Everything I Didn't Say

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Summary

Playing piano was only ever meant to be a way for Peeta to help his memory after an accident that left his brain slightly damaged. He never thought it would help him to talk to people, especially not to Katniss.
Chapter 1

My fingers danced over the black and white keys of the piano, releasing a melody that I had not played before. I snapped out of my reverie just in time to grab the pencil that I always kept behind my right ear and managed to jot down the chords on the piece of paper resting on the stand before I forgot them. Ever since an accident that happened when I was 6, my memory comes and goes and I find it difficult to remember simple things. I’ve been trying out different ways to improve my memory and so far playing the piano is the only thing that helps. By associating music with memories, it makes it easier to remember. Playing the piano helps me to remember stuff for tests as well and I had a history one coming up in a few days. Next to the collection of chords I wrote down the key dates and events that I needed to remember. If I carried on playing this song over and over again, eventually the information would stay in my mind and I would be able to answer at least a few of the questions.

My grades have never been particularly good because I can’t remember enough information to get me through a test. After ten years of barely scraping through, my teachers are beginning to give up on me. Learning songs to help with remembering information is good but I’m not allowed to listen to the music when I take the test which makes the whole thing seem futile. I can’t help but think that I should find another way to help my memory but I can’t give up the piano. The familiar feel of it under my fingers and the music that seeps from it brings me calmness and I don’t know what I’d do without it. Trying out other methods of improving my memory would mean less time doing the one thing I love.

The sound of the warning bell rang throughout the school. I glanced at the clock and cursed under my breath. I had lost track of time which meant that I only had 5 minutes to get to class when it usually took me around 10. The accident also left my left leg damaged and now I walked with a limp. I usually left early for my classes so that I could get there before anyone else and avoid the awkward shuffle between desks to reach mine in the back. The joys of having alphabetised seating plans. I quickly gathered up the scattered papers and shoved them into my bag before slinging it onto my back and pulling my arms through the straps. I picked my crutches up from the floor and hurried out of the room to my next class, History. I took long strides, my feet barely touching the ground as I used the crutches to propel myself forward. When I reached the classroom, the lesson had already started. I took a deep breath before knocking on the small glass window. My teacher, Miss Trinket, opened the door and sighed. 

“Oh, Peeta. I understand your situation,’ she said, pursing her lips and glancing down at my crutches. ‘But please try not to be late. It interrupts my schedule. You know that I like everything to be on time.” “Sorry.” I mumbled, shuffling past her and making my way towards my seat in the back corner of the fairly small room, trying to avoid bumping into anything. Before I’d realised what was happening I was falling to the ground, my arms splayed in front of me still attached to my crutches. I didn’t have enough time to shield my face and I heard the sound of the bone of my nose breaking before I felt it. I heard a shrill yelp from behind me as Miss Trinket rushed over, her bright pink stiletto heels clicking against the floor. I didn’t move. I didn’t want to see the reaction on people’s faces. I felt the blood dripping from my nose and steelied myself for the oncoming surge of pity and laughter from my classmates. I pulled my arms from my crutches, the sound of them clacking against the floor momentarily drowning out Miss Trinket’s steps. I kept my head down as I pushed myself up and leaned against the leg of someone’s desk. I didn’t need to look up to know who it was when I saw the plain black backpack resting on the floor. Great. This just got even better. Not only had I broken my nose, but I managed to do it right in front of Katniss
I don’t know when I’d started liking Katniss. Panem was a fairly small town so we had been at school together, usually in the same class, since kindergarten. We barely spoke apart from when we had to in group work, which was hardly ever. One of the only things I can remember from before the accident is the day I first noticed her. We were both five years old and it was the first day of school. She was wearing a red plaid dress, her hair in two braids instead of the usual one that she wears now. Our teacher asked if anyone knew the valley song and her hand shot straight up. Hearing her sing did something to me and I haven’t been the same since. Out of all the memories of my childhood, I’m not sure why that one stuck but I wouldn’t change it for anything else.

“Are you okay?” Miss Trinket squeaked, her hand resting on my shoulder.
“Yeah, I’m fine.” I replied, holding the palm of my hand under my nose in an attempt to stop the flow of blood.
“You’re not fine. There’s blood everywhere. Go to the nurse, Peeta.”
“I’ll take him.” Oh no. Not her.
“Thank you, Katniss.” Said Miss Trinket, hooking her hand under my arm to help me stand up. I used the hand that I had been holding under my nose to push myself up, having to rely heavily on Miss Trinket as I couldn’t put too much pressure on my left leg. After a few seconds of struggling to gain my footing, Katniss held onto my other arm and pulled me up so that I was standing. This just kept getting better and better.
“Thanks.” I mumbled, putting my hand back under my nose. ‘You don’t have to take me. I can go by myself.” I bended over to get my crutches but Katniss had already picked them up, as well as my bag. She handed the crutches to me, slinging my bag across her shoulder.
“You can’t go by yourself. Let’s go.” Katniss rested her hand on my back, guiding me forward towards the door.
“I’m sorry.” I whispered to Miss Trinket as we walked past her. She just gave me a pitying look in return.
Katniss walked slightly ahead of me, taking her hand off my back. I hadn’t realised how comforting the gesture had felt until she’d stopped. She opened the door for me, allowing me to walk out first before closing the door behind her. We walked in silence down the locker-lined corridor to the staircase that led to the nurse’s office on the first floor. I touched the tip of my nose gently and winced in pain. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Katniss turn her head slightly to look at me. I quickly dropped my hand to my side and ducked my head. I silently hoped that Katniss wouldn’t ask any questions and we could continue in silence.

“Does it still hurt?” Well, there goes that idea.
“Yeah, a little bit. It’s not as bad it looks.” I replied, looking down at the floor.
“Do you even know how it looks?” Katniss asked.
“I imagine there’s a lot of blood.” I said sarcastically, instantly regretting it. None of this was her fault, she was just trying to help. Why was she trying to help me? We weren’t friends, we barely talked to each other. I think this was the most we’d ever talked and even then it was just a few obligatory questions that she felt the need to ask.
“Do you want to clean yourself up before we get to the nurse’s office?” She stopped walking, placing her hand on my arm in a way of telling me to do the same. I finally looked at her and a sudden warmth flooded my stomach. I’d seen her pretty much everyday for 10 years but every time I looked at her, it was like seeing her for the first time. Her head was tilted slightly to the left, her grey eyes searching my face for an answer.
“Um, yeah I guess.” I stammered in reply, turning away to avoid her gaze for any longer. We stood in silence for moment before Katniss cleared her throat.
“I think the bathroom’s over there.” She gestured to a door a few feet away. I nodded, telling her I’d be quick before hurrying to the door.
I leaned backwards against the door to push it open, grateful that no one else was inside. I shrugged my arms out of the crutches before resting them on the side of the sink and turning on the faucet. I looked at my reflection in the mirror and grimaced. It really did look bad, my nose was curved to the left and stained with blood. I felt another wave of embarrassment wash over me, the whole class had seen me like this for a few minutes, Katniss for even longer. I washed the blood off my hands whilst trying to figure out how I would clean my face without touching my nose. I decided to dampen some paper towels and try to wash it using them. I dabbed the now dried blood and managed to get most of it off, leaving me looking slightly better than before. I used my hands to cup some water and swilled it around my mouth, spitting it out a tinted pink colour. I repeated the action a few times, the metallic taste of the blood gradually decreasing. After drying my hands and face with paper towels, I looped my arms through the crutches and left the bathroom. Katniss was still waiting outside, but now she was on her phone. I saw the ghost of a smile on her lips. I cleared my throat before speaking.

“You can go back if you want. I’m alright now.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll come with you.” She replied, clicking her phone off and putting it in the back pocket of her dark jeans. We walked down the corridor in silence. I considered talking to her but as soon as I opened my mouth, I immediately closed it. We’d made as much small talk as possible and every question I thought of asking seemed too intrusive, too personal. Katniss’ phone chimed, breaking the uneasy silence. She reached for it but then looked at me and made the decision to ignore it.

“Don’t mind me.” I mumbled, regretting it straight away.

“What?” She turned her head to face me.

“Oh, nothing. I was just saying that you can check your phone if you want.” I looked down at the ground, following the movement of the crutches with my eyes.

“I’d feel rude checking it in front of you. I think that when you’re with someone, you should be with them completely.’ I felt my cheeks redden at the thought of being with Katniss. I know she didn’t mean it like that and we would never be together in that way, but the idea still filled me with happiness. ‘It’s probably just Gale anyway.’ At the sound of his name, any thoughts of being with her left my mind. No one really knew what sort of relationship Katniss and Gale had. It seemed like they’d been friends forever and maybe now they were something more. They never talked about their relationship, be it romantic or otherwise, and so everyone was left guessing. I tried not to think about the idea of them being in a relationship but all signs pointed to it.

“Sure, whatever.” I said coldly, not realising how jilted I sounded. We walked the final five minutes in silence.

When we reached the nurse’s office, Katniss handed me my bag before turning to go back to class. I thanked her as she walked away and silently cursed myself for the way I had behaved around her. The nurse’s room was small, the walls lined with locked cabinets filled with essential first aid materials. I perched on the edge of the bed, placing my crutches to the side before pushing myself back against the wall. It didn’t take long for the nurse to tell me that my nose was in fact broken and I would have to go to the hospital. The thought of missing out on the rest of my classes and having to catch up with the work filled me with dread. I was already behind on most of my work and this would just add to the load.

“I’ll have to call your parents, Peeta.” She said in a sympathetic tone as she removed the blue latex gloves that she was wearing. It took a few seconds for me to realise what she had said. My parents. My mother.

“No, you can’t call them.” I said, louder than intended.

“It’s standard procedure for something like this. I have to call them, Peeta.” She declared as she left the room.

“No, fuck, no.” I said to the empty room. This was bad. I would rather deal with breaking my nose every day for a year than face my mother right now. Ever since the accident, my mother had hated me. She was involved in the accident as well and she blamed me for it. Even though I knew that what happened was out of my control, I still felt like it was my fault. I clenched my hand into a fist and started hitting my bad leg, a habit that I had started doing a few years ago. I gritted my
teeth through the pain, not stopping until the nurse opened the door.

“You mother is on her way, Peeta. She’ll be here soon.” She smiled as if this was the best news she had ever delivered. I smiled politely back at her and willed her to leave the room so I could spend the next few minutes alone thinking about what I was going to say and do when my mother finally arrived. Before the nurse had come back, a small part of me had hoped that my dad would come instead but I knew there was no way my mother would let him. She wanted to deal with me before my father had a chance to stop her. After standing awkwardly for a few minutes the nurse finally left the room and I clenched my fist again, hitting my leg until the pain became unbearable. I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes, draping one arm across them, the other across my stomach.

I must have fallen asleep because half an hour later the nurse was shaking me awake.

“Peeta, your mother’s here.” She said in a low whisper, her dark hair dangling in front of her eyes. I pushed myself up, swinging my legs off the bed before picking up my crutches. I thanked the nurse for her help as I walked out of the room, remembering to pick up my bag at the last second. The nurse ushered me out of the room and towards the exit where my mother stood. I looked nothing like my mother, I had inherited my blue eyes and blond hair from my dad. My mother had brown eyes and almost black hair that just reached past her shoulders. She was slightly shorter than me but somehow she managed to make me feel smaller than her when she spoke to me.

“Thank you, dear.” Mother said in a creepily polite voice that was unfamiliar to me. ‘Poor Peeta, what happened to you?” She smoothed her hand over my hair, sending a chill up my spine. Obviously, she was trying to seem like a loving parent which couldn’t be further from the truth. “I just fell over. I’m fine.” I mumbled, looking down at the floor and fiddling with the handles of my crutches. She placed her fingers under my chin, tilting my head up.

“Let’s get you to the hospital, dear. It looks broken.” The feel of her thumb under my chin felt wrong. Every time she touched me, it felt wrong. I tilted my head to the left, removing myself from her grip before walking towards the door. I heard the faint sound of her talking to the nurse as I walked to the car, opening the back door and throwing my crutches in before shuffling towards the front door and getting in. A few minutes later my mother got in to the car, all traces of her happy personality vanishing as she did so.

“Do you really think I have time to be running around after you and sorting out your stupid mistakes?” She said, not bothering to look at me as she turned the key in the ignition and started driving out of the parking lot. I didn’t answer, unsure of what to say. I stared out of the window, hoping that she wouldn’t say anything else. I hadn’t been expecting the slap that hit the back of my head, drawing me out of my thoughts.

“Answer me, boy. Don’t make me repeat myself.” She snarled.

“No, you don’t.” I stammered in reply, the pain at the back of my head beginning to dissipate. I cursed myself for speaking too soon as another hit followed in the exact same place, the pain increasing two-fold.

“Full sentences, boy. I didn’t raise you like that. What’s the point in sending you to school when you don’t even speak properly? I told your father we should have just kept you at home, made you work in the bakery full time, but that man insists on sending you to school.” When she spoke about my dad, her words were laced with disgust. The only reason my mother tolerated my dad was because of the bakery. If he didn’t have that she would have left him long ago. My dad could easily leave my mother but for some strange reason, he didn’t. It was obvious that they didn’t like each other, let alone love each other. At this point I think they were together out of necessity rather than because they wanted to be with each other.

“No, you don’t have time to run around after me. I’m sorry.” I tried to hide the anger and hurt in my voice. I was sick of the way she treated me but there was nothing I could do about it. The rest of the journey home was spent listening to her complaining about everything I did wrong, how useless I was, as if I didn’t already know it.

“Your father can take you to the hospital. I don’t have time for you.” She said after we’d gotten
out of the car and I had grabbed my crutches from the back seat. I entered the house after her. It was attached to the back of the bakery and as soon as I walked in, the smell of fresh bread overwhelmed me.

I made my way to the front of the bakery where my dad was working alongside my brother, Asher. At eighteen, Asher was two years older than me and took after both our mother and father with blue eyes and dark brown hair. We used to share a room but when Asher turned eighteen he demanded that he be allowed to have his own room. Unlike me, Asher had many friends that he liked to invite around and it just wasn’t ‘cool’ for him to share a room with his baby brother. It annoyed me that Asher referred to me as his baby brother, there was only two years between us and we were pretty much the same height now.

“Hey, dad? Are you busy?” I asked. He didn’t turn around when he answered me. “Hi, Peeta. What’s the matter?” “I think I need to go to the hospital but it’s fine. It can wait.” This time he turned around and saw the dried blood around my nose. “What happened?” He asked, dropping the dish cloth he was holding and rushing over to me and holding my face in his hands. “It’s nothing, I just fell over.” “It’s not nothing, Peeta. Come on, get in the car.” He dropped his hands and went over to Asher, telling him what work needed to be done. I heard Asher make a disgruntled sound before agreeing to complete what needed to be done. My dad pushed me towards the front door and then into his car.

One trip to the hospital later and I came home with a bandage across my nose that I couldn’t take off for a few weeks. My nose wasn’t broken, but fractured and would heal by itself. When we returned home, I went straight to my room, avoiding the rest of my family and collapsed onto my bed, waiting for sleep to pull me under.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to update this every Wednesday
I woke up the next day and immediately felt a throbbing pain around my nose. I touched it tentatively but quickly dropped my hand and winced. It hurt slightly less than it had yesterday but it was still too painful for me to touch. I hadn’t covered myself with my blanket last night and so it was now bunched up at my feet, half on the floor. I shuffled over to the side of the bed, swinging my legs over the edge before taking a sharp intake of breath. Pain shot up my left leg and I remembered the events of yesterday that led to me punching my leg. This always happened. I would do it and it would feel right but then I had to suffer the after effects where it hurt ten times more and I’d regret it. I rubbed my hand over the sore spot and waited a few moments before pushing myself up off the bed and stretching my arms above my head. I glanced at my crutches lying on the floor before turning away from them and straightening my back. I shook my hands out before dropping them to my sides and took a few deep breaths. I took a hesitant step forward and then another and another. I faltered and could feel my leg giving way underneath me so I grabbed the wooden chest of drawers that contained my clothes for support. I swore under my breath at myself for not getting any further.

A few months ago I had decided that I wanted to learn how to walk without my crutches and so every morning I’ve been practicing. I want to be more independent and not rely on my crutches or other people but I haven’t been able to get past the dresser. Bigger dreams of being able to walk to school have taken second place to just being able to walk to the bathroom. I hobbled back to the bed and sat down, kicking my crutches with my good leg before picking them up and putting my arms through the holes. I walked back over to the chest of drawers, much quicker this time, and pulled out two towels and clothes. I flung them over my shoulder and made my way to the bathroom that I shared with Asher. He was allowed his own room but we still had to share a bathroom. I knocked on the door to make sure that he wasn’t in there and then entered, throwing my clothes and towels onto the rail. I took my arms out of the crutches and rested them against the wall and taking my clothes off. I got into the shower and felt grateful for these small moments where I could be by myself and not have to worry about anything.

“Peeta! Hurry up!” Asher shouted, pounding on the door. I’d barely been in here for ten minutes. There goes any hope of staying in here and having more time to myself. I turned the shower off before getting out and wrapping the towel around my waist.

“I’ll be out in ten minutes!” I replied, grabbing the other towel and drying my hair and body. “Make it five!” He yelled, hitting the door one last time. I dried myself off completely and put my jeans on, having to sit on the lid of the toilet to avoid falling over and threw one of the towels around my bare shoulders. I stood up and walked over to the sink, turning on the faucet before taking my toothbrush out of the holder and putting toothpaste on it. I brushed my teeth and studied my reflection in the mirror. The area around my nose was swollen and it looked like I had two black eyes. The stark contrast between the dark swollen areas and my eyes made them appear an even brighter shade of blue. I rinsed my toothbrush off and put it back before cupping some water in my hands and drawing it to my mouth. I spat it out and used one end of the towel to wipe my mouth. The air in the bathroom was still humid from the steam of the shower so I opened up the small window above the sink so that Asher wouldn’t complain. I unlocked the bathroom door and put my hands through my crutches just as Asher pushed against the door, making it hit against the wall on the other side.

“Time’s up. Out.” Asher said, standing to the side and giving me space to walk past him. I picked
up my old clothes and towels and threw them into the hamper before grabbing my new shirt. “Do you really have to do that every day?” I asked, walking past him and towards my room. “Of course, baby brother.” I turned around to see Asher leaning against the door frame and smirking.

“I’m not a baby.” I said dejectedly as Asher slammed the door shut. I entered my room and sat down on the edge of the unmade bed. I hooked the end of one of the crutches through the straps of my bag and lifted it up, bringing it closer to me. There are some perks to having metal rods attached to you all the time. I checked to make sure that I had the right books I needed and took out the ones that I didn’t. I searched for my pencil that I always kept behind my ear but I couldn’t find it. I emptied the bag out, searched through all of the pockets but still nothing. I must have lost it when I fell over yesterday. I leaned over to the bedside table and grabbed another pencil from the small holder which contained about twenty of them. I pulled my shirt over my head and tucked the pencil behind my ear before standing up. I quickly made the bed and checked my bag again to make sure I had everything I needed and then pulled it onto my shoulders.

I made my way downstairs slowly, trying to drag out the inevitable. I don’t have a mirror in my room so I stood in front of the one in the living room that was hung above the small fireplace. I combed my fingers through my hair in an attempt to make it look slightly better. I looked at my nose again and the off-white bandage that covered most of it. There was no way I could hide it or make it look less worse so I just sighed and accepted the fact that today was not going to be easy.

“Peeta? Is that you?” I heard my father shout from the bakery. “Yeah. What’s the matter?” I replied, turning away from the mirror. I hated the way I looked so I avoided looking in mirrors as much as I could.

“How are you feeling?” He asked as he walked into the living room, wiping his hands on his apron. My mother had embroidered his name on to the top left corner, one of the only indicators that she had loved him. Before the accident, it was obvious that my parents loved each other. They were inseparable. But afterwards, everything had changed and they couldn’t even stand to be in the same room as each other for longer than five minutes. My dad blamed my mother for what had happened to me. My mother blamed me for it.

“I’m fine. Do you want me to pick anything up on the way home?” I walked towards the door, not looking back at him.

“Come here, Peeta. I just want to talk to you. Have you eaten breakfast?” I exhaled before turning around and moving towards him.

“I can get something at school. Honestly, dad, I’m fine.” I smiled at him halfheartedly. I could see the sympathy behind his eyes. I love my dad, I really do, but I hate when he looks at me like that, like I need him to protect me and look after me.

“Sit down, I’ll make you something. You’ve got enough time, Asher’s not ready yet.’ I followed him in to the kitchen and took a seat at the dining table as he walked over to the fridge and started taking food out. ‘Eggs and bacon?’

“Yeah, that sounds great. Thanks, dad.” I watched him make the food, a smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. He was humming to himself, the song that he used to sing to me when I was little and couldn’t sleep at night. After the accident he came into my room every night and sang it to me over and over until I fell asleep. I can’t remember the exact moment he stopped singing to me but a small part of me always wished that he hadn’t. I buried my head in my hands, trying to block out the memory of the accident that always surfaced whenever I thought about the past. I felt my father’s hand on the back of my head, he ran his fingers through my hair stopping to hold the back of my neck.

“Come on, Peeta. Eat something.” I lifted my head and he moved his hand to my shoulder, squeezing it gently before letting go and setting the plate of food in front of me on the table. I picked up the fork and moved the food around, I didn’t really feel like eating but I did anyway because I didn’t want my dad to feel bad. He took a seat across from me and just watched as I ate.

“Are you okay, dad?” I pushed the plate away to show him that I’d finished and reached over the table to hold his hand. He placed his other hand on top of mine and smiled.
“Yeah, Peeta. I’m fine. You know you can talk to me about anything, right? If anything’s troubling you or you just need to vent to someone, I’m here for you.”
“I know, dad. Thanks.” He let go of my hand and stood up, walking around the table to stand next to me. He put his hand on the back of my neck again and leaned down to kiss the top of my head before walking back to the bakery. I sighed as I stood up and took my plate to the sink to wash it. I was grateful for these moments that my dad gave to me and I sat back down at the table to wait for Asher, wishing that they could happen more often.

A few minutes later, I heard Asher running down the stairs and in to the kitchen. His dark hair was messy and fell in front of his eyes when he bent down to tie the laces on his shoes. He stood up and looked at me for a few seconds before smiling.
“I smelt food. Do you have food?” Of course, he was smiling at the thought of food rather than at me.
“Dad made me some breakfast, there’s none left though.” I said, standing up. The smile on his face was replaced with a frown.
“Why didn’t he make me any? Dad! Why didn’t you make breakfast for me?” Asher shouted, turning his head to look towards the bakery. My dad appeared in the doorway, holding a loaf of bread in his hands and grinning.
“Well, Asher, if you had woken up early like Peeta, then I would have.” He winked at me before disappearing again. Asher glared at me and punched my arm before turning around.
“What the hell was that for?” I asked, rubbing the spot he had hit.
“I don’t know, I just felt like it. Let’s go.” Asher shrugged as he walked towards the front door, dragging his bag along behind him. This was his last year of school and even though it was only November, he had already given up. Asher was going to work in the bakery full time when he left school so he didn’t see the point of going to school but my dad made him go at least 3 days of the week. They had worked out a timetable with the school so that Asher could divide his time equally between the bakery and school. He wanted us to have a full education so we don’t always have to work at the bakery. I picked up my bag and followed after him, getting in to the car that he and my dad shared. Dad rarely ever drove and after weeks of Asher complaining about not having a car, they came to an agreement that Asher could drive it whenever he wanted but only if he drove us to and from school.

When we arrived at school I was just about out of the car when Asher locked the doors and went over to his friends a few cars down. Asher wasn’t part of the ‘popular’ crowd but people still admired him and he had no trouble making friends. I sometimes wonder if I would have been like Asher had the accident not happened. At times, I found that I was jealous of Asher’s confidence and his natural ability to talk to people. I always had to think about what to say and even then, I rarely said anything. My thoughts were better translated into music but I never played in front of anyone.

I took a deep breath and walked through the crowded parking lot towards the entrance. When I walked past Asher and his group of friends, he nodded his head in my direction. I returned the gesture and carried on walking, turning my gaze to the ground.

I had managed to make it all the way to my locker without talking to anyone and hoped that I could make it my first class in the same way. I was emptying my bag of the books I didn’t need this morning when I heard her speak.

“Hi.” Katniss said nervously. I closed my locker and turned to look at her, dropping my bag in the process and making every thing fall out. We both bent down at the same time and gathered the stuff up. I looked at her without lifting my head and immediately regretted it. Looking at her woke up a part of me that I didn’t know existed. A few loose strands of hair fell in front of her face and I had to resist the urge to reach over and tuck them behind her ear. I shouldn’t be thinking about stuff like that. That stuff was reserved for boyfriends and I wasn’t even a friend. Katniss cleared
her throat and I realised that I was still on the ground and she was standing up, holding my bag. I quickly stood up and took the bag from her, shoving the few books I was holding inside of it.

“Sorry about that. I should get going.” The warning bell rang at the exact moment I said it and I had never been so happy and sad to hear it.

“Yeah, me too. English, right?” She asked, easing the strands of hair behind her ear. I chewed the inside of my mouth and hoped that she hadn’t noticed the goosebumps that had risen on my arm.

“How did you know?” I knew she wasn’t in the same class as me for English. So how did she know it was where I was headed?

“Gale’s in your class.”

“Oh, yeah.” I said, trying to hide the disappointment in my voice. I don’t know why I was disappointed. It’s not like she would know what class I had for any other reason.

“I’ll see you later.” Katniss smiled slightly and then turned to walk away in the opposite direction.

I hurried to my first lesson and just about made it in time. The rest of the morning passed uneventfully and I counted down the minutes to lunch when I might be able to see Katniss again. She had said she would see me later. But did she mean that literally or did she just say it because that’s what you’re supposed to say? I needed to stop thinking too much about what people said.

I usually sat near Asher at lunch, not on the same table but on the one next to him. I met him at his locker so we could walk in together. When people found out that we were brothers, they couldn’t believe it. We were completely different, not just the way we look but every thing. Asher was outgoing and confident, he was friends with pretty much every one at school. I, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. Although Asher had his own group of friends, he always made sure I was okay whenever we were in school together. He hadn’t been at school yesterday but if he had there’s no doubt he would have stayed with me in the nurse’s office and driven me home.

“What do you want to eat?” Asher asked as we stood in line for food, he held both of our trays.

“I’ll just have whatever you’re having.” I replied, swinging my bag forward across my shoulder so that I could reach in and get my wallet. Asher nudged me with his elbow.

“It’s on me today. Don’t worry about it.” He said with a wink. I thanked him as we got our food and walked to the tables. He placed both trays on his table which confused me.

“What are you doing?” I asked as Asher sat down, pulling his tray closer to him.

“Sit with us.” He replied, putting some fries into his mouth.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, sit down, Peeta.” I looked at all of his friends and they smiled at me, gesturing for me to join them. I took my seat and ate with them, grateful for the fact that none of them mentioned anything about my nose. Throughout the morning I had heard a few whispers and murmurs about the way it looked. After about fifteen minutes I excused myself, wanting to go and play piano. I left my tray on the table because Asher said he would take care of it and made my way to the practice rooms.

I went to my usual room and sat down on the bench in front of the piano. I took out the sheet music that I had started yesterday and propped it up on the stand. I replayed the chords, making sure I had written them down correctly and started adding more to it. The music came easily to me today and I was happy that I didn’t have to work too hard to finish it.

I was playing it through again and writing dates next to each line so that I could learn them later when there was a knock at the door. I thought I was imagining it at first so I carried on playing but then it happened again. I considered walking to the door and opening it but I didn’t feel like going through the effort of using my crutches and I didn’t want to fall over without them.

“Come in.” I said quietly and waited for the door to open. A few moments passed before I realised that they probably hadn’t heard me so I said it again, louder this time. ‘You can come in.”

The door opened and Katniss poked her head around the door, her braided hair dangling over her
shoulder. How did she know where I was? I sifted through our interaction earlier and tried to remember if I had mentioned anything about coming here to practice. I was pretty sure I hadn’t.

“I thought you would be in here.’ Katniss said, slipping through the small gap and closing the door behind her. ‘I was supposed to give this to you earlier but I forgot.” She took a pencil out of her jacket pocket. My pencil.

“Oh, thank you.” I stood up to get it from her but she walked over and handed it to me. “I must have dropped it yesterday. Thanks.”

“Yeah, I found it on the floor by my desk. How is it?” She asked, gesturing towards my nose. Katniss was still standing close to me, after she had given the pencil back to me she hadn’t stepped back like I had expected her to. I had to look up at her to speak.

“It’s okay. Doesn’t hurt as much as yesterday but the doctor said it would take a few weeks to heal.” I looked back down at the piano.

“Are you any good?” Just like that, she had changed the subject. It made me feel warm inside.

“Uh no, not really. It just helps me to remember stuff for tests or whatever.”

“Show me.” She sat down next to me on the small bench, our knees touching slightly.

“What?”

“Play something.” She repeated.

“Uh, okay yeah sure.” I took a deep breath, this was the first time I had ever played in front of anyone. My fingers hovered above the keys for a few seconds and I could feel Katniss watching me. So I played.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading this! The next chapter will be uploaded at the same time next week!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It wasn’t until the warning bell rang that I stopped playing. Katniss hadn’t told me to stop and honestly, I didn’t want to. We sat in silence for a few moments, my fingers pressed to the keys as the last chords faded to a dull hum. There was a muted thump when I finally lifted my fingers and dropped my hands into my lap. I waited for her to say something, anything, but she didn’t. She just stood up and left. Was I really that bad? I curled my hand into a fist and punched my left leg over and over again. The final bell rang. I swore at the empty room and slammed the lid down on the piano before picking up my stuff and leaving the room.

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At the end of the day I went to my locker to dump all of the books that I didn’t need. I opened the metal door and a folded piece of paper fell to the ground. I shoved my bag into my locker before bending down to pick it up. I unfolded it and read the words.

Thank you.

She hadn’t signed it but there was no doubt about the fact that it was from Katniss. I don’t understand why she couldn’t have just said that earlier instead of making me feel like an idiot for playing in front of her. I folded the note back over and put it into the small pocket at the front of my bag. Despite it all, I smiled to myself as I sorted my books out and walked to Asher’s locker. When I rounded the corner, I saw a girl leaning against Asher’s locker and him standing in front of her, one hand on the locker next to her head as he looked down at her. I watched them for a few seconds, jealous of how easy it was for Asher to talk to people, especially girls. I cleared my throat as I walked towards them and they both looked in my direction. Asher turned to the girl and ducked his head to say something to her before kissing her on the cheek. She smiled and walked away, turning around when Asher spoke to her.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, right?” Asher half shouted down the corridor.
“Yeah, definitely.” She grinned as she spun and carried on walking away. I wasn’t surprised to see a smirk on Asher’s face as he turned to face me.

“Who was that?” I asked, as he opened his locker and took his bag out.

“None of your business. Come on, I’m tired. Let’s go home.” Asher said, slamming his locker shut.

We walked out of the school in comfortable silence and towards Asher’s car.

“Peeta!” I turned to look in the direction of the voice but I already knew who it was. Asher stopped walking, raising one eyebrow inquisitively.

“Hey, Katniss.” I mumbled as she walked towards us. I could see Asher smirking out of the corner of my eye. “What’s up?”

“I was just wondering if you got my note. I put it in your locker but it might have fallen out when you opened it and I wanted to make sure that you got it.” She was standing in front of us now, her attention completely focused on me. After a few seconds of silence, Asher nudged me, urging me to say something to her.

“Oh yeah I got it, thanks.” I started to smile at her but it was at that moment that a sharp pain shot up my left leg. I winced and doubled over in pain, clutching my leg. Asher put his arms around my shoulders reassuringly and crouched down to my level so that we were eye to eye.

“Peeta, are you okay? Come on, sit down.” He walked me to his car which was a few feet away and opened the passenger door, helping me rest on the seat. He started rubbing my leg in an
attempt to soothe pain. I looked over his shoulder to see if Katniss was still there. I didn’t want her to see me like this. I was relieved to see that she was walking away but a small part of me hoped that she would have stayed. After a few minutes, the pain stopped and I pushed Asher’s shoulder gently, telling him to get up.

“Thanks.” I said as he stood up and closed the door. A few seconds later he got into the driver’s seat and started the car.

“You don’t have to thank me every time, Peeta. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I’m sure. Can we just go home, please?” I turned in my seat to look out of the window. I was embarrassed by what had happened even though I knew Asher wouldn’t make fun of me for it. Over the years he had learnt to deal with these sudden spasms of pain and he knew how to help me, but I still felt ashamed of myself when it happened. I felt Asher grip my shoulder and lightly shake me. I shrugged his hand off and we drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Asher went into the house first, taking my bag along with his. I stayed in the car for a few more minutes and started punching my leg repeatedly. Eventually, when the pain became too much to bear, I stopped and waited for a few seconds before getting out of the car and going inside. I closed the door quietly and slowly walked up the stairs to my room, hoping to avoid seeing either of my parents before I had to start my shift in the bakery. There was no doubt in my mind that Asher would have told dad about what had happened. And if my dad knew then so did my mother. I was halfway up the stairs when I heard my dad’s voice.

“Peeta? Come here for a second.” I turned carefully on the steps to face him. He wiped his hands on a dish cloth that was draped over his shoulder and smiled weakly at me. I made my way back down the stairs and stood in front of him. ‘Asher told me what happened. Are you okay?” “I’m fine, dad. Don’t worry about me.” I looked down at my shoes to avoid having to look at him.

“How many times has it happened?” He asked.

“It doesn’t happen that often. It’s nothing to worry about. Honestly, I’m fine. I want to finish my homework before my shift. Can I go upstairs?”

“I’ll get Asher to cover your shift. Just rest.” “I want to work, dad. I’m only down for three hours today.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” I replied as my dad placed his hand under my chin and nudged my head upwards so I was looking at him.

“Okay. I love you, Peeta. You know that, right? I just wish it could be easier for you.” And there it was. The sadness in his eyes that made it so hard to look at him sometimes. He didn’t deserve to have me as a son, he deserved another Asher. Someone he could actually be proud of and who wouldn’t disappoint him as much as I did.

“Yes, I know.” I responded. ‘Love you, too. I’ll be back down in an hour.” With that, I turned and walked up to my room, resisting the urge to slam the door in frustration. I sat down on my bed and pulled my homework out of my bag. Two essays and a test to study for. I started on the essays, it would be harder to study for the test without a piano so I would have to do that at school or at Madge’s house.

I’ve been friends with Madge for a few years now. Our parents used to be really close friends when we were younger and we would spend a lot of time at each others houses. Madge was from one of the more well-off families in Panem, our small town with a population of barely a thousand. My family wasn’t exactly poor; we owned the only bakery in town which meant that business was always steady and we had enough money to live comfortably. This was one of the main reasons that our parents had been friends. Madge had a piano in her house and we both took lessons together but she couldn’t quite get the hang of it so she stopped. As we grew older, we grew apart. We still talked occasionally and Madge always let me use their piano seeing as how no one in her family knew how to play. We worked out a deal, I would bake strawberry cupcakes for her and she would let me use her piano. It was a fair trade.
I took my rarely used phone out of my bag and dialled Madge’s number. She picked up after the second ring.

“Hey Peeta, I was just about to call you. There is a cupcake shaped hole in my life that only you can fill. Are you coming around this weekend?”

“As luck would have it, there is a piano shaped hole in my life. What time are you free?” I asked.

“Be here at noon. Some other friends are coming around at like 2 so you can stay if you want.” I considered this for a moment. It might be fun to spend more time with Madge and her friends.

“I’ll check with my dad. I have to work tomorrow afternoon but I could convince Ash to cover my shift. I’ll definitely be there at 12 though. Thanks Madge.” I smiled to myself. Although we didn’t talk often, Madge was still a good friend.

“Don’t worry about it, Peeta. I’ll see you tomorrow. I expect at least a dozen cupcakes.”

“Of course, your highness. See you tomorrow.” I hung up the phone and checked the time. My shift started at 5 which meant that I had ten minutes to convince Asher to cover for me tomorrow. I picked up my crutches and rushed out of my room to the bakery.

Asher was talking to a customer when I walked in so I stood away from him for a few seconds trying to figure out what to say. I could just ask him and see if he would do it but there’s no doubt he would want something in return.

“Have a great day!” Asher said, smiling at the elderly lady. Once she had left he turned to look at me. “What do you want?” He took his apron off and hung it up on the stand before crossing his arms and leaning against the counter.

“Can I ask you for a favour?” A sly grin appeared on his face.

“Depends on the favour and what you’re willing to do for me.”

“Cover my shift tomorrow. Madge invited me to her house to hang out with her and her friends. This is a chance for me to get to know more people.” I could see Asher considering his options in the way that he looked up to the ceiling and then back at the floor again, muttering to himself. After 5 agonising minutes Asher finally spoke.

“Okay, here’s what I want from you. When you go to Madge’s house tomorrow, talk about me. Tell her how great I am. And then give her my number and tell her to call me.”

“What?” I couldn’t hide the surprise in my voice. Did Asher like Madge? And if he did, it’s not as if he wasn’t confident enough to talk to her himself. I thought about what the conversation with Madge would be like and realised that it would not be an easy one. But I wanted to meet her friends properly and spend more time with her so I agreed.

“Alright, sure. Thanks, Ash.” I rested my crutches against the wall and took my apron down from the stand before putting it on. I tried to hide the smile on my face by looking down at the tiled ground. Asher patted me on the shoulder as he walked past me to leave the bakery. “Hey, Ash. If you want her to like you then why don’t you make cupcakes for her? I always take them with me. I can add ‘great cupcake baker’ to the list of shining qualities that I’m going to tell her about.”

“Don’t forget to mention my abs. I’ve got great abs.” Asher turned around and began to lift his shirt up to reveal his stomach. I grabbed a dishcloth from the counter and threw it at him.

“You’re so annoying. Are you going to make the cupcakes or should I?” He threw the cloth back at me, hitting me in the face with it.

“No, I’ll make them. Girls love guys that can bake.” Asher said with a wink before leaving the bakery and heading to the adjoining kitchen.

“She likes strawberries!” I shouted after him. At least now I could go to bed early instead of staying up and baking.

I wiped down the counter and leaned against it, waiting for a customer to come in. Dad always made sure that the cases were full before my shift started so I wouldn’t have to refill them but this usually left me with nothing to do. I understand that my dad was trying to make life easier for me but I wish that he wouldn’t treat me like I was completely useless.

An hour passed and only five customers had come in which meant that most of the hour had been
spent slouching against the counter with my head in my hands, which was what I was doing now. A few minutes later I heard my mother approaching so I quickly straightened up and pretended to check the cases. It was easy to tell the difference between my dad’s and mother’s footsteps; he was quiet whereas she demanded an audience before she’d even entered the room. She walked over to the cash register, completely ignoring me, and opened it up. I avoided looking at her directly but I could see her out of the corner of my eye. She took out a wad of notes and counted it before talking around half of them and putting them in her pocket. She slammed the register shut and walked back to the house. I had seen her do this a few times before but said nothing. I don’t know why she was taking the money or why she felt the need to hide it from my dad. He didn’t really deal with the financial side of things so he hadn’t noticed that money had been missing from the takings. Every time she did it, a part of me wanted to tell my dad so that she couldn’t do it again. But another part of me knew that if I did tell him she would make life a hundred times worse for me.

At around 7 business started to pick up as people came in to buy desserts. At one point Asher had to stop making cupcakes to come and help me. 8 o’clock was closing time so Asher stayed around to help with cleaning down the cases and surfaces. After we had closed we both went to the back and finished off the cupcakes, topping them with frosting and a slice of strawberry. I packed them into boxes while Asher cleaned up.

“So you like Madge, huh?” I felt like this was a good a time as any to talk to Asher about this. There was no denying that Asher had a reputation and I wanted to make sure that he wouldn't hurt Madge. After his conversation with the girl at school I assumed he had his eyes on someone else.

“What’s it to you?” He said loudly over the running water from the faucet.

“She’s my friend. You can’t mess her around like you do with every other girl.”

“You really think I would do that?” Asher asked sounding slightly offended.

“I know you would. Remember what happened with your last girlfriend?”

“Which one?” I could hear the smirk in his voice.

“You just proved my point. I’m serious, Ash. Do you like her or do you just want to use her?” I regretted it as soon as I had said it. After a few seconds of silence Asher turned off the faucet and looked at me.

“That’s what you think of me? Come on, Peeta, you know I’m better than that. I wouldn’t do that with Madge. I know how much she means to you.” I had been standing for too long so I leaned against the counter. He came over and stood next to me, crossing his arms across his chest.

“I just need to make sure that you’re not going to ruin this for me. She’s the only friend I have and even then we’re barely friends. I can’t afford to mess this up.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you, Peeta. You have to trust me.” “Yeah, I know.” We stood in silence for a few minutes. I knew that Asher would never do anything to deliberately hurt me but there was no denying that if he hurt Madge, she would stop being friends with me.

“I like her.” Asher said quietly, almost as if he was trying not to admit it. “I don’t know why but I do. Trust me, Peeta. I don’t want to hurt her. And I don’t want to hurt you. If you’re not okay with this, then tell me.”

“Ash, if you like her then go for it. The worst thing that happens is she doesn’t like you back.”

Okay well I was kind of hoping that she would. Everyone likes me, I’m great.” Asher said returning to his usual cocky self.

“You’re not that great. I’d give you like a six out of ten.” As soon as I had said this, Asher shoved me to the side, harder than he had meant to. I lost my balance and tried to grab on to the edge of the counter but I fell too fast. Asher dropped to my side almost as suddenly as I had.

“Fuck, I didn’t mean to do that.’ He put one arm around my shoulder and the other around my waist and helped me to stand. ‘Are you alright?’

“Yeah, I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.” The fall had sent a sharp pain up my leg but it dulled after a few seconds. The look of worry that had appeared on Asher’s face when I fell was replaced with a scowl.

“A six? Come on, I’m at least a nine.” We both took the fall as a cue to go upstairs. Asher walked
ahead of me and held the door open before locking it.
“Seven, and that’s me being generous.” I walked up the stairs and Asher followed after me and in
to the bathroom. We brushed our teeth, still debating whether we were sevens or eights. Asher
wouldn’t agree with being anything less than an eight which led to a long discussion about what
that made me. Asher said that it was impossible to define me with a number.

“Thanks for everything today, Ash. I really appreciate it.” I told him when we were both standing
opposite each other outside our bedroom doors.
“You don’t have to thank me. I’m your brother, that’s what brothers are supposed to do.”
“I know but I just wanted to say it.”
“It’s not a big deal, Peeta. Now, go to bed. You’ll need all the beauty sleep you can have if you
want to be a nine like me.”
“I thought we settled on you being an eight.”
“I changed my mind, I’m way better than an eight. Goodnight, Peeta.” Asher turned and went into
his room, closing it behind him before I had a chance to say it back to him. I entered my room and
closed the door. I still hadn’t quite gotten used to not sharing a room with him. I took my shirt off
and changed into a pair of sweatpants before getting into bed. I fell asleep thinking about how
grateful I was to have Asher as my brother.

Chapter End Notes

New chapter next week!
Thanks for reading!
Chapter 4

I'm so sorry for not uploading last week!! I was stressed out about exam results and my cousin got married on the weekend so there was no time at all to write. I said I was going to upload on Monday and Friday this week but I am trash so instead I'm uploading this chapter today and the next one this weekend and then I'll go back to normal and upload on Wednesdays.

Thank you for sticking with me on this and I hope you enjoy this chapter!

“Dad! Where are you?” I leaned against the edge of the front door and pulled my phone out of my pocket to check the time. It usually took us about 15 minutes to get to Madge’s house and I didn’t want to be late which meant that we would have to leave now.

“I’ll be there in a second! Go and wait in the car!” He shouted from upstairs. I could have sworn he was in the bakery two seconds ago. The keys weren’t on the table next to the door where they were supposed to be which meant that Asher hadn’t put them back. I groaned in frustration as I walked up the stairs one step at a time. When I reached Asher’s room I knocked on the door twice before letting myself in. His room was slightly bigger than mine and messier. Clothes and textbooks covered the floor so I couldn’t walk far into the room. I stood close to the door and lifted one of my crutches up to nudge him. He mumbled something that I couldn’t understand before lifting his head off the pillow and squinting at me.

“Ash, where are the car keys?”

“What?” He mumbled, dropping his head back onto the pillow. A few seconds later he started snoring.

“Really, Ash?” I muttered to myself before poking him again. ‘Ash! We need the keys!”

“They’re over there.” He replied without any indication of where ‘there’ was.

“Asher, just get up for a second and show me where they are.” I was starting to get frustrated with him. I needed as much practice time as I could get. I threw my head back and looked at the ceiling, sighing in exasperation. I really shouldn’t have done that because the next thing I knew a pillow was flying directly at me. I tried to lift up my hands to block it but I was too slow and it hit my face. I couldn’t help but yell out in pain as I dropped my head and clutched my nose.

“Fuck, Peeta, are you okay?!” He shot out of bed and stumbled to my side. ‘I didn’t mean to do that. Fuck, I’m sorry.” He lowered his head so that we were at eye level with each other and put one arm across my shoulders. I groaned as my nose throbbed in pain. I removed my hand from my face, relieved at the fact that it hadn’t started bleeding. I touched it delicately and took in a sharp breath. I couldn’t really feel the pain before but now it was impossible not to feel it. I lifted my head at the same time as Asher and could see the worry on his face.

“What the hell, Ash?” I punched him lightly on the arm, knowing that it wouldn’t really hurt him.

“I didn’t mean to hit you like that, Peeta. I forgot about your nose and you were annoying me. You know that I’m not a morning person.” Asher said as he stood there with his hands on his hips.

“Just give me the keys, I need to go.” I said, leaning against the door for support. He picked his jacket up from the floor and searched through the pockets before pulling out the car keys. He handed them to me and apologised again.

“Ash, it’s fine. Just remember that you’re covering my shift at 2:30. I’ll see you later.”
“I didn’t forget. Have fun.” I left his room, closing the door behind me and walked down the stairs.

I thought I would have been able to leave before I saw my mother but as soon as I reached the bottom step, she stomped out of the bakery and towards me. She had an angry expression on her face and I braced myself for the imminent yelling.

“Why are you not working today? Did I say that you could have a day off?” I wasn’t sure if she expected a proper answer or not so it took me a few moments to reply.

“Dad said it was fine. Asher’s covering for me and I’m going to take one of his shifts next week.” I made that last part up but she didn’t have to know that. When I told Dad about mine and Asher’s agreement he said it was okay. It was stupid of me to assume that he had cleared it with my mother when they barely spoke to each other. She stepped closer to me and spoke in a harsh whisper so only I could hear her.

“Your idiotic father isn’t the one who organises the work schedule, I am. I put a lot of time and effort into making sure that the schedule is perfect but obviously it isn’t good enough for you. Nothing ever is. You just can’t stand not having the attention on you for five minutes so you had to go ahead and change shifts and mess everything up. If you try and pull something like this ever again, you’re fired. The only reason I gave you this job is because of your father. I told him we couldn’t have someone like you working here but did he listen? Of course not and now you’re ruining everything with your selfish behaviour. Get out of my sight, I don’t want to see you for the rest of the day.” I could feel the hatred in her voice, the disgust at having me for a son. Someone like you. I know what she thinks of me, that I’m useless and at times I agree with her. Who would ever want to hire someone like me who can barely walk five feet without falling over? I stood frozen and unable to move even though my mind was screaming at me to move, get away from her. I had expected the quick slap that hit my cheek but that didn’t lessen the sting of it. I kept my face turned to the side and bit the inside of my cheek to stop me from saying something that I would regret.

“Peeta? Are you ready to go?” My dad’s distant voice broke the silence and my mother walked away from me without a second glance.

“Ye-“ My voice cracked so I cleared my throat before speaking again. ‘Yeah, let’s go.” He bounded down the stairs and opened the door for me, ushering me out of the house as he put his coat on. If my dad noticed the redness of my cheek he didn’t say anything about it. The drive to Madge’s house was passed in silence until we got there and even then the short conversation was just dad asking me to call him when I wanted to get picked up. I got out of the car and made my way towards the front door, cupcakes in hand, as my dad drove away. Before I even had a chance to ring the bell, Madge had opened the door and jumped towards me, arms outstretched. I thought she was going in for a hug but instead she grabbed the box out of my hand.

“Peeta! Come on, let’s go inside.” Madge says as she balances the box in one hand and hooks her free arm through one of mine. I walk into the house with her and shrug my jacket off. Madge takes it from me and hangs it on one of the hooks by the door before she shoves me lightly towards the piano room. She disappears into the kitchen leaving me alone. Even though I’ve been to Madge’s house a lot of times I still find it awkward to be by myself here and it almost feels like I’m intruding. After a few minutes Madge comes back into the room with two glasses, a pitcher of lemonade and two cupcakes on a small tray. Madge knows that I never play in front of anyone and she usually just brings a drink for me before going up to her room. She doesn’t say anything, just smiles, as she places the tray on the tall table next to the piano.

“What’s going on? You know I don’t play in front of anyone.” I ask, confused. I look at her face to see if I can figure out what she’s up to but she is impossible to read as she smiles sweetly.

“We both know that isn’t true, Peeta.” She sits next to me and it takes me a few seconds to realise what she just said. Does she know that I played for Katniss yesterday? But how would she know? I’ve only ever seen Katniss and Madge together for school projects, they get on well with each
other but I didn’t think they were friends. I think about how to respond in a way that doesn't give too much away, just in case she doesn't actually know anything and she’s just bluffing. “Do we? Because I’m pretty sure it is true.” I try to keep my face as stoic as possible so she doesn't think that I’m lying.
“I know what happened yesterday.” She’s still smiling and I have to admit that it’s slightly unnerving. It’s the kind of smile that means she knows something that she isn't supposed to know. “Nothing happened yesterday.” At this point I think it’s obvious that she knows I’m not telling her something so I turn to the piano and start taking my stuff out of my bag.
“You’re the worst liar in the world. I know what happened with Katniss.” At the sound of her name I freeze. She knows.
“I just played a song for her, okay. It wasn’t a big deal.” I try to play it off as something casual but we both know it was a huge thing for me to do. I’ve been playing the piano for 7 years now and in that time I’ve never played in front of anyone. Of course when Madge and I were learning together I would have to play in front of her but back then I would just press a few random keys and hope for the best. Even after all of these years of practicing at Madge’s house, I’ve never played a full piece in front of her. I turn my gaze away from Madge but she grabs my chin and makes me look at her.

“Why her?” The smile has been erased from her face and replaced with a concerned expression. Madge doesn’t even need to ask a full question for me to understand what she’s saying - why did I play for Katniss, but not her? I struggle to think of an answer. There isn’t an answer. I don’t know why I haven’t played for Madge and why I decided to play for Katniss. It would make more sense if the first person I played in front of was Madge. Madge had always been there and probably always would be. But there was just something about Katniss.

“It just happened. She asked me to play something for her, so I did.” I tilt my head to the side and she drops her hand from my face. I glance at her quickly before looking down at my hands which are now folded in my lap. I don’t know what expression I expected Madge to be wearing now but it definitely wasn’t hurt. She looks as if she’s trying to hold back tears.

“What did you play?” Madge asks, her voice higher than usual.

“Something I made up. It just helps me to remember stuff for tests.” I can’t bear to look at her again so I keep my eyes focused on my hands. There’s a pause before she replies, almost as if she’s scared to ask her next question. She starts to speak but then cuts herself off and stands up. “Where are you going?” I ask, reaching out to grab her arm. She doesn’t flinch when I touch her.

“To my room.”

“Madge, you don’t have to go.” I pull her lightly so she’s sitting down next to me. It doesn’t take me more than a few seconds to realise what I have to do. I let go of her arm and crack my knuckles and I play.

When I finish, Madge doesn’t say anything so neither do I. We sit in silence for a few minutes and it makes me think of what happened yesterday with Katniss. It wasn’t like the song was special or anything, I hadn’t written it intending for it to be played to someone yet I’d done it twice within the space of 24 hours. Maybe that’s why it does seem special to me now. Like something that can only be shared with certain people. Another minute passes before Madge wraps her arms around my neck. I hug her back and I’m happy for how different her reaction is to Katniss’. With Katniss it had seemed like she had hated it and it wasn’t until the note that I knew she liked it. Madge, on the other hand, isn’t usually one to hide her feelings and there’s no doubt in my mind that she liked it. I let go of her and she pulls away from me, a genuine smile on her face. However the smile is quickly replaced with a look of anger and she punches my arm.

“What the hell was that for?” I ask wondering if there’s a sign on my head saying ‘hit me’. “Because you’re great! And I didn’t know that until now! God, Peeta, you can be so clueless sometimes. Why haven’t you ever let me listen to you before? You’re so good.” I can feel my cheeks reddening so I turn away from her. Hearing Madge say something like that makes me feel happy.

“I don’t know, I’m not that good at it and you never asked.”
“Do you seriously think you’re not good, Peeta? Because that’s one of the best pieces I’ve ever heard.” She punches my arm again lightly, almost as if she’s using the hits as punctuation for her sentences and as a way of getting back at me for never letting her listen to me before.

“You don’t really mean that.”

“Of course I do. You’re amazing, Peeta. And the sooner you realise that, the better. Now play me another.” Another delicate hit.

“If you stop hitting me then I will.” I say, rubbing the spot on my arm that she chose as her target. Madge smiles mischievously before hitting me again.

“Okay, I’m done. Go ahead.” She sits up straight and shuffles over slightly so that I can sit in a more centred position in front of the piano and then, with a smile on my face, I play.

*****

“I don’t understand why you ever gave up on it, Madge. We could have played together.” I say to her as I start packing my papers away into my bag. I played a few more study pieces for her, nothing too interesting but that’s all I was prepared to do today. It took a while for Madge to understand my system with the information corresponding to certain chords but after two hours of constant playing she eventually got it.

“You know I was never as good as you at it. It was also kind of boring.” Madge replies before drinking the last of the lemonade.

“It wasn’t boring. You just never paid attention.”

“I never paid attention because it was boring.” She says as she stands up and lifts the tray from the table. ‘Everyone will be here soon, help me out in the kitchen.”

Madge leaves the room and I follow after her, leaving my bag on the floor next to the piano.

The kitchen is bigger than the one at our house, there’s even an island in the middle. I sit down on one of the high stools and watch Madge as she makes her way around the kitchen, taking glasses out of the cupboard and filling two more pitchers with lemonade and ice. The light coming in from the tall windows shines on her and makes her blonde hair appear brighter. In another life, one where I hadn’t had the accident, Madge and I would probably be together. Our families are close and I’ve known her longer than anyone else. It just made sense. But that’s not how it worked out. There’s no denying that Madge is pretty, some would even call her beautiful. But I just can’t see her like that. This is the girl I grew up with, who I used to jump around in muddy puddles with and hide from our parents when it was time for either of us to go home. We’ve been friends for too long for anything to happen now and I find that reassuring. There’s no worry that something will happen between us and those years of friendship will have been for nothing.

“Peeta?” She snaps her fingers in front of my face, rousing me from my thoughts. ‘I’m not going to ask you again.” She’s holding the box of cakes so I assume she was asking me if I wanted one. I take one out and set it on the counter in front of me.

“Sorry, I zoned out.” I say, unfolding the cake from the wrapper.

“Yeah, I kinda guessed that.” Madge says sarcastically as she sits down next to me. She’s barely had time to unwrap her cake when the doorbell rings. She sighs dramatically before getting up and walking out. I look at my reflection in the small mirror that hangs on the wall across from me and check to make sure that I look okay. I don’t know which friends Madge invited over but I want to make a good impression on them. I can hear Madge talking followed by a deep voice. It takes me a few seconds to figure out who it is and by that time they’re already walking through the kitchen door together. Gale and I have never really spoken properly despite being in the same English class for the past two years. I didn’t know he was friends with Madge either, it seemed like Katniss was his only friend. Katniss. Was she coming here as well? A small part of me hoped that she was but an even bigger part of me didn’t want her to. After what happened yesterday and her seeing me pretty much collapse in the parking lot, I dread to think about what she thinks of me. I smile politely at Gale and hold out my hand. He shakes it before dropping his hand to his side and sitting in what was Madge’s seat.
“Gale, do you want a cake? Peeta made them.” Madge asks, breaking the silence.
“Yeah, sure.” Gale replies, taking a cake from the box. I don’t know why this makes me nervous but it does. I look at him from the corner of my eye as he eats it and wait for his reaction. He eats it in three bites so I assume he likes it. When he takes another one out of the box, I let out a breath of relief. ‘These are great. Did you really make them?’
“Yeah, my parents own the bakery and my dad taught me how to make them.” I decide not to tell them that Asher made them. For some reason I feel like if I told Gale that I hadn’t made them, he would like me a little less.
“Peeta always makes them for me. They’re amazing, right?” Madge says leaning against the counter and eating her cake. I’m glad that they like them. We carry on making small talk for a few more minutes, talking about school and what homework we have when the doorbell rings again. Madge pushes herself off the counter and walks to the door. Gale and I sit in silence but it’s not awkward. I take a sip of my drink and try to figure out who just arrived. I don’t even need to see her to know who it is.

“Hey, Catnip.” Gale says as Katniss walks in after Madge.
“Hilarious, Gale. That never gets old.” Katniss replies sarcastically but it doesn’t sound mean. She never sounds mean. ‘Hi, Peeta.’
“Hi, hey, hi.” Great, well done, Peeta. She definitely doesn’t think you’re weird now. Katniss sits down and starts talking to Gale and Madge walks over and leans on the counter next to me. She smiles at me before ruffling my hair. She leans close to whisper to me.
“I know you like her, Peeta. You’re welcome.” I can feel myself blushing. I don’t want Katniss or Gale to see so I drink my lemonade as Madge continues to smile.
“That’s how it’s done!” Gale shouted as the rest of us threw our controllers onto the floor in frustration.

“Gale, you’ve won every race so far. Go easy on us. We’re not all Mario Kart experts like you.” Madge said as she stood up to collect the discarded controllers and passed them to us. One and a half hours later and Gale’s winning streak hadn’t been broken. It was frustrating at first because I knew I wasn’t the best at video games but I soon realised that there was no way I could beat him so I just carried on. Madge was as hopeless at it as I was and so we both gave up eventually but Katniss didn’t. I could see from the way her tongue peeked out of her delicately formed mouth and the crease in her forehead that she was determined to beat him.

I would like to say that it was just lack of skill that left me in last place nearly every race but it wasn’t. I spent more time looking over at Katniss than I did watching the screen. Her grey eyes darted from the controller in her hands to the screen more often than I thought they would, almost as if she was doubting her movements. At the end of every race she would pull her dark braid forward and tighten the band before throwing it back over her shoulder. One of the main reasons I kept looking at her was because I wanted to reassure myself that this was real, that she was actually sitting five feet away from me.

“Peeta?” I blinked at the sound of my name. Madge was standing in front of me, her arms crossed over her chest. ‘You need to stop zoning out. Do you want to carry on playing this or something else?”

“I don’t mind. What do you guys want do?” I asked, running my palms across my jeans.

“Gale wants to carry on playing this but Katniss and I want to play something else. We need you to decide.” Madge replied, with a look in her eye that told me I should be on her side.

“I think I’ve had enough of losing to Gale so let’s play something else.” This earned a good-natured shove from Gale and a clap from Madge. I looked over at Katniss to see her reaction and I could see a slight smile tugging at the corner of her lips. It sounds pathetic but I just went along with what Katniss wanted to do even though I would have preferred to carry on playing.

“Gale, come and choose a game with me.” Madge said, pulling Gale up from the couch and dragging him out of the room before he even had a chance to protest. It took me a few seconds to realise what had happened. I was alone with Katniss. She was sitting on the other side of the couch and Gale’s absence made the distance seem even less.

“I didn’t want to ask in front of Gale or Madge but how’s your nose? It looks like it’s better now.” Katniss said and I could tell from the way that she spoke that she actually cared about the answer. The fact that she hadn’t wanted to ask in front of the others made me smile for some reason. I quickly disguised the smile as a cough before answering her.

“Uh, yeah it’s kinda better now. It doesn’t hurt as much as it did unless I touch it. Thanks for asking.”

“No problem.” Katniss smiled in a way that was unique to her. The corners of her lips curved upwards so slightly that you had to be paying attention to notice. This was the kind of smile that made my heart drop. We sat in silence for a few more minutes but it didn’t seem awkward. I tried to think of things to say to her but whenever I opened my mouth to speak I closed it again instantly. I didn’t want to make meaningless small talk with her but that was the only thing that sprung to mind. At one point I was even going to talk to her about the weather. As soon as Gale and Madge walked back into the room, I mentally cursed myself for wasting the moment that Madge had not so subtly created.

“Gale, put it in.” Madge said, picking her drink up from the table.
“That’s what she said.” Gale laughed to himself as Madge kicked him before walking to the couch. I tried to stifle a laugh so that Madge wouldn’t do the same to me. I could see Katniss smiling out of the corner of my eye.

“Ugh, Gale, you’re so immature. You can sit on the chair this time. Katniss, can you move over, I don’t like sitting in the middle.” Madge smirked at me as Katniss shuffled into the middle of the couch, sitting right next to me. As Madge sat down, I shot her a look that was a mixture of annoyed yet thankful. Katniss’ braid had come forward when she had moved seats and I had to resist the urge to tuck it back for her. I don’t know why I kept thinking about stuff like that. It was wrong of me to think those things about her. She would probably hate me if she knew. Gale pressed the disc into the console and took his seat.

We played for another hour but I couldn’t concentrate at all with Katniss next to me. Every so often she would sit forward and her knee would knock against mine, sending shivers up my spine. I tried to focus on the game so that I stopped thinking about her but it was impossible. Whenever we took breaks in-between levels, Madge would tap me on the shoulder and silently urge me to say something to Katniss but I didn’t. We had just beaten one of the hardest boss levels when Madge spoke to all of us. “Peeta, go and get the rest of the cakes. We might as well finish them off.’ I looked questioningly at her before she added, ‘Can you get some drinks, Katniss?’

“Yes, sure.” Katniss replied. She stood up but didn’t walk to the kitchen and it took me a few seconds to realise that she was waiting for me. I got up as quickly as I could and followed her out of the room. Madge was obviously trying to get me to talk to Katniss properly but I didn’t know what to say. Every time we were alone, my throat closed up and my hands became shaky and it was near impossible to speak more than a few words. I pushed the nervous thoughts out of mind when we got to the kitchen and walked over to the island to get the rest of the cakes. Katniss took some drinks out of the fridge and placed them on the island before fling some glasses with ice. I watched the way she moved so naturally around the kitchen, as if she had been to Madge’s house a lot and knew where everything was. I thought of our conversation earlier and realised that Madge had never said how she found out that I played for Katniss. I then realised that maybe I had underestimated their friendship and Katniss probably spent more time here than I did.

“Do you come to Madge’s house a lot?” Katniss asked, as if she was reading my thoughts. “Kind of, I guess. She has a piano so I practice here when I need to.” I replied, pulling one of the stools out from under the island and sitting on it. I could only stand for so long before my leg started to hurt and I didn’t want there to be a repeat of yesterday. “Oh, that’s cool. I suppose it takes a lot of practice to get as good as you are.” She smiled that special smile of hers and I had to look away from her. She was like the sun; you couldn’t look at her for too long but when you did, she was beautiful.

“I’m really not. Trust me, there are people who are way better than me out there.” I still wasn’t looking at her but I could hear her footsteps moving closer to me. I looked up through my eyelashes and saw that she was sitting opposite me on the other side of the island. “You are, Peeta.” The way she said my name gave me goosebumps.

“You are, Peeta.” The way she said my name gave me goosebumps.

“I’m really not. Trust me, there are people who are way better than me out there.” “Where are these people because I haven’t heard any of them play like you. I don’t think you realise the talent that you have, Peeta.” I looked up at her when she said this, wanting to see the sincerity on her face that I could hear in her voice. She really meant it. I could feel my heart pick up pace and I had to take a deep breath before I replied. She has no idea, the effect she can have. “Yesterday was the first time I’ve ever played for anyone.” I don’t know why but I felt like I had to tell her this.

“Really?” I nodded in response. ‘Why me?’ There was that important yet unanswerable question again - why Katniss? There was no logical explanation for why I decided to play a piece for Katniss before I played for anyone else. It wouldn’t have been so weird if Madge was the first person but she wasn’t. Katniss was the first. I couldn’t tell her that I liked her. Even then I’m not entirely sure that was the reason I chose to play for her. There was no reason, just a feeling in my gut that told me I had to do it.
“Honestly, I don’t know. I could give you a list of reasons but none of them would be true. I don’t know why I did it, but I don’t regret it at all. I feel like I should be thanking you instead of the other way round.” “I didn’t do anything, Peeta, I just sat there. You could have easily said no to me but you didn’t. That was a choice you made. It was all you.”

“Yeah, well I still needed someone else to be there and you were, so, thank you.” I said, shrugging my shoulders and trying to play it off like it wasn’t a big deal. I heard the sound of the stool scraping against the floor as she stood up. I glanced up at her and saw that she was collecting the drinks and glasses up and putting them on a tray. I took this a sign that the conversation had ended so I got up as well, balancing the cakes in one hand as I followed her out of the kitchen and into the living room.

As we sat down to play again, I thought about the interactions I had had with Katniss over the past two days. Up until now, I had barely spoken two words to her in the whole time we were at school together. I didn’t think we were at the stage of friendship yet but we were definitely not strangers anymore which made me happy but also nervous. I had gone years without speaking to her and I was glad that I had finally had the chance to have a conversation with her. But, I still felt like she didn’t care about it as much as I did, and I was worried that we could stop talking as quickly as we had started. It obviously didn’t mean as much to Katniss as it did to me that we had talked. And she definitely didn’t like me as much as I liked her. The way that Katniss and Gale acted with each other only added to the thoughts that there was something more to their friendship. After all, there has to be some basis to the rumours that circulate about them. During the game I kept looking over at the way they acted with each other. There was a level of comfortableness to their friendship that I could only dream of. The worst part was that, as much as I wanted to, it was impossible to dislike Gale. He was everything I wanted to be; confident but not arrogant with just the right amount of modesty that allowed him to be liked by everyone. And there was no denying that Gale was good looking which made me want to hate him even more. He had everything.

“Peeta, you really need to stop blanking out.” Madge said, a hint of annoyance in her voice. I looked at the television screen and saw that the game had been paused. ‘Okay, let’s go over the plan one more time. Gale, you circle round back and make sure no one gets out. Katniss and I will go in and take out as many as we can. Peeta, stay on the roof and shoot on sight. Ready?”

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After a successful mission, we decided to stop playing. Spending four and a half hours in front of a screen wasn’t exactly how we had imagined the day to go but none of us were complaining. It had been fun, probably one of the best days of my life. It was great to just sit around and talk with them about anything and for it not to be awkward. They welcomed me into their group with open arms and I couldn’t have asked for more.

“I gotta run, I was supposed to be at home half an hour ago.” Gale said as we all walked to the front door. He hugged Katniss and Madge and shook my hand. ‘Same time next week?”

“Yeah sure, now get out of here.” Madge replied, leaning against the door frame. Gale winked at her as he turned and ran. Katniss stepped out of the house and turned to face us, her hands in the pockets of her oversized jacket that I was sure had belonged to her dad. When he died, she started wearing it and I haven’t seen her without it since.

“I’m glad you were here today, Peeta. You’re going to come next week, right?”

“Oh, yeah definitely.” Why did I say that? I wouldn’t be allowed to miss two Saturday shifts in a row. I could ask Asher to cover for me again but I don’t think he would. I didn’t even speak to Madge about him today.

“Great. Well I’ll see you at school. Bye guys.” With that, Katniss spun on her heel and walked away. When Katniss was out of sight, Madge pushed me back into the house and shut the door.

“Madge, I kind of need to leave as well. My dad is on his way.” I put my hand on the doorknob but she slapped it away.
“Your dad can wait for five minutes. What happened with Katniss? I gave you two great opportunities to talk to her because I’m such a good friend.” She said, rolling her eyes.

“Nothing happened. We just talked a little bit.” I replied, shrugging my shoulders.

“About what? Come on, Peeta, don’t leave out any of the details.” Madge implored, putting one hand on my shoulder. I took one arm out of its crutch and did the same to her, although I was leaning on her way more than she was on me. I recounted my conversations with Katniss and watched Madge’s face light up with joy. She seemed way too happy about the fact that Katniss and I had spoken more than a few sentences to each other.

“Why are you smiling like you just killed a guy?” I asked. Madge lifted her hand off my shoulder to punch my arm. ‘Really, Madge? I’m going to have a huge bruise there tomorrow.’

“It’s not my fault that you stress me out. And I don’t smile like I just killed someone. I’m trying to work out if that was an insult or a compliment. Anyway, I’m happy that you talked to her. I’m especially happy that I was the one who made it happen.” She clapped her hands together before continuing. ‘I can tell that you guys are going to be really good friends. Who knows, maybe she likes you too.’ I felt like the breath had been knocked out of my lungs. The thought of Katniss liking me was impossible to imagine.

“Don’t be stupid.” I muttered. ‘She would never like someone like me. Besides, she’s with Gale, right?’ I asked, unsure if I actually wanted to know the answer or not. Madge burst out laughing and doubled over, clutching her stomach. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Peeta, that’s hilarious.’ She responded, still clutching her stomach but now standing upright. ‘Gale and Katniss aren’t together. Oh my god, that would be so weird. They’re like brother and sister.”

“But everyone says they’re going out.” “And everyone says that Miss Trinket is going out with Mr Abernathy. Just because everyone says something doesn’t mean it’s true.” She said with a smile.

“Are you sure because I can really see those two together?” “Gale and Katniss?”

“No, Trinket and Abernathy.”

“Peeta Mellark, did you just make a joke? A funny joke? Wow. I’m so proud of you.” Madge replied, placing one hand over her chest as if she was in shock. I can be funny when I want to be.

“Yeah, I’m a real comedian. Seriously though, is there really nothing going on between them?” I asked, more hopeful this time.

“There is definitely nothing going on there. That just makes it easier for you and Katniss to get together now.” There it was again, that breathless feeling that came along with thoughts of being with Katniss.

“Never gonna happen.” I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket. I knew without checking that it was my dad telling me he was outside. ‘Alright, I need to go. Thanks for inviting me today, Madge. I really appreciate it.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Peeta.” Madge opened the front door and hugged me before I walked to the car. ‘See you at school!” I waved at her and she stood on the doorstep until we drove away.

When we arrived home, Asher was just finishing the shift that I should have been working. I decided to help him out with the cleaning as a way of thanking him.

“Did you talk to her about me?” Asher asked, rushing over to me as I stepped into the bakery. Asher had hardly crossed my mind all day and I felt bad that I hadn’t upheld my end of the deal.

“Not exactly.” The hopeful expression on his face dropped and was replaced with a look of annoyance. ‘I couldn’t tell her that you made the cakes and then I just didn’t have the chance to talk about you without it being weird.’

“Why couldn’t you tell her? It’s not a big deal that you didn’t make them.” He turned away from me and carried on wiping down the surfaces. I thought about my next words carefully.

“I couldn’t tell her because I wanted her to think I made them.”

“Why do I get the feeling that the ‘her’ you’re referring to isn’t Madge?” I don’t know how he managed to figure that out from one sentence. There was no point in hiding it from Asher any longer. It’s not as if there even was anything to hide, it was just a stupid crush.
“It’s not Madge, it’s someone else. I didn’t know she was going to be there today and by the time she showed up I hadn’t told Madge that you had made them and Madge told her that I had made them and I didn’t want her to think that I couldn’t bake or whatever.” I rambled, speaking much faster than usual. Even when she was nowhere near me, she still had this effect on me.

“Let me guess, it was that Everdeen girl, right?” Asher said, turning to face me with a smirk. I opened my mouth to reply but nothing came out and I stood there like a fish just opening and closing my mouth. ‘Come on, Peeta, it’s so obvious that you like her. I saw the way you looked at her yesterday. Judging by your reaction I think I hit the nail on the head.” Was I really that easy to read? Asher and Madge had managed to figure it out so easily.

“Please don’t tell anyone, Ash.” In a small town like this, gossip spread fast and I didn’t want Katniss to know that I liked her. Not yet, at least.

“Don’t worry, kid, your secret is safe with me.” Asher said walking over to me and ruffling my hair. I scowled at him before he threw a cloth at me. ‘Hurry up and dry those trays, I’m tired.” That was it, end of conversation. I think Asher could tell how uncomfortable I was so he knew to stop talking about it. We cleaned the bakery from top to bottom and went to our rooms. I dropped onto my bed and instantly fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so I was supposed to upload on Monday as well but when I read the chapter over again I wasn't happy with the direction that I had taken the story in so I had to completely rewrite it.
Thank you so much for sticking with this story and motivating me to keep writing it!!
Chapter 6

I entered school on Monday with my head hung low and my shoulders hunched in an attempt to make myself as small as possible. Saturday had been a great day so it was stupid of me to expect that Sunday could be good as well. For no reason at all, my mother was in a bad mood and she decided to take her frustration out on me. She complained that Asher and I hadn’t washed the dishes properly and put them back in the wrong place. Of course we hadn’t done that; we knew exactly how to clean them and where to put them, but she needed a reason to be angry. When I walked into the bakery that day I narrowly avoided being hit with a small cake pan. My mother was flinging pots and pans everywhere and my dad was making no attempts to stop her. I locked eyes with Asher who was standing behind her and trying to get the metalware out of her hand but she wouldn’t let anyone stop her. Silently, Asher told me to turn around and leave and I would have if my mother hadn’t surged forward and grabbed me by the collar of my shirt. She started screaming at me, telling me how worthless I was, how useless, how unbearable it was for her to be my mother. Asher managed to pull her away before she could say anything else and I hurried out of the room as fast as I could. The bakery was closed on Sundays so I spent the rest of the day holed up in my room. Asher knocked on the door of my room just as I was about to go to sleep. He let himself in and crawled into my bed just like he always did when something like this happened. We didn’t say anything to each other and eventually we both fell asleep.

Asher wasn’t in school today and after the events of yesterday I didn’t want to talk to anyone. I tried to make myself invisible which was easy to do. No one ever paid attention to me anyway apart from when they needed someone to pick on. I went to my locker and sorted my books out, passing two of Asher’s friends on the way to my first class.

“Hey, Peeta. Are you riding with us today?” Daniel asked, looking down at me. At six foot five, he was the tallest person at school and probably the tallest in the whole town which meant that he had to look down to speak to anyone. A perk of having to look down all the time meant that his blond hair fell over his eyes in a way that couldn't be imitated. Oli stood next to him, black hair styled in a quiff and his brown eyes crinkled at the corners as he smiled, half leaning on Daniel with their fingers entwined.

“Yeah, if that’s alright with you guys. I’ll meet you outside at three?” Daniel and Oli usually dropped me off at home on days where Asher wasn’t at school. They had been together for a few years now and if I didn’t know them I probably would have given up on believing in true love a long time ago. Just by looking at them now I could tell how deeply they cared about each other. It was just small things, like the way they automatically joined hands as soon as they were within five feet of each other and the way that they looked at each other, as if they had never seen anything so wonderful before.

“Great, well we need to get to class so we’ll see you later, Peeta.” Oli said, pulling Daniel, with
difficulty, down the corridor to their next class. Daniel sighed before giving in and walking away, turning to wave at me quickly before going into the class room.

I spent my first classes thinking about what I would say to my counsellor today. About a month ago I was told that I should go to counselling and so every Monday I had to go and see him at lunch so that we could talk. It was kind of like therapy and I have to admit that it was nice to be able to speak about everything that was bothering me without feeling worried that anyone would find out. I made my way to the counselling room and waited outside. For the past three weeks Mr Abernathy opened the door and let me in whenever he wanted to. It was pretty annoying because it meant that I didn’t know how long our sessions would last and I would have to rush through everything that I wanted to say. I was stood outside for ten minutes before he opened the door and gestured for me to enter, eyes half closed and a glass in his other hand. I walked into the small room and took a seat in my usual chair, resting my crutches against the wooden coffee table. Mr Abernathy sat in the chair opposite me, leaning back and putting his feet up on the table, knocking my crutches over. I sighed and picked them up, propping them against the chair this time. He picked up an unlabelled glass bottle from the floor next to his chair and it was filled with a golden liquid that was definitely not apple juice. I knew I should probably say something about it but who was I to judge? We both had our own problems, we just dealt with them in different ways.

We sat in silence for a few moments as he finished off his glass and I gathered my thoughts. I definitely didn’t want to talk about what had happened yesterday. I decided to talk about what had happened in the days before, when I was happy for the first time in a long time. I looked at Mr Abernathy expectantly. He stared back with a sarcastic smile on his face before nodding his head, which was his way of telling me to speak.

“Thanks for seeing me again.” I said, still unsure of how to start these sessions. He leaned forward in his seat and placed the glass on the table before sitting back again. I took a deep breath before continuing, avoiding looking at him. It was easier to talk when I didn’t look at him. “So, this weekend was good, I guess. I got to hang out with a few people and I think they’re my friends now which is kinda cool.” He didn’t say anything for a while so I looked up and saw that his head was tilted back and his eyes were closed. He was asleep. Actually asleep. During my session. I coughed loudly to try and wake him up but it didn’t work so I picked up one my crutches and nudged him with it. He grunted before opening his eyes slightly. I tried to hide my frustration by clearing my throat and hoping that would make him sit up and actually look at me. Of course, he didn’t. He hadn’t been like this in our previous sessions and I wondered why he was being so off today. I had gotten used to him having a drink during this time but he usually only had one and judging by the way he was acting right now, he had definitely had more than one.

“Sir, is everything okay?”

“No, Mellark, you don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be here. Let’s just cut the bullshit and use this time to take a nap.” He dropped his head back again and closed his eyes. I sat in shock for a few minutes. How did you respond to something like that? A few more minutes later, when Mr Abernathy started snoring, I picked up my crutches and stood up. There was no point in staying here when I could spend the rest of lunch practicing. I was just about to open the door when he spoke.

“Really, Mellark? I thought it would have taken more than that to get rid of you.”

“What?” I turned to face him and saw that he was sitting upright now, one hand holding the glass, the other holding the bottle. He poured another drink for himself as he spoke.

“It only took, what?” He glanced at his watch. “Fifteen minutes? For you to get fed up and leave. From what I’ve seen of you I would have thought you would stay longer. I guess I was wrong.” He took a swig before grimacing. I stared at him incredulously. What was he talking about?

“I’d really appreciate it if you could stop being so vague. What do you mean you thought I would
“stay longer?” I could hear the frustration and anger in my voice but made no attempts to hide it. He deserved to know how annoyed I was.

“You’re a fighter, Mellark. I can tell from the look in your eyes. You’re here for a reason. I read your file, you’ve been through some tough shit. But you haven’t given up. There’s still a spark of hope in you. That’s what I meant when I said I thought you would last longer. Guess I was wrong. I’ll see you next week, Mellark.”

“What the hell is your problem? You’re talking like you want to help me but then you’re just sitting there, drinking away like you’re not in a classroom on a Monday afternoon. How did you even get this job? You can barely help yourself let alone help others. You’re pathetic.” I left the room and slammed the door behind me before he had a chance to respond. I rarely had outbursts like that but I guess the events of yesterday left me feeling angry. There was still twenty minutes of lunch left. Enough time to run through one piece, although I doubted that I could play anything after that. It was like all of my frustration that should have been directed at my parents was spent on him. The more I thought about it, the more I hated myself for saying those things to him. I was already halfway to the practice room but I decided to turn around and go back to apologise to him.

I knocked on the door tentatively before pushing it open. He didn’t look at me as I walked in and closed the door behind me. The liquid in the bottle had definitely decreased in the time I had been gone and I couldn’t blame him.

“Mr Abernathy?” He still didn’t look at me. He was staring straight ahead at the chair that I had been sitting at. I went and sat down so he had to look at me. ‘I’m sorry for what I said. I didn’t mean it. It’s just been a tough week.”

“Don’t say that.” Mr Abernathy replied a few seconds later.

“Say what?” “That you didn’t mean it. Of course you did. People have a habit of saying how they really feel when they’re angry. So you did mean it and that’s fine. Anything else?”

“Uh, no. I just wanted to apologise.” I said, rubbing my palms on my jeans.

“You had a rough week, kid. It’s alright to be angry sometimes. Just don’t take it out on the wrong people. That’s all I’m going to say today. If you don’t want to come to the session next week, I wouldn’t blame you. Just let me know before so that I can make other plans.” He tilted the bottle in my direction, a sign of what exactly his plans would be.

“I’ll be here.” I stated, standing up to leave. He didn’t say anything, just raised his glass in a silent toast and downed the rest of the drink.

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After my last class I made my way towards my locker to sort my books out. I rounded the corner and saw that Katniss was leaning against my locker, she was looking down at the ground with her arms folded over her chest. Was she waiting for me? I looked in the dull reflective surface of one of the lockers and ran my fingers through my hair, attempting to make it look slightly better. I straightened up, pulling my shirt down before taking a deep breath. I debated calling out to her but I didn’t have a chance to even open my mouth. She looked up and saw me coming towards her and she smiled, making my heart beat faster. I smiled back at her, trying to hide my nerves. When I reached my locker, she shuffled to the side as I fumbled with the lock and entered the combination wrong twice. It was hard to focus on anything when she was standing this close to me. She didn’t say anything so I started to take my books out of my bag. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see her looking at me, almost as if she was observing me.

“Hi.” Katniss said, finally breaking the silence. “Hi.” I replied, my voice catching in my throat. I still didn’t know why she was here but I didn’t want to ask her. She must have a reason and she would tell me herself.

“Why don’t you have any pictures?” She asked, looking into my locker. I looked at the blank door of my locker that most people used to hang notes and pictures.

“I just never got round to it, I guess.” That was only half true. There just wasn’t anything that I wanted to stick on the door, nothing that meant anything to me. Katniss pursed her lips together,
which made her get that little crease in her forehead. “Hmm, we’ll find something to stick up next time.’ Next time. Meaning that this wasn’t just an offhand conversation. She wanted to talk to me again. I bit the inside of my mouth to stop myself from smiling. ‘Anyway, you’re going home now, right?” “Yeah, I am. Are you? Going to your home, I mean. Not my home. Why would you be going to my home? Not that I wouldn’t want you to come to my home. I’m just going to shut up now.” I gritted my teeth and mentally swore at myself for being so idiotic. Katniss smiled to herself and I had to look away.

“Actually, I am going to your house. Well, near your house. I need to go to the bakery and I noticed that your brother isn’t here today so if you needed a ride home or whatever then you could come with me.” I lost my grip on the books I was holding and they dropped to the ground. I bent down as fast as I could to pick them up but Katniss was already there, books in hand as she stood up. I smiled nervously at her as I took the books out of her hand and threw them into my bag. I had already told Daniel and Oli that I would go home with them but I knew this would probably never happen again.

“Yeah, sure. I just need to talk to someone quickly, is that okay?” I shut my locker and swung my backpack across my shoulders.

“Go ahead. I’ll wait in my car.” Katniss replied, pulling her keys out of her pocket. I nodded at her and did a strange click and point thing with my fingers before turning to walk away, mentally punching myself.

I walked as fast as I could to Oli’s car, having to take a few seconds to catch my breath before speaking to them. Oli was already sitting in the drivers seat but Daniel was standing outside, leaning against the car. By the time I reached them, I was panting and my sides hurt. That was probably the fastest I had ever walked in a long time but I didn’t want to keep Katniss waiting.

“Woah, Peeta. What’s the rush?” Daniel asked, putting one hand on my shoulder as I folded over, hands on my hips.

“Is it alright if I uh..’ More deep breaths. ‘If I don’t go with you guys today?”

“Oh, of course. How are you getting home though?” Daniel asked, tipping my head up to look at him. ‘You know Ash will kill me if anything happens to you.”

“A friend. I’m going with a friend. She has to go to the bakery anyway and she asked me if I wanted to go with her.”

“A girl, eh?” Daniel laughed to himself, before knocking on the car window. Oli rolled down the window and leaned over to see out. ‘Oli, guess what? Peeta’s going home with a girl.”

“You’re choosing a girl over us? I have to say, I’m a bit offended, Peeta.” Oli said with a straight face.

“No, it’s not like that. I’ll go with you guys if you want me to.”

“Peeta, we’re kidding. Go, don’t make her wait for you. But if you think we’re not telling Ash about this, you’re wrong.” Oli said quickly, rolling up the window before I had a chance to say something back to him. Daniel laughed again before opening the car door.

“See you later, Peeta.” Daniel said with a wink as he got into the car and they drove off.

I looked around the parking lot for Katniss and saw her walking towards her car. I went over to her, trying to act as casual as I could. She saw me before I got to her and stopped walking, waiting for me to catch up to her. When I reached her she smiled at me before continuing to walk to her car. She unlocked the doors and got in. I stood outside for a few seconds wondering if this was actually happening. It was obviously a few seconds too long because she got out of the car and looked at me over the roof.

“Is everything okay?” Katniss asked, one hand on the door and one on the roof.

“Yeah, I was just wondering if it was okay to put my crutches in the back.” I could pretend I was normal as much as I wanted but there would always be at least one thing that would remind me of how different I was. No one else had to worry about where to put their crutches when they got into someone’s car. Katniss was probably already regretting asking me to come with her.

“Of course it’s okay. Do you need any help?” She said with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Uh no, it’s fine. Thanks.” I pulled my arms out of the crutches and opened the back door as
Katniss got back into the car. I tried my best to put them in without making too much noise or damaging anything in the backseat of her car. There was hardly anything in the back, it was fairly neat with just one water bottle on the seat. I closed the back door and shuffled to the front, opening the door and getting in as Katniss started the car.

“Thanks for letting me go with you.” I said as she drove out of the parking lot. “Don’t worry about it. I figured if we’re going to the same place we might as well go together.” Katniss replied as if her words hadn’t just made my stomach perform backflips. The idea of being together with Katniss in any sense of the word was enough to make me lose my composure. She looked over at me quickly and smiled so I smiled back at her. We sat in silence for a few minutes before Katniss spoke again. “It was fun hanging out with you on Saturday. Madge told me that you practice at her house in the mornings. I’m glad you stayed.” “Yeah, it was a great day. Thanks for letting me play with you guys.” “You’re coming this week, right? We need to beat Gale, he can’t always win.” She said, tapping the steering wheel lightly as she drove. “Definitely.” Not definitely, Peeta. Why do I keep saying that? I wouldn’t be able to miss two Saturdays in a row. I would have to talk to my dad and Asher about it. “Great.” Katniss replied, glancing over at me and smiling again. Her smile usually made my heart skip a beat but knowing she was smiling at me made it beat in double time. I rolled down the window, feeling the cool wind wash over me. Five minutes later we were at my house.

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