Desperate measures

by peetalark

Summary

PIP Day 6 Violet
Summary: Katniss Everdeen is out of options; her family is starving and winter has left the woods barren. Desperation leads her to the town brothel, and into the clutches of its money-hungry owner Madam Mellark. Canon au

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
“I’ve been waiting for you to come knocking at my door,” Madam Mellark grinned widely as her piggy eyes took in the skinny girl cowering on the brothel steps. “Takes nights like these to make you lot come to your senses.”

The girl’s eyes were dead as she stared ahead into the building’s purplish depths; the odor of sweat and sickly sweet perfume accosted her nostrils and fogged her already numb mind. Wet snow clung in chunks around her ankles and stuck to her elbows as if she’d fallen a few times trudging from the Seam. Madam caught her tongue behind her teeth and clucked; the girl had better not have hurt herself, damaged goods didn’t sell.

Before the harsh winter wind took what was left of the girl, the Madam drew the poor dark haired scrap into the house roughly by her soaked elbow. Greedy eyes stared into empty ones as the older woman harrumphed, “You couldn’t think to bring that sister of yours too eh?”

For a second the girl seemed alive again, fire burning hot and dark with hatred engulfed the dead eyes and threatened to reduce the Madam to ash. There it was, the Madams smile was smug, there was the fire that would have the gold dropping from men’s filthy hands like hot potatoes. Too soon the heat was gone, leaving the girl even emptier than before as if the flames had licked out her insides and left the mere shell of her.

“What’s your name girl?” the question, although barked loudly enough, seemed not to register whatsoever with the pathetic creature who remained crumpled where the Madam had dumped her. “What do they call you?”

“Katniss” the name at last hissed from the girl as if it had been kicked out of her, so quiet you’d of thought she didn’t want you to hear it. “Everdeen”

Madam shook her blonde head, “No that won’t work, no one's going to remember a name like that.” She thought for a moment, squinting at the girl. “You’ll be called ‘Kat’ around here

Reaching behind herself, the Madam tugged at a thick cord dangling just above her head. Katniss jerked slightly as the metallic clanging of the bell filled the entryway, the sound effectively jolting the numbness from her brain.

A scurrying of steps followed the call of the bell and a woman appeared, curtsying hurriedly to the Madam as she approached. Her face was pock marked and sagging as if she had no teeth to hold it up, and her eyes were a dull mirror of Katniss’s own. This new woman was, as Katniss’s friend Gale would put it blatantly, “ugly as a bare turkey”

“This here’s Mabel,” The Madam pointed rather rudely at the homely woman “she’s the maid here on account of no man wanting to touch ‘er.” Mabel’s neck ruddied at the scathing remark but her head remained bent, whether in respect or shame Katniss couldn’t tell.

Madam Mellark waved her hands away as if she were already sick of the maid. “Mabel will be taking you to your bunk now.”

At this the Seam girl was shooed away down the hall, tripping slightly as she stood. The maid pressed her lips together and eyed the new girl sympathetically. Katniss willed herself to stare back, she may be desperate enough to be here but she would not accept another person’s pity.
Mabel led Katniss down a hallway thick with the smell of perfume and draped in purple and black curtains that seemed to have been hanging since the dark days. The scuttling of rodents underneath the floorboards was the only sign of life as far as Katniss could tell, a stark contrast to her normally cozy Seam home.

Unfortunately, as the year’s winter had become increasingly barren so did the tiny Everdeen house, coal had risen so far in price as to be utterly ridiculous. The woods were empty, and no one in town would spend their own dwindling money on old threadbare clothing. Katniss had no other options, but still her stubbornness made her wait. It was when she woke up to find her little sister Prim’s lips turning blue that she finally let go of her pride. It took the very last of the kindling and knotted straw to make Prim wake up, but it had almost been too late. This was what kept Katniss moving through the run down Brothel, it was her job to take care of her family and she had very nearly failed. No punishment would let her forgive herself.

It was at the top of a flight of peeling white steps that Katniss found her new home. Twenty or so cramped wooden bunks lined the walls of the upstairs, many of which held girls of around Katniss’s age; all desperate, all Seam. Some shrunk into the shadows at the appearance of Mabel, others sneered at her as she approached. A few of the girls looked young enough to be Prim’s age making Katniss’s gut wrench with outrage; who was looking out for them? The sickly perfume smell still hung in the air, now mixing with the smell of sweat and unwashed bodies, the urge to gag becoming more intense.

“Pick one” the maid spoke for the first time, gesturing to the wall of bunks “you’ll be woken in the morning. You’re dinner will be sent up” Katniss nodded stiffly as the maid left her, the weight of what she had just entered into just now beginning to hit.

Walking down the row of bunks Katniss chose one as close to the door as possible: a top bunk with cobwebs interlacing between each of its four posts. She felt the eyes of everyone in the room as she deftly swung herself up to her bed from the bottom bunk, batting at the cobwebs as they tangled in her hair. After stuffing her meager potato sack of belongings into the corner of the bunk, Katniss settled cross-legged in the middle, waiting for her promised dinner.

As if on cue, there was a soft knock at the door and a male voice called “Dinner for the new girl.” Katniss was surprised at the politeness in his voice, even more surprised at the way he requested entry to the room, as if he were afraid of being rude.

One of the girls giggled as she called back, “The door’s open Master Mellark!” Katniss stared at the boy who entered, of course he would be here, why had it never occurred to her until now? Peeta Mellark was always “The bakers son” “Peeta Mellark the pimp” was something so farfetched Katniss had never made the connection between him and his mother… But here he was: blond curls, bread and all, and with his piercing blue eyes staring unblinkingly into her horrified gray ones.

He couldn’t have remembered her, their only real interaction happened years ago. Yet the anger flashing in Peeta’s eyes as he took in her situation could not have been the look he used on every new worker here, and Katniss could imagine why.

Five years ago Peeta had tried to help Katniss, only to be beaten over the head by his witch of a mother for it. Two loaves of burned bread thrown to a starving girl earned him a swollen face and a nosebleed.

No wonder he hates me thought Katniss guiltily, quickly accepting the stale bread and lump of cheese without meeting eyes with their giver. She could have sworn she felt his hand squeeze hers as he passed up the food, but it was probably just her own trembling hand, or worse, an angry spasm from Peeta…
The night was a cold one and Katniss struggled to find comfort as she huddled under the single thin blanket provided. When she finally managed to doze off, Mabel would rouse her awake again by calling one of the girls to work. As morning finally broke and sunlight filtered through the grimy windows, Katniss was in worse shape than she had been the night before. Every limb seemed to ache as if she had been trampled on and her head was a fuzzy mess of exhaustion.

Something landed on her face “So the new girl thinks she can sleep in eh?” a jeering voice accosted her bleary mind. Katniss sat up quickly, blinking accusingly down at the girls below her. Most were in various states of undress, squeezing into tiny dresses and corsets, while some had already begun to imbue the air with their various perfumes.

“Get down here and make yourself presentable would you? It’s nearly five a.m!” The order came from a petite, red haired girl in the corner of the room currently dousing her armpits in eau de minuit. “And I’ll need that back!” Katniss glanced at where the girl was pointing to find the black cotton garter that had been so unceremoniously thrown at her. Picking up the scrap of fabric she climbed down from her bed and turned to confront its owner.

“Ill give this back if you tell me what the hell I’m supposed to be doing”

The redhead laughed and grabbed for the garter; “we’re not complete assholes newbie, all you gotta do is ask. Damn who pissed in your pocket huh?”

Katniss didn’t flinch; tossing the garter back to the girl she asked again “so what do I do?”

“First of all I’m Clem” the girl seemed to be taking pleasure in watching Katniss squirm with impatience. “Who are you?”

“Katni-…Kat”

“O.K Kat first thing is to get you out of those Seam rags and into something a little more… alluring” Clem dragged Katniss over to one of the corner bunks currently being used as a hanging rack. “Now lets see…we don’t want you being picked up the first day, that’s no fun…” The red haired girl muttered quietly to herself as she flipped through hangers full of sequined and sheer garments. “aha, here” Clem lifted a short dark blue boat-necked dress from the rack “The men won’t even glance at you wearing this” winking she added “especially if they get an eyeful of this!” Clem shimmied her shoulders seductively and Katniss couldn’t help but notice the plunging neckline on her dress.

Despite the relief Katniss felt at Clem’s understanding of her fears, there was no escaping the inevitable. The tesserae that had been sent home to Katniss’s family when she agreed to work at the brothel would only last so long. It was a miracle that it was sent to begin with, but without it, a lot of girls would simply throw themselves at the head peacekeeper Cray for faster money rather than choose to work at the brothel. Without the tesserae Katniss would have probably done the same thing, not wanting to risk her family dying while she waited for work.

“I wont make money if the men don’t notice me, Clem.”

Clem groaned as if Katniss were ruining her fun “They will, just not today, I figured us girls better get you ready first.” She shrugged tossing the blue dress to Katniss “In the meantime get dressed, Madam doesn’t wait for the new ones like we do.”
After slipping into the dress and saturating herself with perfume, Katniss followed the other girls down the white steps to a small dingy-looking dining area. A small basket of day-old pastries already sat waiting for them on the long wooden table.

“Excuse me –outta my way!” Clem, who seemed to be the ringleader of the group, pushed her way through the other girls until she was standing over their breakfast. Katniss watched curiously as the girl turned over the basket and began to count through the rolls and danishes. “12 pastries for seventeen girls” Clem shook her head in disgust. Half a pastry to Katniss would have been a full days meal to her a day ago so the shortage of breakfast didn’t concern her in the least, Clem however, was not impressed.

“Girls definitely working today are gonna have to eat their napkins this morning, you can thank the Madam for that.”

Katniss turned to the girl next to her: a tall girl with long, black dreadlocks and a pointed face, “The girls who are working get nothing? I’d’ve thought it was the other way around.”

The tall girl smiled slyly; “Most men like to reward you after it’s done, makes them feel better or like it’s all legitimate or something. Those girls’ll get breakfast and then some most likely, especially if they’ve got their regulars comin in.”

“Oh”

That was a good thing, Katniss tried to convince herself as her skin began to crawl I could give Prim a proper breakfast for once.

For now however the “proper breakfast” had begun to be tossed around and Katniss’s thoughts were chased away with the smells of raspberry and cinnamon.

As Katniss ate her breakfast, Clem and a few of the other girls filled her in on what a normal day at the brothel would be.

“All girls have to be on hand and available for lineup from 6:00 a.m to 1:00 a.m”

“You can’t ever turn down a customer”

“No eating outside of mealtimes”

“No leaving the property on days other than Sunday unless you’re with a client”

Katniss listened as the bars of her new cage fell into place. Each new rule felt as if it were striving to chip away at her humanity, turning her into property. She felt like an animal, trapped and utterly vulnerable to the whims of Madam and her clients. The affinity only solidified in her mind as the Madam’s whistle sounded, calling the girls into their first lineup of the day.

Clem lead the way back down the purple-draped hallway, turning right just before the hall opened into the entryway. The room that they entered shocked Katniss, it was clear where the brothels money went. Polished hardwood and ornate rugs lay on the floor while the walls were adorned with gorgeously framed portraits of beautiful women. The only thing the room had in common with the rest of the brothel was the dim lighting, yet here it seemed as if it served to set the mood.

“Alright, in line! Madam will be in with the client soon!” Clem ordered, and Katniss followed the other girls’ lead as they all lined up against the far wall. Some tittered quietly while others nervously fixed their dresses and pulled at their necklines, revealing as much cleavage as they
could without a wardrobe malfunction. Katniss tried to slouch into the shadows, already her hands had begun to shake with nerves and she could feel the sweat soaking through her blue dress.

The Madam's voice had adopted a gracious, welcoming tone as it could be heard floating from the entry hall; “Lucky for you we’ve got all the girls here for you today, you get first pick!” Katniss could here the two sets of footsteps approaching slowly as the Madam lead her customer into the lavish room.

The man who entered looked nothing of what Katniss expected of a man that would step foot in a brothel. Wearing a smart suit and sporting perfectly coiffed blue-streaked hair, he had a capitol look about him, most likely a respected diplomat.

The look in the man’s eyes was far from respectable as he surveyed the line of women laid out for him. Crossing the room, he introduced himself to the first girl, his eyes roving her exposed chest shamelessly; the girl giggled and swatted at him flirtatiously at a comment he made and he bowed to her before moving on to the next girl.

Katniss couldn’t help but feel like a horse on display at the town fair as the Capitol man checked each girl out one by one. As he reached Katniss, her skin began to crawl with revulsion and the veritable desire to cross her arms over her chest intensified. The man grinned at her like he had with all the other girls: like a rich boy in a candy shop. Katniss pushed her lips into a smile that felt more like a grimace as she felt his eyes slide over her small dress. Just like that, it was over in less than a minute as the man’s eyes caught the breasts of the next girl in line. Clem had been right, compared to the other girls Katniss was easily overlooked.

After the man had chosen a girl to take home, (the tall dark-haired girl that Katniss had talked to earlier,) the rest of the girls dispersed to freshen up and chat while Katniss was left to her own devices. After the first lineup, the morning was rather slow, two regular customers swung by to collect their favorite girls and there was one more lineup in which Clem was escorted away.

Lunch hour could not have come fast enough and Katniss found herself leading the pack to the dining room, the promise of food urging her forward. However, when she reached the room something stopped her in her tracks. Sitting at the long table was the baker’s son, quietly finishing his paltry lunch, flour still dusting his blond hair and smudging on his face from the morning’s work. He had a dinner roll halfway to his mouth when he caught sight of Katniss frozen in the doorway.

“You can come in you know”

A soft smile played at Peeta’s lips as he watched the girl enter, all anger from before seemingly forgotten, replaced with a quiet resolve.

Katniss warily took a seat on the opposite far end of the table, snatching a roll from the basket and cramming it into her mouth.

The boy watched her carefully, taking small bites of his own roll. He could tell by the sharp bones in her neck and wrists that she had been close to starving when she’d arrived here. Her braid no longer shined like he remembered, the black dulled and wiry looking from lack of nourishment. Anger at the Capitol having burned out, Peeta’s stomach now writhed with his own guilt, how could he not have noticed her slowly fading into the empty girl he now saw before him? Every inch of him longed to reach out to her, to bring the color back into her cheeks, and the spark back into her eyes, to give her something to sing about again...

The other girls’ footsteps could be heard approaching and the boy knew he had to act quickly.
“Katniss”

The girl froze at the sound of her name dropping from the baker’s lips. Dinner roll still filled out her olive cheeks and Peeta held in a smile as he was reminded of a startled chipmunk puffed full of nuts. His expression sobered however, as his gaze traveled to Katniss’s eyes.

“Meet me here once everyone’s asleep”

The boy let his words sully the silence for a moment, then he was up and out the door, leaving Katniss to just about choke on her lunch.

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“Master Mellark to you” one blonde girl reprimanded, but Katniss could see the blush beginning to bloom on her cheeks at his mention.

“What’s his deal?” Katniss prodded, she needed to know exactly why the son of the brothel madam wanted to see her tonight. If the sinking feeling in her gut held any indication at all, there was no way she would be meeting that boy.

“He brings the old food from the bakery here for us every day that’s all”

The blond girl tried to sound indifferent but another girl’s giggling gave her away.

“What the hell is it!”

The giggling girl stopped abruptly at Katniss’s tone and the blond girl spoke up instead.

“Mave is just adamant that Peeta has the hots for her, says he saves her the best pastries and all”

“Am not!” Mave had gone red in the face, giggles having given her the hiccups.

Blondie gave Mave a condescending look “Well I’d say he’s sweet on me then, just last night I caught him slipping extra money into my pay-envelope!”

“Stealing it more like! He’s a rat if ever I saw one.” A girl with heavily lidded eyes and a permanent sneer joined the conversation.

“Shut up Dawn! Just cause he shut you down when you tried to get in his pants!” Blondie was quick to turn on the sneering girl and Katniss silently slipped out of the dining hall as Dawn began shrieking in outrage. So much for finding out about Peeta, asking the girls had left her even more confused than before.

That night, Katniss asked Clem.

“He’s their fantasy boyfriend,” the redhead answered simply.

“What?”

“Fantasy boyfriend. That guy they imagine when they think of what could have been you know? Every day they have to give themselves to guys who don’t care, its nice to have someone who does, gives them a little bit of hope.”

“Oh”
Katniss turned Clem’s answer over and over in her head “fantasy boyfriend” still didn’t really give any insight to Peeta’s character at all. She simply couldn’t trust a boy who had so many fantasy projections shielding his real self. Especially since she had no idea what those girls had done for their supposed “special treatment”. No. She wouldn’t sneak down to the dining room that night, she wasn’t about to gamble what little she had left.
The giggling woke Katniss before she had even slept two hours. At first, dreary with sleep, Katniss thought Mabel had come to collect more girls for work. But it was a man’s drunken voice, not the voice of the maid, that met the girl’s giggles. Who in the hell? Katniss rolled over to catch a glimpse of the asshole who had ruined her sleep.

Blonde curls, blue eyes, at first Katniss’s stomach clenched in fear as her sleep-deprived mind imagined Peeta storming up to her room and dragging her from her bed for not meeting him last night. But the boy draped languidly between two half-dressed girls below had a wilder look about him than the baker’s youngest son. His hair curled passed his ears and swept his forehead, a lot of it darkened slightly with sweat, and his eyes glinted blue and mischievous, glossy with the liquor she could smell from where she sat.

Rye Mellark. Katniss had heard enough about his antics to know that his presence in the brothel was no innocent pastry drop-off. She could have guessed as much from the shit-eating grin plastered on his smug face or the way his eyes practically grazed off the scantily clad girls at his feet.

Despite Rye’s obvious misguided intentions, the girls hung off their bunk beds to catch his every slurred word and Katniss snorted in disgust watching the arrogant boy’s ego inflate.

“Hey Kat!”

Clem stood up from where she was lounging to beckon to Katniss who had now slunk back to the corner of her bunk.

“Come down! Rye brought moonshine!” The redhead swirled something in the jar she was holding that looked like puddle water. Glaring at her, Katniss pretended to retch; shaking her head violently and burrowing further under her single blanket. She did not wish to meet Rye or his moonshine tonight. Either one of them could lead to trouble at this point and Katniss just wanted her goddamn sleep.

“Hey new girl, you ever need some trainin’ just come ‘round to the back of the bakery! I’ll show you how things `er done!” Rye chortled wetly around the neck of his bottle and Katniss shuddered beneath her blanket. If Rye were part of some sick hazing ritual….the shudder ran through her again. Prim, think of Prim, everything was for Prim.

“Ewwww Rye don’t scare her you sound like a huge pervert!”

A faint swatting sound followed by more loud guffaws from Rye told Katniss that Clem, at least, had her back. “Don’t listen to him Kat,” her friend’s words fought to be heard above the ruckus Rye was making. “He may fuck more girls than Finnick Odair but he’s decent enough!” Katniss rolled her eyes internally at Clem defending him, did she not see the eyes he was making at her?

“Pump this girl full of moonshine and she’ll say anything!” Rye crowed, Katniss could here Clem swatting him again. “Don’t be an asshole or I’ll take it back” Ignoring her, Rye gulped more of his drink before grinning up at where Katniss was hiding. “Seriously I won’t bite...too hard...and you really look like you could use some liquor.”
Katniss had never had liquor before in her life, alcohol was not exactly a necessity when you were starving. It wasn’t as if she had ever wanted to try it either. Too often she had seen the effects; broken families, sour breath, smart Seam men rendered toppling idiots and their Seam women into punching bags. No, it had never appealed to her...until now. Hadn’t she already stooped to the lowest of the low? A little liquid courage seemed a small sin in comparison. God knows she needed it anyway.

“Ok”

“Heeey look at that Clem! She listens when I ask her” Rye flaunted his small victory at an exasperated Clem as Katniss made her way down off of her bunk. As soon as her feet hit the ground Rye was pulling her down to sit close, shoving the bottle of moonshine under her nose. “Drink up newbie, my finest poison yet” His voice drawled into her ear and she could feel his sour moonshine-breath flutter the hair at the nape of her neck. Katniss wasn’t used to the intrusion of her personal bubble and Rye’s sudden closeness made her want to squirm back to her bunk. Shifting uncomfortably, she took the bottle from Rye’s grasp, tipping it to examine its contents. It wasn’t the most beautiful concoction, and it smelled like it could tip Prim’s goat with a swallow, but Katniss lifted it to her lips anyway, taking a swift gulp before the flavor could settle on her tongue.

She coughed as the liquor burned a trail down her throat and Rye patted her back roughly “What’d I tell you huh? Good stuff innit?”

Katniss gave an awkward thumbs up, passing the bottle off to another girl’s outstretched hands. The rest of the night passed in a sluggish blur as the moonshine was handed around. For the first time in her life Katniss got sufficiently drunk; her mind was emptied, nothing mattered but Rye’s idiotic jokes, The other girls’ laughter and the burning that spread out from her throat to her fingertips with every shot of liquor. Each swallow was a punishment, each time she tipped the bottle her crimes drifted further from her consciousness until every last one had been payed for in liquid fire. When there was nothing else to pay, she slept.

The next morning lineup was excruciating, Katniss’s tongue felt like lead in her mouth, her stomach churned and the ground seemed to lurch beneath her feet. She could hardly lift her head to appear presentable with the pounding of her brain against her skull. It didn’t help that the Capitol client of the day was quite possibly the shrillest woman she had ever heard.

Seeing as Katniss looked like utter crap, she was spared having to work her first job hungover. The Capitol Woman barely glanced at her before choosing a perkier girl who Katniss remembered was named Mave. How the hell did that girl look so good when Katniss remembered her drinking just as heartily as the rest of them last night? Just thinking about last night made her head pound even harder and she resisted the urge to press her fingers to her temples.

As the girls started to disperse from the lineup they were stopped by a loud blast from Madam Mellark’s whistle. Katniss winced as the noise sliced through her sensitive eardrums and the older women began barking orders “Back in line, we’re not done here yet” Madam Mellark surveyed the girls before flicking her wrist at the door “Everyone scheduled for work today may leave lineup, the rest of you stay” A few girls hurried past the Madam to their room.

“I need three girls for work” cold blue eyes swept the line “you” she pointed at Clem “you” Dawn and “you” Katniss stared at the finger pointing at her chest, her legs threatened to give out. Oh no.

“Clem, you know what to do, You and Dawn teach Kat here and make sure she doesn’t get sticky fingers. The rest of you all be ready for lineup. Dismissed”

Was that all she got? So much for training. She watched helplessly as the Madam and the rest of the girls filed out of the dim room, leaving her with the only two people that could help her now.
“Alright let’s get dressed” Clem seemed calm enough, routine even “You bring any extra clothes along with you besides those rags you sleep in?” Katniss shook her head numbly “of course you didn’t.” The redhead sighed and lead the two girls to the stairwell.

Katniss finally managed to find her voice “Can’t I just wear this?” She gestured to the red lace dress Clem had picked out for her that morning.

“Are you kidding? Madam would kill us! You’d ruin it! Not to mention you’d look ridiculous.” Dawn sneered, bumping Katniss a bit too hard with her hip.

Now Katniss was utterly confused, “Excuse me?”

Clem halted on the steps and turned to face Katniss “I’m sorry Kat you’ll just have to borrow some of mine, didn’t know you were so attached to that dress.”

“I’m not”

“Ok then” Clem continued up the stairs with Dawn and Katniss shook her head and followed; whatever was happening she would find out soon enough.

When they reached the bunk room, Clem sunk down to her hands and knees to begin searching for something under the bed. When her head emerged, now dusted in a fair amount of cobwebs and dust bunnies, she had a small duffel bag. “All I brought with me from the Seam way back when” she explained, dumping its contents in a heap on the floor.

Katniss watched as Clem picked a few worn clothing items from the pile before shoving the rest back into the bag and under the bed.

“Suit up” Clem ordered, tossing two items to Katniss before pulling her own dress over her head.

“Who exactly are we working for?” Katniss was no expert on prostitution but she was pretty sure the worn felt pants and threadbare t-shirt she now held were not considered the most seductive of attire.

Clem squinted at her, pulling her own t-shirt on “Madam…”

“No… the..er..client?”

“Oh shit!” Clem was laughing at her “Shit you have no idea do you?”

Katniss glared, but with her pants now at her ankles the look didn’t exactly have its usual effect.

“And you were all nervous we were gonna do some foursome shit or something!” Clem was turning red, her freckles disappearing into her ruddy cheeks. “I’ll let you catch a breather newbie, we’re going to the bakery, Rye can’t handle his hangovers so Madam’s gotten her pack of slaves on the job. No clients today….Alright?”

Katniss stared at her, she couldn’t stop the grin from splitting her face in pure relief.”I-I thought….!”

“Yeah?” Clem matched her grin and even Dawn shook her head good naturedly. Katniss let herself breathe, oxygen helping to relieve the pounding in her head; she still had time. For what, she wasn’t quite sure, every day without work meant less money for her family, but for some reason a tiny sequestered part of her brain told her that if she waited long enough, a miracle might just find a way to sweep her away from it all.

“you know Kat, you look nice when you smile” Katniss blushed at Clem’s compliment, pulling on the rest of her work clothes.
“No seriously...don’t let the Madam see that, she’s only holding off on you until you gain your curves back, if she sees that smile she’ll realize none of it matters.”

Katniss ducked her head, Clem’s second comment effectively erasing her fleeting moment of levity.

When all three girls were dressed in their work clothes Clem lead them back down the white steps and out the back door. Katniss shivered as the cold air hit her but she was too excited to finally be outside to care. She breathed in the scent of pine and crisp frozen snow, her stomach beginning to rumble at the scents drifting from the bakery across the street. Hopefully working at the bakery meant that she could get her hands on more food.

“Damn it, you forget what’s outside when you’re cooped up all day! I should’ve grabbed our jackets.” Clem grumbled, her arms wrapping around her stomach as the winter breeze blew colder.

It was only a very short walk to the bakery and Katniss would have wished it was longer had it not been for the warmth and heavenly smell that engulfed her on her entrance. They entered from the back of the building and now stood in what looked to be the kitchen/work area. The large brick bread oven was pushed to the back and Katniss could count two other smaller standard ovens like the one she used in her own house. One countertop was laden with half-decorated cakes on tiny white stands while another was covered in flour and sticky clumps of raw dough. The double sink was full of unwashed pans while the mixers and whisks all seemed to be dirty. There was clearly a lot of work to be done but Katniss only had eyes for the racks and racks of delicious pastries and muffins stacked one on top of the other, tempting her from across the room.

“Oh God, no wonder Madam sent all three of us” Dawn groaned surveying the mess.
“T’d’ve thought Peeta would’ve gotten some of it cleaned up.”

Katniss’s attention was ripped away from the pastries; obviously Peeta was going to be here, she just hoped he didn’t do anything about her standing him up last night. She berated herself for not doing what he asked, what a stupid thing for her to do anyway. She knew all too well how cruel people could be when they didn’t get what they wanted. Leave it up to her stubbornness to make her life at the brothel even more hellish than it needed to be.

Clem ran a finger along the floured countertop and scowled “Might as well grab a rag girls, looks like we’re cleaning up before we even get started toda —”

Clem was interrupted as the door to the kitchen swung open revealing an equally flour-covered Peeta Mellark.

“Oh wow…. you’re here already?” Peeta rubbed his neck sheepishly, surveying his mess. “Rye usually doesn’t get here ‘till at least 8, I figured I still had time t-to - clean up…” His words stuttered in surprise as his blue eyes caught sight of Katniss. She watched him warily for any indication that he may resent her for last night, but he simply flushed slightly and continued.

“I—sorry about the mess” he finished lamely, his eyes still locked on Katniss. She felt her own flush creeping up her neck at his stare, her eyes looking everywhere but his face. She focused instead on the way his worn brown pants tucked into his boots, their long laces knotted twice for good measure. She couldn’t help but notice how different he was from his brother, she wondered if Peeta had ever touched a jar of Rye’s moonshine.

“This is Kat, Peeta” Clem finally broke the tension, noticing the direction of Peeta’s gaze. “She’s new since Sunday night”
Peeta nodded, fixing her with an amicable grin “Well welcome Katn—Kat, I’m sorry, I’m afraid I’ve given you a wrong impression….I’m not usually this messy”

Katniss narrowed her eyes slightly, the way he said it, with that knowing tone in his voice, told her that “being messy” wasn’t exactly the impression he was talking about. “It’s no problem Master Mellark, more work is more pay anyway."

Peeta frowned slightly at her address “It’s just Peeta...please just call me Peeta” He wiped at his brow distractedly, streaking it with more flour, and approached the counter with the raw dough. “So, Rye was supposed to fill the latest cupcake orders today and finish up the cream puffs...I think the cinnamon bread might need to be made also—not sure how much he got done yesterday”

“Well alright” Clem clapped her hands together, ready to take charge, “Dawn, you get started on clean-up, I need to train Kat with the cupcakes—Peeta, I may need some help with the frosting bit...”

Katniss was lead to a small table off to the side where Clem immediately began accumulating ingredients. Flour, butter, sugar, eggs… Katniss marveled at the sheer bulk of each thing needed for the recipe, the amount of food could feed her tiny family for weeks! How many of these things are we making exactly? She asked as Clem flew by, her hands full with some sort of mixing contraption.

“The order calls for one hundred, Capitol guests I expect”

Before Katniss had a chance to marvel at that, there was a large crash from the other side of the room.

“Dammit!” Dawn let out a stream of expletives as she surveyed the damage. Somehow her mop had caught on one of the racks holding trays of raw cupcake batter, effectively smattering the entire wall in goop. Everything on her side of the kitchen seemed to be dripping in the stuff.

“Make that two hundred cupcakes” Clem groaned, glaring at Dawn.

On the other side of the room, Peeta Mellark seemed to be on the brink of laughter, “I’ll come over there and do the cupcakes if you’ll help Dawn clean up.” his voice came out unnaturally low as he struggled to remain straight-faced stepping over piles of cupcake-goo. He wasn’t the most graceful person, Katniss noticed as she watched him pick his way through the kitchen, hopping over tiny puddles, his pants untucking and dragging in the batter. It was almost endearing how disgustingly messy he was getting.

Clem sighed in resignation “Yeah ok, I don’t trust this klutz on her own anyway.” This earned her a death glare from Dawn who would have been more intimidating had it not been for her dripping hair.

“So, looks like you’re stuck with me then” Peeta grinned half-sheepishly at Katniss as he reached her counter. Stuck with indeed. She didn’t want to make assumptions but she was slightly suspicious that Peeta was all too happy to partner up with her. Whatever he had wanted last night he clearly was still hung up on, and she hadn’t missed how he had cleverly commandeered the partner swap after Dawn’s convenient mishap.

“So where do we start?” Katniss was strictly business, he may have other things in mind but whatever he wanted was almost certainly not going to help Prim. And come to think of it, if he was anything like his brother it probably wasn’t going to help her much either.

“Do you have all of the ingredients?” One look at Katniss’s business face and Peeta had shifted
smoothly back into baker-mode.
“Clem got the ingredients, what now?”
“Kat have you ever made cupcakes before?”
She felt her face get warm, did he think making fun of her would break her down? “She got flour, butter, eggs, sugar….”
“Katniss?”
“Of course not! when would I eve—!”
“Woah! it’s ok! Sorry I asked —I just needed to make sure the need was dire enough for a bit of rule breaking…that’s all.”
Katniss’s head snapped up at his words, meeting the blue eyes she had been avoiding all morning.
“rule breaking!?” She hissed accusingly, glaring at him.
He blinked slowly under her stare, the corner of his mouth turning up “Or not..depends on your taste for sweets I geuss”
“You mean…”
“It wouldn’t be fair to have you make your first cupcake without at least letting you try it, now would it?”
Katniss’s mouth was flooded at the thought— her very own cupcake! Only once had she tasted real bakery cake, her father had brought a tiny slice home one year for her mother’s birthday. They had all gathered around, marveling at the tiny iced flowers and single sugar bird. Prim had almost cried when she was told the cake was to be eaten and not looked at, but after tasting it she was all too happy to oblige. Her mother had kept the tiny sugar bird in her drawer all those years, a memento she had called it. Katniss wondered if her cupcakes would have mementos, she hoped they would, maybe she could sneak one home to Prim.
“It would be breaking the rules”
“Oh absolutely” Peeta was grinning now, she wanted to scowl but it wouldn’t come. What he was saying was too wonderful, she hated herself for how much she wanted it. It must have been written all over her face too, seeing as he looked all too proud of himself for bringing it up. Tricky, he knew her weaknesses. It was cupcake bribing at its finest, but she wasn’t about to turn it down.
“Ok”
They worked together throughout the morning, mixing and measuring cupcake ingredients. Not much was spoken beyond “pass me the cup measure” and “that looks about right” but there was a certain companionship that came with rule breaking.
Anticipation for her promised cupcake fueled Katniss’s every action, each batch of cupcakes pulled out of the oven looking better than the last. Red velvet, chocolate, marble, vanilla, and some Capitol specialties like lavender, peppermint, rose, and butter-rum. The smells that poured from the oven every time it was opened were enough to make Katniss’s mouth water and her stomach groan.
It was nearing dinner time when the final tray of cupcakes was taken out and Katniss could barely contain her curiosity and excitement for the final step. Whenever she took Prim into town, the very first shop they visited was the bakery—not to buy anything of course, but to marvel at the beautiful display of hand-decorated cakes in the window. No cake was ever decorated the same and each design was as intricate as if it had been drawn on a canvas. Katniss’s favorites were always the ones mimicking nature, of birds flying among the trees or tiny fishes in a pond. She didn’t expect each cupcake to be decorated half as luxuriously as the cakes, but she was excited all the same. It was maddening how the simple introduction of sweets could turn her into a wide-eyed child again.
Peeta lifted one of the cooling racks that held their first batch of cupcakes and brought it over to the counter with the white decorating stands. Katniss pulled up a stool, intent on watching him decorate so she could recount the details to Prim. Unfortunately, this was not in Clem’s itinerary.
“Kat! what do you think you’re doing?” she barked at her from across the kitchen. Katniss jumped from the stool as if she’d been scalded, her ears burning bright red, how could she forget even for a second that she was a working girl? That she was on a job for goodness sakes!

“She’s fine, Clem, frosting cupcakes is easier sitting down—gives you a steady hand” Peeta smoothed over Katniss’s mistake with ease. Clem nodded apologetically as Katniss glared at the floor; must he be so kind? She had deserved that scolding, she needed waking up from her stupid cupcake haze and she didn’t need to owe him anymore. And what was he thinking! There was no way a decent-looking cupcake could ever come out of Katniss Everdeen’s work, steady hand or not!

Peeta only laughed when she voiced her concern, earning him a glower. He was already dividing the buttercream frosting into little white bowls. Katniss watched curiously from her stool as he took a small, pink, Capitol-esque case from his apron pocket, flicking up the clasp and opening it to reveal five tiny bottles of different colors. “I thought you used berry dye for all of your cakes” Katniss mused remembering all the times she had brought her day’s berry pickings to the back door of the bakery to be traded.

“Berry dye adds a strange flavor to the cakes and limits what colors we can use” Peeta answered Katniss offhandedly as he remained focused on his work, deftly mixing the dyes into the buttercream. Katniss’s eyes followed the boy’s hand as he stirred each bowl until its contents bloomed with color.

“What do you do with the berries I trade you?” Fascinating as the frosting was, something in Peeta’s answer wasn’t adding up.

“we make tarts, muffins, scones—”
“I brought you pounds of juniper berries”
“...yeah?”
“Master Mellark, juniper is about as bitter as dirt, no one in their right mind would fill a muffin with them."
Peeta paused in his mixing to look up at her. His ears were red at the tips and he scrubbed a hand through his curls grimacing guiltily at her.

“I thought I told you not to call me that”

Katniss wanted to bite her tongue, now she was turning red, she’d overstepped herself, and for the second time that day. It was far from her business what the bakery did with her berries, and she had basically just insulted Peeta’s intelligence asking about it. What a great way to start a job she scolded herself, lowering her eyes in shame and offering an apology.

“Sorry, never mind what I was saying—it was stupid”

“It wasn’t” Peeta objected but no explanation was supplied otherwise as he went back to his work.

“I never get tired of decorating for these people” Peeta joked as he examined the outrageous designs the Capitol clients had requested. Katniss peered over his shoulder and gasped in appreciation; birds of paradise was the theme with brilliant plumage ranging in all sorts of colors—most of which Katniss had never seen represented in nature with multi-colored flowers in different textures and designs.

“You have to do this on every cupcake?!?”
Peeta chuckled at her dismay, shaking his head “I started making the birds a while back, they’re in the freezer now, today is all about the background—flowers and stuff.”

When the buttercream was colored to Peeta’s satisfaction Katniss was put to the task of filling pastry bags with frosting as he continued to go over what the customers wanted on top of their cupcakes. The mindless work gave Katniss too much time to think about the job she would be returning to the very next day. Clem’s words from that morning made her shiver with disgust, words about her body, about how the men would love her smile. The sickening thoughts wouldn’t
stop as she filled each bag with bright, fluorescent frosting. Those Capitol men with their bright, fluorescent clothes and hair, she wanted to shower, her skin crawled, she was choking on it, the thought of those colors on her skin, everywhere, taking everything.

The last bag was filled. Katniss scrubbed every last bit of colored frosting from her skin before she could think straight again. She watched it all drain away, and scoured it from the sink before she let herself return to the work counter.

The counter had bloomed with it’s own color while she was washing up. A few cupcakes already wore caps of bright blue and green buttercream and Peeta wore a look of deep concentration as he piped something on a green one. Katniss moved silently so she wouldn’t disrupt him, slowly easing herself back onto her stool. There was something fascinating about watching him work, something she knew she could never hope to describe to Prim when she told her of it. His face had taken on an entirely new look, intense and removed, as if he was constructing something from a world only he knew. Katniss found herself wishing she could know it too as roses blossomed from the point of his piping tool in vivid detail, tiny petals veined with pink and encircled with pale green leaves and ruby thorns, tropical flowers in sunset-orange and blood red. Eventually, and with great resentment she was forced to release the breath she had been holding.

Peeta startled at the noise, dropping his pastry bag in the process.

“Kat! I-I didn’t know you were watching.”

Katniss opened and closed her mouth stupidly, finding no excuse for herself and her odd behavior she blurted out what she hoped would change the subject of interest;

“W-what am I supposed to do now?”

Peeta blinked at her for a moment in confusion before registering her question. He glanced around the now-spotless kitchen, his eyes resting on the fallen pastry bag.

“You can finish piping the base frosting?”

Katniss looked skeptical at his proposal and he rushed to reassure her “It’s easy I swear, just make sure you have a steady hand and don’t second-guess yourself, you’ll be fine.”

“I won’t be!” Katniss had seen her drawings, Prim’s goat could do better…”I’m a terrible artist”

“Katniss you’ll be fine, I’m here to help”

“I won’t be”

“I promise”

Peeta wasn’t smiling anymore, those blue eyes held something Katniss couldn’t quite decipher, but she held his gaze.

“You can’t promise something like that!” Fine what an empty, useless word, Katniss was far from being fine, the bakery was only postponing the inevitable. It was almost cruel to give her a glimpse of something so wonderful only to pull it out from under her toes the very next day. It suddenly felt wrong to be talking to the baker’s golden son, to be accepting his smiles, his charity, what did he see when he looked at her? This boy who thought he was doing her a favor by offering her sweets and breaking the rules, he felt sorry for her.

“Alright girls party’s over, Madam wants us back to the Big House by six!”

Clem’s voice broke through Katniss’s thoughts, relieving her of her misery. Now she would return to where she belonged and no one would know the better.

“Wait, –Kat!”

Peeta’s hand caught her own as she rushed to leave the bakery. The sudden warmth at his touch startled her into turning around, her eyes questioning. At her expression, Peeta dropped her hand as if it were hot coals clearing his throat and managing a tentative smile.

“We had a deal, remember? Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Katniss froze. A deal? No. There was never a deal, she helped in the bakery, she filled pastry
bags, did he want something else? No.

“You haven’t even tried your cupcake yet.”

She didn’t deserve it. That was her first thought when she saw what he had done. The cupcake was breathtaking, and she didn’t deserve it. A beautiful bird of sugar with tiny iced feathers took flight among a dozen pale-pink and yellow primroses, their petals full and tempting—she would owe him everything for this—if she accepted this.

“I-I can’t” Katniss’s voice came out like ice, she turned before she could see the look on Peeta’s face, and fled. She didn’t realize the tears until she reached the Brothel steps, and by then they were a steady stream.

Chapter End Notes

SO sorry it took so long to update but I’ve gotten into a habit of writing now so the next chapter should be out faster. Feedback is greatly appreciated good or bad. Also I'm in need of a beta so if anyone's interested just message me on my tumblr (Peetalark.tumblr.com) Thank you so much for reading! :)

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! This is my first ever fic so feedback is so greatly appreciated as I figure out if this is something I want to continue to do. I will try to finish this story and keep updates fairly regular (on here and on my tumblr blog at Peetalark.tumblr.com)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!