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Katniss decides to give it one last shot.

Notes

I wrote this as a one-shot for tumblr. Figured I would upload it here as well. Come find me at myusernamehere if you'd like!

Katniss’ eyes flitted around the darkly lit room, taking in her surroundings as the hum of idle chatter tickled her ears. She was seated in an empty booth in a back corner pocket of the bar, watching with mild disinterest as various groups of people filtered through the entrance. It wasn’t her usual scene, a crowded bar on a Friday night. But Katniss didn’t have a usual scene. Her friend Madge seemed to think she was bordering on antisocial these days, which was precisely why she’d been ordered to come here tonight.

Scowling, she looked down at her phone for seemingly the hundredth time. Forty-five minutes. That’s how long she’d been waiting for the guy that was supposed to be meeting her. As if she wasn’t self-conscious about her relationship status as it was, it appeared as though her blind date for the evening had been scared off before he’d even laid eyes on her.
I've been stood up, Katniss thought to herself dourly. Perfect.

She took a long sip of her martini, feeling the alcohol burn as it slid down her throat. She wasn’t sure what the proper protocol was or how long she was supposed to wait before she hightailed it out of here. But she knew it wouldn’t be much longer. Whether or not anybody was actually paying attention to her, she felt as though she had a giant ‘L’ etched into her forehead, signifying what a loser she was. A loser who’d been reduced to sitting by herself at some seedy little bar waiting for a guy who clearly wanted nothing to do with her.

Why she continued to allow Madge to talk her into these things, she’d never know. She was a great friend, but she was a horrible matchmaker. And Katniss was truly getting tired of her butting into her love life so much. Madge was the girl who married her high school sweetheart straight out of college; she’d never been with anyone else. Katniss thought she must be bored, living out some twisted fantasies through her failed attempts at setting Katniss up. It would be one thing if the suitors were even remotely compatible with her, but Madge was completely out of touch when it came to dating. Probably because it’d been so long since she’d actually done it.

When Madge told Katniss about this particular blind date, she’d rejected it immediately.

“I’m busy that day.”

“I haven’t even told you what day,” Madge had said with an exaggerated huff. “Look, I know the last few guys have been less than ideal, but this guy? He’s the one. Believe me.”

They were all the “one” according to Madge. Katniss knew her friend wouldn’t stop pestering her until she gave in, so eventually, she agreed to one final date. If this one went to bust as well, that was it. She’d be more than happy to sit at home with a glass of wine and watch a movie on Netflix or something. Honestly, anything would be better than her current situation.

One hour.

With an irritable sigh, Katniss gulped down the rest of her drink. Then she grabbed her cell phone and sent a message to Madge.

Never again.

As she was gathering her things, her phone chimed to indicate an incoming text.

Really? What’s wrong with this one? :(

Katniss planned to type out a response about how she wouldn’t know because he never even bothered to show up, but a voice captured her attention instead.

“Excuse me?”

Katniss looked up into a pair of unfamiliar blue eyes. Not just any blue eyes, however. The bluest eyes she’d ever remembered encountering. They reminded her of the crystal waters that often adorned the travel brochures that littered her office, clear and alluring. But they were full of uncertainty too, attached to a guy she could only describe as gorgeous. He wasn’t movie-star handsome. No, he was attractive in that unassuming, boy-next-door type of way. The kind of boy-next-door you hoped ran out of sugar just so he would knock on your door and ask you to borrow some. And you definitely wanted to give him sugar.

His golden curls fell like tiny rivulets over his eyes, and his eyelashes were so impossibly long, she wondered how they didn’t become tangled when he blinked. She transfixed on his lips as he wet them; they were full and pink and looked so soft. She wondered if he tasted as good as he
looked. The thought flashed through her mind so quickly, she wasn’t even sure where it came from. And then it occurred to her that she’d been staring at him stupidly for several moments. Finally, she forced her traitorous tongue to cooperate.

“What are you looking for Katniss?”

He smiled warmly at her question, and she felt like melted butter being dripped over homemade biscuits. “Yes, actually. I am.” He indicated the seat across from her and said, “May I?”

She nodded quickly. “Please.”

As he settled into the booth, rolling up the sleeves of his button-down shirt, her eyes gave him a full appraisal. Madge really sold him short in the looks department, she thought. Blonde, good-looking, good build. That had been the basic gist of her description. But he had broad shoulders that indicated that he was probably pretty athletic (and could probably hoist her small frame over his shoulder as easily as a bag of flour). His jaw was formidably chiseled, and tiny freckles peppered the bridge of his nose. Katniss had to actively subdue the sigh from escaping her lips. She knew she was likely overreacting; he was just another guy after all. But her expectations had been set so low, and none of the guys she’d been on a date with in years had been anything to write home about.

So when this one showed up looking presentable and, most of all, normal, it made him seem like that elusive glass of water in the desert. And honestly, she wanted to hydrate. She wanted to hydrate quite badly. But then she remembered she’d been sitting here for an hour waiting for him to show up. And that just wasn’t good manners, as her boss Effie Trinket would say. Groaning internally, she chastised herself for allowing anything her ridiculous, over-the-top boss said to worm its way into her subconscious.

“I thought you weren’t going to show,” she told him. “Actually, I was just about to leave.”

A frown crossed his lips. “I’m sorry about that. There was this huge five-car pileup on the highway. I was stuck in traffic forever, and unfortunately, I didn’t have your phone number. I feel awful about it.”

At his explanation, she felt guilty. All this time, she’d assumed she was waiting for some jerk who either didn’t own a watch or decided he had better things to do than to waste a Friday night with her. The fact that he may have had a legitimate reason not to be here hadn’t even crossed her mind.

With a nonchalant wave of her hand, she said, “Don’t worry about it. I didn’t have your phone number either. It’s actually kind of silly, isn’t it? I mean, who even goes on real blind dates anymore?”

He laughed earnestly, his eyes crinkling at the corners, and she decided it was as sweet as honey. “I can honestly say this is a first for me.”

“He’s so old-fashioned, I swear. She insists upon it. The element of surprise and all that.”

“Well, this is definitely one of the best surprises I’ve had. I mean, you’re beautiful.” He said it like it was a fact, not a pickup line, and it caused a blush to spread across her olive complexion. She wondered when her stomach decided to take up taekwondo. Because it was doing all kinds of crazy kicks at the moment.

Clearing her throat, she tucked a loose strand of inky black hair behind her ear. “Thank you. I, uh… I was thinking the same thing. You know, about this being a great surprise.”
An endearing smile split his face, and he asked, “You’ll let me make it up to you by buying you a drink then?”

“Okay,” she agreed, biting her lip. “I suppose I can do that.” He went up to the bar to order them a round of drinks, and when he settled back into his seat, he offered her the chocolate martini she’d requested. “Thank you,” she smiled shyly before taking another sip. Hopefully, the more alcohol she got in her system, the more at ease she would begin to feel. “Madge tells me you guys know each other from school.”

He nodded, his fingers wrapped securely around his beer bottle. “That we do.”

“And were you a psychology major as well?”

“Graphic design actually. But we had some mutual friends.” Shrugging, he took a sip of his drink.

Katniss watched his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “I can’t believe she never really mentioned you before.”

“She never really mentioned you either.”

“Then again, I shouldn’t be surprised. She has the worst taste in men imaginable.”

At her declaration, he clutched his heart as if he’d been badly wounded. “Ouch, that hurt.”

Her eyes grew comically wide as she realized what she’d implied, and she quickly stammered out an apology. “Not you! No no no, not you. I just meant, you know, before. Before you. Because she’s always setting me up on these really awful dates. But you’re not awful. You’re actually quite the opposite of awful. And I didn’t mean to insult you. But I did, and I’m sorry. And now I’m rambling like an idiot—”

“Katniss,” he interrupted, his eyes shimmering with mirth. “It’s okay. Really. I was kidding.”

“Oh.” Not knowing how to respond to that, she just took another sip of her drink.

Quirking an eyebrow, he said, “I have to admit, you’re making me pretty curious about these awful dates you’ve been on.”

“Yeah?”

“Sounds like it might make for an interesting story.”

She released a long breath. “Well, let’s see… The last guy I went out with was named Marvel.”

“Please tell me his parents were really big comic book aficionados.”

She shrugged. “Wouldn’t know. I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. And he spent the whole night referring to himself in the third person.”

With a smirk, he said, “Marvel thinks he’s extremely interesting.”

She rolled her eyes. “Marvel is not at all marvelous.” With another sip of her martini, she said, “The guy before that was my father’s age. I’m a daddy’s girl, but not that kind. Well, I was anyway.”

“Was?”
“Yeah,” she shifted in her seat uncomfortably, wondering why she even brought it up. “He died when I was a kid.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that,” he offered genuinely.

“Thanks,” she said softly. The conversation between them stalled, the air around them charged with awkwardness. Not wanting to ruin the mood any more than she already had, she cleared her throat again and added, “Anyway… his name was Caesar.”

Nodding, he stroked his chin in thought. “Parents were Shakespeare fans, I’m thinking. Or history buffs. Either way, I’m into it.”

“He was very…colorful. And I don’t just mean that metaphorically.” When his eyes urged her to continue, she admitted, “I couldn’t stop staring at his toupee. It was blue.”

He laughed out loud at the imagery. “Well, that’s one version of a midlife crisis. I kind of wish I could’ve seen it. Did it move?”

“Every time he did.” Chuckling again, he brought the beer bottle to his lips. “Thom was Madge’s third cousin twice removed or something. I can’t remember.”

“I have to say. I’m pretty disappointed at the lack of imagination here. I mean, come on. Thom?”

“Thom with the silent ’h’ if that helps any.”

“Maybe,” he conceded. “But you’ve got me at the edge of my seat. Wait, let me guess!” He thought about it for a moment and then said, “He wore tighty whities with the days of the week sewn into them. Right?”

It was her turn to laugh now. “Talk about a trip down memory lane. But no, I never saw his underwear. Pretty sure he wouldn’t want to sleep with me anyway.”

“Gay?”

“Very.”

He snapped his fingers sardonically. “Best ones always are.”

Sharing the details of her pathetic dating life turned out to be pretty funny in hindsight. Or maybe it was just his reaction that made it all seem funnier. Still, it was a great icebreaker. He shared some of his own less-than-stellar dates in return, and she felt herself getting lost in their conversation. They slipped into a comfortable rhythm, swapping anecdotes about their jobs, hobbies, and everything else that came to mind.

He was a graphic designer for one of the local papers, she learned. He’d always liked to draw since he was a kid. Putting his artistic side to use in the modern age of technology just made sense. His parents owned and operated their own business, a bakery, so he was pretty handy in the kitchen, although baking came more naturally to him than other things. He liked early morning runs, watching horribly cheesy 80s films while substituting his own commentary, and camping trips with his brothers. Karaoke bars were a guilty pleasure for him and his friends since college, and his repertoire was full of Journey songs.

“‘Don’t Stop Believing’?”

“‘You’ve gotta hold onto that feeling. You know?’”
She found him charming and funny and easy to talk to. It didn’t surprise her one bit that he was an artistic person; the words he spoke sparkled off of his tongue, so vivid and alive they became portraits before her very eyes. But he was also a great listener. She didn’t deem herself a great conversationalist. Words weren’t particularly her strong suit, and she never found that she had the right thing to say. But with him, everything poured out of her so naturally. The alcohol probably helped, but she found that she wanted to share parts of herself that she kept locked away from most people.

Currently, she worked at a travel agency, but she spent so much more time helping other people plan their dream destinations than actually doing any travel of her own. In fact, she just recently procured a passport, although it didn’t have any stamps in it yet. Working for Trinket’s Travels definitely wasn’t her dream job, just one of those positions she ended up with after a series of other failed career options. She still hadn’t figured out what she wanted to do with her life. But working there seemed to remind her that every day, she woke up and catered to other people, putting their hopes and aspirations before her own.

It had always been that way, as she’d had to care for her younger sister Prim and had worked numerous jobs to put her through nursing school in the wake of their mostly absent mother. Ever since their father had died when she was younger, their mother had become incredibly withdrawn not only from the rest of society but also from her own children. For all intents and purposes, Prim might as well have been her daughter. She’d been the one looking after her for most of her life anyway.

“Where would you go then, if you could go anywhere?” he wondered.

She shrugged. “Anywhere but here.”

She told him about the archery lessons she took on the side, something that had been recommended to her by some therapist she’d seen in passing who thought it was a good way to work out the anger that festered inside of her. Turned out, she really enjoyed it. And she was good at it, too. Recently, she’d started gardening a bit, remembering all of the things her father had taught her about plants when she was younger.

“Have you managed to grow anything yet?”

“Surprisingly, yes. Some primroses for my sister and even the katniss plant I was named after. Also, tomatoes. Lots and lots of tomatoes.”

“So, what you’re saying is, you’ve got the magic touch?” he grinned.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she teased, feeling surprised by her own boldness. Suddenly, she felt very warm. Was she flirting? She wasn’t even aware she was capable of such a thing. Who was this girl and where had she come from? Surely, there was a lot of alcohol in her system already. And the room had started to feel smaller, as if the two of them existed in some kind of vacuum, void of other people and time. Besides, she couldn’t help but focus on those lips of his. They just looked so perfectly ripe. More ripe than the tomatoes that bloomed in her makeshift garden.

“Actually, yes. Yes I–”

He paused mid-sentence, his words trailing off. She noticed his eyes fasten upon something, or someone perhaps, that seemed to cause him a bit of discomfort, and she swore she noticed him tense up a bit before he quickly averted his gaze and grabbed a menu. Frowning, she looked over her shoulder and noticed a blonde woman who had just stepped into the bar. Turning back toward him, she said, “Do you know her?”
“Huh?” His blue eyes snapped back up to hers.

“The woman that just walked in. I saw you glance at her.”

He shook his head and then shrugged. “I thought it was somebody I knew, but it’s not. Just looked like her from a distance. Anyway,” he changed the subject. “Did you want to get something to eat? I was thinking we could share.”

She looked over her shoulder again, but the woman was no longer in her line of vision. Perhaps she had joined some friends on the other side of the bar. “You would tell me if you had, you know, a girlfriend or something. Perhaps a wife?”

He chuckled at that, the smile returning to his eyes. “I don’t have a girlfriend. Or a wife for that matter.”

“Sorry to ask,” she muttered. “It’s just, well, been there done that. Figured I would check.”

“I understand. So…” He gestured toward the menu. “Food?”

She picked up a menu and flipped it open, her eyes perusing the appetizers. “Something with cheese,” she decided. “Lots and lots of cheese.”

“Now you’re speaking my language. You know, at my parents’ bakery, they make this really amazing apple tart with goat cheese. Family recipe.”

She groaned at the thought. “That sounds like heaven.”

“And you’ve never tried the cheese buns. Those are my specialty, actually.”

“I demand you make me all of these things.”

With a glint in his eye, he assured, “I was planning on it.”

They split a large serving of nachos, filled to the brim with refried beans, seasoned ground beef, and loads of melted cheese. As they ate, the laughter, flirting, and conversation continued. He was wiping his mouth on a napkin, having called it quits, when she noticed him turn toward the wall. Nonchalantly, he began scratching an itch on his neck. Before she could even react to his new strange behavior, she heard a bubbly voice pipe up. “Peeta? Is that you?”

What the…? Confused, Katniss found herself staring at the blonde who had entered the bar earlier. Her lipstick reminded her of cotton candy, matching her floral sundress, and her hair fell in bouncy ringlets upon her shoulders. She beamed brightly, buzzing with energy, and Katniss didn’t miss the abundance of curves she had or the bit of cleavage she showed off as well. It was certainly more than anything Katniss herself had to offer, what with her thin frame and short stature.

He cursed under his breath and then faced her somewhat sheepishly.

“It is you! Oh my goodness, hi!” the blonde woman chirped.

“Uh, hey Delly.” Katniss frowned as she watched his fingers nervously drum against the table.

“I was just making my way over to the restroom, and I thought I recognized you sitting over here,” Delly smiled. “How are you?”

“I’m…” He cleared his throat. “…pretty good, thanks. You?”
Not understanding what was going on, Katniss interrupted, “I’m sorry. Who are you?”

“Goodness gracious. Where are my manners?” she chided herself before holding out her hand. “I’m Delly. Delly Cartwright.”

Katniss reluctantly shook the hand she extended. “Katniss Everdeen.” He was avoiding looking at her so she added, “And you guys know each other how exactly?”

“Oh, Peeta and I go way back.” Delly waved her hand over her shoulder. “From when we were kids.”

“You and Peeta go way back,” Katniss repeated, trying to process the information.

“Yes. The Mellarks and the Cartwrights, thick as thieves. Right Peeta?” She nudged him with her elbow good-naturedly. “How’s everything with your family? Oh!” she exclaimed suddenly. “I have a new phone number I should give you.” She found a pen in her purse and scribbled the number onto an empty napkin. When she went to hand it to Peeta, she finally noticed the tension between him and Katniss. She was staring at him like he had grown three heads, her back completely rigid against the seat. And he was studying the table like it was the most fascinating thing he had seen all day. “I’m interrupting something here, aren’t I?” Neither one of them responded, so she placed the napkin down gingerly. “Okay, well. I’m just going to leave this here. It was very nice to meet you Katniss.”

Katniss forced a smile upon her lips. “You too.”

Then to Peeta, Delly said, “Give me a call sometime when you’re free. I would love to catch up.”

He nodded. “Yeah, sure. It was good to see you again, Dell.”

When she was finally out of earshot, Katniss said in a snide tone, “Clearly you don’t know her at all.”

“I can explain,” he defended.

“Really, Peeta?” she spat. He opened his mouth to speak, but she just continued, “Because the guy I was supposed to meet tonight is named Cato. Cato Taylor, not Peeta Mellark. Who the hell are you anyway? Some weirdo freak who poses as other people’s blind dates?” She grabbed her bag, slung it over her shoulder, and stood up to leave.

Peeta stood up just as quickly, reaching for her arm. “Katniss, wait–”

“Don’t touch me!” she shrieked, yanking out of his grasp.

He flinched sharply at her reaction, holding up his hands in surrender. “Okay, fine. But will you please just let me explain?”

“No! I sat here and poured my heart out to you for the last however many hours, and you’ve been lying to me all night.”

“I haven’t been lying to you all night.” She opened her mouth to object, and he rushed to add, “Okay, I lied about the Delly thing. But that’s only because I knew what would happen if she saw me. Everything else was true.”

“So you went to school with Madge?”

He sighed, his shoulders slumping. “Okay, everything else besides that was true. I’ve never met
your friend.”

“Your whole identity was a lie!”

Shaking his head, he insisted, “No, the rest was true. I promise. Besides, you never even asked me my name.”

Katniss was about to protest yet again when she realized he was right. She hadn’t asked his name. Crossing her arms over her chest indignantly, she said, “I guess I just assumed. You knew my name.”

“You told me your name,” he pointed out.

She frowned when she realized he was right yet again. Throwing her hands up with frustration, she asked, “How the hell did you even know who I was then?”

“I didn’t.” His eyes darted around the room, and he pleaded, “Can we just sit down and talk? Please?”

“Why? Am I causing a scene?” she taunted. “Are people staring at us or something? Well, too bad. Whatever you’ve got to say, say it already. Because I’m about thirty seconds away from walking out that door.”

He sighed again. “All right. I was sitting at the bar when I saw you walk in. I could tell by your body language that you’d never been here before and that you really didn’t want to be here either. Yet, you were. Your arms were tucked across your chest and your eyes moved about like you were looking for someone. Then you made a beeline straight to the back of the bar. Right here to this booth.”

Katniss’ eyes lit up with more confusion. “You were watching me? Why?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I was having a drink after work and in walks this beautiful girl. Probably the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen. But she’s all alone, and she’s clearly unhappy. Maybe even a little sad. I guess I just understood that feeling all too well.” Peeta noticed her fidgeting with her braid, the simply plaited one that hung at the side of her head, and said, “I sat here waiting for somebody to walk in, for somebody to join you. But the minutes ticked by, and I could see you growing more and more frustrated. You kept checking your phone, but nobody came, and I realized after a while that you’d been stood up. It took me a long time to work up the courage to come over here and say something to you, but when you looked at me, I saw relief on your face. Relief that you hadn’t been. And since you already thought I was somebody else, I decided to be the guy you were hoping I was.”

He noticed her features soften visibly, the scowl that had graced her lips melting away. “You pretended to be my date so I wouldn’t think I was stood up?”

Running a hand through his curls, Peeta nodded. “Pretty stupid, I know. I obviously didn’t think about it very much. I just liked being the cause of your smile, even if it was temporary.”

“Wow,” she breathed, more than a little caught off guard. That was not at all what she was expecting him to say.

“Look, Katniss.” He stuck his hands in his pockets. “I don’t know who this Cato guy is, but he’s an idiot. And he missed out on getting to know a great girl. I’m sorry I wasn’t upfront with you from the start.”

Katniss suddenly registered the various looks being thrown their way, and she blushed, a bright
red hue donning her cheeks once more as she ducked back into the booth, plopping down onto the leather seat. Peeta wasn’t sure how to react, so he stood there clumsily until she motioned with her hand for him to sit. As she slowly digested his words, she said, “You were trying to protect my feelings, and you don’t even know me.”

“A misguided attempt perhaps.”

But she shook her head. “I just thought… I don’t know what I thought. I’m sorry I yelled at you. Strangely enough, that’s the sweetest thing a guy’s ever done for me. Over even said to me.”

“Well… that’s me I guess. Strangely sweet.”

A smile tugged at her lips at his comment, and she glanced down a moment, noticing a couple of missed texts from Madge on her phone.

**So you’re not speaking to me now?**

**Hello?**

“Madge still has shit taste then,” she chuckled. “You were just an accident.”

“Yeah, that’s what my parents said.”

Katniss frowned at his words. “Peeta, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I’m kidding, again.” A pause and then, “Well, at least I’m pretty sure they never said it out loud. My father anyway. He likes me. My mother and I have never really….” He gestured with his hands in front of him, creating a circle. “Well, we never really got along, I guess you could say.”

“Is that why you’re unhappy? And maybe even a little sad,” she added, repeating his words back to him.

“I made my peace with that a long time ago.” He took the last sip of his beer before asking, “You ever been surrounded by a bunch of people but feel pretty…alone?”

She nodded. “All the time.”

“Maybe I was just waiting for you to walk into a bar.”

The ends of Katniss’ lips slowly curved into a smile. Teasingly, she asked, “So this is the time of night when you bust out the big guns, huh? Cheesy pickup lines and all.”

Grinning back at her, Peeta said, “I lather it on real thick, too.”

“That might be something I could get used to.”

“Are you implying you might want to do this again sometime? It wasn’t a complete disaster?”

She shrugged. “Better than the guy with the twitchy eyes at least. He was pretty convinced that humanity was under the control of shape-shifting alien reptiles that required the ingestion of human blood to maintain their human appearance. Oh, and that Elvis was still alive and well.”

“I feel wholly inadequate upon hearing this information,” Peeta remarked. “I mean, how could I ever live up to a guy like that?”

Katniss erupted in a fit of hysterics, overtaken by laughter that fizzled in her belly and flowed right
out of her mouth like a geyser. It was completely contagious, this sugary sweet confection, and Peeta couldn’t help but get caught up in it as well, letting it fill him to the brim. In fact, he was pretty sure he could spend a lifetime existing on just her laughter alone. Tears leaked out of her eyes as she continued to cackle, loudly and without regard for anything or anyone. Her shoulders shook, and she grasped the table for support, as if needing to anchor herself there. She might very well float away if she didn’t, feeling lighter than she could remember feeling in forever, the heaviness that usually weighed her down evaporating right out of her pores. Finally, she managed to pull herself together, dabbing her eyes with her napkin.

“You’re not half bad, Peeta Mellark. I think I might keep you. I mean, if you’ll allow it?”

Peeta stood up without a word and slid into the booth beside her. His large, sturdy hands bracketed her face, and his lips descended upon her own. Her mouth opened up eagerly for him, reveling in the opportunity to taste him, having wanting to do it since she first laid eyes upon him. His mouth was wet and warm and inviting; she could taste the combination of beer and nachos on his breath mixed with his own natural flavor. Curling his shirt around her fingers, she pulled him closer, angled her face for better access. His kiss was heady, making her dizzy and exhilarated all at once, and the scent of cinnamon and dill that invaded her nostrils was divine. She was consumed by a fire that ignited deep within the fibers of her being, a flickering red and blue flame that seized her flesh and engulfed her from the inside out until she was dissolving beneath his touch.

He pulled away to take a breath, rasping against her lips. Katniss’ heart hammered inside her chest as she stared into a pair of eyes that were now the color of midnight. But despite swollen lips and dilated pupils, he still grinned at her with that boyish charm of his, and her stomach felt like it dropped out beneath her.

Murmuring softly, he said, “I’ll allow it.”

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