to what went on at the party.

The money spent to buy a table at the Gala, in theory, was meant to raise funds for things Panem needed, like improvements for the schools, funding for playgrounds, or for parks, support programs for those in need, but Peeta knew the money usually went instead to his mother’s friend’s pet vanity projects. No one had ever seemed troubled by that fact except Peeta. “Isn’t it a little late to be mailing them?” he asked.

“Oh, everyone knows to block it off on their social calendars. The invitations are just a formality.” She walked down the stairs and started shuffling through the stacks, extracting a few envelopes and shoved them in Peeta’s direction. “Now I believe Delly Cartwright is working with you? I can’t believe Allen and Genevieve are letting her work there, but I saw Genny the other day, and she said so. You can give this to Delly to take to them, and Delly is of course invited as well. Same with Madge Undersee. Senator Undersee assured me already he would be coming when your father and I saw him in the Capitol two months ago. He’s such a powerful man.”

Peeta stared at her in horror, realizing she wanted him to give out the invitations at work. He could just picture the disdain in Johanna’s eyes as he handed out the glossy embossed envelopes to only those who clearly came from wealth and realized immediately that his mother was still trying to punish him for daring to go to his father for help against her protests that working at the beach was “unseemly and totally unbecoming of the Mellark name.” It had been a surprise to Peeta when his father had supported him against her, an extremely rare occurrence, but he’d accepted his father’s defense of his choice of summer work gratefully. His mother plowed on.

“Now here is Finnick Odair’s envelope. I know his parents are out of town, but his mother said he would attend for their family in their stead. And of course, here are darling Cato’s and Marvel’s family invitations. Anna Montgomery is serving on my Gala Committee, and she’s been doing such a wonderful job,” his mother said with a happy smile and grabbed his hand excitedly. There was an almost fond look on her face.

She pushed a few more envelopes his way, mentioning a few of concession workers whose mothers were also on the committee, along with Clove and Glimmer’s invitations, indicating she’d seen their mothers at the Country Club. “Now, I think that’s all. Wait until you see the special guests that will be coming. It’s going to be--”

“Mom.” Peeta cut her off in a firm voice. “I won’t give these out. They can be mailed with the rest.” He watched the happy look on his mother’s face immediately disappear and be replaced by cold fury.

“Peeta, I expect you to hand these out. We’ll save on stamps that way,” she said in a voice streaked with anger. Peeta met her gaze steadily.

“We can afford stamps. We can afford enough stamps to last a lifetime. I’m not handing these out…unless of course, all the staff is invited, including Uncle Haymitch.” Peeta said his uncle’s name neutrally, as if he was just suggesting they invite any other relative, but his mother’s flashing eyes told a different story at the mention of her brother’s name. He saw her ball her hand into a
fist and immediately took a step back, a reaction born from years of practice. “Your choice, Mom,” he challenged. His mother’s face darkened more.

“You used to listen to me,” she said in a tone that was both acidic and forlorn, her eyes distant. “You were such a good boy when you were young. Until you got mixed up with that rabble beneath your station. You should have listened to me. I tried to tell you the truth, but you didn’t believe me until it was too late. And now look where it’s gotten you.” Her eyes swept over Peeta like he was a cockroach she wanted to step on while Peeta felt a sensation like a vice clamp painfully around his heart. He wanted to argue against her words, but suddenly found his tongue felt like a thousand-pound weight. She always knew where his biggest hurts lay. “Leave,” she commanded, a look of satisfaction forming on her face at Peeta’s suddenly devastated expression. “I’ll mail them myself. I will not have that man or those people be invited guests at my event.”

Peeta didn’t have any energy to argue as he trudged up the stairs and into his room to collapse on his bed. He buried his face into his pillow, blinking hard against the tears that had formed in his eyes. If this had been four years ago, he would have called up Jo or Finnick or Madge or most likely… He punched at his pillow…. Well, Peeta would have called anyone to get away when his mother looked at him the way she just had. Peeta hit his pillow again but startled when a soft knock sounded on his door. He looked up as his father peaked into the room.

“Everything ok, Peeta? I heard your mother talking to you,” he asked. Peeta wondered if he’d always looked so tired.

“I’m fine, Dad,” he murmured. His father didn’t look convinced.

“Where is Annie, tonight?”

“Delly Cartwright and Madge Undersee took her out to show her around Panem. That’s what she said anyways.” His father nodded slowly.

“That’s good,” he said softly. “I’m glad to see she’s getting used to living here. Your mother....I know she was a bit unwelcoming, but I know she’ll come around...” he trailed off.

Peeta sighed, feeling as tired as his father looked, knowing his father didn’t believe his own words any more than Peeta did. “Did you need something, Dad?” Peeta’s father raised his hand and scratched the back of his neck, a habit his father performed when he was nervous and one that Peeta had picked up as well.

“No, Peet. I just, well, I know you have a day off tomorrow, and I was wondering if you wanted to come to the bakery with me? Rye will be there in the morning, but I believe he is going somewhere with Olivia in the afternoon.” Peeta blanched and shook his head before his father’s question was even complete.

“Dad. I just... I can’t.”

Too many good memories. Too painful to revisit.

Peeta’s father looked at him, an unusual sadness falling over his face, but he didn’t press Peeta further, letting himself out of the room quietly. It was only hours later, long after everyone else in the household had gone to bed and the moon had crept high into the sky, that Peeta finally fell asleep.

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Peeta walked down the hidden stairwell banked into the cliff that led to the Mellark’s private
beach, grateful that the sound of his steps echoing loudly against the cliff’s walls masked his sigh. He was doing that a lot these days, he knew, but it was hard to contain his growing frustration with nearly everything in his life. It was not like Peeta had expected things to be easy returning to Panem, but neither had he expected things be this bad, and he found himself longing for the tenuous calm that had existed after that first eventful day back. It was not to be.

Since Peeta had rejected his mother’s appeal for him to hand deliver invitations to his fellow co-workers for the Gala, she had practically ignored him, only bothering to demand he come to the dinner table if he was home from work. Peeta supposed it would have been an improvement if not for the fact that it was obvious his mother had instead recruited Rye to criticize him in her place. Peeta had no idea what their mother had told Rye he had done now, but a few days of snide comments from his brother about everything from his appearance down to the fact that he hadn’t had a girlfriend in three years had been brought up. His father, per usual, continued his long practiced silence in the face of their family’s dysfunction.

Meanwhile, the lonely solitude, occasionally broken by Annie, that he’d been experiencing at work had given way to downright hostility once Cato had loudly and pompously told Peeta (and the entire group) that his family was honored to be invited to “the Gala Event of the Summer.” Even now, Peeta’s ears burned over the glares he’d gotten from the local kids as Marvel and a few others had announced their delight in their invitations, crowing about his mother and father’s generosity, how excited they were to see what the theme for the Gala would be this year. Peeta had wished he could tell them what his real home-life was like, had always been, but he’d long ago learned the futility of that particular gesture. No one could believe a family so wealthy could have a son that felt so unhappy.

Glimmer and Clove, not even employees, had still taken careful steps to thank Peeta for his family’s gracious invitations in front of as many staff members as possible, furthering his humiliation. Peeta had known they were just trying to emphasize their own self-importance, with their designer bikinis and bejeweled shades, but that had been the last straw for even those staff members who had only a vague idea what the Mellark Family Annual Start-to-Summer Charity Gala was, turned off to the constant chatter from those whose families had made the cut.

Of those invited, only Finnick, Delly, and Madge had remained quiet, though Peeta had seen their RSVPs in the large acceptance stack his mother was keeping in her parlor room. With their families as prominent as they were in Panem, they would have no choice but to go, the same way Peeta didn’t.

“Peeta! Wait!” Annie’s voice suddenly came from above him. He looked up at her call as she ran down to him, light on her feet as a bird, her auburn hair streaming out behind her in the morning breeze, a smile on her face.

Peeta smiled at the obvious change in Annie, from the terrified girl who had nowhere to go when he’d found her a few months ago, to the happier one now making her way down the stairs. The friends who had once been his refuge were now hers instead. It was something he couldn’t begrudge her, though the sad envy he’d felt when she’d gone out after work these past nights was something he struggled to ignore.

“Hey,” he said by way of greeting as she reached his position on the lowest landing. She punched him lightly on the arm.

“You left without me this morning, cousin,” she challenged, trying to look angry. Peeta laughed. It had never been a look she’d been able to pull off.

“Just wanted to get an early start,” he said, omitting the fact that he’d been trying to avoid Rye when his brother had strolled into the kitchen this morning. Annie had enough to deal with
without Peeta laying his troubles on her, or so Peeta thought. But Annie frowned anyways at his reply, like she knew he wasn’t being entirely truthful. “You ready for another day at sea?” he asked, seeking to change the subject before she could figure him out.

“Well, hopefully I don’t have to go into the water too much,” she said with a grin as they began walking towards the white picket fence that marked the property boundary line. “Rescuing that little toddler was enough excitement for one week. I think that mom wanted to kiss you for pointing him out to us.”

“Eh… Someone would have seen him way before it was too late. He was only in about foot of water. I think the mom learned she should pay attention to her kid and not her friends. God knows what they were talking about that was so important.”

Annie snorted. “Oh, I heard her earlier. They were all talking about the Gala and what they were planning to wear to it.” She cast Peeta a furtive look. “It sounds like your mom usually expects nothing less than couture.” Peeta felt the smile that had been on his face melt away.

“She’s never set a dress code, but her standards are high,” he said reluctantly. “I don’t know what she’s going to try to force me into. I wouldn’t even go, but Dad requested it. I couldn’t say no.”

Annie nodded her understanding. She was the only one besides Haymitch who knew of his father’s diagnosis.

“I wish you were going to be there, though,” Peeta added. Annie had decided not to attend after realizing her aunt had only invited her so she could show off her niece as an ode to her own twisted brand of charity. “I’m pretty sure you’d be the only ally I’d have,” he said as he opened the gate so they could walk down the public beach to the distant guard house. To his surprise, Annie started laughing again. “What is it?” he asked.

“Well, I am going to go after all. Finnick asked me if I’d go with him as his guest, since his parents won’t be there.”

Peeta’s mouth fell open in surprise. “I didn’t even know you two were talking. I thought you’d just been going out with Delly and...the others,” he finished slowly, unsure of how to feel.

Finnick had a playboy reputation, but Peeta knew that was mostly untrue and was rather a product of Finnick trying to bring home a girl that met his parent’s high expectations; something he’d yet to succeed at. Still, Peeta watched Annie’s blushing face with unease.

“He came out the last night with us. He’s actually going to bring Johanna, too. Said he’s allowed to bring two people in place of his parents, so we’re all going as friends, but I don’t know; it was still nice to be invited,” she said, smiling happily.

Peeta stared at her in shock. “Johanna wants to come to the Gala?” Annie frowned at the look on his face.

“Why wouldn’t she? She said you invited her tons of times in high school…” She trailed off as Peeta shook his head.

“Sure, I invited her. I...I invited all of them, but only Delly, Finnick, and Madge ever came. And that’s only because they were forced to by their parents. We always skived off as soon as we could. What...Why did Johanna say she wanted to come? What does she plan on doing?” Peeta said with a flabbergasted, nervous tone. Annie looked at him with confused alarm.

“I don’t know, Peeta. She just said she was ‘curious.’ Madge is bringing Gale, and Delly is going to bring Katniss as a guest, too. Though I’m not sure she wants to go, but Johanna insisted.” She paused as she caught the look on Peeta’s face. “I...Did you not want them to
come? They’ve asked about you a few times, but I wasn’t sure what to tell them about why you’re avoiding them.” Peeta clenched his fists into balls. *He was avoiding them?*

“Did, you not want me to go?” Annie whispered. The change in her voice level made Peeta aware they’d finally come upon the guard house. Peeta saw Finnick watching them out of the corner of his eye and slowly unclenched his hands.

“No, Annie. It’s fine. You should go talk to him,” Peeta said wildly, still reeling from Annie’s revelations. He practically pushed Annie towards Finn, needing badly to clear his head as his anger deflated and a confused wave of sadness overtook him.

Katliss...Katliss was going to come. He’d asked her so many times growing up, and she’d always said no. And now she was going to be there, and would now probably see his mother make pompous asses out of entire Mellark family.

Johanna’s biting voice interrupted his thoughts with a “You’re looking green, Mellark.” Peeta whipped around to find her smirking at him.

“Why are you coming to the Gala, Jo? You’ve never shown an interest before,” he accused, unable to keep the anger out of his voice. Johanna’s grin widened.

“I suppose I’ve finally grown curious about how the other side lives,” she spat. “Now that I have an opportunity to go without whoring myself out to someone. Plus...” She looked him up and down before fixing him with a hard stare. Peeta felt like she was trying to read into his soul. He could feel the flush creeping up his neck. “...I’m curious about other things as well,” she concluded.

“Like what?” he asked.

Johanna opened her mouth to reply when a girl’s laughing shriek floated through the air. Peeta and Johanna both turned to see a small girl with brown hair in pigtails running down with Prim towards the water.

*Posy.*

Peeta remembered the girl’s name. The last time he’d seen her she’d been no more than a baby. Katniss had dragged him to the Hawthorne house to see Gale’s new sister, telling Peeta that it was like she was getting a new cousin, considering she saw all the Hawthorne children, *including* Gale, as her brothers and sisters.

He looked up to see Katniss and Gale stepping out of his truck as Rory and Vick, Gale’s two younger brothers, crawled out from the back. They sprinted after their baby sister and Prim, but Katniss and Gale remained by the vehicle as Gale pulled a large duffle bag out of his pick-up, his intent to stay the day obvious by the cooler he pulled out next. For a second, Peeta swore Gale scanned the beach, as though looking for something or someone, but the next, he was leaning down to give Katniss a kiss on the cheek. *Guess lots of things have changed.*

The bitter edge to that thought surprised Peeta, and he looked away, only to find Johanna shrewdly watching him. She nodded her head towards the two still by the truck.

“They aren’t dating, you know. Though Hawthorne certainly wants it,” she said, peering closely at Peeta’s face. “How do you feel about that, Blondie?” Peeta almost felt like he could ring her neck.

“I don’t,” he replied instead.
Johanna cocked her head at him. “Your reaction to that little good-bye kiss would suggest otherwise.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Peeta said through gritted teeth. A surprisingly satisfied smile onto Jo’s face.

“You’re right. I don’t,” she said. “But I intend to find out.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I watched you walk out on my best friend four years ago, without giving her an explanation, as far as she’s ever said. You never gave anyone an explanation.” Peeta’s eyes briefly darted down towards the sea, where Prim, Posy, and the Hawthorne brothers were playing, resisting the urge to look towards Katniss and Gale. He arranged his face into a mask of complete calm. Johanna nodded her head at him.

“Now, I’ll admit, Peeta, I was pretty upset when you came home, as your beer soaked hair from two weeks ago would attest. But then I thought about it…” She nodded up to Katniss behind Peeta’s shoulder.

“Brainless, there, is harder to get stuff out of than a locked box inside a safe chained at the bottom of the sea, and you used to be known for never shutting up, and yet here I’ve watched you these past weeks acting like some weird warped version of yourself, hiding from everyone, keeping that pretty face of yours so fucking blank like you’re doing right now, like you aren’t even there. Cut that out. It’s creepy.” She waved her hand over him with mild disgust, while Peeta came to the realization that this was the third person who’d accused him of hiding. “The Peeta Mellark I used to know wouldn’t have done that, and he certainly wouldn’t have taken that shit from Finnick the other day. Yeah, I know about that,” she continued, nodding again as she noticed Peeta’s eyes widen. Her expression became serious.

“So…I figured maybe there’s more to this story than meets the eye, and if that means I have to go to your bitch of a mother’s stupid fucking Gala, then that’s what I’ll do. In other words, Blondie, to answer your earlier question…what I’m curious about is you.”

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Peeta cursed softly under his breath as he watched Katniss fiddling with the buttons on the Waverunner, wishing he’d taught her to use it back when they’d been on speaking terms. But in those days, they’d always just stolen Rye’s sailboat. He’d practically taught everyone how to use it, to get it out from the dock without being seen by any of the Mellark house staff, to find the hidden key to the motor, should the wind die while they were out on the water. Even Prim and Rory had been given a few lessons, and Peeta suspected the boat had been taken out more than a few times in the years he’d been gone. He cursed again, trying…and failing…to think of anything to say to her.

He knew Haymitch must have deliberately paired them together today; he was sure Boggs was around them enough to pick up the tension and wouldn’t have pushed Peeta and Katniss together on his own. His body felt like a live wire as his eyes passed over the wavy tendrils of her loose hair before they trailed to her low cut swim-top and toned thighs, telling himself over and over that the attraction he was feeling was purely physical. He’d never been able to deny how beautiful she was. It didn’t mean anything more. It couldn’t.

*He was going to kill Haymitch for keeping things from him. Or at least have some very strong words with his uncle later today,* Peeta thought. But as he looked at his former best friend (and so much more)...a second thought came to him. *Maybe he was hiding.* Peeta decided he was ready
“Haymitch said you wanted to talk to me,” Katniss said, breaking him from his thoughts. He looked to her only to find she was still avoiding his eyes.

“Look at you, for starters,” he said, swallowing nervously as her piercing grey eyes jerked to meet his blue ones. They were full of challenge.

For what felt like forever, but couldn’t have been more than a few seconds, they stared at one another. Peeta wondered if she was expecting him to turn into some sort of crazed monster, the way she was staring. He wondered if she was feeling the same way as she glanced up the beach towards where the other lifeguards were getting into their positions, clearly looking for a rescue that wasn’t coming.

“You’re not very big,” Peeta said, trying to explain why he’d said what he had, bending to pick up the items of clothing he’d brought from the storage closet next to the lockers. “So I need to make sure you’re wearing the right equipment to be out there.” He handed her a woman’s short wetsuit. “I know you’re tough, Katniss, but since you are small, you’re more likely to develop hypothermia on the water, even on a day like today. The water is colder the farther you get from the shore.” He pointed out at the ocean. “And I need you to wear a lifejacket at all times, too. If for some reason you fell off, your energy needs to go into getting back on the runner, not having to worry about staying afloat or treading water.”

Katniss took the items from him without a word, but then looked him up and down, sending an involuntary thrill through Peeta’s body that he wished he could ignore. “Well, you’ve looked better, then,” she said. Peeta gave her a puzzled look, and her scowl deepened.

“I mean,” she said, gesturing over his body, “If I have to wear this stuff, don’t you? Where is your wetsuit? That’s what I meant. So...so you’ve looked...better…” She trailed off, but Peeta caught her barely detectable blush. The phrase “You know I’m not good with words” echoed in his head. He pointed at the small bundle he’d left on the ground.

“There’s mine. Do you have sunglasses? You’ll need a pair of those as well.” Katniss scowl deepened, and Peeta was barely able to suppress the sudden laughter that bubbled up inside him. “Here, you can take my spares,” he said, pulling out his Ray Bans from his swim trunk pocket and offering them to her.

“I don’t need your charity,” she said roughly. Peeta stared at her for a beat, and then the bubble burst inside him; he couldn’t stop himself from laughing, though there was pain in it, as feelings he’d long suppressed threatened to rise to the surface.

“God, Katniss, you’re not very nice,” he said, still laughing. Katniss flushed bright red at his chuckling as she turned on her heel without a word and stomped away, her face livid. But it was only a moment before Peeta caught up with her.

He pulled her around to face him, so focused on getting to her that it took Peeta a second to realize that his hand was resting on the small of her back, her soft skin blazing beneath his fingers because the swimsuit she wore barely covered her ass. Her small but firm hands were on his biceps, gripping him to steady herself from the movement of being whirled around, and her chest was a mere two inches from his own, heaving with what he presumed was anger. An inferno ignited in Peeta’s body, and he took a step back from her, as though he’d been burned.

“I’m s-sorry. I shouldn’t ha-ve done that,” he stuttered under the thunderous storm he saw in her grey eyes. They did not soften with his apology, and he could have almost laughed again. There was his girl, so magnificent when she was on fire. He took a breath to steady himself.
“I am sorry, Katniss. I...really shouldn’t have done that, and what I said before was unkind. Of course, you don’t need my charity; I would have expected you to return them at the end of the day.” he said.

There was more bite in that last line than Peeta meant to convey, but her statement still rattled inside him, a dagger to the heart for reasons beyond his capacity to examine right now. Judging by Katniss’ narrowed eyes, she knew his sentence held far more meaning than either were willing to admit, but she nodded her head, and Peeta let out a sigh. He felt raw, like there was so much that needed to be said, but he didn’t know how.

“Look, Katniss. Can we call a truce?” he finally asked, running his fingers through his hair nervously. Peeta could tell by her look of surprise that his question was not what she’d expected.

“A truce?” she questioned. Her eyes continued burning.

Peeta spun his arm out to the side, waving vaguely at the beach. “I think we can both agree that these first few weeks have been a little...tense, and it’s carrying over to everyone else. We have to work together this entire summer, and I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of the awkward silences,” he said, hedging his bets that Katniss had been feeling like the center of attention the way he had, that everyone was watching them. Katniss scowled but did not stop Peeta from talking.

“I know you might not believe it,” he said. “But I really didn’t know you’d be working here. Maybe you can ask Haymitch why he deliberately didn’t tell us we’d be working together or maybe he’s already given you an explanation. Sometimes, I think you and he understand each other better than I do.” Peeta shrugged. “The truth is I just wanted to escape my mom and my house and well, pretty much everything associated with the name of Mellark, for myself, and for Annie. Thanks by the way, to you and others for making her feel welcome.”

Katniss’ brow furrowed as she replied, “She’s sweet, though Delly was the one to invite her to things. I can’t take much of the credit.” Peeta gave her a small smile. Katniss had never been one to make friends easily.

“Still, she’s happier now, and she deserves it.”

Katniss continued to stare at him, biting her lower lip in the way that told Peeta she was thinking, so he made one last plea. “Can we at least be civil? I’m not asking for more than that. I...I don’t expect more than that. Though who knows...maybe we can even take shot at being friends,” Peeta joked, but he was unable to keep a small flutter of hope from beating in his chest.

If she agreed to this, then maybe things had changed in his four year absence, he thought. It was a traitorous one to his long guarded heart, but Peeta let it fly anyways, and it only soared all the more when Katniss finally nodded her acquiescence.

“I’ve never been good at making friends.” She said it bluntly, but Peeta caught the ghost of a smile on her face. He smiled back.

“Well, Everdeen, I think the way the whole friend thing works is that you have to tell each other the deep stuff.” Katniss’ hidden smile blossomed to a full-fledged grin, and Peeta’s heart skipped a beat.


“Like...what’s your favorite color?” Peeta asked, even though he already knew the answer. He’d known it since the day he’d met her, sixteen years ago.
“Well, now you’ve stepped over the line…” she said, smiling even wider. It lit up her whole face.

“Seriously, though, what is it?” Peeta asked, enacting an obviously fake stern expression.

“Green,” Katniss said with a laugh. Peeta could tell she knew he knew the answer, too, and he joined in with her until they were both doubled over, gasping for breath. He wasn’t even sure what they were laughing about anymore, but he could feel the strain between them waning a little.

They were so caught up with their laughing fit that the two failed to notice the astonished looks of several beach patrons, their quiet annoyingly disrupted, though one tall beachgoer with smoky grey eyes and olive skin scowled deeply, much the way his would-be girlfriend often did, frustrated by the sound she was making in the presence of the golden haired boy. He’d never made her laugh that way in all his years of trying.

A few of the lifeguards heard the melodic laughter as well. A copper haired man cast a shrewd look at a dark haired girl with a wicked smile, while a curly-haired blonde clapped quietly in delight and a quieter blonde frowned sadly at the tall beachgoer’s distressed face. Even the haggard, mildly drunk man in the guard house lifted his head, unsure if what he was hearing was actually real. It had been a long time since they’d heard Katniss laugh so happily.

Four years, in fact.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note: Ok! Thank you for reading! Just in case it hasn’t been obvious, this fanfic is sort of a modern au Mockingjay redux, in that Everlark has to rediscover who they once were while growing back together. I think they’re making some progress… Now who’s up for a Gala? ;)

Gala (Part 1)

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the slow updates on this story, but rest assured I am still working on it… As evidenced below by the addition of a new chapter! I am so excited for the events upcoming in the story. A heavy thank you goes to my betas, titania522/ct522 and Solas Violetta for their excellent editing skills and desire for new content. It keeps me motivated!

Thank you so much for reading, and also for your patience. Please review!

Katniss

“Delly, why is this necessary?” Katniss sighed irritably while her friend fiddled with her hair. Delly pursed her lips, her mouth full of bobby pins, as she gathered the intricate individual braids into an elegant knot on her head, leaving two to loop down lower on Katniss’ neck.

When she was finally finished, she said, “I want you to look your best tonight, Katniss.” She looked strangely furtive as she studied Katniss’ hair, tucking a stray wisp behind her ear. “This is the biggest party of the year.”

Katniss rolled her eyes. “I don’t care, Delly. I don’t even want to go. You know this. So why are you making me?” Delly bit her lip, and Katniss narrowed her eyes. It was a rare day that Delly Cartwright had nothing to say.

“Please come, Katniss. Everyone is going, even Gale,” Madge said softly. Katniss whirled around to look at her, having not heard her coming into the room. Her brown eyes were soft and a little sad, and Katniss felt her protests dying on her lips as she looked into them.

“I still can’t understand how you got him to go,” Katniss replied. Madge just smiled, bringing out a pair of sapphire and diamond earrings and glittering, crystal stick-ons to be applied underneath Katniss’ eyes to help them stand out. She eyed them warily, remembering her grudging promise to Madge a few days ago that she would not put up a fuss about what the girl brought forth from her mother’s jewelry collection for Katniss to wear tonight.

“I know he doesn’t like this stuff anymore than you, or so he says, but I’m sure he would never pass up the opportunity to see you like this.” She waved her hand over the floor length, fitted,
navy gown with a patterned design meant to give the appearance of feathers, the sleeves designed to look like wings. Johanna had picked it out for Katniss from among the ones in Delly’s closet. Katniss shifted uncomfortably.

The theme for this year’s Mellark Gala was “Variations on Black and White.” Katniss had snorted at its pretentiousness, wishing Johanna had wanted to go to the damn party last year when the theme had been “Panem and the Sea.” That had been a stupid title, too, but Delly had far more colored dresses than white or black. The dress she was wearing was the only one that had fit Katniss’ petite frame. She’d never been so done-up in her life, and she longed for her ordinary, comfortable, ratty t-shirt, pants, and boots.

“I don’t get why anyone wants to go to this,” Katniss insisted. “You, Finn, and Delly never talked about the Gala like it was anything more than a chore. Finn said his and P-Peeta’s goal was always to leave as quickly as possible.” She winced, realizing she’d stumbled over Peeta’s name, thankful that Johanna was not yet there to notice it, and that Delly seemed too busy fixing her own hair to pay attention. True to her nature, Madge only shrugged and began pinning the jewelry in place, leaving Katniss to her thoughts.

Peeta. Even saying his name in her head felt strange, after actively trying not to think of him for four long, lonely years. Katniss shook her head, earning a reproachful look from Madge, and stilled again.

Since they’d come to their “truce” a week ago, things between she and Peeta had gotten both worse and remarkably better at the same time. They talked to one another now at work, had even gone out on the Wave runners together two more times, but the weight of their history was something that was never far from Katniss’ mind.

She could tell Peeta felt it too, with the way he sometimes stopped abruptly or changed a subject quickly, like when Thresh had brought up the brief time Peeta had dated Glimmer in high school while she pranced by the group in a practically see-through bikini. Katniss had been hard pressed to contain her disgust, both at Glimmer’s appearance, and the memories it brought up. Hurt. Frustration. Longing. They were echoes of a past Katniss wasn’t sure she was ready to explore, though the awkward tension that still existed between her and Peeta suggested the need for it.

“Wow, Kat. You look hot,” Johanna said as she burst into Delly’s enormous bedroom, a pleased look on her face. Katniss glared at her.

“That doesn’t exactly look white or black, Jo,” she said, eyeing the lacy, beige dress with a long train that Johanna was wearing. Her black hair was piled on her head in a way that Katniss could only liken to a mo-hawk. Johanna smirked at her.
“It’s close enough. And it’s not like you’re one to talk,” she said, nodding wickedly towards Katniss’ deep blue dress in a way that made her scowl.

“It’s variations on black and white, Katniss,” Delly said pleasantly. “Your dress is a midnight blue and looks beautiful. Johanna’s dress is along the spectrum of white. I promise you two won’t look out of place. You’ll just be the standouts in the crowd.”

Katniss shook her head. “I didn’t agree to this to be put on display,” she said vehemently. “I’m not a piece in some game,” pointedly looking at Johanna. Jo smirked again.

“Oh, unfortunately, I think we all are, but don’t worry. We’re going to make them pay for it.” Katniss blanched at her friend’s words.

“Why did you insist we all go to this? We don’t have to be a part of this; we’ve never been part of this,” she said, ignoring the shadow of hurt she saw on Delly and Madge’s faces at her words. Katniss hoped they understood she wasn’t trying to insult them; they were just the kind exceptions, along with Finnick, to a world that Katniss had never belonged to, no matter how hard she’d once tried. Johanna sighed at her.

“You are so brainless, Brainless. Come on. Gale and Finnick are downstairs waiting for us.”

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“Fuck. This is what I’ve been missing? Why did we say no to this when Peeta asked us in high school?” Jo said in an awestruck voice that didn’t even have her typical disgust at the ostentatious wealth on display. Katniss looked up at the enormous white house, shocked as well. She’d been here many times before, but she’d always avoided visiting on the weekend of the Gala and had never seen it looking as it was now.

Large fountains surrounded by mounds of white roses had been set up on either side of the lawn, their tinkling sound masked by the classical musical being piped through hidden speakers around the various buildings on the property. Mellark House itself was lit by the candles that were flickering in every window and a dazzling light display that changed every few seconds. Gold and cream and black designs danced across its face, sometimes accompanied by soft pinks, greens, and blues. It should have been beautiful, but Katniss couldn’t help but think the lines scattering everywhere looked like prison bars, ready to trap everyone making their way through the giant front doors that led into the house.
“This is gross,” Gale mumbled quietly enough that Katniss knew only she could hear. Even though he was technically Madge’s date, he’d taken Katniss’ arm as soon as they’d arrived. Katniss had felt a little bad for Madge, but she also knew she needed the support of her oldest friend for this. She looked up at him to find his face pinched into a dark scowl. He glared at their surroundings and said, “Half the town lives in the Seam, barely scraping by, and this is what exists on the other side of Panem. I still can’t understand how you and that jerk were ever together.” Katniss stared at him.

“He wasn’t a jerk,” she said, unsure why she felt the need to defend Peeta, but her words continued to flow. “How rich someone was never made a difference to him. I know even you know that.” Gale’s scowl deepened.

“How can you stand there and say that, Katniss?” he practically growled, gnashing his teeth. “He was a jerk. He left. He left, without so much as a word and never looked back! How many times do I have to remind you? In case you’ve forgotten, what with your newfound friendliness and all.” Katniss’ mouth fell open in surprise, but Gale continued. “Oh yeah, Kat. Don’t think Jo hasn’t mentioned how you two are buddies again. Going out on the water together just like old times… I mean, what the hell, Katniss? How can you think I’d be comfortable with you hanging out with your ex-boyfriend when you’re with me?” Anger bubbled up from a well deep within Katniss’ chest but also fear. It appeared Gale’s feelings ran much deeper for her than she’d realized.

“First of all, going out on the water is part of my job. When I go and who I get paired with is beyond my control. And second of all, we aren’t together,” she said harshly, but she regretted it immediately when she saw the pallor under his tan features. She gripped his arm. “I’m just… I’m not ready for that. I’m not good for relationships. There’s just too much you don’t understand.” Gale gave her a sad look.

“I would if you told me, Katniss. We’ve all been waiting for that.” Katniss winced as she watched him look back up at the Mellark House. “And you were ready once. Just not for me,” he whispered, this time so quietly Katniss wasn’t sure she was meant to hear it. She reached up to give him a kiss on the cheek, but to her confusion, it only increased his sad expression. “I knew you’d do that,” he said. Katniss furrowed her brow.


“Because I’m in pain. You only ever notice me when I’m in pain. I can’t believe you’re still…” He trailed off speaking.

“Still what?” Katniss questioned. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer and was almost relieved when Gale gave her a small smile.
“I’m sure you’ll figure it out eventually, Catnip, but that doesn’t mean I’m going to stop fighting for you.” He turned and walked up to where their friends were waiting for them, leaving Katniss to stand there on the lawn, trying to puzzle out what he meant.

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Katniss looked with trepidation on the steep set of stairs that led down into the gardens of the mansion. She had spent the last half hour with Johanna and Gale, scarfing their way along the long buffet tables that had been set up in the Mellark’s dining room, while Finnick, Delly, and Madge had been cornered by a multitude of people Katniss didn’t recognize and few whom she did.

She’d felt bad for Madge, for as quiet as her friend was, her friend’s status as the daughter of a prominent senator made her a magnet for the hangers-on and suck-ups of the town. The Mayor’s simpering plea for Madge to put in a good word to her father as he geared up for Panem’s mayoral election had been the last straw, and she and Johanna had drug a mortified looking Madge behind Gale. Katniss and Jo had hidden behind him, shortly thereafter, when they’d caught sight of Effie and her husband Plutarch, gaping at the large ornate grey ruffle around her neck and 6 inch high heels Effie had on. When Finnick had finally managed to extricate himself from some fawning old ladies, they’d decided to venture into the gardens to find Annie, who had said she’d meet them there.

“Finnick!”

Everyone looked down the stairs to see Annie making her way up towards them in possibly the most beautiful gown Katniss had ever seen. The white material flowed gracefully behind Annie as she climbed and small glass beads of sea green formed a whirling design over the bodice, making Katniss think of how the ocean looked just before the coming of a storm. But it was Annie’s smile that was most radiant as she finally joined them, her beaming gaze directed mostly at Finnick, whom Katniss only just now realized was wearing a tie to match Annie’s gown.

“Oh my God, Annie,” Delly exclaimed. “Where did you get that dress? It’s gorgeous!” She smoothed her hands over her cream colored dress with black-dyed peacock feathers self-consciously. Katniss had to contain a snort. With her blonde curls, buxom chest, and curvy figure, Delly looked like a model tonight. The eyes of many young men darted towards their group as they made their way down the stairs hadn’t escaped Katniss’ notice.

“It was my mother’s,” Annie blushed. They all looked at her curiously. She’d never mentioned her parents before; Annie’s color deepened as she seemed to realize what she’d said. Katniss glanced at Finnick, who looked back at her enraptured. Johanna rolled her eyes.
“Come on, you idiots. Looks like we’ve got to get past the Wicked Witch to see whatever the hell else this party has going on.” Katniss’ heart clenched as she looked where Johanna’s gaze was now directed.

At the bottom of the stairs, where she stood with most of her family, stood Adelaide Mellark, dressed in a sequined, black, high-necked dress that did, indeed, make her look like a witch. Bile rose in Katniss’ mouth as she looked down at the woman who had never looked at her with anything but contempt, and memories of their last meeting had Katniss blinking hard. She’d known seeing Mrs. Mellark was a likely possibility and had been wondering where the Mellarks were greeting their guests, but to see them all standing there after all these years of silence was almost more than she could handle.

“Katniss?” She looked over to see Finnick watching her, his expression one of sadness, like he could see past the facade she always tried so hard to maintain. He took her elbow gently and whispered, “It takes ten times as long to put yourself back together as it does to fall apart. You can do this, Kat. Come on.” He guided her down the stairs towards the small group of people gathered at the bottom.

Her eyes passed over Mrs. Mellark briefly to rest on Mr. Mellark, surprised by how thin he looked. She wasn’t entirely sure, but it almost looked like make-up had been applied to his wan face, the black suit and bow tie he wore only serving to highlight the paleness of his features. Only his lips were red, making Katniss think of the vampire stories Haymitch had liked to scare her and Peeta with as children. Rye and Bannock stood next to their parents, their blond-hair and solid builds marking them easily as Mellarks, but they had brown eyes like their father. Peeta, the only one to inherit their mother’s eyes, was nowhere in sight.

“Mr. and Mrs. Mellark. How good it is to see you! And Bannock. It was so nice of you to come back from the Capitol for the Gala. My parents are there right now on business. How are things?” Delly greeted cheerfully once they all had come down the stairs. Bannock grinned at her.

“It’s busy, Dells. We’re expanding into a few new districts,” he said a little pompously. “So I’ll be glad when my brothers can come help me out.” A shrill laugh from behind him made them all jump as Mrs. Mellark turned from where she’d been finishing up a conversation with one of President Snow’s advisors.

“When Rye joins you, Bannock. Peeta is going into politics. I would think you’d know that after his having lived with you so long. Such a way with words, our Peeta has,” she finished with a smile that made Katniss squirm. Bannock looked at his mother with confusion, while Rye, who had remained silent until now, snorted loudly.
“Whatever you say, Mom,” Bannock said with a shrug, but by then Mrs. Mellark’s ice blue eyes had fallen on Delly, her smile falling away when she noticed the company the daughter of one of her oldest friends had brought. An artery throbbed noticeably in the thin skin of her neck as she finally looked at Katniss. Katniss hardened her stare, trying to keep Finnick’s words in her mind.

“Delly. How lovely it is to see you, my dear,” she said in a tone Katniss sensed was meant to be sweet but held no warmth. “I was so saddened when your parents informed me they could not come.” Her eyes flickered again over their group. “But it seems like you brought some guests with you. I know Finnick and Madge, of course. It’s so nice to see you both again. It’s been too long,” she said, casting a new sickly sweet smile in their direction. “Madge, I was so disappointed your father couldn’t come to my Gala this year.” Katniss watched her friend blush, something Katniss guessed would become a recurring theme throughout the night as it was inevitable others would bring up Madge’s famous father.

“He wishes he could be here too,” Madge squeaked out, looking like she wanted to sink into the ground. Katniss felt bad for her. She hated being the center of attention almost as much as Madge did.

“Yeah. Who would want to miss this?” Katniss jumped as Gale spoke from beside her, startled. She looked up to find Gale’s sympathetic gaze directed at Madge’s red face before he looked down on Mrs. Mellark, challenge in his eyes. Mrs. Mellark smiled almost too happily, her beady eyes falling onto Katniss, who suddenly felt like shrinking into the pavement along with Madge.

“I don’t believe I’ve made the acquaintance of your other friends, Madge. Why don’t you introduce me? Does your father know the company you keep?” Katniss felt a chill run through her entire body and noticed Finnick grab Johanna, who wasn’t even bothering to hide her anger. Whether she’d ever liked them or not, Mrs. Mellark definitely already knew all their names, and the implication that they were “lesser” was clear. Even Delly’s smile faltered. Madge looked at them all helplessly.

“This is--”

“Mom, Annie lives in your house. And this is Gale Hawthorne, Johanna Mason, and Katniss Everdeen. I find it hard to believe you’ve forgotten their names after only a few years. Maybe something is wrong with your memory? Perhaps you should make an appointment with Dr. Aurelius. I saw him walking in a few minutes ago.” Peeta said it all with an air of worry as he appeared from seemingly nowhere, his face arranged perfectly into one of concern, but Katniss caught the smile playing on his lips as his mother’s face tightened, struggling to contain her fury.
“Dr. Aurelius is a surgeon, Peeta,” she said coldly. Katniss noticed Mr. Mellark and Peeta’s brothers shifting uncomfortably.

“I know, Mom,” he said airily. Mrs. Mellark’s eyes bugged out of her head. “Now,” he said, turning towards their group. “I think we should let everyone enjoy the party, don’t you?” He waved his hand towards the great lawn, finally looking at them. Katniss wasn’t even sure what her face looked like, but his expression told them they should move on quickly. As they made their way past him, Katniss did not fail to notice the way his eyes swept over her.

“Well, that was new,” Johanna commented, when they were finally well away from the Mellarks. No one said anything, but Katniss knew what her friend meant.

She glanced back to where she could just make out Peeta, the entirely white suit with gold accents he was wearing highlighted every line of his toned physique, gleaming in the floodlights scattered over the lawn. She wasn’t used to Peeta standing up to his mother. It had been a rare occurrence back when they were young, and she wasn’t sure what to make of it now.

The music from the live orchestra floated through the air as the dancers twirled across the dance floor in a blur of sequins, crystals, and silk while Katniss watched from the table where she’d plunked herself shortly after leaving the Mellark family. Just as the over-done entryway of the house had been, the scene was drenched in its extravagance with the colored lights, twinkling trees, and temporary fountains that had been placed on the lawn. Even the pool was dazzling with a net of glittering white beads placed across its surface, though that was nothing compared to the people in attendance. Katniss laughed internally as she remembered Delly’s words from before the night began. She needn’t have worried about standing out when there was a woman with a working mechanical dove on her head or another with a ball gown so large, she required a five foot berth wherever she walked.

Since the incident at the bottom of the stairs, the night had gone surprisingly smoothly, much to the disappointment of Johanna, who was stewing next to Katniss. Jo had been approached by a few brave men, but her look of disgust had been enough to send them scampering. Delly had spent most of the night in the arms of a boy named Thom, a member of one of the few families to have escaped the Seam, when Thom’s father had struck it rich by inventing some sort of mining tool. Gale, whose scowl had only deepened as the night had worn on, had mustered a small smile for Thom but had spent the rest of the night glowering at the dancers, talking to Madge, or occasionally sullenly looking at Katniss, leaving her to feel even more guilty about their earlier conversation than she already did. There was a part of her that wanted to grab Gale’s hand to tell him everything would be ok, but the part of her that knew she was broken realized that she’d just be lying to him if she did. Her eyes turned to Finnick and Annie, who were still on the dance floor.
She had honestly never seen Finnick look as happy as he did with Annie in his arms. While there were almost as many girls looking longingly at Finnick as they were at Peeta, Finnick’s eyes were riveted on Annie. They moved across the dance floor with a grace Katniss knew she could never possess.

“Seems like Finnick is just about the only one having a good time,” Johanna observed. Katniss smiled thinly.

“You could be out there dancing too, Jo.”

“Yeah. Making a prat of myself like that is just what I want to do. I don’t feel like dancing with any of the Catos of this world. Get enough of him at work,” she said, waving towards where Cato and Marvel had just made their way onto the dance floor with Glimmer and Clove.

Katniss was pleased to see Glimmer looked less than thrilled to be dancing with the blonde lug. Her eyes were fixated on something over Cato’s shoulder, but Katniss frowned when she saw that she was staring at Peeta, who was standing next to Bannock but seemed to be watching Finnick and Annie, a wary look on his face. Suddenly his eyes darted to Katniss’ face, his eyes widening when he realized Katniss was watching him. She didn’t wait to see whether he looked away as Katniss ducked her head quickly.

“Peeta seems quite protective of Annie,” Johanna said in a tone that brimmed with curiosity. Katniss looked up to see her friend’s eyes were narrowed in her direction, not at the couple still on the dance floor. She reddened, guessing Jo wasn’t really interested in talking about their new friend.

“Well, they’re cousins? I don’t know,” Katniss mumbled.

“Yeah…” Johanna said slowly. “But there’s more history there than Annie has told us. Delly told me she’s their dad’s sister’s kid. Delly didn’t even know their dad had a sister, and she’s known the Mellarks the longest. Even longer than you.” Katniss’ brow furrowed in confusion. She honestly hadn’t given much thought to Annie in the wake of Peeta’s return, but as she thought about it, she realized Peeta had only ever talked about his dad’s brothers, men who were more comfortable in a board room than with their own family. Johanna nodded. “Yeah, now you get it. Looks like the Mellark family has even more dark and dirty secrets than we thought. I wonder what else good ol’ Mr. and Mrs. Mellark are hiding.” Katniss’ felt her heart beat increase, and suddenly the humid air felt unbearably suffocating.
“Is that why you wanted to come tonight, Johanna? To try to figure out everyone’s secrets?” Katniss asked angrily, standing up. Johanna quirked her head.

“Maybe. But I didn’t say it was your secrets that I wanted to know, so why so hostile, K?” Katniss blushed.

“None of this is our business, Jo. If Annie wants to tell us what’s happened to her, she will. Don’t push her.” She looked over to where Peeta was, cursing herself when she realized Johanna had probably noticed. She huffed, “And whatever people don’t want to share, they shouldn’t have to.”

_Pain. So much pain._

Johanna looked up at her with stunned seriousness, fiddling with the white table cloth. “Geez, Kat. I’m sorry. Like I said, I don’t need to know your secrets.” Katniss gave her a look to tell Jo that she didn’t believe her, and Johanna sighed. “I don’t, Katniss. Not if you’re not ready to tell me, but you’re going to have to talk to someone sometime. We just want you to be happy.”

“**I am** happy.”

Johanna sighed again. “No, Kat, you’re not. You just haven’t realized it yet,” she said bluntly. Katniss glared at her, but Jo didn’t back down. Instead, she shrugged and pointed to a spot behind Katniss. “I think someone wants to ask you to dance.” Katniss whipped around, ready to tell whoever it was that was approaching her to go away, but she stopped short when she saw who it was.

Mr. Mellark stood before her, still pale and breathing quite heavily, like the short walk across the dance floor had exhausted him. She looked at him in confusion, able to count on one hand the times Peeta’s father had actually spoken to her. His wife had always spoken for both of them.

“Mr. Mellark,” Katniss said uncertainly. Peeta’s father smiled kindly.

“Hello, Katniss. I was wondering if you would do me the honor of dancing with an old man?”

Katniss blinked in shock. “O-Ok,” she stuttered out, allowing herself to be led onto the dance floor, wondering if Mr. Mellark had always moved so slowly. For a long moment, they didn’t move as Mr. Mellark seemed to be catching his breath. “Are you ok, sir?” Katniss asked.
“Of course, my dear. Just getting older. That’s all,” he said with a sad smile, but Katniss couldn’t help but think how much that wasn’t true. Mr. Mellark wasn’t that much older than Haymitch, no more than a few years older than her father would have been if he was alive. Mr. Mellark smile broadened as he took Katniss’ hand in his own, keeping a feather-light grip on Katniss’ waist with the other and began to guide her in a circle. Somehow, Katniss found it comforting, and it was some minutes before they spoke again.

“Have you enjoyed yourself tonight, Katniss?” Mr. Mellark finally asked. “I must say I was surprised to see you here. I remember Peeta always wishing you would come.” Katniss tried to smile, knowing he meant it kindly, but a whole new rush of memories flooded her mind.

“Come on, Katniss. Please come to the Gala. How many years have I been asking you now? It’ll be so much better if you’re there,” Peeta begged, flashing puppy dog eyes in Katniss’ direction. Katniss rolled her eyes back at him.

“Your mom is already pissed enough at you for breaking up with Glimmer,” Katniss replied, trying to keep her relief over that fact from her face. She wasn’t sure if she’d ever get up the nerve to tell her best friend how she felt about him, but at least he wasn’t dating that twat anymore. “Do you really want her to get even angrier by having me show up? You’ll have Finnick, Delly, and Madge there to keep you company.”

Peeta frowned at her. “Yeah, but everything is better with you there.” Katniss stared at him in disbelief as a pink flush rose in Peeta’s cheeks. He seemed to shrink under her gaze. “I just mean, it’s, um, more fun with you there.” Katniss scoffed.

“I’m not the social butterfly you are, Peeta. And that’s not my world. That’s yours.”

Peeta’s frown deepened. “Social butterfly? Katniss…” he started, but Katniss didn’t let him finish, stopping him from talking with her hand. She didn’t want to repeat the same argument they always had, about her perception that she was looked down upon for her wealth or lack thereof. Peeta always told her it was all in her head, and that there was no difference between them. He’d told her that since they were little, but Katniss had never fully believed it. Not that she felt like telling him that.

“I’ll come next year, Peeta. It can be my graduation gift to you. I might even let you have a dance.” Peeta eyed her skeptically for a moment before breaking into a full-fledged grin. He tossed her one of the cheese buns he’d just popped from the oven.
“Ok, Everdeen. I’ll be holding you to that promise. Now I guess I’ll have to get you something too,” he huffed out like it would be some sort of chore. Katniss threw a handful of flour at him, and their laughter echoed through the cavernous kitchen as their play fight began.

“Katniss?” Mr. Mellark questioned, shaking Katniss out of her reverie.

“It’s a little overwhelming,” she said quickly. Mr. Mellark nodded.

“My wife… She likes to make sure everyone is having a good time. Sometimes I think she goes a little overboard, but don’t tell her I said that,” he said conspiratorially, a gleam not unlike Peeta’s in his eyes, but Katniss didn’t smile. He had to know how hard his wife had worked to make Katniss miserable over the years. Mr. Mellark’s smile falling away to sadness again as Katniss kept her silence. Finally, he spoke.

“Katniss, I know you and my wife have had your differences,” he admitted. Katniss pressed her lips together, feeling a little sick. It was so much more than that. Could she really have never told him? “And I do not know exactly what went on between you and my son, but…” he continued, seemingly oblivious to Katniss’ discomfort.

“But w-what?” Katniss struggled out. Mr. Mellark stopped dancing with her, and Katniss was surprised to find he’d brought them back to the edge of the dance floor.

“Peeta missed you.” Katniss’ jerked her head up to meet Mr. Mellark’s eyes for the first time since they’d begun talking. He looked at her imploringly. “You might not believe that, Miss Everdeen, but he did. I hope you’ll give him another chance.” Katniss followed his gaze as his eyes turned to where Peeta was now standing with Rye, and Katniss suddenly got the feeling that Peeta had been watching them the entire time. “He deserves better than I’ve done for him,” Peeta’s father said quietly. Katniss looked at him again, but he only took a deep breath. “Thank you for the dance,” he said.

He shuffled off towards a table, leaving Katniss in a stew of emotions she could barely comprehend. But if she’d been paying more attention, she would have noticed two pairs of blue eyes gazing upon her, one set cold and furious, the other full of struggling hope and longing.

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“Jo, can we go now?” Gale grumbled, moving Katniss out of the dazed state she’d been in for the last hour since her dance with Peeta’s father. She’d taken to staring at the lights on one of the
fountains to deliberately avoid anyone’s gaze, but Gale’s comment finally drew her eyes. He looked back at Katniss for the first time in hours, and Katniss saw her own misery reflected in his face. She nodded at him in agreement.

“Gale, it’s barely 11 o’clock. Since when did you turn into such an old man,” Finnick teased, answering for Johanna, as he set glasses of water down for himself and Annie. Gale glared at him.

“We’ve been sitting here doing nothing for an hour. No one is enjoying themselves, and I could think of a ton of things I’d rather be doing right now.”

“Like what?” Johanna asked with narrowed eyes. “I don’t feel like watching you pound beers and play pool at the Mockingjay. Seen that already,” she said. And when Gale opened his mouth to argue, she added, “We can leave after the damn fireworks. They’re in an hour. I did not put up with wearing this stupid outfit not to see the fireworks. Delly has been gushing about them for so many years that I want to see them just to shut her up about them.” Katniss glanced over to where Delly sat talking animatedly to Thom, completely oblivious to the insult Johanna had just laid at her feet.

“They really are supposed to be nice, Gale,” Annie spoke up timidly. “Peeta said they’re the only part of this night he’s ever liked.” She quailed under Gale’s severe gaze, earning Gale a look of reproach from Finnick.

“They are good, Gale,” Finnick said. He turned to Katniss with a begging expression. “You want to see them, don’t you, K? I bet you heard all about them for years too. You can’t tell me you’ve never wanted to see them.” It was Katniss’ turn to glare, wanting to tell him that there was nothing more she wanted to do than go home and crawl into bed or perhaps cuddle with Prim. At home, things were familiar and safe; they made sense, but Finnick’s sad-sack expression was too much for Katniss to take.

“Yeah, Gale. I want to see them too,” she sighed. Gale didn’t have to say anything for Katniss to know he was calling her a traitor internally. He turned back to Madge without another word, anger written in the tense muscles of his back. Katniss couldn’t muster up a smile when she noticed the grateful look Finnick was trying to give her, and minutes later, she found herself regretting her decision entirely as Rye approached their table.

“Hey O-odair,” Rye said, a slight slur to his words. “Liking the party?” he asked as he plopped down heavily into the open chair between Finnick and Katniss. He scanned his eyes over the table, taking in Finnick’s company. Annie tensed as his eyes made his way past her, but it wasn’t until he noticed Katniss that Rye’s face contracted in anger. He shoved the mop of sweaty, blonde curls out of his eyes.
“It’s...just grand. A Mellark Party. Never changes,” Finnick responded, his expression wary. “Your mother seems to have pulled out all the stops this year.”

Rye answered him with a bitter-sounding laugh. “You could say that. She’s never backed down from a big show, has she?” His eyes moved across the way to where his mother was holding court with the richest men and women present. Then, his face darkened as they all watched her grab Peeta as he helped Mr. Mellark back to his seat from wherever the two had been. Peeta did not smile as his mother began tugging his arm towards an imperial looking man with a gray mustache. “And there goes Peeta, fucking things up again,” Rye said bitterly. “Now, I’ll have to clean up the mess.” The group glanced at one another, and even Delly had torn herself away from Thom to give Rye a shocked stare.

“What do you mean by that, Rye?” Delly asked. But Rye wasn’t paying attention, still looking across the floor, mumbling to himself.

“Why c-can’t he just do what she wants? It’d make everything so much e-easier. I wouldn’t have to be the good son, then. Fucking asshole. Left me all alone with h-her. Never cared about me. The fucking asshole.” Katniss’ eyes widened. She hadn’t realized she and her friends were the only ones who had felt left behind. She wasn’t sure what compelled her to do it, but she placed a hand over Rye’s on the table in solidarity. He looked at her blurrily before his eyes snapped wide at her, and he yanked his hand away, knocking over Finnick’s glass of water.

“Watch it!” Finnick cried as he frantically grabbed some napkins to keep the liquid from spilling onto Annie’s dress, but Rye ignored him.

“You’re the-e reason he l-left, Katniss,” he said with contempt. Katniss’ heart constricted in her chest. “You drove Peeta awaaay. You were never supposed to b-be with him. Should have left him a-alone like we all wanted. He left be-cause of youoo.”

“Rye, that’s enough,” Finnick said sharply, the water long forgotten. Katniss didn’t have to look at her friends to know they were close to a fight. Katniss didn’t know what to say. There was a part of her that feared what he was saying was true. Rye smirked at her silence.

“See, Odair? The S-seam Trash doesn’t even try to defend hersssself.” Katniss felt Gale rise at the same time Finnick leaped to his feet, but Peeta was faster.

From out of nowhere, he descended on their table like an avenging angel, his blue eyes blazing in the candlelight, his face a stone mask of fury. “Rye,” he said coldly. He grabbed his brother and
hauled him to his feet, shoving Rye away disgustedly when his brother stumbled into him. “Excuse me,” he said to Katniss and the rest before guiding Rye roughly over to where Bannock was sitting with an upset look on his face. Katniss saw him looking in Mrs. Mellark’s direction, whose displeasure was obvious even one hundred feet away as she watched her youngest son’s actions. Peeta was making no effort to be discrete as he sat Rye down and gesticulated wildly at him. Katniss could tell she wasn’t the only one who wished she could know what he was saying. After he’d finished with Rye, Peeta spoke briefly to Bannock before twisting violently on his heel away from both his brothers and made his way back over to where Katniss was sitting.

“Katniss, I only heard the last bit of what he was saying to you, but I’m so sorry about that,” he said, looking nowhere else but at her. Katniss kept her eyes on his face, acutely aware that the others were staring, and was oddly struck by how handsome he really looked. Somehow his flushed face and the way his eyes still burned with anger from his brother’s actions made him even more attractive than he already was. Katniss attempted a nonchalant shrug, wishing to avoid the attention she knew was focused on her.

“It’s fine, Peeta. Rye’s had too much to drink. I’m sure he didn’t mean what he said.” Neither of them believed what she said, and Peeta looked like he wanted to say more, but Katniss turned her face away from him, trying to make it clear she wanted the conversation done. She caught Gale’s blazing look and looked at the table instead and heard Peeta sigh.

“Everyone looks beautiful tonight,” he said tiredly. “I hope you’re enjoying yourselves.” She saw his feet turn as if to walk away when Finnick spoke.

“You’ve called me many things, Peet, but I never thought you’d call me beautiful.” His tone was joking and light. Katniss looked at him in surprise. Of all those around the table, he’d been the least friendly to Peeta besides Katniss and Gale. Peeta, too, had turned back around with a startled expression on his face. Finnick grinned at him and struck a ridiculously provocative pose, fluttering his long eyelashes flirtatiously. “Do you find this distracting? Because that’s what I was going for tonight. Right, Annie?” Annie looked at him like he was insane. Peeta and Finnick burst out laughing a second later.

“I didn’t mean you, Finn. But if that’s really what you want me to call you, I’ll consider it,” Peeta said with a new chortle. Finnick smiled wider.

“I think I’ll settle for dashingly handsome. Seems like a good angle for me. You were always the pretty one anyways.” Peeta snorted at this, and everyone except Katniss and Gale started to laugh.

“That’s my title, Finnick,” Johanna said. “How many times do I have to tell you?”
“Oh I don’t know, Jo,” Peeta replied, his eyes twinkling. “I think you are always more the scary one. What do you think everyone else’s are?” Johanna smiled, looking pleased.

“Damn straight, Bread Boy. And hmmm...” She looked around. “Dells, you’re the model, which makes Madge probably the Queen of Pretty.” Madge’s face flushed, though she didn’t look upset with Johanna’s statement. “Annie. You’re floaty and beautiful like the sea. Which makes Gale--”

“Grumpy,” Finnick said. Even Katniss couldn’t contain her smile as Gale frowned deeply. She was stunned by the lightheartedness of the conversation. As soon as the silliness had begun, it felt like old times. Peeta looked radiant, as did everyone else.

“What does that make, Katniss?” Annie asked, her green eyes lighting up in Katniss’ direction. Katniss looked around as they all fell silent with thought. She caught Peeta’s eyes and saw there was an answer already on the tip of his tongue, but he did not speak. Her stomach gave an uncomfortable lurch.

“A bird,” Finnick finally said. Katniss looked over to him in confusion.

“A bird?” she asked. Finnick shrugged.

“Yep. You’re a bird. About to spread her wings and destroy us all.” Everyone began to laugh again, but this time Peeta didn’t join in and Gale did.

“Well, this place could use that. It’s amazing the way some people live. I mean, who needs all this?” Gale said, chortling, but there was a coldness to it that bespoke the years of anger she knew he harbored over the disparity between this life and those in the Seam. “No offense, Peeta,” he added after he observed everyone’s smiles had faded, the happier mood dying as quickly as it had come. Johanna looked like she was about to kick him. Peeta stared at Gale for a long moment before he spoke.

“Maybe, Gale. I daresay my family has too much,” he said slowly, glancing around at their surroundings. Gale made a noise of disgust that didn’t seem to faze Peeta at all. He looked at Katniss.

“Would you like to dance with me? I seem to remember you promised me one once,” he said softly. Katniss gave her head a vigorous shake without really thinking about it, the realization of her outright rejection of Peeta’s request only coming as Gale quietly laughed. Peeta’s face fell for
a second before it became the same emotionless mask she’d noticed he’d adopted while speaking with the group of people around his mother. “No worries,” he said evenly. Katniss felt like she had to offer some explanation.

“I just don’t dance. You remember,” she said, staring back at the floor.

“I know.”

It took several minutes of awkward silence for Katniss to realize that Peeta had left and even longer to realize that she was now alone at the table with Finnick. She gave him a look of befuddlement.

“Where did everyone go?” she asked. Finnick gave her a thin smile.

“Sometimes you get into your own head too much, Katniss. Delly asked Johanna, Annie, and Madge if they wanted to go out to the floor a few minutes ago.” He waved over to where Johanna was doing a jerky whirling dance move that required the other girls to shift quickly away from her. It didn’t escape Katniss how they kept looking over at her. She looked around.

“And Gale?” she asked. Finnick shrugged.

“We told him to go let off some steam.”

“Oh.” Katniss twisted her hands together nervously, wondering if Gale had really gone willingly. “And why are you still at the table and not dancing with the others?”

“Because I wanted to talk to you.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” But Finnick didn’t offer any words after that. He just sat watching Katniss, like he was trying to figure out something about her that he didn’t quite understand. Katniss shifted uncomfortably in her seat.
“Why were you so...friendly...to Peeta?” she blurted out. The question had been in her mouth from the moment Finnick had made his joke. His eyebrows shot up into his hair. Katniss floundered. “You’ve seemed so angry with him when we’re working. You’ve talked to him even less than I have,” she pointed out.

“You’ve been friendlier with him in the past week,” Finnick countered. Katniss blushed.

“We agreed to be friends. Or well, at least acquaintances.” Her friend shook his head and laughed. Katniss wrinkled her nose at him in annoyance.

“You still haven’t answered my question, Finnick. It was just surprising you seem to be...giving in?” She wasn’t sure why she said it like a question, but Finnick sobered enough that she knew he was taking her seriously.

“I’m not ‘giving in,’ Kat. Not exactly.”

“Then what are you doing?” Finnick sighed at her question, twirling a fork back and forth in his hands like a trident.

“He still has a lot to answer for, Katniss. I’m not arguing that. There are things I want...no, need...answers to...” Finnick frowned, lost in his own thoughts before he focused again, staring at her with serious eyes. “But I don’t think he’s quite the asshole I thought he was or maybe even wanted him to be.” Katniss furrowed her brow at him, and Finnick huffed. “What I mean is, while I don’t think he’s the same person we all knew back in school, he doesn’t seem like the jerk who left us four years ago either. Look at tonight. He’s saved us from the Wicked Witch and her dick of a son.” That earned a laugh from Katniss, and Finnick grinned.

“I just finally realized Haymitch may be right. There are two sides to every story.” Finnick gave her a pointed look. Katniss bit her lip, and Finnick sighed again. He reached his hand across the table, making sure Katniss was looking at him before he spoke.

“Look, I know this may not be what you want to hear, but I think it’s something you need to hear.” He took a deep breath. “So here it goes...We all know something more happened between you two than you’ve ever told us about.” Katniss’ eyes widened, not realizing she was confirming Finnick’s suspicions. He continued. “Honestly, when you were together, we were all jealous of what you guys had. I always thought if I could be with someone who made me half as happy as you made Peeta, well I’d be doing pretty well.”

“It took me a long time to realize that he probably didn’t leave just because. No one disappears like he did without...something...happening to cause it, and I’m guessing you know more about it than I do.” Katniss could feel the pain in her heart returning with a vengeance, and Finnick looked at her sadly. ‘I’m not asking you to share anything with me or Jo or Delly or anybody, Katniss. We’re not going to push you on it, but we’ve been friends for a long time. I know you’ve been pretending you’re ok for a long time, but that you’re not really.” He squeezed her hand. “But what I really know is that you can be ok and that talking to Peeta might be the first step in that process.”

“How?” Katniss whispered. Finnick smiled at her.

“Because I saw my best friend tonight. He may not fully be the old Peeta we loved, but like I said, I saw hints of him tonight. And I remember how much that guy loved you.” Katniss gripped the table with the hand Finnick wasn’t clutching. He’d been right; she didn’t want to hear this. What he was saying had never been true. She’d worked too hard to accept that fact. She couldn’t let it go now, but Finnick wasn’t about to stop talking. “I think that guy deserved a dance,” he said quietly.

“I don’t know,” Katniss said, wishing her hair was in a braid so she could tug it like she liked to do when she was upset.

“Or at least that guy might deserve to be saved from Glimmer’s clutches. Yikes.” Katniss looked up abruptly, following Finnick’s gaze to where Glimmer had practically just pounced on Peeta’s back. They watched as she gripped Peeta’s jacket, while Peeta said something inaudible, utter discomfort on his face. Glimmer waved in the direction of Mrs. Mellark before forcing Peeta into the dance.

To her shock, Mrs. Mellark, seemingly satisfied with her son’s “choice” of partner, turned and stared at Katniss, a smug look on her face. Katniss’ whole body went rigid. It had been the exact same look she’d given Katniss when Peeta announced he was dating Glimmer towards the end of their sophomore year. Wordlessly, Katniss stood up, a fury suddenly filling her that she had to accept was jealousy, the same she had felt back then. She looked at Finnick, who was now broadly smiling at her.

“Go save him, Everdeen,” he said. Katniss took a step forward, wondering what it was she was about to do.
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