The Unexpected Year

by MTK4FUN

Summary

Forty and single, Katniss Everdeen steps in whenever her family needs help. But her life of altruism falls apart when she meets Peeta Mellark, her aging uncle’s neighbor. Now Katniss is the person who needs help.
“I doubt Uncle Haymitch will even last a year,” Prim murmured, nodding toward their uncle who sat with his head in his hands in the waiting area of the funeral home. “Especially if he starts drinking again.”

“It’s a wonder he stopped,” Katniss said.

“He told me he quit when Aunt Effie was diagnosed. But now that she’s gone, well who knows.”

Poor Uncle Haymitch. Widowed after forty-five years of marriage. No children to take care of him.

Katniss and her sister Prim were his only living relatives. But the sisters lived in Panem City, on the other side of the state.

“We can’t leave him by himself,” Katniss said. “Do you think he’d be willing to sell the house and move closer to us?”

“We can ask. But I doubt it. He’s been living here forever.”

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They talked to him the evening after the funeral. He refused their suggestion outright.

“I’m not moving away from Dandelion, not with Effie buried in the cemetery.”

“What are we going to do?” Katniss whispered in the darkened guest room. She and her sister had had many bedtime conversations in this very room when they visited their aunt and uncle for a month every summer during their growing up years. It was still decorated exactly the same, too. Frilly white lace curtains, twin beds covered with pink chenille bedspreads, and a small mahogany dresser.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Prim answered. “We can’t force him to move, and we certainly can’t uproot our own lives.”

Katniss punched at the lumpy pillow that must have been thirty years old, trying to get comfortable. It was true that Prim couldn’t uproot her life. Other people were involved, like her husband Rory and the surgeons in the medical practice in which she worked.

But Katniss couldn’t say the same because she didn’t have any person that kept her tied to Panem City. And unlike her sister, her corporate job as Seneca Crane’s administrative assistant wasn’t a career; it was just a way to pay the bills.

In fact, her schedule would open up next month when she finished the night class she was taking at the local university. She’d returned to school last fall. But it would be years before she earned a degree.

“He’s seventy years old. What if something happens?”

“Katniss, you better not be thinking about quitting your job to move here and take care of Uncle Haymitch.”

“What?”
“I’m serious. You turned forty last week. It’s high time you started living for yourself and not for everyone else. You gave up on college to take care of Mom and me after Dad died. You gave up on a future with Darius to make Mom’s last days easier.

“Now you’re finally doing something to improve yourself by going back to school. Don’t throw it all away to take care of an old man who gave up on himself years ago.”

“Is that what you think of my life? That I’ve wasted it?”

“I’m sorry if it came out that way. But I’m tired of seeing you sacrifice for everyone else. You’ve made a lifestyle out of caretaking. Don’t you think it bothers me to see my sister end up alone. All you need is a cat or two.”

“You don’t have to go on. I get the message.”

“Good. Let’s get some sleep. Before we leave tomorrow, I’ll make some calls. There’s got to be some local agency for seniors that could help Uncle Haymitch, maybe bring him meals and send in someone to keep his house clean.”

It wasn’t long before her sister was snoring. But Katniss couldn’t sleep. Prim’s words stung. Katniss had been happy to take care of her family when they needed help. But maybe it was a mistake because now she was forty and had nothing to show for it.

She hadn’t had a boyfriend or even a date for that matter in over five years, ever since Darius had taken that job on the other side of the country. He’d wanted her to join him, but her mother had been diagnosed with cancer and was beginning treatment. Katniss couldn’t abandon her. She’d later heard that Darius had married. He probably had some kids by now.

And weirdly enough, she had been thinking about getting a cat for companionship.

Still she couldn’t help but worry about Uncle Haymitch. Could he make it alone without Aunt Effie by his side?

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While Prim made phone calls the next morning, Katniss decided to go a step further and talk to some of the neighbors.

Her aunt and her uncle had lived in their house almost as long as they’d been married. They’d been friends with their neighbors when they were younger, but over the years those people had moved away.

Clearly they didn’t interact with anyone who lived there now as none of the neighbors had even attended Aunt Effie’s funeral.

Katniss walked over to the house next door. It was small and box-like, the same as her uncle’s, and was painted a warm apricot color. The lawn was freshly mowed, although a few yellow dandelions had already sprung up in the middle of the grass. No one answered when she knocked.

*The owner must be at work.*

But after knocking at several doors, it seemed all of her uncle’s neighbors were out. Disappointed, she crossed the street to try the two-story clapboard house -- the fanciest one on the block. She climbed the steps to the wrap-around porch and walked up to the polished wooden door.
As a child Katniss had always fantasized about living in this house with its cozy, old-fashioned charm. What would it be like?

To her surprise, the door opened before she could even knock.

“Can I help you?” A tiny, elderly woman, old enough to be Uncle Haymitch’s mother, stood in the doorway.

“I’m Katniss Everdeen. My uncle, Haymitch Abernathy, lives across the street. His wife Effie died a few days ago.”

“Effie died?” The woman’s face fell. “I had no idea. Why don’t you come in and tell me all about it. I’m Mags Brown, by the way.”

Mags opened the door wider and Katniss followed her in, noticing the shiny hardwood floors and antique furniture. The interior looked like something from a magazine.

“I only came home last week,” Mags said. “I’ve been staying at my nephew’s house.”

While they drank tea at the kitchen table, Katniss explained the reason for her errand.

“I’d be happy to keep an eye on your uncle, but the thing is I won’t be around for long. I’m leaving in a couple of days to go on a cruise, and afterwards I’ll be staying in Ireland for a few months to visit my late husband’s dear cousins.

“You might want to talk to Peeta Mellark, though, and ask for his help. He’s a good person. He shoveled the snow from a lot of our driveways last December.”

“Peeta Mellark? Who’s he?”

“Why he lives right next door to your uncle in that peach-colored house.”

“I knocked at his door. I guess he’s not home.”

“He owns a bakery, and I believe he leaves for work before sunrise. Leave a note on his door and let him know about Haymitch. I’m sure he’ll be happy to help out.”

Thankful for the information, Katniss left Mags’ house, and returned to Peeta’s, leaving a note that explained the situation. At the bottom she put her name and phone number in case of emergency; then she tucked the note under the knocker on his front door.

She returned to her uncle’s house to learn that Prim had been equally successful, arranging for meal deliveries and a cleaning lady.

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“You didn’t need to do all this,” Uncle Haymitch said, as the sisters packed their suitcases to return home. “I can take care of myself just fine.”

“It’s already done Uncle Haymitch.” Katniss zipped her bag shut.

The two sisters discussed the situation on the car ride back to Panem City.

“I’ll call regularly and check up on him,” Katniss said. “I can also come back and visit this summer. I have a lot of vacation time saved up.”
Prim frowned. “No Katniss. Use your vacation for yourself. Go to a tropical resort. Maybe you’ll meet someone.”

Katniss snorted. “Men my age aren’t looking for forty-year-old women. You and I both know they want women twenty years younger than them. Someone who can give them children. I’m too old Prim.”

“So you’re too old to have kids. Not all men want them. Besides you look great for your age.”

At 9 p.m. that evening, Katniss’ cell phone rang. The number looked unfamiliar, but the area code indicated that the call came from the Dandelion. A momentary panic rose within her. Had something happened to Uncle Haymitch?

“Hello?”

“Hi, I’m Peeta Mellark. You left a note on my door with your phone number.”

The man’s voice was warm and friendly. Immediately Katniss formed a mental picture of him in her head. Tall. Handsome. Wavy hair. A ready smile.

“I’m sorry to be calling so late, but I just got home from work.”

Was Mags right that he’d been at work since sun up? What a long day.

“I’m sorry to hear that Effie died. I hadn’t seen either of them for a quite a while. But then I work long hours.

“I’ll be happy to check in with your uncle every couple of days to be sure he’s all right.”

_Every couple of days?_

That was far more than Katniss had expected.

“That would be wonderful Mr. Mellark.”

“Call me Peeta.”

“Thank you so much Peeta. My sister Prim and I are worried about him. Prim arranged for meals to be delivered and for a cleaning woman to come in. I also talked to Mags Brown who lives in that big house across the street. She’s the one who told me to leave a note on your door.”

“Mags is a nice lady, but she’s travels a lot. She’s hardly ever home.”

“Well, thanks for helping out. My sister and I appreciate it.”

“It’s no problem.”

The call ended and Katniss was relieved that everything was going smoothly. As she fell asleep that night she wondered about Peeta Mellark. He sounded so kind.

When she returned to work, she met with her boss, Seneca Crane to ask for a week of vacation at the beginning of July.

“You just took a vacation,” he growled.
“I need to check up on my uncle to see how he’s doing,” she defended herself. It was none of
Seneca’s business what she did on her time off.

“I’ll have to think about it. I’ll let you know later.”

The next month passed quickly because Katniss’ schedule was full. Work, and class two nights a
week. Plus all the reading and studying she needed to do to prepare for her final.

It would have been easy to forget about Uncle Haymitch, if it hadn’t been for Peeta Mellark. Every
other evening, promptly at 8 p.m., Peeta called Katniss to tell her how Uncle Haymitch was doing.

The details he provided about her uncle were informative, but that was only the appetizer to their
conversation. The real meat lay in their exchange of personal information.

Peeta was such an engaging conversationalist that Katniss found herself revealing more than she
normally would to a stranger she’d never even met. She told him about the petty occurrences of her
job and the difficulties of earning a degree in midlife. In turn, he told her about his bakery and how
he’d recently joined a gym.

After the call ended, Katniss went over the conversation in her mind, pondering every revelation
Peeta provided to try to paint a picture of him. She’d recently learned that they were both forty. Still
so many pieces were missing.

What did Peeta look like? If he went to the gym he must be fit, so she added six-pack abs to the
physical description she was concocting of him. But she still didn’t know the answer to the most
important question -- was he single?

One Saturday afternoon she called him – the first time she’d ever initiated a conversation between the
pair. She wanted to tell him that she’d be arriving for a visit on July 1st. Seneca had grudgingly given
his approval the previous day.

Peeta greeted her warmly, and sounded pleased at the news that they’d finally get a chance to meet in
person. In the background Katniss heard a young child speaking. “I want more lemonade.”

Her heart twisted. Peeta had a child. She’d been flirting with a married man over the phone.

“Can you hold for a moment?” he asked. Dead silence followed.

“I am so stupid.”

“Sorry about that,” he said, when he returned.

“Did I call at a bad time? I don’t want to interrupt time with your family.” She tried to keep her voice
neutral, but it came out snippy at the end.

He chuckled and Katniss almost hung up. Did he have any idea that she’d been daydreaming about
him for weeks now? How much she looked forward to his regular calls? Was it just flirtatious banter
to him? A way to entertain himself? Where in the hell was his wife while all this was going on?
Reading bedtime stories to their child?


“You’re not interrupting,” Peeta explained. “My brother unexpectedly dropped off his youngest son
for me to watch.”

Oh. Thank goodness. The child wasn’t his.

Eager to smooth things over, she babbled. “So you’re an uncle?”

“Yeah, I am. An old bachelor uncle.”

Katniss let out an involuntary giggle.

He’s single.

“How nice of you to give your brother and his wife a break by babysitting. Do you see your nephew often?”

“This one I do, his other boys not as much.”

“How many boys does your brother have?”

“Four.”

“Wow, that’s a big family. Your brother and his wife must love children.”

“Well, this is going to sound sleazy, but Rye’s never been married. The boys have different mothers.”

Shocked, Katniss wasn’t sure how to continue the conversation. It was sleazy, but Peeta had sounded appropriately embarrassed because his voice dropped at the end. Still it wouldn’t be right to call his brother a pig; maybe she should end the conversation, instead.

“Oh. Well, I need to go now. I just wanted to let you know I’ll arrive July 1st.”

“Maybe we can do something together while you’re here.”

A date? He was asking her on a date?

“Yes, that would be great. Good-bye then. I need to call my uncle and let him know he’s got a guest coming.”

Katniss arrived in Dandelion late in the day, exhausted and sweaty. She’d driven straight through, with only a couple of stops at fast food places to use the bathroom and purchase ice-tea. All she wanted was to shower and take a nap.

She pulled her car to the curb in front of her uncle’s house, glancing at Peeta’s house as she removed her bag from the trunk.

Was he home? She hurried to her Uncle’s front door before he could catch sight of her looking disheveled from the long drive.

Turning the key in the lock, she called out. “I’m here Uncle Haymitch.”

“In the kitchen,” he shouted.

She stepped inside, set her bag on the floor and shut the door behind her. The place looked tidy; the
cleaning lady was doing a good job.

“You look like hell,” he greeted her when she entered the kitchen.

“I’ve been on the road all day.”

Her t-shirt and cargo shorts were damp, clinging to her body. Her shoulder-length hair was pulled back into a pony-tail.

Trust Uncle Haymitch for such a brusque greeting. Had he started drinking again? His face looked thinner than when she’d visited six weeks earlier. Still the whites of his eyes looked clear, not bloodshot.

“Are you eating those meals that are being delivered?” she questioned.

“I cancelled that service after the first week.”

“Are you cooking for yourself then?”

“No, the boy’s been bringing over food. He eats dinner with me most nights.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “What boy?”

“Mellark from next door.”

*Peeta? He’d never mentioned eating dinner with her uncle.*

“You look thinner to me.”

“It’s the food he brings. It’s all rabbit stuff, vegetables and such. Chicken without the skin. He owns a bakery for crying out loud and he’s never once brought over a pie or a cake.

“He probably wants to eat healthy and stay fit.”

Haymitch burst out laughing. “Yeah, right.”

“Well, I’ll let him know that he doesn’t need to bring over any meals to you while I’m here. I’ll do all your cooking.”

“Will you make some of Effie’s recipes? I miss her lasagna so much.”

“I will. Let me take a shower and I’ll order us a pizza for dinner. I’m too tired to cook right now.”

While she showered she wondered if Peeta would make an appearance this evening. She had never told Uncle Haymitch that Peeta was calling her regularly to update her on his activities.

“How do you spend your time?” she asked him over dinner.

“Trying to keep those damn geese out of my garden.

“Then stop feeding them, Uncle Haymitch. Maybe they’ll go away.”

“But Effie loved them so. She’d sit in the yard for hours observing them, making up stories about them. She had dreams of writing a children’s book about those geese someday.”

“You miss her a lot.”
His eyes filled with tears. “I do. She drove me crazy most of the time, but I don’t know how to go on without her.”

Katniss didn’t know what to say to comfort her uncle. Maybe it was good that Peeta had been visiting him everyday. Clearly Uncle Haymitch was still in a lot of pain.

She waited until 10 a.m. the next morning to knock on Peeta’s front door. It was Sunday; the only day she knew he regularly took off work. He must be home. A black SUV sat in the driveway, while an older recreational vehicle was parked at the curb in front of the house.

She’d been daydreaming about him for so long, she couldn’t wait to finally put a face to the man who’d captured her heart over the telephone. Should she hug him? Would it be too forward to kiss his cheek?

With only two knocks, the door to Peeta’s house flung open. Katniss gasped as she took in the sight in front of her. Bare chested and wearing only tight boxers, Peeta had to be at least six feet tall. His wavy, collar-length hair was dirty blond with a few strands of gray peeking out on one side. His eyes were pale blue and his face was artfully unshaven.

He looks exactly how I imagined him.

Unconsciously Katniss licked her lips. Forget about cheek kisses. She was going straight for his lips. Peeta gave her a seductive grin. “Can I help you?”

His voice sounded different in person – lower and sexier.

“Peeta, it’s me Katniss. I’m so glad we can finally meet.”

A confused look came over his face. “You think I’m Peeta.” He started to laugh.

Katniss flushed. “I’m sorry. I’ve never…”

But already the man who was clearly not Peeta had turned and yelled, “Hey Peet there’s some woman here for you.”

From inside the house, Katniss could hear Peeta’s voice call out. “For crying out loud Rye I told you not to answer my door. Are you even dressed?”

Ah, so this is Rye, the baby daddy machine. Well, judging from his god-like appearance it’s no wonder so many women have fallen for his charms.

Stomp, stomp, stomp. The sound of heavy footfalls got closer. “This is Peeta,” Rye said, stepping away.

He stood in front of her grinning. “Katniss.”

Her eyes grew big. The man with the warm, friendly voice that she’d shared so much of her life with and spent time fantasizing about looked nothing like she’d expected. It was if the Pillsbury Doughboy had taken on human form, dressed in a baggy t-shirt and loose jeans. His crew cut made his face look even rounder.

Katniss mustered up a grin in return, focusing on his lively blue eyes and the deep dimples on the side of each cheek.

She put out her hand to shake his.
A day had passed and now Katniss stood on the other side of the door, at her uncle’s house, facing Peeta.

“Would you and Haymitch like to join me tomorrow on the Fourth? It seems my brother’s getting all of his kids for the day and he promised to take them to a barbeque. So I’ll be grilling in my backyard.”

“Sure,” Katniss agreed. She had nothing planned for Independence Day, but it would be good for Uncle Haymitch to do something. All he’d done since she arrived was to putter around his garden and complain about the geese.

“Can we bring anything over?”

“Nah, I have it covered. It’s all good.” He gave her a sweet smile.

Katniss grinned back. She’d had a day to part ways with her fantasies. Peeta’s chubby baker’s body may have eliminated him as a potential boyfriend, but she still liked him. She could most definitely be his friend.

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They arrived at Peeta’s house around 2 p.m. She brought two liter-sized bottles of cola with her. In the event that Peeta offered them beer or wine, she was determined that Uncle Haymitch have a non-alcoholic choice.

Peeta’s four nephews had arrived earlier in the day – around 9 a.m. she guessed – because that’s when the noise coming from his backyard started.

He took the soda from Katniss, set the bottles down on the entry table, and then led them through his living room. It was furnished with a sturdy, brown leather couch, matching armchairs, and large oak coffee table. It looked like any other bachelor’s home, except for the bright, oversized artwork that hung on the walls. It brought an unexpected cheerfulness to the house.

Katniss paused for a moment to look around at the vibrant nature scenes, her eyes fixing on a large orange marigold. “Your paintings really brighten the place.”

A modest smile formed on Peeta’s face. “Thanks, I did them myself.”

Katniss’ mouth dropped. “Peeta, these are really good. You could do this professionally.”

His smile grew bigger.

I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone with dimples so deep.

“I used to sell my paintings at one time, but I couldn’t support myself doing it. Guess I’ll stick to decorating cakes.”

Haymitch harrumphed loudly. “Any chance of us getting some cake today?”

Katniss threw her uncle a dark glance.

“Will cupcakes be okay?” Peeta asked. “I made some for the boys.”
He opened the sliding screen door into the backyard. Four towheads were racing around the grass with water guns.

“My brother got a last minute request to work today so he couldn’t make it. He’s a lifeguard and they’re expecting a big crowd out at Dandelion Lake.”

Peeta stood in the doorway and shouted. “Time to turn in your guns, our guests are here.”

It took a few minutes for him to collect all the weaponry as the boys wanted to empty all the water out by shooting each other first.

“Let me introduce you to my nephews,” Peeta said, as the children stepped inside the house. He pointed to the tallest one. “This is Torin. He’s ten. Next is Tristan, who’s nine. Tegan is six, and Taiden is three.”

Four children with blue eyes and varying shades of blond hair stared back at them.

“Boys, this is my neighbor Mr. Abernathy and his niece Katniss.”

Haymitch frowned. “You kids have been screaming for hours now. You scared all the geese away from my yard today.”

The three older boys looked back at him in confusion; while the youngest one’s lip quivered.

Embarrassed by her uncle’s complaining, Katniss spoke quickly. “You hate the geese Uncle Haymitch.”

“Not all of them.”

“I’m sorry if the boys disturbed you,” Peeta said. “You should have called me. I would have had them come inside and watch a movie if I’d known.

“Uncle Haymitch, why don’t we sit down,” Katniss said, pointing to the umbrella-covered table and chairs on the far side of the yard.

Peeta threw her a grateful look. “That’s a good idea. Have a seat outside and I’ll get you two something to drink.”

As Katniss and Haymitch walked across the grass, still wet from the water gun war, they could hear the conversation from the house, drifting toward them.

“Your dad left a movie for you to watch. I’ll put it on now.”

“Yay, it’s The Hunger Games,” a voice shouted.

“You’ve seen it already?”

“Me and Tristan saw it ten times.”

“So I guess it’s good, then.”

“Pretty good, but it would be even better if the kids had guns in the arena.”

“Guns? Wait a minute, is this that movie where kids kill other kids on some kind of twisted television show.”
“Did you see it Uncle Peeta?”

“Nope, and you’re not watching it either. I don’t know what your dad was thinking, but I’m sure I have a DVD of *The Magic School Bus* around here somewhere.”

“That’s for babies.”

Katniss and Uncle Haymitch sat down at the table. She studied Peeta’s yard. It was about the same size as her uncle’s but had a lot fewer plants to tend as it was mostly grass. Also it was free of geese and their droppings.

An oak tree grew near the fence on the side closer to her uncle’s house. A tire swing hung from a sturdy limb.

*I wonder if Peeta put that tire up for his nephews?*

A barbeque sat about ten feet away from the table. Although there was no meat on the grill yet, the smell of burning charcoal hung in the air.

From inside the house, Peeta yelled. “Who shook up the bottles of soda?”

“Torin did,” a voice squealed.

“I did not.”

A cacophony of kid’s voices chimed together to accuse their brother.

A few minutes later Peeta arrived at the table with two tall glasses of cola. “Hope this is okay. I thought since you brought it, you wouldn’t mind drinking it.”

“This is perfect.” Katniss picked up her glass and took a sip.

“I’m grilling hot dogs for the boys, but chicken for me. Which would you prefer?”

“Hot dogs,” Haymitch said.

“I’ll have a hot dog, too,” Katniss agreed. “Do you need any help, Peeta?”

“Nah, I’ve got it covered. It’s all good.”

The meal was chaotic with the continual chattering of the children at the table.

“Haven’t your parents taught you any manners?” Haymitch’s voice was gruff.

Katniss threw Peeta an apologetic glance.

*What’s wrong with Uncle Haymitch? He’s been complaining ever since we got here.*

But as quickly as they came to the table, the kids finished eating and rushed back inside to watch the conclusion of the movie.

“Those boys are something else,” Haymitch mused, when they left.

Peeta laughed. “Oh, they’re not so bad once you get to know them.”
They spent the next hour talking. Katniss watched in admiration as Peeta teased her uncle out of his foul mood by asking him questions about the neighborhood and how it had changed over the years. He appeared genuinely interested in her uncle’s stories.

*What a nice guy.*

After the movie ended, the children came back outside. “I want a cupcake Uncle Peeta,” the smallest one said.

“I’ll get them now, Taiden.”

Peeta returned with a tray of cupcakes, frosted in red and blue and decorated with white stars.

“These are delicious,” Katniss exclaimed, after swallowing her first bite. “Aren’t you having one, Peeta?”

“Nah. I can eat all the cupcakes I want at work. One of the perks of owning a bakery.”

But judging from Peeta’s meal – grilled chicken, green salad and fresh fruit -- Katniss suspected he might be on a diet. She was sure of it when Peeta’s brother arrived in his red lifeguard shorts and a tight white t-shirt to pick up his sons because Peeta asked Rye to take all of the remaining cupcakes.

“He could have given some of them to us,” Haymitch muttered.

Katniss frowned. “You don’t need any more cupcakes.”

As soon as the children were gone, Peeta re-joined them in the yard.

Haymitch stood up. “I think we should go Katniss. I’m worn out.”

“Thanks for inviting us,” Katniss said, standing up as well. “We had a nice time.”

*Well, I did at least.*

“My pleasure.”

As her uncle walked toward the house, Peeta turned to Katniss. “There’s a fireworks display at Dandelion Meadows Park at dark. It’s a pretty good one. Would you like to go? I could pick you up in an hour.”

Katniss hadn’t seen a live firework show in years. It would be fun to do *something*; otherwise she’d spend the rest of the evening watching reruns on television while Uncle Haymitch went to sleep early.

It wouldn’t *mean* anything if she went with Peeta, would it?

She opened her mouth to answer “yes,” when a loud shout and a string of expletives sounded.

She turned her head to see her uncle sliding on the grass and then falling down.

Katniss and Peeta rushed to his side.

Uncle Haymitch was struggling to sit up and moaning. “I stepped on something and lost my footing.”

Peeta fished around in the grass by Haymitch’s feet and found a small Lego figure. He held it up.
“Darth Vader. It figures.”

Katniss bit her lip to stifle a laugh, catching Peeta’s eyes to share the black humor. Unfortunately her uncle wouldn’t understand or appreciate the joke.

“Let me help you up, Uncle Haymitch.”

“I can’t stand. My ankle hurts like hell.”

She lifted up the edge of his khaki pants. His ankle had already swollen to twice it normal size.

“I’m calling an aid car for you,” Katniss said.

“No, you’re not. I refuse to get in it.”

She pulled her cell phone from her pocket. “You don’t have a choice.”

“I’ll get some ice.” Peeta went into the house.

The paramedics arrived shortly, wheeling a gurney into the yard.

“Can I ride with him?” Katniss asked.

“Sure.”

“I’ll follow in my car,” Peeta volunteered.

Katniss turned to him. “You don’t need to come with us, Peeta.”

He’s going to miss the fireworks.

“But how will you both get home then?”

“Oh, I forgot about that. Thanks.”

But what Katniss thought would be a simple bandage or even a cast turned into something serious.

“We’re admitting him. He’ll need surgery to have a screw put in place,” a doctor told Katniss at 2 a.m. after the emergency room staff had kept them waiting for hours before taking a couple of x-rays.

Her face paled. How would her uncle take care of himself after the surgery?

Peeta laid his hand lightly on Katniss’ shoulder for reassurance. “What time are you doing the surgery?” he asked the doctor.

“Sometime in the later morning.”

He turned to Katniss. “Let me drive you home so you can get some sleep.”

“Okay.” She didn’t know how much sleep she’d get, but there was no point in staying at the hospital trying to rest in the straight-backed chairs in the waiting room.

“Thanks for staying with me,” she told Peeta as he drove her back. He’d been good company keeping her spirits up as Uncle Haymitch was prodded and poked. He’d even gone in search of coffee for both of them during the long wait. “Don’t you have to go to work soon?”

“Yeah, but I own the business so I can take a nap on the couch in my office once my assistant gets
Peeta walked her to the front door of Uncle Haymitch’s house. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Thanks Peeta, I will.”

Once inside, Katniss lay down on the sofa and promptly fell asleep. It was 9 a.m. when she awoke. Quickly she dialed Prim to tell her about the surgery. Prim didn’t answer so Katniss left a message. After showering and dressing, she drove herself to the hospital.

Fortunately she was able to speak with her uncle before the operation.

“I’ve always loved you and Prim like you were my own daughters,” he told her.

“You’re not dying Uncle Haymitch. The surgeon is putting a screw in your ankle. They’ll probably kick you out tomorrow with some crutches.”

Yet his words hung over Katniss like a dark cloud as she sat in the surgical waiting area. Her uncle had spent most of his life drinking heavily. *How healthy was he?*

Prim returned her original call to find out more details. “He’s going to need to be moved to a rehabilitation facility after surgery,” her sister said. “He won’t be able to take care of himself right away. And I don’t want to hear that you’re staying longer to nurse him back to health.”

But that thought had already entered Katniss’ mind. She had plenty of vacation time available to her. Why shouldn’t she take it now? Uncle Haymitch needed her a lot more than Seneca did.

A soon as she hung up, her phone rang again. Peeta.

“Are you at the hospital?”

“Yes, he just went into surgery.”

“I’ll be right there.” He hung up before she could stop him. There was no need for Peeta to keep her company.

But she was glad to see him because he arrived with food. “Have you eaten lunch?”

She shook her head. She hadn’t even had breakfast. She opened the brown bag. Inside the sack was a ham and cheese sandwich, a bag of potato chips, an apple, a cookie, and a bottle of water.

Tearing the wrapping off the sandwich, she held out half of it to Peeta.

He shook his head. “No, I brought it for you. I already ate.”

“You didn’t have to do all this,” she said after she finished eating. “But I sure appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. I feel bad about Haymitch falling in my yard. If I’d kept a better watch over those kids, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“I don’t think my uncle’s going to sue you. I’m sure he realizes it was an accident.”

A nervous look came into Peeta’s eyes. “I never thought of that.”

Did he really think Uncle Haymitch would sue him? Without thinking, Katniss rested her hand on his. “Don’t worry Peeta. So he’ll be on crutches for a while. He wasn’t planning to run a marathon.”
A door opened and the surgeon came out. “Are you Katniss Everdeen?”

She nodded.

“We put a screw in your uncle’s ankle and he’s in the recovery area now. But we had a bit of a scare during the operation. His heart stopped briefly but we were able to revive him quickly.”

Katniss’ eyes widened. “What?”

“He’s seventy years old Ms. Everdeen and he has a history of heart problems.”

“I don’t know about any heart problems.”

The doctor looked at his chart and back at her. “He had a heart attack five years ago.”

Katniss bit her lip. “He never told me or my sister.”

It wasn’t surprising now that she thought of it. They’d only learned of Effie’s cancer when she died. Her aunt and uncle had been close-mouthed about their health.

“Can I see him?”

“We’ll come get you when he wakes up.”

“All right.”

She sat down. “I had no idea about his heart.”

“Well, at least you know now,” Peeta pointed out.

They waited for thirty minutes before a nurse appeared. “I can take you to see Mr. Abernathy.”

Katniss and Peeta stood up.

“Only family allowed,” the nurse said.

Katniss frowned at the stupid rule. Peeta had waited with her at the hospital both last night and today during surgery. He was her friend and her uncle’s too. Why shouldn’t he be allowed into the recovery room?

Without looking at Peeta’s face, she reached for his hand. It dwarfed her own. “He’s my fiancé,” she lied.

As they followed the nurse down the hall, Peeta leaned in close. “You certainly move fast Ms. Everdeen.”

His warm breath on her ear brought an unexpected shiver, causing her to let out an uncontrollable giggle. Surely Peeta understood that she had only lied so he could see her uncle too, not because she was open to anything more.

Haymitch was released from the hospital the day after his surgery wearing a cast that went up to the bottom of his knee. Just as Prim predicted, the doctor had suggested that he be placed in a rehabilitation center for a couple of weeks.
“I’ll take care of him,” Katniss volunteered. She’d already sent an email to Seneca requesting another two weeks of vacation. Uncle Haymitch wouldn’t be back to normal in such a short span, but at least he could convalesce at home. Besides it would give Katniss the time to organize his house to make it easier for him to take care of himself when she had to leave.

One evening Peeta mowed their lawn after he returned from work. Katniss and her uncle sat in the living room after supper and watched him through the picture window.

“That boy’s losing weight,” Uncle Haymitch commented.

Katniss studied Peeta. He appeared slimmer than he had when she first laid eyes on him two weeks earlier, but maybe it was because the clothes he was wearing, cargo shorts and a t-shirt, fit him properly.

“I’ll invite him over to dinner before I leave,” she said. They hadn’t seen much of him since Haymitch’s surgery.

“Why?”

“Well as a thank you for mowing your lawn for one thing.” Peeta had been so good about watching out for Uncle Haymitch – she hoped he’d continue to do so when she left.

She spent the day scrubbing up her uncle’s old barbeque in the backyard and then grilled vegetables on it alongside a few steaks. For dessert she layered fresh berries in parfait cups and topped it with a dollop of whip cream.

Peeta showed up promptly at seven. After their meal, Uncle Haymitch declared he was exhausted and immediately headed for his bedroom, leaving Katniss alone with Peeta.

“I’ll help you clean up,” he offered.

“You don’t have to.”

“I know my way around a kitchen.”

A second pair of hands made quick work of the mess.

“Would you like to take a walk?” Peeta asked.

“All right.” Likely Peeta wanted a chance to get some exercise. With the dinner invitation, he’d probably skipped his visit to the gym.

Katniss left a short note for Uncle Haymitch on the counter, and locked up the house. The air outside was muggy.

“I really appreciate all that you’ve done for my uncle,” she said, as they meandered down the sidewalk. “And it was kind of you to stay with me during his surgery, too.”

“I don’t mind.”

What a good friend.

They walked to the end of the block and turned the corner to make a loop. Halfway back, tiny drops of rain began to fall.
They picked up the pace of their walk. The raindrops got bigger, and fell faster. Thunder rumbled, causing Katniss to jump. Seconds later a white light flashed across the sky.

They set off jogging. In better shape, Katniss sprinted ahead, almost forgetting about Peeta altogether because of the lightening. But she heard him huffing and puffing trying to keep up with her, so she slowed down.

“I’ve got plenty of towels,” Peeta shouted above the storm. Without thinking Katniss followed him back to his place, which was closer.

He switched on the light in the entryway. It gave off a warm glow. They kicked off their wet shoes inside the door.

“Let me get one for you.” He disappeared down the dark hallway, returning a minute later with a thick white towel. He’d already placed a matching one around his own shoulders.

Katniss quickly wrapped the towel, which was the size of a small blanket, around her. She really should be getting home, but the storm was just getting started.

“We could sit and watch until it peters out. They never last that long.”

“Okay.”

Katniss joined Peeta on the couch that faced the large picture window overlooking the front yard.

They sat in comfortable silence in the semi-darkened room, watching the storm rage. One of the trees on Mags’ front lawn swayed crazily in the wind. A medium-sized branch broke off and fell to the ground.

Peeta broke the quiet. “My brother lives in an RV. I hope he parked it in a safe spot. If the wind gets too strong a tree could fall onto it, or it could tip over. That would be the end of the love shack on wheels.”

Katniss snorted loudly at that mental image. “I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. He’s always been like that.”

“A ladies man?”

“That’s a nice way to put it, but yeah. It’s hard to believe we’re related. He’s so confident and I’m … well, I’m not.”

“Oh you are too,” Katniss countered, giving him an encouraging smile. She playfully punched his shoulder.

Peeta let out a nervous chuckle, then unexpectedly reached out to tuck a tendril of hair around her ear.

Unintentionally, Katniss took in a sharp intake of air.

A look of panic appeared in Peeta’s eyes. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

“It’s all right. I’m not used to anyone touching me.”

I sound so weird.
“There hasn’t been anyone in a long while,” she admitted.

“That’s hard to believe. You’re so pretty.” His voice was soft. Curious.

Her cheeks grew warm at the compliment. She couldn’t remember the last time someone had called her pretty.

He spoke before she could thank him. “I understand how you feel though. It’s the same for me. It can get awfully lonely. That’s probably why I don’t mind working long hours. If I’m busy it keeps me from feeling sorry for myself.”

She nodded in agreement.

Maybe Prim thought Katniss had gone back to school to better herself, but in truth a lot of her motivation was to avoid loneliness. Classes and homework made her feel purposeful.

“Can I kiss you Katniss?” Peeta whispered.

Startled at his question, her eyes flew to his mouth, noting the way the tip of his tongue ran nervously round his plump lips.

A kiss? It had been five years since anyone had offered. Would it hurt to accept a kiss from a friend? Even if she wasn’t physically attracted to him? It was only a kiss, and anyway she was leaving in the morning.

“All right,” she murmured as she tipped her face upward, closing her eyes.

As soon as his lips met hers she knew that she wanted more than a single kiss because to her surprise Peeta was a good kisser. A damn good kisser.

As the storm continued, what began as a kiss turned into a full-fledged make-out session. Sensations that Katniss had forgotten about began to stir within, beginning in her chest, then running down through her body and out along her arms and legs to the tips of her being.

“We should stop,” Peeta murmured, his hands at her waist to pull her off his lap where she’d migrated.

But Katniss didn’t feel like stopping, at least not yet. Why should she? She was enjoying herself and from where she was sitting she knew Peeta was enjoying himself as well.

Instead, she cupped his cheeks and dotted his face with gentle kisses before moving her hands to his head to rub them lightly across his scalp. She let out a soft sigh. His short hair felt like velvet beneath her fingers.

Still Peeta would look so much better if his hair were longer. “You should let your hair grow out.”

“Okay,” he breathed as he licked the hollow of her neck. At that sensation, all reason fell away. Clothing soon followed.

“Is this all right?” Peeta asked.

“Yes,” she hummed, caught up in the moment. “It’s all good.”

Afterwards, she rested atop Peeta. The storm was over and the rain had turned to drizzle. The streetlight had turned on and its stark white light cast a somber mood in the room.
Their sweaty bodies that had been so warm were rapidly growing cool and clammy.

The reality of the situation struck Katniss like a lightening bolt.

*What have I done? I don’t want to start anything with Peeta. What’s he going to think?*

She needed to get away. Now. “I should go. I need to pack.”

“What time are you leaving?”

“Early.”

“I could stop by to see you off before work.”

“You don’t have to. It’s probably better if you don’t.”

“All right.” The dejection in his voice broke her heart, but she didn’t want to lead him on any more than she already had. She could never be more than a friend to Peeta, and she likely ruined that relationship now.

He clearly got the message because his phone calls after she returned home lessened considerably. Instead of calling every other day, Peeta only called once a week, and the conversation centered solely on her uncle and his ankle. He never mentioned what they’d done.

Embarrassed, she didn’t bring it up either.

Katniss guessed Peeta was upset, maybe even angry with her, but she was grateful that he didn’t take it out on Uncle Haymitch. He even drove him to some doctor’s appointments.

She thought of the encounter as a terrible mistake because she’d never slept with anyone outside of a committed relationship.

*It’s because I’m a sex-starved, middle-aged woman.*

Katniss would have forgiven herself and moved on if she’d hadn’t thrown up on the report she’d printed out for Seneca.
A terrible nausea came over Katniss one September morning as she’d picked up Seneca’s report from the printer and carried it back to her desk. She sat down in her seat and without warning vomited over the papers.

Mortified, she reached into a drawer for some tissues to clean up the mess. Seneca chose that moment to come out of his office.

“What’s that smell?” His eyes flew to her desk. “Is that my report?”

She nodded.

“Well print me another copy. Then go home.”

Surprisingly she felt much better once she left the office. She went straight to bed and returned to work the next morning, assuming it was a 24-hour flu.

However after only a couple of hours on the job, the nausea returned.

*Maybe there’s something in the building that’s making me sick.*

But then, she woke up the next morning at 4 a.m. with a churning stomach. As she leaned over the toilet retching, an alarming thought came to her. Could she be pregnant?

Her cycle had been erratic for the past six months. She’d mentioned it to Prim during the long car ride to attend Effie’s funeral. Her sister had said she was likely going through perimenopause.

“The thought had saddened her, because it shut the door on the possibility of ever having children of her own. But it had also given her the idea that she was practically infertile and didn’t need to be concerned about birth control. Prim had even joked that Katniss had better odds to win the lottery than to conceive at her age.

*But if her sister had been wrong and she was pregnant* …her heart raced. Katniss dressed quickly and headed for a 24-hour pharmacy. Purchasing three different tests, she took them home, and peed on all of the sticks, lining them up on the counter.

Then she hopped into the shower to get ready for work, praying the tests would prove her suspicions wrong. But all three tests indicated she was expecting.

*Oh no. How can I do this?*

Maybe times had changed and being an *unwed mother* didn’t carry the stigma it once had. But Katniss wasn’t a movie star or a celebrity or even young. She was a middle-aged woman who disliked attention, and worked for a jerk. Seneca had a fit when she asked to leave early for her yearly dental cleaning; what would he do when she told him she had to go to the doctor’s every single month for a prenatal visit. That she would be away from work for six to eight weeks of maternity leave. Katniss could only imagine the nasty jibes he’d throw her way. Not enough to get him in trouble with Human Resources, but enough to make her job hell.

And she was supposed to register for the fall semester in a few days. How could she attend a night
class when she was falling asleep by 7 p.m.? Her college degree would have to be put on hold yet again.

She expected her sister would be furious at the news.

Uncle Haymitch, born of an older generation where unmarried, pregnant women were deemed bad, would likely be shocked and disappointed.

And who knows what Peeta would say. He was barely talking to her as it was. If only she hadn’t run off so quickly, had explained to him that she had surprised herself by her actions that night. She’d never meant to go so far, never meant to hurt their friendship.

Katniss knew Peeta loved children -- that was obvious by the way he cared for his nephews -- but did he even want a child of his own? A child with her?

She rubbed her hands over her still flat belly. The logical solution would be to terminate the pregnancy. It would make things so much easier.

But her heart ached at the thought of never knowing her baby. What would she look like? The rounded face of Peeta’s youngest nephew, Taiden, came to her mind. Would her child resemble that cute little boy? Would he have dimples like Peeta?

It’s not fair.

Because she’d put her family first, she’d lost out on so many things in life: college, career, marriage.

No. I can’t do it. I want this baby.

Her mind made up, Katniss went to her job determined to come up with a plan to make it work. She could hardly think straight as she sat at her desk pretending to read emails, her brain overrun with a dozen concerns. Every time one arose, she jotted it down on a notepad. The simple act of making a list calmed her fears.

Fall semester of night school/not sure?
Research company pregnancy policy
Research health plan’s pregnancy benefits
See my doctor
Buy pregnancy books
Call Prim?
When and how to tell Peeta

In the midst of her anxiety attack, her phone rang. It was Seneca’s line. “Can you come in here, Katniss?”

“Sure.”
She turned over the top page of the notepad, and took it and a pencil into her boss’s office.

A grim expression hung over Seneca’s face.

“Look there’s no nice way to put this, but the company is having some financial difficulties. We’ve all been asked to make cutbacks to our department so I’ve recommended that your position be eliminated.”

Katniss wondered if it was all a dream. Could a person’s life fall apart in a single day?

Seneca explained that her position would end in two weeks, on September 30th. She’d receive one week of severance pay for each year she’d worked. Plus a year of free health insurance. And because she had all that vacation time saved up, that money would be added in, as well.

“It’s really a very generous package,” he said, a toothy smile appearing on his face.

*Pregnant and unemployed. Can things get any worse?*

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

“Hello Katniss,” Peeta said. For a moment Katniss panicked that he’d found out about the baby. But that was impossible. She hadn’t told anyone.

But why was he calling today of all days? He’d been calling regularly every Sunday night to update her. It was Friday.

“Haymitch is in the hospital.”

Her thoughts about the baby flew out of her mind. “What happened?”

“His friend Chaff showed up to take him out and Haymitch didn’t answer his door. Chaff called me at the bakery and I came over and we found him passed out in the house. I called an aid car.”

“I don’t know anyone named Chaff.”

“He said they were old drinking buddies. They get together every Friday.”

*Uncle Haymitch is drinking again? Was he drunk?*

“He’s okay now, but it looks like he’ll be in the hospital for a few days. His doctor wants to run some tests.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

The situation was beyond ridiculous. She and Prim had taken advantage of Peeta’s neighborliness generosity. Uncle Haymitch wasn’t his responsibility; the task belonged to his nieces. Clearly her uncle needed someone living in the house to watch over him and be sure he stayed sober.

Prim had warned her against stepping in when Aunt Effie died, but now it seemed like the right thing to do. She’d help her uncle out, but also help herself by greatly lowering her expenses. If she was careful, her severance money and personal savings could last through the pregnancy at least. At some point she’d need to figure out how she’d support herself once the baby arrived, but at least she’d have a roof over her head.

Katniss hung up the phone with more energy than she’d had in weeks. She’d go to work Monday and tell Seneca she was leaving her job early, using her extra vacation time to cover the days until the
30th.

She’d sell her furniture, and pack up as much of her belonging as she could fit into her car. She’d drive to Dandelion and take charge of Uncle Haymitch. Then she’d tell Peeta about the baby. It would be better to do it in person than over the phone anyway.

Katniss called Prim.

“I was laid off from my job and I’m moving to Dandelion to take care of Uncle Haymitch. He collapsed at home and is in the hospital. I’m pretty sure he’s drinking again.”

Her sister didn’t respond.

And I’m pregnant with his neighbor’s child.

But she couldn’t say that. Not now. Prim would go into a full meltdown.

In the silence that followed, Katniss reflected on the relationship that existed between the two sisters. In a sense she’d been a mother to Prim during her teen years when their mother had fallen into a deep depression after the death of their father. But instead of appreciating the sacrifices Katniss had made for the family, Prim seemed angry about them.

“Don’t do this, Katniss. Uncle Haymitch can sell his house and go into a nursing home. You know, you don’t have to keep setting yourself on fire to keep other people warm.”

An unexpected fury swept over Katniss, outrage at Prim’s unsolicited advice about how she should live her life. What did her sister know? Katniss was the one who drawn the short straw in the Everdeen family.

“Just call me the girl on fire then. I didn’t call to get your permission, Prim. I called to tell you what’s happening. I’m moving next week.”

Katniss hung up without giving her sister a chance to respond. Then she dialed the hospital in Dandelion to tell her uncle about her plan.

She pulled up to Uncle Haymitch’s house, her car filled with boxes. Peeta had called the previous evening to let her know that he’d been released from the hospital. The doctor had concluded that her uncle passed out because his heart medication was too strong so he’d readjusted the dosage.

Katniss opened the front door with her key. “Uncle Haymitch, it’s Katniss.”

A young red-headed woman, dressed in cut-off shorts that showed off her shapely legs and a tight t-shirt that emphasized her firm bustline, appeared holding a feather duster.

Katniss’ eyebrows rose. “Who are you?”

“I’m Lavinia. I clean Haymitch’s house.”

That’s his cleaning woman? She looks like she should be playing beach volleyball not scrubbing out the bathtub.

“I’m Katniss, Haymitch’s niece. Is he resting?”

“He’s outside.”
Katniss stormed out to the back yard. Her uncle was watering plants with a garden hose. His cast was gone and his gait was steady.

“What are you doing? You just got out of the hospital.”

He turned toward her. “I’m enjoying my garden. What are you doing here?”

“Remember when I talked to you on the phone last week? I’ve moved to Dandelion to take care of you.”

“To take care of me?” His eyes narrowed. “Where are you planning to live?”

“You are planning to live?” His eyes narrowed. “Where are you planning to live?”

“You with you, Uncle Haymitch. I told you all about it.”

Haymitch frowned. “Are you sure? I don’t remember a thing about you moving in here.”

“Maybe if you stopped drinking you’d remember what people said to you.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t had a drink in over six months.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know that you’ve been meeting up with your old drinking buddy Chaff.”

Haymitch snorted. “We go to A.A. meetings together. For crying out loud, why don’t you worry about your own life instead of sticking your nose into everyone else’s.”

Her jaw dropped. “You go to A.A.? I’m sorry Uncle Haymitch. But you never said anything about it to me or Prim.”

“It’s none of your damn business, that’s why.”

“Well, I’m here now,” Katniss said, chagrined. “I gave up my apartment. Everything I have is in my car.”

Her uncle tossed the hose to the ground, his shoulders sagging. “Okay, then put your stuff in the guest room. I guess you can stay.”

After carrying a couple of boxes from the car into the house, her uncle joined in to help. Even Lavinia carried in a box before saying goodbye.

“You sure have a lot of stuff,” her uncle said, as he looked around the guestroom. “It’s like a warehouse in here.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll find someplace to put it all. In fact, you can probably let your cleaning woman go. I can do all the housecleaning.”

“Fire Lavinia? But I like her.”

“I bet you do. Is that her usual work attire?”

Her uncle laughed. “Yeah. The boy says she dresses that way all the time.”

“Peeta knows Lavinia?”

“She cleans his house too. He’s the one who told me about her after I fired that lazy woman your sister hired.”
How friendly were her uncle and Peeta?

“I’ll make you some dinner now.”

Katniss went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. But the only thing inside was a carton of eggs and some milk. Opening the cupboards, she found a box of crackers and about ten cans of soup.

“What are you eating these days?”

“The usual rabbit food. The boy brings me dinner every night.”

Peeta’s still eating dinner with Uncle Haymitch?

Did he tell her uncle what she’d done? The thought made her face grow warm.

“Well, I’m here now, so I’ll be making all your meals. I’ll go to the grocery store tomorrow. How about I order a pizza for tonight?”

Uncle Haymitch grinned.

Forty-five minutes later, the doorbell rang. Katniss grabbed a twenty from her purse and opened it. A teen-aged boy stood in front of her with a box in his hand.

Even though she was starved, the smell of the melting cheese made her stomach churn.

Why do they call it morning sickness? It’s happening all the time now.

She shoved the bill toward the youth and reached for the box.

“Keep the change.”

Beyond them, on the sidewalk a bearded man with wavy blond hair jogged past. The man’s head snapped twice in her direction, before he raised a hand in a brief waving motion.

Confused, Katniss shut the door. Why would a stranger wave to her? She was dressed in sweats and her hair was a mess.

“Food’s here, Uncle Haymitch.”

She got a glass of water for her uncle and poured some milk for herself and brought it to the table.

“I think the last time I saw you drink milk was when you were a kid,” Haymitch said. “Are you on some kind of fad diet? Cause you don’t need to lose any weight. If anything you should gain some. You look peaked.”

Katniss broke off a piece of crust from the slice of pizza in front of her, hoping it would settle her queasy stomach.

“No, I’m fine.” An odd thought came to mind. Could Peeta be the bearded jogger who’d waved?

No, it couldn’t be him. That man looked completely different from the Peeta she remembered.

Still she had to ask, “Did Peeta take up running?”

Haymitch laughed. “You’re never gonna recognize him now. He looks altogether different from the
last time you were here.”

“How do you mean?”

“He stopped shaving.”

It was him.

Katniss was washing their plates in the kitchen afterwards when the doorbell rang.

When she got to the living room, Haymitch was at the door, letting Peeta in.

“Should have used your key, boy.”

He has a key?

“I didn’t want to startle Katniss by just walking in on you both.”

Katniss’ eyes widened as she took in Peeta’s appearance up close. He was wearing a forest green polo shirt and khaki pants. His build was stocky due to his body-type, but the spare tire round his middle was gone.

With the addition of a closely cropped beard, and his crew cut grown out into ash-blond curls, he looked very different from the man she’d run away from two months ago.

He looked like someone who could be dating his red-headed cleaning woman, even if she was at least fifteen years younger than him.

Peeta gave her a nervous smile and though she outwardly returned it, inwardly she cringed as she thought about the news she had for him. An unexpected wave of nausea came over her.

“Excuse me,” she mumbled, fleeing from the room.

When she returned with her mouth rinsed with water to lessen the taste of the pizza that had made its way back up her throat, the men were seated at the dining table. Uncle Haymitch was telling Peeta a story about one of the geese that populated his backyard.

They both turned to look at her.

“Are you all right?” her uncle asked.

“Yeah. The pizza didn’t agree with me, that’s all.”

“You didn’t say you were coming for a visit when I called you last night,” Peeta said. “How long are you here this time?”

Before she could answer, her uncle blurted out. “She’s moved in with me for good.”

A startled look came over Peeta. “You did?”

She nodded, as her face grew warm. “I got laid off from my job, and with Uncle Haymitch’s health problems I thought I’d move here to help.”

“I’m sorry about the job layoff. But welcome to the neighborhood.”

He’s going to regret that welcome when he finds out I’m the harbinger of doom that will change his
Peeta looked to her uncle. “How about we take a rain check on that chess game we planned. You probably want to visit with Katniss since she just arrived.”

“Sounds fine,” Uncle Haymitch said. “I’m a little tired, anyway. I had to help her carry all her crap into the house.”

Katniss threw a dark look at her uncle.

Peeta chuckled. “Exercise is good for you Haymitch. You know that. Well, I’ll see myself out.”

He headed for the door and Katniss followed him.

“Can I talk with you privately?” Katniss kept her voice low. She might as well tell him the news now. She was physically exhausted from the long drive and unpacking the car, but she’d never sleep tonight if she didn’t tell him about the baby. Instead she’d be lying in bed worrying. At least Peeta appeared to be in a pleasant mood.

“Sure; actually I’d like to talk with you too.”

Another wave of nausea stuck.

_I hope I don’t throw up on him._

“I’m going to walk Peeta home,” Katniss called to her uncle.

“Good idea. Don’t want the boy getting lost.”

Katniss followed Peeta outside. She waited until they were out of earshot of the house to speak. But she found herself panicking, and began to ramble.

“You look good Peeta. I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“Thanks. Someone told me to grow out my hair.” But he didn’t smile and an awkward silence fell over them.

Katniss couldn’t help remembering the way his crew cut felt like velvet beneath her fingers that night. Unconsciously she ran her tongue over her lips.

_Tell him. Tell him about the baby._

Peeta ran a hand through his hair. “Look, Katniss I’ve been wanting to talk to you about what happened the last time you were here.”

She bit her lower lip, wishing the ground would swallow her up.

“I thought we were getting along really well and that you liked me, but afterward when you blew the whole thing off, it hurt. I’m not a person who does casual sex.”

_Me neither. But why should he believe me when I practically jumped him that night and then ran like the wind afterwards._

“It was probably wrong of me to assume you meant it to be anything more. But I’m a sap like that. Anyway that’s why I stopped calling you so much. I knew you weren’t interested in me in that way and I didn’t want to bother you.”
“But if we’re going to be living next door to each other now, can we at least be friends? I promise to forget what happened.”

Tears pooled in her eyes. He was too kind and she was about to derail his life.

“I’m sorry Peeta. I wish it were that easy. But I can’t forget. I’m pregnant.”
In the glow of the streetlight, the confusion in Peeta’s eyes was apparent. “But how? I thought you were on the pill or something. You said it was all good.”

“I never said I was on birth control.” She searched her mind trying to remember what she’d said, but the only thing she remembered was suggesting he grow his hair out. And he’d certainly taken that advice to heart.

“Maybe not those exact words, but you implied that you were.”

“Well, I wasn’t. I didn’t think I could get pregnant at my age.”

He eyed her skeptically.

“It’s true. Anyway why should I take all the blame? I didn’t make a baby by myself.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re positive the baby’s mine?”

*What the hell?*

“Yes it’s your baby, Mr. ‘I Don’t Do Casual Sex’. For your information, I haven’t been with anyone in years. I should never have agreed to let you kiss me.”

A hint of a smile appeared on his lips. “So I woke up Sleeping Beauty. I’m that good, huh?”

She would have laughed at his comment, if she wasn’t insulted by his question, and so damn nauseous.

“Look Peeta, I’m sorry I ran away afterwards and hurt you. It was wrong of me. But it doesn’t change the fact that I’m having your baby.”

He gave her a long, silent stare as if he were sizing her up. Heaven knows he had every right to be upset and angry at the news – it would have been strange if he hadn’t been—but still it made her uncomfortable because the man in front of her looked so different from the man she’d been intimate with two months ago. It almost seemed like she was passing a message along to a handsome stranger, someone she didn’t know in the least.

She was about ready to go inside when he broke the silence, speaking in a measured tone.

“Have you seen a doctor yet?”

“No, I took three over-the-counter tests. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

“But you do plan to see a doctor-- you still have insurance don’t you? Or are you considering…”

She interrupted him. “This is probably the only child I’ll ever have. I want this baby.”

Katniss couldn’t read the expression that came over his face. Was he angry? Scared? Relieved? Happy? She had no idea.

“I’m not asking for anything from you Peeta. I have health insurance and I’ll see a doctor. I just wanted you to know before I’m showing and you started doing the math.
“But would you do me a favor and not mention it to my uncle just yet? He doesn’t know and I’m not sure how he’s going to react.”

He rubbed at his beard. “Okay, I won’t mention it to Haymitch. If you’re that worried about telling him, I’ll do it with you.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I can probably tell him by myself.”

Still she hadn’t considered the friendship that existed between Peeta and Uncle Haymitch. Would the news injure that relationship as well?

What a mess.

A cool breeze blew past, causing her to shiver. She wrapped her arms around her chest to keep warm.

“It’s getting chilly. I’m going inside.”

“All right, Katniss. But we need to talk more about this. I want to be involved.”

“Of course we’ll talk more.”

She bid him goodnight and headed back to the house.

“What were you gabbing about with the boy?” Haymitch questioned. “Plans to put me away?”

Oh, no. Is that what he thinks?

“No. I was thanking Peeta for taking care of you and I told him he didn’t need to bring over dinner anymore because I’ll be cooking for you.”

“You could have said all that in front of me,” Haymitch pointed out. “No need to be so secretive.”

I’m such a bad liar. I’ll have to tell Uncle Haymitch about the baby soon.

Before Katniss went to bed, out of habit she checked her phone for messages before plugging it in to charge the battery. Peeta had sent her a text – the first ever – advising her to see a doctor as soon as possible and giving her the phone number of his medical office.

Is this what he means about being involved?

Irritated at his reminder she didn’t respond back. Of course she needed to begin prenatal care, but she was the one who was pregnant, not him.

The next morning she called the medical office of her uncle’s primary physician and asked for a referral to an obstetrician. They had one on staff and she made an appointment for the following day with a Dr. Latier.

“He’s been delivering babies for over fifty years,” the receptionist bragged.

Good, then he knows what he’s doing.

Afterwards Katniss took her uncle grocery shopping to fill the refrigerator up with fruits and vegetables and lean cuts of meat and plenty of dairy items, like milk and cheese and yogurt. And crackers to settle her weak stomach, a couple of boxes.
“What about ice-cream and candy and soda?” Uncle Haymitch complained. “Between you and the boy, I’ll starve to death.”

“You won’t. Besides we need to keep that heart of yours ticking for a long time.”

“Why? With Effie gone, there’s no reason for me to stay around.”

Katniss stopped the grocery cart in the produce section, alarmed at her uncle’s comment. “That’s not true. You have plenty of reasons.”

But as she considered his words, she realized that he didn’t have much of a life, outside of his garden and his A.A. meetings. As far as she knew the only people he regularly interacted with were Peeta, Chaff, Lavinia, and now herself. He spent most of his time in the yard with his geese.

She made the decision quickly. “Stay alive for my baby Uncle Haymitch.”

His eyebrows raised.

“I’m pregnant,” she said, turning her face away from him and rearranging the items in the shopping cart.

“It’s the boy’s, isn’t it? That’s why you were outside talking for so long last night.”

“Yeah it is.” A creeping heat crawled up her neck. She couldn’t look at his face; it felt as if she was eight years old and was caught stealing a treat from the cookie jar.

She stood frozen, waiting for a lecture to start.

Instead, Uncle Haymitch let out a loud guffaw. “This explains everything. The boy asking about you. You moving to Dandelion.”

She turned toward him, her eyes narrowed. “I moved here to take care of you. What exactly have you told Peeta about me?”

Her uncle chuckled. “I told him about the time you killed a squirrel with a sling shot. And how your sister tried to resuscitate him and when that failed you kids dug up my front yard to bury him. But you didn’t fill in the hole completely and I tripped in it and wrenched my leg. Seems like kids are always tripping me up.”

A small smile came to Katniss’ lips. She’d forgotten all about that incident. Uncle Haymitch had come home late because of a business meeting and in the dark he’d stumbled into the hole. While Prim slept, she’d lain awake listening to Aunt Effie chew him out about his drinking.

“Can’t you hold it together while the girls are here? They only come once a year.”

When she was older Katniss worked out that her uncle’s “business meeting” that night had been at a tavern. From then on he remained sober while they were there, but she suspected he started up again right after she and Prim went home. Maybe that’s why Aunt Effie was so eager for their visits.

“I guess that story is okay.”

“Oh, I’ve told him other things too.”

“What things?”

“How you took care of your mama after your daddy died, and then helped her when she got cancer.”
“I would have helped Aunt Effie, too, if you’d have told us about her.”

“I know. But it was all so fast with Effie. She waited too long to see the doctor and when she did there was nothing he could do.”

Katniss wiped at her eyes, which were getting teary. She missed her aunt.

“So are you two going to make it legal so I can get my house back to myself?”

“We’re not a couple Uncle Haymitch; we never were. I made a big mess of things. He probably hates me and for good reason too.”

She searched his face, waiting for shock, horror, disapproval --- something to indicate that she deserved to be in the situation in which she now found herself. But Uncle Haymitch merely nodded.

“Oh I seriously doubt he hates you. That boy would… well, I’m sure he’s upset about the news. But unless you held a gun to his head; I’d say he’s got some skin in the game, too.

“If there’s anything I’ve learned Katniss, it’s that things have a way of working themselves out. Even the biggest knots can get untangled if you’re willing to work at it.”

“There’s nothing to work out Uncle Haymitch. What’s done is done. There’s no stigma to being an unwed mother these days.”

“Well, I doubt the boy is going to see it that way. He’s not like his brother in the least.”

_I suppose Peeta told Uncle Haymitch about Rye, then._

A woman pushed her shopping cart close to theirs. Seated in the child’s seat was a little girl with curly brown hair. “Do you mind moving? You’re blocking the carrots.”

“No problem,” Katniss said, pushing the cart forward. “We’re finished here.”

She was eager to end the conversation anyway, but relieved that at least Uncle Haymitch knew about the baby.

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She didn’t expect to see Peeta so soon, but he stopped by that evening in his running clothes.

“Have you made a doctor’s appointment yet?” he whispered when she answered the knock on the door. He looked so somber; she wanted to cry.

“I have, but you don’t have to whisper. I told Uncle Haymitch about the baby.”

“I know you’re out there lover boy,” Haymitch yelled from inside the house. “Come inside so I can kick your ass.”

Peeta flushed. “Oh crap, I guess the chess game is off then.”

Katniss opened the door wider for Peeta to come in. She followed him quickly into the living room.

_What’s Uncle Haymitch doing? He seemed so understanding when I told him._

“You’re lucky I don’t have a shotgun.” But her uncle was grinning from ear to ear. He got up from his chair and slapped Peeta on the back.
“So Katniss tells me I’m going to be a great-uncle.”

“I just heard about it myself.”

“Well, I’m sure you two will do the right thing.”

*What the hell Uncle Haymitch. I already told you we’re not a couple.*

She had to stop him now. He had no idea what he was talking about. If he kept going on like this he was only going to make Peeta more upset with her.

“This is my situation to handle Uncle Haymitch, not Peeta’s,” she blurted out.

“Well, if you’re planning to bring a squalling infant into my house, you’ve turned it into my situation too.”

*He’s right.*

For some reason she hadn’t thought that far ahead. What would happen after she gave birth? How was she supposed to take care of an old man, an infant, and financially support herself as well?

*I’ll worry about it later.*

Peeta edged out of the room. “I’ll be going. I need to take a shower and get something to eat.”

Katniss followed him to the door. “I’m sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. Hey do you think we could meet for lunch tomorrow? I’d like to talk with you some more.”

“I guess that would work. I see the doctor at 11 a.m.”

“Meet me afterwards at the bakery.”

“Where is it?”

“Twelfth and Main. You can’t miss Mellark’s.”

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He was right. She couldn’t miss the bakery. It was a big brick building on the corner of the street with a large white awning. The name “Mellark’s” was stenciled on the picture window in front.

There was no parking close to the shop, so Katniss parked a half block away on the street around the corner. The smell of freshly baking bread assaulted her as she walked closer.

She remembered this bakery. Aunt Effie had stopped in with her and Prim a few times during their visits. She bought them large sugar cookies.

Katniss opened the heavy glass door and a bell tinkled overhead. The comforting smell of sugar and cinnamon hung in the air. She smiled as she entered the old-fashioned interior. Large display cases on two sides filled with pastries and breads and cakes. A couple of tables with chairs sat along the third wall.

*This is so cozy.*
Peeta was behind the counter, helping the only customer in the shop -- a woman holding a small boy in her arms.

*Why are there so many young kids in this town?*

He handed the woman a brown paper sack and a chocolate chip cookie. “Here’s something for your little one.”

“Thanks.” The customer turned to go and Peeta caught a glimpse of Katniss.

“You’re here. Let me get Thom out of the back to take over the counter.”

A minute later, a dark-haired man in his early thirties came out. “So you’re Katniss?”

She nodded, and wondered what Peeta had told his employee about her. Did Thom know about the baby too?

Peeta came around the counter toward her. “We can go to Sae’s. It’s just down the street.”

He appeared to be in a businesslike mood and Katniss was glad that he’d arranged to talk with her in a public setting. It was probably for the best to keep both of their emotions in check. She’d had time to get used to the idea of the baby, but it was new to Peeta. Still they were both adults; they should be able to handle their impending parenthood in a straightforward, practical manner.

As they walked down the sidewalk, Katniss made light conversation. “Aunt Effie took Prim and I to your bakery when we were kids.”

“It wasn’t Mellark’s then,” Peeta said. “The Dalton family owned it for more than thirty years. I bought the business from Ken Dalton eight years ago. I was nervous about putting my family’s name on the window but it hasn’t seemed to have mattered too much. Of course it helps that it’s the oldest bakery in Dandelion.”

A block later they were in front of the diner. Peeta opened the door for Katniss and she stepped inside. An elderly, white-haired woman greeted them.

“Can we get a booth by the window Sae?”

The woman nodded. “Your regular then Peeta?”

“Sounds good.”

The woman winked at Katniss as she handed her a menu.

*What was that for?*

“You must come here a lot to have a regular,” Katniss said, as she sat down.

“Almost every day. It’s nice to get out of the bakery for a while. I spend too much time there.”

Katniss studied the menu. Most items looked to be fried or fatty, things that would likely upset her stomach, which needed to be coddled right now.

“If you don’t see anything you like, Sae can make up something special for you.”

“Okay.” She shut the menu. Sae came to the table with two glasses of water.
“Could I get a turkey sandwich and some fruit?” Katniss asked.

Sae nodded, writing it down onto a pad she pulled from her apron pocket.

As soon as she left, Peeta asked, “So how did your doctor’s visit go?”

Katniss twisted her head around to be sure no one was listening. If Peeta ate here everyday, surely people knew him. But no one paid any attention to them in the busy diner. “It went fine. I had to pee in a cup and then Dr. Latier told me I was definitely pregnant. I’m due April 12th.”

A thoughtful look came over Peeta. “That’s right after my birthday.”

“What’s that date?”

“March 20th.”

“The first day of Spring?”

He nodded and took a sip of water. “When’s your next doctor’s visit?”

“In a month.”

“I’d like to go with you, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t know Peeta. I’ll probably have to take my clothes off for the exam and it’s not like we’re a couple.”

“Well I don’t think I’ll see anything I haven’t already seen,” he said. “But I can always step out of the room if it bothers you.”

Warmth rushed to her face. “Can I think about it and let you know?”

“Of course.”

Sae appeared suddenly with two plates. First she set Katniss’ sandwich in front of her, then she put Peeta’s plate in front of him. It held a hamburger patty with a side of cottage cheese surrounded by fruit.

Katniss looked away quickly because the sight and smell of the grilled beef patty made her queasy. She broke off a piece of the crust from her sandwich and popped it in her mouth to settle her stomach.

A few minutes later, after Peeta finished his meat patty and was digging into his cottage cheese, he glanced at her plate. “Is something wrong with your food?”

Katniss had only eaten the bread, and left chunks of turkey meat scattered on the dish. “No, it’s fine. It’s just that I’ve been nauseous lately and being around so many strong smells makes it worse.”

“I’m sorry. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have taken you here.”

He waved his arm to get Sae’s attention. “Could you bring us a glass of ginger ale?”

He turned to Katniss. “It should settle your stomach.”

“Thanks.”
That was considerate of him.

“Did you feel sick in the bakery, too?”

“No, I didn’t. Actually I thought it smelled good in there. Maybe the baby likes sweets.”

Peeta gave her a smile, the first one since she’d told him he was going to become a father. She’d forgotten how deep his dimples were. It was her favorite feature of the old Peeta, as she’d begun to think of him in contrast to the new, slimmer version of himself.

Sae set an opened bottle of ginger ale on the table, along with a glass. Peeta poured the soda into the glass and pushed it toward Katniss.

“I know this might sound crazy, since we never even had a single date, but maybe we should get married.”

Mid-swallow of her first sip, Katniss began to choke on the liquid. Had she heard him correctly?

Surely he didn’t take Uncle Haymitch’s suggestion seriously?

She coughed until she could breathe properly. “Peeta, we’re not living in the 1950s. You don’t have to marry me because I got pregnant. Uncle Haymitch is just spouting off.”

“I’m not asking you because of Haymitch.”

“Then why?”

“For the baby’s sake. It’s better for children to live in a home with both of their parents.

“I know I might not be the Prince Charming you were dreaming about, but I can provide a good home for you and the baby.”

Katniss set down her glass. “I have no intention of keeping your child away from you. We can share custody.

“But I can’t marry you. If I wed, I want it to be real, not because I’m trying to correct a mistake. Anyway, it’s perfectly acceptable to be a single parent these days.”

His face dropped.

This is all because of his brother. He’s only offering to marry me because he doesn’t want to end up like Rye, who lives apart from his children.

“Why can’t we just be friends who share a child?” She put her hand to the side of her face, suddenly worn out.

“Are you feeling all right, Katniss? You look pale.”

“I’m okay. I want to go home and take a nap.”

Peeta pulled some bills from his pocket and set them on the table. “I’ll walk you back to your car.”

He reached for her arm and escorted her from the diner. “I’m sorry if I upset you; I’m only trying to do the right thing. But if you think you can do it alone, well, let me know when you work it out.”
Chapter 5

Trigger Warning: This chapter contains a brief description of a stillbirth. (Not a toastbaby)

“I hope they call me in soon or I’m going to wet my pants.”

Peeta sat beside Katniss in the waiting room, lowering the parenting magazine he’d picked up from the table. “Maybe you should,” he teased. “It might get you to the front of the line.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” she countered. “It only makes it worse.”

At sixteen weeks along in the pregnancy, they were back to exactly where they had originally started – a congenial friendship.

After Katniss had turned down his unexpected marriage proposal, Peeta had agreed to go along with her idea to be friends who were co-parents. In turn, she’d invited him to come to her 12-week prenatal appointment where they’d listened to their baby’s heartbeat together.

They saw each other regularly as Peeta stopped by the house a few evenings a week to bring her cheese buns for the baby and to play chess with Uncle Haymitch.

It was all very chummy and civil and exactly what she thought she wanted. So why was she unhappy about it?

“Do you want me to ask how much longer it will be?” Peeta closed the magazine.

Katniss shook her head. “I’ll be okay.”

She’d been instructed to drink 32 ounces of water one hour before the ultrasound. But how much liquid could her bladder hold? Still it was worth the trouble because the ultrasound would reveal the baby’s sex and they were eager to find out.

“It’s a boy,” Peeta had assured her. “My family hasn’t had a girl in three generations.”

“Well, my mother had two daughters, so maybe my genetics will hold sway.”

At least she was feeling much better than when she’d first arrived in Dandelion. The morning sickness had disappeared after a couple of weeks, renewing her energy and causing her to become productive.

She’d turned the guest room into a bedroom for herself. The twin beds that she and Prim had slept in as children were old and no longer comfortable. Katniss purchased a double bed to replace them.

With her uncle watching, she’d also emptied out the contents of the closet in the guest room so she could unpack the boxes that had lined the walls for weeks, and put her things away.

“I don’t think any of this stuff is worth keeping,” Katniss said, as she pulled faded curtains, frayed towels, and broken, small appliances from the closet.
“Toss it,” Uncle Haymitch said. “Effie should have gotten rid of all this stuff years ago. Maybe you can start on the junk room down the hall when you’re finished.”

_It would be a good room for the baby, but it’s going to take days to clear out that mess._

“Katniss Everdeen,” the nurse’s cheery voice called out. Carefully Katniss stood up -- the pressure on her bladder increasing -- and trudged forward. Peeta followed.

_Don’t pee, don’t pee._

The nurse, who couldn’t have been more than twenty-five, led her to an alcove with a built-in desk and a couple of chairs. A scale stood nearby.

“Why don’t we get your weight first?”

Katniss set her purse down and stepped onto the scale, wincing as the nurse announced her weight loudly enough for Peeta to hear.

_Six more pounds._

She’d gained a total of ten pounds already. How was that even possible? Could the cheese buns contain more calories than she thought?

Katniss stepped off and sat down on a chair so the nurse could take her blood pressure.

Peeta leaned against the wall watching. In his khaki pants and plaid button-down shirt, with rolled-up sleeves, he looked like a model straight out of an L.L. Bean catalog.

The nurse turned her head to smile at him. “Are you excited about seeing your baby today?”

He nodded, a big grin appearing on his face.

“Hopefully the baby will have those dimples.”

Katniss eyed the exchange.

_What the hell? You don’t flirt with a pregnant woman’s partner. Is it because I’m not wearing a ring that you think it’s okay?_

It wasn’t the first time Katniss had been with Peeta and women had paid him extra attention. He’d taken her out to hike the flat trails around Dandelion Lake a few times to observe the changing colors of the leaves. On their most recent walk, two women had made an obvious display of checking him out, using hand gestures to signify their approval.

Peeta had been oblivious to their attention, but Katniss had thrown dark looks at the pair and one of the women had laughed at her.

It seemed so odd, because she couldn’t remember any women lustily eyeing Darius when she was dating him. Not all women were interested in red-headed men, but still Darius had been attractive enough.

Of course she _wasn’t dating_ Peeta; they weren’t even a couple. But they were friends and she was having his baby.

_That should count for something._
“Your blood pressure is a little high,” the nurse interrupted her thoughts.

She led them into an exam room and told Katniss to lie on the table. She placed a paper sheet over Katniss’ stomach and told her to lift her shirt up and lower her pants so that her belly was exposed. Then she left the room.

Peeta turned his back to study a poster on the wall, which depicted the growth of the fetus during each month of pregnancy, while Katniss adjusted her clothing. The nurse returned a couple of minutes later and rubbed some cold, clear-colored jelly onto her already protruding midsection.

“The ultrasound tech will be in soon,” she said, before she walked out.

“Are you decent?” Peeta asked, still facing the wall, studying the poster.

“Yes.” Katniss pulled the sheet up over her bare skin to keep herself warm.

Peeta turned and came to her side. Just then the door opened and a technician rolled a cart containing a portable ultrasound unit in.

The woman locked the wheels of the cart. “Hello, I’m Atala. I’ll be doing your ultrasound.” She had a wand in one hand. With her other hand, she lifted the sheet from Katniss and turned on the screen in front of her.

“Do you want to know the baby’s sex today, Mama?”

*Mama. It sounds so strange.*

“Yes.”

“Okay then,” Atla said, “Let’s start.”

She turned on the machine and ran the wand across Katniss’ belly. A black and white picture appeared on the screen, a tiny blob, twisting this way and that.

Beside her Peeta gasped. “Look at him. He’s waving to us.”

“How can you tell?” Squinting, Katniss stared at the screen. It didn’t look anything like a baby to her. Still whatever she was seeing was very active.

Unconsciously she reached for Peeta’s hand, pleased to share the moment with him, wondering why she hadn’t thought to bring Uncle Haymitch along as well.

The technician chuckled. “Not he, but she. You have a little girl in there.”

“A girl. I can’t believe it.” Peeta sounded amazed.

Katniss turned her head and caught the emotion in his blue eyes.

“You were right.” He rubbed his thumb idly across the back of her hand, a sensuous motion that caused her to involuntarily shiver.

*Oh no, tighten those kegels.*

Atala pointed out the baby’s body parts. Then she pushed a button on the machine and the hum of a printer turned on in the corner of the room.
She gave them two identical copies of their daughter’s first photo.

“She gave them two identical copies of their daughter’s first photo.”

“I’m going to put my picture in a frame,” Peeta said, as he drove Katniss home.

“If you’re this excited about an ultrasound picture, what are you going to be like once she’s born?”

As the words fell from her mouth, images flashed into Katniss’ head, like scenes from a movie. A baby’s birth, a toddler learning to walk, a little girl in a red dress and pigtails climbing the schoolhouse steps, an older girl riding a bicycle, a preteen experimenting with makeup, a young woman clutching her high school diploma.

How am I going to take care of her? I don’t even have a job.

Her eyes flew to Peeta. He smiled as he drove, appearing completely confident.

He parked the car along the curb in front of her uncle’s house.

“What a wonderful day,” Peeta said. “I’m so glad I got to see her and even get a photo.”

Katniss walked up to the front door and turned to watch as he drove away to return to work. The excitement of seeing her daughter was gone, replaced by worry.

She came inside to find Uncle Haymitch in the living room, knife in hand, whittling on a small wood block. Wood shavings lay on the carpet around his chair. Katniss knew she should be grateful that he had a new hobby. But now she’d have to drag out the vacuum.

Maybe I shouldn’t have insisted he dismiss Lavinia.

“How did your appointment go?” Haymitch asked.

“I’m having a girl.” She rested her hand on her belly.

“A girl.” A curious look came over her uncle’s face as he set his knife and the piece of wood down onto the carpet and stood up. “I have something for you then.”

She followed him into his bedroom. Effie’s hope chest sat against the wall. He lifted the lid and the smell of cedar mixed with the scent of the floral perfume her aunt had always worn washed over her.

Tears came to Katniss’ eyes. She remembered the very first time she and Prim had come to visit; Aunt Effie had told them that the chest contained her treasures. “My parents bought it for me when I was sixteen and I filled it with a handmade quilt and embroidered pillowcases and placemats I wove for my future dining table.”

That’s not real treasure, nine-year-old Katniss had thought.

Maybe she’d been reading too many Nancy Drew books, but the next summer when she was ten, Katniss had snuck into Aunt Effie’s and Uncle Haymitch’s bedroom to peek inside the chest, convinced that her aunt had lied about its contents to discourage her nieces from finding her secret cache of gold coins.

Katniss had lifted the lid for a moment but didn’t see much more than a pile of faded tissue paper before she heard her aunt walking down the hallway. Quickly, she dropped the lid. She hadn’t given a thought to this old-fashioned piece of furniture ever since.

But now her curiosity piqued, she bent over to look.
“They’re in here somewhere,” Uncle Haymitch said, pushing through articles of clothing and small knickknacks all wrapped in tissue.

Even though Aunt Effie had been gone for months, it seemed wrong to be pawing through her personal belongings in such a rough fashion.

“You’re making a mess. What are you looking for Uncle Haymitch?”

“This.” He pulled the tissue off a tiny, hand-knit, pink sweater and held it up.

Katniss studied the garment carefully. It looked like something a doll would wear. It was hard to imagine a child would be so small to be able to fit it.

Her uncle thrust it into her hand. “There’s other stuff here, too.” He searched the chest more thoroughly.

“Where did this come from?” Her aunt and uncle were childless.

“Okay, here we go.” Her uncle pulled out a pink blanket, a pair of pink booties, and a tiny pink knit cap.

“You can have this stuff for the baby.” He handed it all to her. “Someone might as well get some use from it.”

He shut the lid on the box and walked over to the bed to sit down.

Katniss followed, sitting down beside him. She placed the knitted items next to her.

“Why did Aunt Effie have all these things?” she repeated.

Uncle Haymitch bent over and rubbed at his eyes. “We had a child. Just the one. She was stillborn.”

Katniss touched her uncle’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. The cord was wrapped around the baby’s neck. The doctor said these things happen.”

A nervous sensation went through Katniss. The thought of losing the life she’d just seen on the screen that morning made it hard to breathe.

As if realizing the implications of what he’d said, her uncle sat upright. “I’m sure that won’t happen to your baby though. So don’t you go thinking that.”

He wiped away a tear that had run down his face. “No one could tell us whether she was having a girl or a boy in those days, so Effie knit two of everything, in blue and in pink, so she’d be prepared. After the baby, well, she gave away all the blue items, but she kept the pink ones to remember her by.”

“I never knew.”

“No, you likely wouldn’t. It happened before you were born.”

“Did she have a name?”

“Elizabeth.”
“I’m so sorry Uncle Haymitch. I’d always thought…” Katniss’ voice trailed off. She wondered if her cousin’s death was the reason her uncle had spent most of his life lost in a bottle.

“We never had any more because Effie didn’t want to. She loved kids too much to go through anything like that again. But she made up for it by inviting you and Prim here every summer.”

“We enjoyed our time with you both too.”

Katniss paused, before asking. “Is this going to be too painful for you, Uncle Haymitch, with me bringing an infant to live in your house next year? I could move out before she’s born, maybe get a small apartment nearby….”

“No,” he interrupted her. “You can stay here. Effie would come back and haunt me if I kicked out family. Besides I’m counting on you cleaning out the junk room and turning it into a room for your baby. It’s already painted pink.”

Eager to change the direction of the conversation because she was in no mood to even talk about cleaning the junk room, Katniss spoke, “I have a picture. Do you want to see her?”

“I don’t know,” Haymitch faltered. “She got all her parts by now?”

“She does. I’ll get the picture out of my purse.”

Her uncle followed her back to the living room where she’d set her purse on the entry table by the door.

She handed him the ultrasound photo.

He studied it, twisting the picture around in his hand. “What the hell is this supposed to be? Are you sure this is the right picture? It looks like someone x-rayed a zucchini.”

Katniss smiled. “No. It’s my baby.” She took the photo from her uncle’s hands, pointing out each body part. As she spoke, a rush of emotion passed through her as she thought about the life she carried. It was real. And the baby could care less whether or not her mother was employed.

“What does the boy think about everything?” Haymitch asked.

“Peeta was excited. He said there hadn’t been any girls born in his family in three generations.”

“He’ll be a good father.”

“He will,” she agreed.

Her uncle’s words brought to mind her own father and the impact he’d had on her life. How would her childhood have been different if she and Prim had been forced to regularly split their time between two homes?

_It would have been strange. But my child will never know the difference._

The thought brought her mood crashing down again.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Thanksgiving was fast approaching.

Ever since Uncle Haymitch had told her about Elizabeth, he’d grown quieter. Katniss suspected he
was thinking about Aunt Effie and their life together. She wished she could take away his pain, but she didn’t know what to do.

“How about we have a big Thanksgiving dinner?” Katniss told her uncle. “We can invite Peeta and your friend Chaff and anyone else you’d like to join us.”

Katniss had only met Chaff a few times, when he’d come to take her uncle to his A.A. meeting.

“Nah, Chaff is going to his brother’s house.”

As for Peeta, Katniss hadn’t seen him in over a week. He’d stayed away after getting his ultrasound photo.

He’d never avoided her for so long and a fearful idea took root in Katniss’ mind – Peeta had met someone. A good-looking man who owned a house and a business, and was kind and decent, too, was certainly a catch.

She tried to remember if the young nurse who had commented on his dimples was wearing a ring.

That evening Katniss sat at the living room window waiting for Peeta to run past. She opened the front door and yelled to him. He jogged across the lawn to her.

“Do you want to join Uncle Haymitch and me for Thanksgiving dinner?”

He shook his head, his breath turning to smoke in the cold night air. “I can’t. My brother is bringing his kids. I was going to invite you and Haymitch, too, but I’ve been busy and lost track of the days. But you’re both welcome to join us.”

He wouldn’t be inviting us over if he met someone else, would he?

“Okay, we’ll come.” She didn’t relish the idea of spending the holiday with his nephews, but they would be her daughter’s cousins. She should get to know them better.

“What can I bring?”

“I’ve got it covered. Dinner will be at three o’clock. And I’ll make sure the floor is free of Legos.”

Thanksgiving day was rainy. Katniss woke up with a headache. Uncle Haymitch seemed just as out of sorts. “Are those nephews of his going to be there again?”

“Yes, but be nice. They’re going to be my daughter’s cousins.”

“Well I hope they don’t plan to do me in today. The pin in my ankle aches with this damp weather.”

Katniss took care in dressing for the meal. None of her regular clothes fit her anymore, so she’d been forced to shop for some maternity items. She didn’t want to spend much so she’d stuck to dark leggings and oversized shirts.

She’d purchased one dress, though. It was tent-shaped so that she could grow into it. The fabric was dark but it was covered with tiny orange flowers. She put it on to find that it hung far too loosely on her body. She tried on every belt she owned until she found a dark one that made the dress look less tent-like.

They made their way next door at 2:58 p.m. Katniss carried a platter of raw vegetables and dip because despite Peeta’s refusal, she didn’t want to go over empty-handed.
The oldest boy, Torin, opened the door. “Uncle Peeta,” he yelled. “Your girlfriend is here.”

Katniss turned crimson at his words. Who had told the boy that she was Peeta’s girlfriend? Surely not Peeta? Maybe Rye? Or perhaps the boy simply assumed she was his uncle’s girlfriend since she was having his child.

But what exactly was she to Peeta? His special friend? His baby’s mama? The neighbor lady he impregnated? His co-parenting partner? If Uncle Haymitch wasn’t with her, Katniss would have turned around and gone home because she was so disturbed by a 10-year-old child’s greeting.

But Peeta appeared immediately, taking the vegetable platter from her, ushering them into the living room and bringing them mugs of hot apple cider. Then he rushed into the kitchen to “put the final touches” on the meal.

The last time Katniss had been inside the house was when her daughter had been conceived. She shifted uncomfortably on the couch, taking in the surroundings with a greater interest now. Her eyes flew to Peeta’s artwork, wondering if their daughter would have the same talent.

The boys played in a room at the end of the hallway, their excited voices drifting back to the living room.

It wasn’t long until Peeta was carrying food out to the dining table. Katniss got up to help him. As she set the food down, she counted seven chairs.

“I thought there would be eight. Is your brother here?”

Peeta frowned. “Rye couldn’t make it. He sold his RV a couple of days ago and bought a boat. He’s at the coast prepping it now for a trip to South America.”

Her mouth fell open. His brother certainly lived an unconventional life. “How did you end up with the boys then?”

“He wanted them to have one last time together. He’s taking Torin and Tristan with him when he leaves.”

“Their mothers are allowing it?”

“Torin and Tristan have the same mother. And she’s going too. The trip was Delly’s idea, actually. She wants them to bond as a family. And if she keeps Rye out at sea long enough, he’ll have a better chance of staying faithful.”

“Good grief!”

“Well, it will probably work, unless my brother meets a mermaid. Then Delly’s out of luck.”

Katniss burst into laughter. “You’re funny Peeta.”

He beamed at her words.

She was immediately embarrassed for thinking he’d met someone. His brother must be the reason he’d been less attentive in recent days.

The dinner was everything Katniss expected it would be with four loud and boisterous boys. Uncle Haymitch ignored the noise, although he eventually snapped at three-year-old Taiden when he refused to eat anything but mashed potatoes.
“You should be lucky you’ve got anything to eat,” Haymitch told the small boy, who appeared shocked at the rebuke. “When I was little, this much food would be a feast.”

Katniss surveyed the spread before her. Peeta had set out a feast. Turkey, mashed potatoes, a variety of fresh vegetables, and cheese buns.

“You don’t we save the pie for later,” Peeta said when the meal ended. “Haymitch, how about I turn on the television so you can watch a football game.”

“Sounds good,” Uncle Haymitch agreed. He stood up and moved to the couch.

“I’ll help you clean up,” Katniss said. There must be a stack of dirty pots and pans in the kitchen with all the food Peeta had made.

“Will you come see the fort I built,” Taiden asked, tugging on the hem of her dress.

“Sure, honey.” The words fell out of Katniss’ mouth so quickly that she was amazed. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d called anyone “honey.” But then she did favor the youngest Mellark nephew. She hoped her daughter was as adorable.

She looked to Peeta. “Just a minute, I’ll be right with you.”

She followed the boy down the hallway. The other bedroom doors were closed and Katniss stepped inside a room with blue walls and a set of bunk beds.

Did Peeta host the boys for sleepovers as well?

Katniss was ready to ask Taiden when he proudly held up the Lego fort he’d built, a jumble of mismatched pieces heaped atop each other. “What do you think?”

“It’s wonderful.”

“I told you boys to stay out of this bedroom.” Peeta was in the hallway talking to the other kids.

Katniss came into the hallway to find him motioning the children out of another room.

Before he shut the door, she caught a glimpse inside. The walls were painted pink and frilly white curtains hung at the window. A white crib stood against one wall, a matching changing table was against the other.

A knot formed in her stomach. “You set up a room for the baby?”

“Yeah, I did. You said we’d share custody.”

*Of a newborn baby? I was thinking when she was older and out of diapers.*

“It’s pretty,” she mumbled, as the door closed.

She rubbed her belly anxiously as she followed Peeta back to the kitchen. She was angry but she wasn’t sure whom it was that she was angry with.

*He’s only doing what you told him to do.*

As Katniss rinsed the dishes and began to load the dishwasher, a faint stirring began in her belly, as if a butterfly had taken residence within and was trying to break free. The anger inside her deflated, as she held tightly to the edge of the sink savoring the strange feeling in her body.
She’d read about this sensation in one of her pregnancy books. It was called the quickening – when a mother first feels her child moving.

“Katniss, what is it? Are you all right?” Peeta looked worried.

“She’s moving.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Can I feel her?”

She reached for his large hand and put it on her stomach. “There she goes.”

Peeta froze. His eyes narrowed as if he was trying to concentrate.

After a minute he lifted his hand. “Sorry, I can’t feel a thing. What does it feel like for you?”

“Like a butterfly flitting around my insides.”

“I wish I could feel it too.”

“You will, later, when she gets bigger.”

A broad smile crossed his face. “I never thought I’d ever be a father. Thank you so much.”

*It’s not like I intended to give you this gift.*

But she didn’t get a chance to respond because he wrapped his arms around her in a hug. She rested her face in his chest and closed her eyes, enjoying a feeling she had no idea she’d been longing for—the comfort of Peeta’s arms.
“I’ll be working three days a week at The Capitol department store filling in for the store manager’s administrative assistant who is on maternity leave,” Katniss told Uncle Haymitch over breakfast, in early December.

“Can you manage it?” He eyed her growing belly.

“Of course. I’ll be sitting most of the day, anyway.”

Katniss had returned from Thanksgiving dinner with a renewed state of mind. Peeta’s excited declaration about becoming a father had eased a lot of the guilt she’d had over getting pregnant. His warm hug had lifted her spirits and provided a comfort that she didn’t even realize she’d been missing.

Her mood buoyed, she’d gone online in search of employment after her uncle went to bed. She’d only meant to get a part-time, holiday job when she filled out the application for sales clerk at The Capitol, forwarding her resume along with her application. Within a day she received an email from the store manager, Jacob Boggs.

Would you be interested in a position other than salesperson? I need an administrative assistant to work three days a week in our executive office to fill in for my regular assistant who is out on maternity leave until early March.

She called him immediately. After a quick telephone interview, she accepted Mr. Boggs’ offer.

The schedule was ideal. Uncle Haymitch didn’t need her around every second of the day and Katniss could arrange to go to her prenatal appointments on her days off. And the job would allow her to make some extra money; she could even get a store discount, which would help in purchasing baby clothes and other items for the baby room she eventually wanted to set up.

“‘You seem to be getting into the holiday spirit,’ Peeta said as Katniss hung tinsel streamers around the living room while he and Haymitch played chess at the dining table.

“I’m not normally so festive, but they play Christmas music all day at the store, even in the executive offices,” Katniss explained. “And I found these vintage streamers in Uncle Haymitch’s junk room the other day along with an artificial tree and some decorations…”

“I told you to throw all that crap out,” her uncle cut in, his eyes not leaving the chessboard as he planned out his next move.

“It looks nice Haymitch,” Peeta said. “Brightens the place up. Speaking of Christmas, I’d like to put in my invitation early for you both to join me for Christmas dinner. I’ll have Teagan and Taiden with me this year and I wanted to make it special for them. Get a big tree, bake cookies, take them to see Santa, the whole nine yards.”

“Sounds like a sleigh full of fun,” Uncle Haymitch noted.

“How did you end up with them again?” Peeta had had his nephews for every holiday since she’d known him. Surely the boys’ mothers would want to spend Christmas Day with them.”
“Teagan’s mom had already booked plane tickets to Bermuda with her new boyfriend, and was counting on Rye taking him, so I offered to help out. And Taiden’s mom is in prison.”

Uncle Haymitch looked up from the chessboard. “That little kid’s mom is a jailbird? That’s a damn shame.”

“It is,” Peeta admitted. “He lives with his grandmother, but she has some health issues and he’s an active little guy. I’ve been thinking about seeing if she’ll let me take him permanently.”

Katniss mouth dropped open. “But what will you do with him when you go to work?” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she thought about their daughter. Who would take care of her?

Her job at The Capitol would end long before she gave birth. Hopefully, she’d be able to stay home with her daughter for the first couple of months. But at some point, she’d have to find paid employment. And she couldn’t expect Uncle Haymitch to babysit for her.

“I’ll have to arrange for childcare, but Lavinia might be willing to help out.”

“But doesn’t she clean houses?”

“Thom says that business isn’t going so well,” Peeta said.

“Katniss made me let Lavinia go,” Uncle Haymitch apologized. “It wasn’t my idea.”

“Does your assistant know her well?” she asked, fishing around to find out the connection between Peeta and Lavinia.

“Lavinia’s his wife.”

Embarrassed at her suspicious thoughts about Peeta and the redhead, Katniss returned to the living room to finish hanging the streamers.

*Why do I care who Peeta knows and what he does?*

Katniss told herself it was because they would share a child. Any woman Peeta might become involved with would likely have access to their daughter. While she trusted Peeta and didn’t think he’d get involved with a potential jailbird like his brother had, still the idea that he could bring a woman that Katniss didn’t like in proximity of their child was upsetting.

*But he could have the same worry about you, too.*

With a Christmas dinner invite in-hand, Katniss began shopping for gifts. A sweater for Uncle Haymitch to replace the raggedy one he insisted on wearing. Lego sets for Peeta’s nephews, although she’d have to be sure they kept them far away from her uncle.

Peeta was harder to buy for, but eventually she decided to get him a sweater too. There was a red pullover on display near the department store entrance that she walked past on her way to the executive office. She thought it would look good on him.

She hadn’t talked to Prim since their blow up on the telephone when she’d told her sister she was moving to Dandelion. Maybe a gift card for dinner at a nice restaurant for Prim and Rory would be the first step toward getting back on speaking terms. Katniss still needed to tell her sister about the baby too, but she promised herself to do it right after New Year’s. She had enough things to deal with now; she might as well enjoy the season.
After sleeping late Christmas morning, she and Uncle Haymitch exchanged gifts. He liked the cardigan sweater she’d selected; he put it on as soon as it was out of the box.

“Now you can throw away your old one.”

“I’m not throwing it away. Effie made it.”

Her heart sunk – she should have known that’s why he wore it, but at least now he had a decent one to wear out in public.

He surprised her with a wood carving of a bear.

She ran her hand around it, feeling the smoothness beneath her fingers. “You have a real gift for this.”

Her uncle grinned. “I hope you like it. It reminds me of you.”

“I remind you of a bear? Am I that big already?”

Her uncle chuckled. “A fierce Mama bear. You’ll make a great mother Katniss. You know how to take care of others.”

Tears came to her eyes at his confidence in her.

“I have to tell you, though, that the bear is part of a set.”

Her eyebrows rose.

“I carved a bear for Peeta, too. Maybe one day those two bears will live together in one house with their Baby Bear.”

Katniss scowled. Her uncle had only mentioned “making things legal” once. Did he plan to start up again? “We’re fine Uncle Haymitch,” she muttered.

They went to Peeta’s house at noon. The house smelled of cinnamon and ginger and powdered sugar. Teagan and Taiden squealed when Katniss gave them the presents she’d wrapped for them.

“I have something for you too,” Peeta said, smiling. “But I’ll give it to you later.”

Katniss put Peeta’s wrapped sweater under the tree, and joined him in the kitchen to help put the meal on the table. Haymitch sat down in an armchair while the two boys showed him what Santa had brought them.

“What are these foods?” Katniss asked Peeta as she carried some small platters out to the table. One dish contained a white fish, covered with sauce, the other plate had some kind of pressed meat in a gelatin shape.”

“The white fish is Lutefisk, the gelatin mold is Sylta,” Peeta said. They’re traditional Mellark holiday foods that my Grandma Griet always made. I thought the kids should taste them.”

“Did you eat them when you were a little?”

“Nah, and I don’t care for them so much either. But it’s part of their heritage. One bite won’t kill them.”
“It’s part of my daughter’s heritage too.”

“Well, I’ll give them a try,” she said brightly. “Maybe the baby will like them.”

Everyone took a bite or two. Peeta advised the boys to put the food in their mouth and swallow it quickly by downing a sip of milk.

Katniss side-eyed him.

“Hey, it’s a good trick to learn,” he said. “It worked for me when I was little.”

After the meal, Teagan and Taiden convinced Uncle Haymitch to help them set up the train tracks that Santa had brought on the cleared off dining table, while Katniss joined Peeta in the kitchen to clean up.

“I was thinking about driving to the mountains tomorrow so the boys could play in the snow since there’s none down here yet,” Peeta said. “Would you like to join us?”

“Sure. It sounds like fun.” Fortunately she didn’t have to work until January 2nd, as Mr. Boggs had taken the week off and gave her the option to do the same.

Once the kitchen was tidy, Peeta suggested Katniss open his gift.

As they walked through the dining room toward the living room, Haymitch was grumbling at the boys as they tried to attach the train cars together, sounding exactly like a curmudgeonly grandfather. “That’s not the way to do it. Let me show you how.”

Katniss followed Peeta to the tree. He pulled a small, narrow box out from under it and handed it to her.

In turn she handed him the box she brought over for him, as well as the wooden bear her uncle had wrapped. “The bigger one is from me, the little one is from Uncle Haymitch.”

They sat down on the sofa.

“You go first,” he said.

Katniss unwrapped the narrow box and opened the lid. Inside was a gold locket, on a thin chain. She hadn’t expected to receive jewelry from Peeta. It seemed so personal.

“It’s beautiful.”

It looked to be an antique. The cover had an interesting design etched into it of a bird in flight. She ran her fingernail along the edge and the locket popped open. It was empty.

“I thought you could put in a picture of the baby when’s she’s born.”

She caught the enthusiasm in his voice.

“I will.” Still the other side would remain empty. Katniss looked at Peeta, suddenly wishing that she had a picture of him to put opposite their daughter.

Is that too weird since we’re not together?

“Thank you. Open yours now.”
Peeta unwrapped the small bear. He held it up. He twisted his head to the dining room and called out. “Did you carve this bear, Haymitch?”

“Yep.”

“You did a great job.”

“Thanks. There’s a story that goes with that gift. I’ll let Katniss tell it to you.”

_Damn him._

Peeta looked to her expectantly.

“I’ll tell you some other time, Peeta. Open your present from me.”

He unwrapped the box, tossing the paper onto the coffee table in front of him, and lifting the lid. He pulled out the sweater and held it up.

“I like it. Great color.” Peeta put the sweater over his head and pulled it down his chest. It fit perfectly.

“Thanks so much. This will come in handy. The clothes I wore last winter don’t fit anymore. I had to pack them up for storage.”

“You’re saving them?”

_Does he fear gaining the weight back?_

Peeta grimaced. “Well, I hope I’ll never need them again, but you never know.”

“Weren’t you the guy who told me to take it one day at a time,” Haymitch called out from the dining room. “Think about staying fit for Baby Bear.”

Katniss turned her head to stare at her uncle, curious about the conversation he was reminding Peeta about.

“Baby Bear?” Peeta chuckled and looked down at the figure he’d set on the coffee table. “I get it now.” He looked to Katniss. “Did Haymitch carve a bear for you, too?”

Katniss nodded.

_And I hope Uncle Haymitch keeps his mouth shut about the Bear family living together happily ever after._

They stayed late at Peeta’s house playing Old Maid – Katniss had thrown her uncle a dark look when he suggested the game -- and feasting on hot chocolate and waffle cookies called Krumkake -- another traditional Mellark food -- until the boys started to yawn.

“Be here tomorrow at nine so we can leave for the snow,” Peeta requested after she and Uncle Haymitch said their goodbyes.

Katniss called Prim when she returned home to wish her a Merry Christmas. Not surprisingly Prim didn’t answer. Likely she was still celebrating with Rory’s family, the same as every year.

Katniss was glad to have avoided attending that chaotic family gathering that she’d been invited to ever since her sister had married into the Hawthorne family. It usually ended with a fight or some
other embarrassing scene. Last year, Rory’s older brother Gale had made a fool of himself when he drank too much spiked eggnog and, in front of his wife Madge, confessed to Katniss that he’d always had a crush on her.

*I’d rather eat Lutefisk and Sylta any day.*

Katniss’ meager maternity wardrobe wasn’t meant for a trek in the snow, but she layered as best she could. She’d come across an old coat of Aunt Effie’s in the junk room. It was too long and hung just a couple of inches above her ankles – her aunt had been taller than her -- but it was lined with lambswool, so it was warm.

“Can I borrow it?” she asked her uncle.

“It’s yours,” he said.

At least her snow boots still fit.

She ate a big breakfast, but she didn’t pack a lunch, figuring Peeta would take care of that. He had plenty of leftovers from the previous day’s meal.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right, Uncle Haymitch. I’ll have my cell phone with me.”

“Probably won’t get any reception where you’re going,” he noted.

She frowned. He was likely right.

“I don’t know what time we’ll be back.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Haymitch said, pushing her toward the door. “I’ll be fine.”

She met Peeta in the driveway as he was loading up the back of his car with an inner tube and an ice chest.

The kids were already in the backseat, strapped into booster seats.

“Hi Katniss,” Taiden greeted her as she got into the front passenger seat.

“Are you excited about seeing snow?” she asked the child.

“I’m gonna build a snowman.”

“I am too,” his six-year-old brother chimed in. “And I’m gonna ride on the inner tube Uncle Peeta has.”

Peeta got into the car and shut the door. He turned around to look at the children. “Is everyone ready to go now?”

“Yeah,” they both chimed.

Katniss smiled to herself, as they drove down the street headed for the main highway. It was as if she was dropped into a different world, playing the role of Mom on a family outing.

As if knowing how she felt, her daughter kicked in appreciation. Katniss rested her hand on her stomach and smiled.
“You seem content,” Peeta said.

“I am.”

“Any special reason?”

“Nothing I can put my finger on exactly. I guess I’m feeling more settled in Dandelion now.”

“You’ve certainly improved Haymitch’s spirits. He’s been a lot happier lately. When you left that note on my door and I first went over to see him – he was in a very bad way.”

Her eyes grew big. “He was?”

“I didn’t want to tell you about it, because what could you do. You lived on the other side of the state.”

“Is that why you were going over every day to eat with him?” It had seemed like something above and beyond simple neighborliness.

“Partly,” he said.

“It was a very kind thing of you to do Peeta.”

They rode in silence, eventually leaving the main highway and turning off onto a winding road that climbed into the mountains.

“Haymitch and I had a lot of long talks over our meals together,” Peeta said, picking up the conversation where it had ended miles earlier. “He talked about you a lot.”

“My uncle told me.”

*He said you asked about me.*

Peeta turned to her startled. “He did? I hope you don’t mind, Katniss.”

She shook her head. The story her uncle had told Peeta about the squirrel was actually funny in hindsight.

“The way he described how you helped your family out was quite impressive.”

“I did what I thought needed to be done.”

“A lot of people wouldn’t see it that way though,” Peeta said.

*Like Prim.*

Peeta ran his hands along the steering wheel. “I can’t say I’m happy with the way everything has turned out, but I’m glad my daughter is going to have you for a mother. A child, especially when they’re young, needs someone in their life who will put their needs first. I don’t mean that a mother shouldn’t have a life of her own or anything like that, but it’s important that a child knows she is special and loved.”

“Did your mother do that for you Peeta?”

He gave a bitter laugh. “No.”
Peeta had told her on the phone when they’d first begun talking that his mother had died when he was in his early twenties and his father passed away ten years ago. She wanted to ask more about his relationship with his mother, but judging from the look on his face he was done talking about her.

“I think you’ll be a good father, too.”

Peeta smiled. “I hope so.”

“I see snow,” Teagan shrieked. “When are we gonna stop the car?”

Katniss startled for a moment, so involved in her discussion with Peeta that she’d completely forgotten that his nephews were in the backseat.

“Soon,” Peeta said, his eyes going to the rear view mirror to glance at the boys.

A spotty splattering of snow lay on the ground beside the cleared road.

“Did you have a particular place in mind that you’re driving to?” Katniss asked.

“Sort of,” Peeta said. “There’s a place about twenty miles up the road to turn off and look at the view. I thought to park the car there. There’s a wooded area on the other side of the road. I figured we could cross it and the kids could play on the edge of the woods.

“You’ve been there before, then?”

“Around nine years ago, Rye and I went camping in that area.”

“Do you go camping very often?”

“Nah. Ever since I bought the bakery, I’ve haven’t taken much time off. This week is the first vacation I’ve had in a few years.”

“You need to take better care of yourself, Peeta.” The words slipped out of her mouth before she could think, but she didn’t regret them because they were true. Her daughter needed a father who was healthy, not a workaholic that might drop dead from a heart attack.

He gave her a surprised look. “You’re right.”

Fifteen minutes later, they reached the look-out. Peeta pulled off the road and turned off the engine.

“We’re here boys.”

Everyone got out. Peeta opened the back of the car to get out the inner tube, while Katniss put knitted caps and gloves on the boys, who were already touching the snowy ground and squealing.

“Let’s look both ways before we cross the road.” Peeta twisted his head in an exaggerated fashion, looking in both directions.

There was only silence though, the two-lane mountain road being free of traffic. Katniss held Taiden’s hand, while Peeta held Teagan’s. In Peeta’s other hand, he carried the black inner tube.

Once they were across the road, Katniss and Peeta let go of the children’s hands. The boys attempted to run down the sloped ground, but the snow was soft and the boys sunk into it.

“Let’s build a snowman,” Teagan told his younger brother when they reached the bottom of the slope, near to the trees. “You help Uncle Peeta.”
Katniss sat on a fallen tree log and watched as Peeta and the boys set to work. The sun shone brightly and a sense of calm washed over her.

When they were done, the snowman was four feet tall. “Too bad we don’t have some coal for eyes and a carrot for a nose like Frosty the Snowman,” Teagan said.

“We’ll improvise.” Peeta picked up two pinecones and used them for eyes. A small stick became the nose and a sliver of bark turned into a mouth.

“We need to take a picture,” Teagan said. “My Mama always takes pictures so she can post them online.”

Katniss stood up from her seat on the log. She pulled her phone from her coat pocket. “I’ll take one.”

When she was done, Peeta pulled out his phone. “You get in the picture, too, Katniss.”

She stood beside Taiden as Peeta held his arm up and shot a photograph of the four of them close to the snowman.

“Let ride on the inner tube now,” Teagan suggested, when the photo session ended.

They walked back up the slope toward the road.

“I want to go first,” Teagan said, when they reached the top.

Peeta positioned him in the tire and the boy slid down the incline, screaming all the way.

When he reached the bottom, Taiden shouted, “My turn now.”

But dragging the rubber tire uphill took some time for his brother in the deep snow.

When Teagan got the inner tube to the top, Peeta positioned himself onboard with Taiden in his lap. They set off down the hill.

Katniss stood along the side of the road to watch. The sound of a car came closer. She stood up and shuffled over to Teagan who stood watching his uncle and brother. Wrapping her arm around the child’s shoulder Katniss stared at the vehicle that passed them. The driver, a man with a chiseled profile and copper hair, waved and she waved back.

The runs up and down the slope continued for the next hour. “I’m hungry,” Teagan said to Katniss as they watched Peeta and his brother go down the slope yet again.

“I am, too.” Katniss pulled her phone out and glanced at the time. It was almost 1 p.m. Her stomach had been growling for a while.

When Peeta and Taiden reached the top of the slope, Katniss suggested they take a break. “I think we could all use some food.”

“Good idea,” Peeta said. “We’ll stop and eat, then we can play some more.” He set the inner tube down and they crossed the road and returned to the car. Peeta pulled the ice chest out of the hatch back and carried it to a single picnic table at the viewpoint.

“It’s so peaceful,” Katniss said. “I think only a single car has passed by since we’ve been here.”

They ate their fill of sandwiches, chips, oranges, and more Krumkake with hot chocolate poured from a thermos.
“Are you boys ready to go tubing again?” Peeta asked.

Taiden stood up and jumped in place. “I have to pee.”

“I do too,” Teagan said. “Where’s the bathroom?”

Peeta rubbed his bearded chin. “It’s called finding a tree.” He looked to Katniss. “How about I take them across the road and to the nearest tree for some privacy.”

“Okay,” she said. In truth she had to pee, as well. She’d been eyeing a bush near where they’d parked the car. She’d have enough time to shield herself behind it, pull down her leggings, squat and take care of business before Peeta got back with the boys.

“Go on ahead with the kids. I’ll put everything away.”

She had the ice-chest packed up and the trash bagged up before Peeta even made it across the road with the boys. She carried it all back to the car and set it on the ground, before making her way to the bush.

She took off Aunt Effie’s coat and tossed it over the top of the bush. Pulling down her leggings was easy enough, but squatting down was near impossible with the size of her belly.

Still she spread her legs as far apart as possible.

The thought that a car might drive by and see her or perhaps Peeta would return with the boys and witness a sight sure to remain with all of them forever ran through her mind. It caused her to giggle uncontrollably, and nearly tip over sideways.

*Pull it together Everdeen.*

When she was done, she carefully made her way upright, doing her best to avoid stepping in the melted snow on the ground. She put her coat back on and made her way to the back of the car. The hatchback opening wasn’t completely closed, so she opened it up and put the ice-chest into the car.

“Katniss.” She jumped as she heard Teagan’s high-pitched yell. She turned her head to see both children standing on the other side of the road.

“Uncle Peeta’s hurt.”

She ran across the highway. “What happened?”

“A tree fell on him.”

Her heart raced. “A tree?”

“It fell on Taiden too, but most of it fell onto Uncle Peeta.”

Katniss’ eyes flew to the three-year-old who had a streak of blood running down from a scratch on the side of his face.

She fell to her knees and hugged him. “How are you?”

His face crumpled. “I’m scared.”

She looked to Taiden. “Take me to Peeta.”
Katniss and the boys tramped down the slope, the snow already compacted by the many trips they’d already made over the same ground. As she walked, her eyes surveyed the area. All the trees remained upright, however a large limb, with many long branches jutting out from it was lying next to one of the fir trees. Could that be what Teagan meant?

She raised her hand to point. “Is Peeta under that tree limb?”

“Yeah.” Teagan sounded as if he was forcing himself not to cry.

As they got closer and she didn’t hear anything, Katniss wondered if he’d been hit on the head.

No, no, no.

The memory of her father’s unexpected death flashed through her mind. Happy and healthy, and gone in an instant in a workplace accident.

Instinctively her hands flew to her midsection. She rubbed it like it was a lucky talisman.

*Please make your Daddy all right.*

She reached the limb and lifted a couple of branches to get a look underneath. The limb was lying close to Peeta’s side. He was pinned by its branches, his body pushed down a few inches into the soft snow.

*If he’d been struck by that limb…*

“Peeta, are you okay?”

“Been better.” The branches covering his face muffled his voice, but at the sound of it her panic ebbed.

*He must be okay if he can talk.*

“Are the boys okay?”

“They’re right here. They’re fine.

But how was she going to set him free?

Katniss walked over to the end of the limb and tried to drag it off him, but it was far too heavy. Besides she wasn’t supposed to be lifting, not in her condition. Another thought came to mind.

“We’re going to pull up the branches so you can roll out from underneath them.”

“Excellent.”

Katniss showed each child where to stand and put a couple of small branches in their hands. Then she knelt down in the snow and reached underneath a few of the biggest branches.

“How when I say *three and hold it.*” She didn’t expect a six-year-old and a three-year-old to have much strength, but she didn’t know what else to do.
“One, two, three.”

The boys made exaggerated sounds as if they were characters in a cartoon. It would have amused her, if Peeta hadn’t groaned.

“I can’t roll. My body has embedded itself in the snow.”

Can’t roll or is he injured? The groan didn’t bode well.

“Okay, change of plans then,” Katniss said. “You can stop now kids.” Katniss gently set the branches back down. “Do you have a knife or something in the car that I can use to cut you free?”

“Only the plastic knife I cut the sandwiches with.”

Katniss reached into her pocket and pulled out her cell phone. She dialed 911. Nothing. She turned it off and shoved it back into her pocket.

“I’ll break off the branches with my hands then.”

It was easier said than done. The kids weren’t any help and Katniss’ gloved hands quickly grew tired as she bent a single branch back and forth multiple times until it broke.

Still she persevered. First she uncovered Peeta’s face. Evergreen needles were stuck in his hair and beard. A cursory look showed that it was undamaged, not even a scratch.

The boys, who had lost interest in her rescue attempt, were throwing snowballs at each other. But they came closer when their uncle’s face was exposed.

“Are you alive Uncle Peeta?” Taiden asked.

“I am sport.”

“Maybe you boys could help by pulling the needles out of your uncle’s hair and beard,” Katniss suggested.

Meanwhile she continued to work to free his upper body. If she could uncover it, maybe he could sit up and slide his legs out from underneath the remaining branches.

“How did it happen, Peeta?”

“It was the strangest thing. I was standing here and I heard a crack and…” His voice trailed off, as his face turned pink. There was a rustle underneath the branches, and then the sound of a zipper.

Katniss cheeks grew warm. “Everything okay?”

“The crown jewels are still intact.”

Taiden’s eyes grew big. “You have jewels Uncle Peeta? Are they in your pocket?”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Peeta said, a small smile appearing on his lips. He caught Katniss’ eyes. “No damage done.”

“Good.” Her eyes flitted away from Peeta’s.

How in the heck did we get into a conversation about jewels? And why do I care that everything is fine?
“Let’s see if we can’t get your uncle out of here, boys.” Katniss’ voice turned serious. She was on the edge of hysteria already – laughing about the Mellark crown jewels might cause her to go into a full-blown crying jag.

“Do you think you’ll be able to walk to the car?”

“I think so. My legs feel fine.”

One branch more and his chest was uncovered. She turned to Teagan. “I need your help.”

Kneeling next to Peeta, she put her hands behind his back. With Teagan’s help, they managed to push Peeta into an upright position, but not without him letting out a few groans.

“Do you want to sit here for a while and rest?”

“Nah, I want to get out of the snow and back to the car.”

Katniss stood up, the kids doing likewise. Planting his arms at his side, Peeta shifted his body backwards and pulled his knees up from underneath the branches.

“I’m going to need your help to stand Katniss.”

She got on one side of him and Teagan got on the other. With great effort he turned, twisted to his knees and leaned against Katniss as a crutch to stand.

Katniss held his arm as he trudged stiffly up the hill, the boys walking alongside.

“Get the inner tube, Teagan,” Peeta said. “Help your brother, Taiden.”

The boys rolled the inner tube across the highway as Katniss and Peeta crossed.

Peeta pulled out his car keys and handed them to Katniss. “Would you drive?”

She unlocked the passenger door and helped him inside, and then opened the back door and buckled up the kids as well.

Katniss put the inner tube into the back of the vehicle. She climbed into the driver’s seat, and put on the safety belt.

“I’m taking you to an E.R. to get checked out, Peeta.” His stiff walk and slow movements, made it clear he was in pain, even if he wasn’t admitting to it.

“I’ll be fine. I got the wind knocked out of me. I’ll be back to my old self in a day or so.”

Scowling, she turned the key in the ignition, her foot gently resting on the gas pedal. But instead of the gentle hum of the engine turning over, a click sounded.

Katniss turned the key again. Another click.

She looked to Peeta. “What’s wrong?”

He frowned. “Sounds like the battery’s dead.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out his phone. He punched in a number.

Please work, please work, please work this time.
“There’s no reception up here,” he mumbled.

“Let me give it a try.” She pulled out her phone, hoping for better luck this time. But it was useless.

“What’s wrong?” Teagan asked. “Why aren’t we going?”

Katniss turned around in the driver’s seat. “The car isn’t working right now.”

“How are we going to get home then?” the child asked.

“I’ll wait by the road and flag someone down for help, Teagan,” Peeta said.

“You’re in no shape to do that Peeta. If anyone’s going to stand on the side of the road, it’s me.”

“No, Katniss.” Peeta frowned. “It’s too cold.”

He was right about that. But worse she’d only seen one car drive down the highway in all the time they’d been there.

“Do you have anything we could use to make a sign to flag down a passing car?”

Peeta furrowed his brow. “I don’t think so.” He clenched his lips, and closed his eyes.

Katniss pulled the keys from the ignition and opened the door.

Peeta’s eyes flew open. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to look in the back of your car and see if I can find anything we can use to make a sign.”

She opened the hatchback and pulled out the inner tube and ice chest. Next to it was a small first aid kit. Opening it, she found some aspirin, which she pulled out for Peeta, as well as a silver space blanket.

Maybe she could use the blanket to make a sign. The shiny silver color might capture a passing motorist’s attention. But what could she use to write on it?

She poked her head into the car. “You don’t happen to have a sharpie pen in your glove compartment, Peeta?”

“No, sorry. I left all my sharpies at home. Did you find something? I emptied the back out this morning so I could fit in the ice chest and inner tube.”

“I was thinking we could drape the emergency blanket across the back of the car. I just need something we can use to write on it.”

“Don’t you have lipstick or something?” Peeta asked.

*Does he think all women carry make-up on their person? I hardly wear it. Has he not even noticed?*

“No, I left all my lipsticks at home.”

“Use the peanut butter on that sandwich that Taiden refused to eat.”

“Not my sandwich,” Taiden whined. “I might get hungry.”

“It’s going for a good cause, bud. Write HELP, Katniss. I don’t think there’s enough peanut butter to write more than that.”
She pulled the sandwich from the plastic container. Thank goodness Peeta had been so generous with the filling.

Unfolding the space blanket, she lay it onto the snowy ground, writing HELP in large letters.

She lay the top of the silver blanket partly across the floor of the back of the car and then put the inner tube and ice chest on top of it, but not before taking out the food. She might as well bring it into the front seat so she could get at it more easily if anyone got hungry.

Carefully, she put the back door down on it. The HELP sign hung down across the bumper of the vehicle.

Katniss got back into the driver’s seat, setting the remaining food on the dashboard above the steering wheel. “It’s all done.”

Peeta was looking through the vehicle’s manual he must have pulled from the open glove box. “There’s got to be something in here about dead batteries.”

She handed him the aspirin packet. He opened it, and swallowed it down.

Katniss hoped they wouldn’t have to wait long for help. Looking behind her she saw that Taiden had fallen asleep.

Teagan looked pensive. “My Mama is supposed to pick me up tomorrow. We’ll be home by then, won’t we?”

“Of course we will.” Katniss kept her voice even, but she was nervous, too. She didn’t like the idea of Uncle Haymitch worrying about them. Hopefully he’d call the authorities when they didn’t return. Then, at least, someone might come looking for them.

But how will they even know where to look?

The sun had warmed the car’s interior, but as it started to set, the temperature grew cooler inside. And not a single car had passed in all that time.

“I’m taking the sign down. We need to use it for a blanket.”

She brought the space blanket inside. It was cold to the touch. Katniss draped it over herself, hoping to warm it up for the boys.

Taiden had awoke while she was outside. He was crying. “I’m hungry. I want to go home now.”

“Have some Krumkake,” Peeta said. A momentary grimace appeared on his face as he stretched out his arm to reach for the container.

Has he hurt his ribs?

“That’s a good idea. Why don’t we all eat something,” Katniss said. “We’ll probably feel better.”

She offered some food to Peeta but he refused, offering it to her instead, telling her she needed to eat it keep her strength up. In normal circumstances she would have disagreed with him, but the occasional kick in her belly reminded her that she had someone else to consider. So she shared the remainder of the potato chips with the boys, who also split the remainder of the peanut butter sandwich between them.

“I’m cold,” Teagan said, when he was done eating.
“Put the space blanket over you and your brother.” Katniss handed it over to Teagan. The child had climbed out of his booster seat and was sitting in the middle of the backseat near to his brother.

“Can we lick off the peanut butter?” Teagan asked.

“Just a couple of licks. We might need to put up the sign when the sun comes up.”

She tried to sound cheerful, but she was finding it difficult considering the circumstance. How were they going to survive a night in the car in freezing temperatures?

“How do the seats go down?” Katniss turned to Peeta.

His eyes were closed as if he was dozing. She tapped him on the shoulder. “Peeta, do the seats in your car go down?”

He startled awake. “Yeah.”

“Maybe we should put them down and we could all huddle together to keep warm.”

Before he could respond, a loud pounding sounded on the side window, causing her heart to race. Both boys yelped.

Turning her head she saw a bright light pointed at her. Peeta put his hand on her right shoulder as she opened the car door. The figure stepped back.

A tall man in a yellow parka held a flashlight upward, illuminating his face. It was the man she waved at earlier that morning; she recognized him immediately. He was tall, with sea green eyes and a face that a movie star would envy.

“Are you in trouble? Has your car broken down?”

The cold caused her teeth to chatter. “Y..y..yes. It won’t start.”

He pointed the flashlight to the interior of the car. “How many are inside?”

“Four,” Peeta said, leaning across the console.

“I want to go,” Taiden whined. “Can you take us home?”

The man smiled. “It’s too cold and dark right now for me to check out your car. Besides my wife’s been expecting me home for hours. I’ll take you to my cabin. It’s just up the road. You can spend the night there with us, and we’ll see about getting your car started in the morning.”

Katniss turned her head to look at Peeta, seeing the relief in his eyes. He nodded.

“That would be great, thanks,” she told the man.

“Okay then. I’m Finnick Odair, by the way.” He put out his hand.

Katniss took hold of it. “I’m Katniss.” She turned and pointed toward the others. “That’s Peeta and Teagan and Taiden.”

“Nice to make your acquaintance.” He eyed the booster seats “It’s not too far to drive, we probably don’t need to mess with those kids’ seats.”

“Okay.”
Katniss unlocked the back door for the boys. Both scampered out.

Taiden immediately grabbed Finnick’s hand. “We made a sign out of peanut butter.”

Finnick’s eyebrows rose. “Well, that’s certainly creative.”

“Do you know Santa Claus?” the boy continued. “He lives at the North Pole.”

In a short time, they were seated in his warm vehicle. Katniss sat in the back with the children, while Peeta rode up front with Finnick.

As they rode a few miles to his house, Finnick explained that he and his wife Annie were wintering in a nearby cabin that they’d borrowed from a friend. “I’m a writer so the solitude suits me. I went for a long drive today to work out a plot twist and I was on my way back home when I noticed your car. I passed it this morning and I thought it was strange that it was still parked there.”

Finnick appeared interested, when Peeta explained what had happened to him, prior to the car not starting. “A tree limb snapped off and fell on you? Sounds like something I’d put in a story to rescue a sagging plot.”

Katniss had pictured a tiny cabin, but it was a large log house. Lights shone out the big front windows showing off the covered porch.

As soon as the car pulled up, the front door opened and a tall, thin woman with wavy brown hair came out. Her eyes grew big when she saw that her husband had brought guests, but she quickly smiled at them, her eyes going soft as she took in Teagan and Taiden.

“Come inside where it’s warm,” she urged them.

Peeta held the handrail carefully as he walked stiffly up the stairs, while the boys flew up running for the door. Katniss walked behind Peeta wondering at his injury.

They entered a cozy room with wooden beams overhead, shiny wood floors below, and leather chairs and a leather couch all facing a stone fireplace in which a fire burned. A tree decorated with a string of popcorn and red and green ribbons stood in one corner.

“Take a seat Peeta,” Finnick advised him. “Do you need an ice pack or anything?”

“No, I’ve been sitting in a refrigerator for hours. I’d rather thaw out.”

Finnick introduced everyone to Annie and explained to his wife how he’d found the family stranded in a disabled car not too far from the cabin.

A dog barked and everyone turned toward the sound.

“Puppies,” Taiden shrieked. He rushed over to a nest of blankets set along the wall near the fireplace, followed quickly by his brother. Atop it lay a golden retriever on her side, nursing her welps.

“How many did Goldie have?” Finnick asked his wife.

She frowned. “Six.”

Finnick turned to Katniss and Peeta to explain. “Goldie’s a purebred show dog. We’ve mated her once before, but Goldie found her own boyfriend this time, a mutt that lives in our neighborhood.

“Would you folks be interested in a puppy?”
Teagan turned his head. “Can I get one Uncle Peeta?”

Peeta chuckled. “You’ll have to ask your Mom about that.”

“You all must be hungry,” Annie interrupted. “I made a big pot of clam chowder, and we have leftovers from yesterday’s dinner.”

“My wife made far too much holiday food for me to eat if I want to keep my girlish figure,” Finnick joked, rubbing his hand across his flat stomach.

Katniss smiled gratefully. “Yes, thank you. We’re hungry.”

At least I am.

Annie pointed down a hallway. “There’s a bathroom in that direction if you want to wash up first. And you can hang your coats on the hooks by the door.”

Katniss unbuttoned her borrowed coat, put it over her arm and then walked over to the boys who were kneeling in front of the nursing dog and removed their jackets and hats, as well. Next she came to Peeta who was telling Finnick about his bakery in Dandelion.

Peeta unzipped his coat and Katniss helped him to take it off because he was having difficulty.

It must be his ribs.

“You’ve got that down to a science,” Annie said. She eyed Katniss’ belly. “Looks like you don’t have much longer.”

“Three and half months more. And once I hang this stuff up, I’m off to use your bathroom.”

After using the facilities, Katniss found Annie in the kitchen re-heating food for dinner. “By any chance, do you have an operating telephone? Neither of our cell phones work up here and I wanted to let my uncle know we won’t be back tonight.”

Annie opened a drawer under the counter. “Use this. It’s a satellite phone.”

“Thank-you,” Katniss said. She carried the phone back toward the hallway outside the bathroom for privacy and dialed her uncle’s number. It was nearly 7 p.m. He must be concerned.

But it wasn’t Uncle Haymitch that answered. It was Prim.

“Where are you Katniss? I spent all day driving across the state to surprise you and Uncle Haymitch. And now I find out you’re pregnant. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Katniss gulped. She wasn’t ready for this conversation right now. “Please tell Uncle Haymitch that Peeta’s car battery died. We’re spending the night at the house of the man who rescued us. We’ll be home tomorrow.”

She didn’t wait for Prim to ask any more questions; she ended the call.

Crap. Crap. Crap

She should have told Prim she was pregnant. But her sister always made her feel stupid. Unmarried and expecting at forty, with only a part-time, temporary job. Prim would have a field day.

Katniss carried the phone into the kitchen and placed it back in the drawer. The others were already
seated at the dining table adjacent to the open kitchen.

“Were you able to make your call?” Annie asked.

“Yes, thank you. My uncle was expecting us back today. I didn’t want him to worry.”

She sat down at the only empty chair, the one next to Peeta.

“I made you a special herbal tea,” Annie said. “It should warm you up after being outside all day.”

“It’s great Katniss, you should try it,” Peeta said, holding up his mug.

*It must be good. His cheeks are already rosy.*

“Peeta, your tea is a hot toddie,” Annie said. “I can’t give alcohol to a pregnant woman.”

Peeta took another sip. “No wonder its goes down so smoothly.”

Finnick and Annie kept the conversation lively, talking about their home on the coast and their dog and their son, who’d recently graduated from college and had taken a job on the other side of the country. Katniss suspected they were eager to see new faces after spending the last month holed up in the woods.

As they spoke, Katniss tried to guess at their ages. They didn’t look much older than Peeta and her. Still they must be since they had a twenty-two year old son.

“Do you know what you’re having?” Annie asked Katniss pointing at her belly.

“A girl,” Katniss said.

“First one on my side in three generations,” Peeta bragged.

Annie grinned. “How exciting. Have you figured out a name yet?”

*We haven’t even discussed it.*

“I’m leaving that to Katniss,” Peeta said, turning to give her a shy smile. After accepting Annie’s offer of a second hot toddie the look of pain had disappeared from his face.

“Well you have a lovely family, you’re very lucky,” Annie said.

“Thank-you.” Peeta set his spoon down and reached for Katniss’ hand under the table, squeezing it.

She turned to give him a smile, feeling slightly uncomfortable about the way Peeta was misleading their hosts to make them think that they were all one big happy family.

*But he hasn’t exactly lied.*

“Are you sure you don’t want a puppy to make it complete?” Finnick’s joke interrupted Katniss’ internal battle.

Peeta chuckled and shook his head.

“Will you look at that?” Annie said pointing to Taiden.

The three-year-old had laid his head on the table and fallen asleep.
Annie stood up. “I have just the bed for him. A giant pillow.”

Finnick frowned. “You’re not serious Annie.”

“Well, why not? Goldie never used it.”

Finnick looked to Katniss and Peeta. “My wife bought a big, round dog bed for Goldie to sleep on while we were here. Unfortunately she prefers the leather couch.” He waved his spoon toward the sofa facing the fireplace. “We’re going to have to buy my friend a new couch after this visit. Goldie’s already left some scratches on it.”

“Here, I’ll show you,” Annie said, ignoring her husband. Katniss stood up and followed Annie into a bedroom across the hall from the bathroom. A double bed with a brass headboard and two nightstands dominated the room, but in the corner was a large plush, circular pillow that must have been four feet across at its widest part.

“Don’t you think it would make a fine bed?” Annie asked.

It did look cozy, and very clean too.

“I swear to you that Goldie never used it, even once. She just sniffed at it and walked away.”

“I believe you,” Katniss said.

Teagan came into the room. “Can I sleep on it too?”

Annie nodded. “I think both boys would fit nicely.”

She turned to Katniss and smiled. “Then you and your husband can have the bed to yourselves.”
Chapter 8

Katniss shouldn’t have been surprised at Annie’s suggestion. Of course she would think they were a couple. They’d both smiled when she complimented them on their family.

Practically speaking, there likely wasn’t another bed in the house anyway. Katniss had noticed a second hallway off the dining area. It must lead to a second bedroom and bathroom that Annie and Finnick used, as there were no other rooms on this side of the house.

“Thanks,” she muttered as Finnick carried a sleeping Taiden into the bedroom. Peeta followed closely behind.

“I’ll get some pajamas.” Annie left the room.

Finnick cleared his throat. “So you’re okay if I put your son on the dog bed?”

Katniss looked to Peeta. An odd look passed over his face, as if he wanted to correct Finnick and say that Taiden was his nephew, but was too exhausted to bother.

_Is he in pain?_

“It’s fine,” Katniss said, answering for him.

As Finnick deposited the child, Teagan spoke up. “Leave room for me.” He got down and curled up next to his sleeping brother.

“They’re sure cute at that age,” Finnick said. “Makes me look forward to the day I become a grandfather. But then again, I hope that time is a long ways off. My son is way too immature to be a dad.”

Annie came back into the room with a handful of clothing. “You can use these to sleep in. She held up a loose nightgown for Katniss, a pair of flannel pants for Peeta, and a couple of oversized t-shirts. “I also brought a throw blanket for the kids.

“You already know about the bathroom across the hall. Finnick and I are just on the other side of the house. If you hear any noises in the night, it will probably be me checking up on Goldie.”

_So the couch isn’t an option._

Annie handed everything to Katniss, before leaving the room with Finnick who closed the door behind him.

“Okay then,” Peeta said, his eyes landing on the bed.

Teagan leaped off the pillow. The six-year-old removed his clothes, socks and shoes, and tossed everything onto the floor. “Give me my pajamas Katniss.”

“Not until you pick up that stuff and put it on the chair in the corner,” Katniss said.

The boy frowned, but did as she requested, even putting his socks into his shoes and placing them under the chair.

Katniss handed him a t-shirt, which he promptly pulled over his head, before curling up next to his brother. She stretched out the throw over the boys, and then she handed Peeta the flannel pants and
the second t-shirt.

“I’ll change across the hall.” Peeta left the room.

Turning her back to the children, Katniss removed her sweater and t-shirt and pulled the nightgown over her bra. She removed her leggings as the gown fell over her hips. She draped her clothes over the armchair.

She pulled down the comforter and climbed in the bed. By the time Peeta returned, she could hear the even breathing of both boys who’d fallen fast asleep.

He deposited his clothes on top of the chair and walked around the bed, sitting on the edge.

After removing his shoes, he swung his legs on the bed, and sat up against the pillow. He turned to face her.

“I’m sorry about today. I wanted all of us to have fun together in the snow. I should have had the car checked out, but I’ve been working so much that I can’t remember the last time I even had it serviced.”

He rubbed at his beard, his hand stopping for a moment. He pulled out an evergreen needle.

“Oh crap.” He set it onto the nightstand. “Are there any others?”

She scanned his face. “No.”

“I feel like an idiot. I can sleep on the floor if sharing a bed makes you uncomfortable…”

“You’re not sleeping on the floor,” she interrupted him. “I won’t allow it.”

She gave him a gentle smile. “And don’t call yourself an idiot. You didn’t cause the tree limb to break, and as for the car, well, stuff like that happens.

“Besides, we got rescued and now we’re in a warm house, not in an icy car. So it all worked out.

“But how are you feeling?”

“I’m all right.”

She doubted that was true, but what good would it do to press him? It’s not like she could whisk Peeta off to see a doctor right now.

“You’ve really held us together today,” he continued. “If you weren’t there, I’d still be lying under that tree. If I’d been alone with the boys, well, I don’t even want to think about it.”

She didn’t either.

“Were you able to call Haymitch and let him know what happened?”

Prim. How easy it had been for Katniss to put her sister out of her mind.

“Yeah. It turns out he has company because my sister’s made a surprise visit to Dandelion.”

“Great. Now, I’ll get a chance to meet her.”

Katniss ran her fingers along the edge of the comforter. “I hadn’t told her about the baby. Uncle
Haymitch did. She’s upset with me.”

Peeta’s face grew dark. “You didn’t tell her? Why not?”

A sick feeling came over Katniss as she saw the situation through Peeta’s eyes. She’d run away after having sex with him. Did he think he was the reason she’d kept her pregnancy a secret. Did he think that she was embarrassed about him?

No, no, no. This is because my sister and I don’t get along.

She needed to set Peeta straight. “My sister can be very judgmental. She wasn’t so keen on me moving to Dandelion to help Uncle Haymitch when I lost my job. If I told her I was pregnant too, she would have flipped.”

Peeta’s face softened. “It would be a shame if she holds it against you and doesn’t want to know our daughter. I guess I’m lucky that Rye doesn’t care about an unintended pregnancy.

“Probably since it’s become another Mellark family tradition.” His voice dropped and it broke her heart.

He turned away from her to look at his sleeping nephews, and stroked his beard with his hand. His easy expression was replaced by something more intense that suggested an entire world locked away inside him.

She stared at Peeta, wondering what he could be thinking about, when she caught sight of his eyelashes. She’d never noticed how long they were. Why didn’t they get tangled up when he blinked?

Peeta sighed. “I’ve been eating too much this week. I’m going to have to get back on the straight and narrow soon or I’ll gain all the weight back since I probably won’t be able to work out for a while.”

He’s definitely injured.

He turned to look at her. “You know, Katniss, that’s another thing I have to thank you for.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I threw away all the junk food in my house after our first phone call.”

Her brow furrowed.

“You look surprised. I thought Haymitch told you. He kept me accountable for what I ate and I kept him from drinking.”

“But he goes to A.A. meetings.”

“He does now, but when I went to his house that first night after talking with you, he was halfway through a bottle of scotch after being sober for months. I convinced him to pour the rest of it down the sink. But not after taking a lot of insults about my size.”

Damn it, Uncle Haymitch.

“I’m sorry about that Peeta.”

“I was pretty mad at him, but he was right about me being a hypocrite. I had let myself go for a lot of reasons that seem stupid now. Anyway, I asked him about you, and he told me you were single. It
made me think.”

*Think what?*

He gave her a sheepish grin. “You sounded so nice on the phone.”

*He lost the weight because of me?*

Her cheeks grew warm. No one ever made any sacrifices for her. She was the person who made sacrifices for everyone else.

“I should probably shut up,” he mumbled. “I guess those hot toddies were stronger than I thought.”

He leaned in close to her, as if he were going to kiss her. Katniss closed her eyes and ran her tongue over her lips, remembering the kiss that started everything. At that moment she wanted to kiss Peeta so badly.

“Would it be all right if I touched your belly?”

Her eyes flew open. “Okay.” She pulled down the comforter and reached for his hand, setting it on top of her midsection.

“Has she been moving a lot today?”

“Some.”

The weight of his hand through the thin nightgown made her shiver.

“She’s quiet now.” He moved his hand around the bump, causing her to catch her breath.

“She’s probably sleeping.” Katniss’ cheeks grew warm again.

Peeta pulled his hand away. “We should probably do the same.”

“All right,” she mumbled, suddenly disappointed. “Do you want to go under the comforter?”

“No, I’ll be fine on top. I’m kind of warm anyway.”

He reached for the light on the nightstand and turned it off.

Was tonight a step toward something more in her relationship with Peeta? Could they be more than co-parents? She stretched out her fingers in the darkness, feeling around for Peeta’s hand. When she touched it, he clasped hers immediately, not letting go.

She closed her eyes and fell asleep.

xxxxxxxxxxxxx

Katniss awoke to a room filled with sunshine and a brief, delicious feeling of happiness that was somehow connected to Peeta. Sitting up in bed, she noted that he and the boys were gone; the pajamas Annie had lent them to sleep in were neatly folded on the pillow the children has slept on.

She got out of bed and dressed, remade the bed, and went across the hall to use the bathroom.

Katniss found the adults in the kitchen drinking coffee, waiting for a batch of cinnamon rolls to come out of the oven.
“Did you have a good night’s sleep?” Annie asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Where are the boys?” she asked Peeta. After their conversation last night, she found herself feeling shy around him, as if she was seeing him in an altogether different light.

“Bothering the dog,” he said.

She stepped into the living room to look at them. The two boys sat beside Goldie as she nursed her pups.

“Katniss.” Annie called her back into the kitchen.

“How do you keep your figure with a husband who bakes like this.”

There it was again. That assumption that they were together. Why was she beginning to like it? Beginning to wish it was true?

“I’m not a big one for sweets,” Katniss replied. “But Peeta makes a mean cheese bun.”

Annie looked to Peeta. “You have to give me the recipe.”

Within an hour, they’d said their goodbyes to Annie and were driving back with Finnick to Peeta’s car. Finnick had brought along his satellite phone and jumper cables.

“I can call for a tow truck if you can’t get it started.”

With a charge from Finnick’s car battery, the motor was running in a couple of minutes.

“I’ll follow you for a few miles to make sure the motor doesn’t die,” Finnick said. “But I’d suggest you visit a mechanic before you turn off the engine, otherwise you’re going to need to jump it again to get it started.”

After a stop at the auto shop for a new battery, Katniss drove the car into Peeta’s driveway around noon, noticing that Prim’s car was nowhere in sight.

Would she have left already?

With the kids’ help she unloaded the car for Peeta, before going home.

“I’m back,” she called out as she opened the door.

“About time,” Haymitch said, as she walked into the living room. The carpet around his chair was covered in wood shavings. “Your sister has been driving me crazy with questions about you and loverboy.”

“Where is Prim?”

“She left to run some errands.

“Are you hungry? Do you want me to make you any lunch?”

“No, your sister made a big breakfast for me.”

“Okay then, I’m going next door to talk Peeta into going to the E.R. to get checked out.”
“What’s wrong with him?”
“A tree limb fell on him yesterday.”
“Are you sure one of those kids didn’t cause it?”
“Uncle Haymitch! Leave those boys alone.”

Teagan and Taiden were at the dining table eating a lunch of more Christmas leftovers.

“I can’t leave to see the doctor,” Peeta argued. “I’m waiting for Cashmere to pick up Teagan.”

At that moment, a knock sounded at the door. Peeta went to answer it, with Katniss close at his heels.

The woman on the other side of the door was taller than Peeta and looked like a model in her tight jeans and low-cut blouse. She held her hands across her chest, trying to keep warm. “It’s so cold here. Bermuda was hot -- I was in my swimsuit all day.

“Did you and Teagan have a nice holiday?”

As she flirted with Peeta, she eyed Katniss’ belly.

“Are you a friend of Rye’s?” she asked.

“I’m a friend of Peeta’s,” Katniss answered, reaching for his hand.

Teagan appeared suddenly, dragging a canvas suitcase behind him. “Can I get a puppy?”

“That might be the last time Cashmere lets Teagan stay with me,” Peeta said as he closed the door, after explaining to Cashmere about their adventure in the snow.

“You’re being too hard on yourself Peeta.”

_I’m sure that woman is glad of your free babysitting. She’s probably got plans for New Year’s Eve already._

“You know, now would be a good time to visit the doctor, Peeta.”

“It’s not necessary. I feel fine.”

Katniss scowled. “Stop making excuses. At least find out what’s wrong.”

He gave her an amused look. “You’re kind of bossy, you know.”

“I need to practice so I’m ready when our daughter arrives.”

His face grew sober. “Okay, then let’s go.”

Katniss finally met up with Prim that evening after a long wait in E.R., watching Taiden while Peeta was checked out. She brought both along for support, although with a broken rib, Peeta should have gone straight home to rest. But she was nervous about Prim’s reaction. She expected her sister to _yell at her._
But what she didn’t expect was Prim to question Peeta.

“What are your intentions toward my sister?”

“I’m going to help her raise our daughter.”

Prim narrowed her eyes. “Are you single?”

“Yes. I’ve never been married. Even Katniss refused my offer.”

_Because I didn’t love you then._

“I’m tired,” Taiden blurt out.

“We better get you home to bed,” Peeta said, using the child as an excuse to escape.

“Good luck,” he mouthed to Katniss as she followed him to the door.

“Think I’ll turn in too,” Haymitch said. He looked at the sisters. “You two keep it down. No brawling or biting each other, or else I’m calling the police.”

Katniss snorted at her uncle’s reprimand.

They’d only bit each other _once_ when they visited Aunt Effie and Uncle Haymitch. Prim was five at the time; Katniss nine. Aunt Effie had been furious with them, and made the sisters write apology notes to each other, except that Prim couldn’t even write yet, so she dictated her note and Aunt Effie did the writing.

Katniss got a trash basket and sat down in Uncle Haymitch’s chair, attempting to bend over to pick up the wood scraps from his day of whittling.

_Is he carving a totem pole?_

Her large midsection made it impossible to bend forward; instead she had to lean over the side of the chair to gather scraps.

“Could you give me some help here, Prim?”

Her sister sat down on the floor and started picking up chunks of wood to deposit in the trash. They worked in silence for a few minutes.

_I might as well say something before she attacks. Better to take the offensive position._

“I’m sorry,” Katniss said. “I should have told you about the baby instead of letting you find out the way you did.”

Prim didn’t respond immediately, but when she did, her voice was calm and measured, surprising Katniss. “I don’t understand how you got into this situation.”

_Is she trying to lull me into a relaxed state before she pounces?_

“Peeta and I became friends over the telephone because of Uncle Haymitch. We finally met in person when I came to visit in July.”

“Well you got cozy damn fast.”
Ah, that sounds more like the Prim I know.

“It was just the one time. I didn’t expect this to happen.” Katniss ran her hand over her belly. “Remember you told me I’d have a better chance of winning the lottery than getting pregnant at my age.”

Katniss waited for Prim to blast her, to say, ‘Don’t blame me for your stupidity.’

Instead her sister burst into tears, burying her face in her hands.

Shocked, Katniss rested a hand on Prim’s back. “What’s wrong?”

“Everything,” Prim broke into sobs.

Katniss made circular motions on her sister’s back to comfort her. She’d never seen Prim so upset, not since her mangy cat Buttercup had been run over by a car when Prim was thirteen.

After a long while, Prim lifted her head, her eyes red, her cheeks wet.

“Rory moved out.”

“But why? You were both so happy.”

Prim blinked back tears. “I’ve been undergoing infertility treatments for the past year and a half so we could start a family. Nothing worked and we blew through a lot of money. Rory can’t stand to be around me anymore because he says I’ve turned into a moody bitch.

“And now I find out my unmarried, forty-year-old sister hit the jackpot after a one-night stand.

“Oh, I wish Aunt Effie was alive. She’d understand.”

“Aunt Effie had a baby.” Katniss lowered her voice, hoping her uncle was already asleep.

Prim dabbed at her eyes with the heel of her hands. “What?”

“A daughter, before I was born. Uncle Haymitch said she was stillborn.”

“Oh.” Prim took a sharp breath. “I wonder if that’s why he drank so much.”

Katniss nodded. “I thought the same thing.

“Prim, I’m sorry about what you’re going through. I had no idea. You should have told me.”

Prim sprang to her feet. “Why? You can’t fix my infertility or my failing marriage.”

Katniss slid forward in the armchair, struggling to get out of it. Pushing herself up from the armrests, she stood to face her sister.

“You’re right I can’t repair any of that. You’ll have to figure it out on your own. But at least let me be your sister and give you a hug.” She twisted her body sideways and wrapped her arms around Prim.

The baby kicked, so hard against Katniss’ belly that Prim felt it. She jumped back. “What was that?”

“Your niece. She says ‘hi’.”

“It feels like she wants to come out -- now.”
“She’s not due until April.”

“I didn’t want to say anything, Katniss, but you’re really large already. You look like you’re ready to pop.”

Katniss winced. “Peeta brings over a lot of baked goods.”

“So what exactly is your relationship with Peeta? I like his beard. I always wanted Rory to grow one.”

“We’re good friends.”

A sly smile appeared on her sister’s face. “With benefits?”

*I wish.*

But Katniss didn’t answer. Instead she cocked her head to the side and gave Prim a knowing smile.

They stayed awake late into the night, talking in the dark bedroom, the same as they did when they were children.

Prim talked about the side effects of hormone injections and her marriage counselor Dr. Aurelius and her brother-in-law Gale’s DUI.

Katniss talked about indigestion and her job at The Capitol and Peeta’s eyelashes.

The next morning Haymitch complained to them. “You disturbed my sleep. What the hell were you girls arguing about?

“We weren’t arguing,” Katniss said. “Well, not too much.”

“Oh, I’ll tell you,” Prim said. “Rory and I split up.”

“Can’t either of you girls keep a man? I would have thought you were smarter, Prim, than your big sister here.”

“Love is weird,” Prim said.

Uncle Haymitch snorted. “You don’t know anything about it. Love is a many splendored thing. Love will find a way. Love makes the world go round. Love means never having to say you’re sorry.”

“Love means never having to say you’re sorry,” Katniss scoffed. “Really? I hope you didn’t use that as an excuse not to apologize to Aunt Effie for all the crap you pulled over the years.”

“Didn’t have too. Effie nagged the apologies right out of me.

“Now that you two are playing nice together, what are your plans for today?” Uncle Haymitch continued. “Are you going shopping or sightseeing or getting your hair done so I can be alone in my house for a change?”

“Prim and I are going to tackle the junk room. We might need your help.”

“Damn it.”
“Can I throw this out?” Prim held up a coffee mug that read, ‘Life is not a fairy tale.’

“You don’t have to ask me about every little thing,” Uncle Haymitch said. “I told you to toss it all.”

Prim frowned.

“I’d like to keep that mug, Prim,” Katniss said, as their uncle fled from the room.

The term junk room was a misnomer. Aunt Effie had used the third bedroom, which had long ago been painted pink for a nursery, as a craft room.

Katniss was sure that the room had been in decent shape when they’d stayed at the house while attending her funeral. But after they’d left, Uncle Haymitch had emptied Aunt Effie’s clothes from the bedroom closet and dresser and put them in the room, along with whatever knickknacks he didn’t like in the house, and their aunt’s entire collection of plastic flower displays.

“It’s like unearthing an archeological dig,” Prim stated, as she sorted through a pile.

“More like taking an exhaustive course in the life of Aunt Effie.”

That’s why Uncle Haymitch doesn’t want to deal with this stuff. It’s painful.

It was easy to toss the plastic flowers into a trash bag and box up books to donate to the library. Neither sister was crafty, so they made quick work of assembling their aunt’s knitting, crocheting, and needlework supplies to give to the thrift store.

But going through her clothing, especially some of the pretty dresses that Katniss and Prim remembered her wearing; all of her costume jewelry, most of which was out-of-fashion by current standards; and the photo albums that their aunt had compiled with such care that she’d even written descriptions underneath each picture, brought up long-forgotten memories and elicited many tears.

“Damn it, he should be going through this stuff,” Prim choked. “Why are we doing it?”

“Because Uncle Haymitch said I can use the room for a nursery.”

It took three days to finish. But after the sisters had set aside items to keep for themselves to remember their aunt by -- a couple of vintage dresses for Prim, and the coffee mug and photo albums for Katniss -- they dodged raindrops to load Katniss’ car to take the donations to the thrift store.

“Do you think Aunt Effie was happy?” Prim asked, as the windshield wipers swished back and forth, to wipe away the waterworks from the heavens. “There were a lot of self-help books in that mess.”

“Everyone needs a good self-help book now and then,” Katniss said. “But at least she had hobbies to keep herself occupied. She must have felt good about helping others, too. I had no idea Aunt Effie did so much knitting and crocheting for charity.”

The sisters had come across letters from several organizations thanking their aunt for her donations.

Katniss was disappointed because she’d hoped to find something more in the room – not a cache of gold coins like she’d fantasized about when she was a child -- but a diary or letters or something that would reveal more of her aunt’s life so she could glean some words of wisdom, something more than
a saying on a coffee mug.

But maybe spending the time going through all of it with Prim is Aunt Effie’s gift to me. When we were kids she used to say: You two are lucky to have each other; stop fighting. And we have been getting along these past few days.

“I wonder how Aunt Effie stayed so optimistic being married to Uncle Haymitch,” Prim said. “Even sober he can be grating.”

“He’s not so bad. There’s a lot of mush once you get past that tough exterior.”

The remainder of Prim’s visit passed quickly. Together the sisters went shopping for a crib, a changing table, and a rocking chair. Surprisingly Prim insisted on paying for the furniture.

It wouldn’t be delivered for a few weeks, but that would give Katniss time to hire someone to paint the room, and convince Uncle Haymitch to let her replace the worn carpet.

Peeta stayed away during her sister’s visit – Katniss hoped he was getting some rest. But she invited him to join them for dinner on New Year’s Eve, because Prim planned to leave early the next morning.

“Be nice to him,” she warned her sister. “He’s the father of your niece.”

“You still around,” Uncle Haymitch greeted Taiden, when the child followed Peeta into the house.

“Yeah. Do you have any toys at your house that I can play with?”

“I’ve got a knife. How’d you like to learn how to whittle?”

“For crying out loud, Uncle Haymitch,” Katniss said. “He’s only three.”

She reached for the boy’s hand. “Help me set the table, Taiden.”

Katniss had made a pork roast, with sides of mashed potatoes, homemade applesauce, and sauerkraut. “It’s an Everdeen family New Year’s tradition,” she announced.

Haymitch caught Taiden’s eye and pointed to the sauerkraut. “I hate that stuff. It smells bad. What about you, kid?”

The three-year-old burst into a fit of giggles.

Conversation over dinner was lively and Katniss was pleased that her sister and Peeta were getting along. She hadn’t had a chance to talk with Peeta since Prim had grilled him days earlier.

“So what have you and Katniss been up to?” Peeta asked Prim, as Katniss began to clear the table for dessert.

“We cleaned out my aunt’s craft room so Katniss can set up a nursery. And we shopped for baby furniture.”

A momentary flash of emotion passed over Peeta’s face, before a mask fell upon him.

Is he upset? But why? He made his own room for the baby.

But she didn’t have time to think about it because Peeta began telling them about the dessert he’d brought. Grandma Griet’s rice pudding came with a special promise that according to Peeta always
held true.

“I put one almond in the finished pudding. Whoever finds it will receive wealth in the new year.”

Uncle Haymitch grinned. “I want a big bowl then.”

They all had large servings, everyone fishing around in their bowl with their spoon.

“I don’t think there’s an almond in my bowl,” Prim said, taking a spoonful. “What the,” her eyes flew to Taiden and she added, “heck.” She pulled the almond out of her mouth. “I almost broke my tooth on this thing.”

Prim looked to Peeta. “So what exactly do you mean by wealth? Is it only money? Or can it mean that something good might happen to me?”

*She wants her marriage fixed. She wants to get pregnant.*

“It’s often money, but in my family it’s meant good fortune, too. Still you might want to buy a few lottery tickets. You never know.”

After dinner Peeta and Uncle Haymitch played chess at the dining table, while Katniss and Prim sat on the couch in the living room and watched *One Hundred and One Dalmations* with Taiden.

“I’m getting a dog,” the three-year-old announced, as the final credits rolled.

Katniss turned her head toward Peeta. “Is that true?”

He looked up from the chessboard. “I’m thinking about it. Annie gave me her number in case I want one of those pups.”

“So you’ll have two kids and a dog. All you need is a wife and your family will be complete,” Uncle Haymitch smirked.

“Ah, Haymitch, haven’t you heard? Being a single parent is perfectly acceptable these days.”

Katniss mouth fell open as Peeta parroted back the very words she’d spoken to him in the diner when he offered to marry her. She got up from the sofa and hurried into the bathroom to calm herself. She’d thought her words were so reasonable months ago, but now they sounded cold and hurtful and left her feeling weepy.

*What was I thinking?*

Her daughter kicked her hard at that moment, as if she, too, was in agreement that it had been a mean thing to say.

Later as everyone but Taiden, who’d fallen asleep, toasted in the upcoming year with a glass of apple cider, Katniss studied Peeta’s face trying to figure out why he’d repeated her comment.

*Is it because of what Prim told him about the nursery? But why would he be upset; where does he expect our daughter to sleep?*

It hit her suddenly. *He wants us to live with him. He wants us to be a family.*

“**You look like you got bigger over the past week,**” the receptionist said as Katniss walked into the
executive offices at The Capitol. “When are you due?”

*Maybe I need to get back on the straight and narrow like Peeta.*

After a busy week off work, going back seemed restful. Outside of her job, she had so much she wanted to accomplish before the baby arrived. Katniss swung into gear in January, hiring a painter to cover the pale pink walls with a creamy eggshell color.

Uncle Haymitch agreed that the threadbare carpet should be replaced; Katniss chose a thick shag, the color of oatmeal.

Once the furniture was delivered, she looked around the newly painted and carpeted room with a sense of satisfaction. Her pregnancy books referred to her preparation as *nesting*, the same as a mother bird would gather twigs to fashion a home for her eggs.

“What do you think?” she asked Uncle Haymitch.

The pensive look on his face made her nervous. Was he thinking about Elizabeth? About everything he’d lost?

He ran his fingers through his thinning hair. “You did a good job. It looks real nice.”

“Can I take my nap in the crib?” Taiden asked.

Katniss looked down at the towhead who was spending the day with them.

“No, you can’t.”

Peeta had taken over as the boy’s unofficial guardian shortly after New Year’s. His idea to use Lavinia as a full-time babysitter hadn’t worked out because Lavinia had found new customers for her cleaning business, including Uncle Haymitch who had rehired her after Katniss admitted that her baby bump made it difficult to clean because she couldn’t bend and twist.

So Peeta had been forced to cobble together an alternate plan, using a number of different providers. Lavinia watched the boy on Mondays and Wednesdays, Katniss and Uncle Haymitch offered to watch the child on Tuesdays, one of Katniss’ days off. On Thursdays and Fridays Taiden attended a preschool program, the only one Peeta could find that had any openings, although he had to take the boy to the bakery in the mornings first because the school didn’t open until 7 a.m.

*If this is what constitutes childcare in Dandelion, what are we going to do when our daughter’s born? Maybe I should open my own daycare.*

On the first Tuesday, that Katniss and Uncle Haymitch took charge, Peeta knocked at the door at 4 a.m. When Katniss opened it, Peeta was carrying the sleeping child. A backpack hung over his arm with the boy’s clothing.

“You shouldn’t be carrying him. What about your ribs?”

“You try to wake him up. Anyway he weights a lot less than a sack of flour.”

“Peeta, you’re not picking up sacks of flour, are you?”

“Nah, I’m leaving the heavy stuff for Thom. Where do you want me to put him?”

“The sofa is fine.”
Peeta set him down, and Katniss covered Taiden with a quilt that was folded over the back of the couch.

“Have a good day,” she called as she walked Peeta to the door and locked it behind him.

Taiden slept until 9 a.m. He was a lively, curious child that kept both her and Uncle Haymitch busy trying to keep him occupied. Peeta had brought over a box of toys – but no Legos-- that sat in a corner of the living room.

He quickly became a part of their life. He came along with them when they ran errands in the morning, and he took a nap in the afternoon, the same as she and her uncle had lately started doing.

Considering that her uncle had no experience with small children, Katniss was happy that he treated Taiden well. One day she’d came upon Uncle Haymitch reading *Where the Wild Things Are* to the three-year-old.

When her uncle finished the book, he decided to rename Taiden, ‘Wild Thing’.

The boy laughed, announcing his new name to Peeta when he went home that evening.

At her mid-January prenatal visit, Katniss questioned Dr. Latier about her size. “Is this normal? I’m so large that people are saying I look like I’m ready to give birth at any moment.”

Dr. Latier chuckled. “Everyone thinks they’re an expert on pregnancy. You’ve gained a bit more weight than usual at this point, but your vitals are fine, and you aren’t retaining any fluids. What have you been eating?”

Katniss listed her food intake, but in the course of the conversation when it was revealed that Peeta owned a bakery, the doctor latched onto the thought that Katniss was overeating baked goods.

“Cut back on the pastries and get some exercise. That will stop you from gaining unnecessary pounds.”

At the end of the appointment, he suggested that Katniss and Peeta sign up to attend childbirth classes that the hospital offered. “It will prepare you for the delivery.”

“We might as well register while we’re here,” Peeta suggested as he and Katniss left the obstetrician’s office, which was located on the ground floor of the hospital. They walked to the hospital’s education office. The woman behind counter studied her computer screen. “Our next series of classes begins on February 14th.”

She turned to smile at them. “I realize that might interfere with any plans you have for a romantic Valentine’s dinner since it starts at 6:30 p.m., but attendance is mandatory for the first session, or you’ll be dropped from the class. Still it ends at 8 p.m., so maybe you could have a late dinner instead.”

*A romantic dinner?*

Katniss didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Although she saw Peeta often, it seemed like she never had any time alone with him. The closeness they’d developed during their outing in the snow seemed to have disappeared as the routines of daily life took over. Yet the more she thought about his
reaction after hearing Prim talk about the baby room, the more convinced she was that he wanted her and the baby to live with him.

But if that was true, why hadn’t he made any effort to make a move of some kind, like asking her out on a date.

*Is he turned off by my enormous, pregnant body?*

“The 14th will work fine,” Peeta said. “Sign us up.”

There were nine other couples in the class. Katniss had thought that she and Peeta would be the oldest, but there were at least two other couples that looked to be about their same age.

The instructor went around the group asking everyone to introduce themselves and for the women to give their due date.

Katniss eyed each woman’s belly as the date was announced.

*I’m the biggest one here.* It was an imaginary award she wasn’t proud of winning.

The instructor spoke for the next 30 minutes about the different stages of labor. Afterwards, she asked everyone to leave their chairs and move to mats that were placed on the floor in a semi-circle.

“Gentlemen, sit down on the mat and spread your legs. Ladies, you’ll need to sit with your backs to your partner’s chest. You can fit in between his thighs.”

Katniss was so close to Peeta that his beard tickled at her cheek. “Is this all right?” Peeta whispered, his hands resting lightly on her belly.

“Yes. I’m not hurting your ribs am I?”

“No, they’re almost healed up.”

The instructor taught the women a couple of breathing techniques that left Katniss so relaxed that she could feel the pounding of Peeta’s heart against her back.

“Now I’ll be showing you dads some ways of massaging your partner’s lower back that will ease the pain of labor.”

Katniss almost melted into the floor as Peeta’s able hands, which had started the massage on top of her clothing, slipped underneath her shirt and kneaded her flesh.

“How does it feel?” he leaned closer.

“Great.” It was all she could do to not roll over, fall on top of him, and devour him.

*This is better than foreplay.*

At the end of the session, the instructor asked, “Does anyone have any questions?”

A man’s hand shot up. “Sooo,” he began. “Is it all right to have sex with my wife tonight? After all, it’s Valentine’s Day.”

*So I wasn’t the only one thinking about it!*
His dark-haired wife blushed a pretty shade of pink and everyone in the room chuckled.

“Unless your partner has a history of preterm labor, sex is safe right up until your water breaks. Just be sure to find a position that is comfortable for her. In fact some women report that their libido greatly increases when they’re expecting.”

“That class wasn’t what I thought it would be,” Peeta said, as he drove out of the parking garage. “I hope you didn’t mind all the touching.”

“I loved it.” Her response was enthusiastic, causing Peeta to turn his head to look at her in surprise.

“My lower back has been aching lately, and your massage was very relaxing.”

He smiled. “If your back hurts, I’d be happy to massage it anytime.”

Just my back?

She returned his smile. “Thanks, I might take you up on your offer.”

They fell silent. It was Valentine’s Day and Katniss wasn’t ready to go home and settle for a book, she wanted more than a vague promise of a back massage, she wanted some time alone with the man beside her.

“Hey Peeta, let’s stop somewhere and get dessert.”

“You don’t think Haymitch will mind watching Taiden longer?”

“We won’t take that long.”

They ended up at Sae’s. Both ordered herbal tea and a slice of apple pie to share.

“I’ll just have a couple of bites,” Peeta said. “You can have the rest.”

Like I need to be eating pie. Maybe Dr. Latier is right about why I’m putting on the pounds.

“I’ve always hated Valentine’s Day,” Peeta said, as she ate.

“I agree. It’s too commercial.”

“That, and my fiancée broke up with me on Valentine’s Day.”

Fiancée?

Katniss set her fork down. “I never knew you were engaged, Peeta.”

“For about five minutes, ten years ago.”

“Does she live around here?”

“No, she’s long gone. Rye said she was engaged a couple of times after me. I guess no one met her standards.”

Was she the reason he gained weight? That bitch. Well, I was the reason he lost it.

“She was an idiot to leave you.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, Katniss blushed. Did that make her an idiot, too,
because she turned down Peeta’s proposal?

A half smile formed on Peeta’s lips. He rubbed at his bearded chin. “Have you ever been engaged Katniss?”

“Not exactly.”

“What does that mean?”

“My boyfriend asked me to quit my job and leave my mother, who had been diagnosed with cancer, to move across the country with him. We probably would have gotten engaged eventually.”

Peeta shook his head. “He sounds like a bum. You were lucky to be rid of him.”

She pushed the empty plate away and sat back in the booth and stared at him. Dark circles lined his eyes.

“Are you getting enough sleep?” she asked.

“Probably not. I didn’t expect that taking care of Taiden would be so much work. But it is, and he wakes up with nightmares sometimes, too.”

“I had no idea. He’s seems like such a sweet kid. He’s lucky to have you.”

Peeta sighed. “I know, but it worries me that when the baby comes, I’m going to be worn out trying to juggle everything. I’m already stressed.”

_This must be why Peeta hasn’t been making any effort to spend time with me. He’s barely holding himself together._

“If there’s anything I can do to make things easier, let me know,” she said. “My job ends in two weeks so I’ll have a lot more free time.”

“I might take you up on that,” he said. “My paperwork for the bakery is a mess. I hate doing it.”

“I can help with paperwork.”

“Good, then.” He pulled his wallet from his pocket and picked up the check. “We better head home, or Haymitch is going to worry.”

Maybe it was her imagination, but as he drove them back to their neighborhood, he seemed a bit more relaxed. They needed to carve out some time and get away by themselves more often.

_You’re right Aunt Effie, life isn’t a fairytale. But is it too much to ask for a happy ending?_
“My parents split up when I was nineteen,” Peeta said, taking a sip of tea. “I’ve often thought that’s what soured Rye on the idea of marriage.”

Listening, Katniss nibbled at the slice of pie in front of her.

They’d made it a habit to stop for dessert after each childbirth class. Now, after the fourth and final class, Katniss was regretting that their “dessert dates” would be coming to an end, and not only because of all the touching that preceded them.

Their conversations had been surprisingly candid, the deep stuff they’d skipped past when they’d first become phone buddies, and Katniss was lost in a fantasy, wanting to put herself forward in the best possible light.

Over the past few weeks, Peeta had filled in the gaps in his life that she wasn’t familiar with — stories about his athletic prowess as a high school wrestler, his failed attempt to make a career as an artist, and his close relationship with his Grandmother Griet who had lived with his family during her final years.

Katniss had talked of her parents’ close bond that sometimes left the two sisters feeling like outsiders in their own family. She also asked his opinion about opening a daycare in Dandelion.

Yet despite everything they’d revealed, neither had spoke of their feelings for the other, and the only co-parenting issue they’d resolved was that their daughter would bear the last name of Mellark, instead of Everdeen or a hyphenated composite of the two surnames.

I need to tell Peeta how I feel about him, otherwise we’ll never move past friendship.

As the waitress set the bill on the edge of the table, Katniss blurt out, “Let me take you to dinner on your birthday next week, just the two of us. I’m sure Uncle Haymitch will watch Taiden.”

I’ll tell Peeta on his birthday.

Peeta’s eyebrows rose. “I’m surprised you remembered.”

“How could I forget the first day of spring?”

He grabbed the bill and pulled out his wallet. “Thanks, that would be nice. But would it be okay if we celebrated the day before, on the 19th? I already made plans to do something with Taiden on my birthday.”

“The 19th would be fine.”

Where do you want to go?” he asked.

“I’m taking you out Peeta. Where do you want to go?”

His brow furrowed for a moment, before a smile spread across his face.

“There’s an Italian place I love called Seraphina’s. I haven’t been there in a long while. They make the best chicken alfredo.”
“Sounds delicious.” Katniss’ hands rested on the top of her belly, which now protruded like a shelf when she was seated.

*I’ll probably just order a salad.*

“You know my offer of a back massage is still on the table.”

Even though Katniss longed for more touching, she’d been hesitant to ask for a private session, worried that any unofficial physicality between the two of them would only bring more confusion to their already complicated relationship.

“It’s only fair,” Peeta continued, “since you refuse to take any payment for organizing my bakery accounts.”

He’d brought over a stack of paperwork and a laptop and spent an hour going over everything with her a couple of days after her job had ended at The Capitol. Since then, she’d dedicated an hour to his accounts daily. It wasn’t difficult; in truth she enjoyed working with numbers.

However, her back did ache, worse than ever. The baby must have dropped, at least that was what she’d gathered in the bathroom after class.

While the childbirth instructor was informative, the most helpful and interesting knowledge was revealed in the ladies’ restroom after class where the women exchanged personal information about their changing bodies. Women who’d given birth previously held court as they detailed the realities of childbirth to all of the first time mothers.

Only tonight there had been an interesting discussion regarding whether sex could induce labor. Two women swore it did, while another insisted it didn’t.

*I guess that won’t be a theory I’ll get a chance to try out.*

The morning of the 19th, Katniss looked through her closet and frowned. Her pre-pregnancy wardrobe was shoved to one side, her maternity clothing in front. She was sick of it all, even the few nice pieces she’d purchased to wear to her job at The Capitol. Everything was tent-like, dark and dreary in color; and spring was tomorrow.

“I’m going shopping,” she told her uncle.

After picking up a small birthday gift for Peeta, a book that he’d mentioned he wanted to read, Katniss set off on a quest to find something to wear. She went to several stores, tried on a few outfits, but she couldn’t find anything she liked.

Her energy flagging, she caught sight of a mannequin wearing a cheerful yellow maternity dress.

*That’s cute.*

To tired to even try it on, Katniss found one in her size and paid for it.

She began to get ready an hour before Peeta was due to arrive, putting on makeup and even curling her hair, which she hadn’t cut since she’d moved to Dandelion. It had gotten thicker and glossier than ever over the past few months and now hung several inches below her shoulders.

She took the tags off the dress and put it on. Then she looked in the full-length mirror on the back of
the door.

*I should have gotten a bigger size.*

Instead of draping neatly over her midsection, the fabric clung to her round belly making it appear as if she was hiding an exercise ball under her dress.

The neckline seemed lower than it had appeared on the mannequin, but maybe it was because her breasts, which had gone up at least two cups sizes, were spilling out on top.

*I look like a pregnant hooker.*

But it was too late to do anything about it now. The best she could do was to drape a shawl over herself and hope Peeta didn’t look lower than her face.

“You look like a fertility goddess,” Uncle Haymitch said when she came into the living room.

“Thanks. It’s exactly the look I was aiming for.”

Katniss sat on a dining room chair while she waited for Peeta. It was getting difficult these days to get out of upholstered furniture.

*Hopefully the restaurant has tables and chairs. I don’t want to get stuck in a booth.*

A knock sounded at the door.

She got up to open it. Peeta stood on the porch wearing dress pants and a sports jacket. Taiden was in pajamas at his side.

“Happy early Birthday, Peeta.”

“Thanks. You look …”

Before he could finish, Taiden jumped in. “Like one of those flowers.” The child pointed to a lone yellow dandelion sitting in the middle of her uncle’s lawn.

*Are weeds coming up already?*

“I guess my dress does match,” she agreed, exchanging an amused glance with Peeta.

“I was going to say you look stunning,” Peeta said.

Katniss stepped away from the door as they entered the house.

“I’m here Haymitch,” Taiden called out.

“Okay Wild Thing, we’ll start as soon as these two get out of here.”

Katniss glared at her uncle. “You’re not teaching him how to whittle, are you?”

“No. He’s got to be at least four to do that. We have other plans for tonight.”

“It’s a secret,” Taiden added.

“Okay, we’ll leave. She picked up the wrapped book from the dining table and handed it to Peeta. “This is for you.”
“Should I open it now?”

“You can.”

He tore the paper off. “How did you know I wanted to read this?”

“You mentioned it a while back.”

“Thanks.” He set it back on the table. “I’ll leave it here for now.”

She reached for her shawl that was folded over the back of the chair, and wrapped it around her shoulders.

“See you two later,” she called out as she and Peeta left the house.

“Will you drive?” she asked him. “It’s getting hard for me to fit behind the steering wheel. I have to move the seat back, but then my legs are too short to reach the gas pedal and brake.”

“Sure. We can take my car.”

They drove for thirty minutes. The restaurant appeared to be in the middle of nowhere, with a dirt parking lot. It was rustic in appearance, with outdoor seating, but no one was outdoors tonight because of the slight chill in the air.

The interior was dim, most of the light came from tiny white bulbs strung around the white walls. Katniss breathed a sigh of relief that there were no booths, only tables and chairs. It was only half full, but then it was the middle of the week.

“Is Mama Seraphina cooking tonight?” Peeta asked a waiter.

“She is.”

“Will you tell her that Peeta Mellark is here?”

The man nodded.

“Do you know the owner?” Katniss asked, as they were led to a table and handed menus.

“I do. She had a contract for years with Mellark’s to purchase baked goods and a few specialty cakes. It ended because one of her family members graduated from culinary school and took over the baking.”

Katniss opened the menu. Judging from the choices, she could see why Peeta would have avoided the place when he was trying to lose weight.

“It all looks so good,” she said, her mouth beginning to water.

*Salad be damned, I might as well enjoy myself.*

The waiter brought water to their table and took their drink orders, club soda for Katniss and a diet coke for Peeta.

Peeta was describing his favorites on the menu when a plump, older woman wearing an apron came over to the table. She stared at him for a moment, confusion in her brown eyes, before shaking her head.
“Peeta, have you been sick? You used to be a big, healthy man, but look at you. You’ve withered away to nothing, although I do like these curls.” She gave his hair a friendly tousle.

“Nope, not sick,” Peeta said, as he followed her inside the restaurant. He gave a wave to the other patrons who were enjoying their meals. “Mama Seraphina, so good to see you too,” Peeta said, standing up to hug her.

He pulled away. “I’d like to introduce you to someone. This is Katniss.”

An enormous smile came over the woman’s face. “So that’s why you stayed away. I knew you would come back when the right person was here.”

The woman appraised Katniss thoroughly before turning back to Peeta. “She’s beautiful. She looks like the Madonna.”

Katniss blushed, as Peeta bobbed his head up and down in agreement. “I told you it would happen someday. I told you not to give up. There’s a lid for every pot.”

Peeta’s cheeks grew pink.

The owner’s voice turned businesslike. “Now have you placed your order yet?”

“We haven’t,” Peeta said.

She removed the menus from their table. “Don’t bother. I’ll make up something special for you and your beautiful lady. All of your favorites.”

“She really likes you,” Katniss said, when the woman had left.

“I like her, too,” Peeta said. “She’s very kind. We’ve had a lot of long talks over the years.”

This would be the perfect time to tell him what he means to me.

But the waiter arrived with a platter of fried calamari and dipping sauce, and two empty plates. It smelled good and Katniss was hungry. She dug in.

“You might want to pace yourself,” Peeta advised. “I have a lot of favorites.”

Soon the table was filled with dishes. Lasagna, chicken alfredo, eggplant parmesan, ravioli. Katniss eyed the plates and sighed. “I can see why you like this place.”

“Try this,” Peeta said, stabbing at a ravioli with his fork, and holding it up to Katniss’ mouth. She took a bite. Warm cheese melted over her tongue. She let out a soft moan.

“Oh my.” She began to fill her plate.

Much later, when their appetites were sated, Mama Seraphina reappeared. “Are you ready for dessert?”

Peeta looked to Katniss. She shook her head. Her stomach was starting to ache after eating so much rich food.

“We’re going to take a pass tonight,” Peeta said.

“Okay, then. I’ll have Angelo box what’s left up for you.”
“Thanks Mama Seraphina. It was all so delicious.”

“Good. Now don’t stay away so long. I want to see you and your family,” her eyes flickered to Katniss, “after the baby arrives.”

As soon as she left, Angelo appeared to clear the table.

“You know what would be the perfect ending to this evening, Katniss?”

“What?”

“If you’d come back to my house and let me sketch you.

Her eyes grew big. “You want to draw a picture of me? Like this?”

“Of course. You have such a glow about you these days, an inner radiance I’m not even sure I have the talent to capture. But I’d like to try.”

*I’ll wait to tell him until we go back to his house.*

Angelo returned with a large paper bag, and a bill. Katniss took the bill out of his hands. A note was written on it. ‘Congratulations on your beautiful lady. Dinner is on the house.’

Blushing, Katniss handed the bill to Peeta to show him Mama Seraphina’s message.

“There’s no charge for our meal. But I’ll leave a tip for the waiter.” She pulled some cash from her purse and set it onto the table.

They stood up -- Peeta reaching for the bag of leftovers -- and walked outside into the cool night air.

“I like this place. Thank you for taking me here.” Katniss pulled the shawl around her tightly.

“Are you cold?” Without waiting for her to even reply Peeta put his arm around her.

Maybe it was the combination of stars shining against the dark sky, a belly filled with scrumptious foods, and an abundance of personal compliments, but it seemed to Katniss as if happiness was all around her if only she would reach out and catch hold. Without thinking, in the middle of the dirt parking lot she blurt out, “I’m tired of pretending.”

Peeta turned toward her, his eyes nervously searching hers. “Pretending what?”

“That we’re a couple. I want to be your beautiful lady for real. I’ve fallen in love with you.”

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, a panic came over her.

What if he doesn’t feel the same?

But a smile crept onto his face, his dimples growing deeper. “This is turning out to be the best birthday ever. I love you, too, Katniss. Would it be okay if I kissed you?”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “I thought you’d never ask again.”

He put a hand on one cheek and pressed his lips to hers. His beard tickled her skin, but she quickly forgot about it as her lips parted and his kiss deepened.

They reluctantly broke apart as voices sounded in the night air; some other diners had exited the
restaurant and were walking to their car.

“Let’s go home,” Peeta said.

A giddy feeling came over Katniss as he drove down the highway.

“So when did you start to fall?” Peeta asked, reaching for her left hand.

Twice actually. The first time was when we began talking on the phone. But I can’t tell him that because then I’d have to explain why I ran away after I slept with him.

“After Christmas when we went to the snow,” she answered.

“And I’d thought I’d screwed everything up completely then.”

“What about you Peeta. When did you know you loved me?”

“When Haymitch showed me your picture.”

“What picture?”

Before Peeta could answer though, their daughter kicked at her groin.

Katniss let out a loud yelp, pulling her hand from Peeta’s.

She put both hands onto her lower belly, trying to hold back a sharp cramping sensation.

“What’s wrong?” Peeta slowed the car and pulled over to the shoulder letting the engine idle.

“She kicked me hard and it hurts. A lot”

A warm sensation came over her like she’d wet her pants.

Oh, no.

“My water just broke,” Alarmed, she turned to Peeta. “This isn’t supposed to be happening yet. I have three more weeks.”

A sober look appeared on his face. “Let’s get you to the hospital.” He turned the steering wheel toward the road and sped off.

“Are you still in pain?” he asked.

“Not any more.” But a few minutes later her first real contraction hit. It made her worst menstrual cramp seem like child’s play.

“Ooh,” she moaned.

“Call Dr. Latier,” Peeta suggested. “Tell him we’re on our way to the hospital now.”

That was a good idea. She opened her clutch purse, and pulled out her phone.

A woman’s crisp voice answered. “This is the answering service for Dr. Beetee Latier. Can I take a message?”

“My name is Katniss Everdeen. My water broke. We’re on our way to the hospital.”
“I’ll get that message to the doctor immediately.”

Another contraction hit and she gasped, turning the phone away from her face.

“Is the doctor going to meet us there?”

“I don’t know. I left a message with his service.”

She grimaced and stared out the window into the darkness as Peeta sped down the road. Although she was tired of being pregnant, she wasn’t ready to give birth tonight.

There goes my time alone with Peeta.

He reached for her hand again and squeezed it.

“It will be all right. Everything will work out, you’ll see.”

On the heels of his words another contraction struck.

She gasped loudly, shaking Peeta’s hand free.

“How long until we get there,” she whimpered when the contraction ended.

How was she going to stand the pain? She could be in agony for hours to come.

“Just a few more miles,” Peeta said. “Remember to concentrate on your breathing.”

Still, he accelerated.

Katniss had four more contractions in the next fifteen minutes, before Peeta pulled up to the emergency room door. Turning off the engine he jumped out of the car and ran around to get Katniss out.

A hospital orderly appeared with a wheelchair.

“You’ll need to move your car sir,” the man told Peeta.

“I’ll be back after I park.” Peeta pressed a quick kiss to her lips.

Katniss sat down in the chair and the man wheeled her inside. In the past year she’d been in this emergency room a couple times, accompanying Uncle Haymitch when he’d broke his ankle and Peeta when he’d broke his rib.

Fortunately, unlike those other visits, she was rushed inside past the sick and injured and through the double doors. She was handed off to a nurse who took her up the elevator to the maternity section on the fourth floor. She was taken into a room with a bed and left alone.

After experiencing another contraction, she decided to get out of the wheelchair. She walked around the room and looked out the window, pleased to see that she wasn’t facing the parking lot, but rather the empty field on the other side of the hospital.

A woman’s voice called out. “Ms. Everdeen, I’d like to check and see how far along you are.”

Katniss turned her head to find a woman not much taller than herself with spiky dark hair wearing a white jacket. The nametag on it read “Dr. Johanna Mason.”
“Where’s Dr. Latier?”

“He went to a basketball game with his grandson. I’m filling in for him tonight.”

“Oh.”

“Go into the bathroom, and get out of those clothes, and put on a gown. I’ll be back in a few minutes to give you a pelvic exam.”

The doctor left and Katniss walked into the bathroom. A stack of gowns sat on a shelf. She leaned against the closed door and groaned as another contraction hit.

When it ended, she undressed, throwing her wet dress into the trashcan.

She put on the robe, with the opening to the front and held it closed with her hand as she carried her shawl and her shoes into the room and set them on a chair. Then she got into the bed.

Katniss lay on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Where in the hell was that doctor? Where was Peeta? Was she supposed to deliver the baby by herself?

Another contraction hit. Her face scrunched up in pain.

Tears pooled in the corner of her eyes when it was over.

Finally Dr. Mason appeared, followed by a nurse pushing a cart with an ultrasound monitor.

“Good you’re changed. Let me get a look see now.” She walked over to the sink and washed her hands, dried them, and pulled a pair of gloves out of a box on a nearby shelf. Coming over to the end of the bed, she pulled up the blanket. “Spread your legs, Mom.”

Another contraction hit. Katniss moaned. When it was over, Dr. Mason did her inspection.

“You’re already at seven centimeters. You’re almost there.”

“The baby’s not due for three weeks.”

“Babies never arrive on schedule,” Dr. Mason said. “But we’ll find out what’s going on.” She turned on the ultrasound machine and ran the wand over Katniss’ belly.

“Everything looks fine,” she said. “Baby A is head down. Baby B is… also facing the right direction.”

A shiver ran down Katniss’ back. “What do you mean Baby A and Baby B?”

Dr. Mason’s eyes narrowed. “Twins. You’re having twins.”

The doctor laughed nervously. “You knew that didn’t you? There are two little girls inside you ready to meet their mom.”
Chapter 11

Twins. This can’t be happening.

“That can’t be right. Could you be looking at a replay from the last woman who used the machine?”

Dr. Mason shook her head. “It doesn’t work that way. Are you serious that you didn’t know you were having two babies? How is that possible? Even if Latier missed the second heartbeat, the amniocentesis and ultrasounds would have picked up on it.”

“I didn’t have an amnio,” Katniss whimpered as another contraction crept up on her. “And I only had the one ultrasound at 16 weeks. Dr. Latier said it wasn’t necessary to get any others. When I asked him why I was gaining so much weight, he told me to stop eating pastries.”

“Damn it. Well, this is something.”

“What’s something?” Peeta asked, as he stepped inside the hospital room.

Katniss scowled. “Where have you been Peeta?”

He ran a hand through his hair.

“It’s a long story, but I picked up Haymitch, and then drove Taiden to Thom’s and Lavinia’s to spend the night.”

“You brought Uncle Haymitch here? Where is he?”

“Out in the hall,” her uncle called as he twisted his head around the corner, peering in the room. “Don’t need to see any lady bits.”

“You can come in,” Katniss said. “Nothing’s showing. You might as well hear the news, too.”

“Hey you look familiar,” Dr. Mason said to Peeta. “What’s your name?”

“Peeta Mellark.”

Dr. Mason broke out laughing. “Mellark. You’re famous. How many kids is it now for you?”

She turned to Katniss. “Oh I am sorry for you, honey.”

“I think you’ve mixed me up with another Mellark,” Peeta said, angrily. “You’re probably thinking of my brother Rye. All of his kids were born at this hospital.”

“Well, it looks like you’re aiming to catch up with him.”

Peeta rubbed at the back of his neck. “I don’t understand.”

Katniss threw him a serious look. “I’m having twin girls.”

Peeta’s mouth fell open. “But how is that possible? Did you know?”

“You were with me at all the appointments. Did you know?”

She clutched at her midsection. “It hurts so much.”
Peeta’s face changed from shock to concern. “Can’t you give her anything to stop the pain?”

“I could but at the rate she’s going I think it would only slow down the labor.”

Dr. Mason turned to Katniss. “What do you think? Wanna see how much you can take?”

Katniss grimaced. She’d never intended to have a drug-free labor. What kind of person would purposely want to suffer like this? But she didn’t want to prolong the pain, either.

“Maybe you could get me something to take the edge off at least.”

“All right,” the doctor said. “Let me go find a nurse. I don’t know where they run off to.”

Peeta came close to Katniss, touching her cheek. “I can’t believe it. Two little girls. This is my lucky day.”

“Maybe you ought to buy a lottery ticket,” Haymitch said.

“I’d say it’s your lucky day too, Haymitch. At least your house didn’t catch fire.”

*Catch fire?*

“What happened?” Katniss asked.

“I called Haymitch after I parked to let him know we were at the hospital. But the fire chief answered the phone.”

The familiar tightening of her mid-section began. Katniss looked away from Peeta and stared at a spot on the ceiling, sucking in air between clenched teeth as she attempted to regulate her breathing so as to take the pain away. It didn’t seem to be working.

“Why was the fire chief there?” she asked, as the pain lessened.

Uncle Haymitch answered. “Wild Thing and I were baking a birthday cake for Mr. Lucky here when the kitchen filled with smoke.”

“It does that when you use the broiler, instead of the oven,” Peeta said.

“Not everyone is a baker. Anyway, the kid got nervous and called the Fire Department.”

Katniss’ eyes grew big. “Taiden knows how to dial 911?”

Peeta grinned. “He’s smart; I just taught him how to do it last…”

“Ooh,” she cried out, interrupting him. This contraction was worse than any of the others that came before. It was as if a strong wave of pain was pulling her under, causing her to lose her ability to breathe. She closed her eyes and grimaced.

*I can’t do this any longer. They’re tearing my body into two.*

When the wave subsided, Peeta appeared pale. “Shouldn’t Dr. Latier be here by now?”

“He’s at a basketball game,” Katniss mumbled. “Dr. Mason is covering for him.”

“I’m going to find her,” he said, rushing from the room.

After he left, Haymitch came over to the bed. “It will be all right, Katniss. It will be over soon and
you’ll have your babies in your arms.”

Tears came to her. “How am I going to take care of two babies?”

Haymitch chuckled. “You’ll figure it out. At least you idiots each bought a crib.” He paused for a moment. “It’s happening again isn’t it? Squeeze my hand hard to take off the edge.”

She crushed his hand.

“Damn it, you need something.” Uncle Haymitch let go of her hand, opening and closing his fingers. “I’ll find out what’s going on.”

When he was gone, she rested her hands on her belly. “I don’t know what you girls are doing in there, but please stop it.”

Another contraction hit, but when it ended the room was filled. Dr. Mason, a nurse, Peeta, and Uncle Haymitch surrounded her.

“Let me check you once more,” the doctor said.

“I’ll be in the hallway,” Uncle Haymitch fled from the room.

“Too late for drugs,” Dr. Mason said as she finished her exam. “You’re ready to push.”

The doctor turned to Peeta. “You should get suited up. And find something for Grandpa to wear if he wants to watch the big show.” She pointed toward a cupboard. Peeta pulled out two sets of scrubs. He went outside the room to hand a second set to Haymitch.

The next thirty minutes were a blur for Katniss. All she could remember was that Dr. Mason told her to push every time a contraction occurred. Peeta sat by her side rubbing her back between each push, while her uncle elected to stay outside in the hall to “stand guard until she was decent again.”

A nurse stood beside Dr. Mason. The clock on the wall read 12:01 a.m. when the first baby emerged. Dr. Mason handed off the child to the nurse to clean up, while Katniss began round two.

“You’ll have to watch out for these girls,” Dr. Mason said after the second one was delivered. “They’re already great hide-and-seek players.”

Eventually the babies were cleaned up and Katniss was stitched up. She held the first baby that she’d pushed out, while Peeta held the second.

A little over five pounds each, Baby A had a few wisps of pale blond hair like her father and eyes that looked more gray than blue. Baby B had a tuft of dark hair like her mother and bright blue eyes like her father. Both girls had a hint of Peeta’s cheek dimples.

“Do you have names picked out?” the nurse asked them.

“You do the honors.” Peeta looked to Katniss.

She looked down at the babe in her arms. “This one came out first. Her name is Hope Elizabeth Mellark.”

She looked to Uncle Haymitch to gauge his reaction. His eyes filled with tears upon hearing that she chosen the name of his deceased daughter.

“But I have no idea what to call the little one you’re holding, Peeta. Do you have any names that you
like?”

He ran his thumb along the infant’s cheek. “I do. If you don’t mind, I’d like to name her for my Grandmother Griet. She was like a mother to me. And what about Effie for your aunt? In a way, she’s responsible for these two being born.”

_Griet Effie. Effie Griet_. It sounded like the noise Uncle Haymitch made when he cleared his throat.

“You know that Effie’s legal name was Elizabeth,” Haymitch chimed in. “Effie was a nickname.”

_I didn’t know that._

Katniss threw her uncle a grateful look. “What about Seraphina?” Katniss suggested.

_Peeta likes Mama Seraphina a lot. And she does have a pretty name._

He smiled. “Yeah, I like it.” He looked down at the babe in his arms. “Hello Seraphina Griet Mellark. Daddy has to go to work now.”

Katniss frowned. “You’ve been up all night. Don’t go to work.”

“I need to go in for a few hours at least,” he said. “Besides I’m so excited I don’t think I could even sleep.

“You’re the one who did the heavy lifting, Katniss. Get some rest. I’ll be back later.”

He handed off the baby in his arms to the nurse, but not before kissing Sera’s forehead. He bent over and kissed Hope’s forehead as well. The he leaned in to push away a tendril of hair from Katniss face, before giving her a lingering kiss.

“Hate to break it up here, but do you think you can give me a ride home?” Uncle Haymitch asked. “I left all the windows open. The smoke should be cleared out by now.”

The babies were put into bassinets; one sat on each side of Katniss’ bed. Katniss fell asleep.

She woke up to find a bouquet of flowers on a nearby table and a couple of helium balloons.

_Peeta was sitting in a chair next to the bed. _

“How long have I been sleeping?”

“All day. It’s three o’clock.”

She pulled herself up in the bed. Her shoulders ached, as did her hips and legs, everything ached. “I need to feed them.”

Peeta smiled. “I already did. The nurse brought in some bottles.”

“Oh.” She’d missed their first feeding.

“I need to call Prim and tell her she has two nieces.”

“Haymitch called her this morning.”

“Okay then.”

A nurse came in to take Katniss’ vitals. “Normally we don’t let new mothers sleep so long, but you
need to rest up. You’ll have your hands full when you get home.”

After dinner, Katniss called Prim. She’d sent Peeta home with an order to get some sleep. Apparently Lavinia was taking care of Taiden for the next few days.

“Holy crap, Katniss, twins,” Prim exclaimed when she answered. Katniss had expected her sister to be upset by the news, but Prim was in a good mood. Maybe it was better that Uncle Haymitch had been the one to talk to her first.

“It was a big surprise, but Peeta’s happy about it.”

“Are you happy?”

“I’m in shock still. I spent all of today sleeping.”

“Well, I hope Peeta’s going to help you out.”

“He will, in fact we’re together now.”

“So you’re moving into his house, then?”

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. We still have a lot to discuss.”

“If you want, I could reschedule some of my patients and come help for a few days.”

“That’s so kind Prim, and I can’t wait for you to see the girls, but you don’t need to come right away.” Katniss glanced at the sleeping infants. “We should manage just fine. Hope and Sera sleep all the time. Come next month like you planned.”

A couple of days later Katniss was regretting that she turned down her sister’s offer. She’d hardly had any sleep since she’d returned home because the girls’ kept different schedules. Peeta moved into Uncle Haymitch’s house, sleeping on the couch so he could wake up at night to help her take care of the twins. And after a few days, Taiden joined the busy household.

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“I can’t believe that two tiny babies could cause so much work,” Katniss said. She was sitting on Peeta’s couch, the same couch on which their daughters had been conceived. Peeta sat next to her. The girls were a week old, and other than taking them to a doctor’s appointment, it was the first time Katniss had left her uncle’s house, and it was the first time she’d been separated more than a few feet from her babies.

But Sera was asleep and Uncle Haymitch was watching Hope and Taiden. Peeta had offered to make her dinner and Katniss had hastily agreed, insisting that her uncle call her immediately if something went wrong.

Peeta made grilled ham and cheese sandwiches, and set out a platter with cookies, which they ate on the couch.

“I can’t keep eating like this,” Katniss said, dipping a snickerdoodle into a glass of milk.

“You’re a nursing mother,” Peeta pointed out.

“But I don’t want to wear these clothes forever.” She glanced down at the baggy shirt she’d changed into to replace the one with spit-up stains on it.
She finished the glass of milk and leaned back into the sofa.

“Prim called today to see how we’re doing. She won a trip for two to Bermuda in a radio contest. I can’t believe my sister would call into a radio show to try to win a prize.”

*I’d love to go on a vacation right now.*

Katniss’ eyes filled with tears. Her emotions were all over the place. One minute she was madly in love with her daughters, the next minute she resented the restrictions they placed on her life. Was it lack of sleep, or the baby blues her pregnancy books mentioned? Either way she’d never felt so snowed under.

“How am I going to take care of them? I can barely take care of myself.”

Peeta put an arm round her shoulder. Her head fell onto his chest. “We’re in this together. Why don’t you close your eyes and get some rest.”

Katniss inhaled deeply getting a strong whiff of cinnamon and sugar, then closed her eyes and quickly nodded off.

She awoke slowly, a sense of calm surrounding her. Peeta’s arm was still holding her. His head was tilted downward resting atop her head. From the sound of his breathing, she guessed he had fallen asleep as well.

From the position of her head on his chest, the steady beat of his heart thumped in her ear. It was the first moment of peace she’d had since she’d given birth.

Her cell phone, which she’d placed on the coffee table, rang, startling Peeta awake.

After taking the call, she turned to him. “Uncle Haymitch needs help.”

“I’ll go with you.” Peeta followed her to the door. A light rain was falling as they set out across the lawn.

“I know you didn’t want to get married, but maybe you should consider moving in with me at least so we could all live in the same house. It would make things a lot easier.”

“I’m not against marriage, not now, Peeta, because I love you.”

He stopped in place, turned toward her, and grinned.

But before he could respond, she cut in. “But there’s something I need to tell you, in case it changes your mind about me.”

The grin faded and a sober look came over him. “There’s nothing you can say that will make me stop loving you or our girls.”

“I’m glad, but please hear me out. You asked me the night I went into labor when I first fell in love with you. I lied.

“I fell in love with you when we first began talking on the phone. I made up a picture in my mind of what I thought you looked like, but when we met in person…”

He cut in, “I was a fat guy with a bad haircut.”

She nodded, taking a deep breath before she continued. “I decided then that I didn’t want there to be
anything romantic between us, instead we could just be friends. But I kissed you and I didn’t want to stop and, well, I took advantage of you. That’s why I bolted; I was embarrassed.

“But then I found out I was pregnant and Uncle Haymitch got sick and… say something, Peeta, before I start crying.”

Peeta sighed. “Is that what’s bothering you? That you had sex with someone you weren’t attracted to? You haven’t done anything that a lot of men given the chance, wouldn’t do.”

“You wouldn’t do it, Peeta,” she mumbled.

He nodded. “So we’re both in agreement that I’m the morally superior one in this relationship. But I had an advantage you didn’t have. I knew exactly what you looked like when we were talking on the phone.”

A memory surfaced. Peeta had mentioned a photograph right before her water broke.

“You mentioned a picture,” she began.

“I told you how I went over to see Haymitch that night after I first called you.”

When Uncle Haymitch insulted you.

“When I asked about you, he showed me pictures from your sister’s wedding. You were stunning. I couldn’t believe Haymitch had such a pretty niece.”

Did he think I would look like Uncle Haymitch? Ugh!

“Let it go Katniss. I said some stuff when you first told me you were pregnant that I regret, too. You were right then; birth control was both of our responsibility. And as upset as I was about what happened afterward, it doesn’t matter to me anymore. You love me. We have two beautiful girls. And now that I’m down to my fighting weight, you’re madly attracted to me. You can hardly control yourself around me.”

“I don’t remember saying that. But you’re right, I’m extremely attracted to you.”

“So what caught your attention? Is it my washboard abs, my long blond locks, or my manly beard?”

“It’s your dimples and your long eyelashes, and your strong arms.” She placed a hand on each arm. “You’re the kindest -- the best man I’ve ever met. You make me laugh, but you also make me feel safe. You feel like home.”

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight, resting his head atop hers. “I promise to always be your home Katniss.”

The front door opened, and Haymitch stood in the doorway holding a screaming infant.

“What the hell are you two doing? Making love in the front yard. Get inside. This kid woke up the other one. Now they’re both screaming.”

Katniss felt her a rush of fluid fall from her breasts. She was glad for the rain to cover up the leaks.

“And Hope pooped her diaper,” her uncle added.

Peeta snorted. “Let’s go take care of our kids.”
Because Haymitch was integral to helping Katniss with the girls while Peeta was at work, she continued to live at his house.

By the time the twins were two weeks old, a regular routine had been established. Haymitch took charge during the morning, while Katniss slept in until ten. After a quick shower, she took over from her uncle, who often times took an afternoon nap. She spent her days doing laundry, housecleaning, and feeding the girls.

Peeta showed up around five with Taiden and cooked dinner. After everyone ate, Haymitch retired to his room, while Katniss and Peeta fed the girls and put them down to sleep, side-by-side in the single crib.

Evenings were spent on Haymitch’s couch, watching television with Taiden, until he fell asleep. Peeta would deposit the child in Katniss’ bed, and then he and Katniss would cuddle on the sofa talking about the future, and occasionally making out like teenagers.

Katniss made sure nothing went too far, though, because she had no desire to show off her body to Peeta.

She still looked a few months pregnant, but instead of a firm belly, her stomach had taken on the appearance of a deflated beach ball. The skin over it had the consistency of cottage cheese. It was both fascinating and frightening to look at.

*It has to go back to normal. How in the hell are all those celebrities able to wear bikinis on the covers of magazines shortly after giving birth?*

Fortunately Dr. Mason had made a point of telling her in front of Peeta to refrain from any sexual activity until her six-week checkup.

*Thank goodness.*

Eventually they’d nod off on the sofa. But later, one of the girls would wake them up and Peeta would move Taiden back to the couch, while he joined Katniss in bed when the baby’s feeding was done.

She would curl up next to him, breathing in the scent of the bakery that seemed to ooze from his pores, and fall asleep yet again. But all of their sleeping was done in fits and spurts as the girls never slept for more than a few hours straight.

“*When is the boy going to move back into his own house?*” Haymitch asked when the girls were a month old. He sat in the chair whittling a small bear for Sera. He pointed to the ones he’d carved for Taiden and Hope that sat on the mantle. “*And he needs to take his kids with him. The bear children want to live with their Papa in his house. Besides my sofa cushions are starting to sag.*”

Katniss didn’t think her uncle would mind so much if she told him it was Taiden who was sleeping on the couch every night, not Peeta. But Uncle Haymitch was right. It was time to move next door and begin her new life.

“*Prim’s coming in a few days. I’ll move next door with the girls after her visit.*”
“Good. It’s about time the boy makes an honest woman of you.”

“I’ve always been honest, Uncle Haymitch.”

“Maybe to others, but not to yourself. So when are you getting hitched?”

“We haven’t made any concrete plans about that yet.”

But I have no doubt it will happen.

“You should. You’re not getting any younger.”

A nagging thought bothered her, though. She’d moved to Dandelion to take care of Uncle Haymitch. Could she keep an eye on him and her family, too?

“Do you think Uncle Haymitch will be all right living alone?” Katniss asked Peeta that evening.

Peeta chuckled. “He was doing okay before you got here.”

“That’s because you were taking care of him,” Katniss pointed out.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine. Besides you’ll be right next door. You can see him every day.”

As soon as Prim arrived and convinced Peeta that she’d help with the night shifts, he and Thom returned to their house to sleep.

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Prim seems so different.

Tanned and smiling, her sister exuded a cheerfulness that Katniss hadn’t expected. She thought her sister might be upset or jealous of her because she’d given birth to twins. But Prim had been busy.

She’d taken her twenty-something, single, sister-in-law Posy with her on the trip she’d won to Bermuda. “You were right about the men at those resorts, they were only looking to hook up for the night.”

Katniss eyes grew big. “You’re still married Prim. You didn’t…?”

Her sister grinned. “Nah, but I had a good time flirting and dancing and letting those idiots buy me drinks. And it didn’t hurt that Posy told Rory all about it.

“We’ve been talking a lot lately,” she added. “He’s going to come to counseling with me. And I’m thinking about taking a leave from work to go back to school to study psychiatry.”

“Wow. What brought this all about?”

“Dr. Aurelius, mainly. But finding that almond in the rice pudding on New Year’s Eve and Peeta’s insistence that it promised something good was guaranteed gave me permission to do things I’d never contemplated, like call up a radio station to win a trip, or check out the requirements to become a psychiatrist, or contact an adoption agency.”

The days Prim spent with her and the girls passed quickly. Soon her sister was gone, and Peeta and Thom came over to move the crib and other baby furniture to the nursery next door.

Katniss packed up her belongings and her wardrobe of pre-pregnancy clothing and maternity wear
that was doing double-duty as post-maternity clothing. When it was all carried next door, Peeta’s neat, organized house was stuffed to the gills.

*I’ll have to start weeding through everything.*

That night over dinner, Taiden asked. “When are we getting our puppy Uncle Peeta?”

Peeta and Taiden had planned to meet with Annie on Peeta’s birthday to pick out a puppy, but the girls’ unexpected arrival had cancelled their plans. Katniss had hoped Peeta would have realized that adding a puppy to their family would be too much for them to take on at present.

“Annie and Finnick will be in the area this weekend, sport,” Peeta told his nephew. “They only have one dog left, but if we like him he’s ours.”

“Do you think now is a good time to get a puppy?” Katniss questioned Peeta after Taiden had gone to sleep.

“Actually, I do,” Peeta said. “We’re paying so much attention, rightly so, to the girls, that I think he’s getting a little Jealous. But a pup could be his friend and sleep with him, too. Maybe it will mean the end of the nightmares.”

Taiden had had a few nightmares while staying at Uncle Haymitch’s house. It hadn’t been a problem, because Katniss or Peeta were up feeding one of the babies at the time, but Katniss would prefer that the boy sleep the entire night without waking them up.

“Oh then, but you need to take care of the dog.”

“Taiden’s going to help.”

*Right.*

Annie and Finnick came on Sunday afternoon with a cute ball of fluff.

“Where’s Goldie?” Taiden asked

Annie smiled. “She stayed home today.”

As Annie knelt down and showed Taiden the tricks the pup could do – rolling over and playing dead, Finnick studied the neighborhood. “I thought your address was familiar, but I had no idea you lived across the street from my Great Aunt Mags.”

“How’s she doing?” Katniss asked. She hadn’t seen the woman once in the past year. Was Mags always traveling?

Finnick frowned. “She’s okay, but she’s starting to feel her age. She’s thinking about selling the house.”

“Mags’ house is for sale?” Katniss looked longingly at the clapboard house with the wraparound porch. The house that represented the ideal life to Katniss when she was a child. The house that was large enough to comfortably accommodate her and Peeta and Taiden and the girls and the pup rolling in the grass. The house with space enough to open a home daycare business.

“Want to make an offer?” Finnick asked. “I’ll put in a good word for you.”
“Aunt Mags thinks she’s responsible for the two of you getting together.” Acting as his great aunt’s proxy, Finnick sat in the escrow office signing paperwork for the house sale with Katniss and Peeta.

“I never would have left that note on Peeta’s door if Mags hadn’t told me about him.” Katniss smiled at Peeta as she rubbed the gold locket that he’d given her for Christmas between her thumb and index finger. Inside it were photos of their daughters.

Over an impromptu meal with Annie and Finnick on the day the couple had delivered Spot, the newest member of the Mellark household, Katniss had further questioned Finnick to find out whether Mags was serious about selling her house.

“She is,” he said. “In fact, I have the key. Would you like to go inside and check it out?”

Peeta gave Katniss a curious look, as she nodded. After the meal, she phoned Uncle Haymitch and asked him to come over to watch the kids and the pup for fifteen minutes.

The house tour took closer to an hour as Katniss and Peeta made a careful inspection of the five bedrooms, three bathrooms, living room, formal dining room, large eat-in kitchen, and family room. It was at least three times as large as Peeta’s current house.

“Thanks for letting us see it,” Peeta said, as they walked Annie and Finnick to their car.

“Give me a call if you’re interested,” Finnick said.

Peeta smiled, and shook Finnick’s hand. As soon as the Odairs drove off, he turned to Katniss. “That downstairs bedroom would make a perfect art studio. I lost mine when I set up the nursery.”

Katniss sighed in relief. She didn’t want Peeta to think she expected him to buy a bigger place for them to live, but the three-bedroom, one bathroom house he owned was small for a family of five that now included a puppy.

Eventually we’ll have to find a bigger place to live. And Mag’s house would be ideal because Uncle Haymitch is right across the street.

They spent the evening discussing how they would coordinate the purchase, as Peeta would have to sell the house they were currently living in to help pay for the new house. But it wouldn’t stretch their budget too far as the bakery was turning a healthy profit.

Peeta called Finnick the next day with an offer. They waited a few days to hear back. But the news was good; Mag had accepted their proposal. If she’d listed it with a realtor, possibly she would have gotten more, but Mags was tickled to learn that Katniss and Peeta were together and that they’d be living in the house with their newborn daughters.

Everything fell quickly into line, a trip to the bank to get a loan, having the house inspected, and meeting with a realtor to put Peeta’s house on the market. Uncle Haymitch had even offered Katniss a portion of her inheritance early in case they needed extra money.

“Thanks, but Peeta says we can afford it.” Katniss was pleased that she could add some of her personal savings toward the down payment; it gave her a sense of ownership in the purchase.

They finished signing all the papers. Finnick gave both of them a key. “I wish you a very happy
future in the house.”

Giddy, they drove back to the neighborhood.

“I’ve hired a moving company to help us get everything across the street this weekend,” Peeta said. “Then the realtor can do some showings of the old house.

“Why don’t we take a look inside before I go to work and you meet up with Haymitch?” Peeta said. Lavinia was watching the girls, and Taiden was at preschool.

“Sure,” Katniss said.

He parked the car in front of the new house and he and Katniss walked up the steps to the porch. Peeta unlocked the door, but before Katniss could enter, he scooped her up in his arms.

“What are you doing,” she giggled, as he carried her over the threshold, before setting her upright onto the shiny wood floor.

“Something I wanted to do last week, on your birthday. But things didn’t go as planned.”

Peeta had taken the entire family to Mama Seraphina’s to celebrate. The restaurateur was stunned to learn that one of the babies bore her name. She picked up the infant and paraded her around to show her off to all of the customers and the kitchen staff.

Afterwards, they’d gone home and Katniss had agreed to let Peeta draw a sketch of her. As he drew, he spoke about how she’d changed his life. Made him a new man altogether. “And not only because the very thought of you caused me to want to make myself over.”

Is he about to propose?

But a crying infant had interrupted him, and the tender moment was lost.

In the entryway of the empty house that now belonged to the two of them, Peeta got down on one knee and reached into his pocket. “Will you marry me, Katniss?” He held out a velvet box.

She knew they’d been heading toward this moment ever since she’d admitted she loved him, ever since their daughters had been born.

“Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He stood up and opened the box. Inside was an old-fashioned ring with an ornate setting that held a white pearl.

“The ring belonged to my Grandma Griet,” he said. “If you’d prefer a diamond I can get you one, instead.”

“No, this is perfect. It’s beautiful.”

And it obviously means a lot to Peeta for me to wear his grandmother’s ring.

Peeta beamed. “I’m glad you like it.”

He pulled the ring out of the box and slipped it onto her finger. It was a perfect fit.

She looked up at him, tears in her eyes.
“Let’s not have a long engagement,” Peeta said. “I’d drive to city hall and marry you today, if I didn’t have to get back to work and you weren’t taking Haymitch to the cemetery. How about we aim for a couple of weeks from now. We could have the ceremony out in the yard.

“Unless you have other ideas.”

Katniss shook her head. She was forty-one and a new mother. She didn’t have the energy or even the time to arrange an extravagant wedding.

“Good,” Peeta said. “After we move in, we can begin planning for the wedding and the honeymoon.”

“Honeymoon?”

*How am I going to leave the girls? I better stock up on formula and begin freezing some breast milk.*

“How am I going to leave the girls? I better stock up on formula and begin freezing some breast milk.

“How am I going to leave the girls? I better stock up on formula and begin freezing some breast milk.

“Of course we’re having a honeymoon. Didn’t you say your prescription would be effective by the end of the month? It’s time we got some time alone for ourselves.”

At her six-week baby check-up Dr. Mason, who had taken over all of Dr. Latier’s patients after his unexpected retirement, had suggested Katniss go on a low dose birth control pill that would regulate her cycle and ensure that she didn’t end up pregnant.

“Contrary to popular belief, you’re still fertile even if you’re nursing.”

Dr. Mason had reminded her that she needed to be on the medication for a month, before it would work. “In the meantime use another form of birth control.”

*But I don’t need anything because we haven’t been intimate.*

With everything that had been going on in their lives, taking care of twins, moving into Peeta’s house, getting a puppy, purchasing one house and readying the other for sale, it was no wonder that she and Peeta hadn’t done much more that make out a few times. They were too tired to do anything more than sleep in their bed.

*I guess we do need a honeymoon.*

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“Are you ready Uncle Haymitch?” Katniss called out as she opened the door to his house.

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

He was sitting in his chair in the living room, holding a bouquet of flowers he gathered from the yard, and staring off into space.

Katniss glanced down at the pearl ring on her finger. She had such good news to share, but maybe now wasn’t the time. Ironically, today was the one-year anniversary of Aunt Effie’s death. She’d offered to drive her uncle out to the cemetery to leave flowers and pay his respects.

He stood up. “Got all the paperwork signed?”

“We did. We even have the key.” She held up her key ring with her right hand, and pushed her hair behind her ear with her left.

His eyes flew to her left hand, a hint of a smile forming. “So the boy did it?”
“What?”

“Your left hand. You’ve got a ring on. I’m guessing he asked again and you finally said yes.”

“How did you know?”

“He talked to me after the girls were born. Said he was going to ask you again when the time was right.”

“I hope you don’t mind that we got engaged today.”

Uncle Haymitch shook his head. “Better to turn the day into a good memory rather than keep it as a bad one. You get to be my age and there are far too many dates on the calendar to dread.”

“Now let’s go see Effie. We have a lot to tell her. Who would have expected the year we’d all have since she left for the pearly gates?”

“...”

“You don’t even have a dress?” Prim shrieked. “You’re getting married in a couple of days. We need to go shopping.”

Katniss’ wedding planning so far had been effortless as Peeta had done most everything, arranged for an officiate, invited guests via email, and arranged for Mama Seraphina to supply the luncheon. The wedding cake was easy: he planned to make it at work.

Peeta and Haymitch watched the kids that evening as the two sisters made their way to The Capitol.

“I don’t want anything too fancy,” Katniss told her sister, as they perused the dress racks. “But I’d like it to be white.”

When they’d gathered up a handful of dresses, Prim joined her sister in the dressing room.

Katniss stripped down to her underwear. “I wish the baby weight was gone already.” The dresses they’d gathered were larger sized than she was used to wearing.

“Your body looks normal for a forty-one-year-old who gave birth to twins less than three months ago,” Prim countered.

“But do you think my stomach will ever be flat again?”

“What does it matter -- you have two healthy babies.”

The snippy tone in Prim’s voice caused Katniss to look up at her.

“I’m sorry Prim, I didn’t think.”

“It’s okay,” her sister said. “But you better be careful, you don’t turn into Mom. Remember all those crazy diets she’d go on when we were little when all she ate was grapefruit and those disgusting vanilla shakes.”

_I haven’t thought about that in years._

Katniss slipped a dress over her head. “Will you zip me up?”

She turned her back to her sister and looked at herself in the mirror. The ivory dress, with a lace
overlay, was sleeveless, with a square neckline and a full skirt. The hem fell to just above her ankles.

She spun around for a moment, pleased at the swish of the skirt.

_I feel like a princess. And at 41, who knew?_

“That’s the one,” Prim said. “Don’t bother trying on the others.

“What are you going to do with your hair?”

“I was thinking of braiding it with ribbon and pinning it up,” Katniss said. At least her hair still looked good, although yesterday she’d come across a few gray strands. She’d quickly plucked them out.

“I think you’re right, Prim. This is the one. And I have some white shoes that would work.”

Afterwards, she got lingerie for her honeymoon, white satin dresses for Hope and Sera, and a pair of white pants and a white shirt for Taiden.

“Is Peeta wearing white too?” Prim asked.

“He said he wanted to. I think he’s renting something.”

Prim chuckled. “Well you better keep Trouble crated up if you want everyone’s clothes to stay clean.”

Trouble was the nickname that Peeta had given Spot. He’d already chewed up shoes, toys, and swallowed a couple of Taiden’s Legos that had led to a trip to the vet. Yes, the dog was definitely being crated.

The night before the wedding, Rory showed up surprising everyone. Prim burst into tears at the sight of him. After introducing him to Peeta and the children, she got into Rory’s car and the pair drove away.

“I hope they’re coming back since she’s watching the girls while we’re on our honeymoon,” Katniss said. “Otherwise we’ll have to postpone our trip.”

Peeta came up alongside her and ran his hand down her backside, stopping at her bottom to give it a gentle squeeze. “If your sister doesn’t return, Haymitch can take care of them.”

“No way, Peeta.”

“Well, Lavinia and Thom then. I’m a patient man. But we are not postponing our honeymoon. I’ve been waiting a long time.”

His words sent shivers down her spine.

Prim called a few hours later. “We’re spending the night at a hotel. I’ll see you in the morning.”

_Good. I’m glad things are working out for her._

The wedding was scheduled for noon. That morning, amidst the preparations, Peeta received an email from Rye. “My brother sends his best wishes,” he said. “They’re all doing well, but he’s docked the boat at some island in the Caribbean. Delly’s been having some problems with seasickness.”
“Maybe she’s expecting.”

Peeta rolled his eyes. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

Katniss and Peeta recited their vows under a tree in the backyard in front of family and a few friends. Prim stood up for Katniss, while Uncle Haymitch was by Peeta’s side.

From the lawn chair where Katniss held court as bride, with her daughters seated in their car seat carriers on either side of her like tiny bridesmaids, she watched her new husband joke with their guests, and Mama Seraphina listen to Uncle Haymitch talk about Aunt Effie’s lasagna.

Lavinia approached her and spoke about the possibility of the two of them opening a home daycare together. Katniss was impressed by Lavinia’s ideas. She seemed like a real go-getter.

Peeta had invited Teagan, who was accompanied by his mother Cashmere and her boyfriend. While the couple ate, Teagan and Taiden picked every dandelion they could find in the yard and laid the yellow weeds at Katniss’ feet, like she was the May Queen.

The party lasted a few hours. Afterward, Katniss nursed the girls one last time and handed the babies off to Prim, along with a written list of instructions. Her sister, and now Rory, would stay in the house for the next three days while Haymitch would take care of Taiden.

“Be sure to check up on Uncle Haymitch,” she warned Prim, in front of her uncle. “He almost burned down the house the last time we left him alone with Taiden.”

“Wild Thing and I are not doing any baking while you’re away,” Haymitch said.

“We’re going to teach the geese some tricks,” Taiden chimed in.

Everyone stood outside to wave goodbye to her and Peeta.

As Peeta started the engine, the loud radio blasted, “This week’s lottery jackpot is $200 million. Only four days left to buy your tickets.”

Quickly, Peeta shut it off. “Ah, the sound of silence. It will be nice to get some peace and quiet for a few days at least.”

Katniss sighed. “I never thought I’d envy my old self. I used to hate being alone after work. I considered getting a cat to keep me company.”

Peeta snorted. “Well if you still want a cat, we could always get one. The more the merrier.”

“No, we have enough responsibility as it is. Our cup is overflowing with it.”

They drove for an hour making small talk about the wedding reception and improvements they wanted to make to their new house, until Peeta turned onto a side road that twisted and turned for a couple of miles until he pulled up to a small hotel, bearing a sign. The Mockingjay Inn.

“What do you think?” he asked.

“It looks cute.” A big veranda wrapped around the two-story building. Wicker chairs lined the porch.

“Good. Let’s go check in.

Katniss got out of the car, her heart beating rapidly. Why did she feel as nervous as a virgin? She’d already had sex with Peeta. They’d made two kids together.
“You’re in room 12,” the manager said, handing Peeta a keycard.

They rode the elevator to the second floor, and made their way inside the room. Katniss took one look at the large bed laden with throw pillows in front of her and a knot formed in her stomach.

Peeta set the suitcases down on the low dresser across from the bed. “Are you hungry? Do you want to go to the dining room?”

“No. I’d like to take a shower.”

Katniss picked up her suitcase and escaped to the bathroom.

A claw foot tub greeted her. A leisurely bath would be nice, but now didn’t seem like a good moment, not with Peeta waiting on the other side of the door.

She showered quickly and dried herself with a thick bath sheet. She surveyed her naked form in the mirror across from the sink.

*I’ll keep the lights low.*

Katniss put on the nightgown she’d picked up while out shopping with Prim.

“It looks like something an old lady would wear,” Prim had chided her when she bought it. “Why not get something shorter and maybe see-through. It’s your honeymoon after all.”

But the lacy, peach-colored gown hid all of her imperfections, her over-sized, milk-laden breasts; her flabby stomach; and her spreading hips.

Taking a deep breath, she exited the bathroom to find only the bedside lamp on and the curtains pulled shut.

*Perfect.*

She glanced toward the bed. Peeta lay back with his head on the pillow. His eyes were shut.

She walked to the bed and crawled on top of it.

“Peeta.”

No answer.

*Is he asleep?*

“But he didn’t respond. Instead, he whimpered and rolled over onto his side.

*He’s fallen asleep on our wedding night.*

She glanced at the clock. It was only seven p.m. The night was far from over. She closed her eyes for a quick nap.

*I’ll wake him up in an hour or two.*

She turned over, and let out a sigh. She was so relaxed.
What a refreshing sleep.

Opening her eyes she found herself staring into Peeta’s blue ones.

“What time is it?” she asked, flustered that the curtains were drawn and the room was bathed in sunlight.

“Seven.”

“In the morning? I slept for twelve hours?”

“You needed the rest Katniss. We both did. The girls have been running us ragged.”

“How long have you been awake?”

“Two hours.”

Her cheeks went pink. “Have you been staring at me for two hours?”

“I like watching you sleep. But no, I got up and took a shower.”

Yes, he had changed. He was wearing loose shorts and a white t-shirt.

“I guess we missed our wedding night,” he said. “But we’re all rested up now. We have the room for two more nights. I put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door.”

He leaned in to kiss her.

She pulled her head back. “I need to use the bathroom.” She jumped out of the bed. After using the facilities, she brushed her teeth and her hair.

Here goes nothing.

She slinked into the room and got back onto the bed.

Peeta smiled at her, moved his body so that he was leaning over her and met her lips. But for the first time ever, Katniss couldn’t concentrate on his kisses, her mind racing ahead, worried about Peeta seeing her altered body.

Maybe I should draw the curtains so it’s dark, instead of so damn bright in here.

Slowly his hand made it’s way under her nightgown, to rest on her stomach.

At the sensation, she gasped.

He pulled away. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s nothing,” she mumbled.

“No something’s wrong. Are you in pain?”

“It’s my stomach. It’s squishy. It has the texture of a marshmallow.”

He pressed down lightly on her midsection. “No it doesn’t, unless it’s a stale marshmallow that’s gone hard.”

“It does too.”
His eyes narrowed and he reached for the hem of her nightgown.

She caught his eyes. “Please don’t look. The pregnancy has changed my body completely. My stomach muscles have turned to mush and my breasts are too big.”

“I like those breasts.”

“Yesterday I found a few gray hairs,” she added.

Peeta rolled off her and twisted his body so that he was sitting up against the headboard. His face contorted and for a moment Katniss thought he was crying, as a hand went up to rub at his eyes, but then she realized that he was laughing. Laughing at her.

“It’s not funny, damn it.”

“Oh Katniss, you have no idea how funny it is.”

Her brow furrowed, as Peeta lifted up his t-shirt, pulled it over his neck and tossed it onto the floor.

“You want to see a squishy belly. Take a look at mine.”

He rubbed his hands over his stomach cavity. Instead of the sculpted chest she’d pictured him having when he’d lost weight, the skin hung loose and rows of white stretch marks ran across his upper body in a horizontal fashion.

“I read that Vitamin E is good for stretch marks. I’ve been putting it on every day. But I’m not sure it’s doing any good.

“And you’re worried about some gray hairs. Haven’t you heard of hair color? Hell, I’m going bald.”

He put his hand to his forehead and pushed back the curls. His hairline had a good half-inch of recession.

“I’ve been covering it up with this hair style, but I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to hide it. I guess I’ll be one of those guys you see who always has a baseball cap on.”

He caught her eye and winked. “Look we’re not kids anymore Katniss; we have kids. Our bodies are beginning to show some mileage.”

His voice lowered and the pupils of his eyes went black. “But that doesn’t mean that we can’t have wild sex on our honeymoon.”

“Wild?” She got up onto her knees to kiss him. His hands went up to cup her face. The intensity was there.

She pulled back, the tip of her tongue running around her lips. “Can we close the curtains at least so the room is dark?”

“I like the light; I need it. I want to inspect every square inch of you, even the squishy parts.”

_How did I ever get so lucky to find a man so accepting of me?_

“Okay, then.” She lifted the negligee over her head and tossed it onto the floor. “Let the wild rumpus begin.”
They left the room fifty-two hours later, after sharing two bubble baths, one very long shower, several meals brought in by room service, and lots and lots of naps.

Katniss wasn’t twenty or twenty-five or even thirty-five anymore. After giving birth so recently, her body didn’t respond in the same fashion it always had.

But Peeta was gentle and sweet and patient; so accommodating that she felt completely relaxed and renewed. Their time together might not have been up to the standards of a smutty fanfic, but it was satisfying all the same.

Besides they were only starting out. With more practice, and as her body continued to recover from the pregnancy, things could only get better.

“We need to do this a lot,” Peeta said, as they drove down the winding road to the highway.

“Go off by ourselves?”

“Yeah. Otherwise the kids will take over our lives. Much as I love them, I loved you first. And now that I’ve got you, I’m not letting you go.” He reached for her hand.

They drove in silence. Katniss pondered the past year. She never could have dreamed of all the twists and turns that would have led to this moment – sitting beside Peeta to face the future together.

“I’m feeling like the luckiest guy alive,” Peeta said, breaking into her thoughts. “Maybe I ought to stop and buy a few lottery tickets. Isn’t that big drawing tonight?”

“You can if you want,” Katniss said. “But I think we’ve already hit the jackpot.”

THE END

Thanks to everyone who read this story, especially those who left reviews and/or kudos. I appreciate all your support and your kind words. If you have any questions about it or any of my other fics you can find me on tumblr at MTK4FUN.tumblr.com.

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