The Mockingbird

by jeeno2

Summary

Peeta Mellark, idealistic young attorney, gets the case that changes everything. Modern day AU.

Notes

For weeks now, I've been unable to get the idea of an idealistic, overachieving lawyer!Peeta out of my head. And so here we are.

This story will *eventually* turn into a multi-chapter fic, but I have absolutely no idea when I'll have time to expand on this little scene. This takes place approximately two-thirds of the way through the story.
"Peeta," she says quietly, folding her arms against her chest and leaning across the table. "You've been at this for hours."

It's two in the morning, and they're sitting across from each other in the firm's large library that overlooks the Chicago river.

Peeta looks up from his book at her words, his reading glasses pushed halfway down the bridge of his nose and his hair mussed from the hours he's been absentmindedly running his hands through it as he reads.

"I know," he tells her, nodding. "I know. I just — I just know the answer is here. Somewhere."

Katniss shakes her head at him. "It doesn't matter. You need to get some sleep. You're no good to that family if you kill yourself with overwork before you can even take a single deposition."

He looks up and gazes at her wordlessly for a long moment.

When he finally speaks he doesn't respond to what she's said. Instead, he adjusts his glasses and whispers to her, "Come here."

She complies, slowly walking around the table to where he sits. And he pulls her into his lap and kisses her.

It's been ages since they've been alone together. Between Peeta's obsession with this new case and her own work they've hardly even seen each other in weeks. It feels strange to be sitting here with him, on his lap, like this — in the fucking law firm library of all places — but she just misses him too much to protest.

She's the first to break away. "Do you promise me this will work? That we'll stop them?" she asks, her breath coming a little heavily. She runs her fingers through his hair, kissing his temple.

He leans up and kisses her cheek. He nods. Smiles at her. "I do."
Chapter Notes

I am just thrilled that so many people want to read more about lawyer!Peeta. And here it is, the actual prologue of The Mockingbird.

Unfortunately, I'm still not sure how often I'll be able to update this. My other story remains top priority and I have real life obligations to boot. That said, I have a clear idea of where this story is heading and am 100% committed to *eventually* seeing this story through to its completion. But it will likely take me quite a while.

A special thanks to evil genius Abagail Snow from FFn for her incredible plotting suggestions and feedback, and to the inimitable RainyDaysAnyways for beta assistance. And of course, thank you to everyone on tumblr and elsewhere who has not-so-gently suggested that, gosh darnit, lawyer!Peeta ought to wear glasses.

Katniss Everdeen is standing in front of the bartender, clinging to the railing and trying not to topple over on her high heels.

"Pitcher of sangria," she asks him. Or at least, she tries to. But he seems to understand her slurred words well enough. The house sangria is really the only thing people order here at Dominick's anyway.

He hands Katniss a large pitcher, and she toddles back with it through the crowded room to the table where her friends are sitting.

It's the day before law school graduation. At last. This is what Katniss has worked towards the past three years – through late nights in the library and summer clerkships, through stints on the law review and moot court team.

And what better way to commemorate the occasion, she and her friends decided today after their last final, than to get completely shitfaced in the middle of the day?

She's really going to miss this bar. Dominick's is across the street from the law school (how the owner convinced Ann Arbor's zoning board to approve that decision, Katniss will never know). Because of its location, she and most of her classmates have been coming here to unwind after exams ever since their 1L year.

Most of her graduating classmates are here right now, in fact, buying pitcher after pitcher of the sangria Dominick's is famous for.

"You picked up your bar review materials yet?" Delly asks the group once Katniss has refilled their glasses.

"Ugh, stop it," Madge whines, covering her ears. "Not today. Please."

Katniss agrees. This summer is going to suck and everyone knows it. No point in worrying about the bar exam – or even thinking about it – until review classes actually start in two weeks. There'll be plenty of time for stressing about all that later.
Besides, all three of them are moving to Chicago and taking the Illinois bar. Illinois has one of the highest bar passage rates in the country – something like 90%, Katniss has heard. She's no stranger to hard work, of course, and neither are her friends. She's fairly confident they'll all pass.

Either way, though, now is just not the time for thinking about it.

"Ladies!" a slurred voice shouts at them, suddenly, from the next table over. "Mind if we join you?"

It's Finnick Odair of course, referring to himself, as he often does when he's drunk, in the third person. "Such an attention whore," Madge stage-whispers from across the table. Finnick pulls up a chair next to Madge without waiting for an answer and sits down with a flourish.

"Hey Finn," Katniss says.

"That's 'Sir Finn,' to you, peasant," he mock-corrects Katniss. She rolls her eyes at him.

"Finnick!" someone shouts, then, from the front of the bar.

He turns and yells back, "Hey! Boys! Over here!" He gestures for whoever is entering to come join them.

Katniss looks up and sees Thresh Wilson and Peeta Mellark walking towards their table.

She feels herself flush. She tells herself it's just from the sangria. But even half-hammered, she knows better.

Madge grabs the pitcher and pours a glass for the three newcomers. Each of them takes one.

Finnick stands up on a chair, then, and raises his glass high in the air. "To us!" he shouts, loudly enough for the entire bar to hear.

The newest soon-to-be graduates of the University of Michigan School of Law give a wild cheer at his words. "I'll drink to that!" Thresh says, pounding his sangria, and everyone at their table laughs.

Katniss doesn't exactly remember leaving Dominick's and walking to Scorekeepers, the sports bar near the bus depot. But she must have at some point because she's here now, sitting in a booth with Madge, Delly, and Finnick.

Katniss thinks she might be what people would call bombed out of her mind. She isn't positive. She's never felt quite like this before, to be honest, so she's only making an educated guess. But she's basing this guess on the fact that it looks like there are three Finnicks sitting across from her right now, even though she knows there's only one. And on the fact that the room won't stop spinning.

Katniss tries, with great effort, to focus on her friends across the table. She sees Madge talking very animatedly with Finnick. Katniss can't tell if Finnick is listening to Madge or not; it looks like he's just using the conversation as an excuse to stare at her tits. Katniss turns her head to her left and sees Delly with her face down on the table, arms folded underneath her.

"Hey, Katniss."

Katniss turns her head towards the speaker and sees Peeta standing right next to her.
She flushes again. But by now, she's too far gone to even lie to herself about why.

Despite her best efforts to ignore him all through law school – she came here for a degree, dammit; to get a high-paying job that would provide her with the security she never had as a child; not to land herself a man or even distract herself with one – there is just no denying that Peeta Mellark is hot.

Katniss noticed Peeta almost from the very beginning. Probably every girl here did. He's tall, with broad shoulders and blonde hair, and he has these incredible blue eyes...

But it wasn't until they both joined the Michigan Law Review in their second year, and they started working together, that she really started to notice Peeta. They were assigned to the same horrible article and although they technically had separate responsibilities (Katniss' was to correct the article’s citations; Peeta's was to track down the sources the author used through inter-library loan), the article was such a mess that they often needed to work together to get anything accomplished at all.

There were so many late nights that year, spent in the Journal's office, a half-eaten pizza between them. Peeta's intensity just mesmerized her. He could go for hours, she remembers, poring over books and checking sources for that damn article long after Katniss wanted to call it a night.

Peeta had these ridiculous horn-rimmed glasses back then (he has since replaced them with a more staid, lawyerly-looking pair with thin silver frames) that would often slide halfway down the bridge of his nose when he was concentrating. And when Peeta was especially focused, the tip of his tongue would sometimes dart out of his mouth absentmindedly as he paged through his work.

How many times did she wonder, their 2L year, what Peeta would look like without those glasses? What he'd do if she took them off his face as they slid down his nose? What it would be like to distract him from his work by kissing him senseless? Katniss eventually lost count.

"Katniss? Are you all right?" Peeta asks her, sounding alarmed, snapping her out of her drunken reverie.

Katniss realizes, suddenly, that she's been staring at him. "Oh. Yeah. Yeah. I'm... I'm fine."

"Good." He smiles at her. "I was just wondering if you wanted another drink." He points to their friends seated at the table behind her. "They don't look like they're much up for partying anymore."

It's always a little funny to her whenever one of her classmates uses a word like "partying." Even when they're drunk, they're all still a bunch of anal-retentive overachievers.

In spite of herself she starts to laugh.

Peeta seems nonplussed by her reaction at first, most likely because he hadn't actually said anything all that funny. But he starts laughing, too, after a few moments.

He's probably drunk as well, Katniss realizes.

"Sure," she finally tells him after her laughter subsides. She takes his hand. Why not? He's moving to New York next week; she'll be in Chicago. She'll never see him again after graduation. And the way his crisp blue button-down shirt brings out the color of his eyes is making her dizzy in a way she knows has nothing to do with alcohol. "Let's get a drink."

A few hours later, Katniss and Peeta half walk, half stumble home to her apartment, laughing
"Shhhhhhh!" Peeta puts his fingers to his lips, mock-seriously, when Katniss' laughter gets especially loud. "Quiet! The fuzz! The... the police here in Ann Arbor, man, they... they know what we're up to out here..."

His words have the opposite of their intended effect and Katniss laughs even harder, doubling over and almost falling to the ground before Peeta catches her and stands her up on her feet.

Katniss has no idea how they manage to get to her building. They must be the two least experienced drunks in the entire world.

But between the two of them, somehow, they get there eventually.

Katniss pauses at her front door a moment. This is the part, she knows, where she takes her keys out of her purse, thanks Peeta for walking her home, says good night and goodbye, and passes out face down in her bed. Alone.

But before she can manage any of that he clumsily spins her around to face him.

"I should have done this two years ago," he says to her, slurring his words. His blue eyes look glazed and a little unfocused behind his silver frames.

Katniss has no idea what he's talking about. "What? Get drunk?"

He answers her question by grabbing her by the shoulders and kissing her.

At first she thinks she must be dreaming. She's felt like she's been in a dream for hours, really – unable to focus on anything, feeling like she's just bubbling along as dizzying sensations dull her mind and take control. Obviously this must be a dream too.

But then Katniss feels Peeta's tongue trace her bottom lip and she realizes that this is actually happening.

She wraps her arms around him quickly, tightly, at the realization. She's not doing anything intentionally anymore. Her faculties have left her and she is operating purely on instinct.

Katniss' sudden movement nearly topples them both to the ground once more, which makes Peeta laugh again. She steps away from him, then, and backs herself against the wall of her building to steady herself. And she reaches for him.

"Katniss," he says quietly, and then his mouth is on hers again, his hands wrapping around the back of her head as he leans into her and into the support the wall provides. He tastes like gin and tonics and the peppermint gum Finnick handed out before they all left Scorekeepers.

Their movements are sloppy and uncoordinated, and her nose keeps bumping against his. But Katniss feels like her entire body is on fire.

Peeta breaks away from her after a long moment, breathing a little heavily, his glasses slightly askew. He leans down and presses open-mouthed kisses along her neck, mumbling her name against her skin. She winds her fingers through his tousled blonde hair as he kisses her, pulling him as close to her as she can get him. It pulls a quiet moan from him, which ignites her even further.

Katniss is just about to ask Peeta if he would like to come upstairs with her – something she hasn't asked anyone in over three years – when she realizes, suddenly, that she is about to be violently...
"Peeta –" she manages to say by way of warning, abruptly shoving him away from her.

"What -?" he starts to ask her, flushed, confused.

But before he can finish the sentence she leans over into the bushes outside of her building and vomits up the contents of her stomach.

When Katniss wakes up the next morning she thinks she might be dying.

Or possibly already dead.

She opens one eye and looks at the clock on her bedside table. 10:17 a.m.

 Fuck.

She's going to be late for brunch with Prim.

Katniss reaches out and blindly grabs for the glass of water Peeta left for her before he took off. She isn't sure she's ever been more mortified than she was last night, when he had to help her into her apartment after she'd puked her guts out in the bushes.

Right after she'd tried to suck his face off.

Oh, God.

Katniss gingerly steps out of bed and winces at the pain in her head. She stumbles to the bathroom and rummages around in the medicine cabinet until she finds the bottle of aspirin.

"Morning, lady," Madge greets her from the hallway.

Katniss waves her off, weakly, as she takes a gulp of water to wash down two white pills.

"Where's Mellark?" Madge asks, peering into her bedroom.

"What?" Katniss mumbles, confused.

"Peeta. Where is he? He go home already?"

Katniss flushes and says, "He went home last night."

Madge raises her eyebrows. "Ah. When I saw you two leave Scorekeepers together last night I thought maybe you'd finally… well. You know."

Katniss buries her face in her hands in embarrassment. "He… walked me home. Or, well, we kind of both stumbled here together, anyway. And… we sort of… made out."

Madge laughs. "Awesome."

Katniss shakes her head and says, "No. I mean, it was… really fun. But before anything else could happen I puked in the bushes. And that was the end of it."

Madge wrinkles her nose. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry."

Katniss walks into the kitchen and sits down heavily in one of the kitchen chairs. "It was so gross,
Madge. Peeta had to help me inside. He got me a glass of water and put me to bed." She shakes her head. "God, I'm just so mortified. Even if I hadn't puked, I just can't believe I did that."

"Did what?" Madge asks, sounding genuinely perplexed.

Katniss rolls her eyes. "Kiss him like that."

"What the hell are you talking about? Why on earth should you be mortified about kissing him?"

Katniss lets out a big exhale, exasperated. "Because, Madge. We were both totally hammered. I wasn't in control at all. I'm pretty sure he wasn't, either." She shakes her head in disbelief. "I just can't believe I made out with a guy I know I'm never going to see again. When I was drunk. I just... can't believe I did that." She's starting to repeat herself, she knows, but she can't help it. It's the truth, and her embarrassment is all she can think about right now.

Madge starts to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Katniss demands.

"You are," Madge answers. "You're acting like getting drunk and making out with a hot guy the night before graduation is the worst thing someone could possibly do." She laughs again. "Not only is it not the worst thing someone could possibly do, it's practically a cliché."

"Not for me it isn't," Katniss responds sharply.

Madge sighs. "I suppose you're right about that."

Katniss stands up and stretches. "I need a shower. I feel like absolute shit. You need one, or can I go ahead?"

Madge stands up and walks towards the door. "I've already showered. I'm meeting my parents at Café Zola for brunch now, actually. See you in a few hours."

"See you later," Katniss replies, walking into the bathroom.

She takes off her pajamas and tries to get the water as hot as she can before stepping inside the shower. She just stands there for a long time, letting the scalding water run over her, letting the steam fill her pores. It makes her feel a little better, physically.

But it does nothing to shake the remorse she's feeling over her actions last night.

She can't be the kind of woman who just gets drunk and throws herself at attractive men. She's worked too long, and too hard, to let any sort of distraction slow her down.

It's not that she never wants to date, of course, but…

Jesus. What must Peeta think of her now?

After twenty minutes, Katniss finally feels human enough to step out of the shower and try to dress. She wraps a towel around her head and goes to her closet, selecting the suit she'll be wearing for most of the day. She'll need to rush over to the graduation ceremony right after brunch with Prim, of course. And immediately after graduation she'll be attending the reception her new firm is hosting to celebrate the new associates joining them in the fall.

She's just finished buttoning up her pinstriped blouse when there's a knock on her front door.

"Coming!" she shouts, pulling on her skirt and rushing to open it.
"Hey Katniss," Prim greets her.

The sisters embrace. "I'm so glad you're here, little duck," Katniss says, mussing Prim's hair.

Prim laughs. "Are you kidding me?" she asks. I wouldn't miss this for anything. 'Katniss Everdeen, Esquire.' Katniss squeezes Prim even tighter at her words, trying hard not to think about their mother who will be missing her graduation. Prim pulls away and says, "I am so, so proud of my big sister."

Katniss smiles at her. "I just need a few more minutes, ok? I need to blow dry my hair and get my shoes, then I'll be ready to go."

"Sounds good to me," Prim says. "And then let's go eat. I'm starving."

The very thought of food right now turns Katniss' stomach. But she will never be able to deny Prim anything she wants.

The graduation ceremony is mostly boring, of course.

First, the Dean of the law school gives a lengthy speech about how important it is for University of Michigan graduates to stay engaged in legal academia once they are all fully-fledged practicing attorneys. The speech elicits giggles and eyerolls from Katniss' classmates, and while she agrees with the Dean in theory, she can't help but join in. Why are these ceremonies always so dry? This isn't helping with her hangover at all.

After the law school Dean's speech ends, the Associate Dean of Career Services takes the stage and implores all of them to go out there and "make a difference." This actually makes Katniss angry. The irony, of course, is that the Associate Dean of Career Services knows better than anyone that Katniss and most of her classmates are graduating with so much debt that they have no choice but to take the highest-paying job they can find. Very few of them will be in any sort of position to make any difference to anyone anytime soon.

Finally, after what feels like hours (but what her watch tells her has only been thirty minutes) the speeches end, and it is time for the graduates to accept their diplomas. Katniss hoots and hollers and screams for her friends as they take the stage, one by one, as law students, and leave it as attorneys.

And when it's her turn to get her diploma they do the same for her.

As Katniss shakes the Dean's hand and is awarded her degree, Katniss scans the crowd. She sees her friends' ecstatic faces. And Prim's.

Katniss feels a huge grin stretch across her face. It's all she can do not to burst into happy, grateful tears.

"You're sure it's ok that I'm coming to this, Katniss?" Prim asks her as they drive to The Depot, the expensive new restaurant where her firm's reception is being held.

"Of course I'm sure, Prim," Katniss tells her. "People are allowed to bring significant others to this, and I can't think of anyone in my life more significant than you are."

Prim rolls her eyes as Katniss kisses her wetly on the cheek.
"Looks like we're here," Prim says, pulling over to the curb and putting the car in park.

"All right, then," Katniss says, squaring her shoulders. "It's show time."

Katniss always feels a little out of place whenever she attends any sort of official law firm function. The University of Michigan prides itself on attracting students from all walks of life. And it is a relatively diverse student body, as far as elite law schools go.

But the truth of the matter is, most people who wind up attending a school like Michigan, and getting jobs at firms like Heavensbee, Paylor & Coin are children of educated professionals themselves. Not daughters of diner waitresses who grew up in a downriver Detroit suburb.

Katniss can practically feel Prim's eyes go wide as saucers as they enter the restaurant and walk towards the back of the room where she knows the reception will be held. Before last summer, Katniss had never set foot in a place like this before in her life. And she knows it's Prim's first time, ever.

"Ms. Everdeen!" she hears a trilling voice call out when they enter the reception area.

Katniss sees Effie Trinket, the firm's heavily made-up recruiting director, walking towards her with her hand extended.

"Effie!" Katniss says with feigned enthusiasm as she shakes the proffered hand. "It's so nice to see you again."

Effie smiles at her. "And it's so wonderful to see you too, Ms. Everdeen. And congratulations! Today is such a big, big, big day for you!"

Katniss smiles and nods at her. Despite her innate dislike of Ms. Trinket, Katniss can't disagree with her last point at all.

Although this reception is ostensibly being held to welcome HP&C's newest associates into the fold, in truth there are only a handful of new graduates joining the firm this fall. The majority of well-dressed people at this event are HP&C attorneys who happen to be Michigan alums and who also happen to be in town this week for graduation anyway.

Katniss knows she's supposed to be getting to know the people here – they will be her superiors once she joins the firm this fall, and responsible for giving her her first assignments and reviews – but she suddenly feels very shy. She has friends, of course, but she's never been especially gregarious. Large groups of strangers have always intimidated her, and today is no exception.

She just never knows what to say to people in settings like this.

"I'm going to go get something to eat, Katniss," Prim tells her, gesturing to the large buffet that's been set up to the side of the room. "You want anything?"

Katniss stomach is still a little on edge from last night's misadventures. She knows a little food will likely settle it, but she also just can't manage to eat anything just yet. "No, I'm fine, Prim," she lies. "You go ahead. I'm going to just get myself some water at the bar."

She watches Prim's retreating form for a moment, then walks over to the bar located on the far side of the room.

Before she has walked ten feet, however, she freezes, completely thunderstruck.

_It can't be..._
"Katniss?" Peeta asks her, apparently as surprised to see her as she is to see him. "What are you doing here?"

She takes him in, then, in spite of herself and in spite of their surroundings, all six foot three of him, in his tailored three piece suit complete with silver cuff links that fasten the ends of his sleeves.

It takes her a long moment to unstick her tongue from the roof of her mouth and to realize that with his question, he's got this all backwards.

"What am I doing here?" she asks. "This is my firm, Peeta. I'm starting at HP&C this fall."

"Oh," he says, apparently thrown. He coughs, then, and starts to flush slightly. He fidgets a little with his shirt collar.

"I accepted my offer to work for them after graduation months ago, in fact," Katniss tells him. "I think the better question is, what are you doing here?" she asks. "I thought you were… heading off to New York next week."

"I was," he tells her. "I accepted the position with the New York City public defender's office. But at the last minute, the funding for my position was cut."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," she tells him honestly.

"I never wanted to work for a big firm," he tells her. "But I need a job. Fortunately, HP&C was hiring, and at the last minute I submitted my resume." He chuckles a little. "It's a good thing I was Editor in Chief on the Law Review this past year. That definitely helped."

Katniss feels a little badly for him. Peeta was here on a full merit scholarship and as such, doesn't have the debt burden that she and the rest of their classmates do. He is probably the only person she knows who could have gotten out of having to work for a big firm, and given how idealistic he's always been, how motivated he's always been to help the less fortunate, she was definitely hoping for his sake that he'd be able to manage it.

But now here he is – stuck, like the rest of them.

"I'm sorry," she tells him.

"It's all right," Peeta says. "HP&C has a real commitment to pro bono work, you know."

Katniss makes a face at him. He's not really falling for that, is he?

"I know what you're thinking," he tells her. "It's what they all say, right? But I've met with Alma Coin, and I really do believe this firm is the real deal." He smiles. "I plan to do as much pro bono work as I can before I find something better."

She doesn't believe any of it. She knows that law firms will tell candidates anything if it gives them a leg up on their competition.

But she doesn't say that to him.

She doesn't say anything at all.

She just stands there for a long moment, looking at him. Despite the voice in her head screaming at her to run as far away from this guy as she can, she stands rooted to the spot.
"Well… I'll see you, then, I guess?" Peeta asks her nervously, breaking the silence.

Katniss clears her throat. "Yes. I'll… I'll see you around." And she makes her way to the buffet line, completely flustered, and tries to find Prim.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

So, almost immediately after I decided to put this story was on an indefinite hiatus due to real-life time constraints, the following chapter essentially wrote itself. ;) I hope you enjoy.

The Illinois bar exam starts in four days.

Katniss is supposed to be taking today off from studying. "You've worked hard all summer," the instructor reassured them. "Once the exam is only a few days away, the best thing you can do for your exam performance is relax."

But Katniss just doesn't know how to do that. Not when there's still so much she hasn't committed to memory. Not when the stakes are this high.

So tonight, Katniss plans to do what she's done every night for the past eight weeks: study until eleven p.m. and then go to bed. And tomorrow morning, she'll wake up at seven and begin the routine all over again.

After finishing dinner, Katniss walks into the front room of her Chicago apartment, thinking she'll look over her answers to the Evidence practice exam with a red pen and a diet coke.

But she pauses, in shock, at the scene waiting for her in front of the television.

"You cannot be serious," Katniss says, incredulously, when she sees what her roommate is watching. "Law and Order?"

"I love this shit. You know that," Madge says, dressed in old sweatpants and a t-shirt, without taking her eyes off the flatscreen. "Oh, dammit, Katniss! You made me miss the synthesized gavel sound at the beginning." Madge hunts through the sofa cushions for the remote, muttering to herself.

Katniss just rolls her eyes. She can barely stomach Law and Order, or any of its spinoffs, on a good day. But watching it now – even having it on in her apartment – when the bar exam is less than a week away is simply intolerable.

"They get it all wrong, you know," Katniss points out, even though she knows Madge already knows that. "Watching this is totally going to mess you up for the evidence and criminal procedure questions on Tuesday."

"I'm not talking to you right now," Madge says loudly, eyes glued to Lennie Briscoe.

Katniss had been torn between studying at home tonight and heading to DePaul University's library. But now her mind is made up; she'll never be able to get the right rules to stick in her head if Sam Waterston is bombastically shouting out the wrong ones in the background.

"Heading to the library," she tells Madge as she grabs her bookbag. "I'll see you later."
It's a sticky Chicago summer night – Katniss' favorite kind of weather – and the heat and humidity press down on her as she walks the four blocks to DePaul's undergraduate campus.

Katniss doesn't like this neighborhood. It feels too homogenous. Artificial, really. Almost everyone she sees in the coffee shops and upscale grocery stores looks somewhere between twenty-five and thirty-five years old. Everyone is rather affluent. And there are very few people of color.

But, she will admit, Lincoln Park is convenient. Katniss' door-to-door commute will only be 20 minutes long on the "El" once she starts at the firm September. Given how hard she knows she'll be working, she decided after graduation that a short commute would be worth everything else she'd have to put up with in living here.

It doesn't take long for Katniss to reach DePaul's library on foot. As usual, when she enters she has to brace herself against a blast of air conditioning that hits her in the face like a brick wall.

Fortunately, after an entire summer spent holed up in here she is prepared for the library's harsh weather conditions. She unties the U of M hoodie from around her waist and puts it on over her white tank top as she waits for the vending machine to spit out her bag of peanut M&Ms.

Candy secured, Katniss trudges over to the carrel she has unofficially adopted as her own and puts down her bag. She drops into the seat with a heavy sigh and puts her face in her hands.

This summer has been just as horrible as everyone said it would be, if not more so.

She doesn't allow herself to think of what life will be like after next Wednesday at 5 p.m. very often; but when she does think about it, all she feels is an overwhelming sense of mental and physical relief.

But no point in thinking about any of that now, she tells herself. Time to get to work. She quickly twists her hair into a messy braid, and then leans down and unzips her bag. She pulls out the tattered and worn review book that has been her bible all summer long, opens it to the section on the Federal Rules of Evidence, and begins to read.

After two hours of studying, Katniss decides to take a break so she can return a text Prim sent earlier to check up on her.

Katniss stands up from her desk and stretches. Her back is killing her. She sits hunched over a desk for so many hours each day now she's beginning to think she'll have a permanent crick in her neck even after the bar is over.

Rubbing the back of her neck a little, Katniss picks up her backpack and walks outside. It's well past nine now and very dark. She heads for a central spot on campus that's well-lit and has a number of benches.

As she nears them she pulls her phone out to text Prim. Without looking up from her phone, or even looking where she's walking, she writes:

*I'm fine, Prim. Just really busy. I can't wait fo—*

But before she can finish the thought, or even the word, she walks straight into a lamppost.

"Fuck!" she shouts, rubbing her nose.

Someone off to her left starts to laugh at her.
"Hey… is that you? Katniss?"

She turns towards the familiar voice. And her stomach lurches.

It's Peeta Mellark.

"Hi, Katniss," Peeta says to her from where he's sitting as he tries to stifle his laughter.

"Oh - hi, Peeta," she says back to him.

And then she can't think of anything else to say.

Katniss hasn't seen Peeta all summer. Hasn't seen him, in fact, since the Heavensbee, Paylor & Coin reception right after graduation. Madge says he's been living on Chicago's south side, in a neighborhood called Hyde Park, with some of his college friends from the University of Chicago. Hyde Park is far from the main downtown bar review class so he's taking the course at the University of Chicago instead.

He looks good, she notices immediately. Stressed, of course, just like everyone else. He has dark circles under his eyes that match hers. His blonde hair is kind of a wreck – probably from anxiously running his hands through it, Katniss suspects.

But despite all of that, he still has those killer blue eyes behind his silver frames and that gorgeous smile. And dammit if he doesn't make his White Sox t-shirt, blue jeans, and Chuck Taylors look like something a male model would wear.

Without warning, Katniss' mind flashes back to the night before graduation – the night she has tried, in vain, to forget. The night he pinned her body against the wall of her apartment building as he drunkenly, hungrily kissed her mouth, her neck; the night she almost took him up to her room to have sex with him.

Katniss feels herself begin to flush and has a sudden urge to run.

"How… how've you been?" Peeta asks her then, breaking her out of her reverie. He puts his right hand to his mouth and takes a drag off the cigarette he's holding.

Well, that's new, Katniss thinks in surprise.

"You smoke now?" she blurts out without thinking.

Peeta looks at his hand self-consciously.

"Uhh… not really," he stammers, crushing the cigarette out on the bench. "I mean… I did in college – but I stopped ages ago." He laughs a little, clearly uncomfortable, and Katniss could kick herself for bringing this up in the first place. "I only smoke anymore when I'm about to crack from stress."

"Things are pretty bad, aren't they," she says, changing the subject. It isn't a question.

"Really shitty," he agrees, mournfully. He runs the hand that was previously holding the cigarette through his hair, confirming Katniss' earlier suspicions about the cause of its disheveled state.

Katniss isn't sure what makes her say it – perhaps it's guilt over putting him on the spot over that stupid cigarette; or maybe she just really wants a break from work – but before she knows what she's doing she asks him, "Do you want to go get a cup of coffee or… or something?"
Peeta's eyes grow wide for a fraction of a second but he recovers quickly.

"Um, sure. That would be great." He clears his throat and looks anxious again. "But… well, would you mind if I brought my books with me? I've spent the whole day at the library," he gestures to the building Katniss just came from, "but there's still so much I can't remember." He shakes his head. "You probably think I'm kind of pathetic…" he trails off, chuckling a little

Clearly, she isn't the only one who isn't able to "just relax" right now, she thinks to herself.

Katniss pats her own bookbag by way of response. "Well, if you're pathetic, then so am I. Shall we?"

Peeta manages a weak smile as he gets up off his bench and walks over to her. "I only moved to the north side a week ago, when my Hyde Park sublet ended," he tells her. "So you'll have to lead the way."

Katniss takes him to Sweet Claire's, a café near her apartment that serves mediocre baked goods, and large mugs of hot coffee, until two in the morning.

After getting their coffee they head for a well-lit booth near the back of the café. Katniss starts to take her books out of her bag but Peeta puts his hand on hers to stop her. She tries, but mostly fails, to ignore the jolt of electricity that the touch of his hand on hers sends through her body.

"Look," he tells her. "Before I beg you to spend the rest of the night grilling me on hearsay exceptions, why don't we try and pretend to be normal people for a few minutes."

She glances up to see him looking at her anxiously.

"Um… sure," she says. "So… we should talk then? About normal, non-law stuff?"

"Normal, non-law stuff," he confirms.

They sit and look at each other for a long moment. Katniss opens her mouth, about to speak, but once again she can't think of anything to say.

After nearly a minute of increasingly awkward silence Peeta says, "Ok then. I'll start." He pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and grins at her. "Hey, Katniss. So - are you going anywhere fun after the bar exam?"

The quick change in his tone of voice, from anxious to playful, throws her a little. But she smiles back at him in spite of herself. "Yes," she tells him happily. "I'm taking my sister Prim to Toronto."

He raises his eyebrows. "Toronto, huh? Awesome. I've never been."

"I haven't either," she says, taking a sip of her coffee. "Neither has Prim. Most Michiganders are fairly obsessed with Canada," she explains, rolling her eyes a little, "but Prim and I could never afford to spend any time there as kids. So we're going now." She laughs a little. "I plan to pull out all the stops."

"How long will you be there?" he asks her, fidgeting a little with the zipper of his bag.

"Only five days," Katniss says. "That's all the time Prim can take off work."

"Well, you should still be able to have a lot of fun in five days, I'd think." Peeta smiles at her
again, a little conspiratorially, and it makes the corners of his eyes crinkle adorably behind his
glasses.

Katniss wonders if he has any idea of the effect he has on her when he smiles like that. Feeling a
little dizzy, she nods. "I hope so." She takes another sip of coffee to steady her nerves.

"So what about you?" she eventually asks. "You doing anything before work starts?"

He nods. "Yes. Heading to Central America for a few weeks.

Katniss is a little surprised. A lot of their classmates will be taking international trips to celebrate
surviving the bar exam; but most are going to ritzier locations. Europe, for example, is popular.

"Central America? Wow," Katniss says.

"Yeah," Peeta says, shrugging. "I studied in Costa Rica for a semester in college. I'd like to see
my host family again. I also plan to spend some time in Guatemala. I got to spend two weeks there
during my semester abroad, and it was… incredible."

"It's incredible? Really?" Katniss asks. Her trip to Toronto will be her first time ever leaving the
country – unless you count a trip she made in high school to Windsor, Ontario, to go drinking.
Which, frankly, she doesn't.

"It is," he tells her emphatically. "The people there are so warm. But it's also a very poor country.
It's... it's a heartbreaking place."

"Then… then why do you want to go?" she asks him, a little confused. She can't imagine why
someone would want to go somewhere heartbreaking after taking the bar exam.

Peeta doesn't answer right away. He seems to be contemplating how to answer her. "Because…
because it's real," he finally says, cryptically, with a hint of wistfulness in his voice, before he
unzips his bag and takes out his books.

"I still can't believe you color-coded your civil procedure flashcards," she teases Peeta, hours later,
as she walks him to his El stop.

"You're just jealous," he tells her, poking her in the side. "You're just jealous that I'm cool enough
to have thought of such a great idea and you aren't."

Katniss laughs at the thought of either one of them being cool.

"What's so funny?" Peeta asks, feigning offense.

"You are," she tells him between giggles.

He sneaks a glance at her face and grins broadly.

"So, do you think you'll be able to remember all those hearsay exceptions after our study session
tonight?" she asks him, her tone serious again.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out. "No," he answers honestly. "They're just so damn…
slippery." He shakes his head. "But fortunately, this thing's graded on a curve, right? If neither one
of us can remember them all, I'm guessing a lot of other people are going to have the same
problem."
He sounds like he's trying to calm himself down. And she tells him so.

"Yeah, I guess that is what I'm trying to do," he says, sighing.

"Peeta," she tells him. "You're going to be fine on Tuesday. Really."

He runs his hand through his hair several times. But he doesn't say anything in response.

They walk together in silence for several minutes, their bodies close enough together that their hands are almost brushing. Katniss suddenly has an irresistible urge to take his hand – to give it a squeeze and promise him, over and over again, that he'll pass the bar exam with flying colors. But she doesn't.

It isn't much longer until they reach the stop for the Brown Line – the line Peeta takes to get to the apartment he now shares with Thresh in Bucktown. When they get there, he turns to face her.

"Thanks for the study break, Katniss," he tells her. His voice is a little strange.

"Don't mention it," she tells him.

Peeta looks at her for another long moment without saying anything. The wind has begun to pick up a little – one of the hazards of living in Chicago, Katniss thinks, fleetingly – and is starting to blow around the hair that has loosed itself from her braid. Peeta raises his hand and tucks a stray lock behind her ear. She shivers involuntarily.

"Katniss…" he says quietly, his hand still on her hair, his eyes on her mouth. He trails off before finishing the thought.

Katniss thinks she knows what comes next. And she suddenly realizes that she wants it. Badly. She wants to throw her arms around this gorgeous, brilliant, driven guy who wants to go to Central America and visit his host family after the bar. She wants him to pick her up off the ground – right here, right now – and kiss her so hard she forgets everything she's ever known about the law.

But she can't let that happen. Not four days before the bar exam. Not ever. Because she suspects that if she does, she will come even closer than she already is to falling for this guy. This guy who will soon be her co-worker.

And just she can't afford to have that kind of distraction in her life.

Katniss moves away from him. His hand falls to his side and he frowns slightly.

"Good… good luck on Tuesday, Peeta," she stammers as she turns to leave. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

She turns on her heels and walks away as quickly as she can before he can say anything back to her.

A few days later, the bar exam is finally behind them.

For weeks, Katniss and Madge had talked about how, the moment the bar was over, they were going to go drinking with as many of their law school friends as they could gather together and get absolutely hammered.

However, when Katniss and Madge finally emerge from the testing center, bone-weary from two
days in a row of exams and delirious with relief that it's finally finished, they make an impromptu change of plans.

"Nap?" Madge asks Katniss, weakly, as they hobble together to the El stop.

"Nap," Katniss agrees. She collapses into the first open seat on the train, rubbing her eyes with the palm of her hand.

Somehow, they manage to get off at the right stop and then walk the five blocks from their stop to their apartment. It takes both of them working together to unlock and open their door. Once inside, Madge doesn't even make it all the way to her bedroom; she collapses on the living room sofa and is asleep in less than a minute.

Katniss isn't far behind her. She shuffles to the bathroom, splashes some cold water on her face, and then climbs into bed. She pulls the covers over her head with a quiet moan and closes her eyes.

The vibration of the phone in Katniss' pocket wakes her up two hours later.

She pulls it out and sees that Gale is calling her.

She slides her finger across the bottom of the screen. "Hey, Gale," she says, yawning.

"Catnip," he says happily. "You survived!"

Katniss smiles. It's so good to hear Gale's voice. "I did. I don't know if I passed, but I survived."

Gale starts to laugh. "Please. Katniss Everdeen, the smartest girl to ever graduate from Melvindale High, not pass a test? Give me a break…"

Katniss rolls her eyes a little. That's Gale, she thinks to herself.

Katniss has known Gale her entire life. They were inseparable all the way through middle school… and dated all the way through high school.

But they couldn't make it through college. Right after graduation, Gale went to work in an auto-body shop during the day and took classes at Eastern Michigan at night; and Katniss was admitted to U of M's honor's college on a full-merit scholarship. The two schools are very close geographically – but in the end, it was still a divide they just couldn't survive as a couple.

Even so, the truth of the matter is that even six years after their breakup, Katniss still doesn't know what she would do without Gale's friendship.

"Anyway, I just wanted to call and say congrats," he tells her warmly. "Got any big plans tonight?"

Now it's Katniss' turn to laugh. "I was going to go out drinking. But I think I may just stay in and sleep for a week instead."

"Whatever you decide to do tonight, make sure it's something you want to do. You deserve it," he tells her. His pride is evident in his voice. "So, hey - I gotta go. But I'll see you next week."

She told him she'd visit when she picks up Prim on their way to Toronto. "See you, Gale. Tell Johanna I said hello."
"Will do," he tells her, and then hangs up.

Katniss lies in bed for another few minutes, staring at the ceiling, trying to decide if she wants to get up or just stay in bed for the rest of the night.

A knock on the door interrupts her contemplation.

"Come in," she says.

Madge walks in and sits down in the chair in the corner of Katniss' bedroom. "Feeling better?"

Katniss nods. "Definitely. How about you?"

"Like a new woman," Madge says, and then laughs. "I mean… sort of like a new woman."

Katniss grins. "Right. I bet it will take a while to feel all the way recovered."

"So, I just got a text from Thresh," Madge says. "Do you want to go over to his place tonight? He's invited a bunch of people over – some from Michigan, a few from his firm, and I think some from your firm too… since, you know, Peeta's working there now and they're roommates."

Katniss raises her eyebrows, trying to ignore the way her heart is racing.

"I'm not sure I'm for a party, Madge," she says. "Seriously. I'm so wiped out."

"Oh, me too," Madge clarifies. "Thresh swears it's gonna be low-key, though. Some beer, some pizza, nothing too wild."

Madge shrugs. "I'm going. You can come if you want."

Katniss isn't sure this is a good idea. She wants to relax tonight – and spending time at Peeta Mellark's apartment will be anything but relaxing.

In the end, though, she decides that she might as well go. She isn't in the mood for a wild party, but she also doesn't want to be by herself the night after the bar exam. And she does eventually have to learn how to be around Peeta anyway. Might as well start now.

"I'll come with," Katniss says. "But I'm not drinking anything but water tonight," she adds hastily.

Madge gives her a knowing smirk and says, "Fine. Let's go."

To Katniss' immense relief, Thresh, not Peeta, opens the front door when she and Madge arrive at their apartment.

"Hey, you made it!" Thresh greets them warmly. "Come on in."

The party is a bit larger than Katniss expected. It looks like there are at least forty people here. But it's every bit as mellow as Katniss had hoped it would be. Most people are just sitting around, talking quietly amongst themselves. Some are walking around the small living space, looking blankly at nothing much at all. And to Katniss' great amusement, one guy is taking an actual nap, right in the middle of the floor.

Looks like everyone's feeling just as wiped out from the bar exam as she is.

"Where's Peeta?" Madge asks Thresh.

"In his room, packing," Thresh says, grabbing himself a beer from the fridge. "His flight leaves in three hours from O'Hare so he needs to leave in, like, fifteen minutes."
Maybe this party will be ok after all, Katniss thinks to herself.

She looks around the living room and is surprised to realize how many people she recognizes from law school. She knows that a lot of Michigan alums end up at Chicago firms after graduation but she hadn't realized just how many from her class were going to be joining her in her new city.

Katniss finds her way to an open spot on the sofa and notices that a dark-haired guy standing across the room is looking at her. She realizes that she recognizes him from her summer internship at HP&C. She remembers thinking he was a little on the eccentric side – he routinely wears gold eyeliner, for example, which is about as outrageous as anyone ever gets at a big law firm.

Katniss also remembers that this guy was, without question, the nicest person she met during her internship. She tries hard to remember his name, but despite the impression he made on her last summer she draws a blank. Her brain is simply shot after two straight days of test taking.

After a few moments he walks across the room and sits down next to her on the sofa.

"Hi, Katniss," he says in a very pleasant voice. "Do you remember me from last summer? I'm Cinna."

"Hey Cinna," she says, balancing her pizza on her lap. "Of course I remember you. You're a senior associate in HP&C's civil litigation department. It's coming back to her now.

"That's me," he says, smiling. "I hope my being here doesn't stress you out. I wasn't going to come – I mean, I know how awful the bar is, and I thought the last thing you guys would want to do tonight would be hang out with a big firm attorney. But Peeta insisted."

"Oh, you don't stress me out, Cinna," Katniss says, honestly. "Just, you know. Don't ask me anything about the rule against perpetuities tonight, okay?"

This makes him laugh. "Oh, God. I'll never ask you anything about that!"

"Well, good," Katniss replies, smiling.

Cinna clears his throat a little. "So, this will be the first and last thing I say to you about work tonight – but, when I saw you here I wanted to say hi, and let you know you'll be in my practice group in September."

"Oh, that's great!" she says. And she means it. There are a lot of attorneys at HP&C she hopes she never has to work with. Working with Cinna will be about as good a situation as one could possibly hope for at a firm like this.

"I'm glad you're happy about it," he tells her. He laughs again. "And I hope you stay that way."

Just then, Peeta enters the room. He's carrying a large duffel bag in one hand and has a messenger bag slung over his right shoulder. Katniss feels herself start to flush just at the sight of him. She wonders, in frustration, if she will ever be able to keep a straight head around him.

"Hey, Peeta," Cinna says loudly so he can be heard over the din of the room. He motions for Peeta to join them.

Peeta smiles and walks towards him. "Hi Cinna," he says. "Glad you came after all." Peeta's eyes quickly dart to Katniss, but they dart away again just as quickly. He doesn't say anything to her or
even acknowledge her presence.

Katniss knows she should be glad that Peeta's acting this way around her tonight. But she isn't.

"Thanks for inviting me, Peeta," Cinna tells him. "Portia wanted me to thank you for her invitation as well, but she got tied up at the office tonight. She said she'll see you when you start."

"Yeah, I guess I will," Peeta says. "Anyway, I gotta go, but I did want to say hi before I left."

Cinna nods. "Certainly. I hope you have a great time on your trip."

"Thanks, Cinna" Peeta says, a little absently. "I haven't been to Costa Rica or Guatemala for years, so… yeah, I can't wait."

Cinna's eyebrows shoot up. "Guatemala?"

"Yep," Peeta says.

Cinna coughs into his hand. When he continues it's in a much quieter voice. "Peeta... I know you have a plane to catch. But when you start at the firm… well, actually, before I get to what I want to ask you, I have a preliminary question. Do you speak Spanish?"

Peeta eyebrows shoot up at Cinna's question. "Fluently," he says.

Cinna nods, seemingly lost in thought. "That's great." He pauses again before continuing. "Look. When you start work, come find me. One of the partners at the firm – Haymitch Abernathy – has a case that involves regular travel to Guatemala. Maybe you'd be interested in working with us on it? I don't know yet if you'll be able to count much of the work towards your billable hours requirement, but..." he trails off.

Peeta is clearly very interested in what Cinna is telling him. He stands up straighter and asks, "But, what?"

Cinna clears his throat and looks Peeta in the eye. "But, I think it might be work you'd be very interested in all the same."

Peeta nods. "All right," he tells Cinna evenly. "I'll drop by your office on the first day. Thanks." He chuckles a little. "And now I really have to go."

"Well go on, then! Don't let me keep you," Cinna says, shooing him away with his hand and grinning.

After Peeta leaves, Katniss spends the next few minutes worrying that Cinna is going to go back on his word and give her her first assignment tonight as well.

But he doesn't.

Instead, they spend the next two hours chatting about themselves and their interests, as Katniss' former classmates mill around the room grabbing pizza and beer.

By the end of the evening, Katniss is confident that even if she cannot allow herself to really get to know Peeta Mellark, she will still have at least one good friend at her new job this fall.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

On the remote chance that anyone familiar with cutting-edge document review technology is reading this, please forgive the not-so-slight anachronism in this chapter. You'll know it when you see it. ;) What can I say – it's been quite a while since I've been there myself.

Thank you to everyone who has reviewed this story, and to all of you who have added it to your follows and favorites. A very special thank you to the folks on tumblr who reviewed an early version of this chapter, and to RainyDaysAnyways and angylinni, who content-beta'd parts of it. You all totally rock.

Katniss adjusts the front plackets on her new Banana Republic suit, tries to calm her nerves, and knocks on Cinna's closed office door.

"Come in," she hears from inside.

At Cinna's invitation Katniss walks into his office. She sits down in a leather-backed chair situated across the desk from Cinna's own.

"Congratulations on finally becoming an official HP&C associate, Katniss," Cinna tells her, his smile warm. It puts her at ease at once. "How was your post-bar trip?"

"It was great," Katniss answers honestly. "My sister and I had a wonderful time."

"Did you go to that Indian restaurant I recommended?" he asks pleasantly.

Katniss nods. "We did. Twice, actually. We loved it."

"I'm glad to hear it. So…” he trails off, rubbing his hands together. "You prepared to be too busy for another vacation for at least the next five years?"

Katniss blanches.

Cinna laughs. "I'm joking. Well… mostly joking, anyway." He clears his throat and has the decency to look a little sheepish. "Anyway… has Effie Trinket shown you to your new office yet?" he asks, changing the subject.

"She did," Katniss says. "I'm set up with my computer and my ID card and all of that. But I need my first assignment." Katniss pulls her notebook and pen out of her bag and looks at Cinna expectantly.

Katniss won't get her bar results for another month, so she knows there isn't really much she can do as an attorney just yet. She suspects her first assignment will probably be fairly menial – legal research of some kind, most likely, if what she observed here over the summer was any guide.

But she wants to hit the ground running on her first day all the same.
Cinna smiles again. "Well, you've come to the right person for that. Before we get started, though, I need to buzz Haymitch Abernathy and invite him to join us in this meeting." He turns to the phone and pushes a series of buttons.

"Yeah?" Katniss hears a gravelly voice rasp out through the speaker.

"Haymitch, it's Cinna. Katniss Everdeen is here."


Cinna rolls his eyes a little. "He's one of the senior partners here, as you know." Cinna rummages through a pile of papers on his desk until he finds the one he's looking for. "He's a little… eccentric," he continues, cryptically.

"Eccentric?" Katniss asks. She met a good number of the senior partners here last summer, but she never met Haymitch. In fact, she's barely heard anything about him at all.

"Eccentric," Cinna confirms. "At one point there was talk of making him a name partner. He's an excellent litigator, but..." He shakes his head. "But I think when you meet Haymitch you'll understand why that couldn't happen."

A moment later, a man with a pronounced five o'clock shadow and wearing a wrinkled suit at least a full size too small for him barges into Cinna's office. He's carrying a cup of coffee in one hand and a small silver flask in the other.

"Haymitch," Cinna says. "This is Katniss Everdeen."

Haymitch looks over at her and nods. "Good morning, sweetheart," he says, tucking his flask into his shirt pocket.

Katniss' eyes go wide at his words. She can't believe what he just called her. *Sweetheart?*

Not only is this man not name partner material, she thinks to herself in shock, but he's also a sexual harassment lawsuit just waiting to happen.

"Ermm..." Cinna says, looking chagrined. "Haymitch, why don't you have a seat next to Katniss over there." He gestures to the seat next to hers, and Haymitch sits down as requested.

"So," Haymitch begins, turning to look at her. "You're the corporate law *wunderkind* we hired, huh?"

"Oh, I'm not sure about that," Katniss says modestly. "It's my area of interest, but..."

"Katniss, please," Cinna interrupts. "We've all read the note you published in the Michigan Law Review. It was extremely insightful. Especially for a second year law student."

Haymitch coughs into his hand. "I want to put her on the new corporate merger case, Cinna."

Cinna nods. "I agree. It's already spiraling out of control, and we need a junior associate who knows a lot about mergers and acquisitions to handle all of the document review."


Katniss knows that "document review" is the most dreaded phrase any junior associate will ever hear.
Her mentor last summer told her that partners and senior associates try to talk document review up by emphasizing how important it is to have each and every scrap of paper in a case be tagged and documented appropriately. And Katniss does understand, on some level at least, that document review is the only way attorneys handling complex litigation can really get their arms around their cases and have any sense of the information that's already been gathered.

But despite its theoretical importance, Katniss also knows that the actual doing of document review involves sitting in a windowless office for weeks on end, surrounded by reams and reams of paper that need to be individually reviewed and categorized.

In short, it's hell.

"Sorry, sweetheart," Haymitch says. His tone makes Katniss thinks that he means it. "But you know how it is. Until you're licensed, there's not much you can really do for us except research and document review."

"It should only be for a month," Cinna continues, not unkindly. "Just until you're licensed. Once you get your bar results we'll take you off this project and have you help draft a motion for summary judgment on behalf of our client. In the meantime, this document review will be a great way for you to familiarize yourself with the chief issues in the case."

"And you'll be able to get in a shit ton of billables right off the bat," Haymitch adds.

Katniss sighs. And then tries to laugh, to act like she's fine with this plan. But the sound isn't convincing even to her. "Well, I guess it's what I'm here for, right?"

Cinna smiles. "Thanks, Katniss. Go find Haymitch's secretary, Lavinia. She'll point you in the direction of the file room."

Katniss is about to stand up and find Lavinia as instructed when there's a knock on Cinna's door.

"Come in," Cinna calls out.

The door opens and Peeta Mellark steps inside.

Katniss has not seen him since the party at his apartment the night after the bar exam. And she finds herself gripping the armrest of her chair at the sight of him.

He's standing in front of her wearing a well-tailored black suit and tie and carrying a brown leather briefcase. The light blue starched shirt he's wearing underneath his suit brings out the color of his eyes so much it makes her feel a little dizzy, even though she's sitting down. His curly blonde hair is a little longer than it was the last time she saw him, and as he enters the room he brushes aside a lock that's fallen into his eyes.

The sun he must have seen during his vacation has brought out a new smattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks. Katniss has a sudden, irresistible urge to rip off his glasses and trace those freckles with the tip of her tongue.

"Peeta," Cinna says happily, snapping Katniss out of her reverie. "Welcome to HP&C."

"You wanted to see me when I arrived today?" Peeta asks.

Cinna nods. "Yes. Come on in. We're just wrapping up our meeting with Katniss."

Peeta glances over at her and gives her a small smile. "Hi Katniss," he says.
"H-hi, Peeta," she stammers, awkwardly.

She might be imagining it, but it looks as though Peeta's trying to stifle a laugh.

"I'll see you at the welcome luncheon today, Katniss," Cinna says. Katniss interprets this as his signal for her to leave.

"Talk to you then," Katniss says, and she rushes out of the room to go find Lavinia.

Katniss knows that the firm's welcome lunch would, under ordinary circumstances, seem rather dry and boring. What with all the speeches; the lengthy discussion of the firm's history (Katniss already knows that this firm split off twenty years ago from its now-rival firm, Snow & Crane; doesn't everyone here?); and the introductions to all the stuffy older partners from other departments who she'll never work with and likely never see again after today.

And the information Effie Trinket gives everyone about the firm's new billing policies – all associates are now expected to bill a minimum of 2000 hours per year (up from last year's 1950 hour minimum), towards which they are each permitted to count a maximum of 100 hours of work annually for non-paying, indigent clients – would ordinarily bore Katniss to tears.

After the morning Katniss just had, however, stuck in her office surrounded by mountains of some of the driest documents Katniss has ever read, this lunch feels like a trip to Disneyworld.

After the speeches are finally over, and just as lunch is being served, the young woman seated to Katniss' left introduces herself. "Hey there," she says. "I'm Rue. Is this your first day too?"

Katniss doesn't remember Rue from last summer – she must be another new attorney who didn't summer here, like Peeta.

"Yes, it is," Katniss says. "I'm Katniss Everdeen. I'm working in commercial litigation. What about you?"

Rue nods. "I'm in the intellectual property group. I was an engineering major in college, and patent law is, like – the only thing I've ever wanted to do."

Katniss smiles. "So no document review for you then, huh?" Only litigators have to do document review, Katniss knows.

"Luckily, no," Rue says, laughing. "But don't worry, I've got my own special hell waiting for me back in my office. I've never been so excited for a lunch break in my entire life."

"Me either," Katniss says.

As she eats, Katniss glances around the room, trying to see where Peeta is sitting. She eventually finds him near the back – he must have arrived late – sitting next to and chatting amiably with a very blonde, very attractive, extremely bitchy young woman who Katniss summered with last year. Glimmer Johnson.

Katniss tries to push down the bile that rises in her throat at the sight of them sitting together and turns back to her chicken cordon bleu.

She spends another six hours hard at work after the luncheon is over.

But by seven p.m., Katniss' eyes are beginning to cross and her back is beginning to ache from
being hunched over her desk all day. She decides to call it a day and go home. She turns off the light to her office, puts her laptop into her bag, and walks towards the elevator bank at the end of the hallway.

As she passes the glass doors leading into the firm's library she turns her head and notices Peeta is still here. Peeta's back is to her, but she can see him bent over his laptop, books strewn all over the table in front of him.

He shouldn't be working this late on his first day, she thinks. Katniss opens the door to the library so she can tell him this herself.

"Peeta," she says very quietly as she approaches him, out of deference to the fact that they are, after all, in a library. But this is unnecessary; they are clearly the only two still at the office.

He turns his head and looks up at her. His glasses have slid halfway down the bridge of his nose, the way Katniss remembers them doing back when they worked together on the law review. He's taken off the tie he wore earlier in the day and the top few buttons of his dress shirt are undone.

Katniss wills herself to keep her eyes trained on his, rather than on the chest hairs that just peek out from underneath the top of his tight-fitting white undershirt.

"Hey, Katniss," he says, smiling a little and pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"What are you still doing here?" she asks him, gesturing to the books on the table.

"It's this case Cinna and Haymitch Abernathy put me on," he tells her. "It's really fascinating, and I… well, I wanted to get as far into it as I could tonight."

Katniss pulls up the chair across from his and sits down. "What's it about?"

Peeta removes his glasses and rubs his eyes with the palm of his hand. He's tired, Katniss can tell. "A Guatemalan immigrant family living here in Chicago contacted Haymitch a few months ago. They're concerned that some of their relatives back home might be working for what we'd call a 'sweatshop.'" Peeta pauses and puts his glasses back on before continuing. "They want to know if our firm can help shut it down or, at the very least, get them to change their labor practices."

Katniss eyes go wide. "Wow, really? Can we… I mean, can our firm actually do that?" Katniss asks. She knows the firm's New York City office handles cases for international clients but this is the first she's heard of HP&C handling a case quite like this. Katniss knows that HP&C normally represents companies; it doesn't usually actively try to shut them down.

Peeta shrugs. "Cinna and Haymitch aren't sure yet. For one thing, we don't know yet what this company is or exactly what it does. It makes clothes, according to the people that came to us with this case, but we don't yet know the scope of their operations or what the conditions are like for its workers. Our clients don't have a lot of details."

Katniss nods, waiting for him to continue.

"Additionally… well, even if we knew what working conditions there are like, we still wouldn't know if the company is violating any international labor or business laws. I'm sure you already know that HP&C doesn't usually handle cases like this," he chuckles a little. "So, no one in any of our offices knows the answer to that offhand."

Katniss looks towards the books strewn about on the library table. "And so that's what you're doing tonight? Reading up on international labor law?"
Peeta nods. "Yes. I mean, we don't have our bar results yet, so all we can really do right now is grunt work, right?" He laughs a little. "But this... well, it's complicated stuff. Given that I thought I'd be a public defender in New York City after law school, I didn't take many business law classes at Michigan." He gives her a sheepish smile. "I'm probably going to need to teach myself a lot of this as I go along."

"Who else is on this case?" Katniss asks. "Besides you and Cinna?" Peeta cannot possibly do all of this work by himself and still meet his annual billable hours requirement for paying clients.

Peeta looks a little chagrined when he answers. "Well, so far, it's just me and Cinna. But..." He trails off and rubs the back of his neck a little. "But... I think I'm going to need help," he continues, very slowly, confirming Katniss' suspicions. "Once I'm licensed, getting the deposition testimony alone will probably take several weeks. Not to mention all the travel back and forth to Guatemala, the legal research, the motion drafting..."

He coughs and shakes his head slightly. He begins tracing invisible patterns on the tabletop with his fingertips. "I don't suppose..." he begins, eyes downcast. "I mean, would you be interested in working on it too?"

Katniss is taken aback. "Me?" she stammers. "Why... why me?"

"You took all those corporate law classes at Michigan, didn't you?" he asks her. "Corporate income tax, mergers and acquisitions, international business law..."

Katniss feels herself begin to flush. She didn't realize he knew all of that.

"I'm confident enough in my Spanish and my trial advocacy skills that with Cinna's help, I should be able to handle the depositions and a lot of the motion practice. Once I'm licensed, of course," he adds. "But it would really help -- I mean, really help -- to have a junior associate on this case who knows the basics of corporate practice better than a guy who trained for three years to defend criminals facing murder charges."

Katniss doesn't say anything for a long moment.

Peeta seems to interpret her silence as a no. "Come on, Katniss," he cajoles, looking her in the eye now. "It'll be fun. Like our 2L year, when we were on law review together...." He gives her a crooked smile and her heart skips a beat. "Except with fewer poorly cited scholarly articles, and more trips to Guatemala."

Katniss takes a deep breath and considers what he's asking her.

"Well..." she begins, slowly. "Effie Trinket did say that we're allowed to count up to 100 hours of pro bono work towards our billable hours, right?"

"That's right," Peeta confirms, quickly.

"We'd have to run this by Cinna..." she continues.

"I can't imagine why Cinna'd say no," he says, emphatically, although his hand trembles a little as he says it. "Especially if we structured it so your involvement in the case was limited to 100 hours."

Katniss can't imagine that Cinna would say no, either. It's his case, after all.

And this case would certainly far more interesting than what's waiting for her in her office...
"Ok," Katniss says, eventually, standing up from her chair. "I'll do it. I'll talk to Cinna about it in the morning."

Peeta beams at her. "Thanks, Katniss." He looks directly into her eyes. "This is really going to help that family a lot."

In a much quieter voice he adds, "And it will help me a lot, too."

Katniss finds herself unable to look away from his intense gaze. "It's… it's nothing," she stammers, her voice shaking a little, completely flustered by the way he's looking at her. "I need to make my billable hours, right? This is just… just another way to get there."

He gives her a small smile. He nods. "Yes," he confirms. "Just another way to get there."

They look at each other for a long moment.

"Well… good night, Peeta," Katniss says, turning to leave.

"Actually, Katniss, hold up a minute," he tells her. He starts putting his things away into his briefcase. "I'm leaving now, too. I'll share an elevator with you."

When he's ready to go, Katniss quickly opens the door to the library and walks over to the elevator bank. When she gets there, she takes a deep breath that she hopes he doesn't notice in an attempt to calm herself down.

She pushes the down button for the elevator and they both step into the car when it arrives.

Katniss pushes the button for the lobby. And waits. And waits some more.

"I… think maybe one of us needs to use our security card after hours to get this to move?" Peeta wonders out loud after the car has remained stationary for about fifteen seconds. But he doesn't sound very confident. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his ID, then leans past her to swipe it across the keypad on the wall, the outside of his arm brushing against hers a little as he does so. Katniss needs to put her hand against the door of the elevator to steady herself.

The elevator still doesn't move.

"Um…" Katniss says, feeling extremely flustered. They can't possibly be trapped up on the 32nd floor, can they?

Maybe they should take the stairs?

Peeta starts chuckling a little. It's a nervous sound.

"Katniss…" he begins. He starts rubbing the back of his neck again. He can't look her in the eye. "Um. Well, at the risk of making things even more awkward than they already are between us…" he trails off.

Katniss thinks she has some general idea of what he's about to say. Her heart feels like it might beat right out of her chest. "I think we need to – to push this button here to contact security…" she stammers, reaching for the call button at the bottom of the panel with a shaky hand.

He grabs her arm before she reaches it. "Just… just wait, Katniss…" he says, a little forcefully.

She looks up at him. There's a blazing look in his eyes she has never seen before. She shivers involuntarily.
And then a split second later he pushes her up against the button panel of the elevator and kisses her.

This is different from their last kiss, when they were both so drunk they needed to lean into each other just to keep from falling down. All of his nervous hesitation from a moment ago is gone. Now, Peeta is coordinated and in charge. His lips move urgently against hers as he pins her body to the wall with his own.

Katniss knows that she should stop this. That this can’t happen. But she is too intoxicated by the feel of his strong body pressing up against her, the sight of him in his partially unbuttoned dress shirt and slacks, and the way his hungry mouth is all but ravishing hers to do anything but kiss him back eagerly. She grabs him by the front of his collar, wrenching a whimper from him, as she tries to pull him even closer.

"I've wanted this for so long, Katniss," he tells her, panting a little as he leans over to trail kisses along her jaw, her neck. She shudders at the contact of his lips and tongue to the sensitive skin beneath her ear, at the feel of his glasses pressing into her neck. "Ever since the last time. Since before the last time."

"Me… me too, Peeta," she whispers, her eyes closed, her head leaning back against the wall to give him better access. And it's the truth.

He works his way back up her neck and his teeth graze her earlobe, making her gasp. And then she's winding her hands into his hair and pulling his face back up to hers. When their lips meet again the contact is rough and frantic, and Peeta thrusts his tongue into her mouth without preamble. She reciprocates, sliding her tongue along his, causing him to moan raggedly into her mouth and push her body more forcefully into the wall of the elevator. She is vaguely aware that the panel buttons are beginning to cut into her back. She doesn't care.

Without breaking the kiss, Peeta deftly unbuttons the top few buttons of Katniss' blouse with one hand. He leans forward and begins peppering her collarbone and the tops of her breasts with open-mouthed kisses, nipping and licking and sucking at her like she is water and he is a man dying of thirst. She arches up into him and she hears a quiet moan, only realizing later that it's coming from her.

The realization that she is having this effect on him sends a shocking thrill down her spine.

… and then suddenly, without warning, the elevator car whirs to life and begins to descend.

"What? Oh, fuck," Peeta mutters, lifting his head, his body still pressed against hers. He reaches behind her and begins to push buttons randomly, presumably in an attempt to stop the car.

Katniss can't help but laugh a little.

"Hey, Peeta…" she says, grinning, running her fingers through his wrecked hair as a sudden thought comes to her. "Do you think there are security cameras in these elevators?"

Peeta pulls away a little. He stares at her.

"Maybe… maybe the security folks saw that we were… stuck… in here… and wanted to help us out." She tries to stifle another involuntary giggle.
This thought had clearly not occurred to Peeta until this moment. He opens and closes his mouth several times but doesn't say anything. Perhaps he's been rendered speechless. A blush spreads across his face as the elevator car continues its descent.

After another few seconds, the elevator dings and the door opens onto the first floor lobby.

Katniss hastily buttons up her blouse and is the first to step outside the car. Peeta surreptitiously adjusts himself and then reluctantly joins her a few moments later.

"So…" Katniss says, a little sheepishly, adjusting her skirt. She is relieved to see that the lobby is deserted and that no one can see them in their present disheveled state. "I guess I'll… see you tomorrow?"

Peeta clears his throat and tugs a little on his sleeves. "Katniss…" he begins, shyly, still blushing. "Do you want to… um. Do you want to have dinner with me tonight?"

Katniss' stomach lurches. Intense, sudden remorse for her actions in the elevator washes over her in waves.

"We can talk about the case," he continues, hurriedly, when she doesn't respond. "Or… or we don't have to. I mean… if you don't want to –"

"Peeta…" she begins. And then trails off.

She knows what will happen if she has dinner with him tonight. And the problem is, she wants it to happen. She wants him. So much.

Which is precisely why she needs to say no to his invitation.

"I think… I think I should probably go home," she says, slowly.

"Katniss, look" he says. "I suspect this isn't something you want to hear but… but I like you." He looks agitated and nervous. "I like you a lot. I have for years."

"Peeta –"

"And I think… I think you like me too," he interrupts her. He can tell he is trying to sound confident. But his voice wavers a little. "Please, Katniss. Don't keep pushing me away."

Katniss takes a deep breath. "I do like you, Peeta. But…"

"But what, Katniss?" he presses. "What?"

Katniss closes her eyes and shakes her head. She can't think of the right words to say that would make him understand how important it is to her not to jeopardize all she has right now by allowing herself to get involved with someone.

She's worked so hard. And she refuses to let what happened to her mother happen to her.

"I'm sorry, Peeta," she tells him. "I shouldn't have let what just happened happen, and I'm sorry. But I… but I can't do this."

She opens her eyes. The crestfallen look on his face nearly breaks her.

"Katniss…" he says. "I…" He doesn't complete the thought.
"Goodnight, Peeta," she says. She leans up on tiptoe to kiss him on the cheek, and then hurries through the building's revolving door.
Katniss opens the door to the 32nd floor conference room. When she enters she sees that Cinna and Haymitch are already there.

She and Peeta leave for Guatemala in a week and Cinna and Haymitch want to meet with them today to discuss strategy.

"Hi Katniss," Cinna greets her. "We're ready to get started. Just waiting on Peeta."

Haymitch rolls his eyes. "Boy's probably out having a smoke break."

"Well… it's a stressful day for all of us," Katniss points out. She feels the need to defend Peeta, given that they will be getting their bar results in six hours. If Katniss had any vices she indulged to deal with stress she'd be partaking in them too.

"Fair enough," Haymitch concedes.

"We have some big news to share with him, but it should wait until he gets here," Cinna says. He looks at his wristwatch. "While we're waiting, though, why don't we get started on what you've found, Katniss."

Katniss nods her assent and pulls her laptop out of her bag.

"I've written a memo describing what we'll need to do, and we'll need to know, before we can successfully bring a lawsuit against this company," she tells them as she waits for her computer to load. "I'll email it to you after we're done here so that you have it."

Cinna nods thoughtfully. "That would be very helpful. Thank you."

"First, we'll need to find out what entity owns this company, if any," Katniss continues. "If it's wholly owned by another company we need to know that before we can begin litigation, of course. If it's owned by an American-based parent company that would be the best possible scenario for the Guatemalan workers, because —"

"Sorry I'm late, everyone," Peeta interrupts, walking into the room. He gives Katniss a wide berth before taking the chair on the opposite side of the room from her. Despite his distance the smell of cigarette smoke on him is unmistakable.

"Glad you could join us, kid," Haymitch grumbles at him.

Cinna looks at Katniss. "I am sorry to interrupt, Katniss," he says. "But now that Peeta's here, we really need to share this news with him."

"News?" Peeta asks, eyebrows raised.

Cinna breaks into a wide grin. "Yes. Atticus Gregory just emailed me, Peeta. You got the Kirkland fellowship."

"I – I did?" he asks, incredulously.
"Congratulations!" Cinna says, beaming.

The Kirkland is one of the most prestigious public interest legal fellowships in the country, Katniss knows. A prominent law firm created it more than thirty years ago to fund first year attorneys at big firms who are committed to working towards the public good. Recipients receive their entire year's salary from this fellowship and are therefore freed from their firm's billable hours requirements for that year.

In short, the Kirkland allows young attorneys to receive a big law firm's salary while letting them focus exclusively on public interest law for a year. Only a small handful of these Fellowships are given out annually. Last year only three were awarded.

"I can't believe this," Peeta said, clearly shellshocked. "Thank you, Cinna."

"Don't thank him," Haymitch cuts in. "Thank Atticus. The old coot is always talking about how our firm doesn't focus nearly enough on pro bono matters. He remembered you from your interview and hasn't shut up about trying to get you this fellowship ever since."

"I'm sorry if we took liberties with this, Peeta," Cinna says. "But we just assumed this would be something you'd be interested in."

"Of course I'm interested in it!" Peeta nearly shouts. His grin looks like it's about to split his face in two. "And... and I assume I'll be working exclusively on the Guatemala case this year, then?"

Cinna looks thoughtful. "Assuming that what you and Katniss find in Guatemala suggests that there's a legitimate cause of action here, yes. If not, you'll need to come up with your own project to meet the funders' requirements."

"I have all sorts of ideas," Peeta says, still grinning. "So there's no need to worry."

Cinna smiles. "Good. Well, now that that's settled, let's hear what progress the two of you have made on this case."

Katniss stomach sinks a little at Cinna's words.

It's true that they've been working on this case diligently ever since Katniss got Cinna's clearance to be assigned to it. But they've been working totally independently of each other. Peeta is developing potential litigation strategies and questions for the Guatemalan workers, while Katniss is researching the corporate case law on which they'll need to rely if they do file suit.

They've had one, and only one, actual conversation since the night Peeta confessed his feelings for her and she ran away. It was tense and awkward, and all they talked about was the division of responsibilities. Peeta didn't make eye contact with her even once the entire time, and bolted out of his seat the minute their meeting was over.

Not that Katniss hasn't tried to talk to Peeta on other occasions. Because she has; at least a half dozen times. But Peeta brushes her off brusquely every time she approaches him, always with a ready work-related excuse.

Katniss wonders if he ever thinks about what happened between them in the elevator. Because the way his lips and tongue felt on her neck as he kissed her, the feel of his body pressed up against hers, has played on a near constant loop in her head ever since.

And at night, when she's alone in her bed, Katniss frequently imagines what might have happened that night had she not fled the scene immediately afterwards. The press of his erection against her thigh had filled her with such a dizzying thrill, and despite her best efforts to stop she cannot help
but think about what it might have felt like in her hands. Or in her mouth.

Katniss knows the cold way Peeta interacts with now is no more than what she deserves in light of how she led him on. And that this is all probably for the best. Because she thinks about him so much – and she wants him so badly – that she doesn't trust herself not to launch herself at him and beg him to just take her the next time they are alone together. And that simply cannot happen.

Katniss doesn't tell Cinna any of this, of course. Instead, she simply continues her presentation where she left off. And when she's finished, Peeta goes over his ideas for what he will discuss with the Guatemalan workers.

"This all sounds great, guys," Cinna says. "So - are you ready for Guatemala?"

"I think so," Katniss says. "Our goal on this trip is mainly to determine whether or not we can bring a viable lawsuit, right?"

Cinna nods. "That's right. If there isn't enough for us to work with, we need to know that as soon as possible so that Peeta and I can advise the clients that we won't be able to work with them. That's why we're sending the both of you down. Peeta will gather facts about working conditions from the workers themselves, and you'll need to work with him to apply those facts to what you've learned about the company's business operations and the current state of international trade law."

Katniss nods. "You know – thank you so much for letting me work on this. This is going to be a great learning experience for me." Katniss doesn't mention how thrilled she is to have any sort of respite from the document review that still monopolizes her days, even a full month after beginning work at HP&C.

"No, Katniss," Cinna says. "Thank you. If you find what we suspect you're going to find on this trip, this work you're doing could really change a lot of people's lives for the better."

Several hours later, Katniss is back in her office, trying to distract herself from the fact that there are still three more hours separating her from her bar exam results.

She decides she should probably just jump back into her document review project. If nothing else, the work will numb her mind enough that she'll be able to daydream about more pleasant subjects than whether or not she'll have to re-take the bar again in February.

Katniss has just pulled out her trusty yellow highlighter when she's startled by a sharp knock on the doorframe of her office.

She looks up and sees Peeta leaning against her door.

"Can I come in?" he asks.

Katniss' eyebrows shoot up in surprise. This is the first time he has spoken directly to her in nearly a month. "Oh. Yeah, sure."

He walks into her office and sits down in the chair across the desk from hers.

"I want to apologize," he tells her, looking at her hands.

"Apologize?" she asks. "For what?"

He looks directly at her. Now it's his turn to look surprised. "For being such a dick to you over the past month."
Katniss flushes slightly. "You… you haven't been a dick to me, Peeta."

"Yes, Katniss. I have," he insists. "I mean… I basically attacked you in the elevator that night, and have been acting totally wounded ever since just because you're not interested." His words are coming out in a rush; he's clearly very nervous. He shakes his head, and gives a rueful laugh. "I've always had a bit of a problem with…" he trails off, apparently searching for the right word. "With moderation," he finally says. "But you have every right to go out with whomever you want, and… and to not go out with anyone you don't want to go out with. I haven't been fair to you, and I'm sorry."

"Peeta," she says. "You have nothing to apologize for." And she means it. "And… well, you hardly 'attacked' me…" She can feel her blush deepen.

A blush starts to rise on Peeta's face, now, too, at her words. He clears his throat. "Well, I'm sorry all the same," he tells her. "I specifically asked you to work with me on this case, and this is how I've treated you ever since."

"Well… I admit that it will be a lot easier to work on this case if my co-counsel is actually speaking with me," Katniss hints, a little shyly.

He smiles at her sheepishly. "Indeed. Especially since we're, you know – flying to Guatemala City together in a week."

They look at each other for a long moment, neither one of them speaking.

"So… are we ok, then?" Katniss asks him eventually.

"Definitely ok," Peeta confirms. "I promise to act like a grown-up towards you going forward. And… and I won't throw myself at you like that ever again. I respect your wishes, and I'll leave you alone. I promise."

He gives her a sad smile, and it nearly breaks her heart.

"All right," she tells him quietly. Wishing, for a fleeting moment, that she were a different sort of woman. A woman who could just go for the guy she was interested in without worrying about ten thousand different things.

"So," he asks, schooling his features. "Do you want to get together tonight to go over our notes for the trip? I have a ton of meetings between now and when we leave and I feel like there's still a lot we need to do before we leave."

Katniss shakes her head. "Sorry, Peeta. I can't. Madge and I are going out to dinner later with a couple of our girlfriends to celebrate – or, uh, commiserate, I guess, depending – over the bar results." She agrees that she and Peeta should meet, and soon, about this case. But Madge made these dinner reservations two weeks ago.

"Ah," he tells her. He smiles again. But it doesn't reach his eyes. "Well, perhaps some other time this week then."

"Definitely," she says.

Peeta gets up out of his chair and moves to leave her office. He turns to face her as he gets to the door. "Good luck this afternoon," he tells her. "I'm certain you have nothing to worry about."

The texts from Madge start at 3:17 p.m.
OMG, Katniss, I'm dying. Is it 4 yet?

WHYYYYYY isn't it 4 yet?!

I flunked. I know I flunked. I'm gonna lose my job and have to move back to Evanston with my parents.

Katniss' is just as nervous as Madge is, of course. But she knows that texting back and forth with her in the hour leading up to getting their bar results isn't going to help calm either of them down.

So Katniss doesn't respond to Madge until she gets the tenth text in as many minutes. And her response is testy.

Madge – stop it. We'll find out the results soon enough, all right? Just do what I'm doing and distract yourself with work.

But when the clock on her computer finally indicates that it's 3:55, Katniss can't take it anymore, either. She logs into the Illinois State Bar's web site and clicks on the link where the list of people who passed the bar will be posted at 4 p.m. When she sees the list isn't posted yet she hits refresh.

Over, and over, and over again.

Finally, at 4:01, the list loads. And she immediately finds Katniss A. Everdeen listed right at the bottom of the Es.

Katniss lets out a breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding for the past three months.

She passed the bar. She passed.

Katniss quickly scans the list of names to see which of her friends also passed. She finds Madge next, and then Peeta. Rue, Thresh, and Delly passed. Finnick too; he's practicing in D.C. now, but he took the Illinois bar in order to keep his options open for later.

A moment later, Katniss' phone explodes with happy, excited congratulatory texts from Delly, Rue, Madge… and Peeta.

After responding to them all, and to Cinna's ecstatic congratulatory email, Katniss decides, just this once – and with a huge grin on her face – to leave work early today.

When Katniss and Madge arrive at Rose Francisco – the fancy Italian restaurant in Lincoln Park that Rue swears has the best bread pudding she's ever tasted – they find Delly and Rue sitting towards the back, already on their second bottle of wine.

Delly pulls first Katniss, and then Madge, into a big hug.

"We did it, girls!" she squeals.

Katniss just can't seem to wipe the smile off her face as the waiters serve them course after delicious course.

"So, Katniss," Delly says after most of the dishes have been cleared away. "It's been, like, months since I've seen you."

"I know," Katniss says. "They're working us into the ground, aren't they."
Delly nods. "Definitely. What's your firm's billables requirement again?"

"Our minimum is 2000," Rue says, still picking at the remaining bread pudding they haven't quite finished yet. "But we all have pressure to exceed that. Especially the patent group," she says, mournfully.

Katniss smiles. "Yeah, because the litigation group is made up of a bunch of slackers, right?" she says, play-hitting Rue on the shoulder.

Delly shakes her head and buries her face in her hands. "At Snow & Crane, our published minimum is 2200 hours." She sighs. "I feel like I'm never going to see sunlight ever again.

"Well, Katniss is gonna see some sunlight pretty soon," Madge chimes in, taking another sip of her wine. Katniss estimates that of the four bottles of Zin the table split this evening, Madge easily drank half of them. "She's going to Guatemala next week."

"Wow, really?" Delly asks.

"Yup," Madge answers before Katniss has a chance to respond. "With a boy."

Katniss' face starts to turn red. Out of the corner of her eye she can see Rue trying to stifle a laugh.

"It's… not like that," Katniss stammers.

Madge leans across the table and says, in a mock whisper, "Hey! Del! She's going with Peeta Mellark."

Delly's eyes are round as saucers. "Peeta?"

"It's a business trip, guys," Katniss insists. "Nothing more."

Madge actually has the audacity to start laughing.

"Oh, Katniss," she says, between giggles. "For such a smart person, you can be a real idiot sometimes. You know that?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Katniss demands.

Madge fixes her with a look that Katniss assumes is intended to be serious. But the corners of her mouth still quirk up as if she's on the cusp of bursting into laughter once again.

"Katniss. You talk about Peeta all the time. You have ever since law review. 'Oooh - Peeta's note on the illegitimacy of the death penalty just got published.' Madge says in a poor imitation of Katniss' voice. "'Peeta is working in New York City after law school, did you know that? Peeta's a White Sox fan. Peeta's so tall. Look at the suit Peeta's wearing today. Peeta got new glasses, did you notice? Peeta Peeta Peeta.'"

And then Madge leans forward and goes in for the kill. "'Oh, Madge,’” she fake whines. "'I accidentally made out with Peeta the night before graduation… but, but it doesn't count because I didn't mean to and I was druuuunk. And, oh yeah, I also made out with him in the elevator of my building on our first day of work, and I also accidentally-on-purpose let him touch my boob while we were going at it. And it was awesome, but it doesn't count because it was an accident."

Katniss' eyebrows shoot up. "MADGE!" she yells. How much has Madge had to drink?

"Um… which elevator did that happen in, exactly?" Rue asks weakly.
Katniss buries her face in her hands.

"Look," Katniss says after she's had a moment to recover. "I admit that I find Peeta… interesting."

Madge snickers loudly.

"But nothing can happen between us. I can't… I don't have time for something to happen between us. I can't let something like a relationship get in the way of my career."

"Listen to me, Katniss," Madge says, her demeanor suddenly serious. She actually takes Katniss' hand in hers, which surprises her. "Peeta Mellark is the biggest workaholic the world has ever known. You know – Mr. Editor in Chief of the Michigan Law Review? The guy who graduated from the University of Chicago in three years? The dude who graduated Order of the Coif from our law school?"

Katniss nods. She knows all of this already. "What's your point, Madge?"

Madge shakes her head a little. She gives Katniss a small smile. This time, though, there's kindness and warmth behind it.

"You really think that a guy like Peeta Mellark would ever, in a million years, allow himself to do anything, or be anything, that would get in the way of your career?"

An hour later, after the fifth and final bottle of wine has been split and the dinner bill has been paid, Katniss climbs aboard the train that will take her back to HP&C.

She left work in such a hurry this afternoon that she forgot a document she'd intended to look over tonight. After a ten minute ride, she gets off the train at the State Street stop, and walks the few blocks from the station to her office.

Katniss opens the door to her building. When she gets to the elevator bank she extracts the badge from her purse that she now knows is what's needed to activate this elevator after hours – trying desperately not to blush while doing so.

When the elevator opens onto the 32nd floor she walks briskly through the darkened hallway to her office.

She notices right away that the light to Peeta's office is still on. As she walks down the hall she can distinctly hear Arcade Fire's latest album playing from inside.

Since Peeta's here, Katniss decides she might as well check and see if he's still interested in going over their notes for Guatemala.

When she gets to his door she knocks on it.

"Come in?" he says from inside.

She opens the door and sees Peeta, apparently hard at work, his hair a disheveled wreck and his suit jacket and tie strewn across his desk.

"Katniss," he says, happily, looking up from whatever he'd been reading.

"Hi, Peeta," she says. "Just got done with dinner with the girls and I thought I'd come into the office to pick up a few things. But seeing as you're here… well, are you still interested in going over our notes?"
"Sure, why not," he says, getting out of his seat and clearing off the books and papers that are piled on the chair across from his, presumably to make room for Katniss to sit down.

"Great," Katniss says. "I'll just go to my office and get my laptop."

"So, let's go over this again, one more time," Peeta says, after they've been working together for about an hour.

"Fine," Katniss agrees.

"I've designed these questions here," he turns back to face his computer monitor and begins to read, "to get at the following: average age of the employees at the garment company; average length of workday; whether, and how frequently, employees are permitted to take work breaks; and details specifics regarding workplace health and safety conditions." He looks back at her, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "And you're saying that those questions will get at the heart of what's required of garment companies under international labor law, and that the answers to these questions will tell us whether or not we can bring a lawsuit."

Katniss nods. "Yes. This is an excellent start. And while you're interviewing the workers, I will be meeting with the managers of the company. You said we've already been granted permission to meet with them?"

Peeta looks up at her and gives her a grim smile. "Technically, yes. But who knows what will happen when we show up there next week. When push comes to shove, I have no idea if they'll actually let you look at a single document."

Unfortunately, this doesn't surprise Katniss in the slightest. She knows how obstreperous corporations can be when they think they have something to hide.

"Have you and Cinna been able to set up an interpreter for me?" Katniss is a little embarrassed to have to ask this. But, unfortunately, her Spanish is laughably bad. If she doesn't have an interpreter she'll be as good as useless on this trip.

"Still working on that one," Peeta tells her. "But I don't think it should be nearly as difficult as most of the rest of it will be."

He clears his throat before continuing. "Before we move on... well, I hate to be paranoid. But could you mind actually reviewing these questions on my monitor, just to make absolutely certain I'm on the right track?"

She walks over to where Peeta sits and stands behind him so she can read over his shoulder as he scrolls down the page. She tries hard to focus on his computer monitor, and not on the fine hairs on the nape of his neck. Or on what it might feel like to run her fingers through them.

"Yeah, Peeta," she says, nodding, feeling what might be her eighth blush of the day rising on her cheeks. "This is all very good. I can't think of anything you've left out of these preliminary interrogatories."

He cranes his head up to look at her and smiles.

"Of course," Katniss continues, "we still need to determine the appropriate venue for this lawsuit. Assuming we bring a lawsuit at all, of course," she says with small smile. "Hopefully I'll be able to find a connection to an American corporation while we're down there so we can sue them in the United States."
Peeta nods thoughtfully at her words.

"And," Katniss continues, "of course, if we determine there's a cause of action here, we'll need to explain to the family you've been meeting with that it's their relatives, not them, who'll need to bring the lawsuit."

After all, it's the workers, not their family members living in America, that are directly affected by this company's actions. Technically, HP&C's clients don't have any actual legal right to sue the company at all.

"Yeah," Peeta agrees. "That's definitely a conversation Cinna and I need to have with them. But I have that aspect of the case under control, Katniss. Civil procedure and constitutional law, I'm totally down with." He looks up at her again and gives her a crooked grin, making her stomach do a somersault. "It's this business law stuff that has my head tied up in knots."

"Well," Katniss says, clearing her throat. "It's a good thing that we're both working on this case, then, isn't it."

Peeta doesn't respond at first. "Yes," he eventually tells her in a quiet voice, still holding her gaze. "It's a very good thing."

He is looking at her with such an intense, smoldering expression that Katniss is suddenly filled with an irresistible urge to touch him.

Before she can talk herself out of doing it Katniss lifts her hand and tentatively reaches out to touch Peeta's cheek. She can sense his entire body stiffen at the contact. But he does not move to stop her.

Emboldened, Katniss moves her hand a little and begins to gently caress the juncture of his shoulder and neck with her fingertips. He doesn't move – doesn't do anything at all– but continues to hold her gaze so intensely that it feels like her brain is shutting down and her legs are turning into jelly.

Only when she leans over and begins pressing little kisses along the line where her fingers were just moving does he speak.

"Katniss…" he says quietly. His tone is unreadable.

She moves even closer to him, then, and gently presses her mouth to his.

The position is awkward – he's still seated, with his head craned back towards her, and she's still standing behind him. She's bending over him a little as they kiss. She breaks away and spins his chair around, slowly, so that he's facing her.

"Katniss," he murmurs again. His eyes are a little unfocused and his glasses have somehow slid halfway down the bridge of his nose again. "What… what are you doing?" he asks her, weakly.

The sight of him with his half-lidded eyes, mussed hair, and rumpled shirt has her nearly undone. So instead of using words, Katniss decides to answer his question by showing him.

She moves towards him and straddles his lap, snaking her arms around his neck as she leans forward to capture his mouth with hers once more. Suddenly, she needs to have his tongue in her mouth, and she traces his bottom lip with her tongue, desperately hoping that he will reciprocate.

Peeta's hands go up to cradle her face. But he pulls away from her. "Katniss…" he begins.
"Hm?" she asks, kissing him on his cheek and the tip of his nose.

"We shouldn't do this…” he tells her. But his eyes are closed, and Katniss can hear his breathing speeding up.

"Why not?" she asks him, boldly. She starts unbuttoning his shirt and leans forward a little to kiss up his neck. She starts sucking on the skin beneath his ear and swirling her tongue, and she can hear his breath catch in his throat.

"Because…” he begins, but trails off. His face is level with her breasts and she can feel his hot breath on her skin.

"I don't want to stop, Peeta," she tells him honestly, and she moves to kiss him once more on the mouth, sucking his bottom lip into her mouth and worrying it a little with her teeth. Madge's advice rings in her ears, and it hits her, suddenly, like a bolt of lightning, just how right Madge was.

And just how foolish she has been.

The idea that Peeta – driven, determined Peeta, a guy who's an even bigger workaholic than she is – would somehow, either intentionally or unintentionally, get in the way of her achieving anything she's ever wanted to achieve professionally is completely laughable.

She's been pushing away this sexy, brilliant, driven guy who likes her. For no good reason whatsoever.

And so Katniss decides, right here, sitting on Peeta's lap in his office chair with her arms around him and her tongue in his mouth that that is going to stop right now.

But instead of kissing Katniss back, Peeta pulls away from her abruptly and holds her at arms' length.

"You tell me now that you don't want to stop, Katniss," he says, a little sharply. She is taken aback by his tone. "But how do I know you aren't just going to run away from me tomorrow morning like you always do?"

"Peeta –" she begins. "I'm… I'm sorry. You have every right to be pissed at me for –"

"I'm not pissed at you," he tells her, looking at her so earnestly she can't help but believe him. "I swear I'm not. But… this wouldn't just be some fling for me, Katniss. And I don't want to get hurt again."

His words are like a physical blow.

"I was just… scared. Before, I mean," she tells him, stupidly. She doesn't provide any clarification; he doesn't ask for any. "It wouldn't be just a fling for me either. I swear."

He cradles her face in his hands again.

"Katniss…” he murmurs. He pulls her towards him for a gentle kiss, but pulls away after only a few seconds.

"Don't you… want me anymore?" she asks him plaintively, her voice cracking on the final word.

His sighs deeply, and fixes her with a piercing gaze, "Katniss. I want to be with you. So much. You, coming in here like this, sitting on my lap and kissing me.." He trails off and shakes his head.
ruefully. "You have no idea how badly I want to just… just sweep off all the papers on my desk and throw you down on top of it." A shiver runs down her spine at his words.

He kisses her forehead gently. "But I need to believe that this is real. That you'll still be here tomorrow. And right now… right now I just don't."

He gently, but firmly, displaces her from his lap and turns back to his computer. Disappointment crashes through her.

"Is there anything I can do to change your mind, Peeta? To… to get you to give me a second chance to do this right? " She can hear the note of panic in her voice. But she doesn't care. She's the one who fucked this up, and if it's possible to fix it, she will.

He doesn't respond right away.

"Convince me," he tells her, eventually, not taking his eyes off his work.

"Con… convince you?" she asks him, a little breathlessly. She doesn't understand.

He swivels in his chair to face her again. His eyes are hard, but not unkind. "I need you to make me believe that if I kiss you again, you'll still want to kiss me the next day. That if I kiss you in the elevator, or in your apartment, or anywhere, and then ask you to dinner afterwards, that there's at least a \textit{chance} you'll say yes."

She nods purposefully at him. "All right, then," she says. She strides towards his office door.

This, she can do. She's a litigator, is she not? Convincing people is her stock and trade.

Before leaving for the night she turns back to face him.

"I'll convince you, Peeta."

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

PenelopeWeaving gave me the idea for the Easter egg in this chapter ages ago, and even though I'm pretty sure she meant the suggestion as a joke, I just couldn't resist. ;)

Thank you to the tumblr ladies who reviewed an early version of this chapter. And continued thanks for everyone's enthusiastic support of this story. You are the best.
am so, so sorry for the long update delay! I can't thank you enough for your patience.

A special thank you to both Court81981 and MalTease for reviewing an early version of this chapter and for their very helpful suggestions. And thank you, also, to the ladies of tumblr, who have taught this old lady literally everything she knows about gchat.

Katniss walks out of the hotel bathroom, wrapping a towel around her body and dragging a comb through her wet hair.

After yesterday's long flight, and subsequent cab ride over roads riddled with potholes, she decided to treat herself to a long, hot shower when she woke up this morning.

But she's due to leave with Peeta for the corporate headquarters of La Maquila, on the outskirts of Guatemala City, in about ten minutes. And now that her shower is over she needs to get ready quickly.

After she decides her hair is combed enough she crosses the room to the old bureau leaning up against the far wall of the room. She pulls out the blouse and skirt she'll be wearing today.

Peeta has repeatedly insisted that the clothes she'd ordinarily wear when visiting the office of a major corporation in the United States would make her stick out like sore thumb in Guatemala. He's implored Katniss to dress casually while here.

Katniss knows that between the two of them, Peeta's the expert on the local culture, not her. And so even though Katniss always feels more comfortable in her suits and heels than in anything else, while she was packing she decided to just defer to his judgment and bring casual clothes.

As she dresses there's a knock on the door.

"Just a minute," she calls out. She knows it's likely either housekeeping (this hotel is modest by American standards but it's scrupulously clean) or Peeta. Either way, she isn't ready to open the door just yet.

"Ok," Peeta calls out from the other side of the door. She hears him clear his throat. "I'll just meet you downstairs."

She hears Peeta's footsteps disappear down the hall, away from her door and towards the staircase leading to the lobby.

Katniss quickly finishes dressing. She gathers her notebook, her laptop, and a pen, and stuffs it all into her black leather briefcase – her gift from Gale and his wife when she graduated from law school last spring – and rushes out the door.

When she gets to the lobby, she sees Peeta seated on the small, worn loveseat. He's got his laptop open and he's typing away.
"Hey, Peeta," she says to him.

Peeta looks up at her, his glasses halfway down the bridge of his nose. The way they always are when he's reading. He pushes them back up and gives her a crooked half smile.

"Hey," he says.

She hasn't seen Peeta in almost a week. They traveled here separately. Peeta decided to fly to Guatemala a few days earlier than they'd originally planned so he could travel around a little before he needed to meet with the La Maquila employees.

Or that was the story he gave Cinna and the firm's travel office, anyway, when he asked for his travel to be changed. Katniss can't help but wonder if he really changed his tickets just so he could avoid spending any more time with her than he had to.

She hopes that's not the case.

"Shall we go?" he asks, tucking his laptop into his bag. He stands up from his seat and slings his messenger bag over his right shoulder. Katniss notices that Peeta's wearing a collared white shirt that's tucked into khakis, a brown leather belt, and casual brown shoes.

Katniss can't remember the last time she saw him out of a suit. She's momentarily thrown.

"Err…” she says, stupidly.

"Katniss?" he asks. He runs his hand through his curly blonde hair. He looks concerned. "You all right?"

"Yes," she finally manages. "I'm fine."

He smiles again. "Good," he says. "Come on, we need to go catch our bus. We don't want to be late."

One of the first things Katniss did when she agreed to work on this case was read everything she could get her hands on about Guatemala. After all, she'd never left North America before, and she wanted to be as prepared as possible.

Of course, she studied these books especially diligently the last week before the trip. Given her final interaction with Peeta before he left – when Katniss kissed him in his office and he told her, in no uncertain terms, to back off - she doesn't want to be in a position where she needs to depend entirely on him while they're here.

And using her smattering of remembered Spanish from high school and the phrases she's picked up in *Lonely Planet's Guatemala*, Katniss successfully navigated both the Guatemala City airport and the cab ride to her hotel. Lying in bed last night she couldn't help but feel a heady sense of pride. Like she'd passed a difficult exam with flying colors.

But no amount of advance reading could have prepared her for today's bus ride from their hotel to La Maquila's corporate headquarters.

"There's no room for us on that, Peeta," Katniss tells him, trepidation in her voice as the dilapidated bus pulls up to the curb in front of their hotel. The bus belches a cloud of thick black smoke from its exhaust pipe as it comes to a complete stop in front of them.

The driver opens the door and three people spill out. When the driver sees Katniss, Peeta, and
three other hotel guests standing on the curb waiting for him, he doesn't drive off like Katniss expects, given the number of passengers still on the bus. He simply motions for them to come aboard and shouts something in Spanish that she cannot understand.

Katniss can see, even from the curb, that there must be over a hundred passengers on the bus. Through the windows she sees people sitting on others' laps. People are packed in so closely together in the narrow aisle that surely they must be standing on top of each others' feet.

But Peeta only laughs.

"Come on, Katniss," he tells her, trying to school his features and stifle his laughter. "There's plenty of room."

He walks towards the bus and climbs aboard. She follows suit.

The crowd of people inside makes it nearly impossible for them to get very far past where the driver is sitting. But Peeta grabs her hand, and together they push forward as best they can.

They manage to get all of their limbs inside the bus – but only just – before the driver closes the door.

"Ready?" Peeta asks her, craning his head a little to look back at her. He's still smiling.

Katniss doesn't think she's ready. People are pressed up against her from all sides. Peeta is standing right in front of her, and her own face is pressed up between his shoulder blades. She worries that sooner or later, she will be shoved into him even further by the crush of people around her.

But she answers him, telling him she's ready, all the same. What else can she say? She knows this bus is the only way to get to where they need to go.

Katniss wonders if he can feel the heat of her blush through his cotton shirt.

A moment later, the bus lurches noisily to life. It throws Katniss forward, just as she thought it would. But Peeta's hands are braced on the seats in front of him and her fall into him doesn't cause him to stumble.

"You all right?" she asks him, yelling to make herself heard over the din inside the bus. She pulls away from him as much as she can – which isn't very far at all – and tries to right herself.

"Yeah," he tells her. "You?"

Katniss is about to tell him she's fine, when the passenger standing behind her stumbles. It causes her to crash into Peeta from behind again, even harder this time.

"Aaah!," she cries out, mortified. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Peeta yells back. "Riding on buses in Guatemala City is always a bit of an assumption of risk."

He reaches behind him and awkwardly gives her hand a reassuring squeeze.

Katniss expects him to take his hand back right away. But he doesn't.

She wonders, fleetingly – as the bus slowly rolls towards their destination; as she struggles to keep her footing; as the heat from his palm radiates into her skin – if this is a sign. Is Peeta convinced, as
he put it last week? Has she convinced him?

But she dismisses that thought right away. She can't possibly have convinced him already. This is the first time they've been within ten feet of each other since he threw her out of his office.

As the minutes pass, however, and his hand remains on top of hers, she can't help but think that this is about more than just making sure she doesn't fall again.

Emboldened, Katniss tentatively wraps her free arm around Peeta's waist. To help steady her, she'll tell him if he freaks out.

As Katniss slides her hand over his stomach, she can feel his abdominal muscles tighten and his quick intake of breath. But when she holds tight to him, he doesn't protest.

The bus lurches on, and Peeta tightens his grip on her hand.

Forty-five minutes later the bus rolls to a stop in front of their destination.

As passengers begin to disembark, Katniss releases her hold on Peeta. But he does not let go of her hand.

Together, they push through the passengers standing between them and the door of the bus. Only when they are safely on level ground again does he release her.

He looks at her and clears his throat.

"So," he says, and then trails off.

Katniss stares at him.

"I… uh," he begins again. He licks his lips. "My… depositions are over there," he jerks his thumb in the direction of one of the two squat buildings behind them.

"Okay," Katniss says. "So, I assume I'm going to the other building?"

The plan for the day is for Peeta to talk, one on one, with as many La Maquila employees as the company will let speak with him. Meanwhile, Katniss will review documents pertaining to La Maquila's corporate structure.

Assuming the company makes good on their promise to let her see them, of course.

Peeta nods. "Yeah," he says. "The files you need should all be in there. And at least one of the guys who works here speaks English, so you should be fine."

Katniss adjusts the strap of her briefcase. She's about to head off in the direction Peeta indicated when he stops her.

"Katniss, wait," he says. But he trails off again. He closes his eyes and shakes his head.

"Yes, Peeta?" Katniss prompts, her heart rate speeding up in spite of herself.

Peeta opens his eyes. He pauses.

"I'll… see you tonight."

And he briskly walks off towards his depositions.
As it turns out, the manager who greets Katniss at the door does, in fact, speak flawless English.

"Good morning, Miss Everdeen," he tells her with only the faintest hint of accent. He smiles graciously at her and points to his nametag. "I'm Senor Gutiérrez. Please follow me."

"Thank you," Katniss says. Katniss can't help but be surprised at how friendly this man is. Doesn't he understand why she's here?

Or perhaps that's exactly why he's being so friendly, she muses. Perhaps Senor Gutiérrez and his superiors understand all too well that La Maquila risks becoming embroiled in international litigation if they don't grant Katniss access to everything she's asking for.

Katniss follows him down a long, windowless corridor. This place could be any office building in America, Katniss muses. With its overhead florescent lighting and its cubicles, it certainly doesn't feel like she's in the corporate office of an alleged sweatshop in Guatemala.

"All right, here you are," he says, when they get to the last door on the right. He gestures to the room that's been made ready for her. She peeks inside and sees a cup full of pens and highlighters on a small desk. The desk has a lamp and is stacked high with documents.

"Thank you," she says. He turns to leave.

Katniss sits down at the desk and begins flipping through the papers in front of her.

And realizes, immediately, that every single document in this stack is in Spanish.

Katniss claps her hand to her forehead and closes her eyes.

"Fuck," she mutters under her breath.

Katniss is furious with herself that it never occurred to her that this might be a problem. While it's true that English has become the international language of business, she and Peeta still should have at least considered the possibility of this being an issue.

She realizes, now, that she won't be spending the day getting her arms around La Maquila's corporate structure like she'd hoped. Instead, she'll need to hope that Senor Gutiérrez will let her use a scanner.

Because she needs to scan as much of this as she can and create PDF versions of everything. And tonight, she'll need to run it all through Google Translator and see what she can come up with.

"Fuck," she mutters again, before leaving the room again to find her guide.

After nine hours of scanning documents, Katniss decides she can leave the rest of it for tomorrow.

She packs up her things and walks over to the adjacent building where Peeta's taking his depositions. She peers into the front window and sees Peeta seated in a metal folding chair, talking with a young woman, a clipboard on his lap. There are three small children clustered around her, clinging to her skirts.

Katniss wonders if they are her children.

Katniss raps lightly on the window, causing the little group to look up. She makes eye contact with Peeta and raises her eyebrows.
Peeta shakes his head infinitesimally and cocks it towards the woman he's speaking with. He makes a hand gesture that Katniss interprets as meaning she should go back to the hotel without him.

She waves back to him and moves away from the window. She walks slowly to the bus stop.

Given that she won't have Peeta to cling to this time, Katniss hopes that her ride back to the hotel is less crowded than this morning's was.

It doesn't take long for Katniss to discover that Google's Spanish-to-English translations are extremely rough, and that this project she had previously thought would take her about fifteen hours to complete will likely take her all week.

About two hours into trying to make sense of the translations, and just as she is about to give up for the night, Katniss sees a gchat message pop up on her computer.

It's from Madge.

*Hey Katniss,* it says.

Katniss smiles when she sees it.

*Hey Madge.*

*How's Guatemala?* Madge asks.

**It's good,** Katniss responds. **I mean, haven't seen much of it yet, tbh. The airport, then the hotel. Went to La Maquila today. Now I'm reviewing documents. Except they're all in fucking Spanish, which we of course should have anticipated. But I can barely speak it at all, and so now I'm trying to translate everything with Google. It's going to take forever.**

Madge doesn't respond right away. This happens a lot when they chat together. Madge is nothing if not a multi-tasker.

**Well, that sucks,** Madge eventually says. **Tell me about it.**

Katniss closes her eyes and shakes her head.

**How about a more interesting topic, then,** Madge says. **How's Peeta?**

**Fine, I guess,** Katniss replies.

*Have any opportunity yet to wear that little black thing I made you bring?* Madge includes a winking emoticon at the end of the question.

Katniss feels her face grow hot. It takes her a long moment before she feels composed enough to respond.

**No, Madge. Not yet. And you're an asshole.**

**Haha!**, Madge says. **Well, I have a feeling you'll thank me later.**

Katniss runs her hands through her hair nervously and takes a sip of water. Because the truth is, she hopes that she will have reason to thank Madge, later, for convincing her to bring the one piece of sexy lingerie she owns on this trip.
But she's also too afraid to get her hopes up, and really doesn't want to have this conversation right now.

_Sorry, Madge, but I gotta go._ One good thing about gchat, Katniss muses, is that you can end a discussion just by saying goodbye and logging off.

_Fine, fine, Madge says. I better get back to work anyway. Doc review for me all week too, ugh._

_We can't seem to escape it, can we, Katniss responds._

_Nope. Nothing we can do about it, though, right? tyl_

And then the green light by Madge's name goes off.

Katniss takes another long pull of water from the glass on the desk. She stands up and goes over to her bureau. She opens the top drawer and pulls out the... outfit, if it can even be called that... she got from Victoria Secret back in college.

She goes over to the mirror in the bathroom and holds the black lace up to her body. It barely even covers her ass anymore.

Katniss hasn't actually _worn_ this thing in years, and she tries to imagine what it must look like on her now. She wonders if it even fits.

She walks back to the bureau and chucks it back into the top drawer.

Katniss knows this sort of thing will not, by itself, fix things between her and Peeta. Her wearing _this_ for him is not the kind of convincing Peeta needs. If anything, showing up in his room wearing nothing but a nighty would just piss him off even more.

Katniss decides that this outfit will have to wait until after she's convinced him.

All she needs to do, now, is figure out how to do that.

After another thirty minutes, Katniss decides to call it a day.

She shuts off her laptop and stretches. She puts her hair in a long braid and walks over to the hotel bathroom to get another glass of water.

When she's halfway there someone knocks on the door.

She opens it to find Peeta on the other side, looking like he got caught in the rain. His hair is wet and plastered to his forehead.

Katniss tries not to stare at how his wet shirt clings to his broad shoulders and chest.

"Hey," he says, pulling off his fogged-up glasses and wiping the lenses on his shirt.

Katniss nods wordlessly at him.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm back," he says. "I need to change though."

"All right," Katniss says, trying to keep her eyes trained on his face.

An idea occurs to her.
"Why don't I go downstairs to the kitchen and get us some food? We can eat and talk about the case when I get back."

"Sounds good," Peeta says, shouldering his messenger bag. "Why don't you come over to my room in, like, 20 minutes? I need a shower." He picks at the wet fabric clinging to his shoulders as if it explains everything.

"Fine," Katniss says, averting her eyes so she doesn't stare. "See you then."

Twenty-five minutes later, Katniss balances the two plates of food she's carrying on one arm and knocks on Peeta's door.

He opens it, wearing jeans and a clean white t-shirt.

"Come on in," he says, gesturing for her to enter. His feet are bare, and he's rubbing his head with a towel.

As she enters the room, Katniss shifts one of the plates to her free hand. She puts them both down on his desk - the only flat surface in the room that isn't a bed.

"Um," she says, a little awkwardly. "Where should we eat?"

Peeta looks around. "You take the desk and the chair," he suggests. "I'll sit on the bed and hold my plate on my lap."

Katniss hands him his plate and sits down at the desk like he suggests.

"How was your day?" she asks, as he wolfs down his tamales.


"Good," Katniss says.

Peeta turns to his bag and rifles through it a minute. He takes out a legal pad filled with handwritten notes.

He flips through the pages and starts reading.

"Leticia Alvarez," he begins. "Age: Eleven years old."

"Eleven?" Katniss asks, shocked.

Peeta looks up at Katniss. His blue eyes are unreadable. "Eleven," he confirms.

He looks back down at his notes and resumes reading.

"She works from sunrise until six p.m. Six days a week." He takes another bite of his food, but keeps his eyes trained on the page. "Her younger brother Almanzo works there too. His hours are the same as hers. He's eight years old." He looks up at Katniss. "Leticia said she was glad they get to work together, because that way she can look out for him. Try to make sure he doesn't fall into anything and get hurt."

Katniss' stomach sinks. "Oh, my God."

"I spoke with thirty other employees today," Peeta continues, setting the notepad aside and
stabbing another bite of tamale with his fork. "Their stories were every bit as heartbreaking, Katniss. Amelia Juarez, thirty years old, is the mother of four. She's seven months pregnant with her fifth, and the manager will only let her take one twenty minute break in twelve hours." His tone of voice grows more frantic the longer he speaks. He shakes his head. "Nursing mothers are denied access to their babies. Elderly men are beaten if they make a mistake."

He puts the notepad down. He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes.

"Katniss, it just goes on and on," he says, wearily. He sounds heartbroken.

"Peeta," she says, gently. "I've reviewed enough case law on this subject to know that this company is violating at least five different international treaties," she tells him, hoping he finds her words reassuring. This is business for both of them, but Katniss knows it's about more than just that for Peeta.

There is a long pause after that. Katniss looks up at Peeta. He isn't looking at his notepad or his dinner. He's looking at her – staring, really – his blue eyes sparkling with intensity. Her heart stutters in her chest.

She licks her lips nervously.

And then the moment is gone. Peeta puts his glasses back on. He nods and picks at his plate. "I figured," he says, clearing his throat. "After I'm done with all the depos, we'll need to go through those cases and see which ones best fit the facts we have."

"Right," she agrees.

"So, that's my day," he says. "How was yours?"

"A bit of a bust, actually." And she fills him in on the problems with the documents, and how hard it's been for her to get usable translations.

"I'm sorry," he says. And he looks it. "But… well, maybe I can give you some key phrases to look out for. Tell you what 'Articles of Incorporation' is in Spanish. That sort of thing."

"That would be helpful," she says.

Peeta rubs his hands over his face again and lies down on the bed, sighing.

He looks exhausted, Katniss thinks to herself.

"You know, Katniss," he says, stretching his arms over his head. "I'm actually kind of shocked at how compliant the company was today. We don't have any subpoenas; we haven't filed anything yet. And yet they still made all these employees available to meet with me and let you scan all that stuff."

"I thought it was weird, too," Katniss confirms. "Maybe they're just terrified of getting sued?"

"Perhaps," Peeta muses, sitting up again. "But with the info they just handed over to me today, they're almost certainly going to get sued anyway. Assuming we can use those documents to link them with an American corporation, of course."

"I guess we should just roll with it, though. Right? Take advantage of their willingness to work with us as long as it lasts."

Peeta shrugs. "Yeah, probably so."
The room grows quiet after that as they finish their meal. Katniss has had tamales before – eats them with some regularity, in fact, now that she lives in a city with decent ethnic food – but she's never had one this good before. The masa just melts on her tongue, and the beans are delicious and indescribably tender.

Peeta takes Katniss' plate from her when they've finished eating. He places their dishes outside the door of his room so housekeeping can come collect them when they make their rounds tonight.

"So," he says to her, sitting back down on the bed. His elbows are on his knees and his hands are clasped together between them. "What should we do tonight?"

Katniss blanches. Until now, she had just assumed they would just work the rest of the night. But separately, in their own rooms. The way things were when they left Chicago. She figured that after dinner, she wouldn't see him again until tomorrow morning.

Is he actually proposing they work together? Her heart rate speeds up again.

"Well," she begins, slowly. "Why don't we start with the rest of your notes from today's depositions."

Peeta shakes his head. "No, I can't. I mean… I just can't. I had a nearly twelve hour day, and it's going to be more of the same tomorrow." He looks at her. "This is just really... harrowing work, for me, I guess. And I need to a break tonight." He looks at her, a little plaintively. "Please, Katniss. My notes will keep."

Katniss swallows audibly. "Well… ok, then," she says, at a loss.

What should they do tonight? Together? If not work?

What is there even to do in Guatemala City after dark?

"Want to watch something on tv?" she suggests, lamely.

He grins at her.

"That sounds perfect."

The hotel doesn't carry many channels, and it doesn't take them long to agree on something to watch.

"It's kinda weird, watching Adam Sandler singing his cheesy songs in dubbed Spanish," Peeta notes, taking a sip of his beer.

"Yeah," Katniss agrees. "And whoever's doing Drew Barrymore has a really deep voice. It's throwing me."

Peeta laughs.

He's sitting, leaning up against the headboard of the bed, his legs crossed in front of him at the ankles. She's sitting in the desk chair, about four feet away from him.

Despite their physical distance, Katniss can't remember the last time she was this distracted. Fortunately, she's committed "The Wedding Singer" to memory – it's one of Prim's favorites – and so she's able to keep up with Peeta's running commentary even though she's barely paying attention to the movie.
She keeps sneaking glances at Peeta as he relaxes. She marvels at just how different he looks tonight - not working and hunched over a desk, but unwinding and laughing at Adam Sandler's antics.

"Oh somebody kill me pleaaaaaaaaaaase!" Peeta sings tonelessly, over the dubbed Spanish version of the song. He starts laughing again.

Katniss decides she wants to see him like this much more often.

Towards the end of the movie – while Adam Sandler gets life advice from Billy Idol on their airplane – she glances over at Peeta for what must be the hundredth time in the past hour. But this time, to her surprise, he's rotating his right shoulder and grimacing a little.

"Peeta?" she says. "What's wrong?"

"Oh," he says, glancing at her and looking sheepish. "It's my shoulder. I think this morning's bus ride caused an old injury to flare up. And laughing like this probably isn't helping. I mean, it doesn't feel sprained or anything, but-"

"Can I have a look?" Katniss cuts in before she can stop herself.

He looks at her. "Um. Sure," he says, after a beat. But his body stiffens a little, and her stomach sinks at the note of hesitancy she hears in his voice.

She doesn't let it deter her. She practically jumps out of her chair and is sitting next to him on the bed in an instant.

"Where exactly does it hurt?" she asks him, her hand tentatively hovering near his neck.

"Right here," he says, gingerly touching the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

Katniss carefully peels his hand away from the sore spot and touches it with her other hand.

"Aaaaah!" he cries out, wincing.

"Sorry," she says quickly, taking her hand away.

"No, it's fine. You didn't do anything wrong."

Katniss takes a deep breath and tries to steady her nerves.

"Do you... do you think it might help if I massaged it? Or... or something?" she asks, her voice shaking a little.

As soon as the words are out of her mouth, Katniss cringes inwardly. She doesn't know the first thing about massage, and she's terrified that Peeta's going to see this offer for what it really is.

Namely: a totally clichéd, thinly-veiled excuse to get her hands on him.

"Um, yes. Yes, I do," Peeta says quickly, to her great surprise. He turns his head a little so that he's looking right at her.

Katniss swallows hard at the look she sees in his eyes.

"I think if you massaged my shoulder it would help a lot, actually," he continues, very quietly.

"All right," she says, with more confidence than she feels.
She rushes off to the bathroom on shaky legs, and comes back with the small bottle of complimentary lotion she finds there. She sits down on the bed.

"Turn around, so… so that your back's to me," she instructs, trying to sound like she knows what the hell she's doing.

But she must have sounded convincing enough, because he complies immediately. She tugs down the collar of his shirt a little so that she can have access to the spot where he's hurting. She's about to squeeze a generous amount of lotion on his skin when she stops.

And wonders just how far he'll let her take this.

"Peeta?" she asks him.

"Hm?"

"Could you… I mean, would it be easier if…" She trails off, her face on fire.

"What, Katniss?" he asks her.

She clears her throat. "Can you take off your shirt maybe?" she finishes, her words coming out in a rush.

He stiffens.

"I mean, you don't have to," she says quickly when he doesn't respond. She knows she sounds panicky, but she's so embarrassed she doesn't care. "I just thought it would be easier if you –"

"Katniss…" he cuts in.

Katniss clears her throat. "Yeah?" she asks timidly, bracing for a rebuke.

But none comes. Peeta simply turns, slowly, so that he's facing her. And in one swift movement he lifts his t-shirt up and over his head. He tosses it onto the floor.

"Like this?" he asks, one corner of his mouth quirked up in a half smile.

"Um… yes," Katniss says, forcing herself to keep her eyes trained on his face. "Just like that."

"Okay," Peeta says, and turns around again so that his back is to her.

Katniss squeezes some lotion onto her palms and rubs them together to warm it up. And to calm herself down. She starts rubbing Peeta in very small circles – gently, and without much force – where he told her it hurt.

She really doesn't know what she's doing. And at first he gasps and tenses up as her hands move over him, and Katniss worries that what she's doing is actually hurting him rather than helping him feel better. But he doesn't ask her to stop, and so she doesn't.

After a few minutes, Katniss can feel his body begin to relax a little into her touch. She takes that as a sign and decides to be a little bolder. She begins tracing the contours of his shoulder blades with her fingertips, half expecting him to stop her and throw her out of his room as she does it.

But Peeta only sighs in response to her touch. "That feels really good, Katniss," he murmurs.

"Oh," she replies. "Good. I mean… I mean, I'm glad." She clears her throat nervously. "So… this
is ok then?"

He laughs a little, breathlessly.

"This is definitely ok," he says. "More than ok."

Katniss doesn't know what to say to that. And so she says nothing. She simply focuses on the feel of him under her hands, on the shape of his broad shoulders and back. She works her hands all the way across his back and halfway down, feeling his strong muscles shift and tense underneath her palms.

"Katniss…" he says after another few minutes. "I…"

"Hm?" Katniss asks. She starts rubbing her hands up and down his spine. He moans a little and his head sags forward.

There's another long pause before he speaks again.

"I think… I think you should stop," he says eventually, very slowly.

Katniss freezes.

"All right," she says. Disappointment crashes through her. But she complies with his wishes, taking her hands off his back and folding them in her lap.

Peeta turns around to face her again.

"Thank you," he says, very quietly. "That was… good."

She nods.

He leans forward and kisses her forehead.

"Thank you," he says again. She glances up at his face and sees his eyes, half-lidded and a little unfocused behind his silver frames, looking back at her.

Before she can talk herself out of doing it, she closes the distance between them and kisses him on the mouth.

As soon as her lips make contact with his, every nerve in her body screams at her to deepen the kiss. To thrust her tongue into his mouth and wrap her arms around him and push him down onto the bed.

But she holds back. This needs to happen slowly, she reminds herself. She needs to give herself to him, little by little, so that he learns he can trust her. That he doesn't need to be afraid of her hurting him again.

After a long moment, however, she realizes that Peeta is kissing her back. She feels the tip of his tongue dart out and gently touch her bottom lip.

And it's all the encouragement she needs.

She allows herself to wrap her arms around him. He reciprocates, and she whimpers. It feels so good, so right, to be in his arms again.

But then, without warning, he drops his arms and breaks off the kiss.
"I think… I should go to bed soon, Katniss," he tells her. He's breathing heavily. He pulls back from her, and Katniss can see how flushed his face is. "You too. We have another long day tomorrow."

Katniss nods, hoping her disappointment doesn't show on her face.

"All right," she says, even though it isn't all right, and this isn't what she wants.

She stands up from the bed and straightens her clothes.

"I'll see you tomorrow."

As Katniss lies awake for hours, tossing and turning in her bed as she mulls over the events of the evening, it finally hits her.

The only way she can convince Peeta that she will still be here for him tomorrow – that she will still want to kiss him tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that – is to show him.

She hopes he keeps giving her the chance to show him.
Finally, after about an hour of hopeless wandering through the forest, Katniss spots a small, bright green bird out of the corner of her eye.

Katniss fumbles with the binoculars hanging on a string around her neck and, as quickly as she can, puts them up to her eyes.

But she's already too late, she realizes immediately. The quetzal has taken flight and is nowhere to be seen.

*Crap*, she thinks to herself. The brightly-colored bird is Prim's favorite, and Katniss had really hoped to photograph one for her on this trip.

Katniss walks a little further along the wet, muddy ground, until she comes to a rock large enough to sit on. She sits down heavily and digs through her rucksack until she finds the birding guide the hotel concierge gave her early this morning.

"Where are you, you little fuckers?" she mutters, a little bitterly, to herself. It's very humid here, and she wipes the sweat off her forehead with the back of her arm as she pages through the booklet.

She's here, exploring the Guatemalan rainforest, because Peeta insisted she take today off. While ordinarily she'd be thrilled with the reprieve and the opportunity for a little adventure, this isn't a good development.

Yesterday afternoon, Katniss finally finished reviewing La Maquila's corporate documents. And despite going over them with a fine-tooth comb – Peeta even helped a little, reviewing some of the more poorly-translated documents with her – she's found absolutely nothing connecting La Maquila with any American parent corporation.

When she told Peeta the news, he called La Maquila immediately and tried to set up another appointment for Katniss to review any additional documents they might have. But the La Maquila representative Peeta spoke with politely, but firmly, told him no. He said La Maquila had been more than accommodating to them this week, and it cannot accommodate them further without a subpoena.

Peeta and Katniss agree that La Maquila's position was reasonable. But it means they'll be returning to Chicago tomorrow morning with a seriously compromised ability to bring the lawsuit
they'd planned to bring.

Katniss feels like she let all the La Maquila employees down. And that she let Peeta down too. She had one job to do on this trip, and she failed.

She told Peeta so last night while they were unwinding in his room after dinner, watching bad television and drinking Mexican beer. Their nightly ritual on this trip.

"Don't be ridiculous, Katniss," he'd told her from his usual spot on his bed. "You can't get blood from stone. It just wasn't in the documents. And even if there is some tie to deep American pockets that La Maquila's hiding, they won't let us go back on this trip." He shook his head. "None of this is your fault."

As the Spanish-dubbed American film played on the television, he continued. "And… I mean, I wouldn't have been able to understand very much of the international corporate laws we're dealing with here without your help. You've been… amazing."

At his words, Katniss turned her head to look at him. But he was studying his fingernails.

Part of her recognizes that Peeta's right. But this does almost nothing to assuage her guilt, and she was up half the night last night with worry.

To make matters worse, while she's enjoying a day off, Peeta still has to work all day. He needs to put together a presentation to convince Cinna and the partners backing this project not to abandon it just because they haven't found a deep-pocketed American corporation to sue.

But she can't really help him prepare this speech. Peeta's the humanitarian, the trial attorney, and the public speaker. Not her.

And so this morning, at total loose ends, and with Peeta's encouragement, Katniss set out on a rickety Guatemala City bus to go birding in the rainforest.

She tries to distract herself from her rising frustration by thinking that maybe someday, she'll be able to bring Prim here and she'll have her own chance to find, and photograph, a quetzal.

This thought – the thought of one day taking Prim on a trip she never would be able to afford on her own – improves Katniss' mood a little.

After another hour spent wandering the poorly marked trails, Katniss notices that the sky has begun to darken off in the distance.

She learned shortly after arriving in Guatemala that it rains almost every day here during the rainy season, and that the storms' timing follows a predictable pattern. She glances at her watch and groans.

Today's downpour will likely start within the next thirty minutes.

She walks along the path she's on as quickly as she can, hopeful that she'll make it to the shuttle stop, more than two miles from here, before it starts raining.

But then she hears a loud clap of thunder and realizes the odds will not be in her favor.

"Dammit," she mutters under her breath as she breaks into a run.

Her bus arrives just as the deluge begins.
It's especially crowded today because of the rain, and Katniss quickly discovers that the seats are all taken.

But Guatemalan busses are old hat to her now.

After boarding, she gingerly makes her way through the passengers standing in the aisle until she finds a relatively open spot about halfway back. She adopts a wide stance and grips the back of the seat in front of her for balance.

She refuses to let herself think about the system she and Peeta have devised for their daily commute to La Maquila: Peeta standing in front of her in the aisle to block her falls; her arm wrapped tightly around his waist to steady herself.

Peeta's large, warm hand covering hers... for no discernible practical reason.

The rain is coming down in heavy sheets now, and it takes the bus twice as long as usual to navigate the congested city streets. Whenever the bus hits an especially large pothole it jostles all the passengers into each other and splashes any unfortunate pedestrians who might be standing nearby.

Not that the splashing from the bus makes them any wetter than they probably already are, Katniss muses.

After about an hour, the bus finally lurches to a halt in front of Katniss' stop, located four blocks from her hotel. She disembarks, puts her small rucksack over her head, swears under her breath, and makes a run for it.

By the time she gets to the hotel Katniss is utterly drenched.

Under the relative safety of the hotel's awning, she tries to squeeze as much extra water from her hair and clothing as possible. But she quickly decides it's pointless. She's so waterlogged that trying to dry off before changing will just be a waste of time.

As she makes her way to her room, she earns sympathetic looks from the concierge and the people who work in the hotel lobby. She gives them a sheepish wave and walks as quickly as she can towards her room, her waterlogged hiking shoes making wet squelching sounds each time they connect with the linoleum.

Katniss finally reaches her destination, key in hand. Not a moment too soon, she thinks to herself as she begins shivering. She pushes her sodden hair away from her face as she tries, and fails, to keep from dripping on the hotel's faded plush carpeting.

Before she can manage to unlock her door, the door to Peeta's adjacent room pops open. He steps out, carrying a small laundry basket, whistling tunelessly.

"Katniss!" he exclaims, apparently surprised to see her. She turns to look at him.

His eyes are round as saucers behind his silver frames, and they quickly rake over her wet body, at the way her thin, light-colored clothing, made nearly transparent by the rain, clings to her. Down, once, and then up again.

When Peeta meets her eyes the feral look she sees in them causes a stab of heat to go through her.

And then the moment is gone.
Clearing his throat, Peeta looks away.

"Just doing some laundry," he says, color staining his cheeks. He's looking past her now, over her shoulder. "I'll... be back in a few minutes if you want to go over...my... um..." He trails off without finishing his sentence.

Katniss nods. He probably wants her to listen to his presentation. "All... all right, Peeta."

She turns back to her door and tries to unlock it. But she's too rattled from Peeta's reaction to seeing her wet from the rain to manage this simple task. Her heart is beating a rapid staccato in her chest and her hands are shaking badly.

"Fuck," she mutters under her breath, when she can't get the lock to turn.

"Here," Peeta says, still standing right behind her. "Let me... um. Let me try."

He puts down his laundry basket and takes the key from her still-shaking hands.

He reaches past her body and fits the key neatly into the lock of the door. As the tumbler inside the lock clicks quietly into place, Peeta slowly withdraws the key.

"I think you're good to go now," he tells her, a little hoarsely, handing it back to her. He gives her a small, lopsided smile, and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"I'll see you soon," he says, picking up his basket. He stands there and looks at her, eyes fixed on her face, for another long moment, before he finally turns and walks briskly in the direction of the hotel's laundry facilities.

Katniss, still shaking a little, opens her door. When she gets inside she immediately closes it behind her and leans up against it. She closes her eyes, taking several deep breaths to calm herself down.

But she's dripping on the carpet, and so she quickly walks into the bathroom and peels off her wet clothes. She turns on the shower and gets in, letting the hot water run over her body as she tries, unsuccessfully, to put what just happened with Peeta out of her mind.

They've spent so many hours together this week, poring over corporate documents and international trade laws and deposition testimony every night until the wee hours of the morning, that it's been all but impossible to think about anything but Peeta on this trip.

She thinks she's memorized all his mannerisms and tics by now. The way he chews his bottom lip when he's anxious. The way his glasses always seem to slip halfway down his nose whenever he's lost in thought or flustered. The way he fidgets with a pen while he's reading.

She's also learned that his eyes are the most vibrant shade of blue she's ever seen. She knew that before, of course. But now that she's sitting across a small desk from him in a dimly lit hotel room for hours every single night, she really knows it. She sees them now whenever she closes her own eyes.

Sometimes, while they're working together, Katniss catches him watching her when he doesn't think she sees. And whenever she looks right at him, those bright blue eyes flit away, guilty.

She's wondered, countless times, what Peeta would do if she leaned across the desk after discovering his secret glances and pressed her lips to his. Would he kiss her back? Would he wrap his arms around her? Would he let her chew on his bottom lip?
Of course, probably none of those things would happen. They've only kissed one time since that first night in his hotel room, and it was a disaster. It happened a few nights ago, after a particularly grueling day. They'd each had a few beers over dinner, and she decided to press her luck – only to be rebuffed almost immediately by her stony-faced colleague.

Peeta must know now that she wants him, Katniss muses in frustration as the hot water fills the bathroom with steam. She doesn't know what else she can do to prove it to him.

She's beginning to doubt whether he's ever going to let her back in. And she's getting tired of being rejected, again and again, over prior events that she's apologized for.

She thinks of the stupid black nightie Madge made her bring down here. Of the box of condoms Madge snuck in her carry-on when her back was turned.

She shakes her head in frustration. And she decides, right there, in the shower, that if anything is going to happen between them, it's going to have to be Peeta who makes the next move.

An hour later, freshly showered and wearing clean, dry clothes, Katniss knocks on Peeta's door.

He opens it and smiles at her. But he looks nervous.

"Hey," he says, gesturing for her to come inside.

He's wearing the most formal clothing she's seen him wear in a week: A baby blue button-up shirt, charcoal gray slacks, and a black leather belt with matching shoes.

"What's with the outfit?" Katniss asks him. She walks over to the bed and perches on the end of it.

"Oh," he says, running his hands through his hair and adjusting his collar. "This. Well. Um, our Moot Court coach always encouraged us to dress like we were actually giving our oral argument whenever we'd practice it." He shrugged. "Said it would help us prepare, mentally."

"Well, you won the competition our second year," she says, as if he doesn't already know that. "So I mean… I guess it's good advice, right?"

He shrugs again. Katniss can tell he's trying to look modest. "Yeah, I guess so," he says. "Either way, I have a feeling I'm gonna get my ass handed to me when I give this presentation to the partners next week. So right now, I'm really only wearing all this to try and calm myself down." He runs his hands through his hair again anxiously.

"Peeta," Katniss begins. She buries her face in her hands. "I'm so sorry."

"Katniss, stop," Peeta insists. "We've been over this. It's nobody's fault." He chuckles a little. "With the possible exception of La Maquila, if they cherry-picked the documents they let you see."

"Well, as soon as we get back, I'm drafting a subpoena to give us another shot at their records," Katniss says, determined.

Peeta nods. "That'd be good." He smiles at her. "In the meantime, though, I need to give this pitch to the partners." He swallows audibly.

Katniss crosses her legs. "Ok, then. Let's hear it."

Peeta crosses the room in three strides and picks up the legal pad lying on the desk. He flips
through the pages for a moment before he seems to find what he's looking for.

He takes a deep breath, and takes a sip of water from the glass of water on the desk. He squares his shoulders.

And then he turns to Katniss and looks her right in the eye with an intensity that makes her heart race.

"As you all know," he begins, in a voice Katniss has not heard him use since the Moot Court finals, "thanks to the generosity of the Kirkland Foundation, and to Mr. Atticus Gregory's lifelong dedication to philanthropy in the law, I will be spending the next eleven months working solely on cases with the potential for significant positive impact on the lives of the poor.

"Since receiving the Kirkland, I have devoted all of my time to investigating the labor conditions of a clothing manufacturer based in the outskirts of Guatemala City, Guatemala." He paces the room with slow, deliberate steps, his hands clasped behind his back. "With the assistance of my co-counsel and colleague Ms. Katniss Everdeen" – he pauses, briefly, and gestures towards Katniss – "I have concluded that this clothing manufacturer – La Maquila – is violating no fewer than five international treaties relating to the treatment of elderly and underage garment workers."

Peeta pauses again, and taps his finger on the computer keyboard. A photograph of La Maquila's corporate compound appears on the screen.

"This is La Maquila." He pauses again. "This building here," Peeta says, pointing to the building where Katniss spent the past week, "houses their corporate offices."

He looks at Katniss again, that same intense gleam in his eye. Her heart starts pounding again and she has to look away.

"It's no different from any cubicle farm. Forty hour workweeks. The occasional catered lunch. Casual Fridays.

"And over here," he continues, pointing to the second building, "is where La Maquila sweatshop workers spend their days. And their nights," Peeta says, eyebrows raised.

"While in Guatemala I interviewed over one hundred La Maquila employees. Their ages ranged from eight years old all the way up to seventy-seven years old." Peeta pauses, to give his imaginary audience a chance to absorb what he's telling them, and takes another sip of water from the glass on his desk.

"Most La Maquila's employees are women and girls. But every single person – the school-aged children; the pregnant mothers; and the elderly grandfathers – every single one of them told me that without their wages from La Maquila, their families could not survive."

Peeta presses a button on his laptop and a new image – one that Katniss has not seen before - appears on the screen.

"This," Peeta says, gesturing, "is – "

"Wait, Peeta," Katniss interrupts, squinting at the screen from across the room. "I haven't seen this one yet. Can I take a look?"

"Certainly, Ms. Everdeen," he says formally, taking a half-step back from the computer to give her room.

Katniss walks over to the desk – trying to ignore, for the moment, how close she's standing to
Peeta right now, and how hard he's breathing– and gasps at the image on the screen.

It's a picture of a little girl. Katniss thinks she can't be any older than 9 or 10. She's hunched over a sewing machine that's almost as big as she is. Although this girl looks nothing like Prim – this little girl is olive-skinned, and has dark brown eyes and hair, whereas her sister has a fair complexion and blue eyes – something about the set of her jaw and the placement of her eyes reminds Katniss preternaturally of her younger sister.

"Thank you Pee—I mean, counsel," Katniss says, shaken. She returns to her spot on the bed.

Peeta nods. He stares at her for another long moment, with his intense, brilliant blue eyes.

But this time, instead of looking away, Katniss ignores the butterflies in her stomach and holds his gaze.

Peeta shakes his head a little, as if to clear it, and coughs once into his hand before continuing.

"This is Leticia Alvarez," he says, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose and gesturing to the computer. "She is eleven years old." He taps at the keyboard again and another picture appears. Katniss leans forward and can see, even from ten feet away, that it's a picture of an entire roomful of girls, all bent over sewing machines identical to Leticia's.

"There is a room towards the back of the facility where most of the young women work. Their shifts are between twelve and fifteen hours long, six days a week. La Maquila supervisors walk the rows to check the girls' progress towards making quota, and to ensure they do not take more than one twenty minute break every twelve hours."

Peeta takes another sip of water from his glass and clears his throat.

"The girls I spoke with are paid much less than the adults. A girl under the age of 16 can expect to earn the equivalent of roughly one American dollar per day." Peeta pauses again to let his audience process what he's told them.

When he begins again, he speaks slowly, and in a low voice. "And," he says, pausing dramatically, "if a garment is accidentally destroyed while they work, the cost of replacing the garment comes out of those meager wages.

"These photos, ladies and gentlemen, were the only ones I was permitted to take during my week at La Maquila," Peeta continues. "But the story doesn't end with them. I heard from seventy year old men who are routinely beaten when they fail to make their daily quota. I heard from women who, at seven months pregnant, must stand on their feet for fifteen hours per day in the pressing room. And I heard from one eight year old little girl who, after injuring herself by falling into machinery, had her wages docked because her fall destroyed a piece of La Maquila's property."

Peeta begins to walk slowly, deliberately, back and forth across the room. He squares his jaw as he does so, and the muscles in his arms flex involuntarily.

"It was our hope that while in Guatemala, we would find documents linking La Maquila to an American parent corporation." Peeta pauses and nods at Katniss. "My colleague, Ms. Everdeen, spent the week reviewing every single document they allowed her to see.

"Unfortunately, we left Guatemala unable to make the connection we'd hoped to find." For the first time in twenty minutes, the gleam in Peeta's eyes fades. For just a moment, Peeta looks nervous, and uncertain, and young.

Katniss looks at him, racked with guilt all over again. Her heart sinks.
But then Peeta shakes his head again, and suddenly the cool, calm, and poised litigator who has kept her utterly spellbound is standing in front of her once more.

"But I say it shouldn't matter!" he exclaims passionately. "It shouldn't matter if we can't find a wealthy American corporation to sue. Because it isn't a multi-million dollar settlement La Maquila's people want," he says, with a dismissive wave of his hand.

"All they want is improved working conditions, fair wages – and nothing more. And while bringing a small Guatemalan corporation to justice might not have the same caché as suing a wealthy American corporation – while it not make for as flashy a byline in Chicago Lawyers' Weekly – pursuing this case would give these people something they will never have without our help."

He pauses again, and chews on his bottom lip.

"This lawsuit would give them hope, ladies and gentlemen," he says, very quietly. His eyes are on Katniss once more; it feels like she's drowning in them. "Hope, and not just for a safer work environment." He shakes his head. "Hope for a better life. And hope for a better future for their children and their grandchildren."

Peeta's eyes are still on Katniss. His eyes are bright, gleaming. His jaw is set and determined. He's breathing heavily, like he's just run a short distance, and his cheeks are flushed.

Katniss thinks, in this moment, that he's the most beautiful thing she has ever seen.

"I encourage you to, please. Think of Leticia, and all the other people I've talked about today, when making your final decision about the future of this case."

He closes his eyes and, bowing his head slightly, clasps his hands together in front of him.

Peeta's speech is finished.

Katniss starts applauding and he looks up at the sound.

"Well?" he asks her, smiling. He sits down next to her on the bed, still flushed and breathing heavily. "What do you think?"

She takes a deep breath.

"I think… I think you're amazing, Peeta," she tells him honestly.

He shakes his head. "That's not… I mean, thank you," he says, quickly, flustered. "But that's not what I meant. What I meant was –"

She knows what he wants. He wants constructive feedback on his speech.

But in the moment she can't bring herself to care. All she wants, right now, is to touch this beautiful, brilliant, passionate man. To feel his caring hands on her body. Kiss his talented mouth.

They aren't going to be back in the office for two more days. There will be time for constructive feedback later.

Katniss leans forward a little on the bed, her heart pounding in her ears, and before she can talk herself out of doing it, gently cups Peeta's face in both hands. He stops talking mid-sentence as she slowly runs her thumb back and forth across his stubbled chin.
"Peeta…" she says quietly.

He doesn't say anything in response. His bright blue eyes look almost feverish now behind his silver frames. They bore into hers.

To her great surprise, Peeta slowly, tentatively lifts his hands and cups her face, mirroring her actions. And he pulls her to him, gently, and kisses her.

But he breaks away again after only a moment.

"Katniss," he murmurs. He leans his forehead against hers, and he laughs a little, nervously. The small explosion of air against her lips makes her shiver.

Peeta takes a deep breath, and it looks like he's about to say something else. But Katniss thinks he's talked more than enough for one night. She worries that if they start talking now, he'll talk himself out of this and tell her that he still can't trust her.

So before he can say anything else, Katniss wraps her arms around his neck purposefully. His eyes flutter closed.

"Kiss me again, Peeta," she whispers. It isn't a question.

He doesn't need to be told twice.

Before she knows it's happening, his mouth is moving hungrily against hers. He slides his hands along her jaw and tangles them in her hair, pulling her even more closely to him. Their bodies are flush against each other now and she wonders, fleetingly, if he can feel the rapid beat of her heart against his chest.

A moment later, he tentatively traces her bottom lip with his tongue. She opens her mouth a little to grant him access and he immediately deepens the kiss. The feeling of his gently probing tongue sliding against hers is otherworldly, and she whimpers into his mouth before she can stop herself. The sound seems to inflame him, and soon their tongues are warring with each other, tangling together feverishly.

"Mmmm," she says on a quiet moan. Without breaking the kiss, Peeta wraps his arms around her tightly and roughly pulls her onto his lap.

"I can't stay away from you anymore, Katniss," he tells her abruptly, finally breaking away, breathless and panting. He's looking up at her now with a look of utter adoration… and something else, something intense, that she can't identify. It sends a pulse of heat racing through her body.

Peeta can't keep his hands still. They run over and over her thighs, down and back up again. The movement inches her skirt up her legs, exposing more skin with every pass.

"I can't stay away," he says again. "You're just… you're so…" He trails off and shakes his head. "All those mornings on that bus, with you pressed up against my back, your arm wrapped around me, I just wanted to… And all these nights working together… It's been *killing* me, Katniss…"

She leans down and begins trailing kisses along his jaw, his neck. He stops talking and tilts his head back to give her better access. His hands stop moving. They grip her thighs tightly.

"I don't *want* you to stay away from me anymore, Peeta" she murmurs into his ear before running her tongue along its outer shell. His eyes roll back into his head.

"Katniss," he whispers, helplessly.
She resumes her ministrations on his neck, and she shifts a little on his lap. She inadvertently brushes up against the growing bulge in his slacks and he cries out.

"Have dinner with me when we get back to Chicago, Peeta," she whispers into his ear. She starts deliberately grinding against him, slowly. He grunts and buries his face in her chest as she moves. "No talking about this case. No talking about work at all. Just… dinner."

He nods enthusiastically against her breasts. "Yes," he grits out. She moves a little faster against him and he groans loudly. She feels empowered. Victorious. "Yes," he says again, more breathlessly this time.

He lifts his hands, and without asking permission, covers her small breasts. "Yes," he says a third time, on a whisper, squeezing gently.

When Peeta starts meeting Katniss' movements with thrusts of his own, every nerve in her body screams at her to push this as far as Peeta is willing to go.

She thinks, fleetingly, that she should probably go get those condoms from her room. But then Peeta starts mouthing at one of her breasts through her thin cotton blouse, and her resolve crumbles into dust.

"Peeta…" she breathes against his neck, knowing they should probably stop so she can run to her room, thinking she'll die if they do.

"Hm?" he asks absently. He moves to her other breast, that silver tongue of his darting out to rub lazy circles against her rapidly hardening nipple. Her shirt soon grows damp from the heat of his mouth, and the sensation of his tongue on her through layers of fabric is an exquisite agony driving every conscious thought from her head.

Desperate for relief, she starts unbuttoning her blouse with shaking hands. He pulls back from her a little and watches her movements with half-lidded eyes. When her shirt is open, he tentatively fingers the front clasp of her lacy black bra. He looks up at her, hopeful, wordlessly asking for permission.

She pops open the clasp by way of response and the cups fall to either side. She shrugs off her shirt and bra and tosses them onto the floor without ceremony. She can feel his cock twitch hard against her center as he drinks in her half-naked form. The ravenous way he's looking at her body, at her breasts, causes the steady heat that's been pooling between her thighs ever since his speech began to turn into a blaze.

"Katniss," he murmurs hoarsely, before he leans forward and takes one of her nipples into his mouth. He swirls his tongue around and around and around the hard dusky pink bud, licking and nipping and sucking. The feeling of his slippery wet tongue on her sensitized skin wrenches an involuntary, inhuman cry from her.

Peeta starts thrusting against her again at the sound, and suddenly, the thought of stopping this long enough to get a condom is unbearable.

Feeling bold, she impulsively slides her hand down between their bodies, over his clenching abdomen, and grasps him, firmly, through his charcoal gray slacks.

His reaction to her touch is immediate and explosive.

"Oh, God, Katniss!" he groans. He stops lavishing attention on her breasts and buries his face in
her neck.

And he whimpers, helplessly, as she slowly, experimentally slides her hand up and down his shaft.

She leans back a little and tries to undo his silver belt buckle with her free hand. His eyes are wide as he watches her pull him, long and thick and hard, out of his pants.

"Katniss," he says again, his voice strangled.

She pushes on his chest gently with both hands. Her way of telling him to lie back. But he shakes his head no and puts his hands over hers.

"No," he tells her, panting hard. He takes one of her hands and brings it down to where he juts out from the opening in his pants. He wraps her hand firmly around his cock and hisses a little at the contact.

He grits his teeth and murmurs, "I want you to sit on my lap while you do this. Please." It sounds like begging. He swallows audibly. "I want you to sit on my lap, and hold me just like this, when I come." He looks up at her again, his pupils so fat there's just the barest sliver of blue surrounding them now. "I've thought about doing this with you so many times, Katniss."

"O…okay, Peeta" she tells him, her voice shaking, the heat between her legs only intensifying at his words. He tries to smile at her, but it looks more like a grimace. He licks his lips and leans his head against her chest as if to brace himself.

It's been a really long time since Katniss has done this, and she's more nervous than she'd dare admit. But Peeta seems to like what she's doing to him well enough. As she grips him firmly and slides her hand up and down, again and again, he grips her thighs and moans incoherently. She puts her finger under his chin to lift his face and she kisses him roughly as she strokes him, her naked breasts pressing into his chest. She tangles her tongue needfully with his and he groans into her mouth.

Without warning, Peeta breaks the kiss and buries his face in her neck again, gasping and panting into her skin. He reaches up and pinches both of her nipples, hard, sending a bolt of electricity rocketing through her.

Her hand stutters on his cock as she loses all ability to concentrate.

"Please, Katniss," he begs her breathlessly. "Don't stop. Please…” But he doesn't stop torturing her breasts, and her skin can't possibly contain her for much longer, and she feels like she's about to fly apart into a thousand pieces.

When she doesn't continue her ministrations, Peeta grunts in frustration and starts thrusting up into her hand. He leans back on his palms and squeezes his eyes shut. Suddenly able to focus again, she leans forward on his hips with one arm and strokes him slowly, meeting each one of his urgent thrusts with a flick of her wrist.

She looks up at his face, eyes shut and jaw slack, and she feels a heady sense of power, having Peeta Mellark lying prone before her, helpless putty in her hands.

Feeling wild and a little drunk, she impulsively leans down and takes him into her mouth.

"Katniss!" he shouts hoarsely, his eyes wide, crazed, watching her as she licks him slowly from tip to base. Down and then up. Down and then up. He collapses onto the bed and begins fisting the sheets. She tastes the salty evidence of his precum as he writhes beneath her.
It isn't long before Peeta's cock swells and twitches against her tongue, and his legs go taut as a bowstring. Katniss knows he won't last much longer and she instinctively pops him back into her mouth.

A moment later, he groans loudly and his cock spasms violently. Several pulses of hot liquid hit the back of her throat. She swallows instinctively.

After another moment, he starts to soften a little, and she lets him slip from her mouth. He sighs, and she crawls up his body so she's lying next to him on the bed.

He rolls over a little so he's facing her. His glasses are slightly askew and his cheeks are flushed. His arm is curled under his head like a makeshift pillow.

"Hey," Peeta tells her, quietly. He reaches out and cups her face. "That was fun, Katniss."

She looks him in the eye. He gives her a shy, goofy grin.

And any remaining doubt she might have had about him trusting her evaporates.

He leans forward and kisses her gently on the mouth. But gentle kisses aren't enough for her right now. She grasps his large hands in hers and covers her breasts with them.

"Can it be my turn now?" she asks, a little nervously.

The hungry look he gives her as he nods his assent takes her breath away.
Chapter 8

Thanks to everyone for reading along, and for all of your reviews, follows and favorites.

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When the alarm on Peeta's phone goes off at 7:30 the next morning, Katniss rolls over in bed, still half asleep.

She hits the button on the phone, which is right next to her head on the bed-side table, to shut it off. Rolling over, she throws her arms around Peeta's neck and buries her face in his bare chest.

"Hey," he murmurs, quietly, into her ear. He starts gently stroking her back.

Katniss pulls back a little and sees Peeta looking down at her. His face is creased from where he slept on his pillow, and his hair is a wreck.

He's positively beaming.

"You stayed," he says, reaching up to caress the side of her face and sounding a little surprised. But happy.

"Of course I stayed," she says, giving him a sleepy smile. She pulls him down to her and kisses him gently on the lips.

"Mmmm," he hums happily against her mouth as he wraps his arms around her. He pulls her bottom lip between his teeth playfully as he deepens the kiss.

They don't have time for this right now, of course. They need to leave for the airport soon and she hasn't packed a thing.

Neither one of them has.

"Peeta," she mumbles against his lips, before moving away a little.

"Hmm?" he asks, pulling her back to him and kissing her again. He palms her breast over the cotton t-shirt he gave her to sleep in last night and teases the nipple with his fingers through the fabric.

She lies back amongst the pillows and lets him touch her for another long moment, awash in sensation. When he shoves the shirt up to her neck and bends to take her breast into his mouth, though, it snaps her out of her reverie.

"We need to pack," she says, trying to sound firm.

"We can pack later," he insists, his voice like silken honey. He traces the outside of her areola
with his finger, making her shiver. "It'll only take, like, fifteen minutes to stuff everything into our suitcases…"

Katniss can't help but laugh at that.

Aside from when Peeta called the kitchen last night to have dinner brought to his room, a few hurried trips to the bathroom – and a quick dash to her room to get the condoms Madge snuck into her carry-on – they haven't left his bed in almost twelve hours. His room is now a wreck of scattered clothing, books, and papers.

And after a week of living out of her suitcase and working late nights, her room is in a similar condition.

It's going to take at least an hour, maybe longer, to get everything ready to go.

"Peeta…" she protests again, threading her fingers through his disheveled blonde hair. But he ignores her, and laves her nipple with his tongue as he slides his hand between their bodies and down her stomach.

"Yes, Katniss?" he asks, mock-innocently. He eases her black cotton panties down her legs, and runs his fingers along and through the folds he worshiped with his mouth for what felt like hours last night.

When he finds her clit and begins slowly circling it with his fingers, she gasps. She can't help it. Katniss is quickly learning that words are not Peeta Mellark's only negotiation tool.

But there will be time enough for this when they get back to Chicago.

She's about to grab his wrist to stop him when, as though he's anticipated her next words, and the next argument she plans to make, he speaks.

"I'm going to be working crazy hours when we get back, Katniss," Peeta says. His fingers are still moving against her, agonizingly slowly, and Katniss begins to grind, involuntarily, against his hand. She's getting wetter with every passing second, she can tell, and she's having trouble remembering why she wants him to stop.

"You'll be busy too. Getting caught up on the work you didn't do while you were here..."

He leans up to nibble on her earlobe. And he whispers, "Please – let me make you come, just one more time, right now, and then we can pack. Promise."

Katniss knows that she should protest some more. But now his fingers are speeding up a little against her, and soon there's nothing in the world except the feeling of his fingertips sliding through her wetness and rubbing her slick, swollen clit.

And so when she opens her mouth to tell him to stop, all that comes out is a low moan.

Taking that as encouragement, Peeta grins wolfishly at her. Without stopping the movement of his fingers he bends to her breast again. He takes her nipple into his mouth, sucking so hard his cheeks hollow out, and he swirls his tongue around and around. He bites down gently and she cries out at the pressure and the pleasure.

With great effort she opens her eyes. His own eyes are closed, suffused as he is in bliss of a different kind. She pulls him up to her face and kisses him roughly.
Suddenly Katniss wants to feel Peeta inside of her – that silver tongue of his, his teeth, his fingers, his cock, his everything – and she thrusts her own tongue inside of his mouth hungrily, tangling it with his, running it along the roof of his mouth and over and around his gums the way she'd beg him to let her treat his cock if she were on her knees and between his right now.

He whimpers a little at the attack, and, sensing that she's close, he begins circling her clit more rapidly with his fingers. Her hips are rising up in rhythm with his hand, and she's making wild, incoherent noises into his mouth, but she's too far gone to care. Slowly, he inserts two fingers of his other hand inside her, and pumps them in and out in a steady rhythm as he curls them against her front walls.

He moves down to her breast again and brushes his tongue roughly, back and forth, back and forth, against her erect nipple. The small movements send lightning bolts of sensation rocketing down through her and up her spine.

Her body stiffens and then convulses in his arms as the pleasure crests inside her. And she hears herself cry out, as her eyes go wide and exploding lights cloud her vision.

As she comes back to herself slowly she realizes that Peeta's cradling her to his chest and gently stroking her hair. But his heartbeat and breathing are heavy and rapid under her ear, and she can feel his erection pushing up into her hip, hot and smooth and urgent against her skin.

She turns to look at him. Peeta's eyelids are drooping with desire. His blue eyes flit briefly to her chest before fluttering closed.

Maybe they can just toss everything into their suitcases at the last minute, Katniss muses.

Wordlessly, she reaches across Peeta to the nightstand where the box of condoms sits next to Peeta's glasses. She blushes when thinks back to last night, at how frantically Peeta had ripped the box open with his teeth.

She pulls out a small plastic square.

She turns to face him, the condom between her fingers. His eyes are wide. His tongue quickly darts out to moisten his lips and then he presses them together in a thin line.

"This ok?" she asks him, tentatively, gesturing with the hand holding the condom. "You're right, I think. We can pack in fifteen minutes if we –"

Peeta cuts her off by pulling her down to him roughly and kissing her so hard it makes her dizzy. Assuming that this means yes, this is absolutely ok with him, Katniss slowly, and without breaking the kiss, takes the condom out of its wrapper.

"Katniss," he groans, as she deftly unrolls the thin sheath of rubber onto his straining penis.

She swings a leg over him then and straddles him, grabbing him with her fist and guiding his tip to her wet center.

"Please," he begs breathlessly. "Take your shirt off first. I want to see you."

She complies at once, reaching down and pulling the shirt over her head in one fluid movement.

And then she slowly, carefully sinks down onto him.

"Ah, God," he cries out, panting, when he's fully sheathed inside her. His eyes are squeezed shut and his hands are clenching and unclenching into fists at his sides.
Katniss wishes she could take her time with this. The way she did with him last night, the second time she made him come, when her hands were cupping his balls and she slowly, leisurely suckled at his tip. The way he’d pleaded with her to go faster, the way he begged her to make him come – he’d been practically sobbing by the end – gave her a wicked kind of thrill, and she had been so turned on by the time she finally did let him come that it took him no time at all to get her off afterwards.

But they just don't have time for that right now.

She places her hands on either side of Peeta's head. And quickly, rhythmically, she begins to move over him. As she rotates her hips and he meets her movements with thrusts of his own, his hands clutch her hips aggressively and his fingertips dig into her naked skin.

"Yes, Katniss, oh, fuck," he manages, gritting his teeth. "Shit, just like that, please…"

Before last night, it had been years since she's had a man inside her like this. Years since she'd let somebody into her life. And Peeta feels so fucking good right now, filling her up, hitting her exactly right as they thrust and move together. She leans forward and captures his mouth in a rough kiss as she continues to ride him. He tries to kiss her back, but he can't seem to manage it, and he eventually gives up trying, his jaw going completely slack under her searching lips.

So she trails her tongue down his body as he thrusts up into her. She swirls it around his Adam's apple, making him whimper, and she sucks the sensitive patch of skin underneath his left ear into her mouth.

When she releases it and, on impulse, blows on the wet skin, he groans loudly. The sound causes a pulse of heat to shoot through her and she instinctively reaches down and starts touching herself where they are joined.

Peeta looks up at her, watching her touch herself. "God, Katniss, fuck... so hot--" he babbles. Gone is the calm and collected litigator who presented his case to her so articulately yesterday afternoon. In his place is a desperate, starving man, begging incoherently for release.

Holding his gaze, she sits up a little and speeds up the movement of her hips. It feels so good, being here with him like this, and she starts circling her clit even faster.

"Katniss…” he grits out. His eyes bulge, and then he squeezes them shut tightly, his face frozen in what looks like a grimace.

A moment later, his entire body goes rigid underneath her and his hands are vises on her hips as he lets out an inhuman groan.

The sound, coupled with the way his body jerks inside and against her as he comes, rapidly and unexpectedly rips another climax from her, and she cries out and collapses against his chest as the waves of pleasure course through her body.

They lie together in bed for another long moment, listening to each other breathe, as their heart rates slowly return to normal.

"I really need to go now, Peeta," she eventually tells him, wistfully.

"I know," he says. "I just wish… I had let this happen earlier in the week." He swallows audibly, and turns his head a little to look at her. "It really is going to be crazy when we get back, Katniss. I don't know how often I'll be able to see you."
Although the words he's saying make her sad, a little thrill goes through her all the same, knowing that he wants to see her, now. It makes her heart race.

She's convinced him.

Katniss moves to climb off of him and gets out of bed, and he makes a small noise of protest. But he doesn't stop her.

"It is what it is, Peeta," she tells him, pragmatically but not unkindly, as she hunts around the foot of the bed for her skirt. "And we'll figure something out." Because she knows they will.

As she dresses, she turns to face him again.

She lets her eyes drift over his body. Over his broad, muscled shoulders, down his chest, and along the fine line of dark blonde hair that leads to the riotous mass of curls surrounding the base of his now-softening penis.

Despite the events of the past twelve hours, the sight of him naked still leaves her breathless, and Katniss finds she has to look away.

Peeta clears his throat a little and she glances up at his face.

"Well, Katniss," he says, the right corner of his mouth quirked up in a half-smile. He sits up a little and fumbles for his glasses, quickly putting them on.

"I can't wait to puzzle out a solution with you."


It takes Peeta nearly twenty minutes to convince the flight attendant to let him switch seats with the gentleman originally assigned to Katniss' row.

But Peeta gets his way in the end. He's grinning from ear to ear when he walks back to where Katniss is already seated, the in-flight magazine open on her lap.

"We're taking off ten minutes late because of you," she tells him, trying to sound stern. But she can't keep the smile off her face.

Peeta just shrugs as he shoves his bag under the seat in front of them. Katniss scoots over to the seat by the window as he lowers himself into the aisle seat. "Oh, it's fine," he says, waving his hand dismissively. He reaches up and starts adjusting the air vents above them. "The pilot will make up the time in the air."

Katniss doesn't ask him why they weren't assigned seats together in the first place, given that the firm's travel agent must have booked their flights home at the same time. She suspects that Peeta specifically requested not to sit next to her. But she also suspects he doesn't want to tell her that.

Not that they'll be able to spend much quality time together on this flight anyway. This plane has Wi-Fi, and they spent yesterday so wrapped up in each other that they haven't checked their work email in nearly twenty-four hours. She desperately needs to write Cinna to find out what he expects her to work on when she returns. And she's certain Peeta is in a similar position.

As soon as the "fasten seatbelt" sign clicks off, and the flight attendant tells them (in Spanish and in English) that it's safe for passengers to use electronic devices, Peeta digs around in his bag for his laptop.

"We can use our computers now," Peeta tells her, unnecessarily, as he waits for his internet
As she watches him scroll through his emails, Katniss realizes, suddenly, that she's exhausted. They kept each other awake for most of the night, after all. And even though she knows she should be checking her email as well, she just can't keep her eyes open.

Telling herself she can do work later, she leans her head against the window of the plane and lets the vibrations rock her to sleep.

When Katniss opens her eyes again, there's a blanket tucked snugly around her body and the cabin of the airplane is completely dark save for a tiny row of lights illuminating the floor.

Given that it was broad daylight when she fell asleep, she realizes, with a start, that she must have slept for hours.

She turns her head to the right and sees that Peeta has fallen asleep as well. His arms are folded across his chest, his head is bowed forward, and his glasses are resting next to his computer on the seat-back table in front of him.

His laptop is still on. But the screensaver hasn't switched on yet, so he must have only just dozed off a few moments ago.

Given her proximity to the screen, Katniss can't help but notice that all that's displayed on it is a large, detailed, and very beautiful artistic rendering of a mockingbird.

Even though this is not her computer, and Katniss recognizes that she's technically snooping, she finds she can't look away.

The picture is exquisite. The bird looks like it was hand-drawn, although with what materials she cannot tell. Katniss has never taken any art classes herself and doesn't know much about art, generally. But it's clear, even to her, that whoever drew this put a lot of time and effort into creating this image.

*But what a random thing to have on his computer,* Katniss thinks to herself.

Either way, it's not important enough to wake Peeta up to ask him about it. After all, he didn't sleep much last night, either.

She blushes when she realizes that he must be exhausted, too.

Katniss glances at her watch. They still have another two hours before they touch down at O'Hare. Feeling somewhat refreshed from her nap, Katniss takes out her own computer. She figures she might as well get *something* done before landing.

She flags down a flight attendant as she waits for her computer to load and orders a gin and tonic.

When her computer loads she quickly scrolls through her emails. There are several mass emails that Alma Coin's administrative assistant sent to everybody in the firm early this morning. None of them apply to her and she deletes them after scanning them quickly.

There's an email from Madge, reminding her about the swanky party her parents are throwing in Evanston in two weeks that Katniss is invited to.

There are also three emails from Cinna, one of which is flagged as Urgent. She's just about to open that one when she sees an email right below it from Prim.
She grins broadly and decides to save Cinna's messages for later.

Prim's email is brief. It says that she and Rory, her boyfriend, both have next Friday off work. Prim says they'd like to come down and spend the long weekend with her, and she wonders if Katniss might be free.

As the flight continues north, Katniss happily writes her sister back, and says she'd love to have them visit next week.

She wonders, her stomach suddenly a mass of knots, if Peeta might want to meet Prim while she's in town. And if he does, what Prim might think of him.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Peeta mumbles something under his breath and shifts a little in his seat.

Katniss turns to look at him. He yawns, stretches, and smacks his lips as he wakes up.

"Hey," she says quietly.

"Oh," he says, yawning again. He grabs his glasses from the table in front of him and puts them on. "You're awake."

She nods. "Thanks for letting me sleep."

He grins at her. "Of course," he says. He laughs a little. "I mean… I'm sure you're… exhausted, and all, from last night." He waggles his eyebrows at her and presses a chaste kiss to her forehead as she blushes.

She takes his hand in hers.

"Katniss," he says, his tone turning suddenly serious. "I'm… really worried about tomorrow."

He doesn't say anything else. But Katniss knows he's talking about the presentation he has to give to the partners.

Katniss lifts his hand to her mouth and gently presses her lips to it. "I know."

After another long pause, he closes his eyes. "This is all I've ever wanted to do," he mumbles, so quietly she almost doesn't hear him.

She wishes she could think of something else to say. Something that would reassure him.

But she can't.

So she continues to hold his hand, gently stroking the back of it with her thumb, as the ice in her plastic cup slowly melts into her drink.

The next morning, Katniss raps on Cinna's closed office door. Dressed in her navy pin-striped suit and her new khaki pumps, she's dressed more formally today than she's been in a week.

Ordinarily she feels more comfortable in suits and dress pants than anything else. But after spending all of last week in casual slacks and tops, today she feels a little like she's wearing a costume.

She came to the office today ready to work, of course. She has a pen in one hand and a notebook in the other. But before she'll take down a single word of a new assignment, Katniss needs to give
"Come in," Cinna calls out from inside his office.

Katniss opens the door and walks in, and sits down in one of the two leather-backed chairs across the desk from him.

"Welcome back," he says with a smile.

"Thanks," she says, clearing her throat. "I got your emails yesterday when we were flying back. I'm sorry I didn't respond to them until this morning. Wi-Fi on the flight kept cutting out." This is a lie, of course. Cinna doesn't need to know she spent most of the flight sleeping, alternately against the window of the plane and in Peeta's arms.

Cinna waves his hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it."

"Look, Cinna," she begins. She knows he's going to put up a fight when she tells him what she's about to tell him, and she braces herself for it. "About La Maquila…"

"Katniss," he cuts her off. "You can't stay on the La Maquila case. You know you can't."

"But Cinna," she argues. "Why not? I was down there, I've seen all the documents, and I understand their corporate structure better than anyone else at this firm. Even Peeta doesn't know it as well as I do. Cinna, I want to stay on this case."

Cinna sighs and steeples his fingers together. "We went over this in the emails, Katniss. You're a first year associate, and there is a lot of pressure on you to make billables. You need to make your billables minimum this year. Even surpass it if you can."

"I know all that, but –"

Cinna cuts her off again with a firm shake of his head. "The firm will allow you to count one hundred pro bono hours towards your annual billables requirement, and that's it. And your logs show you've already spent over one hundred and fifty hours on this case."

"So what?" Katniss asks, boldly. "I don't care if some of my time has to be kept off the books."

"When you're a more senior associate, the partners will be more… lenient, with the way you spend your time, Katniss," he says, assertively. "But if you spend any more time on this case you'll jeopardize your ability to get your billable work finished."

Katniss folds her arms defiantly. "I'm no stranger to hard work, Cinna. I can handle it."

"Katniss," he continues. "I know you're a hard worker. Of course I know that." He pauses, and laughs a little. "We wouldn't have hired you if you weren't. But you've only been here a few months, and there's just no way the firm will approve you doing any more non-billable work on this case."

"I'm really sorry, Katniss," he tells her. His tone is softer now. Katniss thinks he's trying to sound conciliatory. But it doesn't matter, and she's still pissed. "But there's nothing I can do about it."

He folds his hands together on the desk and looks her in the eye.

"Peeta has a Fellowship. The Kirkland folks have effectively bought him out of his billable requirements this year. You're in a very different situation, Katniss." He shakes his head again.
Katniss grits her teeth, about to say more. About how she can help those people. About how she can help Peeta.

But the look on Cinna’s face tells her that this conversation is over.

"I have a vested interest in seeing you succeed here, Katniss," he tells her, not unkindly. "I don't want to see you burn out your first year. Or, worse, be let go because you haven't billed enough." He turns back to his computer, effectively dismissing her.

Katniss stands up to leave. "Is that all, then?" she asks him. She tries to moderate her tone, but the question comes out more harshly than she'd wanted it to.

Cinna sighs. "For now, yes. You need to get in touch with Haymitch. He has your next assignment."

Katniss nods. "Ok then. I'll see you later."

She turns and leaves his office and walks back towards hers. Dreading what horrible case Haymitch is likely going to put her on next.

Peeta’s scheduled meeting with the partners to plead his case for remaining in the La Maquila case is at noon.

To her dismay, Katniss will not be able to attend.

Haymitch called her into his office ten minutes after her meeting ended with Cinna to discuss her next assignment. It's defending a long-term client, Templesmith and Associates, in complex litigation stemming from its merger with another, smaller company last year.

It should be interesting work, for which Katniss is grateful. She'll be responsible for most of the initial pleadings in this case, as well as drafting answers to preliminary discovery requests. It's work that a second- or third-year associate would normally handle, and she knows it's an honor that the firm is letting her handle it just a few months out of law school.

But before she can begin working on this case in earnest, she has a mountain of documents to review first. And there's no associate junior to her that she can delegate this grunt work to.

There are so many documents, in fact, that she will not have time to even meet Madge for the quick lunch they'd planned to grab together today, let alone sit through Peeta's two hour meeting.

As she was only ever assigned to the La Maquila case as auxiliary support, the partners don’t expect she attend anyway. But she'd wanted to be there all the same, and feels terrible that Peeta will have to give his presentation without her.

When she told him she wasn't going to be able to make it, he asked her to come to his office a few minutes beforehand so she could wish him luck in person.

She feels like it's the least she can do, given how nervous she knows he is and how much rides on this.

At a few minutes to twelve, Katniss walks down the hall to Peeta's office. She pokes her head in and sees him pacing the floor, nervously.

She has to tell him at some point that Cinna's taken her off the case. But when she pokes her head in and sees, just from his body language, how nervous he is, she knows instinctively that now is
not the time.

She walks up behind him and puts her hand on his shoulder without announcing her presence. He jumps a little at her touch, surprised.

"It's going to go fine, Peeta," she says, in a voice she hopes sounds reassuring. He turns to face her, his features taut and anxious.

"I hope so," he tells her, letting out a breath. She smiles at him, and reaches out to straighten the knot of his tie.

He leans forward as she does it and gives her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"I better go now," he says. He clears his throat and walks her to the door.

She gives him a quick embrace.

"Text me when it's over?"

Peeta nods. "Yes. Of course."

He walks her to the elevator bank at the end of the hallway and kisses her on the forehead.

"Thank you, Katniss," he tells her, huskily.

She shakes her head. "For what?"

He shrugs. "For all of your help in Guatemala. For… for everything."

They stand there in front of the elevator bank for another long moment, looking at each other.

Katniss is about to excuse herself to go back to her office when a group of senior partners walk towards them from the conference room at the end of the hall. Haymitch is with them, as is Alma Coin and two other partners Katniss hasn't met before.

Peeta looks at them and stands a little straighter.

"These are the people I'll be meeting with," he tells her quietly. "The people I'll be presenting to."

Haymitch turns to his three colleagues and says something angrily to them. Alma Coin glances briefly at Peeta as Haymitch talks, and then turns her full attention back to the older man.

When Haymitch finishes talking, one of the other partners Katniss does not know shakes his hand. He walks back towards the conference room with Coin and the other partner Katniss doesn't know.

When they've left, Haymitch approaches Katniss and Peeta, and shakes his head, a look of disgust on his face.

"I'm sorry, kid," he tells Peeta. "But the answer is no."

Peeta blanches. "What? I mean, I haven't even –"

Haymitch sighs and rubs his face. "I'm sorry." He shakes his head. "When they heard you couldn't find any deep pockets they lost interest immediately. You'll need to find a different case."
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

If any of you are still here, patiently awaiting an update, I can't thank you enough. Real life got in the way of fun for a while, and it became impossible for me to write anything at all for a bit. And then, later, it was impossible for me to focus on more than one story at a time. My other story, We Have Brought Peace Onto You, is finally finished, so going forward, all time I have for writing will be dedicated to The Mockingbird.

To those of you who have left me kind reviews and PMs, and have added this story to your favorites and follows, and who are still here, patiently waiting - I thank you. The fact that you're reading about lawyer!Peeta means so much to me.

Thank you as well to MalTease and SponsorMusings, who together convinced me that this was a story worth continuing. It's not an exaggeration to say I couldn't have written this chapter without their encouragement and support.

Right at six, there's a sharp knock on the front door of Katniss' apartment.

_Punctual as always_, she thinks to herself, smiling. She finishes tossing the huge pile of junk that had just been lying in the middle of the coffee table into the hall closet. She slams the closet door shut, kicking an errant glove into the closet as she does so. She rushes to the front door and throws it open.

"Prim!" she exclaims happily when she sees her sister and her boyfriend Rory waiting outside. She envelops Prim in a huge hug.

"I'm so glad you guys were finally able to make it down here," Katniss says, as Rory and Prim take off their fall coats. They lay them on the living room sofa and follow Katniss into the kitchen.

"Me too," Prim says. She and Rory work such erratic schedules that this is the first time in the nearly five months Katniss has lived in Chicago that they've come to visit her. And Katniss is eager to show them around her new apartment and new life.

"Can I get you something to drink before we go?" Katniss asks, opening the cupboard over the sink. "A glass of water or something?"

Rory sits down at the small kitchen table and shrugs. "Nah. We're leaving soon, right?"

Katniss nods. "Yeah." She looks down at her phone and checks the time. "I said we'd meet Peeta there at 6:30. So, like, in ten minutes, I guess."

"We're fine," Prim agrees. She smiles at her sister. "Give us the tour of your place?"

It doesn't take long to show them everything. The premium she and Madge pay to live here in Lincoln Park means they can't afford a lot of space, even with both of them at big firms and sharing rent. There's her room and Madge's; the living room, the kitchen, and the small bathroom that technically has a view of Lake Michigan if you crane your head at exactly the right angle.
There's the large walk-in hall closet that Madge jokingly refers to as "the study." Its primary function is to store their miscellaneous crap that doesn't fit anywhere else.

And that's it.

"Well," Katniss says, rubbing her hands together after the tour's completed. "Shall we go, then?"

She takes her coat down from the hook on the wall and opens the door for her sister and Rory, locking it behind them.

It's chilly tonight – a far cry from the weather they had in Guatemala, Katniss thinks ruefully. Despite the fact that she's wearing a thick wool pea coat over a sweater and jeans, she's shivering by the time they get to the Asian fusion restaurant in Bucktown that Peeta recommended for tonight's dinner.

It's his favorite, he'd explained yesterday over the phone. Also, it's close to his apartment, so if they eat here tonight, he won't have to waste any time on public transportation. Which means he'll be able to spend more time getting to know Prim and Rory.

Katniss obviously couldn't see his face during this telephone conversation – hasn't seen his face, in fact, even once since the La Maquila case was taken from him last week due to their inability to prove it has ties to deep corporate American pockets – but she could hear the fatigue in his voice all the same.

She knows Peeta needs to find a new public interest case, as quickly as possible, if he wants to keep his Kirkland fellowship. Their firm, with its heavy emphasis on billable work for wealthy corporate clients, has nothing else comparable to the La Maquila case for him to work on. As Cinna made clear to him from the very beginning, La Maquila was the sort of case that only comes around once in big firm attorney's career. "If even that often," he'd added wryly.

So as a result, this past week Peeta's been working nearly fifteen hour days, calling up his professors from Michigan and contacts he made at the New York City public defender's office last summer, tracking down leads and networking locally in search of a new project that will satisfy his funders' criteria. He's been spending his days and nights holed up in his office, his door closed with a Post-It note stuck to it that says "Do Not Disturb" in large block letters.

"Unfortunately, that means you too," he'd told her, sadly, the one time she'd ignored the note and opened the door. "I'm sorry. I really am."

Katniss knows he still hasn't found a new case. She can hear him in his office when she walks past it on the way to her own office every morning; and he's still there, usually talking to contacts on the phone, when she leaves at seven p.m. every evening.

"It'll be good to see you again tomorrow," he'd said at the end of yesterday's conversation. After a long pause, he added, very quietly, "I miss you, Katniss. A lot."

The longing tone she heard in his voice had made her heart flutter a little in her chest. Katniss balanced the phone between her shoulder and her ear and smiled sadly, trying, and failing, not to think about their one night together in Guatemala. The heat of his hands on her body. "I miss you too," she'd said in response, color beginning to stain her cheeks.

"Well," he said. He cleared his throat. "I guess… I guess I'll see you tomorrow at dinner."

He'd hung up then, and she sat perched on the edge of her sofa for a while after that, staring blankly at the phone in her hand.
Peeta's already at the restaurant, waiting for them, when Katniss arrives with Prim and Rory. He's at the bar nursing a beer, hunched over a little on his elbows and watching a football game on the small television mounted on the wall.

"Hi," Katniss says, walking up to him. It's more crowded than she'd thought it would be at 6:30 on a Monday, and she needs to speak loudly for him to hear her.

He turns his head to look at her and gives her a lopsided grin. She can't help but notice the dark circles under his eyes. The sight of them tugs at her heart, and she wishes she could wipe them away with her fingertips.

"Hey," he says, sounding almost shy. He jerks his thumb towards his beer. "Want one? Our table won't be ready for another few minutes."

"Sure," Katniss says. She turns to her sister. "Prim, Rory? Want something to drink before we eat?"

"Sounds good," Rory says, shrugging. Prim nods.

They all pull up stools at the bar and Peeta orders beers for everyone. A moment later he casually slips his hand inside Katniss' and she jumps a little without meaning to. They haven't so much as been in the same room with each other in over a week, and the sudden contact surprises her.

Peeta quickly pulls his hand back, clearly misunderstanding her reaction.

"I'm… sorry?" Peeta says quietly. It sounds like a question, and a hurt look passes over his face. Katniss quickly takes his hand in hers. Gives it a squeeze, hoping it reassures him.

"No, it's fine. I mean – it's good," she says, stumbling over her words. "I just wasn't expecting it," she adds quietly so Prim and Rory won't hear. She squeezes his hand again and he grins broadly at her, relieved. He reaches out with his free hand and tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

Behind her, Katniss can hear Prim giggling. Her sister mumbles something to Rory which makes him snort.

Peeta glances over Katniss' shoulder. Whatever he sees there makes him look away quickly and start to blush.

Until this moment Katniss hadn't decided exactly how she was going to introduce Peeta to her sister.

Well, she thinks to herself, as she begins caressing the back of Peeta's hand with her thumb. Might as well go all in.

She turns around on her seat a little to face her sister. Prim's sitting there with a barely concealed smirk on her face, one eyebrow raised. Rory is looking pointedly at the television set, where the Bears appear to be brutally dismantling the Lions.

"Prim?" Katniss begins. She curses herself inwardly for not having prepared something official to say to Prim about Peeta. It's not like you haven't had more than a week to get ready for this, Everdeen…

"Yes?" Prim prompts. She breaks into a grin.
Peeta cuts in, saving Katniss.

"I'm Peeta Mellark," he says, his voice a little strange, extending his hand. Prim takes it, and they shake. He clears his throat. "I'm your sister's friend," he says pointedly.

Prim raises an eyebrow again and Katniss winces.

"Hi Peeta Mellark, Katniss' friend," Prim says, the left corner of her mouth quirked up in a half smile. "It's very nice to finally meet you." She gives him a full grin. "I've heard so much about you."

Peeta gives Prim a sheepish smile and, blushing a little, turns back to his beer. He mumbles something Katniss doesn't quite catch.

Fortunately, a waitress comes over right then, interrupting the awkward situation, to let them know their table is ready.

Katniss puts her hand in Peeta's again and tugs a little, letting him know, wordlessly, to follow her. He does.

After dinner is over, Peeta offers to walk them to the El stop and the train that will take them back to Lincoln Park.

"You didn't have to tell her you were my friend," Katniss says to Peeta quietly, a few minutes into their walk.

It's even colder now than it was when they arrived at the restaurant earlier this evening, and Peeta's arm is wrapped tightly around her. She can feel his shoulders shake a little in quiet laughter.

"Well," he begins, slowly, still laughing a little. "How should I have introduced myself?"

Katniss doesn't answer right away. A strong gust of wind blows through them, and she snuggles more closely into his side. He tightens his arm around her.

"I guess you could have just said..." Katniss says, then trails off.

He cranes his head a little to look down at her. "Yes?" he prompts.

"You could have just introduced yourself," she responds. "Told them your name and left it at that." She smiles at him. "I think she's figured out the rest." She blushes suddenly. "I mean... that is to say..."

Just spit it out, goddamnit...

Peeta kisses the tip of her nose. "I understand," he says simply. He leans down and kisses her lightly on the mouth before pulling away, making her shiver for reasons having nothing to do with the cold fall evening. "I just didn't want to presume too much, or tell her anything you weren't ready for her to know," he says quietly, his mouth just a hairsbreadth away from her lips.

Katniss wishes they had the time and the privacy for more than just these light kisses. And the time to discuss precisely what it is between them, now.

But at the moment they have neither time nor privacy. Peeta has to go back to work, even though
it's already past eight o'clock in the evening; and they're in the middle of a crowded Bucktown street, her sister and Rory standing not fifteen feet away from them.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Peeta tells her when they arrive at their El stop.

"You will?" Katniss asks, surprised, her pulse quickening.

He smiles sadly at her, and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "The all-firm meeting, remember?"

In truth, Katniss had forgotten all about it until this moment. "Oh. Right." She laughs, but there's no joy in it. "Such a waste of time." The associates are all due for a lecture on how important it is for them to make billable hours this year, and Katniss suspects that's what they'll be in for tomorrow.

"Save me a seat?" he asks her, hopefully.

Katniss nods. "Sure."

She kisses him on the cheek, and he hums a little at the contact.

"See you tomorrow," she tells him. She turns away from him and follows Prim and Rory through the turnstile and onto the waiting train.

Only fifteen minutes in, Katniss thinks this might just be the dullest meeting she's ever attended.

Her hunch last night was correct. The main topic of today's meeting is billable hours and how important it is for all associates, firm-wide, to meet them.

And she tries to listen – she really does try – as Alma Coin prattles on and on about the history of HP&C's billable hours requirements, and as she segues into how important it is to maintain client morale in today's economy.

Katniss knows - objectively, anyway - that all of this is important information. She knows she needs to retain it and that she will need to refer to the handouts she received at this meeting throughout the upcoming year.

All the same, it's all she can do to keep her eyes open. She and Prim stayed up until nearly two a.m. last night, doing each other's hair the way they haven't done since they were young girls, Prim prying details about Peeta out of Katniss until finally, several hours into the interrogation, Katniss, laughing, held up her hands and shouted "enough!"

But by that point Prim had heard plenty. The next time Peeta gets together with Prim, there will certainly be no need for him to introduce himself as Katniss' friend.

Snapping herself back into the present, Katniss realizes that her mind is wandering. She checks the time on her phone just for something to do. And immediately wishes she hadn't. Because now she knows it's only 1:25 p.m. and that there's more than an hour left of this meeting to go.

She glances around the room at her fellow HP&C attorneys. Seems like everyone's here, just as they're supposed to be. Peeta arrived five minutes late, and so she was unable to save him a seat after all. He's sitting in the back next to Cinna, wearing that new pinstriped suit that looks so goddamned sexy on him. When he notices her looking at him he winks at her and smiles.

She winks back at him, crossing her legs nervously, and turns her attention back to the front of the
room, a little flustered.

A few more minutes pass. Coin has moved on to discussing what the name partners plan to do during the next fiscal year to bring in new business. To Katniss’ disbelief, another partner whose name she doesn’t know chimes in, angrily, and takes Coin to task over some details that sound like irrelevant minutiae to Katniss.

Out of the corner of her eye Katniss sees Haymitch nodding off over his coffee.

Katniss has just begun contemplating chewing off her own arm as a way to distract herself when the cell phone in her purse buzzes, alerting her to a text.

Grateful for something to do, Katniss pulls the phone out and stares at it.

The text is from Peeta.

This is killing me, Katniss, is all it says.

She cranes her head back to look at him. While she's bored, and while she'd rather be doing just about anything other than what she's presently doing, one look at his face tells her that the message he just sent her was not an exaggeration.

This was the life Katniss has been envisioning for herself for the past ten years. She volunteered for this. She knew that working at a big firm would likely be a soul-sucking experience, but it was something she signed up for willingly in exchange for the secure life it would give her.

She'd spent the past few years preparing herself for dry-as-dust document review, and for meetings exactly like this one.

But Peeta didn't volunteer. He accepted this job because he believed HP&C wasn't like other big firms. He thought he'd be able to work here and still do work that he found meaningful and socially important.

It turns out, of course, that he was wrong.

As Katniss looks at him, she sees that his face is wan and pinched, and his lips are pressed together in a thin line. After a long moment he glances briefly in her direction and manages a weak smile. But he quickly turns his eyes back to the front of the room, as Coin prattles on, before finally closing them.

Katniss types out a quick message in reply to his text.

I know. But she knows that's not enough. She pauses, not sure what to say next.

I'm so sorry, she eventually adds, and hits send.

And she is sorry.

At four-thirty that afternoon, Katniss closes up her work laptop, grabs her briefcase filled with notes and Lexis printouts from the back of her chair, and walks quickly towards the elevator.

It's Prim's last full day in town, and she has a date with her in fifteen minutes to get their nails done at the salon near her office. Even though a manicure is something Katniss can readily afford, now, it's not something she's accustomed to doing, and it still feels like a ridiculous indulgence.
But she'll never be able to deny Prim anything she wants.

When Katniss arrives at "State Street Hair and Nails" a few minutes later she gives the receptionist behind the desk her name.

"Lucinda, your nail stylist, will be right with you," the woman tells her with a plastic smile. Her hair looks like a bird's nest to Katniss; but Katniss has never been one to keep up with modern trends in hair. For all she knows it's all the rage among millennials. "Have a seat in our waiting area?"

Katniss nods and looks around the salon. Prim isn't here yet. Katniss figures she must have underestimated how long it takes to get to downtown on the Brown Line outside of peak commuting hours.

Katniss walks over to the complimentary refreshments counter and helps herself to a glass of water that's been infused, apparently, with the juice of lemons and limes (according to the sign in front of the pitcher). She takes a seat and begins leafing through the pile of magazines and newspapers scattered haphazardly on a nearby table.

Most of them are rubbish of course. Cosmo. Glamour. USA Today. Katniss eventually finds today's edition of the *New York Times* towards the bottom of the stack, decides it'll do, and plucks it out of the pile.

She pages through it idly, glancing at the headlines but not really paying much attention to any of what she's reading.

When she gets to the business section, however, she sees the large headline at the top and stops short:

"New York-Based Capitol Corporation Plans to Expand its Latin American Workforce by Twenty-Five Percent by 2014."

Underneath the headline is a picture of a smiling, Caucasian man who looks to be in his mid-sixties, wearing an expensive suit, shaking the hand of the smiling gentleman who served as Katniss' guide during her visit to La Maquila.

Katniss stands up out of her chair so quickly she nearly knocks it over.

She scans the article quickly. It's a puff piece, really – very little of substance; just a brief overview of Capitol Corporation (which apparently makes clothes for wholesalers like Wal-Mart in the United States and Canada) and the direction its CEO sees the company taking over the next few years.

She glances up at the top of the page again and quickly reads the caption underneath the large black and white photo. "Mr. Seneca Crane, CEO of Capitol, with Sr. Manuel Gutiérrez of La Maquila, at the 2012 gala celebrating their companies' merger."

At that very moment, a woman with a dress that looks to be covered in chicken feathers and a hairstyle that reminds Katniss of a gravy boat saunters over to where she's sitting.

"Ms. Everdeen?" the woman asks. "I'm Lucinda. Are you ready?"

"I…" Katniss begins. "Yes. I'm Katniss."

She swallows audibly.
"Mind if I take this newspaper back with me while you do my nails?"

The salon won't let Katniss take their newspaper with them at the end of her appointment.

Fortunately, *The New York Times* is sold on virtually every street corner in downtown Chicago, and it doesn't take Katniss long to find a display that's still carrying a few copies.

"Prim?" Katniss asks her sister when she realizes she's out of change. "Can I borrow some quarters?"

"Sure," Prim says, digging in her purse. She starts muttering under her breath. "Jesus… ugh, these stupid nails…"

"Yeah," Katniss agrees. "Maybe manicures are a better idea in theory than in practice?"

Prim looks up at her sister. "Um, yeah. Sure," she says, in a tone that Katniss interprets as meaning *whatever, Katniss.*

"Here you go," Prim says after she's managed to fish out some change.

Katniss feeds the money into the machine, her hands shaking, and she yanks open the door to the display. She pulls out the top paper and flips to where the Business Section normally is, making certain this copy has the article she just found.

To her relief, it does.

"This article's pretty important to one of your cases?" Prim asks, eyebrows raised.

"Um… it's important to one of Peeta's, actually," Katniss says. "I need to read it again, but I think it shows us a company he's trying to sue lied to us about not having any connections to the United States."

"Wow," Prim says. "They can actually do that? Lie to lawyers, I mean?"

Katniss has to stifle a smile at her sister's naivety.

"Unfortunately, yes," she confirms. "Or, well. They can certainly try. Do you think you'll be able to get back to the apartment on your own? I really need to show this to Peeta right away."

"Of course," Prim says. "Will you be coming back for dinner?"

"I don't know," Katniss tells her, honestly. "This technically isn't my case anymore, but…"

Prim smiles.

"I get it," she says. "We've seen a lot of you on this trip already, and I figured I'd have to share you with work." She laughs. "I mean, I've known you my entire life. I know what you are."

Katniss embraces her sister.

"Thanks, Primmy," she says. "I'll definitely be home before too late."

Prim laughs again.

"Right," Prim says, clearly not buying it. "I'll see you when I see you."
Peeta's still at the office when Katniss arrives a few minutes before six, completely out of breath.

She ignores the "Do Not Disturb" note that's still tacked to his closed office door and barges into his office without knocking.

"Peeta," she says, quickly, walking over to his desk. "You need to look at this."

She stands behind him and drops the front page of the Business Section in front of him on his desk, right on top of whatever documents he'd just been reviewing.

He rubs his eyes and looks up at her blearily.

"The New York Times?" he asks her, skeptically. "What… Katniss, look, I'm sorry, I don't have time for –"

"Just read it," she urges. "I think this could change everything."

Peeta still looks skeptical, but does as he's asked.

"Oh, my God," he says after only thirty seconds. "Katniss… Katniss, do you know what this means?"

"Yes," she says. "I was led down the primrose path in Guatemala, Peeta. They wasted my time entirely. According to this, Capitol Corporation bought out La Maquila in 2012."

"Which means…" Peeta says, trailing off, eyes fixated on the photo of Sr. Gutiérrez and Mr. Crane at the top of the page.

"Which means we've got our deep pockets, Peeta" Katniss finishes for him. "This article doesn't go into much detail – it's only The New York Times – and I know almost nothing about Capitol Corp. But there's no way they'd be featured on the front page of this paper's Business Section if they didn't have pretty deep fucking pockets."

Peeta's hands start shaking a little. Katniss reaches around from behind him and covers them with her own. She kisses the top of his head.

"I need to call Cinna," he says, his voice sounding miles away. "Right now..."

Katniss kisses the top of his head again. "All right, Peeta." She walks towards the door of his office, about to leave him to it.

"Wait!" he shouts. She pauses at his door, one hand on the doorknob, as he runs over to her.

He picks her up off her feet and kisses her deeply, and, to Katniss shock, slams her back against the wall of his office. She wraps her arms tightly around his neck and runs her tongue along his lips until he parts them for her, giving her entrance.

It's the first real kiss they've shared in over a week, and her body's reaction is explosive and unexpected. But just as she's mentally calculating how quickly she can get him out of his suit, and just how fast they can shove all those papers and books off his very flat and serviceable desk, he's already pulling away from her.

"Thank you," he murmurs against her lips before setting her back down on the ground. She moans a little, disappointed that their moment has ended before it really began. But his voice is husky, and Katniss knows he didn't want to stop kissing her either. "Thank you so much."
"Of… of course, Peeta," she says, her heart hammering in her ears.

"I need to call Cinna," he explains, almost apologetic. "Can I call you afterwards? Let you know how it goes?"

"Please do," she urges.

But he's at his desk before the words are even out of her mouth, picking up his telephone and punching in Cinna's home number.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Thank you, again, to everyone who's forgiven me for leaving this story un-updated for over five months. Obviously, the hiatus is over, and I'm committed to seeing this story through to its end (we're a little over halfway there).

And thank you as well to everyone who's left me reviews, follows, and favorites along the way. Every single time I get an email alert from a reader it absolutely makes my day. :) And lastly, a very special thanks to MalTease, sponsormusings, and salander-jade for their friendship and support.

Come find me on tumblr if you're so inclined! I'm there as jeeno2.

Katniss sits cross-legged on the sofa, her sister and Rory sitting cuddled up with each other on the easy chair next to her, as the episode of Game of Thrones they're watching finishes up.

"I'd totally do Jon Snow," Prim muses thoughtfully once Katniss turns off the television.

"Excuse me?" Rory asks, in mock offense. Katniss knows that their joint ogling of this show's cast is a running joke between them and she grins.

Rory tries to chuck a pillow at Prim but misses by a mile, hitting Katniss instead.

"Ow!" Katniss shouts, rubbing her nose, even though it didn't really hurt. "You jerk!"

Prim laughs. "You know nothing, Rory Hawthorne," she tells him archly, one eyebrow raised.

Rory rolls his eyes theatrically. Prim gets up off the sofa, stretches, and yawns.

"Well, Rory? Shall we?" she asks, joking forgotten, reaching out her hand for her boyfriend. It's getting late – it's nearly ten-thirty – and they need to hit the road tomorrow morning by five in order to make it back to Detroit for their afternoon shifts.

"Yeah, probably should," he agrees. He gets up and walks to the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Prim turns to Katniss and smiles.

"Thanks for having us over," she says. "It's been nice, just hanging out and spending time with you."

"It was fun," Katniss agrees. "We should do this more."

Prim nods. "We should," she says. Her hands twist together in front of her, and Katniss can tell she's working up the nerve to ask her something. "Any chance of you coming up to see us sometime?" she asks, tentatively.

Katniss' stomach sinks, even though she knew this question would come eventually. "I just don't know, Prim. I mean…. work, and all. And you know about me and Mom. We just don't…"
Prim makes a motion with her hands, cutting Katniss off.

"I know. You. And Mom," she says, simply. "Still, though. It would be nice to have you visit me once in a while."

Katniss embraces her sister. "Once my first year at HP&C is over I think I'll feel comfortable about possibly taking some time off," she says.

Prim pulls back. One look at her face tells Katniss this was not what she had wanted to hear.

"You aren't even coming home for Christmas?" she asks, sounding legitimately hurt.

Katniss winces inwardly. "I… guess I hadn't thought that far ahead," she admits.

Prim puts her hands on her hips. "Please think about it," she insists. "It would mean so much to me if you did come up for Christmas. It would mean so much to her, too."

Katniss doesn't say anything in response. But she knows Prim is right. The animosity she feels towards her mother – the animosity she's felt towards her for as long as she can remember – is, and always has been, entirely one-sided.

"Ok then," Prim says, shrugging, when Katniss doesn't respond. "I guess I'll go to bed." She pulls Katniss into another hug and kisses her on the cheek.

"Drive safe tomorrow," Katniss says over Prim's shoulder, more to change the subject than anything else. She knows she and Rory are flawless drivers.

"I will," Prim promises. "And I'll make sure Rory does, too, when it's his turn to drive." She pulls away again. "'Night, Katniss."

She walks towards Katniss' bedroom, where she and Rory have been sleeping during their visit, and quietly pulls the door closed behind her so as not to wake Madge, asleep in her own bedroom down the hall.

Katniss has just finished brushing her teeth when her phone on the coffee table in the living room vibrates loudly, alerting her to a new text.

She walks over to the coffee table, clad in pajamas and slippers, and looks down at it.

It's from Peeta.

Want to come over?

She glances at the time display on the front of her phone. It's 10:45 pm.

What the hell? she thinks to herself, surprised.

Another text flashes before she has a chance to respond. I have good news. :) 

She stares blankly at her phone for a long moment, her heart hammering in her ears. This can only be about his case. They've never visited each other this late before. Well - except for that one night they slept together, but she isn't certain that counts. And aside from when they were in Guatemala together they've never even contacted each other this late before. Clearly, something really big has happened.
Just as Katniss is about to send him a text asking what this is all about, her phone buzzes again.

*If this is too weird, that's ok. I can tell you about it tomorrow.*

*No,* Katniss responds quickly. She doesn't think it's too weird, anyway. Or is it? Either way, after another long moment in which he doesn't text anything back she adds, *I'll see you in 20 minutes.*

*Ok, see you,* he responds immediately.

She dresses quickly in the clothes she'd laid out for herself for tomorrow, and leaves Prim a note explaining where she is should she happen to wake up in the night and worry where Katniss was. She closes the front door to her apartment quietly behind her and hopes the blue line is still running at this hour.

Before she locks the front door she sends Peeta one more text.

*Is this about what I think it's about?* Because she might as well know now.

His reply is immediate. *Yes. :)*

Katniss breaks into a grin that threatens to split her face in two, and she runs down the steps of her building towards her El stop.

As it turns out, the blue line runs very infrequently this late at night, and it's almost midnight when Katniss gets to Peeta's apartment in Bucktown. She knocks quietly on the door just in case Thresh, Peeta's roommate, is sleeping.

Peeta answers the door right away. His hair is a wreck, as though he's been running his hands through it for hours. His tie from the workday is still on, but he must have loosened it at some point, and the knot is half undone. His shirt is partially unbuttoned and completely untucked and his are glasses askew.

To Katniss' chagrin, his apartment reeks of stale cigarette smoke.

Peeta pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, as if to make himself more presentable, and he smiles.

"Katniss," he says. "Come in."

She complies wordlessly, and he quietly shuts the front door behind her. He takes her by the hand and walks with her to the living room's only sofa. He motions for her to sit on his lap, and she does, tucking her long legs underneath her as he wraps his arms around her body.

"Is this ok?" he asks quietly into her hair.

She nods against his shoulder.

"I just... really wanted to tell you the news in person." He swallows audibly. "And right away."

"News?" Katniss asks, lifting up her head and looking at him.

"Yeah," Peeta says. He breaks into a lopsided smile, and his eyes are bright. "Cinna and I spent the past five hours checking out Capitol Corporation in old online editions of *The Financial Times,* and we've contacted the Delaware Secretary of State, where they've apparently incorporated. And what you found in the paper this afternoon was completely legit." He kisses the
tip of her nose. "Capitol merged with La Maquila sometime last year."

"And it gets better," Peeta continues, still smiling, his words coming out in a rush now. "We still need to do a lot of digging to establish Capitol's corporate structure and the exact nature of its relationship with La Maquila. But we have enough already to know there's a strong – very, very strong, actually – connection between the two entities."

"Which means…" Katniss prompts, holding her breath.

"Which means, Cinna all but guaranteed me that the other partners will green light this case tomorrow morning when he presents to them at their weekly breakfast meeting."

"Peeta, that's wonderful!" Katniss says happily, leaning forward and hugging him tightly. Peeta's infectious happiness is rolling off him in waves, and she can't help but smile.

But suddenly, Peeta's entire demeanor changes. He shakes his head ruefully. "Goddamnit, Katniss. I should have known when Coin went on and on about HP&C's commitment to public interest work when HP&C recruited me that they were just giving me a fucking sales pitch."

"I'm sorry," Katniss tells him honestly. She had suspected as much from the very beginning of course, back when he first told her about his job when they graduated from law school. All big firms are really the same; she knew it even then. But she didn't have the heart to tell him. Not when he was so excited about this opportunity. "I think… well, I think Coin has made it pretty clear that the firm only really cares about social justice when it gets them splashy headlines." She pauses and laughs, but there's no mirth in it. "And large jury awards."

"Yeah," he says sadly, nodding. "Well, I'm going to try not to think about all that for now. Cinna will be meeting with Coin and the others first thing tomorrow, and will be presenting what we found tonight. He told me that barring catastrophe, I'll get to do the work." He pauses. "If all goes as Cinna expects, anyway," he adds, hastily. "And Katniss – oh, my god, Katniss. This only happened because of you. When Cinna told me the news, I wanted to thank you in person. And right away."

The corner of Katniss' mouth quirks up in a half smile. "You told me that already," she says. "Is that the only reason you texted me when I was getting ready for bed?" she asks, teasing him lightly.

Peeta looks a little sheepish and looks away from her. He starts rubbing the back of his neck.

"I mean… and also… well. I've really missed you," he continues, eyes still averted.

She kisses his cheek.

"I've missed you too, Peeta," she says honestly. "A lot. After Guatemala... This week has been rough."

He presses a gentle, chaste kiss to her mouth. The taste of stale cigarette smoke lingers on her lips and she decides, on the spot, that she's got to break him of this nervous habit.

"When I texted you to come over," he begins, "I didn't want you to think... I mean... that is to say..." He clears his throat and looks away from her again.

"You didn't want me to think what?" she presses, one eyebrow raised. On a whim she starts playing with the knot of his tie, loosening it a little more for him. She looks back up at his face while her hands are busy. He's looking at her now, but his eyes are unfocused behind his glasses.
She lifts the tie up over his head and tosses it to the side.

"I..." he says, but he doesn't finish his thought. He begins running his hands up and down her thighs, seemingly unable to spit out the words.

"Hm?"

"I mean, if Prim needs you to be home tonight, or if you want to go home, I certainly didn't mean to imply that -"

*How can a man with such a way with words get so tongue-tied?* Katniss thinks to herself, just before she closes the distance between them and kisses him.

He wraps his arms around her again and grins against her lips.

This kiss isn't like any of the others they've shared so far. It's not a drunken fumble like their make-out session their last night of law school was. It's not a frantic groping borne out of pent up sexual frustration, or a chaste peck on the lips because there isn't time for anything else.

This kiss is leisurely. Exploratory. She runs her tongue slowly along his in a gentle caress, and he returns the favor, sighing into her mouth. His hands resume their earlier movements along her upper thighs, running them back and forth, back and forth along her body, as she deepens the kiss even further.

At some point - Katniss isn't exactly sure when - she starts absentmindedly playing with the buttons of his dress shirt, and then unbuttoning them one by one.

When his shirt is open to his waist he breaks the kiss. His eyes are closed, and his mouth is wet and parted, his breathing heavy.

"Can I stay over?" Katniss blurts out impulsively. Prim's leaving at 5 in the morning tomorrow, after all. They'd already said goodbye before she went to bed tonight.

Peeta doesn't say anything at first. He opens his eyes and takes off his glasses, folding them up slowly and carefully laying them on the end table next to them.

He looks up at her.

When he finally speaks it's to ask her another question.

"Wanna skip work tomorrow?" he asks, smiling.

Katniss doesn't wake up until well after eight the next morning.

She opens her eyes slowly and sees Peeta, lying on his stomach, looking back at her and beaming.

"Hi," Peeta murmurs, almost bashfully. His blankets are pushed halfway down his body, exposing the top of his naked backside.

"Hey," Katniss says back. She sits up and stretches, Peeta's blankets billowing around her waist as she does so.

"What do you want to do today?" he asks her, leaning back on his elbows. He makes no attempt to hide the fact that he's staring, quite unabashedly, at her bare breasts.

"Hm," she begins, pretending to give the question serious thought. "Well, this is a pretty
comfortable bed. We could just stay here for a bit longer...” she muses. She lies back down and gives him a lingering kiss. Within moments she feels him start to harden again against her thigh. "Since we're taking the day off and all..."

If Peeta dislikes her idea he doesn't say it. In fact, he doesn't say anything at all.

He moves over her then and slowly – very, very slowly – begins pressing open mouthed kisses along her clavicle. To her neck, along her shoulder, across her breasts. And then down, down, down her body.

"Oh," Katniss breathes, as he reaches her lower abdomen. He spends a long moment there, swirling his tongue teasingly inside her navel, before continuing his descent downward. She begins fisting the sheets in anticipation and desire.

"Do you like this?" he asks her, finally, his voice husky and dripping with honey, as he places a gentle kiss to the inside of first one thigh, then the other. She knows he's teasing her with the question; he knows full well that she likes this. He blows a long, cool puff of air across the patch of wetness beginning to pool between her thighs, and then begins tracing invisible patterns against her inner thigh with the tip of his tongue.

"Peeta," she moans. "Stop teasing me. Please." She thrusts her hands into his messy hair and roughly shoves his head down to where she wants his mouth to be.

He grins wolfishly up at her and, picking up on her not-so- subtle hint, bends to take her into his mouth.

She cries out at the contact of his soft lips to her sensitized skin... at the exact moment that his phone on his dresser buzzes to life.

Peeta pulls away.

"Fuck," he mutters under his breath as the phone continues buzzing. "Katniss..."

She props herself up on her elbows to look at him. His lips are wet and slightly parted, and he's breathing at least as heavily as she is. But he's also harboring a guilty look, and she knows he wants to interrupt what they're doing to answer his phone.

"Fine," she says. Even though it's far from fine. "Go ahead. Answer it."

Permission granted, Peeta races to his dresser, his erection jutting out from his body cartoonishly.

He takes one quick look at the number displayed on his phone before answering. "Hello?" he says anxiously. It's clearly someone from work, Katniss thinks, or he wouldn't have taken the call. Must be Cinna.

Peeta's quiet for a long moment, although he nods seriously now and again. He's obviously listening intently to what he's being told.

Suddenly, Katniss gets an idea. She knows she shouldn't do this to him, but she's annoyed at the interruption, and frustrated besides.

Impulsively, she sucks two fingers fingers of her right hand into her mouth and withdraws them, a trail of saliva leaving her mouth as she does so. As Peeta chimes in on his phone call, she spreads her legs a little wider and reaches down, rapidly circling herself with her fingers where his mouth had just been.
After a long moment Peeta turns to face her and nearly drops his phone. His cock twitches visibly as he watches her touch herself, his jaw slack and eyes wide.

A wicked grin on her face, Katniss reaches up and pinches her nipple with the finger of her other hand and moans, intentionally, and quite loudly, at the contact. Peeta's eyes widen even further and he reaches down slowly – and almost reluctantly, it appears – with his free hand. He grabs himself forcefully.

"Ok Cinna," Peeta croaks. He licks his lips and walks over to the bed where, by now, Katniss is playing with herself with abandon. She's writhing on the bed a little, and he starts biting his bottom lip to maintain some semblance of control.

"Um. Yeah ok. Thanks, that's great Cinna. Ok. Bye."

Peeta throws the phone across the room, hard, and launches himself at her, kissing her everywhere - her mouth, her breasts, her stomach - not stopping in any one place for longer than a moment.

"That was so mean," he whimpers between kisses. "Fuck, the sight of you on my bed- I just - I, oh shit -""Katniss grabs him and starts pumping her fist up and down. "Serves you right, Peeta," she tells him in a lecturing tone. His cock swells further in her hand at her words, and he groans. "You had me all excited."

With a shaky hand, Peeta tries to return the favor, but with how much he's jerking in her arms and in her hand she can tell he's on the edge can't really focus. After less than a minute he pulls his hand away from her body and grips the sheets tightly on either side of her head.

A moment later, he comes apart with a cry. As he splatters against the inside of her hand Katniss smiles, feeling victorious.

"I know that phone call was important," she murmurs in his ear as his breathing slows and he comes back to himself. "But. Don't do that to me again."

Peeta smiles at her and kisses her forehead. "Lesson learned," he tells her. He starts kissing down her body again.

"And now," he says, with an impish grin. "Where was I before we were so rudely interrupted?"

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After another leisurely hour spent in bed – during which Peeta confirms that, yes, the firm has in fact agreed to let him work on the La Maquila case during his fellowship year – they eventually agree that they should probably get up and do something today.

Peeta suggests they go down to Hyde Park, where the University of Chicago is. "I can show you my old campus," he says. The gleam in his eye tells Katniss that he's quite excited about this idea and so she readily agrees.

They dress quickly, and then climb into his blue Ford Focus parked a few blocks away. He takes them west, out to Lake Shore Drive, and they drive south along Lake Michigan for several miles until Peeta gets to the third exit for Hyde Park.

"You enjoyed college here?" Katniss asks him as they pass by The Museum of Science and Industry and several other campus buildings.

She's genuinely curious. She went to U of M for both undergrad and law school. Aside from a
downriver junior college where she took a few advanced math courses in high school, she really hasn't seen any other colleges.

"Yeah, I did," Peeta says. He makes a sharp right turn and pulls his car into a parking lot behind an Indian restaurant. "It was fun. Since everyone who goes here is a bit of an egghead, I felt less... weird, I guess, than I did growing up."

Katniss nods. Her mind flits back to her own childhood - back to when she was a driven child raised by a practically deadbeat single mom in a neighborhood where girls were almost as likely to get pregnant before graduating high school as they were to ever graduate college.

"I can relate to that feeling," she muses.

"Medici's isn't the greatest restaurant in the world," he admits as they walk towards the two story brick building, hand in hand, from their parked car. "But it's a U of C institution, and it makes me all nostalgic - in a good way - when I come here now." He smiles at her. "It's kind of an important place to me."

Katniss raises their clasped hands to her mouth and kisses the back of his. She doesn't know what to say – she rarely does, when important things need saying – but it fills her stomach with butterflies all the same, knowing that he wants to share this place with her.

"Most students at The University of Chicago are graduate students," Peeta explains, as their heavily tattooed and pierced waiter shows them upstairs to their table.

"So that's why I don't feel ancient here," Katniss muses. When Peeta suggested that they grab brunch at a place he used to frequent in college she assumed the restaurant would be packed with 19 year olds.

"Yup," Peeta nods. "Most of these folks are about our age, probably."

As the waiter takes them towards a seat in the back, Peeta glances over his shoulder and looks intently at a section of the restaurant's heavily graffitied walls.

"Oh hey," he says happily. "It's still here..."

Katniss sits at the table the waiter shows them and starts studying the menu. But Peeta doesn't join her. Instead he stands, staring, transfixed by the same patch of wall that distracted him on their way to the table.

After a few more moments, when it becomes clear that Peeta isn't about to join her anytime soon, Katniss' curiosity gets the better of her. She gets up and walks over to him.

"What are you looking at?" she asks him.

"Something some buddies of mine drew for me back in college," he says. He points to a spot on the wall. Katniss doesn't understand what she's supposed to be looking at.

"Um. Some girl's phone number?" she asks, confused.

He laughs. "No. Not that. Someone must have written that in the last year or so. But if you look underneath you can still make out the picture."

Peeta touches the exact spot he's talking about with the tip of his index finger, and Katniss peers closely at it. And he's right. Looking closely, underneath Ashley M's phone number and assorted
crude messages, Katniss can make out the faded outline of a small, colorful bird.

"Oh," Katniss says. "They drew you a bird?" she asks, still not understanding.

Peeta nods. "Yeah." He stuffs his hands in his pockets. "This was the table my friends and I always used to sit at, and it was kind of my nickname my last few years of college, I guess you could say. 'The Mockingbird.'"

She looks up at him and sees he's blushing a little.

She turns back to the picture. "That's a mockingbird?" she asks. She grew up in the suburbs and although Prim loves birds, she can't really tell one kind of bird from another.

"Yes. Or at least, that's what it's supposed to be."

He takes her hand.

"Pretty cheesy nickname, right?" he tells her, laughing a little. He seems a little embarrassed, which Katniss finds strange, given how excited he was just a minute ago to discover that this graffiti was still here.

Katniss shrugs.

"I've heard worse," she tells him honestly. "But I mean… does it mean what I think it means?" She wrinkles her nose a little without meaning to. "Atticus Finch, 'To Kill a Mockingbird' and all that?"

He doesn't respond right away. "Yeah," he eventually admits. He heads back towards their table in the back and she follows him. "I decided I wanted to go to law school after coming here for college and seeing all the poverty on the south side of Chicago." He picks up his menu and shakes his head. "I did like college, don't get me wrong. But this place is such an ivory tower, really. All these wealthy, smart kids… surrounded by nothing but miles and miles of urban blight in every directions."

Katniss nods, because she understands what he means. But her own college experience was radically different from his, and she cannot quite relate to what he's talking about now.

He laughs again. "I was so idealistic back then," he continues. "There was one night my first year of college when I got super drunk up here," he stops talking abruptly. "Umm, they don't really card down here at Hyde Park," he explains quickly. "Anyway, I was totally shitfaced that one night, and I was standing up on that table over by the drawing. According to my friends, I apparently went on and on about how I was going to go to law school and end poverty and save the world."

He rolls his eyes.

"Shortly thereafter I think I passed out in a corner. While that was going on my friends drew that picture you just saw on the wall. And… um… they drew a matching one on my face."

Katniss has to stifle a giggle in her palm, because she can picture the scene happening exactly as Peeta described it.

"Go ahead, you can laugh," he tells her, grinning himself. "Don't hold back. I was an idiot."

"No you weren't," Katniss corrects him. "And you're still trying, aren't you?" she asks quietly. "To end poverty. Save the world."
Peeta looks down at the table. He picks up his fork and begins playing with it absently.

"A little, I guess," he admits, slowly. He looks her right in the eye, suddenly, with an intensity that nearly knocks her over. "But I'm not as naïve as I used to be, Katniss. I can't do it alone."

She takes his hand in hers again. She begins stroking the back of his hand with her thumb.

"I don't know how much I can do, Peeta," she tells him. "But I'll try." To hell with Cinna and what he thinks, she thinks to herself. And fuck HP&C too. "I'll try."

"I don't want you to get into trouble because of me, Katniss," he says earnestly. "I have the luxury of being able to focus on the sort of work I want this year. I know your situation is different."

"It doesn't matter," she tells him. And she realizes, suddenly, that it doesn't. "I'll work evenings, weekends. I'll make my goddamn billable hours, and help you nail those fuckers to the wall." She is Katniss Everdeen, after all. If there's one thing she knows, it's hard work.

He grabs her then, and kisses her as passionately as he did this morning while they were alone in his bed.

"I think I love you, Katniss," he murmurs against her lips after he finally breaks away. "I… I think I love you," he repeats, more quietly.

She grips his wrists, and squeezes, her heart in a vise.

And she kisses him back, trying as hard as she can to convey, without words, that she thinks she loves him, too.
Katniss, wearing sunglasses and the only bathing suit she owns, pads barefoot across the wet tiled patio to the poolside bartender.

She’s been at the Undersees’ party for less twenty minutes and already she’s in fairly desperate need of a stiff drink. *Not a good sign,* she thinks dourly.

“Gin and tonic, please,” she tells the bartender. “No ice.”

As she waits for the bartender – a nice-enough-looking guy in a starched white uniform – to make her cocktail, her phone buzzes loudly in her purse. She digs through it clumsily with one hand and pulls out the phone.

It’s a text from Peeta. Just three words.

*I miss you,* it says.

Her phone buzzes a second time while it’s still in her hands and another text flashes on the screen. *Can’t wait to see you tonight.*

Katniss breaks into a broad smile. She knows she probably looks like an idiot, grinning down at her phone at this swanky party. But she can’t help it.

It’s been almost a week since she’s seen Peeta. Last Saturday he flew to New York – the location of Capitol Corporation headquarters – so he could review the company’s internal documents and depose its CEO in person.

Before he left on this trip they’d been inseparable for weeks.

True to her word, Katniss has been working with him on the La Maquila case from the moment he basically admitted that he loved her. That same afternoon, right after leaving the restaurant, Katniss helped him draft a class action lawsuit on behalf of La Maquila’s Guatemalan employees.

It took them the rest of the day and most of that night to write it, and it ended up being nearly thirty pages long. Once they were finally satisfied, Peeta quickly e-Filed it with the court before they could second guess any of what they’d drafted.

“Well,” he’d said after it was finished, folding up his glasses and placing them on his desk. He’d smiled at her. “Here we go.”

They’d laughed deliriously then, with exhaustion or relief. Or perhaps a mixture of both. And then collapsed, together, onto his bed.

Every night since then they’ve gone straight to his apartment after work to go over strategy, discuss relevant case law… and then to eventually fall asleep, well after midnight, mentally drained, in each other’s arms.

Katniss has talked to him every day he’s been away. For a few minutes, anyway. He sounds even more exhausted than he was before he left, which concerns her. She suspects he’s been working eighteen hour days to get ready for his two-day question-and-answer session with
Capitol’s CEO. Their entire case against Capitol hinges on him linking the American corporation to La Maquila and its sweatshop in Guatemala. If its CEO manages to evade his questions, they’ll be right back where they started from. With no deep pockets to go after, and no support from their firm.

Peeta is under tremendous pressure to get solid, damaging testimony at this deposition. Katniss knows it. And so on Wednesday, kicking herself for not having thought of this earlier, Katniss decided to invite herself to join him in New York to help him get ready.

But he beat her to the punch.

“I know you can’t count any of this work towards your billable hours requirement, Katniss,” he’d said, sounding apologetic. But also desperate. “I know you have tons of other work to focus on. Believe me… I wouldn’t ask if I thought I could handle this on my own. I swear.” He’d paused and took a deep breath. “But Snow & Crane is just… they’re just… burying me in paper.”

Snow & Crane. The law firm Capitol Corporation retained two weeks ago to defend it in this lawsuit.

The firm where their friend Delly works.

Twenty minutes after getting off the phone with Peeta that night, Katniss booked herself a nonstop flight to New York that leaves from O’Hare at eight this evening.

Katniss knows that the two days she’ll be in New York will be brutal. They’ll barely sleep – and not because of pleasurable nighttime activities, but rather because they’ll be up to their eyeballs in document review and legal research. And up against a very tight deadline.

But still. She misses Peeta more than she likes to admit to herself. His crooked smile. The way his glasses always slide halfway down the bridge of his nose when he’s concentrating or lost in thought.

The way his lips feel, pressed up against her mouth, moving in tandem with hers…

“Miss?”

The Undersees’ bartender’s voice breaks her out of her reverie. She blushes, and her eyes snap to his. The guy is looking at her expectantly, one eyebrow raised.

“Your drink?” he says, nodding towards the small glass he’s prepared for her.

“Um, yeah,” Katniss says, coughing into her hand and shaking her head a little to clear it. She opens her purse again and takes out a few dollars. She folds them up and stuffs them into his tip jar. Katniss smiles sheepishly at the bartender before picking up her drink and taking a large, bracing gulp.

Tonight just can’t get here soon enough.
The Undersees are among the wealthiest families in the Chicagoland area, and quite possibly the most well-connected. Most of the party’s guests are people Katniss has never seen before. Some are wearing more jewelry at this backyard pool party than Katniss has owned in her entire life.

This is not Katniss’ kind of event, to put it mildly, and she wishes she hadn’t let Madge talk her into coming in the first place.

“Madge, you know I’m going to New York tonight,” she’d whined earlier this afternoon. But Madge ignored her, pulling her off their sofa and dragging her into her room to get changed. “I don’t have time for this.”

“Think of it as the last fun you’ll have before trial,” Madge suggested. “Come on. Free drinks? A couple of hours in the sun? You know you want to.”

Katniss knew no such thing and told her roommate as such.

In the end, of course, Katniss came anyway. Not because she thought the party would be fun; she knew it wouldn’t be. Mostly, she just didn’t have the mental energy today to fight Madge on this. But once she’s been at the party for two hours – two hours spent pretending to enjoy herself and doing her best to mingle with drunk rich people – Katniss decides she’s had enough. She walks hurriedly towards the French doors that separate the Undersees’ lavish sunroom from their back yard and braces herself for the blast of air conditioning that will greet her inside.

“Katniss?”

Before Katniss can make her escape, a familiar voice rings out behind her. She cringes inwardly. Katniss turns around and sees her old friend, wearing a one-piece she vaguely remembers from the days when they swam together at Michigan, walking towards her purposefully. Delly has a drink in her hand and looks incredibly nervous.

“Hey,” Katniss says, trying to smile. “Sorry I didn’t get a chance to catch up with you while I was here. But I gotta go,” she says, jerking her thumb back towards the sunroom door. She shifts her weight anxiously from foot to foot, thinking of the flight she needs to get ready for. “Lunch next week, maybe?”

“Katniss,” Delly says again. She shakes her head. “We need to talk.” Her tone of voice brooks no opposition.

Suddenly Katniss knows, without even having to ask, what this is about. “All right,” she says, nodding slowly. I guess we might as well get this over with.

Katniss follows Delly to a set of white wicker chairs off to one side of the pool that’s a fair distance away from most of the party guests. They sit down and Delly sets her drink on the table between them.

“I’m probably not supposed to be talking to you about this,” she admits, quietly. Then laughs. “Actually, I know I’m not supposed to be talking to you about this…”


Delly nods. “But,” she agrees. “I just wanted to tell you that… well… Peeta has no idea what he’s up against in his case.”

Katniss rolls her eyes. “I think he has some idea, Dell.”
“No,” Delly insists. Adamant now. “He doesn’t. I’m… look, Katniss. I’m on the litigation team Snow & Crane has assigned to represent Capitol.” She leans forward, resting her elbows on her knees. “I’m one of ten lawyers my firm has assigned to the case,” she adds.

Katniss’ stomach sinks. She’d assumed from the beginning that Capitol would throw as many resources as it could at this case to make Peeta go away. But ten lawyers from one of the top firms in the country?

“I’m breaching ethical rules left and right just talking to you about this,” Delly admits quietly. Which is true, of course. Delly owes, among other things, a duty of confidentiality to her clients, just as Katniss does. “But you’re my friend. And so’s Peeta.” She shakes her head back and forth, very slowly. “He has to know that this is something he just can’t win.”

Katniss leaps to her feet, suddenly furious. How dare Delly tell her what she and Peeta can and cannot do? Her entire life, people with more money and more privilege than her have told her what her limitations were. And she proved every single one of them wrong. She proved the people she cleaned houses for in high school wrong. She proved the snotty New Yorkers she went to college with wrong. Just like they’ll prove Delly wrong.

“Watch us win, Dell,” she spits at her angrily.

Without another word, Katniss rushes away from Delly and away from the party, her friend’s pleading voice trailing behind her.

Six hours later, Katniss carefully steps into a cab just outside LaGuardia, her duffel slung over one shoulder and her briefcase in both hands.

She’s immediately taken aback by how different New York feels.

She didn’t expect that. After all, she’s no stranger to urban living. Her apartment is just four El stops away from her firm in the Loop – the beating heart of Chicago’s business and financial district. Her office is on one of the top floors of a skyscraper that’s no taller than any of the dozens of others surrounding it.

Katniss had never been to New York before today, but she’d always assumed it would just be more of what she was already used to.

And yet, she muses as the cabbie adjusts his rearview mirror, there’s something fundamentally different about New York. Perhaps it’s its energy. Or maybe it’s the people—with their pronounced accents and sharp speech patterns that sound nasal and harsh to Katniss’ Midwestern sensibilities. Whatever it is, the difference between this place and Chicago is a palpable thing. Something Katniss has felt pressing on her from all sides from the moment she stepped off the airplane.

She finds it a little hard to breathe.

As her cabbie weaves in and around the throngs of other cars and pedestrians in midtown Manhattan, she closes her eyes and focuses on her breathing. On avoiding being crushed by the tremendous weight of this city her very first night here.
At length, the cabbie deposits Katniss at the hotel where Peeta has been staying, courtesy of the generous sponsors of the Kirkland fellowship. Wasting no time, she hurries inside and punches the button to the elevator that will take her to Peeta’s room.

A police car blazes by the hotel, its siren piercingly loud, as the elevator door opens. Katniss rushes into the relative quiet the elevator tube provides and punches the button marked “14” with her elbow.

She’s shuttled upwards slowly, and she closes her eyes, breathing as deeply as she can.

She hopes they can stay in Peeta’s hotel room the whole time she’s here.

It takes longer than Katniss expects for her to get to the fourteenth floor.

Once out of the elevator, Katniss shoulders her bags and walks quickly down the dimly-lit hallway to Peeta’s room. When she gets to Room 1407 she raps sharply on the door, still trying to calm herself down as she waits for him to open it.

She only has to wait a few seconds. Just as she’s checking her wristwatch, the door is yanked open, and Peeta is standing on the other side of it.

His hair is an utter wreck. There are enormous dark circles under his eyes, confirming her earlier suspicions that he’s barely slept since coming here. Despite that, the moment his eyes light on hers he breaks into a lopsided grin.

Her heart flops a little in her chest at the sight of it.

“Katniss,” he says, beaming now. He pulls her into an embrace and wraps his arms tightly around her shoulders. She drops her bags; they make a muted thunk sound when they connect with the thinly-carpeted floor. Unencumbered, she throws her arms around his neck and presses kisses to the tender spot where it meets his shoulders.

Katniss can hear his heart beating, strong and steady and sure, beneath her ear, and she burrows into his chest a little more, sighing. She’s missed this so much. The five days they’ve been apart have been hell. And even this is enough to get her pulse racing.

“I’ve missed you,” he eventually admits, his voice thick with emotion, into her hair. “I’m so glad you came.”

She pulls away a little to look up at him. “Of course I came,” she murmurs, reaching up and caressing the side of his face. His stubble is prickly against the smooth skin of her palm, and she shivers involuntarily.

He covers her hand with his own and gives it a squeeze.

A moment later he’s kissing her, leaning back against the wall of the hotel hallway for support, her body flush against his.

They don’t have time for this. Not really. She’s about to protest – to tell him that she’s only here for forty-eight hours and they really should get to work – but then he starts nipping at her bottom lip with his teeth and she’s gone. In one fluid movement his strong hands slide down her back and cup her bottom. He presses her more closely to him, which allows her to feel all of him through the thick fabric of his jeans.
And then Katniss no longer remembers why she wanted to stop this. Moaning a little into Peeta’s mouth, she snakes her hands between their bodies and places her hands on his broad chest, sliding them back and forth until they eventually come to a rest over his heart.

God he feels good.

She loses track of time as they kiss and twine together in the hotel hallway – until suddenly, the bell over the elevator rings loudly, alerting them to the fact that someone is about to stumble upon them.

It snaps them both back to reality. Katniss pulls away from him with only seconds to spare. She turns around and sees an elderly couple emerging from the elevator, talking quietly to each other and looking carefully at the numbers printed above each room.

Out of the corner of her eye Katniss sees Peeta trying to stifle a grin.

She clears her throat loudly, which makes him laugh out loud. She looks back to him and sticks out her tongue.

He laughs harder.

Sighing, Katniss reaches down and picks up her bags. “You don’t need to thank me for coming,” she tells him, picking up their conversation from where they left it before they were distracted by each other. “I can’t let you do this alone. It’s too much.”

Peeta nods at her, but his face falls and color begins to stain his cheeks. He breaks eye contact. He leans against the frame of the door awkwardly and rubs at the back of his neck with his hand. “None of this counts towards your billable hours,” he says, as though she doesn’t know this already.

There’s a long pause between them, and Peeta still can’t seem to look her in the eye.

“No, it won’t,” Katniss responds, shrugging. They’ve been over and over this. She’s told him repeatedly that she doesn’t give one single fuck about making her billables. She has no shortage of other work to do, and she’ll meet her hours some other way.

Without another word she brushes past him and into his hotel room.

It’s spacious for a room in midtown Manhattan, and much bigger than Katniss was expecting. A king-sized bed outfitted with a fluffy down comforter and large pillows dominates the room. The foot of the bed is piled high with legal-sized notepads, something Katniss recognizes as a hornbook from their Contracts class, and Peeta’s laptop. The room smells very faintly of cigarettes, despite the fact that there is a very visible “no-smoking” sign above the control box for the thermostat. But that doesn’t surprise Katniss at all.

Katniss turns to face Peeta, still standing at the entrance to the room, hands in pockets.

“Where should I put these?” she asks, shrugging and gesturing to her bags.

Peeta looks around the room, biting his lip. Almost every flat surface is piled high with papers and document boxes. He crosses over to the armchair in the corner and carefully moves the paper stacked on it to make room for Katniss’ things.

“Here,” he says. He looks at her, a little chagrined. As if he feels guilty that this lavish hotel room isn’t larger. The idea is so ridiculous Katniss has to bite the inside of her cheek to keep from...
Katniss bends over to unzip her duffel. It’s filled with comfortable clothing, notebooks, and a few cases she’ll need to review for the work she left behind in Chicago. Because Katniss is not technically on this case, she can’t, and won’t, be present for Peeta’s deposition in two days. Her presence there would eventually get back to Cinna, which would in turn get her in trouble.

And so because her role here will be entirely behind the scenes, Katniss left her suits and heels at home.

She opens a few dresser drawers at random. The top one is empty and she begins tossing her things inside haphazardly. She’s reasonably certain there will be no opportunity to actually use it on this trip; but, smiling, she leaves the black nightie that went unworn on their trip to Guatemala on top of the rest of her clothing. Just in case.

“What are you working on?” she asks, crossing over to the bed. “What can I do?”

Peeta’s glances up at her over the silver frames of his glasses. He pushes them up the bridge of his nose and looks down at his notebook again before answering her.

“I’ve been going over Capitol Corporation’s financial statements from the past five years,” he tells her. “I wish I were better at this stuff. I’m looking for a large transfer of funds from Capitol to La Maquila. We need for there to have been a large transfer at some point over the past five years.” He shakes his head again and rubs his eyes with the palms of his hands. “But I just can’t make heads or tails of this accounting.”

“Here,” Katniss says, reaching for the notebook. “I’ll look over the figures.” Katniss looks down at his notes. “I’ll need the original forms, though. Your notes aren’t detailed enough.”

“Err, sorry,” Peeta says, sounding sheepish again. He jumps up from the bed and grabs a messy stack of papers from the table next to it. “This is what they gave me on Tuesday.”

“Do you think it’s everything?” Katniss asks, chewing her bottom lip, thinking of the runaround they got in Guatemala.

“Yeah,” he says. “They have counsel now. They’re not going to try anything stupid.”

“Oh,” Katniss says, nodding, already paging through the documents. She’s grateful, and not for the first time, that she took that Accounting for Lawyers course during her second year of law school. “I’ve got the numbers covered. You go ahead and focus on the line of questioning that will link Capitol Corp’s other business dealings to La Maquila headquarters.”

She looks up at Peeta. Her face falls at the pained expression on his face.

“I think I’m in over my head, Katniss,” he admits to her, quietly. “They’ve been burying me in discovery. I just… it’s clear they have an entire team devoted to this case. And on our side, it’s just you and me.” He laughs a little then, but it’s a bitter sound. “And you aren’t even supposed to be on this.”

Katniss has never heard him sound so defeated.

“You were right all along, of course,” Peeta says. “Our firm doesn’t give one shit about the public
interest. If it did, it wouldn’t have one single first-year associate assigned to this.” He closes his eyes again. “We need to have a whole team on this too. La Maquila’s employees deserve that.”

Katniss takes his hand in hers. She caresses the back of it with her thumb and gives it what she hopes is a reassuring squeeze.

“Well, all of that is true,” she admits slowly. Reluctantly. “But even still, Peeta. There’s one glaring problem with Snow & Crane’s approach to the case,” she says.

“Yeah?” Peeta asks weakly. “And what might that be?”

Katniss leans forward and slowly, gently, kisses each corner of his mouth. She leans over and whispers in his ear: “The law is on our side.”

She presses her lips to his cheek and closes her eyes. She can feel him smiling.

“You have a point,” he admits. He lets out a long breath. “I’m just really worried I’m going to get my ass handed to me in this deposition. And then again, next month, at trial.”

“Not going to happen,” Katniss promises resolutely. “Not with me here.”

She kisses his cheek again. The stubble against her lips feels rough, but also good. She makes a mental note to ask him to shave a little less often when they get back to Chicago.

More determined than ever before, Katniss pulls away from him and starts leafing through Capitol’s financials again.

At two in the morning, Katniss finally looks up from her notes and rubs her eyes.

It’s taking her a lot longer to make sense of these financial records than she’d thought it would. In law school, they occasionally discussed companies that engaged in active obfuscation of their financial records. But only as hypotheticals. As things that could happen.

This is the first time she’s ever had to go through records quite like these. It’s obvious that Capitol is structuring its financials so that determining exactly where, and how, large sums of its money is spent is impossible. While that may be enough to get them in big trouble with the IRS, it isn’t good enough for their purposes. They need to show that there’s a steady stream of funding going directly to La Maquila.

And, specifically, that it’s directly funding La Maquila’s sweatshop operations.

“Peeta,” she says, yawning. She wants to tell him that it’s not any lack of mathematical ability that’s giving him trouble with these statements. The statements are actually nonsensical.

When he doesn’t respond right away Katniss looks up and sees that he’s lying back on the bed, sound asleep. Unintentionally so, most likely, given that he’s still wearing his glasses.

The sight of him asleep makes her realize, suddenly, that she’s exhausted herself. It wouldn’t hurt to get a few hours of sleep.

Yawning again in spite of herself, Katniss puts the documents she’d been reviewing on the floor by the bed. But very carefully, so that she’ll be able to find her place when she gets back to work tomorrow morning.
She takes off her shirt and jeans and pulls on a loose-fitting t-shirt from the top drawer of the dresser. She crawls up the bed and takes Peeta’s glasses off his face for him. She folds them up quietly and places them on the table next to the bed.

Clicking off the lamp overhead, she burrows into Peeta’s side, pulling the covers up around them.

Despite the fact that she can’t remember the last time she was so comfortable, it takes nearly an hour for sleep to take her. Now that she’s here and seeing firsthand what they’re up against, Delly’s words of warning ring in her ears.

In the middle of the night, in this strange bed, she can no longer deny that they worry her.

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve stuck with this story and are still reading, I cannot thank you enough for your patience. Despite appearances to the contrary I’ve never considered it abandoned. And I still don’t. I can’t promise when the next update will come, but I’m (almost) positive there won’t be another eight month drought. :)

A special thank you to Sponsormusings and Salanderjade for cheering me on – and to MalTease, who quite literally pulled this chapter from me word by word. I couldn’t have written this without them.

If you’d like to find me on tumblr, where I blog about THG, Game of Thrones, and my naughty cats, I’m there as jeeno2.
Katniss wakes with a jolt to the sound of someone knocking loudly on her office door.

Startled, she looks up to see Cinna standing in the doorway, impeccably dressed as always. He's leaning against the doorframe and looking right at her, arms tightly folded across his chest and one eyebrow raised. Like he's asking her a question.

"Everything all right?" He sounds alarmed – which is entirely understandable, given that he just stumbled upon one of his associates asleep in her office in the middle of the day.

"Um, yeah, everything's fine," Katniss mumbles. She wipes at her mouth with the back of her hand to make sure there's no drool on her face. She rushes around to the other side of her desk to clear off the extra chair so Cinna can sit. "Come in," she adds hastily, shaking her head to try and clear it.

*How long was I asleep?* she wonders, mind still foggy from her accidental nap.

Cinna does as she asks and sits in the chair she's cleared for him. She sits down in her own seat, fidgeting a little with her hands.

"Not getting enough sleep?" Cinna asks. His eyebrows are knit together in concern.

Katniss hesitates. She doesn't know how she's supposed to answer that.

The truth is, she's only been getting a few hours of sleep each night since returning from New York three weeks ago. She's on target to make her billable hours for the year, just like she knew she would be. But that means she's so busy with her own work during the day that she's only free to help Peeta prepare for trial late at night.

As reluctant as she is to lie to Cinna, the firm specifically took her off La Maquila so she could focus exclusively on paying clients for the rest of the billable year. If she admits to Cinna that she's not sleeping at night, she'd have to explain why. And she just doesn't have the energy for that conversation right now.

"I'm getting plenty of rest, Cinna," she lies, avoiding eye contact. She starts re-organizing piles of paper on her desk that are already perfectly ordered, just for something to concentrate on other than the guilt she feels from lying to her supervisor and friend. "Why do you ask?"

Cinna laughs, and Katniss looks up at him. "What?" she demands.

"I found you in here, eyes closed and head on your arms, dead to the world," he says. "Took a good thirty seconds of my knocking to wake you."

Katniss cringes inwardly. "Oh," she says.

"You're burning your candle at both ends, Katniss. You need to pace yourself." Cinna gets out of his chair and walks towards her office door. "Your work product is terrific, but you need to take time for yourself now and then. You don't want to burn out your first year." He shakes his head. "It's not good for the firm – but more importantly, it isn't good for *you*."

"Ok," Katniss says, hoping this conversation is almost over. She takes a deep breath and lets it out. "I got it."

He smiles at her. "You're under express orders to get at least eight hours of sleep tonight," he says before leaving.

Once Cinna's gone, Katniss closes her eyes and sighs.

Peeta's trial starts in a week. Her role will be behind the scenes, just as it's been from the beginning. Peeta will be relying on her assistance with corporate law research. She'll help him draft questions for witnesses. And every night, after the trial is finished for the day, she'll be drafting motions for the judge's consideration the next morning.

Even though Katniss won't set one foot in the courtroom she still has plenty on her plate. Eight hours of sleep in a single night simply won't be happening until either Capitol agrees to settle with La Maquila's employees… or until the jury reaches a verdict. And with the mountain of evidence Peeta will be introducing and the number of witnesses Capitol intends to present at trial, neither a settlement nor a verdict will likely happen for at least another month.

Shaking her head once more to clear it, Katniss turns her attention back to the stack of papers she'd been reviewing before nodding off. It's more document review for a case involving one of HP&C's banking clients. And that's all she really knows about the case. Haymitch put her on it months ago – but this case still doesn't mean much to her other than endless reams of paper.

Katniss wishes she at least wanted to know more about Haymitch's case. But in truth, she doesn't. She doesn't care about it at all, or about any of the other cases she's been officially assigned. The facts of everything she's working on other than La Maquila are blending together. She's having trouble keeping any of her paying clients straight.

Katniss wonders, and not for the first time, if it will always be that way. Or if, perhaps, someday, she'll look forward to the work she's supposed to be doing as much as she looks forward to working with Peeta.

She glances down at the framed photograph she keeps on the right corner of her desk. It's a very old picture of her and Prim. A snapshot from their childhood. Even though Katniss was only nine when it was taken she remembers everything that night.

Their mother snapped the photo right before she left for one of her night shifts at the diner in Southfield. Her hair was piled high on her head in a messy bun, and she was as distracted and frazzled as she normally was in those days. But before she left that night, on an impulse she took a picture of her two girls with an old Polaroid camera. Katniss' arms were wrapped protectively around her little sister from behind, and Prim, gap-toothed and grinning from ear to ear, was wearing her favorite purple corduroy jumper. The one with the teddy bear embroidered on the front bib.

Their mother left a few moments after snapping the shot and kissing the girls goodbye, leaving Katniss alone to care for her younger sister all night. Just like she did five nights a week for years. On this particular evening, though, terrifying, loud thunderstorms raged outside for hours. It was on Katniss to comfort Prim in their shared bedroom as the little girl cried and shook and nightmared in her arms. Because there was no one else at home to comfort her.

Katniss traces the outline of five-year-old Prim's face with the tip of her pinky and bites her lip. The fierce surge of protectiveness she's felt over her little sister her entire life rears up and becomes the only thing in the world that matters. Just as it always does every time Katniss contemplates life outside the firm.
This job, as horrible as it is, means she will never have to decide between paying rent and buying food the way her mother did. And Prim... well. Because of Katniss' choices, Prim will never want for anything ever again.

Newly resolved and determined to see this through, Katniss grits her teeth and bends to her document review once more.

The alarm on Katniss' phone goes off promptly at seven p.m., playing the first few bars of a song that was popular in Guatemala when she and Peeta were there several months ago.

Despite her exhaustion, and the hours of work still remaining for her this evening, Katniss can't help but smile when she hears it.

But she doesn't have time for reminiscing right now. After only a few moments' reverie Katniss switches off her phone. She stands up and stretches a little, taking off her suit jacket and hanging it on the back of her chair.

She hasn't finished reviewing the documents for Haymitch's case yet. Not even close. But she doesn't really care. It's only paper, and it'll keep just fine overnight.

Tonight, Peeta wants to meet in the firm's library to review the deposition testimony he took in New York. Peeta has seen the recording so many times that Katniss is certain he's committed it to memory. But he pleaded with her to watch it with him tonight all the same.

"I need a second set of eyes on this," he'd told her last night over their late-night Chinese take-out. "Just to make sure I haven't missed anything important."

Reading between the lines of what Peeta's told her since New York, the deposition went as well as could be expected. Capitol Corporation's CEO – a Mr. Mitch DeGrassi – was represented by counsel. Fortunately, Delly wasn't there; two attorneys with far more seniority were there with Mr. DeGrassi instead. But Peeta worked closely with Delly in law school, as did Katniss; and he saw her fingerprints all over most of the objections DeGrassi's counsel raised to Peeta's questioning. Even though Peeta didn't have to see his old friend across the witness table, he has no doubt that Delly spent countless hours before the deposition helping the witness prepare.

Despite the fact that Peeta was outnumbered in the small conference room that day, he refused to be intimidated. He stood his ground, getting twelve hours of testimony that, if everything goes as well at trial as Katniss thinks it will, should hopefully nail Capitol to the wall in front of judge and jury.

Katniss is becoming certain that as long as they both keep their heads down and work diligently the next few weeks, victory will be theirs. To the point where she feel that, in truth, watching DeGrassi's testimony tonight is probably unnecessary. But it doesn't matter. If watching it with Peeta will ease his mind a little in the week before trial Katniss will happily do it.

Anxious to finally get started, Katniss walks quickly down the short hallway that separates her office from the library. She spots Peeta right away through the library's floor-to-ceiling glass windows, the lamp on his table the only light shining on the entire floor.

She lingers outside the library and peers inside. Peeta is sitting at their usual table, right by the window. He's assumed the posture that's become his default the past few weeks: leaning forward, his body hunched over a laptop, elbows on the table and chin resting in his palms. His back is to her, but she doesn't need to see his face to know that his eyes are rimmed with red and there are dark circles under them that would rival any raccoon's.
Eventually, he looks back over his shoulder and sees her on the other side of the glass. He smiles at her and gives her a little wave.

Needing no further invitation, Katniss opens the library door with one hand and strides into their unofficial after-hours war room.

"Thanks for coming," Peeta tells her when she sits down next to him. The firm's library has a very scenic city view from its large glass windows. The wood-paneled room looks out over the Chicago River, and the city is lit up below them like a giant birthday cake.

But Peeta is drumming his fingertips rapidly against the laminated top of the library table, and Katniss knows there's no time to admire the scenery right now.

"Of course I came," she tells him. She leans forward and brushes her nose against his. "You need me right now, and I'm here."

"Well I appreciate it all the same," he murmurs very quietly. His lips are just a hairsbreadth away from hers, and she feels his words as little puffs of air against her mouth more than she hears them.

Even though they've been together for a few months, being this close to Peeta still sends shivers down her spine. She closes the tiny distance between them and kisses him on the lips, seeing no reason not to.

He breaks it off a moment later and leans his forehead against hers. He sighs. "Shall we get started?" he asks quietly, eyes closed.

"Sure."

Peeta gives her another quick kiss before loosening his necktie and taking it off. He drapes it over the back of his straight-backed chair and rubs his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Obviously we can't watch the whole thing," he tells her, adjusting the settings on his laptop so they can view the deposition on a full screen. He sounds anxious. "And I mean, lots of it's just boring waste of time stuff anyway. But there are two specific segments that I really want you to help –"

"Ok," Katniss says, cutting him off. "It's fine, Peeta. Whatever you need." She rests her hand on top of his and tries to give it a reassuring squeeze. To her dismay, his hand is shaking.

"How freaked out is he right now?" She looks him in the eye and tries to ask him, wordlessly, if he's all right. She squeezes his hand again.

If he understands what she's asking him he doesn't acknowledge it. "Ok," he says instead, changing the subject, nodding absently. He clears his throat and punches a few buttons on his laptop with his free hand, queuing up the video Katniss strongly suspects he was already watching before she got here.

A moment later an image of a small conference room with several people seated around a long, narrow table pops up on Peeta's monitor. He leans forward again to adjust the picture quality and presses play.

Mr. DeGrassi, Capitol's CEO, is a puffy-faced, white-haired man who looks like he must be at least seventy years old. In the video he's seated across the table from Peeta (who's shown from behind), and flanked on either side by two middle-aged, male attorneys wearing very expensive-looking suits. Katniss has never seen these men before but she assumes they must be the senior
partners at Snow & Crane that Peeta told her about.

Everyone present in the room has a tall glass of water in front of him that's completely full. Which means, Katniss assumes, the deposition has only just begun.

"Sir," the videotaped Peeta begins, his voice authoritative and calm, belying the severe case of nerves that Katniss knows plagued him that entire day. "Could you please state and spell your full name for the record?"

"Certainly," the recorded image of Mr. DeGrassi replies. "My name is Mitchell DeGrassi." Mr. DeGrassi then proceeds to spell his name very slowly. The court reporter is not pictured in the video, but her keystrokes are easily heard off camera as she takes down the letters.

"Can you please describe your educational background?" Peeta continues, voice smooth as silk. He taps his pen against the notebook in front of him twice – the only outward sign that he's anything but completely at ease.

"Sure," Mr. DeGrassi says. "I got my Bachelor's of Science in Business Administration from Harvard University in 1970. I stayed on after that to get my MBA," he said.

"You got your MBA at Harvard?" Peeta asks.

"That's right."

"What year did you graduate from that program?"

Mr. DeGrassi steeplest his fingers together and rests his chin on the point they make. "Hm. Well, it was a long time ago..." he laughs a little. "It was... I believe it must have been 1974. Yes, 1974. Because I took two years off in between finishing college and beginning my MBA program to travel."

Katniss rolls her eyes. Of course Capitol's CEO took two years off from all responsibility to travel. Of course he would have been wealthy enough, even as a young man, to do so.

If Peeta had the same initial reaction to his answers that Katniss does he didn't show it in front of the camera during the deposition. He proceeds to ask other questions – about Mr. DeGrassi's professional background; about the work he did for other companies prior to joining Capitol in 2008; and about what, specifically, he's done for Capitol as its CEO.

Katniss sits next to Peeta through all of this, eyes fixed on his laptop. Her hand still rests gently on top of his and she twines their fingers together. Without taking her eyes off the screen she brings their hands over towards her and rests them on her knee.

She rests her head on Peeta's shoulder and watches Mr. DeGrassi's mouth move, willing herself to pay attention to the details Peeta wants her to hear.

Katniss doesn't look away from the deposition playing on Peeta's computer for nearly an hour.

Eventually, however – when Mr. DeGrassi asks for a water break, and when Peeta grants it – she tears her eyes away and glances over at Peeta out of the corner of her eye.

What she sees when she looks at his face makes her frown.

There's no longer anything happening in the conference room on the screen. All the attorneys and witnesses have left the room. But the recording is still going, and Peeta is still watching it with a
focus that alarms her. His jaw is rigid with concentration as he continues to watch, and the hand she isn't holding is clenched into a tight fist on his thigh.

She glances down at the time in the bottom right corner of the computer screen. It's nearly nine now. She bites her lip and rests her head against Peeta's shoulder again, sighing. She intends it to be a loving, caring gesture, but the muscles in his body are so rigid with tension that he flinches at her touch.

She pulls back. "Peeta?" she asks, very worried now.

"Err, sorry," Peeta says, sheepishly, blushing a little. "I'm just… this deposition is just…" He gestures wildly with his free hand, and then runs it anxiously through his hair, over and over again. The rapid movements nudge the stem of his glasses off his right ear, causing his glasses to slip halfway down the bridge of his nose.

If Peeta were in his right mind right now he'd push his glasses back up with his pointer finger, just like she's seen him do a thousand times before. But Peeta just leaves the glasses where they are, too agitated and far too distracted to even notice they're no longer where they're supposed to be.

Katniss sighs again and closes her eyes. She reaches over and adjusts his glasses for him, very gently, and then begins running the flat of her hand up and down his leg. Down and back, down and back, from his knee back up to the top of his thigh.

"Peeta," she says, as soothingly as she can. "Maybe we should call it a night? It's getting late, and…"

"No," Peeta says adamantly, his jaw clenched tightly again. Normally, caressing Peeta's upper thigh is all it takes for her to draw Peeta's attention away from whatever is stressing him and back to her. But not this time. He shakes his head and, with no small amount of force, displaces her hand from his leg. "No, Katniss. Trial is next week. I need to know everything there is to know about this guy before –"

"I think you've got all you're going to get from this," she says, cutting him off, gesturing to the monitor in front of him. "Spending any more time watching this is just going to drive you mad."

"But Katniss," he says plaintively, his voice cracking in the middle of her name. "You don't – I can't – you don't understand –"

But Katniss does understand. She places one hand on either side of his face and, very gently but firmly, she cuts off the rest of his frantic words with a kiss.

It's immediately clear to her that Peeta was not expecting this. He's so frazzled right now that he gasps and jumps involuntarily as she tries to deepen the kiss, twisting a little in his seat. But she doesn't stop kissing him, and he recovers quickly. He throws his arms around her and, without warning, pulls her over and onto his lap, twining his fingers in her long unbraided hair as he starts to kiss her back.

"Katniss," Peeta says, after a very long moment, pulling away a little. Their faces are less than an inch apart and she can feel the short pants of his breath on her lips. "Wait… We're in… I mean, we're in the library," he sputters. The panicked look on his face would be comical if she weren't so concerned for him.

"So?" Katniss asks, one eyebrow raised. It's been too long since they've been together like this—way too long. And he clearly needs a temporary distraction desperately.

It's not like anyone is still at the office at this hour anyway.
And so she throws her arms around him, giggling. She leans forward and kisses him again, ignoring his feeble protests as she moves over to sit on his lap, and closes the distance between them until their bodies are flush against one another. She traces the outline of his lower lip with her tongue and worries it gently with her teeth, eliciting a quiet moan from the back of his throat, trying to drive out every fear and every stressor from his mind and willing Peeta to think of nothing in the moment but this.

But eventually, he pulls away again. "What if... I don't know. What if one of our colleagues walks in?" he asks. He's panting heavily now, and he makes no move to stop her when she begins pressing a line of kisses down the side of his throat. "Or... or the cleaning staff?"

"I think we're safe here," she tells him evenly. "Everyone's gone home." She reaches up with one hand and brushes his long, curly hair off his forehead. She slowly takes his glasses off his face and, without taking her eyes off his, folds them up and places them on the table behind them.

He raises one eyebrow at her – suggestively or warningly; Katniss can't be certain. But either way tightens his hold around her body. And for the first time in more than a week, he gives her a small smile.

"All right," he says quietly, nodding. She begins running her hand up his thigh again, and his smile grows. "I've probably seen that recording enough by now anyway."

Chapter End Notes

If you're still reading, thank you so much for sticking with this story. :)

If you'd like to find me on tumblr, where I blog about THG, Game of Thrones, and my naughty cats, you can find me there as jeeno2.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Katniss pulls the warm down comforter over her head, trying to shut out the feeble early morning sunlight struggling to pierce through the slats in Peeta’s bedroom window.

She wraps her arms around Peeta’s body and burrows more closely into his side, breathing him in and reveling in the fact that there’s absolutely nowhere either of them needs to be right now.

She could definitely get used to this kind of luxury.

When she presses a gentle kiss to Peeta’s neck he sighs quietly. He reaches up and begins running his fingers through her long, tangled hair.

He’s awake, then.

“Hey,” he murmurs, very quietly, his voice thick with sleep. He kisses the top of her head as he continues to work through her tangles with dexterous fingers. They’d both gone to bed very late last night, right after their celebratory dinner… and their shower for two. She hadn’t bothered to dry her hair before going to sleep, which she knew was a mistake even at the time. But drunk as she was on victory and on Peeta, in the moment she just didn’t care that her hair would be a wreck this morning.

Katniss shoves the covers off her and props herself up on one elbow, looking down at Peeta’s face, slack with fatigue and more relaxed than she’s seen it in more than six months. His eyes are open, but are unfocused without his glasses. Even still, they travel leisurely down from her eyes, to her lips, to her collarbone until they finally stop to rest on her bare breasts.

He cups them gently in his hands and stares at them, smiling a little. For half a second Katniss thinks he’s wordlessly suggesting they resume their activities from last night. She’s just about to suggest it herself when his eyes flutter closed on a sleepy sigh.

He’s asleep again in seconds.

Carefully, so as not to wake him, Katniss reaches down and pulls the covers back over them both. She drapes one arm across his bare chest and nestles her head on his shoulder. Pressing a gentle kiss to his cheek, she decides to stay awake and watch Peeta for a while. Standing sentinel over him, a guard against unpleasant dreams.

After everything he’s been through the past six months he deserves a full night of restful sleep.

Even though their agreement from the beginning has been that Katniss would stay in a behind-the-scenes role for this trial, once they’re only a few days out she realizes what she really wants is to be there, agreement with Peeta be damned. Not holed up in her comfortable downtown office, doing what increasingly feels like completely unimportant work during the day and conducting research for Peeta’s trial on the sly at night.

She wants to actually be there as Peeta nails Capitol to the wall for what they’re doing in Guatemala. She wants to be the one to use her research on international trade law to cross-
examine Capitol’s CEO. She wants to be the one to make the goddamn closing argument at the end of trial that she wrote for Peeta two days ago.

After spending months surreptitiously helping Peeta prepare, Katniss feels prouder of her work on this case than of anything else she’s ever done in the law. By now it’s truly their case. *Theirs.* Not just Peeta’s. Even if Katniss won’t, and can’t, get any of the credit for it. And Katniss hates that she can’t be there with Peeta every single minute of this trial to see it through to the end.

But every time she brings it up to him Peeta’s answer is always the same. “You can’t,” he always says. “You know that.” He usually follows up his words with a heated kiss that, while more than pleasant, does little to placate.

He’s right of course. Cinna would have her head if she ditched her billable work for a whole month to try this case with Peeta. To say nothing of what Haymitch or the firm’s name partners would say about it.

But none of that changes how she feels.

Katniss does manage to be there for Peeta’s opening statement.

She has to come up with an excuse involving a fictitious aunt and a sick puppy to get out of her weekly team meeting with Haymitch and Cinna. But even if she can’t be present for as much of the trial as she’d like, she refuses to miss this first part of it. No matter how much time and hard work you put into the rest of the trial, the opening statement can often make – or sink – your case. She can’t let Peeta do this alone.

When she arrives at the courthouse that morning, Peeta is already sitting at the plaintiff’s table – the larger of the two counsel tables; the one to the left of the judge’s bench. There are books and stacks of documents three deep and piled up nearly a foot high on either side of him.

“Peeta,” she says.

His head snaps up at the sound of her voice and he looks at her, eyes wide with surprise behind his glasses. She hadn’t told him she was coming today.

“Katniss!” Peeta says happily, if more than a little shakily. He stands up to greet her with an enthusiasm that belies the exhaustion she knows he’s feeling.

The courtroom where Peeta will essentially be living these next four weeks is much smaller than Katniss imagined it would be. It’s really not much larger than their Moot Court room was at Michigan. It is ornate, though. Or at least, as ornate as a room in a Federal building ever is. The Federal Government’s seal hangs prominently over the judge’s bench alongside a richly decorated tapestry displaying the State of Illinois’ seal. And the two counsel tables appear to be made of real mahogany.

Katniss wastes no time in walking over to Peeta and wrapping her arms around him. He pulls her close and buries his face in her hair. He sighs, and kisses the top of her head before resting his cheek against it.

Ordinarily, Katniss wouldn’t feel comfortable engaging in public displays of affection like this in a courtroom, but right now she doesn’t care. The trial won’t start for another hour. And the only other person in the room is a bored-looking bailiff who’s ignoring them and messing around on her iPhone.
They stand there together in silence for a very long moment, enjoying each other’s company and the last precious moment of peace they’ll likely know for a month.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” Peeta eventually admits to her under his breath for what must be the hundredth time. He’s said it to her so often it’s become a sort of mantra for him. “I just don’t know, Katniss. It’s… it’s so much.”

She presses a gentle kiss to his neck and snuggles more closely into him. She can hear his heartbeat – steady and strong and sure – under her ear.

“You can,” Katniss assures him, just as she always does whenever he begins to doubt himself. She holds him tighter. “You will.”

Peeta lets out a muffled noise that sounds a little like a sob.

“Okay,” he says slowly, sounding unconvinced.

Peeta’s opening statement is little changed from the presentation he made to her that night in Guatemala, when it was just the two of him in his cluttered hotel room. The night when they’d finally both let down their defenses and slept together.

Over the months he’s added a few additional facts about La Maquila’s operations that they’ve gleaned from discovery. There are a few extra paces around the counsel’s table they’d choreographed together, a few nights ago in HP&C’s library over a midnight dinner of greasy pizza.

And the jury is rapt, watching him, slack-jawed and riveted, as Peeta masterfully holds them in his thrall.

It is, by and large, the same speech Katniss has heard dozens of times before. But it is no less powerful and affecting for that. She has to dab her eyes with a Kleenex by the end.

The following day, Katniss is able to sneak into court again for a few hours so she can watch Peeta question the Plaintiffs’ first witness: La Maquila’s CEO, who is at least as nervous and easily rattled in court as he was in his videotaped deposition, if not even more so. Katniss wishes she could come tomorrow for Peeta’s questioning of La Maquila’s Guatemalan Chief of Operations, too; but she knows she won’t be able to swing that.

About an hour into Peeta’s direct examination, the courtroom door behind Katniss opens very quietly and then closes again. Katniss turns her head and sees Delly walk in, wearing a Neiman Marcus suit that must have cost her over a thousand dollars. Delly stands by the door, holding a giant briefcase in both hands, too distracted by the trial to notice that Katniss is here and staring right at her.

“Delly,” Katniss whispers. Loudly enough for Delly to hear her, quietly enough that the other people assembled in the courtroom won’t notice.

Delly turns to look at Katniss and she pales. She holds up a hand and waves a little, smiling weakly.
Katniss glances at her wristwatch. It’s nearly noon. No matter how much she wants to stay and watch the rest of this she needs to get back to work. And soon. Sighing, she stands up from her seat and walks to the back of the courtroom where Delly is still standing.

When she gets there she puts her hand on Delly’s shoulder. Delly flinches a little at the contact.

“Game over,” Katniss mouths deliberately and soundlessly to her friend, trying to look intimidating. She can’t do much to help Peeta now that trial is underway, and this stupid gesture probably won’t do much. But Delly’s eyes go wide at Katniss’ implication, and in spite of herself Katniss feels a small flash of pride.

She hopes Delly will forgive her when this is all over.

“Good luck,” Katniss whispers to her before opening the courtroom door and walking through it.

Katniss isn’t able to get back to the courthouse until the trial is very nearly over.

Cinna’s on to her. He hasn’t said as much but Katniss knows it’s true. He’s a very intelligent man, and she knows that somewhere along the way he started suspecting what’s been going on right under his nose for months.

Even from the beginning of her time at HP&C, Cinna always did the best he could to keep from piling her up with meaningless busy work. And to the extent possible he’s always been flexible about deadlines. But suddenly, and without warning, all of that has come to an end. Now that Peeta’s trial is ongoing Cinna keeps Katniss’ inbox so full of depositions to review and pointless pleadings to file that Katniss is tied to her desk until nearly ten every night just to keep her head above water.

Katniss had become very used to having dinner with Peeta every night during their months of trial prep, but that’s over now as well. Given that she’s still trying to help Peeta behind the scenes – late at night, once her work from Cinna is finally complete – and given that Peeta is even busier than she is, all that they have time for now are supportive texts to each other before collapsing in their respective beds.

Sometimes they’re both so exhausted from the day’s work their text conversations make no sense.

One week before the jury is set to begin deliberation, and at two in the morning, Katniss reaches her breaking point. Even though she hopes Peeta is sleeping at this hour she needs to reach him. She needs to know that he’s okay, that he’s hanging in there. And that he still believes they’ll come out of all of this alive on the other side.

She grabs the phone lying on her bedside table and begins texting him.

I wish I could be there with you, Peeta.

She waits a few moments for him to respond. When he doesn’t, she puts the phone back down on her table and lies back down, eyes wide open and staring at the ceiling.

Her phone vibrates and lights up with a text a few seconds later. She scrambles to the phone and picks it up.

I know, Katniss. I wish you were here with me too.
She closes her eyes and grits her teeth, trying to work up the courage to tell him what she’s been wanting to say for months now.

*When this is over….*

She pauses and takes a deep breath. Tells herself she can do this. She can tell him.

*When this trial is over, I don’t want us to be apart like this anymore. Ever again.*

He doesn’t text her back right away, and Katniss can hear her heart hammering wildly in her chest.

Finally, her phone vibrates in her hands with his return message.

*I don’t want us to be apart like this anymore either. This really sucks.*

She lets out a shaky breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

*Can we find a way to fix this, Peeta? Make sure it never happens again?*

His response is instantaneous:

1. *If it’s what you want. Because that’s definitely what I want, Katniss.*

That night, Katniss doesn’t fall asleep until after three in the morning, her phone clutched tightly in her hand. When her alarm goes off four hours later her fingers stiff are from having held it all night.

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The morning Peeta is due to give his closing argument in front of the jury Katniss doesn’t even bother going into the office.

She has another meeting with yet another irritating corporate client that afternoon. But she doesn’t care. Missing the prep meeting with Cinna and Haymitch will earn her a reprimand but she’ll be damned if she’s going to miss Peeta making his closing argument in front of the twelve men and women he’s been trying to win over the past four weeks.

She arrives at the Federal courthouse after trial has already been in session for a few minutes, and so she pushes the door open as quietly as she can. Unlike the first two times she came here, the room is packed with people. Including, to her great surprise, journalists. There are no cameras allowed in the Seventh Circuit’s Federal courtrooms but after a lifetime of watching CNN she’d recognize the telltale recorders and notepads they use anywhere.

There are so many people gathered in the small room that Katniss has to crane her neck at an awkward angle to find Peeta. And when she sees him – his back to her, standing in front of the judge’s bench with three of Capitol’s attorneys – her jaw drops.

In the three weeks since she last saw Peeta he’s lost weight. A *lot* of weight. The suit he’s wearing is one he had tailored specially for this trial. Six weeks ago it fit him perfectly, but today he’s swimming in clothes that are clearly two sizes too big for him.

Katniss strains her ears to listen to what the judge is saying to Peeta and the other attorneys. But she’s a good two hundred feet away from them and she can’t quite make out the words. Whatever it is, though, she can tell it has Capitol’s counsel agitated. The man Katniss assumes is their lead
attorney shakes his head from side to side. She can see his profile, and his face is a mask of disappointment.

Peeta, for his part, is nodding along as the judge speaks and writing whatever she’s saying down on a notepad. His face is hidden to Katniss. She wishes more than anything that she could know what he’s thinking right now.

“All right,” the judge says eventually, loudly enough for the entire courtroom can hear. The row of journalists seated in the back row sit up straighter at her words and stop fiddling with their recorders and iPhones. “Counsel for the Plaintiffs?”

“We rest, your Honor.” Peeta’s voice is hoarse – Katniss’ heart clenches painfully in her chest when she hears how scratchy it is – but to her amazement it still conveys strength and confidence.

“Very good,” the judge says. “And counsel for Defendant?”

“Rest, your Honor,” the lead attorney says.

“Very well,” the judge says. She pushes up the long, flowing sleeves of her black robe and turns to Peeta. “Counsel, your closing argument?”

“Yes, your Honor,” Peeta says. He slowly makes his way over to the jury box and stands in front of the twelve men and women who’ve been listening to his every word for four weeks.

“Men and women of the jury,” Peeta begins.

As he paces the courtroom, all that can be heard aside than his voice is the occasional quiet cough and the whirring of the journalists’ recorders.

Peeta is just as magnificent in front of crowd as he’s always been. But he leans against the jury box railing for support far more than they’d practiced a month ago – and to Katniss he just looks so, so tired.

And then, just like that, it’s over.

As the jury files out of its box, Peeta carefully winds his way to where Katniss is sitting in the back.

He places his palm on her shoulder.

“I need to get out of here,” he rasps.

She covers his hand with hers. He’s shaking. She gives his hand what she hopes is a reassuring squeeze but he doesn’t stop.

“I love you,” she says. He smiles at her, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Please, Katniss,” he pleads. “I need to go.”

Wordlessly, she takes him by both hands and leads him out of the courtroom.
“I can’t lose this trial, Katniss,” he tells her as soon as they’re outside the courthouse.

He insisted they go outside, despite the frigid late spring temperatures. He has a cigarette in one hand and a fistful of his own hair in the other and he’s pacing so quickly Katniss worries he’ll wear out his shoes.

Katniss decides to spend the entire day with him, right here, waiting for the verdict. She has mountains of work to do for Haymitch but she gives exactly zero fucks about any of it right now. She holds Peeta’s hand when he stops pacing long enough for her to do so, and tries to say sweet, encouraging things to him as he frets.

Mostly, however, Peeta is full of far too much kinetic energy for her to do anything for him but sit there, quietly, listening to him rant when he needs her to listen.

“This is it,” Peeta says at last, to no one in particular. He stops his frantic pacing and stares off at an invisible point in the distance. “This is it,” he repeats. He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath; and then buries his face in his hands and begins to sob. Huge, racking sobs that shake his entire body.

Alarmed, Katniss jumps up from the bench she’d been perched on all afternoon. She runs over to his side and gathers him into his arms.

“It’s ok,” she murmurs to him very gently, although she isn’t entirely certain he can hear her in this state. He’s tall, and he dwarfs her frame – she only comes up to his shoulder, and her face is buried in his chest and his starched white button-down – but she attempts to rock him a little anyway. “You’ll be all right, no matter what happens. I promise.”

He makes an incomprehensible strangled noise in the back of his throat by way of response. And simply stands there and lets her try and rock him as his tears fall on her hair.

Katniss isn’t certain how long they stand like that, clutched in each other’s arms, in front of the Federal courthouse. An hour? Four hours?

Either way, the sun is beginning to set when Peeta’s phone vibrates in his pocket. The interruption startles them both and they break apart.

Peeta looks at her from red-rimmed eyes. His face ashen, but at least he’s no longer shaking. He fumbles for his phone and looks at the screen for a long moment.

“The bailiff,” he says. His voice is distant and strange. “It’s the bailiff.”

“Go on, then” Katniss says to him, trying to sound encouraging. Trying not to vomit from nerves herself. “You need to answer it, Peeta.”

Peeta nods and pushes a button on his phone, his eyes wide.

“Yes?” he says into it.

A short pause.

“All right,” he says. He’s shaking again, and Katniss’ stomach sinks. “Yes, sir. I’ll be right in.”

He shuts off the phone and puts it back in his pocket.
"The jury has a verdict," he tells her.

Chapter End Notes

I’m chaining myself to my desk until this story is finished. Just one more chapter and an epilogue to go. For those of you who are still reading and who haven’t given up on this story, I thank you!

If you’d like to yell at me for how bad I am at updating – or if you’d like to just say hello – you can find me on tumblr as jeeno2, where I blog about THG, Game of Thrones, and my naughty cats.
Katniss sits next to Peeta at the plaintiff’s counsel table as the jurors file into their box.

Given that Katniss is not listed as an attorney of record in this case it's technically a minor violation of court rules for her to be sitting here. But in the moment she doesn't care.

"I can't face this without you next to me," Peeta confessed as they walked back into the courtroom together, hand in hand. "It all comes down to this and I just… I can't do it alone."

That was all Katniss needed to hear before agreeing to be right there by his side for the verdict.

They quickly decide that if the judge asks who Katniss is and why she's sitting there, Peeta will explain that she's his colleague, and is therefore just as entitled to be there as he is. Which, absent an appearance from her on file, isn't technically true. But they're banking on the judge not wanting to do anything about it on the very last day of trial.

Five hours, is what the bailiff told Peeta over the phone. Five hours is all the jury needed to deliberate, and to reach a verdict, in a case it took Katniss and Peeta months to prepare.

"This is either very good news or very bad news," Peeta whispers into Katniss' ear as the judge ambles forward and takes the bench. Katniss already knows that. How could she not? But she looks at Peeta and nods her agreement all the same.

"Madame foreman," the judge says, turning to look at the elderly juror who remains standing after the others have taken their seats.

"Yes, your Honor," she says.

"Has the jury reached a verdict?"

"We have, your Honor," the foreman confirms.

The judge nods. "Good," she says. She picks up a pen lying on her desk and begins writing something down on a notepad. "Beginning with the first count against Defendants Capitol Corporation and La Maquila, and continuing through to the last one, would you please read off how the jury finds?"

"Certainly your Honor."

Katniss grips Peeta's hand as the foreman takes out a sheaf of paper from her white lined notebook. Peeta squeezes her hand back. His grip is steady and strong – which surprises her.

A moment later the foreman clears her throat and begins to read.

Katniss has imagined many different versions of this moment over the past several months. Almost every time, the jury's verdict has been accompanied by absolute chaos. Whenever Katniss imagined Defendants winning, their attorneys usually pounded their fists on their table in triumph. Whenever she imagined them losing, they’d storm out of the courtroom, furious.

In every version of this scene Katniss always imagined tears and anger; fury and elation. And
shouting. Everybody shouting – the judge, the jury, plaintiffs and defendants; sometimes even the bailiff and custodial staff – no matter who won and who lost.

As the real foreman reads off the real verdict, however – as she lists, one by one, each and every one of the counts on which the jury has found for Peeta and the Plaintiffs – the universe remains firmly on its axis. There is no throwing of paper nor rending of clothes. Nobody is screaming, and there is no hysteria.

When the foreman finally reaches the end of the list, and it is clear that Peeta and the plaintiffs have won on every count – and everyone in the courtroom is still as calm as they were five minutes ago – Katniss realizes, highly annoyed with herself, that she's spent way too many hours watching stupid legal dramas with Madge.

And just like that, it's over.

Peeta's hand tightens into a vise grip on Katniss'. Because he's won. After all this time – after all the sleepless nights and the countless hours spent preparing for this moment – Peeta has won on each and every count he brought against Capitol Corporation and La Maquila.

But aside from Peeta's grip on her hand there is no other outward sign in the courtroom that anything terribly momentous, or even all that interesting, has just happened. The judge thanks the members of the jury for their service and dismisses them. They leave the room in single file, talking about what they plan to have for dinner tonight, what's on TV this evening, and other minutiae.

Katniss glances across the courtroom at opposing counsel. Delly Cartwright's face is white as a sheet, but the partners in her firm who tried this case – while they hardly look happy – don't look terribly upset, either. Lead counsel for Capitol is saying something Katniss cannot make out to Capitol's CEO.

And for his part, Capitol's CEO looks only mildly annoyed.

"Well, then," Peeta says to her. Katniss turns to look at him for the first time since the verdict was read. The pinched, anxious expression Peeta has worn nearly constantly the past few months is still there. Like he can't believe it's truly over, and that he's finally emerged on the other side, victorious.

"I guess we won?" Katniss says. She says it like a question, even though she knows it's true. She hopes Peeta believes it. He deserves to believe it.

"Yeah," Peeta says. He swallows audibly. He smiles a little. Shrugs his shoulders. "I guess we did?" He says it like it's a question, too.

"Mr. Mellark," a voice cuts in abruptly.

They turn in unison to look at the speaker. It's Mr. Davenport, lead counsel for Capitol Corporation.

"Can I help you?" Peeta asks, sounding dazed.

"Congratulations," Mr. Davenport says, his voice utterly devoid of warmth. It's clear to Katniss that he's not remotely interested in congratulating Peeta on anything. "Tomorrow morning, after we've all had a good night's sleep, let's talk about the post-trial briefing schedule. And damages. Shall we?"

"Oh. Right. Briefing, yes. And damages figures, yes, ok," Peeta says absently, as though suffering
from the disorientation that often accompanies waking from a long nap. He stands up and 
rummages through the papers on the table, looking for something to write with, his movements 
clumsy and slow.

"I'll call you first thing tomorrow morning. What – what's a good number for me to call you at?" 
Peeta asks. Katniss winces, because Peeta's had more phone conversations with Mr. Davenport 
these past few months than he's had with her. If Peeta were in his right mind he'd be able to rattle 
off the phone number from memory.

"Don't bother calling me," Davenport says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I'll have my 
associate call you." Katniss looks up and sees Delly walking towards them, carrying a legal pad.

Peeta smiles at their old friend. Or he tries to smile at her, anyway. "That would be great," he says. 
His voice is still shaky. "I look forward to talking numbers and dates with you tomorrow morning, 
Ms. Cartright."

"Thanks, Mr. Mellark," Delly says, nodding at him. She tries to smile back at him. Katniss notices 
Delly's only marginally more successful at it than Peeta had been.

When Delly and Mr. Davenport leave the plaintiffs' table and return to their own, Peeta turns once 
more to Katniss.

"Hey," he says, as though he's seeing her for the first time in weeks. The look of anxiety and 
shock on his face has faded – replaced with a wild, almost feverish glow. Peeta's grinning now, 
and the smile reaches his eyes.

*It's hit him, Katniss thinks. It's hit him that it's over, and that we won.*

"Hey," she says back to him. Also smiling.

Before Katniss even realizes what's happened Peeta's long arms are suddenly wrapped around her, 
and he's pulling her close. He lets out a carefree, bubbly laugh – *god,* how she's missed his 
laughter – a moment before he closes the short distance between them and presses his lips to hers.

"Oh, hey," Katniss says, giggling uncomfortably. She tries to pull away from him but Peeta 
appears to be hell-bent on kissing her right here, right now. She eventually manages to extract 
herself from his grip but it's no easy task.

"Come back," he whines – loudly enough that everyone in the courtroom can likely hear him. He 
doesn't seem to care, though. Refusing to be deterred, he tries kissing her again – her lips, the tip 
of her nose, her cheeks. Every part of her he can reach.

"Peeta," she chastises, breathless with laughter. She places her palms flat on his chest and tries to 
gently push him away. "People are watching us."

He grins wolfishly at her and rests his forehead against hers. "Let them watch," he sighs against 
her lips. He reaches up and tucks a loose lock of hair behind her ear. "Because I really don't care 
about the other people in this courtroom right now, Katniss."

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Despite what Peeta told Delly and Mr. Davenport at the end of trial, he's still soundly asleep at ten 
o'clock the next morning.

His phone lies on the dresser across the room from his bed. It's rung three times in the past hour. 
Katniss knows it's probably been Delly each time, trying to reach him as planned to discuss post-
trial issues. But the phone's buzzing didn't wake him, and Katniss decides to let Peeta sleep.
It took them months to get to this point. Katniss figures Delly and her clients can wait a little while longer.

After some time passes, Katniss decides to get up and make them both breakfast. Last night they agreed they’d be taking today off work. (Katniss willfully avoids thinking about the multiple unchecked messages on her own phone. She decides Cinna and Haymitch can wait a little while longer, too.) A leisurely midweek brunch is something they’ve never had time for before and in the moment Katniss can’t think of a better way to spend the morning.

Of course, she’s not much of a cook. Growing up, she and Prim mostly ate soup from cans and whatever her mother brought home from the diner the night before. She didn't do much better for herself in law school, either. But she and Peeta are celebrating today. If she's ever going to take a stab at cooking, it might as well be now.

Katniss pushes the bed covers back very carefully so she doesn’t wake Peeta, and then rolls over a little so she can feel around on the floor for her clothes. Her fingers close around the underwear Peeta tore off her without ceremony last night and she pulls them on. She searches a bit longer for the rest of her clothes but can't seem to find the blouse or skirt she was wearing last night.

She eventually gives up and just puts on the blue button down shirt Peeta wore yesterday. Because Peeta is so much taller than she is the bottom hem reaches all the way down to her mid-thigh. Fortunately, Peeta's roommate is out of town this week. Given that, Katniss figures she's decently enough attired to make breakfast for two.

Stifling a yawn with the back of her hand, Katniss pads into Peeta's small galley kitchen so she can rummage around for breakfast fixings. Unsurprisingly, the fridge is mostly a wash; there's not much in there other than half-empty takeout containers. In the very back, though, Katniss eventually finds a small carton of milk that's only a few days past its printed expiration date. She also finds a carton of eggs.

Katniss opens the milk carton and tentatively sniffs it. It's still good. A quick search of the pantry yields a box of pancake mix and enough vegetable oil to make up a small batch of pancakes for the two of them.

She's halfway through mixing the ingredients together in a large metal bowl when a pair of strong arms wrap themselves around her from behind, startling her.

"Hey," Peeta breathes into her ear. He leans forward a little and kisses her cheek. "Whatcha doing?" he asks, resting his chin on her shoulder.

"Pancakes," she tells him. She cranes her neck a little so she can look at his face. For the first time in recent memory his blue eyes are bright and clear and there are no dark circles underneath them. The sight of him relaxed and rested makes her smile.

"Yummy," he says, grinning broadly. He kisses her on the lips and walks to the only flat surface in the apartment that's not covered in books and reams of paper: a small kitchen table tucked into the corner. Peeta sits down in one of the chairs and buries his face in his hands, yawning loudly.

"Your phone rang a bunch of times," Katniss says. All Peeta's wearing right now is a pair of plaid boxer shorts. The sight of his bare chest and broad shoulders makes her think back to how she'd straddled him in bed last night and teased the shirt she's currently wearing off his body. And the sounds he'd made while she did it.

She turns back to the mixing bowl, a blush rising on her cheeks at the memory.
"Yeah, I know it rang," Peeta says. "I listened to the messages before coming out here."

"Was it Delly?" Katniss asks. She bends at the waist and digs through Peeta's cupboards until she finds a griddle large enough for pancakes. The bottom hem of Peeta's shirt rises up at the movement, and she can practically feel Peeta's gaze inching up the backs of her bare thighs.

She stands up and turns back to face him. Sure enough, Peeta's blushing now too. He clears his throat before answering her.

"One message was from Delly, yeah," he confirms. "She wants to talk about damages, like Davenport said yesterday. And also the timeline for dismantling the facility in Guatemala and retraining the workers left without jobs." He rubs his eyes and yawns again. "And, well… that's gonna take some doing. We got the facility shut down, sure – but now all those workers are unemployed. There won't be an easy solution to that." He shakes his head.

"But the damages you're getting for the workers should help them, right?" Katniss asks, raising one eyebrow.

"Yes," Peeta concedes. "Until the money runs out, of course."

Katniss gives him a grim smile. "Peeta, those workers are safe now because of you. The rest will work itself out. We'll make certain of it." She nods, because she knows it's the truth.

Peeta sighs. He shakes his head a little as if to clear it, and Katniss can tell he doesn't believe her.

"I guess I always thought of this trial as just the first phase in helping those people," he admits to her, very quietly. "But... but anyway. Yeah. The first call was Delly."

"Okay," Katniss says. She turns back to the stove and flips over the first pancake in the pan, grimacing a little when she sees it's a little overdone. "Who were the other calls from?"

"One was from the Chicago Trib. They want to interview me about the trial and the verdict. Sometime later today, I think. And the third message... well..."

Peeta coughs again, and trails off without finishing his sentence.

"Yes?" Katniss prompts, glancing over her shoulder at him as the pancakes sizzle on the stovetop. But Peeta's not looking at her. He's staring down at his hands, studying his cuticles as he drums his fingers on the table. "Who was the other message from?"

"Well..." he says again, then pauses. He swallows audibly. "The other message was from the City of Chicago's Legal Aid office." Another pause. "Their Executive Director, actually."

"Oh," Katniss says, poking at a pancake. "Really? What did she want?"

"Yeah, really." Peeta confirms, drawing out the words. "She called me completely out of the blue. And... uh. She wants me to call her back right away." Another pause. "For a... um. For a job interview."

Katniss' spatula slips from her fingers and clatters to the floor, splattering pancake batter everywhere.

"I see," Katniss says, very slowly, trying to sound nonchalant. She grabs a dishtowel and starts cleaning up the mess she's made of Peeta's kitchen floor, trying to ignore the rapid increase in her heart rate at his words. But her voice comes out squeakier than she'd intended all the same,
making her cringe.

*Stay calm, Katniss.*

"Well," Katniss continues. She doesn't know what to say, so she starts babbling just to fill the silence. "I mean… do you think…"

"Katniss," Peeta interrupts. He gets out of his chair and walks over to her. He gently turns her around so she's facing him and puts one hand on either side of her waist. His palms are very warm. Katniss can feel the heat of them through the thin cotton of his button-down shirt.

She shivers a little anyway.

"The pancakes, Peeta," she stammers, looking down at the floor, the wall over his shoulder, anywhere but at his face. "I don't want them to burn."

"I'm not leaving Chicago," he blurts out suddenly. Which surprises her. It hadn't occurred to her that he might be moving. Then she realizes Peeta likely doesn't really know what to say right now, either. "I'm staying right here in Chicago with you," he adds, as if to emphasize that point.

"Okay… well, that's good." Katniss takes a deep breath and closes her eyes, bracing herself for the rest of it. "But."

Peeta sighs again. "But," he agrees. "*But,* when my Kirkland fellowship runs out in four months, if I'm still at the firm it will take over paying my salary again. And they'll treat me like any other associate."

Katniss nods, waiting for him to continue, but already knowing what he's going to say.

"Meaning, I won't be able to do the work I want to do anymore," he says. He looks into her eyes. "I'll be expected to represent corporate clients and meet an annual billable hours requirement just like everyone else."

Katniss worries her bottom lip with her teeth. She takes a deep breath and chooses her next words very carefully.

"You mean you'll be treated like me again," she says. It's not a question.

Peeta winces a little at the accusation but doesn't respond. His silence, however, tells Katniss everything she needs to know. He kisses her forehead, and when he pulls back from her the expression on his face is unreadable.

"I love you," he says, his voice husky. "And I promise you that I didn't look for this opportunity. It just… I mean, it just kind of came out of nowhere. And if – *if* I leave HP&C to join the Legal Aid office in a few months, I promise that you and me," – he pauses a little, gesturing between himself and Katniss and then back to himself – "won't change at all." He chuckles a little under his breath, but the look in his eyes is suddenly very intense. "I waited too long for you to let a job change get in the way of us."

Katniss' heart feels a little lighter at his words.

"Well…" she begins, still not knowing what to say. She knows Peeta's soul would be crushed if he had to do the mind-numbing work she's been doing at HP&C since joining the firm. Leaving at the end of his Fellowship year is of course the right thing for him to do.

But how will she be able to bear the work herself if his office is no longer just down the hall from
She doesn't want to get into any of that right now, though. "What sort of work would they have you doing, Peeta?" Knowing that whatever the answer might be, it'll be better than what he'd be doing at the firm if he stays.

"I don't know yet," he admits. "But I know their civil rights division just lost someone. So… possibly that kind of thing?" He shakes his head. "I'm going to call them back today, though and get more information." He walks back to the table and sits down. "I also want to be clear with them that I'm not going anywhere until my work on La Maquila is wrapped up."

Katniss tries to smile. "I'm happy for you Peeta," she says. Because it's the truth. Or part of the truth, anyway. She decides to keep the rest of it to herself for now. No point in ruining their celebration.

"I'm happy too," Peeta says – one short moment before his stomach growls very loudly.

He laughs again.

"Will the pancakes be ready soon?" he asks. "Because I'm starving."

"Soon," she says absently, as she tries to think of a way out of her own miserable job situation. But she knows there's no way out for her. Because as always there is still Prim; her own impoverished childhood; and her astronomical student debt that's not going anywhere anytime soon.

"Just one more minute, Peeta, and they'll be ready."

"I love you," he says again, sounding happier than Katniss can ever remember him sounding. "And breakfast smells delicious."

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will be the final one. If you're still reading along, I can't tell you how much it means to me.

If you'd like to find me on tumblr to yell at me for taking forever to finish this story; to congratulate me on finishing it in less than two years (!); or just to say hello, I'm there as jeeno2. .
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As planned, Peeta leaves work right after lunch.

When he looks back over his shoulder into his office he realizes his desk is little more than a mountain of memos and unfinished projects. It doesn't surprise him. He can't normally afford to take time off like this in the days leading up to his quarterly trip to Guatemala.

But today he doesn't care about any of that. Instead of feeling guilty about all the work he's leaving unfinished by skipping out early he simply sighs and closes the door behind him. Staying any later would be ridiculous. He already cleared this time off with the Executive Director a few days ago. Ms. Southerland is ordinarily quite the task master but even she agrees that he needs to make tonight special for Katniss.

"Go," she'd said to him on Tuesday, grinning, when he'd asked if he could leave at noon today. She'd even made a shooing motion with her hands to emphasize the point, making Peeta laugh. "On Friday, go home early and celebrate with your wife."

"I will," Peeta promised, smiling back at her.

In a perfect world Peeta wouldn't have even had to go into work today at all. But Katniss texted an hour ago to let him know she'd need to stay at HP&C until at least eight tonight. As much as he hates that Katniss will be stuck late on her last day at the job that's crushed her soul for three long years, the one small upside is it will give him plenty of time to get everything ready before she gets home.

After leaving his office he rides the brown line the short distance back to their apartment in Lincoln Park. He rushes around the neighborhood for the next two hours making certain he's gotten everything he needs for tonight's dinner. He goes to two separate grocery stores – the one they go to for their everyday shopping, but also the specialty one on Fullerton that carries the bulk spices Peeta likes to use on special occasions.

On a whim, he pops into the corner florist shop to pick up a bouquet of yellow daffodils.

When he finally gets home Peeta quickly unpacks everything on the kitchen counter. Before he gets to cooking he pours himself a glass of red wine and sets their small kitchen table with the china his aunt and uncle gave them as wedding presents. It's stupid, ostentatious stuff that they haven't used once in the eight months it's been theirs. But Peeta figures they might as well pull out all the stops tonight.

He puts on some jazz as he cooks, deciding he could get used to the kind of life where he's home at a decent hour to cook and his wife is home at a decent hour to join him.

Katniss says very little during dinner.

She isn't rude to him. She says all the right things: about how good the food tastes; how pretty the flowers are; and so on. She repeatedly tells him how thoughtful he was for doing all this for her on her last day.
She even laughs a little at his jokes.

But her eyes are downcast throughout most of the meal. He made her favorite dinner – beef stroganoff, with the dill and the special sour cream from the fancy market. He made those cheese buns she loves as an appetizer. But she spends much more time pushing small bites of food around her plate with her fork than she does actually eating.

She's not acting like herself at all.

"What's wrong?" Peeta finally asks once they've finished dessert. This isn't the reaction from her he'd hoped for. Or, frankly, expected. He knew Katniss would be exhausted from her long day. From her long three years, really. But every time they've discussed her leaving the firm these past few weeks there was such giddy elation in her voice he just assumed she'd be grinning from ear to ear tonight.

She doesn't answer his question right away. She closes her eyes and sighs before speaking.

"I'm guess I'm still scared, Peeta," she eventually says, very quietly. She looks up at him over the candles he lit earlier this evening. Their flames are reflected in her silver irises, making them warm and sparkling in the dim light of their kitchen.

Peeta reaches across the table and takes her hand in his.

Despite how unpleasant life at the firm was, it took Peeta a long time to convince Katniss that things would be all right if she left. They both knew she'd never make the kind of money HP&C pays its associates anywhere else, and for a very long time that terrified her too much to even think about making a change.

Six weeks ago, however, one of the clients Katniss co-chaired a trial for last year approached her and asked if she'd like to join their in-house team. The pay would be about two-thirds what HP&C paid, and the company was less than five years old. But they promised her varied, interesting work. They assured her she'd rarely be expected to work more than forty-five hours per week.

Katniss really enjoyed working with the people who run that company. Other than the work she did with Peeta on La Maquila it was some of the most enjoyable work she's done since graduating from law school.

And so in the end they both decided it was too good an opportunity to pass up, despite the large pay cut. They crunched some numbers and decided that while it would make things a bit tighter, they could make it work. Katniss happily accepted the position two days after it was offered to her and gave her two weeks' notice to Cinna the following morning.

Peeta doesn't understand what's behind her sudden change of heart. He gently rubs his thumb across the top of her hand, not knowing what to say. After three years with Katniss he knows that sometimes saying nothing at all is the best way to get her to talk to him, and so he stays quiet.

After another few moments of silence Katniss sighs again. She shakes her head a little, a look of determination in her eyes.

"But….well. I was scared before we started dating, too," she eventually points out. It sounds like she's trying to reason with herself. She reaches across the table for Peeta's other hand. Gives it a squeeze.

"You were terrified," Peeta agrees. "You thought dating me was going to ruin your career or… or something? I was never quite clear on what the issue was to be honest." He laughs a little, remembering, although his memories from that time are not fond.
Katniss laughs too, looking a sheepish.

"Or something," Katniss confirms, a slight blush rising on her cheeks. "But…. but then I said to hell with it, didn't I."

"Essentially."

"And then after you stopped worrying – quite reasonably, actually – that I was going to freak out on you again, we had sex."

"Yes," Peeta says, laughing again. Happily, this time. "We did."

"And, well," Katniss continues, shrugging her shoulders. "After that, pretty much everything has been great, don't you think?"

"It has been," Peeta confirms. "For me, anyway. I think you feel similarly most of the time, too. Or at least I hope you do."

Katniss smiles warmly at him from across the table. "I do."

For a long while they sit silently together in their kitchen, holding hands, listening to the faint strains of music streaming in from the adjoining room.

"So," Katniss eventually says. She gestures to Peeta, the room they're sitting in, their small apartment. "I guess all of this is proof that sometimes, taking risks can be a good thing. No," she corrects herself, shaking her head. "It proves that sometimes, taking risks can be the best thing."

Peeta grins broadly at her, ecstatic that she's finally thinking this way. He takes off his glasses and places them on the kitchen table. He stands up from his chair and slowly crosses over to her, pulling her into his arms.

"I think it does," he agrees, before kissing her.

"Thank you, Peeta," she mumbles happily against his lips. "For being the best risk I'll ever take."

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Chapter End Notes

This epilogue is an early birthday present for my dear friend MalTease, without whose unending encouragement and support I never would have been able to finish this story. I hope she (and all of you) like the story’s conclusion.

Thank you so much for reading.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!