Summary

For up-and-coming chef Peeta Mellark, agreeing to be the Bachelor on a popular reality dating TV show is just the means to an end in guaranteed restaurant success. But when Katniss Everdeen, a girl from Peeta's home district with an agenda of her own, ends up one of the contestants vying for his love, things get complicated.

AU. An Everlark love story inspired by "The Bachelor."

Notes

In deciding to try my hand at full length Everlark stories, I couldn't get this idea out of my head. I'm by no means a Bachelor fanatic, but I will watch it from time to time, and all snark is meant with love. : ) That being said, I just love the idea of Peeta as the Bachelor, and THG characters seemed to fall into place naturally as characters in this story. Please let me know what you think of this little snippet, and expect new chapters soon!
Prologue

"I can't believe you dragged me to this," Katniss sighs as she surveys the room crowded with over-groomed, sweet-smelling women. Desperate, over-groomed, sweet-smelling women. The line of them snakes through the warehouse-like restaurant and bar and well out the door down the street, all here under the ruse of finding love. Or instant celebrity, really. She's been in this line for over an hour, and she's losing her patience with Madge.

Madge smiles sweetly at her. "It's not that bad. They're giving away free champagne at the bar," the pretty blonde counters, nudging her head towards the bar at the back of the expansive space.

Katniss rolls her eyes. She doesn't want free champagne. She wants to get out of here and go eat the pizza Madge promised her if she went with her.

But this is what friends do; they indulge each other by doing stupid things with them if it helps to cheer one another up. It'd just be so much easier to tolerate if Madge hadn't made her wear heels. And if the girls in front of them didn't literally smell like cinnamon buns. The perfume is giving her a headache and making her stomach rumble at the same time.

Really, in the grand scheme of things, this is all Thom Johnson's fault, for dumping Madge last month and making her feel insecure enough to try out for a reality television dating show.

That's what's going on here, at Sae's Bar and Grill: a casting call. They'd posted flyers at the Hob, which is the bar where Katniss and Madge bartend. Madge picks up a few shifts to supplement her teacher's salary, and Katniss does it more frequently to make sure she has an income while she tries to cut her first record. Last Saturday, Madge had pulled the flyer from the wall, before the bar got busy, and read it aloud to Katniss.

"Calling all single beautiful women in District 12. That's us," she'd grinned at Katniss, who'd rolled her eyes while squirting herself a glass of water from the fountain gun. "Sick of bad blind dates? Tired of looking for your future husband on the internet? Come to our open casting call to find love with Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor. It's from noon to six next Saturday."

Somehow, Katniss hadn't been able to talk Madge out of this terrible idea. Which is why she's currently standing in a line of hundreds of women wearing too much eye makeup.

But it's when a group who's waiting a few feet behind them starts screaming excitedly that Katniss decides she needs a break. Some sort of producer has approached them to hand-pluck one very lucky lady for an interview, but their shrieks sound more like she just won the lottery.

"Maybe I will go get that drink," she tells Madge, asking if she wants anything in the meantime. Madge shakes her head, her pretty blonde ringlets bobbing with the movement. Madge won't say so, but Katniss can tell she's at least slightly disappointed that the lucky chosen one wasn't her.

It's sick, that the culture they live in can create a generation of women who think it's desirable to be selected to compete with 20 others for the attention of one man. And that this show, Panem's Most Eligible, which is one of the most popular shows on television, can make smart, otherwise reasonable women like Madge do crazy things like stand in line for hours just for the chance to compete.

Katniss approaches the bar, which is surprisingly dead, considering the sheer amount of people
here. When the bartender tells her they ran out of the free champagne, it makes a little more sense. Katniss smirks, not intending to drink crappy cheap champagne anyway, and scoots herself onto a bar stool, with the next closest patron two stools away. She drums her fingers on the old wooden bar top, which is similar to the one she's used to serving behind, surveying her choices of bottles that stand on display behind the bored-looking bartender. You'd think a male of mating age would be more interested in a bar full of single women, but he just seems annoyed. Not that Katniss can blame him.

"Johnny Walker Black on the rocks, please," she tells him, receiving an eyebrow raise in response, although he gets to work on fixing her drink for her anyway. It's a whiskey kind of situation; if she has to burn a hard-to-come-by Saturday night off here, she's at least allowed a decent drink.

After she receives her drink and pays, telling the bartender to keep the change, she sighs into the rocks glass, rattling the ice cubes slightly. Katniss sniffs the drink, its stiffness a welcome comparison to the mixture of perfumes she'd been standing in a few yards away.

"Excellent taste in liquor, Sweetheart," a gruff voice comes from the paunchy middle-aged man seated two stools to her right. He holds his own glass of brown liquor up when Katniss turns to look at him, caught off guard.

She raises an eyebrow, but doesn't respond.

The bar patron takes this as his cue to keep talking.

"You here for the casting call?" He chuckles his question, like he doesn't believe that's possible.

It irritates Katniss, because even though she's not, it's not like she's some dead slug who couldn't possibly get a boyfriend if she wanted one.

"No," she practically barks her answer. But then she looks towards the line that Madge is in, watching her friend tap her foot absent-mindedly, and sighs. "Well, not really."

The man studies her carefully for a moment before bringing his drink to his lips, slurping the liquid loudly.

"What? You're not interested in winning the love of Panem's Most Eligible?" His eyes twinkle with amusement, apparently finding himself much more entertaining than Katniss currently does.

She rolls her eyes and flips her braid off her shoulder defiantly. "I'm not interested in winning anyone's love."

"Good answer," the man tells her, nodding as if he's intrigued. "So tell me, what the hell are you doing here then?"

Katniss takes a sip of her whiskey, letting the hard liquor burn down her throat as she contemplates who the hell this guy is and why he's asking her so many questions. She should just walk away, go back to Madge, and leave this creeper to himself. But then again, he's her alternative to listening to competing conversations regarding how to make yourself more interesting for the cameras and whether or not this season's bachelor will be a millionaire.

And Katniss will choose the creepy guy any day of the week over that.

"I'm here for a friend," she tells him simply, studying him right back as his eyes continue to analyze her. He's not very tall, and his dark hair is kind of scraggly and starting to gray, but Katniss can tell he must have been attractive back in his day. And while he's asking her questions,
he's not giving off a vibe suggesting that he's hitting on her, so she doesn't think he's here trying to pounce on dejected, vulnerable women. Maybe he's the owner of the bar or something.

"And you have absolutely no interest in being on this television show yourself?" He asks her through narrowed eyes.

Katniss snorts. It seems to be answer enough for him.

"I'm Haymitch Abernathy," he tells her, extending his hand as he leans across the seats that separate them.

"Katniss," she replies, accepting the handshake, still wary of who she's talking to.

Haymitch grins. "Did you grow up around here, Katniss?"

Her suspicion builds with each question, and Katniss furrows her brow. "Why?"

"Relax, Sweetheart. I'm an agent, not a serial killer," he laughs.

Oh no.

"Listen, Haymitch, is it?" Katniss begins, pulling her drink closer to her. "There's hundreds of girls here who'd love to be on your show. I'm just not one of them." She pushing herself away from the bar, about to stand up to leave when he stops her.

"I don't work for the show."

He smirks as that grabs her attention back to him.

"I work for the bachelor himself."

Katniss groans. That's worse. She continues to resume her attempt to leave.

"Hear me out," Haymitch raises his hand in a plea to get her to stay. "He's from District 12. Around your age too, by the looks of it. I'm not allowed to be telling you any of this, but he's a nice enough kid. I'm just looking to make sure he's not surrounded by bimbos for six weeks. And you'd be a breath of fresh air."

Katniss has been called a lot of things in her lifetime, and that is certainly not one of them.

"Thanks but no thanks," she cuts Haymitch off again, shaking her head. Although she's admittedly slightly intrigued by the idea that the bachelor himself comes from her home district. She wonders if she knows who he is; it's a pretty small town after all.

"What if he's the love of your life and you just don't know it yet?" He laughs his question, so at least Haymitch isn't completely insane.

But Katniss just shrugs, standing now, and clutching her drink in one hand.

"Doesn't matter. I'm never getting married anyway. So I don't think I'm a good fit for your Romeo."

Haymitch looks her up and down, and she shifts uncomfortably at his unforgiving eyes.

"Oh, I think that makes you a perfect fit, actually."

Katniss narrows her eyes at him, trying to figure out what he means. It's a reality dating show
based around an expected marriage proposal at the end of it. So either he's fucking with his bachelor client or he's fucking with her.

"Well, like I said, I'm still not interested. And I have to go." She takes a big gulp of her drink, puts it on the bar top, and turns to leave.

Haymitch hasn't stopped looking at her.

"What if I made it worth your while?" He says to her back. Katniss stops short, unable to walk away like she should.

When she turns back around to face him, he looks as if he's already won.

"Now that I actually have your attention, tell me. What do I have to do to get you on this show?"

Katniss may be cynical, but she's not stupid. And the fact of the matter is she's talking to a Capitol agent right here in this stupid bar, and real agents don't just show up in 12 all that often. And if he's really as interested in her as he says he is, then maybe he can help her.

He grins as she slides back into her seat with a scowl.

But she has to know that there are some ground rules before she agrees to anything.

"First of all, what do I have to do if I agree to go on your stupid show?"

Haymitch slurps his drink again, taking his time in answering her. He shrugs.

"Like I said, not my show. But I'd want you to just be yourself. Try not to kill the other contestants while doing it. That's not asking too much, is it?"

Katniss raises an eyebrow, disbelievingly.

"That's it?"

He chuckles, setting his glass down on the bar so he can lean into her. He hunches over his shoulder as he smirks.

"And try not to fall in love, since you seem so adamantly against it."

Katniss rolls her eyes. "Not a problem." Hell, she's been doing that her whole life. But then her expression turns more serious.

"And there's no…physical obligations?"

That literally has Haymitch cackling.

"Jesus, you're not a prostitute." But then he narrows his eyes at her. "Are you?"

Katniss glares at him, and Haymitch laughs again.

"Relax, girl. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. I just want you there to say things these other women won't and keep my guy on his toes. Makes for good TV, you know?"

"So do crying drunk girls," Katniss mutters, revisiting her drink on the bar, rolling it between her hands.

"Ah. So you have seen the show."
Katniss's lips quirk upward in spite of herself. She looks back up at Haymitch. He's pulling something from his wallet, focusing on fumbling through the mess of papers Katniss can see sticking out from the folds, as he continues on.

"So, what are you anyway? An aspiring actress? Or maybe some Taylor Swift wanna-be?"

He looks back up at her, handing her a card.

"Do I look six feet tall and appealing to twelve year olds?" Katniss retorts with a scowl. But she takes it from him.

*Haymitch Abernathy*

*Seamless Entertainment Representatives*

*Senior Agent*

His contact information follows below.

Katniss can't quite believe what she's seeing, and she looks back to him with a mouth-open expression.

He winks.

"You and me? I think we come from the same place, Sweetheart."

The Seam is the less affluent part of District 12. It's where she grew up, in a small two-bedroom house that her mother was barely able to hang on to after her father died in a freak construction accident when she was eleven.

"And us Seam brats, we stick together," Haymitch continues when she's too dumbfounded to say anything.

"So why don't we go and get you officially signed up for this little show here, and I'll see what I can do with that demo tape of yours?" He tugs his coat off the back of his chair, indicating his readiness to get up and go as he speaks.

Katniss is beyond confused.

"How did you…?"

He smirks as he stands, motioning for her to follow him towards the producers' tables at the back of the bar; the tables she's been standing in line just to reach.

"Let's just say I didn't find you here by accident."

She receives chuckling in response to her furrowed brow.

"How do you think I got out of this hell hole in the first place? I'm very good at my job. When I'm interested in talent, I do my research first. You've been playing dumpy bars and venues all over this town for years now. And you're much too good for that."

Katniss's heart stops. Haymitch Abernathy, a real Capitol agent, knows who she is. And maybe even likes her. He could seriously help her finally get a real record deal.

But her excitement at her big "break" is quickly tempered by the knowledge that she was just
"So when I came looking for you at your bar earlier, and your manager friend told me you'd be here, I couldn't believe my good luck. Because I get to kill two birds with one stone. I potentially get to sign a new client, and in exchange, you help make my other client a fucking superstar. I can't lose."

They approach the tables crowded with producers, casting agents, and crew members awkwardly holding cameras in peoples' faces much too fast for Katniss's liking. And besides, her head is still spinning from what Haymitch just divulged to her. He was really looking for her? It just seems so unlikely. Something's up, but she can't put her finger on it.

"Wait," she screeches as she halts herself a few yards before they reach their destination.

Haymitch stops with her, but doesn't appease her and shakes his head.

"This is it, girl. Right now. You give me a few weeks of your time for this, and I'll take you to the labels you didn't even dare to dream of. Tribute Records. Career Records. Avox Music Records, if you're adventurous and want to go indie. Are you in or out?"

He stares at her with wide eyes, clearly trying to read her before she can make her decision.

Katniss looks behind her, trying to find Madge in the crowd. She left her a while ago now, and she must be wondering where Katniss went. But then she sees her, standing in a line slowly but surely inching its way up to where Katniss currently stands, and their eyes meet. Katniss's heart sinks. She knows. Somehow, Katniss has become one of the lucky chosen ones. Madge's eyes conceal their disappointment with genuine excitement, albeit confused excitement, for a friend. Ultimately, it's a look that conveys her approval.

And even if it doesn't make sense to her, Katniss knows this could be it; her big break. Born in the most unlikely of places.

Fuck, she's going to have a lot of explaining to do. And she's probably going to have to buy the damn pizza now.

So she turns back to Haymitch with a lopsided smile, steels herself and nods.

"I'm in."
Chapter 1: Leading Man

Peeta wipes his hands on a clean white dish towel as his phone begins to ring, the shrill tone and the jump of the phone vibrating against his granite countertop alerting him to attention. He quickly turns the stove top's burner down so as not to burn his dinner as he preoccupies himself with the phone call. Then he reaches for the phone, sighing when he sees who's calling.

Haymitch.

Peeta's avoided three calls from his agent already today, having insisted he have the day off from stupid promotional requests and even stupider casting opportunities.

Apparently being the runner up on a silly cooking competition television show makes you a hot commodity for store openings and late-late-late night television talk shows.

But just to stop the damn phone from ringing, Peeta answers.

"Haymitch, I told you no work today," he complains immediately into the phone, looking out over his breakfast bar into his spacious Capitol condo. It has floor-to-ceiling windows along the far wall, showcasing a breathtaking view of the mountains that frame the city. It's a far cry from his tiny apartment he rented previously when he worked as a sous-chef in a small, but respected, modern restaurant downtown. And it's an even further cry from the green rolling hills of District 12, where he grew up. Peeta still can't believe this is becoming his real life.

"Yeah, well, this couldn't wait. I've got some good news."

Peeta sighs, wondering aloud what it is this time. The last offer was for him to become a contestant on a show that locked all the participants in a house and had the players vote each other off one by one. It sounded worse than terrible. Besides, Peeta was busy enough building his brand. He already had five bakeries opened throughout the Capitol, and was expanding into the Districts shortly. He didn't need these publicity stunts Haymitch kept calling him with.

"Well, I better ask first. You're a bachelor, right?"

"What?" The shock in Peeta's voice is genuine—since when did Haymitch care about his personal life?

Haymitch grunts, sounding annoyed. "No wife? Or kids? No girlfriend, either? Or at least one you wouldn't be willing to dump?"

Peeta switches hands with the phone and walks the space of his kitchen, scratching the top of his
head in confusion. Haymitch is talking like a crazy person.

"Haymitch, what the hell?"

"Stop wasting my time, Boy. You're as single as a one dollar bill, right?"

*Rub it in, why don't you.*

Peeta exhales, biting his tongue to keep from blurting out the string of expletives he really wants to say.

"Yes, Haymitch, I'm single," he strains instead.

"Good. Because I just got a call from a friend at the B&C network. They want you to be the next *Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor.*"

"Isn't that the reality show where twenty women cry and fight for some jackass's attention just so he can propose to one of them and then call off the engagement within six months?"

"That's the one."

"Yeah, no thanks." Peeta doesn't hide his aggravation. How could Haymitch have possibly thought this was something to bother him about today?

Haymitch laughs, like he knows something Peeta doesn't.

"Listen, Kid. You hired me for a reason, right?"

"I'm starting to wonder that myself, actually," Peeta mumbles, opening up his fridge and digging for a beer.

Haymitch continues on, ignoring the disparaging remark.

"This isn't one of those stupid, desperate D-list bullshit celebrity reality shows. This is a full-fledged 10-million-viewers-an-episode bullshit reality show."

Peeta can tell there's an excitement to Haymitch's tone that isn't usually there. He tries to cover it up with his usual bitterness, but it's still obvious enough that Peeta decides to pay attention.

"It's contrived, and it's dumb, and it's not going to get you any brownie points with the snooty food critics. But right now you're a name that Panem has *maybe* heard of. This show will make you a household name. A fucking heartthrob."

Peeta's heart starts to race and he twists open the beer with a satisfying "swish" when the pressure releases from the bottle. He takes a sip, letting Haymitch's words settle into his brain. He's seen *Panem's Most Eligible* in passing before; it's been on for a few seasons now. The bachelors and their prospective fiancés end up plastered all over the tabloid magazines at the grocery store, and their insipid "love" stories make the evening news. Haymitch is right, the bachelors are known by practically everyone in the country.

But it still doesn't mean Peeta wants to meet his prospective fiancé on national television. It's not exactly the romantic love story he imagined telling his future children one day.

"Yeah. I guess I'm flattered they asked, but I'm still not interested."

He walks into his living area, towards the windows, and stares out into the mountains. The city's skyline is mostly behind him, since his building is on the edge of downtown.
He hears an exasperated sigh on the other end of the phone.

"Are you trying to kill me? And your career, before it's even begun? What the hell do you think is going to happen if you turn this down? That you'll open a bakery or two and live happily ever after in your smalltime little life? This will give you the resources to make your stores the hottest restaurants in the country. Everyone will want to eat at The Bachelor's bakery. I'm talking a multi-million dollar enterprise. And all you have to do is go on TV and make a couple of girls swoon over you. It's a no brainer, Kid."

"And what about the fact that I don't necessarily want to meet my future wife on a fucking television show, Haymitch? Or turn myself into a national joke? I'm sorry, but some things aren't worth giving up for money and fame."

Haymitch snorts in response. "Don't lay into me with your high and mighty bullshit. You and I both know that you didn't hire me so you could be mediocre. And you didn't go on that damn cooking show to live a quiet, private life. You want your chance? Here it is. Take it now. Or leave me the fuck alone from here on out."

"Are you giving me an ultimatum?" Peeta raises his voice to a full-fledged yell. So much for a relaxing day off. Now he's screaming at Haymitch like any other day.

"You're damn right I am!" Haymitch yells back at him. "This isn't about love, or marriage, or even meeting a pretty girl or two. This is straight, unemotional, fucking business. And don't pretend like I'm not right!"

Haymitch exhales, and there's a moment of silence while Peeta takes a deep breath of his own. He badly wants to yell back, to tell Haymitch this is a fucking joke and that he's never been more wrong for even suggesting something so stupid. He cannot possibly be the fucking Bachelor on Panem's Most Eligible. It's a desecration of all of the ideals Peeta seeks in his life: hard work that leads to a successful career, humility, pride, happiness, and true love to share all of it with.

But he can't tell Haymitch that.

Because Haymitch is right.

Peeta sighs.

He can tell that Haymitch knows he's won out, because his voice is exponentially calmer now.

"I set up a meeting with the producers at 9:00 A.M. tomorrow. The Arena building. You'll be there with bells on."

Peeta contorts his face, wanting to scream again. Of course he's already been offered up, like some sort of animal for the slaughter. He should've known better. Haymitch wouldn't have really left this up to him anyway.

"Fuck you, Haymitch."

Haymitch snorts again. "You're welcome."

And then the line goes dead.

Peeta throws his phone into his couch, because he's pissed and wants to throw something, but not pissed enough that he wants to break something. Especially when that something is a $600 piece of technology. It bounces a couple of times on the tight cushions, but remains intact.
He absolutely, without a doubt, does not want to be the next Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor. His stomach actually tightens from dread at the thought. He can't imagine trying to date 20 women at once, let alone while the whole country is watching. Peeta hasn't even been on a date in six months. And oh god, he has such a low tolerance for crying drunk girls.

Peeta shakes his head at himself, trying to ward off all of these thoughts running through his mind as he continues to stare out his window. Because he has to think of this as a business decision, plain and simple. An act, a ruse, not real.

Because that's all it will be, really. Right? Just acting. Putting on a show.

Not real.

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The conference room B&C has put him in is bright and airy at nine o'clock the next morning. There's coffee and pastries and about ten other people in the room all smiling and staring at him like he's a zoo animal. Haymitch sits next to him, swigging coffee like it's water on a 90 degree day. Peeta wonders how drunk Haymitch was last night; he can only imagine the man celebrated what was certainly one of his bigger scores as of late. A client landing a gig like Panem's Most Eligible is sure to bring in the big bucks for Seamless Entertainment.

And seeing how Haymitch is basically a functioning alcoholic, other than the massive coffee consumption, it's almost impossible to tell he's hungover right now.

Peeta opted to wear a suit and tie for the meeting, and he's glad he did since the room's full of suits. But matching everyone else in the room doesn't exactly do anything to put him at ease. In fact, he has to tug at his tie around the collar just so he can breathe a little easier.

Really, he's just ready for the meeting to start already.

As if reading his mind, a woman with neatly cropped blonde hair and a blouse that doesn't leave one more button buttoned than necessary gives Peeta an apologetic smile.

"We're just waiting on Mr. Heavensbee, Mr. Mellark. He should be with us in just a minute."

She introduces herself to Peeta as Fulvia Cardew, assistant to Plutarch Heavensbee. Plutarch seems to be the man in charge around here—he's the head executive producer for PME. PME is what Peeta has quickly learned everyone here calls Panem's Most Eligible. But so far, Mr. Heavensbee is ten minutes behind for their meeting.

"Would you like some more coffee?" Fulvia offers politely, as Peeta looks down to his still-full cup.

He shakes his head and waves his hand over it, turning down her offer.

"Ah, no thank you, I'm okay for now."

The last thing Peeta needs is anything to make him feel even more jittery than he already is.

Before he'd arrived, he met Haymitch outside the building on the way in, and Haymitch had at least given him a rundown of what to expect this morning.

"They'll bring you in, woo you, make it seem like you're the next best thing since sliced bread. And then they'll get down to business, going over expectations, obligations, and the bottom line. Just be your normal, annoyingly charming self and you'll be signing contracts before you know it."
Peeta'd simply nodded, swallowing hard. He'd attempted to portray confidence to Haymitch as he fuss ed with his shirt sleeves, making sure they lay well beneath the sleeves of his suit jacket before they headed inside.

They'd both calmed down significantly since their last conversation, and Haymitch even seemed to show some sympathy for Peeta this morning.

"You look good, Kid," he'd said, studying his client before clapping him on the back in an unusual display of affection. "You've got this heartthrob business in the bag. Just, uh, relax and let them do the talking, okay?"

Peeta still didn't really want to do this, and was convinced up until just about right that very moment that he'd be able to figure out at least one decent excuse not to agree to it, but it just didn't come to him. He was a single, 25 year old chef-turned-restaurant owner who had already signed up for a reality television show once. There really wasn't a reason not to do this show too, except maybe his pride. Maybe most guys would be honored, or flattered, or excited to be someone who gets to choose between 20 women all vying for his attention. But Peeta just felt humiliated by it. Like something was wrong with him for not being able to find love the old fashioned way.

And embarrassment just didn't make a good enough excuse to turn down a potential multi-million dollar opportunity.

So here he was, trying to give off his best heartthrob vibes while people like Fulvia Cardew offered him coffee he didn't want to drink.

As they continue to wait, Peeta tries to ignore the two men at the other end of the table furiously scribbling notes, since it makes him insecure about what they could possibly be writing about, as Haymitch makes small talk with Fulvia. He's asking if Plutarch still plays golf every Thursday morning with the other network execs when a large, round, middle aged man enters the room loudly proclaiming that he's sorry to have kept them waiting.

The room stands, and so Peeta stands too, watching the man who must be Plutarch Heavensbee laugh boisterously as he shakes Haymitch's hand. They seem to be old friends.

"I'll tell you, Mitch, I already liked this kid before, but when I found out you represented him, it was a done deal."

Peeta suppresses a snort at Haymitch's nickname and then he's shaking Plutarch's hand himself.

"Peeta, it's wonderful to finally meet you. You've been on my radar for some time now."

Plutarch's eyes are bright and his handshake is firm. But there's a certain lack of genuineness to the tone of his voice that keeps Peeta guarded.

"It's a pleasure to meet you as well, Mr. Heavensbee." Peeta smiles as he slips into a personality he's become accustomed to recently. In the limited experience he's had in this entertainment business, Peeta's already learned that it's better to give the people what they want rather than what you actually want to say.

Plutarch waves Peeta off.

"Oh no, please, call me Plutarch," he tells him as he motions for everyone to be seated, moving to take his own seat around the corner of the long conference table, just to Haymitch's left.

Peeta nods, smoothing his tie as he settles into his seat. He watches Fulvia immediately pour Plutarch a cup of coffee, and the room waits while Plutarch takes his first sip before addressing
Peeta again.

"So, listen, Peeta. I'm not going to pretend like we all don't know why we're here. But let's go through the formalities at least, okay?"

Peeta nods again, coupling it with an agreeable smile.

But, surprisingly, Haymitch leans forward in his chair and interjects before Plutarch can say anything else.

"Before you start, you should know the boy's got some concerns of his own. It's not a done deal, Plutarch."

Ah, yes, of course. Negotiation tactics. Peeta's sure that both Haymitch and Plutarch know that Peeta's eventually going to agree to this, unless B&C has him promising up his first born child or something equally as ludicrous, but what fun would it be without a little back and forth first?

Plutarch chuckles at Haymitch before taking another sip of his coffee. Then he directs his gaze to Peeta, unabashedly looking him directly in the eye. His gaze is intense, but Peeta doesn't flinch.

"I'm sure he does," he says, still speaking to Haymitch without breaking eye contact with Peeta. "As would any reasonable young man who's about to become a household name."

Peeta swallows.

Plutarch continues, his lips upturning as he talks.

"My wife, she likes to think of herself of somewhat of a stay-at-home chef. And one of her favorite shows is *Number 1 Chef*; she watches it every week even though it's on a network we don't mention around these parts."

The room laughs, expectantly, although Peeta and Haymitch remain reactionless, save for a polite smile Peeta offers.

"And so I sometimes watch it with her." Plutarch pauses again, and studies Peeta's face carefully.

"I also like to think my wife has wonderful taste in men."

"I must say, Peeta, my wife developed quite a crush on you last season. Almost enough to make me jealous."

Plutarch winks, and Peeta can't help the heat rising in his cheeks.

"It was always, 'oh, that Peeta looks so good in an apron. And the camera just loves his smile.' Or 'he's so sweet to help another contestant out when he doesn't have to.' And so it got me to thinking. I did a little recon investigation on that network's numbers, and as I'd suspected, my wife wasn't the only one who thought all these things about you. You developed quite the following in the weeks you appeared on their show."

Peeta was unaware that anyone followed him other than the homeless man who camped out on the corner of his building when he chose to beg aggressively for money. So, needless to say, this was news to him. And it made him even more nervous and uncomfortable.

"I, uh, I'm flattered, I guess. Sir." Peeta stammers, unsure of what he's supposed to say to all of that.
Plutarch laughs whole-heartedly.

"You should be! You made my wife fall in love with you! I should hate you, you know that, right?"

"Well, to be fair, your wife is the kid's age, so it's not his fault," Haymitch snarks.

Peeta's eyes go wide as they dart between Haymitch and Plutarch, waiting for a reaction, but it just makes Plutarch laugh harder.

"Touché, Mitch. Touché. But anyway, back to my point," Plutarch sighs, returning his gaze back to Peeta. He leans forward, resting an elbow on the table, cocking his head so that his finger rests on his temple.

"I may be a jealous man, but I'm not a stupid one. If a few episodes of a cooking show can make my wife fall in love with you, then I think all of Panem's ready to fall in love with you too. As well as one very lucky lady."

Peeta doesn't know why, exactly, but the whole pitch comes off so smarmy that his skin crawls. It is flattering that people who've seen him on television have found him to be likeable and charming, he supposes, but the idea of random people he's never met discussing his characteristics while casually observing him on their sofas is going to take some getting used to. And Plutarch is looking at him like a piece of meat.

But again, this isn't about what Peeta actually wants. It's about what everyone else wants to hear right now. Because what Peeta wants comes later; this is just a means to an end, right? And the fact that he might end up with some version of a fiancé is just a side effect.

"Like I said, I'm incredibly flattered—honored, actually—that you're even considering me for your show." Peeta pauses timidly, taking a deep breath before continuing.

"But I have to be honest. I'm a pretty traditional guy, and I come from small town roots. And I'm not concerned with the whole country knowing my name, or people liking me or anything else. I'm here to find my future wife. That's it. So I have to know that love comes before everything else."

Out of the corner of his eye, Peeta can see Haymitch smiling slyly.

Fulvia Cardew actually gives an audible sigh.

Peeta's eyes don't leave Plutarch's, and he sees the glint in Plutarch's eyes gleam brighter.

He points his finger, shaking it at Peeta.

"You. You are going to be very good at this."

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The details of Peeta being the next PME Bachelor come quickly after that.

Plutarch tells him they're working with a hard and fast six month timeline from start to finish.

"Once we've got you all signed up and the contractual obligations squared away—which I hope we finish today—we'll spend the next month casting the women." Plutarch nods his head towards a bearded man who Peeta guesses is his early thirties a few seats down the table. "Seneca here is in charge of casting. We typically start with 20 women, though we've been known to use a few
more or less depending on the talent that season."

Haymitch asks the question so Peeta doesn't have to.

"Does the boy get any say at all in his options?"

Not that it matters, really. It's not like Peeta's using this show as actual means to find anyone significant in his life. It's not real. But he plays along and sheepishly grins at Haymitch's question.

It's Seneca who answers, seemingly eager to pipe up.

"You don't get a say in the casting directly, because you're not allowed to see the women beforehand, but we can make sure to provide specific 'types,' if you like." He grins like this is a wonderful accommodation.

Peeta hopes he successfully disguises his grimace.

Haymitch grunts. "The kid should get some say of what he's walking into, no?"

Peeta gets the feeling this is just Haymitch trying to be more difficult than necessary, but he has to admit, it's an interesting concept. The idea of getting to choose the women he's to date in the upcoming months never even crossed his mind.

Senaca looks to Plutarch uneasily, and Plutarch furrows his brow, as if considering Haymitch's point, before answering.

"I'll tell you what, Mitch. Peeta can absolutely not know the identity of the women prior to the first meeting. But if you want to be present at the casting calls, we'll let you have some input."

Haymitch nods. "And I want sole decision power for at least three girls."

Senaca gapes at the audacity.

Plutarch ignores it and stares Haymitch down.

"One."

He says it in a way that it's clear it's his best and final offer.

Haymitch begrudgingly accepts it. Peeta knows it's more than Haymitch would ever have expected to get anyway, so it's still a win. That's one thing about Haymitch—he loves the thrill of the chase, the adrenaline rush negotiating gives him, and getting as much as he possibly can out of people. This is typically a good thing for Peeta as Haymitch's client. It's not such a positive quality when Haymitch uses these tactics to get what he wants out of Peeta, however.

From there, Plutarch explains that filming begins pretty quickly after the cast of women are finalized. They film for a little less than two months, and Peeta's expected to go out on different dates every few days. At a certain point in the process, once the field has been whittled down to three women, they move production from the Capitol to an exotic vacation location for an enhanced romantic effect.

"And then, of course," Plutarch beams, concluding his rundown of scheduled events, "you make your choice. And hopefully it all ends happily ever after with a proposal."

Peeta raises his eyebrows at this.

"So it doesn't necessarily have to end in a proposal? If for some reason I happen to not want to
marry one of your preselected women?"

He hadn't meant his tone to carry so much attitude, but it just kind of slipped out, becoming less and less patient while listening to Plutarch's litany of expectancies during the course of this show.

Plutarch laughs, but smiles tightly, leaning forward across the table towards Peeta.

"It's not required, no, in the sense that you're not contractually obligated to marry someone. Let's just say it's highly encouraged, and B&C is prepared to provide appropriate incentive."

Peeta swallows the lump in his throat, knowing he should have expected as much, but he's still taken aback by the un-sugarcoated candor. It almost makes him want to throw in the towel right now, say screw the enormous opportunities that will come as a result of this and just walk away. But he doesn't.

Haymitch, smart enough to divert the tension immediately, redirects the conversation.

"Speaking of incentive, I assume B&C's willing to buy us out of contract with NLN? As of now, he's currently obligated to them for the next year."

Oh, right. Peeta's contract from *Number 1 Chef* included them getting first priority for any future television appearances from their runner up chef. To be honest, he hadn't even thought of it.

It's a big enough issue that it focuses Plutarch's attention on Haymitch, relieving Peeta from a particularly intense stare.

Plutarch nods. "We've already discussed it with their lawyers. It's a done deal."

And then he turns to Fulvia. "Speaking of lawyers, this is probably a good time to call ours in."

The room becomes a pressure cooker as no less than three B&C lawyers enter with documents upon documents that they try to unsuccessfully explain to Peeta before getting him to initial here, sign there.

Plutarch interrupts them within minutes to remind Peeta that really, the most important thing from the network's standpoint is that Peeta doesn't break their confidentiality clause. This means under no circumstances can he talk about the show to anyone before it's aired. It gets trickier once the show begins airing, since he'll be doing promotional activities, but the obvious take away is that he doesn't give away the ending and doesn't provide any clues or hints to anyone, not even his own family.

This doesn't bother Peeta because he doesn't think he'll be too eager to chat about his phony romantic life to anyone anyway.

But shortly after that, when two of the lawyers are speaking at once and Peeta can't tell what either one is saying, lost in a foreign language of legal jargon, Haymitch shuts it all down.

"Listen, Plutarch, I know you wanted to get this done today, but I really think it's best if you give us the night to look it over for ourselves," he says, giving Peeta a knowing look.

Peeta must look as peakish as he feels.

"It's a lot for the kid," Haymitch continues when Plutarch doesn't respond instantly, instead looking a little shocked.

"We usually ink all of our deals inside these walls," Plutarch finally says, reclining slightly in his
chair. He's clearly pondering his options, weighing the pros and cons of giving into Haymitch's request.

Haymitch puts his hands to his chest in a deferential manner. "Plutarch, you and I go way back. It's not like we're not on board here, I'd just like the ability to go over these papers with my client privately, for more than five minutes."

Plutarch still doesn't budge, still pondering. Peeta watches him carefully, studying the lines of his face. The ones on his forehead crease deeply as his eyebrows furrow before looking at Peeta and then back to Haymitch.

Peeta doesn't know if Plutarch was about to respond, because Haymitch continues too quickly first.

"You also don't want these contracts voided down the line for undue influence, do you? Because I'd say getting a green 25 year old kid from District 12 to sign his love life away in a room full of B&C suits without his own lawyer present might not look too favorable to a judge if it came down to it."

Fucking Haymitch Abernathy. Cutting throats when he has to.

Peeta forces a straight face as one of the lawyers urgently leans into Plutarch's ear, whispering something inaudible.

Plutarch stares at both of them again for a moment, looking displeased, but defeated.

"Bring them back in the morning. Not a word to anyone."

***

They leave the Arena building on good terms with Plutarch regardless of the contractual showdown, and are in relatively high spirits.

"Where the hell did you pull that from?" Peeta asks Haymitch, once they're in the elevator.

Haymitch smirks, shaking his head.

"It's never a bad idea to Google a few contracts terms before entering into negotiations."

Peeta laughs, knowing Haymitch is only half joking, and slumps against the wall of the elevator, feeling an enormous relief to be free of that room.

"You weren't so bad yourself in there," Haymitch compliments. "Fat old Plutarch had dollar signs bugging out of his eyes when you went into that whole earnest small town boy bit."

"Thanks," Peeta responds with an empty smile.

Haymitch's face reads unusually sympathetic again.

"Take a breather for a while," he instructs Peeta as the elevator reaches the lobby. "We'll go over everything later tonight."

They exit the elevator and walk through the large, tall-ceilinged atrium towards the doors they came in a couple of hours ago now.

"You're obviously still signing whatever the fuck they tell you to sign, since this deal is still worth selling your soul for, but let's let them sweat a little first."
Peeta doesn't respond and picks up his pace, the freedom of fresh air enticing him. Haymitch is on his heels, grumbling about how he was only half serious and that he'd have a real lawyer look everything over first.

Once they reach the sidewalk, and the Capitol sun shines down on them from high in the air, indicating the early afternoon time it must be, Peeta exhales loudly, shaking his head at Haymitch. He feels like he's right back where he started this morning, when he and Haymitch stood in this very spot, Haymitch having to give him a pep talk just to enter the building.

"A fucking incentive to propose? What the fuck am I getting myself into, Haymitch?"

Haymitch stares at him, his face unreadable as pedestrians weave their way around them.

"You won't have to propose to anyone if you end up not wanting to," Haymitch tells him finally. Flatly. Like he might not believe it himself.

"Somehow I don't think that's true." Peeta glares at him, unappreciative of Haymitch's insincerity.

"Kid, if it comes down to some forced, fake, engagement that lasts a few months, so be it. It's not the end of the world. And they really can't fucking make you marry someone, that's why there's nothing about a wedding in the contract—it'd be voided for public policy reasons."

Haymitch's exposition makes Peeta raise his eyebrows.

"What?" Haymitch shrugs. "I told you already, I Googled "marriage contracts," and "void for public policy reasons" was the first phrase that popped up."

Despite everything, this causes Peeta to laugh.

They begin to walk in the direction of the parking lot where their respective cars are parked.

"So, the way I see it, you've got two options." Haymitch keeps pace with Peeta as he speaks. "One, we find you some girl who's willing to go along with the whole thing with you, so you can play your parts and then part ways amicably when it's all over a year from now. This shouldn't be too hard to find, since these girls are crawling all over the Capitol."

Peeta sighs, shaking his head, not necessarily objecting, just in awe of what Haymitch is saying. So much for reality television, right?

Although in the grand scheme of things, this is probably the most viable option. But Peeta's still curious.

"So what's option two?"

Haymitch stops, causing Peeta to stop with him, turning to face Haymitch and his mischievous smirk.

"Well, that's simple. You actually fall in love."

Haymitch snickers at Peeta's dumbstruck reaction. And then he shrugs.

"It's not impossible, you know. So stop acting like a bunch of beautiful women ogling you is such a bad fucking idea."
In the abstract, of course it's not a bad idea. It's just, Peeta's pretty sure the kind of woman he sees himself settling down with would never be caught dead on a reality dating show. So, to be honest, he's not exactly setting his expectations high for whomever shows up for him.

But it's like Haymitch reads his mind.

"Relax, Kid. I weaseled myself into your casting process for a reason. I've got your back."

Peeta considers this, raising his eyebrows, since Haymitch's taste in women doesn't exactly gain Peeta's vote of confidence.

Haymitch laughs again.

"Although, since you haven't dated anyone since I've known you, you're going to have to tell me what your type is."

Peeta's absolutely aware that he has a "type." When he closes his eyes, he sees her behind his eyelids. Or, at least, some made up version of her. Long, dark brunette hair and silvery gray eyes with silky, olive skin. He's been dating girls like her his whole life—probably on some level, subconsciously trying to replicate the original.

But no way in hell is Peeta telling Haymitch who—*what*—that is.
"I can't believe you're not more excited about this."

Gale sits at the bar, counting out money for the register as Katniss slices limes for the fruit tray. It's the following Monday after the casting call, and they're getting ready for The Hob's three o'clock opening. The Hob's owned by old Sandy Ripper, who everyone just calls Ripper, but she's barely around so Gale basically runs the place on his own. He's been managing The Hob for over five years now. Katniss has bartended here since she was 21 and old enough to—at first as a means to make a few extra dollars as she finished her degree at the local state college, and then picking up more shifts after graduation when it turned out her dreams of being a singer-songwriter were harder to come by than she'd anticipated.

Katniss makes a face as lime juice squirts her in the face and she tosses down the steak knife, annoyed.

She looks Gale in the eye, who's trying not to appear amused.

"I don't even know if I'm really going to go through with it."

Gale raises his eyebrows, which are dark and thick, and it's all he has to do in order for Katniss to know that he doesn't believe her.

They've been friends since they were kids. He's a couple of years older, but they grew up on the same street in the Seam. Both coming from fatherless homes, the two of them spent a lot of time wrangling up their younger siblings for their overworked mothers. Luckily, Katniss only had her younger sister, Prim. Gale had three kids to worry about.

From there, they'd become friends by default, hanging out after school and even attending parties together when they reached the right age. It's grown into a genuine friendship over the years, although most of the time they spend together is at work. But without a doubt, Gale Hawthorne is her best friend. Not that that's saying too much. Katniss isn't particularly friendly.

So, she's familiar enough with Gale's facial expressions to know when he's calling her out.

"Gale," she says, exasperated, "it's all such a joke, though. I could absolutely humiliate myself for the whole world to see—and then who will take me seriously?"

Gale shrugs as he rubber-bands a stack of twenty dollar bills, placing them in the bottom of the register tray.
"But who's going to see you at all if you don't do it?"

Katniss sighs and puts her hand on her hip. She's been playing bars and small-time gigs for three years now, and she's become popular enough to headline the local concert venue twice. She's has a couple of connections in the sense that Darius Coleman, a wanna-be music producer and drummer in a band she's played shows with acts as a semi-agent for her, even helping her record a demo tape to send to a couple of smaller labels.

But Gale wouldn't be wrong in pointing out that she hasn't exactly heard back from any of them yet.

"Overnight success stories don't really happen in the business—you know that," Katniss argues, half-heartedly believing the words coming out of her mouth. "And it hasn't been \textit{that} long since I sent my tapes out."

Gale's eyes follow her as she moves to the bucket of fruit, pulling out more limes. He shakes his head when she looks back up at him.

"You've never been any good at accepting help from anyone, you know that right?"

Katniss narrows her eyes.

"And you need to learn that it's okay for people to help you get to the places you want to go. I think you're going to find out that's how it works 99 percent of the time in the real world. So don't be so stubborn."

"So, what? I should be a bimbo instead?" She retorts, picking up the knife forcefully, wielding it as she speaks.

Gale makes her even angrier when he responds with a grin.

"And what exactly about the conversation you had with this Abernathy guy makes you think he wants to turn you into a bimbo?"

"Gale," Katniss yelps, as she begins to angrily slice more limes, "normal women don't go on these shows. You weren't there! You didn't see the group of lobotomized Barbie dolls that showed up for this thing."

Gale laughs.

"You're insane."

Katniss's glares at him, wishing harm upon him.

"No, seriously."

He stands up, pushing his chair back in, lining it up with the others before moving around to the other side of the bar with her.

"First of all, Madge isn't a lobotomized Barbie doll, is she?"

Katniss purses her lips, silently conceding his point, and giving Gale ammunition to continue.

"And second of all, I know what you're doing. You're scared as hell and trying to push opportunities away because you don't like the risk. And I'm not going to let you talk yourself out of the greatest opportunity you'll probably ever get, just because you're afraid some boy might not
like you."

Katniss's eyes go wide with rage.

"That is NOT why—" she begins to yell, but Gale just laughs at her again and winks.

"I'm just kidding, Catnip. Calm down. But seriously, who knows, maybe this could be good for
your love life too."

Katniss points the knife at him, grateful for a weapon in her hands at the moment. She'll kill him.

"Don't."

One word is threatening enough to force Gale to take a few steps back, but he does so while he's
biting his bottom lip to keep from grinning.

"I don't know what you're so worried about—what guy wouldn't love you, what with your
affinity for deadly weapons and overall pleasant demeanor?"

"Gale," she warns, through clenched teeth. But she does put the knife back down, realizing it's not
the most appropriate of behavior. Her arms hang limply at her sides instead.

Gale's grin softens to a lopsided smile as he approaches her, moving towards the cutting board and
fruit tray. He picks up the knife and begins to work on the limes himself.

"I'll just uh, finish this up myself, okay? Why don't you get the ice stocked instead? Less…
dangerous."

Katniss watches him for a beat as he slices the lime into six equal wedges.

He turns to look back at her when she doesn't move right away.

"They're going to love you, Katniss. I joke with you because it's funny that you don't see it for
yourself. Panem's going to love you, and whoever this shcmuck is, he's going to love you too."

He shakes his head.

"But god help him for it." Gale mumbles the last part under his breath.

Katniss doesn't respond.

There's really nothing to say.

So she grabs the ice bucket under the well basin and goes to fill up on ice instead.

***

Effie Trinket calls halfway through Katniss's shift.

The bar's busy in the sense that over half the bar stools are occupied, but it's a crowd of regulars,
and everyone seems content.

Katniss has no idea who Effie Trinket is until she answers the phone, her interest piqued by the
non-local area code. Haymitch and one of the show's producers—Seneca, he'd called himself—
had told her after they'd spoken on Saturday to expect a call early this week.

But the bubbly voice on the other end introduces herself and tells Katniss that she's the "senior
talent coordinator" for the show.

"Ms. Everdeen, we're so excited to have you as part of PME this season! I watched your tape and just loved you!"

Katniss makes a face as she cradles the phone to her ear by tilting her head to her shoulder, freeing her hands in order to twist open a beer bottle for a patron at the end of the bar.

Haymitch and Seneca had required her to answer a few questions in front of a video camera, telling her that every girl needed to have something on tape that they could give to the production team. It had mostly just been basic stuff like her name, age, and occupation. And Haymitch had spoon fed her the answer to why she wanted to be a part of Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor. Because she's ready to find the love of her life. Katniss had recited it on cue, and even managed not to gag on the words. So needless to say, Katniss is having a hard time believing there's anything about that tape that Effie Trinket could possibly love.

"Oh, um, thank you," Katniss responds lamely, rolling her eyes and regaining her grip on the phone as she places the beer in front of her customer, taking the three dollars he hands her in exchange.

"Anyway, there's so much to go over, but I figure we can do all of that once we arrive. You'll be available for preproduction filming tomorrow, correct?"

Katniss's eyes go wide as she finishes the transaction by placing the money in the cash register, shoving the drawer closed with a little extra oomph. They'd told her on Saturday that they'd have to come back to film more footage before she left for the Capitol, but no one bothered to mention that it'd be so soon.

"Tomorrow?" She repeats, her voice strangled.

Effie's laugh is light and airy. "Well, yes, I realize it's short notice for you, but we only have a couple of days before we've got to get you out here to the Capitol! You're flying out on Friday, dear."

Katniss's heart jumps to her throat and catches there. A feeling of pure terror overtakes her. Friday? As in four days from now? She cannot possibly be expected to show up as a contestant on a reality dating show less than a week from when she was unfairly bribed into the whole damn thing.

Gale emerges from the refrigerator in the back and sees her, frozen at the other end of the bar, and gives her a questioning look. Is everything okay?

Katniss sucks in a breath, shaking her head to wave him off.

"Hello? Katniss, darling, are you there?" Effie's voice chirps unsuspectingly.

"Yes… Yes. Sorry about that," Katniss breathes into the phone, walking quickly down the length of the bar, past Gale, as she leaves for the back room with Gale's desk and the safe.

It's easier to talk without people around. Or at least think. Because right now she has no words.

"So myself and a couple of assistants are set to arrive in the late morning tomorrow," Effie continues, none the wiser of her "talent's" current state of panic. "It's quite the outing for me, all the way to District 12, but the producers insisted I come."

Well, isn't Katniss lucky.
"We're scheduled to meet and film with you from noon to two. Now, it was mentioned that you work at a little bar and restaurant. How would you feel about us meeting you there and possibly filming you as you work?"

Katniss feels like she'd give her left arm not to do this, actually. But she forces herself to say something slightly more pleasant.

"That sounds...okay."

"Oh, perfect!" Effie coos, and Katniss imagines just what kind of woman must be attached to that affected voice. She'll find out soon enough.

"We'll probably use another location or two, for variety, but I'm sure our location scout will find something. You just worry about being yourself. And don't worry, dear. We'll have someone to help with your make up. For the cameras, of course," Effie adds quickly, clearly aware she'd sounded harsh.

Katniss sighs, feeling like the walls of the small, windowless back room are closing in on her as all of this becomes more real by the minute. Someone doing her make up for her sounds stupid, but then again, all of this sounds pretty stupid, so what does she know.

"All right then, Katniss. I'm sorry to cut this short, but I've got a big day ahead of me tomorrow and must finish up some other phone calls now."

"Okay," Katniss answers in a daze. "I, um, well, thank you." She realizes she's said maybe 10 words the entire conversation. It's a relief, not to have to talk, but it can't be leaving a good first impression.

"My pleasure, dear. And don't be nervous about tomorrow—we'll walk you through all of it! See you tomorrow then."

It's actually a nice thing of Effie to say. But it doesn't make Katniss feel any less nervous.

Katniss hangs up the phone, and stays in the room alone for a minute. It's a lot to take in—having just begun processing the idea of going on a reality television show in the abstract, dealing with it in real time is like being hit by a ton of bricks.

But now there's really no time for second guessing.

And honestly, Katniss figures it's likely that they'll fly her out to the Capitol on Friday and she'll end up on a return flight home within a few days. She'll probably just be some filler; someone to stand in the background while the really pretty, perfect girls are selected to continue on.

That's her best case scenario. She'll have quickly fulfilled her end of the bargain, and Haymitch Abernathy is all the sooner able to start fulfilling his.

A long weekend in the Capitol won't be so bad.

Completely worth it.

Right?

She pulls herself together and leaves the back room, making her way out to the bar, where she finds Gale tending to the patrons she deserted minutes ago.

He stops filling the pint glass with craft beer from the tap when he sees her, holding up his hands
in a *what happened?* gesture.

Katniss smirks as she approaches.

"I volunteered The Hob for filming tomorrow afternoon. Hope you don't mind." She walks past him, moving straight towards old man Cray, a cranky, retired police officer with a bad drinking problem, who's holding up his hand, signaling he needs another bourbon.

She swiftly scoops the ice into a rocks glass, blindly reaching for the bottle to her left, its location committed to muscle memory, and pouring four counts out. Cray always gets a little extra because he tips decently.

She hears Gale chuckle beside her as he serves the beer he just poured.

"Sounds like Ripper should get some royalties then, huh?"

Katniss grins in spite of herself.

The Hob appearing on national television is almost as ludicrous as Katniss appearing on national television.

***

"Excuse me, sir? Maybe it's best if you're not in the shot."

Effie Trinket, in all of her powder-blue suit skirt glory, stands behind the camera, frowning.

Gale looks up, first at Katniss, where she's seated at the bar, preened and camera-ready—finally—and then turns to give Effie an apologetic smile. He's behind the bar, trying to restock bottles.

"Sorry, mam, just trying to do the job," he tells her as he walks out of the shot, holding the box of bottles in his arms.

He moves to join her behind the camera now, where Katniss can't see them, since she's been instructed to face forward while they take some shots from behind. They've already filmed her working behind the bar, making drinks for nonexistent customers while Effie kept telling her to *keep smiling!*

"We don't usually show our bachelorettes with other prospective suitors," Effie says matter of factly.

Katniss bites her lip to keep from saying anything, knowing it's not worth it. Effie Trinket knows absolutely nothing about her except that she's 25 and from District 12. And she certainly has no idea who Gale is to her.

She hears a strangled chuckle escape from Gale's throat.

"I don't think you have to worry about that."

Effie ignores him, in favor of directing Katniss.

"Katniss, turn around and look at us over your shoulder!"

Katniss complies, feeling awkward and stiff, forcing a smile.

She catches eyes with Gale, who's amused.
Effie frowns.
"Now try it with less…grimacing."

Katniss sighs.

"I'm terrible at this."

Effie shakes her head. "You're doing fine. Everyone's unnatural in front of the cameras at first; that's half the reason we shoot you girls prior to taping the show. It gets you ready for them when it really counts."

Her words are hardly reassuring.

"You should film her with her guitar. She's a natural on stage."

Katniss's eyes bore into Gale like daggers. He stares back at her, straight faced, void of any tells as Effie whips her head to his attention.

"What, Katniss didn't tell you? She's a musician. A singer, really. She headlines the town's biggest venue."

Effie Trinket gawks at Katniss. Katniss isn't sure if it's because she doesn't believe him, or just can't believe Katniss didn't tell her herself.

"Is he serious?" She asks Katniss, flailing her hands. "And you didn't think to tell anyone?"

Katniss shrugs, still seated in her chair, but she spins around to face everyone rather than craning her neck over her shoulder.

"I told Haymitch."

Effie purses her lips and narrows her eyes, as if it all makes sense now, and she doesn't like why.

"Haymitch Abernathy?"

Katniss raises her eyebrows. "Is there another Haymitch I should know?"

Effie sighs and waves off the man working the camera—Castor is his name—telling him to stop rolling.

"We're done here."

For a split second, Katniss thinks maybe she's pissed this lady off enough that she's somehow worked her way out of the whole ordeal.

But then she's dragged back in to her current reality.

"Do you have your guitar with you or do we have to wait for you to go get it?"

***

They shoot Katniss strumming her guitar under a big oak tree in a park located in the middle of District 12. She gives Effie enough hell about singing a song that they only get her humming along to a few notes. Regardless, Effie actually seems pleased. She tells Katniss that the sun shining through the trees' leaves illuminate her in a "romantic" way, and that Katniss seems a lot softer with a guitar in her hands.
Katniss doesn't know what that means, but she's grateful that after ten minutes of filming, Effie declares that they have what they need.

"You know, I shouldn't be telling you this," Effie begins on the short drive back to the Hob, where Effie suggested they go over all of the paperwork. She twists her body around to face Katniss as she speaks, her face and poufy hair peeking out from around the passenger's seat. "But I think you're going to be one of the ones to root for this year."

Katniss stares back at her dumbly in response. She though Effie hated her. Effie should hate her, anyway.

"You're different from most of the other women I've met so far. And honest. Men like that, you know." Effie smiles knowingly with a nod of her head, like she's the authority on what men like.

Katniss looks down and runs her hands over the smooth surface of her guitar, resting in her lap as she sits in the backseat. Castor is pulling double duty as camera man and driver, focusing straight ahead at the road. She wants to tell Effie that she's not honest at all, actually, and that men don't like when women use them in order to get what they want. But she goes on pulling the wool over Effie's eyes a while longer, surprised by the feeling of guilt that hits her as she does.

"Thank you, Effie," she tells her softly.

And then she stares out the window silently for the duration of the car ride.

***

Thursday night, Gale closes The Hob early in honor of Katniss's last night before going off to the Capitol. He, Madge, and Katniss sit around the bar afterwards, drinking beers. Madge, who's been nothing but supportive these past few days, asks Katniss if she's packed yet.

Katniss snorts, sipping her beer before answering.

"Effie told me to pack lightly since they provide a lot of our wardrobes for us. I think she was afraid I'd show up in jeans if they let me dress myself."

Madge smiles pensively. "Well, you'd still attract the Bachelor's attention, even if you did, I'm sure."

Katniss rolls her eyes pointedly, not wanting to hear it.

"What?" Madge responds to her look, defensively, looking like she's about to say something else on the subject. But then she sighs and moves on instead.

"So who do you think the Bachelor is going to be?"

"Does it really matter?"

"Katniss!" Madge exclaims with exasperation. Her round blue eyes seem almost hurt at Katniss's blatant disregard for the intended premise of the television show.

Katniss shrugs, and rotates her beer bottle between her hands, its perspiration making the label peel at the corners as she does.

"What? We all know that's not really the point of all of this."

Her eyes don't leave the bottle as she speaks.
Madge shakes her head at her, narrowing her eyes thoughtfully once Katniss looks back up.

"You know, I think I'm entitled to a request. Seeing as you took my spot on this show and all."

Katniss groans. Although Madge is right, Katniss does owe her. And Katniss hates owing people. But she's afraid of what Madge could possibly want to even the score.

"So. While you're out there, catching your big break or whatever it is you claim you're doing, you have to promise me something." She looks at Katniss sincerely.

"Don't shut yourself out from the opportunity for love."

Yep. That's what Katniss was afraid of. She sighs, now picking at the peeled corner of the beer's label.

"Okay, Madge, in honor of you, and you only, I promise to fall in love and get married to a complete stranger, all in the name of a ratings spike."

Katniss expects Madge to get frustrated at her sarcastic response, like she usually does when Katniss gets too surly, but Madge actually seems moderately satisfied with Katniss's answer, her lips upturned into a half smile.

"That's the spirit."

Gale laughs uncomfortably. He adjusts his position in his chair before he changes the subject.

"So, what time's your flight, superstar?"

"Not until noon. I just check into a hotel tomorrow, and filming doesn't start until Saturday."

"Need a ride?" He offers, as Katniss shakes her head.

"No, Prim's taking me."

Gale nods, taking his time as he looks at her before he asks his next question.

"What do Prim and your mom think of all this, anyway?"

Katniss chuckles.

"I'm more concerned that my father's rolled over in his grave at least twice by now," she half jokes. She's fairly certain her father would not approve of his daughter making a spectacle of herself on what essentially amounts to an arranged marriage competition.

Gale laughs, able to appreciate a dead dad joke with the best of them. Madge cringes and sips her drink silently.

But Katniss's expression relaxes as she continues.

"But Mom and Prim seem happy for me, I think. Prim said something about finally being able to follow my dreams now, instead of worrying about hers. Whatever that means."

Gale tilts his head slightly so his silver eyes stare straight into hers.

"That girl's always been the smart one in your family."
Katniss smiles softly.

"Well," Gale says, looking at his watch and sitting up straight in his seat. "We should probably let the bachelorette get her beauty rest, right?"

Katniss rattles her bottle, shaking the remnants of beer left in it, and shrugs in agreement.

"But first," he says, before anyone moves to get up, "a toast is in order."

He raises his beer in the air, and waits until Madge and Katniss oblige him, raising their own bottles as well, only one of them grumbling under her breath about it.

"I'll be brief. But I have to say something now. Because things are going to be very different for you, very soon," he tells Katniss with a serious expression. "So I want you to know that I'm grateful to know you as the girl you are right now, while you're still grounded and not some famous celebrity."

Katniss scowls, and Gale puts up his hand to stop her.

"But don't you dare think that I won't take the perks of your future superstardom too. You have to promise to take me to the Grammys, okay?"

Gale grins.

Katniss rolls her eyes sheepishly, shaking her head.

"Okay," she says, only to appease him.

Gale makes them all clink bottles, and then he grins wider.

"Unless of course you come back with a fiancé. Then I guess you can take him instead."

Katniss shoves him playfully in the arm.

"Shut up Gale."

But she can't stop the smile that creeps up on her lips.

***

She's been sitting in a salon chair for over an hour now as multiple people do her makeup and style her hair. She listens to their mindless chatter, and engages them politely when they ask her questions, but she's otherwise tuned out, her mind on other, more pressing, things than what color eye shadow will best bring out her eyes.

Katniss hasn't seen any of the other women, save for two ridiculously beautiful girls who were checking in to the hotel at the same time as her yesterday. She assumes the show didn't want the girls mixing beforehand, but has no way of actually knowing because the only information she's received was a letter on her hotel bed explaining to show up here at 2:00 P.M. for styling and that they'd begin filming tonight.

Her room is swanky and spacious, with a view of the Capitol's skyline and an incredibly comfortable bed. She tried to walk around yesterday, to sight see, but got overwhelmed by the tall buildings and crowded streets—and probably jet lag too—and didn't last long. So she ordered room service and watched TV before passing out in that comfy bed, perfectly fine with the peace and quiet.
After tonight, if Katniss is selected by the Bachelor to continue "dating" him, she has to move into a house with all of the other chosen women. It's more conducive for filming, obviously, to throw a bunch of girls, all competing for the love of one man, under the same roof.

This is the part that terrifies Katniss most. Not the cameras, not the idea of being on national television, not even meeting a complete stranger and being expected to date him while he also dates other women. No. For Katniss, it's the female drama. She doesn't have many friends in the first place, and has never been a girl who's had sleepovers with manicures and pillow fights. So she's dreading the social interaction with the women she's already labeled as Barbie dolls.

But she only has to worry about that if she gets that far.

Right now, she should be focusing on the fact that it's taken these people over an hour to do her hair and makeup in a makeshift dressing room on the lower level of the hotel. It's literally some propped up full length mirrors, a chair, and a clothing rack, where a black dress hangs. Flavius and Octavia—her makeup artist and hair stylist, respectively, told Katniss she could pick out anything from the racks of clothing in the main room down the hall.

They'd seemed less than thrilled with her choice, suggesting she could always change her mind once she'd tried it on.

Octavia is just finishing up using a large-barreled curling iron to put large, loose waves in Katniss's long brown hair when Cinna walks in.

Cinna, as she learns when he introduces himself to Katniss, is the stylist for the show. He oversees all of the women's wardrobes and looks as well as the bachelor's himself. Cinna is probably in his early thirties, with dark brown hair and skin a shade or two darker than Katniss's. He's thin and wears a simple black shirt and dark pants. His warm brown eyes relax Katniss immediately, as does his lack of tattoos or piercings—particularly compared to his prep team.

Cinna tells her that at the moment, it's his job to make sure the women are adequately clothed. Apparently there have been some issues in the past that Katniss doesn't ask him to expound upon.

He looks first at Katniss and then to the wardrobe rack next to the makeshift wall.

"So let me ask you something, Katniss. That black dress hanging up—that's what you were going to wear tonight?"

Katniss sighs, wondering what the hell is so wrong with that damn dress.

"Yes," she tells him, her tone a mix of annoyance and defeat.

He nods, pondering her for a moment.

"It's a nice dress, but no one's going to remember you in that."

Katniss stares at him, unblinking, and tugs the robe she's wearing tighter around her body.

"I have an idea for you in mind, but you might have to trust me." Cinna raises his eyebrows, attempting to gauge her reaction. The genuine smile on his lips and the inherent kindness of his face makes Katniss believe she can.

She gives a small, mute, nod, and Cinna grins.

"You're not afraid of a little red, are you Katniss?"
**A red dress that's snug to Katniss's curves. It has straps and a scoop neck, and exposes much of her back. Cinna tells her it's a Herve Ledger dress and the way he says it makes Katniss think it must be a big deal in the fashion world, but she's more concerned with the dress hugging her legs so tightly that she's unable to walk. She shifts uncomfortably from high-heeled foot to high-heeled foot while looking at herself in the mirror.**

She's almost unrecognizable. But not in a bad way.

Cinna stands behind her, and he catches her eye in the reflection. His expression shows his approval.

"Now that's how you make a first impression."

Katniss turns, tugging the dress's hem at her knees, about to say something about how she's going to fall down in this dress, but Cinna puts his hand on her shoulder and gives her a reassuring look. Katniss keeps her mouth shut instead.

He fixes a misplaced strand of her long, loosely waved hair and looks her in the eye.

"Small steps," he tells her softly. "You'll be fine."

Then he spins her around gently so that she can see herself in the mirror again.

"You're a knock out, Katniss."

With the hair and surprisingly tastefully applied makeup—she'd been less than confident that someone with sleeves of tattoos would be capable of such restraint—and, of course, in this dress, Katniss has to admit Cinna's kind of right.

She smiles reluctantly.

"Even better when you smile," Cinna grins.

They're interrupted by Effie's excited squeal as she bursts through the door.

"Oh, Katniss! You look stunning!" As if she wasn't at all expecting as such.

Katniss can feel her cheeks turning a shade of red, probably matching her dress.

"Cinna, is that a Herve Ledger? It's just amazing on her," Effie gushes, her eyes admiring the dress as she pets Cinna on the arm. Effie's own fashion statement for the night includes a shirt with short leather sleeves that include spikes protruding from them. Despite this, Effie's compliments still feel like a vote of confidence.

"It is, isn't it?" He nods, still smiling.

Katniss swallows hard, looking between the two of them as their eyes continue to appraise her. Effie appearing means they must be close to show time, right?

"I just can't wait for the Bachelor to see you," Effie breathes, still taking Katniss in. "I knew Cinna would do an amazing job—with all of the girls of course—" she adds quickly, "but you just… well. Well I'm getting off topic now aren't I?" She sighs, stepping back and looking at the clipboard she's carrying in her hands.

"You're scheduled to depart for Snow's Mansion at six." She checks her watch. "And you should
probably eat something now, production won't feed you once you're there, and we film straight through dinner, until at least ten."

Katniss's stomach is in knots, and she doesn't feel the least bit hungry. This must be how the women on previous seasons ended up so drunk—they don't eat and then are spoon fed alcohol throughout a long, nerve-wracking party. She almost feels sorry for judging them now. Having a few too many drinks would make all of this much easier.

When Katniss doesn't have anything to say in response, Effie goes on.

"The President of the network, Cornelius Snow, lets the show use one of his mansions for filming. It's where the Bachelor gets to stay. Of course, you girls stay slightly down the road, to avoid unsupervised fraternizing."

Katniss stifles a chuckle. Clearly, Effie is implying secret rendezvous of the sexual kind. Which leads Katniss to wonder who in their right mind would sleep with someone else with a house full of other people that's under constant video surveillance.

She doesn't get much time to think about it, gratefully, because Effie goes into explaining that Katniss's car will arrive at the mansion, as each girl is escorted in her own car, and then she'll be introduced to the Bachelor one-on-one, getting just a minute or so to meet. After that process is done, there's a cocktail party of sorts, meant for the women to mingle with the Bachelor in the hopes of him getting to know them a little better. It sounds ridiculous, but based on those couple hours of interaction, the Bachelor then chooses the 10 women he wants to move on to the next "round," essentially cutting his dating pool in half.

At least when it's all over, either way, she gets to come back to her hotel room for the night.

"Oh, I just know you're going to have fun tonight, Katniss. I'll let you finish up here, and then I'll see you afterwards. And remember to smile!"

Effie can't resist giving Katniss a tight hug, and Katniss is unexpectedly touched by her gesture.

"Thanks, Effie," she says, purposely plastering a smile on her face as she does.

Effie nods in approval and breezes out of the room, surely on to the next girl.

Cinna chuckles once she's out of ear shot.

"Well, Effie's right about at least one thing. You definitely need to eat something before you leave."

***

Katniss is left waiting in the stupid car for a half hour. There's a divider between the driver and herself in the backseat, but it has air holes so they can communicate if necessary. Not like Katniss has anything to say. The half of a turkey sandwich she forced down back at the hotel really is going to have to hold her over, because the only thing that shares this back seat with her is a bucket of ice and a champagne bottle.

She gave in ten minutes ago and had a couple of sips, reasoning it'd help to calm her nerves. Which are absolutely making her a jumpy mess right now.

It'd be easier if she could see anything, but she's left in the dark until the car arrives at Snow’s Mansion.
Once it finally pulls up in front, Katniss is in awe. It's huge, with an ornate façade of stonework and turrets that belong only on a home fit for a king. Ivy even creeps up the sides, with flowering blooms bursting. Spotlights light the home up like it's daylight, even though the sun's well behind the mansion by now, on its way to setting. She sees water fountains flanking the sides of a stone pathway that leads to the front doors, but the front yard feels garden-like otherwise, with an abundance of planted flowers—rose bushes, particularly, are everywhere.

Katniss doesn't see him until the driver stops the car completely. At first, his back is to her, and her pulse quickens just knowing this is the man she's going to have to play nice with, captured on film for the entire country to see. He's dressed in a well-tailored black suit, with broad shoulders and a sturdy stature. Katniss catches a glimpse of his golden blonde hair and the profile of his jawline as he begins to turn back around to face her and she tells herself she's just seeing things.

But it's a flash of his blue eyes that confirms it.

Her heart drops.

Subconsciously, deep down, Katniss had a feeling she was going to know who the Bachelor was, at least in passing, given that Haymitch told her that he was from District 12 and that Effie has acted so strangely with her.

But never in a million years did she expect it to be him.

Katniss freezes, watching those blue eyes stare expectantly at her car. She can't move.

It takes the driver tapping his knuckles on the glass that separates them.

"Honey, you have to get out now," his raspy, annoyed voice huffs, jerking her out of her fog of ten year old memories.

Katniss swallows hard, pushing open the car door that feels like it's made of lead. She closes her eyes momentarily, saying a silent prayer that she finds a way to exit this vehicle gracefully.

And then she's got both feet on the ground, pushing her hair over her shoulder as she steadies herself. When she's able to look back up at him, it takes him a moment, and his face contorts from confusion to utter disbelief as his jaw drops.

"Katniss?"

His voice is deeper than she remembers. And his features have squared off with age, but he still looks the same to her.

She has a bemused look on her face as well, but remembers to smile.

His lips upturn into a grin of his own as she does.

"Peeta. Hi."
Chapter 3: She Had a Job to Do

Chapter Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all of your support with this story. And to those reviewers who mentioned aspects of Katniss's personality—I assure you, in everything I have and will ever write involving KE and PM, she will always have a spine, and he will always have twinkling blue eyes. ; ) And as always, your thoughts are much appreciated.

Song: Assassin, John Mayer

She's the fifth girl to arrive.

He almost doesn't recognize her. Peeta's never seen her dressed like this. She looks amazing, with an incredible red dress and long, flowing brunette hair, but it's her gray eyes on him that absolutely wrecks him.

Peeta'd genuinely thought the first four women he'd met were all pretty in their own way—and one, a blonde named Glimmer, was particularly memorable, but it doesn't matter who shows up now. They can't hold a candle to Katniss Everdeen.

He's standing in front of the President of B&C's mansion, with perfect lighting and perfect ambiance, and about 20 different cameras and even more people standing around, just outside of the shot. At the beginning of filming, before the producers started parading women out of separately arriving cars, the host of the show, Caesar Flickerman, interviewed him in this very spot. Caesar Flickerman is something of a television legend. He's clearly old enough to be aging, but it's as if he's not a day past 30, with tight skin, slick hair—a color between blue and gray, and a signature tan that gives him an orange tint. He's here to interject questions with Peeta every so often, to break up the monotony of meeting 20 women at once, and to allow the viewers to see Peeta's feedback as the introductions happen.

Caesar asked Peeta some simple questions about himself, which were mostly rehearsed beforehand with Haymitch, when he'd pulled Peeta aside to give him one last pep talk. Haymitch is also here somewhere in the wings, probably enjoying watching his monkey dance.

Fucking Haymitch.

Peeta knew, at the first glimpse of Katniss Everdeen stepping out of that car, that he'd been set up. That her being here is somehow Haymitch's doing. How the hell did he find out about her? Better yet, how did he find her? And why?

She was unattainable in high school, and a crush even before that, and now she just shows up in his life, supposedly vying for his love?

This is not good. Not good at all.

All of this was only supposed to be some stupid publicity stunt, to help get his name and brand out there in the public eye, so he can be successful in the restaurant business and then go live in peace.
His nervousness takes over his feelings of anger and betrayal toward Haymitch for the time being. His mind may be running a mile a minute but he can't get his tongue to move, glued to the roof of his mouth.

The cameras and bright lights are not helping.

Peeta gulps, restraining himself from tugging at his tie, wondering just how stupefied he must look. He wants to call the whole thing off, rather than have to talk to Katniss Everdeen. In twelve years of school, he couldn't find the courage to talk to her, and now they expect him to be Prince Charming on national television?

_Ha._ He's just hoping it's not a disaster.

Somehow, he's able to blurt out her name, and he's relieved to find his tongue still works. It comes out as a question, and he self-consciously wonders if she even remembers him.

She might not even know who he is.

So when she smiles shyly and breathes his name, Peeta's own smile comes so naturally it's practically involuntary.

Out of the corner of his eye, he can spy Caesar leaning over to a producer, whispering with confusion. Although everyone seems to have the good sense not to stop what's unfolding—knowing that whatever's happening is eventually going to make for can't-miss television.

"You're...here," Peeta announces dumbly, as Katniss makes her way down the path that leads to him. Watching her move in that ridiculously hot red dress makes Peeta want to groan out loud, and as she stops in front of him, he almost does. He hasn't seen her, well, up close and in person, in years. But now he really wishes he had.

Katniss's lips quirk, and her eyes dart from his to their surroundings—the cameras, the mansion, the people that flank them. And then they settle back to his eyes, flickering with amusement.

"You're the Bachelor?"

Peeta blushes at the accusation, then shrugs as if he can't believe it either. His adrenaline is kicking into overdrive and he knows they should greet physically in some way—the other women have all kissed him on the cheek—but he can't exactly figure out how to choreograph that one on his own. So instead Peeta stands in front of Katniss, trying not to fidget with his hands.

"I just can't believe you're—"

Katniss doesn't let him finish because she laughs, maybe even nervous herself.

"It's been a few years, huh?"

She looks up at him and Peeta aches to touch her, brush her hair that's fallen over her ear back into place. Of course, he doesn't. It's been a while, but he's used to resisting those urges when it comes to her.

Peeta nods, silently. He lets his gaze dip, but quickly brings it back up when he realizes looking anywhere else will just make the dull ache inside of him worse.

And then he sees the red light blinking on top of a camera filming behind Katniss and starts to panic—even more than he currently is—because that means they should be wrapping up so the next girl can arrive. Peeta hasn't even said two words to her yet!
"You look…really pretty." Peeta does his best not to mumble the words, but his tongue still feels funny. He cringes inwardly, hoping his face doesn't show how dumb he feels. This is the furthest from charming he could possibly be.

And that light keeps blinking, taunting him.

Katniss looks down at her toes instinctively, self-consciously. He holds his breath as he watches her eyelids flutter before she looks back up at him, her lips curling into an embarrassed smile. It washes over him like a cool breeze.

"You look pretty good yourself." Peeta notices she gives him a quick once-over as she speaks.

His heart pounds against his chest, and they continue to exchange nervous glances for a moment before Katniss breaks his trance.

"I should probably go inside, right?"

She's reacting to the producer who's waving wildly at them from the side.

Peeta tries not to look disappointed, aware he has to at least act interested in the 19 other women here.

"Yes," he nods. "But I'll find you in there, okay?"

Katniss nods back at him, her tongue darting over her cherry-stained lips as she leans into his body, touching his arm softly before she brushes his cheek with a soft kiss.

He closes his eyes, enjoying the tingling feeling her lips leave behind.

Peeta doesn't know why or how she's here, and he can't even begin to figure it all out as he watches her walk towards the door, his eyes not leaving her until she's disappeared inside.

Caesar's quick to interrupt him though, bringing Peeta back down to reality. Well, not reality, per se, but back to the confines of this show, where Katniss is simply one of 20 women and not the girl he's had a crush on since he was five.

Caesar lets out an exaggerated breath, studying Peeta carefully. He stands next to Peeta in a practiced stance, facing both Peeta and the camera as he speaks. Ever the perpetual television host.

"You knew that young lady, yes?" His tone is surprised, but it's a statement, not a question.

Peeta nods anyway.

"We, uh, went to school together. We're both from District 12." He pauses, just long enough to have Caesar waiting with baited breath.

"But we've never really talked before."

Caesar tilts his head, raising an eyebrow.

"You've never talked to her?" he asks incredulously.

It's obvious to Peeta that Caesar doesn't know at all how to handle this—clearly the producers didn't know that Katniss was a girl from Peeta's past. Or, if they did, they didn't tell old Caesar.

Peeta's eyes flit down, and he can literally feel the camera angle zooming in on his face. He looks
back up, tentatively.

"I could never work up the nerve."

Caesar lets Peeta's words dangle, his expression solemn, and he nods in understanding.

"Well then it sounds like you know Katniss just about as well as you know any other woman here tonight."

Peeta considers this. On the one hand, Caesar's right—he doesn't know Katniss Everdeen at all.

"I guess that's probably true," he answers softly.

But on the other hand, it's a complete lie. He feels like he knows absolutely everything about her.

Which is why he knows she shouldn't be here.

Then Caesar tells him it's time to meet more women.

***

Peeta bursts through the door of a study that's off to the side of the main wing of the mansion. It's marked as a production room, the conversion being a few monitors and spare cameras lying around. Haymitch sits leisurely, along with a couple others, probably producers or production assistants, whom Peeta doesn't know.

"What the hell was that?" he cries, harried.

The others are startled, but Haymitch just looks amused. He sips his rocks glass nonchalantly and nods his head towards the monitor they're huddled around, watching the live feed.

"Fantastic television. That's what."

Peeta looks to the other men in the room, unable to stomach Haymitch right now.

"Can you give us a minute please?"

Peeta's already probably breaking a hundred rules by sneaking off to chew out his agent, but he'd told Caesar he needed to use the restroom before entering the cocktail party he's supposed to be hosting right now.

Because this couldn't wait.

The men obey Peeta's request and exit soundlessly, albeit with intrigued expressions.

Once they're alone, Peeta squeezes his eyes shut, balling his fists as he grimaces and tries to find the words.

Haymitch sits, waiting patiently with a smirk as Peeta finally composes himself.

"How did you find her?" he asks through gritted teeth.

Haymitch raises an eyebrow, still unmoving from the chair he's reclining in.

"Is there a problem here?"

"Stop fucking around Haymitch, this isn't funny."
Peeta spins around to close the door, afraid of anyone overhearing the conversation he's about to have.

"She'd never be here on her own. What did you do?" He stares at the middle-aged man, trying to figure out how he knew. Clearly, this was not just a happy coincidence. And the mastermind behind it is currently taunting at him.

"What? I didn't do anything. Believe it or not, but that girl was at the casting call of her own free will." Haymitch sips his drink and chuckles to himself like he just realized he's even cleverer than he thought he was.

Peeta palms his eyes and feels his hands slide against the makeup that production insisted he wear. Just foundation and powder, for the cameras, but now they're probably going to make him have a touch up.

"I don't have time for this right now," he groans. He has to go mingle with twenty different women fighting for his attention for two hours instead. All while trying not to make an ass of himself in front of Katniss Everdeen.

"But I know you're responsible and I don't fucking appreciate it. You said this was just a business decision, damn it," Peeta hisses.

Haymitch responds with a pointed look and a sly half-grin.

"Why wouldn't it still be?"

Peeta crinkles his forehead and huffs.

"Fuck you," he says, pointing his finger at Haymitch, not having anything better to say. He turns away, pacing a few steps before turning back around to see Haymitch snort and shake his head.

"You really don't get it, do you?" He's at full attention now, staring at Peeta like he's a rube. "First of all, I didn't know you actually knew her. That was just a piece of dumb luck."

Haymitch stands up, upping his intensity further, becoming face to face with Peeta, and then lowers his voice.

"Second of all, that girl just made this the most interesting season of PME in years. B&C's already going nuts. And you were great, with your lovesick school boy bit."

Peeta's face falls and he suddenly feels sick to his stomach. No.

"So calm the fuck down and do exactly as I say from here on out."

***

He comes out the other side of that conversation dreading the cocktail party even more. The producers have staged the grand living space with more cameras and lighting, and it still feels spacious even though it's crawling with people. For every person that's supposed to be on screen, it feels like there's at least two more behind the scenes.

Peeta sees her across the room, standing in the corner chatting quietly with another girl who he thinks is named Rue. He tries not to stare, since he's supposed to be approaching a group of women on the couches and should act interested in them instead, but it's impossible for him not to. That is until her eyes meet his gaze and he's caught, immediately looking away, staring into his drink instead.
Everyone's holding some sort of beverage in their hands, and there are multiple staffers making sure the drinks are refilled off camera. Peeta learns this is strategic—the tipsier a girl gets, the more likely she's going to let her guard down and do, or say, something entertaining.

And that's all anyone associated with this show seems to care about anyway—entertainment value. Haymitch has already told him that the producers have basically picked out his top ten women already, rendering most of this evening moot, but here he is, approaching a group of overly eager, giggly women anyway.

Glimmer, the blonde he'd noticed getting out of the cars is part of the group, which also includes a brunette named Clove, another blonde named Delly, and a red-haired, fox-faced girl whose name Peeta can't remember at the moment.

"Ladies," he greets, hoping his smile is charming and not the grimace he feels like giving.

He stands in front of them until Glimmer pats the seat next to her. She wears a slinky gold dress that creeps up her thighs, and when Peeta takes the seat, she crosses her legs towards him.

"We were just talking about you," she tells him, her blue eyes raking over him seductively.

She's not wasting any time, Peeta thinks, gulping his drink.

The four sets of eyes on him don't help to ease his nerves, but it's nothing compared to the cameras and production assistants practically in his face. But he has a job to do.

He'd be remiss to point out that it's not like it's the worst job—these are beautiful women, after all. But it still feels like work.

He buys another moment by finishing off his drink, sighing inwardly as he raises his eyebrows suggestively.

"And what were you saying about me?"

She smiles and shakes her head, petting his thigh as she does.

It's enough to make Peeta fight a blush. He smirks instead, instantly aware that every woman here is now attempting to flirt with him.

Delly, the kind-faced, large-chested girl to his left chimes in to tell him that actually, they were talking about how she'd loved him on Number 1 Chef, and that she herself works in a restaurant as well.

And so begins the round-robin of women bombarding him with a mix of how much they just love him and tidbits of information about themselves that they think is important for him to know—Delly rides horses, Clove was a collegiate athlete. And so on.

It doesn't matter who he talks to, this is essentially the structure of the conversation. So, an hour and a half later, when his mind is numb and he's been discretely scanning the room while talking with an incredibly confident woman named Johanna, he finally spots her through the back windows, sitting outside on a bench under a large oak tree strung with twinkling lights.

Peeta politely excuses himself at the first opportunity, claiming the need for a new drink.

He swings around towards a server, swiping two glasses of champagne off his tray to authenticate his excuse.
And then he heads directly outside.

Her back is to him, and she doesn't notice him at first, so Peeta takes a moment, just looking at her. There's a cool breeze, and the wind blows her hair softly. It's peaceful outside, without all of the clamoring and loud chatter. The night air, despite the breeze, has a calming effect, and for the first time all night, Peeta lets out a deep breath.

If it weren't for the cameraman following tightly behind him, they'd be all alone.

His heart still thumps against his chest, but at least his tongue seems to be working now, lubricated by a drink or two and the practice of having talked to every other woman here.

"I see you found me," Katniss says evenly, staring straight ahead as he makes a move towards her, still out of her sight. He thought he'd been discreet, but maybe not.

"I've been trying to find you all night," Peeta answers honestly, if not genuinely. Everything about this night has a tilt to it that he just can't shake, caught somewhere between real life and make believe.

But Katniss Everdeen is as real to him now as she ever was.

She looks up at him as he stands in front of her, a small smile crossing her lips.

"I needed some air."

He nods.

When he doesn't move, frozen in place by her proximity, she furrows her brow.

"Do you need me to go back in? I know I shouldn't have left, but it was all just...a lot."

The last thing Peeta needs is to go back inside right now. This. He needs this.

He makes the executive decision that they can all let him have five minutes.

"No," he says softly with a shake of his head. "You're okay here."

He swallows as she eyes him curiously, then nods, satisfied with his answer.

"In fact," Peeta continues, jumping back into Bachelor mode, "I was hoping I could join you." He holds out a glass of champagne to her. An offering.

Katniss accepts the glass and motions to the seat next to her, a silent invitation for him to sit down.

Peeta doesn't hesitate to slide down next to her, their thighs almost touching.

The camera follows, filming closely from Peeta's side of the bench. He tries to ignore it, but he can see Katniss tense at its presence.

Then she swigs her champagne, laughing lightly after she does.

"This is weird, right?"

Peeta laughs too, staring straight out into the blackness of the backyard. It's more than weird. It's surreal.

"What? Are you saying you didn't think I'd grow up to have 20 women competing for my love?"
He takes a sip of his drink, turning his head with a smile to watch her face.

Katniss looks at him out of the sides of her eyes, unappreciative of his humor, and he contains a chuckle. But then Peeta watches as she studies him for a moment, her gray eyes narrowing slightly like she's actually thinking about his question.

Her voice is soft, and her words hang low in the air as she speaks.

"I wouldn't say I expected it, but I think if I had to choose the most likely person from back home to end up here, it'd be you."

Peeta inhales without letting go of the breath. He's not sure if it's a compliment or what, if anything, she means by it, but it doesn't matter, because just the idea of Katniss Everdeen ever noticing him back makes his heart skip a beat.

The revelation also gives Peeta a boost of confidence. He grins at her, raising an eyebrow.

"It's funny you say that. Because if I had to choose someone from home who's the least likely to end up here, it-"

"It'd be me," Katniss finishes for him with a knowing half smile. She shrugs when Peeta chuckles uncomfortably.

"It's okay," she assures him. "I agree with you."

Peeta wants to ask her why she's here then. How she ended up sitting next to him on this wrought iron bench with the twinkly lights hanging above and the camera man standing two feet away. He knows she didn't just fall into his lap. He knows she has a reason to be here, and that it somehow has something to do with Haymitch.

But he can't ask.

So he studies the soft lines of her face instead, drinking in her high cheek bones, full lips, and her silvery eyes. They stare back at him with what Peeta reads as a mutual understanding. A look that conveys that she knows. That none of this is really real.

Peeta swallows, blinking her gaze away and putting his grin back on.

"Well, I'm glad you're here anyway."

And selfishly, he is.

But he still wishes she wasn't.

Katniss's smile doesn't reach her eyes, and she changes her stare from him to the floor.

The cool night breeze upgrades to a colder wind, and Peeta watches her shiver involuntarily. While that dress is stunning on her, it doesn't exactly provide much coverage, and she must be getting cold.

He starts to shrug off his suit jacket, intending to drape it over her shoulders.

But Katniss's hand on his arm stops him up short.

"I'm okay," she tells him with a quick shake of her head.

Peeta instinctively looks down at her hand, feeling it burn through the layers of fabric creating a
heat on his skin, until Katniss catches his gaze and jerks it away.

She places both hands uncomfortably in her lap, looking away from him.

"Sorry," she breathes.

"You looked cold," Peeta explains.

The camera man moves, directly in front of them, his lens trained on both of their faces. Peeta wants to kick him, and he's so close, he could. The man's actually been unobtrusive enough that Peeta almost forgot he was there for a moment before he switched places. And really, Peeta should want to kick himself instead. He can't let himself forget that the camera will always be there.

He watches Katniss shrug her shoulders, taking a small sip of her champagne. She's still looking anywhere but him.

"It feels kind of good though."

Peeta leans back in his seat. It does feel kind of good.

If only this could be about what feels good.

"Do you still live in District 12?" He asks, knowing he needs to keep up the conversation. And provide the unknowing viewer with some more background.

Katniss finally looks up at him, nodding with a sheepish smile.

"I do."

Peeta smiles, knowing she still lived there. He wonders if she's still picking up shifts at the Hob, but can't ask her that without sounding like a stalker. It's not like he's kept tabs on her—honestly, he's lived his own life since he moved out of District 12 at 19, but every once in a while, when he comes home to visit, sometimes she comes up in conversation. Last he heard though, she was bartending, post-college. And his brother had mentioned something in passing about her playing a show at some of the bars near campus—Ryan was a PhD student at the state college on the outskirts of District 12—which made sense because Katniss always had a beautiful voice.

"I saw you on TV," she blurts out, interrupting Peeta's train of thought, and when he looks back at her, she's biting her bottom lip, like she's embarrassed.

He tilts his head back, chuckling softly. Peeta's been told by multiple women tonight that they watched him on Number 1 Chef, but none of them have seem so ashamed by it.

He raises an eyebrow teasingly.

"And did you just love me on it?"

Peeta means it to be funny, mocking what everyone else has told him about himself tonight.

But Katniss only provides him a confused look.

She takes a moment in trying to figure out how to respond.

"I…well…I don't know what…"

Peeta finally laughs, putting her out of her awkward misery.
"I was joking, Katniss. It's okay."

Her scowl is mixed with a sense of relief.

It makes Peeta laugh again.

"I don't expect you to love me. At least not yet," he says with a wink and a flash of a playful grin. The words just kind of tumble out of his mouth, and he's not sure whether they're the Bachelor Peeta talking or the real Peeta talking. A mix of both, maybe.

An amused but bashful smile upturns Katniss's lips, and she almost rolls her eyes but doesn't. Instead she locks them on Peeta's.

"Not yet, huh?" She's intrigued.

Peeta nods, feigning seriousness.

"Right. I expect it to take at least a week before you fall in love with me."

She finally laughs a laugh that makes her eyes crinkle. Peeta enjoys making her laugh like that enough that he doesn't mind that it's at the idea of loving him.

He watches her contentedly for a moment, until Katniss sighs, regaining her composure and tilting her head back towards the house.

"We should probably go back."

Unfortunately, he agrees with her. They've been out here long enough that he's going to get fetched by a producer or Caesar soon anyway. Not to mention the girls he can see from inside staring at them now when he cranes his neck behind him. Peeta probably hasn't made Katniss any friends by singling her out like this.

So he nods, and stands up, offering her a hand to help her off the bench.

This time he gets her full eye roll, but it doesn't stop her from taking it.

His other hand grazes the small of her exposed back as she stands, her skin freezing cold from the iron bench, but the touch still makes Peeta feel warm inside. His breath hitches and he gently redirects her towards the doors before leaning over her shoulder and into her ear.

"You go in first," he whispers, figuring it'll be easier on her if they don't walk in to the room together. It also gives himself a moment to refocus out here, alone.

She nods in understanding. He watches as she takes small steps toward the house, shoving his hands in his pockets, feeling like he's waking up from a fuzzy dream he can't quite remember.

So he startles slightly, hopefully unnoticeably, when Katniss stops halfway to turn around and face him.

"Peeta," she calls softly, thinking she'd need to catch his attention. Like she wouldn't already have it. She smiles when she realizes he's listening.

He could watch her smile that shy smile a million times and never tire of it.

"I'm glad you're here too."
It's a simple, nondescript statement that probably doesn't mean anything. But it still makes his knees go weak.

It's not even fair, the kind of effect she has.

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Later that night, after the ridiculousness of going through the motions in narrowing down the women from 20 to 10, Peeta lies wide awake in bed, unable to sleep.

Caesar had pulled Peeta aside shortly after he and Katniss had gone back inside, interviewing him one more time outside of the women's presence, making a big deal about what difficult choices he had to make tonight.

Peeta found that particularly funny because he was literally handed a list of ten names to read from at the "rose ceremony." Rose ceremonys are the culmination of the episode each week, where Peeta selects a certain amount of women to move on by calling out their names and handing them roses for them to "accept." It's all meant to be incredibly dramatic, and from what Peeta's seen of the show, it usually ends up with at least one rejected woman crying.

Luckily, no one cried over him tonight. He'd have been concerned if anyone had—these women knew him for all of an hour or two. Well, except of course for Katniss.

Haymitch said during their closed-door conversation that she's already the producers' favorite—the clear front runner. He told Peeta that as soon as everyone realized he and Katniss knew each other and saw his face when she stepped out of her car, that Seneca came up to him immediately asking about her.

Haymitch also told him that he was better at this than he'd thought he'd be—that it really came across like he'd been infatuated with her. The glint in Haymitch's eye had made Peeta even more fuming mad, since it was clear Haymitch knew more than he was ever going to let on, but Peeta hadn't said anything in response.

Because what was there to say? Haymitch would just make it worse somehow if he knew there was some truth to Peeta's reaction.

Besides, saying it out loud would also make it real, and if there's one thing Peeta's officially learned tonight, it's that nothing about this show is based in any sort of reality.

The rose ceremony was scripted for him, right down to the order in which he announced the selected women, who he didn't even get to select himself. Katniss had been first.

Supposedly it's a sign of how much Peeta's supposed to like her—it acts as some sort of signal to the viewers, as well as to the other women, that Katniss is a favorite. Some unspoken PME code or something. It did the trick, though, because Peeta noticed a couple of women shoot Katniss dirty looks when she was awarded her rose first.

But really, the other nine women should be put on notice—because the way Haymitch told it, how is anyone supposed to compete with unrequited young love? It's going to make for a love story the viewers won't be able to get enough of.

Peeta sighs, staring at the tall ceiling of the bedroom suite he's calling home for the duration of the show. He's staying at Snow's Mansion, meaning he only traveled up a flight of stairs to his bed, but he's been lying here for hours now, unable to even shut his eyes.

The part about Katniss playing the role of his long lost love—however unwittingly that may be—
doesn't bother Peeta as much as he thought it would. At least for now, it just means he's going to get to spend more time with her. It's hard for him to get upset about the idea of that.

What does upset him, and what's keeping him up now, is why she would want to make herself a part of all of this. He knows that Haymitch said she was at the District 12 casting call, but Peeta finds it incredibly hard to believe. She's not that type of girl—she wouldn't even date boys in high school; there's no way she'd go on a television show to find a husband. He didn't even think she wanted to get married, or so he'd heard.

And he also knows that Haymitch is the reason for her being here. Peeta's sure that Katniss was Haymitch's pick, but their connection eludes him.

He'd asked Haymitch earlier how he was so sure all of this was going to work—that people would buy Peeta and Katniss as some long-tormented love story when really all they did was go to high school together.

Haymitch had grunted into his drink.

"You're already there," he'd told Peeta cryptically. "Just keep doing what you're doing." Then he'd paused, considering Peeta for a moment.

"And as for the girl, I wouldn't worry about it, Kid."

The moonlight streams in from the large windows, across the bedding he's pulled half way up his bare chest, one arm propped under his head as he lies on his back recounting all of the details he knows about Katniss Everdeen and how that might get her in cahoots with his agent.

They went to school together their entire lives, graduating in the same class. Her dad died in middle school, and she didn't have a great home life after that. In high school, she was always working after school, leaving her little time for extracurricular activities. She was rarely around outside of classroom hours, really. But their junior year, the drama teacher had baited her into the lead role in the spring musical with the promise of extra credit in the math class he also taught. Peeta'd been in that pre-calculus class with her—she was pretty terrible at math.

But when she sang, she had the sweetest, clearest, most beautiful voice he'd ever heard.

He'd always had a crush on her, since they were five years old and in Kindergarten, but it took him sitting in the assembly hall on opening night of the musical, completely mesmerized by her, to know for sure that he was an absolute, total goner.

Peeta stirs in his bed, propping himself up on an elbow as the memory finally helps his brain connect the dots.

That's it.

He knows exactly how Katniss knows Haymitch.

Her perfect voice.

The shows she's played at home in District 12.

How hadn't he realized it sooner?

Peeta was right. She's not here to find love. Katniss has her own reasons to be here, and they have nothing to do with him.
Because Haymitch is her agent too.
Chapter 4: You Don't Know What Love Is

Katniss is just turning the water off from her shower when she hears the knock at her door. She makes a face, cursing Effie under her breath. She told her she didn't have to be ready until ten. It's barely nine now.

"Just a second!" Katniss yelps, hurriedly patting herself dry with a fluffy hotel towel before wrapping up in her robe. She gives her hair a quick pat with the towel as she practically hops to the door. Effie's going to think she looks like a drowned rat, her hair still dripping and hanging over her shoulders.

"I thought you said ten—"

She stops short when she flings open the door and sees Haymitch instead.

He raises his eyebrows at her appearance, staring at her expectantly as she stands in the doorway. She crosses her arms over her body protectively.

"What are you doing here?"

It's more of a complaint than a question.

Haymitch seems unmoved by her lack of enthusiasm.

"You should probably let me in. We need to have a chat."

Katniss scowls, actually wishing he'd been Effie instead. But she relents, moving aside to let him pass into her hotel room. She watches as he makes his way inside, surveying the room before settling in and taking a seat at the small table stationed by the windows. He motions for her to join him.

"I have to be ready to go in less than an hour you know," Katniss informs him with a sigh as she sits down across from him, combing her hair with her fingers.

Haymitch smirks. "Relax, sweetheart. This won't take long."

His eyes look her up and down and he shakes his head at her.

"You clean up pretty nice, by the way."

Katniss assumes he means last night. She would agree that how she looks now is a far cry from how she looked then. So she just shrugs, not disagreeing with his backhanded compliment.
Then she sighs.

"So what do you want?"

Haymitch doesn't respond right away, looking out the window for a beat before looking back at her.

"Last night went well for you."

Katniss narrows her eyes at him, already suspicious by his presence, and her concern growing by the second.

"Did you know?" she asks with a pointed look, requiring no other explanation.

Haymitch relaxes in his chair and chuckles.

"I swear to god, if I'd have known that was going to happen last night, I'd be a much more powerful man than I am."

Katniss gives him a confused look, and begins to plait her hair in a quick, wet, braid.

"So you didn't know we knew each other?" she asks, still skeptical.

Haymitch shrugs his shoulders, watching her with interest as her hands move quickly in her hair, expertly finishing off her braid in seconds.

"I knew you were the same age and that you're both decent-looking kids. I figured District 12's not big enough for you not to have noticed each other. But I didn't know there'd be such a… spark," he tells her, pausing to find the right word. "That part was unexpected."

Haymitch is still considering her carefully, and it's putting Katniss on edge. She crosses her arms across her body again, still wondering why he's in her hotel room right now. She's not stupid—she knew as soon as she saw Peeta last night that her net worth on *PME* was going to go up by being someone who grew up with him because the show would have to play to that personal interest angle. And she's also smart enough to recognize that Haymitch might not have been entirely honest with her for his motives of getting her signed up for this show. But she genuinely doesn't know what he's talking about—Peeta Mellark had never said two words to her before last night. She'd always known him to be charming—popular and charismatic enough in high school to be prom king, and last night, she'd figured he'd been no different with all of the women. Katniss certainly didn't think she'd been anything special; she never had been before, right?

She sighs, doubtfully, but doesn't question him directly. "So what's your point?"

Haymitch smirks. "In case you hadn't noticed, you're on a television show. About falling in love. So it wouldn't kill you to be just a little bit more loveable."

Confusion and surprise furrows her brow as Katniss stares at Haymitch silently. What the hell does that mean? Her expression must pose her question for her because Haymitch sighs impatiently. Like she's the one wasting his time right now.

"Believe it or not, and I can see why you wouldn't, but the network has you pegged as the favorite right now. Let's just say they're intrigued with the idea of reuniting two long lost lovers."

It's enough to make Katniss's whole face contort.

"But that's not—"
"Did you not hear the part about it being a television show?" He says it with such force that it makes Katniss shut up and sit up straight with attention.

"I'm not asking you to marry the boy just yet. Just give me something I can work with." He pauses. "And don't give B&C any reason to change their minds about you."

She's horrified and angry, but those feelings are nothing compared to the anxiety building inside of her.

"But I don't want to be the favorite," Katniss sputters, feeling like she's been tricked.

Haymitch shakes his head at her, his irritation growing more prevalent in his voice as he speaks.

"Life's tough at the top, huh? Well let me give you your first official piece of advice in the business, sweetheart. You want to sing, then play nice with the boy. To be successful, you have to make people like you. Starting with him."

Her heart sinks when she realizes what Haymitch is suggesting. Maybe it'd be easier to swallow if it wasn't Peeta Mellark but some stranger instead, but the idea of play-acting some made up love story with anyone sounds pretty sickening.

Either way, this is not what he signed her up for.

Not to mention, Katniss doesn't have a clue about how to get people to like her. Least of all Peeta.

"And how exactly would you suppose I do that?" she finally asks acerbically, once she realizes any further argument will just eat into her packing time.

It's clearly not a problem for Haymitch to understand how clueless she actually is. He sighs.

"If you can't find a reason to at least feign attraction to that kid, then I can't help you."

And he's right. Peeta's attractive, of course, that's not the issue here. It's really more that it's hard to believe someone who moved out of District 12 after graduation and never looked back would want anything to do with her, even in the abstract. Maybe the show's producers are crazy. Or maybe Peeta's better at this acting thing than she is. But she can't deny that she did get butterflies when he'd found her towards the end of last night. They'd surprised her, sneaking up on her and making her an absolute inward mess when he'd brushed his mouth against her ear, telling her to head inside before him. But she pushed them back down, deep into her gut, where they couldn't make her legs shake as she walked away. Last night, Katniss thought she needed to ignore the butterflies, and not let Peeta's bright blue eyes and smooth, slightly husky voice affect her. But if Haymitch is telling her to let Peeta affect her now, then that's not going to be the problem.

The problem will be how she's supposed to turn butterflies into love—even if it's contrived. Attraction, she gets. But she doesn't have any experience with love. Real or fake.

Haymitch studies her, and it feels like he's reading her mind, because his face softens.

"Jesus," he mutters, "you don't have anything to be scared of. It's kind of a sure thing. I'm just telling you to smile more. And remember that maybe, once upon a time, you had a crush on the kid. They'll eat that up."

Katniss swallows and nods in understanding, but not in agreement.

Haymitch looks at her, with a slight expression of approval, and then looks at his watch. He
shakes his head as he stands.

"And the thing about not killing the other girls in this house still stands, too."

Katniss rolls her eyes as she stands up with him. That might be the toughest request he's made of her yet.

Haymitch grins at her expression. "Actually, they're probably going to want to kill you—so maybe it's better advice if I just tell you to stay alive."

Katniss exhales, staring back into his gleaming gray eyes. He's clearly amused with himself now.

"I'll keep that in mind, thanks."

She walks him to the door, and as he's about to leave her to her last few minutes of peace and quiet, Haymitch turns back to her, pointing a finger, like he forgot one last thing.

"Your demo tape isn't half bad, by the way. I'd send it to Tribute Records now, but it's going to be better for you if we wait until the show airs. They'll be fighting over you then."

Katniss fights a blush in her cheeks. She doesn't know Haymitch all that well yet, but she imagines this is as nice of a compliment he's capable of giving. She half-smiles, hanging in the doorway with a knowing look. Sweet talk isn't going to get him entirely off the hook for the latest ambush he conducted.

"They better be, since you owe me now. I thought I was only signing up to keep the Bachelor on his toes, remember?"

Haymitch snorts.

"And that's exactly what you'll be doing, sweetheart."

Katniss narrows her eyes at him.

"That is, unless he sweeps you off your feet first." He chuckles to himself, enjoying Katniss's reaction—full of contempt.

"Have fun with your girlfriends in the meantime," he calls over his shoulder, taunting her, as he leaves.

As she watches him walk away, she wonders if he's had the same talk with Peeta. He'd already seemed to know what he was doing last night, though. But he's always been a natural charmer, she supposes. It probably comes more easily to him.

But, she doesn't have time to dwell. Effie'll be here any minute to move her into her worst nightmare.

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Her roommate is named Delly. Katniss had been hoping for Rue, who was actually nice to talk to last night, but she's already been moved in with a girl named Jacqueline. Delly's okay, she guesses. She's not mean or bitchy, at least. Overly nice, if anything.

The girls' house is huge, which is probably necessary with ten girls living in it, and all of the bedrooms are on the second floor. The good part is she and Delly have their own bathroom and queen-sized beds. The bad part is, well, the bad part is everything else.
Well, the only other kind of good thing is that while there are cameras set up throughout the house, and outside in the pool area, they're stationary so the house isn't crawling with people filming them like last night. Effie tells them that there will only be actual cameramen for specific events—like when Caesar stops by to announce the dates or conduct interviews.

But there's still the ominous feeling of someone always watching. Most of the other women take this to heart and show up wearing sundresses and full faces of makeup. Katniss was barely able to throw on a pair of jeans and a button up shirt before Effie came knocking on her door, frowning at her appearance.

She'd appeased Effie by applying a quick brush of mascara and blush to her face, but it didn't seem like quite enough.

"It's just that the cameras require makeup, even to look natural," she'd tsk-ed. "And the cameras are going to be paying attention to you, Katniss."

Once she made it to the house, it became clear that more than just the cameras would be paying attention to her. A couple of the women have already been flat out rude to her—less than an hour into their stay. A dolled-up blonde, named Glimmer, stopped and stood in her bedroom doorway while she was unpacking just to ask who she'd slept with in order to get that first rose last night.

There aren't cameras in the bedrooms.

But Delly had overheard. She'd immediately tried to stand up for Katniss, calling Glimmer "really mean," but Katniss had waved it off, staring directly into Glimmer's icy green eyes, coated in mascara. A thousand nasty words were on the tip of Katniss's tongue, but Haymitch's advice held her back. She smiled sweetly and held out her hand instead.

"I'm Katniss. I don't think we've officially met."

Glimmer had only narrowed her eyes at her, glancing Katniss up and down with pursed lips before finally turning away with a huff, her short flow-y skirt flouncing behind her.

Katniss raised her eyebrows at Delly afterwards, receiving a wide-eyed giggle from the perky, curly-haired blonde.

Apparently Glimmer had failed to realize that just because there weren't cameras in the bedrooms, it didn't mean their mic boxes weren't still on.

She told Delly as such to a dropped jaw.

"Smart," she'd nodded approvingly.

And that's when she went ahead and decided Delly wasn't so bad.

So now she sits outside on a lounge chair next to the pool, absently flipping through a magazine as a few girls gossip on the chairs beside her. Some of them prance around in their bathing suits, showcasing their perfect bodies, while others are still dressed to the nines. Katniss wears her shirt unbuttoned over her suit, a plain navy two-piece. She's thankful to be wearing sunglasses, because they help hide her excessive eye rolls at the conversation happening around her.

It starts out benign enough—Rue, the young girl from District 11 that Katniss had spoken with for a while last night, is talking about growing up on a farm, which is actually kind of interesting, when Cressida, a journalist from the Capitol, cuts her off and bluntly asks the group to share what they know about Peeta so far. *She must be an investigative reporter,* Katniss quips inwardly, turning a page of the magazine without having looked at it. She feigns disinterest, secretly curious.
to hear what the other women think of her former classmate.

Lavinia, a model in the Capitol with dark red hair and porcelain skin, sips her mimosa and offers that he used to work at a popular restaurant here in the Capitol before coming in second on Number 1 Chef last season. And apparently Peeta told her last night that he's been working on opening a string of his own bakeries now.

The information tugs at Katniss in an unexpected way. She remembers Peeta's family used to own a bakery in town before it burned down in high school. Rather than reopening, Mr. Mellark had retired and simply invested the insurance money instead. So it seems Peeta's carrying on his family line of work.

Johanna, who's slightly older but incredibly ripped, and on display for everyone to see in her string bikini, declares that that's old news by now. But she doesn't offer any new information of her own, instead shooting a glance in Katniss's direction, like she's scoping her out, which Katniss pretends to ignore.

"Well, what I do know is that he's incredibly handsome," Cressida giggles, and Katniss thinks she seems tipsy. "I mean those blue eyes? I thought I'd melt on the spot last night when he looked at me."

Rue sighs, and nods in agreement. "He seems nice too. He asked me all about myself before I could even get a question in about him. But I did find out he has two older brothers."

It's funny to Katniss, because she knows all of this and then some. As they talk about Peeta, which is strange in and of itself, tidbits of information pop into her head, like she's stored them away somewhere for safe keeping. It takes her aback, how much she must have kept track of him growing up. Because how else would she know that his brothers are Ryan, who's two years older, and Brandon, who's even older than that?

"Consolation prizes?" Lavinia suggests with a sly grin. Katniss isn't going to break it to her, but Ryan’s gay and Brandon's happily married with kids.

"Where's Peeta from, originally?" Delly asks, the last of the group to pipe up about their Bachelor.

Katniss tenses, although she has no reason to. She flips another stupid page, burying her face in an article about finding the perfect dress fit for your body type.

"District 12, I think," Cressida answers after a beat of silence. "A small town boy with small town values, I'm sure." Her tone suggests her every intent to corrupt those supposed values.

Katniss bites her lip, trying to focus on how a wrap dress is flattering on every body type.

"Where's everyone from, anyway?" Lavinia asks the group, after the obligatory tittering at Cressida's comment subsides.

Rue's from 11, they already know, Johanna's from 7, and Lavinia, Cressida, and Delly are all from the Capitol. But apparently Delly's parents grew up in District 12 before moving to the Capitol after college. The group thinks this gives her a built-in connection to Peeta.

Katniss thinks they're going to flip a shit when they find out about her connection to Peeta, then.

Cressida tells them that she knows Glimmer's from 1, and Clove's from 2, and that she thinks Enobaria's from 2 as well, but she's not sure where Jaqueline is from.

The girls grow quieter for a minute when Delly finally asks.
"Katniss, where are you from?"

Shit. Well, here we go.

Katniss peers out from her magazine, looking at the group through her sunglasses. They're all looking at her expectantly. She sighs softly and puts the magazine down.

"District 12, born and raised."

All of their eyes go wide, but Cressida is the first to jump on the information, leaning in as if getting ready to listen intently.

"Did you know Peeta?" Her question suggests a hunger for details more so than anything else, but it definitely carries an accusatory edge.

Katniss hesitates, and considers lying for a second, just to save herself the trouble. But she figures that's not going to make her any friends—or fans—in the long run. So she tells the truth, and nods slowly.

"Yes. Well, kind of. We went to school together. We weren't friends or anything though."

The girls all stare at her, processing her response. Katniss can see differing flickers of jealousy, shock, and contempt in their eyes.

But it's Johanna who verbalizes all of it.

"Let me get this straight. You grew up with the man we're all trying to date?" Her intense gaze makes Katniss feel very small.

Katniss nods. It's easier than trying to speak. Johanna's kind of scary.

In the silence, Katniss can overhear Lavinia whispering to Delly that that explains Katniss getting the first rose, and Johanna laughs.

"It explains a lot more than that." She directs her statement back at Lavinia, but doesn't break her eyes away from Katniss. Johanna's calling bullshit on the whole thing, and Katniss isn't really in a position to disagree.

"And let me guess. You had no idea he'd be here until you saw him last night, right?" Her voice grows, mocking more than just Katniss at this point.

"I really didn't know," Katniss responds, feeling herself getting defensive. She didn't set all of this up, and it's not like she has a say in how the producers want everything to play out.

"And we've never even talked before last night." She juts out her chin, positioning herself as unafraid of Johanna. "It's really not a big deal."

Johanna narrows her eyes and smirks.

"What are you, brainless? He can't send you home! He'll look like the biggest jackass if he sends home the cute girl from his hometown. It's like you have immunity. At least for a while."

Johanna shakes her head in disbelief, and then turns to the others.

"And if you're all so curious about small town pretty boy Peeta Mellark, you might want to start asking her your questions."
The rest of the girls stare at her, and Katniss isn't sure if she should feel popular or shunned. Some of them are clearly jealous of the advantage Johanna has just pointed out she has, and some seem like they genuinely want her to spill her guts on everything she knows about their Bachelor. They'll be sorely disappointed though—it really isn't much.

Then Rue smiles sweetly at her, looking as if she has no ulterior motive to do so.

"Were you surprised? To see him here?"

Katniss relaxes slightly at Rue's genuineness, her cheeks growing hot as she's unable to stop her lips from curling into a sheepish smile.

It's all the answer Rue needs.

And then Cressida can't help herself, even though she's still looking at Katniss like she's unconvinced.

"So, what's he like? Or was he like, back in school?"

Katniss swallows, recognizing this has already become a television moment. She has to say the right thing, in the right way.

She looks down and away before looking back up at the group of girls ready to hang on her every word. What is she supposed to share to them about Peeta? Everything she knows about him feels better kept safe, locked up with her. But that's confusing and doesn't make any sense, so she pushes the possessive feelings aside, taking her sunglasses off and sitting up straight.

"Like I said, I didn't really know him, not personally. But he was always kind to others. Everyone seemed to like him, he was popular. I think he was on student council, too. Oh, and he wrestled."

She catches eyes with Johanna, who raises her eyebrows. Then Katniss stares at the ground, embarrassed that she knows so much about a practical stranger. She wonders if she could recite these facts about other boys she graduated with. Possibly. But probably not.

"He wrestled? Did you ever see him in his singlet?" Cressida giggles, killing the last of her mimosa.

Katniss looks back up at her carefully. She'd attended exactly one wrestling match in her high school career, when she was a senior and Prim was a freshman. Prim had wanted to cheer on Rory, Gale's younger brother who was a sophomore and on the JV wrestling team. She doesn't know why she remembers this so vividly—maybe for the same unknown reasons she remembers the other random details about him—but Peeta, who was the varsity captain, had been supporting the underclassmen from the sidelines. She distinctly recalls having the feeling that his eyes were on her—because it had made her squirm, uncomfortably, at the time—and when she'd finally glanced his way, he'd given a little wave. She had looked behind her to see if he'd been waving to someone else, someone who would have been expecting his sign of hello, but no one was behind her. She'd blushed at his crooked smile when she turned back around front.

Prim had wanted to leave after Rory's match, but Katniss, entirely uncharacteristically, had suggested that they stay, even digging out a couple of crumpled up dollars from her pocket, coaxing Prim with a concession stand dinner.

At the varsity match, Peeta'd pinned his opponent in less than two minutes.

So yes, Katniss has seen him in his singlet.
But she keeps that story to herself. Instead, she just nods, inwardly appreciating the memory.

Lavinia gets impatient with Katniss's relative non-answer and asks more simply if he'd always been such a ladies' man, like he appeared to be last night.

Katniss was aware that Peeta was charming, but she genuinely doesn't remember him dating much in high school. Though she's certainly not an authority on the subject.

So she shrugs, feeling less and less comfortable with spilling information about Peeta they should be getting from him anyway, and not some girl who knew him in passing.

"I don't really know," she says, honestly but evasively. And then she overcompensates, "I'm not really the best person to ask. Dating...wasn't really my thing in high school."

Johanna shoots her a knowing look.

"But it is your thing now, right?"

Katniss tries to keep a neutral face, but the lines around her eyes wrinkle slightly.

"Right," she confirms, with a tight smile.

And then she picks her magazine back up, deciding it's time to end this conversation.

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When Caesar arrives later that night to announce the first week's date schedule, none of the other girls even act surprised when he tells them that Katniss has been selected for one of the one-on-one dates with Peeta. And because the cameras are present and this footage will surely make it to air, no one is outwardly grumpy about it either. The women sit around on the furniture in the living room, dressed up for the cameras again, as Caesar explains that there will be one group date for six of the women, all going "out" with Peeta at the same time, a two-on-one date in which two women will go on a date with Peeta, and then finally two one-on-one dates round out the busy Bachelor's line up. Glimmer receives the other one-on-one date, and Clove and Enobaria have been chosen for the two-on-one date. The rest of the women are relegated to the undesirable group outing.

Of course, each date has a "theme," because this is television, and nothing can be natural or normal. So each "date" comes with a little card giving the girls clues as to what to expect. Katniss has never been more relieved to see her card with a pine tree drawn on it and a note telling her to wear comfortable walking shoes. It must mean her planned date is something outdoors, which is more than she could have hoped for.

But she's going to have to wait a few days—all of the other dates are scheduled to happen before hers.

Luckily, Caesar's in and out pretty quickly, and Katniss avoids interaction with the other girls, who are too busy trying to guess the details of their respective dates. She's able to sneak out relatively undetected, relieved to make an early bedtime after a taxing day, but she's sure Glimmer, and Clove—a sharp-featured brunette who's befriended Glimmer and shares her propensity for bitchiness—are giving her dirty looks to her back.

She's going to have to remind Delly to lock their door when she comes in for the night. They legitimately seem like girls who would come in in the middle of the night and shave her head while she slept or something.
But she falls asleep almost as soon as her head hits the pillow, so she doesn't even have the chance.

Fortunately, Katniss makes it to her date day unscathed with a full head of hair. She's also become closer with Delly, and Rue too, who have been nothing but nice to her as they've spent the last four days together. They're the ones who tell her the group date was essentially a disaster—the camera crews being more worried about getting the right shots of the seven of them at the amusement park the show had taken them to than making sure there was actual interaction between Peeta and any of the girls. Delly says that she only got about five minutes of time alone with him, while they rode the scrambler together, and all they'd done was establish that Peeta liked Delly's dress and that her grandparents lived a few streets over from Peeta's parents. And that had seemed like a victory to her. As had not throwing up on him.

They also inform Katniss that they're pretty sure Glimmer's been lying to everyone about making out with Peeta on her one-on-one date, since Rue overheard Clove grumbling to Cressida in the kitchen that Peeta had told her on their date that he was taking things slowly this week, and there was no way he'd actually make out with Glimmer if he wouldn't even kiss Clove goodnight.

Katniss isn't convinced, but no one else claims to have interacted physically with Peeta beyond a hug or a kiss on the cheek, so maybe they're right.

Not that it matters, as the three of them hide out in Delly and Katniss's room while Katniss gets ready for her date. Delly's rummaging through her drawers, trying to find a shirt she insists Katniss should wear today, and Katniss is letting her look, even though it's pointless because Delly's boobs are two cup sizes bigger than hers, and Katniss isn't changing anyway. It's a bright, warm, sunny day, and Katniss wears a pair of chino shorts with a favorite simple, loose white v-neck shirt that's slightly dressier than a t-shirt. She's tied a long-sleeve plaid button up around her waist, in case the weather gets cooler, and she wears a pair of hiking boots, because she was instructed to do so. And her hair is braided over her shoulder.

No one let her get away with not wearing makeup, though—including a production assistant who, earlier, had handed her a tub of finishing powder she claimed Katniss needed to apply to keep from looking too shiny on camera. Katniss begrudgingly put it on over simple foundation, a swipe of eye shadow, mascara, and blush. And Delly had made her put on lip gloss that tasted like strawberries.

"What time do you leave again?" Rue asks, watching Katniss clasp a simple pendant necklace around her neck from her position on Delly's bed.

"Umm, in twenty minutes," Katniss answers after checking her watch once her hands are free. She lets out a deep breath.

Rue smiles knowingly.

"Nervous?"

Katniss scrunches her face, looking between her and Delly, who's still digging for the "perfect" shirt.

"A little bit," she confesses, catching her reflection in the mirror and brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "More so for the cameras and stuff, you know?"

Rue nods vigorously. "They're kind of awful. But it should hopefully be easier for you, since
there's only two of you today,” she tells Katniss brightly.

Katniss shrugs. *We'll see about that.*

Delly comes up clutching some pink, lacy monstrosity and it's all Katniss can do not to wrinkle her nose. Even Rue tries to hide the face she makes.

"Delly," Katniss tells her gently, "thank you, but I think I'm okay in this."

Delly sighs, plopping down on her bed next to Rue.

"I just thought you'd want to look a little more feminine for him, is all."

Katniss laughs an honest, amused laugh.

"I think there's more to femininity than pink," she smiles with a playful eyebrow raise, once she recovers. This successfully appeases Delly, whose eyes go wide.

"Oh, Katniss, if he kisses you, you have to promise to tell us so we can rub it in Glimmer's face."

Katniss laughs again, but her stomach turns slightly. She's already got too many dishonest incentives pushing her into this date—she does not need to add spite to the list.

And so she doesn't promise Delly anything.

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She's dropped off at a park on the outskirts of the city at the base of a hiking trail. The terrain is mountainous, but the really big ranges can still be seen at a distance, so they're not entirely off the beaten path. The park looks like it's popular with city people; where the trails are probably easy enough to complete in a few hours.

It doesn't take a genius to guess they're going on a hike.

Peeta, with his production team in tow, is already there. She absently wonders how the cameramen are going to fare, thinking it's no simple task to climb a mountain with a camera on your shoulder. But then she gets a better look at Peeta, dressed in casual khaki shorts and a well-fitting t-shirt, a baseball cap adorning his head with his blonde locks peeking out around his ears, and it becomes hard to focus on anything else.

"Hey," he calls out to greet her, grinning as she approaches. Katniss tries to ignore the cameras and the crew members standing around them, doing her best to act like this is just a normal, average date. She could have theoretically ended up on a hiking date with Peeta Mellark in real life, right?

"Hi," she replies, matching his smile, and he opens his arms to give her an easy hug. She tries to relax as she returns his embrace, but her pulse picks up at his touch.

And he smells good. Clean and slightly sweet, like a good, masculine soap. It mixes well with the fresh air and pine trees that surround them.

Peeta pulls back and raises his eyebrows playfully.

"How's your week been so far?"

Katniss recognizes that he's implying that things might not have gone 100% smoothly at the house, but to the outside viewer, he's simply making small talk.
She smiles with a small laugh, shrugging her shoulders. "All right. Better now."

Peeta’s grin widens, his eyes sparkling, and he seems so honestly excited to see her that she worries she won't be able to keep up with him. He's such a natural at this.

"Mine too," he replies, and his hand moves to the small of her back, guiding her gently as he turns them to face a sign indicating the start of a trail about 20 yards away.

"So. Are you up for a little walk?"

Katniss laughs.

"Sounds like fun." She spins around once, taking in their surroundings. The sun streams in through the foliage, warm on her bare skin. It's also relatively quiet, and Katniss realizes that minus the production crew, there's no one else around. They must have shut down the trail just for them.

"I thought if anyone would be up for something like this, it'd be you," Peeta explains as they head toward the well-traveled path.

Katniss looks at him wearily.

"How far are we going, exactly?"

He shakes his head, knowing the answer, but unwilling to share it.

"Just far enough," he tells her instead, and the devilish look that accompanies his response suggests he's feeling playful.

Katniss rolls her eyes good-naturedly.

"I don't need provisions, do I?"

Peeta laughs. "Nope. Just me."

Her heart flutters, but she narrows her eyes at him.

"I need you?"

Peeta nods solemnly.

"For protection."

Katniss stops short, skeptically.

"Protection? From what?" She's no expert on the mountains of the Capitol, but she's held her own on a camping trip or two back home.

"Oh, it's probably nothing to worry about. But you know, the usual. Coyotes. Bears. The occasional mountain lion."

Katniss furrows her brow, confused and a little worried. She's pretty sure the Capitol park system wouldn't willingly allow its residents to trek through coyote-infested territories, but maybe Peeta knows something she doesn't.

And then Peeta grins, adjusting his hat by the brim.
"I'm just kidding. It's perfectly safe. I've walked this trail before myself."

He winks.

"I just wanted to hear you say you needed me."

Katniss's mouth hangs open, in part in disbelief, in part in annoyance, and okay, a little bit in amusement too. Anyone else dropping a line like that on her would have instantly turned her off. But with Peeta and his boyish grin, somehow it works.

Which makes sense, she guesses. He's the Bachelor for a reason.

"Yeah, well, if we happen to come across any bears, you just volunteered yourself as the sacrificial lamb."

Peeta chuckles and they continue moving, passing around a large tree set in the dead center of the path.

"Deal," he calls behind him, leading the way. "Anything for you."

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They continue on for a while, the terrain changing slightly as they ascend the small mountain. Surprisingly, the two-man camera crew that follows them is tagging along without trouble. While they climb, she chats easily with Peeta, mostly because he's so good at carrying the conversation, but also because it feels safe to tell him about Prim, and how she's a premed student, or how she's bartending at The Hob, still trying to figure out what she wants to do, but purposely doesn't mention the singing thing. And she's genuinely interested in what he's been up to the past seven years, so when she asks about it, it's not just because Haymitch would want her to. Peeta's in the middle of telling her that while his life in the Capitol is fast-paced and exciting, it doesn't give him the same feeling of home that District 12 does when he stops short at a bramble of berries.

He looks at her, his eyes challenging her.

"Do you want to try some wild Capitol raspberries?"

She looks down at the berries, then back up at him, trying not to show her concern. Katniss assumes Peeta knows what he's doing and that he's not trying to kill her, or stupid enough to do so accidentally.

"They're safe to eat," he assures her, reading her expression, and squats down to pick a few plump red berries off their branches.

"I've hiked this course before. Haven't dropped dead yet," he grins, popping a berry into his mouth as he stands back up. She watches him carefully as he chews, flipping her braid over her shoulder.

"See?" Peeta sticks out his tongue, blood-red from the berry juice, as proof that they're safe.

She smiles reluctantly and holds out her palm so he can drop a large raspberry into it. She examines it in her hand, wanting to see it for herself even though she trusts Peeta. It's much bigger than the ones she buys at the grocery store, but otherwise looks the same. It's large enough that she actually bites into it, which leaves some of its juice on her lips as she chews.

Peeta's eyes are trained on her, and before she realizes what he's doing, his thumb brushes the corner of her bottom lip, feeling rough and warm, ridding it of the raspberry's remnants. Katniss
stares into the flecks of green that ring the pupils of his blue eyes as he does.

"Good?" he breathes.

She nods, swallowing the rest of the tart, sweet fruit along with the lump in her throat. She instinctively runs her tongue along her bottom lip, tasting the faint amount of salt his thumb left behind.

"Told you," he says with a wolfish grin.

It makes her shiver.

Peeta offers her the rest of the berries in his hand, and pops them into his own mouth when she declines.

His eyes finally break away from her, looking back towards the trail as he tells her that it's probably better that way because she wouldn't want to spoil her meal.

"We're almost there anyway. C'mon."

Katniss doesn't know exactly where there is, but she's willing to follow.

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Peeta leads her to the top of a landing that overlooks a valley as well as the mountain range in the distance. They haven't made it all the way up the trail, but have gone far enough that Katniss is tired and perfectly fine with stopping. The landing is grassy, with sparse wild flowers scattered throughout. And there's a large blanket laid out with a spread of food.

A picnic.

It's picturesque, down to the red checkered print of the blanket and a woven basket, but she doesn't mind the cliché. Their view is fantastic and resting in the fresh air and the warm sun is a welcome respite from the two hours they've just spent hiking.

"You do all this yourself?" she turns to Peeta and asks.

He chuckles, amused. "I may have had a little help."

And then he reaches for her hand, pulling her towards the blanket.

They're both famished, and eat the picnic lunch without too much to say—enjoying the assortment of cheese and crackers, tiny sandwiches, and fruit salad that's been kept on ice mostly to the sounds of the chirping birds and wind-rustled trees.

It's peaceful, and Katniss feels content, sharing a simple meal on a hilltop with Peeta.

After they eat, she sips her lemonade quietly, staring out over the valley and into the rocky mountains on the horizon.

"It kind of reminds me of home a little," his voice cuts through their silence softly. "Home, home," he corrects himself.

Katniss understands what he means. Their mountains in District 12 are more of the large rolling hill variety, covered in greenery, but this view gives her similar feelings of just how vast and beautiful the world they live in can be. And she imagines after living in the busy city, filled with concrete and high-rises, anywhere with some fresh air would remind Peeta of home.
She turns silently to look at him. He's relaxed, having removed his shoes and hat, and he's leaning back on his forearms, tilting his chin up, eyes closed, soaking the sun up on his face. She notices in the sunlight the smattering of freckles on his nose, barely visible. His blonde lashes flutter, and he turns his head to face her after a moment. It causes her to change her gaze, guiltily. She hopes she wasn't caught staring.

There's a beat of silence before he speaks again.

"You never talked to me in school." It's an accusation, like he's offended. Like he wishes she would have.

They've avoided this topic entirely until now, and her mouth drops open in surprise. Plus, it doesn't make any sense. She gets defensive on instinct.

"You never talked to me in school!" And what did he expect, anyway? That's the way the hierarchy of high school worked—girls with no friends and even less money didn't just up and approach the popular jocks and strike up a conversation.

Peeta smiles lazily and cocks an eyebrow, still perched on his elbows.

"That's because you were so intimidating."

Katniss throws up her hands, turning her position to face him entirely.

"You were prom king. And captain of the wrestling team. I didn't even know you knew who I was." She's slightly exasperated, wondering how Peeta could possibly think their failure to ever communicate before four days ago could be her fault, and the small laugh she receives in response doesn't help.

Peeta shakes his head and faces forward, again looking out over the valley they're sitting atop.

"I knew who you were, Katniss," he says softly.

She doesn't respond, watching him, slowly. She doesn't know what to say. She's not sure she's supposed to.

Peeta exhales, picking up a small rock off to his side of the blanket, and sits up in order to throw it as far as he can, watching it arc and land somewhere unknowable below them.

He finally looks back up at her, his gaze unwavering.

"I've had a crush on you for as long as I can remember. So yeah, I knew who you were."

His blue eyes stay locked on hers until it's her turn to blush and look down. But a smile plays on her lips despite her embarrassment.

"You did?" She breaths, looking back up, her expression a mix of confusion and happiness.

Peeta nods, slowly, studying the features of her face carefully. Then he scoots closer to her, to share her side of the blanket, moving the leftover spread of food out of his way. He moves close enough that she can see those freckles on the bridge of his nose again, and their arms brush against each other as he settles in beside her. She shifts her weight so that her body turns into his, trying unsuccessfully to fight the heat on her cheeks, forcing the words off her lips.

"So you liked me, but you never talked to me?"
Peeta nods again, shrugging his shoulders softly as he does. He leans into her slightly, and her breath hitches, overwhelmed by his lips six inches from hers, perplexed by his confession, and distracted by the camera that's just appeared behind him, its handler getting closer for what he apparently thinks is about to be the money shot.

Oh right, cameras. *Acting.*

Instinctively, she pulls back.

"Wait. Are you telling me all of this just to make me fall in love with you by the end of the week?" She copes with her nerves with humor, reminding Peeta of what he'd told her at the rose ceremony. Plus, she's really not sure if he's just beat her to Haymitch's "I used to have a crush on you" punch, or if he's telling the truth.

She sees the confusion in his eyes until he exhales a chuckle, recognizing her allegation.

"You got me," Peeta confesses, putting a hand to his heart.

"None of it's true. I never noticed you at all growing up."

Katniss's mouth falls open, unexpectedly disappointed. His lips quirk upward at her expression.

"In fact, I didn't notice you in Kindergarten, when you wore your hair in two braids and pushed Cato Calloway down on the playground when he tried to steal your kickball. And I didn't notice you in middle school, when you never smiled because you were sad about your dad and you'd walk over to the elementary school every day after class just to make sure Prim got home safe."

Katniss furrows her brow, and Peeta's soft eyes search hers for approval, like he's making sure she's okay. Like he wants her to be okay.

He sighs deeply, and Katniss realizes she's holding her breath too.

"And I definitely wasn't paying attention when you were the lead in the musical our junior year and you wore that green dress, and your voice was so clear and perfect that you made the entire place fall silent."

She's taken aback. She watches as Peeta drops his eyes downward before pulling them back up to her slowly, shyly.

"You remember all of that?" she finally asks softly, confused, stunned, and nervous enough that her palms start to sweat.

Peeta snorts, shaking his head lightly.

"I remember a lot more than that, Katniss."

Peeta looks out toward the valley again, and Katniss stares at him for a moment, considering him.

He's so earnest and it comes so naturally from him, with just enough of the truth behind it that she can't help but get swept up in what he's saying. It scares her, because she's been given strict instructions that this is all just pretend, and they should be acting, but what if he's not? Or what if he is, and he's just *that* good? She doesn't know which scares her more.

"Why did you spend all that time trying so hard to ignore me then?" she asks, genuinely wanting to know his answer. Maybe it will help her understand his angle here.
Peeta looks back at her with a shrug.

"Oh, I wanted to talk to you. Believe me. I spent a lot of time trying to work up the courage. And a lot more time hoping you'd finally acknowledge me to give me a reason to."

Katniss swallows, a pang in her chest developing as she thinks back to high school and all the times she'd thought she was crazy for feeling his eyes on her. Is he serious? Had she inadvertently scared Peeta off? She knows she's purposely scared a lot of people off over the years, so maybe it's true. It doesn't matter though, because neither is an option now anyway.

"Well, we're talking now," she points out, trying to sound cheerful.

Peeta scratches the back of his neck with a wry smile.

"Yeah, but I don't have much competition here."

It'd be easier to crack another joke, pull away again and reference how fake all of this seems. For god's sake, there are cameras in their faces and they're wearing microphones. But she doesn't.

Instead Katniss fights her instincts and manages a half laugh and a coy smile as she shakes her head, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You don't have much competition anywhere."

His perfect blue eyes flit down to her mouth for a half second before he captures her lips with his own. She feels a soft sigh escape him as he does, and tilts her head to the side for better access as she presses her mouth firmly against his, her hand reaching for the thin fabric of his t-shirt, curling the material in her fingers. Her touch makes Peeta kiss her more urgently.

Katniss melts into his lips, feeling his hand move somewhere between her cheek and jawline, holding her in place, as if she might slip away.

It's a good, long kiss. And it makes Katniss ache for more.

When they finally break, Katniss pulls back, seeing only a mess of golden locks splayed across his forehead and blonde lashes that take their time blinking open.

She watches as Peeta licks his lips, exhaling like he can't quite believe that just happened.

"Do you know how long I've wanted to do that?" he asks her, his voice low and heavy.

Katniss, maybe a little delirious herself, doesn't even attempt to answer him, instead leaning back into him for a quick, soft, second kiss.

Peeta's expression conveys his pleasant surprise.

"There," she says with a definitive nod, and his eyebrow quirks, curiously.

"I didn't want to make you wait for the next one."

He chuckles and pulls her into him, wrapping an arm around her torso and positioning himself to let her lean against him, the back of her head resting against his chest.

He kisses the top of her head, and then his voice tickles her ear as he speaks.

"You can kiss me any time you feel like it."
She laughs lightly, shifting slightly against him, allowing herself to relax into his proximity.

"Okay."

And her simple response seems to be enough.

They stay like that until it's time to pack up to head back down the trail, and she watches Peeta as he throws his hat on backwards, giving him an informal, almost frat boy look.

Katniss thinks it suits him just as well as that suit she met him in the other night.

He lays a happy smile on her once he realizes she's watching him tie his shoes back on.

"Ready to go?" he asks her, cheerily.

She nods her assent, forcing a small smile of her own.

But she's not.

Because right here, like this, in the fading sunlight of a perfect day on a grassy hilltop overlooking majestic scenery, Katniss feels happy. Like maybe, just maybe, all of this isn't insane. Or that it is insane, but in a good way. And maybe she's an idiot for letting anything resembling a real feeling creep into her heart because it's the perfect recipe for her to get hurt. Because it's supposed to be an act, and real feelings aren't supposed to exist. But maybe some things are just out of her control.

Because maybe she really likes Peeta Mellark.
Chapter 5: You Just Do As You're Told

Chapter Notes

Hello, sweet friends. I am continually floored by the support for the Bachelor!Peeta and thank each and every one of you for reading, liking, and reviewing. A quick note about this chapter-in my brain, I kept singing a song by the White Stripes called "You Don't Know What Love Is, (You Just Do As Your Told) as I wrote it. I hope that's not too much foreshadowing, but if this story were to have a soundtrack, that song would definitely be on it, even if the lyrics don't 100% apply... So you know, go listen to the White Stripes if you feel like it. :) Also, on the subject of music—all lyrics used in this chapter are clearly not mine, and you'll see why I say that so obviously if you keep reading! But thank you to Bonnie Raitt, Heart, and The Outfield for helping me tie some things together. One last thing-please don't be afraid to let me know what you think-and I'm always looking for new friends on tumblr at c-r-roberts dot tumblr dot com.

Song: See above ; )

He thought he'd put up a good defense. He used cheesy lines, flashed winning grins, and even tried not to make too much eye contact. His plan had been to be the consummate Bachelor on their date, a sugar-coated shell of himself. But what she did to him was too powerful, and any act of his was no match for Katniss Everdeen.

Something had changed during their picnic. He'd been relaxing in the sunshine, mentally counting the reasons this Bachelor thing was a horrible, no good idea, when he'd caught her staring at him. Her gray eyes had moved off him quickly once he'd noticed, but the blush in her cheeks suggested that maybe she'd liked what she'd been looking at. And it had made him too hopeful. So he'd gone off the rails and ended up telling her the truth.

It was a stupid thing to do for a couple of reasons. First, it turns out, it's slightly traumatic to pour your heart out to a girl who's faking a relationship with you and probably doesn't know that actually, everything he's saying is true. At least Katniss hadn't freaked out on him, and she'd kissed him back even, but let's be honest, Haymitch had probably coached her to kiss him back even if he'd just leaned into her and told her she looked beautiful in the afternoon sunlight or some other bullshit thing that usually gets girls to swoon. There had really been no need to spill his guts with all the other stuff.

Although, that kiss had felt pretty damn real.

But apparently, that gets him to the second reason: according to Seneca and the other producers, he might have done his job a little bit too well. Don't get them wrong, they'd insisted—they absolutely loved his date with Katniss and all of the great footage it provided, but while they like her as his ultimate choice, he can't exactly reach endgame on the second episode.

And so he was forced to change his strategy.

So here he is, on dinner date with Cressida, trying not to look like he wants to beat his head against the table.
It's not Cressida's fault; she's a perfectly attractive, interesting woman. But it's just not that much fun to date other women when the woman he was infatuated with for a good portion of his life is hanging around, waiting in the wings.

So when Cressida starts playing footsie with him under their dinner table, something Peeta normally would have enjoyed—taking it as a cue that his date was up for a lot more than just dinner, he smiles mechanically and tries not to choke on his water.

"So, uh, ahem, what do you like do for fun?" Peeta asks, picking up his fork and turning it over on his plate. He leans back in his chair then, and his leg becomes out of her foot's reach as a result.

Cressida pushes her plate aside, leaning in, on to the table with her elbows and a grin.

"Well, I work a lot, but I try to live by the motto of work hard, play hard, you know?"

Peeta raises an eyebrow.

"And how hard do you play?"

Cressida's green eyes twinkle back at him, and he's sure she's trying fuck him. It's all a little much, considering how unashamed she is, even with the cameras and strange men standing around filming them. It's a style he can appreciate, but not one he necessarily prefers, since desperation isn't really his thing. But he knows he'll kiss her anyway tonight. It just wouldn't add up if he didn't, especially after the way he's flirting back with her.

At the same time, he wonders if she'll be one of the women who will go home this week.

At the last ceremony, Peeta cut the pool from ten to six. Again, he hadn't had too much say in his choices—not that it mattered—and he'd said goodbye to Jaqueline, Enobaria, Lavinia, and Rue. He tried to feel bad about it, and had acted like he did, but he hadn't really known any of them, anyway.

Because there's only one girl he even tried to get to know last week.

And somehow that had gotten him into trouble, so here he is, leading Cressida on. The producers of this show are really assholes, when he thinks about it. They create this ridiculous premise of a man who's looking for love, with a bunch of women showing up to compete for it, and when he actually maybe finds it, they distort all semblance of reality about it and make him keep dating the other women because otherwise the show is too boring.

So now Peeta's gearing up to give the producers what they want.

His week has been busy, to say the least: four one-on-one dates and a two-on-one date. He's already gone out with Delly, and hadn't hated it, spent half a day trying not to ogle a seductively-dressed Glimmer, and his two-on-one date with Clove and Johanna is tomorrow. He's legitimately scared for that one—they're intense women who could hurt each other. Or him.

He's set to see Katniss again two days from now. It feels further away than that.

During the meeting he had a couple of days ago, the producers also told Peeta that he can give input for date ideas with the women—to make it more "real," as if things weren't fucking ironic enough already. They thought it'd be a good thing for him to show his "personality," and do things on the dates that he likes to do—you know, because he's a big fan of taking women on helicopter rides over the city and landing on a skyscraper's roof top to have an expensive dinner at a restaurant on the building’s 82nd floor, as he's done tonight. Not that the helicopter ride turned out to be a bad thing, actually, since Cressida likes to talk, a lot, and she wasn't able say much
with all the noise in the chopper.

But Peeta’s strategically withheld any specific requests so far this week, hoping he's earned enough points by going along with the producers’ awful, contrived romantic ideas up until now.

Because he has an idea for his date with Katniss, and really needs it to happen for everything to go according to his plan.

Of course, he'll have to run it by her agent first.

Which he'll do right after he finishes this date.

***

Peeta calls Haymitch after a hot shower, pouring a drink as he sits in the living area of his master suite at Snow’s mansion as the phone rings. His date with Cressida hadn't lasted much longer after dinner was finished—and he’d tamely kissed her goodnight when her car arrived to take her back to the women's house. He'd never seen someone swoon so much over a simple kiss, though the cameras probably had something to do with it. Kissing her didn't bother Peeta per se, but the aftermath hit him harder than he’d expected.

He’d never kissed a girl that he hadn't wanted to kiss before. And it was a weird feeling—not wanting to kiss a pretty girl. But it had been bland, just a set of lips on his, completely inconsequential. Peeta wonders if that's how it felt for Katniss with him, and the thought makes him queasy.

Haymitch picking up the other end of the phone call doesn't make him feel any better.

The miserable man of an agent opens with a gruff chuckle.

"Holy hell, kid. You've either been carrying one hell of a torch or you're a fucking Oscar winner in training."

Peeta groans. He's seen the footage. He must have requested it from B&C or something. Peeta and Haymitch haven't talked since the first rose ceremony; Haymitch has been out of town on location with some actor client who's trying to ink a new movie deal while filming another action block buster.

"Yeah, well, you know. Just following orders." Peeta doesn't hide his annoyance and sips his drink, relaxing in his chair. It's almost midnight, and he's dressed for bed, wearing only a pair of athletic shorts. He's supposed to be up early for another round of interviews with Caesar before his day date with Clove and Johanna. Canoeing. He'd like to meet the genius who came up with that date idea. Peeta's already prepared for multiple scenarios where he may have to jump ship just to avoid getting caught between the fisticuffs he's envisioned them having.

"Orders that are going to make you a very famous, successful man," Haymitch points out, in a tone that suggests he's bored with Peeta's attitude.

That's okay. Peeta's been waiting to make this phone call for days now, and he doesn't think Haymitch will be bored much longer.

"See, that's the thing, Haymitch," Peeta replies. "I think the man who's set to make the most out of all of this is you."

Haymitch snorts.
"Kid, this is not the time to try and renegotiate our contract."

His arrogance makes Peeta laugh sourly. How does Haymitch always manage to bring out the worst in him?

"That's not why I'm calling."

Haymitch sighs. "Well get to the point then. You're not my only client, you know."

Haymitch's aggravated response is such perfect foreshadowing that Peeta actually smiles.

"It's funny you say that. I'm well aware that I'm not your only client, Haymitch."

The dead air on the other end of the line propels Peeta to continue, eager to blow the cover on Haymitch's little covert operation.

"But anyway, I was actually just calling to see what you thought about taking Katniss to a karaoke bar for our date this week. You know, whether you think my horrible singing might damage my heartthrob reputation."

There's another pause of silence, and Peeta's pleased his feigned innocence actually caught Haymitch off guard.

"Fucking Christ," Haymitch finally mutters under his breath. "Listen to me, kid, it's not what you think."

Peeta can practically hear Haymitch backpedaling.

"Unless you're going to tell me that you didn't sign Katniss Everdeen to your agency and throw her on this show for publicity, then it's exactly what I fucking think, Haymitch," Peeta growls through clenched teeth. He's trying very hard not to lose his temper. Why can't Haymitch just admit he's been playing him so he can double dip in the break-out celebrity client pot? Peeta wouldn't get so angry with him if he just told him the truth.

"You think you're so smart. That you can dump us both into this mess and think you're just going to pull the strings and it'll all end up exactly like you want it to. Well what if it doesn't? You're not fucking God, Haymitch. You're my agent. And there's clearly a fucking conflict if you're her agent too."

Peeta exhales, his tension dissipating slightly as he gets the words out. He's been play-acting so much these past couple of weeks that it feels good to release some real emotion. Plus, it's been a few days since he's talked to Haymitch. Yelling at him is part of his routine by now. It helps him feel a sense of normalcy.

Well, as normal as Peeta can feel discussing how he's being set up to fake-propose to Katniss Everdeen all because Haymitch wanted to get his clients' names out there.

When Haymitch finally responds, he does so in a very un-Haymitch like fashion: quietly and thoughtfully.

"The karaoke thing is a genius idea."

At first, Peeta's confused, upset even, that Haymitch has completely ignored his tirade.

But in reality, Haymitch isn't ignoring Peeta so much as just cutting straight to the point.
How Peeta feels about Haymitch doesn't matter.

Hell, at the end of the day, how Peeta feels about anybody doesn't really matter.

Peeta sighs, rubbing a hand back and forth through his still-damp hair, keeping it from plastering to his forehead.

"You think it'll help her?"

Haymitch's chuckle is almost giddy.

"Help her? She'll be on the radio by the time you hand out the final rose. It's perfect."

Peeta smiles to himself, still mad at Haymitch but unable to hold his anger against Katniss's career. Or Katniss, for that matter.

He swallows a gulp of the bitter brown liquor satisfactorily, giving a nod no one can see.

"Good."

It's the answer he needed to hear.

Peeta's ready to end the conversation then, getting what he needed from Haymitch and not wanting to talk to him any more than he has to, but Haymitch chuckles again.

"You know exactly what you're doing, don't you?"

Peeta sighs, taking one last drink before pushing the glass away from him on the table, finished—with everything—for the night.

"Yes."

***

It's mostly true. At least, Peeta knows what he's trying to do. And he thinks Haymitch doesn't have a clue what that really is, but it's better that Peeta keeps him in the dark for a change. Because he's not quite ready for that fight yet.

Convincing the producers to set up the date at a karaoke bar is easier than he thought it would be—Seneca even said they'd never done anything like that before and that it would make for great television. Something about people singing being endearing to viewers.

He wonders if they know, then. That Katniss is Haymitch's ringer in more ways than one. Well, if they don't, they're about to find out.

It's a cooler evening, a passing afternoon thunderstorm dropping the temperature and making the world overcast and damp. Peeta wears dark jeans and a tight fitting concert t-shirt, layered with a plaid button down left open and a tan collarless leather jacket. Cinna made him wear the jacket, insisting it was appropriate for the location of his date. Peeta has to admit, it doesn't look terrible.

And he feels a little bit like a bad ass, as he sits behind the wheel of a BMW six series convertible PME's provided for their date. Even with Castor, a cameraman, riding in the back seat as he drives the short distance from the mansion to the women's house. Peeta's picking Katniss up there to take her out. At first he'd thought it was stupid, that the show wanted him to pick her up in a cool car and drive her around town, but then he realized it may be to their benefit anyway. Besides, it's a hell of a lot better than traveling by helicopter again. Or canoe. He's still recovering from
yesterday's double-date adventures on the water.

When he arrives, she's already waiting for him at the front of the house.

She's dressed in tight jeans and a soft green silk tank top that hangs from her shoulders, loosely, accessorized with a simple long necklace. He's pretty sure Cinna must have planned their attire accordingly, since they complement one another.

He sees her smile as he approaches, and she tucks her hair behind her ear, the rest of it falling in long, soft waves over her shoulders. She looks effortlessly, casually sexy. Like a heartbreaker.

Castor adjusts something on his camera and mutters something about show time, to Peeta's unexpected amusement, as Peeta pulls up to her in the roundabout drive.

"Well, look at you," Katniss tells him, still smiling, once he stops the car.

He raises an eyebrow, quickly shutting off the engine.

"Can't," he says, shaking his head. "Too busy looking at you."

She rolls her eyes, but doesn't stop smiling as he exits the car, rounding it to meet her. He greets her easily, warmly, with a soft kiss on the cheek. In her heels, she's almost his height, but not quite.

"Nice jacket," Katniss says, the glint in her eye making it difficult to tell if it's a compliment.

Peeta tugs at its openings self-consciously. "Too much?"

Katniss shakes her head as she reaches out to inspect the jacket herself, her hand running over the fabric carefully.

"Not at all. Just right."

Their eyes meet briefly until Peeta shakes his head bashfully.

Peeta'd really been hoping that giddy feeling wouldn't come back tonight.

But it took all of 15 seconds for his heart to literally fill with happiness.

"You look great," he tells her with an appreciative smile.

She looks down at herself, as if checking to see what he's talking about, before looking back up at him with a shrug.

"Thanks," Katniss breathes, not dwelling on his compliment and nodding towards the car.

"Nice ride."

Peeta chuckles, turning back toward the ridiculously expensive car.

"Thanks. So, ready to go?" He looks back at her, her gray eyes smoky with makeup and her full lips upturning as she shoves her hands in her pockets.

"Sure. Where to?"

Peeta moves quickly to the passenger door, to be sure to open it before she can, and watches her flit her eyes into a roll, but he can tell she's secretly pleased as he lets her in.
"We're going to grab a quick bite to eat first, but the rest is a surprise," he tells her, trying to sound mysterious, even though he's really just not telling her because there's a good chance she'll bolt back into that house if she knows where they're ending up. Peeta's pretty sure Katniss isn't going to be pleased with his little plan. She hasn't even mentioned a word to him about her singing career, still claiming she's just a bartender.

He closes the door carefully once she settles in, and jogs around to the driver's side to slide in next to her. They have to wait for Castor to wind up uncomfortably behind them in the back seat, and aware they're likely not meant to be on camera for that part, Katniss turns her head to him with a knowing smile.

"So. I heard you've had quite the week."

Four prior dates. Kissing other women. Almost drowning in the Old American River. His face gets hot just thinking about what she could have overheard in that gossip-ridden house.

But she only looks amused. Right. No reason to look anything else.

Peeta quirks an eyebrow and shakes his head.

"I plead the fifth."

Katniss snorts, staring through the windshield as Castor clicks his seatbelt in the backseat and the rest of the cameras at the house train back on them.

"Sure you do," she says lightly under her breath.

Peeta revs the engine, grateful for the powerful noise as the car lurches forward gently.

"Time to go for a ride, Everdeen."

***

He takes her to dinner at a pizza place that Peeta knows well. It's a quirky place, famous for weird toppings and its late hours, which is why Peeta's frequented it so much—when he was still suex chef at the restaurant, they'd go there after it closed for a late bite and a good beer. When he tells Katniss this, her face softens, like she realizes this is actual information about himself.

She let Peeta do the ordering, right down to the beers they drink, and then tells him this is a much better idea than making a cheap frozen pizza when she gets home from her shifts at The Hob.

Peeta grins, watching her look around the cozy, trendy restaurant with exposed brick walls that have kitschy signs hanging on them. When her eyes settle back on him, and she sees that he's been watching her, she smiles shyly.

The meal's a quick one, but he enjoys it. Katniss isn't afraid to try the half of the pizza that's topped with large meatballs and spaghetti, and she sips her beer even though Peeta's pretty sure she doesn't like it.

And she laughs, like really laughs, when he tells her the story about how, back in high school, he and Thom Johnson, who was also on the wrestling team, tried to play a prank on their coach, and went to his house in the middle of the night to toilet paper it, but when they got there, the coach was hiding in the bushes, waiting for them so he could spray them with his garden hose.

Peeta decides she's prettiest when she laughs.
So when Katniss starts asking questions about what's next, he almost feels guilty, even though he knows this karaoke thing is exactly the right thing to do for her. But she's going to hate him for it.

Haymitch had warned him she was going to take some convincing. And Peeta's ready for it when they enter the little bar on the edge of downtown. It's one of those places that has an interesting mix of drunkards singing horribly to Neil Diamond and people with legitimate talent trying to show off their chops.

To the producers' credit, they don't shut down the entire bar, so there are other patrons—and singers—there. And of course, more cameras, already set up and waiting.

But Katniss freezes as soon as they walk through the door.

Some poor soul is attempting to do his best Bon Jovi on the stage, so it's immediately apparent where Peeta's brought her.

He practically bumps into her from behind as she stops short in the doorway. Peeta puts what he hopes is a reassuring hand on her waist. She tenses only slightly at his touch.

"Surprise," he whispers in her ear so only she can hear. He's trying to be light about it, and somehow tell her without words that it's okay. That he knows why she's here and that it's okay. This would be easier for him to do if she didn't smell so good. Her perfumed scent is a mix of feminine and tomboy, easy and polished. Just like he'd expect she'd smell. He doesn't want to move.

But Katniss spins around slowly, taking in Peeta's face, which is projecting a thousand silent apologies for springing this on her at the moment. She studies him, her eyes narrowing slightly.

But they don't have any more time to read each other, Castor's camera already invading their space as it is, so Katniss nods. And then she smiles. It's not one of the few that reaches her eyes.

"I didn't know you liked to karaoke!" she chirps happily, clasping her hand in his as she pulls him further into the bar.

It's clearly her game on signal.

Peeta gulps.

They sit at a table that's been saved for them, off to a corner and away enough from everyone else that the crowd noise won't disturb their filming. Plus, they've got someone holding a boom mike over them to ensure their every word is captured.

Someone takes their drink order right away, and Peeta, on edge, orders a whiskey, while Katniss asks for a light beer.

When the DJ makes a show of bringing over the songbook, Katniss grins, flipping it open immediately to peruse.

"So, what are you going to sing?" she asks, not bothering to look up from the page of singers listed under "A."

Peeta chuckles nervously, drumming his fingers on the table top.

"I uh, don't sing. I kind of treat karaoke as a spectator sport."

That gets Katniss's attention. She looks back up at him, her eyebrows perched atop her forehead.
"You brought me to a karaoke bar and you don't sing?"

He clears his throat sheepishly. *Well, when she says it like that.*

"I thought it'd be something fun to do."

Her eyes narrow again.

"Something fun," she repeats, unable to stop herself from cracking a small smile at his terrible lies.

Peeta nods, slowly, the life returning to his eyes with an added bit of mischief. Maybe he's not entirely in the dog house.

Their drinks arrive, and Katniss puts the bottle to her lips, sipping it slowly, with a not so innocent gaze of her own.

Peeta doesn't touch his drink yet, too busy watching her. He exhales.

"But, I'll uh, make you a deal though. If you sing something, then I'll sing something."

He wishes she knew how grand of a gesture this really is—he's absolutely terrible. Of course, he knew going in that there's no way *Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor* gets away with taking a girl out on a date to a karaoke bar and not singing something himself. But if it weren't for the sake of making sure Katniss gets up on that stage, he'd rather crawl in a hole and die than sing karaoke.

She shakes her head, just once, and pushes the songbook in front of him deliberately.

"You sing first."

*Fuck.*

Peeta'd also hoped he'd have a little more time to ease into it.

Although it's probably better than following up Katniss.

"What's the problem?" she asks, smiling a little too innocently, when he doesn't respond right away. "You're already dressed like a rock star anyway, right?" Her gray eyes gleam back at him.

A slight at the leather jacket. Which is making him feel uncomfortably warm at the moment, what with the crowd, bright lights shining in his face, and certain humiliation awaiting him.

Peeta wrinkles his nose.

"Why don't we, ah, watch some of the other talent first? You know, to scope out the competition?"

Besides, this girl belting out a Carrie Underwood song isn't half bad.

But Katniss shakes her head again, unrelenting.

"You've got five minutes to pick your song, or I'm picking it for you."

And she sure as hell sounds like he wouldn't want that.

She sips her beer again, seeming pleased with herself.

Well, at least she's enjoying his impending doom, and seeing her smile, even if it's at his expense,
helps temper his nerves a little.

"And what about you?" he asks, already knowing his song choice, but flipping through the pages of the thick book absently for show.

"I'll sing when you sing," Katniss agrees.

"Good," Peeta nods, catching another glimpse of her gray eyes with his blue ones. She's doing a pretty good job of covering up how irritated she must be, making it seem more like she's just being playful. A fiery kind of playful, nonetheless, but he wouldn't expect much else from her.

He reaches for the scraps of paper and pencil placed at the end of the table, scribbling down his selection and folding it over.

"What are you going to sing?" she asks him, as Peeta moves to stand up to hand in his choice.

This time, he gets to shake his head at her.

"You don't get to know."

She rolls her eyes but smiles one of those real smiles.

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25 minutes later, Peeta can say he successfully survived the most embarrassing moment of his life. The crowd was polite enough not to boo him off the stage, even clapping when he finished—probably because he finished—and as he heads back to their table, Katniss is smiling at him.

"You just wanna use my love tonight, huh?" she asks with a pointed eyebrow raise.

Peeta chuckles, the sweet relief of having finished his singing obligations rushing through him.

"No. I don't wanna lose your love tonight," he corrects her.

She laughs. "Then maybe we won't have you sing again."

Peeta's self-deprecating enough to appreciate her concern.

"But seriously, where did you pull that one from?" She's clearly amused with his choice, and obviously curious as to how he decided on an '80s hairband classic about keeping another woman on the down low.

He shrugs. "It's a fun song. Really brings out the tenor in my voice," Peeta grins jokingly. Katniss laughs again. Maybe she's even having fun.

"Besides," he continues, "it was either The Outfield or Jesse's Girl, which I thought was a much too obvious choice."

Peeta sips his drink, grateful for its cool, smooth, strength.

"Well, you're fun to watch," she says, suddenly shy about it, looking down to her beer bottle.

Peeta's aware he has a certain charming quality about him—he didn't end up the Bachelor for no reason—but he'd hardly categorize the four minutes he just spent on stage as fun.

But he enjoys her compliment anyway.
"Yeah, well, I think it's time for you to show me up."

Katniss looks back up at him and sighs.

"My turn, huh?"

He nods and swallows. "Your turn."

The way karaoke works, you're supposed to pick a song, then write your name and the song choice down and turn it into the DJ, who calls you up to the stage once he's ready to play your song. Depending on the waitlist, this could take over an hour. But for Peeta and Katniss, the DJ can obviously pull some strings. Peeta'd just wanted the extra wait time, happy to submit his song like everyone else.

But Katniss shrugs, standing up with a quick pull of her top to straighten it, and heading straight for the DJ. His pulse quickens as she walks away, knowing it's going to be a big moment for her. She doesn't look nervous at all as he watches her lean over into the DJ's ear, telling him what to play.

They have to wait until the guy rapping *Ice, Ice Baby,* surprisingly successfully, finishes before the DJ introduces her. The *PME* cameras are trained on her as Katniss steps up on the small stage, and Peeta realizes he's been anticipating this since the last time he heard her sing.

He gets her to quirk her lips into a smile by grinning a wide-toothed grin of support to her as the synthetic karaoke track begins to play. After a few drum beats and the strum of a guitar, Peeta knows exactly what song Katniss chose. And she must know it well, since she's not even glancing at the monitor that scrolls the lyrics. He shakes his head to himself in a combination of disbelief and appreciation. It's the perfect song.

Peeta's amused appreciation is quickly replaced with complete and utter awe once she opens her mouth.

*People are talkin'*

*Talkin' about people*

*I hear them whisper*

*You won't believe it*

*They think we're lovers*

*Kept under cover*

Her voice is clear and low, with a soft raspy-ness to it that's fit for the song. And she's not doing anything but singing on the stage, but no one in the place can take their eyes off of her.

She doesn't even look his way until she gets to the chorus.

*Let's give 'em somethin' to talk about*

*A little mystery to figure out*

*Let's give 'em somethin' to talk about*

*How about love?*
As she sings, her voice carries through the whole place, but it feels like she's only signing right to him.

She's even more mesmerizing than she was back in high school.

And in all of his recent plan-making, he hadn't counted on Katniss knowing exactly what she was doing too.

*I feel so foolish
*I never noticed
*You act so nervous
*Could you be fallin' for me?
*It took the rumor to make me wonder
*Now I'm convinced I'm goin' under.

Good, he thinks, in response to her last line. Then they can both drown together. Because he feels just like he did at that silly little musical. A sucker. A goner.

The crowd loses it as she finishes.

And Katniss slips off the stage with a simple head bob and a small thankful wave, turning in the microphone like it was no big deal.

Peeta's standing up already when she makes her way back to the table, because the place has given her a standing ovation, and he fights the urge to kiss her right then and there as she passes him, sliding into her seat.

"You're even better than I remember," he tells her.

She blushes faintly, as she crosses her legs and leans into the table, resting an elbow on it. She sips her beer, leaving the bottle dangling at her lips.

"I've had a little more practice."

Her first acknowledgement that she just might be more than a bartender.

He smiles. Peeta doesn't have to tell her that he already knows.

"And you just happened to pick that song out of a hat or something?" He scratches the back of his neck with disbelieving eyes.

Katniss laughs.

"Something like that."

"Well, you're really good, Katniss. I couldn't take my eyes off you. Well, no one could. I don't count—I can never take my eyes off you."

He's expecting an eye roll, or maybe even a signature shy smile, but Katniss just stares back at him, shifting her weight uncomfortably.

"Peeta, can I ask you something?"
He nods, shrugging, curious at her less than sure tone. "Yeah. Of course."

"All that stuff you said the other day on the mountain. Is it—"

She doesn't finish her question. Peeta doesn't let her. Once he realizes where she's going with it, he shakes his head sharply at her, and she stops, abruptly.

She was about to ask him if it was all true. *Real.* In front of the cameras. Maybe she'd forgotten where she was, or maybe she'd just gotten sick of everything and didn't care. Peeta can understand wanting to forget or wanting not to care, but this is not the place. His expression seems to remind her of that.

She snaps out of it quickly, giving an airy laugh.

"Sorry. It's just hard to believe, you know?"

Peeta questions her with his expression, cautiously.

"What's hard to believe?"

Katniss sighs. "That you had a crush on me for so long and I never knew. I liked you too, you know."

She says it simply, with little fanfare.

Peeta's pretty sure she's back in character, but like most things with Katniss, he can't be certain.

He swallows slowly, and it feels like there's molasses traveling down his throat.

He's about to respond when the DJ rudely interrupts him.

"Darlin', you gotta sing another one. That was really something special."

He's standing in front of Katniss, practically trying to put the microphone back in her hands right this minute.

She looks at Peeta quizzically before looking back at the DJ.

Peeta shoots him a look of annoyed disbelief at first, thinking that the last thing he wants to do is to sing some more karaoke right now, but then it hits him. That's exactly what she needs to do. Peeta perks up in his seat. "I agree, you need an encore," he tells Katniss enthusiastically. Probably too enthusiastically, considering the tone of their conversation seconds earlier. But his eyes tell her to trust him.

And she must, because she agrees.

Peeta tells the DJ they just have to choose the song and she'll be right up.

When he leaves, satisfied, Katniss looks at Peeta again with a strange look. *What are you doing?*

He just grins.

"One more song, okay? And I get to choose."

She's confused, and weary, and her eyes narrow, but Katniss nods her assent.
"Be nice."

Peeta chuckles, eagerly scribbling something on another slip of paper. It's a lot for a one-word song choice, but no one has to know that.

Plus, she's going to sound fantastic on the song.

When he's done, he folds it over again and pushes the paper towards her.

"You're going to kill it," he assures her.

She raises an eyebrow. "Or you," she mutters under her breath. And then, realizing she's just threatened his life, she puts her hand to her mouth. "Sorry," she mouths.

He laughs, genuinely, and his blood is coursing through his veins, ready to kick his escape plan into action.

"Just go sing the song."

She shrugs, taking the slip in her hand and heading back up towards the DJ stand. He sees her read it on her way, and she stops half way to turn back at him.

She looks slightly confused, but intrigued.

Peeta nods reassuringly at her, and Katniss looks back down to the piece of paper, rereading his words.

*Let's get out of here. Really get out of here.*

Then she looks back up and nods back at him, almost unnoticeably. But he can't miss the sly smile that creeps across her face as she tells their DJ friend to queue up Heart's "Alone," his song choice that followed his note to her.

Because Peeta's figured out how to get her alone.

And they're about to ditch.

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After Katniss finishes belting out lyrics about *always getting by on her own* and *never really caring until she met him,* she's the one to suggest they step outside for some fresh air.

Peeta readily follows, slipping his fingers between hers as she grabs his hand to lead him to the door. As soon as they reach the fresh night air, and as a camera is scurrying to meet them outside, she pulls Peeta in for a surprising, yet wholly satisfying kiss.

It happens quickly, and Katniss's lips are on him, feeling hot and heavy. She holds on to him as she kisses him, curling her fingers in the tendrils of hair at the back of his neck. He lets his fingertips skim her waist before resting lightly on the small of her back, feeling, tasting, breathing her.

Katniss breaks, exhaling and opening her eyes, smiling shyly at his surprised appearance.

"Hi," she says.

He takes that back—it's not a satisfying kiss at all. He wants a thousand more, just like it.
Peeta chuckles lightly, running his fingertips along the length of her back.

"Hey."

Katniss's eyes dance between his, and her expression is a mix of bewilderment and desire.

It makes Peeta lean in to kiss her again, unable to stop himself, and not wanting to either. She sighs against his lips, causing him to pull her tighter against him. He's losing himself into her, and when she softly worries his bottom lip, Peeta invites himself into her mouth, flicking his tongue gently against hers. Katniss's hand is still in his hair, and it tickles, the combination of sensations igniting sparks that travel up and down his body.

His breathing becomes unregulated, and he suppresses a pant when he finally leaves her lips.

He blinks his eyes open slowly.

She's already looking up at him under her lashes and smiles contentedly.

He grins and rubs her bare arms gently, only then feeling the goose bumps on her skin. The temperature's dropped, but Peeta was so warm inside and they've produced their own kind of heat out here that he hadn't noticed that she's probably freezing.

Instantly, Peeta moves to shrug off his jacket, and Katniss tries to stop him—again.

"I'm okay," she insists, but unlike that first night at the mansion, Peeta's more insistent this time. Especially because it'll help clue her in on the next step of their escape.

So he pulls the jacket off his arms, holding it out to her anyway.

"Katniss, you have to take it. I'll look like a jerk if you don't."

So she accepts it without further protest, tugging it on slowly.

Peeta smirks as the leather hangs loosely on her, almost swallowing her up.

"Looks good on you."

She rolls her eyes. Sometimes he wonders if they ever get dizzy, for how much she does that.

But it just makes his grin wider.

"Seriously. It's better on you. Now you look like the rock star."

Katniss hands him a look of warning, like she's not going there with him.

So he kisses her again, softly and quickly, brushing her hair behind her ear when he's done.

"So. You wanna get out of here now?"

His voice is low, barely audible.

Her eyes are curious, but excited.

She nods, wordlessly.

*Oh god, he hopes this works.*
"I just have to run inside first," she tells him, gesturing toward the door.

Peeta shrugs casually, eyeing up his competition—just two cameramen for now. He's supposed to follow a schedule, and he's not even the one who's supposed to call the shots as to when the date ends. Oh well, too bad. He is now.

"Wait," he calls to Katniss as she steps to head in.

"Check the pockets first—I need the keys. I'll bring the car around."

Katniss reaches into the leather jacket's pockets, fumbling around until she finds the keys. As she hands them to him, he knows she's also found the second note he left behind for her.

"Meet you back here in a few," he tells her with a grin.

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He's got his foot on the brake, waiting in a dark alley near the bar's back door when Katniss comes barreling through it, literally jumping in as he pulls off, leaving the cameras, production vans, and everything else but her behind.

"What'd you do with yours?" she asks breathlessly, buckling herself in as Peeta pulls out on to the main street, still undetected.

He focuses on the road, unable to look at her because he needs to make sure no one's seen them, but he smirks.

"I told Castor I needed a new one because mine was all staticky. I think he's still looking for a backup in the van."

Katniss gives him an impressed look. He already knows she ditched her mic box in the bathroom.

"The DJ idea worked perfectly too," she tells him, and he can see out of the corner of his eye that her cheeks are still flushed as she talks. "He came right up to me, asking me to sign something to hang on the wall for when I'm a "big star." They didn't even think to follow us into the kitchen," she chuckles.

Then Katniss cranes her neck behind her, as Peeta picks up speed, turning onto an entrance ramp for the first highway he comes across. Good thing this fancy car's got some pick up—he's planning on getting as many miles between them and anyone associated with PME as possible.

"Aren't we going to get in trouble?"

Peeta finally looks at her, and her gray eyes don't seem concerned. Relieved, if anything.

He shakes his head at her with a chuckle, like it's obvious.

"I think I'm already knee deep in it."

Katniss smiles, but furrows her brow, not fully understanding him. But then she sighs, relaxing back into her seat, letting the wind whip her hair.

Peeta drives into the night, until there's no longer traffic or buildings—only country roads and skyscraper-like trees. They're silent for a while, and the night air smells fresh, still like the rain that fell hours earlier. Moonlight fights to push through the night's clouds, providing their only light, save for the car's headlights.
Peeta doesn't know where he's going, or even where he is right now, but he's perfectly content getting lost with Katniss Everdeen.

She's the first to break the silence.

"Why are you doing this?" she asks him finally, her head turned to face him, still resting it against the seat of the car.

Peeta sighs, turning to look at her.

"You know why, Katniss," he tells her softly.

She contemplates this for a moment, maybe trying to figure out if that's true—if she does know why—and her eyes narrow, and then soften.

He focuses his attention back on the road, telling himself it's to not kill them, but really it's because he's too nervous to look at her.

Katniss's voice is timid when she finally responds.

"What I tried to ask you back at the bar—about everything you said on our hike. About always having a crush on me." The words leave her lips slowly, and when she pauses indefinitely, Peeta raises his eyebrows.

"Yes?" he asks, an invitation for her to finish her thought.

"So I'm supposed to believe you liked me all of those years and never noticed any other girls?" She's skeptical.

Peeta laughs, still looking at the road as it winds upwards, towards the mountains. He should probably stop soon; they're getting pretty far from town now.

"No, I noticed just about every other girl," he tells her honestly. And then he chuckles again. "I mean, you started out as one of twenty just on this show, Katniss," and he turns his head slightly just in time to see her face fall slightly. He bites his lip to fight his smile.

"But you're the only one who's made a lasting impression."

And she needs to believe that. Because he's serious. There's no reason for him not to be—no cameras, no script, no Haymitch fucking with everything.

Katniss searches his face with those eyes of hers, a wave of shyness competing with the uncertainty he finds in them.

He shakes his head, turning back to the road, wondering what else he could possibly do to get this girl to believe him.

There's an uncomfortable pause of silence between them until her voice cuts through him, right down to the bone.

"Haymitch put you up to tonight, didn't he?"

Peeta whips his head to her attention, caught off guard.

*So much for Haymitch not fucking with everything, then.*

Katniss gives him a sad, apologetic look. Like she knows she's right. Although technically, she
"Peeta, I'm so sorry."

And it breaks him. Because she thinks she has something to be sorry for. Like it's her fault that this show has them barreling down a ridiculous path to a forced engagement. Or that Haymitch dragged her here, throwing her at him, however unwittingly he claims that to be. It's ridiculous for her to think it's all somehow her fault because when she signed up for all of this, she had no idea that the Bachelor was going to be madly in love with her before she even stepped out of the car.

So Peeta stops, pulling the car abruptly off the road, suddenly sick of heading nowhere.

He throws the car in park, letting it idle on the side of the practically deserted road.

"Katniss, you have nothing to be sorry for," he murmurs finally, looking down at his hands, still on the wheel.

But she shakes her head, almost desperately, wanting to explain herself.

"I didn't know this was going to happen—I wasn't trying to hijack your life showing up here. It's all just one big mess and I don't know how to fix it."

Her bottom lip trembles.

Peeta maneuvers himself to face her now, reaching out easily in the tiny coup, brushing a thumb across her lip, stilling it.

Her breath hitches at his touch, and their eyes connect, both realizing this is the first touch between them that hasn't been monitored or contrived.

"I've already told you," he hums, watching another labored breath pass between her lips. "You hijacked me a long time ago, okay?"

Her eyes fall downward, and she opens her mouth as if to begin some other explanation, but Peeta doesn't want to talk about it anymore. So he stops her by kissing her.

And with nothing there to encourage her but her own free will, Katniss kisses him back.

It doesn't necessarily feel any different, at least physically, because her lips are the same as they were an hour ago, but inside, she's fueling a hunger he's never felt before.

A surprisingly innocent hunger, too. One that makes him want to make her smile and laugh every day. And cook her dinner. Stay in with her on a Saturday night watching dumb movies. But most importantly, it makes him want to protect her.

So when he draws away, he watches her open her eyes slowly, and Peeta exhales and greets her with a half-smile.

"I had to do that at least once, okay? Without other...people...staring at us."

Katniss's gray eyes, silver in the moonlight, blink at him before she lets out a breath she must have been holding herself.

Then she returns his small smile with one of her own.

"Well then maybe you should know that it's okay for you to kiss me any time you feel like it."
There she goes, using his own words against him. He grins, almost deliriously happy for a moment, wanting to reconsider everything and somehow forge ahead with her, a partner in crime, figuring out ways to turn this whole farce of a show into something very, very real.

But Peeta forces himself to remember that it would never work.

This stupid show—and all of the strings that come with it—will suck the life out of her. Even if she's meant to be a singer, she's not meant to be part of a soulless celebrity tabloid couple. Besides, there's a difference between kissing someone and loving them. And he knows Katniss cares about him, on some level, but it's not the same way he cares about her.

And he can't ask the question either—if she feels even one shred of what he feels for her—because he's too afraid of the answer. He'd rather just have this moment right here, like it is, and commit it to memory.

"I'm still sorry, though," she tells him, snapping Peeta back into focus. "About Haymitch setting you up like that. And for making you sing," she adds, with a grin and an amused eyebrow twitch.

Peeta laughs, but it's actually Katniss, right then, joking and smiling with him that makes him absolutely sure he has to go through with his plan. This part is too good. Too real. And he won't be able to go back to doing these things with her for the cameras—for the whole world to see.

It'll just hurt too fucking much.

*She's* too much. And the only way she can't have this effect on him is if she's not here.

He sighs, turning the ignition back on. It's getting late anyway, and he's going to have a lot of explaining to do when they get back.

He looks at her one last time, while they're out here on their own, and savors her long, wind-tousled dark hair, how ridiculously cute she looks in that oversized jacket, and most of all, her steely gray eyes, dancing just for him.

Then Peeta puts the car in drive and shakes his head, looking away. Unable to say it to her face.

"I'm sorry too, Katniss."

He imagines she gives him a confused look in response, but she doesn't question why.

Which is really for the best. He's never going to be able to explain himself now anyway.

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Peeta doesn't have to twist Haymitch's arm to meet him for a drink. He's actually surprised he gets permission to leave the mansion's campus, after what he pulled last night, but the producers didn't give him as much grief for it as he thought they would. They hadn't said much about it at all, actually—other than being relieved the car had come back in one piece.

So he meets Haymitch at a bar on the other side of town, closer to Peeta's condo, just to be sure there's no one around to overhear their conversation.

Haymitch arrived back in the Capitol late last night. Peeta's hoping he hasn't seen the latest date footage as a result, because he knows he'll just give him even more shit for it.

So when Haymitch walks in asking how it went last night, Peeta's relieved.
He fills him in on only some of the details, as Haymitch settles in, making sure he has a drink in his hands before Peeta decides to lay the big news on him.

"So she was good, huh?" he asks gruffly, but seeming pleased.

"More than good," Peeta confirms, tapping his foot nervously against the rail of the bar stool.

"Sounds like things are coming along nicely, then," Haymitch comments, looking at Peeta curiously as Peeta starts to fiddle with the cuff of his sleeve.

"What the hell's the matter with you kid? You're bouncing around like an fucking kangaroo right now."

Peeta sighs and wipes his mouth with his hand, past his chin before he looks Haymitch in the eye.

"I need to kick her off."

Haymitch studies him, taking a long sip of liquor as he does, and Peeta doesn't break his gaze. When Haymitch doesn't say anything back, Peeta tries to explain.

"I want option one, okay? I want the fake engagement with the fake girl. And it can't be with her."

His voice sounds desperate, and maybe he is, but it's still not how he was hoping to sound right now.

"So look, she's got her exposure now, right? You should've heard her last night Haymitch, the whole place couldn't take their eyes off of her. She'll be a big star even if she's not part of some big publicity stunt of a relationship, right?"

And then Haymitch sighs a genuine *fuck me* sigh.

"Why do you care so much?" he asks Peeta slowly.

Peeta sighs. Isn't it obvious by now?

"Katniss doesn't deserve to be a pawn in this game, okay? She shouldn't have to pretend to love anyone. Especially not me."

He takes a drink, not able to look back at Haymitch.

"She signed up for it, didn't she?"

This angers Peeta, because both he and Haymitch know that's not true. She didn't sign up for *this*.

"Are you really trying to make me spell it out for you? Humiliate me even more?" Peeta snaps, now perfectly capable of staring Haymitch down. "It's real for me. It's too fucking real, okay? And I don't have much experience with them, but I imagine fake engagements go a lot more smoothly when both people are actually faking."

Haymitch makes a face, scratching the place on his head where his hairline recedes.

"Look kid, I don't know what you want me to tell you."

"Tell me I can let her go," Peeta says, thinking it's simple enough. There's no reason for Haymitch to need her on the show any more now, so this shouldn't be that difficult.

So then why is Haymitch hesitating so much?
Haymitch shakes his head.

"And how exactly, do you think the rest of this is all going to play out then? What, you just kick
the girl off, with no explanation, after professing your undying love for her on national television?
So, what, you can go off and marry the hot blonde? You really think that's going to play well?"

"I don't care how it plays. And I'll figure it out." Peeta grits his teeth now, thinking this meeting
was going to be more of a courtesy announcement than a fight. Which was stupid of him, since
everything with Haymitch these days turns into a fight.

"Look. I wish I could help you here. I really do. But Plutarch himself called me this morning.
They're planning the fucking engagement party already. They want you to be thinking about rings
and wedding venues. So getting rid of Katniss at this point is not an option."


He blinks the initial sting away, thinking there's still got to be a way.

"They can't force me to choose her, though, right? They can't. You said so at the very beginning
of this!"

Haymitch shifts on his bar stool, and Peeta can tell he's holding something back.

"What? What is it? I swear to god Haymitch, don't try me right now," he's hissing like a wild,
wounded animal.

Haymitch sighs.

"You can't let her go okay? Plutarch also called because he wants to offer Katniss a deal with
B&C's subsidiary, Gamemaker Records."

Peeta's mouth hangs open, and Haymitch sighs again, actually looking pained.

"Don't think that'll happen if you boot her to the curb now, do you?"

Peeta wants to scream and curse, even punch a wall maybe.

But he draws his mouth in a tight line, silently taking in the realization that his plan had backfired.
Well, really, it half-backfired. Katniss is getting her record deal, at least. They'd just beaten him to
the punch.

"Does she know yet?" Peeta asks, becoming eerily calm.

Haymitch shakes his head.

"You interrupted my plans to tell her with your desperate need for a secret meeting and
harebrained ideas."

Peeta sighs, rubbing his temples.

"And it's a good deal?"

"It's a hell of a lot better than playing the dingy bars back in 12, don't you think?"

And Peeta knows that it is.

"So, if you really care about her as much as you say you do, then suck it up and pretend to love
her. Sounds like you'll have plenty of inspiration to draw from.” Haymitch raises an eyebrow, taking another swig of his drink.

Fine. Peeta can do this. He only wanted to let Katniss go because it's what he thought would be best for her. But if what's best for her is to fake a relationship with him, then that's what he'll do.

But only on one condition. They have to tell her the truth. All of it.

When he tells Haymitch this, Haymitch agrees and tells him he'll take care of it.

Peeta laughs, angrily.

"Absolutely not. Together. From now on, you talk to us together. You're not pulling the strings any more, all by yourself, like a fucking puppet master. If we're doing this, we're doing this as a team."

Haymitch snorts and shakes his head, but doesn't argue with him.

"Fine. We'll do it your way, kid." He stands up, plopping enough money down on the bar top to pay for both drinks.

"But just know that if you had a little more faith in yourself, and the girl too, maybe this would all be a moot fucking point."

And then Haymitch walks out of the bar, calling over his shoulder that he'll get Katniss to the mansion an hour early tomorrow for their damn team meeting.
Katniss wakes, reluctantly, to streaks of sunlight streaming through the blinds of the bedroom window. She opens her eyes, registering a smiling Delly, who's sitting on her bed, atop her covers, reading a book and sipping a cup of coffee.

"Good morning, sleepy head," Delly says chirpily.

Katniss squints and attempts to blink the sleep out of her eyes, seeing flashes of moonlight on golden blonde hair and dark, winding mountain roads flanked by sweet-smelling pine trees behind her lids.

For a moment, she panics in fear that last night was a dream she's just waking up from.

But Delly's laugh brings her back into focus.

"Someone was out late last night!"

She doesn't sound upset, but Katniss feels the guilt of the fleeting look of sadness in her eyes as Delly watches her stretch in bed.

She had been out late last night. Peeta hadn't gotten her back to the women's house until well after two a.m.

Delly tells her that she wasn't trying to be creepy in watching Katniss sleep, but she needed to hide from the other girls for a while and didn't know where else she could lock the door.

Katniss shakes her head groggily, licking her lips, dry from sleep, as she pushes herself up on one elbow.

"What time is it?" she asks, knowing it's much later than she normally wakes up.

"Just past nine," Delly shrugs, sipping her coffee. "I figured there's really no reason to wake you. So what kept you out so late?" she asks, trying not to sound too curious. Or too sad.

Somehow Katniss doesn't think a jailbreak with your wanna-be boyfriend is an appropriate response.
So instead Katniss groans and slides back down into the bed, pulling the covers up over her head. "I'm in so much trouble," she mumbles, immersed in her bedding, shutting her eyes tight in an attempt to delay the day further. Except now she sees herself tossing her mic in the bathroom garbage, then hopping into the car as Peeta speeds out of that dark alley with a grin and a determined face.

"Katniss, you can tell me about it. It's okay—I know you're his favorite. You're not going to hurt my feelings."

Delly's voice comes to her slightly muffled from inside her cocoon of blankets, and her words just make Katniss feel worse and more confused. Katniss had meant she was in trouble for breaking the rules, about ditching the cameras and producers and coming back to the women's house hours behind schedule. But maybe it was more than that, because she also couldn't stop replaying that kiss in the car over and over in her head. They'd shared some pretty good kisses up until then, but that one had hit her like a ton of bricks. She'd come up from it wanting so much more. More of what, exactly, she wasn't sure. But it scared her. And so did Peeta. He'd barely said two words to her after that kiss. Instead of going in for another, like she'd been hoping he would—like she'd practically asked him to do—Peeta'd shut down. And she'd been surprisingly disappointed, frustrated even, when he'd decided to just up and turn back around for home afterwards. Like something was suddenly wrong.

What had she done wrong?

She hears Delly sigh, realizing Katniss isn't going to respond, and Katniss can hear as she gets out of her bed, rummaging through her drawers, probably getting dressed for the morning. "Well, I hope you had fun, at least."

Fun?

She'd never felt so alive before in her life.

This terrifies her, naturally. So she keeps her thoughts to herself, unable, and in all honesty, unwilling to share anything, even with Delly. Not like anyone would fully understand her predicament anyway, since no one knows about her and Peeta's little arrangement. And if she said anything, she'd just end up making more enemies.

And in this house, Katniss certainly doesn't need any more enemies. The women have gone slightly insane over the past few days—the product of everyone getting more time with Peeta and deciding they all love him, and their inability to communicate with the outside world—with no access to the internet, phone calls, or television. And then of course, there's the alcohol. That's certainly not helping anyone speak or behave rationally.

But Katniss avoids talking about Peeta with the other women entirely. She does this mostly by physical avoidance, spending the day either in her room or going for a "run." She's found a loophole to get her out of the house—the girls are allowed to leave campus for "exercise purposes," and so she takes off that afternoon, simply to get away, and to try to clear her mind.

It doesn't work.

Because for as much as she's not talking about him, she can't stop thinking about him.

Ugh. She hates how it feels to be an insecure girl who likes a boy. She's mortified, and worried that she'd somehow embarrassed herself in front of Peeta and he'd suddenly realized that without
all the cameras and acting, that she's not as special as they're trying to make her out to be. But at the same time, she's anxious just to see him again. Talk to him again. Kiss him again. Even if it's just for the cameras.

What the hell is happening to her?

She sounds just as insane as everyone else in this house.

So the next morning, she forces herself to go outside and lay by the pool. It's the day of the rose ceremony that determines which three women will continue on to the vacation "dream dates" in District 4, and this puts the other women particularly on edge. But she figures it's better to listen to their crazy than to let her brain wander down that path itself. So as she sun bathes, she picks up on a few things. Like Johanna and Clove fighting over a missing pool towel. They've been fighting since their two-on-one date, so it doesn't cause anyone else too much concern. But things get really interesting when everyone starts dissecting who's kissed Peeta for the longest period of time, down to the second. Katniss listens to Cressida basically declare that she's going to marry Peeta because they kissed on her date. Even Delly laments, slightly tipsy off champagne, that she thinks she's going to get cut because Peeta hasn't kissed her at all yet. And Glimmer won't shut the hell up about how Peeta's so handsome and his lips are so soft, and she can't wait to rake her hands all over him on her dream date next week.

When Katniss has to bite her tongue from telling Glimmer a thing or two— including how she'd like to rake her hands all over Glimmer's face and that Peeta's lips aren't actually that soft, or at least that they're pretty firm when they're pressed against her—she decides it's time to go in and make herself lunch. But thank god this is her very last day in this house. Because the way Glimmer glares at Katniss as she walks away is almost enough for her to turn back around really do it. But instead she settles for a peanut butter sandwich.

She's spreading peanut butter on a slice of bread in the empty kitchen when an assistant producer approaches her stealthily, causing her to jump and drop the knife to the ground, the noise of the metal clattering on the tile floor before he whispers for her to come with him to the control room at the back of the house. Apparently, she has a phone call.

And considering Katniss is well aware that the girls aren't allowed to receive phone calls, obviously someone has made an exception for her.

She doesn't even pick up the knife as she follows him, wordlessly.

Her mind immediately thinks the worst as she sneaks down a taped-off hallway into a room filled with monitors showing the different cameras' live footage. She gets a peek of the footage from the pool, showing the rest of the women still sunning themselves on the pool deck before she's directed to another man, older, with long shaggy hair and a mustache, holding a cell phone out to her. No one tells her who it is or why she's being given this phone call, so she answers it shakily.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Sweetheart."

Haymitch. Well, she supposes he's not the worst. But he's close.

Katniss sighs out of both relief and dread.

"What do you want, Haymitch?"

"Oh I'm sorry, am I interrupting your busy tanning schedule?" his voice responds dryly.
She sighs again, her only response.

"Listen. I have good news and bad news for you. And I need you at Snow's mansion at five tonight so we can discuss it all."

She's not supposed to be there until six. What could he possibly need to talk to her about that's so important? Especially right before a rose ceremony? Her mind starts to go bad places again.

"You can't tell me now?" Katniss asks skeptically, scanning the room as she does, taking note of the two different producers that keep her company while they talk.

Haymitch cackles.

"I can, but I've been given strict orders not to. Sorry."

And then he hangs up.

Katniss, slightly stunned, hands the phone back to the mustached producer. He instructs her to be ready by five and that they'll have a car waiting for her. And if the other girls ask, that she's going early to get her interview with Caesar out of the way.

Katniss gets the impression that this meeting might be between more than just her and Haymitch.

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A producer walks her right into Snow's mansion precisely at five o'clock. Her heels click on the marble tile of the entryway, and it's strange, because the house has never been this silent before. Every other time she's been here, it's been filled with chatty women and production crews. Right now, it's just a few cameras resting on tripods flanking the room and a couple of PAs setting up a crudité table.

She's already been poked, prodded, and dressed for tonight's rose ceremony. PME's been sending Flavius and Octavia to do the women's makeup and hair for ceremonies and dates—so needless to say, Katniss is camera ready. Although she does like the dress that Cinna sent along with the prep team. It's a simple black sheath that V's down her front and flatters her slight frame. It looks somewhat similar to that black dress she tried to wear the first night, and Katniss appreciates that it's not over the top. Flavius braided her hair in an intricate French braid and told her she absolutely had to wear the red lipstick he's swiped on her lips. She hadn't fought him, and didn't mind the results.

So yes, physically, Katniss is ready for tonight.

Emotionally, she's nervous as hell for what she's about to walk into. Initially, when she'd hung up with Haymitch, her first thought was that this was about escaping on the date with Peeta. That she was being reprimanded in some way. But then it didn't make any sense, because no one had even been that mad at them when he'd dropped her off at the women's house. In fact, the two bored and tired producers' assistants that sat up waiting for them had seemed relieved, more than anything, and that was because the car was okay. And besides, PME didn't have any footage of their getaway, meaning as far as the show's concerned, their date ended with her kissing him outside of the karaoke bar. Which probably isn't such a terrible way to end a date.

So she doesn't know whether she's relieved or even more nervous when the producer leads her into a room that looks like a study, with walls of books and deep velvet curtains.

And Haymitch and Peeta waiting for her.
The producer closes the door behind Katniss and the three of them stare at each other without speaking. Katniss swallows hard, glancing at Peeta, who's already dressed as well—wearing a gray suit and a black tie with his hair swept to the side handsomely. He and Haymitch are seated around a coffee table on leather furniture, and of course, because Haymitch is here, there's a bottle of liquor present.

"Oh, good, the last member of our team has arrived," Haymitch mutters while shooting a pointed look at Peeta.

Katniss doesn't know if she expected Peeta to greet her in some way—a hug, a kiss on the cheek, maybe just a simple hello. But she doesn't like that he doesn't. He barely even looks at her as she steps further into the room. It gives her an ominous feeling.

"What's going on?" she asks plainly, looking between the two of them, unsmiling.

Haymitch motions for her to take a seat in the chair next to him, across the table from Peeta.

As Katniss positions herself in her chair, smoothing the skirt of her dress, Haymitch asks if she wants a drink as he sips his own rocks glass.

"She likes the brown stuff, too," he exposés for Peeta's benefit. Peeta's blue eyes flit in her direction briefly, but he doesn't actually look at her.

It makes Katniss unable to take her eyes off of him.

"I'm fine," she tells Haymitch firmly, still staring at Peeta. He shifts uncomfortably under her gaze.

Something's wrong.

That much is obvious.

Haymitch attempts to break the tension with a gruff laugh, but it dies in the air.

"Well aren't you two the happy couple."

"Fuck, Haymitch, come on," Peeta groans, squinting his eyes painfully and shaking his head at the man as he leans back in his seat.

Haymitch smirks. "This was your idea kid. You wanna tell her?"

"Tell me what?" Katniss barks, having had enough of being the only one in the room not in on their little secret, whatever it is.

Her voice is loud enough that it gets their attention, and Peeta's finally able to look at her. She watches him look her up and down and quirk an eyebrow, almost like he can't help be slightly amused despite the tension, before turning back to Haymitch, who's got a hand up, signaling for her to calm down.

"Relax, Sweetheart. I told you, I've got good news." And at this, he grins.

"You've got a record deal if you want it."

Well, that wasn't the news Katniss was expecting.

Katniss sits stunned, trying not to gape at him.
She shakes her head, confused, in disbelief, and wondering if this is some sort of joke.

"Wh-what?" she stammers, catching Peeta's soft smile at her reaction out of the corner of her eye. It can't be true though; if this is the news, why was the tone so somber when she walked in?

"How is that even possible?" Katniss asks, regaining her composure. "You said you hadn't even sent my tapes out yet." She looks in Peeta's direction again, guiltily, thankful he's eyeing the ground.

She knew he knew, of course. But they hadn't come right out and said it. So it feels weird to admit it out in the open. The real reason she's here.

Haymitch nods in Peeta's direction.

"I can't take credit for Peeta's idea. It was your singing the other night, at the bar. The executive producer of the show, Plutarch Heavensbee, called me yesterday. B&C has a music subsidiary and they're interested in signing you."

He can't take credit for Peeta's idea.

That's the first thing she hears. Not that a major music label wants to sign her. But that somehow Peeta's responsible for it.

Katniss furrows her brow and whips her head in his direction. He'd been the one to set her up on their date? She's floored. She thought for sure it was Haymitch; it had Haymitch written all over it. And Peeta hadn't exactly corrected her when she'd called him out for it. Fuck, he'd let her apologize to him about it, even!

Peeta shrugs, lifelessly, under her steely gaze and sighs. "I wanted to help you, Katniss. Once I realized why you were here. I'm happy for you."

Peeta smiles at her tightly, and her heart constricts in her chest.

So is that really what all this between them has been about? Peeta helping her get a recording contract? Just out of the goodness of his heart, as an old friend from back home?

But it doesn't make any sense. Did Peeta really think he'd have to kiss her to get her to sing? Or was that just for fun? But why would he possibly care so much then?

She feels slightly dizzy, and is grateful she's already seated, as the rush of conflicting emotions pass through her and she tries to synthesize what she's just heard.

Katniss doesn't know how to respond. She feels guilty and victimized at the same time. She studies the strong lines of his face, looking for answers. Possibly trying to figure out if she knows him at all. Peeta sets his lips in a straight line and nods.

"It's okay. Really. And look, you're getting what you wanted. It's a good thing. A great thing," Peeta corrects himself, speaking like he's trying to convince more than just Katniss of what he's saying.

He smiles, but it's a distant, cold smile, and Katniss isn't at all sure how to reconcile this Peeta with the one she fled the scene with two nights ago. The one who'd seemed so content just to be in her presence and kissed her until she felt it in every fiber of her body.

And if this is such a great thing, then why does everyone not seem happy? She should be happy, right? This is her dream. This is why she's here.
Figuring it out, Katniss turns back to Haymitch.

"So what's the catch?"

"Ah. And now for the bad news. Well, maybe not so bad news. You two seem to be getting along swimmingly right now."

He gets two very dirty looks in response, and Peeta curses under his breath again, telling Haymitch to knock it off.

Haymitch takes a long drink from his liquor glass and sighs, leaning over his knees on the end of his seat.

"The show. Plutarch's concerned because they haven't had a successful couple since Finnick and Annie five years ago. They've been starved for a real romance story and have decided you two are it. So yes, they want to sign you to a record deal, but it comes with some strings."

Haymitch takes another sip of his drink, and Katniss can't tell if he's taking his time in getting to the point because he's enjoying keeping her in the dark or if he just doesn't want to tell her.

But she doesn't have to wait because Peeta's annoyed enough with Haymitch's drawn out explanation that he blurts out the real reason why they're having this meeting.

"They want us to get engaged. That's the catch. You get a record deal, but you have to agree to marry me."

Oh.

His expression is pained.

"I'm sorry," Peeta apologizes, his tone softening. "It's my fault. I thought I was helping you—that you'd get to sing on the show and it'd help you get noticed. That way I could let you go before everything got too serious and you could go be the singer you always wanted to be."

She can't believe what she's hearing. Talk about misplaced chivalry, then. She stares at him, her forehead crinkling as she tries to figure him out. He confesses a practically life-long crush on her and kisses her like she's never been kissed and now he's telling her it was all just to help her get noticed?

Why?

She looks to Haymitch for answers to her unasked questions, but he just shrugs.

"That about sums it up, Sweetheart. B&C's music label—Gamemaker Records—they're going to want to get you in the public eye before taking the risk on you. "This," he says, waving a hand between her and Peeta, "is how they make sure you are."

Katniss stares back and forth between the two men, considering what she's just heard, and weighing her options.

She wants the deal, obviously. Well, she wants a deal. Although this one feels like a blood deal. It's unsettling, to say the least. And right now, she's not sure she wants anything to do with PME anymore. Or Peeta, for that matter.

So she turns to Haymitch pointedly.
"What about sticking to the original plan and sending my tapes out to other record labels?" she asks flatly, not bothering to look Peeta's direction.

Haymitch, however, does bother look at Peeta, with a shake of his head, before looking back at her.

He answers her carefully.

"We can do that too," Haymitch nods unenthusiastically. "But Katniss, this is a powerful network you're dealing with here. You probably don't want to make them mad. If they can't have you, they're not going to want anyone else to have you. And they're not above sabotaging you, turning you into a joke, if you turn them down for a different deal. You want to take that risk, hey, I'll support it. But as your agent, I can't advise it."

Of course he can't.

So now she's just stuck? It's this or nothing? All because of a couple of karaoke songs and a kiss? Fuck.

She looks to her prospective fiancé, curious as to his thoughts.

"And you're okay with this? You'd agree to this?" She's incredulous.

He rakes a hand through his perfectly styled hair, mussing it to the point that it will have to be redone, and drops his eyes.

"I came into this knowing I was probably going to have to propose to somebody anyway," Peeta mumbles into the ground. "So maybe it's better that it's you."

And then he looks back up at her, his eyes dull, and sighs.

"Haymitch says they can't really make us get married though. So we have time. It doesn't have to go that far."

Gone is the boy who laughed at her eye rolls and whose smiles gave her butterflies. And left in his place is a fucking businessman brokering some strange arranged marriage deal.

Outwardly, Katniss reacts flippantly.

"Well then let's do it," she says, trying to sound cavalier, as if she'd known it was an act all along. Like it's no big deal.

But really, inside, she's miserable. And angry too. At him. And at herself, for being that idiot who let the real feelings in. But maybe this is good—meant to give her a good kick in the ass to remind herself that she'd gone into this thinking it didn't matter who the Bachelor was and that she'd been okay with the idea of using him for her own personal gain. Katniss needs to focus on what she set out to achieve when she signed up for this show. And it wasn't falling in love. And two dates and four kisses from Peeta Mellark is not going to change that.

Besides, Peeta's not even who she thought he was. He's a jerk, no matter how blue his eyes are, or how good their kisses were. He could've just gone through the motions with her—and he knew she would've done the same, for the cameras. But instead, he used real things about themselves, creating this false sense of reality, luring her in and making her feel...loved?

Somehow, that makes it much, much worse. Because he got her to trust him. And for what? Just because he could? All for what amounts to an elaborate publicity stunt?
This is why she doesn't date.

Haymitch is looking at her wearily, and it makes Katniss think that maybe she's not playing it as cool as she thinks she is. And forget Peeta, he's practically buried his head in his hands. Good.

"Look," Haymitch begins, his eyes darting between his happy couple. "The kid's right, okay? There won't be a wedding. We won't let it get that far. This is how we game the system. Let it go just far enough to make you both popular and successful in your respective careers, and then when you call off the wedding, it's too late for the network to be able to do anything about it. But I need you both to look me in the eye and tell me you can commit to this right now. You have to go on doing exactly as you've been doing. Be the distraction, hide the ball. And while everyone's fawning over your long lost love story, you'll both be taking them to the bank."

Peeta lifts his head up long enough to snort in Haymitch's direction.

"And so will you."

Katniss's lip quirks involuntarily at the quip. But Peeta does have a point.

Haymitch ignores it, checking his watch with a frown.

"Do what I say, and work together, and I promise, you'll outsmart them. Deal?"

He's asking them both to agree to this makeshift plan. Well, really, he's asking them both to commit to almost marrying each other.

Katniss nods her agreement surprisingly calmly and watches Peeta shrug his slumped shoulders, as if he has no other choice.

Well isn't this engagement off to a lovely start.

But Katniss sighs inwardly, determined, now, more than ever, to stick to her plan. And refusing to let those blue eyes affect her from here on out.

Then Haymitch looks them both in the eye, approvingly. They've both agreed.

"Okay then."

He turns to Katniss.

"We have to get you to the other side of the mansion, so I don't have time to talk to you about the details, but we'll set something up with Plutarch or whoever he wants with Gamemaker after you get back from District 4 to get the ball rolling. I suspect they'll want a single cut and ready to go for radio before the show airs, so expect to be busy."

She doesn't have time to respond, because then Haymitch stands, pointing his finger at Peeta, who looks a little green in the face.

"And you. Try to at least seem interested in the other girls, okay?"

Peeta's eyes glance at Katniss before he turns them back on Haymitch coolly.

"Yeah. Okay."

"All right," Haymitch nods, satisfied. Then he motions to Katniss.
"You coming, Sweetheart?"

Katniss moves to stand, ignoring the stare she knows Peeta's giving her.

"Yep."

She's three steps into following Haymitch out of the room when Peeta's voice cuts through the air, freezing her in her place.

"Wait."

Peeta sounds desperate as he calls out, standing up from his seat, making Katniss turn back around to him. Haymitch arches an eyebrow.

He swallows hard enough she can see his Adam's apple bob.

His eyes finally find hers, locking in on them for the first time tonight. Pleading with her.

"Can we just have a couple of minutes? Please," he adds when Haymitch's face twists with uncertainty.

Haymitch is standing in the doorway eyeing up the both of them. Katniss remains motionless, halfway between Haymitch and Peeta.

Haymitch finally nods. "I can probably buy you five."

And then he's gone, closing the door behind him with a soft thud.

She's forced to turn her attention to Peeta, her mouth going dry when she sees him standing there, hating herself for thinking he still looks so handsome.

"Are you okay?" His mouth frowns with concern.

In a strategically defensive move, she steps back, crossing her arms.

"I'm fine."

Peeta sighs, looking exhausted.

"Katniss, please. Just talk to me for a minute."

"What is there to talk about, Peeta?" She juts her chin, shrugging.

He stares at her, his eyes carefully observing her, most likely trying to read her—attempting to cut through the defensive posture and angry tone. Maybe looking for the girl who laughed at his jokes and blushed at his touch.

Well, just like that boy in the car, she's gone too.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to, Katniss."

"And why wouldn't I want to? I get a record deal out of it, remember?" Her voice is lifeless, but her eyes pierce through him until he finally reacts.

"Damn it, Katniss!"

He crosses half the distance to her, frustrated, and clearly gearing up for some sort of lecture.
But as Peeta gets closer, the words don't find his lips.

She raises her eyebrows, a gesture taunting him to spit it out. When he still doesn't, she fills the silence herself.

"You lied to me."

Peeta closes his eyes in a long blink, and when he opens them, his frustration is replaced with guilt.

"I didn't know it was going to happen like this. If I had, I'd…" his voice trails off.

"You'd what?" Katniss prods, not letting him off the hook. But she drops her arms, opening herself up to at least an explanation.

It makes him inch closer to her.

"I'd have done things differently," he admits, looking down. "I'm sorry."

Katniss considers him, desperately willing the electricity between them to go away. He's a liar and a manipulator. And he must be using her for something, otherwise he'd never agree to this. She can't be the only one set to lose something.

So how come he gets to know her secrets, while she doesn't get to know his?

She decides the least he can do is even the score.

"So what do you get out of all of this?" she asks, studying the knot in his tie rather than looking him in the eye.

He's stepped closer to her again, approaching her like she's a wild animal he needs to heed with caution.

She hears him sigh and feels his eyes on her.

"A restaurant franchise conglomerate and something Haymitch calls 'heartthrob status.'"

Even upset, Katniss can't help but upturn her lips at that.

She looks up at him, and allows him to take the last step towards her finally closing the distance between them.

She's stopped backing up steps ago.

He licks his lips, nervously.

"And you."

His blue eyes are almost magnetic; they have a pull she can't resist. Her breath hitches and she closes her eyes when Peeta reaches the spot right in front of her, close enough to reach out and brush the apple of her cheek with his thumb.

"You look beautiful, by the way," he whispers, and she can feel the heat of his breath on her skin, and she knows he's about to kiss her.

It's what makes her eyes fly open, jerking her head back and pushing him in the chest, just hard enough to leverage a step back from him.
"Don't," she insists, shaking her head fiercely. "Don't let's pretend when there's no one around." Her eyes try to glare at him, but they have trouble, competing with having to fight back her tears.

Peeta's face contorts with realization, the initial shock of her rejection morphing into something sadder.

"All right, Katniss," he says tiredly. His shoulders slag, nothing left to say.

But in the moment, she can't stop herself from studying the features of Peeta's face—taking in the line of his jaw, frowning at her, and attempting to find the freckles she knows are smattered on the bridge of his nose, currently covered by camera makeup. And she's trying to figure out what to make of the hurt in his eyes. But all she can come up with is that she can't afford to make any more stupid mistakes, like getting sucked back in by them.

So she turns away to leave.

He doesn't stop her this time.

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Effie's waiting for her outside the door. Katniss startles slightly, hoping for a moment alone to compose herself, but instead she has to swallow the hiccup in her throat and brighten her eyes for the overly anxious talent coordinator.

"Oh, Katniss! We have to get you in your interview right away! Caesar is waiting!"

Effie says this like no one keeps Caesar waiting.

Katniss straightens her shoulders and nods, attempting a smile. But the last thing she wants to do right now is talk to Caesar, having to gush over Peeta and their budding relationship right now.

As Effie leads her back down the long corridor of a hallway into yet another room, where Caesar is apparently waiting, Katniss wonders if Effie knows that she's just come from a private, unchaperoned visit with the Bachelor. It kind of seems like the thing Effie Trinket would first, want to know, and second, frown upon if she did.

"You look just beautiful tonight, as always," Effie tells her as they click their way to the interview. She knows the words belong to Effie, but all Katniss hears is Peeta's voice saying them instead, haunting her. It takes her a moment to respond, Effie having stopped at the door of their destination, looking at Katniss expectantly.

"Thank you Effie," Katniss says lamely, the blonde woman still eyeing her carefully.

"You know," Effie says, with a knowing nod of her perfectly coiffed head, "I told you you were going to be the girl to root for this year. Looks like I was right."

And then she winks at Katniss, just before she opens the door to the interview room. It's meant to be reassuring, and knowing, to let her know that Effie absolutely knows who Katniss left behind in that study. And that she seems to approve.

It's not Effie's fault, of course, but it's anything but reassuring to Katniss.

She manages a small smile, probably stiff and as miserable looking as she feels, and then enters the room with Effie following. Katniss was unaware Effie would be overseeing this interview, but she doesn't mind, thinking it might be easier with her here, since Effie will help keep Katniss on
task, making sure she's upbeat and coming across as the lovesick girl she's supposed to be portraying.

Caesar greets her along with a small team of people, one of them who is clipping Caesar's microphone on him at the moment. Caesar's nice enough, and he's made Katniss feel mostly at ease during her interviews so far, but his garish appearance is always a little off-putting. His skin's been pulled just a little too tight, and his teeth are three shades too white.

"Oh, Katniss, so good to see you doll," he says, shooing off a woman who offers him a pat of finishing powder. He gestures to Katniss to come join him in the center of the room, where the camera man is finishing up perfecting the lighting in front of the two high chairs the interview will take place on.

Katniss stands awkwardly, reminding herself it'll be just like any other interview, as the PA who'd just mic'd up Caesar does the same to her, telling her to hold still as he attaches the device to the deep v-neck of her dress.

"How much time do we have?" Caesar asks Effie, who's standing in the corner. "Because I have a lot of questions for this one," he asks, wiggling his thick, cartoonish eyebrows.

Effie tsks. "Just ten minutes Caesar, so you can't make her give too much away."

They're smiling at each other, and also at Katniss, like they're all in on some big joke together. Katniss supposes that's about right, actually. It's all some big joke.

She wonders if they're really in on the behind the scenes maneuvering, though, and that it's not just a dirty little secret between her, Peeta, and Haymitch.

Caesar's first question to her on camera points to yes.

"So tell me, Katniss, it's obvious now to all of us that Peeta's liked you for quite some time. And on your date, you told him that you'd liked him too, even before coming here to meet Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor. Do you care to fill us in on the details?"

Katniss forces herself not to react with the terror this question gives her, avoiding its debilitating capability by looking at Caesar with an airy giggle.

If there's one way to know Katniss is acting, it'd be when she giggles. She'll smile, and smirk, and laugh until her belly aches even, but she doesn't giggle. It's not in her nature. Except on this show, now, talking about her previously thought to be unrequited love for Peeta Mellark.

"I can't say I knew for sure that I had a crush on him, Caesar," she explains, playing into the blush that spreads across her cheeks. "But I know the exact moment I really noticed him."

And what the hell, she figures, as she impulsively decides to take a play out of the Peeta Mellark play book and begins describing the wrestling match story to Caesar. She includes the little details, too, down to bribing Prim with nachos and how he looked in spandex, wanting the story to have a ring of truth to it. Peeta's not the only one who can use passing memories for melodramatic effect.

It works too, because Caesar looks captivated, and as if he hadn't expected her to open up to him that much.

And so Katniss shrugs, playing like she's helpless.

"I guess I never really stopped noticing him after that."
It's surprisingly easy for her, to spit the truth out, when she knows it's all under the guise of make believe.

"Well, I think it's safe to say that not only Peeta, but all of Panem's noticed you now. Especially with that voice of yours. In-cred-ible!"

They do a bit about her karaoke songs and she admits to being an aspiring singer, claiming that she didn't tell Peeta because she didn't want him to think she was here for the wrong reasons.

Again, that much is actually true. But no one has to know that now.

Then, after a painful two minutes of having to gush about how attractive and sweet and funny she thinks Peeta is, and that she's just grateful to have had the opportunity to run into him again because of this show, Caesar lets her go, mercifully.

After the cameras cut off, and everyone's free to speak honestly again, Caesar turns to her with a pointed look.

"That was very good, dear."

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Johanna's the first to see Katniss reemerge into the great room. And she's eager to call her out for showing up later than the rest of them.

"So you leave early and show up late? What, were you getting in a quickie before the rest of us are strategically kicked off?"

Katniss had been approaching the room at a timid pace, but Johanna's words tick her off enough during a particularly bad enough mood that she marches right up to Johanna's face.

"What exactly is your problem?"

The slightly older woman's dark eyes glimmer with the excitement of the challenge.

"That's easy. You are."

Katniss narrows her eyes, wondering if this is the exact moment she explodes. On some unsuspecting, irrelevant bystander in the grand scheme of things.

She keeps it together for another question, at least.

"Do you have a reason?"

Johanna, with her slinky hunter green dress and pixie black hair, smirks a question back at her.

"Where were you?"

Katniss is about to answer for herself, but she's cut off by a breathless Effie who rushes over to break up a fight that hasn't quite started yet.

"Girls, please," she huffs, with a disappointed look in Katniss's direction.

"The cameras are about to start rolling," she hisses. And then the talent wrangler turns to her least-behaved talent.
"And she was giving her interview with Caesar, Johanna. I was there with her."

Johanna's eyes rake Katniss over like hot coals, but she doesn't say anything else.

"Please behave yourselves," Effie continues her scolding before scurrying away when someone off to the side gives her the signal that the rose ceremony is set to start.

Meaning Peeta's about to join them.

This distracts Katniss enough that she forgets she wanted to explode on Johanna, and focuses her attention on avoidance instead.

He helps her out by chatting with the other women, mostly one-on-one, in various parts of the room that never seem to be in her vicinity.

He's physically painful for her to look at, with his handsome gray suit and re-styled back to perfect blonde hair, and she tries not to watch as he smiles and laughs with the other women.

So when Delly catches her off in a corner and asks if something's wrong, Katniss knows she has to turn up the happy notch, and tries to chalk everything up to nervousness with a giggle and a smile.

She's actually taken aback though, when Delly touches her arm reassuringly with a genuine smile.

"Oh, don't be silly. You should know you have nothing to be worried about."

But Katniss has everything to worry about, unbeknownst to poor Delly.

Although, when it comes down to narrowing the playing field, with the remaining six women half-circled around Peeta anxiously awaiting his three choices, Katniss is glad Delly is chosen first. At least she's one of the ones who already knows that this isn't her game to win.

And to be honest, she also doesn't mind when she watches Peeta choose Glimmer, despite the sour taste on her tongue as she presses it hard to the roof of her mouth when Glimmer's hands linger on Peeta's waist as she embraces him in a long hug. It will be fun to take her down, even if it's rigged.

Wait. It won't be fun at all. It will be awkward. And painful.

Damn it. Maybe she'd rather let Glimmer have him, on second thought.

And then she knows it's coming, but she barely hears Peeta call her name as he offers her the final rose of the night. She's finally forced to look at him, instead of her shoes, and Peeta's smiling so hard his cheeks must hurt. It's a smile she doesn't recognize.

She tries to look happy, and grateful, and relieved, as she moves to accept his invitation to continue dating him. As she approaches, and he hands the rose out to her, she notices the slight tremor of his hand. She's careful not to let their skin touch as she takes it, keeping as much distance as she can while still acting like they're so very close.

Katniss plasters a stupid smile of her own on her lips as he kisses her on the cheek and tells her he's excited to see her next week like he's reading out of a phone book.

Luckily, they've done enough of these robotic rose ceremonies by now that the coldness between them will go largely unnoticed. But they're probably going to have to figure out another strategy for the romantic beaches of District 4.
Because refusing to look the other in the eye for an entire date probably isn't going to go over so well in the telling of their epic love story.
Chapter 6, Part 2: Stay With Me

Chapter Notes

You all have been amazing. I'm so grateful for each and every one of you who's taken the time to read this. And I know I left you hanging there for a couple of un-updated weeks, but thanks for sticking with me. I certainly hope Part 2 makes up for the wait.

Song Inspiration: Stay With Me, Sam Smith

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The smell of salt, heavy in the air, is what hits her first, as soon as she steps off the plane. She's never been to the ocean before, but welcomes the calming effect of its warm breeze.

But it's nothing compared to the pull of its waves crashing against the sandy beach, which she can see from her room once she checks into the hotel. So she settles in, not unpacking a thing, sitting on her balcony, watching the water roll in as the sun begins to sink behind the horizon line.

Katniss hasn't felt this alone in weeks. A part of her relishes it, not having to share a bedroom with someone, or a house with a bunch of other girls. The rest of her just feels sad, knowing this empty feeling isn't because she's not around other people.

She'd arrived this afternoon, after one last night in the women's house. Post-rose ceremony, Johanna had come up to her again, and Katniss had expected another fight, so she'd cut it off before it started, claiming that Johanna knew nothing about her and that she should just leave her alone.

Johanna'd gone quiet then, muttering that it wasn't like Katniss had ever told anyone anything about herself anyway. Everyone was packing up to leave at the time, either for District 4 or for home, and Delly was taking a shower, so it had just been Katniss and Johanna standing in Katniss's room, her suitcase splayed on the bed with half-folded clothes strewn about.

"I was coming to apologize," Johanna'd told her, making Katniss feel stupid for snapping at her.

"It's not like the kid's my type, anyway," she'd smirked, and Katniss had smiled at that too, because even in Katniss's confusion as to who Peeta Mellark really is, she can be sure that he's absolutely not Johanna Mason's type.

"I'm sorry too," Katniss had returned the apology, feeling a little better for it. "You'd caught me at a…a bad time."

"Well, I just wanted to let you know there were no hard feelings," Johanna'd told her, still lingering in the doorway. "And that I hope it all works out for you."

Katniss had known Johanna was vague for a reason—aware that it's completely unclear as to what "working out for her" actually means.

Katniss had continued folding her clothes then, not looking up as she told Johanna, just to clear her chest of it, that she really hadn't known about Peeta being the Bachelor before she got here.
And that's when Johanna'd left her with a lasting piece of advice. "Well, I'll tell you what, Brainless. It is what it is now. And I hope you know what you're doing. And to watch your back. Who knows what they'll do for ratings, right?"

Katniss had raised an eyebrow, careful not to respond out loud, knowing there were still hot mics lying around.

But Johanna had chuckled sardonically, waving off Katniss's concern. "What? I can say whatever I want now. They've already kicked me off, right?"

She'd made a good point.

Actually, Johanna had made more than one good point, and Katniss had thought a lot about her words during the flight, wondering if she, Haymitch, and Peeta really knew what they were doing. Honestly, should she really be selling a piece of herself just for some contract that she's not even guaranteed exists yet? Is it really worth all the grief?

It's certainly a lot to think about before she prepares for her day-long date with Peeta.

And what an awkward day it's going to be. The idea behind having everyone travel to the beaches of District 4 and giving the Bachelor a whole day, and night, with the final three women is simple enough—it helps promote any burgeoning relationships to the "next level," and it makes for great, soapy, romantic television. Viewers want to watch them kiss and laugh and gallop around on horses or whatever cheesy events the producers choose for them, all with the water and the palm trees swaying in the background. And Katniss is all too aware that this is a show that's first priority is giving viewers what they want.

Which means it's all supposed to culminate with Peeta and his dates staying overnight in some sort of lavish honeymoon-type suite. She'd been appalled at the idea when she'd first heard about it, at the thought of this show invading their privacy like that in the bedroom, but that's the catch. No cameras. No mics. Just the Bachelor and his date. Allowed to really get to know each other, in whatever sense that may be.

Letting the viewers' imaginations run wild.

She tries not to worry that Peeta's date with Glimmer is today, but it's not like she doesn't have an imagination of her own.

Instead, she stares out into the ocean, trying to numb herself to the idea of everything.

It's practically dark when her solitude is interrupted by a knock at the door.

She almost ignores it.

But she gets nervous that it's a producer, or Effie, and at least goes to the door, cutting through her lavish hotel room, to check the peep hole.

She opens the door, slightly confused.

Delly's standing there with two empty glasses and a bottle of wine. "You have to let me in. I've been knocking on every door in the place just trying to find you."

Katniss raises an eyebrow, but moves aside, allowing the girl into her room.
Delly walks past her, explaining. "No more cameras, no more microphones, no more house full of catty girls." She turns back around to Katniss, putting the glasses and wine down on the coffee table and plopping herself down on the sofa, raising a knowing eyebrow.

"And I know you have a lot to tell me. I want the whole story." She pats the seat next to her, reaching for the already-open bottle of red wine and dumping a good portion of its contents into the two glasses.

All of it makes Katniss smile reluctantly, and she moves to joins her on the couch.

Delly hands her a glass with a grin.

"It's not doing any good to keep it all to yourself anyway. And the least you can do is explain exactly why Peeta has absolutely zero interest in me."

At this, Katniss blushes, but Delly's so honestly unaffected by her clearly doomed romantic prospects with Peeta that she succumbs, starting from the beginning.

And it feels good to finally talk to someone about it. The wine doesn't hurt, either, opening her up to sharing the juicy insider information—telling Delly everything. Well, not quite *everything*, since Katniss isn't about to admit how stupid she was for starting to fall for Peeta, and she's not allowed to say a word about her forthcoming contract, but Delly gets the details on why she came here, and how the show has orchestrated this whole crazy back story that she and Peeta are stuck playing out for the cameras now.

Delly's eyes glimmer with mischief and probably the effects of two and a half glasses of wine when she tells Katniss that she has to admit, it's a pretty darn good story.

"Really though, him having this unrelenting crush on you, you noticing him but not knowing what to do with it, and then you just show up together on this show, years later, lives on completely different paths?"

She giggles.

"Even I'm rooting for you."

Katniss stares at Delly, letting her words settle. With an outsider's perspective, it's easier to understand why PME seems willing to do anything to make this happen. It does kind of sound like a fairy tale.

"But doesn't it matter that it's not real?" Katniss finally responds, looking to bring Delly back down to Earth.

"Not really," Delly shrugs.

"I'll just hold out hope that it is."

Delly's grin attached to her words makes Katniss shake her head, vigorously trying to convey to her that it's not going to happen.

Delly doesn't buy it though, still grinning.

"I guess I'll just have to watch to find out."

***
Zip lining.

That's how their date begins.

It's a bright, blue sky day with puffy clouds wafting through the air, but it's also warm and humid enough that Katniss is hot even in shorts and a tank top, which cover up the bathing suit she was told she needed to wear.

Peeta, dressed similarly in his own set of swim shorts and t-shirt, greets her with a little too much ease, a little too much bounce in his step. It lets Katniss know that this is probably not easy for him and that he's trying to force it.

She kisses him on the cheek, and he slips his hand into hers with a big smile, swinging their arms lightly as he walks her toward the jeep that he tells her is going to transport them up into the jungle-like terrain so they can swing from the trees.

Yep. He's definitely nervous.

It's easier for Katniss, who's realized that, in this setting, knowing that it actually is a setup, there's less to be nervous about.

So she gives his hand a slight, reassuring squeeze, hoping it tells him not to worry—that she won't leave him hanging out here all alone. She can play her part just fine.

The cameras have become second nature by now, and Katniss barely notices the men surrounding them with the bulky machines on their shoulders as they get out at the base of the zip lining course, an instructor pointing out the basics and safety necessities as he clips them both into their harnesses.

But even with his nervous energy, Peeta plays his part just fine too, because when the instructor—a local who calls himself Rusty, which fits his rust-colored head of hair—hands both of them helmets, Peeta doesn't miss a breath-hitching opportunity, leaning into her and gently adjusting the strap under her chin, making sure it stays on her head, good and safe. Luckily for Katniss, when his eyes and nose and lips are only inches from hers, and she watches him concentrate on snapping the plastic three-pronged clip, she's built up enough walls that it doesn't make the ends of her nerves jump out of her skin. Instead, it just feels more like a dull ache.

"There," Peeta says with a nod, satisfied, as he steps back, going to work on his own helmet.

"You nervous?" he asks, fumbling around to find the clip under his neck.

Katniss shrugs, keeping her unaffected expression.

"I've climbed a tree or two in my life. I think I'll be okay."

And maybe she's misread him, because it appears Peeta might be more afraid of zip lining than he is of her.

She narrows her eyes curiously. "Are you nervous?"

He looks up at the first large tree as they stand at its base, with a makeshift ladder built into the trunk, and nods, mouthing an anxious yes.

He grins, and she shakes her head, reminding herself that Peeta's charming demeanor and boyish smiles aren't going to change her mind about him.
Zip lining is almost fun. It's not exactly a conversation-driven activity, so it's a good way to start this whole 20-some hours with Peeta thing. She's still upset with him, of course, but it's a little easier to let go of the tension with the adrenaline of flying through the canopy of District 4's jungles rushing through her. And she learns that Peeta's definitely uneasy with heights, which amuses her, since she wasn't aware he had any weaknesses.

But he flings himself down the lines just the same, only looking a little worse for the wear after each one.

And really, if the guy holding the camera can do it, then Peeta can't complain even if he wanted to.

It's less fun when they share a pretty terrible kiss after landing on a platform with an incredible view of lush green covered hills and crystal blue waters, prodded by a not so subtle hint from Rusty when he dubs the scenery the *most romantic* in District 4. It's awkward and disjointed, their noses actually bumping, like neither one of them can remember how to kiss the other.

But it's nothing compared to the awkwardness of having to complete the last zip line in tandem. It's Rusty's suggestion, telling them it's safe, and all Katniss has to do is wrap her legs around Peeta's waist and hang on tight on the way down. Rusty's words, not hers.

Peeta shoots her a knowing look, as if to say *well, this should be fun,* and Katniss fights a scowl.

"Good," Peeta tells Rusty, like this is the best idea ever. "I was just thinking I could use something to hold onto—I feel like I might fall out of this thing," he says with a jiggle of the harness that attaches him to the zip line and a wiggle of his eyebrows in Katniss's direction.

Katniss sighs, but steps up to the platform with him all the same.

"You're perfectly safe already, you know."

He grins. "But especially now, with you to protect me."

Katniss rolls her eyes. But Peeta's cominess, whether genuine or forced—and god, she hopes it's forced—still helps her crack a smile. But nothing can help her from having to hop on Peeta's back so they can ride down a cord hung 30 feet in the air for 500 yards.

And so Katniss essentially ends up leaping on to him in some version of a piggy back ride, becoming a mess of suspended limbs. Peeta does his best to help her catch her balance, using his free hand to steady her as her arms wrap around his torso. And she only hesitates briefly before crisscrossing her legs at his waist, all discomfort abandoned in the name of following Rusty's orders.

Katniss wonders if this should feel worse than it does. Because she wants to hate it. But Peeta feels sturdy and solid underneath her, intriguing her in ways she'd rather he not. And something inside of her clearly betrays her, because the damn butterflies are back.

Then Peeta cracks a joke about this suddenly turning into the best date ever, and she makes a face into the back of his shoulder, resting her cheek against his back. Her hands cling to the front of him, and she can feel his heart thumping in his chest.

"You two ready?" Rusty asks from behind them on the platform. Katniss inhales and nods against Peeta's back, hearing Peeta grunt a yes under his breath, clearly anxious—from the height, and if he's anything like her, from their closeness.

But anxiety doesn't stop him from letting go of the brake, and just like that, the exhilaration of the
speed and the wind and the view overcomes the tension, and they're both screeching with excitement.

Half way through, Peeta calls back to her to make sure she's still doing okay, and she assures him that she's fine, but wraps her legs around him even tighter, liking the feeling of security it gives her.

And when Peeta kisses her again after they sail in to the last platform, still breathy from their tangled descent, this time their noses don't bump.

It's still just a quick, adrenaline-filled kiss, but it actually feels like a kiss, and not just a meeting of lips. It takes her aback, expecting to feel bored, and certainly not aroused.

Emotionally, it makes Katniss pull back on the reins, hard.

But physically, she still slides her hand in his, and lets his arm around her shoulder, and giggles playfully when he tickles her side, all until the cameras turn off, ready to set up for the next portion of their date.

Because that's when she quickly drops her hand from his, clamping it snugly at her side.

Peeta looks at her like he's surprised at the abruptness of her movements, or maybe at how quickly she reacted to the show's implied yell of "Cut!," and he opens his mouth to say something, but instead he just sighs, and stalks off toward the van that's waiting to transport them to the private beach they're headed to.

The private beach about 15 minutes away where they're expected to frolic in the sand and the waves with one another. Actually doing god knows what, because it's going to be decidedly more challenging to phone in a relationship with Peeta when bathing suits are involved.

Trailing a good distance behind him, Katinss deliberately climbs past Peeta into the van, who's seated on the first bench, opting to sit alone in the back for their ride back down the jungled mountains. Again, Peeta seems irritated with her and shakes his head to himself in a huff, which in turn irks her, because who cares where she sits. But neither of them actually says anything about it.

This is their first opportunity to communicate without any cameras present since their secret meeting with Haymitch, and they spend the first five minutes of it in silence. Awkward, awful silence. As if any goodwill generated from zip lining is gone.

And with no cameras to stop them, they can be the strangers they really are.

Until Peeta finally breaks, turning back to her with a hard look.

"So is this how it's going to be? Behind the scenes? Just, nothing?" He sounds incredulous and a little upset even. Angry upset, not sad upset.

Katniss shrugs, not searching for a fight but not backing down from one either.

"What do you expect, Peeta?"

He snorts. "Oh, I don't know, maybe just that you acknowledge my presence or something."

He shakes his head again when she just stares back at him.

"Am I bothering you so much that you can't even sit next to me? Are you really that miserable,
Katniss?"

"Peeta, c'mon, let's not make it harder than it already is, okay?" she sighs, then stares out the window of the van so she doesn't have to look at him, his gaze not backing down from her otherwise. Because he's hit the nail on the head—she is miserable, and he does bother her. Only not in the way he might expect.

Her response does nothing to appease him, however, and Peeta's voice comes back even more irritated and forceful, making her startle slightly.

"You know you're not the only one inconvenienced here, Katniss. And I'm sorry my presence is so off-putting. But really, under the circumstances, it'd be nice if you could treat me like I don't have fucking leprosy."

He's talking to her like she saw him talk to Haymitch, and it's unexpected and discomforting.

It also pisses her off.

She re-fixes her gaze on him, her eyes hardening as the anger takes precedence over all the other emotions, and she sets a strong line with her lips.

"Fine."

Katniss moves to unbuckle her seat belt, jerking the thick straps apart, aggravated at his stupid requests. They're not actually dating. They're not even friends. She should get to ignore him if she wants to. But if what he wants is for her to keep acting even when the cameras are off, then fine, she'll oblige him. And she's halfway out of her seat before Peeta gives her a bewildered look.

"Katniss, what the hell are you doing?"

He puts a hand up to stop her.

"I was going to come sit up there with you and pretend some more."

Her words are harsh, she realizes a little too late, since they've already tumbled out of her mouth and Peeta's already cringed at them. But they're both clearly upset with one another, and really, this is the only way they can have it out, stuck here in an outdated van as it bumps along a poorly paved road encased by tropical trees and a humidity that makes the windows perspire.

So she doesn't apologize, but slumps back into her seat, unwavering, as Peeta narrows his eyes, considering her, still frustrated.

"You're honestly impossible, you know that right?"

She thinks Peeta has some audacity to look her in the eye and call her impossible when he's been the one so hard to figure out.

Katniss tilts her head to the side, a challenge.

"I thought you already knew everything about me. So you tell me."

Peeta's eyes flash with something she doesn't recognize, expecting more annoyance and anger, but it's softer, sadder than that.

"I think you've already made it perfectly clear that you're not interested in anything I have to tell you, Katniss."
And then he turns back around in his seat, not saying another word until the cameras return.

***

They spend the rest of the afternoon fighting a weird kind of tension. The air between them is filled with some version of anger, and probably resentment, and as much as Katniss wishes it wasn't, an undeniable underlying sexual tension as well.

Wearing next to nothing all alone on a private beach doesn't help.

Although she's the first to exacerbate things when she disrobes her clothes with purpose in front of him, leaving his eyes to take in a simple black halter top bikini and her slender figure.

It happens after they've been at the beach for a while, even more stiffly going through the motions of playing a terrible game of frisbee and checking out a cliff that's a five minute walk up some built-in rock stairs in order to see another amazing view, this time of the mountains and a picturesque fisherman's village set in their valley. Katniss actually wished she'd had a camera to take a picture, wanting to remember the lush greenery, the ocean-blue waters, and the pops of turquoise and orange colors of the small buildings and shacks until she remembered there were two cameras filming them and everything would be documented and broadcast for the world to see anyway.

No need to capture her own memories.

But as they'd taken in the scenery, Peeta'd touched the small of her back, gently leaning in her ear to tell her that it was almost as beautiful as she was.

It was fake, and cheesy, and honestly, lazy, even for the purpose of acting as the Bachelor, but Peeta's breath still lit the sensitive skin of her earlobe on fire.

And a part of her wanted to make Peeta feel the same way. Uncomfortable.

So after their descent back down to the beach, when he suggests a dip in the ocean, she doesn't hesitate, and with an unusual burst of confidence, Katniss slips her top over her head, tossing it casually onto their blanket in the sand, making sure his blue eyes are trained on her as she unbuttons the clasp of her shorts, shimming out of them easily.

Katinss watches him swallow as his gaze travels up, and then down, and then back up her body before resting back on her face, surely catching the slight, satisfied smirk of her lips when it does.

Peeta removes his own t-shirt with little fanfare, and she's purposefully not looking at him, a little out of spite and a little out of nerves, pretending to be distracted with watching a seagull peck at something in a pile of sand a few yards away when Peeta's voice alerts her to his attention.

"Do you mind, uh, helping me out here?"

Katniss raises her brow, turning back to look at him as he stands before her, shirt removed, in just his swim trunks, with what she thinks is meant to be a sheepish expression and a bottle of sunscreen in his hand.

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Peeta knows what he's doing too. And he's one-upped her with his seemingly innocent request to provide his backside in UV protection.

She hates him for it.

But she brushes her hands together, whisking away any possible remnants of sand as she steps...
"Yeah, sure," she agrees nonchalantly, not missing the glint in his eye. Or the curves of his bicep muscles and the toned abs of his stomach that V where his trunks hang loosely.

Katniss accepts the bottle of lotion from him, motioning for Peeta to turn around. He complies, telling her to lather him up. She imagines he's smirking to himself, enjoying the double entendre.

She sighs, but squirts the liquid into her hands, rubbing them together before reaching out to cover his back. Katniss has to fight the burn in the pit of her stomach as she begins to work her hands over his sun-warmed, tanned skin. Peeta stands patiently, but his muscles tense at her touch.

Of course it'd be easier to rub the lotion in as quickly as possible, with just a few quick streaks of her palms, like he's her brother or something, but Katniss knows that just won't do. So she swallows hard, massaging the toned muscles near his shoulder blades, slowly moving down the length of his back as it tapers to his waist. He feels strong in her hands under the small circles she makes, but he shudders ever so slightly when she lingers them just above the waistband of his trunks.

He lets out a short, breathy chuckle as he does, to cover, like she's hit a ticklish spot, but she knows better. And making him react to the tips of her fingers empowers her.

So when she finishes with his back, and there's left over sunscreen on her hands, Katniss hoarsely tells him to turn around, fighting with herself to keep her gaze trained on him as Peeta obeys. His eyes have changed to a deeper shade of blue, and they watch her raise her hands slowly to him before she leans in to apply the excess to his front.

"Thanks," he breathes, and she can feel his voice on her skin because she's standing right under his mouth, pressing her fingers into his bare chest, the lotion catching on the light layer of blonde chest hair kept there.

"You're welcome," Katniss responds with a quirk of her eyebrow, her hands making the last of the sunscreen disappear into his skin, hoping the catch in her voice doesn't betray her.

Because this would be a whole lot easier if Peeta Mellark wasn't so fucking hot.

Finished, Katniss steps back, ready to trek through the sand to the ocean, but Peeta shakes his head, stopping her.

"Your turn now." His voice is gravelly and insistent. And he squints, but it's not from the brightness of the sun.

He thinks she's being a tease.

And he's right, because she is, purposely trying to stir up a knee-jerk reaction from him for more than just the sake of the cameras. Because a part of her just wants to see Peeta squirm, if only because he shouldn't be allowed to mess with her head without some consequence.

And judging by his hooded expression, she's succeeded.

Except now Peeta's standing in front of her gesturing for the bottle of lotion and ordering her to turn around so he can repay the favor.

And she's not exactly immune to her own medicine, because instantly, it's sensory overload, with his strong hands on her bare skin, the coconut scent of the lotion mixing with the ocean's salty breeze. Peeta's voice tells her to hold still, coming in a whisper that cuts through the whoosh of the
Forget tension. Peeta's hands on her turns her reaction to him into an entirely new kind of pressure. One that rests between her legs and doesn't go away by itself.

Katniss inwardly fights against his touch—even though it'd be so much easier just to melt into it—refusing to let him turn into putty quite literally in his hands as she weakly tries to convince herself that it's just the cool lotion on her heated skin that makes it tingle.

But Peeta's effect on her is relentless, with his winning grin currently full of mischief and confidence, and his stupidly blue eyes that shine back at her when all too soon and not soon enough, his hands are gone and she's left with just him leading her to the water.

The waves feel good as they crash against her shins, and the heat between them dissipates somewhat as she and Peeta are filmed splashing around with each other, but it's going to take more than a dip in the ocean to cool her off completely.

***

Luckily, after their swim, it's time to move on to a fancy dinner, and Katniss and Peeta are afforded a reprieve from one another in order to shower and change. The shower helps, and she pelts her skin with ice cold water at the end, hoping it somehow ices down the hot blood still coursing through her veins. It doesn't relieve the tension completely, but it at least makes her physically able to face round three with Peeta.

Cinna's sent along another beautiful dress, one that ties at the neck and flows around her knees, a royal blue color that looks good against her complexion. And PME's even brought Flavius to District 4, who's waiting for her in her suite when she exits her shower, scaring her to the point of a small heart attack and a yelp of choice curse words as she tightens her towel around her chest, but that doesn't stop him from blowing out her hair and painting on her face all the same. Again, he tells her she looks beautiful and wishes her good luck on her date with Peeta, surely something he's said for years to all of the girls he's made up, but it's still strangely comforting to Katniss, for someone associated with this show not to know it's all a sham.

And at dinner, thankfully, things seem to go back to relatively normal, as both of them are careful and weary around the other again. They intentionally avoid anything too real, staying away from topics that could cause emotions like anger or passion to surface, and end up chatting benignly over a gourmet dinner at a restaurant on a pier that juts out over the ocean. Peeta's still charming, of course, and Katniss still laughs, once in a while catching herself from getting lost in his eyes, which just look even bluer against his suntanned skin and crisp white shirt he wears with slacks. But the truth is, it's been a really long day and keeping up the act of happily falling in love with Peeta is exhausting when she can't decide if she wants to kiss him, hate him, or ignore him completely.

So it's actually a relief when Peeta pretends to be nervous and asks her to join him in the overnight suite the show's reserved for them, because it means she gets to turn the switch off.

But not before putting on the climax of the show.

As they reach their suite, just before the cameras leave them to their own devices, Peeta turns to her with a heat in his eyes Katniss hasn't seen before.

And this time, when Peeta kisses her, he does so like he's got something to prove. She gasps slightly at the unexpected determination behind it, but it just makes his mouth more urgent, muffling her sounds.
It must make for great television.

He backs her up until they reach the door, quite literally falling through it mid-kiss, her fingers digging into his shoulder blades, his arms wrapped tightly around her waist, only letting go just long enough to turn the knob, nudging it open with his shoulder, as if he can't be bothered to leave her lips or the bare skin of her back long enough to complete simple tasks.

That familiar tugging feeling balls itself tightly between Katniss's legs again, making her want to hang on to Peeta and not let go. This is the most real their kisses have felt all day—like their lips aren't afraid of each other's anymore. As if maybe it's possible to work out their frustrations with forceful, bruising kisses and needy hands. It's almost enough to keep going once the door shuts behind them and the cameras are no longer there to encourage them.

Almost.

Peeta's weight leans into her against the inside of the door, and she lets his teeth worry her bottom lip for just a few more seconds before removing her arms from around his neck and lightly placing them over the hands he's got on her hips, a gentle reminder it's time to stop.

She feels his sigh before she hears it, fluttering her eyes open to Peeta staring at her, not moving an inch.

"Think they'll buy that?"

His eyes are dark now, but not for the right reasons.

Katniss frowns, now biting down on her own bottom lip.

He removes his hands from her waist.

"I think we're safe," she croaks, watching Peeta turn away from her, moving into the expansive suite that has all the fixings—a luxurious king-sized bed, a small dining table, a kitchenette, and a large balcony with its own plunge pool. She watches him run his hand back and forth across the back of his neck before he turns back around to her, unsmiling.

"So. Now what."

She's surprised, and a little panicked, since this is his shindig and she thought Peeta'd have a plan. Are they just going to spend the rest of the night staring at each other?

Because that's clearly not going to work. All she'll be able to do is feel the remnants of his weighted lips on hers if that's the case.

There has to be some sort of distraction to keep them occupied, right?

Katniss's eyes move all around the room, in an attempt to find the answer and also to avoid looking at him while her heart rate recovers. Then they stop on the chilled bottle of champagne that sits on the granite counter top of the kitchenette, which doesn't look appealing at all, deciding she needs something smooth and strong and not light and bubbly for this predicament. So she finds and focuses on the tiny refrigerator, sure to include a mini bar, located just below the champagne bucket.

"I could use a drink," she offers plainly.

It certainly would take the…edge she's currently feeling off.
Peeta tilts his head, considering it favorably.

"Right you are," he agrees, following her eye line to the mini fridge and closing the distance to it quickly enough that Katniss thinks maybe he's hoping to dull the same nerves.

As Peeta busies himself with taking inventory of their provisions, Katniss spies her own suitcase in the corner, placed there by some PA, she's sure, and grateful for it, because it means she can change out of this dress, put on pajamas and wash her face of all the makeup.

Because she can do that now, right? With no one left to impress.

She refocuses on Peeta, who's got a row of mini bottles lined up on the counter.

"Let's see," he says, looking back at her. "Three vodkas, two rums, two whiskeys and two tequilas."

"Sounds like a party," she deadpans and he smirks.

"What's your poison, Sweetheart?"

And he's deliberately imitating Haymitch, causing Katniss to scowl and Peeta to chuckle. It lightens the mood just a little.

So she shrugs, her face softening at his laugh.

"Bachelor's choice."

He snorts.

"Well then I'll take our agent's word for it and assume you'll drink the brown stuff with me."

Peeta reaches for the whiskey, and begins rummaging the cabinets for glasses. With his back to her, Katniss watches him carefully, wondering just what she's supposed to do with him.

Parts of him infuriate her, and parts of him make her laugh. She's tense and then she's comfortable. Hot and cold.

Acting and then not acting.

She clears her throat, and Peeta turns around, looking surprised she might have anything more to say.

"I'm uh, just going to change and wash up, I think," she says, for some reason, shyly.

He nods. "Oh. Yeah, of course. I'll have your drink waiting for you," he offers, busying himself with twisting the mini bottles of liquor open.

She watches him for an extra beat before Peeta looks back up at her, curiously.

"I think the bathroom's just through there," he tells her, pointing across the large room, thinking she needs help finding it.

When in actuality she was just caught staring.

"Right," she breathes, jumping into action and moving toward her suitcase.

Katniss ends up taking the whole thing in the bathroom with her, deciding it didn't seem like fun
to dig through underwear and who knows what else in front of Peeta.

And figuring out what to change into proves to be more difficult because she knows she shouldn't care what she wears, but a part of her still wants to look good. But not too good. Still comfy and effortless, exactly like she doesn't care.

She settles on a soft tank top and a pair of lounge pants that are light-weight but flattering. And she washes off all of her makeup, only wiping a layer of moisturizer back on to help alleviate the tightness and heat from all the sun she got today.

Looking in the mirror, Katniss decides she looks acceptable. The sun's naturally flushed her skin so it's like she's wearing blush, and, after quickly plaiting her hair over her shoulder, she actually looks like herself.

Now it's just a matter of getting to act like herself.

And it's to be determined how that will go with her night in with Peeta and miniature bottles of liquor.

When she emerges from the bathroom, she bites back a laugh and opts for a wry smile instead. Peeta's changed too, into mesh athletic shorts and a worn but snug t-shirt—*District 12 Wrestling* scrawled across the front of it.

He's set up shop at the dining table, sitting in one of the cushioned, high-backed chairs, her drink placed opposite him.

A distinct, safe amount of space and a whole table to keep between them.

But there's a glint in his eye when he sees her emerge.

"Nice shirt," she compliments him dryly, sliding into her seat, one leg propped up on the chair with her.

Peeta smiles, the first smile he's given her off camera today. It feels honest.

"I thought you might like it."

Katniss flits her eyes from him to her glass, picking it up and rattling the cubes around in the whiskey before taking a small sip. It burns in her throat, but its effect instantly takes some of the sting off.

Peeta's still looking at her, contemplatively, when she looks back up from her drink.

"It's crazy that we both ended up here, right?"

It's not exactly a question she can argue with.

She perks an eyebrow and the corner of her lips.

"It's absolutely insane," she confirms.

Peeta nods, drumming his fingers on the table top lightly, nervously. The suite has multiple large windows with shutters that open uncovered into the tropical air, and a somewhat cooler night breeze sweeps through the room as Katniss waits for him to speak again, absently pushing her drink back and forth in her hands.

"Do you hate me?"
It's a strange question to ask, but one that's not any more difficult for Katniss to answer than his last.

She furrows her brow, worried that he's been going along thinking she actually might hate him. Even with the pent up frustration and okay, an angry outburst or two, of course she doesn't hate him. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't. In fact, she's pretty sure it's actually impossible for anyone to hate Peeta Mellark and his perfectly lopsided smile, golden hair, and uncanny ability to always know what to say.

Maybe she should tell him all of these thoughts, fill him in on what's really going on in her brain, cutting through all of the miscommunication and confusion, but all she can manage is a one word answer.

"No."

And then Katniss swigs her whiskey, watching Peeta's reaction, which gives nothing away.

"Do you hate me?"

She almost laughs when for once, he rolls his eyes at her.

"Of course not," Peeta responds quickly, making her question seem as ridiculous as she thought his was.

But then he nods, as if the first part of his checklist is complete and he needs to move on to whatever point he's meaning to get at.

He takes a drink first, leaning into her, his elbows on the table.

"So then do you think it's possible for us to take a shot at being friends?"

And Peeta's third question posed to her is one she's finally not sure how to respond to.

First of all, she's not very good at friends. Not with people she hasn't known for years and grown to love and trust. And especially not with people whose lips she's currently imagining trailing kisses all over her body.

Second of all, that's the second reason. Being just friends with Peeta just might kill her. Because when she's not mad at him, she wants him. And she's beginning to realize that she might even want him even when she's mad at him. And all of this fake engagement stuff is overwhelming and frustrating and scary and so ridiculous enough as it is, without any semblance of real feelings to complicate things even more.

Peeta sighs, running a hand quickly through his still-styled hair when she doesn't answer him immediately.

"It's just that, we agreed to handle PME and this network as a team. And I could really use an ally right about now. Because what happened between us today—the ups and the downs and the arguments that morphed into kissing and laughing back into anger—is too much for me to handle on top of everything else."

And right there, that's the difference between her and Peeta Mellark.

Because where Katniss would rather ignore the situation completely and stew stubbornly in her own head, alone, Peeta wants to talk and make amends and forge ahead as a cohesive unit.
So she lets the idea roll around in her head, considering his points, aware his eyes are studying her with a mix of caution and concern.


Friend.

Maybe he's right. Maybe it'd actually be easier to handle all of this with one.

"You want to be my friend?"

Her response makes her cringe inwardly, knowing she needed to force something off her tongue, but it sounds so stupid, like a parrot, just repeating his words back to him.

But Peeta still chuckles with a soft nod.

"Yeah. Friends. You know, people who hang out together because they enjoy one another's company and not because they have to make out with each other for the adoring public."

An amused smile forms on her lips at that.

"I guess we could try that."

Peeta quirks his lips, holding up his glass to her, wanting her to do the same, and Katniss obliges, clinking her drink against his, watching his smile grow as they both take sips. The liquor swirls inside of her, reaching her gut, where it mixes with the warmth his grin's already caused.

The whiskey also makes her more forthcoming, and she suddenly feels the urge to tell Peeta something of her own.

"I'm sorry about earlier. In the van. I was mean, and I—"

But Peeta cuts her off.

"Please, Katniss. I was mad at you too, and I wasn't exactly nice myself. And you don't have to be sorry for feeling something."

He drains the rest of his drink with one long gulp.

"Besides, it probably made for some interesting television clips on the beach."

Her cheeks redden, instantly remembering Peeta's determined hands traveling up and down her back. She takes a long drink of her whiskey too.

"Probably," she agrees with a smirk as she swallows.

Peeta smiles impishly, and he gets up to make a second drink, tapping into the rum this time and mixing it with a soda he finds in the mini fridge.

"So," he changes the subject smoothly, pouring a drink for her too, even though she's not ready for it. "This is where we get to know each other, for real. Because I went to school with you for 12 years, am technically dating you and have even kissed you, but I don't actually know all that much about you."

Peeta's words carry a lightness about them, but they affect her anyway, because she hasn't exactly been lying as they've chatted on their dates. She's mentioned home, and Prim, and they've talked
about random things they've shared in their past like pre-calculus and other classmates in passing, but when she thinks about it, she realizes she doesn't actually know that much about Peeta either.

But over the next couple of hours, she learns a lot. Their conversation comes easily, and while there's still a tension there—sure to be present between any two people who've locked lips, real or not—Katniss begins to feel comfortable around Peeta. They continue to sip drinks at the table, and first she starts off safely, leaving out her own past, telling him about Delly and how she's planning on breaking up with him on their date tomorrow. Something she'd confided in Katniss last night when she'd made yet another friend.

Peeta doesn't exactly seem shocked by this news, but there's certainly a readable surprise in his reaction.

"Well, why doesn't she just do it now then? Before subjecting us both to another pointless date?" He catches himself when she Katniss shoots him a protective look. "Not that she's not nice," Peeta adds quickly. "It's just, well, you know…under the circumstances."

And at this, Katniss nods, then shrugs.

"My guess is the producers wouldn't let her. What would they have to fill the air time with? Other than our rousing rendition of playing Tarzan and Jane and whatever the hell you did with Glimmer last night?"

Peeta raises an eyebrow, amused at the bite to her words.

"Do you really want to know what I did with Glimmer last night?" He's grinning now, clearly pleased with her inadvertent slip of jealousy.

Katniss blushes furiously, then scowls, tipping back her new drink.

"No."

He laughs.

"You sure?"

Her furious blush turns into a furious stare that answers his question just fine without words.

But Peeta only laughs harder.

"Okay then."

So he leans back in his seat, still smiling as he recovers from his laugh, changing the subject again.

"Will you tell me about your music?"

Peeta looks at her earnestly, and it's probably the least she can do, since a good part of why they're doing this is because of her music.

And so she shyly tells him about her songs, and how she's been playing for a few years now. How ideally, she'd get to cut an album or two and continue on playing smaller venues with just enough success to get by on her music alone. That she's not in it for the money or the fame, just for her love of it all. Something she gets from her father, although she's not quite ready to share that with Peeta just yet.

He lets her talk, seemingly enjoying what she has to say, until finally she doesn't know what else
"Well, I think you might end up a bigger deal then you've ever planned to be." Peeta means it as a compliment, but it scares her, because she's never planned for that. So she deflects, turning the tables on him and asking about him already being a famous celebrity chef, and just how the hell he ended up this year's *Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor*.

Peeta's answer is ridiculously simple, and he chuckles and tips back his drink as he explains.

"I have absolutely no idea."

Katniss laughs too, understanding the sentiment.

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The conversation turns to their respective love lives only after they shoot the mini bottles of tequila and Katniss decides she wants to move outside, with the night air and sound of the ocean and the ability to dangle her feet in the cool water of the plunge pool as she perches herself on its edge.

Peeta slides down next to her, and their arms brush against one another, sending a fuzzy wave of current up her side, even though he's telling her about his college girlfriend and how she used to attend a lot of his lectures for him because he'd started working in a restaurant off campus by then and was pulling long hours and late nights.

Katniss laughs, incredulously.

"She must have really liked you. I could barely be bothered to attend my own classes."

He smirks.

"I may have broken a heart or two in the past," he confesses before turning the question to her.

"What about you? How many boys have you crushed?"

She snorts, finding him hilarious and feeling no need to respond to his question.

"Oh, come on," Peeta prods her, thinking she's just being shy. "You're a heartbreaker and you know it."

Katniss places a quizzical look on him, full of skepticism and disdain.

Peeta sighs and shakes his head good naturedly.

"Well, fine. I know for a fact I wasn't the only one who had a crush on you in school. Did Jacob Marvel ever ask you out? He had the hots for you senior year."

When she gives him a blank stare in response, he taps his finger to his lips.

"Oh, right. He never did. I think someone talked him out of it, telling him you had some big buff college boyfriend."

And then Peeta looks at her knowingly.

"You're welcome for that, by the way."

Jacob Marvel was the biggest asshole in their class. He also ran in the same circle of friends as Peeta did, also a jock, one who played football and baseball. Jacob Marvel asking her out, and
Katniss subsequently rejecting him would have absolutely meant him tormenting her until he found some other victim to pick on.

Katniss isn't sure if she believes Peeta, and isn't about to ask him, afraid his little confessions and the tidbits of information she's learning about him will only make it that much harder to call him her friend.

So she rolls her eyes, shaking her head at his story, a small smile her only sign of a thank you, just in case it's true.

And then she gives in, telling him about her pretty pathetic love life.

"There was a boyfriend in college. He didn't last long though. Too busy trying to become the next ninja warrior."

Peeta makes a face, and Katniss shakes her head again, embarrassed, holding up her hands as if to tell him it wasn't a joke.

"Hence why he didn't last."

And Peeta nods, as if that makes sense.

"And one after college," Katniss continues, happy to move on. "He lasted a little bit longer."

Darius. Her previous sort-of manager. But when they'd just been musicians crossing paths in the small time music scene of District 12, they'd also dated.

But that was years ago now. And there were no hard feelings. No real feelings at all really. That had been their problem.

So when Gale's name falls out of Peeta's mouth as a question that he seems certain he knows the answer to, it disorients her.

"What?"

Peeta's face turns red at the confusion, and he sputters a few syllables before explaining.

"I heard you were a thing once upon a time."

Katniss scrunches her nose, mentally adding Peeta to the list of people who've mistaken her and Gale for some form of a couple.

She wasn't even aware Peeta knew who Gale was—then again, she hadn't known Peeta knew who she was either—but she guesses she can't really blame him for being like half of District 12 and just assuming she and Gale were together, or had been at some point, simply because they're close.

"You heard?" she repeats deliberately, with an eyebrow raise of curiosity.

"Yeah," Peeta answers seriously. "I have District 12 spies who report back to me all of the town gossip, Katniss."

She furrows her brow, confused, and a little scared, and he shakes his head with self-exasperation.

"I don't know how I heard! I know things about you and I have no idea how or why I know them, okay? It just kind of…happens."
She studies him, the nervous tick in his eye, and the crooked frown line of his mouth.

"Well, you're wrong," she finally answers, simply, shrugging.

Peeta sighs.

"I'm sorry. I guess I just assumed. You two always seemed so close. But you never…?" his voice trails off, unable to finish the question.

Katniss shakes her head, slowly. Definitely.

Peeta asks his next question carefully.

"Why not?"

She should have shut down questions ago, giving him none of this information about herself, and with anyone else, she probably would have, happy to put them in their place with a signature scowl and a choice word or two.

But with Peeta, it's different.

It's almost like she wants to tell him these things.

She doesn't know why.

But, she certainly knows why not.

She lets out a breath, figuring the short answer is simplest.

"Gale and I…we're not…compatible. Like that. And despite popular opinion back home, there's never been any…confusion between us."

Really, it's because she and Gale would make a terrible couple. They know each other too well. They grew up like brother and sister. And they're too similar—reserved and sullen half the time, fighting and angry with one another the rest. And she's watched Gale self-destruct too many failed relationships over the years to know he's anything but dating material.

Peeta nods once, accepting her answer, staring out into the darkness of the ocean as they fall into a silence.

"Your turn to ask," Peeta reminds her quietly, after a few moments. They've been alternating asking one another questions all night now, and Peeta's used his up, falsely accusing her of dating people and all.

She sighs, chewing on her lip absently as she thinks, trying to blame the alcohol for impairing her ability to think of anything clever or good. Because she definitely feels…fuzzy, and knows she'd probably not be so forthcoming in their little question and answer session without these drinks in her. But Katniss knows it's not just the alcohol in her system that's got her head in a cloud. After another moment or two of trying to come up with something better, she settles on the proverbial lame interview question, mostly because it's an easy one to come up with and partly because she genuinely wants to know how Peeta predicts his future.

"Where do you see yourself in five years?" She leans back on her hands, arching her back as Peeta sighs, looking at her before turning his gaze away, focusing forward as he thinks.

"Honestly?" Peeta asks her back, for clarification, but all she gives him is an impatient look and a
nod, because of course she means honestly. Even if it's a dumb question.

He sighs again before he begins.

"Well, let's see. Still running Mellark's, but hopefully done building the company by then so I can stop being a CEO and get back to cooking and baking. Maybe even moving back home, to District 12." He pauses before he continues cautiously, dropping his voice.

"And married. Or at least on my way. If I can ever find the right girl."

Peeta's words reach her ears slowly and it takes a moment for her to figure out he might be implying that he means her.

But that's impossible, and he's certainly been vague enough that she has no real reason to think that's what he means, so she brushes it aside, instead deciding to interpret it like Peeta wants this whole farce to be over as soon as possible so he can finally have the chance to find his real wife and settle down.

Because that's the much safer version.

So she smiles ruefully and kicks the water with her half-submerged leg, shaking her head.

"I'm never getting married."

She doesn't look at him as she makes her declaration, but laughs, hoping it's airy enough to lighten the mood.

"Well, except almost to you," she teases.

Peeta's expression changes, recognizing her attempt at a joke as he plays along with her.

"Well, I'm honored to be your only almost husband then."

And the way he says it is exactly right, making Katniss smile and putting her back at ease into their comfortable rhythm of conversation. Even if his words tug at her heart a little harder than they should.

But they both laugh, appreciating the absurdity of his statement and really, not knowing what else to do with it but laugh.

As their laughter dies down, and the moon hangs high in the air, signaling it's somewhere past midnight, she realizes they're probably long overdue to call it a night.

Peeta swallows the rest of his laugh, making sure she's looking back at him before he speaks with a small smile on his lips.

"You know, it turns out I was right about you. You're a pretty great friend, Katniss Everdeen. I wish I'd have worked up the courage to talk to you all those years ago."

She smiles appreciatively, again attributing her inward giddiness to misinterpretation.

"Well, who knows where we would have ended up then, right?"

Peeta laughs again, and leans his shoulder into hers, bumping it playfully.

"Definitely not here."
She laughs too, at first. And maybe it's his touch, or maybe it's something else, like the idea of possibly having met—really met—Peeta outside the context of this stupid show, but her laughter quickly turns into holding her breath, watching Peeta's eyes search hers, inches apart.

But searching for what?

She knows the answer quickly, just as quickly as Peeta's eyes dip to her mouth and back up again.

*Permission.*

And she's figured it out in just enough time to lean in with him, fueled by a slight buzz, an emotionally charged day, and sheer proximity.

Katniss closes her eyes, tilting her head and parting her lips in anticipation.

But his lips never find hers.

At the last moment, Peeta sucks in a deep breath instead, placing his hands on the tops of her thighs and gently propelling himself back from her. When she's able to reopen her eyes, he's looking back at her with a sense of disbelief.

"I, uh, should…we shouldn't…shit." He's shaking his head, rubbing his mouth and the line of his jaw with his hand.

Peeta exhales slowly.

"I think I should probably get a different room, Katniss."

She's immediately bewildered by his suggestion, left wondering what the hell just happened.

But then, as he pushes himself up from the edge of the pool, pacing slightly and telling her he's sorry, she gets it.

*Friends don't kiss.*

So she hops up herself, trailing him back into the room, their wet feet leaving footprints behind on the tiled floor.

He's almost to the hotel room phone now, located next to the bed, surely intending to get in contact with management or possibly a producer to fulfill his request.

And she blurts the words out without having time to think about them.

"Peeta, stop."

And he does, freezing on the edge of the bed, only after turning his attention to her from the night stand and the phone.

Katniss frowns at him.

"This is stupid. It's late, and you're only going to cause a commotion."

And she sighs, not knowing what the hell she wants anymore and aware that she's probably—definitely—a complete idiot for even attempting to let him back in. Because she was right, it's going to be impossible for them to just be friends.

But she can't stop herself.
Then she flips the lights off at the switch on the wall, crossing to the opposite side of the bed in the darkness. She can't see him as her eyes adjust to the lack of light, but she knows he still doesn't move as she climbs in.

As she pulls the blankets close to her and lays her head on her pillow his low voice cuts through the lingering silence.

"Katniss, what are you doing?"

Honestly, she's not exactly sure herself. But she knows she doesn't want him to leave.

So she tells him so with a simple request.

"Just...stay with me."

She turns herself onto her side, facing away from him, afraid of him still leaving and not wanting to see him walk away. And only a little less afraid of what might happen if he doesn't.

It feels like hours before Peeta finally answers.

"Okay."

His voice is soft, and weary, and he sounds tired.

But then she hears the rustling of the covers and feels his weight sink onto the other side of the bed.

Her heart rate picks up, sharing the bed with him, until Peeta rolls over into her, his chest pressing up against her back, and an arm languidly curls around her waist, calming her. Making her feel safe.

He kisses the top of her head, and she relaxes into him, breathing in his sweet, clean scent.

The mix of a long day in the sun, the effects of riding the ups and downs of a variety of emotions, and the security of Peeta's strong arms makes her ready for sleep almost instantly, but not before she catches him murmur one last word into her hair.

"Always."

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, come find me on tumblr. I'm c-r-roberts. Where Everlark, Jhutch, PME sneak peeks and snark reign supreme. : ) And I'd really, really, enjoy hearing your thoughts, here, or there...

Oh, and P.S. This rating is about to change. It wasn't quite there, yet, this time around, but...soon. ; )
Chapter 7: Slow Down, and Try to Tell the Truth

Chapter Notes

I honestly love this fandom so much. And every one of you who's come across this story means the world to me. I've got a few more things to say, but I'm leaving them for the end.

Chapter Title Song: "Always," Panama

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Her skin and hair are dark against the white bed sheets, and he's breathing in a mix of fresh ocean air, remnants of sweet-smelling sunscreen, and something inherently Katniss that he can't quite describe. It's pulled Peeta back into her, after having untangled himself from her once she'd fallen asleep last night, and here he is, in the early hours of the morning, her head resting on the pillow just beneath his nose and his arm casually but desperately snaked around her midriff.

He listens to the rhythmic in and out of her breathing in her sleep, a contented peacefulness taking over him with Katniss Everdeen tucked in his arms.

In his bed.

Peeta had wanted more to happen last night. And something almost had. The day-long tension between them had changed into a different type of electricity, something softer because the anger wasn't there, but more powerful too because the attraction was almost impossible. Especially with the looks Katniss had given him and the uncertain pauses between her words that made him sure she would have kissed him back.

For real.

But he'd just worked the friend angle pretty hard with her and couldn't risk messing up the delicate balance they'd achieved, especially after the awful feeling of actually fighting with her.

And if he had kissed her right then, under the moonlight, half drunk on whiskey and rum and tequila, the other half of him drunk on her tan skin and silvery eyes, he'd never, ever, have come back from it. And they'd have done a hell of a lot more than just kiss.

Even Peeta had to admit that he wasn't ready for that. Not yet. Because when he finally figures out how to worm his way into Katniss Everdeen's heart and she finally lets him in, he wants none of it to be because of PME.

Though it doesn't mean he can't stop thinking about it. Or having to work very hard to keep his hands in the most gentlemanly of places right now.

She stirs slightly in her sleep, a sigh escaping her lips as she unknowingly shifts further into him, and Peeta accepts the added pressure of her body against him, letting his head drop down to the crook of her neck, resting his chin on her shoulder lightly.

He wonders what it'd be like to wake her with gentle kisses there, fluttering them from behind her ear to the exposed skin of her collarbone. For her to stay pressed up against him, smiling lazily as
she returns to consciousness at the touch of his lips on her skin, maybe even humming his name sleepily, happily, when she realizes what he's doing.

But the gray of the early morning light is beginning to break for bright streaks of sunlight, soon to be filling their suite, and soon enough, it'll be time to end their little private reprieve.

And then it will be back to more taped interviews, a plane ride back to the Capitol for Katniss, and an apparently doomed date with Delly for him.

So Peeta lets himself have just a few moments longer with her, enjoying his own version of make believe before having to return to PME's story instead.

And then, her none the wiser for it, he stealthily slips himself out from under her, padding lightly across the room to first start a small pot of coffee, then quietly tidying up their small mess from last night—empty mini bar bottles to the trash, glasses to the sink.

He washes up in the bathroom next, brushing his teeth, looking at himself in the mirror above the sink, his hair mussed from sleep and his eyes staring back at him, daring him to explain just what the hell he thinks he's doing.

Because not much longer than 12 hours ago, he was ready to throw in the towel with her, angry at her indifference, hurt by her honesty.

He splashes water on his face, patting it dry with a hand towel.

But maybe that's the thing about love.

It drives you absolutely insane.

Because he's in love with Katniss. He's sure of it. Every ridiculously cute, devastatingly beautiful, maddeningly complicated and infuriatingly stubborn part of her.

And he's done fighting it. It's time to just accept that she'll always be there, with her fiery gray eyes and the low, honest laughs Peeta has to fight to earn from her, rooted into him deep and good.

He spends the next hour or so sipping coffee at the table, half-heartedly skimming the newspaper left outside their suite door while he watches her sleep.

The air's warming, and with the windows open, he can hear the resort start to come to life, the clinking of plates and silverware of staff cleaning up, or possibly bringing, room service down the hall; a couple of other hotel workers spraying down the pool deck located just below them.

It must be just enough to wake Katniss, too, because she stirs in bed, splaying a hand out past her side, her eyes fluttering open and looking to the side of the bed where Peeta had been, a flash of confusion crossing her face when she realizes he's not there.

He has to bite his lip to keep from grinning. Because now her eyes are on him, across the room, and she sees he's watching her.

"You should've woken me," Katniss accuses, wiping the sleep from her eyes, perching herself off her pillow with an elbow.

"For what?" Peeta asks her, taking another sip of his coffee. "Nothing's going on here."

Then he curls his lips upward, good-naturedly.
"Besides, I like watching you sleep. No scowling or eye-rolling."

Without fail, this brings on a scowl that makes him break out into a grin.

"But seriously, you looked peaceful. Didn't want to wake you up."

Katniss sighs, stretching her limbs lightly, implicitly agreeing not to fight him on it. Then her face perks up as she spots his coffee mug.

"Is there more coffee?"

He nods.

"Still fresh, too."

"Are you hungry?" he asks as she groggily pushes her way out of bed, making her way to the coffee, pouring a cup and dousing it with the milk he's left out on the counter. "We can order room service if you want."

Katniss joins him at the table, their seats the same as they were last night, and she sips out of her cup gratefully. Her hair's only slightly disheveled from sleep, and her tank top's stretched out just enough to hang a little too loosely from her chest, providing a somewhat gratuitous view of her cleavage.

"Mmm. I'm okay for now."

Peeta nods.

"What time's your flight out of here today?"

Katniss takes another sip of coffee, squinting like she's trying to remember.

"Two, I think. What time is it now anyway?"

"Eight-thirty," he answers. "Plenty of time."

But Katniss sighs. "A PA told me they'd pick me up here at ten. For an interview or something before I go."

And a knot forms in Peeta's stomach. He'd been hoping to have more time with her than that. This wasn't enough.

Then again, it'll probably never be enough.

"So what about you? What's on your agenda today?"

He smirks. "I think I'm about to get dumped."

Peeta lifts an eyebrow when she stares blankly back at him.

"Date with Delly," he reminds her.

She smiles softly.

"Well I hope she lets you down easy."

Then Katniss plays with the ends of her braid, studying them intently, like there's something
interesting about them he can't see, and he knows there are words on the tip of her tongue that she's not ready to say.

He tries to help her out.

"Last night was fun," he begins carefully, relaxing back into his chair, watching her eyes finally lift to him.

"Yeah," she agrees softly. Still hesitating.

Okay, so maybe she needs more prodding.

"Think we'll be able to do it again sometime?" He doesn't take his eyes off her, even when she looks down at her hands and smiles shyly into them before looking back up.

"I'd say there's a pretty good chance."

He grins.

"Good."

But then she sighs, deflating the innocent energy of their conversation to something more serious. Too serious for coffee talk, really, but it's not like they have much time to spare.

"Peeta," she begins, but can't seem to get any further, her lips twisting on her future words.

He sighs too.

"Just say what's on your mind, Katniss."

She gives into his request uncertainly.

"Is what we're doing…okay with you?"

And he's not sure what she means. The fake romance? The burgeoning real friendship? The sleeping in the same bed and not letting anything happen because they're just friends?

Thankfully, Katniss clarifies before he has to ask.

"I mean, it's just... you said last night that you really do want to get married someday. Don't you want to save your proposal for that girl?"

Peeta frowns, considering this warily. Because the idea of proposing to anyone for any reason other than he wants to marry them had been a hang up for him even before Katniss showed up and he was just PME's Bachelor. But he's been actively avoiding thinking about it as the show chugged along and he and Katniss were swept up in this overly contrived love story, picking up record deals coupled with thinly veiled threats, and let's be honest, maybe just the tiniest bit of truth, along the way.

He sighs. Maybe it's time he stopped avoiding the inevitable.

"Katniss, c'mon. I'm not thinking like that. And you shouldn't either."

And he's really wishing he hadn't mentioned a word about marriage last night, because now she's latching on to this fictional future wife of his that's allowing her to distance herself from him and act like the friend he told her she was.
Oh god. He's really no good at this with her, is he? Because in his head, Peeta thought he was telling her he wanted a real relationship with her; but out loud, it's easy to see why she thinks that's not the case.

Except she still almost kissed him last night. And asked him to stay.

And Peeta's trying to figure out how to reconcile everything under the gaze of her serious gray eyes when she interrupts his muddled thoughts.

"Don't you think it's going to be hard though?"

The question makes Peeta want to laugh. Of course it's going to be hard. It's going to be more than hard. It's going to be the worst feeling in the world, to have to tell her these things and mean them, but not really mean them.

Not that he's saying he wants to marry Katniss—certainly not any time soon, at least. And maybe not ever, considering her sentiments on the institution. But he knows he wants to be with her.

And he can't imagine being with anyone else. Fictional future wives included.

And really, isn't that all that matters?

Peeta inhales slowly, watching her wait for his response.

"Yeah, it's going to be hard," he confirms. He raises an eyebrow lazily.

"Got any ideas on how to make it easier?"

His words linger between them, with her eyes still trained on him, not giving away much except a small glint when she finally nods.

"Yes. We make a break for it. Never come back."

And Peeta chuckles, appreciating the sentiment. He'd give just about anything to run away with her.

"I don't have any fast cars at my disposal this time. I'm sorry."

And Katniss laughs too.

"Well then I guess we're stuck here, huh?"

Peeta quirks his lips.

"Could be worse."

And she smiles softly.

"Yes, it could."

"But speaking of cars," she sighs, reluctantly pushing herself up from her seat, quickly stealing one last sip of coffee first, "Mine will probably be here soon. I need to get ready."

And as Peeta watches her retreat into the bathroom, he realizes that maybe she was asking him those questions for more reasons than just checking in on his own well-being.

"Katniss."
She skids slightly on the tiled floor as she turns around abruptly at her name.

"I didn't even ask. Are you okay with all of this?"

And her eyes go wide, surprised by the question, but she's able to mask whatever she's really thinking with a light shrug and a resolute nod.

"I'll be fine."

It's not the most convincing of statements.

Peeta eyes her doubtfully, and she crosses her arms over her chest defensively.

"You sure?"

And Katniss forces a small smile, but her eyes don't quite meet his.

"I'm sure."

Then she turns back around, more eager to head into the bathroom now.

Peeta sighs, watching her walk away.

She's clearly bothered. And she's clearly trying to seem like she's not.

It's what makes him sure there just might be something real between them.

But not one bit of it is going to come easily.

***

An hour later, Peeta leans up against the door frame of the suite, still in the clothes he slept in, watching Katniss wheel her small suitcase out into the hallway, having refused his help.

She pauses once she's stepped through the door, turning to face him.

"Three more days, right?"

And she's right. They only have three days left shooting *PME*. Or at least this portion of it. Peeta has his date today, then he'll fly back to the Capitol tomorrow, where he'll start promotions because he's officially been announced as this season's Bachelor and B&C wants him to appear on a couple of network talk shows, and then the following day is the big reveal. His choice. The proposal.

Peeta nods, solemnly. "Three days," he repeats.

She nods too.

"Well, good luck, with Delly, and…everything."

Katniss looks as if she's ready to leave then, reaching back for her suitcase, like that's all there is to say.

But it's not.

"Katniss."
His voice is soft but firm.

"Hmm?" she hums, as she stops, looking back up at him with a polite smile on her lips, her curious gray eyes making his heart race.

Peeta exhales, figuring if they don't discuss this option now, they never will. It's the last time he'll see her before rings and betrothals are involved.

"You don't have to go through with this, you know," he begins slowly.

And when Katniss opens her mouth to say something he assumes will be in protest, he shakes his head at her, cutting her off.

"No, seriously, Katniss. You're good enough that you don't need this stupid show."

And Peeta means it. She's much too good for this.

She sighs, and drops her hands from the suitcase, focusing her full attention back on him.

"So are you."

Then she shakes her head, like she can't quite believe they're finally having this conversation, now.

"Why are you here, anyway? Why did you agree to do it in the first place?" She flaps her arms as she talks, questioning him as though Peeta being the PME Bachelor doesn't make any sense to her.

Which is a fair reaction, he supposes. It's never made any sense to him either.

Peeta shrugs, shifting his weight slightly, but still keeping his shoulder against the wooden frame of the door.

"I didn't have a good enough reason not to."

Her eyes narrow, just slightly, the air between them thickening with tension.

"And now?"

He pauses before he answers.

"I'm trying to figure out if my good enough reason came along."

And all he can do is watch as she exhales, leaving her mouth hanging open when she doesn't respond right away. Instead taking her time, looking like she's working through her options, considering him, his words, and whatever unknowable factors she's got inside her head. Ultimately trying to decide if he's her good enough reason too.

But it's taking her too long to answer.

And his heart drops when she smiles sadly.

"Peeta," she whispers, shaking her head. "It would never work."

He doesn't know if she means that in a vague or a specific way—that calling everything off with the show wouldn't work, or that they wouldn't work.
Maybe both.

In both instances, she's wrong. Because he knows they could make it work, if they really wanted to. The run away and never look back option. She'd still become a singer, he's sure of it, and he'd still have his bakeries, and they'd have each other. And that's all that would matter.

In a perfect world, that's all that should matter. But clearly, in Katniss's mind, things are more complicated than that. And Peeta supposes that in the real world, they probably are.

He's really in no position to fight her about it at the moment, anyway. They went into this deal as a team, after all. And he's the one trying to change the terms, last minute.

So Peeta shrugs again with a dejected sigh, defeated, not so much by her, but the overall situation they're in.

"Yeah, I know. Just a thought."

"It's a nice one, though."

He watches her smile ruefully, and then hears the tires and the dull roar of a car engine below them, and knows that her ride's here. She hears it too, craning her neck over the side of the landing's railing.

"You better get going, Katniss," he says.

She nods, hesitating, before leaning in to kiss his cheek, and it feels almost like an apology.

"I'll uh, see you later Peeta."

He nods.

Because now, there really is nothing left to say.

***

Peeta's never felt so completely and totally inadequate in his life. Because Finnick Odair is hands down the best looking person he's ever met. He's like a cartoon character action hero version of what a human being should look like. And Finnick's a genuinely nice guy, too, although Peeta still can't help but wonder if his skin really has to be that bronze, or his teeth so eye-blindingly white. He's baffled that B&C thought that putting him next to Finnick would help promote this season's PME.

Because Peeta thinks it makes their new Bachelor look like an absolute schlub.

But the network's brought out their most famous alumni anyway, supposedly to help gain interest in Peeta and this upcoming season of the show, in which they're touting him essentially as Finnick's second coming. And if he remembers the phrase correctly, as the Bachelor with the grandest love story yet.

It's so bad it's comical.

But this roomful of people sure seems excited about it, so he doesn't laugh.

And so here Peeta stands, in a semi-circle with Finnick, the Greek god look-alike, and Haymitch. Haymitch being here came as a bit of a surprise, since it's just a photo shoot and a couple of five-minute interviews—nothing Peeta hasn't done before—but he's here all the same, rounding out the
conversation with one-liners and his usual surly attitude.

Peeta flew in straight from District 4, not even getting a chance to stop at the mansion before coming to B&C's studios. He's been changed, into a shirt and tie, coiffed—his hair brushed off his face in a harmless enough way—and sufficiently powdered for the bright studio lights and cameras.

And he's pretty tired as a result, standing here as Finnick asks about his home district, wondering pleasantly if Peeta'd enjoyed it, since both Finnick and Annie are products of District 4. Peeta manages a polite response, because of course District 4 is beautiful, and he spins a bit about having kept some good company while he was there, so that had helped him enjoy himself too.

Finnick's eyes light up at that, like he understands exactly what Peeta's talking about, since they're in some sort of exclusive fraternity and all. But he catches Peeta off guard, because he doesn't talk about the glory of having multiple women fawn over him or even the fame and celebrity that comes for it.

"Yeah, I hear you may have found her, huh? Must be someone special too, since the network seems so excited about it."

And Peeta tries not to furrow his brow, wondering exactly what Finnick knows. Or thinks he knows.

Haymitch snorts, and since it's really no place to obligatorily curse at Haymitch, Peeta shoves his hands in his pockets instead.

"I have."

Finnick grins, and his green eyes sparkle, and it just makes him even better looking.

"Well, I'm happy for you. And it's good you know now. Before going into the final ceremony. I knew with Annie beforehand too."

Peeta nods, slowly, looking around at the people bustling around them, staging lights and chairs and getting ready for their first interview, with B&C's daytime talk show host, Claudius Templesmith.

"Yeah, she's, uh, pretty amazing. When you know, you know right?"

And he smiles, even though it's painfully awkward, talking to Finnick about Katniss, especially in such a superficial way, and particularly because he's aware that Finnick and Annie's love story isn't a fictional one. They're happily married with children. He can't know what it's like to be Peeta in this situation.

Haymitch snorts again, clapping Peeta on his back, apparently no longer able to contain himself.

"Let me tell you Odair, this one's been head over heels right from the get go. Couldn't pick another girl if he tried."

Peeta balls his fists, fighting to get out a chuckle, his expression probably twisted manically since all he wants to do is growl at Haymitch for still finding all of this so inappropriately funny. He's sure the curious look Finnick gives him is a result of that.

But Finnick, well-practiced in the art of conversation, just continues it smoothly.

"Yeah, well, it wasn't... as immediate for me, with Annie. But once I figured it out, it was like
none of the other women existed. It's still like that actually," he smiles sheepishly. "Two kids later and counting."

Finnick says this in a way that's so earnest and truthful, so clearly in love with the bride he found on this show five years ago, that it takes Peeta by surprise. Because he didn't think it was possible, but talking to this ridiculously good looking man, and hearing about how in love he is with his wife, not sounding the least bit cynical about PME or the tabloid fodder they still endure to this day, Peeta almost understands it.

Why people watch this show. Or at least, when they're not tuning in for the crying drunk girls.

Because watching people fall in love with each other is beautiful. And hopeful. And people want the fairy tale.

Peeta smiles a genuine smile.

"Hey man, I'm happy for you."

Finnick nods, still smiling himself. "Yeah, I got lucky. Sounds like you may have too," he winks.

"Well, we'll see," Peeta laughs.

And Finnick chuckles too, conceding Peeta's valid point.

"Well, I hope it all works out for you then. And I can't wait to meet her, assuming it does."

Peeta hears Haymitch mutter something under his breath about what a treat that would be, but he's not even given the opportunity to respond with so much as a dirty look because he and Finnick are whisked away to the directors' chairs set up in front of the cameras, where they're expected to try and out-charm the other for them.

And they do a decent job of it, with a good rapport and off the cuff joking around that includes Finnick declaring himself Peeta's mentor and a slight dig at other past bachelors when Finnick says he's glad he can officially pass the hypothetical PME Bachelor torch to someone else worthy of it.

Claudius Templesmith eats it up, and then makes Peeta talk about himself, so the viewers can get the basics on him. Runner up on Number 1 Chef, successful restaurateur, originally from District 12, two older brothers—both taken, sorry!—and ready to find love.

Then Peeta does the whole shy and bashful routine when Claudius asks how it's going so far for him, aware that they're almost done filming this season. Peeta's under strict orders not to give away anything, but the network has also asked him to tease. And so, like a good Bachelor, he does his part to convince.

"Well, of course you know I can't really tell you anything. But I will say that I'm very happy. And that sometimes love can find you in the most unexpected of places."

"I don't think a show of 20 women competing for your love is exactly the most unexpected of places, Peeta," Finnick cracks, good-naturedly, and everyone's laughing.

So Peeta just shrugs, giving the camera a knowing grin.

"I guess you'll just have to watch to see what I'm talking about."

He knows he's satisfied the group of producers standing behind the cameras, because that's where
And then after a few more similarly quick and equally shallow interviews, they're done for the day, and Finnick pulls Peeta aside, alone, where he decides to live up to that self-proclaimed mentor role and offer Peeta some unsolicited—yet insightful—advice.

"Look, I'm sure you know by now that a lot that comes along with this gig is bullshit. It's stupid promos like this. And attending staged events for the network while being forced to mingle with people you don't care about. It's cameras in your face at any moment of any day. Your personal business spread all over the news—magazines, the internet, television—just because people are going to feel entitled to know everything about you."

Finnick sighs.

"But truthfully? Finding my wife because of it? Makes it worth all of it. Even if we have to hole up in our house for the entire weekend just to be able to enjoy it. Or when I have to distract a paparazzi so Annie can push the stroller by on the sidewalk un-captured."

Finnick furrows his brow in concern at Peeta's frown.

"It's important to remember that, okay?"

Peeta absolutely takes Finnick's words to heart. Just probably not in the way Finnick expects him to. Because they help Peeta remember exactly why this show is so evil. It's its ability—no, purpose—to take a private, sacred thing like the love between two people—only to capture it and make sure it's plastered everywhere for the world's consumption.

Of course Peeta knows that Finnick and Annie must have voluntarily signed up for PME too, and in some way, tacitly knew what they were getting into.

But despite what Finnick's telling him, how could anyone possibly choose that life?

So Peeta asks him, in earnest. "So even with all of that—knowing what you know now, would you do it all over again?"

Finnick stares at him, seeming surprised by the question.

Like the answer is obvious.

"Of course. You'll see. When you love someone enough, you'll do anything for them."

***

Peeta rides back to the mansion with Haymitch.

And once it's just the two of them, alone in the back of a luxury town car, complete with a privacy window and a mini bar that Haymitch surprisingly doesn't take advantage of, Haymitch uses the opportunity to fill Peeta in about what's been happening behind the scenes. He makes a crack about still being at work while Peeta took his little vacation, which Peeta maturely ignores, but then tells him Plutarch and Seneca seemed happy to restructure the format of the final episode, now that it's just Katniss left.

"They think the concept of the finale being just about you proposing to Katniss is going to play even better this way. More realistic too, since it's not like the other two girls really stood a chance anyway."
Because Katniss is the only one who came back to the Capitol with him.

Although she obviously doesn't know that.

Mostly because when Peeta'd offered to tell her about his date with Glimmer, she'd amusingly not allowed him to explain that she really didn't have any reason to be jealous. Since Peeta had kicked Glimmer off half way through their date and all.

Glimmer had gotten pretty tipsy on too much champagne at their romantic cliff-side, ocean-view lunch, and had started to turn hands-y—and mean, outright saying bad things about Katniss and Delly, all as part of her pitch to make sure he knew that she was the one for him.

So, during an intermission, Peeta had actually pulled aside a producer, who'd called Seneca himself to make sure it was okay if he let Glimmer go now, rather than waiting for the final rose ceremony.

He'd gotten pretty quick approval too, probably because Seneca could foresee the crying and screaming that was to come and its ability to provide enough entertainment to fill whatever void their short-lived date would leave behind.

Peeta's also pretty sure Glimmer had single-handedly filled his crying, emotional drunk girl quota for the season—giving him enough tears and you fucking assholes to last him a lifetime.

And when Delly, in stark contrast, had left their date voluntarily, practically doing so with a smile and wishing him luck with her, it meant the rose ceremony's focus would no longer be about his choice, because there wasn't one now, but how he'd propose.

To Katniss.

When Peeta doesn't respond, instead staring out the window at the fast-moving landscape as they barrel down the highway back to Snow's mansion, he hears Haymitch change the subject, who must be feeling not only unusually sober, but also unusually chatty.

"Listen kid, you just need to be ready. Because over the next few days, once those promos air, and filming's over, and you're back out in public, your life is going to change completely."

Peeta scoffs, still focusing out his window.

"Because it's been just the same-old, same-old these days, right?"

Haymitch grunts.

"Hey, this is just a warning. Do with it what you want. But the way Seneca and Plutarch are talking, they think you're on pace to be bigger than Finnick."

At that, Peeta turns and looks at Haymitch skeptically.

"Are they blind?"

Haymitch's laugh is gruff, but genuine.

"Hey, while I agree that standing next to Odair is…humbling, to say the least, have you actually seen yourself on screen with her?"

And Peeta stares blankly at Haymitch. Because he hasn't. He hasn't seen one minute of what the PME cameras have captured.
But he can imagine they've probably put on a good show.

Haymitch shakes his head at him.

"There's a reason they let you ditch Glimmer, and a reason Delly left last night. This isn't one of those horse race type of seasons where people are going to be backing different girls. Because as soon as that girl stepped out of that limo the first night, it was over, and everyone saw it. Your mind was made up."

Peeta narrows his eyes at his agent. "Only because you made up my mind for me."

Which is at least partly true, since without Haymitch, Katniss wouldn't be here.

But Haymitch obviously isn't buying it, laying his hard, gray eyes on Peeta as he calls him out.

"Oh, just stop with the bullshit, okay? You and I both know that you loved her long before you ever knew me."

And try as he might, Peeta knows he's in no position to argue. Even though it'd be decidedly easier to, rather than having to accept responsibility for putting himself, and Katniss, in the situation they're currently in.

He sighs, frustrated.

"God, Haymitch, how did you even find her, anyway?"

Haymitch is more than happy to fill him in.

He grins, and it seems sincere, or at least it's without any sarcastic intent.

"She doesn't try to impress anyone, you know? Well, of course you know. But it makes her easier to notice."

Peeta smiles at that characterization of Katniss.

"Her friend sent me a rough demo tape of her—really just a video of her performing at some bar at the edge of the Seam. It was right around the time they tapped you for this."

And Haymitch shrugs, looking more like an evil genius now.

"And when I saw her, a light bulb went off. I knew people would eat that shit up. Two good looking small town kids making it big together on reality television? And I already knew she'd fit your "type," at least physically—all those skinny brunettes you'd bring around for a couple of days before trading them in…"

He raises an eyebrow at Peeta, exaggerating his enjoyment in calling him out for his less than stellar past love life.

Again, Peeta ignores it despite his agitation, distracted instead by all of these details Haymitch has neglected to tell him until right now.

"So when I was back in Twelve for the casting call, I went to find her, intending to drag her there. But it turned out her friend had already dragged her there for me. Although she had zero interest in me—or you—hypothetically speaking, at least—whatsoever."

Haymitch smirks.
"And that's what absolutely sold me on her. I figured she'd just make for good television, call the other women out on their bullshit, maybe even pique your interest. And then call you out on your bullshit too."

Haymitch shakes his head, still pleased with himself, as Peeta just stares and listens.

"I had no idea I'd hit such pay dirt, though. The two of you ending up being madly in love with the other? It really was just a genuine stroke of luck."

And finally Peeta speaks up, unable to let him twist this into even more of what it's clearly not.

"It's just a fucking act, Haymitch. It's not love. Even if it's real for me, we're still only doing what you're making us do."

Haymitch snorts, and decides to finally reach for the mini bar.

"Look kid, neither of you needed that much convincing."

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Cinna puts him in a tuxedo.

Not that Peeta expected any differently.

But it makes him uncomfortably stiff, the cummerbund constricting his waist and the bowtie closing in around his throat.

Unless that's just the unrelenting pressure of an impending proposal of marriage.

Which is only minutes away now.

They've already spent half the day filming his preparations. The show wanted footage of him "choosing" a ring, which had been absolutely no fun. And it's not like he could bring himself to take the task seriously. So he'd quickly chosen a simple round solitaire, figuring it would be least offensive to Katniss.

Although it is a really pretty ring.

They'd also taped him getting a haircut and interviewing with Caesar earlier, but now here he is, at least afforded the right to get dressed in privacy.

Although Cinna's still with him; but he doesn't mind Cinna and the calming energy he brings to a room.

And as Cinna helps him with his jacket, holding it out so Peeta can slide an arm through before shrugging it on his shoulders, Cinna gives Peeta what he thinks is meant to be a pep talk.

"She looks stunning, you know. She's going to take your breath away."

Peeta's pretty sure he doesn't need to be convinced of that. Although it's not helping to settle his nerves, knowing that Katniss is probably going to look as beautiful as she's ever looked tonight.

He stares at himself in the mirror, shrugging his shoulders again to get the jacket just so, fiddling with the bowtie that looks perpetually crooked even though Cinna's assured him it's perfectly straight. And it's like looking at a practical stranger who has his eyes and hair and face—because this man, in the tux, and the slick hair, and the ring in his pocket, is certainly not Peeta Mellark.
He's *Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor*.

Peeta would never make a big to-do about proposing to a girl. He'd keep it clean and simple, focusing on what's important. The girl. Their love. Making sure she knows just how much she's loved.

And that's about it.

Not an expensive suit, or a thousand roses decorating the staged platform where he's set to get down on one knee. Or the incredibly public forum he's supposed to do it in.

Part of him thinks that's how he'll get through tonight—constantly reminding himself that this isn't him proposing to Katniss. This is the Bachelor proposing to his final contestant.

But most of him knows that he's had a terrible time of keeping himself and the Bachelor straight when it comes to Katniss Everdeen. And he's probably not going to be able to start now.

His heart jumps and a hard lump forms in his throat when Caesar knocks at the door to his suite, trailed by two cameras and their handlers.

And with one last kind, reassuring look from Cinna and a *good luck*, it's show time.

But before anything, Caesar squeezes out one last interview. They're set up on the stage now, sufficiently mic'd and just waiting for the red light of the cameras to flicker on. It's another picturesque back drop, of course, with the evening sun glowing through the trees and illuminating him from behind, the mansion's gardens flanking the shot, and the roses on top of roses arranged to ring the circular platform.

"Well, Peeta, we're finally here," Caesar begins solemnly once the red lights begin flashing. And Peeta's so used to Caesar and his less than conventional appearance that he doesn't even bat an eye at his tightly slicked blue-gray hair matching the shade of his suit.

"And this is officially a *PME* first. You've already made your choice before the final rose ceremony." Peeta has to try not to laugh at the gravity that Caesar says this, like it's a very serious divergence from the norm. As if it's unconventional for a man to know who he's going to marry more than minutes before he proposes.

But he nods along anyway, pretending to fidget with the buttons of his jacket to give the appearance of a nervous energy.

"Well, let's be honest with each other, Caesar. Katniss has been the only one for me from the start. Since before then, really."

It makes Caesar smile wistfully.

"Well, that's beautiful then. How long have you known, Peeta?"

And he shakes his head; it's impossible to come up with a time frame. It's an unfair question, asking him to pin point exactly when he fell in love with her.

He sighs.

"I think I've always known."

Caesar pauses after Peeta's words, letting their desired dramatic effect sink in. Then he exhales slowly, considering his Bachelor thoughtfully.
"And Katniss? Do you think she feels the same way?"

No.

He knows she doesn't. Even if she cares for him, likes him even. Peeta knows she doesn't feel like this.

So he tries his best to keep the ruefulness out of his smile.

"I hope so. I guess we're about to find out, right?"

And he chuckles nervously, where Caesar joins him with his own light laughter.

"Ok then, Peeta, fair enough. I'll let you get to it."

And Caesar steps aside, leaving just him and the cameras, awaiting Katniss's arrival. She's probably parked in a car somewhere just like that first night, just waiting for her cue.

And the thought of her joining him should probably make him more nervous.

He expected to feel like throwing up.

But a calmness overcomes him instead.

He's spent a lot of time, energy, and emotional capital on Katniss Everdeen throughout the course of his life. And certainly none more so than over the past few weeks. She can consume him—running through his thoughts late at night, popping into his mind while doing mundane things, unable to stop himself from thinking of her even when he'd rather not. And his head can spin and spin, just trying to figure her out.

And it's made him more ready for this moment than he could ever expect. Because he's kind of an expert in all things Katniss.

So even when he finally sees her and his heart rate picks back up, the cameras still manage to disappear and it's just her.

With dark hair spilling over her bare shoulders, and soft make up that brings out the silver of her eyes and a pretty pale yellow dress that compliments the olive tone of her skin.

Peeta doesn't know how many times during the course of his life time he'll end up declaring himself a goner for this girl, but he can add right now to the list.

She smiles at him as she approaches, with a warmth that's reassuring even though she's fighting a nervous glint in her eye, and Peeta grins too.

And seeing her now, he knows there's really only one way he can do this.

And it's to propose to Katniss Everdeen as himself.

Even if it's for the cameras and an audience.

Because she deserves to know exactly how much she's loved.

Katniss stops when she reaches him, and Peeta instinctively takes her hands in his, her grasp, even though shaky from her own nerves, helping to tame the erratic beating of his heart just a little.
"Hey," she says with a breathy laugh, her casual greeting reminding him of how surreal everything is. And that's no good, because Peeta's ready to just do it already, and remembering how staged this is won't help.

So he squeezes her hands reassuringly, with a nervous smile.

"Hi. I um, listen. I have some things I need to tell you, okay?"

Her eyes lock with his momentarily before she nods.

"Okay," she agrees and matches his smile.

It puts him at a little more ease.

"You look beautiful, by the way."

Her eyes flit down to herself before steadying back on him, shrugging as if none of it is any of her doing. But she thanks him softly anyway.

And then he opens his mouth and the words just start to come out.

"So. We both know that never in a million years did we think we'd end up here," he begins, and he's grateful his voice is sturdier than he expected it to be.

"And even though we're really just two kids from District 12 who were randomly thrown together on this show, in a way, I feel like you came here with me."

He exhales, getting his bearings, watching her smile softly at his words.

"Because I've known you practically my whole life. Even if I hadn't talked to you until a few weeks ago," he rightfully points out, and she smirks.

"But I promise you that I knew you. You're the girl I've compared others to. The girl I couldn't even fathom talking to, because I was sure you'd want nothing to do with me."

At this, Katniss rolls her eyes, with an expression that implies he's an idiot for thinking that, and he can't help the nervous chuckle that escapes his lips. It makes her smile.

And her smile encourages him.

"Katniss, when you walked out of that limo the first night, you were already the girl of my dreams. And then I had to talk to you, finally. And I actually got to meet you, the real you."

Peeta notices something change in her eyes as he says this; a sense of surprise, maybe, or a sense of realization. But she's looking at him more intently now. It throws him a little, the look she's giving him, because it's so….real.

He takes another deep breath, ignoring the growing clamminess of his hands.

"And well, it didn't help. At all." Peeta tells her, raising an eyebrow teasingly at the flash of confusion in her eyes.

And then he smiles, letting her in on the secret.

"Because the real you is even better than I'd imagined. You're caring. And funny. Loyal, and brave too. Stubborn. And a really good friend." He pauses, the words tumbling off his lips easily, so easily, and he doesn't want her to lose his meaning in them.
"And it turns out, the more I learn about you, the more there is to love about you."

Katniss's mouth falls partly open and he shrugs helplessly.

"See, that's the thing, Katniss. All you've done over the past few weeks is make me absolutely
sure that I've been right about you all along."

And finally, he lets go of her hands. His right one moves to his pants pocket, hoping he doesn't
fumble as he pulls out the black velvet box that's been awkwardly pressing against his thigh,
feeling heavy even though it weighs almost nothing.

And although she knew to expect it, Katniss still gasps his name under her breath as Peeta does
his best to open the box and smoothly hold it out to her as he bends his knee.

She's all big gray eyes and a quivering bottom lip when he gains the courage to look back up at
her, and it takes him by surprise, because it's almost as if she looks like she's going to cry. But
Katniss sinks her teeth into her lip determinedly, darting her eyes from his face to the sparkling
diamond in his hand.

And he's overcome with just how much what he's about to say is one hundred percent, absolutely,
without a doubt true.

"I love you, Katniss. Every little part of you."

Her face softens, and instead of quivering, her lips upturn at the corners. Peeta swallows hard
again, trying to figure out what it means. He wants her to believe him, to know that he really does
love her. Has probably always loved her. And probably always will.

But he's pretty sure she doesn't.

Because while there's a look of encouragement in her eyes, there's also a sense of pity. Like she's
sorry those words had to leave his lips. And because she knows what's coming.

Peeta sighs, making it seem like he's just exhaling a deep breath, but really he's taking a second or
two to come to terms with another failed attempt at convincing Katniss Everdeen.

"I've spent the better part of my life loving you. And I was lucky enough to end up here with you.
And now I'm asking you to leave here with me." He can't take his eyes off her, though it'd be so
much easier to do this if he could because she looks so…sad, even though she's covering it with a
smile. But he still manages to pop the question.

"Katniss, I'm asking you to marry me."

The rest of it is a blur.

She's nodding her head, and she's saying yes, and reaching for his hand to pull him back to his
feet. There's kissing. And laughing. And he slides the ring onto her finger. It sparkles. She holds it
out in front of her to admire it. More kissing.

And as it all happens, Peeta feels like he's been run over by a truck.

Forget hard. That had been practically impossible.

Finally, after another minute or two of them torturously acting like a happy, newly engaged couple
for the cameras, he hears Seneca's voice in the background yell Cut!
It's unexpected, and abrupt, because no one's ever officially directed them that much; usually a camera man will just quietly tell them he's going to stop filming now, if anything.

So they're taken aback when Seneca makes his way to them from where the monitors were set up, a few yards away, watching the live feed.

"That was nice, you two. Really nice." But he pauses, and it's clear Seneca has more to tell them than just compliments.

He scratches his beard and wrinkles his nose.

"But, well, the way the sunlight's coming in, it ended up really washing you out on the feedback, Katniss. I think it's the color of your dress."

And at this, Kantiss shrugs, not seeming to care. But Peeta senses the other shoe's about to drop. Seneca sighs, maybe trying to seem sympathetic, but really just coming off as slightly annoyed.

"It really would be best if we tried it again with you standing in a different place."

And now Peeta wants to throw up. Having to do that again just might actually kill him.

But before he can react outwardly, it's Katniss who puts her foot down, shooting daggers at Seneca so forceful that Peeta ends up more concerned for Seneca’s life than his own.

"No," she says firmly, shaking her head. "Absolutely not."

And she glances at Peeta, who must look just as shocked at Seneca and the rest of the crew. Katniss has probably said only two words to anyone behind the scenes the entire time they've been on camera together.

And here she is yelling at the head producer.

The ring on her finger distracts him momentarily when it catches the light of the very evening sun causing her current outburst as she flails her hands as she speaks.

"It's bad enough we had to do this even once for you. And you're not making him do that again."

Clearly, Peeta's aware that Katniss doesn't hide her irritation well. But he's never seen her actually angry. Even Seneca flinches as she spits the words out at him.

"Katniss," Peeta warns softly, even though he's upset too, because she needs to calm down. He's pretty sure no one yells at Seneca like that.

Although, it's not like he doesn't deserve it.

Especially when his response is to tell them that this is the most important shot of the season, and he'll do whatever it takes to get it right.

Oh, and by the way, he wasn't asking. *He was telling.*

Katniss stares at Seneca for a hard, tense moment, still trying to put him in the ground with her eyes, and Peeta catches her ball her hands into tight fists. It feels like a standoff.

Until Katniss turns without another word and storms off the set.
She moves quickly, heatedly, and no one stops her.

At least until Peeta follows on her heels after one look at Seneca, who clearly has no idea what to do now.

"Katniss," he calls after her, a good distance behind her.

But she doesn't stop until she's halfway into the gardens, away from everyone. And the cameras.

When he reaches her, surveying their situation, Peeta has to give the producers and crew at least some credit, because no one dares to come after them.

"Katniss, c'mon," he says again, slightly out of breath because she'd gotten away fast and it took some effort to catch up.

He approaches closely enough to touch her shoulder, and she startles at his touch, shrugging him off as she turns around. She shakes her head firmly at him, looking something between wanting to cry and wanting to scream.

"No, Peeta. Don't try and tell me that it's okay or whatever it is I know you're about to tell me. Because it's not okay, all right? You know and I know that that was awful. Friends or not, we can't pretend something like that."

She sighs, frowning.

"Not again at least," she mumbles.

And instinctively, all Peeta wants to do is comfort her, make her feel better.

And calm her down.

Even if it means lying to her.

"Katniss. Please don't worry about me. I don't mind."

His words do the opposite of his desired effect.

"Well maybe you should, Peeta!" she yells at him. "I mind."

Peeta stops, her declaration catching him off guard as he realizes what she's really saying.

Because this is what he's been trying to get her to do all along.

It took weeks of prodding. And some fighting. With multiple, failed attempts on his part to convince her this is more than just some act. And one heart-wrenching proposal and a ridiculous request to re-do it.

But she's finally admitting to having real feelings for him.

In that maddeningly complicated, infuriatingly stubborn way of hers, of course, but he'll take what he can get.

Peeta studies her cautiously, just to make sure he's reading her correctly. And also to figure out what to do with her now.

He swallows.
"You're right. I mind too," he finally tells her quietly.

And she sighs, and seems to lose her frustration with him at his concession. She shakes her head hesitantly.

"You... you just, Peeta, you shouldn't have..."

And he doesn't get to know the rest of her sentence because Katniss stops abruptly as she notices that they have company.

Peeta sees him too, and thinks seriously about hurting the unfortunate PA who's approaching them, causing Katniss to cut herself off at his presence. He's clearly been sent over to them with orders from Seneca. And lets them know that he's come to tell them that regardless of whether they do another take of the proposal, they're still needed back on set to finish up filming after-shots and interviews.

And while Peeta knows it's not the kid's fault and he's just doing his job, this is important and he's interrupting.

He glares at the PA, his voice stern.

"Look, clearly, we're going to need a little more time. Unless you want a scowling bride to be."

Peeta directs his gaze at Katniss, who, as if on cue, perfects a grimace.

It's enough to buy them another few minutes alone, at least.

And enough to make Peeta crack a smile, once the PA leaves them to themselves. He runs a hand over the back of his neck, leaving it propped there, taking her in.


He sighs.

"God, what are we doing, Katniss?"

Because he honestly doesn't have a clue any more.

She shakes her head helplessly, looking down at the ring on her finger before pulling her eyes back up to him with a concerned frown.

"I don't know," she admits.

It draws Peeta into her, needing to close the distance between them. She watches cautiously as he moves in to her personal space, yet lets him invade it.

"It's, uh, probably going to be a while before we see each other again now," he points out, his voice lower, softer now.

"I know," she sighs.

He looks at her pointedly.

"So maybe we can take that time to figure it out."

It's his last invitation. An open one. Asking her just to think about it. About them.
She exhales and only hesitates slightly before nodding.

"Okay."

And just her acceptance of his small request makes Peeta smile.

"Okay," he agrees.

And then he raises an eyebrow. "But in the meantime, just give me the damn ring back, Katniss."

He'd be tempted to chuckle at her confused look, if the reason for his request wasn't so painful.

"Let's just do what they want," he explains, knowing there will be consequences if they don't. "It won't be that bad, I promise."

Yes it will. It will be a thousand times more awful this time around.

Katniss shakes her head, her eyes narrowing at him, refusing his request.

"Fuck them and what they want, Peeta. I'm—we're not doing it."

And at first, Peeta thinks she's just being angry and stubborn again, and he sighs, trying to talk her down.

"Katniss, honestly, it's just going to be easier in the long run if—"

But he's cut off by her words and a certain, different kind of desperation that catches him off guard.

"No! You were right, Peeta. And I should have just said it then. Before, all of this," she says exasperatedly, waving her hands around them.

She finishes off the inches between them, staring fiercely into his eyes. His heart thumps against his chest at her proximity and her heat.

"You're a good enough reason, okay?"

And before he can comprehend her meaning, before he can do anything, really, her arms are wrapped around his neck, and her body is pressed up against his.

And she's kissing him.

Chapter End Notes

I know I mentioned a ratings change last time. There's still going to be one. It's happening in the next chapter. And if an M rating isn't your thing, then please feel free to travel over to that other fanfiction website, where I'll be keeping this story's rating as is. : )

Also, I'd love to see you over on tumblr! We're kind of freaking out over there these days, but I post teasers and sneak peeks of this story, along with some others, as well as tons of Everlark, THG, Josh, Jen and other goodness, so come find me at c-r-roberts.
It's terrible timing. Impossibly bad. Because she's leaving for District 12 tonight, and won't see him, or even talk to him for weeks.

And the setting isn't the best either—with cameras and people and microphones still all around them.

But she needs to do it then and there. After Peeta had told her about fifteen different ways that he loved her, looking vulnerable and charming and all around perfect in his tuxedo. After he'd pretended to propose to her with an earnestness that scared her and made her heart race at the same time.

Then told her he'd do it all over again, just because Seneca didn't like the lighting.

Because even if they'd started out pretending, even if none of it had started out real—it feels different now.

And so do his lips.

She likes the surprise she senses on them, as if he can't quite believe it's finally happening, here, of all places. And she really likes how that surprise melts into a comforting, reassuring acceptance, which she feels in a soft sigh before Peeta kisses her back, now without hesitation. And maybe even a little bit of desperation. His mouth is hot on hers, and his hands keep her close against him, and it's a good, long moment before he's forced to pull back first, coming up for air with a pleasantly stunned, satisfied expression that makes her smile.

And while it's terrifying, to kiss Peeta like this, especially when they're both so emotionally charged and still with so many people who can see them, it's freeing too. And that kiss was for nobody but him.

But the next one is entirely for herself.

Soft and contented, leaning back into him, a thank you and an apology and a confession of her own feelings for him somehow wrapped into it—saying all of the things that she doesn't have words for. Hoping he understands her actions.

Even if she's not quite sure what it all means.
And Peeta probably doesn't know either—because really, what do they do now? The show's over. They can't take it back if they tried at this point. And part of her doesn't want to take it back—not if means ending up here. Really kissing Peeta.

When she leaves his lips once more, Peeta catches her gaze before rubbing the small of her back gently, smiling sheepishly.

"Don't think I'm trying to stop you from kissing me again, but I uh, think we need to head back now."

And one glance over to where production's still set up confirms his request.

They've garnered quite a bit of an audience.

While she knew they wouldn't be entirely alone for that kiss—kisses—seeing cameras and eyes trained on them is still jarring. But she takes some comfort in knowing none of it's exactly usable footage, so it really doesn't matter anyway.

They quietly head back to the crowd of impatient and probably agitated producers, and Peeta slips his fingers into hers, clutching her hand securely when he whispers for her to take his lead.

Where he promptly and curtly tells Seneca there won't be another proposal. That they'll do whatever other reaction shots PME may want, but his speech was a one-time deal.

It makes her want to kiss Peeta again right then and there, in front of Seneca and everyone else. And she might have, if it wasn't exactly something the producers would have wanted.

Seneca doesn't say anything for a moment, studying the two of them carefully, Katniss tightening her grip on Peeta's hand as he stares at them with a dark look.

And surprisingly, or maybe not surprisingly, considering her purpose on set and her penchant for punctuality, Effie pipes up from behind a row of cameramen and PAs.

"I'm not sure you'd have enough time for a reshoot anyway. She's scheduled to fly out in a few hours, Seneca."

As she says it, Katniss is pretty sure she catches a wink that's meant for them.

It's enough to get Seneca to relent, who begrudgingly agrees to let them off the hook and mumbles something about how editing will really need to work their magic.

And of course, Katniss feels relief, knowing Peeta—and herself, if she's being honest—won't have to go through that again.

But Effie's also reminded her that she's leaving in less than an hour.

And half of it is spent in front of the cameras, back to fake kissing and plastered on smiles—both her and Peeta somehow tacitly agreeing to save real for off camera.

But they make the most of the other half of the hour they still have. You'd think PME would want to give their happy couple at least a night before separating them for weeks on end, but that's not how it works. With the public all the more aware of Peeta and the upcoming season, B&C can't allow for even the chance of them being seen together.

So when they get to dump their microphones and leave the cameras behind for good, Peeta leads
her up to his suite, telling her she can change for her trip up there—grabbing her suitcase that's sitting in a corner and moving quickly enough that no one has the chance to stop them.

And then he locks the door behind them.

It's a confusing combination of fake and real—being in Peeta's suite, with him standing there in a tuxedo, the two of them still done up for the cameras, theoretically engaged, but finally alone.

But the kissing? There's no confusion there. And it's very real.

It starts slowly and deliberately. With a carefully discarded jacket. And heels slipped off feet. A gently untied bow tie. A sharp intake of breath and a pair of blue eyes that flutter shut at her first touch. Lips that are still warm and soft and tentative. That become more and more eager until hunger takes over and it's no longer slow or deliberate but quick and messy. With tongues and needy touches, light nips and pleased gasps.

And a heat that burns from the inside out.

That ultimately ends with her breathy, disappointed sigh when Peeta's lips dislodge from hers, deciding they need to have some sort of discussion about what they're doing.

Peeta sighs too, but while there's a glint in his eye, his words are all business. Like he expects to come up with answers in the next five minutes when it's taken them a month just to figure out they both actually liked the other.

"Katniss," he says softly, as they sit on the end of his bed, his hands resting comfortably on her upper thighs, "are we really doing this?"

She looks at him helplessly.

"Peeta, I don't even know what this is," she admits. Because here she is, with a ring on her finger, and yet this feels more like a first date.

A really good first date.

Peeta raises an eyebrow, like she's made a good point. She smiles softly, then sneaks another kiss, and Peeta actually chuckles against her mouth, obliging her only for a moment before directing her back to the conversation he wants to have that she's perfectly content avoiding.

"It's just that things are going to move pretty quickly now, and it's going to be different…the next time we see each other."

She nods, more than aware that their lives are probably going to be drastically different in a matter of weeks. Publicity and recognition. Fame, even. Television stars. And music contracts.

But then again, it feels like her life is already a lot different than it was before showing up here a few weeks ago.

"Well, the good news is that I'll be able to watch you on TV at least," she tells him lightly, with a grin, and it gets him to crack a smile.

"And we're both going to be pretty busy these next few weeks anyway, right?"

"Yeah," Peeta sighs in agreement, before shaking his head and hitting her with a look that expresses self-resentment.
"God, sometimes I wish…” and he trails off, looking down. She puts her hand atop of his, leaning in closer and furrowing her brow.

"What?"

He smiles ruefully, looking back up at her.

"Honestly, I wish I would have just worked up the nerve to talk to you ten years ago."

"Well, that would have never worked anyway," she says, making a face and shaking her head.

It prompts another curious eyebrow raise.

"No?"

"No," she confirms, half serious.

"I wasn't…I couldn't have…well. You wouldn't have stood a chance back then," she finally admits, and that's probably the honest truth. Because teenage Katniss was even more of a mess than 25-year-old Katniss is, and Peeta Mellark was intimidating enough as just a popular guy in her class who sometimes smiled at her. She'd never have known what to do if he'd actually have directed his easy charm her way.

"Besides," she tells him, entirely playful now. "I like you as Panem's Most Eligible. When else are you going to wear tuxes and give me diamonds?"

Peeta laughs, his eyes giving in and twinkling without the seriousness that clouded them seconds ago.

"Well, I guess I'll take it. At least you finally like me. For whatever misguided reasons."

She laughs too.

And their laughter is a good thing, at least from her perspective. It's in her instinct to make light of things when they start to feel too serious, and even though she usually loves Peeta's words, there's been too much heart-wrenching emotion spilled today already.

"Look," she tells him, more seriously now, intending on ending the conversation with one final point.

"All I know is that whatever happens—wherever this takes us—it's taking us together."

Peeta's eyes lock on hers, shining and blue as ever, a crooked smile appearing on his lips.

"Together," he repeats, like he likes the sound of it.

She nods, tilting her chin closer toward him as she does.

"Okay?"

She watches Peeta's Adam's apple bob as he swallows before he nods too.

"God, I'm going to miss you."

"Well, I'm not gone yet," she whispers.

And she gets just a piece of an impish smile before it's lost on her lips and they're kissing again.
They stay that way until there's a knock on the door and Effie's voice is on the other side reminding them impatiently that Katniss has to go, now.

And then that's it.

There's no riding with her in the car to the airport because of the possibility of trolling paparazzi; nor any unrealistic promises of talking to the other soon; and no real goodbye either.

It's just one last kiss right before she leaves, after she changes quickly into jeans and turns the ring back into a producer, since she can't exactly parade around wearing it—not that she wants to, really.

But at least the kiss comes with a one-word reminder—and while it's just his whisper on her lips, it's enough to keep her going.

"Together."

***

Katniss arrives home, late, having crossed two time zones and over 2,000 miles, and Madge picks her up because her arrival time coincided with her shift at the bar ending.

And she's grinning like a Cheshire cat when Katniss arrives at her car outside of arrivals wearily.

Even though Katniss has been expecting this type of reaction since she got out of that limo and saw Peeta standing there, it doesn't mean she's any more ready to deal with it now. So she dumps her bags in Madge's trunk and slides into the passenger seat with narrowed eyes.

They don't even exchange so much as a hello before Madge studies her knowingly.

"What?" Katniss says, trying her best to sound annoyed.

And Madge starts the car with a shake of her head and that big, annoying grin.

"So. Peeta Mellark, huh?"

Katniss exhales, taking her time in responding, mostly because she's not sure how to, finally settling on the non-answer.

"Madge, you know I can't—"

And Madge nods in agreement, cutting her off.

"It's okay. I know. You can't say anything."

Katniss sighs, relieved, relaxing back into the seat as they pull out of the airport. She's too tired and drained, and quite honestly, shy, to talk about any of it—even if she could.

But Madge keeps talking.

"But even if you can't say anything, I can. And holy shit. Just holy shit, Katniss."

On some levels, Katniss has to agree that that about sums things up, actually.

"I absolutely cannot wait to see how that went down."

Again, Katniss can't really respond with anything but another sigh.
"Oh, and thank god they chose you and not me. Because Peeta's cute and all, but we grew up together." Then she makes a guilty face.

"And I made out with Ryan Mellark the year before he came out, so it would have been all sorts of weird."

And Katniss laughs, mostly out of disbelief, and a little out of relief, afraid of what might have otherwise come out of Madge's mouth.

"That's actually kind of messed up, Madge."

Madge laughs too.

"I know. But anyway, back to you. And Peeta. Because you two are totally getting married now, aren't you?"

For some reason, this makes Katniss laugh too. It's so absurd coming out of Madge's mouth, removed from production and the cameras and Caesar's interviews, just a conversation between two friends in a car at one in the morning. However one-sided the conversation may be.

And she lets Madge's eyes scrutinize her as she continues to chuckle, stuck at a red light before getting on the highway, the only car on the road, because she's sure Madge won't be able to read her.

Madge shrugs when Katniss doesn't give her anything.

"Well, just so you know, since this is basically all of my doing, I fully expect to be a bridesmaid at the wedding."

Katniss rolls her eyes, really really liking this confidentially clause now.

"Oh, and hi, by the way. We've missed you."

***

Life in District 12 is relatively normal for her first week back. She resumes her usual shifts at the Hob, and touches base with Haymitch only enough for him to confirm a flight back to the Capitol after the first episode of PME airs when she'll meet with Plutarch Heavensbee and B&C's people at Gamemaker Records. And for him to advise her to have her music and her shit together by then because he expects them to want to move fast—Plutarch's already told him he wants a single ready to go while the show's still airing. Although, she has to admit, she doesn't mind working tirelessly around the clock, either on her music or at the Hob, because at least it keeps her mind off of missing Peeta.

Well, at least too much.

Because she definitely misses him. Especially when she's reminded of him around practically every corner back home—whether it's driving past the empty storefront three blocks down from the Hob with the Mellark's Coming Soon sign hanging in the window, or patrons at the bar wanting to talk about him with her, giving her a wink and a nod and telling her that they know they're both on that television show.

In fact, the only person who doesn't seem to want to talk about Peeta or PME with her is Gale. And Katniss guesses she likes the normalcy of their friendship resuming right back where it left off before she flew out for PME, but it's almost strange how he seems to be doing everything he
can't to not talk about what she's been up to for the past month. Or that the Bachelor is Peeta Mellark.

At first she thinks he's just taking the confidentiality clause more seriously than Madge and everyone else, but after her second shift with him not asking a single question about it—not even so much as a joke about how she survived living with ten other women—it feels more like Gale's ignoring it. And also like he's annoyed by it.

Especially when they're gearing up for the first episode's watch party that Madge volunteered the Hob to host. And Katniss is sitting at the bar doing little more than twiddling her thumbs because both of them have insisted that this party is for her and she can't very well work it. But she catches Gale roll his eyes when a promo for PME takes over the television screens and it shows a clip of Peeta's jaw dropping when the camera pans to Katniss getting out of her car. She's seen the clip at least 15 times by now—they've been airing it for three days—and while it personally makes her a little queasy because she's nervous for how the producers will play things out, it also gives her the butterflies feeling all over again.

And with Madge off in the kitchen working on hors d'oeuvres trays, Katniss, fed up with Gale's surliness, finally speaks up.

"I saw that."

She says it plainly; emotionlessly. Even though she's confused and a little hurt by Gale's obvious disdain.

He turns to her, still holding the bottle of Tanqueray he's wiping down with a towel, and she sees only a flash of guilt in his gray eyes the same color as hers before he narrows them.

"It just seems a little contrived."

At that, she laughs.


Gale sighs and looks toward the kitchen, making sure the coast is clear, before leaning over the bar and speaking with a lowered voice.

"It feels like you were set up, all right? Like that agent knew exactly what he was doing and you got sucked into something you didn't sign up for."

And for as technically right as Gale is, the way he says it just feels so wrong. With a voice low with anger and eyes clearly unable to see that Katniss doesn't seem so bothered.

But Katniss wants none of it right now. Not minutes before the place is going to be filled with people whose eyes will be on her, watching her in person and also as she's broadcast all over Panem making a fool of herself.

"You know what, Gale?" she tells him in an equally low, and now fully annoyed, voice as she pushes herself off the bar stool, deciding to walk away and already regretting having said something to him in the first place.

"It's a good thing I'm a big girl and can handle myself just fine then, isn't it? But thanks so much for your concern."

And she turns her back to him to stalk off and find Madge, actually craving a little of her enthusiasm, wondering why it's taken Gale a week to actually say something, and then when he
does, it's something angry and accusatory.

But the crowd begins to arrive too soon for her to figure out Gale or his motives, and she pushes it to the back of her mind, knowing she's kind of the center of attention and needs to be all smiles. Which when people like her mother, and Gale's mom and little sister Posey—who isn't so little anymore, fully grown and in high school—arrive, smiling isn't so hard for her to do.

Family and close friends she expects; but Katniss doesn't expect so many other, tangential people in her life to show. And she really doesn't expect so many people to attend because they know Peeta.

Even both of his brothers are here—Brandon with his wife whose name Katniss doesn't know, and Ryan, who she's spotted already chummily saying hello to Madge at the bar. Half of her wants to bombard them with questions, just go right up to them and ask how Peeta is, whether they've talked to him, if they'd be willing to pass along a secret message or two for her.

And the other half wants to shrink into a corner and hide, afraid of what they think of her and exactly how much they know.

But instead of doing either, she mingles mostly with the people she's close to right up until eight o'clock and suddenly everyone's scrambling for a seat and a good view of the TVs scattered around the place.

Katniss starts out wanting to throw up from nerves when Caesar's voiceover begins to footage of Peeta—clips of him working in some kitchen, and then standing in an empty storefront at work on opening another Mellark's, all interspersed with shots of him conducting interviews and standing outside the mansion waiting for women to arrive on that first night. Caesar formally introduces this season's Bachelor as an up and coming chef who's just beginning his journey on the grandest love story PME's ever told. She sighs lightly, forcing herself not to roll her eyes.

Then the show starts introducing the different women, and she's bombarded with minute-long back stories on Delly and Rue, and Johanna, and Glimmer and everyone else.

But right off the bat, they focus heavily on her. Her introductory piece is at least twice as long as anyone else's. And it includes her looking not entirely cheesy with her guitar under that tree in the park, sound bites of the stupid questions Effie made her answer, and then working right here, at the Hob. Of course, the places goes nuts when that happens, with cheers and clapping and laughing when it doesn't look too shabby on national television. But for as loud as the crowd gets then, it becomes intently silent when she meets Peeta for the first time in front of the mansion.

Watching herself interact with Peeta is like an out of body experience. And Katniss notices things she'd been too nervous to pick up on in real time. He's adorably tongue-tied, and she's visibly on edge, and they both look genuinely stunned on camera, but it all combines together for an energy that's practically palpable.

So much so that even in just those first moments, it's easy to see why PME is willing to fight so hard for their love story.

Especially when she hears an audible sigh after Peeta admits to Caesar that yes, he knows Katniss, but he'd never been able to work up the nerve to talk to her before tonight.

Hell, it makes Katniss want to fight for their love story too.

She gets caught up in watching him, the cameras making it clear his eyes follow her around the room as she painfully mingles with other women; and she has to bite her lip to keep from smiling
when Peeta practically chokes on his drink in Glimmer's overeager presence.

But all of a sudden it's her and Peeta outside on that bench on the mansion’s terrace, and all she can register is his nervousness—their nervousness—and his boyish smile and the small laughs that she remembers not having to force.

And then she's catching Ryan Mellark's eye unexpectedly when she looks away because he's staring at her from across the room as the show cuts to commercial.

Suddenly it's all too much, with all of these people, and the show, and seeing Peeta on her television screen. And in Ryan's blond hair and blue eyes and similar build.

Because she remembers her cynical expectations going in—probably prodded by her recent conversation with Gale—and that she'd been so sure she'd signed up for her career, for her music, for opportunities. And it had been a joke that Madge had even considered she might actually find happiness. Or funnier still, that she might find love.

And Katniss thought it was going to be awful, just a bunch of catfights and terrible, awkward interactions with some even more terrible guy.

But then, in what now feels like the blink of an eye, everything had changed, because she had found Peeta.

And she thinks she's happy.

But what's really scaring her, what's sending her into what feels like a panic attack, is the possibility that maybe she's actually found love too.

So she quietly slips off her stool as the commercials begin, feigning the need to use the restroom but really sneaking into the back room that's really more of a closet than an office, just needing a minute to regain her composure.

To get her head straight.

To be alone with only her and her crazy thoughts.

Until she has company.

"You okay?"

Gale.

She turns around to face the doorway at his voice, having been staring at the wall, just sitting in the wobbly old chair they keep at the tiny table that serves as Gale's desk.

He sounds concerned. And still a little upset.

And she's still pretty mad at him.

"I told you I was fine," she snaps, turning back around so her back's to him again.

She hears him sigh.

"Yes, because fine people hole themselves up in a closet while 100 of their closest friends and family wait out front wondering where they are."

Katniss doesn't say anything in response, annoyed that he has a point.
"It's okay to be freaked out, you know. It really is all pretty ridiculous." Gale's chuckling now, but his tone is anything but light.

"Although I have to say, I didn't expect Peeta Mellark to come off so smoothly."

And if there's anything that will get Katniss to speak to him right now, it's Gale talking about Peeta.

She spins around in the chair, clinging to the back of it to keep her in it and not in his face.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?

"I'm just saying, he's better at it than I thought he'd be." And Gale raises an eyebrow.

"And it seems like you're doing a pretty good job of keeping up." He huffs his words and looks at her with a strange tension.

Katniss narrows her eyes, not quite believing what she's hearing, because it's pretty unbelievable that he's choosing right now to pick a fight with her.

Because obviously that's what he's doing. There's no other reason to say these things to her.

"*You* pushed me into this in the first place! Remember?" Katniss wants to yell, but has to settle for hissing her words at him in light of the 100 people a hallway away.

"Yes, but before I knew you were going to be turned into some big spectacle."

He folds his arms across his chest, studying her silently for a moment.

"Aren't you mad? Don't you feel used?"

And that's when Katniss realizes. He doesn't get it. He doesn't get it at all.

But she's more than happy to help clue him in.

And so she shrugs, shaking her head, not even upset with him anymore.

"You know," she tells him, standing and meeting his tall, broad frame in the doorway, staring up into his dark gray eyes. "Maybe if you had asked me anything at all about what's been going on in my life for the past month, you'd already know that it really wasn't so bad."

She narrows her eyes pointedly.

"And that not all of it was fake."

It feels really good to get that off her chest. And to see the slight drop of Gale's jaw just before he steadies his mouth into a stern line. Although Katniss knows she's already said too much.

So she turns to leave without another word, ending her conversation with Gale for the night.

Then stumbles into a completely different one with Madge almost immediately as she reemerges from the back room.

Katniss thinks she's pulled herself together enough on the short walk back to the public area of the Hob, but Madge catches her elbow, stopping her before she can rejoin the main crowd of people, still distracted by the rose ceremony that's just beginning on the televisions.
"Hey, everything okay?"
Katniss just smiles with a reassuring nod.

"Yeah, of course."

Madge, seeing Gale come from the back carrying a case of bottled beers and head straight for the bar, rolls her eyes at him before turning her attention back to Katniss.

"Don't worry about him, he's been acting even grumpier than usual this week."
Katniss glances at him quickly as Madge talks before shaking her head in confusion.

"But why?"

"Have you met Gale? He's pretty territorial, Katniss."
Madge is giving her this knowing look like she's supposed to know what she's talking about, and Katniss makes a face because she doesn't, not really, and almost opens her mouth to respond, but Madge just waves all of it off.

"Like I said, nothing to worry about."

They're momentarily interrupted by some cheering and clapping, and Katniss realizes she's just earned her first rose in the background. She tries hard not to blush at the sets of eyes that have found her here in this corner of the bar, refocusing back on Madge instead.

Who seems to have all but forgotten their brooding friend Gale and is grinning impishly at Katniss.

"Something good happened out there, didn't it? You're different now, Katniss. Softer. Happier."
Watching her smiling friend seem so genuinely glad for her makes her swallow a lump in her throat, wondering if Madge really can read her so easily. Because if so, she's definitely going to have to work on her poker face.

"Madge…" she warns, her voice strained.

Madge just nods her head knowingly.

"C'mon, there's someone I want you to meet."

And up close, Ryan Mellark is strikingly similar to his brother.

He's a little thinner, a little taller, and his features aren't quite so…perfect, with narrower eyes and a less infectious smile, but when he speaks, he sounds almost exactly like Peeta.

"So. You're the last person I know to have actually seen my brother. How's he doing?" Ryan chuckles, but it still makes Katniss squirm, because everyone knows she can't say anything. And for all Ryan knows, she hasn't seen Peeta in weeks.

Although the glint in Ryan's eye makes it seem like he knows better.

Kind of like everyone else in District 12. They're all just as bad as PME's producers—already planning the wedding.

"I talked to him on the phone today," Ryan continues, clearly not expecting an actual answer from
"He sounded tired. But he said he's happy. And that he misses us back home. All of us."

And damn it, his eyes are just as blue as Peeta's as he studies her face carefully.

She's holding her breath as she nods at him, eying him just as cautiously.

"It must be hard. To be away from him for so long," she begins slowly. "I'm sure you...all...miss him too."

Ryan lays what must be a Mellark signature crooked smile on her in response.

"Well, anyway. I'm sure I'll be seeing more of you soon, Katniss. At least by the looks of the previews for next week," he winks, before tipping his beer to both her and Madge and parting ways. Like he's successfully completed his mission for the night.

Madge practically squees out loud once he's out of ear shot.

"I don't care what you can or can't say, Katniss," she whispers loudly. "It's so obvious right now. You are head over heels for Peeta Mellark."

***

The Arena Building is the biggest building Katniss has ever been in. And its 40th floor is also the highest up she's ever been, save for the planes that have taken her from District 12 to the Capitol and back.

She sits with Haymitch in a large conference room, just the two of them, as they wait for PME's executive producer, Plutarch Heavensbee, and a music executive for Gamemaker Records, Amanda Paylor. And shifts uncomfortably in her seat, crossing her legs one way and then the other, tugging the skirt of the sundress Haymitch suggested she wear every time she does.

"I'm going to need you to relax," Haymitch grumbles at her from his seat next to her, growing more annoyed with her fidgeting. Although Katniss guesses the fifteen minutes they've been kept waiting isn't helping.

"And take as much offense as you'd like, but just let me do the talking, okay? I don't think you're going to be quite as good at this thing as Peeta was, and I don't want you to mess anything up."

Katniss considers scowling, but she's too distracted by Haymitch bringing up Peeta and the probability that he's right to do anything but stare at him.

Haymitch sighs, taking a sip of the coffee that a short-haired blonde lady named Fulvia had offered them when they'd first sat down.

"He's not in town, you know. I think they sent him for promotional reshoots to 4," he tells her shaking his head.

"So don't get your hopes up or anything, Sweetheart."

And at that, Katniss actually does scowl.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she responds, folding her arms across her chest.

Haymitch's lip curls into a smirk.
"You're not fooling anyone with that act anymore, you know."

Luckily, she doesn't have to respond—not that she would have anyway—because the door bursts open, and a round, middle-aged man makes a loud entrance, followed behind by a more serious-looking thirty something woman with dark hair and darker eyes.

Haymitch stands, so Katniss stands too, and as Haymitch introduces her to Plutarch, who shakes her hand with a tight grip and an erratic shake, he laughs heartily as he meets her.

"So, you're the girl the whole country's about to be jealous of!"

She's already nervous, and his boisterous enthusiasm jars her slightly.

"Including my wife," Plutarch continues, finishing off the handshake with a pointed smile.

It's all she can do to manage a stammered, "Wh-what?"

Haymitch leans in, gaining her attention and shaking his head.

"You don't want to know."

She takes Haymitch's word for it as Plutarch introduces the woman with him as Amanda Paylor, the woman at Gamemaker who's set to work specifically with Katniss. And Plutarch calls her Paylor, so Katniss assumes she will too, all the while secretly glad to be working with someone who seems more her age and...quieter, too.

"So," Plutarch continues, moving back to his topic of choice as he motions for everyone to sit down. "Lucky girl you are, landing a charming lad like Peeta."

Katniss tries not to squirm in her seat, not missing the look Haymitch shoots her out of the corner of her eye.

So maybe she does feel lucky. But the thing is, regardless of what Plutarch and anyone at B&C, or Gamemaker for that matter, might think they know, she really doesn't feel like giving them anything else. Not after all they already have.

So her response is bland and inoffensive, but still in character. And wholly unrevealing.

"Oh, um, yeah. We're very lucky to have...found one another."

"It's really something," Plutarch agrees, still smiling.

"Did you know the first episode had 10 million viewers? That's 70 percent higher than last year's season premiere."

Ah. The real reason Plutarch must be so happy. More viewers means more advertisers. Which means more money.

And then Plutarch is ready to get down to business, looking at her with a meaningfully perched, bushy eyebrow.

"And that's 10 million people who are already ready to buy your album."

The magnitude of what he's saying isn't lost on her, and she swallows, her throat going dry. Because it's really happening. They really do want to sign her.

As the meeting progresses, she ends up grateful that Haymitch does all of the talking, because
within minutes, her head is spinning with the number crunching, and the contractual details, and talk of wildly optimistic projections and future scheduling—including a Panem wide tour next spring they’d expect her to headline—and it's all she can do to keep up, let alone contribute meaningfully. But the gist of what Plutarch and Paylor are saying is that she'll have to come back to the Capitol next week to begin collaborating and recording with some of their people, and will be making frequent trips back, and may need to consider an extended stay in order to have something of hers radio in their desired time frame.

Then, as if systematically presented to her after promises of fame and concerts and incredible opportunities, Plutarch presents that they have a one-year contract they're ready for her to sign today.

Haymitch balks immediately.

"We need at least a day or two."

Plutarch pushes back, as Katniss sits quietly, letting them argue over her music career's fate.

"Not this time, Mitch. I purposely gave it over to you yesterday to review."

That's news to Katniss. She certainly hasn't seen it yet.

"So why don't I just give you a few minutes with Katniss, and we'll regroup once you're done discussing?"

Haymitch grumbles, choice curse words included, and when he looks to Katniss, she just shrugs. It doesn't sound like they have much say anyway.

And then it's just her and Haymitch in that big conference room again.

He sighs, looking at her tiredly as he flips through the approximately 20 pages of contractual terms absentely.

"It's a decent contract," he tells her. "Guaranteed one album, full backing by the record company. And publicity and touring as deemed necessary. But, they do have exclusive rights to your music and get to choose radio edits and what ultimately makes the album."

Haymitch looks at her carefully.

"It's really not all that different than any other first-time recording artist's contract."

Katniss sighs, and he passes the document in her direction, letting her take a look at it.

She stays focused on him for the time being, however.

"And what about any additional strings?"

It's all she has to ask for Haymitch to understand her real question. Does this contract obligate her to anything PME related?

He raises an eyebrow.

"Does it really matter?"

If he's expecting a straight answer out of her, though, he won't get one.

Even though yes, it does matter. Of course it matters.
Haymitch sighs at her nonresponse.

"Look, sign this contract or don't. But like I've said before, good luck getting another one if you don't." Then he shrugs, kicking back the dregs of his coffee cup.

"And it would seem to me that since you and the kid have already done all of the hard work, it'd be stupid to spit on the spoils of it now."

Haymitch certainly has a point. This is what she and Peeta had been working toward all along. And now that it's here, she can't really walk away and turn it all down, right? What good would that really do anyway? Besides, Haymitch has already assured her that there doesn't have to be a wedding, or a marriage. Because no matter how powerful B&C may be, they can't make them do that.

Not if they don't want to.

So she agrees with Haymitch to sign the contract, and while they wait for Plutarch, Paylor and a lawyer for B&C to reenter the room, Haymitch drums his fingers on the table absently. Or at least at first it sounds absent, before after a few repetitions, Katniss recognizes the rhythm and looks at him curiously.

When he notices her stare, he gives her the closest thing she's seen to a smile from him all day.

"The new song on your demo. The one about the kid. Catchy as hell, by the way. That's your single."

***

Things move so quickly after she signs with Gamemaker that it's hard to keep her days straight. She's traveling regularly back and forth between the Capitol and District 12 now, and Peeta's officially famous—a top search on the internet and gracing magazine covers in the grocery store checkout line.

Katniss receives a lot of coverage too, although she can't be bothered with any of it, instead working on collaborating with Gamemaker's producers and musicians, pleasantly surprised that her guitar-driven, natural sound hasn't yet been destroyed by pop synthesizers and auto-tune.

Her life is a blur of days and nights, high rise buildings and mountains and being holed away in recording studios, which morph into green rolling hills and shifts at the Hob.

She's home for the second episode of PME, and attends the second watch party at the Hob, which is bigger than the first, and along with family and friends, the bar's filled with simple acquaintances and even strangers who are simply here for the show. And she's strangely disappointed when no one from the Mellark family attends. Although maybe it's easier, having enough to deal with already, like avoiding Gale's gaze—even though they both claim they're no longer fighting—and trying to tame Madge's overenthusiastic giddiness. But the hardest part is fighting the perpetual flush of her cheeks when the television screens show her and Peeta's first date, complete with ridiculous banter, picnicking, and Peeta revealing what she'd once thought was a completely fake crush on her, all of it culminating with a kiss.

A kiss she can't even watch, not only because it's embarrassing, but because it hurts too. That kiss feels like years ago to her.

So maybe it's better that she spends most of the next week in the Capitol, too busy to even watch the next episode because she's working long hours recording her single, which Paylor and the rest
of Gamemaker wholly agree should be the song Haymitch suggested. And as the clear frontrunner now, it's hard for her to go anywhere without getting noticed. B&C doesn't even let her leave the studio or the hotel, not wanting her to be spotted in the Capitol. So instead of going for food or coffee, they bring it to the studio or her hotel. Which is crazy and makes her feel strange.

Although six days away from home with only Haymitch to call her closest friend isn't doing her any favors in the sanity department either. Especially when the person she really needs to talk to is everywhere around her—on her television, on billboards in the Capitol, and the topic of discussions she's not allowed to have—and there's nothing she can do about it.

So when she gets back home, she practically begs to have a shift at the Hob, even though they're already training someone new to take her spot. And despite her exchanges with Gale still being on the shorter side and less than comfortable, he lets her take an opening shift as long as she agrees to train the new girl, Leevy, for a couple of hours.

Katniss is opening the bar for the early crowd, taking the saran wrap off the well bottles while Gale takes inventory in the back when the door bells jingle and she startles because although it's 3 o'clock and they're technically open, her first usual patron, Cray, never shows until almost four.

She's greeted by Ryan Mellark sauntering up to the bar, casually taking the seat in front of her as if they're old friends. Just the sight of him instantly makes her miss Peeta like crazy. A very real reminder that it's been almost a month now.

Neither of them says anything at first, and Katniss just watches him as he places the plain white envelope he's holding in his hands down on the bar top just so, right in between them. She tries not to pay attention to it in order to keep her mind from all of the possibilities that could be inside. So she nods at Ryan instead, sticking her beer bottle opener in the back pocket of her jeans, officially on duty.

"Can I get you something?"

He shakes his head with a smile and a light chuckle.

"That's not exactly why I'm here."

Her heart rate picks up, and she instinctively looks toward the back, ensuring they're still the only two witnesses to their conversation.

And she raises an eyebrow at him.

"Why are you here then?"

Ryan narrows his eyes at her, smirking, and ignoring her question, going ahead with his own cryptic conversation instead.

"That was some kiss this week."

He's talking about her and Peeta, obviously. This week's episode was their karaoke date. Even though she hadn't seen it herself, she's heard enough to know half of Panem seems to be in a tizzy over it.

But Katniss just shrugs, moving a few feet to the cooler to pull out the stored cherries and olives, refilling her garnish tray as she speaks.

"Must be weird, watching your brother date a bunch of women on national television."
She hears Ryan chuckle again, and he doesn't really respond until he's sure she's looking at him again.

"Nah, it's not that weird. It's kind of nice to watch him fall in love."

Katniss swallows hard and furrows her brow skeptically, but she stops what she's doing, suddenly unable to multitask.

"Well I don't know—"

"—Well, I do." Ryan cuts off her doubt before she can even fully express it. And his tone is firm, like he's ready for her not to believe him and not wanting any of it.

"And Peeta doesn't take these things lightly." Ryan's whispering now. He sighs quietly, shifting in his seat as he keeps Katniss's gaze. "Sometimes he tries to, okay? But it's not in him. It's all or nothing for him. Always has been. I've always admired that quality about him, actually."

Her mouth hangs open, and her palms are sweating now as she wipes them on the front of her jeans discreetly, glancing around again, completely in disbelief that Ryan Mellark is telling her these things.

But here in this deserted bar, with no one but possibly Gale to overhear their hushed conversation, Katniss can't bring herself to stop it.

Ryan nods at her.

"You and I don't know each other Katniss, I realize that. But something about you makes me think that you don't take these things lightly either. And I think that you should know that it makes me admire you too."

His eyes convey more meaning than his words—considering her seriously. Approvingly.

She exhales the breath she's been holding for the past minute.

"Ryan, I—"

But he cuts her off again, a shake of the head and a crooked upturn of his lips.

"No, it's okay, I didn't come here for a pep talk anyway. I just came to give you this."

He pushes the envelope closer to her, his smile broadening as she accepts it, picking it up carefully. Slowly examining its contents.

A plane ticket. In her name. To the Capitol.

Leaving three hours from now.

Ryan stands, still smiling as she looks at him, dumbfounded.

"It was suggested to me that you dress without trying to draw attention to yourself and that when you get there, you look for the driver holding the sign with my name on it."

"Ryan, what—"

But when she tries to ask questions, he just shakes his head knowingly and puts a finger to his lips, quieting her.
Then he leaves, without another word.

And Katniss isn't far behind him.

***

She was just here, not two days ago. And the plane ride was particularly unbearable, because she's nervous and anxious about what's going on and a little worried that she'll get caught.

But she hadn't even thought twice about coming. She'd left the Hob in a rush, hurriedly telling Gale that she officially quit, explaining that something suddenly came up at his confused expression, and then not looking back. She'd thrown a bag together at her apartment, and opted against calling Madge for a ride to the airport, afraid at her own inability to lie, deciding to take a cab instead.

And she'd arrived relatively unnoticed, not taking her baseball hat off until she gets in the car with the driver who’d been looking for Ryan, and who hadn't questioned her when she'd approached him. And then, without even an explanation, drives her about an hour’s ride outside the Capitol, eventually pulling up to what amounts to an idyllic cabin in the woods, built on stilts and overlooking valleys and mountains.

Where it feels like no one else is around for miles.

Her heart rate picks up as the car rolls to a stop.

Katniss is more than aware that she's missed Peeta over these crazy, busy, and lonely few weeks. It's grown into more of an ache for him—his voice, his touch, anything that's real and not projected on a television screen or published on the internet. In fact, missing Peeta is probably her worst kept secret, apparently unable to stop it from showing on her face every time someone mentions his name.

But it's not until she gets here, knowing that Peeta's waiting for her in that cabin, that she's overcome with why she's missed him so badly. Why she's thought about him too much, why she's had trouble sleeping, why this is the first time she's felt like this about someone.

Though the answer is simple.

So when Katniss approaches the cabin’s door, and before she can even knock, there Peeta is, looking effortless and relaxed with slightly mussed blond hair, a lopsided smile and blue eyes that light up when they land on her, she doesn't even let him greet her first.

Instead, she drops her bag and kisses him full on the mouth.

And continues to kiss him, kissing away his surprise, unrelentingly, even when Peeta chuckles against her lips.

"Hi," he breathes, chuckling softly between kisses, although he lets her practically push him back inside. She's not even sure her bag makes it in with her, too preoccupied with touching and feeling and tasting Peeta.

They're barely through the entry way, and even though Katniss can tell that the cabin is beautiful, a full on luxury home that's much too much for just two people, with floor to ceiling windows that open to a balcony with a breathtaking view, she doesn't care about any of that.

"Hi," she returns softly, only allowing a moment of her lips not on his and already tugging at the hem of his soft, well-worn white t-shirt that's just grazing the waistband of his relaxed jeans.
Peeta raises an eyebrow as her hand begins to skim the taut skin beneath his shirt, and kisses her back appreciatively, mumbling his question between kisses.


Other than not wasting any time.

"Something I should have done weeks ago," she tells him, the words low in her throat.

He tries to laugh again, but it comes out as more of a groan when she angles herself against him, pressing her hips into his, not letting an inch of space between them.

"Are you sure…you don't want to settle in first?" he asks, still trying to sound gentlemanly as his reaction betrays his words, his hands clasping her hips firmly against him.

Katniss shakes her head determinedly.

"No. I want this first. You first."

She watches Peeta's pupils dilate, realizing—or really confirming, what she's suggesting.

"Yeah?" he says, and she sees, and then feels the smile on his lips as he kisses her lightly.

She nods.

But it's so much more than want at this point.

It's need.

Undeniable, insatiable, almost painful need.


Hers.

And while his darkened blue eyes are paying attention, she tells him softly but never more sure of her words.

"I need you, Peeta."

And then watches him swallow thickly, his thumbs brushing the curves of her hips as his hands dig themselves into her sides.

"You do?" he asks, his voice heady and making her smile, liking the soft haze to his eyes and the languid way his lips curl upward as he stares at her.

She nods again slowly as she resumes her work on his shirt, sliding it gradually up his abdomen, tracing his warm skin and feeling the light hair of his chest, forgetting to breathe as he helps her out, raising his arms above his head, neither breaking their gaze until he's dropping the shirt, unconcerned for its whereabouts.

Katniss drops her eyes, appreciative of the easy broadness of his arms and chest, pressing a hand against him before looking back up at him and sighing.

"I need you so much."
Her words are practically interrupted by the crush of his lips, and she gasps when his hands greedily climb her body, dragging her shirt along with them, and when it's discarded somewhere near his, Peeta takes just a half second to admire her, sounding slightly out of breath and impossibly sexy as he speaks.

"I need you too, Katniss, okay? You have no idea how much I need you."

Peeta trails kisses from her mouth, and past her ear, and groans against the hollow of her throat when she rocks into him, almost involuntarily, because his proximity, his hands, the heat of his breath, just everything about him—is entirely overwhelming.

Although it just gets worse for her, because of course, Peeta's words keep coming.

"I need to hear your voice," he whispers into her neck, tickling her sensitive skin.

"And I need your lips," he continues, kissing her softly on them.

Peeta cups the line of her jaw and part of her neck in his hand, his eyes consumed with want.

"And I really need you to give me those looks, the ones that drive me crazy, telling me you think I'm an idiot and your favorite thing in the whole world at the same time."

She lets out a choke of a laugh at that, because it's so honest, and almost true.

She drags a hand through his already tousled hair, just to muss it more before tugging gently at the back of his neck, moving her lips to his ear to correct him of just one thing.

"Except I don't think you're an idiot," she whispers, closing her eyes as she feels him shiver. And freeze.

It takes a slow moment between them, watching the other carefully, breathlessly, before their words melt into more kisses, and Katniss closes her eyes, everything good and right about Peeta thrumming through her mind as her blood courses through her veins. And then they're no longer sharing quiet declarations, but instead just acting on their underlying need.

They tumble into the bedroom, Peeta deftly unclasping her bra, pressing his mouth to her shoulder as he does, and taking the weight of her exposed breasts in his hand. She sucks in a breath at just his touch.

She kisses the line of his jaw, clean shaven and smelling slightly musky like aftershave, arching her back into his hands, closing her eyes at the sweet pressure of his palms, the pull in the pit of her stomach consistently building. And ready for more.

Katniss skims her hand lightly across his groin, over the denim fabric of his jeans, resting on his erection and earning a sharp groan from him against her collarbone, allowing her hand to linger there until Peeta takes control.

He wordlessly draws her down onto the bed with him, each of them pushing the other's remaining clothes off hastily. And they settle in quickly on the king-sized bed atop the soft covers and comfortable pillows, where Peeta pulls her into his bare arms, and she relishes the heat and solidity of his body against hers, letting him pepper the curve of her neck and shoulder with kisses. Then bites down hard on her own lip when his hand finally moves between her legs, allowing her eyes to roll back in her head as she instinctively exhales his name.

Just his hand sends her mind spinning as Peeta's finger dips nimbly between her folds and an initial hot wave of pleasure rolls through her. She writhes gently against him, feeling herself
pushing into his hand because it's not enough. Not nearly enough.

She grasps for him, needing to touch him too, and Peeta exhales appreciative noises into her hair as she takes him in her hand, rubbing tentatively against his hardness until he draws in a breath along with her name.

"Katniss," he says more like a warning. And she gets it. They're so charged for one another already that she's not sure they'll withstand much more build up.

She kisses him eagerly, agreeing.

"I need you. Now," she hums.

In one fluid motion, Peeta moves on top of her and positions himself between her legs, pausing to look at her first. And to brush a stray hair off her forehead as he does.

"Are we really doing this?" he asks softly, the glint in his eyes mixing with the briefest moment of concern. Meant for her. And as she recognizes his words, this time Katniss doesn't hesitate, instead rolling her hips up gently, running a hand along the flexed muscles of his triceps as he braces himself above her. Because now she knows exactly what this is.

"Yes," she breathes, nodding. And as he smiles, she almost thinks she wants to freeze this moment right here and stay in it forever, where she not only feels the warmth in her core, but also in his eyes, and in their touches and their words.

But at the same time, the anticipation is just about killing her.

Peeta begins with an agonizingly slow push, sliding himself in gently, carefully even. It allows each of them to savor the other, and he still makes her gasp softly at the dull ache of his fullness. Peeta's eyes close momentarily, and she watches his face look instantly relieved. He adjusts slightly, still tentative with the next push, but he already feels so good that Katniss pulls him down to her by the back of his neck, also needing his mouth.

And they begin to rock, exchanging heated kisses and murmured sounds as she meets his hips with hers, arching slightly to help him reach deeper inside of her, making her feel even fuller.

Making her feel whole.

She keeps her hands on his back, drawing light patterns there, pressing her fingertips against the muscles of his shoulder blades, feeling them tense and move as his body works to thrust into her.

She sighs gratefully when Peeta traces his hand up along her side, resting on her breast and beginning to tease.

And as her breathing morphs into a soft, whining moan, she feels Peeta react instinctively and somehow pushes even further into her, authoritatively and swiftly moving her hands off his back to rest above her head, holding them there with his forearm.

"Oh, god, Peeta," she swallows her gasp at the new sensations and the angle change, burying the noise against his neck.

She feels his shuddered sigh too, his lips on her ear, his forehead breaking a sheen of sweat, the weight of him on her becoming exquisitely crushing.

And she's so close to him, feeling every bit of him, bending and on the verge of breaking, hanging in the balance between feeling so full and so good and still needing just a little bit more.
But it's like he knows she needs the extra pressure, and Peeta's hand dips between them, his thumb circling her clit, looking at her with the darkest eyes as he lets out a soft groan when his touch makes her cry out.

"Fuck, you feel so good, I'm...I'm close," he warns, on the verge of breaking himself.

His strangled voice does something to her as she hastily presses her mouth to his, kissing him hard and deep until he pulls back, needing the air and the leverage.

And even when she begins to come, the sweet relief rushing from her center all the way to her curling toes, Peeta doesn't let up, his thumb pressing more insistently against her, and his gyrations picking up their hurried, haphazard pace. It's...he's...unbelievable. He feels mind-numbingly unbelievable.

Her chest rises and falls with building pleasure, air escaping her lips with short, hard breaths, and her heels dig into his back as she arches hard against him.

"It's...I'm...Peeta," her words make no sense as she gasps them, as her orgasm crests and falls, hitting her in trembling waves.

Peeta pushes into her with one erratic last thrust before stilling his movements. And then they're breaking together.

And while Peeta's never been closer, never more tangible as she spills into a million pieces, in a sense, she hazily feels like he's a million miles away.

Like a dream.

Except it's not. He's real.

And that's the best part.

And after, she rests her head on his chest, feeling his lungs expand and collapse and the strong beat of his heart as his breathing regulates, one hand lazily behind his head, the other stroking her hair softly.

"You're perfect, you know that, right?" he sighs happily. And she smiles into his skin.

"We're perfect," she corrects him, curling further into him. Because even though she's far from perfect, with Peeta, sometimes she still feels it.

He chuckles.

"Okay, we're perfect," he agrees.

After another lingering moment, Katniss sighs as she lifts herself from him, looking into the blue eyes that are watching her with a contented gaze.

"So, um, now what?"

And he chuckles again, pushing himself up with her and scratching his chin.

"Well," he starts slowly. "I had been planning on dinner...first. Are you hungry?"

She grins, kissing Peeta lightly on the lips, thinking he must finally have some idea of just how hungry she is.
"I'm starved."

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like, you can come hang with me on tumblr where I'm @ c-r-roberts. I'd love to see you around and hear from you, here or there!
Chapter 9: The Difference Between Real Love and the Love on TV

Chapter Notes

All I can say is thank you for your patience, and I sincerely hope it doesn't take me so long to update ever again.

*Song: Where Did the Party Go, Fall Out Boy*

*P.S. The lyrics used in this chapter are almost exclusively the intellectual property of Taylor Swift. And if she minds, well then I guess she'll just have to talk to me about it.*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When he wakes, for the first time in what feels like months, he's relaxed. Completely and totally at ease. Because he's not *Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor* this morning. And he's not a reality television star whose face was on exactly four billboards he passed on his way out of the Capitol yesterday. Nor is he an exhausted man who's working too many hours to promote a television show while simultaneously trying to grow his bakery business. He's just a boyfriend waking up with his girlfriend next to him in bed.

His *naked* girlfriend next to him in bed.

He wants this all the time. Just them. No one else around, no cameras, no producers. No pretending. But it's not that simple. Peeta knows that. Even with just the two of them this morning. Because Katniss is still confusing, even when she's entirely his.

His mistake is when she stirs against him, and he knows she's awake because her hand that's placed on top of his, the hand he's resting on her hipbone, squeezes his softly. "Good morning," she mumbles sleepily, pressing herself further into him. And he lets himself get slightly carried away by it all, breathing in the flowery scent of her shampoo and feeling her hot bare skin next to his. Remembering how many times they'd been together last night. And knowing how each time had been better than the last.

"Think we can try to make that break for it now?" he murmurs into her ear, nipping it after he does. "Run away and not look back?" His hand skims slowly down her abdomen. "No more pretending for the cameras?" It's all meant to flow together—his words and his actions, along with her sleepy yet pleased *reactions*. But instead, as he exhales his last sentence, she freezes beneath him. And then tugs herself out of his grasp. Peeta watches with concern as she blinks the sleep from her eyes as she rolls over to face him, pulling the white sheets with her and holding them to her chest.

"What do you mean, no more pretending?"

"Exactly that," he answers simply, shrugging as he props himself up on an elbow. "I want *this* with you—reality. Time. The freedom to just be us."

She sighs, her brow creasing as she studies his face, taking her time in responding.

"It's not that simple, Peeta. You and I both agreed to see this thing through. And I signed my
contract. I've got a song coming out." As she speaks, Katniss draws even further away from him, sitting up and resting her head against the bed's headboard, rolling it back in his direction with a darker look in her eye as she does.

"And I wasn't aware it was all still a bunch of pretending to you."

He sighs, trying not to get frustrated. But a very small part of him is mad. Mad that she'd signed the contract, and upset that she's going to be bound to B&C now—making him bound to them too. Peeta knows she probably didn't have another option, and also that Haymitch wouldn't let her make a bad career move, but he still feels left out. He still feels like he should've been consulted. And it makes him feel like this reunion maybe happened a week or two too late. Because he'd wanted to at least talk to her about everything first.

But the rest of him is ecstatic. Katniss and her music is why they're both still on this train. And maybe he shouldn't be so selfish, or so greedy. He needs to remember that he's lucky to have what he has right now. Including her. Especially because with the way she's looking at him, and with the tiniest bit of anger bubbling up inside himself too, he's sensing an unnecessary argument coming on.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," he tells her quietly, pushing himself up to sit next to her.

Katniss purses her lips, watching him with a guarded look that's also unnecessary.

"So what did you mean?" Her arms fold neatly over her chest, clasping the bed sheet to herself as she does.

"I meant that I thought maybe we could do things not according to B&C's plan. And that we wouldn't pretend to plan a lavish wedding with 500 of our closest friends and all of Panem watching. And maybe just let ourselves do things a little more realistically."

"Peeta," she says as she sighs, shaking her head at him. "You're their bachelor. And you're their golden boy now. And I think you need to do things a little more realistically."

It's his turn to narrow his eyes at her, wary of her tone and what she's trying to imply. "Katniss—"

"No. Listen to me. This is important." She frowns. "I'm sorry if I don't live up to whatever idealized version of me that you've made up for yourself in your head, Peeta. And I'm sorry if you're disappointed that I don't want to just run away with you right now and leave everything I've been working for behind just because you don't want to play their games any more. But you've already gotten what you wanted out of all this. I haven't. Not yet. Okay?"

"God damn it Katniss. Don't do this."

"Don't do what?" she challenges, jutting out her chin.

"Don't come here and wrap me around your finger even further just to yank it back when you feel like it. Stop playing hot and cold. Stop being afraid of us. And, while you're at it, stop being so afraid of them."

"I'm not afraid," she says defiantly, her gray eyes flashing with a heat he recognizes as anger. "I'm just living in the real world. I'm not some celebrity chef who showed up to meet twenty women already famous enough to launch his career without their help. So I don't see what's so bad about going along with them. At least for a little while."

But for as angry as she seems, he knows she's also worried. She really thinks one little twist, one
misstep could wreck her. As if she doesn't know how much B&C needs her—needs them. She has no idea how powerful she is in their situation.

His incredulousness reaches his voice. "Do you want to get married? Like this? With cameras and strangers and every detail not your own?"

"No! But I also just thought…I thought…damn it, Peeta! Do we really have to figure this all out right now?" She's upset. And even a little bit scared. And he wants to know what she thought. But more than that, he wants to not fight with her.

He shakes his head softly. "No," he tells her, resigned. "We don't."

He hasn't had a clue from the get go as to what to do with Katniss Everdeen anyway. Why should he start figuring it out now?

"Good," she nods, her face softening as she slips her hand into his, buried somewhere underneath the sheets. "Because there are a lot more important things I think we should be doing instead."

It's too easy, how smoothly she rolls on top of him, as he slinks back down into the pillows and covers, closing his eyes at the warmth of her body, the heat of her skin on his. His mind slips, losing all its concern and worry in exchange for overwhelming desire as she sinks herself down onto him, beginning a rhythmic pace that's becoming wonderfully familiar.

It won't work forever—putting off how to handle phase two of PME and what comes after. But for now, she's right. In this moment, just being with her is more important.

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They don't talk about weddings or PME at all after that morning. Not that they have much time to talk about anything at all really, because Katniss is gone in what feels like the blink of an eye. The same driver that brought her sneaks her back into the Capitol later that night. He sleeps restlessly, alone in bed and still in the hidden cabin he'd asked his brother to rent him. After sleeping with Katniss, it's not as easy to sleep alone. But most of his unrest is really caused by not knowing what to do; he doesn't have a next move. From the time Haymitch had sat the two of them down in that room at Snow's mansion, the plan had been a fake romance. A fake engagement. Even though his love had already been real.

But now, he's not the only one not faking his feelings. And Peeta's no longer sure when they should stop the chain of events PME's set in motion. Or if they should stop them at all. Is it so crazy, really? To think that? Because despite any arguments caused by misunderstandings and the tension of their current contractual situations, being with Katniss still feels like the easiest, most important, and best thing he's done in his life.

And if she let him, he'd marry her tomorrow.

But he still has a hard time thinking that means they should have to get married on television. And they shouldn't feel obligated to give PME any more of their relationship than they already have. Recording contracts or not.

But, if he's being honest, if that's what she really wanted, he just might do it. Not that he knows what she really wants. And while he's getting ahead of himself with the whole marrying her tomorrow thing, at some point—some point soon—people will be asking about their upcoming wedding. So for as much as they've agreed not to talk about it for now, it's not going to be an
Although it's going to be weeks before they can even talk again, so it's pointless to worry about things that are out of his control right now. But he can't help himself.

At least they'd promised to try and communicate secretly more often for the last leg of the show's run. Right before she'd left, her bag packed and the door propped open so they could listen for her car pulling in the hidden drive, he proclaimed he'd try and pass more notes to her through Ryan. And Katniss had sighed, saying she didn't expect to be home much. But then she'd kissed him, joking against his lips that if he got any weird text messages from Haymitch involving heart eyed emojis or nice words whatsoever, that either Haymitch had developed a crush or he should assume they were from her. They'd both laughed, but really, Haymitch is probably their best bet at staying in touch with one another.

And that doesn't exactly gain Peeta's vote of confidence.

His conversation with Haymitch the next day doesn't help to suggest otherwise, either.

He calls during Peeta's drive back to the Capitol. Peeta had ignored his last few calls because he'd been otherwise preoccupied, but Haymitch's huff of a hello and mumbling something about finally answering his phone reminds him that he never really feels a sense of urgency in talking with Haymitch. Nothing about it is pleasant. Especially when he's on Bluetooth.

And even more especially when Haymitch begins to chew Peeta's ear off.

"Kid, you've really got to be more careful if you're going to be boneheaded."

Peeta knows that Haymitch knows immediately. But he pretends like he doesn't as his mind begins to race. "What are you talking about?"

His feigned confusion doesn't help Haymitch's disposition, who curses at him before confirming that he's been made, his voice booming through his car's speakers. "I'm talking about not sending your brother into her bar. And I'm really talking about your little rendezvous in the woods. You're both out of your minds if you thought you could get away with something like that unnoticed."

Peeta tenses. And it takes effort on his part not to swerve the car off the road. "So they know," he says tightly, having sorted through thousands of different thoughts, ultimately landing on the only one that matters.

Katniss.

He hears Haymitch sigh on the other end of the line. "Know? Of course they know. Kid, I'd bet the bank it only happened because they wanted it to happen."

This information stuns Peeta even more. He sputters.

"What? Why?"

Haymitch sighs again, sounding tired and sad.

"Well, I don't know for sure. But from what I'm hearing, other networks aren't happy with how well PME's doing this season. And with Katniss's song coming out this week, I wouldn't be surprised if there's...backlash."

"Haymitch," Peeta warns, not appreciating the man's crypticness. "Just get to the point."
"My point is that other networks will want to paint it as a set up. To make you two seem fake."

At this, Peeta snorts. "It was fake."

And Haymitch snorts too, but for different reasons. "Huh, funny word choice. That's the other part of this, kid. You and I both know that even if it was fake in the beginning, it's not anymore. And guess what. PME knows it too. Plutarch knows. And since I know Plutarch, he's going to try and turn your sudden change of heart toward one another into an advantage somehow."

It's almost too easy for Peeta to understand then. He just, gets it. Right then and there, sitting behind the wheel of his car, driving full speed back to the Capitol after a weekend trying to pretend things could be different. But nothing the two of them do is going to make a difference, is it? No matter what, the two of them are still just pawns. Pieces in a game. To be moved about as the players see fit.

He should have seen it for himself sooner. He's angry that he didn't.

It's a game that's never really over.

Not unless someone does something to put a stop to it, once and for all.

"I'll be sure to keep that in mind then," Peeta finally responds, bitterly. He hears Haymitch chuckle, as if he's trying to lighten the mood or something.

"Just remember what's important here. And don't get too hung up on what these network assholes might do. And Jesus Christ, be more careful next time, alright?"

Peeta sighs, rubbing the crook out of the back of his neck, thinking it's impossible not to be worried right now. "Does Katniss know any of this?"

Haymitch snorts. "She's not exactly the type to entertain my conspiracy theories."

"Haymitch," Peeta groans. Even though he's right, Katniss still needs to know. And it's not like Peeta can tell her himself.

"Don't worry about it, kid. She'll know. So. Did she tell you about her song?"

Peeta's jaw tightens. "I heard. Thanks for the heads up on that one by the way."

"I'm sorry, were we supposed to call her boyfriend to approve first? I didn't know she needed your consent to sign the deal she showed up here for in the first place."

"It'd just be nice to know what the hell's going on for a change!" Peeta takes a deep breath, wondering if it's actually physically impossible to hold a conversation with Haymitch that doesn't end up with one of them yelling.

"Fine," Haymitch snaps. "You want to know what's going on? Her song drops on Tuesday. You might want to listen to it."

*Like Peeta wouldn't want to hear Katniss on the radio.* He sighs. "Yeah, Haymitch. I think I'll be paying attention."

Haymitch chuckles to himself. "Oh, I almost forgot. B&C also wants you to host a new cooking show next season."

Peeta almost thanks Haymitch for that. He needed a good laugh.
For as much as the first four weeks of PME’s airing meant that Peeta's face was everywhere, he probably should have been more ready for Katniss ending up this month’s star.

Her song release coincides with their fantasy date episode week. Logistically, it works because now everyone knows she can sing after their karaoke date. Not to mention she's the clear fan favorite, too. And as far as promotion for B&C goes, it's like two for the price of one because she can promote the show and her song. So while Katniss pulls double duty, Peeta's—thankfully—left with a little more down time.

The first time he hears her on the radio, he's at home, not even dressed yet for the day. It's the following Tuesday morning, and when her song comes on the Capitol's Top 40 station, he's so overwhelmed with excitement and pride that he doesn't even really listen to it. He knows it's her song, of course, and he hears her voice, perfect and clear over the strums of a guitar and a synthesized mid-tempo beat, but he doesn't actually process much of it. Though he hears enough to decide it's going to be a hit, because it's catchy but not too catchy, with just enough edge to keep her from veering into pop princess territory. And he feels vindicated in his opinion when the DJ also predicts it's going to be popular, based on the requests they're already receiving for it.

The second time he hears it, it's fifteen minutes later. Ryan sends him the link to District 12's local radio station live stream, and this time, sitting at his breakfast bar and listening through his computer, Peeta actually hears the lyrics.

And it sounds like her song is about him. But that's crazy. She's had songs written for years. And there's no way she'd write something new and make it her first single. Right? When would she have even had the time? Though he can't shake the feeling as he listens and she sings. In the first verse alone, Katniss is singing about being alone, just you and me, up in your room, our slates clean.

And those lyrics feel awfully familiar to him. But the chorus is even more convincing.

This isn't a race  
But it's a worthwhile fight  
Love is a ruthless game  
Unless you play it good and right  
These are the hands of fate  
You're my Achilles heel

You're my something good and right and real

If this song isn't actually about him, then it's clearly meant to be interpreted that way. And while he listens to the rest of the song, including a bridge that includes Katniss crooning that she never saw him coming and that she'd never be the same, all he really wants to do is talk to her. He'd give anything to just be able to call her. First because he wishes he could tell her how proud he is of her, and how he knew the first time he heard her voice that it'd end up on the radio one day. But also because he needs to know how this song became her first single. Because he can't help it, one of his first thoughts is that they made her do this—that B&C sat her down and said, okay, here's your contract, now go write 15 songs about Peeta Mellark and report back next week.

To be honest, that sounds a lot more likely than Katniss Everdeen actually writing a song about him. Even though he hopes he's wrong. If only because the thought of Katniss selling out completely breaks his heart.
He doesn't have much time to dwell though, because his second surprise of the morning comes when the song ends and the local District 12 DJ announces that he's got the singer of that song herself—hometown girl Ms. Katniss Everdeen—on the phone now to talk for a few minutes about her up and coming music career as well as what to expect from this week's episode of PME.

Peeta almost laughs at how uncomfortable she sounds on the air, picturing her squirming in a seat in some quiet room somewhere else in this city, scowling as Haymitch hands her a phone.

She thanks the DJ for having her, and mentions growing up listening to him. The DJ talks about having met her at events around town in the past, and that it's really just wonderful that it looks like a local girl is about to make it big.

Katniss laughs, sounding embarrassed. "Well, I don't know about that."

The DJ chuckles. "Don't be modest. You're on the radio. And you're all over my television. And if I had to bet, you're probably happily in love these days too."

The pause on Katniss's end of the line makes Peeta hold his breath.

Then she laughs a breathy, awkward laugh that Peeta imagines coincides with a roll of her eyes, because honestly, how is she supposed to answer that?

"Yeah, well, I don't know about that either."

"You have to admit, your song sounds an awful lot like it's about a certain Most Eligible Bachelor."

"Does it?" she asks coyly, and like her nerves are settling. Which only makes sense to him, since Katniss is a natural at being evasive. Then she laughs again. "I can at least safely say that song is about someone."

"And you can let us fill in the blanks by also mentioning that you're probably contractually obligated not to tell us who that someone is."

When she still doesn't give, good-naturedly suggesting she wouldn't tell who the song was about either way, the DJ follows up by questioning her about PME.

"So. How did you end up competing for our friend Peeta Mellark's love anyway?"

"Actually, I went to the casting call at Sae's with a friend. And I don't know how or why, but they picked me."

The DJ laughs. "Well, you've seen the show by now. It sounds like he's had a crush on you for some time now. Maybe that had something to do with it."

The conspiracy theory question makes Katniss laugh awkwardly, and she pauses before she answers. While it annoys Peeta that the DJ's trying to imply a set up, he can't really blame him, considering he'd questioned the coincidental nature of her appearance on PME himself.

"Peeta's a really great guy," Katniss finally responds, sidestepping his question. So maybe Haymitch had talked to her after all, since her answer feels pretty coached. "And no matter how things end up, I just hope that he ends up happy."

"I think I speak for all us here in District 12 when I say we hope both of you end up happy," The DJ tells her, just before concluding the interview, wishing her good luck, and thanking her for her time.
And then he rolls right into playing *Ruthless Game* for the second time.

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Haymitch pours two glasses of brown liquor instead of his usual one from the green room's mini bar. Peeta slides the knot up his tie, catching the man's gray eyes in the mirror behind his reflection.

Haymitch smiles wryly. "Trust me. You're gonna need this."

Peeta doesn't disagree. He already thinks he looks a bit nauseous, and the taping hasn't even started yet. He smoothens his black tie against his chest, then moves on to fixing the cuffs of his gray dress shirt, watching Haymitch take a sip of his drink while simultaneously checking his phone that just pinged.

"Huh. Well look at that. Our girl's officially number 2 on the charts."

He shows his screen out to Peeta like it's proof.

Well, that's some good news today. At least Katniss will have that bona fide pop star thing to keep her busy when she ends up boyfriendless because he's been skinned alive by the 9 women waiting for him on the sound stage down the hall.

Peeta smiles, turning around and joining Haymitch on the other end of the sofa set in front of a coffee table. A TV hung on the wall streams the live feed from the cameras on set. The audience is being let in now, slowly filtering into their seats.

"Why do neither of us seem surprised?"

Katniss is everywhere this week. Her song was instantly picked up by radio stations all over the country, and her sales have been through the roof, according to Haymitch. Everyone loves her. They love her song, her voice. And they love her story—a small town girl from a poor family who catches a break because she thought about trying to find love unconventionally and stumbled onto a television show with one of her old high school classmates. A high school classmate that's loved her for years without her knowing.

Well, at least that's how B&C's spinning it. But just like Haymitch had predicted, there's also the fair share of stories, mostly on un-vetted blogs and online magazines, claiming that Katniss used PME—and Peeta—to get her record deal. And that she's still using them for the free publicity.

Peeta had actually laughed at that—the idea that any of this publicity is free. Even if the rest of it had started out as true, this path that B&C has her—them—on comes with a high price.

Peeta sips his drink, easing back into his seat and attempting to relax as Haymitch smirks.

"She's such a pain in the ass. I didn't think they'd like her so much."

Peeta smirks too. "Tell her she better remember those of us who loved her before she got famous."

Haymitch's face softens, and he puts his phone back down. "She said she'd be watching tonight."

"I can't imagine her wanting to miss this shit show."

"Kid, no one's going to want to miss this shit show."
At that, Peeta laughs, genuinely. He knew he'd have to do it, eventually. He's been dreading it since almost day one, too. But every season, right before the finale, PME tapes a live episode with the Bachelor and the women he kicked off the show. Caesar hosts, and basically spends the entire hour asking questions that he knows will provoke drama. They film it in front of an audience too, just for what Peeta figures is the added effect of live cheers and boos. Because of course it's not enough for it to be broadcast into millions of homes in real time. No, 150 people have to watch it happen from the stands just a few feet away too.

The two of them watch as the other women take their places, set up in seats that form a semi-circle around a slightly raised small platform stage with two chairs, meant for Caesar and himself. Everyone’s back—Delly, Glimmer, Rue, Johanna, Cressida, Clove, Lavinia, Enobaria, and the fox-featured redhead whose name Peeta embarrassingly doesn't remember until Caesar shows up on set and announces her as Jaqueline.

The show begins without Peeta present, and while it allows Caesar to catch up with each of the women individually, it's also supposed to help them to speak freely about their experiences on the show. About their experiences with him. And of course, what everyone really wants to hear—their opinions about his final choice. Which, at this point, has already been made. Katniss is the only woman left. No one else had survived the last rose ceremony. So really, the only unknown is whether he proposes.

Well, and of course, whether she says yes.

Peeta thought this might leave little for Caesar and the women to discuss, but surprisingly, it's not. Not only do they have opinions on him proposing, but they're also divided on whether Peeta should have chosen Katniss in the first place.

Haymitch snorts at the screen as Clove's featured, discussing with Caesar how closed off and standoffish Katniss was in the house, and that she thinks it's clear that Katniss has just been acting for the cameras this whole time.

"Well, there you have it. The only people in the country who don’t like your girlfriend. Your ex-girlfriends."

Peeta shares an amused look with Haymitch, inwardly glad he's got his agent here with him tonight. Not that he's complaining, but the past month has left Haymitch much more focused on Katniss's career. But it's almost…nice to have Haymitch around right now.

When a PA knocks on the door to give him the two minute warning just then, Peeta grimaces, pushing himself up from his seat after one last quick sip of the alcohol that's also helping to take just a bit of the edge off.

Haymitch stands with him, considering him carefully. "Listen. Be ready for anything, okay? If PME's planning on pulling something funny, now would be the time to do it."

Peeta decides he really is grateful to have Haymitch with him tonight—he knows these people like the back of his hand. Of course they'd want to create a wrinkle and add drama a week before the finale. It can only make more people want to tune in. And that's what this is all about, right—to them at least? Ratings. He can never forget that it's always about ratings.

So while he'd already been planning on approaching this interview cautiously, he nods his understanding to Haymitch before going into the taping now completely on the defensive.

At least the crowd cheers for him when he walks onto the stage, giving everyone a polite wave before taking his seat next to Caesar as the cameras settle in on them. A cursory glance at the
women demonstrates a clearly divided group, with most of them giving him polite smiles while a few others are scowling scowls he's not sure even Katniss could pull off.

"Peeta Mellark! Man of the hour." Caesar allows the audience to applaud again, his signature Cheshire cat grin gracing his face at the noise. Peeta gives Caesar a nervous smile, kicking one of his legs up to rest his ankle on his knee.

"I don't think I've ever been more nervous in my life," he jokes, looking into the circle of women he'd dumped. His leg bounces, as if in proof of the nerves coursing through him.

Caesar chuckles, as does his apparently supportive audience, along with some of the more friendly women, like Rue and Delly. "We'll try not to bite," he promises.

Caesar begins congenially enough, asking him what he's been up to since the show ended. And Peeta gives a pre-canned answer about keeping busy with his bakeries, mentioning he's set to open a Mellark's back in District 12 two weeks from now.

"And your potential other half. It seems she's been busy too."

Peeta nods, carefully, a small smile crossing his face as the crowd reacts with a cheer.

"She has fans," Caesar mock whispers, leaning into Peeta, as if he didn't already know.

"It looks like she's been very busy," he agrees, looking up to the large screen behind them as it begins to flash with footage of Katniss promoting her single on Claudius Templesmith's show earlier this week.

"We just received confirmation that her song came in at number 2 on the new releases chart," Caesar says to him, but also to the audience members who, predictably, cheer again. Peeta attempts to act surprised, because no one can know that his agent just informed him of this very information minutes ago. He also tries not to seem too pleased, although it's genuinely hard to hide his excitement, because the fact that Katniss's career is currently sky-rocketing makes him almost as happy as her currently being his legitimate, real girlfriend.

"But that's right, you haven't spoken to her since the finale, have you?" Caesar's question is like stating the obvious, since everyone in the room knows they're not allowed to speak. Although Peeta wonders if this is the beginnings of some sort of trap, because clearly, they've broken the rules. And he doesn't know who knows.

"It's been a while," Peeta agrees with an affable smile and a confirmatory nod.

"Well, I'd love to hear your thoughts on the general consensus that her song is about you, but of course, you can't really answer that, can you?" Caesar looks out at the audience, making a movement with his hands to suggest that although he knows they'd love to know, sorry, his hands are tied.

Peeta shakes his head, a certain level of adrenaline kicking in because this is going way too smoothly so far. Caesar is throwing him softballs. And either Haymitch is actually a wing bat conspiracy theorist—which isn't implausible—or he's a genius and Peeta's being set up so PME can drop the other shoe. Knowing his company, the latter's much more likely than the former.

"I can't answer that," Peeta tells him. "But I can't answer it because I actually don't know. Not because I'm not allowed to."

"So," Caesar tells him, segueing the conversation. "Why don't we talk about something we can discuss then?"
That gets the audience clapping again. And some of the women sit up straighter in their seats, as if they’ve been prepped to know it’s their time to participate.

"We're in an unusual position this season," Caesar explains, "because in a sense, we already know who you've chosen. And it's really more about Katniss choosing you back at this point, right?"

Well, he supposes that's one way to put it.

Peeta nods along, shrugging as Caesar continues. "And while we've gotten to know her over the past few episodes, and clearly, so many people—present company included," he says with an over-exaggerated wink, "love her. But maybe we should ask what the other women, the women who saw her every day in the ladies' house, think."

Here we go.

Peeta exhales deeply when Caesar begins with Delly, who, predictably, supports Katniss wholeheartedly. Her blonde curls bob as she nods her head vigorously when Caesar asks if she believes Katniss is right for Peeta. Delly says that as her roommate, she thinks she should get to speak with some authority, and Peeta hides a smile when she pointedly shoots Glimmer a quick look.

"I watched her fall for him, Caesar. I saw it firsthand. Her shy excitement to spend time with him, the way she didn't have to admit to liking him because you could just see it in her eyes. And it was obvious right away that Peeta liked Katniss too. Even just catching glimpses of them interacting at the rose ceremonies, it was like we were intruding on something special. And I didn't want to interrupt that. It's why I left voluntarily. Because they just seem right for each other." She shrugs, a sweet smile crossing her face. "I don't know. I guess I'm just rooting for them."

Peeta hides his smile behind his hand, though he doesn't miss the wink Delly shoots his way when the cameras shift off of her and Caesar turns to Rue, who'd been nodding along while Delly spoke, asking her if she agrees.

"Even more so after watching their dates," she nods. "I mean, I think we're all sad because we came on this show to hopefully find love too, but we knew the risks going in, and that it would probably only happen for one of us, if at all. And just because Katniss was guarded in the house and didn't tell us every last detail about herself or her dates with Peeta, it doesn't mean she was hiding anything. And it also doesn't mean she didn't fall in love."

Again, Rue shoots a look to Glimmer. Glimmer purses her lips and crosses her legs, adjusting the hem of her short, tight black skirt as she does.

It isn't hard to figure out that Glimmer probably has something different to say. Though Peeta could have guessed that well before showing up tonight.

"She lied to us though," Cressida murmurs, unprompted, but looking frustrated none the less. Peeta meets her gaze briefly, but looks away when he receives a steely stare in response. She's the only other woman Peeta kissed, which he'd done almost out of obligation after their one-on-one date. He doesn't necessarily blame her for being upset, because out of anyone, she's really the only one he led on. Though it's unfair of her to be mad at anyone but him.

"She told us she was a bartender when she was really here to launch her singing career. And she didn't even tell us she knew him until we found out on our own."

"She was a bartender," Johanna hisses, clearly annoyed. Peeta's expression quirks, surprised by the dark haired woman coming to Katniss's defense. The last he can remember, she and Katniss
had almost gotten into a fight at a rose ceremony. "She didn't lie to us. She didn't lie to anyone. Besides, after you started peppering her with all those questions about our friend Peeta here, she practically melted." Johanna sighs, taking note that the place has fallen silent at the words that sound harsh coming out of her mouth, but are, in actuality, incredibly nice. Then she turns to Peeta, directing her next statement to him.

"And just because she was skeptical of the cameras and the show, and maybe even you, it doesn't mean she still is. Because she clearly likes you. And I hope you don't mess it up."

Peeta doesn't have time to respond to Johanna's unexpectedly kind words, because all hell breaks loose instead.

"Oh for god's sake, she's using the show and him for her career." Glimmer's ice blue eyes narrow on Johanna before turning them on Peeta. "And she's got a boyfriend back home."

Her red lips curl into a smirk, keeping her eyes trained on Peeta, more than aware that every eye and every camera—save for the one catching his reaction shot—are on her. "And you're all stupid if you think otherwise, because there's proof."

There it is. The other shoe. Dropped.

He'd like to think it's just the ramblings of a crazy scorned woman, but her declarations are clearly supported by PME, because even though Caesar feigns shock and confusion, a photo of Katniss and Gale appears on the screen behind him all too quickly.

"That's Gale Hawthorne," Glimmer says, happy to fill everyone in. Katniss Everdeen's 'best friend' from back home." She even does air quotes with her fingers for emphasis. "And that picture was taken two days ago."

There's nothing to actually place it in time, first of all. So Peeta's not sure how Glimmer knows when the photo was taken. But she is correct in her knowledge that it is, in fact Gale Hawthorne. He's not sure how she knows that either. Though no one seems concerned with where Glimmer obtained her information, considering they're all currently staring at a photo of Katniss hugging Gale tightly, a smile on her face and her arms wrapped around his neck.

Right outside of what Peeta recognizes as The Hob.

It means nothing. Peeta knows that instantly, despite the shock of seeing how an innocuous snapshot in time can be turned into something alarmingly false so easily. So the feeling like he's been punched in the gut and the corresponding expression on his face is really a result of feeling completely blindsided by PME.

Peeta has to hand it to them. This was an ingenious, completely unexpected way to go. He doesn't know what he'd been expecting, exactly. But after months of being told their relationship was almost single-handedly responsible for the success of the network, he hadn't even thought about this angle.

But apparently, love triangles must be the most powerful of ratings generators. And B&C found a way to create one after all.

Caesar doesn't even ask Peeta, or anyone else, about the photo, or Katniss, or Gale. He simply just asks the audience to tune in next week and ends the show there, fading to black on a shot of Peeta's still stunned face.
He doesn't believe it. Not for a second. Not when his phone rings off the hook and the internet goes crazy with rumors instantly. And especially not when he leaves the PME soundstage studios in a rush with Haymitch, and Haymitch laughs his ass off in the car because even he hadn't been expecting that.

Though even though Peeta doesn't believe it, he doesn't find it funny either.

And he dreads the thought of Katniss fielding questions about it, picturing her bombarded and blindsided. But, if she'd been watching like Haymitch said she would be, maybe she'll be more ready for it than he'd been.

Peeta watches silently, slumped against the car's door as Haymitch makes a phone call without success.

"She's not answering," he shrugs, like it's not a big deal. "What'd I tell you, kid? I told you they'd do something. Damn, he's good."

Peeta stops listening after Haymitch mutters something about Plutarch probably being the one to plant the fake romance rumors in the first place, annoyed with his agent, who's treating this like it's all some sort of game to him, too. Instead, he lets his mind wander elsewhere.

Why isn't she calling Haymitch back? If she'd been watching the show, why haven't they heard from her yet? There's a million reasonable explanations, he's sure. Maybe she didn't see the show. Or Katniss avoids phone calls from Haymitch like he avoids phone calls from Haymitch. She could be holed up in a recording studio. Or she was watching PME but fell asleep in bed before things blew up. It could be anything, really. But after a 40 minute drive with radio silence and the exhaustion from a long, stressful day settling in, he hates himself for even remotely considering the possibility that it could also be true.

Because it's not.

Peeta remains steadfast in that belief, even when the barrage of photos and information comes fast and furiously after that night. It's just a ridiculous fabrication concocted by the network to drum up ratings and even more publicity, ensuring the PME finale will be the most-watched television event of the season. He knows that. He knows Katniss. And the stories from the people back in District 12 talking about what a great relationship Gale and Katniss had, or have, and even the Hob's patrons who are interviewed right there at the bar, on camera saying they thought the two had been dating for years, mean nothing. First of all because who cares what those people think? And second of all because Katniss is his girlfriend.

No amount of B&C spun propaganda can change that. They can dig up as many photos from her past showcasing her and Gale growing up together through the years as they want. It means nothing. Well, it means nothing except Katniss has a best friend named Gale Hawthorne back home. And just because Gale Hawthorne is really good looking, it doesn't mean that they're secretly dating. Though something still doesn't sit right in the pit of Peeta's stomach, because in some of those photos, he recognizes a look in Gale's eyes that's similar to the one in his own when he's seen himself with Katniss.

B&C also cuts back on Katniss's appearance schedule this week. It's almost like they've purposely hidden her away, so that she's unable to field questions about the secret boyfriend she's been accused of having and what that means for her incredibly public relationship with Peeta Mellark.

It only gives the media even more reason to speculate.
It'd still be nice to hear from her in some way though. Some form of confirmation that he has no reason to worry. And not only for his unnecessary peace of mind, but also because he wants to know that she's handling all of this okay too.

But there's nothing.

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Without having to worry about any more promotional commitments, at least Peeta's free to let his real work take over. He buries himself into getting the bakery back home ready for its opening. There's plenty of work to do too, since Mellark's is supposed to open next week and the walls are still bare and the floors aren't even in yet. Heading back to District 12 helps with the paparazzi too, with virtually no strangers there to jump out at him from bushes or to lurk behind corners. The most he really gets is shocked looks of recognition and, depending on the person, a friendly slap on the back or a worried frown.

The worried frowns bother him more than he lets on.

Ryan tells him the insanity will be worth it in the end. And assures him half-drunk over three too many beers the night before the finale episode airs, that once he sees Katniss, he'll feel better. Because he's sure she's just as worried about him as he is about her. Peeta rubs his face tiredly from his seat at Ryan's kitchen table. He's spent the past few nights at his brother's rather than one of the few hotels their town has to offer. It's certainly better than staying alone, even if he's not particularly interested in being on the receiving end of a pep talk tonight. But Peeta knows that Ryan's probably right. And the insanity—at least this leg of it—will end tomorrow, when he'll finally see Katniss.

There's another hour-long, live PME special planned to air right after the finale airs. And it's coming to you live on location from the very place where this romance technically started—District 12! He's even passed the PME crew trucks set up in front of Sae's Bar and Grill, readying it for its television debut. Even knowing he'll be with Katniss, he's still dreading every minute of it.

"This shit is exhausting," he finally sighs, finishing off the last of his beer before pushing himself up from his seat. It's getting late. "You know this is exactly what I didn't want to happen, right?"

Ryan smiles, collecting the few empty beer bottles they've accumulated and moving to throw them in the recycling bin. "Well, it sounds like you have the chance to call them out on their bullshit tomorrow if you want."

Peeta's considered that, actually. But PME and Plutarch and all of B&C must know that Peeta and Katniss will probably go on air tomorrow and tell the world that all of these claims of Katniss having someone else back home are nothing but made up lies. And really, how could they pin it on PME anyway? Glimmer's the one who technically started the rumor. Not that it even matters, because B&C's already gotten what they wanted. Their relationship is the number one topic searched on the internet this week. Even the news—not just the tabloid gossipy news, either—is reporting about it, like it's an actual life event for anyone other than the two—well, technically three—of them. And besides, whether anyone believes Katniss and Gale are an item, she and Peeta are going to be presented as a happily engaged couple tomorrow night.

Well, unless, of course, they're not.

And that's what really keeps Peeta up the night before the finale.

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The next afternoon, hours before show time, Peeta's still working in the bakery. The construction crew’s just left, and it's just himself and Ryan, who's come to help finalize paint colors. Even though all his other stores have a standardized look to them, this one's different. Peeta's worked hard to incorporate elements from the original Mellark's into this one. And he's given himself more freedom to make sure it feels right. It's important that it feels right. His Mellark's isn't in the same spot as his family's was before it burned down, but he likes this location better, on District 12's Main Street rather than tucked away in some shopping strip. And even though the windows are still taped up with heavy brown paper that keeps any natural light from filtering in, and there's a lot of unfinished edges to the place, Peeta's still pleased with how things are shaping up. Just yesterday, they hung the salvaged original Mellark's Bakery sign. So it just kind of feels…official now.

He and Ryan are leaning against the counter in the bakery's store front while Ryan compares an old photo of the original bakery to paint swatches when he hears the back door to the kitchen creak open. Peeta doesn't think much of it, assuming it's a construction worker who left something behind, or even Brandon, who'd mentioned possibly stopping by before the show tonight.

But when he finally looks up, it's not a construction worker. Or Brandon.

It's Katniss.

"Hi," she says, her eyes darting between his and Ryan's.

She looks worried sick. And maybe even…guilty. It's hard to read her. Then she focuses her gaze solely on him and swallows hard.

"I need to talk to you."

Chapter End Notes

_P.P.S. I've had a tumblr name change. I'm no longer at c-r-roberts. Come play with (or possibly yell at) me at my new url: hashtagpeeta._
Chapter Notes

Song: "Mess is Mine," Vance Joy

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She's been trying to reach him all week. Well, longer than that, really, but especially this week. So it hits her hard when she finally has her chance. And when she makes her way into the bakery, through a propped open back door, she's slightly panicked. Part of it is because she really, really, has to talk to him, and she's nervous about what to say. And part of it is relief, knowing that at least after she sees him, the stress of him not knowing will finally be gone.

But she hates herself—she hates everything—when she rushes into the unfinished bakery and sees Peeta's blue eyes land on her, filled with worry and concern.

And then she takes a deep breath to begin to explain.

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Katniss doesn't find out about PME's bombshell until the next morning.

But she knows how it happened. She and Gale had made relative amends over the past few weeks. With the excitement of her song coming out, and with her being away so often now, she was just glad to return to something familiar. So when she came home to 12 for two days in the middle of last week to film a couple of scenes for her music video and tape a few promos for PME, Katniss hadn't hesitated to visit Gale during a shift at The Hob. And when she'd walked into the bar, it was almost like both of them had forgotten they were fighting in the first place.

Quite frankly, Katniss was too tired and too grateful to be home to bring up the fact that Gale had had essentially accused her of being a spineless fame-hungry reality star the last time they'd been together. Instead, they talked about normal things—their families, how business at The Hob was more than steady these days, and less than normal things too—her song on the radio, how she's holding up with the demands of the press she's doing and whether she's getting enough sleep.

And so, back in her hometown, with old friends and in comfortable territory, Katniss stupidly forgot she'd become magazine filler. And when she left, she'd stupidly let Gale walk her out the front door instead of the back. Then she'd stupidly hugged him goodbye.

And she stupidly didn't notice the distinctive rustle of some sub-human hiding in the bushes or the flash of a professional grade camera until it was too late.

At the time, she'd just been annoyed, thinking it was just another photo of her living her day-to-day life that had suddenly become so fascinating for all of Panem to follow, just like all the other benign headlines—Katniss Everdeen walks down the street!; Peeta Mellark's favorite bachelorette drinks iced tea!; How to wear your hair like Katniss! She'd recoiled quickly from Gale as it happened too, and he'd given her a confused look as she'd smiled sadly. "Welcome to my new life," she'd said with an apologetic shake of her head. "Hope you don't mind your picture showing up on the Internet."

She hadn't been expecting this.
But then, no one had.

Haymitch shows up at her hotel room that morning, after she woke up to strange messages on her phone that prompted her to go on the Internet and turn on the television, only to fight back tears of anger when she saw the photo of her and Gale accompanied by multiple accusations calling her a liar, a fake, a cheat. She stopped herself from reading the really mean things, the things that can't be printed without words with letters exchanged for asterisks, but it doesn't mean those comments aren't out there, for the rest of the world to see.

It feels like a bad dream. But the look of pity, and concern, on Haymitch's face when she opens the door makes her sure this isn't all some sick joke.

"Where were you last night?" Haymitch asks, letting himself into her room when Katniss says nothing at his presence. "The kid could have used a little affirmation that you aren't in fact, double-timing him." He snorts at himself, and Katniss scowls at him, since for as much as Haymitch may be concerned, he can't help but also be an asshole about it.

"What happened?" she asks, rubbing her hands over her cheeks, pulling them down her face as she shakes her head. "I was in the recording studio all day, and I fell asleep at the beginning of the show. And then I woke up to…this." She waves her hand toward the television, the channel tuned to an entertainment station currently airing a story questioning the validity of newfound pop star Katniss Everdeen and Panem's Most Eligible Bachelor Peeta Mellark's love story.

Haymitch considers her for a moment, and she tenses under his gaze. She can tell just by his eyes. There's something he doesn't want to tell her.

"It's just for extra publicity," Haymitch begins to explain. "Plutarch's spinning everything on its head. This season, they're telling their typical love story in reverse—create a happy couple and then create the love triangle. Apparently their show can't be interesting if it isn't about a choice."

Haymitch raises his eyebrows pointedly at her. "And he's probably thanking his lucky stars that you made it all possible for him."

Katniss wishes she could be angry at Haymitch for that, so she can lash out and yell at him that it's not fair to blame this on her. But on some level, he's right. It's her fault.

"Did you really have to go around hugging other men? Really attractive other men? What were you thinking, Katniss?"

"I was thinking he's my lifelong friend, and a lot had changed since the last time I'd seen him and that I wanted to hug him, okay? I'm sorry I wasn't thinking that someone might snap a picture of it and that I'd be turned into some two-timing whore who's using PME and their bachelor just to get famous!"

The irony of her words doesn't escape her though. Because for as ridiculous as it is now—now that she really is with Peeta, that statement isn't all wrong. She had been using PME and Peeta to get famous. Until she wasn't.

Haymitch reads her like a book. His voice softens, and he actually sounds sorry for her. "Look. Relax. Everything's going to be okay."

Katniss isn't as easily convinced. She plops herself down on the hotel bed as Haymitch takes the desk chair.

"Listen to me. It's going to be a bumpy ride this week. So…hang on tight, alright? Don't fight
them too hard on anything. Don't give them a reason to make it worse."

How could it possibly get any worse? Though if it's possible, she guesses she doesn't really want to know.

"How's Peeta?" she asks quietly.

"He's fine," Haymitch assures her, but something about the way Haymitch looks at her as he says so doesn't sit right with her. "He sees it for what it is, at least. And he knows that at the end of next week, you'll still be engaged."

Then Haymitch stops holding back. "Unless, of course, you don't want to be engaged."

Katniss considers him slowly, her heart starting to race at the same time her stomach turns with an awful nauseous feeling. "Are you...saying they're giving me an out? Is that what this is?"

He sighs, looking legitimately perplexed now. "I don't know what their end game is, honestly. I've spent half the night trying to figure it out. Maybe they think you're more marketable single. Or you've suddenly become more important to them than an elaborate wedding. Or maybe it's meant to push you two closer together. I don't know." Haymitch shrugs, his body language slumping like he's essentially throwing up his hands, officially unable to predict the outcome.

Haymitch's next words are careful and measured as he speaks them. "But I, I think you shoot yourself in the foot, if you don't end up with the kid. Especially with that single of yours that's so popular right now. It wouldn't make sense for you to break up with him right this second."

Katniss swallows the lump in her throat, feeling even sicker. "What if I don't want to break up with him at all?"

His face softens, an almost smile crossing his face as he pushes himself from his chair, standing to leave. "Well, for once, I think that's between you and him, Sweetheart."

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Gamemaker, PME, B&C and anyone who works for them, really, shut her down at every turn all week. Haymitch had warned her to keep her mouth shut, but it's impossible for her to get a word out anyway. For as many interviews as she's given over the past few weeks, after the Gale bomb drops on the latest episode of PME, she conducts exactly none. And Paylor suddenly seems content keeping her in the recording studio around the clock, insisting it's just because they want to fast track her debut album and are trying to meet deadlines when Katniss asks what the sudden rush is. But Katniss isn't stupid—she knows it's also to ensure she doesn't even have the opportunity to blow the cover on their latest publicity stunt. So, Katniss spends her week recording, which would otherwise be fine by her since it's better than plastering on fake smiles, loads of makeup, and a variety of tailored, trendy leather jackets that have somehow wound up as her signature look just to talk nonsense with reporters and talk show hosts.

And she's still genuinely excited to record her music, even if she's inherently distrustful of those around her as she does. But for as focused as she tries to be, it's hard not to continuously think about Peeta and what's going through his mind. Is he really okay like Haymitch says? She thinks she'd been pretty clear with her feelings the last time she saw him, but honestly, she can't help but worry it wasn't enough. Hadn't Peeta though she and Gale were an item once upon a time, after all?

And speaking of Gale, she wonders what the hell he's thinking right now too. Because for as impossible as it may be for her, or Peeta, to speak up, it doesn't make sense why Gale isn't. He of
all people would never stand for this manufactured, false so-called relationship.

Or so she thought. Because he hasn't said a word to anyone.

Though not for lack of their trying. Every news outlet in the country is trying to get a hold of him. At least that's what it sounds like when Katniss talks to Madge, on the phone, two days before she's set to return home before the big PME finale show. Madge sighs heavily when Katniss asks how Gale's doing with his newfound celebrity status.

"Katniss…I'm sorry. I can't get through to him. He's refusing to speak to me about it, let alone the press. He wants nothing to do with it."

For that, Katniss guesses she doesn't blame him. But she still wishes someone could make it stop. She's just so tired of it all. Exhausted and worn out, not only from the schedule she's currently keeping, or the isolation she's feeling, but also because the story just keeps on snowballing. Practically out of control.

At first it was hard to believe, the way the media turned one innocent hug with Gale into a hot and steamy, tumultuous relationship she's supposedly had with him over the past few years. But then the photos and the stories kept coming—and pictures of her and Gale from high school, or working shifts together at The Hob become attached to headlines like "She Went on PME to Make Him Jealous," and "She Told Him He's the Best Sex She's Ever Had," and "He Wanted Her Back, and He Got Her Back." And random people, like old classmates and drunkard patrons, supposedly provide snippets of information to these stories to give them validity. And since none of the actual players in this triangle are anywhere to be found, all that exists is speculation and the ability for insane rumors to run rampant.

A part of her has to hand it to B&C though, because the story's completely saturated the news cycle. And by the time she boards her plane back home to District 12 the day before the finale, judging by the security she needs at the airport, this episode should be the most-watched episode of PME of all time.

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The absolute best part about being home is Prim. She lands late in the middle of the night, and though Katniss had insisted she'd meet Prim back at her place, she's relieved to see her sister outside the terminal, waiting to pick her up. She hasn't seen Prim in months. And while they've talked on the phone and through text and email, it isn't nearly the same as seeing her in the flesh. It's hard not to be taken aback by just how grown up and adult she seems, ushering Katniss into her used Prius with a quick hug. The urgency of their getaway is unnecessary—no one's actually waiting for her when she lands at District 12's tiny airport, but after everything that's happened, it certainly doesn't hurt to be safe.

The car ride back to Katniss's apartment is relatively quiet, and Prim waves off Katniss's questions about school and finals and MCAT results, only asking Katniss if she's okay with worried eyes. And Katniss waves off her sister's question too, insisting everything's just great, but Prim's exasperated sigh suggests she's less than convinced.

Though the mood changes significantly when that hot new single from hometown sweetheart Katniss Everdeen starts playing through the car's speakers. Prim squeals and reaches for the knob, cranking up the volume.

"Prim, stop." Katniss half sighs, half begs, because hearing herself on the radio mostly makes her want to curl into a ball and die, since for as much as she likes singing, she's not particularly fond of actually listening to herself.
Prim shakes her head at her, grinning. "You're not going to stop me from fangirling over you properly by jamming out to you in my car."

Katniss sighs again, rolling her eyes. "You're a dork, you know that right?"

But halfway through the second chorus, she can't help cracking a grin at the way Prim sings along enthusiastically—her hands slapping the wheel with the beat, her head bobbing with every other word. And even the way she sings the lyrics wrong is amusing. Though if she tries to correct Prim now, telling her it's actually our slates clean and not plates clean, she'll probably just get scolded for not enunciating properly. As the song approaches its instrumental break, Prim catches her eye, a sly grin spreading across her face.

"You must really like him if you wrote a song about him."

***

Back at Katniss's apartment, Prim's questions start flowing and they don't stop. And to be honest, Katniss doesn't try to stop them because she's relieved to finally be able to talk to someone who understands.

"Katniss," Prim begins, curling up at Katniss's kitchen table with a cup of tea that Katniss hands to her, dunking her tea bag into her own cup of hot water as she slides into a seat across from her sister. "Where did all of this Gale stuff come from, anyway?"

Katniss shakes her head, setting her mug down carefully. "I have no idea what's going on any more. One minute, they're trying to plan my wedding, the next, I'm screwing Gale while screwing over Peeta."

"And you haven't talked to either one of them?"

"Well, I can't exactly talk to Peeta, and Gale must be furious, because he's refusing to talk to anyone about it." Katniss frowns with a resigned shrug, sipping the too-hot liquid and making a face when it burns her tongue. Her sister's blue eyes look back at her seriously, and Prim opens her mouth to speak, then hesitates.

"What?" Katniss sips her tea, burning her tongue again, unable to stop herself even though she knows it's too hot to drink, because it's something to do and Prim's expression is making her fidget.

Prim frowns. "I think…I think Gale's liked you for a while, Katniss. So I can't imagine this is easy for him."

Katniss isn't quite sure she's hearing her sister correctly. Because it sounds like she's saying Gale likes her. Has liked her. And that's absurd. They argue all of the time. She pisses him off at least ten times for every shift they pull at the Hob together. And he's a serial dater. Of women other than her.

But on the other hand. Gale was so irrationally upset with her the last time she was home. When it became clear that she and Peeta looked like PME's endgame. And when he realized she wasn't entirely pretending. And maybe not pretending at all.

"Prim," Katniss starts slowly, looking her sister up and down. "What are you talking about?"

Prim sighs, as if this conversation should be unnecessary. But her eyes convey a sense of pity for Katniss. "He probably didn't think he would lose you."
"Yeah, well, I didn't know I was someone's to lose," Katniss snaps, probably harsher than she needs to, because Prim looks taken aback.

"Katniss," she starts softly.

But Katniss shakes her head, cutting Prim off. "No. Look, I'm sorry. I know you're just trying to help. But this is the last thing I need to worry about right now." Seriously. She's got television executives and music producers and basically an entire entertainment company manipulating her. And a whole country infatuated with knowing every last thing about her. Including whether she actually loves Peeta Mellark. Not to mention having to worry about Peeta. So, yeah, Gale's potential unrequited feelings is officially one too many problems for her to have.

And she needs to solve it as soon as possible. Because this can't happen. She can't have not only B&C attempting to destroy the first real relationship she's had in her life, but Gale too. And while she can't control what B&C does, she can control what's going on with Gale.

And she needs to talk to him.

Katniss pushes herself up from the table almost instinctively, moving across the kitchen and reaching for her phone she left on the small table next to her front door where she keeps her keys.

"Katniss, it's two in the morning," Prim calls behind her, her voice calm. As if she knows exactly what Katniss is doing. Like she's the big sister or something. "You can talk to him tomorrow."

Katniss freezes, then turns, looking at her baby sister. She's right. She knows Prim's right. Calling Gale right now would be a really stupid idea. Not to mention out of line, considering the hour. But she so badly just wants to figure things out, resolve them once and for all and be done with it. She's sick of waiting. And if she's being honest, she's angry too. Because what right does Gale have to try and stake his claim now? Or really, at all?

Katniss sighs, throwing up her hands in frustration. "So, what do I do then?"

Prim smiles innocently, too innocently at her. "Sit back down and talk to me about the other guy in your life."

Her grin just grows as Katniss's mouth falls open. "Seriously. While we're on the topic of people who've liked you for a really long time..." Prim lets her voice trail off, in a dreamy way, which contradicts the smirk on her face when Katniss glares at her. "Come on. I've been dying to finally be in the same room as you since your eyes bugged out of your head when you got out of that limo on the first episode. And you have to tell me. Those are the rules. Little sisters get the details before the rest of the country."

"I'm under contract not to tell you, or anyone else, anything for another 18 hours," Katniss says flatly, though the slight upturn of her lips betrays her.

Prim's eyes dance, and she swallows a sip of her tea. "Well it's a good thing I can keep a secret then."

They move to Katniss's apartment sized sofa, curling under light blankets while Katniss turns on some late night chick flick movie for background noise. And Prim begins the conversation Katniss didn't know she'd needed to have for months.

"You know, it's super weird to watch your sister date a guy on television," Prim tells her, tucking her legs beneath her and angling towards Katniss. "And all of the girls on my floor, they'd gather in my room, and we'd watch the episodes together." A soft half of a laugh passes Katniss's lips at the thought—the idea of Residential Advisor and pre-med student Primrose Everdeen housing 10..."
freshmen in her dorm room to watch a ridiculously contrived reality dating show. "And they all wanted to know about you, of course. Especially when they found out you grew up with Peeta."

Prim's expression grows more thoughtful, and Katniss shifts slightly under her gaze. "Everyone thought it was so romantic, Peeta's obvious infatuation with you, the way it seemed like you had no idea." Prim pauses, licks her lips, then chews on her bottom one. "And they'd all ask me if it was really true. If you really didn't know. That he liked you."

"Prim," Katniss warns warily, furrowing her brow. Because her sister's playing in unfair territory now. Not to mention complicated territory. "It's just a television show, you know that right? Half that stuff…it's not real."

But Prim just shrugs, as if Katniss hasn't even said a word, still focused on her question.

"But didn't you have any idea? That Peeta liked you? Before, I mean."

"You know, it's not like he confessed his love to me every day in the cafeteria or something. He wasn't exactly forthcoming about it."

And while that's technically true, she's conveniently not mentioning the way she noticed blue eyes flitting to hers in pre-calculus, and how a lot of times when they'd pass one another in the halls, his smile—the same boyish smile he still has—would make her stomach flip-flop when any other classmate's would have most likely made her fight a scowl. And of course, she's not bringing up that whole wrestling match incident either.

"Well, you should've known," Prim tells her firmly. And seriously, too. As if it was some egregious error on Katniss's part to not read into a couple of nonverbal cues from teenage Peeta Mellark. And as if she's suddenly some sort of expert on love.

"Oh yeah?" she chides, pulling her blanket up to her chin, her eyebrows raising with her amused expression.

"Yeah," Prim repeats. Then she stops, her eyes narrowing with realization. "Wait. You really don't remember, do you?"

"Remember what, Prim?" Katniss yawns, the long day and the travel and the time of night finally beginning to take its toll on her, although her heart beats just a little faster out of curiosity.

Prim answers softly. "After Dad died. About the cookies."

No. She hadn't remembered.

To be honest, Katniss hasn't thought about that part of her life in a very long time. It's always been easier that way. To shut it out, and pretend like it didn't happen. Everything for those first couple of years after their dad's accident had been clouded in such sadness, and there had been so much bad to want to forget. But along with shutting out the bad, Katniss knows she'd closed off some of the good too. But now that Prim's said something, jogging her memory, she recalls what Prim's talking about as clear as day.

She's talking about the first time Katniss really paid attention to Peeta Mellark. Or rather, the first time Peeta Mellark paid attention to her.

And maybe her little sister is right.

Maybe she should have known.
Because the memory is absolutely some of the good.

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"What the fuck, Gale?"

Katniss enters the Hob silently, slipping through the back door at precisely ten in the morning, the time she knows it will only be Gale and last night's receipts seated at the bar. She's not loud, and she's not yelling, but her tone isn't exactly friendly either. She watches his back tense at the sound of her voice.

"What the fuck, Gale?" he hisses back at her, the cold anger in his steel eyes taking her aback when he turns to look at her. "How about what the fuck, Katniss? You think this is somehow my fault?"

He takes her stunned inability to respond as an opportunity to keep going, and she crosses her arms over her chest as he lists the litany of reasons why he has a point.

"Am I the one associated with these people all of a sudden? Am I the reason my photos and likeness are all over the news and there are entire websites dedicated to my demise? Am I the one with the record deal and the TV show and the fiancé?"

Katniss narrows her eyes at him, not particularly liking the way he's thrown Peeta into the equation like he's another part of what's wrong here. Even if the rest of it is true. "Why haven't you said anything?"

He snorts, sliding off his stool and making his way back behind the bar. "Why haven't you?"

She watches him begin to wipe down the countertop absently, surely as something to focus on other than her, since he's having a hard time looking her in the eye.

"You know I couldn't! They wouldn't let me! It's all a big game to them! But for you—for you to help them? It makes no sense!"

Gale continues to polish a long-existing, irremovable watermark in the wood as her voice becomes hectic and screechy in her anger. And the longer he polishes, the harder he polishes. It's a long moment of just...polishing and silence before Gale finally lets his shoulders slump into his work, like his inability to get the stain defeats him.

"Do you love him?"

Katniss sucks in a breath, taken aback, caught off guard without any warning for his question.

"Gale…"

"I need to know, Katniss."

"Why?" she challenges, tilting her chin up to him defensively. But just looking at him, the way his hard gray eyes have wrinkled around their corners, and his mouth has downturned from a straight line to a frown, suggesting sadness over any other emotion, she knows why.

Prim wasn't lying.

Her throat feels like it's closing and it's difficult to hold his gaze. And her skin suddenly feels flushed while her head starts to pound. Because seriously. This really is the last thing she needs right now.
And to be brutally honest, it's also the last thing she wants.

Gale sighs, throwing the towel down onto the bar top and standing up straight to face her. "Because these people have claimed that it's all been an act with you, and him, and then for some bizarre fucking reason I got involved. And a part of me was okay with that. That's horrible, I know, because it makes your life worse. But I thought, I guess I thought that maybe if it was all an act with him, I could help you out of it somehow."

Katniss watches him shake his head at her unreactive expression. She's equally stunned and not surprised at all by Gale's admission—because while she's not expecting it, maybe she should have. It's just so...him. To think he could be some sort of knight in shining armor. And mixing up all the signs in letting himself think she needed rescued. From anyone. Least of all Peeta.

"But you're not acting. Are you."

"I'm not...I can't...Gale, seriously, do we have to—"

"You're a terrible actress, Katniss," Gale cuts her off with a tired shake of his head. "And an even worse liar. So I already know the answer. I just think I need to hear you say it."

Katniss stares at the floor. She hates this. She hates how strained things feel between her and Gale right now. She hates how he's calling her out, wanting her to answer questions for him when she should only be answering them for herself. And it's not fair that she feels guilty. For somehow putting him out. For finally feeling something, for once in her life. She shouldn't feel guilty, or bad, or anything negative at all for trying to be happy. Or for falling in love.

Right. She shouldn't feel guilty.

Katniss pulls her head back up, straightening her shoulders and looking Gale in the eye.

"It's not an act."

The air in the room fills up with a quiet sort of tension, and she holds Gale's stare as he takes her in, considering her for a long moment. He nods once.

"Okay."

"I'm sorry."

Gale sighs. "Don't," he says, shaking his head. "Just, promise me you're happy, okay? And that you know what you're doing with these people."

Katniss snorts. "I have no idea what I'm doing, Gale."

His eyes flash a sense of anger. With her? With himself? With the world? She's not sure. "Look, Peeta may be a good guy or whatever, but this network? After what they've done this week? If I'd have known, I'd have never wanted you to get tangled up with them."

"It's not like they're holding me hostage or something, you know. And I'm not innocent in this thing, either. I mean, I did use them to get a record deal and a boyfriend out of it."

"And your boyfriend. What does he think of all this?"

Katniss looks down, pursing her lips together in thought. "I don't know."

"You haven't seen him yet?" Gale asks incredulously.
"I can't exactly just show up at his door, Gale," she says tiredly. "And besides, I just got in last
night. I came here first. I had to—"

"You had to take care of me first," Gale nods, understanding. *A task to check off her list.*

"Um. Yeah. I guess."

"So. Problem solved here. What's keeping you now?"

"You mean other than contractual obligations and multiple people hiding in bushes with
cameras?"

Gale tilts his head slightly, like he's conceding she has a fair point. Then he shakes his head at her
again. "You know what I can't figure out, though? Why would the show want to do this? To
make it look like you're cheating on him and using him? If you're actually the sickeningly sweet
fairytales couple they made you out to be, why would they try to destroy that image?"

She doesn't bother resenting or denying the *sickeningly sweet fairytale couple* dig, figuring Gale's
still allowed some resentment, even if the shit she's putting him through was entirely inadvertent.
Instead, she shakes her head, dejectedly. "I don't know. And I have no idea what they're going to
pull tonight. I just wish…I wish I didn't have such a bad feeling about it."

Gale stares at her for an extended beat. "Do you think it would help if their love triangle was
squashed before the show even started?"

Katniss can't quite believe her ears. It's an awfully big olive branch for Gale to be offering. But it's
one she could desperately use right now.

"Yes,"

He nods. "Okay. I'll do it. Just um, help me figure out how to get an audience. And then get out of
here and go find your boyfriend."

"You don't have to," she tries to tell him, though the relief she can hear in her voice makes it an
unconvincing statement.

"This is also for my own benefit, you know," Gale says, shaking her off. "And when you find
Peeta, you better make sure he doesn't want to punch me in my face."

Katniss allows herself a small, nervous laugh. And Gale allows himself a small, barely visible
smile.

"Deal," she agrees.

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Mellark's Bakery isn't up and running yet. But Peeta's clearly still there when she pulls into the
small parking lot behind the building, because that *has* to be his Jeep Wrangler three spots over
from where she parks Prim's Prius. Normally, she'd be worried about paparazzi lurking,
considering her location, but she thinks the raucous Gale's currently causing may have drawn just
enough attention away from the Bachelor's bakery. And for that, she'll be eternally grateful.

But even without anyone else around, it's still overwhelming. She's not exactly a *spill her guts in
earnest* type of girl. On top of that, she's been trying to reach him all week. Well, longer than that,
really, but especially this week. So it hits her hard when she finally has her chance. And when she
makes her way into the bakery, through a propped open back door, she's slightly panicked. Part of
it is because she really, really, has to talk to him, and she's nervous about what to say. And part of it is relief, knowing that at least after she sees him, the stress of him not knowing will finally be gone.

But she hates herself—she hates everything—when she rushes into the unfinished bakery and sees Peeta's blue eyes land on her, filled with worry and concern.

And then she takes a deep breath to begin to explain.

"Hi," she says, noticing Ryan for the first time, his presence startling her, but not stopping her. Or diverting her focus.

"I need to talk to you."

Peeta's frozen in place, clearly trying to figure out what to make of their unexpected guest, but Ryan clears his throat, and Katniss watches as Peeta's eyes leave hers to look at his brother.

"I uh, think I'm going to get going," he says quietly, clapping Peeta on the shoulder before making his way out from the bakery's counter they're both standing behind. Katniss's eyes focus on her feet as Ryan makes his way towards her, his footsteps loud against the concrete of the unfinished bakery floor. "Glad to have you back, Katniss," he says when he reaches her, gently clapping her on the shoulder too.

She forces her gaze up, surprised to see his eyes are kind and his lips are upturned into a half smile. She'd have figured Peeta's family hated her for what's going on right now. But the look on Ryan Mellark's face looks like anything but hate.

"Thanks," she breathes, managing to give him a small smile too. And as he makes his way to the door, letting himself out without another word, Katniss looks back to Peeta, who's watching her from his place still behind the bakery counter. He's dressed casually in a white undershirt and jeans, and a light zip-up hooded sweatshirt left unzipped. He leans into the counter as he flips the folder placed in front of him closed, and then rests his hands against the granite surface, his gaze still on her.

"So, what's new?" Peeta's eyebrow flares up just slightly, like all of this is amusing to him somehow.

A strangled laugh escapes her, and she shakes her head at him, shrugging her shoulders. "Oh, you know. Not much."

His lips form the beginnings of a smile. "You know shouldn't be here, right? You're breaking the rules."

"Like we haven't done that before."

Peeta smirks openly now. "And look where that got us."

Katniss furrows her brow, unsure of his meaning. Then Peeta shakes his head at her. *Never mind.* "So. What's so important it couldn't wait a few hours, Katniss?"

The way he looks at her almost makes her lose her nerve entirely.

"It is important," she agrees, making a face at the shakiness of her own voice. She wishes she could just will away the nerves, especially because she's done this before. She's already told Peeta that she likes him, and that she *needs* him, even. And she's sung songs about him on live national television, and she's been interviewed as millions watched. And all of it had happened without this
nervous, sick feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Though she knows why it's there. Because none of it means as much as this. Because right here, right now, this is it.

So she takes a deep breath and swallows as much fear and doubt as she can, taking a few steps toward him to close some of the distance. "I couldn't let you think that...that I'd ever...Peeta, I wouldn't..."

"Katniss, are you okay?"

*Well. This isn't going so well. She's so...bad at this. It'd be comical if it weren't so unfunny. She shakes Peeta's question off and takes another deep breath.*

"It's not an act, okay? I'm not faking it."

Peeta chuckles, the muscles in his chest and his shoulders relaxing as he does, his eyes shining back at her, distractingly crystal clear and blue. "I know."

"I mean, obviously, I went on *PME* for my music, and Haymitch coached me at the beginning, but—"

"—Katniss." He's still smiling, confusingly so.

"—I just don't want you to think I'm still pretending with you. Or that I had some other boyfriend back home waiting for me."

"Katniss."

"And I tried to talk to you—to get through to you somehow, but they wouldn't let me, and Haymitch said—"

"Katniss!" Peeta raises his voice just enough to shut her up and so that it echoes off the bare walls of the empty space. "I don't think you're pretending."

Peeta shakes his head, his grin spreading across his face at her bemused expression. He slips out from behind the counter and onto one of the stools set below it, like he's settling in for some sort of discussion. "Do you think I'm pretending?"

"No. But you're not the one with the extra boyfriend lying around."

"Are you forgetting about the 20 girlfriends I had just a few months ago?"

Good point. Great point, actually. And when she laughs, he laughs too.

"Do you want to know how I know you're not pretending? There have been a few signs, you know."

At this, Katniss raises her eyebrow. This could be interesting.

Peeta smiles a small, knowing smile that makes enough of her tension and nervousness fall away that she takes a few steps closer to him, until she's standing just in front of him as he sits, perched on the stool that's high enough that he's practically at her eye level.

"On our first date. Hiking. When you kissed me, it was real. Right?"

She doesn't know why it makes her blush, but she feels a heat rising in her cheeks and she smiles
sheepishly. "Real," she confirms, though it's unnecessary, since he already seemed to know her answer.

Peeta nods. "And I don't think you were faking it when you told Seneca and all of PME to shove it at the final rose ceremony. Because it felt pretty real when you kissed me like crazy afterwards."

"Also real," she tells him, laughing softly when Peeta grins and reaches out for her, pulling her into him by the hand. She lands between his open legs, catching her balance on the tops of his thighs. Her breath hitches at the proximity, because even though this is Peeta, and she's been here before, he still makes her heart skip a beat. She hopes he always does.

Peeta rests his hands on her hips, and it feels like his hands belong there. He looks up to her from his seat as she tilts her head at him. "Have you really liked me since high school though?" she asks skeptically, since he's not the only one who can play this game. Peeta chuckles, like he finds the question funny.

"Real, Katniss. Although I think it goes back further than that. Kindergarten, if you want to get technical about it." Peeta laughs again when her eyes go wide, because come on, that's crazy, and it feels so good, to hear his laugh and feel his touch, that she almost forgets the reason she's here in the first place.

"Okay, but here's one I'm actually not sure of. The first time you noticed me. Was it really at my wrestling match, like you told Caesar?"

"Not real," Katniss says solemnly, with one shake of her head, only able to keep a straight face until Peeta's eyebrows furrow and she can't take the confusion in his eyes. "It was before then," she admits, grateful for Prim digging up the memory and that she can surprise him for once. "We were eleven. And I think you must have always gotten a cookie in your lunch or something—son of a baker and all—and after my dad died, you started slipping them into my locker." She studies the recognition on Peeta's face as she explains softly, smiling ruefully. "I guess you didn't want me to know it was you. But I caught you one day. And I know I should have gone up to you, and thanked you, or told you to save some of your own damn cookies for yourself, but I mean, we were eleven. I didn't know how to talk to you, much less thank you. Especially for something so sweet."

Peeta exhales slowly, his eyes still trained on hers. They narrow in thought, and his thumb brushes absently at the place where her shirt meets her jeans. "I didn't know you knew it was me all these years."

"To be fair, Prim had to gently remind me," she confesses.

"Speaking of Prim," Peeta responds, his brow arching at the mention of her sister's name. "You gave every single one of my cookies to her, didn't you?"

On their walks home from school. It's true. They'd made Prim so happy, too, and it was one of the few times Katniss remembers being happy back then—watching her sister's eyes light up at the treat Katniss found in her locker that day—a frosted sugar cookie, chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, or whatever it happened to be.

So Peeta really does remember everything.

"Sorry about that," she smiles apologetically, shifting into him, resting her forearms on his upper thighs.

He tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear, his eyes soft pools of blue as they focus back on
"It's okay. If anything, it just made me love you more."

He says it so simply, like it's just some universal fact or something that's common knowledge.

"Peeta," she whispers, swallowing the lump in her throat. "All those things you said during the...proposal?"

He sighs quietly at her question. "Real, Katniss. Sometimes too real. The I'd do anything for you real. Even marry you on national television if I had to real. Because I love you, okay? And I'm going to do whatever it takes to be with you. You know, if you'll let me."

Katniss plants her mouth on his before he can say another stupidly perfect word. He's so much better at this than she is, it's almost unfair. She'd come here to tell him she loves him, and here he is, doing it first, and seemingly unworried about her response as his lips cover hers, not letting her speak even if she tried. A lot of her wants to melt into his kisses, his breath warm and thick against her skin, and to revel in the assured way he holds her, his fingertips ghosting over the bare skin of the small of her back.

But more of her wants him to know, unequivocally, that she loves him back. She breaks away from a particularly fervent kiss, a regretful sort of noise escaping her as she does.

"Peeta, wait," she says, watching his eyes open slowly. He stares back at her contentedly, and she smiles, the words right there on the tip of her tongue, needing to finally be said before anything else happens. But Peeta's expression hardens just as Katniss opens her mouth, and she catches herself, furrowing her brow in confusion instead.

"You know, you should probably learn to cover your tracks better, Sweetheart. You're pretty easy to find."

Katniss startles, not expecting to hear his drawling voice behind her. She spins around to see their agent, staring at the two of them with an unreadable expression save for a lazily quirked eyebrow. Peeta slips his hand into hers, and she feels him give it a tight, reassuring squeeze, and while it helps, it can't stop her stomach from dropping.

"Let me guess which one of you can tell me why Gale Hawthorne is holding a live press conference down the street right now." It's no accident that his narrowed gray eyes cut directly to Katniss.

Then he looks disinterestedly at Peeta. "You got a working television in this place, Kid? Apparently show time's starting earlier than expected."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading. :) Come find me on tumblr @ hashtagpeeta, if you'd like.

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