In the years leading up to the Civil War, situations begin to draw two unlikely people together. This is part of the eight round of prompts in Panem over on tumblr. This is for day 2 and the prompt of the antebellum south.

Notes

One thing I have learned writing is that sometimes I can produce a halfway decent chapter with the help of just one beta. This is not one of those. Let me just say thank you, to everyone on my little list here. You helped me when it felt like no one would. I love each and every one of you. All of you have become very near and dear to my heart in the past couple of years to months. One day… we will all sit together and sip our wine, whiskey, moonshine (or tequila. There will probably be tequila!) and talk for hours. Or we can watch the movies and complain about what they had to leave out. Whatever we decide, as long as I get to hug you, well that’s all that matters. So thank you to sohypothetically, famousfremous, smartaleyex, titana, gentlemama, hutchhitched, notanislander, arby and Florence.

And thank you to the amazing Jessa!!! You can come drink with is too. I know no one
will mind a bit!

This is a fic about the time around and during the American Civil War. There are mentions of slavery, nothing violent, but there are mentions.
Chapter 1

Under the Wisteria Vine
Part One
Prompt: antebellum south

In the years leading up to the Civil War, situations begin to draw two unlikely people together. Warnings... this is a fic about a period of time where there was slavery. There is mention of this in this story.

One thing I have learned writing is that sometimes I can produce a halfway decent chapter with the help of just one beta. This is not one of those. Let me just say thank you, to everyone on my little list here. You helped me when it felt like no one would. I love each and every one of you. All of you have become very near and dear to my heart in the past couple of years to months. One day... we will all sit together and sip our wine, whiskey, moonshine (or tequila. There will prob be tequila!) and talk for hours. Or we can watch the movies and complain about what they had to leave out. Whatever we decide, as long as I get to hug you, well that’s all that matters. So thank you to sohypothetically, famousfremous, smartalexy, titana, gentlemama, hutchhitched, notanislander, arby and Florence.

And thank you to the amazing Jessa!!! You can come drink with is too. I know no one will mind a bit!

There will also (for PIP) be two more parts, so be on the lookout for them!

Summertime, North Carolina, 1856

“Prim!” Twelve-year-old Katniss shouts through the open door. “Get out here. It’s too hot to stay in there today.”

All of eight-years-old, Primrose comes to the door, sighs when she gets to the doorway, “That breeze feels good.”

Prim joins her sister where she sits on the edge of the porch, their legs dangling into the dry dust of the dirt yard. This summer is a hot one since it hasn’t rained in weeks. Mama was just saying last night how she was so glad that Daddy works in the mines and not as a farmer. Katniss picks at a spot on Prim’s new dress, but finds that it’s nothing. Prim asks, “Why was Daddy so upset when Mama made these dresses for us? They are so pretty.”

Katniss shrugs. “He wasn’t mad about the dresses. He was mad because Mama wouldn’t tell him where she got the material.” She isn’t about to tell her sister that she remembers the fabric hanging in the windows up at the Mellark plantation. She went with Mama to check on Mrs. Mellark a couple of weeks ago. Since Old Doc Lund said that Mrs. Mellark has consumption, Mama has been up there almost every day treating her. “Maybe she got some coins from the Masons? And she bought it down at Sae’s?”

Prim nods like she understands, but Katniss herself doesn’t really understand. She just knows that Daddy works really hard to get them what they need, and when Mama wouldn’t answer him it hurt him somehow.

Prim’s innocent smile lights up her face. “That has to be it. But why did Daddy not believe her?”

Katniss shrugs. “I don’t know, Primmy.” She asks, “Do you want to go wade in the creek?”

Prim jumps up. “Oh can we please?”

“Let’s go put on our old dresses, so we won’t get these dirty.”
Prim runs into the shack with Katniss trailing behind her. Soon they are walking down the path to the creek. Even before they get there, they hear their friends Annie and Jo, splashing in the water with the Hawthornes. The girls run barefooted to join them in the water. Soon the echoes from their laughter can be heard all around their little valley.

It’s well into the afternoon when the girls get back to the house. Daddy and Mama are both sitting on the porch enjoying the slight mountain breeze trying to blow through their valley. Daddy greets them, “Ya’ll are wearing yer old dresses and your hair is wet. Did the creek feel good?”

Katniss and Prim both start talking at once, trying to be the first to tell them about how Gale tried to catch a fish with his bare hands, but everyone had giggled so hard when it jumped up and slapped him in the face. They laughed until they fell on their backsides into the water.

“How big was that fish?” Daddy asks, resting his elbows on his knees, his anticipation making the girls excited.

Prim spreads out her arms as wide as she can and exclaims, “It was that big, Daddy!”

Katniss laughs, holding out her hands more to its true size. “It was more like that, Daddy.”

Jack looks at Lily and sighs. “I wish I had time to go catch that fish and fry it. Add some cornbread and beans. That’s good eating right there.”

Lily giggles. “You only have to work half a day tomorrow. You and Katniss can go fishing tomorrow, and we will have us a fish fry.”

Prim pouts, “But I want to go too!”

Jack swoops up his youngest and twirls her about. “You can go too Little Duck. You can go too.”

Kpkpkpkp

As is custom at the soapstone mines, the men only work half a day on Saturday. Katniss is the first to spy him walking up the drive, so she runs to meet him with Prim following behind. They come walking back to the house, all three Everdeens chattering a mile a minute about their day.

Lily comes out to meet them, and Jack walks up onto the porch to greet her with a kiss. Katniss smiles when she sees her parents finally smiling at one another again.

"Do you want a sandwich before you go fishing?” Lily asks.

Jack nods. "I would." He looks at his daughters. "Did ya' ll eat?”

Prim nods and Katniss answers, "Yes sir, Daddy."

He sits on the edge of the porch and pats the space on either side of him. "Come and sit with me, girls."

They perch on the porch, one on either side of him. Katniss smiles and says, “Daddy, I’m gonna catch the biggest fish today!”

Daddy grins at her, and Prim echoes, “No me! I’m going to catch the biggest one!”
Jack chimes in, “I don’t care, as long as I get to eat it for supper!” He finishes his sandwich, and gives Lily back the napkin it was on so she can wash the little piece of fabric. Years ago when she ran away to marry Jack, her parents disowned her. It was Lily’s best friend, Maysilee, who brought her hope chest and clothes to her out of the back alley behind the apothecary where her father threw it out instead of giving it to her. The napkins and the tea set that sit in the hutch in the corner are among the items that survived. The other things, like the fancy table cloths and the silver, have either been sold or traded when times were really bad. The only things that were left are the cameos that Jack carved for Katniss and Prim.

Daddy pats her on the leg. “Come on, girls. Let’s help Mama start the fire, and then we will go fishing.”

Prim skips along behind them and says in her little sing-song voice, “I invited Rory and Vick to come fishing and to eat with us. Then I asked Annie and Jo and their families too.”

“You invited everyone, didn’t you?” Daddy asks.

Prim’s face falls, and it looks like she was about to cry. “But I didn’t invite Mr. Mellark and them.” She starts to wring her hands together. “They will be mad. Won’t they Daddy?”

He stops and bends down so he can look her in the eye. “My sweet little Primrose, always worrying about everyone else. I doubt the Mellarks could have some anyway. Remember how Mrs. Mellark is still sick?”

Prim nods. “We’ll have plenty for everyone, won’t we?”

Jack smiles. “If I know Hazelle Hawthorne and Abigail Mason, we will have enough for everyone.” He stops and grabs his shovel on the back porch and then walks out into the yard. The girls watch him as he clears out the dry grass and sticks.

“Come on, Prim,” Katniss says while walking to the edge of the yard. She starts picking up the stones that are bigger than her fist, and Prim picks them up too.

“Oh, this is heavy!” Prim complains, but her little eight year old voice doesn’t really sound like it minds.

Jack takes the stones from her. “Go get me some more, Little Duck.”

By now, Lily has joined them, and they all chuckle as Prim walks back, wiggling her bottom with a “quack, quack, quack,” echoing behind her. This time, they all gather stones to circle around
what is going to be the fire pit.

Katniss walks over the wood pile and starts picking up the smallest pieces of wood while Prim picks up the rest. Jack is on the other side, picking out what logs he can use to build the fire. They pile their treasures beside the rock ring, and Jack starts to layer the wood. Lily meantime brings out a rack that will go over the fire for the women to cook on. She doesn’t put it on yet, but she will when it’s time to cook.

Lily hands Jack the tinder box, and in just a moment, there is a spark landing on the shavings. Katniss crouches down beside it, blowing gently, and feeding it brown pine needles until there is a small flame dancing. She then starts to feed the flame, until it grows into many, catching easily on the dry wood.

Katniss stands up, and Daddy throws his arm around her, bringing her in for a side hug. “I knew you would be a good fire starter. Are you two ready?”

The heat of the hot summer day is building, and Katniss knows of nothing better than to go play in the creek. It’s Prim who shows both of their enthusiasm when she jumps and sings, “Let’s go! Let’s go!”

Mama kisses Daddy and then presses a kiss on her daughters’ foreheads. “I hope ya’ll catch a lot of fish!”

They walk the short way to the creek and smile when the Masons, the Hawthornes and the Crestas are already in the water. The daddies all gather where the creek goes wide and start casting their lines. Some of the bigger boys like Gale and Johanna’s brothers Clinton and Gabe, with Annie’s brother Uriah have brought their poles too. The mamas are at home getting the rest of the food ready.

The water washes down off of the mountain into their little valley so it’s always wonderfully cold. The big sisters watch over the little sisters as they splash in the water. Annie says, ”Daddy said that Mrs. Mellark is sick.” They all watch the little girls run in the shallow water of the creek, giggling as they go.

Katniss nods. “Mama is worried.”

Jo pipes in, “She will be alright. Ms. Lily will save her. She saved your mama didn’t she after she had Lila and Leah?”
Annie nods. “She did save Mama after the twins were born. Maybe she will be alright.”

Both older girls look to Katniss, but when she doesn’t have anything else to add, it’s Johanna who says, “You know the oldest Mellark boy? Bram? He left the other day.”

Katniss starts listening, and Annie asks, “He did? Why?”

Jo shrugs. “I think he went to university. Somewhere off from here.” She sighs dramatically, and Katniss looks at her friend like she has grown another head. “I’m going to miss seeing him.”

Annie chuckles, and Katniss asks, “When do you see him now?”

She looks at them through her eyelashes with a smirk on her face. “Oh you know, I’ve seen him in town—”

Annie interrupts with a gasp, “Is he courting you?”

The boys and their fathers all look their way, and Jo waves to them. “Everything is ok.” Once their attention is elsewhere, Jo whirls back to Annie and Katniss. “Geez, you two. Get me in trouble, why don’t you?”

Katniss asks, “You talked to Bram Mellark?”

Jo shakes her head. “No, not yet. I want to.”

Annie says, “Your daddy ain’t going to let you do that. He’s Bram Mellark. His daddy owns the tobacco plantation. They have—” She pauses for a moment, then stutters, “a lot of slaves. I’d say at least fifty. And you are the daughter of a—”

The three girls are close. Their daddies have always worked together, and they all played and went to the one room school house together. That also means they fight like sisters. Jo narrows her eyes at Annie making her pause again. Annie straightens up, as proud as any princess. “I am the daughter of a miner too, but that doesn’t mean that either one of us is going to go live in that big house one day with all of those servants.”
Jo shrugs. “You never know what will happen.”

Katniss says, “I hate it when you two fight.” Cheering on the bank gets their attention. All of the girls stop and watch as the men pull out a big trout. “There is one. How many fish do we need? I’m hungry.”

Annie covers her mouth to hide her giggle. “Mama killed one of her hens today. I think she is bringing that too for us to eat.”

“Mama is doing the same thing!” Jo adds. “She thinks that all of the fish are gone out of the creek.”

Just then, Gale and Clinton both pull out two more trout. “Well, we might be eating fish after all,” Katniss says.

Kpkpkpkp

The sun goes down and the musical instruments come out. All the children from the oldest to the youngest gather around the dying fire. By the time several songs are finished, everyone is breathless and giggling. The sound of approaching hoof beats coming down the road makes everyone pause.

At first, Katniss isn’t sure who it is, but as soon as she sees the windswept blond hair, her heart leaps in her chest. She knows that it’s Peeta Mellark, the youngest son of Graham and Anna Mellark. He approaches the shack alone, pulling the horse to a stop. Jack is the first one to reach him with Lily coming up beside him. Katniss creeps around the guests in her yard until she is close enough to see what they are doing.

She watches Peeta take in the festivities, and he nods at her father. She can’t hear what Mama says to him, but she turns and walks into the house. Daddy says something to Peeta, and they share a chuckle. Peeta scans the yard, and he stops when his gaze lands on her. She doesn’t think that he can see her, but when he nods at her, she can’t help to nod back. Her heart quickens the longer he looks at her, and she can’t help the grin that spreads across her cheeks.

Peeta is still talking to her father when Mama comes back out and hands him a little glass bottle. She misses his gaze as he listens to what her mother tells him. When Lily pats him on the hand, she can read his perfect lips as he mouths ‘thank you’. All of the air leaves her lungs when he meets her eyes again and smiles. He then turns his gray horse around and sets off at a gallop back from where he came.
Everyone is silent for a moment as they watch him leave. It’s Mr. Hawthorne who asks, “What happened?”

Lily announces, “As you probably know, Mrs. Mellark has consumption. Peeta came to get medicine because she is coughing again and her fever has returned. We all need to pray for her to be healed.”

It’s Mr. Cresta, who offers, “Let us pray now for her. Dear Heavenly Father--” Everyone in the yard bows their heads. Katniss bows her head too, but she is too busy thinking about Peeta Mellark to talk to Jesus about healing his mama.

Kpkpkpkp

Peeta gallops up the drive that leads to the stables. He quickly jumps off, and Thresh is there to catch the reigns. Before he has a chance to say anything about putting the horse up, Thresh says, “I got him. You go help your mama.”

He pats Thresh on the shoulder and says, “Thank you.”

He enters through the kitchens where Seeder waits on him. Without a word, she takes the bottle of willow bark from him and rushes it upstairs. He follows her to his mother’s room.

Since Anna got sick, she barely leaves the room, even though Mrs. Everdeen and the doctor both told her she would only get up and move about she would feel much better. Instead she lies there, ordering everyone about. Not for the first time, he is envious of his brothers getting to leave and go to university.

Peeta lingers in the hallway listening to Seeder encourage his mother to take the medicine he got from Mrs. Everdeen. After a quiet moment he knows that she has taken it. “Peeta? Can you come here, please?”

She must have seen him, he thinks as he enters the room. He doesn’t go further than the foot of the bed, scared that he will catch it too. “Yes, ma’am?”

He can barely make her out against the pillows. “I need to tell you something.”

He listens to her and comes closer. “I’m here.”
He hears her sigh. “I’m probably not going to make it much longer --”

"Oh now missus, don't you be talking like that. You are going to be just fine."

"Oh Seeder, you know that I'm not going to make it much longer. I need you to promise me that you will watch over my boys. Can you promise me that Seeder?"

Peeta watches Seeder wipe a tear from her eye. He knows that through the years, his mother and Seeder have had their share of disagreements, but Seeder is also as close as a sister to his mother since they grew up together.

Mama turns her gaze to him and holds out her hands to him, waving him closer. He comes to her, and sits on the bed besides her. "Oh Peeta. I do wish I could see you grow up and get married. I want you to go on to West Point like you plan and make your father proud." He won't say it, but even just last night Daddy told him that he didn't have to go into the military. He could go on to the University of North Carolina like Rye did. He's not about to tell his mother that. Long ago she had made plans for him to be a great military commander.

He presses a kiss to her cheek. "You are going to live for a long time yet.” He tries to reassure her. Seeder brings her another bottle he doesn't recognize and helps her to take some.

She closes her eyes and relaxes as if the medicine works that quickly. He looks at Seeder in question and, she whispers, "She’s taken her laudanum. She will be asleep in just a moment.”

Before he reaches the door, she isn't moving, but a soft snore makes Seeders words true.

Kpkpkpkp

Graham Mellark arrives late that night. He and Chaff were going to stop on the way back from Raleigh, but after changing out the horses, they decided to go ahead home. With Anna being sick, he didn’t want to be that far away.

The ever present Seeder greets them at the front door. “You should be asleep,” Graham tells her. “Someone else could have waited up for me.”

She looks down nervously and picks at a wrinkle. “Young Peeta is in the library. He fell asleep.” She looks into Graham’s eyes. Throughout the years, he has fostered a relationship with his people that is more like an employer than slave and master. Graham has been offered triple what he paid for many of them but always refuses by saying that this farm is their home too. A couple of people have left over the years, only to go up north to freedom. “I’m worried about Anna”

Many people would have been taken aback with the familiarity Seeder speaks of her mistress, until one looks closely and sees the same nose on both of their faces. This made them family. Anna’s father never would have admitted to seeking comfort in Seeder’s mother’s arms after his wife passed. “What’s wrong?” Graham looks upset. “What happened?”

“I found the laudanum bottle. She took the whole thing!” she exclaims.
“How is her breathing?”

“I can hear her rattling in the hallway. She even told Peeta that she isn’t going to be here much longer.”

Graham runs his fingers through his hair, just like his sons do. “I’ll go up and check on her. Is there any supper left?”

Seeder says, “I’ll check.”

Graham goes upstairs and peeks in on his wife from the doorway. She is resting peacefully on her side just like Lily told her to. She is still snoring lightly, but at least she is still breathing. He wishes he could do something but knows that when it comes to consumption, there isn’t much he can do.

He goes back down to the kitchens and sits down at the table. Seeder sets a plate in front of him and he starts to eat. He doesn’t really taste anything he is so lost in his thoughts. It’s not until his youngest son sits down in front of him that he smiles for the first time since he came home.

Peeta picks up a new potato and pops it into his mouth. Graham watches him chew. “Still stealing my potatoes?”

Peeta shrugs. “You weren’t going to eat it.”

Graham chuckles. “I guess I wasn’t.” He grows serious. “How is your mother?”

Peeta looks down at the wooden table, tracing the rings. “I had to go to the Everdeen shack to get Mama some willow bark. Her fever came back.”

“Did Lily have enough?”

Peeta nods. “She gave me what she had and told me that she would have some more soon. I also asked her to come by tomorrow to check on her.”
Graham sets down his fork, not feeling as hungry as he did just a moment ago. “That will be good. Maybe I shouldn’t have sent your brothers away yet.”

“She will be fine in a couple of days. You just wait and see.” Peeta boasts.

Kpkpkpkp

They find her dead the next morning.

Seeder checks on her right after sunrise as is her custom. It’s Seeder’s sob that wakes up Graham who is asleep in the room next door. He stands at the connecting door, not coming into the room, and simply says, “Let me go get Peeta.”

He wakes his youngest son who quietly follows his father to his mother’s room. They watch Seeder for a moment in her grief and then come to stand behind her. Peeta, only having learned that Seeder is indeed his aunt only a couple of months ago, wraps his arm around her, pulling her to his side. Graham leans over his wife and kisses her forehead. He straightens and murmurs, “We need to call the Coroner and send Chaff to fetch Rye and Bram.”

Peeta nods.

Kpkpkpkp

Word of Anna Mellark’s death travels quickly through the valley. Lily gets the girls cleaned up, and they along with Jack, go up to the big house a couple of miles away to pay their respects. They meet the Masons, the Crestas and the Hawthornes on the way.

The kids end up walking ahead of the mothers and the fathers, not really staying to listen to their conservation. Not that there is much being said. Gale does say, “I can’t imagine Mama and Daddy dying. I hope they never do.”

Everyone who understands just nods, while Posy and Jessie chase one another. After just a couple of more turns, they see the mansion sitting on top of the hill. The children all stop and wait for Lily to take the lead. The families follow her up the hill.

Lily pauses at the entrance, behind other people who live in the valley who are waiting. Katniss feels Prim’s little hand take a hold of hers. She whispers, "It’s alright, Prim."

"Mama said that Mrs. Mellark is gone to heaven. We came to tell Mr. Mellark that we are sorry for her dying. "

"Yes, that's what we are doing." Katniss huffs, "it's too hot."

The line moves forward onto the sweeping front porch that travels the length of the house. Katniss has been here before, but never entering the front door like a treasured guest instead of with the local healer at the kitchen door because the doctor couldn’t make it in time.

Katniss looks up and down the porch taking in the French doors that are open all down the side of the house welcoming in any kind of breeze that might be stirring in this hot summer heat. A couple of well-dressed ladies pass by them with such lovely fans that Katniss would give what little she has to get one.

The line moves forward, and they also move with it. This time when they pause, the girls are standing in the doorway. It is so big, that they both can fit in it, side-by-side without touching the frame. Katniss and Prim peek all around them, their eyes growing wide as they take in the marble tile awaiting their feet. It looks so smooth, that Katniss wants to touch it to see if it’s really as smooth as it looks.

“Look Mama, there are the other children from school.”

Katniss looks up to see Madge Undersee standing on the other side of the foyer. She is standing with a tall woman who must be her mother. She hears her say, “Lily, it is so nice to see you.”

Katniss watches the back of her mother’s head nod at this woman. “May, it’s nice to see you too. Is that Madge? She has grown up so much.”

Prim whispers, “That’s Madge.”

Katniss whispers back, “It is. Her mama and Mama used to be friends.”

“Why ain’t they still?”

Katniss shrugs. She wonders why Mama isn’t friends with Madge’s mom and aunt anymore. Madge’s daddy is the mayor of their little town as their teacher likes to tell them in their little one room school house. Madge always sits in the corner and it seems to Katniss that she is trying to hide when Ms. Atala reminds the class of that. This is the first time in a long time Katniss has seen Madge’s mother. She is usually at home in the bed with a headache so Madge walks to school
alone since she just lives down the road from the schoolhouse.

The adults have stopped talking and by now Katniss is standing in the middle of the foyer, unable to take her eyes off of the grandest staircase she has ever seen. Granted the only other one is the wooden one at Sae’s shop leading up to the dry goods on the second floor. “Look at that Katniss. Does that lead to heaven?” Prim asks.

“That’s silly Prim.” She answers, but wonders that herself. She looks around, taking in the grandness of the wide open room. She will learn later what she is looking at, but for now, the fancy paper lining the walls with delicate flowers makes her speechless and for once, the rest of her friends aren’t saying anything either. She reaches out and runs her fingers along the ornate piece of wood at runs along the wall at her waist. It’s painted white to match the paper above it.

She smiles when she sees Prim’s little fingers feeling along beside hers. “That feels smooth,” Prim whispers.

Katniss nods, looking around the rest of the room. Nothing else stands out except for how white and clean everything is. It’s so unlike her shack where everything seems to be dirty, well not dirty, but not this.

Before she realizes what is happening, her and Prim are ushered into another room. All of the air seems to leave her lungs when she sees the fancy black coffin at the end of the room. She squeezes Prim’s hand, and steps closer to get Daddy’s hand again.

His big, weathered, gentle hand envelops hers. She looks up to him and the smile he smiles only for her lights up his face. He pulls her closer, bringing Prim in too. He doesn’t say anything, but follows Lily up to the front of the room, where the family waits.

"What are they doing Daddy?" Prim whispers.

"This is what a wake is. The family stays up with the deceased while people come to pay their respects."

The adults start talking, and while Prim is too short to see into the black box, Katniss can. She can’t help the shiver that travels down her spine when she sees the gray stranger’s face surrounded by blonde curls. She takes a step back, putting Daddy in between her and coffin, not wanting to see anymore.

The young man who came by her house the other night is standing there, watching her. She boldly stares back, meeting his sky blue eyes with her own silver ones. Blond curls, lighter than his mother’s relax against his forehead. He is wearing a form fitting coat that almost matches his eyes. She hears his clear his throat and her eyes fly back up to his face.
Their eyes meet, and she isn’t sure what to do when he arches his eye brow like he wants to ask her something. She finally breaks the gaze, to look down at Prim, who is whispering something to Leah and Lila, Annie’s little sisters. She looks back to Peeta, who is still watching her. She follows her parents like a good daughter, and waits while her mother introduces them to Mr. Mellark and then he introduces them to his sons.

She already knows who they are, but she doubts if they know who they are. She watches Peeta’s lips mouth her name after he learns it, and somehow in her twelve year-old mind, she knows that she will never forget the day that Peeta Mellark said her name, even if it isn’t out loud.

Kpkpkpkp

It’s a couple of days after that, Jack has Katniss in the woods hunting with him. He began teaching her the year before, but only their close friends know that he is doing it. Even if they are dirt poor, fathers didn’t often teach their daughters to hunt.

She creeps along behind him, stepping where he does so she can be as quiet as he is. He stops, and waves at her behind him. He glances back and when he meets her gaze, he barely nods towards the flock of turkeys beside them. They both notch an arrow, and take aim.

Katniss takes a deep breath, and as she exhales, she lets her arrow fly. The grin that appears when her arrow sinks into the turkey says everything. The rest of the turkeys stand there for a moment before her father's arrow finds its mark. Then what's left runs away into the underbrush.

"You are getting better and better."

She doesn't say anything as Daddy pulls the arrows gently out of the birds. He field dresses the birds, whispering a prayer of thanks as he works. He quickly finishes, and puts them into his game bag. "Come on my sweet Kat. Let's go start supper."

Kpkpkpkp

The rest of the year passes quickly. The children of the valley start school again, the leaves change colors, and daddy teaches her to hunt the deer in the woods surrounding them. Mama keeps on visiting her patients, and Daddy works in the mines. The Christmas celebration finds them all better off than ever before, with both Katniss and Prim receiving dolls and new dresses. There is
even an orange and peppermint candy in the bottom of their stockings.

There are many things that Katniss remembers about January. The cold of the season settles in, the winds pick up, and the snow starts. Katniss and Prim have already walked to school, and are warming themselves by the old wood stove in the corner before Ms. Atala asks them to take their seats.

“Daddy is sick today,” Annie says.

“What’s wrong with him?” Prim asks. Katniss thinks that she is going to be a healer like Mama.

Annie shrugs. “I think it’s just a flu, but he is running a fever. He didn’t go to the mines. ”

The girls all nod before they are interrupted by Ms. Atala. They find their desks and are just sitting down, when the loudest boom they have ever heard, shakes the one room school house. Katniss hops back up, as does all the children in the school room who has a father working in the mine.

Ms. Atala quickly calls out, trying to get everyone’s attention. Everyone is voicing their fears and not paying attention to her. She finally pierces the noise with a most un-lady like whistle. Head all over turn to look at her. “Everyone needs to be quiet for a moment. If you will quickly get your coats on, we will walk over to Sae and Blight’s to see what happened.”

The older ones help the youngest ones, and siblings gather together so they can walk across the street to the general store where everyone went to learn the news of the day.

Prim slides her hand into Katniss' hand, and they follow the rest of them out the door. Before they even have a chance to cross, Mama is there, grabbing Prim's other hand. Silently, they cross the road.

People have already started gathering, and they join the crowd. Everyone looks up when Blight comes out. "Pastor Enloe came by. He's opened the church and has a fire going. Let's all go over there and get these kids out of the cold."

Everyone murmurs their thanks and walks next door to the church. It's not very big, but it is big enough to hold most everyone in town. Even the smallest children are quiet as the church fills up. The Everdeens find the pew they usually sit on quickly sit. The families gather around one another and Katniss whisper’s in Annie’s ear, “Where is your Daddy at?”
Annie turns around. “He went to the mine to see if he could help.”

Katniss nods, and sits back. Prim slides her hand into hers, and she can hear her mother praying under her breath when Bristol, the foreman of the mine steps up on the podium. He clears his throat until he has everyone’s attention. “We have started recovering some of the men from the mines,” he pauses when he sees Lily get to her feet. “Ms. Lily, old Doctor Lund has come from Asheville to help us for now. We’ll come and get you if we need you.”

Katniss sees her mother nod, but she doesn’t stop praying. Katniss leans into her side, and Lily pulls her close as she wraps her arm around her. “Mrs. Everdeen, Mrs. Hawthorne,” Bristol says to the ladies as he approaches them.

It’s Hazelle who finds her words first. “Mr. Bristol. Have you seen our husbands yet?”

He looks down at the old wood flooring, and even Katniss who is all of eleven years old can tell something is wrong. He finally looks back up, and says, “Would you two come to the Sunday school room with me?”

Hazelle grabs Lily’s hand, and says, “We need our children with us please.”

He looks at them and sighs most tiredly. “We found Jack and Colton first thing.”

Kpkpkpkp

Katniss weaved herself in and out of the people crammed into her little shack. She is just glad that Prim still has a hold of her hand. The people finally thin out close to the pine box sitting on the table. Prim pulls back, and it makes Katniss want to cry when she hears her sister whimper. She squeezes her hand, and they walk to stand beside mama.

Hazelle explained to Katniss that it’s custom for the family to sit with the ones who die, but she is very sure that Mama hasn’t moved from the chair that sits beside the coffin. Even when Prim tries to hug Mama, she won’t even look at either one of them, much less hug her back.

There have been so many people today, that Katniss can’t keep them straight. She shakes another
stranger’s hand, when a deep, warm voice, gets her attention. The crowd parts just like she imagines the Red Sea did for Moses, this time however, instead of the Egyptians, she sees a warm, welcoming man with thick blond hair and kind eyes the same color of a summer day. He stops and shakes hands with several people along the short length of the house before he arrives at the box beside what’s left of the Everdeens.

Katniss sees someone behind him, and even though a deep grief that she won’t understand until years later has surrounded her heart, it still speeds up when she sees Mr. Mellark’s youngest son, Peeta coming in behind his father.

They travel the short length of the shack, and both of the Mellarks takes their caps off. They stop first at the pine box behind Katniss, pausing for a moment to look upon Daddy’s face. Not for the first time that day, Katniss wishes how he would wake up, tell everyone that this is just a joke on Lily, and it’s time to go home. Instead, Daddy is lying dead in his shack, while friends and strangers come to look at him.

Mr. Mellark and Peeta turn to Lily next. Mr. Mellark bends down and she can’t hear what he is saying. Her heart sinks when she realizes that Mama isn’t going to talk to anyone, much less Mr. Mellark. She can see the worry on his face, but he doesn’t say anything. Instead he reaches for her, and she puts her hand in his. "Your mother talked about you,” he smiles at Prim, who for the first time since they were told, smiles. “And you so many times when she would come and try to help Anna. I am so very sorry about your Daddy.”

Katniss blinks as the tears she has been trying not to cry try to run down her cheeks. Before she has a chance to wipe her eyes, Peeta is giving her a hug, which somehow, makes her cry all the harder. She calms herself down, and he is handing her his handkerchief. She dabs her eyes, like she has seen Mama do and whispers, “Thank you.”

He still has his arm around her when he murmurs, “I’m sorry about your Daddy, too.”

She can’t help the sob that comes out of her, and he pulls her in again. She isn’t sure what it is, but for the first time since she heard the boom, she feels safe.

Kpkpkpkp

“Mama,” Katniss says in Lily’s ear. “Mama, we are hungry.”

She only moves from the bed to the chair, and only if they help her. Prim encourages her to eat what little Katniss has found, but it’s not much. For the past three days, they have been drinking weak tea made with even weaker mint leaves that Prim found in the back of Mama’s medicine bag.

The mines gave them some money after Daddy, a sob catches in her chest. She is so weak, that she can’t even cry. She used that as sparingly as she could. But it’s gone now. People have even stopped sending for Mama, knowing that she isn’t able to get up, but somehow no one is coming around to check on them. She must be fooling them better than she thought.

Prim sounds like a newborn kitten when she says, “Katniss, I’m going to go lay down.”

Katniss puts another piece of wood on the fire, and weakly stands up. She crosses the room to Mama’s hope chest. She struggles under the weight that even a month ago when they still had some food to eat, she would have lifted it fine.

There isn’t much in there, except for the fancy napkins, some old baby clothes, and the tea set. She spies the cameos that Daddy made them, but sadness grips her when she thinks about something happening to them. So she grabs the gowns and slams the lid shut. Not for spite, but because it’s too heavy.

“I’ll be right back,” she says bringing the blanket up around Prim’s shoulders.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to find something, anything to eat.” Prim nods, and closes her eyes. She glances at Mama sitting in the chair, and decides that she needs to save what energy she has to walk to town.

A light, cold rain is falling. She pulls Mama’s shawl tighter around her, and walks through the squishy mud. She knows that she is walking slower than her normal brisk pace, and she has to stop and rest for a moment where her road meets the main road that leads to town.

The walk must have made her weaker because when she takes the next step, she slips and sinks to her knees. The rain is picking up, and it’s getting colder. She can’t help to think that she is going to die out here on the road, and no one will be here to take care of Prim.
She takes a deep breath, and struggles to her feet, refusing to let her family, her Prim die. This time she manages ten steps before she is on her knees again. There is an old apple tree that grows next to the road, so she crawls over to it grateful to finally be able to rest for a moment.

She closes her eyes, willing herself to stop shaking. It doesn’t work.

Is someone coming? She barely gets her eyes open to see who it is, when that someone is picking her up, this time she finds the energy to open them to see seventeen year-old Peeta Mellark picking her up. She mews, “I’m too dirty for you--”

He shakes his head interrupting her, “Shhh,” he interrupts. She knows in that moment that he has the voice of an angel when he asks, “what are you doing out here?”

She can feel his gaze taking her in. the only looking glass they have at home is Daddy’s little shaving mirror, but she knows even without looking in it, she must looks a fright. As least that is what Mama would have said. “I’m going to town.”

He grips her tighter when her teeth start chattering together. “I need to get you home--”

This time it’s her who interrupts, “No! I need to get some food! Prim--”

Understanding flits across his face. At least she thinks that is understanding. Before she can say anything, he is lifting her up to his horse and climbing up behind her. He unfastens his cape, and pulls her close, wrapping it around them both. She then realizes how warm he is and tucks herself into his chest.

“Are you hungry?” He whispers. She groans when the pins and needles begin to torture her as the feeling comes back in her arms and legs. He pulls the horse to a stop, and asks, “Are you alright?”

She answers him by rubbing her arms, trying to get the sensations to stop. When he adds his touch to hers, it seems to soothe instantly. She sags against him in relief when it finally stops. “Better now?”

She nods, and he clicks his tongue encouraging his horse to move again. She sneaks a look up at him, her handsome savior. There is a light scattering of white-blond beard dotting his chin and
jaw. She can sort of see the blue of his eyes, and even her eleven-year-old heart does a little flip when she thinks about how they are the same color as the sky on an autumn day. Just not a rainy day. Like today. His blond curls are poking out from under his wool slouch hat. He has her tight enough against him, that the rain that drops off the brim, hits the cape around them, and not on her face.

He pulls the horse to a stop, and she peeks out seeing that they are in front of Sae’s. In a flurry of movement, he climbs down with her still in his arms. He walks to the sidewalk in front of the storefront, and sets her down. She wobbles on her feet, hanging on to him until she feels steady again. “Are you alright?” he asks. She nods, while he fastens the cape around her again. “We are going to go in here, and I want you to get what you need to for you family to eat.” She opens her mouth to protest when he continues, “You are just like your father, don’t like to owe anyone anything. Well consider this as payment for what your mama did for my mother. She helped her more that ole’ Doc Lund ever did.”

Katniss, nods, and follows him into the store. He walks to the counter, and begins to talk to Sae while she wonders the aisles. The food on the shelves makes her mouth water. She doesn’t pick anything up until Peeta comes back to her with a basket on his arm. He motions for her to follow him to the canned goods aisle. Without a word, he begins to fill the basket full of cans. Then he goes to the flour, retrieves a bag of it, and then adds some oil. She watches him in disbelief, fighting between the feelings of that he is doing this to be kind, or collecting the food to be cruel to her. She can’t help but to think that after his kindness today, that is he is indeed doing this to be mean, she will probably die along with Prim. For the first time since he picked her up out of the mud, she says, “I can pay you back for this. I know, this summer, I can hunt, and share with your family.”

She is almost afraid to meet his gaze when he looks at her. She looks up, and sees nothing but kindness there and she sighs in relief. He says with a smile, “That would be fine if that’s what you wanted to do. You can hunt?”

She nods a faint smile on her lips. “Daddy was teaching me.” she takes a deep breath, her voice cracking with her next words, “I’ll be able to provide when it gets warmer.”

Peeta says, “I have no doubt that you will.”

She follows him back to the front of the store. Sae comes around the counter to give her a hug. “How is your Mama,” she asks when she goes back around.

Katniss won’t meet her eyes. “She is alright. We are all alright.” Katniss watches as Peeta gives her a gold coin to pay for the food. Then he packs into his saddle bags that Katniss didn’t even realize that he had.
She follows him out the door and to the horse. It’s not raining anymore and she waits as he ties the bags onto his saddle. She isn’t sure why she fumbles over the simple, “Thank you.”

He turns and grabs her hand pulling her along. “Where are we going now?”

Peeta doesn’t answer, but instead pulls her into the bakery. The wonderful smells of the rich loaves reach her nose, making her stomach growl even louder. He leaves her at the door, and in a moment comes back to her. “Now we can go.”

She mutely trails after him, and he hands her the bread. Then he helps her back onto the horse with him climbing up behind him. Before he urges the horse forward, he digs out a roll and tears it in half. He offers her one, and she takes it but watches him. He crams the other half into his mouth. She smiles and puts the roll up to her nose. She can’t help herself when she eats the rest of it.

He sets the horse in motion, and in no time, they arrive back at her shack. He helps her down, and then climbs down himself, and unties the bags. He starts for the house, and she realizes that he is intending to go in. “I’ll get that.” she rushes by him. “When I left, Mama and Prim were sleeping.”

Peeta stops and looks past her at her door. “Well then I won’t go in.” He does step onto the porch and gives her the bags. “I’ll get those from you another time.” and then he shoves the bread into her arms. “And that’s for you.”

“But this is too much--”

He interrupts, “No it’s not. I left you with an account at Sae’s. Please, go and get what you need. In fact I know that my father would insist on it.”

All she can do is nod as he climbs back onto his horse. She watches him trot down the drive. Once he has disappeared around the bend, she releases a deep breath that she didn’t know she was holding. She looks down, and spies a bright flash of yellow reaching up out of the mud.

Katniss smiles, letting the wonderful feeling of hope wash over her. She isn’t sure how, but as she picks the dandelion and holds it under her nose, she knows that she and Prim are going to be alright.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you my sweet Gentlemama for beta-ing! You rock!

Merry Christmas everyone!

Winter, 1860 [four years later]

Katniss draws her arrow, releases the breath she always holds, and lets go with a prayer on her lips. She doesn't stop the grin when it sinks into its eye, dropping it to the ground. Gale slaps her on the back and says, "Good job, Katnip."

"Thank you. Now you can help me carry him back."

He throws his own bow over his shoulder. "I knew that's the only reason why you brought me out here."

She shakes her head at him, and grabs his game bag. Gale then hoists the deer onto his shoulders. "You came out here to check your traps. I was here hunting."

It's been years since the mines blew up, leaving Katniss and Gale both without fathers. In the year that followed, they started hunting together and trading to feed their families. Katniss never told any of her friends or family about Peeta helping them that one time. While she is thankful for his generosity, it's with a proud tilt of her chin she knows that she hasn't had to use the store credit since those first couple of months. Everything else since then, she and Prim have earned. She was also able to find a goat for Prim, and Prim uses the milk from the goat for trade.

It took Mama a little longer to get back to herself. Even now, there are days that they have to beg and plead for her to get out of bed. If they aren't in school, Prim goes with her on her visits and Katniss goes to the woods.

While Jack Everdeen and Colton Hawthorne were killed in the mines, Jo's father lost his legs. Without Mama to tend to him, Doc Lund had to come and help. The owner of the mine, Mr. Snow, gave Mr. Mason a wheelchair, and a tiny monthly sum. It's enough to cover some of the expenses.

Johanna's oldest brother Gabe and her other one, Clinton have both left home. Gabe went to go work as a ship hand, and Clinton went into the army. Jo confided to Katniss that her brothers send home money when they can.

Annie's daddy was sick that day. Since then, he has quit working in the mines, not wanting to go back where his friends were killed. So he opened a sawmill with Mr. Mason helping him. Uriah, Annie's older brother, has stayed home to work at the sawmill. Annie has told her the stories about how even with his legs gone, Mr. Mason will climb all over logs, measuring them before they are sawed, doing things a man with two legs can do easy.

Soon Katniss and Gale are where they butcher their kills. They work together in silence, quickly dividing the meat, so they can go do their trades. They part, with Gale heading towards town,
while Katniss heads to the Mellark's.

Graham sets down his newspaper as Seeder brings him his coffee tray. "Thank you. Is Lily here yet?"

Seeder gives him a knowing look "I know what you are doing with her-"

Graham grins at her. "We are just two widows who are enjoying one another's company. Did I ever tell you that I knew Lily when we were young?"

Seeder nods as she pours the dab of milk he likes in his coffee. She hands him the cup, and huffs, "Just because you two have known one another for a long time doesn't mean that what you are doing now is right. Why don't you just marry her then? Move those girls out of that run down shack and give them a proper home since their daddy died."

Graham sets down his cup. "Is something wrong? I told you to tell me if something is wrong-"

Seeder interrupts, "Nothing is wrong. Prim is usually at the Hawthornes' while Lily is here:-

"Where is Katniss?"

"I've tried to tell you, she puts on her daddy's old pants and goes into the woods with the oldest Hawthorne boy."

Graham stands up, reaching for his coat. "That is highly improper. I'll move them right-"

"You can't do that without marrying Lily."

"And she won't marry me." he says, his wide shoulders deflating in defeat. "I've asked, she won't."

"Then there is nothing you can do." Seeder says as she hands him the mail.

Graham smiles when he sees letters from Peeta and Rye, then his smile fades. "Do you think they will be alright?"

Seeder sighs. "The boys or the Everdeens?"

"Did you see the paper this morning? South Carolina is wanting to leave the union."

"Do you think they will?"

Graham Mellark isn't an old man, but in that moment, all of his worries about his loved ones, his people, and world weigh heavy on his shoulders. "I think this just may lead to war. The boys will be fine. Peeta is at West Point, Bram and Rye are at Chapel Hill. I just worry about Lily and her girls."

Seeder nods, understanding, but also knows that he is thinking out loud. She offers, "I wish I knew what to tell you. If I can do anything, let me know."

Graham focuses on her. "Thank you. I know that it's not always easy being in the position that you are in. You know that you can leave anytime you want to. You and Chaff can go up-"

Seeder shakes her head. "My family is here. Anna might be gone, but my other half-sister lives in the next county. You are letting Rue and Thresh get an education too and we are together. That means a lot. Besides if a war might be starting, then we want to stay here."
Graham stands and circles his old desk. "You will always be welcome here-

He is interrupted by Chaff knocking on the doorframe. "Ms. Lily is here."

Graham knows that he smiles, but only Seeder and Chaff knows that he has only smiled that way since he started courting Lily. "Seeder can you-

She finishes his sentence, "I'll bring you two tea in the parlor."

He grins and makes his way down stairs. He finds her sitting on the low couch that Anna hated. She wanted to throw it out, but since it was the very one that he and Lily would sit on when they were coming of age, it would have been like cutting a piece of his heart out. So he bid for Chaff to move it to the attic. He brought it back out after Anna passed. He watches her for a moment fidgeting with her threadbare shawl, wishing she would finally accept the one he bought her a month ago. He supposes the years have been kind to him, at least that is what she tells him, but he promises her that her beauty grows more and more each day. She swats him on the arm like she did once when she was sixteen, and they chuckle together. He wants to give her everything that she has missed out on since she ran away with Jack Everdeen instead of him, but he knows that she is also very proud. "Have you been waiting long?" he asks.

She jumps, and he feels like a cad for scaring her like that. "Oh, Graham, there you are."

He enters, and she doesn't get up, but does offer him her hand. He sits down beside her, bringing her knuckles up to his lips. He brushes feather-light kisses on each knuckle, and loves that he can still make her blush. He keeps a hold of her hand when Seeder comes in with the service. She winks at Lily, who by now, is an old friend of hers too, and shakes her head at Graham. The blush on Lily's cheeks grows in brightness, and she pulls her fingers from his grasp. "Thank you Seeder." Lily says.

She reaches for the tea pot, and begins to pour. They both sip the welcome warmth on this cold winter's day. He waits for her to set her cup down before he asks, "How are you and the girls?"

She nods and takes one of the cookies cook baked today. "I'm cold-

He sets down the dainty cup that always looks too small for his huge hands. "Please, Lily. Let me move you and the girls. I can give you everything."

Lily interrupts. "You know that I can't do that. We will be fine this winter. Mr. Cresta is letting us have the scraps, along with a couple of logs that Gale and Rory have chopped for us to share. We have put up plenty of food," she places her hand on his arm. "We will be fine."

He only really touches her when they are in the bedroom, but he pulls her into a hug anyway and whispers, "I just worry about you, please let me do more for you, for Katniss and Prim-

She pulls away and hushes him when she puts her fingers over his lips. "Thank you for worrying about us. Can we go upstairs?"

He smiles against her fingers, his head whirling that she is letting him hold her. He nods eagerly, and pulls her with him to his room.

Kpkpkpkp

Katniss pulls the old game bag higher up on her shoulder and opens the door to Sae's. It's early yet, so it's only her and Sae. "Hello dear. Did you get the mistletoe?"

Katniss sets the bag on the counter, and slides in her hand in, reaching for the leaves. "I also got
Katniss can't help the repulsion that makes a chill run down her spine. Cray has only talked to her once in the store, and thankfully Gale was with her. She isn't sure why, but she can tell that he is a cruel man. She is sure at one time he might have been a decent sort of fellow, but now he is hunched over, one side of his face is droopy, and he is always wiping drool from his mouth.

She makes herself smile, ready to leave the store before Mr. Cray does arrive. Before she reaches the door, the newspaper boy comes rushing in waving a paper. He is breathless from running, but when he lays it on the counter, they all read the headline, "SOUTH CAROLINA SECEDES FROM THE UNION" with the date, December 20, 1860.

Ever since the mine blew up, the families get together for a Christmas meal. The Masons and the Crestas wanted to do more, but with their own big families, they would share their food when they could. This year, as they all sit at the Crestas the now teenagers can't help but to hear the adults talking about South Carolina. The boys are in there listening, while the girls are as far away as they can get.

"This war is stupid anyway." Jo whispers while Annie is trying to hush her. "Oh you hush yourself Annie. This war is going to do nothing but make our brothers go away."

Katniss knows that there are tears in her eyes when she sees Annie's and Jo's both fill with their own tears. Annie gets out her handkerchief and dabs her eyes. "Hush now Jo. Let's talk about something else."

Jo smirks. "Guess who I saw in town today?"

It's Jo's little sister Jessie who answers, "Who?"

"Hey, you aren't supposed to be over here! Go back to Mama!" Jo fusses.

"I'm not a baby anymore. I can be over here with you."

Annie's twin sisters, Leah and Lila chime in too, "We can be over here too."

Katniss scowls. "Just tell us already who you saw!"

Jo looks at her knowingly. "That's right, you have a crush on him." she pauses for dramatic flair, "I saw the Mellark brothers. And they had a very handsome friend with them. I think they said his name is Finnick-"

"You talked to them?" squeals Annie.

Katniss feels her heart speeding up. Should she do something? Go seek him out and offer to repay him? She wipes her hands on her skirt. This time, Jo leans forward and says, "I bet you they will be at Blight's barn dance tomorrow. I think we should go."

"You look so pretty Katniss." Prim says behind her, straightening her dress.

She runs her hands over her bodice, enjoying the feel of spun, rich cotton under her fingers. The
dress is a wonderful shade of light forest green, with little pink flowers stitched delicately all of it. She has never seen material this fine except when she passes the wealthier citizens of their little town when she is out doing trades. Mama left out early this morning after hearing Katniss and Prim expressing a wish to go to the dance, she came back with two dresses, one for her and one for Prim. Katniss and Prim both asked where she had gotten it. Lily just shook her head and wouldn't say anything. It reminded Katniss of the arguments Mama would have with Daddy.

Katniss, for the first time, is wearing a corset. She isn't sure how she likes the tightness around her ribs, but she will have to get used to it. She walks across the floor, and the rustling of the petticoats distracts her. These are so stiff, they can stand up by themselves.

Prim sighs dreamily, "I wish I could have petticoats like that." Prim's dress is a beautiful shade of pink. In its simplicity, Katniss feels like it's even prettier than her dress.

"You have petticoats," Katniss says with a chuckle.

Prim shakes her head. "But you have more."

Lily is still adjusting her stays when she notices them. Katniss isn't sure how to describe the look on her face, but she is relieved when mama sighs happily. "You two are going to be the belles of the dance tonight."

Katniss blushes, it's been a while since Mama has been this happy. Prim says, "Let me help you get dressed Mama. I'm ready to go."

"You know you can only dance the reels," Lily admonishes Prim.

Prim sighs, "I know mama. I just want to go watch everyone dance!" She grabs Katniss' hands and pulls her around the room, twirling in circles. They finally stop in a flurry of skirts and giggles.

Lily asks, "Can someone fasten me, please?"

Prim goes to Mama while someone knocks on the door. "That must the Crestas." Katniss says as she goes to the door. She opens it to Annie standing there with a huge grin on her face.

"Are ya'll ready to go?"

Katniss looks back at Mama and Prim. She nods and opens the door wider. Annie accepts her unspoken invite and comes on in. "Ya'll look so pretty!" Annie exclaims.

Prim finishes with Mama, and they grab their shawls and clutches and follow Annie out the door. Since the start of his sawmill, Mr. Cresta has been busy. Instead of showing off the new found prosperity, he has been putting everything back into the mill. Tonight for the dance, he has offered the use of his long wagon to carry his neighbors to the dance.

Mama and Prim go ahead of Katniss, and she latches the door behind her. She notices who is driving and she yells, "Clinton! Gabe! What are ya'll doing home?"

Clinton mason jumps down from the wagon and hurries over to her. Their porch is of a good height, and with Clinton standing before Katniss, his head comes to her waist. He reaches up, grabs her about the waist and carries her to the back of the wagon, where the Crestas have hay bales for everyone to sit on. "We wanted to surprise Mother and Father for Christmas." Clinton says.

"We didn't even tell Jo we were coming home." Gabe adds. Katniss notices her friend sitting there
behind her brothers. They help Mama and Prim into the wagon while Jo huffs, "They woke me up when they put a piece of ice down my gown. You will have to help me get them back."

Katniss sits down beside Jo and pinches her in the side. "It's nice that they are home. I know that you've missed them."

Jo shrugs, trying to keep the smile off of her face. "Where did you get the fancy dress? Prim is all dressed up too."

Annie joins them, sharing her blanket with her friends. The wagon starts moving, and Katniss hopes that the subject is forgotten, but it's Annie who asks, "I love this dress."

Katniss whispers harshly, "I don't know where Mama got them. She won't tell us."

Annie pats her arm. "It's alright. Tonight, we are going to dance all night long! Or at least 'til Daddy says no more wagon rides."

They all chuckle at that, and then they are in town, approaching the barn. "It's beautiful," Katniss breathes.

The wagon pulls to a stop, and they help one another down. Katniss doesn't think anything about it when Clinton helps her down again. She tries to step away from him, but he keeps his hands on her waist for a moment longer than he normally would. She looks into his deep brown eyes, and he whispers, "Will you save a dance for me?"

Before she has a chance to answer, Jo links her arm through Katniss' and pulls her away from her brother. Katniss looks back at him, not sure what just happened.

Jo pulls her into the big barn, that Blight built after Mr. Cresta built his sawmill. They use it to store their hay in, which for the evening, is gathered around the wall to make room for a dance floor. It seems that everyone has brought their lanterns, lighting up the entire barn as if it's in a fairy tale. She recognizes several of the musicians warming up at the other end of the barn. It's going to be good to hear music again.

"This is beautiful," Annie murmurs, and she can't help but to agree. She isn't sure what it is, but something wonderful is in the air. That is, until someone, a big someone, runs into her back, nearly knocking her down.

"I am so sorry, miss-"

He trails off as she meets his gaze. Silver meets his wonderful sky colored eyes. Tonight, she decides, his eyes are the same color as the sky on a clear winter's day. Her breath comes out with a delightful shudder and she breathes, "It's alright, I'm sure you didn't see me."

Peeta Mellark's right eyebrow lifts the exact same way it did so long ago. A smirk decorates his face, lightly teasing her sixteen year old self. "I definitely see you now."

She smiles at him, but it's Annie who interrupts, "Are you alright, Katniss? I'm so glad that he caught you before something happened."

She can't help but to think that something is happening. Peeta lets his hands trail down her arms, ending at her hands. Then he brings one of her hands to his lips, and brushes his lips across her knuckles so lightly, she can barely call it a kiss. He murmurs, "Will you save a dance for me? And not a reel, but a real dance?"
All of the air has left the room for her and all she can do is nod. This time, when he smiles at her, there isn't a hint of anything but genuine warmth. She smiles back until they are interrupted by his green eyed friend slapping Peeta on the back. He drops her hands and rolls his eyes. "What Finnick?" he asks, with a hint of boredom in his voice making Katniss wonder where he's been all this time.

Finnick ignores his friend, and instead gives her a little bow. "My lady, would you please introduce me to your beautiful friend over there?" She follows his nod to the where Annie and Jo are both standing, the rest of their brothers and sisters scattered about.

She glances at Peeta, who is still watching her. "And you are-"
Finnick pushes Peeta away enough so he can get a hold of the hand he didn't kiss. He brings it to his lips, gives her knuckles a sound kiss and she knows in that moment that Peeta's touch makes her feel good. "I'm Finnick Odair of the New Orleans Odairs. I know young Peeta here," he releases her hand and slaps Peeta on the shoulder, earning him a grunt from Peeta. "From West Point."

She give a little crusty, and replies, "My name is Katniss Everdeen." She then waves Annie and Jo over. The girls quickly catch up to them. "Finnick Odair, this is my friend Annie Cresta, and my other friend Johanna Mason."

The simple sound of a fiddle starting brings a hush over the crowd that is assembled. Blight stands before the musicians, and clears his throat. "Can everyone hear me?" He asks loudly.

Someone in the back who sounds like Mr. Mason replies, "We would rather hear the music."

Everyone laughs. "I'll be out of the way in just a moment. As I look around my too big barn, I am grateful for so many familiar faces I can see this evening." He looks towards the Masons and nods. "I hope everyone has a wonderful time."

One of the men in the back, Katniss can't tell who it is because the shadow is hiding his face yells, "What about South Carolina leaving the union? Do you think North Carolina is next?"

Blight looks into the corner, covering his eyes so he can see better. "Who is that? Cray?" Katniss shivers when she sees the nasty man come into the light. "I told you Mr. Cray, we aren't talking politics tonight. This is Christmas, there will time for that later." His words are met with applause. Blight nods at one of the fiddle players who Katniss can see that it's Mr. Bristol. He begins to play and Blight continues, "Now let's start this dance. First one up, ladies choice!"

His announcement is met with giggles as ladies of all ages seek out the men of all ages to dance with them. Katniss hears a throat clearing beside her and she can't stop her small smile. Peeta is still beside her when she meets his eyes, and he has that same eyebrow raised. She isn't sure if he is daring her or asking her to accept him, she sighs, "Would you like to dance, Mr. Mellark?"

He grabs her hand with a chuckle. "I thought you would never ask." He leads her out onto the dance floor. She sees that Finnick somehow got Annie to dance with him, and she isn't surprised at all that Jo is dancing with Bram, or is that Rye? Peeta swirls her around, and she no longer cares who Johanna is dancing with.

"How old are you now?" Peeta asks.

"I'm sixteen."

She can't tell if he is surprised, but he does tease, "You are but a baby."

"I am not a baby," she huffs. "Now old are you?"
He grins. "I'm twenty-one."

"What is it like at West Point?"

He shrugs. "It's alright. I might transfer to Chapel Hill. I don't think the military is for me."

She's heard the rumors at the store and school. She doesn't understand everything, but she does know that there might be a war. "Yeah, I don't blame you."

The musicians end the song and he tucks her hand into his elbow, escorting her off the floor. He returns her where he found her, and catches her hand again. This time, she knows that he gives her more than a kiss because he lingers over her hand. "Thank you for allowing me to dance with you. Remember me when you are all grown up," he whispers, then chuckles as he watches her cheeks grow red.

He then rejoins his brothers and friend and she can't help but to feel that she just wants to hide him somewhere away from what might be getting ready to happen.

The next day is Christmas. Before the holiday, Katniss had been able to trade several deer and turkeys for all of the presents she needs. Prim has worked hard too, selling and trading cheese from her goat, then with Lily seeing patients again, they've had a successful fall and winter so far.

Christmas morning finds them opening both homemade and presents bought at Sae's. Each of the ladies receive a new dress, some new hair ribbons, and peppermint candy.

Lily wraps her new shawl around her slight shoulders. "You girls really went all out this year. Prim, this shawl is beautiful."

Prim smiles at her mother's words then she throws her arms around Lily's neck. "Thank you Mama. I love you."

Lily returns her hug. "I love you too." she waves Katniss over. She wraps her other arm around Katniss. "I love you."

Katniss whispers to both Prim and Mama, "I love you."

"Let's get ready for church," Lily announces. Katniss looks after her as she fairly bounces across the shack.

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This time it's Uriah who is driving the wagon to take them to church. Prim settles down in between Lila and Leah and says, "I could get used to this. Katniss? Maybe we should have gotten a wagon and a horse for Christmas."

"And where would we keep a horse? I'm always fixing the fence from where your goat tries to eat it. That's enough," Katniss says with a scowl.

The younger girls giggle while the wagon starts moving. Katniss isn't going to say it out loud, but she could get used to this too. It only takes them a minute to arrive at the church. She glances around at the wagons and sees the ones she normally sees when she is in town. The fancy carriage at the front of the church building is an unfamiliar one. She wonders briefly if it might be the Mellark buggy, and her heart speeds up at the thought of being able to see him again so soon.

Uriah lets them all off at the front door, and they quickly file in to find their seats. She loses all
ability to breathe when she sees four varying shades of blond hair and a ginger one standing in the front of the church. Annie stops besides her, freezing in her tracks too. "They are here?" Annie whispers.

Then, it's as if they hear Annie's whisper, Peeta and Finnick both turn around. The girls don't miss the grins that spread across their faces when they see them.

"Come on," Katniss hisses as she pulls Annie into the pew with her. They remain standing while more of the congregation comes in, and several people come by and greet them. Katniss and Annie watch the young men wind their way around to them.

"Ms. Cresta," Finnick asks, "may I have a word with you?"

Annie looks nervously at Katniss, and she doesn't really know what to do, so she nods and tries to look encouraging. Annie steps out of the pew so she can stand closer to Finnick. Katniss can't hear what he is murmuring to her because Peeta steps into Annie's place. He nods, and whispers, "Miss Everdeen."

She smiles nervously, "Mr. Mellark."

She isn't sure what else to say to him, so when he asks, "Did you have a good Christmas breakfast this morning?"

She nods shyly. "Did you? Have a good breakfast I mean?"

He smiles, and it feels as if her heart is doing summer saults in her chest. "I did. If I would have known I was going to see you this morning, I would have brought you something to remember me by."

She wonders why he is even talking to her, much less being so kind to her. "Do you want me to pay you back? For Sae's I mean? I took several of my kills to your cook. Was it not enough?" She blurts out, then she claps her hands over her mouth, wanting to catch the words before he hears them, afraid that somehow, she might hurt him.

He merely chuckles, and reaches for her hand. His fingers are so warm against her forever cold hand. "You don't owe me anything Katniss," he murmurs. Before either one of them could say anything else, Pastor Enloe takes his place behind the podium. He clears his throat, so he can get everyone's attention. Peeta leans over and murmurs, "Wait for me after the service?"

She nods while he steps aside so Annie can slide in beside her. She watches Peeta and Finnick walk back to the front pew and then looks back to Annie wanting to ask her something, but the big goofy grin on her face says everything. They get the song book and Katniss whispers in Annie's ear, "What happened?"

Annie replies with a sigh, "I think we might be courting."

Everyone starts singing, and Mama pokes her in the ribs before she can ask Annie anymore questions. She sits impatiently through the short Christmas service and as soon as Pastor Enloe says amen, she jumps up and grabs Annie, who still has that stupid grin on her face. She pulls to the wall with her, to get out of the way of everyone leaving. "How can you be courting? He's going back to WestPoint after New Year's."

She feels guilty for reminding Annie of reality when she sees her grin fade away. She really is Katniss' dearest friend, except for Jo, and she doesn't mean to hurt her. "Finnick said that we could write, and he might transfer with Peeta to another school in North Carolina. Especially since there might be a war." Annie tries to reason with her.
Katniss huffs instead of pinching her like she really wants to, "I am already tired of hearing about a war that probably isn't even going to happen." she looks around and sees Peeta and Finnick watching them from across the church. "Let's go outside."

They weave in and out of the parishioners still talking. They reach the door, and somehow Katniss is not surprised when she sees the young men arriving at the same time. Without a word, but only with a smile, Finnick grabs Annie’s hand and practically drags her outside. Peeta just nods at her and they walk out together.

Katniss watches Finnick bring Annie's hand up to his lips, and then linger there for several moment past what would be considered proper. The look on Annie's face says that she doesn't mind at all. "Only father was going to come this morning, but when Finnick learned that Annie would be here, he made us all come with him," Peeta whispers in her ear.

She takes a nervous step back, and almost runs into old Mrs. Johnson who is coming out at the same time. The widow who often buys rabbits from her eyes light up in recognition at the young people standing and braving the Christmas morning cold. "Merry Christmas," she wishes them and hurries to make her way back home.

Katniss isn't sure what to think, but is saved when her mother and Prim exit the church behind the widow. Lily looks from her to Peeta, confusion clear on her face. Mr. Mellark steps out behind her mother and grins when he sees her and Peeta. Lily looks from her to Peeta and says, "Don't stand in front of the door."

They all walk out to the parking area, getting closer to Annie and Finnick. She isn't sure why, but Katniss wants to protect them all of a sudden. So she goes to Annie, and slides her hand into the crook of her elbow. "Your parents are coming," she whispers.

Annie nods and starts to step away from Finnick who also heard the whisper. He looks at the people who are filing out of the church. "Where are your parents? I would like to talk to them."

Annie's mouth forms a perfect O, before the dreamy grin reappears. "You want to meet my parents?" Annie asks.

Finnick returns his gaze and mirrors Annie's grin. "I wish to call upon you before I have to go back. Can I? Call on you I mean?"

Even Katniss has to smile at the way he is fumbling over his words. Peeta has joined them by now, and he has a smile too. Annie nods and she waves at her parents who are coming down the church steps. Katniss looks around for her mother who she left to go over to Annie. She spies her talking with Mr. Mellark. The look on both of their faces-

Peeta interrupts her thoughts, "I wonder where Father is, and oh there he is talking to your mother. I think something is wrong with him."

Katniss says, "Oh no. what do you think it is?"

He shrugs. "I'm not sure. Bram said that she has been coming to the house almost every day but he seems fine."

She studies Mr. Mellark, looking for anything that might be wrong. She can't tell if he is sick or not. Her mother and Prim are the healers, not her. But there is something… is it the way he is looking… Uriah pulling up in the Cresta's wagon interrupts her thoughts. Peeta says, "Is that your ride?"
She nods, and her family and neighbors all start to gather at the wagon. "I've got to go," she murmurs, not sure what or how to say what she wants.

He offers her his hand, helping her up. She doesn't miss the looks at Clinton and Gale both give Peeta. She thinks that he doesn't notice since he is still smiling his easy smile at her. Finnick comes up beside him, helping Annie in. Johanna comes up behind them, and with her hands on her hips, says, "Who is going to help me up?"

Peeta and Finnick both turn and grab one of her arms. She is the shortest of the three girls and they basically throw her up onto the platform. Katniss and Annie both giggle at surprised shock on Jo's face. She turns around and drops into a deep curtsy and says, "Thank you, gentlemen." Then with a strut that the queen of England would be proud of, she joins Annie and Katniss. The girls giggle watching them having to help everyone up into the wagon from Annie's twin sisters who look at them with awe, to Hazelle and Lily. Even little Jessie hops impatiently wanting them to pick her up.

Katniss watches Peeta the entire time. He isn't mad that he is helping, but is kind to everyone he is helping, even the little girls. She might only be sixteen, but she knows that kind people have a way of getting into her heart. She just wonders if he knows that he already has hers.

Katniss walks along the dirt road to town with her game bag on her hip. She's lucky that those rabbits jumped across her path today if they hadn't, well even she doesn't want to admit that she is thinking about Peeta Mellark instead of hunting. It's not like she is going to end up marrying him. Not that she will. Get married that is.

"Katniss!" she hears someone calling her as she passes the Cresta house. She pauses for a moment and smiles when she sees Annie running towards her. "There you are."

"What's wrong?" she asks.

"Oh nothing, I just thought you would be by when Finnick came calling," Annie says with a grin. Katniss mirrors her smile. "What happened?"

Annie sighs, "Well Daddy said that we can't really court, because he is so far away. He did say that we could start writing letters." Katniss almost laughs when her friend sighs again, "It's so romantic and heart breaking all at the same time."

"Why is it heartbreaking?"

Annie pauses, and Katniss can almost swear she can see her thinking. She finally shrugs. "I guess it's heartbreaking because I will have to wait so long in between letters."

They chuckle together. "Do you want to walk to Sae's with me? Blight wanted some squirrels for supper."

Annie nods. "Let me tell Mama and I'll walk with you."

Annie turns, and Katniss has an idea. "Why don't we take the wagon?"

"You just want me for my buggy, don't you Katniss Everdeen?"

"Who me? Couldn't be." She replies, then smirks when Uriah comes around the corner of the house with the wagon ready to go.

Graham reaches for Lily and she lands in his lap. She is reading the newspaper over his shoulder.
He kisses her on the nose. "You know, I love you, but when you read the paper over my shoulder-"

She interrupts him with a kiss surprising him. He is the one who always kisses first, hugs first, and drags her upstairs first. She pulls away with a loud smack. "Do you still want to marry me?" She whispers.

He has known Lily Watts Everdeen ever since they were small and played on the river bank together. This is the first time she has rendered him speechless. She fiddles with his top button. "I know this is being very forward-"

He grabs her sides, and claims her lips. They part with a sigh. "Are you sure?" he asks, unable to keep the tremor of excitement out of his voice.

She nods and looks at the headline of the paper again. "Louisiana makes the sixth state to leave the union" the headline screams. She doesn't miss the date, January 26, 1861. She asks, "You know that I love you." he nods. She smiles and says, "Then let's go get married. The girls are staying at the Masons tonight."

"You mean, we can go and get married right now?" He asks and she smiles to hear his eagerness.

She nods and he kisses her again before he pushes her off of his lap. She stands with a giggle. "Why did you do that?"

He stands up beside her and drags out her out into the foyer. He gets his coat, and gives her shawl. Then he is dragging her out to the barn.

"Where are we going?" she asks with a giggle.

"To find Pastor Enloe before you change your mind," Graham says with a grin.

They have to go to Rutherford County to find Pastor Enloe. He goes to visit his dear mother and the sick on every Tuesday. Graham doesn't want to wait another day, so they go to find him.

The ceremony is short compared to both of their first ones. Neither one minds, Lily is happy that she will be able to move the girls into a safer house since there might be a war like the reporters from Atlanta seem to think, while Graham is thrilled to finally be able to call Lily his.

There is a small bed and breakfast in Rutherfordton, and while Graham wishes they can have their wedding night somewhere better, he is quickly convinced when Lily pulls him into the room with the biggest smile on her face that this humble room will be just fine. They both leave the room the next morning wearing the same clothes they wore in, but no one says anything. The inn keeper and his wife remember fondly when they eloped, and wish them well and to come back on anniversaries.

They are on the way so Lily can go and tell the girls, and Graham can write letters to the boys when a herd of deer run out in front of them. This startles the horse who rears back, falling on his side, tipping the buggy over and sending it down a steep bank.

"Where's Mama?" Prim asks coming back out of the cold shack.

"Is she not in there?" Katniss asks, stepping up on the porch behind Prim. They both look in the house again, expecting to see her. "I don't think she's been here since yesterday."

Johanna had brought them back in the wagon and come up on the porch to investigate. "I wonder where she is?" Jo asks. "Let me help you build a fire."
Katniss leaves them in there and goes to gather some kindling. Soon they have a fire going, and Jo says, "Do you want me to stay until she gets back?"

Katniss rolls her eyes. "We are fine. Thanks for letting us stay the night."

Jo sees the worried look on Prim's face. "Y'all can come back if you want. Even if she is out delivering a baby, she could be there for days."

Katniss nods. "We might. Can you give us a ride to Sae's? They would know if anyone is in labor."

Jo shrugs. "Alright. Make sure you turn down the stove."

Prim chuckles, "Yeah, if the house burned down, that would be bad."

Jo nods. "Well let's go."

It only takes them a moment before they are there, and the girls rush in. "Do you know if anyone is having their baby? We spent the night at the Masons' and can't find Mama." Prim asks.

Sae shakes her head. "We haven't heard of anyone."

Prim looks behind the counter where Katniss knows Blight likes to read the paper alone. "Have you heard anything about Lily Everdeen? The girls are here and can't find her."

It just takes a moment before he appears from behind the curtain. He nods a greeting at them, then turns his attention to his wife. "I haven't heard anything. Did you try up at the Mellark plantation?"

Prim looks confused, while Katniss asks, "Why would Mama be up there?"

Sae scowls at her husband. She says to the young ladies standing in front of her, "She might be up there is all. Do you want me to send Blight up there?"

Jo whispers, "I can take you."

Katniss says out loud, "Jo can take us."

It's a couple of miles to the plantation, and while Katniss has walked it several times, this is the first time she has traveled it in a wagon. Prim sits in between her and Jo, so they can huddle together for warmth. "You know, I've said it before, but I'm going to have one of these."

"What are you talking about? You want to get a horse?" Prim asks.

Katniss nods. "We could go anywhere if we had one of these."

"You know Daddy will let you use this one anytime you want." Jo adds.

They pull up at the mansion, but Katniss says, "Go that way Jo, the kitchens are over there."

Jo watches the front door pass by and says, "Why are we going to the kitchens?"

"Because that's where Seeder will answer." before she has a chance to jump down, Thresh is there, helping her down. "Thank you," she says shyly. Even she, who is usually oblivious, notices the worry on the servant's face. Seeder comes running out the kitchens about then, not giving Katniss a chance to say anything.

"Miss Katniss, I'm glad you are here." Seeder says a little breathless.
Prim has climbed down, followed by Jo. Seeder notices them and waves them in. "Let's get you warmed up. Come on dears."

They follow her in, and gratefully accept the cups of hot tea. Katniss sips, lets the heat move through her before she asks, "Have you seen Mama? We spent the night at the Masons and haven't seen her today. There wasn't a fire at home, so we know that she hasn't been home all night."

Seeder takes a deep breath but Katniss can still hear how nervous she is, "I haven't seen them either. I wonder if I should send Chaff to look for them-"

Katniss interrupts, "Why would Chaff go looking for them? What happened?"

"They went yesterday to find Pastor Enloe." Seeder answers.

"But why would they do that?" Prim asks.

Jo's eyes grow big. "Did they elope? Is that why they went to go find the pastor?"

Katniss says, "No, Mama wouldn't-" her voice trails off when she sees the look on Seeder's face. No one has to tell her that Jo has figured out the secret. All she can say is, "oh-"

Prim asks, "Did they really go and get married? Why wouldn't they have told us?" Prim's voice sounds so pitiful that Katniss wraps her arms around her.

"When were they supposed to be back?" Jo asks.

Seeder shakes her head. "I thought they would be back by now. Let's call Chaff. He and Thresh can go looking for them.

They decide to wait. Jo sent word to her parents, and they return to wait with them along with Annie.

A flurry of movement announces the men's arrival several hours later. First they carry in Mr. Mellark and immediately take him upstairs. Chaff comes in carrying Mama. All Katniss has to do is see her grey face, and she knows. She knows... Prim runs to Mama's lifeless body, fussing the whole time about not telling them what she was doing and how she must have been so in love... Katniss doesn't reach her sister in time, before Prim starts screaming. Katniss catches her, and then Johanna and Annie catch them. They all sob together on the floor.

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