"I'm messed up."

"We're all messed up in the end, Katniss."

Katniss is in her third year of college, struggling to deal with the death of her sister and the abandonment of her mother. Everyone she loves leaves her. Afraid to let love in, she doesn't expect to be on the receiving end of the affections of her friend, Peeta Mellark. When someone from her childhood comes back to haunt her, she has to decide if love is really worth it. A Modern Day Everlark AU with horses and college.

“Good Katniss. Give him a little more of his head.” Cinna calls to me from across the riding ring as my horse and I clear another jump.

“You’re chocking up a little too much on the reins. Give him some room.” I loosened up on the reins a bit, giving my horse Kodiak a little more range of his head as he cantered around the arena.

“Good, good. Now set him up right for this last one.”

As Kodiak–or Kody as I call him– cleared the last jump, I pulled him into a trot and guided him to the center of the arena. I smiled as he trotted towards Cinna. I cleared that whole coarse in record
“Good job today Katniss. I can see why you got that scholarship here.” Cinna grabbed the bridal and stroked Kody’s cheek, “You are showing so much improvement. Now, get this guy cooled down and turn him out.”

As I turn Kody away I look over my shoulder, “Thank you Cinna, See you next time.”

Cinna is my favorite professor at University of Northern Panem. He was one of the ones who scouted me for the University’s equestrian team when I was in high school. It was actually a funny story of how he found me. Kody had been my dad’s hunting horse when he was alive. He got him off a slaughter truck and only paid 25 dollars for him. He was passed on to me when he died in a mining accident when I was 11. Kody is ornery and spirited and can be a downright brat when he wants to be. On the day I met Cinna, he was up in my area visiting family. I had taken Kody hunting and was going to meet up with Gale and his mare when Kody decided he would rather go back to his shed. He bolted with me on him and wouldn't stop running. He leapt a 6-foot fence and ran right in front of Cinna’s car. By the time Kody stopped– happily in his pasture, I might add– Cinna was pulling into my driveway, raving about how he has never seen anyone jump a fence that high bareback. He sat me down and offered me a scholarship to UNP.

College had never been an option I considered for myself due to a lack of funds. Especially after my sister, Prim, died in a house fire when I was 17. My mom had been at work and I was out back with Kody. It was nearing the end of January and the bitter cold was unbearable. The Portable heater we kept in the living room was old, and according to the fire marshal, was too close to the couch. I remember walking out of Kody’s small shed to see flames coming out of the living room window. I ran in, trying to save Prim. The day ended with my sister dead, our house gone, my mother MIA and myself in the hospital, suffering from 2nd and 3rd degree burns all over my body. By some miracle, my face was mostly spared. I have a few scars that go up the right side of my neck and onto my jaw and ear. The rest of my body bears the puzzles of burn scars and skin grafts. After her death, my mom checked out completely and I was on my own. I don’t even know where she is anymore. But between the scholarship and my work-study program, I manage. It also helps that Kody’s board is free to me because I volunteer my time as a stable hand. Every morning at 6am (save for Sundays and Thursdays) I am at the barn, letting horses out, mucking out stalls and grooming the horses. It’s hard work, but it allows me to study and major in biology, which is one of my passions.

I dismount Kody at the entrance to the arena and run my hand along his powerful neck. His black fur is gleaming with sweat and he cocks his ears at me as if to say “Can’t we run now?”

“Not tonight, boy”, I smile at him and press my face onto his, “It’s supposed to storm pretty soon, wouldn’t want to be caught in that, would we?”

Kody shakes his head and snorts, as if he is in agreeance, “Come on now” I lead him back to the barn and stop him in front of his stall. As I begin the process of untacking him, I see his ears perk up as he stares down the line of stalls. A white dapple horse sticks her head out of her stall and whinnies down to Kody. He answering whinny back is high pitched and excited.

“Wow Kody, that is the girliest sound I’ve ever heard. Now, stop flirting with your girlfriend and hold still”

As I am brushing Kody down, I see a blonde head stick out of the dapple’s stall, “Hi Katniss! I thought I heard your voice.” I smile as Madge opens the stall door and slips out before walking down towards me, “I was just giving Jellybean a carrot before this storm hits. I saw you riding tonight. You guys looked great!”
“Thanks Madge.”

Madge smiles at me and leans against Kody’s side. Madge has been my roommate for 3 years now and she is one of my best friends. We got randomly paired up together as roommates and once we discovered a mutual love of our horses, we have been attached. Her horse, Jellybean, is the most expensive horse I have ever seen and was a gift to Madge from her parents on her 16th birthday. Jellybean was born and raised in Europe and comes from a regal bloodline. How she got the name Jellybean is beyond me.

“So, are you coming out with us tonight?” Madge takes a step back as I lead Kody into his stall, and then comes forward to lean against the stall door once it is closed. I shrug and focus all my attention on petting my horse, hoping she will get the hint and stop asking.

“Oh, come on Katniss. You are such a hobbit. All you do is homework and riding and work. You see your horse more than you see your best friend.”

“Madge, you know I don’t—”

“Like social interaction, yeah I know.” Madge finishes for me. I turn to look at her. “Look, we are just going to get some hot wings and cheap beer. It’ll be fun. You haven’t been out with us for so long.”

“Well, some of us have to work our butts off in order to be able to afford to continue going to school.” I argue.

“Don’t give me that Catnip” I look up into the aisle to see Gale holding a hay net out to me, “I work just as much as you do, but I still find time to see everybody. Hey, babe.” He leans down and gives Madge a kiss before tossing the hay net to me. I hook it up in the corner of Kody’s stall and sigh. Figures Gale would show up right about now. He decided to come to UNP the same year I did, however, he has taken out loans to cover his tuition. He volunteers as a stable hand like I do to get free board for his mare, Delilah.

“Seriously Catnip, stop complaining, put on your big girl pants and come out with us. It’ll be fun. Plus, Peeta will be there.” Gale wiggles his eyebrows at me. I turn around and busy myself by playing with Kody’s mane to try to conceal my blush.

“I really don’t care if he is going or not.” I try to feign nonchalance. Gale and Madge look at each other and snort, “Yeah, okay, if you say so. I’m going to go to Gale’s and shower there. We will pick you up outside the dorm at 6. Be there.” Madge turns around and wraps her arms around Gale’s waist as the two of them walk out of the barn.

I lean against the stall door and stare at Kody as he eats his hay. I’ve known Peeta for just as long as I have known Madge. Peeta and Madge went to the same high school together and they ran in the same social circle. When they both started UNP, they became even closer friends and Peeta became a friend of mine through extension of Madge. We are also the only two in the group not paired up. After Gale and Madge became official last semester, we became the odd pair out. Annie and Finnick have been dating since their sophomore year of high school. Delly and Johanna began dating our freshman year and have been–disgustingly–attached at the hip ever since. And, more often then not, group dinners turn into movie nights at the guy’s apartment, which turns into the couples separating and going to their bedrooms, with Johanna and Delly going back to their apartment, leaving Peeta and I alone with the movie still playing. I have nothing against Peeta. He is a wonderful man. Nice to everyone that he meets. I’ve even begun to admit to myself that I have a crush on him. Everyone is waiting for us to get together, but Peeta has never given any indication that he wants more than friendship.
“What do you think Kody? Should I go?”

Kody doesn’t look at me as he munches his hay, but the way he flicked his tail in my face is answer enough, “Alright, alright, I’ll do it.”

I give Kody a pat goodbye and then begin the walk back to my dorm. Madge and I chose one of the nicer dorms this year. While we still share a room, we finally have our own bathroom. The room is pretty much mine anyways, since Madge is at Gale’s almost every night. I walk into my dorm hall and flash my student ID to the RA on duty at the front desk and slink to the elevators, hoping the RA doesn’t notice my muddy boots. When I got on, I breathe a sigh of relief. I have gotten written up more times than I can count due to the amount of mud I track into the hall from the barn. When I get off on my floor, I walk to my door and unlock it. When entering the room, there is a tiny hallway with the bathroom on the left and a coat closet on the right. I walk into the room and sit down on my bed and take my boots off. I groan as I lift my socked feet onto my bed and lay down, checking my phone for messages. I have two unread texts. The first is from Madge, stating that if I am not ready at 6, she will drag me out regardless of my state of dress. I roll my eyes and don’t bother to reply. The next text makes my heart beat a little faster.

Peeta: Hey! I heard you were coming out with us tonite. Excited to finally see you! Glad I wont be 7th wheeling tonite!

I text him back a simple smiley emoticon with the tongue sticking out and am debating about if I really need a shower tonight or if I can skip when he texts back.

Peeta: Seriously though, I’m glad you are coming. We can sit together and try to fend off all the PDA.

I can’t help but smile when I read that. Definitely getting a shower then.

X

As I open the front door of my dorm, I shudder a bit as the breeze blows over me. The on coming storm is bringing in a pretty strong cold front. The air smells of rain and I can’t help but inhale. This smell always reminds me of my dad.

“Katniss!”

I look across the quad and see Delly standing next to Johanna, waving her hand frantically in the air at me. I give a small wave back and walk towards the group.

“Hey, look. Katniss actually does exist and isn’t just a figment of my imagination.” Finnick smirks at me as I get to the group.

“Haha, very funny, Finn.” I shoot him a playful glare.

“Hey, it’s not my fault you’ve gone MIA recently.” Finnick bumps me with his shoulder.

“Well, it might interest you to know, but I have the time trials coming up soon. And if I don’t maintain a good time then I’ll—”

“Lose your scholarship, we know!” The whole group looked at each other then burst out laughing. I scowl at them all.

“Aww, lighten up Catnip, we’re just messing with you. We know how important it is for you to practice.” Gale places his hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze.
I roll my eyes and take a step away from him. Peeta moves over towards me and gives me a timid smile. I smile back.

“Aw, look, twinsies!” I glance up to find Delly staring at Peeta and I. Sure enough; we are both wearing plaid shirts and jeans. I glance up at Peeta as Delly giggles to find him rubbing the back of his neck, a slight blush on his cheeks.

“Babe, leave them alone.” Johanna says as she wraps both her arms around Delly’s waist.

“Well, are we ready to go? I have homework to do tonight still.” I ask as I look around at the group. We all start to walk downtown to the local bar that specializes in chicken wings and cheap beer, a college kid’s dream. Madge and Gale lead the group with Peeta and I lagging behind all the couples. Peeta shuffles beside me with his hands in his pockets.

“So, how was your clinical today?” I ask, trying to fill the silence between us. Peeta smiles, and begins to tell me about his day at the hospital. When I first met him, I was surprised to learn he wanted to be a nurse. But his love for people and the drive in him to help makes it clear that he will make a wonderful nurse. He has a love for each patient he comes across.

“I had a little girl today. She, uh, had to have her leg amputated because of osteosarcoma. She’s 8 and was pretty upset because she wants to be a ballerina. I showed her my leg. She couldn’t believe I was just like her. I told her how I am still able to run and play sports. I helped motivate her to get out of bed and try walking with PT for the first time.” I smile as Peeta talks. He had told me our first year of college about how he lost his leg in a car accident when he was 16. I couldn’t help the smile that crossed my face as I watched Peeta talk about his clinical experience. His face was so bright and his eyes lit up.

“Alright, lovebirds!” I startle and look down the street. The group is standing at the entrance to the bar, and it’s only now that I realize that Peeta and I had stopped walking and I was staring intensely at him while he talked. I can feel myself blush as I dart down the street, leaving Peeta in the dust. As I approach the door, Gale snickers at me, “Real smooth, Catnip.” I flip him off and stalk inside and plop down at our usual corner booth. The rest of the group slides in around me, but I don't fail to notice the way that Finnick shoves Peeta in front of him, so he can sit next to me in the booth.

Once everyone is situated, the waitress comes over and takes our drink orders. I order water, along with an Amaretto Sour.

“Do you want to share some mozzarella sticks? My treat.”

I look at Peeta and nod; “I’m always up for free food.” Peeta laughs, and rests his arm on the booth behind me.

X

We all make small talk as we wait for our food and drinks to arrive. Johanna is throwing crumpled straw wrappers down Delly’s shirt, while Finnick and Annie are staring at each other, deep in conversation. The empty basket of mozzarella sticks sits between Peeta and I.

“…so then she said, what’s the difference?” Peeta, Madge and I cracked up with laughter as Gale smiled proudly at his joke. Madge buried her head into Gale’s chest, her shoulders shaking with silent laughter. Gale continues to grin and wraps his arms around her. The waitress comes by and drops off the food we had ordered earlier.

“Thank you” Peeta politely greeted the waitress as he took his plate of boneless wings.
“So,” Peeta takes a bite of his wing and turns slightly to look at me, “How is your practicing going? Madge said you practically live at the barn now.”

“Yeah, between classes and work and volunteering at the barn, any free time I have I have to devote to practicing. If I don’t keep Kody worked, he’ll get ornery and sloppy. And I can’t afford to lose this scholarship.”

“You know, we’ve know each other for years now, but I still feel as if I don’t know you.”

I snort, “There isn’t much to know.”

“Sure there is. Tell me the deep stuff.”

“The deep stuff?” I raise my eyebrow at him, and take a bite of my food.

“Like, what’s your favorite color?”

“Well now you’ve stepped over the line.”

Peeta laughs, “No, seriously, what is it?”

“Green. What about yours?”

“Orange, and before you say anything, more like a sunset orange.”

“Oh, that’s nice.” I give him a smile.

Peeta nods and takes another bite of his wings. He takes a deep breath, “Do you, uh, think you might, um, be able to…”

I raise an eyebrow at him. It’s unlike Peeta to jumble his words. He looks up at me and blushes then opens his mouth to speak again.

“Does everything taste okay?” Peeta jumps about a mile high at the waitress’ voice and turns to face her.

“Yes, great! Just wonderful…” I can’t help but notice how his shoulders slump a bit. After the waitress walks away, he shoots me a lopsided smile. But I can’t help but notice that it doesn’t reach his eyes. He doesn't try to finish his previous sentence; instead he shows an intense interest in his dinner. I look up to catch Gale shooting me a look from across the table. I shrug back in response.

On the walk back to campus, Peeta walks with his hands in his pockets. He looks up at me, occasionally taking a deep breath and looks as if he wants to say something, but whenever I make eye contact with him, he just smiles and looks back at the ground. We stop outside the apartment building that the boys and Johanna and Delly live in. I say goodbye to the group and prepare to walk back to my dorm alone, as Madge usually stays with Gale.

As I start to walk, I notice a dark green Honda Civic parked on the curb, idling, and it stop me in my tracks. When I was 10, there was a little girl who lived down the street from me. Her name was Lavinia. Gale was going through his “girls have cooties” phase and didn’t want to play with me, so Lavinia and I spent everyday that summer playing together. Her father was a mechanic who worked from home, and I remember sneaking over to her house late that night to see if she wanted to catch fireflies. There was a dark green Honda Civic parked in her driveway. I remember her dad fixing it that morning, because I was fascinated with the color of the car. Lavinia’s front door was unlocked, which I thought was odd because her mom and dad had a date
night tonight, which was why I snuck over to play with her. I tiptoed into her house and into her room. Her door was shut and behind it, I could hear crying. I opened the door and found Lavinia lying on the bed, her nightgown pushed up to her neck. Our neighbor, Seneca Crane, was naked on top of her. I didn’t understand what was happening, but I remember screaming. He leapt out of the bed and grabbed me by the arms.

He told me that if I ever told anyone what I saw, he would find me and do the same thing to me. I remember looking over his sweaty shoulder to see Lavinia crawling up the bed. Her purple sheets were stained with blood. I’ll never forget the look she gave me. Instead of helping her, I ran and didn’t look back. I never told a soul what I saw that night and I never saw my friend again. Her family moved away by the end of that year. I buried that night deep within my memories. But I still have nightmares of that dark green civic chasing me down the street.

I’m shaken out of my thoughts when I hear footsteps behind me and look up to see Madge running to catch up with me.

“Uh, did you forget something?” I ask her. She hasn’t slept in the dorm in weeks. As we begin to walk, the Honda Civic pulls out from the curb and drives down the street. I shake the thoughts out of my head and keep walking with Madge.

“What, is it that weird for me to walk back to my dorm with my roommate?” I scowl at her response. She only stays the night when she wants to talk to me about something. She’s silent for a moment then she looks up at me.

“So, what happened with you and Peeta?”

“So, what happened with you and Peeta?”

“Nothing, why?”

She looks at me and bites her lip, “I don’t know. I was just wondering.”

“He was acting kind of strange tonight. Like he wanted to say something. He kept trying to talk to me and then would stop or change the sentence.”

I am unprepared for the shriek that Madge lets out and jump at the high-pitched cry.

“What is the matter with you?”

“He was trying to ask you out, Katniss!” I immediately start to stutter.

“What? Are you crazy? No he wasn’t.”

“Yes he was! He’s had a crush on you since freshman year.” I gap at Madge as she continues, “He has been texting me and asking about how he should ask you out. I told him you weren’t the gushy type and to just man up and do it. I’m sorry; I’ve just been holding this in for so long. The guys have been trying to tell him to just get it over with and ask already, but you know Peeta, everything has to be perfect.”

She slides her ID card through the slot in the door of our building and pulls open the door once it is unlocked. We both flash our cards to the RA on duty and continue towards the elevator.

“Are you being serious Madge?” I punch the elevator button and cross my arms as we wait.

“As a heart attack. Peeta has had the hots for you for three years now. He just made me promise not to tell. It was actually kinda irritating. He would just stare at you when you weren’t looking.”

“Madge, you can’t just spring this on me like this.”
The doors open and we walk in. After Madge hits the button for our floor and the elevator begins its ascent, she looks over at me.

“I’m not springing anything on you, Katniss, it is so painfully obvious that he likes you. How did you not notice? Even the guys noticed.”

I shove the key into our door and stomp inside, “So what, you all just discuss me and debate whether Peeta should go out with me or not?” I throw my purse on the bed and start to unbutton my shirt as Madge sits down on her bed.

“No, Katniss, that isn’t it. In freshman year, Peeta confided in Delly and I that he liked you. The guys and Johanna and Annie all thought he liked you, and he reluctantly confirmed it when we had a movie night at guys place last semester. You didn’t go because you took Kody out, but we were a bit tipsy and Johanna started teasing him because his crush has always been a bit obvious. Once he finally confirmed it, we have all been encouraging him to talk to you. I… I see the way you look at him Katniss, when he isn’t looking at you. You look at him like Annie looks at Finn and like I look and Gale and like Delly looks at Johanna. You look at him like you love him.”

I open and close my mouth a few times, trying to come up with a response. Madge stands up and sits next to me on my bed.

“Katniss, I know you are scared of relationships. And you have a good reason too, but you need to trust me when I say, Peeta would never purposely hurt you.”

I stare at the ground and try to blink back tears. Even thinking about my past makes me upset. Loosing Prim absolutely destroyed me. She was my best friend. Once she was gone, and my mom left me, I didn’t have anyone. The Hawthrones took me in and loved me as their own, but I have been terrified to let anyone else into my heart. I don’t know if I could handle losing anybody else. The thought of loving Peeta, only to have him ripped away from me makes me panic. Madge immediately wraps her hand around my arm and squeezes forcefully. She and Gale are one of the few people who know how to bring me right out of a panic attack.

Madge and Gale have both dealt with me when I have panic attacks and they have both seen me when my depression takes over and is so crippling I can’t get out of bed and Madge, being my roommate, has been there when I wake, screaming from nightmares of fire and dead sisters and that stupid dark green civic.

“I’m not telling you that you have to marry the guy, but I think you should think about it. I think he could be good for you.” She wraps her arms around my shoulders and gives me a quick squeeze, and then stands up, “Just, hear him out, when he does finally work up the courage to talk to you.”

I watch her walk into the bathroom and shut the door. A few moments later, once I hear the shower start, I let out a shaky breath. Even just thinking about my past gets me all worked up. I finish changing into my pajamas and lay in bed, surfing through my newsfeed when a text from Peeta pops up.

Peeta: Hey, I just wanted to let you know it was really good to see you tonight. Have a good night. Sweet dreams. ;)

I smile as I read the text. Peeta has become one of my best friends. Of course I would hear what he has to say. I have already accepted that I have a crush on him, but I have never allowed myself to think of the possibility that he would want me in return. I send a text back to him, bidding him goodnight as well. I plug my phone in to charge and set it on my desk and lay back in bed. When I hear the bathroom door open, I quickly roll over to face the wall. I really don't want to talk
anymore tonight. I can hear Madge getting ready for bed, then the rustle of her covers as she gets in bed and shuts off her lamp.

Her voice breaks through the darkness, “Just think about it Katniss.”

I find it pointless to voice that it is all I have been thinking about.

X

I’m startled awake by a nightmare. I quickly sit up and flip on my lamp. My heart is still pounding and my breathing is heavy. Across the room, Madge groans and rolls over, burying her head under her pillow. I rub my eyes and grab my phone to check the time. 5:14 am. I have to be at the barn at 6 to start my chores, so I decide that it isn’t worth it to go back to sleep. I quickly decide on a shower, as I am drenched in sweat. My sheets are soaked as well. I let out a groan and quickly strip my bed and shove the soiled sheets in my laundry basket. Guess I am spending my Friday night doing laundry. I shut my lamp off to let Madge sleep undisturbed and then find my way into the bathroom.

After a quick shower, I use the flashlight on my phone to find a pair of yoga pants and a long sleeved t-shirt. After braiding my hair and dressing, I shove my feet into my boots, grab my book bag and walk out into the hall. After I am done with my chores at the barn, I have an 8am class that I have to practically run to in order to make it on time. Thanks to my nightmare, however, I’ll be able to get a head start on my chores. I might even have time to get a vanilla latte before class.

The walk across campus is quiet and peaceful. It’s just not even dawn yet; the moon still in the sky, and the grass is covered in a slight frost. Fall is definitely here. As I walk past one of the many parking lots on campus, I am startled to hear my name. I look up to see Peeta waving at me. He is in the telltale UNP all white student nurse uniform. He holds a coffee mug in one hand and his car keys in another. He walks towards me.

“Hi Katniss, heading to the barn?”

“Of course. Where else? You going to clinical?”

Peeta chuckles, “Where else? I have my Med-Surg clinical every Friday.”

I give him a smile, and then suddenly freeze. Last night’s conversation with Madge comes flooding back into my head.

“Hey, Katniss, there was something I wanted to ask you last night, but I, uh, never really got the chance.”

I can feel my eyes widen and I start to panic. I’m not ready to handle this yet.

“Um, actually, I am running kind of late. Can it wait?” I quickly stutter out.

Peeta’s face visible falls, “Yeah, of course. It’s not that big a deal. You, uh, have a good day. I’ll see you at movie night tonight?”

“Um, maybe. I have laundry to do and homework and I just don’t know if I can make it…”

“Oh, well, mind if I join you? I have a lot of homework to do too.” The look Peeta gives me is one that is so innocent and so…Peetaish that I just can’t deny him. I bite my lip and nod my head. His face immediately lights up and he smiles at me, “Great! I’ll, uh, see you tonight then? Maybe 6? I’ll bring take-out.”
I look up at him and give him a slight smile; “I could go for some chicken tenders from Euro-Gyro.”

“Absolutely! Have a great day Katniss.” Peeta gives me a smile and then reaches up a hand. It looks like he wants to touch my cheek, but then thinks otherwise and gives a small wave goodbye. With one more lopsided grin, he turns and walks back to his car. As I walk away, I spare a glance over my shoulder to find him watching me leave. At our eye contact, he looks to the ground then gives me a shy wave. I wave back and can’t help the smile that graces my face. I know that I have feelings for him, but that scares me. Because of my fear of loss, I never allowed myself to stop and consider me actually being in a relationship.

I shake the thought from my head as I approach the barn. The access door is already opened and as I walk in, I see Darius, the stable manager, leading a paint horse out of its stall.

“Hey Kat, you’re early today.”

“Yeah, couldn’t sleep. Let me put my stuff up and I’ll help.”

“Okay, they’re going in the south pasture today.”

I shoot Darius a thumbs-up as I walk up the stairs that lead to the barn’s office. Once my stuff is put away, I hurry back down the stairs and grab the lead off of a chestnut mare’s stall and open the door.

“Come on, Prancer, breakfast time.”

Between Darius and I, we get all the horses into the south pasture in record time. Once the horses are out, I grab a pitchfork and wheelbarrow and begin to muck out the stalls. After I take my last load of manure to the pile and am walking back into the barn when a pile of straw lands on top of my head. I drop the wheelbarrow in surprise and look up to see Gale and Darius leaning over the banister of the hayloft, laughing. I scowl up at them.

“What was that for?”

The boys continue to laugh, and then disappear into the hayloft.

“Heads up!”

I jump back just in time as a bale of straw lands at my feet. My scowl deepens.

“Gale! That almost landed on top of me!”

“Yeah, but it didn’t. Lighten up, Catnip.” Gale smirks at me as he hops down the stairs from the hayloft. He lifts the bale of straw over his shoulder and whistles as he walks into a stall to spread the fresh straw.

As I pick up the wheelbarrow and begin to walk away, I hear Gale’s voice echo down the hallway, “So, what happened with Peeta last night?”

“Not you, too!!”

I can hear Gale’s laughter following me down the aisle.

X

Fridays are my favorite day. Not because of the weekend, but because I am done with class by 11
and I have the rest of the day to do as I please. The girls and I always meet up at 12:30 for lunch and then afterwards, I take Kody out for a long gallop. I’m walking towards the dining hall, looking forward to lunch. I’m really feeling a quesadilla today. When I walk into the lobby of the dining hall, I see everyone is already there, waiting for me. I give them a wave and we all get in line to get our student ID’s scanned. I pull out my phone as I wait in line and see I have a snapchat from Peeta. It’s a picture of him, with his stethoscope around his neck and white package in his hand, held up by his face, with a huge smile. He looks to be standing in a supply room. The caption said, “Guess who’s about to cath a patient?”

I snort and quickly snap a picture of myself, nose crinkled in disgust. I caption it with a simple, “Ew.” And then send it to him. Once I have my ID scanned, I follow behind Madge as she heads to the main buffet line. She hands me a plate, and then proceeds to scoop some mac and cheese onto her plate.

“Have you given anymore thought to what we talked about last night?”

I shrug and focus on grabbing some curly fries.

“Not really. I did run into him this morning though.”

“Really? What happened?”

We continue down the line, grabbing food for our plates. I tell her about my run in with Peeta.

“Wait, so is it a date??” Madge looks at me in shock.

“No. I’m going to be doing laundry and homework. It isn’t a date.”

We sit down at our usually table and join the other girls.

“It sounds like a date to me.” Madge murmurs.

“Brainless has a date tonight?” Johanna looks up at me, her mouth full of her burger.

“Thanks Madge. I don’t have a date. Peeta is just coming over and we are doing laundry and homework. That’s is. End of story.”

I see the girls exchange looks, then Madge interjects, “He’s buying her dinner.”

“It’s just Euro-Gyro!”

“So, let me get this straight. Blondie is coming over, by himself, to your dorm. You’re going to be alone for the night, and he is buying you a meal. It’s totally a date!” Johanna starts to laugh, “Look how hard she is blushing! It’s most definitely a date!”

“Johanna, leave her alone.” I look up at Annie, grateful for her interjection, “I think it’s sweet that they finally have a date.”

I let out a large groan and scowl at them. The girls all giggle.

“So, what are you planning on wearing?” Delly asks me.

“I don’t know, this I guess.” The girl’s look at me, their mouths open. It’s especially gross because Johanna has a bite of her burger still in her mouth.

“You cannot wear that!” Madge eyes my outfit.
“What’s wrong with it?” I look down at my shirt and yoga pants. Sure, I got a bit of mud splashed on them from this morning, but I don't think it is necessary to change.

“Well, for starters brainless, you smell like a horses’ ass, no offense.”

I scowl at Johanna, “Well, that's what happens when you work at a barn. And there is no point in changing because I am taking Kody out after we eat.”

“Okay, but you ain’t taking him out tonight. You can shower and change after you ride.” Johanna rolls her eyes.

“Would you like some help, picking out something to wear?” Delly offers, placing her hand on top of mine.

“I don’t really think that’s necessary.” I stare at my plate. I really don't want to get all dressed up for this.

“Please, let us help you Katniss.” I look up to see Annie staring at me with her big green eyes. It’s no wonder Finnick can’t resist her.

I scowl, and bury my face into my hands. The girls take this as a yes and let out a cheer, and begin to discuss what I would look good in. I tune them out and focus on dunking a French fry in ketchup.

X

The fallen leaves crunch under Kody’s hooves as he walks down the trail. It’s nice to be in my dad’s old western saddle. Because of my scholarship for jumping, I am forced to ride in an English saddle most of the time. So when I get the chance to take Kody on a run, I prefer to use my dad’s old saddle. The foliage surrounding us is in various shades of red, yellow and orange. I grin, the last color making me think about Peeta. Lately, it seems like everything makes me think of Peeta. Kody tosses his head: I can tell he wants to run.

“You want to run?” Kody tosses his head again, as if showing his agreement.

“Alright, let’s go.”

I urge him into a canter and hold him there. There is a field at the end of this trail, where I can give him full control and let him run. The crisp, fall breeze hits my face as we continue down the trail.

As we break through the trees and enter the field, I squeeze my legs against his sides and urge him into a run. Kody gladly takes off at a full gallop. The sound of his hooves hitting the ground creates a soothing rhythm as we fly across the field. The freedom I feel whenever I ride my horse is indescribable. It’s as if time stops, and it is just Kody and I. When I am riding, it's as if everything makes sense and all my problems are gone.

Kody loves to run. He always pushes himself faster and faster. Before I can even blink, we are almost at the edge of the field. I slow him down to a trot. He is breathing heavily, but he pulls his head, wanting to keep running.

“Easy, boy, easy.” I stroke his neck. His powerful muscles shiver underneath my hand.

We get on the worn path that leads back to the barn. Kody is still pulling his head, so I decide to give in to him and let him canter down the path. This trail leads us around the outside of campus. As we come up on the apartment complex, I see the guys and girls in the back in the sand volleyball quart. I pull Kody to a walk and lead him up to the group.
“Hi Katniss!!”

I call out to them in greeting and walk Kody closer to the net. I can tell he is eyeing it cautiously. This horse spooks at anything.

“Peeta not back yet?” I casually ask as I notice he isn’t with the group.

“No. He usually doesn’t get back until about 3.” Delly tells me, stroking Kody’s nose.

“So, what’s this we hear about you having a date tonight?” I can hear the smirk in Finnick’s voice as me addresses me.

“It’s not a date!” I throw my arms up in dismay, which in turn spooks Kody. He jumps under me and gives a little rear. Delly screams and jumps backwards.

“Whoa, easy Kody. Sorry. It’s okay. It’s okay.” I stroke his neck again, trying to get him to calm down. He tosses his head and snorts at me.

“Sorry Delly, are you okay?”

“I’m good. He just scared me.”

“So, anyways,” Finnick approaches us and pulls a sugar cube out of his pocket and feeds it to Kody, “Your date tonight?”

“As I’ve already told the girls, it isn’t a date. We are doing homework together and I’m doing laundry. And as I have also already told you, stop feeding my horse sugar cubes! It makes him bratty.”

Finnick smirks at me and pulls another cube from his pocket and pops it into his mouth. Kody pulls his head and tries to nibble on Finnick’s pants, looking for more sugar. “Do you want one, Kitty?”

I roll my eyes and scowl at him, ready to retort, when an RA yells out the window for me to get “that animal off the lawn! It’ll ruin the grass!”

“I’ll see you guys later.”

The group waves goodbye and then gets back to their game. I turn Kody around and get ready to head back to the barn when Gale calls my name.

“Wait up!”

He jogs towards me and then pulls himself onto Kody, sitting behind the saddle and me.

“Excuse you?”

“Oh, shut up and walk. I need to talk and you need to listen.”

My scowl deepens, but I guide Kody towards the barn. Gale is silent for a while, but I can practically feel the wheels in his head turning. Once we arrive outside the barn, we both dismount. I grab Kody’s reins and lead him to his stall and hook his lead to his bridle. I undo his girth and pull the saddle and pad from his back and set it on his stall door. Gale picks up a brush and walks to Kody’s right side and begins to groom him. I pick up another brush and begin to groom his left side.
“Look,” I glance up to see Gale is focused on brushing Kody. He isn’t trying to make eye contact with me, “You’re my best friend. I can read you like a book. I know you’re scared of relationships, of intimacy. And you have good reason to be. Your sister and father are dead, and your mother abandoned you. But as your best friend, I think it’s time to start to move forward. If you live in the past, you will miss everything good life has to offer. Being with Madge, being in an intimate relationship, is the most amazing feeling in the world. I don’t want you to miss out because you are scared of your being left behind. If this is something you want, if Peeta, is something you want, then you need to move forward and stop living in fear. Let yourself be loved.”

Gale finally looks up at me. He reaches over Kody’s back and brushes a tear from my cheek. It’s only then that I realize I’ve been crying.

“And, maybe, you should tell him about what happened to you. Help him to understand you. He’s a good guy and I think he could make you happy. You just have to let him.”

Gale sets the brush in my tack box and brushes his hand along Kody’s back as he walks behind him, towards me. He pulls me into a hug and I don’t hesitate to wrap my arms around him. I suck in a shaky breath and try to stop my tears. Gale presses a kiss to my hair and whispers, “You know where to find me if you need me.”

He gives my shoulders a squeeze, and with one more look, he turns and walks out the barn, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I finish grooming Kody and then change him into his halter. I hook his lead back on to him and lead him out of the barn to let him go to pasture. The whole time, I can feel tears rolling down my cheeks. I lead Kody into the pasture, unhook his lead and watch him trot down the hill to the rest of the herd. He gives out a whinny and Jellybean trots out of the herd to meet him. I watch them nuzzle, black fur against white. Kody nips her forelock and I watch as the two of them begin to graze, side by side.

It seems even Kody has accepted love.

X

I find myself sitting on my bed in a towel, freshly showered. My wet hair hangs over my shoulders and I watch as the girls dig through my closet.

“What about this? It’s Peeta’s favorite color!” Delly holds out a light orange shirt. Prim got it for me days before she died. I think it is ugly as hell, but I can’t find it within myself to get rid of it. I shake my head. Delly hangs the shirt back into my closet and keeps looking.

“What about this, brainless?” Johanna holds up a lacy mint dress that I wore for a presentation in one of my classes. I shake my head again.

Johanna groans and shoves the dress back, “This shouldn’t be this complicated. How about you just wear underwear. I’m sure he’d like that.”

“Johanna!!!” Madge, Annie and Delly yell simultaneously.

“Alright, alright. Geeze, I was kidding.”

Annie, who has been rummaging through the drawers of my dresser, pulls out a pair of old blue jeans and a tan, fitted t-shirt.

“What about this? Cute but comfy.”

I finally nod my head and laugh as Annie throws the outfit at me.
“I have a necklace that would be cute with that!” Madge rummages around in one of her drawers and then pulls out a silver necklace that comes to my cleavage.

Johanna reaches into my underwear drawer and holds up a pair with penguins wearing Santa hats on them, “Do you own anything even remotely sexy?”

I quickly snatch them out of her hands and scowl at her. I can feel my face turning red. “What does it matter? He’s not going to be looking at my underwear.”

“Yet.”

I turn around to glare at Johanna and find her smirking at me. She raises an eyebrow at me, as if daring me to challenge her statement. I send her one more scowl, and then stomp into the bathroom to change.

“And don’t even think about braiding your hair!”

I slam the door in response. Once I am dressed, I look at myself in the mirror. The short sleeves reveal more of my scars than I would prefer. I usually wear long sleeves. I find myself turning sideways and staring at myself. I lift my hair up into a bun and then let it fall back onto my shoulders. I then roll my eyes at my behavior. Who the hell cares what I look like? Its just Peeta, and it’s not a date. I end up braiding my hair despite Johanna’s threat. I hang my wet towel up and take a deep breath and open the door to find the girls leaning against the wall across from the bathroom door and I scowl in annoyance.

They push me back into the bathroom and make me sit on the closed toilet lid. Madge pulls open the drawer that has some of her make-up in it.

“Oh hell no,” I protest immediately, “I am not wearing make-up.”

“Come on Katniss.” Madge pouts, actually pouts, and holds up some blush.

“That face may work on Gale, but it won’t on me. I am not wearing make-up, Madge. Sorry.”

“Brainless…” Johanna puts her hand on my shoulder and forces me to sit back down. I smack her hand away.

“No. I’ve told you all before, this isn’t a date. I never wear make-up, and if he shows up tonight and sees me wearing it, then he’ll think it is a date.”

The girls exchange looks. It almost pisses me off that they are having a silent conversation that I am not included in. Annie walks towards me and pulls some mascara and eyeliner from the drawer.

“What if I just do your eyes? You have such beautiful eyes. They are such a gorgeous color. And your eyelashes are so dark.” Annie gently grabs my chin and tilts my face up towards hers. She has such a calm, gentle approach that I find myself nodding my head before I even realize it. Next thing I know, Annie is applying some eyeliner to my eyes while the rest of the girls share triumphant looks.

Annie then begins to undo my braid.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to try something.” Annie starts at the side of my head. I feel tugging and pulling on my
hair. She works her way across the back of my head and then begins to quickly braid the rest of my hair. She smiles at me and helps me stand to look into the mirror. I find my eyes widening. Annie has french braided my hair, starting on the left side of my head and worked the braid across the back of my head, then somehow turned the braid into a fishtail braid to finish it off. My make-up is done subtly. I smile and meet her eyes in the mirror. She grins when our eyes meet.

“Thank you, Annie.” I turn and wrap my arms around her in a hug.

“Group hug!” Delly yells and squishes herself between Annie and myself. Madge jumps in next and drags Johanna by the arm to force her into our hug. I look at myself in the mirror once again, surrounded by some of my closest friends. Three years ago, the only person I had left was Gale. And now, here I am in the middle of a group hug with 4 other girls, waiting for another friend to arrive on our not “date”.

“Thank you.” I murmur to my friends. They squeeze me back tighter. I feel Madge’s hand on my arm. She gives me an extra tight, reassuring squeeze and I know everything she is trying to convey to me. She knows my past; she knows why I am so scared. I know she wants what is best for me. A chime breaks a part our hug. Madge pulls out her phone.

“Gale just texted me. He said Peeta just left the apartment.”

“And that is our cue to go then.” Annie smiles at me, then brushes her hand across my back and walks out of the bathroom. The other girls follow as Madge shoves her make-up back into the drawer.

While Madge quickly packs her book bag, I sit on my bed and watch as she scurries around the room, shoving everything that is needed into it. She pulls her phone charger from the wall.

“Alright, I think I have everything. I’m staying with Gale tonight, so let’s grab breakfast or something tomorrow. I wanna hear about everything that happens tonight.” I roll my eyes but accept the quick hug she gives me.

Annie gives me a hug and whispers good luck into my ear. Delly bounds forward and squeezes me.

“He’s a great guy. Give him a chance. But, just know, he’s like my brother. If you hurt him, I’ll have to take action.”

I snort at the mental image of Delly trying to beat me up. She pulls away from our hug. Even though she has a smile on her face and a twinkle in her eyes, I can see that she was being serious about me hurting him. I feel the need to reassure her.

“I would never try to hurt him, Dell.”

“I know.”

Johanna gives me a wave, “Later Brainless. If you need anything, don’t call me.”

I return her wave. I know she would be the first one banging down my door if something happened. After many more goodbyes, the door finally closes and I am left alone. I hear my phone vibrate and read the text message that Peeta just sent. He said he was getting food now and would be here in 15 minutes. Instead of sitting around waiting, I decide to start my laundry. After lugging my dirty laundry down to the basement to start it, I quickly put new sheets on my bed. Just as I am finishing making my bed, my phone vibrates again.

Peeta: Hey! I’m here and I have food. Come sign me in if you want to eat. :p
I smile and shoot him a quick text back, telling him I am on my way down. I grab my keys and get into the elevator. For extra security, our campus requires that all guests in the dorms be signed in and registered. The elevator doors open, revealing Peeta, leaning against the RA desk, chatting away to the RA on duty. I have no idea how he can strike up a conversation with people he doesn't know. But I guess that is what makes him Peeta. At the sound of the elevator doors closing, he looks up and makes eye contact with me. As I approach him, he just stares at me. I smile stiffly at him and then hand the RA on duty my student ID. I look towards Peeta out of the corner of my eye and find he is still staring at me.

“I need your ID too.” Peeta jumps and quickly hands the RA his card. The RA signs him in and then hands him his card back. Peeta picks his book bag off of the ground and then grabs a brown paper bag off the desk. Once we are in the elevators, Peeta awkwardly fidgets next to me. The elevator doors open and I get off when I hear him say, “You look really beautiful tonight.”

“Thank you.” I subconsciously cross my arms and run my hands over all my scars. I don't miss the way his eyes follow the movements of my hands before darting back to my face.

“I’m serious. You look gorgeous.” I can’t stop the blush that spreads across my face, so I turn and focus on unlocking my door. When I open the door, I hold it open for Peeta. He brushes by me, “Cute slippers, by the way.”

I look down at my feet. I didn't want to walk to the lobby in my socks, so I threw on a pair of slippers that I’ve had for years. They’re these obnoxious yellow slippers in the shape of a duck. I got them for Christmas from Prim when I was 16.

“Thanks, my sister got them for me.” I shut the door and walk into my room. All my friends know about the fire that killed my sister and caused my scars, but I never really spoke of Prim to them. “Prim, right?”

“Yes, but I called her ‘little duck’ more often than Prim. That’s why she got me these. They used to quack if you squeezed their bills.” I wave my foot around, and Peeta and I laugh as the ducks head flops back and forth. “It’s nice to have things like this that remind me of her. Even though it has been almost 4 years, it’s still so hard to believe she is gone. She would have been 18 this year.”

“Wow. What do you think she would have done to celebrate?” Peeta sits down in my desk chair. I watch him study the picture of Prim and I, taken on the 4th of July, the summer before she died.

“Probably something stupid, like buying a pack of cigarettes just because she could. Then she would throw them away and then probably volunteer at an animal shelter or a retirement home or something.”

I laugh to myself. I could just see Prim skipping out of a store, waving a pack of cigarettes or cigars around, just to show off to everyone that she was 18 and could buy what she wanted. I know without a doubt that after she showed off, she would toss them in the trash, unopened. Then I would scold her for wasting her money on something she had no intention to use and then she would skip off to go save the whales or something like that. Because that’s just the type of person she was.

Peeta smiles and picks the picture of us up to examine it closer, “She’s very pretty. She looks like you.”

“Really? Everyone found it hard to believe we were related.”
“No, I can see it. You guys have the same jawline, the same slope of your nose, the same eye shape.” Peeta points out each detail he finds, “I don’t know, maybe you just have to have an artist’s eye.”

He sets the frame back down on my desk and pulls open the brown paper bag.

“Your chicken tenders, my lady.” He presents me with a black takeout box, the smell of fried food filling the air.

“Thank you, kind gentleman.” I take my box and set it on my bed, then walk over to the mini fridge to get out the bottle of ketchup we keep, “Would you like something to drink? We have water, some Pepsi and Sprite and a few beers.”

“A beer would be great, if you don’t mind.”

I grab two cans of Budweiser and hand him one, then sit cross-legged on my bed.

“Do you want to watch a movie or something?”

Peeta nods, his mouth already full with a bite of his gyro. I flip on the TV that sits on the dresser across the room. Another advantage of having Madge as a roommate, her father buys her the latest technology. His most recent purchase for her was a 50-inch flat screen TV with a 3D blu ray player. I pull up Netflix.

“I’ve been watching “Orange is the New Black”. Do you care if we watch an episode?”

Peeta shakes his head and turns his chair around so he faces the TV. “Not at all. I’ve heard good things about this show.”

“Yeah, it’s not bad.” I hit continue on the episode I was watching this afternoon before the girls came to help me get ready. As the episode buffers, I open my take out box and shove a french fry into my mouth and moan. This tastes delicious and I am starving. I notice the Peeta suddenly tenses at my moan. He grips his beer so tight that it actually dents the can. We make eye contact and then we both blush, our faces turning beat red.

Peeta lets out an awkward cough. “So, uh, what is going on in the show?”

I quickly explain the characters and what has been happening at Litchfield Prison to him. He seems to catch on quickly and nods his head and watches the episode.

X

“You were totally crying!” I grabbed my pillow and shoved it over my face to muffle my laughter.

“I was not! I just got some dust in my eyes.” I can practically hear the pout in Peeta’s voice because I caught him about to cry.

The episode of “Orange is the New Black” ended with one of the inmates being compassionately released onto the streets due to her dementia. It was a death sentence for her. The ladies of Litchfield prison watched in shock as the van drove off with the elderly women inside, screaming for the main character to save her. As the episode ended and the episode menu came into view, I glanced over at Peeta to see tears gathered in his eyes, staring at the screen in shock. I couldn’t help it. I burst out laughing.

“Okay, whatever you say.” I stand up and gather our trash and take-out boxes.
Peeta swivels the chair around to face my desk, and pulls a huge textbook out of his book bag.

“I have to run to the basement and switch out my laundry.” I dump the trash into the garbage can and pull the bag out and tie it. “And then throw this away outside, I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” Peeta gives me a smile, then turns to open his textbook. He pulls out a stack of papers and a tiny notebook and begins to write.

I head to the basement first and switch my laundry to the dryer. After that is done, I head out the basement door and walk past the parking lot to the community dumpster. As I toss the full bag into the even fuller dumpster, I notice a dark green Honda Civic idling in the spot next to the dumpster. The windows are tinted, but I can barely make out the figure of a man. He seems to be staring intensely at me. I begin to slowly back away, when the car’s lights flip on and the car peels out of the parking spot and drives down the street. This is the second time in 24 hours that I have seen that car. I watch it drive away until the taillights disappear.

Convincing myself that it was just a coincidence, I jog back into my dorm and head to the elevators. I open my door and toss my keys onto the tiny counter that holds our microwave. Peeta looks up from his homework and gives me a smile that fades when he sees my expression.

“What’s wrong?”

I give him a small smile. “Nothing, I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine. You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Peeta stands up and walks over to me. “You’re really pale.”

He tries to put his hand on my forehead, but I smack it away. “Seriously, Peeta, I’m fine.”

He looks unconvinced, but sits back down at my desk and picks up his pen. I feel bad for smacking his hand away. “I’m sorry, it’s just embarrassing. A squirrel jumped out of the dumpster and scared the shit out of me.”

Peeta snorts out of laughter and turns to look at me. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, it scared me so bad and I took off running.” Peeta bursts out laughing and I smile, relieved that he bought my lie. Peeta goes back to writing and I let out a sigh of relief while sit on my bed and pull out my laptop to start to work on my most recent lap report.

“What are you working on?” Peeta glances over at my laptop.

“My lap report.” I open up a new blank Word document.

“What’s it on?”

“Well, we investigated whether hens insert antibodies into their eggs by isolating the yolk cytoplasm and then using an ELISA test to detect the presence of any antibodies. The results proved that antibodies are present in the yolk cytoplasm, if you wanted to know.”

I glance over to see Peeta staring blankly at me. “Uhh, cool.”

I smile at him. “What about you?”

“I’m just working on my paperwork from my clinical today. We have a huge packet we have to do each week on our patient and we have to do two nursing care plans on them. My patient today was a total hip, which became infected. So I got to do a sterile dressing change on him, hang his
IV antibiotics and insert a catheter…”

“You can stop talking now.” I scrunch my face in disgust and Peeta laughs at my reaction. I open up my Spotify and hit play, letting the voice of Ed Sheeran come out of my speakers.

“Photograph. Good choice.” I shoot a smile at Peeta and begin to type my report, singing under my breath.

“I can put headphones in if it bothers you.”

Peeta shakes his head. “You’re fine.”

We work on our homework in silence, the only sounds being that of my typing and the soft voice of Ed Sheeran. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Peeta keeps glancing over at me. I don't know how he is even getting any of his work done with how often he looks up at me. I think back to what Madge said to me. According to her, he’s had a crush on me since the day he met me, back in freshman year and is trying to ask me out. In all the years that I have known him, I never suspected that he had feelings for me, even though everyone else apparently knew. Finnick always teases me that everyone knows my secrets before I know them myself, and I wonder if this is a prime example of that. Does he know of my crush that has developed on him, and that’s why he is suddenly trying to ask me out?

I try to picture what it would be like to date him. Would it be like it is now? Just sitting near each other and working on homework? I imagine the two of us walking downtown, holding hands and eating chicken wings and beer in the corner booth of our bar. I picture him coming up to my room after we eat, lying on the very bed I’m sitting on together and watching a movie. We are cuddled together, my head on his chest. We start kissing, hands brushing each other’s sides and faces. As I start to imagine his hands trailing under my shirt, I remember that he would be trailing his hands over all my scars and skin grafts, and that thought startles me back into reality. He knows about my scars, and he seems to accept them, but the thought of him seeing them all, all over my body, scares me. I look at my computer, where my screensaver has popped up due to my lengthy daydreaming. A picture of Prim and I pops up and moves across the screen. We are both sitting on top of Kody, with my dad sitting behind us. This was taken a few days before my dad died.

I think of my dad and how happy he made my mom. I think of how utterly destroyed she was when he died. I think of how destroyed I was when Prim died. So far, life has taught me that love leaves you destroyed. But everyone tells me different. Madge has been begging me to give Peeta a chance.

The screensaver changes to a picture of Gale and I at my senior prom. He threw a fit that he had to go. He thought prom and dancing was stupid. I think of Gale now, and how different he has become since he started loving Madge. He’s softer, almost. He is definitely calmer and more thoughtful. He takes her dancing at least once a month. He seems to think Peeta could be good for me. I trust Gale.

I look away from my screensaver and look at Peeta. He is busily flipping through a textbook and writing something down on one of his assignments. His forehead is scrunched up, as it often is when he is deep in thought and his eyes dart back and forth from the textbook to his paper. I smile. I want to be with him. I want to love and be loved in return.

“Peeta.” He looks up at the sound of me calling his name. I open my mouth. I don't even know where to begin.

“Peeta, I…” He puts his pen down and turns in his chair to face me. “Do you want to know the full story of how my sister died?”
He gives me a look of confusion, but nods his head. I take a deep breath.

“My mom was at work. It was the middle of winter, and it was so cold. Our heat had broken, and we couldn't afford to fix it. So we piled up our old space heater and a bunch of blankets in the living room. We hung blankets over the doorways to keep the heat inside the living room and we camped out there for days. It was cold, but we managed. I went out that night to feed Kody and Prim stayed inside, working on her homework. I was in the shed that Kody uses as shelter, when I heard Prim scream my name. The entire living room was in flames. I don’t remember running inside, but the next thing I knew, I was in the living room. Prim was on the floor. She was unconscious from the smoke and the fire was already starting to engulf the blankets on her. I just remember reaching into the flames to rip the blankets off of her. I could see my skin melting off of me. But, oddly enough, it didn't hurt. Prim was wearing this old, pink nightgown. It was melted to her body. I remember thinking that it was weird. I didn’t know clothes melted. I looked down and saw my shirt was melted to my stomach. I managed to drag Prim outside and I collapsed into a snow bank.”

I glance up at Peeta, with tears in my eyes. He’s looking directly at me, and his gaze slowly drifts down to my arms, which are covered in the skin grafts and scars from my melted skin. I take in a shaky breath and continue.

“I woke up in the hospital 4 ½ weeks later. They had put me in a medically induced coma to give my body the chance to heal without inference. After I was awake for a few days, they told me that Prim didn’t make it. She was dead when the firefighters arrived on scene. They didn’t think that I was going to make it. Gale’s parents were with me, and they eventually told me that mother left. She signed over full guardianship to them and just left. She didn’t even wait to see if I would live. She just, took off. I went through a lot of physical therapy and rehab, and obviously, I’m okay now. My mother wrote me a letter for my 21st birthday last year, but I burned it instead of reading it.”

Peeta moves to sit next to me on my bed. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close to him. I turn into him and bury my face into his neck.

“I loved Prim, more than anything. And she left me. My dad left me. My mother left me. Everyone who loves me leaves me eventually. And I’ve been so scared of losing someone else. But I don't want to be scared anymore.”

I pull my face out from his neck and look into his eyes. I can see unshed tears in his eyes. Our faces are inches apart. His hand reaches up to frame my face and his fingers lightly trace the scars on my cheek. As we make eye contact, I can tell he knows what I am trying to say.

“Then don’t be.” He leans his face closer to mine. Our lips are centimeters apart. He is giving me the option and the choice. I think of everything Gale has told me. Let yourself be loved.

I press my lips into his.

It’s a soft, gentle kiss. The way a first kiss should be. It only lasts a few seconds, but I don't care. When we pull away, I can’t help the small smile that crosses my lips. I look up at Peeta to see him with a similar smile. He places a kiss on my forehead and then gathers me close to him to rest on his chest. He grabs my hand and covers it with his own, above his heart.

“Katniss. Will you go on a date with me?” I nod my head and bury my head into his chest. He wraps his arms tighter around me and I feel him nuzzle into my hair. I shut my eyes and relax in his embrace. I haven’t felt this safe since before my father died. I feel his fingers come up to trace the features on my face. He touches my scars as his softly whispers to me. “You are so beautiful.”
My phone vibrates on my bedspread. I reach over Peeta to pick it up and look at it. “I set a reminder on my phone to go off when my laundry was finished. I’ve got to go get it before someone throws it on the floor to use the dryer.”

“I’ll come with you.” Peeta and I both get up and I slip on the obnoxious duck slippers. I grab my keys and Peeta holds open my door for me. I find it hard to make eye contact with him as we wait for the elevator. This all feels like a dream to me. On the ride down to the basement, we stand side by side, barely touching, giving each other stolen glances. At one point, I meet his eyes and we both blush and look away, shy smiles on both our faces. After my laundry is stuffed haphazardly into my laundry basket, we are back on the elevator, heading to my floor when Peeta finally speaks. He takes my laundry basket from my arms.

“Thank you for sharing that with me. I can’t imagine how hard that must have been to do.”

“I just wanted you to understand…why I am the way I am.” We walk out of the elevator and I unlock my door. He places my laundry basket on my bed and sits back down at my desk. I begin to quickly fold my laundry.

“Katniss, you are an incredibly brave and strong person. You don’t need to explain that to anyone. Everybody can see it.”

He stands up and grabs the end of the bed sheet that I had been struggling to fold. We fold it together and I quickly shove it into the bottom drawer of my dresser. After my clothes are put away, I shove my laundry basket back under my bed.

“I want to be with you, Katniss. I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you. I promise to do everything in my power to never hurt you or leave you.”

“I know, Peeta.” I wrap my arms around his neck and bury my face into his chest. He wraps his arms around me. We stand in the middle of my room, wrapped together in a close hug. Eventually, Peeta pulls away. He places a kiss on my forehead.

“We should probably keep working on our homework.”

After a few hours of working on homework and occasional small talk, Peeta decides he should head back to his apartment. I awkwardly stand behind him as he packs up his books and homework and then walk him to the door.

“I’m really glad we did this tonight.” I smile at him and nod. “Me too.”

“I’ll text you later? We can figure out what we want to do for our first date.”

“Okay.” He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his chest. I wrap my arms around him, his book bag stopping me from wrapping my arms around him completely.

“Thank you for everything Peeta.” He pulls away from the hug and he leans down to rest his forehead on mine. “Can I kiss you?”

“I think…I’ll allow it.” I stand up on my tippy toes to place a soft kiss on his lips. His lips are so supple and warm against my own.

He breaks the kiss after a few seconds and brings his hands up to frame my face. He gives me one last kiss, then breaks away with a huge smile on his face.

“Thank you, Katniss. I’ll text you later. Goodnight.” He pulls away from our hug, opens my door and walks towards the elevators. I watch him until the doors open, and with one last wave; he gets
on the elevators and disappears.

I shut my bedroom door and lean against it. I can’t help the smile that crosses my face. I reach up and touch my lips, where Peeta’s rested just minutes ago. I walk into my room and collapse on my bed, still running my fingers over my lips. I stare at the ceiling, but my gaze is unfocused. All I can picture is Peeta. After an undetermined amount of time staring at the ceiling and thinking of Peeta, my phone vibrates. I reach over and smile at the text I just got from Madge.

Madge: Peeta just came prancing into the apartment with the biggest shit-eating grin on his face. He said something about it being a beautiful day, then literally twirled into his room and shut the door. What the hell happened??

Katniss: Sorry, I don’t kiss and tell.

My phone immediately starts to blow up with text messages and calls from Madge and the other girls. I send back a simple “Goodnight” with a winky face.

Madge: We are SO talking about this in the morning!!!

I plug my phone in to charge and then head into the bathroom to get ready for the night. Once I am ready for bed, I turn my lamp off and get under my covers. My mind immediately wonders to Peeta and the evening we spent together. I roll onto my back and talk out loud to Prim, as if she was here with me.

“I wish you were here right now, little duck. I just had my first kiss. I’ve spent so many years avoiding love and Peeta just snuck up on me. I really think I like him.”

I run my hands over the cover, and glance to where the picture frame of Prim and I rests on my desk. “I miss you.”

I close my eyes and wait for sleep to overtake me. Just as I start to doze, I am startled from sleep by my phone lighting up and vibrating loudly against my desk. I pick it up and squint at it, blinded by the bright light. I have a new text message.

Unknown Number: You grew up beautifully.

tbc

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