"He’s a grown man, Katniss. With secrets," he says to the trees. "You’re barely eighteen. Be careful."

In-Panem AU.

Nobody ever moves to District Twelve. Not voluntarily. No one just shows up, let alone handsome blond men with blue eyes that crinkle at the corners.

*No, not handsome.* Katniss scowls as she misses the deer that skitters to her left. She’s off her game today.

All because of a stranger.
She remembers how she had watched him earlier that afternoon. How he had crouched down and touched the hand of the little girl being bullied; a Seam girl nonetheless, with dark skin and darker hair, the Merchant boys who had torn her school sack running off in terror as the man spoke to them in tense, clipped tones that had set even Katniss on edge from her careful distance behind the sweet shop.

After the little girl was up on her feet and moving, the man jerked his head toward her suddenly, and it had sent Katniss ducking back behind the building, all flushed with embarrassment when she realized she had been caught. Her hunter’s instincts had failed her.

All because of a stranger.

She turns berry-red even thinking about it again, how she was so captivated by the blue light of the man’s eyes, familiarly Merchant but absolutely foreign in his random act of kindness.

Who is he? What the hell is he doing here?

It haunts her.

She hates mysteries. She hates wondering about people, because it’s a waste of time, and time means money, and squirrels and deer and rabbits scampering and bounding and thumping away with every pause that she gives to this person who should mean absolutely nothing to her.

She clears her mind, she expels the stranger, and bags a fat turkey.

She sits at the Hob, the dark green hood of her jacket pulled over her eyes and blood staining the tips of her fingers, mostly unnoticed as she spoons a thick stew into her mouth.

Her pockets are for once heavy with coin, received in trade for turkey meat, feathers and feet. Even the beak and skeletal remains are used by the Bone Man for reasons that she never asks about, only shivers a little as she hands over a sack of white-and-red splattered sticks and things to him for which he happily trades a coin or two.

Greasy Sae teases Darius, whose friendly, cheerful countenance is mostly solemn today. It’s unusually sullen behavior for the youngest Peacekeeper in the district.

“Ah, girl troubles ailing ya, you ruddy thing?” Sae chortles, her careworn face contorting into a wink as she slides another bowl of her concoction his way.

Darius only grunts into his spoon. Katniss exchanges a look with Thom, a man who is on daybreak from a mining crew that includes her best friend Gale, who in turn raises his eyebrows at the red-haired man. Two other men are slurping away at the counter, good for a bawdy comment or two but otherwise harmless and mostly oblivious to anything other than their dog meat stew.

She blinks when a sudden form slides easily onto the stool next to her. She grips her dented spoon as she realizes who it is.

The stranger. The blond man.

The counter becomes quiet as the grave. He chuckles a little, unbothered by their abrupt reticence.

“Might I try some of that soup?” he asks politely, reaching into his pocket for a coin.

“Sure,” Sae agrees, voice clipped. She won’t turn away a customer, but she will not be friendly to
an outsider, either.

Darius has stiffened. Thom’s lip is curled, and the two other men that Katniss knows from her childhood, broad types that are known for tumbling and inept poaching and the like, grumble and snicker amongst themselves. She hears them mutter something vaguely sinister, something about meeting the pretty boy outside, and it doesn’t sound good.

“Leave him alone,” she says suddenly, calmly, just loud enough to startle everyone at the counter. She doesn’t realize how seldom she speaks and how respected her words are when they pass her tongue and form letters. At eighteen, just past the Reaping, she is regarded to be as skilled and as worthy as any man in Twelve. Most people in the district, Seam and Merchant alike, have tasted the victory of her bow on a weekly if not daily basis.

Sae coughs a little. The men scowl under heavy eyebrows, casting dark looks at the stranger but otherwise do not utter another word against him.

"Thank you," the man says, peering at her curiously. She can tell that he’s trying to look beyond her hood.

She just nods, tucking her chin to her chest before turning her face pointedly towards Darius. He is flushed and freckled and angry. It confuses her.

"He can fight his own battles," Darius mumbles, pushing his stew away with a clatter. Greasy Sae tsks in annoyance when some of the liquid splatters over the side of the bowl, careless droplets landing on the already stained wooden counter.

Katniss throws back her hood and levels him with a stare.

"Be a Peacekeeper or not," she says, cool as she pleases. “Either he was about to get creamed,” she motions toward the man next to her, “or not.”

Everyone is looking at her now. She stands up, suddenly embarrassed. Katniss Everdeen doesn’t cause scenes. She throws a coin onto the counter and turns away.

She’s walking down the dusty lane towards the Seam when she hears a heavy tread gaiting towards her. She casts a look over shoulder, her eyes widening and flattening when she sees the man a few feet away.

She’s now hyper self-aware of her blood stained fingers, the filthy game bag clutched between them. Her haphazard braid, her dusky skin. She’s painfully aware of it all for the first time in eighteen years.

"You didn’t have to do that back there," he says, hands in the pockets of his nicely tailored pants. “Get involved like that.”

Katniss looks at him scornfully. “You had a beating coming to you. And the nicest Peacekeeper in the district seems to hate you. How’d you manage that already?”

A faint smile crosses his lips. “How is that any of your business?”

She shoots a side-angled stare at him.

He holds his hands up. “I didn’t mean that as an insult. It just appears that you have no consideration for your own well-being. Those men were pretty big. “He looks her up and down. “And you’re…not.”
Katniss frowns. “Pah. No one in this district would touch me.”

“I would,” he says. And then, he looks at her.

She blanches and scowls, kicking up a tiny dust cloud with the tip of her worn boot.

*He’s making fun of her!*

“I’m Peeta, by the way,” he adds with a smile.

"I don’t care," she says, spinning around and walking away.

*The answer to his question,* she agonizes later as she sits in a mostly lukewarm bath, *is none.* It had been none of her business, and she made a fool out of herself in front of everyone.

And then *he* made a fool out of her.

She’s done with the stranger. *Peeta.*

She will not make that mistake again.

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She makes the mistake again.

She’s walking in town with a sack of squirrels the next day when she sees him standing outside of the bakery, staring up at the second story window. He looks sad, contemplative. She wants to keep going, to breeze right past him. *You mean nothing to me,* she thinks.

She taps him on the shoulder. He turns in surprise, and she thrusts a squirrel into his hands.

He stares down at the puffy dead thing and looks back up at her.

“Here,” she mumbles, and keeps going. She’s breathing heavily as she rounds the cobblestoned corner leading toward the shoemaker’s shop, with whom she’s been making down payments for a new pair of winter boots for Prim. She’s one squirrel short of her usual trade now. Because of *him.*

It’s just…well. No one had ever looked at her like that before.

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She doesn’t see him, *Peeta,* again that day.

And then one day turns into two, two into three, and before she knows it, it’s Sunday. Gale’s day. Gale who is a miner, tall and dark and Seam through and through, with an attitude that has persisted through years of being beaten down by the dredges of a life full of hardship.

He’s surly and negative and sometimes they clash so hard she can barely look at him by the end of their Sundays together, but still, he’s her closest friend and that counts for something.

She can tell he has something on his mind. She’s surprised when it never manifests into a confrontation. Pleasantly surprised, even, until he finally looks her in the eye and says, “I’ve heard some things.”

She shoots him a glare rife with scorn and tests the string resistance of her bow, sucking her teeth.
“I don’t listen to gossip. You shouldn’t either. Especially about strangers,” Katniss says.

She doesn’t even pretend that she doesn’t know what he means.

“I heard he’s not a stranger,” he says, his voice deceptively even as he crouches down to check a snare line. He smiles to himself when he finds a plump rabbit, but it disappears from his lips quickly with his next words. “Heard he’s the baker’s son. Left town years ago.”

She stares him.


"Are you the baker’s son?" she demands, her voice low as she casts a look to her left and right. The Hob is mostly empty this morning, but she can never tell who might be listening. Secrets come at a premium in District Twelve. “Are you Peeta…Mellark?” She sounds out the name of the bakery.

“Well. Hello to you, too,” Peeta says mildly, raising an eyebrow at her.

She tucks herself onto a stool and frowns. “Hello,” she bites out.

He takes a sip from a smudged cup and smiles at her over the rim. “You’re not one for small talk, are you?” He pauses and sounds out her name. “Katniss.”

He knows her name.

He laughs at her look of disgruntled surprise. “I guess we’re both curious about the other,” is all he says.

“I’m not curious about you. Just concerned,” she insists, flushing after the words escape her lips. “No. Not concerned- about you, concerned because of-” She stops, flustered.

“I get it,” he drawls solemnly, and it kills her that there’s a twinkle in his eyes. "Mocking her! I’m a stranger here, and you’re a protector of sorts for the district…”

She jerks her head into a nod, practically rendered speechless after that humiliating attempt at explaining herself. She has never been very good at saying something.

“Yes,” she finally says. “It’s certainly not the Peacekeepers,” she adds under her breath. He considers her comment before nodding.

“Well,” he says, leaning in. “Would it help if I confirmed that I’m not really a stranger? That I grew up as the baker’s son?”

"Depends."

"On?"

"Why you left and why you’re back."

He contemplates her a moment, his blue eyes thoughtful. “And what would I get in return?”

“What?” Katniss frowns deeply, pulling on her braid.

“You’re asking for an awful lot,” he shrugs, schooling his features. She hates that he finds her so
amusing. Like she’s a petulant, funny child.

She’s silent, glaring at him with mistrust. He sighs.

“I used to live here,” he allows, his hands cupping the mug on the counter. “But, I wanted to become an artist, so…I set out for the Capitol.”

“You’re an artist?” she asks, her face softening with curiosity. “In the Capitol? I’ve never heard of anyone leaving District Twelve and making it to the Capitol.”

He tilts his head in acknowledgment, his smile as tight as she’s ever seen it. “It happens.”

“How long ago?” she blurts out.

His smile turns genuine, unfurling from it’s strict line. “Are you asking me how old I am?” he teases.

“No,” she denies harshly. She worries that at this rate her cheeks will be permanently stained. She shifts awkwardly on her stool, glancing around the Hob. “I-I’m just-”

“I’m thirty-three,” he says. “I left home fifteen years ago.” He searches her face, but she shrugs off his age. It means nothing to Katniss—by her account, once you’re past the Reaping, it’s all the same downhill slope from there.

“Why?” she asks.

He doesn’t answer her for a moment, lifting the cup to his lips and taking a long sip. “Wouldn’t you?” His icy eyes pierce her.

“I have a sister to look after,” she says. It’s not quite an answer.

He nods slowly. “Well, that’s the difference between you and I,” he says. “No one really needed me.”

She touches his hand lightly, quickly withdrawing when she fully realizes what she has done. His eyes follow the movement.

“Why are you back?” she asks aloud, averting her gaze. His eyes are still on her hand, but he doesn’t press the issue.

“I have a new project I’m working on,” is all he says instead. “Something for the Capitol. Ah, there are some influential people with very strong opinions and a specific vision for what I’m doing.”

“How long?” she hears herself asking, cringing when the words leave her lips. Still, she finds herself holding her breath as she waits for his answer.

He meets her eyes. “A long while.” He pauses, his hand reaching out to cover hers, cautious at first, but then laying more ground when she doesn’t pull away. “Is that all right?” he questions, and she doesn’t miss the double meaning behind his words.

She licks her lips.

And nods.

She’s walking through town, her game bag clutched in her fist when the Head Peacekeeper
stumbles into her path.

“Watcha got there, missy?” Cray slurs in her face, and she winces at the smell, the overall proximity of the older man.

“Things for trade,” Katniss says curtly, looking away. She knows that he’s partial to over-the-fence meat, but it doesn’t mean she’s not still leery of the man. He’s a Peacekeeper after all, even drunk and mostly ineffective.

Katniss eyes him, though, because he’s just a little more drunk than usual. She glances up at the sun with a frown, calculating the time of day. It’s also very early, and he’s in broad daylight.

Come to think of it, when’s the last time she has even seen Cray before today?

He scoffs and stumbles into her a little, and she pushes him away, an involuntary gesture. “It’s time to put a stop to this,” he says gruffly, swaying on his feet. “It’s the end of an era, girlie. Time to find a new trade.” He leers at her.

Her eyes flash, and she clutches the bag to her side tightly. Prim needs new boots desperately.

“Leave her alone,” comes a cold voice to her left, and she jumps. She looks up and feels a flash of alarm as she stares at Peeta, whose calm face is betrayed by his clenched fists.

Cray sneers. “That’s big talk from a boy who used to get beaten by his mama.”

Katniss sucks in a breath at this bombshell, and somehow her hand ends up on Peeta’s chest as he moves forward towards Cray.

“Peeta, no,” she whispers, looking up at him from beneath her eyelashes. “It’s not worth it. He’s a Peacekeeper.”

“I know what he is,” Peeta says. He looks down at the hand on his chest, relaxing by a narrow margin beneath her palm.

“This is sweet,” Cray chuckles without humor, and when Katniss looks behind her shoulder, she sees him looking at her. “Looks like you’ve found a new trade after all. Good luck with that one, dolly,” he adds in parting, ambling away down the lane.

Katniss cocks her head in confusion. It’s only when she feels a hand slide over her fingers, the ones still pressed to Peeta’s chest protectively, that she whips back around. She pulls away, but he catches her hand and brings her curled fingertips to his lips.

“You’re always saving me,” he says, looking down at her with an unreadable expression. When he finally drops her hand, it burns all the way down.

“Will you show me your artwork?” she blurts out later that day. “Your work for the Capitol?”

She has practically zero interest in the Capitol, but she is very interested in Peeta Mellark.

When he followed her to the shoemaker’s shop, she had been pleased at first, then chagrined when she realized he was only renting out a small living quarter in the back of it. When he pulled out a key from his pocket and invited her inside, her heart jumped in an embarrassing staccato. She had agreed with much less hesitation than even she knew she was capable of.
He looks up at her from his paper, appearing surprised at her question. Startled, even. They had been sitting in companionable silence while he scratched away at his parchment, writing intently while she sipped her way through two mugs of hot tea he had made for her on a small hot plate in his tiny kitchen. The tension from before slowly melted away, but left in its stead were questions, and Katniss had found herself more curious about this man than ever.

“Maybe when I finally draw something worthy,” he says lightly, his eyes landing on hers, heavy with meaning. “My interests are pretty narrow so far.”


“Yes?” he coaxes her, leaning forward.

She bites her lip and plays with her fingers. “The forest. Um. I could show you- in the forest. There are pretty things there,” she says, her voice hushed. “But it’s- you can’t tell anyone!”

Already she is regretting her indiscretion. He’s from the Capitol. He knows people.

He sits up straighter and regards her. “I won’t say a word.”

“Because we could both get into horrible trouble,” she continues with anxious eyes.

“Katniss,” he says gently, standing up from his desk and crouching in front of her. “You can trust me.”

She leaves his little apartment an hour later, glancing left and right before crossing the cobbled lane and heading back to the Seam. She glances toward the bakery as she passes and sees the older man (Peeta’s father!) staring back at her through the window. She smiles at him, but it falls away quickly when he just gives her stony eyes in return.

She’s confused because Mr. Mellark has never been anything but kind to her, even when his shrewish and hateful wife was alive, but now she thinks about what Cray said. How Peeta’s mother had beaten him. She wonders where his father was when that was happening. She wants to ask Peeta about it, but it’s too soon.

Too personal.

She walks faster, turning sharply and taking a back lane that is mostly out of sight from prying townie eyes. As she passes into the outskirts of the Merchant Quarter, she’s startled to see a bevy of men working on Cray’s house, which has been falling into steady disrepair for as long as she can remember. She shivers as she thinks about how many poor District girls have lined up at that shabby door, praying for a few coins or even leftovers scraps as they lie on their backs for Cray.

One of the men streaks a fresh coat of bright blue paint across the door, and she watches for a moment before continuing on, the strange sight already at the back of her mind as she wonders what she will make for herself and Prim for dinner.

It’s two days later when she wakes hours before the sunrise, Prim grumbling sleepily when she climbs over her in their shared bed. She dresses quickly, pausing before braiding her hair in a slightly more elaborate style than what is required for a trip to the forest. She cleans her teeth and washes her face, foregoing her game bag because today is not meant for hunting.

She creeps outside and sprints toward a copse of trees out of sight from a line of sad Seam houses,
and there he is. A leather satchel is strapped across his broad chest, and he looks way more comfortable than a former Merchant and Capitol dweller should be before entering highly forbidden territory.

“You made it.”

“You sound surprised,” he chuckles, reaching out and touching the end of her braid. “This is nice.”

“Stop,” she scowls.

“You’re the one who said you were going to show me pretty things,” he chides her with a smile, his eyes raking down her form. She’s wearing black pants, threadbare and heavily patched, and a dark blue shirt that has seen better days. Her father’s jacket was left behind due to the warmish day. She looks like a ragged Seam girl.

But he’s looking at her like she’s something special.

“Well,” she says, clearing her throat. “Follow me then. And be quiet.”

He dutifully trails after her, through trees and crumbling buildings from days gone by until they reach the large, intimidating fence that separates the district from freedom.

“How do you know if it’s on or not?” he asks with interest, studying the twenty-foot high fence intently.

“I can hear it,” she says. Peeta looks impressed.

“Has it ever been on before?” He lifts a finger and touches the metal.

“Not very often,” she replies, lithe as she slides underneath a large hole in the fence. “You coming?”

He nods absently, giving the length of fence one more appraising look before following her. He grunts with the effort, and she laughs as the seat of his pants gets caught on a piece of jagged fence. She strides off across the short meadow that leads to the deep woods, glancing behind her shoulder to see Peeta jogging after her.

“Keep up. Wouldn’t want you to get lost out here, Capitol boy.” Man.

“Aw. I need you to take care of me in the big, bad woods,” he says, nudging her elbow.

“Uh huh.”

“Does anyone else ever come out here?” he asks curiously, glancing around with keen eyes.

She hesitates, thinking of Gale.

“Not that I know of,” she says, stepping over a log. She looks up with startled eyes when she feels fingers wrap around hers. He gives her a steady look as he holds her hand, the sun rising around them. She opens her mouth and closes it.

“Lead on, hunter girl,” he says into her ear.

She huffs in irritation when he cracks and snaps every stick and stone along the way.
“Are you trying to be that loud?” she asks.

“No,” he says. “Why does it matter? Are you going to hunt?”

She pauses. “No.”

“Then why don’t you enjoy yourself? Let go a little?” he suggests with a smile, lifting her hand and twirling her in a circle. She’s so caught off-guard that she goes along with it before pulling away.

“Because!” she protests lamely. “Someone could hear us.”

“Someone?” he raises an eyebrow. “I thought you said no one comes out here.”


“By herself?”

“Himself,” she corrects him. She kneels down to tie her boot and misses the way his eyes shutter at her words.

“Hey,” he says, dropping in front of her. She looks up and sucks in a breath at his proximity. Their noses are practically touching. “You should really double-knot these.”

He shoos her hands away and quickly loops them together for her in solid knots, squeezing her knee before standing and pulling her up with him.

“Thanks,” she says, and surprises herself by lacing their fingers together.

They talk and laugh along the way. She points out a grove of trees that yields maple syrup, the leaves changing into beautiful hues. He loudly admires the colors and she struggles not to shush him, inordinately proud of herself when she succeeds. He pulls out a sketchbook and brightly colored pencils from his satchel, sitting on the ground and staring up at the trees. She stands for a moment, awkwardly observing until he yanks on her fingers and she drops down next to him.

She watches him work in companionable silence. Every once in awhile he’ll ask her opinion on his shading or color choices, and listens with a serious expression when she haltingly shares her thoughts.

All too soon, he’s closing his sketchbook and they’re on their way again. Every so often she’ll point out a special flower, a serene bird, a small brook winding through a ring of trees, and they’ll stop while he draws whatever strikes his fancy.

“What’s next on your agenda?” he asks.


“I didn’t even think to bring food,” he groans.


They walk a few more minutes with comfortable quiet steps, their hands lightly touching between them. She watches him out of the corner of her eye as they emerge from an especially thick brush of trees, smiling a little when a shining blue lake appears before them, deep blue with gentle, glittering waves. To the right is a small house, weathered but durable, surrounded by primrose bushes. The scene is picturesque, and for once in a very long time, she’s proud of herself. Proud
of the woods, and that she has something this lovely to share with Peeta. She even thinks she hears him gasp a little beside her.

She revels in the sound.

“This is beautiful.” Admiration rings in his voice.

“I told you I’d show you pretty things,” she says.

They walk toward the house, and Peeta looks at it with appraising interest.

“What’s this?”

“A house of some sort. It’s been here a long time, I think,” she says, thoughtful. “My father showed it to me years ago.”

Inside, it’s all wood beams and wispy cobwebs and a little dark, but Katniss makes quick work of starting a fire in the fireplace. She briskly opens one of the worn cabinets and retrieves a small glass jar.

“Are those preserves?” Peeta asks, a hint of longing in his voice. He removes his leather satchel and places it on a dusty chair. “I haven’t had that in a very long time. Not the real thing, at least.”

“Yes. Blackberry. No bread, but I keep some dried meat in the cupboards for emergencies.” She pulls down a package and looks at him apologetically. “I know it’s not much.” It goes without saying that spare food is a rare commodity.

“That sounds great,” he assures her.

She locates a small paring knife from a sparse drawer and spreads a little bit of the preserves onto a strip of the jerky. She holds it out to him and he takes it, gingerly taking a bite before smiling. “This is good,” he says.

“It is,” she replies with a nod, taking a bite of her own jerky. “It’s filling, too. My dad and I could eat a piece of this and not feel hungry for a whole d-” She stops and averts her eyes, busying herself with putting away the snack ingredients.

“Were you hungry often, Katniss?” he finally asks.

She’s quiet a moment, chewing carefully. “Yes.”

“Me too,” he says.

“You?” She raises an eyebrow. “You were-”

“The baker’s son? Yes. But I was also the baker’s wife’s least favorite son,” he says. “And the baker’s wife sent me to bed without supper more times than I can remember.”

She swallows and debates, staring at the floor. “Your mother,” she starts, lifting her face. “Your mother used to…”

Her voice dies as he bridges the space between them, his hands reaching up to brush at the space beside her lip. “You have some jam- just there-” he says, his eyes searching hers.

He pulls his thumb back and licks it lightly, and she lets out a shuddering breath, so loud in the silence of the little house that she’s embarrassed as it echoes back to her. She’s aware of time passing, of a trail of ants that march lazily across the wooden slats of the floor. Of the breeze in the
passing, of a trail of ants that march lazily across the wooden slats of the floor. Of the breeze in the curtains as it billows the moth-eaten material upward like a Merchant lady’s fine skirt.

And his eyes. They’re so blue, glittering like her father’s lake.

“Katniss,” he murmurs, his head bent and bending. He’s so close. So close-

She kisses him. It’s a brush of lips, a clumsy whisper of soft skin against her slightly chapped mouth, and she pulls back with wide eyes.

Her first kiss.

“I, I—” she stutters, mortified. But then she’s quiet again as he cups her face and presses his lips against hers with a soft shhhhh. It’s feather-light and then insistent, and she’s at a loss for what to do, her hands fluttering uselessly at her sides as he moves her lips with his own, her lips slack and pliant as he takes the full bottom one and gently worries it between his teeth.

She whimpered, a weak, preyed upon noise, and he swallows the squeak with his lips and tongue. She clutches at his arms as he backs her toward a dusty couch pressed against the wall, thin slats of light highlighting their bodies as they collapse onto it.

His weight is heavy and crushing and good as he bears down on top of her, and she doesn’t even care when her breath quickens and her head is light on her shoulders.

He breaks off a kiss with a liquid smack and sits up, his knees straddling her hips. “Are you all right?” he asks. “I’m sorry—”

“Y-yes!” she says breathlessly as she blinks up at him, little pants passing her lips. “I want more. I want— I just, I don’t…”

“We can stop right now,” he says, his hand squeezing her thigh in a comforting gesture, but it only ignites her further.

“I don’t want to stop,” Katniss says, sitting up on her elbows. “I’ve just never— I’ve never done anything.” She’s ashamed of her ignorance. She never cared about intimacy or men, and now she’s paying the price.

“We’ll go slow,” he promises, leaning down to kiss her again, slow and fluttery pecks against her lips. His eyes shimmer in the faint light from the window as he draws back, resting his forehead on hers. Her skin tingles where it touches his. “I want to make you feel good with my mouth.”

“Aren’t you already?” she asks, confused as she reaches a finger to touch her swollen lips.

He laughs a little, the sound as warm as a summer’s day. “You’re so pure,” he says, a little awe and a lot of admiration tinging his voice.

She ducks her head and feels him slide down her body, and she peeks beneath her lashes to see him kneeling between her legs, his fingers toying with the frayed loops of her pants, a bit of rope in lieu of a belt strung through the holes.

“Can I?”

She nods, watching as he deftly unties the rope and slides it through the loops. He stares at the rope for a moment before looking up at her hands in contemplation.

“Do you trust me?” he asks. He places the bit of rope on top of the couch.
“Yes,” she says, shocking herself. No hesitation. She just does.

Something flashes in his eyes at her words, and he nods slightly as he tugs on her hips, motioning for her to lift up as he slides the course material down her legs. He blinks when he fully realizes that she is nude from the waist down. Undergarments are a commodity in the Seam, and one she can’t afford at that.

Peeta inhales quietly, his nose flaring at the sight of her bared before him. Katniss wonders what he thinks, if she is passable to him. She’s never been especially self conscious about her body before, but for him? She wants to be right.

It’s silent for a moment and she starts to feel ridiculous, her pants pooled around her worn boots, legs sprawled apart obscenely, bent at the knees, but the look on Peeta’s face as he stares down at her calms her nerves.

"You’re beautiful,” he murmurs, stripping off his shirt and motioning for her to lift up again, carefully placing the material between her and the couch.

Her mouth drops open when he suddenly loops the rope around her wrists. She could easily slip out of them, but…she doesn’t. She likes the feeling of being contained. Of being out of control for once.

“You can be loud,” he says softly, scooting backward and bowing his back. She’s confused at his words, but then his head disappears between. She blanches. “I want to hear you,” is the last thing he says before she loses her mind.

The first lick up her slit has her arching off of the couch, and a cry— no, shout of pure shock and elation echoes throughout the room. He hums in approval, drawing out her cries with his tongue, flicking and prodding the swollen bud of her clit with his mouth.

Katniss has never felt anything like it in her life. Her whole life. She whimpers when a warm hand strokes her lower lips and his tongue continues to play with her clit, a little button between her legs that she never really thought about much but heard plenty about in the Hob or the school yard from giggling girls and disgusting Town boys.

She cries out and locks her legs together when a finger slides inside of her, not exactly in pain, but the pressure combined with his earnest licks and sucks is threatening her sanity. Her hands pull the rope taut between her hands, and the bite of the scratchy material is like an absolution.

“I can’t,” she pants, but her hips thrust upward, telling a different tale altogether. He looks up at her, his chin wet and shining. His palm slides up her torso and under her shirt, squeezing her small breast. “I’ve never- never-”

“I think you can,” he says hoarsely, his eyes locked on her eyes as he kisses her lower stomach. His finger teases her entrance, and she shivers when he slides it back out and up the wetness of her slit. And then his head lowers again, and there’s no more talking, only his lips and tongue and oh my oh my oh my his teeth and his fingers inside of her, working at her and then-

“Peeta!” she cries, her mouth frozen open as something rushes through her and works away at her defenses from the inside, and she feels vulnerable, like she’s melting and on fire all at once. She clutches at his head with her bound hands and howls, and he sighs against her flesh.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, dropping little kisses on her clit. “Take it. This is yours.”

Katniss twitches as she rides out the aftershocks of her climax, and her head drops back onto the couch cushion with a soft thump. She moans weakly. “I don’t- what was that?”
He laughs quietly and crawls up her body, hovering over her limp form. He presses his lips to her and smiles against them. “That was an orgasm,” he says, leaning back and stroking her face. He frees her hands from the rope and tosses it onto the floor before kissing her again.

“Does everyone know about it?” she asks innocently, her olive cheeks flushed and a dreamy look in her eyes. She feels relaxed, carefree, and absolutely decadent. She feels like she could chase this feeling forever. What is hunger? What is thirst? She only wants this.

“Oh, Katniss,” Peeta says, his eyes growing dark as his lust-blown pupils search her face. “I have so much to teach you.”

And he does.

An hour later, she leaves the cabin a different person. She feels as if she’s been reborn into a thing with wings and hope, something that sees in color, and cares about someone other than her very close family unit. Something to be desired.

Peeta takes her hand as she walks a step ahead, and she pauses and waits for him to stand next to her. He lifts her chin and kisses her lips sweetly before tugging on her fingers. He strokes the raw skin of her wrist, a reminder of the rope that is now looped back through her pants.

“Tell me about the Seam,” he says conversationally, swinging their hands back and forth between them. “I want to know…everything about you.”

And as they walk back to the district line, her lips move the entire time, and he smiles attentively as she sings like a pretty bird.

"Mother," Katniss says, clearing her throat.

The older woman looks at her in surprise, the battered fork (one of three that they’ve managed to save without bartering or trading them away for goods) paused halfway to her plate.

Katniss continues, “Did you know Peeta Mellark?”

"Yes?" she replies slowly.

"What was he like?" She scoots her chair closer to her mother.

She places her fork on the table. “Are you seeing Peeta Mellark?” Layla Everdeen asks in such a way that it’s obvious it’s been on her tongue for quite awhile. "Because I don’t think that's such a good idea, Katniss."

Katniss glares at her over the rim of her chipped cup, Prim’s eyes wide as she looks back and forth between her sister and mother.

"That is really none of your business," she mutters, standing from the table.

"Sit down. You’re still my daughter." Layla exhales shakily. Confrontation is not her strong suit, and Katniss wonders how much sanity this conversation is costing her mother. “It is most certainly my business.”
"Fine." Katniss sounds the word out defiantly. "Yes. I see him," she says with heavy sarcasm. "I have eyes. You should know—I use them to bring food to the table when you decide you don’t feel like it."

"Katniss!" Prim gasps, her blues eyes wide with shock and censure.

"He’s too old for you," her mother says stubbornly, her face white.

"Please," Katniss scoffs. She digs the end of her fork into the scratched wood of their small table. "It’s not as if we’re getting married or something."

"Are you being…intimate?"

"No," she lies. Her eyes flit to Prim and then away again.

Layla follows her line of sight. She sighs heavily. “Primrose, take the scraps to Lady.”

“But, Mother-”

“Do as I say,” she says, and even Katniss raises an eyebrow at her tone.

Prim gathers the meager scraps and exits with a quiet huff, leaving the two women to regard each other stiffly.

"Did you know him?" Katniss finally asks, breaking the silence.

"I did."

A horrible thought occurs to Katniss. She swallows in disgust. “Did you ever…?”

"No," her mother replies, her face tired. She takes a sip from her cup before speaking. "Among other reasons, I’m four years older than him."

Katniss frowns. "Was he a bad person?"

"No. He was…quiet. A nice boy. Especially considering his home life-" She stops and shakes her head.

"I know about that."

"Really." Layla looks at her daughter sharply.

"Did everyone know?" Katniss presses.

"I don’t know," she sighs, her eyes full of regret. “I knew because the Mellarks bought an awful lot of salves and creams, and-” She inhales. “My mother tended to his broken bones on more than one occasion.”

"That’s awful!" Katniss breathes. She rages as she imagines Peeta as a child, suffering in silence without anyone to help him. "Why didn’t anyone do anything?"

"What could anyone do?" her mother replies simply, standing up and clearing the table. "The Mellarks own the only bakery in the entire district. I suppose no one, not even the Peacekeepers, thought the trouble to be worth the price of bread."

"That’s the worst thing I’ve ever heard," Katniss says, her words full of righteous anger. She watches as the older woman starts to clean the dishes, presenting Katniss with her back.
"You're young, Katniss," she replies softly. "There are worse things."

“Cray’s house is nice now,” she comments as they walk by the tree line close to the dwelling. There are only two people left working on the house, and she can’t imagine that there is much left to improve upon. She wonders briefly if Cray is holed up inside, drunk as a skunk.

Peeta looks at her speculatively. “You like it?”

“I guess.” She’s lying—she loves it. She can’t believe someone like Cray would have such good taste. She often finds herself staring at the blue door, the color beckoning her. She kicks at a clump of dirt. “Better than mine.” She doesn’t look at him as she speaks. He’s never said a word against their crumbling but clean Seam shack, and she’s never been ashamed of it, but sometimes she wishes she were a Merchant girl with a little more to offer.

“You do the best you can,” he says firmly, stopping suddenly and pulling her into his arms. He smacks a kiss to her lips, and she pulls away with a blush.

“Someone could see,” she protests shyly, peering over at the couple of carpenters left fixing up Cray’s home. It’s not that she especially wants to keep them a secret. Not really. She just doesn’t know what they are, and it all feels too precious to sully with judgement from others.

An annoyed glint flashes in his eyes, but he nods. “You didn’t mind the other day.”

She looks over his shoulder, remembering how she had gotten carried away and pressed a kiss to his cheek in the Hob. “That was different,” she says lamely.

He nods. “Fair enough.”

They start to walk again, but Peeta tugs on her hand. She looks at him.

“Soon,” he says, cupping her cheek. His voice has a hint of sadness. “It won’t matter.”

Katniss looks away, and can’t bring herself to think about when he will inevitably leave for the Capitol again.

She tries not to flush with pleasure when Peeta continuously seeks her out. It goes something like this:

**Thursday:** He sidles up to her in the Hob and shares with her a bowl of soup.

**Friday:** He waits for her behind a copse of trees as she walks toward town, and drags her into the brush and makes her orgasm with his fingers, and when she gasps out *But the peacekeepers!* he just shushes her with his lips and makes her come again.

**Saturday:** He stands at the end of the alleyway that leads to his little apartment, patiently waiting for her to notice him as she quickly peddles her wares to the shoemaker.

She’s panting and out of breath and tucked into his chest when Peeta asks for her Sunday plans, and she hesitates.

“I’m busy,” Katniss says, weaving her fingers through his, afraid that he will let go in the face of her rejection.

“Too busy for me?” He slips the words into her ear, his voice low and perfect and sending shivers
down her spine. She’s regretful but firm.

“It’s hunting day,” she finally admits, her voice so quiet that she’s breathing the reply more than speaking. “Gale and I.”

He goes still behind her back, and he finally kisses her hair. “I see,” Peeta says easily. “Monday, then.”

“What will do you without me?” She tries her hand at teasing him back, but he only smiles in reply. In truth, she wonders what he does with himself when she’s not around, other than paint or sketch, but when she asks he just shrugs and says he’ll find work to do.

“At the Justice Building?” she asks. He raises an eyebrow at her. “I’m not stalking you,” she adds defensively. “Gale said he sees you go there sometimes during his trade route in town.”

“I have contracts through there,” he says. “But Katniss.” He smiles. “It’s okay to stalk me.”

He kisses her and says, “I keep my tabs on you, too.”

“I don’t want to ever be married,” Katniss says as she watches a young couple toasting each other in the square from his apartment window.

Peeta looks up at her from his sketch pad and furrows his eyebrows together.

“You’re a little young to be making such a final statement,” he replies, his tone maddeningly gentle.

She glares at him. “I know.” She stares out the window again. “No toasting. No children.”

She startles as he moves like a cat behind her, his arms winding around her as he kisses her neck. “I hear making children is a pretty fun past time,” he says in a low voice.

“I wouldn’t know,” she replies tartly. His hands find her hips as he turns her around to face him. “The things we…do together…don’t fit the bill.” She looks at him a little questioningly, their jokes making way to a type of self-consciousness. She loves the kisses, the caresses, his tongue in places she can barely think about, let alone say out loud, but she feels anxiously ready to give all of herself to him.

“Not yet,” he says, kissing her cheek softly. “But soon.” He leans in to purr into her ear, “And there are ways around children.”

“Have you seen Darius?” Katniss asks a couple weeks later, handing over a squirrel to Greasy Sae. There are two more in her bag, and she can normally count on the red-haired Peacekeeper to buy one from her. She smiles as she remembers how Peeta expressed surprise at this one morning when they were holed up in his room, idly chatting between languid kisses.

“Was District Twelve so different when you were younger?” she asked curiously.

*He shook his head slowly. “I suppose not,” he replied. “I guess we’ve always had a history of turning a blind eye to things.”*

“Well, in this situation, it’s to my benefit.” Katniss shrugged. “I don’t even think Darius likes squirrels, though.”
“He likes you,” Peeta said.

“Sure, he’s-” She stopped when she understood his meaning. “Wait. No. Not like that.”

“You underestimate the effect you have,” he said, and flipped her beneath him.

“Haven’t in a few days,” the other woman replies, pushing a coin into Katniss’s palm. She then busies herself with ladling some stew into a chipped bowl before sliding it across the counter. “Heard some rumors.”

Katniss cocks her head. “Oh?”

Sae continues lowly, “Heard he was reassigned to another district.”

She blinks at this relatively unheard of news. “But- why?”

Sae shrugs and wipes at the counter, a disturbed look on her face. “Best not to ask too many questions, I suppose.” She looks away shiftily. “None of the other ‘Keepers will say, anyhow.”

“What about Cray?” Katniss looks around instinctively. “What has he said?” The old drunk, susceptible to corruption, could be found lingering at Ripper’s stall more often than not.

“Haven’t seen him around, either,” Sae whispers.

"I want no part of you," the baker was saying from the doorway of the shop, and she can’t believe how cold, how angry he sounds.

Katniss clutches her game bag and wills herself to move away, to not watch this show if only for Peeta’s sake, because she is certain he doesn’t want her to see this.

But she can’t look away.

There is a small crowd gathered by the bakery door behind him, shifting uncomfortably as they wait for their morning loaves.

"I won’t be getting any bread, then." This Peeta states more than asks, no emotion in his voice. He looks so heartrendingly stoic, so calm before the storm as his father practically curses him from the doorstep.

Two Peacekeepers stand in the square across the street, looking uneasy. One of them Katniss has never seen before, and she doesn’t miss how his hand rests menacingly on the thick baton at his side. She drags her eyes away from them and turns her attention back to the scene in front of her.

Mr. Mellark disappears before quickly returning with a hastily wrapped bundle in his hands. “Here,” he says, practically throwing it into Peeta’s hands. “Now leave, and let these decent people eat.”

Peeta reaches into his pocket and pulls out a coin, but the baker holds up his hand and backs away. “A gift for my son,” he says bitterly. “You’ll need your strength.”

His son stiffens.

And then the baker turns away, leaving Peeta on the steps of his childhood home, a stranger in a strange land.

She weaves through the crowd, ignoring the stares of the Merchants and few Seam folk that can
afford a baked meal.

"C’mon," she murmurs, and leads him by the hand down the cobbled street to his apartment.

He’s quiet as Katniss removes his shoes and pants. He raises his arms as she strips him of his shirt. He’s not as quiet when she takes off her own, followed swiftly by her pants, baring her completely.

“I want you,” she says, kissing his chest. “I’m ready.” She meets his eyes. “For all of you. Everything.”

“Katniss-” He looks at her evenly. “Not yet.”

She argues -has been arguing for weeks- but he shakes his head. “There’s no room for pity in my bed,” he says bluntly.

But she doesn’t have time to register rejection or embarrassment, because his head is between hers legs, his lips are everywhere, and she forgets who is trying to do the seducing.

Afterward, he traces lazy circles on her shoulder and asks her if she wants some hot cocoa, a delicacy he makes from a mixture in a tin he brought from the Capitol that she can never turn down. He mixes it with some milk he pulls from the small icebox in the corner and heats it on a hot plate as she lies on the bed, her legs sprawled and her eyes lidded as she watches him work. He takes a small vial from the cabinet and pours a dash in her cup, and she cocks her head.

“What’s that?”

“Sugar berry extract,” he says, his back to her. “A little something special tonight.”

“Oh,” she says, pleased.

He walks over to her and places the warm cup in her hand, and she drinks it down greedily as he watches her, his hand toying with her messy braid. She pauses before she finishes, and holds the cup out to him. “Share?”

“No,” he says gently, pushing it back toward her. “It’s all for you.”

She lies back after she is done, feeling drowsy and content. Her energy is gone, and she’s in a fuzzy, twilight haze where she’s not quite awake and not quite asleep. Peeta lies down next to her and pulls her naked body into his arms, and the running of his large, calloused fingers down her skin lulls her into a practically catatonic state.

“I loved him once,” Peeta is saying. “My father, I mean.”

She pries her eyes open and peers up at him, but he’s staring off into the distance, his eyes focused on a crack in the wall. She opens her mouth, but her lips won’t form words. She’s tired. She’s so, so tired.

“I thought he didn’t protect me because he was afraid of my mother. I thought after she was gone…” he trails off, his voice hardening. “It’s just me. Impossible to love.” He laughs, a humorless sound. “Or maybe it’s this godforsaken district. I didn’t miss it. Not for one day did I miss it, even when I was practically homeless.”

She struggles to keep up with him, but she feels herself drifting away to the siren call of sleep.
“I thought he would understand what I’m doing here,” Peeta murmurs, his fingers tightening on her arm. “I have money now. I could help him.” His voice grows dark. “He doesn’t want anything from me.”

“I do.” The words are soft and garbled, and he looks down at her. He grasps her chin in his hand and gives her an intense stare, searching her face for something. “I love you.”

“You’ll have to make a choice soon,” he says. She doesn’t understand. She’s seconds away from sleep, her eyes impossibly heavy.

“I choose you,” she mumbles inanely.

He pets her hair. “We’ll see.”

She wakes up to utter confusion. Her body is heavy and lethargic, and she feels as if she was beaten in her sleep.

_Sleep._ She fell asleep in Peeta’s apartment! Oh, her mother would be _furious_. And Prim would be worried to death.

She groans. “Gale is going to be so angry,” she mutters, twisting to look at the window above the bed. It’s Sunday morning, and light is already shining merrily through the glass. It has to be mid-morning, at least. She had completely missed hunting day.

She sits up and and wipes at her eyes, her eyes narrowing when she realizes Peeta is nowhere to be found.

And then she hears it, the noise registering to her normally keen ears which now feel as if they have been stuffed with cotton.

Screams, chaos. Yelling.

She trips over herself in her haste to dress, almost falling head first to the floor as she throws on her pants and shirt. She jams her boots onto her feet and bursts out into the street, her eyes widening as she emerges onto the main lane in front of the square. She can’t believe what she is seeing. For a moment, she wonders if she is still asleep in Peeta’s bed.

Instead of park benches, there are stocks. Lines of them. And they aren’t empty. There are three whipping posts with men tied to them, and Peacekeepers are lashing their backs as they groan in agony.

The Hob is on fire.

People are screaming as they rush from the flames, and Peacekeepers in new, more formidable uniforms are catching them and loading them into trucks.

Katniss sways on her feet and clutches her head. _What in the hell is going on?_

“Katniss! Katniss!” She lifts her head and searches frantically for Prim, who is shouting her name, high pitched and panicked. One of the Peacekeepers is wearing a helmet, and he turns away from the whipping post he is manning and cocks his head her way, his powerful frame blocking the kneeling man on the ground. He has the insignia of a Head Peacekeeper, but he’s definitely not old Cray.

Something was so familiar about the stance of him, and she blinks her blurry eyes and shivers
before weaving unsteadily toward her sister’s voice, and almost collapses into Prim’s arms. *When did she get so tall?* Katniss thinks absently, clutching at Prim.

“*Oh, Katniss,*” Prim says in sobbing little voice. “*I’m so sorry. It’s awful. You must feel—*”

“What?” she asks, rubbing at her face. “What’s going on?”

“Everything has changed,” Prim whispers, wrapping her arms around Katniss as a man runs by with a gash on his head, two ‘Keepers rushing behind him.

Katniss recognizes him as Alotious Bent, a man who runs a rudimentary weapons stall out of The Hob. She remembers pointing him out to Peeta not too long ago, explaining how he doesn’t keep his goods in his stall but has a deal with the blacksmith, sharing his profits in exchange for use of his tools.

Katniss stares over Prim’s shoulder at the men in the stocks. Daven Teddly and Brick Perrish, two poachers who had once threatened Peeta in the Hob what so seemed like so long ago.

Mal Tavish, a black market Capitol goods trader.

“How does he get his wares?” Peeta asked, running a thumb across her lips.

“*His brother works at the train depot,*” Katniss replied distractedly, toying with his hair. “*Why? Already missing your fancy Capitol soap?*”

Kestrel Fairbain, the only woman in the stocks.

“I’m dying,” Peeta said, his lips touching hers in a brief, chaste kiss. “*I need to touch you. Are you ready to leave yet?*”

Katniss looked around to make sure no one had seen, but the only person who stared back at them was a woman with long, red hair and a cynical smile. She raised a cup of Ripper’s finest and toasted Katniss before moving away into the shadows with a man Katniss recognized as a married Merchant.

“What was that about?” Peeta asked. “*Who is she?*”

“Kestrel Fairbain,” she replied, trying not to feel uneasy at the knowing look the woman shot her.

“Ah,” he nodded. “She’s approached me before. She’s the…aggressive type.”

Katniss turned her head sharply. “What?”

He laughed and caressed her hand surreptitiously. “Jealous?” he teased her.

She shrugged. “It’s not my business how you waste your coins.”

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Oh, you don’t know?” she asked, feeling petty and ruffled. “You can have her for three silvers. *All the Merchant men do.*”

Katniss feels sick. She feels faint. Everyone she had ever spoken to Peeta about, everyone on the shadier side of the law, is being exposed and punished under the hot Panem sun. Ripper, The Bone Man. This couldn’t be a coincidence. She didn’t believe in them.

She clutched at her stomach and gagged.
“Katniss-” Prim starts, and then they hear it. A familiar voice crying out in utter agony.

Gale.

“Katniss, wait!” Prim cries to her back, but she is stumbling through the crowd, their hands rough as they push her away from them. She emerges, shaky and nauseous at the front of semi circle around the square, and there is Gale, tied to the post in front of the Head Peacekeeper who had stared at her.

She breaks into a run toward Gale, whose back is a bloody horror show, the skin just a mess of cracked, seeping rivulets that runs red into the grass of the square. She hears her name being screamed, but it barely registers as the Peacekeeper rips off his helmet and holds his hand up in an imperious movement, gesturing sharply behind her.

She feels her feet fly out from under her and her vision grow dark, but not before she meets the cool blue eyes of Peeta, her eyes flicking down to his Peacekeeper boots as her head hits the ground.

She wakes up to a warm hand on her face, and she feels as if she is floating on the most comfortable, decadent cloud. Her blurry eyes flutter open and she stares at an unfamiliar ceiling painted a shade of soft orange.

Her stomach churns and she shoots up to a sitting position, struggling to free herself from the heavy, luxurious bedding. The warm hand moves from her face to carefully hold her hair back, and a bedpan emerges like magic in front of her, and she throws up violently into the clean porcelain before collapsing against a fluffy pillow. She closes her eyes and wills herself to wake up from this nightmare. She hears a sink running and peers apprehensively toward an open door in the corner.

“I was afraid the sleep syrup dosage I gave you was too high,” Peeta says, emerging from the doorway of what looks to be a wash room, the bedpan now clean. He looks at her in concern as he places the pan on a sleek, wooden dresser. “Turns out— yes and no. I should have given you a pill instead. Fewer side effects. And I expected you to sleep much longer. You caused quite a scene, Katniss.”

Sugar berry extract. Sleep syrup. Betrayals on top of betrayals.

“Damn you,” she says, her voice hoarse. “Why?”

“How do you feel? Do you want some water?”

“How could you?”

He sighs and sits on the bed beside her, and if she had the energy, she would roll away from him. Onto the floor if necessary.

“I never meant to hurt you,” he tells her. He actually looks sincere. “At first you were just a means to the way. A weak link in the chain to exploit,” he explains brutally, and she feels like her guts are being torn out of her. “But you…captivated me. Made me love you.”

“Don’t act like this is real,” she whispers furiously, her eyes wet with traitorous tears. That he would say those words to her now— it’s unbearable. “You don’t love me.”

“Katniss-” He has the audacity to sound put-upon. Insulted.
“What about all those people? They were innocent!” She’s practically panting out the words. “You knew them. And- the Hob. You ate there almost every day. Don’t you have any compassion?”

“I don’t give a damn about any of them,” he says evenly. “This is my job. And even if it wasn’t, their suffering means nothing to me. Make no mistake, Katniss. Everyone is out for themselves in this world.” He laughs, a hollow sound. “I learned that as a child, and it served me well.”

She stares at him, her fingers clutching at the bedsheets. “Are you- are you even an artist?”

“I was,” Peeta replies. “I wasn’t lying to you about that. I did leave this hellhole to study art in the Capitol, but as it turns out, that’s an impossible dream. I ended up in the streets, eking out a life, until a recruiter for the ‘Keeper Academy spotted me and offered me a chance for a new life. They trained me to be strong—to be hard.” His eyes unfocus. “To be a survivor.”

“What about all those people? You were torturing them! You tortured Gale.”

Peeta regards her calmly. “They were breaking the law. Known vigilantes. Some even rebellious and on the Capitol radar. Twelve has been out of control for years.”

A tear slides down her cheek. “You used me!” She breathes heavily. “You tricked me into telling you things- showing you things about the District-”

“And I appreciate it more than you know,” he says, his voice impossibly gentle. He touches her hand, and she yanks away. “Your trust in me was a beautiful thing.”

“You- you’re horrible.”

He shakes his head, and she hates herself for still thinking him to be the most handsome man she has ever seen. That his face is capable of hiding such deception is a painful reality. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Stop,” she says, holding up a shaking hand. “I want to go. I don’t want to hear anymore of this. Of your lies.”

“We can be good for each other, Katniss.” He runs a hand through her dark hair, loosened from her braid. “You don’t want to be married. Not interested in children. I can’t have those things, either. It’s forbidden for Peacekeepers.” He pauses. “I’m sure you see the benefits.”

She feels as if she can’t breathe. Who is this man staring at her so calmly, his blond hair brushed back, still wearing his black and white Peacekeeper uniform?

“How could you do this to me?” Her voice breaks. “I really thought you might care for me.”

“I do. More than I ever wanted.” He takes her now-limp hand in his. “Your choices are limited now, Katniss.” Peeta pauses, almost apologetic. “The fence is back on. Permanently.”

She stares at him dully.

“Be with me. Be my…special girl. You won’t want for anything.” He plays with her fingers. “You’ll never go hungry again. I promise.”

Katniss snatches her hand away again, fear filling her words. “I want to go home.”

“Maybe I can even arrange for a trip over the fence,” he says coaxingly, leaning forward. “To our lake house-”
“Stop!”

He sits back. “I won’t force you—I’m not Cray.” His tone is rife with disgust at the notion. “You can think about it,” he reassures her, carding his fingers through her hair once more. “I’m not going anywhere. This is a long term assignment. “

She stumbles out of the bed and jerks away from his hands, and Peeta presses his lips together as she searches for her shoes. She trips again, but he doesn’t help her when she almost falls down the stairs to his blue door.

“I’ll be waiting,” he says to her back.

Everyone in the District knows.

Katniss isn’t exactly sure when their discretion had failed, but she imagines that Peeta carrying her away from the town square in his arms had been a nail in her coffin at exactly the worst possible time.

It turns out Twelve can hold quite a grudge against a girl, a traitor, that was by all appearances coordinating with the Head Peacekeeper of the new tyrannical reign of the district. And with the fence back on and no way to earn her way back into the good graces of Twelve, Katniss finds herself in the unfortunate position of being the most hated person in the community.

She feels the effect at home, first. Hazelle Hawthorne all but spits on her when she stops by their shack to check on Gale.

She stares in shock as the door slams in her face, but not before the older woman calls her names Katniss has never heard outside of the bawdy corners of the now burned-out shell of the Hob.

No one will give her mother any work. Katniss doesn’t know who is healing the miners’ gashes, or tending to the new mothers, or giving herbal remedies to the elderly, but it certainly isn’t Layla Everdeen.

“I’m so sorry, Mama,” Katniss whispers.

“It’s okay,” she says, exhaustion lining her voice. “We’ll figure it out.”

Prim’s stomach growls from across the room, and Katniss closes her eyes and thinks of a 20-foot-high electrical fence.

A sack of cheese and meat shows up on their doorstep, both of such fine quality that it can’t be mistaken for anything other than pricey, imported Capitol goods.

Katniss looks around quickly, her eyes dropping with guilt to the sack at her feet. Her heart pounds and her stomach whines in protest. She wants so desperately to throw the gift into the trash, but just like the past dozen or so gifts, she brings it inside, places it on the table, and lays down face-first on the bed.

It’s when Prim comes home with a bloody lip and a black eye that Katniss decides. Her mother
protests and Prim cries, but in the end neither one of them stop her from packing up a small bag with a few clothing items and one family photo.

“You don’t have to,” her mother says, but Katniss hears the thread of relief in her voice.

“Yes, I do.” Katniss meets her eyes bravely. “It’s not you they hate. It’s me.” She touches Prim’s hair lightly but speaks to her mother. “Everything will go back to normal with me gone. They’ll forgive you. Come to you for healing.” She tweaks Prim’s nose and struggles to keep the tears at bay. “And your goat cheese.”

“Will you come back soon?”

Katniss shrugs, trying to hide the despair in her voice. “I don’t know,” she says honestly. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

She shows up at the blue door with her worn bag. She knocks.

The door opens.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” Peeta says warmly, and pulls her into the house, kicking the door shut behind him.

End Notes

Written for Prompts in Panem. Thank you to my beta nonemoreblack.

I'm peetaspenis on tumblr. Come hang out!

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