The Chance You Didn't Take

by Ronja

Summary

Canon AU from the end of "Mockingjay". Peeta returns to District 12 and things progress much like in the book, except with one major difference: Peeta has not fallen back in love with Katniss. She, on the other hand, feels the same way about him as she does in the book...

Notes

Something I’ve been working on for a while, parallel with "Labyrinth". Once I got the idea for this one in my head it felt too interesting to leave aside =) My plan is to keep both stories going, hopefully updating once or twice a month. First chapters for this story will be fairly brief but they'll get longer as the story progresses.

The title is temporary, so don't be shocked if it changes at some point.
Prologue

To my own surprise, and halfway through dinner, I suddenly realize that I'm feeling happy. The realization comes as such a shock to me that I pause with my fork halfway between the plate and my mouth and I have to take a second to put the cutlery down and take a few sips of the ice water in my glass to gather my wits. The faintest of smiles is suddenly on my lips and I set the glass back down and continue eating. A quick glance at the other two people at the table tells me that neither one of them noticed what just happened and for that I'm thankful. I don't want to make a big deal out of it.

It's been so many months of nothing but pain and grief and not really having the will to live anymore. It got better three weeks ago when Peeta came back to the district and I found him planting primrose bushes outside my house. On some level I think I was waiting for him and once he came back I could start moving forward with my life. I have to take everything in small steps but for the first time in forever it feels like I'm on the right path.

For the past week we've been having dinner together every night, the three of us. Haymitch, who spent so much time hiding out in his own house, seems to really long for company and he even lays off the bottle every day until he's had dinner with us. I'm starting to realize that Haymitch will never be fully healed. There have been too many years of pain and guilt and fear and the horrible memories from the Games, and he has been holding on to his bottles of white liquor for so long that he won't ever be able to let them go for good. They sobered him up in Thirteen and he stayed sober for some time but as soon as he had the option to drink again he did. That's just how he works. I understand that better than I ever did before and aside from the worry that he will drink himself to death I don't really mind it anymore.

The only one who's really changed for the better is Peeta. I was a bit wary when he returned, afraid of trusting the belief that he could get better. I never did make my peace with the idea of him being lost forever thanks to the hijacking and his gradual recovery left some spark of hope inside of me but too many bad things have happened for me to trust to hope. But he's doing better. He's moving closer and closer to becoming his old self, his true self. The kindness and understanding is back, the gentle spirit too. I don't know to what extent he's recovered since he hasn't talked to me about it yet but in my heart I'm beginning to think that he can be the same way he once was.

Sitting here tonight with two of the people I care the most about in the whole world being here with me makes me feel happy. It's not a feeling I ever thought I would have again but it's there and it's a little overwhelming to realize. I thought it would take something monumental to feel like this again but maybe the everyday things could have that effect also.

I look at Peeta, blowing a curl of ashen hair away from his face before putting a forkful of food in his mouth, and I wonder how much of this feeling is because of him. It's so good to have him back. Gale went off to District Two, my mother to District Four and the friends I made in Thirteen and during the Quell went their separate ways also. Only Haymitch came back home with me. Having Peeta here too makes me feel relieved. At least I didn't lose them all.

I have to admit to myself that I like looking at him. I like quietly studying his blue eyes, the curve of his upper lip, the way his body moves. I like looking at him and seeing the Peeta I knew before the hijacking. It wasn't so much the things he's said since coming back that made me know that he was beginning to recover for real. It was his body language. I recognized him in how he moved and in his face and that matters more than hearing him say the right things.

Once dinner is over we relocate to the sitting room. Haymitch throws his legs up on the coffee table and leans back on the couch, burping loudly. Peeta goes over to the fireplace and starts to work on
getting a fire going. I curl up on an armchair, my feet folded underneath me, and allow myself to relax and enjoy the moment. It's quiet and we only talk a little bit but it still feels good. It feels like home.

After about an hour Haymitch begins to miss his bottle and he gets up and bids us a good night. Peeta rises from his spot on the couch and offers to help me clean up after dinner. I feel myself smiling slightly again. We haven't been alone together since he came back. Not unless you count that brief meeting when he was planting the primrose bushes.

We walk into the kitchen and Peeta begins to fill the sink up with hot water. I gather the dishes and open a cabinet to find a towel to dry everything off while Peeta begins to wash the forks.

"Dinner was good," he offers, though he already said so while we were eating.

"Thanks," I say anyway, taking the forks he hands to me.

"It's been nice having dinner with you and Haymitch every day this week."

"It has been," I agree.

He doesn't say much else until he's finishing up washing the last item, a large pot. He glances at me as he scrubs it with a brush and gives me half a smile.

"I think it can be better now," he says. "I'm better."

"You are," I acknowledge.

"Obviously I don't hate you anymore, like I did when…" He trails off and hands me the pot, reaching into the sink to pull out the plug and let the dishwater out. "I don't hate you. And I think we have a shot at being real friends now. And I mean, like, real friendship. Not like what we were trying to force between the Games."

"We weren't trying to force anything," I object softly, though that is of course a lie. Then again it's not, because what we tried to force was a grand romance, not friendship. We were quite good at being friends, as I recall.

"I know it was awkward back then," says Peeta, drying his hands on the fabric of his jeans. "There's a lot of stuff I don't remember, and stuff that I'm not sure if what I remember is real. I try to think positive though, and as awful as the hijacking was, at least it brought something good."

"What good could that possibly be?" I snort.

"I'm not in love with you anymore." He smiles a little. "Before there was always my unrequited love making things awkward and preventing us from truly being friends. Now we're on equal footing. Nothing to disrupt the balance."

"Great," I say, but I can hear how hollow my voice sounds.

"Anyway, thanks for dinner." His smile widens a bit. "I should get going. Bakers get up early in the morning."

"Safe a loaf for me tomorrow morning," I reply, following him with my eyes as he walks towards the kitchen door.

"I'll do that." The door opens and he steps out into the night. "Have a good night, Katniss. See you
tomorrow."

"You too."

The door closes and I find myself staring at it for a good five minutes. I'm well aware that when it comes to identifying a feeling I'm not one who excels. Right now that is pretty damn inconvenient because I can't figure out what that hollow feeling inside me is about and how it could come on the same night that I began to feel happiness again.

The closes thing I can liken it to is loss.
"I'm not in love with you anymore".

Seven simple words. Ones I should have been relieved to hear, at that. It used to make me feel awkward and uncomfortable whenever Peeta reminded me of his – at the time thought to be – undying love for me. If he doesn't harbour such feelings for me anymore then everything should be okay, right?

For some reason the words keep echoing in my mind in the months that follow, but never making me feel relieved. Spring turns to summer, summer turns to autumn, and we begin to rebuild our lives. It should be so much easier now that we're on equal footing, but those words just won't leave my mind.

I try to tell myself that it's just difficult seeing Peeta lacking of any of the attributes he had before I destroyed the second arena and he was taken prisoner. His love for me was such a big part of who he was, and such a driving force for him. Now that it's not there anymore it feels a little bit like part of the old Peeta is lost.

Deep inside I think there might be another meaning to it. I've lost so much love in the past year. I lost my sister, the one person I was sure that I loved. My mother moved away and that means I'm living alone, for the first time ever not sharing a roof with somebody who loves me. Gale's and my friendship came to a tragic end, that much is for sure, and while I do not mourn his romantic love I do miss the days when he was like a brother to me. And Cinna, he loved me too in a way. So did Finnick, in a completely platonic way, the way Gale and I should have stayed. All of that is gone now so perhaps that is why it hurts to know that Peeta doesn't love me anymore either. I have always been aware of the less pleasant sides of my personality but so long as there were people who loved me I assumed that I couldn't be that horrible and that there must be something redeemable about me. Now it's like I have no such people left and I don't know how to feel about that.

Then again, I know I'm not alone. I have Haymitch and I have Peeta, even if things with the latter aren't what they used to be. The three of us slowly evolve back into the family we once were, only now instead of having Peeta's unrequited love hanging over our heads we can be more like siblings, him and I. We can be a real family to each other with no silly romantic feelings threatening the balance or making things awkward.

At least that's what I try telling myself. The truth is I feel something lacking when I'm around Peeta and it's difficult for me to come to terms with. He still smiles, he still laughs, he's still compassionate and caring and so many of the things that were once essentially Peeta. There's just no deeper meaning or feeling behind it and it makes me feel threatened. I used to think his behaviour around me was rooted in love but if this is just how he acts around the people he is close to, whether romantic or platonic, then what does that leave of what used to be? I always thought he treated me in a special way because of his feelings for me, and selfishly I want to hold on to that thought.

There's also no denying that no matter how well I get along with Peeta and Haymitch I am not quite an equal in this arrangement. Haymitch and Peeta have a way of understanding one another that I've never noticed before. They seem to seek each other out more than they seek me out and that makes me feel left out. They never directly exclude me but it's all in the little things. How Peeta brings Haymitch breakfast in the mornings but never brings me anything unless I've specifically asked. How I see Haymitch wobble over towards Peeta's house when he needs company, instead of ringing
my doorbell. How, when we gather at my house for dinner, they always leave at the same time.

I try not to let those things bother me too much. I know I should be focusing on the positive. That the district is being rebuilt and people are free now and there aren't, to my knowledge, any important politicians who want me dead at present.

And I do enjoy those rare alone moments with Peeta more than I ever think I did before, bittersweet though they may be.

It doesn't happen often. We get maybe an hour here, a fleeting moment there. I like being around him. I like the way his presence makes me feel. Though it always stings to think about him saying that he no longer loves me I do enjoy the new friendship that I can feel growing between us. It's something different than what we've had in the past. Maybe it's for the reason he said – that there's no more unrequited feelings hanging between us. Yet at the same time that doesn't seem to be the full answer.

He's different than he used to be. Not necessarily because of the hijacking but because his experiences have caused him to mature in a way he might not have otherwise. He's more introverted now; it takes more coaxing for me or Haymitch to get any close information out of him. He doesn't say anything about his dead family or the friends he's lost. He doesn't like to talk about his experiences in the Capitol, whether it's his time as prisoner or his time with me in the Star Squad. We can barely get him to tell us what his plans are now. Haymitch and I both assumed he would rebuild his parents' bakery but he doesn't seem to be in a hurry to do so. He still bakes almost every day but it seems more like a routine than a choice.

Sometimes when we have those rare alone moments I watch him from the corner of my eye, hoping he can't tell that I'm studying him. I watch the lines on his face, admire the look of concentration when he's working on something, observe the way his expressions change and try to read as much as I can from his body language since he volunteers so little verbal information. I've asked him to help me re-create some pages for my herbal book because some of them have been damaged and usually our moments alone are when he's drawing for me. It brings back memories of when he first started helping me with this book and how comfortable I felt in his presence at that time. I still feel comfortable in his presence but it's different now somehow.

The one thing I would really like for him to draw, but can't seem to bring myself to ask, is a primrose. I have the real thing growing outside my house but there's a part of me that would like to have a picture drawn to put up on my wall. I long to get to see it whenever I walk into the room but I also fear it. Prim's death is still too near. I can't quite handle it yet. When I do feel ready I hope Peeta will help me out.

It's the first really cold day of the year, the day I finally feel ready to ask him.

I've been out in the woods and the ground was covered in frost. I found a flock of birds at the lake, stopping their on their way south for the winter. I killed two, and one is currently roasting in the oven along with Haymitch's trademark dish, potato wedges drenched in oil and seasoned with rosemary. Exhausted from his contribution to the meal Haymitch has fallen asleep on the couch, snoring with a newspaper over his face. I'm sitting by the fireplace trying to warm up, even though it's been hours since I got home from the woods, and Peeta is kneeling by the coffee table, working on a sketch for
"Do you still do paintings?" I ask, my voice a touch low so Haymitch won't wake up.

Peeta looks up.

"Haven't thought about it. I suppose I can't say I don't, only I haven't since the… since the war. Paint hasn't been the easiest commodity to get your hands on and I've sort of been saving my tubes of paint for when I get a real inspiration to paint something."

He goes back to working on the sketch, as if the question was merely me making conversation. I falter for a moment but then gather my courage.

"Would you paint something for me…? If I asked you?"

He looks up again and our eyes meet. It's strange how his eyes can be so piercingly blue in daylight but look so dark in other forms of lighting.

"Are you asking?"

I avert my eyes, feeling strangely bashful.

"I would like… I would like a painting of a primrose. To hang on the wall in Prim's old bedroom."

He's silent for almost a full minute, his brow furrowed as he thinks it over. Immediately I feel like an idiot for asking. He just told me that he's saving his paint for when he's truly inspired to paint something and here I am asking him to paint something for me, whether he feels inspired to or not. "I can pay for the paint," I blurt out.

He doesn't answer. His eyes move a bit as he thinks, a trait I've noticed in him before. I imagine his mind to be full of images while mine is a lot less colourful and lively. While I think of things in terms of words I like to believe that Peeta thinks of things in terms of images, and that his eyes moving about is because in his mind he goes from one image to the next. I don't know why these thoughts are in my head right now, nor do I realize I'm actually staring at his eyes until they finally move in my direction.

"Which colour primrose?"

"What?" I ask, brought out of my own thoughts and surprised by the question.

"Primroses come in different colours. Yellow, blue, orange, white…"

"Yellow," I answer. "The yellow primrose is Prim's flower."

He nods slowly. The ones he planted outside my house are yellow but perhaps he's low on that particular colour of paint and that's why he's asking.

"Sure," he then says. "Sure, I can paint that. Only…" He gives half a sheepish grin that makes me smile and sends some strange sensation through me. "To be perfectly honest with you I don't quite remember what they look like. I didn't spend much time looking at those bushes I planted, once they had begun to bloom. Do you want me to try and paint it now off of memory, or can it wait until spring?"

"Oh." I try to think of what to answer. On the one hand I of course want him to paint it as accurately as possibly. On the other I want that painting soon, now that I've mustered up the courage to ask for it. "Well… I suppose there's no harm in waiting."
"Prim deserves having it done right, right?" he offers.

"Yeah," I nod.

He gives me a smile and then returns to the drawing he's currently working on. I find myself still smiling for several minutes, though I'm not really sure why.

Chapter End Notes

I'm definitely no botanist and when I looked into primrose flowers it seemed like "primrose" is more a flower family name than one specific blossom. I chose to go with the specific flower the Swedish translation of the books names as the ones Peeta plants in Katniss' garden (nattljus in Swedish, or Oenothera biennis) as the one Katniss thinks of when she hears the name.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I confess I didn't proof-read this chapter, so I hope it holds up okay.

The snow comes early this year. It's been chilly for a few weeks, with frost on the ground each morning, but during daytime the sun has warmed everything up and it's been around ten degrees centigrade. When I wake up from a nightmare in the dead of night and go to the window I first think that I'm still dreaming when I see the white flakes falling. Going to the window is my standard move after a nightmare, feeling at least a little bit comforted by the sight of Haymitch's and Peeta's houses, reminding me that I'm not as alone as I sometimes feel. But when I see the snow falling down hard I feel isolated, almost trapped. It takes me hours to fall back asleep that night, which in turn means that I don't wake up until it's past ten o'clock, which hasn't happened in months.

Once I'm up I look out the window again and find that the whole world seems covered in snow. It seems to be at least a decimetre or two deep, obscuring the grass, the road and the pebbled paths that lead up to each house. The houses seem almost like islands in the middle of all this white. Neither Haymitch nor Peeta appear to have set foot outside judging by how the snow looks untouched around their houses.

I head downstairs after putting on clothes warm enough for winter. I don't need to go hunting but I long to be out in the woods to enjoy the beauty of the glistening snow and the tranquillity I hope I will find there. I shove my feet into my old boots and put on a scarf, coat and gloves made by Cinna. I can't seem to find a hat that belongs to me but in a drawer I find one that belongs to my mother. It's dove blue and warm and when I put it on I'm able to pull it down over my ears with no problem. I cast only a brief glance at myself in the mirror and then I head out the door.

I trudge through the snow to get out on the road, not bothering to shovel a path. For all I know there will be more snow anyway, and besides I've never been bothered by walking in deep snow. Few people even had snow shovels in the Seam so I've never seen much use for them since moving to the Victors' Village. Before the war all such things were taken care of Capitol people anyway.

I haven't taken many steps in the direction of the woods when I catch a noise. I turn to see Peeta wearing a rather thin coat considering the weather, standing right below his front porch with a shovel in his hand. Apparently he has other ideas than me when it comes to the necessity of shovelling snow.

Feeling uncharacteristically light-hearted I forget about my intentions to go to the woods and begin to walk in his direction. It feels good to see another living soul that isn't Buttercup, and being reminded that it's just a bit of snow and it won't isolate me from the only people I have left in my life.

"Watch your step!"

Peeta's voice surprises me. He hasn't looked up to see me coming and I didn't think he would hear my soft steps over the sound of the shovelling. I stop when I hear his warning and look down at the ground, trying to locate the cause of his cautioning.

"It rained last night, before it began to snow," says Peeta, glancing up at me. "The rain froze to ice
underneath the snow."

What he's saying makes sense, though not entirely. It's true that ice underneath a layer of snow makes for really slippery footing. Most people who fell and broke bones and sought my mother's help back before the war had slipped on ice underneath snow. But if there really is ice underneath here I ought to have felt it.

"Are you sure?" I say. "Didn't seem slippery when I left my house."

He takes a pause from his shovelling and looks over at my house.

"Judging by your tracks it seems you walked across the grass, not the path. The grass won't be half as slippery."

"You have good eyesight," I remark.

He shrugs and sends another shovel full of snow flying out on his lawn.

"I wouldn't be much of a painter if I didn't."

"I guess," I say with a hint of a smile.

"You off to the woods?" he asks.

"Yes. I thought I'd go enjoy the first real day of winter out there."

He gives me a look.

"You'll be sick to death of winter long before it ends."

"Probably," I admit, taking a few careful steps in his direction. "But now that winter doesn't mean being freezing cold and starving I can enjoy its beauty."

He smiles.

"I've always wished I could capture snow in a painting. It's so beautiful how it glistens and sparkles on the ground. And while I don't care much for frost in and of itself I love the way it looks on the branch of a tree. Being able to capture a forest on a clear winter's day would really be an achievement."

"You'll manage it, some day," I offer, fully confident that he will.

"In my eighties, perhaps," he mutters. By now he's made it about two yards and is just couple of feet away from where I'm standing. "Aren't you going to clear the path to your door?"

I look over at my house and shrug.

"I don't mind walking through a foot or two of snow."

"A foot or two?" he questions.

"I think you'll find you're the only one out here who bothers shovelling snow," I say teasingly. "I doubt Haymitch will bother with it."

"No, knowing Haymitch he will wait until I get fed up sinking down to my knees in snow just to give him his breakfast bread every morning. I can hear him already, throwing me some comment on
how if it bothers me so much then I can deal with it. Even though I know he hates wading through snow himself."

"You're probably right," I chuckle.

"Yeah, well joke's on him," says Peeta, stopping to brush a strand of hair from his face. "He needs to get out of the house more. Get some actual fresh air for a change. If he wants bread this winter he'll have to come to me."

"Listen to you, sounding all strict," I say with another small chuckle.

"Like I said, he needs to get out more."

"What about me?" I ask. "Will I have to come to your door to get breakfast, too? Or can I have mine delivered?" In my mind I start picturing the three of us having breakfast together every morning, like old times, and a warm feeling runs through me.

"Shame on you for expecting the guy with the prosthetic leg to wade through the snow to bring breakfast to you," he says in a jestingly chastising tone.

"Well what do you say both Haymitch and I show up at your door to get our bread and to cook whatever I've killed for dinner?" I suggest, my tone light but the question quite sincere. I like the idea of spending long winter days cooped up with Haymitch and Peeta in a house that smells of freshly baked bread and, let's face it, is much more like a real home than mine or Haymitch's houses.

"Do the dishes afterward and you might just have yourself a deal," he answers with a raised eyebrow.

"Haymitch can do the dishes."

By now we're standing right in front of one another. It's good to see him like this, looking healthy and more recovered from his traumas. His cheeks are rosy from the cold fresh air, his eyes seem an almost unnatural shade of blue and he's got snow here and there in his hair, glistening as much there as down on the ground. I don't think I would mind standing here for a minute or two and watch the boy they broke so badly looking so alive and youthful and innocent.

"You realize you're in my way, right?" he teases.

"Or you can put the shovel down and just walk in my footsteps the last bit," I reply.

"You'd still need to move for that to happen, though," he smirks.

"Eager to get rid of me?" I tease.

"Not necessarily. Though if you want to hang around I'd rather you moved to stand beside the mailbox, like a good lawn ornament."

"Hey!" I yelp, giving him a playful smack on the shoulder, enjoying the sound of his carefree laughter. "Okay, okay, I'll move."

I turn around a little too fast and lose my footing. Instinctively I reach out and grab his arm to steady myself.

"Whoa!" he says. "Careful now!"

But it's too late. We both begin to slip on the ice underneath the thin layer of snow left from Peeta's
shovelling. I hear the shovel drop to the ground and I grab on to Peeta with both hands out of pure reflex and for a brief second it seems like we might be able to stay on our feet. Then we've fallen over in the snow, me landing on top of him, both of us laughing like carefree children.

"Did you hurt yourself?" I ask through my laughter.

"Only my pride," he laughs back. "Ow, and my tailbone I think. A little."

The closeness of his body, even through the layers of my winter clothing, brings a warmness to me. I'm reminded of another time we slipped and fell like this in the snow, in what seems like a whole lifetime ago. That time there were cameras, there was the threat of Snow hanging over our heads and there was the uncertainty of my feelings. I don't feel that uncertainty anymore as I look at him, his face so close to mine. My laughter subsides and I can think of nothing but how it ended the last time we were in this predicament. It feels like an odd chance of a do-over, a chance to get to re-live that kiss for nobody else but for us. And I wonder what it would be like to kiss him now. Would it be like those kisses on the beach? I don't let myself think about those kisses often but in this moment it seems like it's the only thing on my mind.

"Are you okay?" asks Peeta, brow furrowed with concern.

"Yeah," I exhale.

"You're not getting up."

The moment is gone as quickly as it came. He doesn't feel the way I do. He doesn't want to kiss. I'm not even sure I want to anymore either, equally frightened of what it would mean if a kiss now would feel like the ones on the beach and of what it would mean if it didn't. All the same I can't seem to get off him just yet.

"Do you remember...?" I ask him. "When we were in the snow like this? When we were leaving for the Victory Tour?"

"Vaguely," he says. Then he makes a displeased face. "It's one of those memories I can't really reach. They twisted it in my mind and I don't know what is real and what is their spin on it. It's not a good memory in any case."

"Oh."

Reluctantly I lift my body off of his, defeated by his reply. It takes me by surprise to learn that he doesn't consider that a good memory, and it makes me feel a lot sadder than it probably should. I focus on looking down on my outfit as I brush the snow off of it. I take a step to the side so that I'm standing on the lawn and I am no longer in the way. Peeta rises beside me and grabs the shovel.

"I try not to think back," he says, sounding a bit closed off now. "I want to make new memories instead. Ones I know are real and mine."

"Still," I say, brushing myself as if there's more snow there. "We had some good memories, too."

He takes a short pause from his shovelling.

"They're not so good in my head." He continues what he was doing, sending a heap of snow flying onto the pile beside the path on the opposite side of where I'm standing. "I don't like thinking about it."

I feel completely deflated. All the warm, happy feelings inside of me when I headed out to enjoy the
beauty of the first snow in the woods, and the strange excitement I felt when Peeta and I were on the
ground mere seconds ago, have gone away.

"Peeta…" I hear myself saying. "There were good moments. I don't want you to forget or ignore
them."

He shrugs.

"Like I said, I would rather make new memories." Yet another shovel-full of snow goes flying out
over his lawn. "Sometimes that's what keeps me going, you know? The thought that the best
memories I will have in my life have not yet happened."

"You'll get good and happy memories," I say. "Just... Don't let them take away the good ones from
the past. I'd be more than happy to help you reclaim them."

"Thanks, but..." A cringe flashes over his face for a brief second. "I think they'll come back to me
easier without your help. At least until I've recovered more. As much as I despise it I haven't fully
learned yet to ignore that voice in my head that tells me to be wary of the things you say about the
past."

His revelation feels like a punch in the stomach. I wrap my arms around myself, feeling a growing
sadness aching inside. I had no idea that he still had that much wariness regarding me. I know he
desperately wants to overcome it, and I know he doesn't hate me anymore, but it feels like such a big
hurdle. I want him to come back to me, the way he was before, trusting me like he used to. Whatever
the nature of our relationship will be I want it to be genuine and complete and not tainted by the past.

"You should get going if you want a chance to see all your favourite spots in the woods before
darkness falls," he says. Nothing in his voice hints to what we were just talking about, and the
change makes me falter for a moment.

"Oh... Actually I'm not so sure I want to go out there anymore. One tumble in the snow was enough
for me today, I think." I look at him as he wipes his brow with the back of his mitten-clad hand.
"What about you? What are you up to for the rest of the day?"

"Heading into town," he says. "I noticed a few weeks ago that my winter coat is looking rather...
worse for wear, to put it mildly. I've been meaning to get another one but I thought I had more time
before the snow would fall." He pauses and sticks the shovel in the ground, resting his forearms on
the handle. "To be fully honest with you... I've been avoiding getting a new one because I wanted to
hold on to the one Portia made. I know how much love and concern she put into everything she
made for me."

I'm not sure how to respond. Funny, I never thought about Peeta feeling close to Portia the way I felt
to Cinna. In the end we both got our designers killed, and we both had to watch their demise from
just a few feet away, powerless to save them. I look down at my own clothes and know I want them
to last for as long as possible, as if Cinna still lingers on as long as I wear his clothes.

"I can understand that..." I tell Peeta. "I'm sorry it got ruined."

"It's not Portia's fault," he says, though I didn't think it was. "The morning I left for the Quell reaping
I must have left a window open. Looks like a rat chewed on it."

"You have other clothes that she made, right?" I say, not knowing what else to say.

The hint of a smile appears on his face.
"Mostly suits and dress shirts... But there are a few other items that I'm being very careful with nowadays. And three very comfortable sets of pyjamas."

It never occurred to me that Portia would make Peeta pyjamas. Cinna didn't make anything like that for me, though Octavia mentioned that he had been tasked to make me something to wear for my wedding night. Thinking about it makes me blush.

"I should get going," I say, feeling suddenly awkward being near Peeta.

"If you're not going to the woods maybe you can go wake Haymitch?"

"Gee, doesn't that sound like fun?"

"Just be careful that you don't slip and fall again," says Peeta, offering me a friendly smile. "Don't think you can get me to come to your door with bread every day this winter just because you fell and broke your hip."

"My hip?" I echo. "What am I, eighty?"

He chuckles and shrugs. I give a small wave and then I walk off in the direction of my own house. On my way there I do as Peeta asked and stop by Haymitch's house to wake him up, naturally getting no thanks at all from our old mentor for providing this service. I let him grumble and growl and gripe while I put a kettle on the stove to make him some tea, giving him almost none of my attention. I usually don't when he's in this kind of mood but today it's more than just drowning out his discontent. My mind keeps going back to that moment when Peeta and I were lying on the ground together, just like when the Victory Tour began.

I wonder again what it would have felt like to kiss him today.

I feel a bit strange when I go over to Peeta's to have dinner that evening. I wonder if he's going to say anything about what happened earlier in the day, or if things will be weird between us. Imagine my surprise when I walk through the door and am immediately greeted by the sound of Peeta and Haymitch laughing. I quickly hang up my coat and kick off my shoes and walk to the kitchen where I find the two of them already working on dinner. Peeta is stirring something in a big pot and Haymitch is chopping bell peppers.

"Sweetheart, you're late," says Haymitch in a fairly cheerful tone. "Thanks to your tardiness Peeta forced me to help out with dinner."

"God help us all," smirks Peeta. He lifts the large wooden spoon full of red sauce from the pot, grabs a teaspoon and scrapes some of the sauce off. He puts the teaspoon in his mouth and a look of concentration passes over his face when he tastes it. "More pepper. It needs more pepper."

"Alright already, I'm working on it," says Haymitch in a playfully nagging tone, chopping a yellow bell pepper with gusto.

"Pepper as in spice, not vegetable," chuckles Peeta. "Katniss grab the pepper from the kitchen island, would you?"
Still confused by the merry mood I grab the jar and hand it to him. He adds what seems like an awful lot of pepper and then puts it back on the spice rack where it belongs. Haymitch grabs a handful of chopped up bell peppers and tosses them in the pot while Peeta eyes through the other spices on the rack trying to decide what else to add to the mix.

"What are you boys making?" I ask, not entirely able to hide my surprise.

"I have no idea," says Peeta. "Haymitch is improvising. I hope you're not hungry."

"Careful," warns Haymitch. "I've got a knife in my hand."

"You often do but I'm faster than you."

"Did you both nab from the extra stash of morphling?" I ask while I take a seat by the kitchen island. Both Peeta and I were given a few doses of the drug to use in emergencies, since our wounds haven't fully healed yet.

"What, we can't be in a good mood?" asks Haymitch. He grabs the wooden spoon from Peeta, scoops up some sauce and shoves it in his mouth, ignoring Peeta's protests. "Ugh! Too much pepper."

"You can't eat straight off this spoon!" Peeta objects. "No, don't put it back in the pot now!" He takes it from Haymitch at the last second. "That's it, you're on a cooking time out. Go set the table instead."

"Who made you boss of the kitchen?" snorts Haymitch.

"It's my kitchen."

The good-natured bickering continues, though Haymitch is not allowed near the food again until it's ready to be served. After dinner Haymitch challenges Peeta to a game of chess and I volunteer to do the dishes while they take out the chess board and duke it out at the kitchen table. Haymitch has tried to get me to play him a few times but I always say no. I was taught how to play when I was younger but I never had the patience for it. The concept of forming a strategy of attack did draw my interest but it just takes too long to play. I get bored just watching Haymitch and Peeta.

When I'm finished with the dishes I pull out a chair at the end of the table and take a seat anyway, entertaining myself by pointing out various strategic moves, or at least moves I perceive to be strategic, which seems to annoy both Haymitch and Peeta. I pretend not to notice, finding more amusement in messing with them than I do in watching the game itself unfold at a snail's pace. After about an hour they decide to put the game on hold for now, neither one of them seeming to be anywhere near victory. Haymitch carefully lifts the board and carries it over to a side table, putting eliminated pieces in a wooden box.

"Time to head on home," he says.

"Katniss, would you mind sticking around for a minute?" asks Peeta as we both rise from our seats. "There's something I want to show you."

"Sure," I say, my curiosity woken.

We follow Haymitch to the front hall and bid our goodnights as he heads out into the darkness. There's a strangely pleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach at staying behind and watching Haymitch leave – not because I mind his company but because something about it reminds me of the togetherness Peeta and I enjoyed in the brief period of time around the Quarter Quell. When the door
has closed behind Haymitch and Peeta has locked it he turns to me and gives me a friendly smile that makes me feel even better inside.

"So what did you want to show me?" I ask.

"Come," he says, leading the way to his sitting room, talking while we walk. "I know we said it would wait until later but I had a fit of inspiration today when I got back home, and honestly it was my first real inspiration to draw anything at all other than depressing stuff since, well, before the hijacking I guess." He walks over to the mantelpiece and picks up a sketchbook. "It's just a sketch, the real thing will of course be on canvas, but it's an outline of sorts and I would love to hear what you think of it. It's probably not very accurate but it will look better once I can study the actual thing more closely. At least you'll get an idea of what it might end up looking like, in terms of composition and such."

He walks up to me and hands me the sketchbook. I look down at the paper and see a primrose flower sketched in delicate details, beautifully shaded and just the kind of thing I had in mind. It doesn't look exactly like a real primrose but he's gotten the general shape of it down, and I know that once he can study an actual flower he will be able to recreate it in detail. I open my mouth to tell him I think it's beautiful, but instead a sob comes out, and I sink down on the couch behind me. Primrose. I've been trying so hard not to think about her, not to let grief consume me, and I was the one who wanted this picture in the first place. Yet seeing the flower she was named for lovingly captured on paper by Peeta's hand makes me miss her terribly, and does not at all make me remember fondly the way I thought it would. Instead it hurts. It hurts beyond words to realize once again that I will never get to see her again, or hold her again, or hear her voice.

I can barely see through my tears but I feel the sketchpad being gently taken from my hands, and then Peeta's arm is around my shoulders and he's sitting beside me on the couch. In the midst of my sorrow I feel terrible that this is my reaction to something I asked him to do, and which he thought would make me happy.

"I'm sorry," I gasp through my sobs. "It's not... It's lovely, I just..."

"Hush, hush now..." he says gently. "You must miss her so much."

Hearing him put it into words pushes me to the point where I know I won't be able to pull myself together until I've allowed myself to let go and cry. I'm not even bothered anymore that I'm letting this weakness show in front of him. His arm stays around my shoulders and he pulls me close, offering his shoulder to cry on. I lean against his broad chest, feeling comforted in the middle of my pain through his sheer closeness, and he lets me cry without saying a word, which I think is just what I need. Peeta is good with words but I can't imagine that any words in the world could comfort me in this moment, so his silence feels like balm to my soul. Like he still understands me even after everything they did to take him away from me.

To my own surprise I don't cry for very long. A few minutes of intense sobbing and then the immediate grief subsides a bit, bringing me back to my senses. I don't sit up straight at once, as I perhaps should. Peeta's presence feels so right and just to be back in his embrace, a place I never thought I'd be again, feels better than I can describe. I want to stay like this for as long as he'll allow me, but I don't want to overstay my welcome in his arms. I sniffle and sit back up again, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

"Peeta the drawing is wonderful," I say. "Maybe a little too good," I add with a little chuckle, despite my sadness.

"I'm glad you like it," he answers gently. His hand has moved from my shoulder and is rubbing my
back in a soothing way.

"It's exactly what I had in mind," I say, trying to smile a bit while I try to dry my face from all the tears.

"Do you need anything?" he asks. "Can I get you anything?"

I realize all of a sudden just how exhausted I am. It's been a long day following a night with little sleep and the emotional overload mere moments ago seems to have drained me of my last energy. A hot bath would be nice but most of all I just want a chance to compose myself and gather some more energy.

"Actually, would it be alright if I laid down for a while?" I ask. "Just for fifteen minutes, or so. I could use a little more energy before I head out there."

"Of course," says Peeta. His hand leaves my back and he rises to his feet. "There are no bed sheets in the downstairs guestroom but I always keep bedspreads on the beds and there should be some decorative pillows and a blanket or two. You could lie down there for a moment."

"Thank you," I say, feeling a touch wobbly as I rise to my feet.

"Come, I'll show you the way."

I don't need directions, his house is just like mine only mirror-imaged, but I don't voice an objection. I let him lead me to the bedroom on the downstairs floor and gratefully I lie down on the bed with my head on the pillow Peeta grabs from an armchair.

"I'll only be a few minutes," I promise.

"It's alright," he assures me. "Do you want some water?"

"Sure, that would be great."

He leaves the room and heads for the kitchen, leaving the door open so that I can hear him moving around. I curl up on my side in a foetal position, wondering to myself if I actually will be able to get off this bed and put my coat and boots on and walk the short distance back to my own house. My whole body feels so heavy and every movement seems draining.

Peeta comes back after about a minute, carrying a large glass of water. He's added three ice cubes and a thin cucumber slice and I smile a little at the memory of how they used to have large pitchers of ice water in the bakery, also with thin slices of cucumber in them. Some things seem to be ingrained in his memory still, regardless of what they did to him in the Capitol.

"Here you go," he says, kneeling by the bed to get in level with me.

I lift myself up on my elbow and take the glass in my hand, taking a few sips of the cool water. Out of nowhere tears begin to well up in my eyes again and I think about having to go back to my empty house in just a short while. It's been a while now since I've felt taken care of; Greasy Sae stopped coming by when I began to get my life in order again and she started working on building a new shop for herself. The simple gesture of bringing me a glass of water brings to mind all the little things my mother and my sister used to do for me, and the things I used to do for them.

"Hey..." says Peeta gently, his fingers reaching up to wipe away the new tears, but I know there will only be more to follow.
"I just feel so alone," I admit to him in a moment of uncharacteristic vulnerability. "In that big house, just me and the cat, no Mother, no Prim..." My voice breaks when I say her name and I'm back to sobbing.

"I know," says Peeta. "I know how lonely and empty it must be. Prim, she had a way of filling up a room with her presence, didn't she?"

I nod and hold out the glass for him to take before I accidentally drop it on the ground or something. I don't think I can handle heading back to that house tonight. I will have to go to Haymitch and have his company until the sun begins to rise, and the loneliness will feel a little less palpable.

Then Peeta rises to his feet and moves over to the foot of the bed. From there he climbs up and comes to lay down right behind me, tentatively wrapping an arm around my waist, perhaps unsure if I will allow the breech of personal space. My tears keep coming but for a short moment I feel an unexpected warmth and – almost – joy. I remember so well those nights on the train when he held me like this during the night, even if he doesn't remember, or chooses not to remember. It's like having another little piece of the real him back and it means more to me than he can ever know.

I move my hand down and rest it on top of his to show that I allow, and as a matter of fact welcome, this intimacy between us. He pulls back a little but only to grab the blanket he put on the bed for me, which I didn't bother wrapping over myself. He pulls the blanket over us, and it makes me realize I am shivering and he probably thinks I'm cold. He then moves closer to me and it feels just like old times, and it makes it even harder to face the reality that I have to get up and leave in less than fifteen minutes, and head back home to a lonely house and an even lonelier bed.

I close my eyes and continue to cry silently. Peeta's face comes to rest just beside my neck, making me feel every exhale, and I imagine that I can feel or hear his steady heartbeat the way I always could when I let his chest serve as my pillow. Slowly my tears subside and I begin to feel relaxed and even comfortable. Peeta stays silent, offering me his comfort without interfering with my grief. I open my eyes to check what time it is but can't seem to locate a clock from the position I'm lying in, and I'm damn sure not going to move an inch unless I know the fifteen minutes I asked for are up. I feel my eyelids grow heavy and I allow myself just a brief moment of closing them again. I can't remember the last time I felt at peace like this and I want to enjoy it for whatever few moments are left. The thought brings on new tears and I bury my face in the pillow.

I wake up in the middle of the night, but not from a nightmare. In fact I don't know what it was that woke me but it doesn't make a difference. Even though the room is in darkness and it's unfamiliar to me I instantly know where I am, and who I'm with. I must have cried myself to sleep and Peeta let me sleep on, curled up safe in his embrace. He's still here with me, the "puh"-like sound he makes in his sleep with every exhale blowing a puff of air at my neck each time.

Despite the difficult ending to the day I feel genuine happiness. I had almost forgotten what a luxurious feeling it is to sleep in his embrace, and how good it feels to not be alone in the night. Reason tells me that this night is an exception, and that I can't expect to get to fall asleep with him like this every night like I would want to if I could, but for tonight I am going to enjoy it to its fullest.
With a smile on my lips I close my eyes and drift off to sleep again, for the first time in a long time without fear of what I might see in my dreams.
Chapter 4

After that first day of snowfall it gets warm again and most of the snow melts. It's not until late November that winter seems to arrive for real, with temperatures well below freezing and some heavy snowfall that makes even me grab a shovel to create a path to my door.

Peeta's house becomes our main meeting place. We gather every other night to have dinner and a bit of human contact, though more often than not Haymitch falls asleep on the couch when it's time to clean up after the meal. Peeta and I never mention the one night I spent in his guestroom, and it's almost as if it never even happened. What reminds me that it did happen is that slowly, steadily, Peeta and I are growing closer again. It feels like we're becoming friends in a way we haven't been before. We don't touch each other all that often, and when it happens it's usually one person brushing against the other accidentally or our fingers brushing when one of us hands something to the other, but the touches feel natural now, and I enjoy the slight tingling feeling I get whenever his skin meets mine.

One evening Peeta and I are doing the dishes in comfortable silence when a sudden loud howling sound catches our attention. It's dark out already but the lights from the lamp posts are enough to allow us to see what is going on. Peeta walks over to the nearest window and frowns.

"The wind is really picking up speed," he says. "Looks like we might have a real snow storm on our hands."

"First of the winter," I remark.

"And hopefully the last." With a troubled look on his face he walks over and takes the dish brush from my hand. "Leave the dishes. Go wake up Haymitch. You two had better get home while you still can."

I want to protest. The idea of being snowed in all by myself in my big, lonely house makes me very uncomfortable and a little scared, and I would much rather spend a snowstorm here with Peeta and Haymitch, but I don't want to suggest it to Peeta in case he prefers sitting it out alone. He does seem rather concerned as he keeps looking out the window with a furrowed brow.

"I'll get Haymitch," I mumble. I walk into the sitting room, grab a pillow and hit Haymitch over the head with it. "Get up!"

He wakes up with a snort and lifts himself up to a sitting position, rubbing his eyes and looking confused.

"What? What's going on?"

"There's a snowstorm coming."

"Well it is winter," he replies dryly, yawning big.

"We need to go," I say. "Or we'll end up snowed in here."

"Oh the horror," yawns Haymitch. He lays back down, curls up on his side facing the back of the couch, and clearly has no intention of leaving his warm spot by the fireplace in favour of the cold outside.

I look from Haymitch to the window, though I can't see much out of it. I can't see the point in putting
a lot of effort into getting him off the couch when I don't want to leave either. Instead I walk back into the kitchen where Peeta is still doing the dishes with the same displeased facial expression.

"Haymitch doesn't want to go," I say.

Peeta sighs, puts down the plate he was washing and walks into the sitting room. I follow in his tracks, a bit annoyed by his determination to get rid of us.

"Haymitch!" he says.

"Forget it boy, I'm not heading out into that storm when I've got a perfectly good spot here on the couch."

Peeta grabs the bottle of white liquor Haymitch put on the coffee table and without flinching he empties its contents over Haymitch's head. Our old mentor flies up into sitting, sputtering and cursing and waving an imaginary knife at Peeta, who looks completely unfazed by the reaction.

"Well now you're up," he says, putting the empty bottle down on the table.

"Are you crazy?" yells Haymitch. "That was my last bottle!"

"You know what, I really don't care." Peeta grabs him by the hand and pulls him up to his feet. "The wind is howling outside and the snow is falling heavily. If you're not out the door in a few minutes you might not make it back to your own house before the storm kicks into full gear."

"Can't we just stay here?" I ask.

"The hell we are," snarls Haymitch, pulling himself loose from Peeta and stumbling in the direction of the door that leads through the kitchen to the downstairs hallway. "Apparently you're both strangely disagreeable people these days."

I realize that Haymitch probably won't be able to walk back to his own house without assistance given his current condition. I also realize that if that was indeed his last bottle of liquor then he's not going to be much fun to be around in the upcoming days. No wonder Peeta wants him to go home. I sure don't want to be cooped up with Haymitch when he's going through withdrawal. Reluctantly I follow him, trying to avoid stepping in the drops of white liquor that have fallen from him on his way to the door.

Peeta tries to help Haymitch get his coat and gloves on, but Haymitch is much too angry with him for wasting alcohol and refuses to let him. I dress myself quietly, uncomfortable seeing those two be at odds with each other. When I reach for my scarf I notice that Peeta still has the same winter coat that he had when the first snow fell. He's going to be freezing cold now that winter has come for real.

"I thought you were getting a new coat," I comment.

"Huh?" Peeta takes his attention off of Haymitch. "Oh. I am. In fact I was supposed to pick it up tomorrow but judging by this weather that's not going to be possible."

"Want me to pick it up for you once the weather clears?" I offer. "The coat you have isn't going to be enough to keep you warm all the way into town after the storm."

"No that's okay," he says quickly. "I don't mind."

I wrap my scarf around my neck and grab Haymitch by the arm. He reeks of white liquor but at least the smell isn't primarily coming from his breath for once.
"Come on, old drunkard, let's get going."

"Who are you calling an old drunkard?" snarls Haymitch.

"Walk safe," says Peeta, opening the door for us. "Hey Katniss…"

I stop in the doorway, even though we should move quickly and not let too much of the wind and snow inside.

"Yes?"

"Give me a call when you've gotten home," he says, almost hesitantly.

Feeling a little bit better I offer him a smile.

"I'll do that."

I lead Haymitch outside and fight the urge to close my eyes to protect them from the wind and the icy-sharp snow that's blowing everywhere.

The snow keeps howling for another two days. I spend those days isolated and lonely in my house, feeling the absence of my mother and sister more than I ever think I have before. My only company is Buttercup, who thankfully chooses to curl up on my lap every once in a while, perhaps in as great a need for physical contact with another living being as I am. Oftentimes I find myself sitting in my mother's empty bedroom, looking out the window even though there's nothing to see but the falling snow. Somewhere out there is Peeta's house. I long for him, too, not just for my mother and sister. I long for the Peeta I knew on the other side of District 13 and the end of the Quarter Quell. The Peeta I saw a strong glimpse of that night when I cried myself to sleep in his guestroom. I don't think that Peeta would have shooed Haymitch and me out of his house when a blizzard hit.

In my mind I imagine all kinds of reasons why Peeta didn't want us there. Haymitch's probable withdrawal is one. Another is that he might be worried that he'll have a flashback and that it won't end well if he and I are essentially locked in the house together. Maybe he doesn't have food enough for three people to ride out a snowstorm. Perhaps he simply wants to be alone.

"I miss him, Buttercup…" I admit with a sigh, scratching behind the cat's ear. My heart begins to grow even lonelier. "I miss Prim… I miss my father and my mother…” I close my eyes hard, trying to prevent the tears from falling. "It's just you and me now, old cat. What a sorry pair we make."

Buttercup meows, as if to protest. I keep scratching behind his ear, finding at least a little bit if comfort in his presence, though I have to fight with myself not to start thinking of Prim when her cat is on my lap.

Eventually I lift the cat up in my arms and carry him to the kitchen where I serve him dinner before opening my refrigerator to find something for myself to eat. Nothing looks appetizing and I feel even more isolated at the thought of having to eat dinner alone. It's hard to feel hungry for anything when I know I will be sitting by the kitchen table all by myself while I eat. Eventually I decide to simply skip dinner. I'm hungry but not excessively so, and it wouldn't be the first time I've gone to bed without having had dinner. I just can't bring myself to prepare anything. I grab the last apple from the
bowl on the counter and chew on it while I walk into the sitting room to turn the TV on, hoping the storm won't result in too much static.

When the storm has finally ended I reluctantly leave the house to get the shovelling of snow out of the way. Sometimes I admit there are things I miss from the days between our two Games, specifically that people employed by the Capitol took care of things like tending the garden and shovelling the snow. I'm beginning to consider hiring somebody to do the job but I haven't gotten very far in that thinking process yet.

It takes me a long time to clear away enough snow so that I can easily move from the door to the street, where thankfully they have ploughed the worst. It's a cold day out but I'm sweating heavily and I head back inside to take a shower. Once I'm dry again and my hair has been braided I decide to go see Peeta. It's been a while since we've gone even two days without seeing one another and I want to know how he rode out the storm. I smile when I think that perhaps his house will smell of freshly baked bread, and that if he's been out shovelling snow too today his face might be flushed from the fresh air and exercise.

Buttercup stands by the front door, meowing unhappily. I open the door for him but he shudders and stays put, still meowing and looking at me like he thinks I'm supposed to take away the cold and the snow just for him. I give him a look while I put my boots on.

"Either man up and go outside or stop whining about it," I say. "Preferably go outside. Cleaning your litter box is not something I do for fun." I stand up and put my coat on, then grab the cat. "It's just a bit of snow, you big wimp."

I open the door and send the cat flying into a pile of snow, resulting in indignant meows and a lot of sputtering. He looks at me and hisses, trying to regain some of his lost dignity, and then sticks his head in the air and trots off down the path I have created. I chuckle a bit and close the door behind me.

The snow crackles under my boots as I head down the path to the road, and the sun reflecting off of it is almost too bright. I squint and look up at the clear blue sky which show absolutely no signs of the storm that raged for over fifty hours. I wonder what it's like out in the woods today. I can't say I have a longing to go out there. Trudging through deep snow when I don't need fresh game to fill my belly doesn't seem worth it.

As I walk toward Peeta's house I send a look in the direction of Haymitch's. To my surprise he's actually outdoors too, cursing loudly as he wields his shovel. He doesn't seem at all affected by the lack of alcohol in his system during the storm. I wonder if he's got a secret stash somewhere, and if so, if I ought to find it.

"Lovely day, isn't it?" I say cheerfully, knowing it will annoy him.

"On days like this I long back to the good old days of tyranny and oppression when I at least didn't have to shovel my own damn snow," he snarls in reply.

"Don't strain your back, old man. I'll see you at Peeta's tonight for dinner?"

"Maybe," he mutters. Apparently he's not forgiven Peeta for the thing with the white liquor quite yet.
I walk up to Peeta's house and knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer I walk inside and call his name to alert him to my presence. I smile when the smell of freshly baked goods fills my nose. He hasn't made bread but he's made something even better – cinnamon rolls.

"In the kitchen, Katniss," his voice calls in response to my greeting.

Steadying myself with a hand to the wall I reach down and begin to tug at the laces of my boots. Peeta is very particular about taking off your shoes when you walk through the door of his house. I think he wants to keep the dirt of the street out of his kitchen; it also has the benefit of keeping all the snow we drag inside on days like today from melting all over the house. When I put my coat up on a hanger I notice the new winter coat hanging where his old, worn one used to be. Surprised to see it I reach out my fingers and gently let them graze the fabric. The coat is navy blue and looks well made even if it's nothing fancy. It's bound to keep him warm through winter.

"I see you've got your new coat," I say as I walk to the kitchen.

"Yeah, picked it up today."

I stop on the threshold and allow myself a moment of looking at him while he's occupied with the second batch of rolls. Sometimes I think his standard baking outfit – comfortable slacks, a t-shirt and an apron – is the look I like the best on him. It just seems to be the look that's most genuinely him. His hair is tousled and his cheeks do indeed look a bit flushed and I long for the moment when his eyes will look up and meet with mine.

"You must have left early," I say, continuing the conversation about the coat just to hear his voice answering me. "You should have let me get it. It's really cold out."

"No, it was fine," he insists. "I had an errand to run in town anyway. Including, but not limited to, buying more booze for Haymitch." He finally looks at me and smiles. "What did you think of it? The coat, I mean. It's nice, right?"

"Yeah," I agree.

"I think I'm going to have a new sweater made by the same tailor," he says. "Or a shirt, perhaps."

"Okay," I say, walking up to the kitchen counter where he's working. The subject of the coat is no longer keeping my interest. "You're baking cinnamon rolls?"

I've always adored the smell of cinnamon rolls, and I have vivid memories of my tenth birthday when my father surprised me by coming home from the mines with a bag holding two large ones from the bakery. It was a lot of money to spend on food that barely qualifies as food, and is eaten for the flavour and not for its nutrients, but it was his and my mother's birthday present to me. I remember I got to have one all to myself while my father shared the other one with Prim. My mother didn't want one. The flavour seemed to stay in my mouth for weeks afterward and I've never tasted one since, not even in the Capitol. But I oftentimes did smell it when I walked past the bakery and a customer walked through the door. Prim loved to stop by the bakery's store window to look at the beautiful cakes, but I liked stopping there because of the lovely scents.

"The first batch were cinnamon rolls," says Peeta. "These are going to have a bit of custard on them."

"Interesting," I say, my eyes glued to the dough he's working with.

He looks at me, chuckles and cuts off another slice of the rolled dough. Instead of putting it in a paper cup he holds it out to me.
"Here."

I stare at it with wide eyes.

"You're giving me dough?"

"You're practically salivating," he laughs. "Try it. It's good. On days when my mother was in a good mood she'd sometimes let us have the small ends of the dough roll."

I take the slice of dough and smile at the feel of it in my fingers. Then I shove it in my mouth unceremoniously and close my eyes when the flavour hits my taste buds. I let out a loud moan, and when I hear Peeta's laughter I open my eyes again.

"Good?" he asks with a mischievous glint in his eye.

"Amazing," I say, mouth still full of dough. "I don't know why you're thinking of baking this when it's incredible as is."

He gives me a playful nudge and goes back to his task at hand. I walk over to the kitchen table and take a seat, savouring the last bit of dough that's still in my mouth. Peeta whistles a cheerful tune as he finishes putting slices of dough in the paper cups. He applies a coat of raw, battered eggs to each bun-to-be and sprinkles pearled sugar on top. Then he puts the whole tin in the oven. He closes the oven door, sets a timer and brushes his fingers on his apron.

"Wait till you try the cinnamon rolls."

My grin seems so wide it almost hurts.

"I get to try one?"

"Most of them I have a special purpose for," he says, walking over to the refrigerator to get a bottle of milk. "I set aside a few who didn't look so nice. Between you and me I don't think the shape will matter, right?"

"They can look like flattened bugs for all I care," I admit with a shrug. "That's good, though, that you're selling baked goods again."

"Not much else I can do for a living," he shrugs, getting a plate from a cabinet.

"At least you have something to do," I point out. "All I know how to do is hunt and be unsociable."

"You're not so bad," smiles Peeta. He lifts a towel covering a large rack of rolls and selects two of them, putting them on the plate. "Get two glasses and bring the milk to the table, would you?"

I do as asked and soon we're sitting opposite each other, each with a large glass of cold milk and a still warm cinnamon roll in front of us.

"I've always wanted to try one of these again," I admit with childlike excitement.

"Sounds like you haven't had enough experience with cinnamon buns. I sense a story here."

I grab one of the rolls and let my fingers lightly tread over its surface, feeling each and every pearl of sugar on top of it. I tell Peeta my story, embellishing it with as many details as I can remember, and he listens without a word. When I've reached the story's end I find myself remembering that Haymitch told me they reminded Peeta of me telling him the story of the goat while he was in District 13, and how the only thing Peeta had asked about afterward was the goat.
"It was probably my mother who made those cinnamon rolls," says Peeta, oblivious to my change in moods. "My father never made them but she would let us kids help her out with them. It's one of the first things we learned how to make."

I don't like knowing that his witch of a mother was most likely behind one of my favourite childhood memories so I quickly lift the pastry from its cup and take a big bite to distract myself. My eyes close again and I whimper slightly. It tastes just as I remember.

I stay in his kitchen the rest of the afternoon, keeping him company while he works. After the rolls with custard he goes back to making bread but he declines my offer to help him knead the dough. Instead I'm put on clean-up duty which is usually not my favourite task but after the isolation during the storm I'm happy to do anything as long as I can do it in his company, and as long as I can hear his laughter.

Slowly the winter months pass by. We keep meeting at Peeta's house every other night for dinner, but as winter stretches on we more and more often take turns buying food in town instead of relying on my hunting to feed us. Game is scare this time of year and what animals I do find are usually rather malnourished. I don't need to kill them to put food on the table and so it seems wasteful to do so now, instead of waiting until winter is over and they've gotten more to eat and will bring us more meat. By early March Peeta offers to take over the full responsibility for buying food, which Haymitch applauds and I question. Peeta and I have agreed over the past few months that it's good for Haymitch to have to walk into town at least once a week and get a little bit of fresh air, and some company other than ours. Besides, it doesn't make any sense that Peeta should have to buy all the food. Money isn't an issue since we still have more than we can spend in a lifetime, but I like having even divisions of labour. Earlier on I hunted, Peeta baked and Haymitch began to do most of the actual cooking. I don't like the idea of just arriving at Peeta's several nights a week having a meal served for me when I contributed nothing to it.

"You can do all the dishes and I will be a very happy guy," smirks Peeta in response when I mention this to him.

"Not on your life," I snort. I've come to enjoy doing the dishes together with him, taking turns washing and drying. I'm not about to do all of it by myself while Peeta and Haymitch make themselves comfortable in front of the fireplace.

"All I'm saying is that I like going in to town," says Peeta. "I like getting the fresh air, I'm starting to feel like I'm getting back into shape, I enjoy seeing all those people and just getting out of the house for a bit. I might as well do the shopping when I'm in town, that's all I'm saying."

"What are you even doing in town so many days a week?" I ask, not really grasping what is so interesting about going in there all the time.

"I talk to people," shrugs Peeta. "I check in on Sae once a week. I'm scouting for a good place to build a new bakery."

"You bake here," I point out. "Why do you need another building for that?"

"I feel so isolated out here, Katniss," he says. "Can you understand that?"
I can. And I do admit that it's nice to go into town every once in a while and see how life is starting to return to the district, but I've become less comfortable in larger crowds. I enjoy the physical presence of other people, but I find the mindless chatter so meaningless. Always the same conversations about the weather, and how great it is that we don't have to slave away for the Capitol anymore, and exchanges of platitudes and things of that ilk. When I go to town I make a list of the shops I want to visit and I stick to them, and then head back home. It seems like Peeta can flutter from one shop to the next all day just to socialise.

I don't begrudge him the social contact. I can see that it's doing him good. He's slowly becoming more and more like his old self, and seems more at ease these days. He's often in a good mood and from what I can tell he's having fewer and fewer hijack attacks. If going into town several days a week helps that then I'm all for it. It's the part where he provides everything for our meals that makes me uncomfortable. I don't want to feel beholden to anyone, not even him, not even for something like that which I know he would never consider a debt in the first place.

"You're really nice to offer to buy everything," I say finally. "But I kind of need to have something to do, too, you know? I'll go crazy if I just drift around and…"

An apologetic look comes over his face.

"Katniss I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't even think about it like that. I didn't mean to… I mean, I know you miss being out hunting…"

"It's okay," I say, feeling a little bit better.

"I know it's important to you to be self-sufficient and to do your part and I respect that. In fact I think that's a very admirable mind-set to have, and most people could benefit from thinking that way," he continues. "I just don't want you to forget that you can let go sometimes, too." His face turns into a sad smile. "We help and protect each other, right? You and I? We take care of one another?"

I find myself smiling the way I always smile when I see something Peeta coming back in him.

"That's what we do," I acknowledge. "Protect each other. Take care of one another." My own smile turns a touch sad as well. "You do help me and look after me. Like that time after the first snowfall when…"

He nods slowly. His hand comes up and caresses my cheek in a far too brief, comforting gesture.

"Anytime you need that kind of help, Katniss…" he says.

I nod and smile.

"I know. Thank you."

We don't say anything else about who will buy the food, we both know we will keep things the way they've been. Routines are supposed to be good for us, anyhow. But for the rest of the evening I can still feel a tingling sensation on my skin where Peeta touched my cheek.
I'm standing beside my front door, still with my coat and boots on, leaning back against the wall while I look through the mail I just picked up from the mailbox. Mail never interested me before, but since the end of the war my mother writes to me, and occasionally Johanna or Cressida or someone else from the Star Squad. Every now and then I also get some form of government related mail, like Plutarch wanting me to consider giving an interview for television, or writing an inspiring column for the new national newspaper or agreeing to let some writer come here and write my life story. Those letters tend to make good fodder for the fireplace.

As I shift through the mail I find three such letters, only one is addressed to Haymitch and one to Peeta. For some reason all three ended up in my mailbox. I'm tempted to just throw all three letters on the fire, unopened, but it's not up for me to decide what to do with the two letters that aren't mine. I know Haymitch enjoys using such letters as target practice when he throws knives. I'm sure Peeta has some personal usage for it as well.

Since I haven't yet gotten out of my outdoor clothes I head right back outside to deliver the letters to the rightful owners. There's a shift in the temperature today, finally a sign that spring is on its way. I am more than tired of this particular winter and I look forward to being out in the woods when spring arrives. I unbutton my coat and leave it hanging open, feeling warm enough without it closed. I really hope spring is actually coming and that we won't have a winter setback in a few days, or weeks.

I step inside Haymitch's house and immediately hear the sound of his loud snoring. Shrugging my shoulder I leave the envelope on his kitchen table and walk back out to the street, steering my steps in the direction of Peeta's home.

I catch him just as he's walking out the door, dressed in that blue winter coat even though it's a touch too warm for it today. I can't say that I mind, though. The colour of the coat goes really well with his blonde hair and it brings out the blue in his eyes even more. At first I felt a bit embarrassed when I realized I noticed it, but by now it's happened so often that it's almost like second nature to me.

"Hey," I say. "Going somewhere?"

"In to town," he says. "What's that in your hand?"

"Letter from our best buddies in the Capitol," I say, waving the envelope in the air. "Yours and Haymitch's ended up in my letterbox by mistake."

"Did you read yours?" he asks, stepping down from the porch and taking the letter from my hand. "Do you know what it's about?"

"I haven't read one of these letters in months," I point out.

He studies the envelope for a moment, walking down the path that leads from his front door to the road, and sticks the letter in the letterbox.

"So I can remember to pick it up later," he explains. "I don't want to bring it with me and I can't be bothered going back inside."

"So you read those things?" I question, walking up beside him.
"Sometimes they're from Dr. Aurelius and I need to stick with his program," he says. We begin to walk down the road together but he stops when we reach my house. "So are you going out to the woods today?"

"I think it's too early yet," I answer. "Springtime in the forest is lovely… Melting time, however, is not."

"I'm pretty sure it won't start melting until the thermometer goes into above-freezing temperatures," he points out.

"I'd rather not take my chances. Besides, I'll have all summer and autumn to enjoy the forest. I'll walk with you to town, if that's okay. I've been putting off going there for over a week so I might as well get it done today."

"Oh," he says, looking hesitant. "No, that's okay. I've got a lot to do while I'm there so I won't be much company."

"That's fine," I assure him. He doesn't have to talk much so long as he is nearby.

"No, I wouldn't want to take up your time."

"It's not a problem," I say with a small laugh. "Like I said, I haven't been to town in far too long anyway. Not since it was my turn to buy the groceries last week. I really ought to stop by the pharmacy and I've got one or two other errands to run. Like, for instance, buying groceries."

He seems to think it over for a moment, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Then he gives me a hesitant smile.

"Okay, we'll go together," he says. "If you're sure. But seriously, you don't have to."

"Duly noted."

I'm tempted to link my arm with his as we begin to walk down the road, the way I used to do when we were out in public together. My heart feels light and my spirits are high. Finally spring is here and this year it truly feels like rebirth. This is the first year without death and destruction and horrible threats hanging over my head. I know I will spend many hours crying over how it's also the first whole year without Prim, but for now my focus is on the good things. Winter is nearing its end and we've got a chance to start fresh. Peeta and I seem to grow closer each week, and oftentimes I find I live for the way I feel when he's around me. That happiness was not supposed to exist anymore, not for me. Peeta somehow seems to make it possible and he doesn't even know it.

We don't talk much as we walk but that's fine with me. Gale and I could be quiet together for hours and there are very few people I can have comfortable silences with so sharing one with Peeta only feels natural and good. Once we start drawing near town I turn to him with a smile on my face.

"So, where to first?"

"Oh…" he says, seeming a bit unsure. "You know, why don't we just split up and meet up again when we're heading home? It would save us a lot of time."

"True," I admit. But I want to spend time with him. "I'm not in a hurry, though."

He shrugs a shoulder.

"I suppose I'm not either."
"So, then. Where do you want to go first?"

"Seamstress," he says as we reach the street where most shops are. "I'm getting a new shirt made and hopefully I can pick it up today."

"Are you in a hurry?" I ask, somewhat incredulously. I cannot imagine what he might need a new shirt for at this point in time.

"No," he chuckles, though it doesn't sound entirely believable. "Just refreshing my wardrobe. I really liked this coat, so…"

"Alright," I say with a shrug. "Lead the way."

He leads me around a corner down a smaller street which I've never really visited before. Most of my shopping is done on the main street, though I really long for the good old days when the Hob housed several different booths and I didn't have to run from one house to the other. Aside from the main street there are two or three smaller streets that have shops as well, and to my amazement it looks like District 12 might actually end up with a real shopping district, smaller in size but still reminiscent of the several blocks large shopping district of the Capitol.

We walk inside a small shop consisting of a room no larger than my bedroom. There's a door that leads to a back room where, from what little I can see through the door opening, the clothes are actually made. I can see a sewing machine and what looks like clothes' patterns. The store itself has almost no finished clothing. Instead it consists mainly of cloth of various fabrics and colours laid out on large tables.

When we stepped through the door a small bell alerted the shopkeeper of our presence. After a moment she appears, walking in from the back room, her face lighting up in a bright smile. She's young, much younger than what I had expected, probably still a teenager just like Peeta and I. I find myself staring at her hair, which falls in loose waves down to her collar bone. It's the colour of mahogany, which makes me think of Effie Trinket.

"Peeta!" she says happily, walking around the counter where she keeps the cash register. "I'm almost finished. I swear! All that's left is the button holes but that part usually takes quite a while."

"That's alright," says Peeta cheerfully, even though he seemed in such a rush to come and get his shirt.

"I will get the button holes done before tomorrow, I swear."

Bored with the idea of listening to their discussion of a shirt I begin to walk slowly through the store, examining the various pieces of cloth. Perhaps I ought to start thinking about a new wardrobe as well. My closet still holds several treasures from Cinna but most of them are too fine for everyday wear. The rest of my closet consists of two pairs of pants, a few worn-out shirts, and my mother's old sweater, a warm and big old red thing she's had for so many years that it's becoming a rather faded red.

I've just decided that I will ask this girl if she can make some clothes for me as well when the sound of her laughter catches my attention. It's a very happy, almost pearly kind of laughter and I haven't heard a sound like that in what seems like forever. I barely even remember the sound of truly carefree laughter. I look up and see her smiling brightly, putting a hand on Peeta's arm as she replies to whatever he said that caused her to laugh.

I notice the smile on Peeta's face. And I notice the look in his eyes. For a second I almost don't
recognize it. It's something I haven't seen in quite a while, something I had accepted that I would
never get to see again. It's a look on his face that I have only ever seen before when he's looked at
me.

Suddenly it all begins to make sense. Peeta's reluctance to have me accompany him today. His
sudden need for a whole new wardrobe. His many trips into town. His brighter spirits lately. Pain
rises in me so fast that I lose my footing a little, reaching back to grab onto something to steady
myself. It turns out to be a book with fabric samples and when I put my hand on it, it falls from the
shelf and down on the floor causing a clatter that gets the attention of both Peeta and the girl.

"Oops," I mutter, diving to the floor to pick up the book, thankful to have something to look at
besides Peeta and this girl, and thankful that they can't read the discomfort on my face because of the
table blocking me from their view. "Sorry."

"Let me get that," says the girl, walking over to me and kneeling to help me out.

"It's okay, I've got it," I say a touch harshly. Her hand lands on mine as I grab the book, but I pull it
back and rise to my feet. I don't want to be touched by this girl. I need some time to think all of this
over first. "Sorry about your book."

"That's alright," she says. "It's not broken. It can handle a fall to the ground."

"Peeta let's go!" I say.

"There's no rush," he says, looking a bit confused.

"Your shirt isn't finished yet," I say. "Let's not waste her time. We have other things to do today so
let's get going."

For a horrible moment he looks from me to her, uncertainty written on his face. If he tells me to go
ahead while he stays behind to chat with her I think I might lose my temper, if not my mind. He
doesn't get the chance to decide what he would prefer to do, staying with her or going with me,
because the girl decides for him.

"She's right, you should go ahead." She gives me a brief smile but then turns her attention fully to
Peeta, walking towards him. "Come back tomorrow."

"I'll do that," he says, a glint in his eyes that makes me feel sick to my stomach.

I walk straight for the door and pull it open, eager to get out of here as fast as humanly possible. I've
never experienced a feeling like the one that's burning hot inside me right now, but I definitely do not
like it and I want to get away as fast as I can. I want Peeta to come with me, too. The thought of
leaving him here with her makes me feel even worse, and I'm glad that he's not staying, but at the
same time it bothers me that it was her who convinced him not to stay.

"Come on," I say sharply.

Peeta turns towards the girl and gives her another one of those looks, and I have to turn my face
away. I hear him saying something to her in a low, soft voice and I hear her responding in a similar
tone but thankfully I can't make out their words. Then I hear him bidding her goodbye until
tomorrow, and I step outside before I can hear her reply. When Peeta joins me out on the street half a
minute later I'm afraid that he might give me a strange look and want to know what my behaviour
was all about, but he just nods in the direction of the pharmacy and we begin to walk. He sticks his
hands in his pockets and has a smile on his face that bothers me now that I can guess what brought
the smile on.
I say nothing to him until we've visited the pharmacy and bought our ointments and pills. At first I
decide not to say anything at all to him about what I saw in that seamstress' store, but at the same
time I feel a strong need to know more about it.

"She seemed awfully eager to see you," I comment. "Doesn't get a lot of customers, does she?"

It's a cheap shot but Peeta doesn't seem to notice.

"You know, that book that fell to the floor?" he says. "That's the only book she owns. It's not even a
real book, just a collection of fabric samples. There's something sad about that, don't you think?"

"What? Peeta most people barely have homes or families anymore. What difference does it make if a
person has books?"

He shrugs, using his left hand to unbutton his coat, apparently realizing by now that it's a bit too
warm for a winter coat today.

"I don't know," he says. "My parents had three fiction books. I read each of them so many times that
my mother eventually told me not to touch them or they might end up falling apart."

This is news to me. He's never mentioned anything about this before, or even about enjoying
literature.

"They must have been good books."

"They were okay. They were the only ones we had so I had to make do. They were a way to escape,
you know?"

"So what you wish to do with yourself now that there's peace is to make sure everyone has a book to
read?" I ask.

"It would be nice if Lace had a book with actual words in it," he says with a coy smile.

"Who's Lace?" I ask.

"Lace, the seamstress," he says with a chuckle. "Lace Bomull. You were in her store with me about
fifteen minutes ago. Any memories springing to mind?"

"Oh, her," I say. "I had already forgotten about her." Quite the blatant lie but I can't bring myself to
acknowledge her.

"I'm thinking maybe I should call or write Effie and ask her to send me a book from the Capitol,"
Peeta goes on, still with that smile on his face. "And give to Lace, as a thank you for making so
many new clothes for me."

"You are paying her, aren't you?" I say, thinking to myself that it ought to be she who gives
something nice to Peeta as a thank you for bringing her so much business even though he really
doesn't need this many new clothes.

"Of course," he answers with a chuckle. "But she's worked hard and it seems nice to acknowledge
that."

"By giving her a book? You don't even know if she likes to read, or if she'll enjoy whatever book
Effie gets her hands on. Knowing Effie it will probably be something vapid and shallow about
shopping or party planning."
The thought occurs to me that perhaps this seamstress girl would enjoy a book about shopping but I keep that thought to myself. Reason tells me I have no actual grounds to dislike this person. All I know about her is that she's from District Eight, makes clothes, makes a lot of clothes for Peeta, and has mahogany hair and a pearly laughter...

And Peeta looked at her in a way he's only ever looked at me before.

The thought makes me feel bad in a way I've never felt bad before. In Thirteen I came to accept that Peeta finally saw the real me and could only hate what he saw. Accepting that was one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life, and looking back I wonder if maybe there was more to my sadness than the loss of someone seeing only the best in me. When the war was over and Peeta came back home I started to believe that we could go back to where we had once been, that he could remember what we once meant to each other. Instead I had to come to terms with the knowledge that, while he no longer hates me, he's not in love with me anymore either. That transition has been so very difficult and I'm not fully resigned to it yet.

Do I now also have to accept that Peeta can look at other women in ways he only used to look at me? That he could feel attraction and perhaps even infatuation with someone else? Of course I want things like that for him – in the future. Not right now. Not yet. I haven't yet fully found my Peeta again and I definitely don't want to have to think of him as someone else's Peeta. And the bitter truth is that I miss him looking at me like that.

This girl, this Lace, is probably no more than a flirtation. He's an eighteen year-old boy, of course he's going to notice girls. He told me in our first arena that he'd noticed other girls than me, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that he could do so now. Really, I should see it as a good sign that his charm and his charisma are beginning to come back. I just don't want him to be flirting with other girls yet. And certainly not right in front of me! I don't like what that implies but whatever it is I'm not comfortable with it. Truthfully I'm not sure I ever want him to be doing that with anybody else, though I know the door has closed on him feeling that way about me.

"I think you've got enough new clothes for now," I say in a rather cold tone of voice. "It doesn't look good, Peeta."

"Doesn't look good?" He sounds nonplussed. "You've seen some of the things she's made. Just look at this coat!"

"No, I don't mean the look of the clothes themselves," I say, getting irritated. "I mean that people are trying to rebuild their lives, and many don't have money for more than their daily meals. You running around buying a dozen shirts you really don't need isn't going to paint a good picture in the public eye."

"I think you're wrong," he says carelessly.

"You think I'm wrong?"

"I think the money that I do have is best put to use by me buying things. I buy shirts from Lace, she gets more money, she can spend that money elsewhere and, well, you get the idea. How's my money going to help anyone in my wallet or in the bank box in my study?"

"Maybe consider distributing your wealth more evenly, then," I retort. "Or we're going to have a well-off seamstress and everyone else in town will still be poor."

"I don't think that will be much of a problem," chuckles Peeta. "Like I said, she spends the money buying from other people and that's the whole circle of economy, or whatever they called it in
"Unless she spends the money on more fabric and nice threads from the Capitol," I reply surly.

"Katniss I haven't forgotten about Portia," says Peeta with a slight sadness in his smile, completely misreading my irritation. "Or Cinna. But they're gone now and we still need clothes."

"A whole new wardrobe, it seems," I mutter. "Going on tour again?"

"Not in the near future, no," he smirks.

I snort and wrap my arms around myself, feeling colder now than I did earlier in the day. The sun is, at the moment, hidden behind a patch of clouds and it goes well with the mood I'm currently in. What bothers me the most is probably the fact that I'm getting this bent out of shape over seeing Peeta flirt with one girl. What is the big deal, really? Why should it bother me even if he decided to flirt with every girl we meet from this moment until we're back at home?

Straightening my back a little I decide that it doesn't matter and I won't let myself be affected by it anymore. I was having a good day before and I really don't want that to be ruined over some young seamstress who probably has a crush on Peeta Mellark, Hunger Games victor, but doesn't know the first thing about who he really is.

"Can we stop by the supply shop?" I ask, trying not to sound sullen. "I'm almost out of envelopes and I was planning on writing my mother."

"Sure. Need an envelope per page of the letter, or…?"

His teasing smirk does nothing to improve my mood so I promptly ignore it and walk towards the shop that sells all sorts of everyday supplies, like envelopes and dishrags and napkins.

As we enter the shop I am still sullen and fighting to ignore the pain in my chest while Peeta has his hands in his back pockets, and is in such good spirits that he's begun to whistle a tune to himself. I have to bite my tongue to keep from telling him to cut it out, and I stride over to the paper section of the store, both pleased that he follows me and irritated that I have to keep listening to his whistle.

"Are you sure the rest of the people here like hearing that tune?" I end up saying anyway as I stop to sort through the various kinds of envelopes they sell.

The whistling stops and I seem to be bringing him back from someplace far away.

"What?"

"You were whistling." After a moment's pause I add: "You never whistle."

He looks thoughtful.

"I don't?" He sighs, the good mood gone. "Well that figures. You have no idea how utterly confusing, not to mention frustrating, it is to not even remember basic things like that about yourself."

"You remember most of it now though, right?" I say carefully. "You seem more and more like your old self every day…"

"I feel more and more like my old self," he says, reaching out his hand to let his fingers brush the small assortment of paint tubes the store sells. "It sounds corny but I'm starting to feel myself coming
back to life. If that makes sense."

"It does."

His fingers trail over the tubes of paint, five in total, each one in a different colour.

"Sometimes I worry though… that I will always be wondering about myself. If a trait, or mind-set, or behaviour is genuinely me or if it's something I've developed afterward, or even something they put in there…"

"People change all the time," I point out in a low voice.

"Not like I changed, they don't." He takes his eyes off the paint tubes and looks at me with such sadness in his eyes that for half a second I long back to the look he had in them before, regardless of the reason behind it. "You are my touchstone when it comes to who I am," he says. "Haymitch too, to a degree, but you knew me best before… Well, before. At least, among the people who survived."

"You're going to be fine, Peeta," I assure him. "You already are fine. The rest will come back to you, I know it. I think most of it already has come back."

Except the part I come to realize I cherished the most. The part of him that loved me, unconditionally. It's beginning to dawn on me how much it meant to me that someone as inherently good as Peeta thought I was wonderful, but it's more than that. There must be other people out there, other men, with that same kind of goodness, I reason. Yet I wouldn't trade Peeta's love for all of their love combined. I want him to love me. I want him to not look at anybody else the way he looked at that seamstress.

Peeta has turned his attention back to the tubes of paint and he's picking up all five of them. Black, white, red, blue and green. They don't have yellow, the colour he needs to make that painting he promised me. Him buying several tubes of paint is a good sign anyway, a sign that he's finding inspiration to paint again. Under any other circumstances I would have been thrilled but today I can't help but feel worried. Is there some deeper reason for his inspiration or is it all just a coincidence? For all I know it could be the first signs of spring that brought it on, or he might not even be particularly inspired. It could be that he's just stocking up so he'll have what he needs at home when inspiration does strike.

I turn my face away, trying to focus on the envelopes. They sell packages of three, or just separate envelopes if that's what you need. They come in three different sizes. I decide on the middle-sized one so I can write a long letter to my mother and not have to jam too much into one envelope. I haven't written her in a while and I know I ought to keep in touch. It just hasn't seemed like all that much has been happening in my life, especially in comparison to the number of life-changing things that happened the two previous years.

"Hand me one of the small ones, will you?" asks Peeta.

"Okay," I mutter, doing as he asks.

"I'm going to write Effie when I get home."

It takes everything I've got for me not to turn on my heel and storm off to a different section of the shop. So he's really going to do it? He's really going to write Effie and ask her to send him a book? I want to tell myself it's just an innocent gesture of friendship but I'm not that naïve.

I stay mostly silent while we walk back home. Peeta seems lost in thoughts the whole way but there's a smile on his lips again and I have a gnarling suspicion that his mind is in a much happier place than
That evening I sit by the fireplace alone, save for Buttercup who has fallen asleep on my lap. I'm in an armchair, my back against one armrest and my legs draped over the other, stroking the cat absentmindedly while I look into the flickering flames. What a strange day it has been. I feel embarrassed at how I overreacted earlier, and grateful that Peeta thought it was the memories of Cinna and Portia that made me behave like that. I guess it stings a bit that he can't read me as well as he once used to, but in this case it provided me with some protection, and I didn't have to make a fool of myself.

What occupies my mind the most tonight is the realization of how often I think about him. Peeta seems to be constantly on my mind, and it's been like that for a while now but it happened so gradually that I never even realized it. Not until today, when each time I thought about him I've also thought about that look. I miss having him look at me that way. I selfishly feel that I want him to look only at me with those eyes. I can't help but wonder if there is a way that I could make that happen again.

I think about the night he let me sleep in his arms. I think of the few, precious moments when we've stood close to one another and his eyes have met with mine, and I've felt something that I cannot believe he wasn't feeling as well. I think about when we were lying in the snow together and I really wanted to kiss him. Next time, if there is a next time, I tell myself that I will actually go for it and press my lips against his. He's not in love with me anymore but I wasn't in love with him at the start either. Perhaps there's a way for me to bring those feelings back. I want to at least try.

There has to be a next time. And it has to be soon. The sense of urgency seems to weigh heavily on me tonight and it's not exactly difficult to guess why. No matter how hard I try not to think about what I witnessed between Peeta and the seamstress that overbearing sadness keeps gripping my heart. Even when my mind is elsewhere that hurt seems to come creeping back over and over and over again. So far all Peeta has done is look at another girl in that way. I'm afraid that if I don't make a move soon he will progress further with his fancy for that girl, or find somebody else, and I will have missed my window of opportunity.

There's no denying it, I realize as I sit there stroking Buttercup's back. I am not indifferent towards Peeta, nor do I view him as just a friend. I care about him, deeply, in a way I haven't cared about anybody else before. I'm not one hundred percent sure it's love, but it's got to be something close to that, or at the very least a stepping stone towards reaching that place. It's my regular bad luck that I don't come to realize this until it's too late, and he has gotten over me.

If only I could get him to see me again, like the way he used to see me. There has to be a way to make him do that. I just don't know how. I've never been good at these kinds of things, and I've never had to pursue a boy before. It's especially difficult because it is Peeta, and because of the fragility of our friendship. As much as I like to believe that we are strongly bound together in friendship for eternity I know that things like that are never certain; my friendship with Gale proved that without a doubt, and it was only a year ago that Peeta detested me and wanted me dead. If I let him know how I feel about him and he doesn't feel comfortable with that then we might drift apart. I might lose him all over again.

I close my eyes for a moment and all I can see is Peeta looking at that girl and her beaming smile in
response. I remember how I felt like an outsider, watching two people share an exclusive connection. And the hurt comes back, full force, and I can feel the tears burning hot behind my eyelids.

So this is jealousy? A broken heart? This is something I've subjected both Peeta and Gale to, albeit without having any grasp of what it actually feels like at the time? Logically I assume I should feel terrible for causing two people I care about to feel that way but right here, right now all I can manage to do is feel sorry for myself. I allow myself to wallow in this emotion for a while but it gets too strong, too intense, and I take a deep breath through my nose and try my best to clear my mind. I can't let myself get this upset or I might slip back into the pits of depression. Especially when I don't know for sure that there's anything to be upset about.

If only there was somebody I could talk to about all this. There is no one left. Prim is dead and gone and I can't even bear to think of her right now. My mother is far away in another district, and this isn't a conversation I want to have over the phone. I used to be able to talk to Gale about anything, but even if our friendship had managed to survive I couldn't be so cold-hearted as to discuss this with him. Hazelle has not returned to the district, and even if she had it would feel wrong to talk to her as well. Finnick is probably the one who would understand my feelings the most, but he's dead too. So who does that leave? Greasy Sae? Not a chance. Haymitch? Completely out of the question.

Peeta – obviously not.

Tears begin to fall down my cheeks as I acknowledge once more how painfully alone I am. I don't even know if I have Peeta the way I thought I did when I woke up this morning. If he's off flirting with other girls, looking at them like that, then who's to say that he will be interested in a close friendship with me? Perhaps all I am to him now is an extended family that replaces the one he lost.

A sister.

I think I would rather have him hate me.

Chapter End Notes

Props to ForestFairy and Sixela72 who figured out that Peeta has been visiting the seamstress. How far it goes beyond just visiting is yet to be revealed though =) Originally she had a different first name but I decided quite late to change it into something that felt more District 8 appropriate. That's why her last name is Bomull (Cotton in Swedish), a name I gave her mostly just because it entertained me.

Thanks for reading!
I don't see Peeta again for three days. We were supposed to have dinner the day after our trip to town together, but winter came with one more attempt to keep the hold on the district, and it ended up snowing too heavily. I fervently wish we hadn't missed that evening together because by the time our next dinner comes along I've become so nervous at the thought of seeing him again that my heart is pounding in my chest when I walk the short distance from my house to his. I don't know how to act around him now. I don't know if he will act differently around me. My whole world seems like it's been turned on its head, but for Peeta nothing might have changed at all. That thought is almost more depressing than anything else.

I walk with heavy steps through the snow, which this time I didn't bother to shovel. It's probably just going to melt soon anyway. It's become warmer again now that the snow has stopped falling, and it makes the snow on the ground wet and heavy and it puts me in a really bad mood. I walk up the three steps to Peeta's door, pause to stomp the worst of the snow off my boots and then I draw a deep breath. Have I ever needed to gather courage this way before knocking on Peeta's door? Have I ever dreaded seeing him like I do now, yet at the same time longed to see him?

"Have you forgotten how to open doors, sweetheart?" says Haymitch behind me in a dry voice.

I startle a bit. I didn't hear him come up behind me.

"Thought I'd wait for you to catch up," I reply, somehow finding my bearings right away. "You're getting slower by the hour, old man."

He doesn't bother to reply. Instead he walks up the steps, shoves me aside and throws the door open, hollering to Peeta that we've arrived. I follow in his heels, grateful that my first moment with Peeta since we went into town won't be a private meeting, and for once finding some relief in Haymitch's rather uncouth style.

He throws himself down on the small backless couch by the hallway mirror and reaches down to untie the laces on his boots. I remove my scarf and jacket and look over at the coat rack where the blue coat is still hanging. I don't like the sight of it anymore. I stuff my scarf down the sleeve of my jacket and hang it on top of the coat, covering it from my line of sight. Peeta comes walking in just as I lean down to undo my boots.

"Hey you two," he says, crossing his arms over his chest casually and leaning against the doorpost. He doesn't look entirely pleased to see us. "From what I can tell Katniss brought nothing and Haymitch brought nothing also. May I remind you both that I paid for dinner last time?"

"It's Katniss' turn," says Haymitch and grabs a long shoehorn which he proceeds to poke me with. "Hey! Run back home and fetch food."

"My turn was the day before yesterday," I protest. "Today is your day."

"Oh no you don't! Just because your day got snowed in-"

"Oh great," sighs Peeta, rolling his eyes. "Whatever happened to wanting to contribute your share? I don't have anything at home that we can cook, and I don't really think it should be my responsibility by default."
"Well maybe if you spent less money on your vanity you would be able to feed us twice in one week," I retort sullenly, feeling embarrassed that I forgot it was my turn to bring the ingredients for dinner.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asks Peeta, his brow furrowing.

"Peeta spends all his money on fashion these days." I say to Haymitch, in a way that makes it sound a lot shallower than I know it is.

"What's your problem?" asks Peeta in an annoyed tone.

"Ah, shut up both of you," says Haymitch, finally getting both boots off and rising from his seat. "You," he says, pointing at me with the shoehorn, "try to keep track of when it's your turn to put food on the table." He turns to Peeta, pointing the shoehorn at him. "And you, don't you have leftovers or something?"

Peeta looks like he wants to say something to me, and judging by the look on his face it's not something I'd care to hear. I worry that I've picked a fight when that wasn't my intention, and there's a strange, uncomfortable feeling in my chest at knowing that he's irritated with me. Instead of saying something though he snorts and shakes his head, turning on his heel to march to the kitchen.

"I have oatmeal," he says. "That will suffice. Neither one of you deserves better tonight."

"What did I do?" asks Haymitch. "It's Katniss who forgot to bring dinner and who called you vain."

I glare at his back as he goes into the kitchen. Trust Haymitch to hammer it home further. I can easily think of at least a dozen sharp comebacks but I hold my tongue, knowing that I won't make the situation any better by adding further fuel to the fire.

Once my boots are off I follow the guys into the kitchen, where Peeta is pouring oatmeal into a pot. He turns on the faucet and adds water, finishing off by adding a dab of salt. It's a little bit fascinating to me, the fact that he doesn't use any form of measurements to make sure he's got the right balance of oatmeal and water. When he bakes he sometimes uses what seems like millimetre precision. He once explained to me that cooking is art and baking is science, though that made no sense to me. The thought of it, however, brings to mind something else.

"I guess the bad weather gave you ample opportunity to use those tubes of paint you bought," I say, trying to keep my voice casual. I'm hoping that if I play it that way he won't put too much weight into my previous demeanour and we can avoid having the evening be a disaster. The last thing I wanted for tonight, for any night, was for us to be at odds with one another.

"Yeah, I guess," he says, not sounding too exalted. He uses a wooden spoon to stir the pot and twists a knob to change the stove's temperature. "I started on something when we got home from town the other day but I am sick and tired of the snow falling down so heavily. It kind of killed what inspiration I had, honestly."

"Oh." I can't tell if he's still annoyed with me or if he's annoyed by the bad weather we just had. "I, uh… I noticed that they didn't have yellow paint."

"Doesn't really matter yet," he replies. "Your primroses won't bloom for maybe another two months."

"I'm sorry about what I said before," I say. "Calling you vain. You know I didn't mean it. I'm just… really out of sorts."
"Yeah, don't worry about it…" he says, stirring the pot. He still sounds rather low-spirited. "I wish you'd find something else to pick on, though."

I bite my bottom lip, wishing now that I could have a conversation with him between four eyes, but that's not likely to happen today. Haymitch has begun to set the table and I can't think of anything to say to get him to give us a moment, and even if I did I don't want to make too big of a deal out of it to Peeta. Whatever is going on in his life right now I don't want it to bring us farther apart than necessary. I want us to stay close so I can have the chance to show him that I truly care about him, and hopefully make him remember how he used to feel about me.

I don't even know if it's actually possible to remind somebody of their feelings. Can you fall in love with someone again by coming to remember that you had those feelings before? I know so very little about love and how it works. It could very well be that he has to fall in love with me all over again for him to ever feel that way about me now, and if that is the case then I'm really out of luck. I don't have the first idea what made him fall for me the first time around, and I have a gnawing insecurity that maybe he was more in love with an idea of me. He didn't really seem to have noticed my bad qualities until he was hijacked.

Peeta deems the porridge ready and asks Haymitch to give him the bowls. I search through his refrigerator to find something to spice it up a little but finding nothing that fits except for a little bit of apple sauce that Peeta uses for some of his baked goods. Deeming it better than nothing, even though there will only be a dab for each of us, I grab it from the shelf and bring it to the table.

The rest of the evening passes by uneventfully and rather uncomfortably. Peeta and I don't argue, but we aren't exactly comfortable around each other either, and the fact that all we're eating is oatmeal porridge does nothing to brighten the spirits. Haymitch chooses not to comment on the damp on the mood even though he obviously picks up on it. The three of us make polite small talk while we eat, and then the boys play chess for a while. When Haymitch and I bid Peeta a good night and head to our own homes it's much earlier in the evening than when we usually leave.

I come back to my own house feeling no more at ease than when I left it earlier this evening.

The back door to my house is wide open, letting fresh spring air flow into the house and make the whole place seem nicer and almost rejuvenated. This is the time of year when my mother would usually do a big spring cleaning of the house from top to bottom. The rugs would be taken outside and weathered, the floorboards would be scrubbed diligently, the windows cleaned, every possible surface dusted, pillows and comforters washed and the end result would be a home feeling infinitely fresher. Even our old Seam house felt pleasant and homely and clean when as much coal dust as possible had been brushed, scrubbed or pounded out. The first three years after my father's death my mother didn't bother with the spring cleaning, but the fourth year I took it into my own hands. I spent so much time on my knees on the floor, scrubbing it vigorously, that my knees became blistered and scraped. Prim wanted to help out, and she did as much as she could, but she was only ten years old and thin and lacking in both height and muscle so she could do very little to help me with the heavy things. She dusted though, and took to the task with gusto and energy, working on every last item on every shelf and in every cupboard in the house. It took three days for the cleaning to be done, and by the last day my mother took active part, and together we took care of the heaviest parts of the cleaning.
Last year I didn't do a spring cleaning. I was too weak and wounded from everything I had been through, and I didn't really come back to life until Peeta returned to the district, at which point it was late spring and no longer the time I associate with spring cleaning. This year I intend to make up for it. Not so much because the house needs to be dusted – the quality of the house itself and the lack of coal dust makes a huge different from the house I grew up in – but because I want to cling to as many elements of my past life as I can. Dr. Aurelius has told me so many times that routines are good for me, and spring cleaning is a routine, even if it only happens once a year. It's something normal that I used to do, and the fact that it will take forever to clean this big house all by myself does nothing to discourage me. It has the opposite effect, in fact. I look forward to having a task of physical labour that will take days to do properly, and will no doubt distract me from how alone I am in this house, and keep me from wallowing in thoughts of the girl who will never come back home.

I've decided to tackle the chore on a room-by-room basis, except for scrubbing the floors, which I'll leave for last. Living here I don't have to be down on my knees with a thick brush and a rag. I have a dust-drawing mop of high quality, as good as any they used to sell in the Capitol, and instead of soap I have a large bottle of multi-surface cleaner that smells of lily of the valley. The house also came equipped with a large collection of cleaning products I had never even heard of or thought a person could have use for. I intend to make use of each and every one before I'm done with my cleaning project.

The one thing I dread having to do is clean the windows. I've always hated that particular chore, and this house seems to consist of two dozen windows, most of them fairly big and the ones in the sitting room even being floor-to-ceiling. I'm currently standing looking straight at them, my hands on my hips as I bite my bottom lip and try to devise a strategy for how to get them clean. They're definitely in need of a good cleaning. When we did spring cleaning that year my mother, sister and I all lived here together my mother and I worked as a team to get the job done, one of us standing on a tall stool doing the upper halves and the other doing the bottom. That took long enough, and now that I'm on my own it will take twice that time. It is one distraction I'm not welcoming.

I'm side-tracked from my attempts to come up with a plan of attack when there's a knock on the door. I turn to go and answer it, giving the windows one last glance over my shoulder, sighing as I leave them behind for now. Perhaps I can find somebody in town who wants to make a bit of money cleaning the stupid windows for me.

I open the door and my spirits rise at once when I see Peeta standing there. He's wearing a pair of old jeans and a green t-shirt, a light jacket Portia made for him flung over his left shoulder. Nothing made by the town seamstress, I'm relieved to note. I'm surprised to see him. He rarely comes knocking on my door unexpectedly. He's not giving me the carefree smile I enjoy so much, but I suppose beggars can't be choosers. I offer him a hesitant smile and say his name in greeting.

"Hey Katniss," he replies. "Am I interrupting?"

"No," I say, shaking my head. The cross-breeze from having both the back and front door wide open causes the door to the kitchen to slam shut, making both of us jump. We both laugh a little at how we startled, and the tension that seemed to be there a moment ago begins to fade. "Just letting some air into the house."

"A little too much air, maybe," says Peeta with a crooked smile.

"What brings you by?" I ask.

"I was heading out for a walk," he says, gesturing towards the road with a nod of his head. "I was wondering if you'd like to join me."
"Sure!" I say, all thoughts of cleaning the house cast aside. "Just let me, uh, just let me go close the back door. I don't want to come home and find a flock of geese eating my mother's orchids. They're the only indoor flowers I seem to manage keeping alive."

Peeta chuckles a bit and walks the three steps down from the front porch.

"Go close the door. I'll wait here."

I nod and eagerly head back inside the house, closing and locking the front door. I hurry through the kitchen to the sitting room, noticing that the cross-breeze made a vase tip over on the coffee table but choosing to ignore it. What does it matter, really, when I'm going to clean the whole house later anyway? I leave the house through the back door and close it behind me, not bothering to lock it.

I go around the house, grateful that I decided to wear a long-sleeved shirt when I feel a gush of the not-exactly-warm winds that are blowing today, but even with the shirt it's a bit cold. I ought to have taken my jacket. The sun is warm in the sky but when you step into the shade it's significantly colder, and even in the sunlight the winds keep you from getting hot. When I round the corner of the house I spot Peeta standing on the road, his hands in his back pockets, eyes squinting at the sky, and suddenly I feel a lot warmer. My eyes follow the direction he's looking in, and I spot a flock of birds returning from winter.

"So where do you want to go?" I ask him, getting his attention.

"Oh, nowhere in particular," he says, blinking a bit as if the sun blinded him a little. "I just thought it would be nice to… well, walk."

"The ground is drying up but it's still a better bet to stick with the roads," I say as I reach him. "We could walk in to town and back."

"I'd rather not walk to town today," he says. "Isn't there a road around here somewhere? Or a dirt path or something?"

"More like mud path at this time of year. But there is a small road that leads from the edge of the Victor's Village to the old abandoned entrance to the mines. Effie told us they used it to transport building material for the houses here."

"Yeah, I remember that," he nods. "Okay, let's take that road, then."

While he seems to recall the history lesson Effie graciously bestowed upon us when we first arrived to live in this part of the district it's clear he doesn't know where the road in question actually is, so he gestures for me to lead the way. We walk in silence past the row of houses until we reach the small road, and I try my best to think of something to say to fill the silence with. I don't like the fact that it's an uncomfortable silence between us, and I'm not even sure why Peeta wanted me to join him if he's not going to say anything to me. We walk down the road for about five minutes, and I begin to look around me in a slightly desperate attempt at finding something to talk about. Unfortunately for me this part of the road offers little more view than ditches with smelly, mud-mixed water, and plants that haven't come back to life after the long winter.

"So…" I say, hoping that something will come to me.

"Katniss I…" Peeta begins, sounding hesitant.

I look at him and am saddened by the troubled look on his face. I hate that I can't read him like I want to be able to read him, and I hate that we seem to have drifted apart these last few weeks. Perhaps I shouldn't try to force it and just let things work by themselves, but I'm a little paranoid that
I might lose Peeta just like I've lost so many other people I care about, and it makes me want to grab on all the more hard when taking a step back and allowing things to develop naturally is in all likelihood the wisest choice.

"Katniss are you mad at me about something?" He looks at me, his eyes almost as blue as the sky above us, and there's so much insecurity and sadness in them that I want to close my own eyes so I don't have to see it. "Did I do something to upset you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think I've had a bad episode and blacked out about it," he goes on, "but I suppose it could be possible that I did, and I'm scared that if that is the case I did something to hurt you."

"No, you haven't had an episode around me in a month or so," I tell him. "And the last one wasn't bad. I mean, not like before, during the war. It was just you holding on to the back of a chair and… Well, point is you haven't hurt me during an episode."

"Then what?" he asks. "Is there something else that I have done?"

"Peeta I don't even know what you are talking about," I say, baffled at hearing him ask the question. "You've been acting like you're cross with me," he says. "Snide remarks, scowls, sullen silences… Just towards me, not towards Haymitch. I don't know what I did to bring that about but whatever it is I'm sorry."

When I hear him describe my recent behaviour, and I see how much it's been upsetting him, I feel absolutely terrible. Guilt flows through me and I can't believe I have hurt him when what I really wanted to do is make him feel as good in my company as I do in his. I take his hand in mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze, and the hint of a smile comes over his face, though not enough to cancel out the sadness in his eyes.

"You haven't done anything to me," I assure him. "I'm not mad at you. God, I feel terrible that I've made you think that. It's just…"

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"You haven't done anything to me," I assure him. "I'm not mad at you. God, I feel terrible that I've made you think that. It's just…" He looks at me expectantly now, his eyebrows raised a bit, and I try to muster my courage. This could be the chance I've waited for. Perhaps I could tell him, right here and right now, how I feel about him and why it's affected my behaviour towards him negatively. Then I see before me how he looked at that seamstress and I feel my courage deflate. I turn my face away and come up with a lie to cover the truth I'm not brave enough to admit. "It's been really difficult for me lately. So many things this time of year remind me of Prim. It's been a whole year without her and…" The thought of my loss brings real tears to my eyes. I'm trying to give him an excuse that isn't the true one but this explanation is not a lie, not really. I miss Prim so much I can barely breathe sometimes. "Whenever I think I've gotten past the worst of it something happens that makes me think of her, and the pain comes flooding back."

"Katniss it's alright," he replies, voice full of caring and compassion. It makes me have to fight with all my might not to have more tears come. "I'm sorry, I should have realized… I just needed to be sure that it's not about something I did."

"You do plenty," I tell him. "In a good way. Which is why I don't know why I take my sadness out
on you."

He smiles crookedly, still looking sad but now sad for me and not for himself. At least not entirely.

"It's only human to react that way," he says. "It doesn't make you a bad person. You don't have to bottle it all up inside though, you know? How about instead of scowling at me you talk to me?"

"I would like that," I say with a faint smile. I really do feel I want to open up to him about the grief over my sister, but I'm feeling a little confused right now since the thing he's offering to listen to me talking about is not the real reason why I've been treating him coldly the last few weeks.

"Good. It's been killing me trying to figure out what's been wrong between you and me lately." He stops and I stop with him, meeting his very serious gaze. "I need for everything to be alright between us. You're all I've got. You and Haymitch. It feels like you've been pushing me away and you don't know how nervous that made me."

My heart flutters inside my chest and I'm at once jubilant at hearing him say he needs me and ashamed that I've made him feel insecure. And didn't he just clearly insinuate that there is no other special person in his life - meaning the seamstress, or some other girl for that matter?

"I'm sorry."

"I ought to tell you not to worry about it," he says. "Dealing with the loss of your sister is, is something I cannot even begin to comprehend the… I mean I lost my brothers, but... What I mean is, I don't want to fault you for acting out when you're going through that much pain. We're friends, and friends should be understanding of things like that. I need you to understand though that I've lost too many people and things that matter, and I'm scared of losing even more. You and I, we need each other, I think. I need you." He swallows hard and looks away for a few seconds before he continues. "I'm afraid of losing you."

"Peeta…" His name comes out soft, almost like a caress. I wrap my arms around him and pull him close to me, my heart swelling when he wraps his arms around me in return. "I promise you that you will not lose me. We have each other and that's not going to change. I'm so sorry I made you feel like you did something wrong." Wrapped in an embrace with him, unable to see his face, I find the courage to reveal a small piece of my heart to him. "Remember that night you let me sleep in your guest room, when I was crying over Prim? That is probably the safest I have felt in… I don't even know how long. No nightmares. I need you. Even though oftentimes I am too proud to admit it."

As lovely as the embrace feels I have a strong desire to look into his eyes. I pull back and kiss him right on the corner of his mouth, halfway between a purely chaste peck on the cheek and a real kiss. In that second when my mouth crazes the corner of his I feel a jolt of the same feeling that overtook me on the beach. I'm breathing heavily and I don't know what I'm struggling with more, the fear of kissing him for real when he might reject me or resisting the urge to press my mouth against his.

I pull back a little bit, just enough so that I can look into his eyes. He is smiling at me, gently and full of affection. A wave of pain runs through me when I see that the way he's looking at me is affectionate but it's not the look I'm dying to see. I pull back from him and clear my throat, looking down at the ground while I try to form a coherent thought and figure out what I'm supposed to do next to avoid things becoming awkward only a few minutes after we progressed past the earlier awkwardness.

"I'm glad to hear it," Peeta says, surprising me by laughing slightly and seeming completely unfazed. "Not the part about you being too proud. That other part."
He gives me a playful nudge and then starts walking again, me following beside him. We walk silently together for a few minutes but this time it's the kind of comfortable silence we used to have. Peeta seems relaxed now, and relieved. I, on the other hand, feel anything but relaxed. We just had a conversation that felt deep and meaningful, at least to me, and then we embraced, I kissed him almost on his mouth, and we looked into each other's eyes. As lovely as it was there was an important component missing, and there's a part of me that feels relieved that he didn't pick up on it.

"Are you having more frequent nightmares now?" he asks after a few minutes.

"What?" I say, drawn from my confused thoughts.

"You mentioned nightmares," he says. "I get them too, a lot. So does Haymitch. I assume that goes for all victors, the few of us that are left." The last part is said with a bitterness that doesn't match the concern in the rest of what he's saying. "Since you're being hit pretty hard right now with grieving for Prim… Are you getting enough proper sleep? Or are you being plagued by nightmares every night?"

He sounds concerned, but also like he's trying to figure something out. Perhaps he thinks that it's sleep-deprivation that has made me act so coldly towards him. I open my mouth to tell him that I'm plagued by nightmares several nights a week, and have been ever since our first arena, but I close my mouth again. I don't want to sound like I'm whining or full of self-pity. I don't want him to have to worry about me.

"It's nothing," I say. "Everybody has nightmares from time to time."

"Yeah, well there's nightmares and there's the kind of nightmares you get from being in the Hunger Games, a war and losing your favourite person in the world."

I draw a deep, shaking breath and look away. It's painful to hear him phase it like that. Not only does it remind me of the tremendous thing I've lost, but it makes me scared that I might lose him, too. Out of all the people alive in the world today there is nobody I like better than him.

"Katniss?"

"Yeah," I say in an exhale. "I have bad nightmares. They will pass."

"Dr. Aurelius says accepting help from others is an important step." He smiles a little. "I want to help you. If you can allow it."

"Of course I can allow it," I say, though wondering to myself if there is anything he can truly do to help me except return my feelings for him.

"If you've had a really bad night you're welcome to come over and take a nap or something at my place. If having other people around helps, I mean…"

"Thank you, but I don't want to start sleeping during the day and being awake during the nights," I say, deeply disappointed that he's offering me a place to nap and not his presence to comfort me during the nights.

"Well the offer stands if you should change your mind."

"It's nice of you, Peeta, but…” I sigh heavily. "I've dealt with nightmares ever since my father died. They got worse after the Hunger Games and even worse after everything that happened after that. You know, the only time in these past couple of years that I remember sleeping soundly was… was during the Victory Tour."
"I don't really remember that part of my life very clearly," admits Peeta, sounding a touch sheepish. "Did they give you something to help you sleep?"

"Nothing that helped. In fact the pills Effie gave me only made things worse."

"I don't remember anything about any pills… The majority of the Tour is still a blur. What they did leave is not exactly pleasant."

I decide I might as well take a leap and lead Peeta all the way to the end of the line I've begun to tread. I take a deep breath to gather my courage and I try to sound as casual as possible, as if what I'm saying only just occurred to me and hasn't been on my mind every night since Peeta came back to the district.

"You heard me scream in my sleep one night on the Tour, when you were unable to sleep and wandering the halls. You came and woke me up. Then you stayed with me… Every night for the remainder of the Tour you came to bed with me and we… we helped ward off each other's nightly terrors as best we could."

I let my words sink in for a minute, curious to see how he will react to them.

"It sounds nice," he says after a minute. "I can see why they blocked that memory."

"It was nice. It was one of the few things in my life that were nice at that point."

He gives me a crooked smile.

"Well if you ever have a truly terrible night, come knock on my door."

I give him a crooked smile in return, nervously hoping that he genuinely means it and isn't just trying to be nice, or that it's some weird form of playful banter.

"I just might take you up on that."

"You should."

We smile at each other, another silence falling between us, this one even more comfortable than the previous one. Then Peeta breaks the gaze and changes the subject entirely, filling me in on the talk he's heard in town of what they plan to build here in District 12 now that the days of oppression are over. I only listen with half an ear, my mind re-playing the conversation we just had over and over and over again.

I haven't felt this good in weeks.

The following evening we meet up for dinner, and it's much more relaxed and comfortable than it's been since that day in the seamstress' shop. Thankfully Haymitch doesn't comment on how the atmosphere has changed, and the three of us carry on like nothing ever happened. I took a break from cleaning and went out hunting earlier in the day and brought home a wild goose for the dinner table. Haymitch and I squabble amicably over who gets to keep the feathers, and Peeta chides Haymitch for eating the brethren of his own flock of geese. The original intent when he bought his
flock was to breed them to feed us, but he has grown strangely fond of the stupid animals, and while he still keeps the number to an even ten he doesn't allow us to eat the ones he kills. Instead he sells or trades them in town, seeming to be alright with his pets being eaten so long as he doesn't do the eating himself.

After dinner we relocate to the sitting room, and Peeta brings up the subject of the things that are being planned for the district. I didn't pay much attention to it yesterday, and I'm not overly interested now either. Most of it sounds ridiculous to my ears but Peeta seems excited, and Haymitch appears to think positively of it too.

"Why on earth does District 12 need an ice-cream parlour?" I ask, interrupting Peeta in the middle of an animated description of a new shop that is being built.

"What's wrong with ice-cream?" he asks.

"I don't have anything against ice-cream per se," I reply. "But a whole shop selling only ice-cream? Who's going to shop there? Especially during winter? People have more important things to spend their money on, and it's not like anyone wants to eat ice-cream every day. I fail to see how a shop like that will be able to turn a profit."

"I suppose they'll have to branch out when winter comes," shrugs Peeta.

Haymitch snorts.

"If it were up to you, Katniss, I bet the only shop this district would have is a butcher shop."

"That's not true," I object. "What good would the butcher shop do me if I couldn't sell game to them and use that money in the other stores?"

"You don't need to sell anything to get money," replies Haymitch. "We'll all be living comfortably off our winnings until our dying days."

"Which is a good thing, I suppose," I say, glancing out the window. "It was miserable out in the woods today. Wet and smelly… Things like that never used to bother me, but I found myself wondering why I was even out there at this time of year when I could go to the aforementioned butcher shop and buy meat there."

"Well if you had we wouldn't have had that delicious goose for dinner," says Peeta, raising an eyebrow in Haymitch's direction. "We could all be starving to death and Haymitch's geese would still live to quack another day."

"Which is why I get to keep the feathers," I say. "It was my kill. You want goose feathers go get them in your own back yard."

"There's talk of a home textile shop opening at the end of summer," says Peeta. He lifts the large tea mug he brought from the kitchen to his lips, taking a careful sip of the steaming hot liquid. "Selling pillows and comforters and tablecloth and things like that."

"They seem to have shops for everything," I mutter. "I don't really like the thought of District 12 turning into a new version of the Capitol."

"I wouldn't worry about that just yet," says Haymitch. He lifts his flask and tips it in my direction. "Besides, there are some Capitol stores that I would be happy to welcome here. Like their liquor stores for instance."
"Perfect," I mutter, rolling my eyes.

"Did you hear about the swimming pool?" asks Peeta.

"The swimming pool?" I echo with disbelief.

"Yeah. They already started building it. They are turning the old rugby field by the school into a swimming area. I heard that they intend to teach all kids to swim as part of the curriculum."

"Where do you get all this information?" asks Haymitch incredulously between the sips from his flask.

"I have my sources," smiles Peeta.

They continue to discuss the pros and cons of having a swimming pool in the district while I rise from my seat and head to the bathroom. While I'm washing my hands I look over at the two towels hanging in Peeta's downstairs bathroom. One for himself and one guest towel. Looking at them brings to mind how my bathroom in the training centre had only one set of towels, and Peeta and I would share. It was only for a few nights but there was something nice about it. He used my toothbrush, too, and I remember liking to use it after him. My mind goes to what he said when we were out walking, about me coming to knock on his door if I have a particularly bad nightmare. I imagine getting to spend my nights here, or having him spend them at my place. We could share towels again. We could share a toothbrush. I miss that intimacy.

On the way back to the sitting room I stop in the doorway and lean against the doorpost, observing the two men for a moment before going to join them again. Haymitch is telling a story about his geese and their antics and Peeta laughs. Longing grips my heart, so strong it is almost unbearable. I love the way he smiles. I always have, but it's on a whole new level these days. Whenever I see him smiling widely or laughing I can't think of anything that I find more beautiful. I want so badly to be the one who makes him laugh on a daily, or even hourly basis, but I know that's never going to happen. Comedy has never been my forte. I'd settle for being able to make him smile in that special way, but I rarely manage to do so anymore. In the early days it seemed to take almost nothing on my part to make him smile like that, but it seems I've lost the ability.

Watching the two of them and hearing Peeta's laughter puts a smile on my own face. Right now I very strongly feel that these two are my family, and that we share a bond that can never be severed. I know life does not work that way. I know that friendships end, families fall apart and even the most ardent love can die. It's bound to happen with our trio at some point, and it's most likely Peeta who's going to leave. Peeta, the one who's genuinely nice and likeable and not a sad, disagreeable mess like Haymitch and me.

But tonight he's still here and a part of our screwed-up family. He's just a few short feet away from me, laughing at Haymitch's story, carefree and relaxed and at home. To me, this company will always be the place where he belongs. Once he is gone there's no telling how far deep into the darkness Haymitch and I will sink. I think Haymitch needs Peeta almost as much as I do, though in an entirely different way. I can't bring joy and hope to Haymitch's life. There's too much darkness and raging fire inside of me for that. He needs Peeta's warmth and softness like a lifeline, just like I do.

I allow myself to imagine what it could be like if Peeta's feelings for me returned. Him and me together, the way it feels like it should be, and Haymitch being the most important person to us outside of each other. I imagine meeting for dinner not at Peeta's house but at Peeta's and mine. The two of us welcoming Haymitch together and bidding him goodnight later in the evening. Retreating upstairs to go to bed, curled up in each other's arms, guarding each other from the terrors of the night.
The fantasy is almost too good for me to indulge in. I will only end in pain when the evening draws to an end, and I have to face reality and go back home to an empty house. Just thinking about it makes my heart sink to the soles of my shoes and I turn my face away, closing my eyes hard to try and push back the drowning feeling.

When I open my eyes Peeta is looking at me, his brow furrowed. He gets up from his seat and walks over to me, placing a hand on my arm.

"You okay?" he asks.

I can't bring myself to lie to him but I also can't tell him the whole truth.

"It's just… I like it when we're here, having dinner. What I don't like is having to go home to an empty house. I just started thinking about it and…"

Peeta's hand moves, his arm wraps over my shoulders and his hand now squeezes my right upper arm.

"Why don't you stay here tonight, then?"

"I don't want to be a bother."

"Don't be silly. Stay here."

Warmth spreads through my body, and I want to bury my face against his chest and wrap my arms around him. Peeta's hand leaves me before I get a chance to move, and the next thing I know he's walking back to Haymitch. The two continue their previous conversation as if what just happened was just a parenthesis, and I don't know if I'm happy or disappointed. I do know, however, that I'm relieved. I won't have to go back to my lonely house tonight. I get to stay here. With Peeta.

Haymitch leaves about an hour later and I follow Peeta as he shows me to the downstairs bedroom. He makes small talk while he unmakes the bed but I say very little, saddened that he's putting me in the guestroom and obviously have no intention of climbing into bed with me. He does, however, offer me one of his pyjamas to sleep in and I take him up on it. It's not a shared toothbrush or towel but it will do.

I crawl into bed that night knowing that I'm not alone in the house, that Peeta is nearby even if he's not in the same room as me, and that I could wake him up if I have a terrible nightmare. But going to bed alone downstairs is like a mockery to the fantasy I indulged in earlier. The only real bright side is that the pyjamas smells of Peeta, and I get to have that scent in my nose when I go to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

And that's it from me for a while! I'm going on vacation and probably won't be going online at all during that time. Which is liberating, if somewhat strange... =) 
Hope everyone is having a good summer and I'll see you all in a few weeks!
I've been getting a lot of requests to reveal whether or not this story is going to end with Everlark as endgame. I'm afraid you're going to have to wait and see. I usually outline my stories before I begin to write them but I want the option to change things as I go along, so while I have a specific ending in mind I don't want to paint myself into a corner by giving it away. It has happened in the past that I've scrapped my original intended ending for a story and gone in a different direction. If you're the kind who enjoys an angsty story so long as it has a happy ending, or if you simply don't care to read a Katniss/Peeta story that might not end up with them together, I won't blame you if you decide not to continue reading the story until the endgame has been revealed. That said, I'm grateful for any feedback I get and I'm very happy that people are sticking with the story even though there hasn't been any real happy K/P moments at this point. All you lovely readers make my day and inspire me to keep writing!

"The two of you are going to have to have dinner by yourselves next time around."

Haymitch and I both stop what we were doing – Haymitch rolling a tumbler back and forth between his hands and me putting plates and glasses back into the cupboard. Both of us stare at Peeta with wide eyes. Since we started having these every-other-night dinners we've only missed out on them when the weather has been too bad. We're all becoming creatures of habit, dr. Aurelius insists that routines are good for us, and hearing Peeta announce a deviation from the routine makes both Haymitch and I uncomfortable.

"Why?" asks Haymitch after a moment of silence.

"Because I have other plans," says Peeta a bit too lightly, probably attempting to sound casual but failing.

"You have other plans?" questions Haymitch.

"Uh-huh."

"Might I ask what those other plans are?"

Peeta pauses for a moment. A smile appears on his face and it seems like he's been trying to hold that smile back for a while. His cheeks turn a light shade of red and I try to remember if I've ever seen him blush before.

"I'm having dinner with somebody else."

My heart sinks to the soles of my shoes and I immediately avert my eyes, busying myself with the plates and glasses. I have a pretty good feeling what he's actually trying to tell us but I vehemently wish not to have to hear it.

"Okay," I manage to say, trying my best to sound like I could care less. "Speaking of dinner, I've
decided to start bringing game to the table again. The woods are starting to dry up after the melted snow, the animals are getting fatter, and quite frankly I could use the practice after a long winter of hardly ever shooting anything."

"Got a dinner date, boy?" asks Haymitch, completely ignoring my attempt to steer the conversation in a different direction.

"It's a dinner date, yes," says Peeta, still with that small smile on his face.

"Okay, well go have dinner with someone else, then," says Haymitch with a shrug. He rises from his seat at the kitchen table and heads for the sitting room. "It's my turn to provide the food next time anyway."

"I'm sure I won't be missed," says Peeta with a light chuckle. "We're actually going to a restaurant. It's going to be a bit weird but at the same time fun to try it out."

"Uh-huh. Can we still come here and make dinner? Your place smells less than mine or Katniss'."

"Stay away from my house when I'm not here."

Peeta follows Haymitch to the other room while I remain in the kitchen. I take my time putting everything back in the cupboards, grateful to have a few moments to myself so that I can put on my mask of indifference. Peeta is going on a dinner date. At a restaurant. Peeta is actually dating someone, or will be in two days.

I press my lips together, forcing back the tears that burn in my eyes and the sob that threatens to escape my lips. I had almost begun to forget how badly this situation makes me feel. In the weeks that have passed since I first saw Peeta looking at the seamstress I have almost been able to convince myself that I was imagining it, or making a mountain out of a molehill. Peeta hasn't so much as mentioned her to me since that day, and there has been no indication that something might be going on between him and some other girl. I gladly chalked it up to me having read the situation wrong before, but I'm beginning to realize that there is a significant portion of his life that Peeta doesn't share with me. That realization ought to hurt but right now it can't compare to the jealousy that burns so painfully in my chest.

I know I can't stay in the kitchen forever. I can hear Peeta's and Haymitch's voices from the other room. I should go and join them. If I don't they will start to wonder where I am. All I can do is pray that my face won't betray how devastated I feel.

Slowly, and with a reluctant sigh, I close the door to the kitchen cabinet. I walk from the kitchen to the sitting room, doing my best to seem casual. Haymitch is sitting on the couch and Peeta is in an armchair, his feet pulled up underneath him, his face lit up by a smile as he excitedly gives Haymitch more details about his date.

"… When she smiles she's absolutely lovely," he says. "Her laughter, though, is even better. It's this really contagious, bubbly kind of laughter, you know?"

"Uh-huh," says Haymitch, listening politely but not seeming as excited as Peeta. "So you're going to buy her dinner and tell her jokes all evening?"

"Pretty much," smiles Peeta. "I love being the reason she laughs."

"Comedy was never your strong suit," says Haymitch. He looks over at me. "Both of you, completely lacking of the ability to tell a joke. I'd say you've got your work cut out for you, boy."
"Thanks for the vote of confidence," says Peeta good-naturedly.

"So who is this girl you want to make laugh?" I force myself to ask, taking a seat on the armrest of the couch. As much as it hurts to hear about it I want to know what girl he's got his sights set on. I strongly suspect it's the seamstress but I could be wrong. I'm not sure whether it's better or worse if he's interested in more than one girl. More than one implies that there's nobody in particular and he's just being a typical hormonal eighteen-year-old. On the other hand it also means he's interested in several girls, yet not in me.

"Her name is Lace," says Peeta, confirming my suspicions. "You've met her, actually."

"Oh?" Somehow I manage to keep my voice steady. "Where?"

"She's a seamstress, the one who's been making clothes for me."

"Oh." I shrug my shoulder and hope to find the right balance in tone so that I sound neither jealous nor mean. "She must not have been laughing at the time because I can't remember a thing about her." Except of course that she was laughing, and that her laughter sounded pearly to me, rather than bubbly.

"Which one of the restaurants did you have in mind?" asks Haymitch, leaning back on the couch and putting his right foot over his left knee. "I hear the seafood one is utter crap. Shockingly shellfish and dead fish don't hold up all that well when you take four days to get it here from the fishing district."

"I heard," nods Peeta. "Thom had dinner there a couple of weeks ago and ended up with food poisoning. They're going to have to find some better way of preserving the fish or they'll be closed by Midsummer."

With that the conversation thankfully turns to a discussion of the three restaurants in town, and whether or not any of them has the potential to stay open for very long. Folks in the districts aren't used to the idea of being able to go out and sit down at a table and have food served. The Capitol had countless restaurants but the closest we ever got in District 12 was the soup Greasy Sae sold at the Hob. I suspect very few people will frequent these establishments since at this point most of the district's citizens are focusing on re-building their homes, putting food on the table each day, and, at least some, starting up their own businesses. Spending enough money to feed you and your family for at least a few days on just one meal is luxury few will be interested in.

For the rest of the evening we stay on safe topics, making no further mentioning of Peeta's upcoming date. That doesn't mean it's ever far from my mind. Every time he smiles I wonder if the date is the real reason why. For once I long to go back to my own house, where I don't have to fight to hide the horrible pain in my chest, but I force myself to stay until Haymitch declares that it's time to leave.

We haven't gotten off Peeta's front porch before he brings up the topic I've been glad to avoid all evening.

"I should've figured there was a girl involved," he smirks. I don't reply, unsure of how to react, but unfortunately for me Haymitch doesn't seem to need me much for this conversation. "He went from being rather down in the dumps to being… well, more like his old self, and it happened fairly fast."

"That could be attributed to anything," I argue sullenly.

"Well in this case it's attributed to a girl. Though I admit I am a bit surprised."

"Why is that?"
"He was a romantic one-track-mind for most of his life up until the hijacking," says Haymitch with a shrug. "I guess I wasn't expecting him to get the googly eyes for some other woman quite so soon."

I get that sinking feeling in my chest again, and I wonder how I will be able to get some help with my predicament from Haymitch without him figuring out what's really going on. He knows Peeta better than anyone else, perhaps even better than I do, and if I can get his truthful, objective thoughts on what is going on with Peeta and this girl then I might have a better understanding of what I am up against.

Every instinct I have is telling me to fight to win back the heart of the boy I care so deeply for. Every instinct save for one. My instinct to protect myself is screaming at me to not enter a fight like this unless I know I stand at least some fraction of a chance at winning. I have suffered far too many losses as it is. If I fight for Peeta and he rejects me I will not only lose the chance of being loved by him again, but I will also lose his friendship and companionship, and consequently lose the only real family unit I have left. The thought of that happening is far too frightening to even consider. I need Haymitch to help me figure out whether or not I still stand a chance at winning Peeta's heart, but I have to get it without my old mentor figuring out what I'm really feeling.

"Do you think it's good for him?" I blurt out as we walk slowly towards our own houses. "Pursuing a relationship so soon, I mean? Like you said he was in love with me for a long time and they jumbled his brain up pretty good."

"Could be exactly what he needs to get back on track again," argues Haymitch.

"Or it could be what throws him off the rails completely," I retort. I wrap my arms around myself and force myself to sound casual and make Haymitch believe what I say next. "He's going to start dating girls eventually, but I worry it will only hurt him to rush into something too fast. Routines are important, you know how adamant Dr. Aurelius is about that. I don't like that he's breaking our dinner routine. Furthermore we know nothing about this girl, and having his heart broken or having someone take advantage of him could be… Well it could be devastating for him at this point."

"Obviously this is a great concern of yours," says Haymitch, eyeing me carefully. "It's just a date, sweetheart. I trust the boy to know what tempo he can handle. I'm just grateful that someone has been able to make him more like his old self."

I allow myself the luxury of closing my eyes hard for just a second. Someone is able to make him more like his old self and that someone is not me. I hate that. I hate that so much that words can't describe it. For the moment though I have to hide my true feelings on the matter.

"I suppose you're right, Haymitch," I say. "Time will tell."

"You should be glad, you know," says Haymitch, giving my shoulder a pat before he heads down the path to his front door.

"Why is that?" I ask, stopping to make sure he gets through the door, the way I always do on our walks home from Peeta.

"The boy's got his eye on some new girl. That's what you wanted, right? For the whole romance thing to be taken out of the equation. His feelings for you aren't going to be a problem anymore by the looks of it."

He gives me a wave and goes inside his house. The door closes behind him and the lights come on inside. Through the window I can see him taking off his outdoor clothes before he stumbles off, in all likelihood in pursuit of alcohol.
Somehow I manage to keep my mind blank while I walk the remaining distance to my own house and head inside. Once the door has closed behind me I close my eyes hard and breathe heavily, trying my best not to let the tears begin to fall.

It's not lost on me, the irony of Haymitch's words. He must think that Peeta's affections for me were such an annoyance, and that it kept me from fully accepting his friendship. With Peeta's affections turned elsewhere the problem should be gone. Little does he know that the true nature of Peeta's feelings for me is a bigger problem now than it's ever been before.

It's Saturday evening. I'm sitting in one of the bay windows, a deck of cards in my hands and a ceramic bowl a foot away from my toes. One by one I flick the cards at the bowl, about one in three actually landing where I mean for it to. The grandfather clock by the bookshelf is ticking steadily, almost tauntingly, as if to hammer the point home that I am all by myself with nothing better to do than flick cards at a bowl.

There are a dozen things I could be doing. It's been a beautiful sunny day, perfect for going out into the woods. It's Saturday night and no doubt dozens of programs I could watch on the television. I have books on the shelf that I haven't read, there's a large pile of laundry that needs to be done, and I'm in dire need of some new arrows. I just can't muster the energy or the desire to do any of those things.

Peeta's date was last night. It's all I've been able to think about. Even when I try to distract myself, try telling myself that I don't care and I'm not heartsick and I'm just vexed that I had to eat dinner with Haymitch alone last night, nothing seems to work. All it takes is five minutes, and that horrible ache comes back, and my mind goes to Peeta and that girl.

How did the date go? Is he with her now? Did he kiss her? If he did, did he feel the thing I felt on the beach? Did she? Did he kiss her the way he kissed me that night? Questions upon questions burn inside me and each one hurts as much as the previous.

The clock strikes eight and I look up from my deck of cards and sigh. I can't bear not knowing what Peeta is doing right now. If he's with her or not. I know I stand no chance of getting a good night's sleep. Last night I slept terribly, tossing and turning, and every time I closed my eyes I saw Peeta with that girl.

Acting on an impulse I toss the cards left in my hand towards the bowl and I get down on the floor. Hurriedly I move through the house to the front door, grabbing my jacket on the way out. It's chilly outside tonight with a cold wind blowing, reminding me that it's not summer yet. Luckily I don't have very far to walk. I put one foot in front of the other and get moving before I can do something stupid like rethink this decision. I jog from my house to Peeta's, more to avoid the cold wind than anything else, and I hurry up the steps to his front door and knock firmly.

Shortly thereafter Peeta opens the door, surprise written on his face when he sees me. A smile is on his lips the next second and he steps aside to allow me to enter.

"What are you doing out at this hour?" he asks.

"It's only eight o'clock."
"On a cold and windy night." He closes the door behind me. "Look at you, you're shivering."

"I'm sorry," I say. I feel foolish for having come here, but at the same time I can't bear to be anywhere else. "It's just… It's been a bad day. I can tell already that it's going to be a bad night." I hesitate. "Do you mind if I stay here tonight?"

He grabs my jacket and helps me out of it, putting it on a hanger.

"Of course I don't mind. Come on in. I'm just watching TV."

"Thank you," I say, smiling faintly.

"Want a cup of tea?" he asks, leading the way into the kitchen. "Something to warm you up?"

Just being in his presence warms me up quite well, but I hate myself for even thinking something so silly. Instead I smile a little and shake my head.

"It was not even a minute long walk over here."

"Sure you don't want a cup?" he asks anyway.

"I'm sure. Thanks."

"Okay, suit yourself. Go have a seat, I'll be right with you."

He opens a cupboard and begins to rummage through it for something. Still with that small smile on my face I walk to the sitting room and take a seat on the comfortable couch. There's a soft, orange blanket thrown over the back of it and I take it and curl up underneath, feeling better already.

The TV is on, showing a cooking show, which makes me roll my eyes. Peeta's not even all that fond of cooking, which is surprising to me since he loves to bake. I grab the remote and wonder if he'll mind me checking what's on the other channels. I ought to be a nice house guest and let him continue watching his show, especially if he's going to let me spend the night, but watching some Capitol nitwit explain the intricacies of battering eggs just right does not interest me in the slightest.

"You can change the channel if you want," says Peeta as he comes walking in. "I've missed about five steps in how to make this dish anyway."

"Since when are you eager to find out how to make…" I squint and lean a bit closer, trying to figure out what they are cooking. "Battered eggs and slices of uncommonly large cucumber," I conclude.

"That's squash," chuckles Peeta. He flops down next to me on the couch, holding a pair of bananas and a dark brown plastic tube with glittery sprinkles. "Check this out. I got a package from Effie the other day. For whatever reason she's worrying that I'm not eating enough." He nods at the TV. "Cooking show was her suggestion." He leans over the table and puts the bananas down together with the tube. He grabs one banana and peels it quickly before picking the tube up again. "Among a few other Capitol foods, and I'm using the word food lightly here, she sent me this."

"What is it?" I ask, my curiosity peaked.

"Something that's most certainly not good for you," he replies with a grin. "Here, hold out a finger."

I do as he asks and he unscrews the lid of the tube, squeezing it carefully. A small dab of dark, liquid chocolate ends up on my fingertip and I stick it in my mouth, surprise by how rich the flavour is.

"Wow."
"It's meant to be put on ice-cream," he explains. "I haven't bothered explaining to her that ice-cream is not usually on our grocery lists. Or part of any important food group. Maybe I can recommend it to that new ice-cream parlour though." He grabs the banana again and squirts a dab of chocolate on the fruit. He takes a big bite and grins mischievously. "You should try it with a banana. It's really something else."

He looks so charming with his big grin and his new Capitol treat that it tugs on my heartstrings, and I want so badly to be able to turn back the clock to the point in time when I could have told him so without fear of rejection. My right arm rests on the back of the couch and I'm sitting with my right leg bent, my body angled towards him. I decline the banana he offers me, content to just watch him. He finishes the fruit, applying chocolate sauce before each bite, and then tosses the banana peel on the table. He leans closer to me and I feel my heart start beating faster. "You have a dab of chocolate on your lip," he says. He's so close to my face now, eyes on my mouth, and I'm having trouble remembering to breathe. This could be the moment I've been waiting for. All I have to do is lean in and kiss him. It would be so natural. But before I can actually do it he licks his finger and uses it to wipe the chocolate off. He then sits back down and turns his attention to the TV, which is still showing the cooking show. "Sure you don't want the other banana?" he offers. "I'm good," I murmur. "Okay, well let me know if you change your mind. Effie sent me like ten of them and I don't think they will hold up for too long, so you really would be doing me a favour by helping me eat them."

In a daze I shift on the couch, sitting with both feet on the ground and my hands on my lap, staring at the television though taking in absolutely nothing of what it's showing, while I wait for my heart rate to slow down. I'm part exhilarated from how close he was to me, and part painfully disappointed that he didn't press his lips to mine. Neither one of us speaks for a few minutes. Peeta watches the show, chuckling at some of the slightly absurd moments, and seems completely unaware of how his closeness moments before has affected me. I force myself to watch the TV and not turn my eyes to him every other second. The silence feels strange because Peeta doesn't seem to notice how on edge I am. Finally there's a commercial break and he turns to me. "I might be skipping on dinner every now and then in the future."

Disappointment fills me to the point where I almost want to cry. How can we go so fast from where we were moments ago to this? How does he have the power to make my emotions run this wild? If this is love I'm not at all sure I like it. I want to be the Katniss I used to be, who never let another person impact her emotions like this. "Oh," I manage. I clear my throat and ask the question I don't want to hear answered. "So last night was..."

"Nice," he finishes and a smile spreads slowly across his face. "Really nice. We're having dinner again on Tuesday."

Tuesday. It couldn't be Monday or Wednesday? It had to be the day he's supposed to have dinner with Haymitch and me? "I see," I say, gluing my eyes to the television, which hopefully means I won't catch too much of the
look on his face right now.

"I'll try to arrange for my evenings with her to be ones when it's not our dinner night," says Peeta, perhaps catching something in the tone of my voice. "Although… If last night was any indication I probably won't be able to make it to dinner with you guys every other night of the week."

I can't stop myself from looking at him.

"You can't spare three or four nights a week for us?" I ask, though right now I honestly don't care too much about how much time he allots to Haymitch.

"I don't know," he says with a shrug. The commercial break is over and he turns his attention back to the television. "I could be getting way ahead of myself here. We've only been on the one date, but it was a good date."

I say nothing, biting back the hurt inside. Why, why did this have to happen? Why did some trollop of a seamstress have to come and turn his head, making him care about dinners with her more than he cares about his dinners with Haymitch and me? It's not just about my own jealousy. It's a disruption to the routine and it worries me, for my own sake as well as for Peeta's and Haymitch's. I think to myself that I ought to voice this concern, but I don't know how to phrase it so that it doesn't come out wrong.

Suddenly the phone rings and startles me. Peeta turns away from the television, looking towards the kitchen where he's got the nearest phone. He gets up and heads for the kitchen, and I hear his voice answer and then sound excited. It's probably her, calling to interfere with this night too. Jealousy and pettiness fills me and when my eyes land on the tube of chocolate sauce I reach forward and grab it. Tilting my head back I get the lid off and point the tube straight at my mouth, treating myself to a big mouthful of chocolate sauce. It tastes good and actually makes me feel a little less crappy, but at the same time I feel ashamed of myself, and I quickly screw the cork back on and put the tube back exactly the way it was, wiping my mouth with the back of my other hand.

A few minutes later Peeta comes back and takes a seat beside me.

"That was Effie," he says, sounding a bit irritated. "Called to make sure I was doing okay. I didn't realize that writing her a letter would activate some form of need she apparently has to escort someone. It felt weird, like she thinks she's my surrogate mother or something." He snorts. "My own mother thought I could do fine in a big house all by myself at age sixteen. I definitely don't need a replacement mother at this age."

I look at him and wonder if there's anything I can say to make him feel better. He sighs, furrows his brow, crosses his arms over his chest and leans back against the couch, his good mood completely gone. I realize I can't think of a single thing to say so I stay silent, pretending to watch the cooking show. Ten minutes later, when the show is blissfully over, he turns to me.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound like such a brat. She just gets a little… Effie, sometimes, you know?"

"She cares about you, Peeta. You're…" My cheeks flush a bit as I realize that what I'm about to say is incredibly cheesy, but I can't help myself. "You're important to her. There's a distance between the two of you now that wasn't there before and-"

"She was barely in my life before," Peeta points out.

I can't believe I'm sitting here talking about my own feelings disguised as interpretations of Effie
Trinket's behaviour. Sometimes I really don't like what feeling this way about someone turns me into.

"Nonetheless. She loves you, you know. She's just not good at showing it. If she wants to shower you with this kind of attention then let her. Where's the harm?"

"No I know," says Peeta, offering me a faint smile. "I shouldn't complain. It just gets on my nerves sometimes, that's all."

"You know, I can understand how she feels," I say with a tremble to my voice, feeling my pulse quicken and a knot tighten in my stomach as I brace myself to test the waters.

"Oh?" He sounds surprised.

"I care about you, too," I say, too bashful to use any stronger words at the moment. My hand finds Peeta's and I lightly caress the back of his hand with my thumb. "I mean I… I like you. So much. I like knowing you're okay, and I can understand that Effie feels that way too, albeit in a more… overbearing escort kind of way."

I know I must be blushing but I don't care. Peeta is looking at me with a new intensity in his eyes and a warm smile on his lips. It's impossible for me not to return that smile. I can't recall that I ever knew before how good it feels to smile with someone this way.

"I care so much about you, too, Katniss," he says with warmth.

"You do?" I ask, by now convinced that my cheeks must be flaming red.

"Of course I do." He reaches out his hand and gently brushes my cheek with the back of his fingers. "You don't know how glad I am that we can have this type of relationship now."

"What kind of relationship is that?" I ask, awaiting his answer with bated breath.

"Real, genuine friendship. Unhindered by my jealousy of Gale and your… well, for lack of a better word, inability to reciprocate my feelings. You're my best friend, like Delly was when we were kids, but on a much deeper level."

I avert my eyes, biting my bottom lip and focusing on taking slow, even breaths. Was I completely crazy or did we have a moment of understanding before he opened his mouth and effectively friend-zoned me? I know I didn't spell out my feelings for him in exact terms, but surely he must be able to read it on my face right now? Giving him the best fake smile I can muster, which admittedly is rather half-assed, I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. He nods and reaches for the remote while I get up and leave the room on slightly unstable legs. Once I reach the bathroom I lock the door behind me and grab the sink with both hands, staring at myself in the mirror, trying to force myself to stop trembling.

"Get it together," I mumble to myself. I need to calm down or he will see that I am upset, and I cannot handle that. Not in the wake of what just transpired.

After everything we've been through together Peeta must be able to tell what I was trying to get through to him moments ago. Yes I know it's cowardly to expect him to read between the lines like that, but I have to tread very carefully with this or I might risk losing him altogether. As it is, I can only think of two explanations for what transpired.

One is that Peeta simply didn't pick up on my intentions. Maybe I was too subtle after all, and it all came across as just an affirmation of friendship. I can accept that. All that means is that I have to be more obvious the next time. What worries me is the possibility that he's too busy thinking about Lace
to notice the signs I'm trying to send him.

The other option is that he did in fact see what I was trying to convey, and that he gave me my answer as subtly as he could. The more I think about it the more I become convinced that he did in fact just give me the brush-off. I should be glad that he's nearly as invested in keeping me in his life as I am in keeping him in mine, but that seems almost insignificant in light of the crushing fact that if he did understand that my feelings for him are more than friendly he doesn't reciprocate.

I stare at myself in the mirror and hate the fact that I am such a coward. Really, what's wrong with me? I ought to just go out there and tell him straight out that I can't stop thinking about him, and I want a chance at a real relationship with him, and tonight I want to sleep in his bed, in his arms, and I don't ever want to spend a night, or day, without him. I should remind him that even though he's got a thing for this girl Lace it can't measure up to everything we and I have meant to each other and the bond that we share. I am his first love, and if he loved me for over ten years then he must still have some feelings for me. It wasn't at all long ago that those feelings were a big part of who he was. I should kiss him and try to make him feel the way our kisses in the second arena made me feel. I ought to do all of that, and if he turns me down then we can deal with the fallout, but if he gives me the chance we could have something far beyond anything I, we, have ever experienced before.

The problem is that the odds seem horribly not in my favour.

I think of how uncomfortable Peeta's references to his love for me used to make me feel, and how strange it felt to be kissed by him at first. I picture Peeta feeling uncomfortable knowing that I'm in love with him and not wanting to feel my lips against his, and the thought of it breaks my heart. Sighing heavily at my own cowardice, and longing back to the good old days when I wasn't sure what I felt or who I felt it for, I splash my face with cold water and dry off on Peeta's guest towel. I head back to the sitting room where Peeta is watching a documentary on the oh-so-fascinating creature that is the mosquito. When he hears me coming he cranes his neck and looks at me over his shoulder.

"Sure you don't want a banana?" he says.

"I'm sure," I say, surprised at how steady my voice sounds. I sit back down on the couch, this time with a bit more space between myself and Peeta. "You should use them in your baking."

"That's a good idea," he nods, a touch of excitement in his voice. "I can still spare one for my best buddy, though."

His smile is relaxed, but I can't muster up the energy to return it. I sit beside him and watch television until he begins to yawn and suggests we call it a night. Declining his offer of a mug of hot milk before bed I walk towards the downstairs bedroom, assuring him that I can get the sheets for the bed on my own.

When I crawl between the sheets I curl up on a foetal position and sigh heavily, feeling hopelessness and jealousy and sadness wearing me down. The sheets smell of Peeta's favourite fabric softener, vanilla-orchid, and the comfortable t-shirt I'm wearing is one of his old ones that still carries his scent, but for the first time I don't feel any better sleeping here than I do in my own bed in my own house. I can hear Peeta moving around upstairs, and I wonder what he's thinking and who he's thinking of, and if he really wants me to be here.

I have a nightmare that night, dreaming that I confess my true feelings to Peeta and he reacts by looking very uncomfortable, and then suddenly Lace Bomull is there beside him, pregnant and glowing with happiness. The rest of the dream consists mostly of Peeta disappearing and me trying to find him but Lace constantly showing up to block my path or take him away once I do find him. My
subconscious is not exactly being subtle tonight.

I wake up with a gasp and a shudder, sitting myself up to catch my breath, feeling terrible and wondering how I came to this place. How in the world did I end up in unrequited love with the boy who loved me from age five?

Letting myself fall back against the mattress I clutch the comforter, staring at the ceiling in my loneliness. I feel a strong urge to get out of bed, put my clothes on and head back home, but I know I have to be here in the morning or Peeta will wonder. What I want to do the most is go up the stairs and seek comfort in his arms but I'm afraid to. If he was giving me the brush-off tonight I don't want to make him uncomfortable by crawling into bed with him. I can't risk doing anything that might drive us apart.

I just don't know how to do anything that will bring us closer together.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This is a fairly short one and I had some struggles with it (more details in the end note). I made some attempts at adding length to it but I couldn't fit something in that didn't feel like mere padding so it is what it is, just about 3500 words or so.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Springtime is particularly lovely this year. The process of rebuilding the district has gotten fairly far and all the rubble and debris has been removed. A committee was formed the previous autumn to make decisions on how to spend the funding we get from the new Capitol, a committee Haymitch reluctantly agrees to be part of after Peeta and I blankly refuse. From what Haymitch tells us the members of the committee spend most of their time arguing with each other, which Peeta calls a side-effect of having gained freedom after so many years of oppression – people never had a say before so now everyone wants a say to make up for it. What they have managed to agree on is that the district needs to be made nicer on the eyes, and part of that project has been to plant trees and bushes. So while the sun shines brightly from the sky for several days without a cloud in sight the new flora begins to come to life. In town there are several chestnut trees surrounded by rose bushes, all in bloom. Beech trees with fresh bright green leaves line the roads that lead to the factory, the hospital and the Justice Building. The road out to the Victors' Village has been lined with cherry trees that soon burst into bloom. While I strongly dislike the rose bushes I find the other parts of the new plantlife to be beautiful and soothing.

It's just a shame that all this beauty is wasted on a spring when I walk around with a constant knot in my stomach. In the six weeks that have passed since Peeta's first date with Lace he has been on many more, at least one every week but probably more. Always on Friday nights, whether he was supposed to meet with Haymitch and me or not, and there have been at least two other times when he has bailed on us for a mid-week dinner. He's in bright spirits and I want so badly to be happy that he's in a good mood, but I can't separate his frame of mind from the person responsible for it.

At first we barely speak of her. I never ask questions and Peeta, for whatever reason, chooses not to give me any details. Yet with each passing week I begin to wonder and worry more and more. Is this a person he will continue seeing? Is Peeta about to have a proper girlfriend? If that is the case, what will I do then?

The subject of Lace, the New Love Interest, finally comes up one afternoon when we are out in my garden, Peeta and I. He's helping me tend to the primrose bushes because I haven't got the first idea how to make a plant survive, and Peeta has at least some knowledge of how to tend to them.

"For the life of me I cannot fathom how a person so apt at finding medicinal herbs and edible plants can have absolutely no knowledge of how to tend to a garden," smirks Peeta as he kneels by the primrose bushes and gets to work.
"I know how to find wild plants," I retort, crossing my arms over my chest. "These are domesticated ones. It makes no sense that they should need to be watered by mankind when their wild companions seem to survive just fine on their own."

Peeta chuckles. I've actually been very careful not to let these flowers come to any harm but I know that watering them during a drought is not the only care they need.

"We'll settle for the simpler stuff this year," says Peeta, using a small hoe to pat fresh soil over the plants' roots. "In a year or two though we'll have to think about planting new ones, preferably from these bushes' sprouts."

"Why would we have to do that?" I ask, feeling slightly worried.

"I don't think these bushes live all that long," he answers. "To keep gardens alive you sometimes have to focus on the offspring of your original plants, as it were."

"Who knew it would be so complicated?" I mutter. "Can I count on you to help me with this stuff or will I have to go get myself a gardener?"

"I'd be happy to help," he smiles. "I'm not doing much of value these days anyway, so it's nice to have something to busy myself with during the day. Oh by the way, I've ordered some yellow paint."

A smile lights my face.

"You'll be busy working on the painting soon, then?"

"Indeed I will, once I get the paint." He rises from the ground, a bit wobbly on his prosthetic left leg, and brushes dirt off his pants. "Just as soon as I finish with what I'm working on at the moment."

"So what are you working on?" I ask, handing him a bottle of water.

He unscrews the cap and tilts his head back, swallowing several gulps in a row. It's a warm day, not summer hot but enough to make you thirsty when you're out working in the sunlight in a pair of overalls.

"It kind of sounds stupid," he says when he's done drinking, wiping his mouth with his sleeve, "but it's the view of a tree as seen from when you're lying down on the ground looking up at the sky."

"That sounds nice, not stupid," I say, though I'm not quite sure why he would choose that specific angle.

"I hope so," he smiles. "Lace has been telling me all about how she and her best friend used to lie on the grass underneath a large chestnut during summer afternoons. It got me thinking of how the light hits the leaves when you're looking at it from that view, and it made me want to paint it."

"Oh."

"It's frustrating, actually, because I also ordered more green paint and I can't finish this piece until I get it. I have this perfect image in my head and I think I know how to put it on canvas, but I need more paint to complete it. It's like I can't stop thinking about how leaves look from that angle when the sun shines down on them. You know, how they're dark at the centre but a bright green on the edges."

"Yes I know," I say, a touch coldly. "I have seen leaves from that viewpoint before."
"If it turns out alright I'm going to give it to her."

He hands the bottle back to me and I take it, screwing the cap back on. That hurt that is by now far too familiar returns to my chest and I can't help but scold myself for being so ridiculous. It saddens and hurts me that Peeta is considering giving one of his paintings to Lace even though he's given away paintings before. Am I really so petty and jealous that I don't want her to have anything from him?

"Does she miss her old district?" I ask, mostly just to make conversation.

"Quite a lot. Well, she hasn't said it straight out but judging by the things she tells me… Especially now during spring it seems she misses her friends and family and District 8 springtime in general."

"So why did she even move here?" I ask. "Was District 8 that badly damaged?"

"You don't know?" asks Peeta, looking surprised. "They told me… I was told you went there. During the war. They said you visited a hospital and it was attacked. My handlers in the Capitol wanted me to believe you provoked the attack."

"It's true, I was there when the hospital was bombed," I tell him. "I'm not so convinced Snow and his forces knew I was there, though. Not until afterward. I'm just curious, Peeta, why didn't this girl go back to her home district when the war ended?"

"She figured there would be more opportunities here, I guess."

"More opportunities?"

"There's bound to be a surplus of seamstresses and tailors in the fabric district, don't you think?" he asks. He grabs the wheelbarrow and begins to push it towards the shed in my back yard.

"Yeah but… Why come here?" I ask, following him as he goes. "Why not go to a district that's better off?"

"Twelve is a lucrative choice, I guess." He looks up at the sky and squints at the bright sunlight. "Looks like we might have rain this evening."

"Never mind the weather. What do you mean Twelve is a lucrative choice?"

"I do mind the weather," frowns Peeta. "I'm going to town tonight to have dinner with Lace and I'd prefer not arriving soaking wet."

"Peeta. What do you mean Twelve is a lucrative choice?"

"Isn't it obvious?" he asks, motioning for me to open the door to the shed. "The factory is creating a lot of work and so is the rebuilding of the district."

"Yeah, but Lace doesn't work at the factory and she isn't building houses," I point out, holding the door open for him. "What's in it for her?"

"People need clothes to wear, don't they?"

"Look, Peeta," I say, closing the door to the shed and brushing my hands on my sleeves. "Are you really concerned about arriving soaking wet for a dinner with a girl who's making a profit off of the suffering of the people in our district?"

"You make it sound so sinister," he says, his tone disapproving.
"It's vulture behaviour and I hate it!" I spit out, a touch too aggressively.

"Katniss." He says my name with a mixture of surprise and chastisement. "Lace isn't like that."

"How do you know?" I ask. "What do you really know about her, Peeta?"

"A lot more than you do. She's no more taking advantage of people here than you are when you sell your game to them just so you can spend money that isn't from the Capitol. She makes a living by making clothes for people who choose to come to her shop." He pauses as if he realizes he's about to go off on a long rant, and runs a hair through his curly hair. "Look, maybe you should meet her again. Spend some time with her, get to know her."

"No thank you," I snort. I'm about to ask him if she's really that important to him when he gives me a disapproving look.

"You judge people so harshly sometimes," he says. "Why can't you give someone the benefit of the doubt?"

"You try too hard to only see the good in people," I shoot back. I begin to walk back across the lawn and Peeta follows. "For the record I admit that I don't know her. Okay? Maybe she's a saint. Maybe she's better than everyone else in all the country."

"Katniss…"

"I'm just saying, Peeta, that you shouldn't let your guard down and just assume that she's wonderful just because you like the sound of her laughter." I stop and give him a serious look. "I don't want to see you get hurt."

"Thanks, but I'm a big boy," he says. "I've already had my heart broken. I'm not going to let that stop me from seeing the good in people." He looks away. "I don't know that I can carry on otherwise. I can't see the world as being full of villains."

"You mean the way I do?" My brow furrows and I cross my arms over my chest. I need to focus on this comment rather than the one he just made about having had his heart broken. I can focus on that later, when I'm alone.

Peeta's eyes meet mine again.

"No, Katniss, I didn't mean to imply… You have your walls up and I understand why, believe me, I do. We're just… different, you and I. We find different ways to cope. For you, being wary of people is self-protection. For me, holding on to my beliefs that most people are good is self-preservation. They've taken so much from me already and I don't want to give them that part of me, too."

"I'm just trying to look out for you," I say, my tone softening. "I do think it's nice that you want to believe the best about people. Just don't let that blind you, okay?"

"I'm not blind when it comes to Lace," says Peeta. "I'm just starting to get to know her and I know she will turn out to have negative qualities and… less bubbly personality traits. I can assure you, though, that she's not here to make a profit from anyone's suffering."

I had almost forgotten what the discussion had originated on. I feel deflated that when I was able to find a, in my mind, valid reason for concern regarding her Peeta just waves it aside.

"How can you be sure?" I ask.
"She works so hard," he says, following me up the steps that lead to the back porch. I offer him a seat at the wooden table and he takes it. "She never takes advantage of her customers. In fact she does the opposite. I've seen her agree to make clothes for people on credit, even though it might be a long time until they can actually pay her and she doesn't have much money herself. She knows what suffering is, Katniss. She wouldn't try to benefit from somebody else's hardships."

"Still," I say, sitting opposite him. "Why come here? She could have gone to the Capitol. They must have a lot more exciting prospects for a seamstress. Or she could have gone to Two, they were pretty badly hit during the war, and people need new clothes there, too. Twelve seems like an odd choice."

"Look around you, Katniss," says Peeta. "At least one in four out of the faces you see in the streets is a person who wasn't born in Twelve. There are an infinite number of reasons why any of them chose Twelve and not one of the other districts. Why are you so suspicious of her motives and not of theirs?"

Because none of them are the object of Peeta's affections, but of course I can't tell him that. I don't even want that to be the truth. I want there to be some real, tangible, legitimate reason for me to dislike her, one that has nothing to do with Peeta.

"I just don't want to see you getting hurt," I say, to my chagrin unable to come up with anything else at the moment.

He smiles slightly.

"Are you going to be this hard on every girl I date?"

I return his smile, a touch of relief in my chest. So he's not really infatuated with her, not yet at least. If he was he wouldn't be entertaining the thought of dating other girls at some point in the future.

"What will you do with the guys who want to date me?" I ask him, attempting for it to sound like carefree banter but hiding a serious question underneath.

Peeta leans his head back and laughs.

"Not a damn thing. You, Katniss Everdeen, the Mockingjay herself. You don't need me or anyone else to ward off potential suitors."

"So I can date whoever I want then and you won't mind?" I ask, hiding my inner feelings with a smirk.

"Well, not anyone," he answers, still chuckling. "If you brought home a morphlingist, or a baker who might possibly become a future business rival to me I might not be best pleased. Tell you what, the next time you've got a date you let me know who it is, and I will give you my opinion then."

The smile slowly fades from my lips but Peeta doesn't seem to notice. His attention is on Buttercup, who has come walking up the porch steps and is begging for attention. Peeta leans over to pet him, asking him if he's been out chasing mice. I can't help but think to myself how ridiculous it is for Peeta to refer to the next time I've got a date. I've never had a date in my life.

Peeta picks Buttercup up and places him on his lap. The cat permits him to pet him but doesn't curl up and purr like he always did with Prim and occasionally does with me nowadays. I keep my eyes on the cat, finding it the safest choice at the moment.

"So, uh…" says Peeta, glancing up at me through the blond curls that fall over his brow. "Why the question?"
"Huh?" My eyes go from the cat to him. "What question?"

"You know… About how I would react if you were dating someone…"

I shrug and lean back in my chair, letting my eyes drift away from him.

"Just banter."

"Banter…" he says with a small nod. "So it's not your way of testing the waters before you tell me about some new guy you're dating?"

I look at him again, suddenly curious.

"What do you care?"

"We're friends, right?" He smiles half-heartedly. "You know, people care whether or not their friends have a date."

"That's not true," I scoff. "They might care if their friend has got a crush on someone but whether or not they're dating in general?" A disturbing thought crosses my mind. "Unless you're thinking about setting me up with someone."

He holds up his hands as if to surrender, laughing slightly. Buttercup hisses at him for pausing the petting.

"No, no fixing you up with anyone, I promise!"

"Then why do you care?" I ask, feeling interested and for once like I'm in some level of control.

"Just making conversation," he claims. He begins to pet the cat again, but Buttercup has decided he's no longer worthy and hisses at him before jumping down on the floor.

"Really?" I say, voice full of scepticism. I can feel the cat brushing against my legs and in an odd way it makes me feel better, as if Buttercup is siding with me.

"Okay, I'll admit…" says Peeta. "I'm not sure how I would feel if you were going on a date with somebody. Don't get me wrong, I know it's not for me to have an opinion about it. It's just a little weird. I remember feeling jealous of Gale, that part they very kindly let me keep, and I don't know if…"

"If?"

"It's not my place to have an opinion on your love life but I'm still trying to figure out what my… emotional-self is like now post-hijacking."

I tilt my head slightly, studying him intently. He seems quite uncomfortable all of a sudden, and my heart feels a touch of warmth and satisfaction. If I start flirting with some other guy will that make him jealous? If so then what does that say about his affections for the bubbly seamstress?

"This conversation just turned very strange," he laughs uncomfortably, rubbing his neck with one hand.

"I'd say it just turned interesting," I reply calmly.

"You know what, forget that I said anything at all." He rises and looks at his watch. "I should go home and take a shower anyway."
"Why? The seamstress doesn't like your natural musk?" I say, rather enjoying myself for once.

"My natural musk is one thing," he answers. "Right now I smell of the fertilizer I used on the primrose bushes." He walks towards the steps leading down from the porch but then he stops and turns slightly towards me. "I'm sorry, I know I'm acting a little peculiar, but there's... There are some things I'm still trying to figure out. A lot of things, to be honest. It's weird not knowing your own brain or your own emotions anymore."

I frown and get up from my seat, no longer finding anything about this conversation to be entertaining or strengthening.

"Peeta are you talking to Dr. Aurelius about this? Is he helping you?"

"It will work itself out in time, Katniss," says Peeta in a calmer tone. "Yeah I talk to him about it, to an extent. Most of all it's just... me having to get to know myself all over again, if that makes sense."

"Maybe you shouldn't be dating anyone right now then," I say. Setting aside my jealousy, it still concerns me that he's getting involved with someone new in the light of what he's just told me. "It sounds to me like you need to focus on yourself right now, and not on getting to know someone new."

"Spending time with Lace is really helpful," he says, a touch of annoyance in his voice. "Trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Know what you're doing?" I echo with scepticism. "You just acted really weird and told me things I didn't know about your recovery. Peeta it doesn't sound to me like you've got this all figured out."

"I don't," he says. "What I do know is being around her helps. Look I really have to get going. Just... Just ignore these past five minutes altogether if that makes you feel better, okay?"

He heads off towards his own house and I walk to the railing to keep my eyes on him as he goes. What on earth just happened?

Chapter End Notes

My two biggest problems with this chapter are the argument they have and the conversation on the porch. With the argument I did a few re-writes but I'm still not sure it says what I intend for it to say. The porch conversation must have existed in like a dozen different versions by the time I decided not to change it any further. I've ended up pretty much stuck and I realize I won't be able to figure out if it all works like I intend for it to work so I decided to post it as is. Hopefully through your feedback I'll find out if I got it right. If I didn't, I might re-post a different version of this chapter (though knowing myself that's not likely) or I'll try to "right the wrongs" in the chapter that follows.

On an unrelated note, the comment on how "people never had a say before so now everyone wants a say to make up for it" is lovingly borrowed from Vilhelm Moberg's amazing "Emigrants" suite. It seemed like such a fitting viewpoint that I couldn't help giving it to Peeta.
Oh, and I am working on a series of ficlets (chapters? chaplets?) for this universe from Peeta's POV. I will post them at a later time as a separate piece. At least some of Peeta's thoughts and reasonings will be revealed.
Okay, so, I didn't proof-read this but I did some re-working yesterday so hopefully I was able to catch anything else that needed fixing while I was at it. This is a chapter I struggled a lot with whether or not I needed to remove large chunks of it and find some other way of getting the same thing across. In the end I decided to go with my original plan for it but my end note will have more detail on this.

I once heard it said that being in love is being consumed by another person. If so then that must be all the proof I need that I'm in love because my mind is occupied at all times with thoughts of Peeta, now even more than before. Not much of it is pleasant at the moment, unfortunately, as daydreaming about him makes me feel strange in the light of everything that's happened recently. Along with the by now familiar pain I feel in my chest whenever I think of him and his budding relationship with Lace I now also spend a lot of time worrying about him and his emotional state.

The evening after our talk on the porch we met up for dinner with Haymitch, as usual. When I first arrived Peeta apologised for having acted strange the previous day, but after that he made no more mention of it, and his behaviour was back to normal. The conversation we had the day before seemed like a parenthesis, and I almost began to wonder if I was remembering it wrong or dreamt the whole thing. Throughout the evening Peeta never mentioned Lace, though that in itself is not uncommon. He talks about her from time to time but thankfully doesn't seem to have the need to bring her up every time we meet for dinner. I secretly hope this means his infatuation with her is fading.

It's been a week and a half since the porch conversation, and he hasn't brought it up again. Neither have I, mainly because I'm not sure what I would say or what was really going on. I've been tempted several times to call Dr. Aurelius and voice my concerns, but it doesn't seem right to talk to the doctor about something that concerns Peeta's recovery. Perhaps I ought to just disregard our conversation entirely and chalk it up Peeta simply having had an off moment. Only I can't do that. If there is something he's struggling with then I can't just let it go.

On Wednesday we walk together in to town, both of us in need of food supplies, among other things. We visit the pharmacy together, followed by the shoemaker, and then we go to the market to get our groceries. Our last stop is the Justice Building where the post office is located. The paint Peeta sent for has finally arrived, and it's a large, fairly heavy parcel so I offer to carry Peeta's groceries for him. He takes me up on the offer and carries the parcel by wedging it under his armpit and holding it with his hand.

"You must have bought a lot of paint," I comment as we step outside into the sunlight. "How many shades does yellow come in?"

"You'd be surprised," he chuckles. "Though most of them I mix myself. It's part of the process, or the challenge in some cases. The reason why this parcel is so big is that I ordered a new palette and a new set of brushes. The reason it's heavy is I got some more tubes of paint along with the yellow."

"So when can I expect to see the primrose painting done?" I ask lightly, feeling a growing sense of
relief with each step we take away from the Justice Building and the town square. "Also, will I be needing to buy a frame for it?"

"Patience, Miss Everdeen," he chuckles. "I'm still working on the tree painting, and the primroses have only just begun to bloom."

We continue in silence as we pass by the houses on the nowadays fairly busy streets. A few people nod to us or give us a wave, recognizing us from our time in the public eye but knowing that we don't want to be approached randomly. Peeta returns each greeting with a nod while I settle for turning the corners of my mouth up just slightly for a fleeting second. Some people smile at the sight of us together. Or at least that's what I think they're smiling about. Nobody ever smiles at me like that when I'm out by myself.

I like the thought that seeing us together makes people smile. As much as I hated the general public for feeling so invested in our fake romance and felt like they ought to mind their own business, I find nowadays that it's reassuring to see that some people still care. I don't like admitting it to myself but I enjoy people seeing us together and knowing that we still matter to one another. It's no secret in the district that Peeta is having dinner with Lace Bomull at least twice a week, but there's still a special connection between him and me that no one can deny.

"So, listen..." he says once we've cleared the town and are on the road to the Victors' Village. "About next Friday, when we're supposed to have dinner..."

Rage begins to well up inside of me. I suppose I shouldn't expect him to actually be present for any dinner on a Friday evening anymore, but I have just about had it with him bailing on Haymitch and me, and this particular occasion is one I won't let him skip out on without consequence.

"Peeta you are not skipping that dinner," I snarl, drawing a deep breath to begin a rant about what I think and feel on the subject.

"What? No!" he says quickly, shaking his head slightly. "No, no, no, no. I'm not going to miss dinner next Friday. I know I've been absent for a couple of Friday dinners, but next week I'm there, I promise."

Absent for a couple of Friday dinners? Well that's one way of looking at it. A more accurate description would be that he hasn't had dinner with us a single Friday night in two months. I'm relieved to hear he's going to be there next week, but I'm still angry, and I'm beginning to feel a strong need to vent my frustration and my concerns. Not even the crooked smile Peeta flashes me does much to calm me.

"Katniss I'm not going to miss your birthday," he says. That, on the other hand, manages to disarm me. "I was just going to ask if you have any preferences for the cake."

"The cake?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"Yeah, silly, your birthday cake."

This turn of events startles me enough that the anger goes away, at least for the time being. I have been worrying that Peeta wouldn't be there for my birthday dinner since it falls on a Friday, even though it shouldn't be that big of a deal. We haven't celebrated each other's birthdays this past year except to let the person having the birthday decide what we'll eat and the other two cook it. Haymitch, who had his birthday in October, decided he wanted pulled pork, something Peeta and I had only eaten once before in the Capitol and had absolutely no idea how to make. It took us forever to prepare it, and that's not counting how long it took to actually cook. I've been trying to think of
something equally bothersome to ask for in case it would end up being only Haymitch cooking it. The thought that Peeta would plan to bake me a cake is completely unexpected.

"Well..." I say, trying to think of any sort of cake at all, but realizing I have no real clue how many variations there are to what is beneath the frosting.

"You don't have to decide right here, right now," says Peeta, amused by my reaction. "Just let me know three or four days in advance so I can make sure I have everything I need to bake it."

"Anything you bake will be fine."

"Hey, you've got a baker here offering to make whatever cake you want," he grins. "Seize the opportunity. Dare to dream."

"I'm just glad you're going to be there," I tell him sincerely.

His grin briefly turns to a grimace. The cherry trees along the road are still in full bloom but a few petals fall here and there, and one lands on his cheek. He brushes it off with the hand that's not holding the parcel, and keeps his eyes on the petal for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry that I've been skipping dinners now and then."

"Well you've had dates to go on," I say dryly. "One must prioritise."

"See the thing is Friday evenings are the only ones Lace can always take off work," he begins to explain. "Monday through Thursday she spends her evenings working and on Saturdays she usually-"

"I don't need to hear her schedule," I object.

"Maybe we can change our routines a bit, you and me and Haymitch. We've been meeting every other day but why not settle on three or four specific days each week?"

"We have a routine that works," I argue.

"Except on Fridays."

"I'm always there on Fridays," I retort. "So is Haymitch."

Peeta sighs and furrows his brow.

"You're right. I'm the one who can't make the routine fit anymore. What I'm asking though, is would it really be that much trouble for you guys to agree on a different arrangement?"

"Peeta we have routines for a reason," I point out. "We're not supposed to change them around or deviate from them, you know this. Is there any reason why your girlfriend can't take Thursday nights off instead every other week?"

Peeta's eyes meet mine when he hears me say the word girlfriend. I cringe inwardly. He's never referred to Lace that way, and for the life of me I can't understand why I just used the term. He doesn't comment on it, but I feel uncomfortable having said it, as if by taking the word in my mouth I have somehow come to accept that my window of opportunity to make him mine has begun to close.

"The reason she works Monday through Thursday evenings is that her store is open Monday through Friday," he then says. "Sometimes she can take the night off, but oftentimes she's got so much work to do that she has to work evenings for the clothes to be ready on time." There's a touch of pride in
his voice as he continues. "She's doing really well. In fact she could probably hire an assistant soon, to help her out."

"Peeta," I say, softly but commandingly. "I think we need to talk about this. About the deviation from our routines."

"I don't want a lecture from you, Katniss," he says sharply.

"That's not what this is about."

"All you do is complain about the fact that I'm spending time with her," he snarls. "If you don't like it then that's your problem, not mine. She matters to me, don't you get that?" We're right outside my house, and he takes his grocery bag from my hand. "I'll be there next Friday, don't you worry."

With that he strides off towards his own house, leaving me sighing at his retreating figure. He's gotten more irritable lately. I don't know how this conversation went from me being upset with him to him being upset with me. Whatever is going on with him it's not good, but when he won't talk to me about the demons he's fighting I have no idea how to help him. If I ask him I'm almost convinced he will deny that anything is wrong in the first place. He's got a wall up still, though I had begun to believe I had managed to get past them.

The mailbox is empty so I'm only carrying my groceries and my small bag of medication when I walk through the front door. I hear a thump from upstairs and after a few seconds Buttercup comes rushing down the stairs, meowing at me.

"Hey you," I say, walking into the kitchen with the cat in tow. "Did I wake you up? How many hours a day do you spend fast asleep? Your life is passing you by while you nap on my favourite blanket."

I put the bags on the counter and kneel down to pet the cat, but all I get from Buttercup is a hiss and a scratch on the arm. Groaning I rise again and walk to the kitchen door to let him out. First Peeta and now Buttercup. This is shaping up to be a wonderful day.

That afternoon I walk over to Peeta's house, hoping he has calmed down and that we can have a serious conversation about what is going on with him. I'm far from sure I can get anywhere with him, as he seems to be rather defensive on the subject of Lace, or anything related to her. Still I know I have to try and talk to him. I refuse to let him slip away from me, and I am determined to get past the walls he's been putting up.

The weather is lovely, as it's been most of the days this spring, so I walk around his house instead of knocking on the front door. As I predicted Peeta is on his back porch with a sketch pad, looking concentrated but not necessarily angry.

"Hey," I say.

He looks up at me.

"Hey yourself."
"What are you working on?" I ask as I walk up the steps to join him.

"A squirrel." He rubs a spot of the paper with his eraser and wipes it clean. "One was sitting right there on the bannister ten minutes ago. He must not have gotten the memo that Katniss and Buttercup, the squirrel-killing duo, live only three houses down."

I smile hesitantly and sit down beside him.

"We like to lure them into a false sense of security," I joke. I look at his sketchpad, amazed by the half-finished yet still lifelike sketch of the animal. "You should do more sketches. That one is really good. You could probably sell these if you wanted."

"People aren't looking to buy stuff to put up on their walls," says Peeta, and continues to sketch the animal's front paws.

"Not yet perhaps," I agree. "Someday they will be."

Silence falls between us. Peeta works on his sketch, adding texture and shading to the squirrel's thick tail once he's done with the paws. He's not in the best of moods but he hasn't asked me to leave either, and I take that as a good sign.

"I'm sorry I stormed off like an angry child," he says after a while, his eyes still focused on the sketch.

"I'm sorry I kind of freaked out on you when I thought you were going to tell me you won't show up next week."

"I take it you're not here so we can kiss and make up," he says.

"Do people actually do the kiss part?" I ask. "Was that some weird tradition they had back before the Dark Days?"

"I don't know," shrugs Peeta. "My parents used to kiss when they made up after having a fight. Not sure it applies to people who aren't together, though."

"People like you and me?"

"Maybe friends kiss each other on the cheek or something."

An awkward pause follows. Peeta finishes working on the tail and begins to add details to the head. I stare mindlessly at the beech trees that mark the end of his lawn. The rustle of the wind through the leaves and branches makes me feel a little bit better, like a reminder of the tranquility and peace I sometimes find in the woods.

"I'm not out to criticize you, Peeta, or your choices," I say when at least five minutes have gone by. "Nor am I out to sugar-coat things for you. Straying from a routine is a big deal, you know that. Dr. Aurelius has been very clear about it. When you miss our dinners together it affects Haymitch and me too."

"I haven't thought of it that way," he answers. "If that's true then I'm sorry. I know routines are important, but there comes a time when we must learn to deal without routines, or create new ones for ourselves. With Lace I…" Sighing heavily he puts the pencil and pad down on the patio table next to him. "Having dinner with you and Haymitch is something I appreciate, but maybe not every other day. Earlier on you called Lace my girlfriend. I'm not sure that's what she is yet, but we're definitely heading that way, and I have to find a way to incorporate that into the other aspects of my..."
life. I was hoping you and Haymitch would be able to understand that."

"I worry about you, Peeta," I say. "You've been acting strange lately."

"Why? Because I've wanted to spend time with Lace?"

"Because you get very defensive where she is concerned, for one thing. Peeta I want to understand what's going on with you. Something's clearly bothering you."

"Besides the fact that something in my life finally feels right, and all I get from you is negativity about it?"

"I don't like that you break our routines for her, and I'm not comfortable knowing you spend so much time with someone when you don't know who they really are," I say. "I'm worried she might hurt you."

"I know she cares about me," he replies. "I know I want to be near her."

"Why?" I challenge. "What's so special about her, Peeta? What can she offer you that I can't?"

"It's not easy to explain," he says, seemingly not noticing my exact words, nor the slight blush on my cheeks.

"Try me."

He visibly hesitates. I see his eyes moving back and forth in their typical way when he's pondering something. Then he takes a deep breath and exhales through his mouth.

"Okay, this is going to sound... so much like wallowing in self-pity but bear with me."

"Never in the time I've known you have I seen you wallow in self-pity," I reply, wondering to myself if he's really that bad a judge of his own character or if he's just that good at hiding his emotions.

"See, the thing is..." he begins. "After the war... No, even sooner than that. When I recovered enough from the hijacking to really start to feel like me again, if only for brief periods of time... I know it sounds crazy but I've struggled so many times with the feeling that there must be something wrong with me. Not the hijacking or anything else that's been done to me, but something wrong with me. I've often wondered if I'm simply lacking something, some basic quality. Forgive me the self-pity here, but I've been feeling like I lack whatever it is everybody else has that makes people love them."

"I don't understand."

He looks pained and he hesitates, each word seeming to be a struggle.

"Well... Logically I know that my parents loved me. They must have, that's how it all works. I never gave it any thought growing up. Looking back, though, I've asked myself over and over how my mother could hit me and speak so harshly to me, and at the same time love me. And my father, how could he have loved me when he allowed her to do those things to me? Same goes for my brothers. I mean I think of you and Prim, and of Gale and his siblings, and Johanna and her kid sister who they killed, and the one common denominator is the older sibling wanting to protect their younger sibling. Yet my brothers didn't try to protect me from my mother's... harshness."

I try my best to follow his train of thought. I can't deny that I too have often wondered how Mrs.
Mellark could hurt her eleven-year-old child badly enough to leave a black eye, but I never thought Peeta asked himself the same thing. His comment about Johanna surprises me, too. I know she said that there's nobody left that she loved, but it didn't occur to me that she might have had siblings once, too. Upon hearing this I can't help but wonder if part of her resentment towards me is that I was able to protect my sister, and even though I defied the Capitol when I held out those berries my sister still got to live unharmed, while Johanna wasn't able to protect hers. Now that my sister is dead too perhaps we can find even more common ground.

Peeta has been silent for a few seconds, but when he continues speaking I set aside all thoughts of Johanna and give him my full attention. He has picked up the sketchpad again and is doodling aimlessly as he talks, his eyes on the paper rather than on me.

"One thing I remember believing between our Games is that I mattered to Haymitch. True, he planned to sacrifice me to save you in our first arena, but I asked him to do that, and I know he knew it would be a waste of effort to aim to make me the winner. When he got me out of the arena too we formed a bond, and in a way we were each other's family, and that comes with some measure of affection. But it's hard to think of his feelings regarding me in terms of love when he sacrificed me during the Quarter Quell. Without any qualms. I was an acceptable loss, so long as you were protected. Again, wallowing in self-pity, I know. What happened wasn't his fault. Still the thoughts come to me every now and then. Basically I've just... asked myself over and over again why it seems so impossible for anyone to love me; to love me enough to want to keep me safe."

His words hurt my heart. I cannot help but notice that he hasn't mentioned me at all and my inability to love him the way he so deserves, but most of all I feel deep pain over knowing that he feels unloved. I don't think it's a matter of self-pity. I'm fairly certain that this is something Snow engineered, putting all that doubt in Peeta's mind, making him feel worthless and abandoned and all alone in the world. I'm beginning to realize that there are aspects of the hijacking that I've never even imagined.

He sets the pencil down for a second, and I stick my hand in his and give it a squeeze, racking my brain to find the right words to say to him. Before I can think of anything Peeta continues.

"And now there's Lace." His lips actually form a smile in spite of the dreary subject we're discussing, and his words flow more easily. "There's this wonderful, kind-hearted, vivacious young woman who seems to think I'm amazing. I can't remember anybody has ever made me feel this way, Katniss. I haven't been spending time with her for very long, and I don't know for sure yet what really is between us or where it might lead, but for the first time in as long as I can remember I feel like there is indeed something about me that's loveable."

"You don't need Lace for that," I reply. "Peeta you're... you're the only truly decent person to ever come out of the Games alive. You're the one everyone looked up to for his goodness of heart, and strength of character, and compassion. I think all of Panem loved you in a way, and... and I think perhaps that factored in to their decision to hijack you. Like a punishment for being such a good person, you know?"

"Thanks, but..." He chuckles and gives me a strangely sunny smile. "To me all of that is just... stories. It's easy to admire and love the idea of someone when you don't know them. People saw what they wanted to see, and I know I had my share of fans but the people who knew me, those who actually mattered, they are the ones I keep thinking about, and keep feeling like not a single one of them loved or loves me. Lace... she sees me differently. She sees the person I am now, the damaged soul on the other end of the hijacking, and she genuinely wants to be around me and get to know me better. She and I... I think there can be something genuine and really good there."
His words seem to make it hard for me to breathe. I know I should hold my tongue but I can't help the words that come out of my mouth.

"Peeta be careful. Don't get in too deep with this girl because you feel loved by her. I don't have a doubt that she will love you, but that doesn't mean…"

"I like the way I feel when I'm with her," Peeta says, cutting me off before I can finish what I wanted to say. "Really, isn't that what matters? She makes me feel good and I'm at some form of peace when I'm with her."

Deflated I let go of his hand, the gesture feeling too intimate all of a sudden. He picks the pencil back up and turns to a blank page in his sketchbook, where he begins to draw something. I scoot closer to him on the wooden bench, aching to have some bit of physical contact between us, even if it's not as close as handholding. Another silence falls between us but this time it seems lighter. Peeta seems a bit more at ease now that he's voiced something that's obviously been bottling up inside him for a long time. If only I knew how to get him to understand that the last thing he lacks is the ability to make people love him. I love him, and I think I have from very early on, albeit not romantically the entire time. Haymitch loves him too, I know that for sure. It's just a little hard to think right now as I try to quench the highly unpleasant emotions that came with the double-whammy of hearing him say he hasn't felt genuinely loved, and adding that he might have finally found that in her. I don't even notice at first that Peeta seems troubled too, a deep frown on his face that wasn't there a moment ago. Once I do notice I try to put my own difficult emotions aside and focus on him.

"What is it?" I ask. "What's wrong?"

"I'm scared, Katniss."

"Scared of what?"

He stops sketching and raises his head, staring up at the clouds with a distant expression. My hand on his shoulder brings him back to me, but he rises from his seat as if too fidgety to sit still. The sketchpad falls to the floor but he makes no move to pick it up. I stand up as well, and gently squeeze his arm with my hand to let him know I'm with him. He takes a few heavy breaths, brow still furrowed, his eyes moving back and forth the way they do when he's struggling with some decision or thought-process.

"Through sheer luck I've never had an… attack… around her" he then says. "I've told her I sometimes feel overcome by the darkness and the memories, but I haven't been able to make myself tell her more than that. I'm worried that when the time comes that I have an attack when I'm with her, and that time will come if I keep seeing her, she's going to…" He takes a heavy breath, exhaling in a huff. "I'm scared that she's going to leave me. That it will frighten her, disgust her, make her think of me the way so many other people think of me. I don't want her to think I'm a mutt. Not her, Katniss." He looks at me with what can only be described as despair. "What if she sees me all differently after seeing that? What if she thinks I'm horrible, or unstable, or dangerous? What if she can't love me then? And worst of all, what if I hurt her?"

He's beginning to get himself worked up so I let go of his arm and put that hand on his cheek instead, my other hand landing on his shoulder to squeeze it reassuringly.

"You're not going to hurt her," I say insistently. "You're not going to do that. You've had those attacks around me at least a handful of times since you've been back, and not once have you hurt me. Why then would you hurt her? The hijacking was designed to make you want to hurt me. She was never a factor. You didn't even know her then."
"What if she gets scared that I'll hurt her?" asks Peeta, his voice practically pleading me to reassure him. "What do I do then? I can't stand to think about it."

"Peeta… The hijacking is a part of you now and always will be, but it's not who you are. Any girl, any woman, who loves you truly and who is worthy of your love in return is not going to let it deter her. The woman you deserve is someone who will love you so much that she hates the people who did that to you, but only feels protective of you when you're like that. If Lace is what you hope she is then it will be fine. If not…"

"If not?" he echoes with a tremble.

"If not then she's not the right girl for you."

"Should I tell her?" he asks while I run my hands up and down his upper arms, hoping it will help him stop shivering. "Exactly what those attacks are about and how they tend to play out and what she can expect?"

"I don't know. Like you said, she's going to find out at some point anyway, right? I don't know her at all really so you have to be the one to decide if she'll respond better to knowing about it in advance or finding out when the moment comes."

He closes his eyes for a moment and tilts his face downward, as in defeat. His eyes then meet mine again, and I find myself oddly glad to be sharing this moment with him, that he can be this vulnerable with me.

"Katniss why did this have to happen to me?" he asks with so much sadness that I almost can't bear hearing it.

I know the answer to that one. It's something that eats away at me constantly, sometimes keeping me up into the small hours of the night. The closeness I feel with him in this moment, the intimacy and the vulnerability, almost makes me blurt out the real answer, but luckily I catch myself before the significant words pass by my lips and I'm able to change my answer into something of less magnitude. Love or no love, this is not the way to let him find out.

"Because I lo… Because we longed to be free of the tyranny and they needed to make examples out of you and Johanna and Annie. Because District 13 made me the figurehead of the rebellion and Snow saw the perfect weapon in you. Somebody I trusted implicitly, who would easily get close enough to me to kill me. It was nothing you did to deserve this."

"No I know," he says, nodding slightly. "It wasn't your fault either."

Yes it was, but he can't know in what way. I pull him close and hold him in my arms, closing my eyes and allowing myself the luxury of having a moment like this with him. How I used to take his embraces for granted, seeing it as natural that he would want to wrap his arms around me. I never, ever thought I could lose this. I'm not prepared to let it go. Holding him this way, feeling his body pressed up against mine, makes my resistance begin to crumble.

"It will be alright, Peeta" I whisper in his ear. "One way or another. And you will always have Haymitch and me."

He pulls back and smiles slightly, though it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Thanks. But it's just not the same… I really want to see if I can have her, and what that could mean. I don't want to be stuck in the past all my life, and with her I see a possible future that isn't weighed down by all the darkness and the horrors. It scares me to think that she might not be able to accept
my past and we willing to look past it."

I force myself to smile, even though what I really want to do is cry.

"If she's the right girl for you then there won't be a problem," I manage.

"Or maybe she's far too good for the likes of me," he argues.

"Peeta, please. She's lucky to have your affections. Really, truly lucky."

He chuckles a bit.

"Well you ought to know, I suppose. Though you never were all that happy being the object of my affection, were you?"

I have no idea how to answer that. Partially it is true. His love for me made me uncomfortable, for many reasons. Now I would give anything to have it back.

"Peeta do you believe that you need to have a girlfriend in order to be happy?" I find myself asking. I hope he doesn't take offense to the question. I've never thought of him as someone who needs a someone to be happy, but I can't deny that the hijacking has changed him, and I sure as hell don't want to lose him to some other girl just because she loves him even if he doesn't love her back.

"No, Katniss, of course not."

"It's not a dumb question, you know. All I'm getting at is that you shouldn't need someone to be infatuated with you in order to feel good about yourself. Are you pursuing her because she wants you and not vice versa?"

"You're a hobby psychologist now?" he snorts.

"No. I'm being serious, here. And you're evading the question."

"I'm not evading it. I just answered it."

I take his face between the palms of my hands and look deep into his eyes. For a moment we just gaze at each other, each lost in our own thoughts but still connected. Everything he's said today about how Lace makes him feel runs through my mind along with all the insecurities he voiced. Unlike before I know my own heart now, and I know there's nothing I desire more than to be with him. I know I am at a fork in the road with the choice to either pursue him with all my might or to step back, admit defeat and allow him the chance of happiness with her. One option means the chance of him loving me back and the risk of losing his friendship. The other means giving up on the possibility of having his heart again but guaranteeing his friendship.

"Katniss…"

There's an uncertainty in his voice yet the same steadiness he always brought to everything. Is he thinking what I'm thinking? Does he want what I want? Is all of that still alive in him somewhere, just in need of a push from me to blossom again? Or has the time for that come and gone and he desires only her?

"Answer me, Peeta…" I say in a low voice. "Do you think you need a relationship to be happy? Is that the reason why you're so keen on spending time with her? Are you willing to settle for a relationship with someone who loves you even if you may not feel it back?"
"I could never do that," says Peeta, his voice gravelly. "Not to her. Not to anyone."

My heart pounds in my chest so loudly that I can barely hear him. My mouth is completely dry and I'm so nervous that I can barely breathe. I know what I want to do. I want to take the chance. I don't want to lose him by default. So I forget all reason, forget logic, forget everything I fear and take the leap.

"I love you, Peeta," I say, my voice barely more than a whisper.

"I love you, too," he answers, his voice steady and calm. "You're like my family now, you and Haymitch. Which is why I need for you to be able to accept Lace. I really think I might be falling for her, and I don't know what to do if you and Haymitch can't accept her."

Oddly it doesn't hurt as much as I had feared it would. All I feel is emptiness as I realize what is happening. Peeta doesn't understand that I'm in love with him; he thinks I love him the way I used to love Gale. The way you love a friend. Whether or not he was aware of it he gave me a definitive answer. He sees Lace as a potential girlfriend. He sees me as family. That is what I have been relegated to.

My hands fall to my sides and my shoulder slump. Slowly the pain begins to come but I fight it off, knowing I have to make it through the end of this conversation. If I fall apart here and now I might lose everything.

"As long as you're sure," I mutter, averting my eyes as I find I can't look into Peeta's. "I want to be able to accept the… the woman you choose."

"Look, I know it's a little weird," says Peeta softly. "You were my de facto girlfriend before even if it wasn't real, and this situation is new to us both. The last thing I want to do is make you feel uncomfortable in any way. I shouldn't even be talking to you about my relationship with her, but I can't really talk to Haymitch and…"

"It's not weird," I insist, a touch too passionately.

"It's okay if it is," he replies.

"It's not," I say sharply. "As you said, it wasn't real with us, right?" I pull away, creating distance between us. "Look I need to get going, I'm expecting a call from my mother." The lie slips easily past my lips. I walk past him and step down from the porch, giving him a look over my shoulder. "If you're sure about her then… then I will have to trust you. I won't cause any trouble. I promise."

He nods slowly, looking emotionally exhausted but lighter at heart. Without sparing him another glance I begin my walk back home, still feeling unexpectedly calm. I even give a casual greeting to Haymitch as I pass by him on my way. Once I'm back inside the safety of my own home I find myself staring at my reflection in the hallway mirror with wide eyes. I told Peeta I love him. He misunderstood me completely. He told me he's falling in love with somebody else.

A wave of pain rises in me and slowly I begin to tremble, closing my eyes as a few stray tears roll down my cheeks. He is gone now, that boy who stood beside me on the chariot and held my hand. The boy who confessed his love for me on national television. The boy who wanted me to decide to live in the second arena because his life would have no meaning if I was not in it. And I am an awful person for wishing, even for just a moment, that he had been killed physically as well instead of living on to desecrate what once was.

I force myself to move, to walk up the stairs and draw a hot bath in the bathroom connected to my
bedroom. I choose foam that smells of coconut and slowly undress as the water fills in the tub. It's almost too hot when I step into it but I need the heat, need a strong sensation to cancel out the burning pain and aching loneliness. Sinking down into the water I close my eyes and lean my head back, trying to come to grips with everything.

For as long as I have known Peeta, and not just known of Peeta, the fact that he's in love with me has been such an integral part of him. It's impossible to think of him as he was back then without thinking of the way he looked at me, cared for me, felt for me. With that gone, can he still be Peeta the way I remember him to be? This boy I love, the one who is giving his heart to a seamstress from District 8, can he really be the same boy who loved me so? Or is he different now, not because of who he loves but because of how they made him? Did Snow's doctors and technicians perhaps even have some method of blocking his heart from ever loving me again?

I sink down, the almost too hot water washing over my face, and when my head is above surface again there's foam everywhere. I wipe it off and force myself not to imagine that Peeta is in the tub with me. I've been doing things like that a lot, imagining him when he's not there, picturing conversations we would have, visualizing the way he would look at me and lean in to kiss me.

It's time to stop with fantasies like that. I have to stop believing that he might return my feelings. Even if he can, now is not the right time. If the Peeta I knew before is still intact inside of him then in time his heart will eventually remember how he felt about me for so long. Perhaps he needs to be with somebody else right now. Perhaps he's not ready yet to love me like he used to. He's right about one thing: I cannot give him the sense of having been loved right from the start. Perhaps he's not ready yet to love me like he used to. He's right about one thing: I cannot give him the sense of having been loved right from the start. It took me a while to fall; just like Annie did with Finnick Peeta grew on me. Lace must be falling in love already and she is far braver than I am because she doesn't seem to be frightened or bashful about her emotions. I should step back and let this thing between them run its course. I don't have much of a choice. Right now I have nothing to gain from pursuing him.

The only previous experience I have of a situation like this is when I was the person two people wanted to be with. To say that it was difficult for me would be an understatement. I think of the way I felt knowing that both Peeta and Gale wanted to be with me, and that I would have to hurt one or both of them. I think of how desperate I was to keep Gale close, and how I kissed him and gave him hints of promises that I couldn't stand for, and I don't want Peeta to do the same with me. Being on the other side of the situation I realize that my behaviour towards Gale was far more unfair than outright rejection would have been. The possibility of Peeta acting towards me like I acted towards Gale out of fear that if he doesn't he might lose me as a friend makes me shiver. I would rather have an honest no than a false yes from Peeta, and being kissed by him when he doesn't genuinely want to would be worse than never feeling his lips on mine again.

I recall how guilty I felt whenever I kissed Peeta, because of Gale. I didn't want to be with Gale romantically, and I was only beginning to understand that I did want Peeta's kisses, but nonetheless the feeling of guilt was there. I want Peeta to be happy. I don't want him to have to feel torn or guilty. If I'm not the one he wants I don't want him to feel obligated towards me anyway and experience the same guilt I felt. I've come to realize over the past few years that you can never owe a person to love them or want them. It has to come on its own. I care too deeply about Peeta to want him to feel that way when he kisses her, even though I desperately wish he wouldn't kiss her at all.

I groan slightly and lift my leg out of the water, studying it as water and foam slides down it. My leg, like the rest of my body, is covered in scars and reminders of the past. Peeta's body is the same. He can't look in a mirror without seeing the marks the war and the torture left on him, not unless he's fully clothed. Compared to the two of us Lace is pure and whole. Why would he want more of the scars and the marks when he could have something like that instead? Why would he want my darkness and fire when he could have her light and gentleness? Perhaps Lace is his dandelion.
Perhaps he needs something like that at this stage in his life. How can I begrudge him that when I know so well how badly one can need it, even if that means denying myself that very thing?

There's not really a choice to be made anymore. I let my leg sink back into the water and I stare mindlessly at the foam that covers my body from view, breathing in the faint coconut smell. I choose what will make Peeta the happiest. I can't give up hope that someday that might be me, but for the time being it's clear that Lace is doing something for him that I cannot. I won't interfere with that. I will hide my wounded heart and wait for this all to be over.

It's impossible not to think of how Peeta handled the situation when our roles were reversed. He never gave me a hard time about the feelings he thought I had for Gale. He never pushed me, pressured me or demanded anything from me. He went into the Quarter Quell arena to fight for me to live, encouraging me to forget him and have a life of happiness with Gale. I cannot love Peeta and not at least try to follow his example. I must take a step back and allow for him to pursue this girl if that's what he needs right now. Giving up on him entirely is not an option but getting in his way is not an option either.

Again I sink down underneath the water, trying to will my heartache and longing to rest beneath the surface as well.

Chapter End Notes

So, much of what Peeta tells Katniss in this chapter were things I had a hard time deciding if he actually would reveal to her. I considered removing it and working it into one of the Peeta POV bits I'm doing but I wanted Katniss to have this information about him and in the end this seemed like the best option. Whether or not it's appropriate for him to discuss these things with her is a different matter (I considered having him talk to Dr. Aurelius about it instead but, as I said, I wanted Katniss to know about it). Additionally, much of what he reveals to her are things meant to be specific to this story. I don't think Peeta felt particularly un-loved in canon but it seemed like an interesting angle for his character.

This chapter basically marks the end of the first third of the story. I've divided it into three main parts which will each have a slightly different focus. I hope you'll be willing to follow me through the second and third part as well =)
Kicking off the second part of the story!
As always, when temperatures are mentioned they are in centigrade. The Farenheit scale makes no sense at all to me. Besides, Anders Celsius was Swedish, so I could claim patriotism ;)

It's inevitable that I will have to meet Lace Bomull for real. Peeta seems determined to keep seeing her and I have promised myself, and him even though he doesn't know it, that I will set aside my own feelings and let him have his happiness. I'm not convinced that this girl is going to be a long-term love of his, and the part of my heart that longs for him the most tries to believe that he's not in love with her, he just needs what she can offer him at this point. Whatever he may feel for her it cannot come close to what he felt for me. I don't believe a person can love like that more than once in life.

He does seem to have realized that I need him to be there for our dinners every other night, and doesn't miss any further ones as May turns to June. Things go back to normal, or at least some version of what used to be normal, though I have a hard time putting on a happy, or even just unbothered, face. I can tell Peeta's mind is on her quite often, but if he has the urge to talk about her all the time he manages to suppress it. The conversations around the dinner table tend to be mostly about the re-building of the district and the expansion of the shop section of town and other mindless, meaningless drivel.

"I curse the both of you for chickening out on being on the committee," grumbles Haymitch one evening when we're gathered in Peeta's house eating barbecued meat from the rabbit I killed earlier in the day. "These people have an almost supernatural ability to argue over the most insignificant things."

"Sounds right up your alley," smirks Peeta. "You're the one who sat in on all those important meetings about rebellion and whatnot. Katniss and me, we're mere foot soldiers. Too plain and ignorant to understand the intricacies of."

"Oh would you shut up?" snarls Haymitch, making both Peeta and I chuckle.

"I think the trees they decided to plant are lovely," I offer.

"Except now they're arguing over who should be in charge of looking after the damn things," growls Haymitch.

"Sounds like a job for Katniss," suggests Peeta.

"No it doesn't," I object, shaking my head. "I want to be out in the woods, not tending to the trees in town. Besides, you've seen how well I do with plants. You're the one who has to tend to the primroses."

"Generally speaking, letting you near things we want to keep alive is probably a bad idea," says
Haymitch dryly, earning him a glare from me and the need to duck the cherry tomato I send flying in his direction.

"You should find something to do with your time though, Katniss," says Peeta, paying no attention to Haymitch and me. "I should, too. It's occurred to me that we spend most of our time sitting out here in the Victors' Village when we could be contributing to the rebuilding of the district."

"We contribute plenty," I argue. "We provide them with food, do we not?"

"Well that's one way to look at it."

"What about you, boy?" asks Haymitch, shoving a forkful of food in his mouth. He chews the food hastily and swallows it before continuing. "Being treated to freshly baked bread every morning is nice, don't get me wrong, but have you made any plans to get serious about it and start up a new bakery?"

"I don't know," says Peeta with little enthusiasm. "I'm not sure if I see myself working as a baker till the end of my days."

"Well what are you going to do instead?" I ask, helping myself to some more meat from the platter.

"Is this your way of telling me all I'm capable of is baking?" he asks with a smirk.

"Baking and scaring away all the game in the forest," I reply cheekily.

"Right now I feel I want to focus on painting," he says, a pensive look on his face. "For several months I couldn't get the inspiration to make any art whatsoever… Now I enjoy it, the way I used to. There's something… cathartic about holding a brush in my hand, starting at a blank canvas, having the possibility to put anything I want on it…"

"Great, so one of you is going to paint pretty pictures and the other one is going to kill cute little bunny rabbits," surmises Haymitch. "Way to contribute to the community."

"You're not exactly complaining about the cute little bunny rabbit I killed today," I point out, giving him a glare as I fill my plate with more mashed potatoes.

"I'm not going to earn any money by painting," says Peeta, still paying no attention to our squabble. "I mean, I know I don't really need lots of money…" He shrugs. "Perhaps I'll start up a bakery later on, but for now I'd rather paint. I've promised Lace I'll make a nice sign for her shop. Maybe I can start doing the same for other shopkeepers in town."

"How is that painting?" I ask. "It's writing on wood."

"Please, I expect you to think better of me than that," says Peeta with a grin. "I'm going to paint something on the sign that pertains to her profession. I haven't decided exactly what yet. She and I have been tossing a few ideas back and forth, and I think it could turn out fairly neat."

"When are we going to get to meet this mystery lady?" asks Haymitch.

"You want to meet her?" says Peeta with doubt.

"That depends," answers Haymitch. He's done eating and tosses his cutlery on the plate, then leans back in his chair and clasps his hands over his belly. "If she's promoted to girlfriend I would assume introductions would be in order. Just don't make the mistake of thinking I give too much of a damn about your love life."
"Wouldn't dream of it."

"So is she your girlfriend now?" I ask, gripping my fork rather hard in my hand while I wait for the answer.

"I guess you can say that," answers Peeta. "I do want you both to meet her. In due time. Right now I kind of enjoy having her to myself."

"You worry Katniss and I will sweep her off her feet and steal her away from you?" asks Haymitch, guffawing at the thought.

With a smirk on his face Peeta places a cherry tomato on his fork and flicks it at Haymitch who is almost too busy laughing to deflect it.

"What is with the pair of you and throwing vegetables at me?" he asks through his laughter.

"I hear throwing tomatoes is what you're supposed to do with people like you," I retort good-naturedly.

"Well joke's on you, boy," says Haymitch to Peeta who's sending another tomato his way. "I'm sure as hell not cleaning up the mess you're both leaving on the floor."

Peeta swallows his last bite of food and with rolling eyes rises from his seat and brings his dishes over to the sink, giving Haymitch a playful smack upside the head in passing. I shake my head at their antics and rise to help Peeta clean up after the meal. The subject of Lace Bomull is dropped for the evening, but I can still feel it hanging over my head, knowing that it's becoming more and more real and it will soon be impossible for me to pretend it doesn't exist at all.

It ends up happening rather randomly, me being formally introduced to Peeta's new girl. It's a bright summer's day and I've been successful on my hunting trip and decide to sell it all rather than bring anything home. It has been decided that us Victors have earned our winnings and shall continue to receive them until we're dead, but I much prefer spending money I've earned in a more straightforward way.

With the butcher's money in my pocket I am on my way through town to visit the supply shop. I'm lost in a trail of thought when I approach the ice-cream parlour and spot Peeta and Lace sitting together by one of the outdoor tables. About half of the tables are taken, many by families with young children, a sight that would normally warm my heart but not under present conditions.

I halt for a second, caught off-guard by the sight of Peeta and Lace together. By the looks of things they are an official item now, neither one of them trying to act like they're only out as friends. Her thick mahogany hair hangs loose down her shoulders and seems to catch the sunlight almost as much as his blonde curls, and when they lean their heads closer together the two colours seem to match annoyingly well. There are many other people around and their conversation is drowned out by the distance and the sounds of those other people, but I can still hear her pearly laughter. She seems to be saying something about her ice-cream and holds the cone up to him in offering. He leans in to taste but she presses it against his mouth before he's expecting it, leaving soft white ice-cream all around
his mouth and on his nose. This evokes another fit of pearly laughter, followed by her wiping the ice-cream off his nose with the tip of her finger and then kissing away what landed near his mouth.

I turn my face the other way, wondering if I can turn around and head in another direction without making people look at me funny. Then I feel angry with myself for even considering taking a different route on account of Peeta and some girl. I start walking again, keeping my eyes fixated forward, intending to walk right past them as if I haven't seen them.

Unfortunately they see me. Peeta calls my name, and I have to stop walking. With a forced smile on my face I turn to look at them.

"Hey!" says Peeta sunnily. "No luck hunting today?"

"Great luck," I answer indifferently. "Sold it to the butcher."

"Want to spend some of that money having ice-cream with us?" My hesitation must be written on my face because he has a persuasive tone when he continues. "Or at least come have a seat for a minute? There's somebody I'd like you to officially meet."

I force the corners of my mouth to turn slightly upward, and turn to go to the opening of the fence-like structure that surrounds the outdoors seating area. Having ice-cream definitely doesn't appeal to me right now, so I walk straight to their table without going inside to order first. Wooden benches are placed by each table, and I take a seat opposite Peeta and Lace, who are sitting a little too close together on one side of the table. Peeta looks happy and relaxed and she looks bright and bubbly, though to my satisfaction I think I can detect a hint of nervousness in her eyes.

"You two have already met but I still think proper introductions are in order," says Peeta, taking another lick off his bright blue ice-cream. "Katniss Everdeen, this is Lace Bomull. Lace, meet Katniss."

While he makes the introductions she sets her ice-cream cone down in one of the holders on the table, wipes her ice-cream stained hand on a napkin, and then extends the hand to me with a smile on her face. I manage to return the smile, though mine is not nearly as bright as hers, and I shake her hand.

"Hey," I mutter.

"Hi," she smiles. "It's good to finally meet you properly."

"Likewise," I lie.

"Peeta has told me so much about you."

I try not to roll my eyes. I know she knows a fair bit about me but I doubt that her biggest source of information is Peeta. I remember the first time I met her and how the only thing that struck me about her appearance was her long, thick mahogany hair. Now that I'm sitting just a few feet away from her I get a chance to take in her other features. She's nothing out of the ordinary to me. Round face with big doe eyes, a combination that to me just feels a bit too round. A nose that's almost completely straight which doesn't go with the roundness in my opinion. Nothing noteworthy with the shape of her mouth, though when she opens it I can't help but think that her two front teeth remind me of a bunny. Definitely not my type of look. In fact I find her rather plain, that hair of hers still being the most striking feature.

She picks her ice-cream cone back up and tries to catch a few melted drops running down the side, making no further comment about me, and seemingly not noticing that I'm studying her face. Peeta
smiles at her, and then turns to me.

"So what plans do you have for the rest of the day?"

"I need to make new arrows," I say quickly, worried that he might think to invite me to spend the afternoon with them.

"She makes most of her arrows herself," he explains to Lace, who laughs her pearly laugh and gives him a nudge with her elbow.

"I should think so. There aren't a lot of weapons shops around."

"So what are you two doing out here in the middle of the day?" I ask. It's Tuesday and I would have thought Lace would be busy in her shop.

"I finally managed to convince this one to close her shop for an hour and come enjoy the sunlight with me," says Peeta, giving Lace a playful nudge.

"Me having no customers at all so far today helps," she replies.

"What if a customer tries to visit your shop right now?" I ask.

"Hopefully they'll come back later. If not, well, I guess dinner will have to be on Peeta for a week or two."

They both seem so completely at ease while I am anything but. What I would really like to do is get up and leave now that I have been formally introduced to my romantic rival, but doing so would probably seem strange to them. Either way I know I have to get acquainted with this girl at some point or other, so I might as well get it over with.

"So you're a seamstress?" I say.

"Yes, very original when you're from District 8," she replies. "Although I wouldn't call what we did back there being seamstresses."

"Why is that?"

I listen with feigned enthusiasm as she fills me in on how things worked in her home district. Whereas our district had two distinct classes plus the more vaguely defined class of people working at the Justice Building, District 8 had three. Their equivalent of coal miners in the Seam were the people working out on the cotton fields. They had a merchant class just like us, but Lace comes from a family of factory workers, a kind of middle-ground between merchant and Seam. When she talks about the factory an unpleasant memory stirs.

"You moved here to Twelve all by yourself," I say. "Did you lose family members when they bombed the factory?"

It's become customatory to ask people if they lost loved ones during the revolution, though I still find it a bit awkward to ask the question. The perkiness goes away from Lace's eyes, and the smile fades a bit.

"No, not direct family members. My uncle and his wife died and so did a few friends of the family. By a strange stroke of luck everyone in my family was sick that day, save for my father who was made to stay home anyway so he didn't spread the disease at the factory." She scoffs and shrugs a shoulder. "Seems so pale in comparison… Having a lot of workers sick halts production, but not as
much as blowing the damn thing up."

"At least your family lived," I point out.

"Through dumb luck. To the Capitol every single person working in that factory was disposable."

I don't know what to say so I keep quiet. When Peeta talks about her he usually goes on about her smile and her bubbly laughter, but it's clear that she's got a wounded side as well. I don't know her nearly well enough to tread down the path of exploring this, so I leave it up to Peeta to bring the conversation around to safer topics.

Which he does, though not without sneaking an arm around her waist for silent support. He keeps his tone light but not jovial.

"Speaking of your family, at least you will be having parts of it near soon."

A smile spreads on Lace's face, sadder this time but still genuine.

"I can't wait."

"Lace's brother and his wife are moving here in a few weeks," explains Peeta, even though I didn't ask.

"Is he coming to help you with the shop?" I ask.

"No, he always hated working with fabric," she tells me. "He's hoping to get a job at the medicinal factory. His wife, on the other hand, will probably help me out at first."

"It must be nice getting to have family near again," I say, trying my best not to think of the sister I will never see again.

Lace nods slightly, still smiling yet looking melancholy.

"I won't deny that it's been lonely moving here all on my own." She looks at Peeta and the sadness seems to melt away from her face. "Luckily I've made a couple of friends by now, including this fine man."

Peeta smiles back at her and then turns to me.

"We were discussing housewarming presents for her brother when you came walking by. I have this idea based on old traditions. There was this culture back before the dark ages where it was customary to give, as a housewarming gift, a loaf of bread wrapped in a kitchen towel. Thereby giving the recipient something to eat and something to use in their new home. I think it sounds perfect."

"I haven't said a word against it," Lace points out, laughing slightly.

"You haven't praised it to the high heavens either," teases Peeta, giving her another nudge. He moves the arm that's been around her waist and instead brushes a strand of her hair away from her face. "You have to admit it's a good idea."

"It is a very good idea," she nods with amusement.

"It's a reasonable idea, if nothing else," I blurt out, beginning to feel like the third wheel and knowing I can't leave without addressing my departure.

"Exactly," nods Peeta before turning his focus back to Lace. "You make the towel, I make the bread.
It's economical and it's something from the both of us."

I feel a bit sick at how apparently they are now an us to the extent that they give her family members presents together, although I can't argue with Peeta's assessment of it as being economical.

"You're already planning what kind of bread you're going to bake, aren't you?" comments Lace.

"I'm thinking… pumpkin."

"Where are you going to get pumpkin in the middle of summer?" I ask. District 12 doesn't grow any and they usually only import them for the harvest festival.

"I have my connections. Though if pumpkin turns out to be unavailable I think I'll go with…" He seems to ponder it for a second. "Sourdough. Though that isn't very festive, so if that's what we go with I might have to bake a cake or something to go with it."

Lace shakes her head with an amused look on her face, and takes a sip from the glass of water in front of her.

"One day, Peeta Mellark, you are going to be the father of a bunch of very chubby children," she predicts.

My throat tightens and I have to look away, fighting not to have an outward reaction. I feel like such an idiot. This is something I haven't even considered yet – the possibility of Peeta wanting children someday. We have never spoken outright about having children and what that would mean before, not even when we were planning an engagement and a marriage, but he insinuated to me that he wasn't happy about having babies who would be destined for a turn in the arena. I never thought much about it after that; we were heading into another arena and after that there was revolution and hijacking and all kinds of chaos going on around us. Now that there's peace and stability perhaps Peeta does consider becoming a father someday.

He would make an exceptional father, of that I have no doubt. Does he want to have kids? If so, would he choose the chance of fatherhood over a future with me if his old feelings were to return? It seems almost ridiculous now that the topic never came up between us during or after our first Games, and if only it had I would have a better understanding of what I am facing now. Would Peeta choose me over fatherhood? Thinking it over I can't help but think that he would have before Snow's team got their hands on him. He never pressured me back then, but he also never made a secret of his feelings and that he wanted me more than anything else.

If he does want to have children now will Lace be their mother? Will it make that big of a difference to me if it's her or somebody else? She seems like a nice person. Even her bright and bubbly disposition seems to be at least partially a mask for some deeper pain caused by the rebellion, so I can't write her off as silly.

I'm not succeeding well enough with hiding my discomfort because I hear Lace gasp slightly and when I glance at her from the corner of my eye her big doe eyes have gotten wider.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to… I mean I thought that was all…"

Peeta's brow furrows in confusion as he looks from her to me and back again a few times. Lace's cheeks have turned a light pink, and she looks like she wants to disappear from the face of the earth. Unable to keep in a sigh I put an end to the confusion.

"That was all made up. Don't worry about it. I was never pregnant."
Slowly Peeta's brow unfurrows, but he doesn't look entirely comfortable. Neither does Lace, who has gripped the straw in her glass of water, and takes another couple of sips while avoiding my eyes.

"I'm sorry anyway. It was an unnecessary thing to say."

If this encounter was uncomfortable for me before it's unbearable now. I fake another smile and hark my throat, rising from my seat.

"I should get going. Those arrows won't make themselves."

Lace offers me an apologetic smile.

"It was nice meeting you. Foot-in-mouth incident aside."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'll see you at dinner tomorrow, Katniss," says Peeta.

I nod slightly and make my way back out to the street. I spare a glance at the happy couple as I pass them by, and they are already engrossed in another conversation, though not quite as jovially as before.

The rest of my walk home I spend wondering to myself if really am the right choice for Peeta. He is definitely the right choice for me; I can already feel myself slipping slowly back into darkness now that my grip on the person who gives me hope is loosening. Does that necessarily mean that I am the right person for him to be with? I can't think of a single thing I want or need that Peeta Mellark cannot give to me, but the more I think about it the more I realize that there are things he might want and need that I can't provide for him. I am definitely darkness compared to the lightness of Lace. If she were only lightness I would expect his interest in her to fade fairly quickly, but she does seem to have a different side to her as well, one that is perhaps well suited to support him through his difficult moments, perhaps even more so than I am. Peeta probably doesn't need the connection to someone who suffered through the same arenas as he did, the way I need him. His memories of those experiences have been warped and changed. I might in fact be a hindrance rather than a help in that regard.

Lace might also be willing to give him children, whereas I am not. Though as I think it over on my walk back home and replay many of my favourite memories of Peeta and me together in my mind I begin to wonder just how far I would be willing to go to have him again. Would I be willing to be a mother if that's what it takes to win his love?

I walk up the steps to my front porch, sighing heavily and dismissing the thought. Whatever Peeta wants and needs in the future, I don't think I'm it for him right now. All I can do for the time being is to be there for him as a friend, and slowly and steadily remind him of the other, stronger bond between us. A love like the one he felt for me just cannot disappear entirely, and it's going to take time to awaken it again. Time and patience.

I've got plenty of both.
Summer is unmercifully hot. At first I enjoyed the warmer temperatures, feeling at least a little bit better when the sky is crystal clear and bright blue, and the sunlight warms my sensitive skin. My mother called me when she heard of our good weather, and reminded me that my burnt skin needs to be protected from direct sunlight. A week later a whole box full of sunscreen lotions arrived, enough for both myself and Peeta. I intended on bringing a few bottles over to him, but then I saw that he had already bought his own, which for some reason made me feel disappointed.

Now, in the third straight week of near 30-degree weather, the summer heat has lost its charm. It's too hot even to be out in the woods, the trees merely providing shade but not relief from the hot humidity in the air. The bedrooms of my house have air-conditioning, so getting out of bed in the morning soon begins to feel very unnecessary. Unfortunately lying in bed all day is not something I have positive associations to. It's usually what I do when I wake up feeling too depressed and afraid to muster the energy to move at all, which has begun to happen more frequently lately. So on days when I feel okay I venture downstairs and open up my front- and back door to let air flow through the house, hoping this will cool it at least a little. I spend countless hours lying on the hammock on the back porch with a book on my lap, though I only rarely read. Poor Buttercup sometimes lies there with me, panting and looking miserable. He seems to be something of a control freak, unwilling to yield his territory to any stray cat who might wander by, which is why he doesn't stay cooped up in the cool bedrooms at all hours. I find that I like having him out there with me. We've started to grow accustomed to each other's company, and I think we both remind the other of Prim, in a good way.

On my good days I walk over to check on Haymitch. It worries me that he keeps drinking alcohol in this heat, knowing from my mother that alcohol dehydrates. More often than not I find him snoring away in one of the bedrooms, but sometimes he is actually awake and we share platitudes about the weather for half an hour or so before I head back home. Dinnertime at Peeta's has been somewhat reduced because neither one of us can bother to cook anything on the stove, so there are fewer meals to meet up for.

One particularly hot Thursday I spot Peeta leaving his house just as I leave my own to check on Haymitch. Peeta is wearing a pair of shorts and a tank top that's already got a few sweat stains on it, and a worn cap that used to belong to one of his brothers is on his head. A bag is flung over his left shoulder, and I can't help but think that it must be even hotter when you carry around something that lies pressed against your skin that way.

"Going somewhere?" I ask needlessly when I approach him.

"Yeah," he nods, smiling crookedly.

"Off to try and avoid the sun?"

"Something like that… Or the exact opposite, depending on your viewpoint."

"Now you've lost me," I confess.

He grins.

"Lace and I are going to the pool."

I stare at him, dumbfounded. The pool? Since when does Peeta Mellark go to a pool, even on a hot summer's day?

"You don't swim," I point out. I began teaching him in the Quarter Quell arena, but I doubt he remembers now, years later.
"We're taking classes."

"We?"

"Yeah. Lace and I. They have classes three times a week for adults, and we figured it would be good knowing how to swim if the weather is going to stay like this. It's so refreshing to immerse yourself in water, however strange it smells."

I can't stop the disapproving frown on my face. If Peeta wants swimming lessons why doesn't he ask me? I would be glad to take him out to the lake and pick up where we left off two years ago. My mind goes to something else we did two years ago that I would like to pick up where we left off. I feel my face flushing as I think of his hungry lips against mine, his tongue stroking mine, his hands caressing my skin.

"You should come to the pool, too," he says, bringing me back to the now. "I know you don't need swimming lessons, but that's really just all the more reason why you would enjoy the place. All that water for you to swim around in."

"No thank you," I say, dreading the thought of being a third wheel to Peeta and her. "I'm good."

"You sure?" he asks. "I mean, what else are you going to do in this heat?"

"Going to the woods." Peeta doesn't have the first idea whether or not it's cooler there, so he won't question it.

"Oh." He averts his eyes for a moment, seeming uncomfortable. He adjusts the bag and gives me another smile, though a touch strained now it seems. "You should come with us some other day, then. You'd like it."

"Crowds, unnatural water…” I scoff. "Doesn't sound like my kind of thing."

A frown passes over his face for a second.

"Well let me know if you change your mind…” he says, "I should get going. Lace is waiting for me." He begins to walk, giving me a look over his shoulder. "Have a good day in the woods! I'll see you tonight for dinner?"

"Tonight," I confirm.

I stand there for a minute, watching him head down the road. There's a sadness in my chest I can't quench. My eyes leave Peeta and go over to Haymitch's house, but I can't seem to bring myself to go there, already knowing how foul the place will smell in this heat. The problem is I don't know where to go otherwise. I don't want to head back to my lonely house, I'm really not in the mood to go to town, and I most certainly do not want to go to that stupid pool.

Out of habit I turn my steps towards the woods and the refuge I have often found there. The walk there is exhausting in the scorching sunlight, and I soon wish I had brought a bottle of water with me. Luckily I have some coins on my pocket, and as I pass through town I stop by Greasy Sae and buy one of the water pouches she sells, filling it up with cool water before I head out.

Underneath the shade of the trees it is less hot, but still far too humid for my liking. Slowly I walk down familiar paths with no clear goal in mind. My mind, and my heart, can't seem to stop obsessing over the same thing that's been going round and round for months. Peeta and that damn girl. You'd think I'd be immune to it by now, resigned to the bitter truth that he wants somebody else and not me. Only, letting go of things has never been my strong suit, and letting go of Peeta seems completely
It pains me to admit it, but I begrudge Lace Bomull everything she gets of Peeta that I can't have. I don't want to be that person, someone who hates another individual for something completely beyond their control. The fact is I know I might actually like her if Peeta didn't like her quite so damn much. I've spent time with her a few more times by now and I know she's hard working, driven and talented. I know she's caring and compassionate. I know she has that ability to see the good things in life and retain the capacity for laughter and joy in spite of all the hardships life dishes out. It's one of the things I love so much about Peeta, so how come I can't stand that trait in her? Doesn't he deserve somebody like her? Shouldn't I be happy for him? I want the best of the world for him, I truly do, and not even on my best of days could I fool myself into thinking that was me. I'm not like that. I was damaged and bitter and cold even before the Hunger Games. If Peeta was the sun then I was most definitely the moon, something lonely surrounded by darkness that only truly could shine when the light of the sun was on me.

It might have been easier if I hadn't had Peeta's love in the past. At least then I wouldn't be so painfully aware of what I am missing, and I wouldn't feel the loss of that in my every waking moment. Peeta used to love me despite my negative sides. He used to see something in me that was more than what I could see myself. Something I realized too late that I want to be, that I needed him to see in me.

I got to have the worst of Peeta. Not of his personality but the worst times of his life. What Peeta gave to me was the child beaten by his mother for burning two loaves of bread. The young tribute who had to go through the hell of the Hunger Games not once but twice. The hijacked boy thrust into a gory war. Significant parts of him, and something I know that nobody but I could ever fully understand. Whatever happens between Peeta and Lace he will never share that kind of connection with her. Does that even matter? She gets to have his rebirth. If they end up lasting and their relationship deepens she will even get his future. I'm finding it more and more difficult to bear the thought of that. The truth is I can't even bear to let her have Peeta learning to swim at the pool. I was the one who began teaching him to swim.

Then again that might just be one more thing that proves she is better suited for him than I am. In the Quarter Quell arena when Peeta began to learn the basics of swimming I was the seasoned swimmer, the one teaching him. With Lace it's an even game, the two of them learning together, as equals.

These thoughts, and more like them, buzz in my mind for hours. The sun climbs higher in the sky and the day becomes so unbearably hot that I begin to feel disoriented. I only have a few mouthfuls of water left, and the liquid is almost as hot as the air by now.

I'm somehow not surprised when the treeline ends and I stumble out on familiar grounds. My father's old cabin. The lake. I wasn't planning on coming here, but suddenly there's nowhere else I would rather be. I muster what energy is left in my body and jog over to the house, throwing the door open to let fresh air in. I toss my water pouch on the floor and head back outside, pulling my top over my head as I go. My clothes are left to lie where they fall, and by the time I reach the waterline I am naked. The water in the lake is cool and invigorating, and I feel myself come back to life as I wade out to my waist and then dive forward, submerging myself completely.

The world is calm and quiet around me. A light breeze causes a faint rustling of leaves, but all birds seem to deem the day far too hot. The only clear sound in my ears is the sound the water makes as I move through it. I swim far out in the lake and close my eyes as I tread water, enjoying myself for the first time in I don't know how long. This is what water should be like. Cool, natural, smelling only of nature and not of Capitol chemicals. When I open my eyes again I can only faintly make out my arms underneath the surface. The lower half of my body is a mere suggestion. I feel shielded and
protected, not exposed as I imagine one would in the crystal clear water of the swimming pool. My mind goes to Finnick, and I wonder if he would have liked my lake.

I wish Peeta was here with me. I wish I could share this with him. As I begin to swim back to shore I imagine that he is here, swimming easily beside me. I suddenly become aware that I am naked, which brings to mind the idea that if Peeta was with me he would be naked too. The thought makes me blush and feel strangely bashful. At what point did I start to actually wonder what Peeta looks like without any clothes on?

I step out of the water and slowly walk back towards the house, picking up discarded items of clothing along the way. My skin quickly dries in the sunlight but my hair will take longer. I didn't bring a comb so I walk to the treeline and find a twig I can use to battle the worst tangles. All the while I can't seem to stop thinking about Peeta, and what his body might look like unclothed. I might be innocent and inexperienced, but even I am aware that it's no longer just the temperature that is making me feel uncomfortably hot.

It grows a few degrees cooler as the hours stretch into late afternoon. Sitting on a rock by the lake with my clothes back on, mostly to protect my sensitive skin from sunburn, I try to enjoy the serenity and relative peace of mind I can find out here. I know I need to start heading back home, but the thought of walking for hours through the still hot woods is not particularly exciting.

My eyes leave the crystal clear surface of the lake and go to the house. It stands in the shade of the trees and is comparatively cool, although it can't compete with my air-conditioned bedroom at home. It would be nice to stay here for just a little while longer. I know Peeta and Haymitch are expecting me to show up for dinner and I have to leave real soon or I'll be late, but for once I don't really care. I make up my mind to stay and spend the night. I can head back to town early tomorrow morning, before the day grows too hot. There is fresh water here and while I don't have my bow I can set out a few snares or take the fishing gear from the house and catch myself some dinner.

It takes about an hour for me to find myself some dinner and cook it, and I sit out on the grass, looking out on the lake as I eat. I try to tell myself that I enjoy the solitude, that it feels right being here all by myself. It doesn't work. As the sun sets my mood goes down as well, the by now familiar hurt in my chest coming back. While I gathered dinner and ate it I imagined Peeta being here with me, playing out conversations between us in my mind. Being all alone when darkness comes and the air turns cooler only serves to remind me that the boy I love probably wouldn't want to be here with me. He would much rather spend his day bathing in pool water with his girlfriend than live in my gritty reality.

As I walk inside the house and kick off my shoes I feel none of the freedom I experienced earlier in the day. There are no more Hunger Games to keep me in line, and no more threats from the government restricting my life, but instead I think I'm becoming a slave to jealousy and heartache.

Feeling weary and dejected I make the bed, every movement happening slowly, as if the quilt weighs
far more than it actually does. Once the bed is ready I crawl underneath the blanket to try and get some sleep, even though it's still early and the sun hasn't fully set yet. I'm not particularly sleepy, just void of energy in that familiar way that oftentimes prevents me from getting out of bed at all.

In my solitude my mind begins to wander, and the thoughts I have are anything but pleasant. I think of the people I have killed, the people I were incapable of saving, and the people who died because of me. There's still a part of me that counts Peeta in amongst that crowd because there's no denying that the boy I got back was not the same one I said goodbye to that night in the Quell arena. Not that it does me any good to think about it.

Tears slowly fall down my cheeks as I ask myself why on earth he would want me now. Are there any admirable qualities to me at all? Could I ever even begin to measure up to Lace, or any of the other girls he might give his heart to later in life? I am just a cold, selfish, calculating person whose only friends in life are a drunken wreck and a person who's been irrevocably damaged because of me.

The worst part is that there is a part of me that hates Peeta for no longer loving me unconditionally.

Chapter End Notes

I'll admit right away that I'm a bit anxious to see what people think of Lace. She's not meant to be unsympathetic (Peeta deserves better than that) but I know from past experiences that original-character love interests can be a hard sell (or that I suck at writing them). I hope you'll go easy on her =) She'll be showing up again real soon. The house warming gift tradition Peeta mentions is an old tradition here in Sweden (and probably in other countries as well). I only know a handful of people who've actually followed the tradition but the combination of baked goods and cloth seemed fitting.
Chapter 11

I wake up the next morning feeling anything but rested. In fact I had a terrible nightmare during the night, and waking up to find myself all alone in the cabin in the woods made me almost panic. I flew out of bed and grabbed my hunting boots, ready to race back home, race to Peeta's house, but managed to get a hold of myself and go back to bed. I didn't dream anything else after that, but the uneasy feeling is still strong when I wake up, and the sunshine and the birds singing outside the window can't do much to improve that. I toy with the idea of staying here all day, wondering to myself if anyone would even miss me, but eventually decide that I'd be better off at home. With a weary sigh I lace my boots and begin my walk back.

The town seems rather quiet and slow when I walk down the familiar streets. The heat isn't doing wonders for the work morale as it seems most people are staying at home to rest rather than venture outdoors. I walk with a grim look on my face, and nobody waves at me, probably scared off by my scowl. I can't say that I mind much.

I've gotten halfway down the road to the Victor's Village when Peeta comes into view, heading in my direction. He frowns when he sees me and stops right in front of me. I'm not sure I want to see him right now or if the sight of him is only a painful reminder of the things I cannot have – things I do not deserve to have.

"Where have you been?" he says, a touch of anger in his tone.

"In the woods," I ask, wondering where else he would assume.

"You never showed up last night!"

"Sorry," I mutter, rubbing my arms slightly. "Was I meant to bring the food? I thought it was my turn next time."

"Who cares about the food? We were worried about you!"

"Why?" I ask sullenly. "Suddenly you don't think I can take care of myself?"

"That doesn't mean you... Katniss is everything okay?"

The gentle worry in his tone makes me feel even sadder than I already was. I don't want to make Peeta worry about me, but I also find solace in knowing that he did so.

"Everything's great," I say with a scowl. "What, you get to skip dinner all the time but the one time I do I get a lecture?"

His brow furrows, and I see him biting his bottom lip slightly.

"No, no lecture. I just wish you would have told us beforehand. We called you like twelve times. Haymitch even went over to your place to make sure you weren't in bed."

Haymitch went. Why couldn't Peeta have gone? It was Haymitch's turn to fix dinner so it would have made more sense for him to stay and do just that. There have been times when I have had to force myself to get out of bed and put some clothes on to go have dinner, but usually the thought of
seeing Peeta has motivated me to doing so. They have never had to come and talk me into getting up to come join them.

"Well I'm fine," I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

He looks at me expectantly, apparently thinking I will tell him where I was and what I was doing. In my gloomy state of mind I don't think he deserves to know any such things, especially not without asking. Determining the conversation to be over I begin to walk past him but he stops me with a hand on my arm.

"Hey listen… Are you doing anything now or do you have time to follow me to town?" He looks a bit nervous and that manages to catch my interest. "We could go have ice-cream. It's going to be another hot day and all… Also there's something I would like to… discuss with you."

"Can't you just follow me back to the Victors' Village?"

"I would, but you're here and I have things to do in town later…"

He doesn't specify what those things are but I can imagine. Lace's brother and sister-in-law have just moved here, and the rest of the family is coming to the district to help them get settled. I've already had to meet the brother and his wife since I was at the train station when they arrived. I was there waiting to see if the new bow I had ordered would be arriving with that shipment. I ended up leaving without a bow, and with the annoying knowledge that Lace's family members seem to be perfectly nice people.

"Please, Katniss?" says Peeta. "It's kind of important and I would like to have this conversation today, but I won't have much time this afternoon. I was actually planning for us to have talked last night after Haymitch had left…"

That melts away my irritation and sadness, and I actually feel myself smiling slightly. I should be ashamed at myself for reacting this way to Peeta wanting to tell me something important, but I don't have much reasons to be happy anymore, so I'll take what I can get without complaint.

"Ice-cream, then," I say and Peeta smiles at me.

"Have you been there yet? As a customer, I mean?"

"No," I say as we begin to walk into town, my arm linking with his. "To be frank I don't get the allure when it's this hot."

"It's the heat that makes it alluring."

"The heat makes the ice-cream melt."

He chuckles and admits I have a point. We walk back into town together without talking much, but I don't mind. I love the fact that I can enjoy a silence with him, and quite frankly I don't care whether or not we're talking so long as I get to keep my arm linked with his. I very rarely get to have physical contact with somebody anymore, and I remember far too well what it was like to be held in his arms, sleep in his arms and have his lips pressed against me. His skin is warm from the sunlight even though it's only around ten in the morning, and despite the scar tissue the skin still feels smooth against my own.

I do notice that he doesn't seem entirely at ease and I wonder if he's suffered a flashback, either last night or this morning. He doesn't look ragged the way he would after such an attack, except for dark rings under his eyes, but seeing as he was heading in to town, probably to meet up with Lace and her
brother, he could have taken care to make sure he looked okay.

He leads the way and we arrive at the ice-cream parlour to find we are not the only ones who've had this particular idea today. Peeta looks a bit dismayed at the number of customers, and I wonder what exactly it is he wants to talk to me about. I try to think of some other place we could go to have some privacy but nothing within near range comes to mind.

"Would you mind taking a walk in the woods?" I say. "There's a glade I like to go to… It takes a while to walk there but it's a good place to talk."

"How about we just go to the football field?" he suggests.

The football field is one of the few things that survived the bombings, probably because it really isn't more than a patch of grass a couple of hundred meters from the school, framed by two old goal structures that barely have complete netting anymore. It's not secluded per se but you could probably have a more private conversation there if you wanted to. I nod and begin to walk in that direction, but Peeta's hand on my arm stops me for the second time this morning.

"I still want some ice-cream. How about you?"

I don't really care for it but I shrug my shoulder anyway. I haven't had much for breakfast, just the leftovers from yesterday's dinner, and ice-cream is at least something to fill my belly until I get home and can eat a proper lunch.

I follow Peeta inside the store and instantly place myself as close to the cool refrigerator as possible, glad for any relief from the heat. The refrigerator has a glass top, allowing for you to see what kinds of ice-cream they sell. Many of them have flavours of fruits or berries, like strawberry, pear or blueberry. There are a selected few with more of a Capitol feel to them, like chocolate chili, green candy cane, or crème brulée. You pay per the scoop, and I find myself rather intrigued now that I'm actually looking at the selection.

"I recommend the soft serve," says Peeta. "Or the melon flavour."

"Been here enough to have favourites?"

"Yes I have and I feel no shame."

Soon we step back outside under the glaring sun, the two of us working on our ice-creams rather quickly in the hopes that they won't melt and spill down on our hands. To be on the safe side Peeta grabbed a whole bunch of napkins and stuffed them in his pant pocket, which was probably a good idea as I can feel my fingers getting sticky with melted ice-cream almost right away. Peeta got a soft serve while I'm working my way through three scoops of regular ice-cream. Strawberry, peach and melon, the last of which I chose because Peeta recommended it. I have to admit it's quite tasty and I can understand why he and so many others choose to visit the parlour so often.

By the time we reach the football field I'm already done with my ice-cream and stealing a couple of licks from Peeta's as well. He offers the last of it to me but I decline, worried that I might start to feel sick, so he throws it in a trash bin by the school along with the napkins we've used to clean our hands. We walk together out on the grass field, and when Peeta takes a seat I follow suit. He sits cross-legged, hands on his knees, squinting up at the sun. I stretch my legs out in front of me and lean back on my hands, eyeing him in silence. I'm curious to know what he wants to talk to me about, but I won't rush him. I so rarely get to enjoy moments like these with him, especially outside of the Victor's Village.
After a few minutes he finally clears his throat and reaches into the pocket of his short-sleeved shirt to get his sunglasses.

"It's incredible how much more you can enjoy a summer like this when you're not forced to slave away in a hot bakery every day," he says.

"Or in the mines," I reply. "The mines are at least not so hot, but on the other hand you don't get the sunlight."

"Katniss I… I hope you know that no matter what happens you will always be a very important person in my life."

"As are you in mine," I reply, frowning as I sit up straight.

"We are so lucky to have each other, to have somebody who went through the same nightmare in the arena." He shrugs a shoulder and looks uncomfortable. "What I'm trying to say is that I want to be there for you, no matter what."

"I know, Peeta," I say softly.

"That said, I…" He sighs heavily, then looks at me with a crooked smile that's not entirely happy. "I've been thinking about our nightly arrangement… You coming over and spending the night at my place when you've had a nightmare…"

"What about it?"

"It just doesn't seem…” He rubs his neck with his left hand, the right pushing his sunglasses up his nose. "Lace and I, we're officially together now. It feels a bit weird to have another woman spend the night at my place, even if we don't share a bed."

Dread and anger rises in me. He cannot seriously be telling me this. Some nights the only thing keeping me sane is running over to his house and knocking on his door. I don't see why that should be a problem, or how it is anybody's business but ours.

"It's not weird," I insist. "It's what you and I do. We take care of one another."

"I know," he says.

"Is this coming from Lace? Because it sure as hell doesn't sound like you."

"Lace hasn't said anything about it," he says, thereby making me quite sure she at least knows about the fact that I sometimes stay over. "I don't want to be a bad friend to you but I just… It doesn't feel right, Katniss. Not letting you stay over makes me a bad friend and I hate that but… Letting you stay over makes me a bad boyfriend. At least at this point."

Furioulsy I fly to my feet.

"Fine," I snarl. "I won't be a bother to you anymore. Perhaps I should stop coming over for dinner, too, in case that offends anyone!"

"Katniss."

"No, don't talk to me!"

I storm off across the field, and he knows me well enough not to follow me or call out to me. The anger I'm feeling fuels me all the way home, making my walk unusually brisk. I arrive home to find
Buttercup racing around the corner of the house and jumping up on the front porch, angrily meowing at me for not having come home to let him in last night. I don't bother acknowledging his existence other than to shove him aside with my foot as I open the door, and to make sure he's inside before I slam the door hard behind me. I unlace my boots and send them flying in a pair of furious kicks. Then I storm up the stairs and throw myself down on the bed, knowing I won't be doing anything other than laying here for the rest of the day.

By evening I start to feel bad in a different way. Regardless of what Peeta said I shouldn't have thrown a temper tantrum and stormed off the way I did. That kind of behaviour won't do me any favours, or keep him near me. I suppose I could hope that my reaction to his words has made him reconsider, but I don't hold it for likely. I don't want to drive a wedge between us, and I don't want to push myself further into depression.

With a groan I lift myself up off the bed and rise to my feet, heading for the bathroom to take a shower. I need one after having slept in my clothes in this heat. I strip down naked and step into the shower, placing my hands against the wall and leaning my brow against the cold tiles. The water washes over me, but I can't say that it makes me feel invigorated. I just feel like going back to bed. I promise myself that I will only have a brief talk with Peeta, and then head home again and crawl underneath the covers, and not emerge until the next time Haymitch or Peeta summons me to dinner.

Slowly I get dressed and braid my hair. I don't bother checking my appearance in the mirror. What does it matter if I look good or not? When I get downstairs I spot Buttercup napping on the backless couch by the front door. He wakes up and looks at me, hissing angrily. He then jumps down on the floor and through some very assertive meows and grunts lets me know that I am to follow him to the kitchen. Rolling my eyes I go with the cat and notice that his water bowl is empty. He stops in front of it, looks up at me and meows accusingly. I fight the urge to simply kick the cat out of the house, but I remind myself that he was the apple of Prim's eye, and I fill the bowl with fresh water for him. I then leave through the kitchen door, ignoring the grumbling in my stomach since I have no appetite and I don't intend to be gone for long.

It's dark outside but still warm and humid. It's a short walk to Peeta's house, but I still start to feel sweaty before I've arrived. The lights are on inside the house, which is a relief since I'm not exactly sure what time it is. I knock on the door and wait for him to answer, reminding myself that I am just going to have a brief conversation with him and then go home to make myself some dinner.

The door opens and Peeta looks both surprised and relieved to see me.

"Hey," he says. "I'm glad you're here." He looks uncertain. "I didn't know if... if I should go knock on your door or if you wanted me to stay away."

I exhale in a huff, feeling my shoulders slump a bit as if a weight has been lifted off of them. I wasn't even aware of how tense I was, but now I am flooded with a strange sense of relief, and I have to force back the urge to just step into Peeta's arms and hold him close and revel at being in his presence.

Instead of doing that I just look into his eyes and offer him a faint smile.

"Can I come inside?"
"Of course."

He steps aside and allows me to enter. I'm barefoot so I don't have to stop and remove my shoes, but instead of proceeding straight to the kitchen or sitting room I just stand there and wait for Peeta to make a move. He's closed the door and is leaning back against it, eyeing me with a small crooked smile. He looks a touch weary and I want to believe that us fighting is as strenuous on him as it is on me.

"You came to talk?" he asks and I nod. "You should know… I'm not alone."

I feel myself deflate. Of course he's not alone. Just when something is beginning to feel good it undoubtedly has to be ruined by something like that.

"Oh," is all I manage, rubbing my upper arms slightly.

"Do you want me to follow you to your place instead?"

The offer surprises me, and I can't think of anything to reply at first. I most definitely do want to be alone with him at my house for a while, even if it's just for a little bit, but I know that would inevitably be followed by him leaving and I don't know that I can handle having him walk out of my house, leaving me all alone, and heading back home to her. Because it's got to be her who is here with him.

"No, that's not necessary," I finally say. "I just… wanted to stop by and apologize for, you know… storming off like that."

"I might have deserved it."

Neither of us says anything else for a moment and I begin to feel a bit awkward. Deciding that I've done what I came here to do, and reluctantly starting to resign to the fact that our lives are changing now, I move towards the door. Peeta doesn't move however, and we end up standing very close to one another, close enough that I can feel his breath on my face.

"Before you go… There's something I would like you to have."

I nod slightly, not knowing what else to do.

"Okay."

"I'll go get it." His hands land on my hips and gently nudge me a step back so he can move. His touch excites me in a way I'm not used to, and it makes my head feel a bit dizzy, which I force myself to attribute to not having eaten anything since the ice-cream. "You can wait here if you prefer… Or if you want to you are welcome to come with me."

I opt for the second choice, wanting as many moments with him as I can get. He leads me to the sitting room, where much to my dismay Lace is sitting on the floor. She's got a large inflatable mattress in her hands, the kind you can buy nowadays at the hardware store, and she's working on inflating it, though she doesn't seem to have gotten very far with it yet. Judging by the size of it I should guess she'll be at it for quite a while.

"Hey Katniss," she says, taking her lips from the spout for a second.

"Hi," I reply, giving her a funny look. "What's with the…"

"It's a long story," says Peeta, taking a large step over the uninflated plastic mattress. "The short
version is that her five year-old nephew is going to sleep on it."

I feel obligated to give Lace a half-hearted smile, and while I can't tell for sure she seems to be smiling back at me. Peeta begins to rummage through a pile of plastic wrappers and envelopes on the coffee table. I remain standing by the door, not sure what I should be doing, wishing I had stayed by the door instead.

"Ugh!" says Lace after a minute. "This is going to take all night."

"Hang on, I'll help you in a minute," says Peeta. He seems to find what he's been looking for, a large square object wrapped in the plain brown wrapping paper that is the only one available at the supply store.

"My jaw is aching like crazy," Lace comments with a frown.

"I don't normally hear that until later in the evening," teases Peeta, earning him a slap on the leg and an annoyed look as he passes her by.

I have no idea what that's supposed to refer to, but I don't enjoy watching them engage in inside jokes so I avert my eyes and pretend like I'm somewhere else entirely until I feel Peeta's hand on my shoulder. I follow him to the front door. He opens it and I step outside, stopping on the porch so he can give me the parcel. He steps outside with me and closes the door behind him, making my heart beat a touch faster.

"I've been meaning to give this to you," he says, holding out the parcel.

"What is it?" I ask.

"You'll soon find out."

"Compensation for not letting me stay over anymore?" I can't help but ask dryly.

He hands it to me and kisses my cheek.

"I care so much about you. Please don't be mad at me. It's just..."

"Peeta, please, you don't have to explain," I say with a sigh, feeling like I'm done with this particular topic and I don't want his pity. Hearing him say he cares about me warms my heart, but it hurts that he doesn't mean it the way I want him to.

"No, I need you to understand," he says softly. "It's not that you're not important to me, because you are. I didn't sleep a minute last night, wondering where you were, scared that you might be hurt. If something ever happens to you I..." He looks distressed and draws a deep breath to gather his wits. "I know you must be thinking that I'm neglecting you and Haymitch because of Lace, and perhaps I have been doing that, but I promise you this is not about that."

"This is not about you not wanting her to question why you get out of bed in the middle of the night to let another girl sleep in your house?"

"No," he says. "Lace doesn't even usually sleep here."

I cringe at the implication that she sometimes does, and I'm just about to leave when Peeta takes my hand. The simple action makes me look up at him, and I wish with all my heart that I had realized years ago how incredible it can be to just be the two of us looking at one another. Now it's not the same.
"It's not that I don't want to be there for you, Katniss," he continues, his thumb gently stroking the back of my hand. "You can call me if you want to when you wake from a nightmare, no matter what the time is, okay?"

"How is that more acceptable than just coming over?"

"You're not just a friend, Katniss," he says softly. "You're… you. I mean, it's us, you and me. We're platonic now but that wasn't always the case. We had a very, very public love affair, a façade, but real to everyone who didn't know us. My memories are one giant mess and none of it makes any damn sense, but I know I must have been overwhelmingly in love with you."

"You were," I say in a faint voice, looking down at the hand he's holding. I smile sadly, feeling close to tears, and look him in the eye again. "You loved me more than anybody else ever will."

"I hope that's not the case," he says with a sad smile, reaching his other hand up to gently brush my cheek. "I hope you will find love someday, the kind where you both feel it, and there are no doubts. As for me, I care so much about you, but there are some aspects of my life where Lace has to come first. I wouldn't be much of a boyfriend otherwise."

"I thought you said this idea didn't come from her," I reply coldly.

"It doesn't. But at some point it might. I know I wouldn't feel good about a guy she once cared that much about spending nights at her place, no matter how platonic they might be." He lets go of my hand and offers me a smile. "I'll still be here for you. Just not like that. At least not right now."

I still don't understand, but I know better than to argue the point. I don't want to push him and find out what the limit is to how much he would be willing to bend for me. In a whisper I bid him a good night and walk down the steps of the porch, slowly making my way back to my own house. I can feel Peeta's eyes on me the entire way, and when I reach my porch and turn around I see him going back inside. I feel like he is slipping away from me in more ways than just romantically, and a chill runs down my spine. The more I feel him moving away from me, the further I seem to slip back into the darkness.

Forcing the thought from my mind I open the front door. Buttercup comes rushing out and I realize that I will not even have him around tonight. With a weary sigh I walk inside and close the door behind me, carrying Peeta's parcel with me upstairs. I toss it on the bed and go make myself ready for the night without bothering to get anything to eat first. I don't have much of an appetite right now anyway.

Wearily I walk back out to the bedroom once I'm done brushing my teeth. The comforter has already been pulled aside so I sit down and grab the parcel, running my finger along the edges of the paper to unfasten the tape. It's quick work to remove the wrapping paper, and I feel the change in my heart rate when I recognize the backside of a painting.

Quickly I turn it around and tears immediately fill my eyes. One of my hands goes up and covers my mouth while the other gently fingers the surface of the canvas. Peeta finished the primrose painting. It's bright and beautiful and gentle and everything I remember my sister to be, captured in expensive oil paint on a canvas in the form of the flower she was named after. It's one of the most beautiful things I've seen Peeta paint and I begin to sob thinking about the time and effort and love he must have put into it, and of how it still is a poor substitute for the person it is in honour of.

I press the painting to my chest as I shake with sobs, mourning my sister most of all but mourning Peeta a bit as well. I've lost them both, haven't I? How do I go on with my life without the two people that matter the most? I try to tell myself that I'm acting crazy, that Peeta is not at all lost to me,
in fact he held my hand and kissed and caressed my cheek just a little bit earlier this evening. Then I think of the girl sitting on his floor with an inflatable mattress on her lap, the girl who apparently does spend the night there sometimes. When she stays over it sure as hell can't be that he makes her sleep in a guest room.

Eventually I end up laying on my side in bed, the painting resting on the pillow where I wish Peeta's, or Prim's, heads were laying. I can still feel my skin burning where he touched it, and especially where he kissed it. It cannot be real that he would want somebody else beside me. Not when he loved me so much in the past. It's too cruel to think of how they took that away from him, away from me, away from us.

I end up crying myself to sleep that night, and when morning comes I can't make myself leave the bed. All I want to do is fall back asleep and never wake up again, but I won't be that fortunate. As I lay there without moving, staring at the painting beside me, I can hear the voices of all those people I destroyed and those who lost their lives trying to aid me. What did I ever do to deserve them giving their lives for me?

I hear their voices telling me I got what I deserved. That Peeta no longer being in love with me serves me right. That I should be alone for the rest of my life and never have that love that Peeta spoke about. That he will give his entire heart to somebody else and I should accept it and stand on the sidelines and watch.

I wonder if perhaps they are right.

Summer continues to be hot and humid and I spend most of it either in the woods or in bed. I begin to feel a sense of apathy that is only lifted when I am hunting, when I spend time with Peeta, and occasionally when Buttercup curls up on my lap and wants to be petted. Little by little I begin to see things shift and change in Peeta's life, and consequently in my own and Haymitch's. I can't say for sure but I think Haymitch is drinking more heavily now than he was before, though he's always been prone to periods of sobriety and periods of bender.

Summer begins to turn to autumn, and as the heat subsides and is replaced by heavy rainfall I assume at first that our old dinner routine will continue the way it used to be. To my dismay I soon learn that this is not the case. Haymitch has been doing more and more work with the committee and can't seem to find time for that, his drinking, taking care of the geese, and showing up for dinner every other day. Peeta is fairly busy as well, making shop signs for storekeepers in town and spending more and more time with his girlfriend. It seems I am the only one with eons of free time on my hands. When Haymitch suggests we change our routine to having dinner ever Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday Peeta agrees at once while I only agree because I feel obligated to since I know I'm outnumbered. It's still a fixed routine and we still see each other three nights a week, but it's different and I don't like it.

Occasionally Peeta and I spend time together outside of these dinners. I never seek him out anymore when I've woken from a nightmare, too proud and stubborn to want to get any help at all from him when he won't let me spend the night. All the time we spend together is during the day, often helping each other out with various chores. There are a few occasions when he lets me help him with his
baking and those are my favourite moments. Just the two of us having fun in his kitchen, our skin often touching due to Peeta's preference for a hands-on teaching approach.

One afternoon when I am on my way home from a walk a heavy rain begins to fall, soon followed by rumbling thunder. Peeta's house is closer than my own or Haymitch's, so I seek refuge there, pounding on his door, hoping he will be able to hear me over the sound of the rain crashing down.

When the door flings open I run inside, almost knocking Peeta off his feet. He stares at me with wide eyes at first, but then hurries to get me a large towel while I take off my father's old jacket which is now soaking wet. He hands me the towel and I begin to wipe my face, shivering from the wet rain.

"You want me to see if I have any clothes that might fit you?" he asks.

"No thanks, I'm good." The last thing I want is to be wearing his girlfriend's clothes, which is what I strongly suspect are the only clothes in this house that might fit me.

"You sure?" he asks with a frown. "You might catch a cold."

"I'll survive. But thanks."

"Let me make you something warm to drink at least."

He goes to the kitchen and I finish drying myself off as best I can. The pants I'm wearing are already start to itch as they dry, but I decide I don't care. While using the towel to dry off my hair, still in its standard braid, I walk to the sitting room to take a seat by the fireplace. I notice something on the coffee table and it draws my interest. It's a book, about medium sized, its cover a warm red colour. I walk over and toss the towel on the couch. My fingers graze the book's cover, feeling that the red is not paper or plastic but a soft fabric.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Something Lace and I are working on," answers Peeta as he comes into the room carrying a trey with two mugs of tea and some cheese buns. He sets the trey down on the other end of the table. "I surprised her with it for her birthday. Effie sent me the book but Lace added the red cover."

He walks over and stops just behind me, so close that we're touching and that I can feel his breath when he looks over my shoulder. He reaches around me and puts his hand on the one of mine that's on the book's cover. Suddenly I don't care about the book anymore, or even that it's something he's given to Lace. As long as he keeps his hand on mine that way the book can be anything he wants, I don't care.

"See, it's a bit like your father's plant book," he says, opening it up. "She wants to design custom clothing, and not just make shirts and pants and blouses. The idea is that when we've completed more designs she will keep it in the shop, and customers can browse through it to see what they want."

My hand falls away from the book now that his hand isn't covering it anymore. I look at the pages and feel a sadness bordering on desperation rise within me. Each page has a name and description of the design, including which fabrics it can come in and which colours. There's also a drawing of the design, undoubtedly done by Peeta. Each design is beautiful and clearly done with love and care. There's no doubt that it's a fine idea for a seamstress' store, or that it's a wonderful present for someone who makes and sells clothes for a living, but it's too similar in idea to my father's plant book, and how Peeta helped me with it. I can't help but feel that the book, by its very existence, steals from me.
I so fondly hold on to the memories of Peeta helping me with drawings for the plant book while my foot healed that winter between our Games. It's one of the memories I like to go to when I'm feeling overwhelmed by all my losses, and when I long for Peeta. In a way it's sacred to me, a connection to my father, to my mother, to my sister and to Peeta, and a point in time when he loved me unconditionally.

I don't have to ask him to know that he got the idea for this book for Lace from my plant book. It feels like being punched in the stomach, knowing that he's taken something that was between him and me and given it over to Lace. Somehow the memories of how we worked on my book together feel different now, like they've been hollowed out.

I have to get away. I can't bear to stand here and look at the pages in this book and try to pretend that I think they're lovely and that it's all so romantic and sweet and something that I support. When I try to back away I bump into Peeta, having forgotten that he's standing right behind me.

"Oh!" Peeta exclaims.

For once I'm not too concerned with him or his feelings, and I push him aside so that I can move away. He looks confused when he sees that I'm heading for the door.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

"I have to go."

"Go where?" he questions with an uncomfortable, confused chuckle. "You just got here."

"And now I'm leaving."

"What's wrong? Katniss…"

I kind of hate him in that moment for knowing me well enough to tell that I don't just have somewhere to be, that something is wrong, but I can't bring myself to feel that I owe him an explanation. Not when he has forgotten about how we worked on my father's plant book together and gone and done something far too similar with the girl he chose over me. There has to be a limit to how much I can put up with being hurt, and right now I dislike him more than I care about him.

"I just have to go, okay?" I say, heading for the front door of his house, feeling like I might throw a fit when I hear his footsteps following me.

"Shit, I'm sorry Katniss, I didn't… I didn't mean to remind you of-" I cry, spinning around and holding a warning finger up to him. I don't even know how he was going to complete the sentence, but I don't care. It would be equally awful if he's right on the mark or far off.

"I'm sorry," he says, deflated. "But Katniss, you're freaking me out a bit right now."

"Too bad," I snarl, opening the door and rushing out, slamming it hard behind me.

The rain is still coming down hard and the thunder is rolling above, getting closer by the looks of it. I take off running towards my own house, not caring in the slightest that I am soaked through and through. I make it home, hurry up the stairs and draw myself a hot bath, ignoring the trail of water I've left behind me.

It's not until I've emerged myself in the bathwater that I realize I left behind my jacket. I think about...
going back to retrieve it later this evening if the weather calms down, but then it hits me what I just did.

I sit up straight, pulling my knees up towards my chest and burying my face against my palms. Dear God, I just threw an epic fit at Peeta with no real justification. Actually with plenty of justification, but none that Peeta is aware of, though that just makes it hurt more. I wonder what he was going to apologize for. Does he think he reminded me of my father? Of Prim? Of my entire lost family? Or does he actually realize what it was that set me off? Can it be possible that he remembers those winter days when I was confined to my bed and he sat beside me, working on the plant book with me?

Either way it's going to be terribly embarrassing to come face to face with him again. Groaning at my own overblown reactions I lean back again and let myself sink further into the water. If I keep this behaviour up I will have lost him for good before long, no doubt about that.

Once I'm out of the bath I dry myself off, braid my hair and head straight for bed, even though it's only afternoon. Crawling under the sheets I know without a doubt that I won't be getting up again until the next time we're having dinner together.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully this chapter doesn't seem too disjointed. I contemplated switching things around and either moving the first part to the previous chapter or the last part to the next but ultimately it works best this way. The pacing of the story is going to seem a bit strange for a while but that's intentional.

Also, I hope Peeta doesn't come off as too unsympathetic, with everything being from Katniss' POV and all. What I can tell you is that he doesn't remember working on the plant book together with her. At least in my head canon Snow's torture crew knew how to draw out memories of key moments in their relationship and tamper with them, even if they happened off-camera back home in Twelve.

EDIT: With the large amount of anger and Peeta-hate I've been getting in the comments I feel I should comment on this here (and I'll probably mention it again in the AN for the next chapter). It seems the jaw comment offended a lot of people and I'm seriously considering editing it out all-together but before doing that I'll clarify the scene in question: The comment was meant mostly as a joke, a very common kind of joke at that. It doesn't actually say that Peeta and Lace engage in the activity alluded to, only that they both know about it. In the books Peeta had a bit of fun at Katniss' expense a few times regarding how innocent he is, so it's not exactly out of character for him to joke about sex. His comment here is more crude than his teasing in CF but my intention with it was not that he's deliberately trying to hurt Katniss or shove it in her face that he's not in a chaste relationship. For one because the comment itself doesn't actually mean they're doing that particular thing and for another because he doesn't think she has feelings for him. It's a joke with a few undertones but none of those undertones is Peeta deliberately being hurtful towards Katniss.
I'm sorry I've offended people because that wasn't my intention.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Phew! It took me quite a while to read all the comments on the last chapter. That must be a new record for me, though I didn't actually count the comments. There are still a few comments I mean to reply to but haven't gotten to yet; I'll try to get it done as soon as possible. I want to thank everyone who took the time to comment, analyze and/or discuss.

Chances are there will be a lot of comments on this chapter too. I just hope everyone is willing to give me and the story the benefit of the doubt =) We're starting to get near a turning point. This chapter originally existed in a much longer version but I cut a big chunk out because it didn't fit in anymore (I wrote the first draft quite a while ago) and I've been making a few adjustments to the rest of the text over the past two days. I got kind of tired of the chapter by then so I didn't give it a proof-read before uploading it but hopefully it works. I say that a lot, don't I?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Winter comes, bringing a few heavy snowfalls, below-freezing temperatures, and less and less time for me out in the woods. The days grow darker and I find I'm spending more and more days either in bed or cooped up inside my house, making no effort to put on anything but pyjamas and a bathrobe. I almost dread going outside sometimes, fearing that I will run into Lace in Peeta's company. I'm annoyed by the mere sight of her now, resenting her for the intrusion into our lives. Peeta has told dr. Aurelius about her, and to my dismay the doctor seems to be encouraging the relationship, though Peeta speaks very vaguely about it and I don't ask follow-up questions.

After I ran out of Peeta's house during the thunderstorm things have been different between us, though if I am to be honest it has been a long time coming. I stop going over to his house to help him with his baking or with any other random chore, my wounded pride making it near impossible for me to be the one to initiate a reconciliation. If a reconciliation is even the right word. He showed up at my door the day after I ran out, my hunting jacket in his hand and an apology on his lips, but since he didn't understand the real reason for my anger the apology was meaningless to me. I took the jacket and bid him a good afternoon before closing the door.

Peeta seems downhearted by the distance I'm putting between us, or perhaps that's just wishful thinking on my part. Either way he gives me my space. During autumn he asks me twice if I want to spend time with him, baking or watching television or anything really, but I turn him down both times, too weary to want to settle for crumbs. We still see each other three days every week, but it's not the same anymore. As much as I love him there's also a part of me that's angry with him, angry and disappointed. He seems to be picking up on it, and responds by stepping back and giving me whatever space I need.

The difficult part is that I don't really want space. What I want is to have the old Peeta back, the one who loved me unconditionally, and the one who was my friend. I want things to be the way they used to be, before she came into the picture. I know it's not her fault that my heart is broken, but she is still the girl who is dating the boy I want to be with, and her presence in his life is edging me out. Looking back I think we were on the right path, Peeta and I, until she came along and derailed.
everything. Sometimes I think she's mainly an escape route for him, but if that is the case I don't know what the implications are, or what can be done about it. All I know is that it's not worth subjecting myself to having front row seats for it.

The months of winter go by slowly, days blending together. Some days are good days, days when I speak to my mother on the phone, or find interest in a book, or spend a few hours playing card games in Haymitch's kitchen. Haymitch gives me odd looks sometimes that make me wonder if he knows how bad I'm feeling, but he never comments. He seems to be lonely now, and as winter progresses it dawns on me that he too is seeing less of Peeta. So we try to cure our loneliness together, Haymitch and I, and to some degree it works.

We talk about mundane things mostly, but that in itself is something of a relief. The emotional rollercoaster with Peeta has more than sated my desire for big conversations about important matters. It's nice to have a little touch of everyday normalcy, and it makes me realize that even if Peeta and I can grow apart it's not likely that Haymitch and I will cease to be a part of each other's lives. At one point though Haymitch mentions how we're seeing less of Peeta nowadays, and to my surprise he ponders how well Peeta is actually doing. When he says that I can't help but think back on the time Peeta told me he sometimes feels like nobody has genuinely loved him, and I wonder if he's immersing himself so much in his relationship with Lace because she makes him feel loved, and that makes him feel good in the middle of all the bad.

I worry about him. I worry that he's lost whatever coping mechanism he had before that got him through the hardships, and that now he's running or in denial. I tell myself that I'm just letting jealousy get the best of me, that I want there to be something fundamentally wrong with him because he doesn't love me anymore, that I simply can't accept that he could be moving on for real. Even so I can't help feeling worried.

Through the blur that is my twentieth winter there are occasional good days, and many days I can barely remember. Two days stand out to me as particularly bad days. Both of them because of her.

It's a cold winter's day, though not excessively so. There is no wind blowing, which helps, both with preventing it from being too cold and with my hunting. I got up hours before sunrise and spent well over an hour perched uncomfortably in a tree waiting for prey to pass me by. I've got a rabbit and a wolverine in my game bag as reward for my effort, though the wolverine was more of an accident and I'm not planning on eating it. I don't like the meat of predator animals, but their fur is often lovely. I never hunt them on purpose anymore because it seems like a waste of meat, though back in the day I would much prefer to come home with a ferret or a wolverine than with nothing at all.

When I reach the Victors' Village I stop for a moment. There is a strange sound, one I'm absolutely not accustomed to hearing in this part of town. I stand frozen for a moment, waiting to see if it will appear again, and soon it does. Laughter. Specifically the pearly laughter of Peeta's girlfriend. With a frown I gaze up at the sun in the sky. It's hours before noon – what is she doing out here at this early hour? Did she spend the night?

In order to reach my own house from the direction I have come I have to pass by Peeta's, and I cringe at the thought. I don't particularly feel like faking a cheerful greeting or stopping for some mindless, "pleasant" conversation. Luckily I know that if I take the back way to my own house I will stand a chance of passing by without being spotted, and even if they do see me I will be at a distance
and it won't be as necessary for them to call out to me.

I leave the road and tread out into the snow. More pearly laughter comes as I walk behind the first house on the row, but I haven't yet heard Peeta's voice. There's the sound of the barking of a dog, and then I hear Peeta's laughter. It makes me cringe. I used to adore the sound of his laughter, but it seems like a much less pleasant sound when it's combined with the sound of hers.

As I progress further down the lane of houses I am able to hear them more clearly. I can hear Peeta saying something about going inside to get a leash, and then the sound of a door closing. I exhale in relief, hoping I will be able to pass by the house opposite of his without having to see him.

What I didn't take into account was the dog. As I approach the house opposite Peeta's the dog either picks up my scent and sound or, more likely, the scent of my dead prey, and begins to bark vigorously. I hear Lace's voice trying to calm the dog to no avail, and for a moment I'm worried the animal might come running up to me with her in tow and I will be forced to have an awkward conversation with her after all.

My eyes go to the basement window of the house I'm passing by. It's open slightly, as with all the empty houses. They come by once a week to either open or close basement windows, hoping that letting fresh air through the house will keep mildew away. For some reason they still do that, though they don't tend to the gardens or shovel any snow. I make a split second decision to throw my game bag through the window to hopefully make the dog stop smelling the animals.

As soon as I let it drop I realize what a stupid idea that was. I have no way of retrieving it, except to go to the new Justice Building and ask the maintenance crew to come out here and unlock the front door for me. I cannot bring myself to do that, it would be far too awkward, but I'm also not prepared to let my precious game bag go to waste. Then there's the thought of the retched smell if those animals are left there to rot…

Cursing under my breath I get down on the ground and begin to squeeze myself through the window. It's big enough to let me through, thankfully, but I feel more than a little bit stupid and irritated once my feet hit the floor. I seem to be making nothing but bad decisions lately. I really need to get a grip of myself.

Once I'm inside the basement I grab my bag, coughing from all the dust that blows up into the air. It blows my mind how they can bother to come by and open the windows but not bother to dust the place. Then again it might just be the basement they're not bothering with. I put one foot in front of the other and make my way up the stairs to the bottom floor of the uninhabited house. I'm not sure why all these houses are empty when many people are without a place to live, but for the moment I'm thankful that I didn't inadvertently barge into someone's home.

Once I'm on the bottom floor I walk slowly through the empty rooms, pondering if I should make my exit through the back door or the kitchen door. The front door is definitely not an option since I would be clearly visible from the street, which means clearly visible from Peeta's house as well as Haymitch's, and he would have a question or two if he saw me. I decide to use the kitchen exit and walk inside the room, but then I stop in my tracks when I look out the window. The dog did in fact run over to this side of the street, and seems to be searching for the dead animals he smelled earlier. Lace has followed and caught up with him, and is currently kneeling on the ground beside him, holding the dog's thick coat in one hand and wrapping her other arm around him to keep him from running away again.

I stop and observe her for a second. She's wearing a blue coat which she no doubt made herself and which brings out the red in her hair. It makes her hair almost light up against the white snow behind her, and it's more beautiful than I would like to give her credit for. For several seconds I stand there
just gazing at the contrast between her mahogany hair, the white snow, and the blue of her coat, and then she lifts her head and smiles widely. I have found her rather plain looking before but I can't bring myself to call her that right now. She definitely lights up when she smiles, but the effect loses any positive impression it might have had on me when the cause of her smile comes into view. Peeta kneels beside her and pulls a collar around the dog's neck, holding the leash in a firm hand. I can see her mouth moving as she speaks but I can't hear her words. Unfortunately I can very clearly see her lean in and kiss him, but that's about as much as I'm prepared to see. While they are otherwise occupied I quickly move through the house and quietly exit through the front door, listening carefully to stay aware of where they are at the moment. I don't want a surprise run-in right now.

What I once again fail to take into account is the dog, who again smells the rabbit and wolverine and begins to bark, ruining the moment for Peeta and Lace and making it more difficult for me to sneak by unnoticed.

"What is with you today, Shep?" I hear Lace say.

"He probably needs a good, long walk," Peeta's voice replies. "Come on, let's get up and get moving."

Their voices move further away from where I'm standing. Quietly and quickly I make my way to my own house, throwing the game bag down on the ground the second I'm safe inside, trying to get a hold of myself and the emotions raging in my chest. I feel so painfully jealous from seeing them kiss, something I don't think I've ever seen before. Peeta is not shy about public displays of affection but he has kept it to a minimum with her in my company. I can only wonder if this is how Gale used to feel when he saw me and Peeta kiss, and how Peeta felt when he found out I had been kissing Gale.

Either way there's nothing I can do about it now. All I can do is try to not let it bother me, but the thought fester. I almost wish I had run into them, that I could have been able to act completely unbothered by seeing them together. I don't want Peeta to know how much this hurts, partly because I don't want to make things difficult for him, but also because it would wound my pride. If there's no chance for me to have him then I don't want him to know how much I would want him to be mine. Feeling that way makes me vulnerable, and I want to be done being vulnerable.

Winter progresses and I begin to tell myself that I am getting over Peeta. Deep down I know it isn't true, but there are weeks when the snow falls so heavily that we cancel our dinner plans and I only see him once in six or seven days, and even though I'm still very depressed I at least feel functional to a degree which I didn't before. Still, I cannot deny that seeing him is the highlight of my day, or week, and sometimes I can even pretend that things are back the way they used to be. We act friendly towards each other, though there's definitely something between us that keeps things from being the way they used to be. An awkwardness, a shyness, a divide I don't know how to cross.

During the coldest part of winter I rarely see Lace through my window, or hear her voice or the barking of the dog she seems to be dragging with her everywhere nowadays. She becomes a parenthesis in my mind, something I don't want to deal with, and I can almost fool myself into thinking I don't care either way about her and that she has no impact on my life. I almost manage to fool myself that the knowledge of her and Peeta being together doesn't bother me like it used to.
"How long do I have to be here for?" I ask Haymitch with a sigh, leaning back against one of the pillars in the room. "I'm bored to tears already."

"You've been here all of one hour," replies Haymitch dryly. "Try to hold out at least until dinner has been served. Isn't that what you came here for on the first place?" The last part he says with a dry, sarcastic tone and an eyebrow raised.

"Sure," I agree. "But I didn't think dinner would be served at midnight. What are we waiting for?"

It's a small event compared to the Capitol extravaganzas I've attended in the past, but by District 12 standards it's the equivalent of the old Nobel Prize dinners Beetee likes to talk dreamily about. The occasion is the appointment of a mayor for the town and a governor for the district, neither of whom were actually born here, which seems rather odd in my opinion. Chuck Andrews, the new mayor, is from District 7 and Annette Brown, the governor, is a distant relative of Annie Odair. Throwing a party like this seems awfully self-indulgent in my opinion, but I've decided to attend anyway and appreciate the fact that they're at least treating everyone to a free meal.

Or so I thought they would. It's been over an hour since the party officially began, but all we've been served thus far is a flute filled with some pink alcoholic beverage and a slice of melon wrapped in ham. I'm starving and grumpy and would like to go home as soon as I possibly can.

Haymitch, who is my date for the evening, is just as impatient as I am, though in his case it's the promise of the bar opening when dinner is served that's making it difficult for him to stand around waiting. I've already told him in no uncertain terms that I am not dragging him home tonight after he's had too much to drink. I'm wearing one of the few nice dresses I own, and like everything beautiful in my closet it was made by Cinna. I am not risking this dress being thrown up on.

"I barely recognize people," I say, just to make conversation. "Everyone looks so nice, even if it is a rather modest nice."

"Just wait until we celebrate ten years since the Capitol fell," replies Haymitch. "By then these buffoons will be able to afford more expensive dresses and suits. It will look like a Capitol party knock-off."

I keep looking out on the crowd of people, mostly just to pass the time until they finally announce dinner. I try telling myself that I'm just observing the crowd in general, but deep down I know I am looking for Peeta. It's odd not attending a party on his arm, and I think I will feel better once I see him. He must be around here somewhere, though as of yet I haven't spotted him.

Finally they ask us to take our seats so that the meal can begin. Except for an honorary table where Andrews, Brown and their families are sitting there are no pre-determined seats, so I head strategically for the table closest to the doors leading to the kitchen. Haymitch follows without a word, and even courteously pulls out a chair for me. Just as I'm about to sit my eyes finally find Peeta, and for a brief moment I find it difficult to breathe. He looks so handsome in the grey suit I recognize as one of Portia's creations, his blond hair backslidked, and his face relaxed and happy. I try to will him to look up and meet my eyes, but his full attention is on his date for the evening.

It's the sight of her, of Lace at his arm, that makes the happy feeling in my chest go away. She's wearing a simple yet beautiful pale yellow gown, and her mahogany hair falls in soft waves over her shoulders and down her back. Even from the distance of the three tables that separate us I can tell
that she's wearing makeup, and I can tell that she looks good. More beautiful than I would like to
give her credit for.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? You look like you've seen a ghost."

Haymitch's voice brings me out of my daze, and I hope I'm not blushing as I try to sit more
comfortably and direct my full attention at the decorations on the table.

"Nothing. Just seems like Peeta finally showed up."

"What do you mean?" asks Haymitch, grabbing a breadstick and shoving it in his mouth with his
typical poor table manners. "He was here when we arrived."

"What?"

"Yeah. He and his girl have been chatting with our new governor the whole time we've been here."

"Oh," I say. "Pass me a breadstick, will you?"

I feel surprisingly relieved that Haymitch had to inform me that Peeta has been here the whole time.
For some reason I don't want my old mentor to know I was waiting for him to show up.

"Try to not eat like a pig," says Haymitch, handing me the breadstick I asked for.

"Please," I snort, rolling my eyes for good measure. "I may be starving but I'd have to slobber a
whole lot to out-pig you."

The person sitting to my left gives me an odd look, but I ignore it and turn towards Haymitch on my
right. He is getting up to go over to the bar and order something to drink, and I ask him to get
something for me as well. Once he's left I start to look for Peeta again, but it's difficult to see him in
the large group of people. I give up for the moment and decide to try and focus on my meal instead.

Once dinner is over more mingling commences. I immediately lose sight of Haymitch as he makes a
beeline for the bar. Not sure what to do I lean against a concrete pillar and observe the crowd,
wondering how long I need to stay before I can make my leave.

"Hey you," says Peeta's voice in my ear.

I turn around, unable to stop the smile that's spreading across my face. It fades a bit when I see Lace
standing beside him but it doesn't go away entirely.

"Hi," I say. "Enjoying the night?"

"I never thought I would ever enjoy parties," he admits. "Still not sure that I do, but this is infinitely
better than those Capitol shindigs."

"Oh listen to you, Mr. I've-Been-To-Too-Many-Fancy-Parties," teases Lace. "Some of us have never
attended anything fancier than the Victory Tour parties, and as you probably recall District 8 didn't
host a particularly grand one in comparison to all the stories you tell of the Capitol parties."

I'm surprised to hear that Lace attended Victory Tour parties, and even more surprised to hear her allude to Peeta remembering the parties in the Capitol. I thought for sure those would be among the memories they had taken.

"The food is great," Peeta offers with a laugh. "But you have to admit that it's a rather stuffy event."

I stand there growing increasingly uncomfortable. I'm not sure my presence is needed at the moment, yet they were the ones who came up to me. Lace's hand reaches up and untangles a strand of hair which has caught in the flowery necklace she's wearing, and my eyes study the piece of simple jewellery for a moment in lieu of better things to do. The pendant of the necklace reaches down to the tip of the valley between her breasts, and I can't help but notice that she has a bosom at least twice the size of mine, not that mine are very big to begin with. For some reason the thought festers. My lack of female forms has become one of my secret sources of insecurity, and I remember vividly the look in Peeta's eyes when Johanna stripped in the elevator and he saw her breasts, which were definitely bigger than mine too.

I realize my eyes are on Lace's chest and quickly I look away, trying to force the blush to leave my cheeks. Neither Lace nor Peeta appear to have noticed, but at least it seems they are coming to an end of their repartee.

"Are you going to let me talk to Katniss?" asks Peeta with feigned annoyance.

"Fine, I know when my presence is not wanted," Lace replies with a smirk. She kisses him on the cheek and gives his hand a squeeze. "I'm going to the ladies' room. Try to stay out of trouble, and don't bug Katniss too much."

She leaves, and the joy of having a moment in private with him diminishes when I see his eyes following her for a few seconds more than necessary. Then he turns to me and flashes me a smile.

"So tell me, are you enjoying the party?"

"I enjoyed dinner," I say. "Now I'm busy working out how long I have to stay before I can make a graceful exit."

"There's going to be dancing soon," says Peeta. "You should stay for that at least. Haymitch could use a good twirl on the dance floor."

The thought makes me smile, and Peeta seems pleased by it as his own grin widens.

"So what about you?" I ask. "Having a good time?"

"Better than I expected," he admits. "I wasn't planning on coming at all, truth be told, but I decided to be here anyway, for Lace's sake."

"Why for hers?"

"She made that lovely dress she's wearing," explains Peeta. "She's hoping to secure a few more customers tonight among those with enough money to afford buying the kind of stuff she really wants to do. So we're basically here networking, which is an entirely new thing for me, but I'm proud of her."

My heart sinks a little. How did this conversation just between the two of us end up being about her?
"The dress is beautiful," I manage.

"So is yours," he answers. "Cinna?"

I nod, averting my eyes to try and get a hold of myself. The thought of the man who made this dress for me, and what became of him, almost brings tears to my eyes in my already emotional state.

"He certainly knew how to dress you," says Peeta with warmth. "You always looked amazing in his creations."

"I'm surprised you remember any of that."

"There were some memories they couldn't access," says Peeta, a touch too lightly. "Ones I tucked away and managed to keep for myself. Many of them involve you walking down staircases in Cinna's various dresses."

"Sounds repetitive," I say, for the moment not seeking compliments from him.

"Maybe, but in a nice way."

I smile faintly. If only he knew how much it hurts to be complimented by him sometimes when I know that in his eyes I fade in comparison to Lace. I might look beautiful in my dress tonight but that is mostly a compliment to Cinna. I know he must find Lace more beautiful than I, and even if that was mostly due to her dress then it's still a dress she made.

Peeta smiles softly at me, his hands in his back pockets. I wonder what else he remembers from our Victory Tour. Does he remember the nights he held me on the train? Does he remember the self-congratulatory mood between us whenever we successfully managed to sneak away from the cameras and the crowds?

Does he remember the way we danced?

"Save me a dance for later, will you?" I ask. "In case I wear Haymitch out."

"Sure," he says.

"Well, I'm going to go get myself a drink," I say. I don't feel like standing around here with him until Lace returns and he devotes himself to her again. Better to be the one who ends the conversation.

"Don't spend all evening networking. Try to have some amount of fun."

"I'll do that." He offers me a faint smile. "You have fun, too."

I give him a half-hearted wave and walk away from him, steering for the bar. I ask for a glass of something that won't taste too much of alcohol, and while I lean over the counter and wait for the drink to be handed to me I weigh the pros and cons of having a dance with Peeta tonight. I haven't been in his arms in quite a while now and it would be heaven to share a dance. Too bad the aftermath would be hell, having to let him go and watch him return to her.

I get my drink and I pick up the tiny plastic pitchfork that decorates it, and I eat the olive it spears. I decide there's no point in trying to get a dance with Peeta tonight. It would just feel strange, even if it would be heavenly. I would love to dance with him alone, just the two of us, swaying in each other's arms the way we've done several times before. Since that is not an option I don't feel like settling by going for the scraps I could have.

Besides, he might be uncomfortable dancing with me in public, especially when his girlfriend is
A look at the large clock tells me it’s eleven o’clock and I deem it a suitable time to leave. It doesn’t seem like anybody else has left yet, except for a few couples who have small children they want to get home to, but I figure somebody has to be the first to go. I find Haymitch at the bar and thankfully can tell that he's not going to want to leave with me. I won’t be stuck dragging him home. Peeta can have that pleasure.

"Tried everything in the bar, yet?" I ask dryly when I reach him.

"Most of what they have in this bar is crap," scoffs Haymitch. "Milk-based drinks and ciders in flavours like vanilla and mango. I'll stick to my liquor, thank you very much, although since you asked I am well on my way to trying every drop in the bottle."

"Charming," I reply. "I'm leaving now, just so you know."

"Bold move," nods Haymitch. "How do you plan on getting through the front door without everyone asking where you're going and why you're leaving so early?"

My eagerness to get home dampens a bit. To reach the doors from the party room you have to pass through a corridor which is lined with people standing in smaller groups and talking. I can't slip past there unnoticed.

"I'll think of something," I say. "I'm really bored and I'm tired. I've been up since five o'clock."

"Try the back exit," suggests Haymitch, taking another large gulp from his tumbler.

"The what? I didn't know this place had a back exit."

"Just go out that way," he says, pointing to a corridor in the other end of the room. "Technically you're not supposed to be there since it's the staff's corridors, but it will take you outside without passing by half the district."

"Thank you," I say with a sigh of relief. "That sounds great."

"And if anybody of the staff sees you and wonders what you're doing there just pretend like you have terrible sense of direction."

"Thanks," I say, rolling my eyes. "Rock solid advice."

I give him a pat on the shoulder and then make my way through the dancing crowds to grab my coat. Once I've got all my belongings I head for the corridor he pointed out. I take a look around before heading in, in case someone is watching me, but nobody appears to be paying attention. The dancing is at full swing and everyone in the room seems to be having a great time, whether they are out on the dance floor, sitting by the bar or gathered at one of the tables, talking.

I reach down and take my shoes off, breathing a sigh of relief when my feet are freed from the uncomfortable high heels. Carrying the shoes in my left hand I walk down the corridor, moving
much more quietly and discreetly without the sound of clicking heels. I can hear members of the staff in an adjoining room and I’m guessing they’re working on the dishes. Nobody seems to be in the corridor with me, and I will probably be able to make a discreet escape.

When I'm little more than halfway down the hallway strange noises catch my ear. At first I'm not sure what they are but then they begin to sound like muffled whimpers. I frown, wondering what this is all about, but then I decide I don't care. It doesn't sound like anyone is hurt or dying so it doesn't really matter.

The lighting is dim but I can see the door leading outside. A few meters ahead of it is an adjoining corridor, and I deduce that the sounds are coming from there. I shake my head and roll my eyes, glad to know I will be outside and on my way home in less than a minute.

When I reach the other corridor I can't help but cast a glance in that direction, a bit curious to know what the source of the sounds are. The sight makes me stop in my tracks and gape. It's a couple, just as I was beginning to suspect, and they are in the middle of what seems to be a heated make-out session, not that I have all that much experience. His hand is tangled in her hair, one of her legs is wrapped around his hip, their lips are locked in a passionate kiss. What seems to catch my attention the most is Peeta's hand kneading Lace's breast through the fabric of her dress, and the sight brings a mad rush of jealousy that I'm not sure I can control. Startled by it all I drop my shoes and they fall to the concrete floor with a clatter that brings the couple out of their bubble.

Lace yelps when she sees me and quickly turns her face the other way, pushing Peeta's hand off her breast and trying in vain to adjust the fabric he's been messing up. Peeta gapes at me, looking startled and embarrassed but there's also a deeper look in his eyes. It's the same look I remember from our kissing session on the beach in the second arena. I think it's lust or arousal or both, but I don't know for sure, and in this moment I don't care to know. For a fleeting moment I remember that his hand was on my breast that time, and I remember how good it felt. But he's found somebody else to enjoy that kind of hunger with, someone with more flesh to fill his eager hands.

"Katniss!" he gasps, sounding out of breath. Lace's leg drops to the ground but he keeps standing close to her, as if to keep the crotch of his pants from my view. "Gosh, I'm so sorry! What… What are you doing here?"

"Leaving," I say shortly. "I'm leaving."

Without bothering to apologise for interrupting them I almost run the remaining feet to the door and push it open with full force. I stumble out into the chilly night and want to lean forward and throw up, or something, anything to ease the anguish I'm feeling, but I also want to put as much room as possible between myself and the door in case Peeta should walk through it in search of me. Instead of following the asphalt road I hurry over the gravel parking lot which leads to a collection of trees. The frosty gravel hurts my feet, but I'm not willing to stop and put my shoes back on. I realize I don't even have my shoes with me anymore.

Once I'm safely hidden away among the trees I close my eyes hard and lean back against a thick trunk. Images of what I just saw burn beneath my eyelids, and I regret coming to this party. What the hell were they doing there? Well it was obvious what they were doing but why? Why did they sneak off in the middle of a big party to do that? Couldn't they contain themselves? Does she really awaken that kind of hunger in him? I think of all the times Peeta and I pretended to sneak off from parties during the Victory Tour, ostensibly to do what I just caught him and Lace doing. I do realize that many couples would like to sneak off like that, that I would love to do so with him if I had the chance to, and he doesn't have to pretend anymore. He's found someone to sneak away with for real."

"Damn it," I cry through gritted teeth. "Damn it all to hell."
I can feel tears burning behind my closed eyelids, and I want to go home now even more than I did before. I want to run back to the safety of my own house, quickly get out of this dress, and wallow in the self-pity and hurt I'm feeling. It's useless to try and say now that I don't care about them being together, that I'm not as much in love as I was in summer, and that I'm impervious to this pain.

I'm shivering, so I put on my coat, but it does little to help warm me up. I open my eyes because all I seem to be able to see when they are closed is Peeta's mouth on Lace's, Lace's leg around his hip, his hand on her breast. Slowly I begin to walk back home, trying not to remember what it felt like when his hands and mouth were on my skin instead of hers. It's quite cold outside, and not a good night to be walking barefoot, but I welcome the pain in my feet. I probably won't be able to feel much in them by the time I get home anyway, considering how cold the ground is. Once I reach the road to the Victors' Village I begin to walk faster, and when I'm about halfway I begin to run, as if I would be able to outrun the things I saw tonight.

Peeta kissing her passionately. Peeta kneading her breast. Peeta having the same look in his eyes that he had when he kissed me in the second arena.

When I finally reach my house my feet ache pretty badly, and the gravelled path from the road to my front porch hurts the soles with each step. My hands reach out and grab the banister as I make my way up the three steps to the porch. I didn't bother locking the door when I left so I stumble inside and throw myself down on the backless sofa and bury my face in my hands.

Chapter End Notes

I hope I'm not too cruel for adding the physical aspect to Katniss' situation. It's something I think most people experience when the object of their affection is with somebody else. Katniss didn't show much concern for her looks in canon but I think it's only natural to compare oneself to a rival.

I'll try to update again soon enough. Don't roast me too hard :)
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I can't express enough how much I enjoy reading all the comments on this story and how grateful I am to everyone who takes the time to read, comment and discuss. It means a lot to me so thanks to all of you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The long winter finally comes to an end. There was always a part of spring that I loved – the fresh awakening of the world, the sounds and smells of nature coming back to life, the bright greens of the new leaves. Before my father's death I looked forward to my birthday each year, but we practically stopped celebrating it when he died. It wasn't just because of his death – turning twelve and thus eligible for the Reaping was never something to be celebrated, even though I was relieved that year to be old enough to sign up for tesserae.

As beautiful as spring is it's probably my least favourite season these days. For six years it came with the Reaping and for two it came with the Hunger Games. The year after that it came with the death of my sister, and the next with Peeta beginning to date Lace, though compared to losing my sister that was survivable. It's difficult to be in this season now with the constant reminder of her absence.

Winter has been very difficult, almost like a hibernation period. Most of it is just a blur in my memory, endless days of loneliness and depression only kept apart by those highlights that were the dinner evenings with Peeta and Haymitch, phone calls with my mother, and playing games in Haymitch's kitchen.

I've learned to put on a strong face and hide my inner turmoil. I don't want Peeta, or Haymitch, or anybody else to start asking questions about my state of mind. I want to be happy in those fleeting hours when I can be. I've even learned to start having my calls with dr. Aurelius before I go to Peeta's house to have dinner, letting my brighter spirits at those times help me fool the doctor into thinking everything is alright. I know I haven't managed to fool him entirely, but he clearly doesn't suspect the depth of my sadness, or he would have commented on it by now.

To my surprise though the beginning of spring actually marks a turning point for the better. Peeta begins to talk about my primrose bushes and tending to my garden, which I realize I look forward to. He talks about my spring cleaning, and suggests we help each other out and clean both our houses together, which gives me an almost silly amount of joy. The thought of spending hours on end with him doing something ordinary and mundane gives me something to actually look forward to outside of our dinners. We haven't spent time together alone in months, mostly because I've chosen not to, but I can't deny I've longed for him.

On the last day of March I open up the back door to the house, letting the spring air inside. It's only a degree or two above freezing but it still feels fresh and nice. I'm waiting for Peeta to come by so we
can get started with the spring cleaning. We are doing my house today, and his house later this week.

I gather all my cleaning supplies and place them in the kitchen, ready for action. I unscrew the cap of the multi-surface cleaner and breathe in the strong scent of lily of the valley, smiling to myself as I think of how the whole house is going to smell lovely by the end of the day. Then I get started gathering up the rugs and taking them outside for Peeta and me to shake clear of dust later on.

As I walk back into the kitchen the phone begins to ring. I grab the cordless phone by the wall and am a little surprised to hear my mother's voice on the other end. She usually calls me once a month and we last spoke two weeks ago. Instantly I get a worried knot in my stomach, wondering if something bad has happened.

"How are you Katniss?" she asks, sounding a little strange in her tone.

"Fine," I answer. "About to start spring cleaning, actually."

"You're still doing that?" she asks, sounding a little distant. "Good."

"Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yes, everything is fine."

I can hear from her tone that she's lying, and I wait in silence for her to tell me what is actually going on. I feel like a horrible daughter, but I hate that she had to call me right now when I'm eager to get started with spring cleaning, and expecting Peeta to come by any minute.

I look out the window. Where is he anyway? A glance at the clock above the door tells me he's running ten minutes late.

"I got a package in the mail this morning," my mother finally says. "From the officials in District 13. They've finally gotten around to doing something about the storage room where they put soldiers' personal belongings when they went off to the Capitol."

"What does that have to do with us?" I ask, my eyes fixated on the street outside.

"They classified your sister as a soldier." The world seems to slow down around me as I realize what she's saying. "They sent me a package with the few things she left behind in their storage room." Her voice begins to tremble. "Nothing much, just some of the silk bands she liked to use in her hair, and the physiology textbook they gave her to study before deploying her into the field…"

I forget about Peeta and nearly drop the phone, painful memories coming flooding back to me. Prim. Prim who would have been sixteen years old this year. A proper young lady, on her way to becoming a doctor probably. Prim who died because she wanted to help and save others. Prim, my sister, who will never return.

Leaning against the wall I slowly slide down on the floor, holding the phone tightly, tears streaming down my cheeks. My mother is crying on the other end, and neither one of us speaks for a good five minutes. It's actually quite relieving, getting to cry with my mother without having to find any words to say.

"Would you like to have any of it?" she finally asks, pulling herself together a little.

"No," I say at first but then immediately change my mind. "Yes. The silk bands. She tied them around Buttercup sometimes…"
"Okay."

We talk for a few minutes more, mostly meaningless stuff, and then say our goodbyes. I remain seated on the floor, hugging my knees, letting the tears fall down my face. It will be another month at least before the primrose bushes bloom, and the anniversary of Prim's death has already come and gone this year, so I'm in-between the two most difficult parts of the season, Prim-wise. Even so I find myself crying more now than I did on the day that marked two years since her death.

I don't know how long I've been sitting like this when a knock comes at the door. It must be Peeta but I can't bring myself to get up off the floor or even call out to him to go around the back. Why wasn't he here already when my mother's call came? I don't want to hear any of his excuses, hear how he was caught up in a phone conversation with Lace, or running late because he was with her. I want to be left all alone in fact, alone to wallow in my misery and to miss my sister. Peeta could never understand this pain anyway. He never loved his brothers like I love Prim.

He knocks again and calls out my name. I ignore it and bury my face against my knees, trying desperately to keep at bay the feeling of how damn much I miss my sister. Everything would have been different if she had been here. I would never have been so depressed if she had been with me. She would have been studying medicine, and would be growing up into a young woman, and we would be on more equal terms than before as our difference in age wouldn't matter as much as when we were kids. I would have been so proud of her. I am so proud of her.

The knocking on the door finally stops, and I'm not sure if I'm relieved or if I'm even more depressed because of it. Then suddenly there's an unexpected sound soon followed by the sound of Peeta's hand landing on the doorframe above me, and his voice as he sees me down on the floor just a foot away from where he's standing.

"Katniss."

He sounds worried and I want to tell him that it's all okay, that he can go, that I don't need him right now. If he's not even going to bother to show up on schedule then he doesn't have to be here at all. Before I can get any of this out he has knelt down beside me and pulled me into his embrace, his hand cradling the back of my head.

"It's okay," he says softly.

"No," I protest in a sob.

"It's okay Katniss."

"No. Prim…"

"I know. I know how much you miss her."

The tone in his voice is so comforting, so accepting, that instead of pulling myself together I let myself fall apart for a moment. I find the fabric of his shirt with my fists and cling to it, bury my face in the nape of his neck, allowing his warm embrace, the steady beating of his heart and the alluring scent of him to carry me through the waves of grief for my sister. We stay like this for a long time and when I finally stop sobbing and pull back a little my head is aching.

"You're late," I manage, snivelling and wiping my nose on my arm.

"I know," he says. "I went by Haymitch to drop off some bread and found him passed out on the floor covered in vomit. Had to get him into the shower and then into bed."
"So taking care of complete messes is what you do today," I say in a failed attempt at being humorous.

With the back of his fingers he strokes my cheek in an affectionate manner, and I can't resist reaching up and grabbing him by the wrist, holding his hand to my cheek for a few seconds more. He leans in and kisses my brow.

"I know this time of year is difficult for you," he says. "I know you miss her. I know you love her. I know it hurts."

I can only nod, afraid I will start crying again if I say anything. Without saying anything else Peeta rises to his feet and begins to move cleaning gear aside, clearing the table and the kitchen counter. I watch as he rummages through my kitchen cabinets, starts up the oven and then takes to baking a batch of small cookies while I sit there watching him, gathering my composure. As he puts them in the oven I get up on my feet, my joints feeling stiff and sore, and I walk over to the stove to put on a kettle. His hands on my waist stop me and it feels dangerously nice.

"Let me," he says. "Have a seat."

"You're making cookies," I point out. "Let me make tea."

"No, indulge me, please," he says, his kind eyes capturing mine. "I'm afraid I've been doing a really poor job making sure you're okay while you have never failed me in that regard. Let me take care of you, just for today."

We look into each other's eyes for a moment and I feel an unexpected warmth flow through me.

"Okay," I say in a whisper, nodding slightly.

I end up taking a seat at the table while Peeta makes tea, and then serves it with the freshly baked cookies. He sits down next to me rather than opposite me, and he gives me that smile of his that has just the right touch of bashfulness. He stays with me until evening, at which point he leaves to make sure Haymitch's geese get something to eat, and it's the best time we've spent together in probably a year. Finally it seems like the wide gap between us is starting to be bridged.

As he leaves I stand in the doorway watching him, feeling surprisingly good, wondering how that young man has the ability to turn my mood from deep sorrow to contentment in hardly any time at all.

Slowly it begins to feel like Peeta and I grow closer again. Winter was long and dreary feeling the distance between us growing, and in that sense it feels a bit poetic that the beginning of spring also brings us closer together. It happens in small steps, and to an outside observer there might not be any change at all, but to me, perhaps the only person in the whole world who can see the true significance in the smallest moments between us, the signs are clear as day.

As agreed upon we clean both our houses together, which is emotionally difficult because of the memories of Prim that I can't seem to escape no matter how I try. Peeta seems to be getting better at
knowing when I need to feel sad and when I need to be brought out of it, letting me have silence when I need it and cracking jokes to make me smile at just the right moments. We don't talk about Prim as we clean, and thankfully we don't talk about Lace either. We don't talk about anything significant, really, but that's what makes it so nice. There have been far too many conversations between us in the past year that have been about feelings and changes in our lives. I feel like we're finding our way back to our old camaraderie, and I think it's doing us both good.

It's Peeta who suggests that we should take one day each week and earmark it for hanging out together. He doesn't say it out loud, but I get the strong feeling that he's missed me this winter, even if it hasn't been on par with how I've missed him. He tells me that our friendship is important to him, and it does me good to hear it, to know that I'm still someone significant in his life just as he will always be in mine.

Over a period of about a month we spend every Tuesday together, doing whatever we feel like doing, just enjoying each other's company. During this time I want to ask him about how things are going with Lace, knowing that they are still together but hanging on to hope that the relationship is beginning to have served its purpose. It feels so right when Peeta and I are together, and he must be feeling it too.

Like the world outside my door I begin to come back to life, depression finally loosening its hold on me. It's not just that I'm beginning to feel hope again in the romantic sense, the brighter days and warmer weather makes me feel more comfortable in my own skin, and more eager to head out into the woods and do the things I enjoy doing. As for Peeta, infatuation or no infatuation he is a very important person in my life, and having spent all winter feeling distant to him has not done me good at all. I'm not exactly rich in friends and Peeta is the only friend I have who is around my own age. Having a friend to spend time with who isn't much older than I am makes me feel lighter at heart and more at ease.

Not that I kid myself for a moment – I do want Peeta's friendship but I want so much more than that. Perhaps it's time that I start to do something about that. Springtime has meant better conditions to go out hunting, and it's making me feel like that part of myself is awakening again too. I am a huntress and I start to enjoy thinking in terms of doing what I do best, letting Peeta fill the role of prey.

There is a large bookshelf in the sitting room, filled mostly with books that came with the house. I never touched those books before, figuring they were all Capitol propaganda of some kind or other. Prim and Mother read a book or two and seemed to like them, but even though they insisted they were just books, not subliminal forms of mental programming, I couldn't be bothered. Reading didn't appeal to me much at that point in time, seeming too slow and tedious and static. Just sitting there with a book, not moving, just staying in one spot. It didn't appeal to me at all.

This year I begin to take an interest in the books. It makes me feel closer to both my sister and my mother just to contemplate reading one. Still it takes me a few weeks to graduate from contemplation to actually doing it. I spend hours one day trailing my fingertips over the backs of the books, reading the titles, feeling the covers. Finally I pick one at random and settle down on the couch with a bag of carrots I bought at the marketplace.
I'm halfway through the second chapter, and my fifth carrot, when a knock on the door disturbs me. Looking around for a bookmark I end up dog-earring the page I'm on, and I set the book down on the coffee table to go to the front door. Peeta is standing on the other side, smiling at me in that way I love.

"Hey," he says and holds up a brown paper bag. "Got something for you."

I chuckle when I see what he's holding. Two days ago he came by in a mild version of baker panic, having run out of sugar in the middle of baking. He was only in my house for about a minute, in a great rush to get back to whatever he was making, but on his way out he gave me a kiss on the cheek that landed very close to the corner of my mouth. So far it's been the best minute of my week, which is sad and nice at the same time.

"I could have gotten by without you returning it," I smile.

"If you borrow something from a debt detester you return it," he says in a mock serious tone. "Seriously though, you really helped me out, so thanks."

"And that's all I get? A thanks and my sugar back?"

He laughs and lifts up another bag from the satchel he's carrying.

"You get that… and a batch of the cookies I was baking."

"Great," I say, taking the cookie bag but not the bag of sugar. I step aside to allow him to pass. "Come on in."

He walks inside the house and heads for the kitchen with me in tow. He removes the sunglasses from his face and sets them down on the counter together with the bag of sugar. He then shoves his hands in his back pockets and gives me a crooked smile that gets my immediate attention. There's something more to his smile today. Now that I think about it, there's something different all in all. His body-language tells me that this is not just an ordinary social call, and it makes me curious.

"So no baking today?" I ask, just to make conversation.

"Can't bake every day. Though I suppose you could bake today, seeing as how you've now got sugar in your cabinet again."

"Thank goodness," I smirk. "I don't know how I would have gotten by for one more day without the possibility of that."

He chuckles and gives me an intense look that sends a shiver down my spine.

"Did you really come by just to return my sugar?" I ask.

"No," he admits with a bashful laugh that touches my heart in an almost painful way. "No, you got me. I did want to return the sugar, but I have something I need to talk to you about. And it might be a bit… awkward."

I don't know why, but something about how he says it makes me feel good inside. It makes me feel hopeful. Peeta Mellark is not usually shy about talking, only when it pertains to something very personal to him, or something close to his heart. If he's nervous about this then it must be something very important. I can't seem to think of any negative things he would have to bring up, so whatever it is it must be something that I could possibly be happy to hear, only he's nervous in case I don't have the reaction he's hoping for.
"That's okay," I say, a shy smile playing on my lips. "We're at the point where we can talk to each other about anything, aren't we?"

"I hope so. But it might be awkward, nonetheless, given our history."

"Try me."

He smiles at me and I feel hope rising in my chest.

"There's going to be a toasting. I've asked Lace to marry me."

Just like that the hope is gone, and instead I feel as if I've had the wind knocked out of me. Pain grips my stomach, feeling like hot coal twisting around in there, and the feeling spreads to my chest. I stand speechless, desperately hoping that my emotions aren't reading clear on my face. I bend forward, as if I had been literally punched in the stomach, and brace myself against the kitchen counter with one hand.

Marriage?

"Oh…" I finally manage. I straighten my back, and try to keep my bottom lip from trembling. "Wow, that's… that's… unexpected."

"Yeah, I know," he says with a light laugh. "Maybe it's sudden and too soon, I don't know. I just know I feel so good when I'm with her, and if it's one thing all the tragedies have taught me it's to not take baby steps through life. Besides, how many times does a person get to fall in love?"

He can't seem to take that smile off his face, and it makes it so much worse. I feel like I want to die, right there on the spot, and it's even harder because I know I can't show my emotions and let him know how I really feel. What would be the point to that anyway? It would only be selfish to take away from his joy. Miserably I wrap my arms around myself, trying to muster up the courage to say something positive and encouraging, but the pain makes it hard to speak.

"Lace has family coming in August, so we thought we'd do it then," Peeta continues. "Of course her brother and his wife already live here. She also has a best friend back in Eight, and I don't think anyone can stop her from coming. Which means a lot of people from her side who will be there, while I for my part… don't really have all that many." A flash of sadness passes over his face. "All my family is gone. Delly was my only childhood friend who survived the bombings, and she's in District 6. I'm going to ask Haymitch tomorrow if he would like to stand up for me. District 8 has this wedding tradition that the bride and the groom each has a person who stands up for them during the ceremony and officially welcomes…" He makes a gesture with his hand like he's trying to gather his thoughts to explain this to me properly. "The person who stands up for the bride officially welcomes to groom to the family and vice versa. Haymitch is the closest thing I have to a parent now, so it seemed fitting."

"I'm sure he'd be honoured," I say in a small voice, averting my eyes because it's far too difficult to look at Peeta when he's talking excitedly about this.

"This is where the awkward part comes in," says Peeta. "Katniss… If you are okay with it I would so much love for you to be there."

I didn't think anything could hurt worse today than hearing him say he's getting married, but I realize I was wrong. This somehow hurts even worse. I look up at him and see the happiness and the hopefulness in his eyes but also the trace of uncertainty, and wonder how I will be able to refuse him. He really has no idea how I feel, because if he did he wouldn't hurt me this way, and still he's unsure
if I want to be there.

"I…" I begin, willing my voice to sound steady.

"I know it's weird," says Peeta, walking closer to me. "With the star-crossed lovers thing, and you technically being my ex-fiancée and everything."

Technically? I was his fiancée. If it hadn't been for the Quell we would have gotten married. How much more real than that can it get?

"Well I…" I manage to get out, trying to buy some time to figure out how to let him down gently.

"Listen, I fully understand if it feels too strange or uncomfortable for you to be there," he says, and I begin to worry that he's reading my emotions better than I want him to. "I don't know if it's even proper to ask you, given how I used to feel about you, even if I can't remember it. I won't be offended if you say no, and I only want you to be there if you feel comfortable with it. I had to ask you because if you feel okay being there then I really want you there. I would really like for you to think about it." He pauses for a second and gives me an affectionate look. "Either way you're still one of my best friends."

It takes all my self-control to keep breathing calmly, and to keep a neutral facial expression. It feels like he's stabbed me in the heart with a red hot knife several times already, and hearing him imply that I'm one of at least two best friends is almost more than I can take. I thought I would at least always be his best friend. I guess that was naïve, I mean how can he be best friends with a woman he used to love without his new lover, his fiancée, feeling threatened by that? But I want her to feel threatened. I want there to be some part of Peeta that is mine, a place in his heart where I come first. I will always be the first girl he loved, but I'm not sure that really matters anymore. I don't know if he remembers that he loved me, or if it's just an anecdote he can't fully relate to.

Despite my pain it's the thought of holding on to some part of him that gives me the strength I need to give him his answer. I feel a sense of ownership of Peeta, in that we mattered so much to each other in the past, and we were bound together by the Games and were a team that only death could break apart. Or so I thought. What matters now is that I can hold on to whatever part of him that I can, and part of that means to make a statement towards Lace. If I don't attend their wedding then she will think that she won, and that I have let him go completely. I won't give her that satisfaction.

"Of course I'll be at your wedding, Peeta," I say, my heart breaking as I say the words, but my voice thankfully holding strong.

The wide smile that appears on his face is yet another stab, but he pulls me close for a hug, so at least I don't have to see it for more than half a second. What a delicious torture it is to be in his embrace, feeling his strength and his scent and his closeness. For one short moment I get to be his, or at least pretend that I am.

"Thank you, Katniss," he says. "It means so much to me. I can't even tell you."

"Are you going to go talk to Haymitch now?" I ask, wanting to cry when he releases me from his embrace.

"No, I have to go meet Lace." The smile seems permanently fixated on his face now as he walks across my kitchen floor and grabs his sunglasses from the counter. "We're having dinner with her brother to tell him the news. I'll talk to Haymitch in the morning. If you see him, please don't mention anything to him."
"I won't."

He stops in the doorway and turns to show me that smile one more time. He puts the sunglasses on, and seems so happy and carefree and in love and everything I would wish for him to be, except I wanted it to be with me.

"Thanks Katniss."

He waves at me and then walks out into the hall that leads to the front door. I stand frozen in my spot, hearing the door open and close. Through the open window by the door I can hear him whistle a happy tune as he walks off.

Time seems to be standing still. I don't know how it is that I'm breathing air into my lungs. I should be impervious to pain by now, because what could ever hurt me more than losing Prim? But this is pain of an entirely different kind. Not only have I lost Peeta, it seems like he was never even mine to begin with, as if all his previous love for me has been wiped out and our past no longer matters. This day must be Snow's greatest triumph over me. I can't think straight, just one thought repeating itself over and over and over. No. No, please, no. Not this. Not having to see him get married, raise a family, live to his old age with his arms around some other woman.

I begin to feel panicked, like an animal caught in a snare. I can't breathe, I can't deal. I have to get away.

There's a sharp, burning pain in my palms as my hands slam against the door that leads from the kitchen out to the yard outside. I fumble for the doorknob, find it, twist it around and push the door open, slamming it hard behind me as I take off running. I can feel the tears burning in my eyes, but I don't stop to wipe them away. I have to get out of here. I run as if I could outrun the implications of what just happened. I know it's futile, but if it can buy me at least another few minutes without having to comprehend the enormity of what I can now never have, then I will keep on running.

I don't spend a single second thinking about which direction I'm going in, except that it's not the same way I know Peeta is heading. I don't look where I'm going either, which is why I get the wind completely knocked out of me when I crash right into a tall body, sending me flying to the ground, a flash of physical pain feeling like a welcome distraction. I look up and see Haymitch, staring at me with wide eyes, rubbing his collarbone which I must have knocked into.

"What on earth are you doing?" he snarls. "Watch where you're going." Then he frowns, seeing the distress I'm in, and reaches out a hand to pull me back on my feet. "Did something happen?"

I burst out crying, letting go of what I've been trying to hold in. I almost lose my footing due to the force of my sobs, but Haymitch's hand comes out and steadies me. He takes me by the arm and leads me towards his house. Once I'm inside the will to run has completely left my body, and I sink down on a chair by the kitchen table, burying my face in my hands. When I come to my senses later I'm sure to feel terribly ashamed of crying this way in front of Haymitch, but for the moment I'm too heartbroken to care.

"What is it?" demands Haymitch, pulling up a chair to sit beside me. "Is it your mother? Did something happen to her?"

I shake my head and take a deep, trembling breath hoping to calm myself at least a little bit. I snivel and take a few more breaths, finding some composure. I manage to get a few words out between my sobs.

"Peeta came by... ask me to attend his... toasting. He's getting married."
Having gotten that much out I let my arms fall forward and bury my face against them, allowing myself to cry until the pain lessens at least a little bit. I feel Haymitch's hand on my back, but he doesn't say anything until I've calmed myself enough to lift my head.

"He's been with Lace for a while now," says Haymitch. "We both know that when it comes to matters of the heart he doesn't do casual. Didn't you know that eventually he would want to marry?"

"I just didn't know it would happen yet," I complain. "I just didn't think he'd… I mean, how could he just…"

Haymitch studies me in silence as more tears fall down my face.

"Katniss… Do you have feelings for him?" he then asks.

What's the use in denying it now? Perhaps it will even feel a bit better to have someone in the know, someone who understands why this is going to be so difficult for me.

"I think about him all the time," I admit. "I hate it when he's not near me. I've been wishing, hoping, that he would tire of this thing with her and be… to be mine to want again. To want to be mine again." I look at Haymitch through my puffy eyes. "It just feels like we should be together. Like we were meant to be together. Isn't that what it was all about? Me and Peeta?"

"I thought it was all him," says Haymitch carefully. "You had Gale, and you weren't happy having to play the role of the star-crossed lovers."

"Obviously I was wrong."

"When did you start to feel this way? When he came to District 13 you seemed to let him go entirely. After that I thought you were just platonic friends."

"I don't know when I started to feel this way," I answer in a pathetically whiny voice. "All I know is how I feel when we're together, and how I long for him when he's not around, and how badly it hurts to see him with her." I begin to sob again. "And now he's going to marry her, and I have to be there and watch it happen, and I have to live three houses down from them for all my life."

"Can't do anything about living next door to him," says Haymitch. "But why do you have to be at the wedding?"

"Because he asked me to." With the back of my hand I wipe away a few tears. "I can't go back on that now. He would know something's up. And he can't know this, Haymitch. He just can't."

"So what, then? Want me to get you seriously hammered the night before the wedding so you can claim the stomach flu on the actual day?"

"No," I say, composing myself a bit. "I'm going to go there, and I'm going to watch him marry someone else, and I'm going to pretend not to be upset about it because I can't ruin that day for him."

"I guess that's an option," says Haymitch. "Another option is to act like a grown-up and simply tell him how you feel. Trust me, Katniss, he's going to figure it out eventually. You can't be in his life without this mattering."

"I can't," I insist. "He doesn't feel that way about me anymore. He's told me so, to my face. He's in love with Lace now. Besides, what do I even have to offer him? He could have a family with her. You know he wants children. He has two women who want him, and one of them is a sweet and upbeat and nurturing woman who would love to be the mother of his ten children, while the other is
a wreck, a murderess, a woman with whom he'd always have the darkness of the Games hanging over him, and he would end up childless."

"I didn't know you were unable to bear children," says Haymitch.

"I can bear them," I say. "In the physical sense. Or at least I assume that I can, though I suppose it might be possible that everything I've been through has messed that part up. But I don't want to, and isn't that just another piece of evidence that Lace is the right choice for him?"

"He still needs to know, Katniss," argues Haymitch in a gentle tone. "He needs to be able to make that decision for himself."

I groan and begin to feel like it was a serious mistake to confide in Haymitch. In my current miserable state I want someone to commiserate with me, not someone trying to convince me to do the one thing I can't.

"He needs to know nothing. He needs to have his chance at happiness. Either way it seems like the choice is pretty much made now." I laugh joylessly. "I just need to get a hold of myself and get over him. Then, a few years down the line, we will be great friends and I can laugh about how I once wanted so much more."

"Do you really think you can do that?" questions Haymitch.

"I'm damn well going to try. For Peeta's sake."

"You don't have to be a hero and show up at the wedding. It's not worth the pain. I don't think Peeta would want you to suffer that. I don't want you to suffer like that. Don't put yourself through it for his sake when he's marrying someone else."

"Then what? What should I do? It's going to be awful for me either way, but if I'm not there he'd probably feel let down, and we'd grow apart even more."

There's a pause.

"I can't tell you how to get out of this particular pickle, sweetheart. Not without somebody getting hurt along the way." Haymitch scratches his chin, running his fingers through the dark stubble. "I still think you need to tell the boy. You ought to have told him months ago, whenever you first realized your feelings."

"I don't think I fully did realize until after he had already met her," I say miserably.

"Still, it would have been better if you'd told him then even though I know how difficult, not to mention terrifying, it can be to reveal something like that. Listen, Katniss, he will figure it out at some point. It will be so much more difficult for everyone involved if it happens because you break down at the sight of his and Lace's firstborn child."

The thought of that, of seeing Peeta cradling the baby I know he wants, borne to him by another woman, brings new tears to my eyes.

"I can get over him," I say. "The time for confessing my feelings is way, way behind us now. Peeta shouldn't have to suffer anything because I'm too blind to know what I want while I still have a chance of getting it."

"Sure, you could get over him," says Haymitch. "Possibly. But don't think for a moment that it's going to be easy to do so. Once you're in love it's not easy to let go."
"When was everything regarding Peeta and I ever easy?" Slowly, shakily I draw a deep breath and close my eyes. "I've only felt this way for a little while, all things considered." I open my eyes and look at Haymitch. "That should work in my favour. I never had time to develop real, deep love so I think I stand a good chance at moving on." I swallow hard to get rid of the lump in my throat that threatens to rise again. "After all, Peeta did."

I arrive back home later that afternoon with a hollow feeling in my chest, yet strangely also with a sense of relief. It's definitive now. Peeta is not going to be with me. He's going to be with her – for the rest of his life. While that thought breaks my heart into a million pieces it also sets me free. I don't have to keep hoping anymore. I can start to pick up the pieces and mend myself. What other choice do I have? I refuse to spend the rest of my life lamenting a love I lost. My mother serves as a frightening example of that life, though I know I can't compare my situation with hers.

I walk to the sitting room and light a fire before sitting down in one of the armchairs. Buttercup comes and hops up on my lap, walking around in a circle three times before laying down. I scratch behind his ears and he begins to purr lightly. I feel exhausted from the emotional day I've had, but as I sit there and stare at the flickering flames in the fireplace I realize I was wrong a few moments ago when I decided I don't have to keep hoping. There's an entirely new form of hope kindling inside of me. A hope that I can get past all of this, that I can become me again, that I can take charge of my own life and not have to be so tied up in feeling something for somebody else.

For such a long time I've been feeling like I need Peeta in order to be happy. There's no denying that I associate him with hope and brightness, and that if he were to fall out of love with her and back in love with me I would be thrilled to live with him and build a future with him. What I am realizing now that despite how true that is there's no reason why that has to be the only chance for me to be happy and feel fulfilled. True, it won't be the same happiness, but being without Peeta doesn't have to equal living the rest of my life in misery.

As I stroke Buttercup's coat I begin to wonder how much of my pain has even been about him. I love him, I do, and I miss him like crazy, but maybe I've put more of myself into my feelings for Peeta than what's actually about him. Have I really allowed myself to grieve my sister properly? Have I allowed myself to deal with the loss of having my mother near? Of losing Gale, my best friend and hunting partner for so many years? Of the trauma I've suffered both physically and mentally? Or have I lumped all of that together into one giant cluster of heartache and grief, and channelled all of it into the pain of not getting to be with the only person I have ever been in love with?

I should probably talk to dr. Aurelius. I wish he were here, in Twelve, where I could see him and speak to him face to face. It's difficult to bear your heart and admit to all your vulnerabilities and your sorrow over the phone. Perhaps I can ask him to come here for a while. Peeta would probably benefit from that, too.

Peeta. There's still a lump in my throat at the mere thought of his name. I can't even think about him for more than a second without feeling an agonizing pain at the knowledge that my future is going to be without him. I need to redefine his place in my life, once and for all. I need to let go of the idea of
him and me together. The Peeta who wanted a life with me was killed a long time ago, and the person who remains can only ever be my good friend. Maybe that's all he's meant to be? As much as I hate to admit it the Peeta I know today is not the same person as the boy who loved me so much, and it's not just the absence of his love for me that's different about him. This Peeta may not be right for me, no matter how much I want to believe that he is.

That is a tough thought to swallow, to acknowledge. I want him, I really, really want him, but I need to move on from that. I can't let go of him as a friend, that's too much to lose at once, but our friendship probably needs to change in nature. It's probably not healthy that he is my only friend my own age. I should get out more, try to get to know other people, form other relationships. It's not fair for me to place so much on him, to make him that important in my life, when he doesn't know how I feel and doesn't have enough to give me. Even if he could love me like he used to I ought to make friends outside of him, and not wrap myself up in one person the way I've been doing for far too long.

As much as this hurts right now, and will continue to hurt for a good while I predict, it's time to cut my losses and find my way back to myself. Who knows, maybe I could even be able to help Peeta find himself again too along the way. I wish there were tapes of our Games that someone could show him, that he could see for himself how much we've mattered to each other over the years, but I never owned any copies of our Games and since the war they no longer provide them for the public. There's been talk of destroying all footage from the Hunger Games, but I don't know if that will actually happen. There are vocal advocates on both sides of the issue. Either way I know dr. Aurelius is against showing Peeta the tapes because they've tried that before with bad results.

Tears are falling down my face and I let them, feeling the salty taste when they land on my lips. I will give myself this evening to grieve him, and tomorrow I will begin the process of putting him behind me and making my life about Katniss Everdeen.

Chapter End Notes

Definitely not a good chapter for Everlark, though hopefully it doesn't seem like an entirely horrible chapter either. She's not going to be out of love with him by next chapter but she basically hits rock bottom here and begins to travel upward from there.

Keep a look out for the first Peeta-POV which I will hopefully be able to post before I run off to work.
Chapter 14

Well it's with some measure of trepidation that I update this story ;) Still I continue to be extremely grateful to everyone who comments and I only wish I could reply to every post. This chapter came around much sooner than I anticipated, as most of it was written in one sitting during the weekend. I hope you guys won't hate it =)

"Haymitch!" I bellow as I walk through his front door, game bag in hand. "Wakie, wakie. Rise and shine."

A loud burp coming from the kitchen tells me he's already awake. I roll my eyes and note to myself that it's not exactly a shocker that Haymitch is still single. Then again, I will no doubt be single for the rest of my life as well so who am I to judge?

I walk into the kitchen and find a surprisingly healthy looking Haymitch doing dishes by the sink. I almost wish I had found him in his usual state of drunken mess instead. I've been feeling nervous about seeing him after the tearful, pathetic display the last time. Also I'm curious as to whether Peeta has told him yet that he's getting married. I hope that he hasn't. I don't want to talk about Peeta Mellark and his fiancée. It's difficult enough trying not to think about them.

"I brought food," I say, holding up the bag.

"Anything good?" he asks. "Rabbit tastes like shit."

"It's quail," I tell him. "And rabbit is too good for the likes of you."

"But quail is not?" he smirks. He begins to scrub a pot vigorously as I lift up a pair of birds by their feet. "That's more food than I can eat. Care to join me for dinner?"

I hesitate before I answer. I hate eating alone and I enjoy his company, especially when he's in the shape that he can cook the meal with me, but he seems a bit too serious today for me to feel comfortable.

"Sweetheart?" Haymitch questions when I haven't answered him in over a minute.

"Uhm, sure," I answer his invitation.

"Well golly, sister, you make me feel so special," he says dryly.

"I'll be outside, plucking the birds."

I walk out his kitchen door and close it behind me before taking a seat on the wooden steps that lead from the doorway down to the ground. I place the game bag at my feet and one of the birds beside me, then I begin to pluck the feathers off of the other bird. It's a fitting task when you're feeling frustrated or upset, and I tug hard at the feathers, never minding where they land, though I know I ought to gather and save them. Haymitch doesn't come out to help me and I'm thankful that he gives
"Well, I officially know about the betrothal," says Haymitch after swallowing his last bite of the bird and putting his knife and fork down on his plate.

"And you were able to pretend you didn't already know?" I ask anxiously. I still have plenty of food left on my plate. The mood I've been in lately doesn't do wonders for the appetite.

"Boy was none the wiser." He gives me a look. "I thought I should check in with you… See how you are doing."

I smile and let out a short, upbeat laugh that must sound so odd coming from my mouth and therefore might betray my inner emotions.

"Don't worry about me, Haymitch. I'm fine."

"Sure you are," he says dryly.

"Actually I wish you wouldn't bring it up," I admit, then slip easily into a lie. "I'm not heartbroken."

"Excuse me?"

"I feel really embarrassed about how I behaved the other day," I say truthfully. "I made a huge fool out of myself, and it seems I even got you to worry about me, which is a real feat. You're worrying about nothing, though. I was… upset, but not the way it seemed."

"How was it different from how it seemed?" asks Haymitch, an annoyed undercurrent in his voice.

"It hurt me to hear he is getting married" I confess. Then I slip back into the lies. "But not like the way it seemed. I've done a lot of thinking about it and what really made me so upset was not Peeta loving somebody else and wanting to be with her for life. I'm scared of losing his friendship. I already lost Gale and who's to say Lace will be comfortable with Peeta and I having a close friendship?"

"If it comes down to the wife or the friend he's going to choose the wife," Haymitch surmises, which makes me want to cringe but I manage to keep a straight face. "Then again this is Peeta we're talking about. He might have long ways to go yet before he's really himself again but he's still Peeta, and I don't think he'd turn away from you so easily. But Katniss… all you're worried about losing is his friendship?"

"I love him. I'm not in love with him."

Haymitch gives me a long, hard look and I meet his eyes with as much determination as I can muster, which is quite a lot right now. I really want to move forward with my life, and knowing I have nothing to claim where Peeta is concerned I want to think about him as little as possible. I don't want Haymitch to know how much I truly am in love with him, and after a full minute of staring I begin to believe that I have convinced him. He sighs, shakes his head and grabs a bottle of white liquor.
"This is just fabulous. What ill have I done to be caught in the middle of this hormonal drama that ought to have been over and done with a long time ago? Sweetheart I honestly do hope that this is nothing more than your emotional constipation talking, because if you were bawling your eyes out over the idea of no longer getting to feel possessive about Peeta then he's well rid of you."

"Haymitch."

"I mean it." He gives me a disdainful look. "Yesterday I thought you deserve much better than the mess he is right now, but if what you're telling me now is true then I'm not so damn sure. If this is you trying to convince yourself that what you feel for him isn't romantic then I pity you for being so out of touch with yourself. If this is about you feeling entitled to his love, whether you feel the same way about him or not, then you don't deserve to be the one he loves. If you are straight-up lying to me I would very much like to know why. I would have liked seeing you two together, but the bottom line is I care about his wellbeing and happiness just as much as I care about yours. He's earned it, more than any of us, for the torture they put him through mainly for your sake and by my willingness to sacrifice him. I'm damn sure going to make sure he gets to hold on to it if he's found it."

I swallow hard, tilting my chin upward defiantly, hoping, praying he won't be able to see through my bluff.

"I care about that, too. I'm not going to do anything to put that at risk. Which is why you have no reason to be worried."

"Oh don't I? Then what were the waterworks for yesterday? Katniss if you do genuinely love him then tell him so or at least admit it to me now. If you believe he is the key to your happiness I would help you achieve that in whatever way I can, but I will not intervene just so you can feel possessive."

"Don't insult me. I would never ask you to do that," I snarl. "I got a big shock yesterday but I'm over it now."

Haymitch shakes his head, looking very annoyed.

"The two of you have always been far more trouble than you're worth - especially you. I always thought an upside to never having kids was not having to deal with this stupid teenage drama."

"Good thing we'll be twenty this year, then," I say dryly. "Besides, Peeta isn't all that wonderful anymore, in case you haven't noticed. Why would I pine for a lesser version of him?"

"Because no matter what he is Peeta and part of this family and he is barely keeping afloat," says Haymitch, the words hitting me like a punch in the stomach. "Couldn't you see it when he told you about the toasting? He's happy, sure, but there's much more underneath all of that. They tore him apart in the Capitol, and I think he's trying to run from that instead of build himself back together properly."

"Peeta wouldn't do that," I argue. "He's not a person who runs."

"He doesn't even know which memories are real or not anymore," Haymitch points out. "He's not the same boy we both got to know four years ago. And truth be told I haven't been much of a support system for him to find himself again. He's been left mostly to his own devices."

"Well he seems happy now," I say curtly, not wanting to deal with the implications of what Haymitch is saying. "As you said, we shouldn't mess with that."

Haymitch gives me another long, hard look.
"Do you really mean it when you say you're not in love with him?"

I force myself to look indifferent.

"I mean it."

He sighs and looks away, shaking his head slightly.

"Then I guess you and I will be standing there with him at his wedding, welcoming Lace to the family."

The very thought of it almost makes me want to cry, but I'll be damned if I let my charade fall apart now. The only way I know how to try getting over Peeta is to tell myself I don't care and above all accept that I can't have him.

"I guess so."

The following morning I head down into town, determined to do something other than hunt or mope around the house. I've come to realize that I need something other than my usual routines to bring me out of the morose mood I've been in for so long. I've been deathly afraid of change but it's time to realize it can be a good thing. It's time I found something to do with all my time.

I'm not entirely clear on what I want to be doing when I reach the populated area. Construction is still ongoing everywhere but I don't think I have any talent for house building or furniture making. I could volunteer at the medical station but I don't think I could stomach the reminders of my mother and Prim and I have a sneaking suspicion that I would want to run and hide, or possibly throw up, at the first sight of a badly injured or seriously sick person. I am many things but healer is not on the list.

I pass by the Justice Building and for the fraction of a second contemplate applying for a job there before remembering that Paylor has banned me from taking any part in official governmental work. At least for the nearest ten years or so, until people stop thinking of me as that freak who killed President Coin.

Having made it halfway through town I stop at a new town square that's formed naturally in the middle of the constructional hubbub and I look around feeling slightly bewildered. I've been sleepwalking through the days and now I feel like I'm waking up and realizing all of a sudden how much is happening in town. New buildings all around me, some four or five storeys tall, new roads, people from every district wandering about. I barely recognize a single face. I feel like a stranger in my own home town.

"I'm relieved to see you're not carrying your bow today!"

The unfamiliar voice addressing me brings an immediate scowl to my face and I turn around to see who the person speaking is. My eyes land on a guy who looks to be in his mid-twenties, tanned already even though it's only March and with brown hair in desperate need of being cut as it seems to fall over his eyes every other second no matter how many times he brushes it aside. And
that's *many* times even in the few seconds I lay eyes on him.

"Not funny yet?" he asks with an apologetic cringe.

"Not funny ever" I say coldly. I turn away, fully intent on forgetting I ever encountered him, but he addresses me again.

"Sorry. I guess seeing the Mockingjay herself up-close is a little intimidating. I thought a joke might ease the tension."

"There was no tension until you opened your mouth so this is when you stop talking to me" I say curtly, disliking him the second he refers to me as the *Mockingjay*.

"Sorry."

I roll my eyes and don't bother furthering acknowledging his existence. Choosing a direction at random I begin to walk, heading down the road which turns out to lead to the new school house. The old school was destroyed during the bombings and they decided to move the entire locale. I've heard from Haymitch that they initially built a house with just the one room where a group of twenty-or-so children have gathered to be educated but now it seems they're expanding to make room for an entire town's worth of kids.

My hands find the white picket fence that encloses the school grounds and the first genuine smile I've mustered since the news of Peeta's engagement comes over my face. A group of six or seven children are running around playing during what I assume is recess. Among the group are three girls that look like they're around eight or nine years old and one of them has blonde braids that remind me of Prim at that age. I see the girl and her friends playing out on the yard, which sadly lacks any form of toys or swing-sets or anything else for the children to play with. The kids don't seem to care much, though. They're perfectly capable of entertaining themselves.

Behind them construction on the rest of the school is ongoing. The existing house is made from wood but it looks like they're building the rest in bricks, which is good. It will help keep them warm during winter. It's going to take a long time to complete it though. I wonder how many children are going without a school education right now and how the playing children before me got lucky enough to get to go to school.

"It's going to be pretty impressive when it's done, huh?"

That voice again! He startles me and I swing around with a threatening glare in my eyes and ready to physically pounce.

"Don't *ever* sneak up on me!" I growl.

"Sorry!" he says, holding his hands up in surrender.

"And don't follow me!"

"I wasn't! Honest!" He slowly lowers his hands and nods toward the school building. "I work there."

"Good for you" I scowl.

"I'm Max, by the way."

"I'm indifferent."
"Not the type who likes to make friends, huh?" he asks in a slightly nervous laugh.

"I could go home and get my bow" I reply.

"Okay, okay, I get it" he says, holding up his hands again and taking a step back, though there's an annoying grin on his face that tells me he doesn't find me threatening for real. He should. I have killed people and he's seen me do it. "I won't try to make friends with you."

I don't answer, deciding to tune him out again. When I decided to go out and meet new people roughly my own age this was certainly not what I had in mind. I don't like people who approach me like that, I don't like people who see me primarily as the Mockingjay and I don't like feeling like he's having fun at my expense.

I go back to looking at the children but after only a minute or two they are called back inside. Recess over. I take it as my cue to leave but just as I mean to move that guy comes and stands right beside me and leans against the fence.

"You know, I was just wondering…” he says. "If you're not busy shooting dinner all day long or doing whatever else former victors do out there in the Victor's Village-"

"I'll never be a former victor" I snarl. As much as I would like to forget the Games they will never not have happened and I don't want to run from my past. I don't want to do what Peeta is doing.

"Relax" he says. He's beginning to sound irritated and I like that. Maybe he will get fed-up and leave me alone already. "I was just thinking that if you've got some time to spare perhaps you could consider helping out at the school. We're a little short on staff and the kids would probably think it was so neat to be educated by Katniss Everdeen."

"Why on earth would I help out at the school?" I ask. "I'm not a teacher. I lose my patience in about six seconds flat if the person I'm trying to teach doesn't get it right away."

"I can imagine" he says dryly, causing me to scowl again. Then he looks at me and smiles slightly. "I'm not asking you to teach math or anything. I've got this idea about taking the kids outdoors more now that the weather has improved, letting them get out of that cramped room. When I saw you just now I got to thinking that you probably know the woods around here better than anybody else and could teach them all about edible plants and wildlife and that sort of thing."

"That's part of the curriculum now?" I ask with disbelief.

"At this point the curriculum is what we want it to be."

"If you're so involved in the school how come you're standing here being completely useless while the children are inside?" I ask.

"Merciless, you are" he says with mock drama. Then he smirks. "My parents run the school and my brother, my sister and I help out. We know we need more teachers but that's scarce these days. I guess I figured if I could get you involved that would help me curry favour and put me in a better position to teach what I want to teach when we get things rolling for real, which will hopefully be this fall."

"And why would I help you achieve that?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"Because there's no reason not to" he says, straightening out his back and shrugging. "Also because I think you would agree with me that math and history and literature are good things to learn but basic survival skills are pretty damn helpful too."
I glare at him for almost a full minute without saying a word. Then I look over at the school building and think of the girl with the blonde braids. I think of my sister. I think of my father who taught me how to find food in the wilderness and how that knowledge saved both myself and my sister.

I think of the instigator to using that knowledge, that dandelion in the spring, and swallow to try and force the sad lump in my throat away.

Then I think of the offer the guy beside me is making. I don't like him. I think he's far too pushy and I detest the fact that he sees me as just the celebrity and wants to take advantage of that to further his own agenda, yet at the same time I find it refreshing that he's so upfront about it. The offer itself isn't actually that bad. It's a worthwhile pastime and would give me something to focus on.

"If so much as a single kid annoys me I'm quitting" I say finally.

A bright grin spreads across his face.

"Fantastic! So you'll do it?"

"I'll try it" I say. "Once. And you'd better not speak two words to me during the entire day or I will bring my bow."

"That actually sounds a little exciting" he grins but the scowl I give him in return quickly wipes the smile off his face. "Sorry."

"And stop apologizing."

I push myself away from the fence and turn around to head back home. I've gotten maybe twenty or thirty yards when his voice bothers me one last time.

"See you tomorrow, then?"

"Absolutely not" I reply without turning around. "I'll be there Monday. And I make no promises for further appearances."

Thankfully he doesn't follow me as I make my way back through town. Once he's no longer near me I begin to think more about the actual offer and what it might entail. I'm not a big fan of children, one or two exceptions aside, but at least taking a group of kids out into the woods and showing them how they can feed themselves is something worth doing. I might actually start to feel good about myself doing it, knowing that I'm finally contributing to the rebuilding of everything that was destroyed partially because of me. I believe I would enjoy passing my knowledge on to a new generation, ensuring that the things I know about survival in the woods won't be lost.

Before I've gotten halfway through town I actually start to feel like I might be looking forward towards Monday.

"Katniss!"

Surprised to hear a voice on this road that isn't Haymitch's or Peeta's I stop and turn. Hardly anyone
comes out to the Victors' Village so for a split second I worry that somebody is following me. Somebody like a reporter or a government official or any such annoyance. We've had gratefully few of those but you never know. I've had enough of strangers following me around for one day.

When I realize it's Lace Bomull calling my name I suddenly wish I had a whole crowd of reporters, government officials and other such annoyances following me instead. She is probably the last person on earth that I want to see, and the fact that her big, annoying dog is with her makes it all the more unpleasant. My feelings must not be showing on my face because she looks absolutely ecstatic as she catches up to me.

"Katniss!" she breathes, laughing a little at how out of breath she is from running to catch up with me. The dog barks enthusiastically but thankfully she keeps him from jumping at me. "I'm so glad I caught you. I've been wanting a chance to speak with you in private."

A tight knot forms in my stomach. Gale used to tease me about how I completely lacked female intuition and for some reason that is the first thing that comes to my mind. Peeta is absolutely clueless about my feelings for him but could it be that Lace knows? Can she sense it? Is this where she marks her territory and makes it absolutely clear to me that I've lost and that I had better known my place? Because even though I have no intention at getting further involved in Peeta's life I still don't want to have his girl telling me to stay away.

"I know you heard the news!" she chirps, brushing a long strand of mahogany hair behind her ear. "I had to come speak to you and thank you."

This has me confused.

"Thank me? For what?"

"Peeta told me you agreed to be in the wedding." She slips her hand around my arm, holding it in a way that ought to feel way too intimate for two people who quite honestly barely know each other but somehow she manages to make the gesture seem natural. "He didn't want to tell me at first but he was worried that you might find it too awkward given your past as the star-crossed lovers." She gives me a smile that seems to be bursting with happiness and gratitude. "I'm so glad he did ask you and that you agreed. You being there means the world to him. He holds you in such high regard."

"Sure I'll be there for his big day" I manage, wondering to myself what would happen to her annoying dog if I had my bow and arrows on me.

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me!"

I can barely hide my shock when I look at her. Does she genuinely mean this? Shouldn't she be at least a little bit intimidated by my past with Peeta? Most people in Panem still believe we were madly in love before the war tore us apart. Can it be that she is just that secure in her relationship with Peeta that she cannot perceive of me as a threat? The cynical side of me wants to believe that she wants me to think that's the case but I can't know for sure. I really don't know this girl at all, even though she is the one Peeta has decided to spend his life with.

The sobering thought that precisely because Peeta has decided to spend his life with her she has every reason to feel secure and dismiss me as a possible threat crosses my mind and makes me feel even more annoyed that she's talking to me.

"Well, I…" I begin, not sure how to respond to her professes of happiness.

"I'm really glad to have someone to talk to about the wedding, someone who isn't a boy!" she
babbles on. "I always wanted to have a sister but I'm the one girl in a litter of four. My best friend
still lives in District Eight. I love Peeta but it's not the same as having a female friend, you know? I
really hope you and I will become friends. It would be so great if we were."

I can barely follow her train of thought but I know there's only one answer to what she just said.
Things will be even more complicated if I can't be friends with Peeta's bride and she might just want
to have a good relationship with the few people her fiancé has left in his life. Who knows, this might
even be a person I could genuinely like if she was anybody else's wife to be.

"I hope we'll be friends, too" I tell her, though I honestly have no intention of living up to those
words.

She smiles an awfully infectious smile but it's not enough to make the corners of my own mouth turn
upward.

"I've been saving money for a while now, thinking that I might need it for a rainy day" she says, as if
we are good friends already. "It's enough to send for some fine white silk to make a wedding dress."
Her smile gets even wider somehow. "Oh I can't wait to show you the plans I have for my wedding
dress! I wish I could show Peeta and that he could help me with it, but the groom isn't meant to see
the dress beforehand according to old traditions. I haven't fully completed the sketch yet, frankly
sketches aren't my strongest suit, but it's going to be so much fun to make it myself. My family hasn't
had a wedding dress to call our own for generations, you know, one of those lovely ironies the old
regime seemed so fond of." The jab at Snow and his government seems to be the only interesting
thing she's said so far but it quickly gets lost in her continued babbling.

She keeps talking about her wedding dress as we approach the Victors' Village. To my own surprise
I actually understand some of what she's talking about but it doesn't help endear her to me. Instead it
reminds me of Cinna and it makes me want her to leave even more. She stops just outside the gates
to the Victors' Village and I stop too, wondering if perhaps she intends to head back into town, just
being out to walk the dog. She lets go of my arm and instead takes both my hands in her own.

"I think, I hope, that you and I can be like sisters" she says. "Haymitch scares me a little but at least I
have you."

"Let's not get carried away" I protest with a scowl, resisting the urge to yank my hands free. "We
don't actually know one another."

She releases my hands, leans in and kisses me on the cheek.

"I hope that's about to change. I'll let go you about your day. Thanks for the chat!"

Sending me one last bright smile she gives me a wave and then walks towards Peeta's house. I force
myself to walk slowly towards my own house and appear unbothered. Buttercup waits for me on the
front porch and meows impatiently while I fumble with the keys, coming very close to losing my
patience when I can't seem to get the damn thing to fit in the keyhole.

Once the cat and I are both safely inside I let my anger have free reign, moving quickly towards the
sitting room where I pick up a throw pillow and scream into it, not wanting Haymitch to overhear my
emotional state of mind. I scream a few times into the pillow then send it flying into the wall, needing
some outlet for my turmoil.

Why does she get to be so happy and carefree and full of dreams and plans for the future? It doesn't
seem fair that she gets to walk around talking about how much she loves him when I cannot tell a
single soul. And sisters? That little gem of a comment nearly made it lose it right there on the street
when she said it. I only have one sister, I will only ever have one sister, and she cannot ever come close to being what Prim was and always will be. Furthermore the mere implication that she would be as a sister to me because Peeta and I have some sort of brother/sister relationship feels like a slap in the face. I am not Peeta's sister and therefore I will never be her sister in any way, shape or form. And if she thinks we're going to spend five nights a week having dinner at each other's houses and chatting by the fireplace then she has another thing coming. I don't care if she's the sweetest, nicest, most endearing soul who ever lived. She is the girl who gets to be loved by Peeta and I alone know what that truly means. I would give anything to go back to the days when his love was all for me.

After stomping around in my sitting room for a good twenty minutes, imagining all kinds of verbal smack-downs I wish I could bestow upon her but know full well that I never will I finally run out of steam and fall back onto the couch, closing my eyes hard and barely keeping in a groan.

"What the hell is wrong with her?" I ask Buttercup, who's perched on a windowsill watching me with wary eyes. "I want to just… push her off of me and make sure she never gets anywhere near me ever again. There's no way I'm going to smile and hug her and pretend like we're friends." I scoff at the thought. "She's delusional if she thinks otherwise. I've never had many friends. Not my area of expertise. What's so great about having a dozen friends anyway? They'll never be close friends if there's that many of them. And even if I did want to go get a whole bunch of new ones she is the last kind I would ever pick. God, it's like he's gotten engaged to Delly Cartwright."

The similarities between Lace and Delly haven't occurred to me before and for a minute I think I'm actually on to something. Then I dismiss the thought. Lace is not as sugary sweet as Delly, nor as wide-eyed and innocent. She's more… idealistic and bubbly than perky and naïve. In fact, something about her reminds me of Prim.

And that's probably what I hate about her the most.

Later that afternoon I am washing dishes, something I really ought to have gotten started on several days ago but have ignored until now. Doing the dishes was never my favourite chore. Usually I got out of having to do them since I brought home the actual food and thus was considered to having contributed my share. Nowadays there's rarely anyone else around to help me clean up after a meal and the result tends to be dishes that pile up on the counter for a few days before I grit my teeth and take them on.

While I'm scrubbing the cast iron pot my mind goes to something Haymitch said yesterday that has been bothering me ever since. He said something to the effect that he owes it to Peeta to help him be happy because he chose to save me over him in the second arena. While I was in District 13 I put a lot of blame on Haymitch over Peeta's fate but these days I don't see it as being so black-and-white anymore. I have no idea what resources he had to locate Peeta and get him out and I have no doubt he didn't give up trying to find him until he knew the Capitol had gotten to him and he was lost. Yet from what I heard yesterday he still carries a great deal of guilt over what ended up happening to Peeta.
I shudder as I think of the words he used. That they tore Peeta apart. The idea is too horrible to even think about but I know it's the truth. What doesn't sit right with me though is the growing suspicion that Haymitch has been treating Peeta with far too much leniency because of the guilt he feels. Peeta deserves to be happy, absolutely, but no more than any of us do. Haymitch suffered through an arena, too. His loved ones were killed and he spent twenty years as the sole mentor to tributes he had no hope of being able to save. Then Peeta and I came along and he grew attached to us only to have to see us go back into the arena. Then they took Peeta. I blamed Haymitch for that. He obviously blames himself for it to this day. That's a lot of hell to suffer through. As for me, I lost my father at an early age and nearly starved to death. I volunteered as tribute to save my sister and she ended up dead anyway. In the process of the war I lost my closest friend and a lot of the friends I made along the way. I wake up screaming several nights each week, plagued by horrible nightmares. Yes Peeta has suffered a great deal but Haymitch and I have suffered through hell as well.

Have I been too lenient on Peeta because of my own guilt? My guilt at not loving him like I should have when he was still his old self and the guilt I feel over knowing that it was the fact that I do love him that got him tortured in the first place? There have been several instances in these past two years where I should have put my foot down and yet I didn't. That can't just have been rooted in love. I loved my sister more than anything but I still didn't let her do whatever she liked.

Well whatever the case it's time to stop being so lenient. It's gotten me precisely nowhere, or maybe it's even gotten me a few steps behind where I was two years ago. I love Peeta and I wish him all the best and I want to be his friend but this pattern that has developed has got to stop. I don't think the old Peeta would have wanted me to let him unknowingly hurt me time and time again. He would have wanted me to let him know if he ever overstepped a boundary he wasn't aware of. I don't think he wants to hurt me now either or that he feels he deserves happiness more than Haymitch or I do.

And I think, I hope, that deep down he wants to find his way back to who he used to be. By just playing along the way I have been doing I haven't exactly helped him find himself again. I don't think either me nor Haymitch have been helpful to him at all in that process and while I know it's something Peeta has to do largely on his own the very least Haymitch and I can do is not enable him when he tries to run.

A knock on the door gets my attention. I call out that the door is open and then freeze once I hear the steps of the person entering. Peeta. That fake leg gives him away every time. I draw a deep breath and focus everything on keeping calm and not having some sort of unsuitable reaction at seeing him again for the first time since the announcement. I don't know how I will feel coming face to face with him for the first time since his announcement but if I am going to change anything about our dynamic I have to start with myself and there's no point in not starting right this second.

Evidently I'm so wrapped up in these thoughts that Peeta's first reaction to seeing me is one of concern.

"Is everything alright?"

I give him a quick glare, long enough to note that he still looks good but not long enough to make me feel anything else. I turn back to the dishes and focus on that.

"Everything's perfect."

"Doesn't seem like it" he says. He walks closer and hops up on the counter a few feet away from me. "What? Come on, tell me."

I scowl and I realize that the prevailing feeling at the moment is anger. I am angry. Angry with Peeta for not having been strong enough to recover completely from his hijacking and for failing to realize that I love him. Angry with myself for not having gotten over him yet, even though it's preposterous
to think I would do so in just two days. Angry at Lace for coming on so strong today and for everything she said about her happy wedding and how we would be like sisters. Does Peeta know she came to speak with me? Does he think I would enjoy such a conversation? Is he really that deluded? The more I think about it the angrier I become.

"Is that damn dog going to be around much?" I snarl.

"The dog?" asks Peeta, eyebrows shooting up.

"Yes, the dog. That big, slobbery thing that seems to be all over the place."

"I wasn't aware you disliked dogs" says Peeta, sounding surprised.

"That's not the point" I scowl. I place the last plate on the drying rack and pull the plug in the sink to let the water out. Peeta hands me a towel to dry my hands on and I take to the task with vigour. "This is Buttercup's domain and I don't want some damn dog running around here hurting the apple of my dead sister's eye."

"I'm pretty sure Buttercup could take Shep in a fight" answers Peeta. "If you're worried about it though I'll make sure he's never running around without a leash on." He frowns. "Is that really what's going on?"

Drying my hands with angry motions I turn around so that my back is against the counter. It felt strangely good to snarl at Peeta just now and I would much like to keep doing it, to get some of the tension out.

"Katniss?"

"Your girl came running up to me today" I say coldly. "Babbled like a complete idiot about how we were going to be sisters and how I was going to help plan the wedding with her and who knows what other nonsense."

To my surprise Peeta cringes a little.

"Coming on too strong, is she?"

"I am not her damn sister and I am not her damn best friend" I say, letting the towel go with a smack. "I will be there at your wedding but planning it is definitely not something I will partake in."

"I wouldn't ask you to" he insists. "And I'm sorry if she overstepped any boundaries. I know you don't like to be crowded and I know you aren't the type who makes instant friends with people."

"Oh, so I-" I begin but he cuts me off.

"I'm saying you're much more selective when it comes to who you become friends with and that's not a bad thing. I am very glad you accept Lace but I would never expect you to become her best friend or consider her family just because I care about her. I think she's just a little over excited and she misses her best friend and, well... I think she's a little intimidated by you. She's been talking about wanting to get to know you better and I've been telling her to take it easy and let it happen on its own."

It annoys me even further that he seems so calm and rational about this when what I really want to do is fight with him.

"Just keep her out of my personal space" I snarl. "I wasn't interested in any of the details when I was
the one supposed to be getting married so I sure as hell don't give a damn under these circumstances."

There's an unreadable look on his face as he gets down from the counter.

"Look, I said I was sorry and that I will talk to her. If it really bothers you perhaps you should speak to her yourself. Like I said Katniss, I don't expect you to have a close relationship with her unless you want to on your own accord. I chose to bring her into my life but I'm fully aware you and Haymitch did not."

"Just get her to back off with the damn sisterhood talk."

"Sisterhood?"

"Yeah, apparently we're going to be sisters now."

He looks decidedly uncomfortable but I don't care. I don't even feel sad or disappointed when he moves towards the door.

"Clearly this isn't the best time" he says. "I'll get going. I just wanted to stop by and see how you feel about bringing back spring cleaning and getting Haymitch's house somewhat fresh on Tuesday. Apparently he's got a committee meeting and-"

"I can't on Tuesday" I say briskly, crossing my arms over my chest.

He looks taken aback.

"What do you mean? We meet up on Tuesdays."

"Well not this Tuesday. I've got other things to do." Before he can ask I volunteer the information on my own accord. "I'm taking a bunch of school kids out to the woods to teach them about edible plants and how to survive off the land."

"Wow" he says, sounding surprised, disappointed and impressed all at the same time. "That's quite the project."

"Yeah" I say with a simple shrug of my shoulder. Until this moment I hadn't decided if I was going to show up more than just on Monday. "We'll see how it goes."

"It sounds great" he says. "I'm a little sad that it's on our hang-out day, though. Maybe we can reschedule?"

"We'll see" I say.

He smiles faintly at me but I can tell he's both confused and disappointed. I don't particularly care. Let him feel like crap for a change. I've had it up to here with enduring his happy engagement and his bubbly, happy fiancée and her stupid dog. I'm done being lenient. I want to be done putting so much time and energy into worrying about my relationship with him.

"Well tell me all about your day in the woods with the kids later" he offers on his way out. "It really does sound like a great idea, Katniss. I think you're better with kids than you give yourself credit for."

I'm far from convinced about that but I keep silent as he leaves and closes the door behind him. Then I sigh heavily and walk to the sitting room to grab my father's plant book. If I'm going to be teaching
the kids about what plants they can eat and what plants they'd better stay away from I should probably brush up. The last thing I need is to accidentally make some kid eat a fly agaric or try to pick stinging nettles with their bare hands.

I sit down in an armchair with a huff and open the book, sticking to the old pages and staying well clear of the ones Peeta and I worked on together. That part of my life is well behind me now and the less I can revisit it the easier it will be.

Come Monday morning I head out the door and begin to walk into town, a nervous knot in the pit of my stomach. What the hell have I agreed to do? I don't know the first thing about teaching children. I don't even know what age group we're talking about. I don't know how many there will be. Am I expected to be able to keep control of a group of maybe twenty kids while we're out in the woods, a place I've been conditioned to think of as hazardous if you don't know what you're doing? Hell, it is dangerous if you don't know what you're doing. There are carnivorous animals out there and more ways to hurt yourself than I would like to think about.

These thoughts and others like them occupy my mind during the entire walk and when I reach the fence at the school I almost stop and turn back around. Then I draw a deep breath and steal myself. This should be nothing. I've been in two Hunger Games arenas. I've fought out in the streets of the Capitol during the war. How scary can a group of children be?

Cocking my neck and keeping my head held high I march through the gate and up towards the door to the school house. I realize I have no idea when school starts or when they expect me to be there but since there are construction workers around I assume the daily business is in progress. I stop by the door and wonder if I should knock, then scold myself for thinking something so stupid. I open the door and walk inside.

More than twenty pairs of eyes turn and look at me. The room has two separate rows with wooden benches and tables with lids, each one shared by two students. Girls on one side of the middle aisle, boys on the other, ages seeming to vary from first graders up to early teens. All of whom are staring at me. At the other end of the room stands a large lectern in front of a black board. Two teachers, presumably the parents of the guy who roped me into this, are standing in front of it, looking at me just as their students are doing. The room is dead quiet. You could hear a pin dropping.

My face begins to flush and I have to suppress my instinct to turn and flee but the silence is broken by a voice I've already begun to think of as very annoying.

"Ah, there she is! Told you she would be here." The guy from last week comes walking up to me with a bright smile. "Welcome Katniss."

"Stop smiling at me" I hiss at him through gritted teeth. "Don't think for a second I'm here to help you curry favour."

He seems a little bit intimidated by my tone but manages to keep smiling as he turns to the class.

"Say hi to Katniss everyone. She's going to come with us out to the woods and show us all about the plants and the animals."

A hand shoots up in the air. A boy around the age of ten with square shaped glasses and hair so
blonde it's almost white.

"Yes Jake?" says the female teacher.

"Where's your bow?" the boy asks.

"I left it at home" I mumble.

"Why don't we give Katniss a moment to settle in before we bombard her with questions?" suggests the female teacher. "We still have to go over the weekend's homework before we head out into the woods."

The chorus of whines that result from her comment baffles me. We would have never dared to sound like that in front of our teachers when I was in school. I don't have much time to think about it however because the annoying guy's hand is on my back, nudging me to follow him to a corner of the room.

"Get your hand off me" I snarl in a hushed tone.

"You're really not a people person, are you?"

"I don't like annoying people" I reply, wrapping my arms over my chest. "And you, whatever your name is, are definitely pushing it."

He looks a bit dismayed.

"The name's Max. I hope you're in a more friendly mood once we get out in the woods because right now you're lowering the room temperature with one solid degree."

"Whatever" I snarl. "I told you, I'm not here to help your ambitions."

"But you're here nonetheless" he smiles.

I roll my eyes and do my best to tune him out, focusing my attention on the class of children I am supposed to be imparting wisdom to. Despite his presence and the nervous pit in my stomach I'm feeling a kindling excitement at the thought of what my day will entail.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I hope that wasn't too bad. Katniss is going to have other things to focus on at this point than Peeta but her feelings aren't going to go away over night either. For the time being I'm leaving Lace's thoughts/feelings/motivations largely up to interpretation.

And now I'm going to try and focus on the next chapter of "Labyrinth", which is giving me a bad case of writer's block.
Chapter Notes

As always, all the thanks in the world to all of you who've commented =)

Don't know if this warrants a warning or not, but there's some non-PG language in this chapter. Very little of it though =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Miss Everdeen, what is this?"

Seven year-old Lilac, born here in Twelve and survivor of the war, comes up to me and holds up a flower. I'm down on one knee on the ground together with two of the other children in her class showing them animal tracks but Lilac doesn't notice the markings on the ground and walks right through them, placing her hand on my knee.

"That is clover" I tell her.

"Can I eat it?"

"Yes, you can eat it." She opens her mouth wide and moves the rather dirty looking blossom towards it so my hand reaches out to stop her. "Though not right this second! It looks a bit muddy."

Today is Monday which means I'm out in the woods with the youngest children, grades one through three. There are only seven children in this group but I prefer it that way, finding it a manageable number. It's my fourth week of helping out at the school and the first time I'm out with the children alone. It's a little scary to be responsible for all of them out here but they seem to flock around me like I'm a safe spot in a sometimes scary place. I prefer to have it that way. I want them to like the woods but more than that I want them to respect the woods, and the dangers therein.

"I can't see the tracks anymore" complains Jake, the boy who asked me about my bow on my first day. "Lilac ruined them!"

The girl looks like she might cry at the accusation so I try to distract her by taking the clover blossom and sticking it into her ponytail. Thankfully this makes her laugh and try to reach the flower, forgetting about the boy's words.

"That's why we have to be very careful where and how we walk" I tell the other children. "Especially if we're trying to follow tracks."

"My brother dropped a glass on the floor one time and it broke into lots of pieces and my mother said we had to be very careful walking on the floor" offers one of the other children enthusiastically.

"Sound advice" I answer as I rise to my feet. "Come on, kids. Time to head back and have lunch."

A chorus of whining complaints rises from the children and I shake my head with disbelief. When I was a child meal time was the best time of the day. These children don't seem to have known hunger on any larger scale, at least not in later years.
Gathering the kids together I make sure everyone is holding someone's hand and then usher them ahead of me, heading back towards the school. We're not very deep into the forest, under normal circumstances a ten minute walk from school, but I've come to learn that herding a group of children can add at least twice that many minutes to the walk. They are constantly letting go of each other's hand to pick something up, getting into squabbles with one another or for unknown reasons trying to head off into the wrong direction. By the time we reach the road leading to the school building we're five minutes late for lunch, however the sight of the white fence gets most of the kids excited and they begin to run to get there as soon as possible.

Taking a headcount I make sure every child who left with me is now returning safely as they pass through the gate. Some of the older children are sitting around outside having their lunches out in the open while others are eating by their benches inside. I get the seven children in my group to go inside to get their food and thereby leave them in the hands of the regular teaching staff.

I have a lunch pack of my own in my bag, a sandwich with some of the ham Haymitch bought last week on bread Peeta baked. It's difficult not to think of him whenever I taste something he's made but I try not to pay any attention to the hurtful stab in my heart. I take a seat on the wooden steps right outside the door and unwrap my sandwich, feeling very little of its taste while I chew on it.

Later that week I find myself staying around even after my own class is over. I don't really have anywhere else to be and I have to admit to myself that I'm enjoying the interactions with the children, especially the younger ones. Many of the young girls seem to be drawn to me, wanting to sit on my lap or wanting to show me pictures they've drawn or wanting to tell me stories. I listen to what they have to say, smile and tell them their paintings are lovely and allow them to sit with me. I never thought I would be good with young children but they seem to feel differently.

In a corner of the room Max's sister, Moira, has a math class with the two first-graders as their last class of the day. I join her and watch with fascination as she uses toys and building blocks to help teach the children about one plus one and three minus two. I've seen her do the same thing with the second-graders. Some of the children seem to get it intuitively, others find it boring or difficult. She doesn't pressure them, even though the end of the school year is nearing its end. The point doesn't seem to be to teach them the math per se, but rather to introduce them to the concept.

Abigail, the youngest child at the school, sits on my lap and studies the blocks with a frown. After a while she looks up at me with dead serious eyes.

"I don't understand" she says and points to the three blocks. "That block is green. That and that block are yellow. There are not three, there are two yellow and one green."

I have no idea how to respond to reasoning like that so I don't even try to. Abigail gets restless on my lap and squirms to get down. She then walks over to the blocks and picks the green one up in one hand and one of the yellow ones in her other, studying them with a frown, trying to work the equation out.

"She is either a brilliant mind or…” begins Moira, shrugging instead of finishing the sentence. "Alright children, time's up for today."

"But I don't understand" protests Abigail.

"We can talk about it tomorrow" says Moira. "It's time to head home now. Hurry on, get your bag and your jacket."

"Can I be of any help?" I ask. I've never stayed this long and I'm not sure what comes with the
"I'm going to get the kids ready and walk them home" answers Moira. "But, uh… I suppose you could clean up the blocks and all the other things they've spread around the room. You don't have to if you don't want to. I'll tell one of my brothers to take care of it if you've got better things to do."

Do I have better things to do? None that I can think of. I shrug and kneel down to pick up a shoe that belongs to one of the second-graders and which apparently came off at some point during the class. I find the kid who owns the shoe and make him sit down on his chair so I can put it back on. Then I help Moira get the children ready to go home, making sure everyone has their outerwear and their little backpacks or bags. Most of the older children have already left at this point, save those who are waiting for younger siblings.

Moira and the younger children leave and suddenly the room seems very quiet. Her parents and brothers are outside making sure everyone heads home and I'm alone in the room. I look over to the corner we were in and sigh slightly looking at the mess. How can just a few children create such a mess with so few blocks and toys? It's nothing short of an unappealing wonderment.

Kneeling on the floor I begin to gather blocks, frowning when I hear the door open. I turn my head to see who is entering and try not to sigh loudly. Max. Some days he leaves me alone, other days he hangs around me even though I've made it clear I'm not interested in chatting with him. His brother and sister are alright but he rubs me the wrong way. I still haven't forgiven him for coming on so strong the first time we met and especially for calling me *Mockingjay*.

"Thanks for helping out" he says with a smile as he walks over to me.

"I can manage this on my own" I say. "Aren't you needed outside?"

"I would rather be useful in here" he says innocently enough. He walks over to the desks and begins to move all chairs into their places.

"Well by all means, you can do all the cleaning up."

"Any reason we can't do it together?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Why would you want to do it together?" I ask back.

"Because together is usually a lot more fun than alone."

I frown, sensing a deeper meaning behind his words. This isn't the first time since I started working here that he's tried to strike up conversation and most of the time I shut him down. I'm not here to help him further his career, or whatever it is he wants from me.

"Well, what do you know about togetherness?" I mutter.

"I have worked with other people before" he says in a tone that suggests he's entertained. "True, I never worked with anyone in a Games arena nor as a soldier on the streets of the Capitol-"

"Although one might wonder why" I cut him off. "You're older than me. Definitely old enough to have fought in the war. What, you were too busy keeping tabs on the first-graders to join the fighting?"

"Ouch" he says without sounding particularly wounded. He stops beside me and smirks. "Hey how about we steer this into safer territories and chat about the weather while we clean up?"
"What is it with you?" I scowl. "How many times do I have to make it clear that I don't want to chat with you before you stop bothering me?"

"Look, you… you make me a little nervous, okay?" he stammers. "I mean, I like you, I admire you, you're Katniss Everdeen – the Mockingjay. I just want you to, you know… not dislike me."

"You're going about it in all the wrong ways" I say in a surly tone. "And I'm not interested in getting to know anyone who thinks of me that way. You think you know me because you've seen me in the Games and you've seen me as the Mockingjay. You don't have the first idea who I am so how the hell can you claim to like or admire me?"

"You don't have the first idea who I am either, so how the hell can you claim to dislike me?" he challenges back.

"Because you bother me."

"It probably wouldn't be so bothersome if we got to know one another."

"I don't care to get to know you."

"You haven't even tried. You decided from the get go that you disliked me and I don't think that's fair. I'm not after anything more than some amicable conversation here."

"What does it matter?" I snarl. "You're not interested in getting to know me, just the Mockingjay."

"How would you know?" He gives me a look and sits down on the floor, collecting the pencils that are scattered. "Like I said, you just dismissed me right off the bat. Didn't even bother to remember my name. You've never asked where I'm from or how my family came to have this job or why we're even in this district."

"I don't care" I repeat.

"I guess that cold, bitchy attitude on-screen wasn't for show" he says dryly.

"I don't care about being warm and friendly to people who think they know me because they saw me on TV" I reply. "You're disappointed in me because I'm not and that's your problem, not mine."

"I think that's everyone who meets you's problem."

"People are obsessed with the idea of everyone being happy to meet them" I say. I scowl again. "I'm not bright and bubbly and perky and always sounding off a pearly laugh and generally acting like a happy-go-lucky human being. If you can't accept that then why should I want to get to know you?"

"Fuck happy people."

The comment startles me so much that I completely lose my anger and resentment. I've hardly ever heard anyone use crude words like that and it rolls off his tongue so effortlessly that I suspect it's not the first time he's used it.

"Fuck them" he repeats, shrugging a shoulder. "What the hell is there to walk around being so happy about anyway? I don't care if you're not bubbly and perky and whatnot, I just don't like that you're hurtful towards me."

"I…" I begin, feeling a little bad that he described my behaviour as hurtful but getting lost in his vocabulary. "I cannot believe you just said that" I say, surprising us both by bursting out laughing.
"Said what?" he asks, now with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. "Fuck happy people?"

"Who says something like that?" I ask through my laughter.

"I do. I'm serious here, what's so great about them?"

"I don't know" I manage, wiping away a stray tear that's managed to escape.

"Like for instance you just became infinitely less likeable now that you started showing signs of not being the human equivalent of a frosted chicken."

I should be offended but instead I'm just laughing harder. Max looks at me with a grin and then begins to laugh a little too. I draw a deep breath to gather my composure and use the sleeve of my shirt to wipe away a few more tears.

"Sorry" I manage. "Gosh, I don't know what just got into me."

"Neither do I but despicable as it was I think I like it better than when you look at me like you want to shove me into a fiery pit."

I smile bashfully and avert my eyes, back to feeling bad over how he says my treatment of him makes me feel. I want to keep him at a distance but I didn't mean to actually hurt his feelings.

"I'm sorry" I say. "If it makes you feel any better, you would be dead by now if I wanted you to be."

"Oh that's much better, thank you" he says chirpily, causing me to chuckle again.

"I just can't believe you spoke like that" I say with a slight smile.

"For a former tribute you've lead one sheltered life" he surmises.

"Or maybe I just surround myself with more decent human beings" I retort, though this time there's a more teasing tone in my voice. "Seriously though, you work with school children and you have that big a… potty mouth?"

"Well I don't say that word in front of the kids" he points out.

"Fair enough."

He smiles at me but I turn my attention away from him and continue the task of tidying up the room. I admit he took me by surprise and I haven't laughed like that in a while but I hope he doesn't take that as an invite to further conversation. He's still the weird guy who talks to me too often and thinks of me as the Mockingjay. I meant what I said to him earlier, about not having any desire to get to know him better.

"Okay…" he says after a minute. "I take it you've used today's fill of niceness and, you know, not-cold-ness. I'll leave you alone and let you go back to being slightly scary and very intimidating."

I don't answer but there's a slight smile on my face as I finish up my task.

The following Monday I leave as soon as my class is finished and head towards the Victor's Village. I have plans with Peeta for the first time in weeks, not counting our dinners with Haymitch. Peeta has been continuously suggesting that we spend a day together, even if it's not on a Tuesday, but I've been claiming to be busy. For the most part it's been true, though not every single time. I can see the disappointment on his face when I turn him down and in a twisted way that makes me feel good, a
solid reminder that I matter to him. It's just not concern enough, not the same kind of longing I have to see him, so I figure it won't do him any harm to feel that way every once in a while.

He's not expecting me until later this afternoon but I didn't feel like hanging around in the school so I left as soon as I was done. We're not going to do anything in particular, just chat and have tea and spend some time together. I think it will do us both good, truth be told. I know it's time for me to accept that Peeta is fading away from me and will have a completely different life once he's married but I'm not ready to let go of him entirely.

Reaching his house I knock on the door and walk inside without waiting for an answer. I call out to him and stop to take my boots off, bracing myself against the wall to keep my balance. His voice responds after a few seconds, telling me he's in the sitting room. I manage to get both boots off and then walk to the room he's in, finding him sitting by the coffee table with a not so pleased look on his face.

"What's wrong?" I ask, taking a seat on the armrest of an armchair.

"Nothing" he mutters, turning his eyes to the collection of papers in front of him. A glance tells me they're drawings of various pastries.

"Nothing?" I question.

He sighs heavily.

"I had a bit of a fight with Haymitch but it doesn't matter. It's not your problem."

I have to admit I'm taken by surprise. I figured the pair of them always got along masterfully, perhaps an eye-roll here or there but never outright arguments.

"Come on, talk to me" I say. "Whatever it was it must either have been nothing at all or something really serious."

Another heavy sigh as he seems to contemplate whether or not to tell me. Then at last he shakes his head and leans back on the couch and speaks.

"It's just... I could do without all the negativity, you know?"

"Negativity about what?"

Yet another sigh.

"About Lace. About the toasting." He looks down at his fingers, twiddling a pencil between them. "First it was looks, then it was hints and today it was just blunt. He doesn't think I should be doing this."

There's a lot of conflicting emotions inside me at hearing this. On the one hand I'm glad Haymitch really does seem to be in my corner on this and relieved that somebody who isn't me said something to Peeta about it but at the same time it's clear that Peeta's feelings have been hurt.

"He's just looking out for you" I say, feeling like I should say something.

"Yeah I know. That doesn't mean he's right. He's got a point that this happened fairly fast, I'm not going to deny that, but he doesn't know the first thing about how I'm feeling and he most definitely doesn't know the first thing about how she's feeling. He doesn't know what we are like as a couple and he's not interested in knowing. I know he's looking out for me but when it comes to this he
doesn’t…” He pauses, shakes his head again and tosses the pencil on the table. "It's not the fact that he has concerns that bothers me. It's that he seems to hell-bent on seeing things from a bad perspective when it comes to me and her. I'm not sixteen years old and about to be a slaughtered tribute anymore, nor am I a kid who needs his mentor's guidance to navigate the currents of the Capitol and all that."

"But you are still a young person who's been through more than his share of trauma and who doesn't have any parents left alive" I point out.

He gives me a sharp look and I cringe inwards, realizing I wasn't using a very good tone to say that. "The bottom line is he can support me in this or not." He gets up from his seat and bends over the table to begin collecting the drawings. "I'm not demanding either one of you to be supportive, that's entirely up to you. And if he can't be supportive I'd rather he tell me so and not be there at the toasting."

"Peeta that's a bit extreme, don't you think?"

"Yeah I know" he says with a sigh. "I'm just tired of having to wonder if things are real or not real. Haymitch's support for me in this can be one or the other and I would rather have a genuine not real than a false real."

I look away and try to formulate an appropriate response. What I really want to do is make him think more at depth about what Haymitch has been implying, to ask himself if maybe there's some truth to our old mentor's concerns. Only I can't think of a way to say it that doesn't come off the wrong way.

"Have you told Haymitch how you feel?" I finally say.

He snorts a little. "Should I really have to tell him that it hurts me when he insinuates that my engagement is a mistake?"

"Does the relationship have to be a mistake because the engagement might be?" I hear myself retorting.

He looks surprised and his expression softens a touch. "Well…"

"I mean, why the rush all of a sudden?" I say carefully.

His face darkens just a touch but it's enough to let me know that if I was making any form of headway I've now said the wrong thing.

"I don't want to talk about this" he says. "It's been weeks since you and I did anything just the two of us and I don't want to waste that time talking about something that might lend to an argument." He walks to the kitchen and I follow him in his tracks, nervously playing with the end of my braid. "Let's just have some tea and banana cake. You can tell me all about that teaching thing you're doing."

"Sure" I say, though not with a lot of enthusiasm.

I sit down at the table, my fingertips playing with the tablecloth. I definitely wouldn't mind not talking about Lace but I also want to make him think harder about the concerns Haymitch expressed.
I would also like to know if he's spoken to dr. Aurelius and, if so, what he thinks.

"Tell me," says Peeta as he fills the kettle with water, "who's worse at moving silently through the forest? Me or the seven year-olds?"

I find myself chuckling a little and shaking my head slightly.

"Definitely you. No doubt about it."

He flashes me a grin and moves to place the kettle on the stove. The subject of his engagement is dropped for the time being and instead we spend the next hour talking about the school and what I do there.

I mention the children and the couple who runs the school but for some reason I never get around to mentioning Max, Moira or their brother.

Another couple of days pass. It's the last days of April and spring is in full bloom, much to the delight of my younger students. The older ones, those who would have been of Reaping age had things not been different, act like they couldn't care less but I can tell that at least some of them are enjoying the beauty of nature. I take the eight-graders out to a spot in the woods where I know lilac grows and some of them even drop the act and step closer to breathe in the scent of the blooming flowers.

We return to the school just in time for lunch. All my classes are between ten in the morning and noon, giving me time to go hunting first if I want to and some free time in the afternoon if I choose it. The construction workers have set up large wooden tables out on the school's lawn and all students eat out there now when the weather allows. Sometimes I stay and eat with them but more often than not I head back home. I'm not entirely sure why. It's more fun to eat with other people but I don't feel completely comfortable with the family who runs the school, friendly though they might be.

"Katniss" says Mr. Matson, the head of the school. I don't even know his first name. Everyone always calls him Mr. Matson.

"Hello Mr. Matson" I say politely, forcing an awkward smile. He is tall and heavy set with bushy white hair and a commanding voice. He intimidates me a little.

"Did they behave themselves out there in the woods?"

I feel oddly nervous. If I say no, how would he respond then? I don't actually think he'd do anything bad but I still feel like it's important to convince him that they behaved. Which they did.

"I think even the most stubborn of the bunch thought the lilacs were lovely" I manage awkwardly.

He laughs a boisterous laugh.

"Yeah I bet. Listen Katniss, the school year comes to an end in six weeks. You've only been with us for a short while but the students and the faculty have really appreciated your contributions."

I try not to make an odd face at hearing him refer to his family as the faculty. It sounds a little too pretentious.

"It's been my pleasure."

"I hope you'll come back in the fall and continue your work."
I'm not sure how to respond. The truth is I'm glad that he's offering. I know I haven't given them any idea of how long I would keep doing this, more than to confirm before I leave each day that I'll be back the next, and I haven't even given any thought to how long I want to continue. The truth is I've found it quite nice and a welcome distraction. It's only been a few weeks but there are a few students I've started to feel fond of.

"I… I'll give it some thought" I say with a smile that's more genuine now.

"Please do. Think about it and give me an answer before the end of the school year. If you agree then we'll start working on a proper curriculum for you."

"A what?" I say, a bit taken aback. "I'm just taking the kids out into nature, taking things as they come."

"Which is fine for now but if you're on board we'd like to have a more proper study plan in mind" says Mr. Matson. "Goals for each grade, specific things they should be learning, and when winter comes maybe even proper lectures indoors."

"I don't do lectures" I say uncomfortably.

"You'll get the hang of it." His large hand gives me a pat on the shoulder blade. "Now take a few weeks, think it over and get back to me."

He walks over to the table to join his family and the students, leaving me standing there feeling confused. I would not mind at all continuing with the trips to the woods but the idea of following a set educational plan doesn't appeal to me. Nature doesn't work that way, anyway. I can take the students to various places where I know we'll find specific plants but it's impossible to predict whether we'll see any animals.

Deciding I'll have lunch at home I walk to the school building to grab the bag I left there. I expect the room to be empty since it's lunch break but when I open the door I see a person kneeling by one of the desks. I can't tell if it's Max or his brother Milo but I decide it doesn't matter and quietly I sneak towards the shelf where I put my bag earlier today.

I hear a tool dropping followed by a string of very colourful curse words that make my cheeks blush. Max, then. I haven't heard Milo utter any such words and he is much more quiet and withdrawn than his brother.

Despite myself I can't help but comment on the situation.

"I thought you said you never cursed like that when the children are around."

He spins around quickly, startled by my voice, and bangs his head on the wooden desk. With a groan he rubs his head and sits down on the floor.

"Man, don't startle a guy crouching under a damn desk" he complains. "Fuck…"

"Again, school children right outside the door" I say in a chastising tone, though truthfully I'm finding myself feeling a bit amused. "It could have easily been one of them who walked in here and overheard you."

"I seriously doubt it" he groans, still rubbing his head. "None of them could sneak up on a deaf rock, much less a human male in his prime with optimal hearing."

"At least the confidence is in its prime" I smirk. "Don't know about the self-awareness, though…"
He gives me a pointed look.

"Very funny. You know, I liked you better when you were just snarling at me."

"Oh I like snarling at you, too" I say, unable to stop a faint smile from spreading across my face. "Not quite as much as I like putting you in your place when you've stupidly banged your head but I'll take what I can get."

"Born pedagogue you are" he says dryly, rising to his feet.

"What were you doing down there anyway?"

"What do you think I was doing?" he questions. "What would anyone be doing? I'm repairing the desk, it's getting unhinged."

"I didn't know you knew how to repair a desk."

"Well then now that means the things you know about me number in three and the things you don't number in… infinity."

"Okay" I say, rolling my eyes and crossing my arms over my chest. "I know more than three things about you. I know your name, your occupation, the fact that you can repair a desk, that you have worse language than anyone I've ever met…"

"Wow" he says, giving a whistle. "Four things. Colour me wrong."

"Also I know you're incredibly annoying."

"That's an opinion, not a fact."

I smirk.

"Fair enough."

"You don't even know what district I am from" he points out, sounding a little irritated even though I don't think that gives him room to be.

"It's a brand new Panem" I reply, mouthing off one of the slogans I've heard on television so much. "District numbers are merely numbers now."

"Except that's bullshit and we both know it" he snorts. "These kids in first or second grade, sure, for them and their younger siblings it will be just a number. The likes of you and me, we're too old for that. District culture is embedded in our subconscious."

"Is that supposed to sound impressive?" I scoff. The conversation is beginning to bore me so I adjust my bag over my shoulder and move towards the door. "Well if I were to guess then I'd say you're from District 7, what with the woodcraft and the foul language and all."

"I'm from District 5."

"Good for you." I stop at the door and give him a look complete with a raised eyebrow. "Please try to guard your tongue while children are still nearby."

He cackles and opens his mouth to reply but I walk out the door and close it before I can hear whatever cleverness he had in mind.
Dinner night the following Thursday takes place at Haymitch's house instead of Peeta's because Peeta is having a new oven installed and the old one is currently out of function. He cooks the dinner though, making chicken and wild rice, playfully squabbling with Haymitch the entire time about the lack of spices and seasonings in his kitchen. It seems Haymitch only knows of three spices – salt, pepper and more pepper. I don't usually mind but Peeta is much more of a gourmet. Luckily he was foresighted enough to bring a few spices of his own.

"So what's with the new oven?" I ask as we sit down at the table. "Did the old one just stop working?"

"No" answers Peeta, grabbing a napkin. "It just wasn't... I want a hot air oven, you know? Makes for better baking."

"You don't bake on any larger scale" Haymitch points out.

" Doesn't mean I don't want the things I do bake to turn out well."

"Any thoughts about starting up the bakery thing again? You've got to start doing something with your time other than painting business signs. Even Katniss has found some form of employment."

"Excuse me" I snort, taking offence at the word even. "When was the last time you did anything with your time?"

Haymitch isn't paying attention to me. He's looking at Peeta as if he's very interested in hearing the answer.

"I don't know" Peeta shrugs. "I mean yeah, probably, at some point I'll start a bakery. I just don't feel like it yet."

"Planning on living off the victor's pension?"

"For the time being I'm okay with that, just like you and Katniss. I'm making some money on the side painting those signs and we'll have Lace's income too." He chuckles and reaches for the salt. "Since when are you this interested in my finances?"

"I was just thinking that once you're married you might end up having kids really soon and at that point it wouldn't be so bad if you had a real profession."

"I have a real profession" says Peeta calmly, salting his rice. "Look, it's just a bit... I'm not really sure if baking is what I want to do all my life or if it's what I've been conditioned to do, growing up a baker's son. When I was little I used to dream of being able to paint for a living but knew I would never have that opportunity. Things have changed now and I just might be able to do that full-time."

"What does Lace think?"

My eyes go from Haymitch to Peeta. I don't like that our dinner is turning into a conversation about Peeta and Lace but there's not much room to complain about it. I try to think of something I can say to steer over to other topics.

"Lace thinks I should do what I want to do" answers Peeta.

"Is she going to be moving her shop out here when you're married?"

"No. Why would she do that? No one's going to come all the way out here to buy clothes. Plus she started up that shop on her own and she's proud of it. She doesn't want to relocate it. Where would
"we even have a seamstress' shop?"

"So she'll be going back and forth into town a lot?"

"No more than Katniss is doing. No more than I would be doing if I started up a bakery." He grabs the bowl of salad and puts some more greens on his plate. "Is there a point to all this, Haymitch?"

"I'm curious about your plans" shrugs Haymitch.

"And has your curiosity been adequately satisfied? You're nice for taking an interest but you don't have to worry about it."

"I just want to make sure you've thought everything through."

"I'm old enough to get married, Haymitch" answers Peeta calmly. "I'm therefore old enough to take responsibility for that myself. Is this really about whether or not I plan to bake professionally?"

"I'm concerned for you, boy" admits Haymitch, leaning back in his chair with a furrowed brow. "You're moving awful fast. What's the rush?"

"If life has taught me anything it's to grab on to the things you care about, that matter to you, because there's no guarantee they'll be there tomorrow" answers Peeta and I hate to admit it but his reasoning makes an awful lot of sense to me.

"Still," argues Haymitch, "how well do you really know this girl?"

"Far better than you know her." There's an annoyed look on Peeta's face now and I watch nervously as the two argue with one another. "I've been with her for over a year, or somewhere around seventy weeks longer than I had known you before I trusted you with my life."

"And now you're trusting her with your life, in a manner of speaking" says Haymitch, voice sounding calm but a confrontational look on his face. "Listen, I'm not saying never marry the gal. If she's the one you want to be with then be with her, just don't tie yourself down to her so early on. It's a lifelong commitment we're talking about here. The fact is that you're a celebrity and you're young and handsome and charming and--"

"And unhinged and burnt and with a fake leg" Peeta adds curtly.

"There must be a lot of girls out there who'd love to date you so all I'm saying is maybe you should give it some more thought before you marry the first one to cross your path."

"And genuine, lasting happiness will come from dating my way through the district's female population?" replies Peeta mockingly.

"Do you know, do you seriously know, for sure, that she loves you and she isn't just out to land herself a charming celebrity?"

Hurt and betrayal flashes over Peeta's face and even though Haymitch's concerns have crossed my own mind I instinctively want to protect him from what was just said. Haymitch knows Peeta well but he doesn't know everything and I strongly doubt Peeta has shared with him what he shared with me. I can read on his face what thoughts are going through his mind right now and it's not something I ever want him to have to think or feel again. As much as I wish that he and Lace would not get married I don't want him to end up betrayed by her, finding out her feelings were a lie.

"I get it" he says shortly. "Why would she love me, right?"
Haymitch looks surprised.

"Now hold up, that's not what I was saying."

"Never mind" says Peeta. He drops his cutlery on his plate and pushes his chair back. "I'm done with dinner."

With surprising calm he stands up and grabs his light jacket from the back of his chair. Bidding us a good evening he walks out of the room and towards the door, leaving a half-eaten plate behind. Haymitch for once looks baffled but I'm on my feet in an instant, following in his tracks. I can't stand to know his mind might be going to that place, that place where he lacks the quality to be loved. That place Snow had engineered in his head.

I catch up with him outside, when he's just gotten down from the porch and is heading for his own house, his steps calm but his shoulders tense.

"Peeta…" I say.

"It's okay, Katniss" he answers without turning to look at me. "I just don't feel like company right now."

"We love you, Haymitch and I" I say. "He wouldn't say those things, he wouldn't express those concerns, if he didn't."

He stops for a brief second.

"All the same, I'd rather be alone right now."

He continues to walk and I want so badly to run up to him and wrap my arms around him. Instead I stop and watch him go, wrapping my arms around myself. I can't fault Haymitch for what he said and I do believe Peeta needed to hear some of it, just not that last insinuation. I don't doubt Lace's feelings for him, though perhaps my own judgment is clouded by how much I care about him. It's difficult to imagine somebody wanting to use him for their own purposes and play with his heart that way.

I truly, deeply hope that's not what she's doing. If she's using him that way, if she breaks his heart, I will have her face off against my bow.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be an unpleasant one for Peeta, which is all I will say at the moment.

Thanks for reading =)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Uhm, I don't think I have all that much to say before we kick off this chapter. At least, not about the chapter itself. As always I want to say eons of thanks to all wonderful commentors =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sun is shining brightly from a clear blue sky. It's somewhere around twenty degrees in the shade and all the girls are wearing skirts or dresses. The boys complain about having to wear pants and shirts. They all look nice in their best outfits and unlike the previous time each year when children had to wear their finest clothes they are all smiling and full of excitement. The dress code may remind me of Reaping Day but instead of making me uncomfortable I find myself feeling full of joy and a touch of the same excitement the children are showing. It's graduation day, the final day of the school year.

The Matson family have gone to a lot of trouble making the school grounds look festive and summer-like. The construction workers have the day off so that the day won't be disturbed by their noisy work. The tables outside have been scrubbed and polished and are adorned by beautiful white tablecloths that are long but thin, running through the middle of the tables but leaving ample room on the sides. Yesterday Moira and I bound wreaths and hung them up by the school door, and beech tree branches have been placed here and there. Milo borrowed someone's ceramic bird bath and placed it on the grass, filling the bowl up with fresh flowers. It smells lovely and it looks very nice.

Charity, a girl from District 1, comes running up to me with her long blonde hair flowing behind her like a mane. She's in the third grade and is one of my biggest fans. Most days she wears her hair in a braid like I do but not today. Yesterday she saw Moira and I work on the wreaths and I told her that Prim and I sometimes made wreaths from leaves and flowers and put them in our hair when we were little. She made me promise to make one for her to wear today. I agreed even though I know it might result in envy and angry tears from some of her classmates.

"Miss Everdeen, Miss Everdeen!" she cries as she runs towards the wooden steps where I'm sitting. "Do you have my flower crown?"

I laugh a little and pick up the wreath lying beside me. I made it this morning so that the flowers would be looking fresh for most of the day. Mostly its daisies and clover but there's a bluebell or two in there as well. Charity squeals with delight and claps her hands. I make a point of placing it on her head in a very ceremonious matter.

"Let me see" I tell her and she grins up at me. "You look fantastic."

"Thank you!" she squeals, jumping up and down a little. "I have something for you! My mother says
you should always give something in return."

"Aww, sweetie, you didn't have to do that" I say.

"I picked them myself!"

She reaches inside her little handbag and fishes out a bouquet of not-so-healthy looking flowers, handing them over to me as if they were the finest blossoms in all of Panem. I have to force myself to keep smiling and to ignore the lump in my throat. She's picked a bouquet of dandelions interspersed with a few other weeds.

"Thank you" I say, my voice a touch hoarse. "They are beautiful."

Pleased with having given me her gift in return she turns and runs over to her friends to brag about her 'flower crown'. I remain seated, holding the bouquet in my hands, wishing I could just throw them to the side but knowing that it would devastate the little girl. Why did it have to be dandelions?

"You know, it's okay to smile every once in a while" I hear a voice saying.

"Yeah…" I mutter, paying very little attention.

Not one to be deterred by my less than friendly behaviour Max plops down beside me on the steps and gives me a nudge with his elbow.

"Someone sent you flowers? I didn't know the Mockingjay had a secret admirer. Tell me, which one of them is it? I think Flash might be the kind of guy who would woo a lady using flowers."

Under different circumstances I would have snorted at his failed attempts at comedy. Flash is nine years old and seems to find me, and girls in general, very uninteresting. He's at the age where his interests are mostly focused on sports and worms and getting himself really muddy. Right now though I'm not in the mood for any of Max's clever quips. I've been avoiding to look at the dandelions this spring because no matter how hard I try I will never not associate them with the boy with the bread.

"Katniss?" says Max. "Are you at home? I feel like the lights are on upstairs but the house is vacant."

"Huh?" I say, finally looking up at him.

"Don't tell me you're this heartbroken that the school year has come to an end." He gives me a grin. "There's plenty of work to be done here during summer, you know. Planning the curriculum for the fall, helping out with construction, polishing the desks, buying new books, buying new pencils…"

"I'll be fine" I say dismissively, looking at the flowers again.

"Okay…” he says slowly. I expect him to go away and leave me alone but after a minute he tries to strike up conversation again. "I take it you're currently busy doing research for the fall curriculum, seeing as how you've agreed to continue working here when the new semester starts. Planning to teach the kids all about daffodils, huh?"

"They're dandelions" I correct him, wondering how on earth anyone can get those two flowers mixed up.

After another minute he slowly waves his hand up and down in front of my face as if to see if I will have a reaction. I take my eyes off the flowers and glare at him.
"Would you just go away already?"

He raises his eyebrows, looking hurt.

"Geez, sorry. I'll just leave you and your weeds to yourself, then. Wouldn't want to come between such close friends."

I resist the urge to lightly punch his arm as he rises and begins to walk towards the tables, his hands in his back pockets. I focus on the dandelions again and let my fingers graze over the petals. I decide to get them out of my sight, and hopefully then out of my mind, so I rise to my feet and walk inside the school house. The room looks strangely empty and it almost sounds like my footsteps cause an echo as I walk over to the shelf where I usually place my lunch. Carefully I place Charity's flowers there, unsure if I will bring them back home with me later or simply throw them out when the day is over.

Trying my best to shake off any thoughts of dandelions and the man they remind me of I walk back outside, squinting in the bright sunlight, and head over to a group of girls who are playing by the birdbath. A few of the older girls are showing the younger ones a dance in which they all hold hands and move in a circle around the centre object, singing a song I don't recognize. I stand there in silence for a few minutes, watching them, feeling a little bit better at the sight of them having a good time. They all seem so excited about summer. It's a little strange how they can seem to like school a lot and still be thrilled that they're getting their vacation.

I hear footsteps approaching and turn my head to see Max. He looks a bit disappointed when our eyes meet.

"Damn it, I was hoping to sneak up and startle you" he says.

"Language" I reply.

He chuckles and stops right beside me, leaning in to whisper several different words for both male and female genitalia in my ear. I stare at him in shock and feel my cheeks turning bright red, which makes him laugh really hard.

"I'm sorry" he manages. "I couldn't resist! You should see the look on your face!"

"Always the gentleman you are" I say, frustrated with myself for reacting this way. "Do you expect me to be impressed by your vulgarity?"

"No" he says, shaking his head and wiping away a tear. "No, not at all. Though honestly, Katniss, for someone who's been technically married you're awfully prude." He sees the disapproving look on my face and quickly holds up his hands in surrender. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry. That was inappropriate."

"It most certainly was" I say icily. I'm assuming he's referring to Peeta's announcement the night before the Quarter Quell and I get the feeling he's also referring to the claim that I was pregnant going into that arena. I don't want to think about that and I don't want him to think that the activity that would lead to pregnancy makes me uncomfortable so I try to steer him in a different direction.

"We're on school property, a few feet away from young children innocently dancing and this is their graduation day. Be a pervert on your own time."

"Duly noted, Miss Everdeen."

He stands silently beside me for a few minutes, watching the children dance and play, but he seems fidgety. When Mrs. Matson calls the students over to the tables he places a hand on my arm to stop me from going with them.
"What?" I ask.

"Can I run something by you? Before we join the others?"

"Sure but make it quick" I say. I've got my eyes on a delicious looking strawberry cake one of the parents brought for the occasion and I want to make sure I get a large piece. "I'm hungry."

"There's going to be a lot of talking before anybody gets to eat anything" he replies. "So you've got a few minutes I reckon."

"I still think we should be over there listening to what your parents have to say" I argue. "Perhaps we can talk later?"

"This will only take a minute. Listen…" He makes an awkward face and brushes a strand of his brown hair away from his eyes. "Okay, here's the thing. Summer is starting and school will be out until mid-August. We were hoping to have construction of another part of the building done by then but funds are running low."

"Okay" I say, not sure why he's talking to me about this. "Do you need a loan or something?"

He looks surprised.

"A loan?"

"Yeah. The government still pays me for my troubles in the arena. I have money to spare if that's what you're after."

"That's very kind of you but I don't think you've got enough money for the purpose" he says. "We're planning a fundraiser, actually."

"Okay" I say, losing a bit of interest when I hear his father hark his voice to get the students' attention. "Seriously, can we talk about this later?"

"I'd rather run this by you now" he says. "When there's witnesses."

I glare at him. He wipes away another strand of hair from his eyes. I find myself wishing I had a pair of scissors to just cut the damn hair off already.

"Spit it out, Max."

"Like I said, we need money" he says. "And if the Mockingjay herself were to attend the fundraiser…"

"Max" I groan.

"Look, okay, I know you're not keen on people seeing you as the Mockingjay but admit I have a point. We want people to attend and to donate money so we can keep building the new school. You carry a lot of clout and if you were there, supporting the cause, that would go a long way towards making people loosen their purse strings. And hey, you'd be getting a chance to use your Mockingjay status for a good cause. Have something good come from the thing."

I scoff at him.

"My Mockingjay status helped overthrow the corrupt government and made Panem a free place to live in. I'd say that's a pretty damn good cause. I did that, and for my troubles I had to live with the knowledge that they were torturing Peeta and I lost my little sister. Forgive me if I find your so-
"I didn't mean it like that" he says, looking crestfallen. "Katniss…"

"I can't wait for the school year to be officially over so I won't have to be anywhere near you for two whole months."

I stalk over to the tables and take a seat, making sure there's no other seat available anywhere near me. I really don't want to talk to him anymore today. Just when I was beginning to think he was a decent enough person he goes and shows that he wants to use my old role as the Mockingjay to further his own purposes.

I try not to think about it while Mr. and Mrs. Matson speak to the students, faking a smile and trying to focus on the things they're saying. Once they are done talking I shift all my focus to the light lunch we're being served and to the children seated closest to me.

"Mrs. Matson says you'll be back in the fall, Miss Everdeen" says Ebba, a seventh grader who is the older sister of little Jake.

"That's the plan" I say, forcing myself not to let my irritation show in my voice.

"Will you show us how to use a bow?"

I pause just as I'm about to shove a forkful of pasta salad into my mouth.

"You… want to learn how to shoot a bow?"

"I wouldn't mind learning how to hunt" she says. "Neither would my brother, though I think he's a bit too young."

"Well, uhm… I'll have to think about it."

It hadn't crossed my mind that I could teach the children how to hunt. I'm not at all sure it's such a good idea. Teaching one or two of them is one thing, but the entire school? Ebba starts to talk about how fascinating she finds the bow and arrow to be and how she would love to be able to support her family through hunting and I welcome the distraction from my conversation with Max. We discuss it back and forth while we eat and I begin to toy with the idea of perhaps offering a couple of students special courses. I would enjoy passing on my hunting knowledge to a selected few, keeping the number small enough that we don't end up becoming each other's competition out in the woods, or begin to overhunt.

We finish lunch, and the delicious cake, and then Mr. Matson announces that we're to move back inside the school house to hand out the grades. Many of the children have their parents coming to watch them get their grades and even though it will be crowded indoors they seem to think it will be more orderly to do it there.

I rise from my seat but before I can begin to move towards the school house I feel a hand on my arm. I turn and see that it's Milo, Max and Moira's brother. It surprises me to see him. He barely speaks to me and keeps mostly to himself. What does he want?

"I'm sorry to bother you" he says, his voice low and gentle. "I was just wondering if we could speak before we go back inside?"

I look around, a bit unsure. I can't remember if I've ever had a one-on-one conversation with Milo.
"Uhm… Sure…"

"Good. Listen…" He looks away and makes an awkward face, then turns his eyes back to me. There's a steadiness there that draws my interest. "I know my brother spoke to you earlier and that it… didn't go very well."

"If that's what this is about then-" I begin, my irritation surfacing immediately.

"Max is not always the most subtle person" Milo cuts me off.

"Yeah, I've noticed."

"He told me how your conversation went and first of all I wanted to apologise for his rather blunt behaviour."

"You don't need to apologise for him" I say, pulling my arm away from his hand. "And let me guess, you're here to try and convince me to do what he didn't manage to?"

"Yes" he says. His frankness surprises me. "Or at least to think about it. I know he asked you to be there because having the Mockingjay support the fundraiser would be helpful to us and he told me you refused because you don't want to be seen only as the Mockingjay. It's entirely up to you if you want to be part of the fundraiser or not but I was just thinking…" He shrugs. "Well, what if you were to show up as Katniss Everdeen? Forget the Mockingjay, you're Katniss, and what kind of things does Katniss want to support? You're free to do as you like but it seems to me that one way of being seen as Katniss and not the Mockingjay is to establish what kind of things are important to you as an individual." He gives me a shy smile. "All I ask is that you consider it. You have our word that we won't use your name, or the name Mockingjay, to draw in the crowds if you do accept."

With that he leaves and begins to walk towards the school house. I'm quite surprised at what he said and it takes me a minute to digest it before I start walking towards the school as well. Attending the fundraiser does sound appealing to me if I can be just another person attending and not the draw.

Once I'm inside I keep to the back of the room, leaning back against the wall, trying to be as anonymous as possible. I can see some of the parents looking at me and I know I have to accept that people will do just that. Even here in District 12 I can't be anonymous anymore and even at this point when I've spent more than two years shying away from the public eye people still find the sight of me interesting. I realize Max has a point in that I can use my status to bring people to the fundraiser and help to finance the construction of the school. I can't help but think it's actually the government's job to pay for something like that but through Haymitch I know that Panem's finances aren't strong enough to finance everything that needs to be built in every district. If I can contribute in some way perhaps I have a responsibility to do so.

On the other hand I am much more attracted to Milo's suggestion that I just show up and don't act as an attraction for the evening. I like working at the school but I want it to be something I do with a low profile. As much as possible I want to live an anonymous life.

One by one the children get to walk up to the blackboard and have their grades handed to them by Mr. and Mrs. Matson. Max, Moira and Milo are standing up there with their parents but I remain hidden in the back of the room. If I were to stand up there it would no doubt take focus away from the children and this is their day, not mine.

When the ceremony of sorts is over many of the younger children, and a few of the older, hug Max, Moira, Milo or their parents. I remain standing in the back, almost wishing I could sink into the wall, wanting to observe but not participate. To my surprise one of the children comes up to me. A ten
year-old girl with dark skin and long, black hair tied up in a pretty green bow. I know her name is Spring but I've very few interactions with her during my time here. She's quiet and shy and doesn't ask many questions and the only one-on-one interaction I can remember us having is when I pointed out a squirrel to her just as it was about to climb a tree. I might have expected Charity or Jake or little Abigail to come up to me but not this girl.

"Will you be back in the fall?" she asks me in a voice that's so quiet I can barely hear her over the sounds of a small room full of talking people.

"Yeah" I nod.

Then she takes me completely by surprise by hugging me, wrapping her arms around my stomach. On a reflex I hug her back. When she pulls away she stands up on her tiptoes and whispers in my ear.

"The squirrel was the best part of school this year."

She then blushes and hurriedly returns to her younger sister and her parents but I find myself smiling and feeling rather good again. For some reason my mind goes to Prim, and instead of the thought of her being mostly painful this time it also feels kind of nice. I think Prim would have liked what I'm doing and been excited about it. I wonder if she would have also been positive to the idea of me being part of the fundraiser.

The good feeling evaporates when the door opens and Haymitch's face comes into view, looking decidedly grim. A cold hand grips my heart and I rush to the door and exit, closing it behind me before anyone else can notice that he's here, or notice that I've left the room. Now that I'm outside in the daylight I can see that Haymitch doesn't have the look he usually sports when something is really serious but it's clear as day that something is wrong or he wouldn't be here in the first place.

"What is it?" I ask.

"The boy had an accident." Quickly he holds up his hand as if to stop me from having a reaction. "Fell from a scaffold while working on a sign. Wouldn't have been so bad, it wasn't a high fall, but someway or other it dislocated his shoulder. I saw him fifteen minutes ago and he's alright under the circumstances."

"Dislocated his shoulder?" I echo with a frown, feeling worried even though Haymitch seems to want me to think I shouldn't be.

"He was taken to the medical facility and had it pulled back into place. Should be released within the hour. Just thought you'd like to know."

My frown deepens and I try to make sense of what he is telling me. I don't know all that much about traumatic injury but dislocating a shoulder from a fall seems a bit odd.

"I don't understand" I say. "Did he… try to grab on to something as he fell and dislocated it that way?"

Haymitch shakes his head.

"When I was at the medical station the doctor insinuated that he would have had to have suffered a dislocation before in order to get one from a fall like that."

A feeling of deep hatred washes through me.
"His mother?" I ask, though it's not really a question.

"Of course not" says Haymitch, almost angrily.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because while he's never been talkative when it comes to her he told me enough between your two arenas that I know her methods did not include pulling joints out of their sockets. His mother was no paragon of motherhood but she wasn't that cruel."

"Old wrestling injury?" I suggest instead, crossing my arms over my chest as I try to remember what exactly wrestling entailed.

Haymitch turns his face away, as if to make sure no one is listening, though there's not another person in sight.

"Personally I think it's something they did to him in the Capitol."

A painful, icy stab goes through my heart as I realize what he's saying.

"No..." I say in an exhale.

"Who knows what they had time to inflict upon him when they didn't need him to be presentable on air?"

I cover my mouth with my hand, a number of unpleasant images passing through my mind. I realize I don't want to know what they did. Knowing won't change what happened and it probably won't help Peeta. Especially if he doesn't remember it himself.

"Can I see him?" I ask.

"If you want to" says Haymitch but he sounds hesitant. "Lace is with him at the medical station."

Why did he add that bit of information? I ponder that question while I grab him by the arm and lead him down on the grass and away from the school. Any moment now the door will open and people will start coming out and I don't feel like talking to any of them right now nor explain why Haymitch is here.

I really, really want to go see Peeta and see for myself that he is doing alright but I wonder how awkward it will be if his fiancée is there with him. Just the thought of her getting to be summoned when he's hurt and getting to be there to offer him comfort and support makes me painfully jealous. Yet I think it is better to put up with that jealousy than to just head home and wonder how he is doing. Also, I want him to know that I'm there too.

"Okay, lead the way" I tell Haymitch. "I want to see Peeta."

An hour later I arrive back home, having stayed with Peeta and Lace until he was discharged. I'm pretty sure Lace did not appreciate my prolonged presence but I really don't give a damn. If Peeta
had insinuated that he would rather I left then I would have left but he seemed glad I was there.

It was difficult seeing him with his arm in a sling and clearly in pain but he kept a brave face on and
claimed it didn't hurt very much. I would have much liked to speak with the doctor who treated him
but I didn't get a chance to since it was a nurse who discharged him. I would also very much have
liked to have a moment with Peeta alone but that didn't happen either. The entire time I was there
Lace sat right beside him on the gurney, holding his uninjured hand in both of hers in what felt to me
like a possessive manner. If she wanted to mark her territory she was wasting her efforts. It's not like
there's a contest between us anymore. Even so it hurts to think about it, almost as much as it hurts
seeing Peeta with that injury. Truthfully part of the pain I'm feeling is also due to the reminder of
another time and another place when Peeta was in a lot of pain and I couldn't be there for him but I
force those thoughts from my mind, knowing I can't handle thinking about it.

My eyes go to the calendar on the wall as I walk into the kitchen. Each month has its own picture of
an animal and for this month it is a deer. Effie sent the calendar to me as a gift, apparently thinking I
would love looking at forest animals on my wall every day. I know the second-to-next month has a
picture of a hedgehog. I've already looked ahead and towards the end of it one day has been circled
with a black marker. Peeta's wedding day. I circled it myself, in part to give Peeta the illusion that I'm
looking forward to it if he were to see it, and in part to have a reminder for myself and not allow
myself to forget even for a day what is going to happen.

I sigh tiredly and reach up my hand to undo my braid, combing my fingers through my hair while I
walk slowly up the stairs to head for the shower. Less than three months until he marries Lace. For
seventy more days I can pretend that things might change or daydream that things were different to
begin with but I want to prevent myself from doing that. What's the point of fantasizing? Daydreams
like that can never turn to reality and all it ends up doing is hurting my heart. Peeta's not mine to
daydream about anyway, whether he is married or not.

I sit down heavily on my bed and begin to pull my pants down my thighs. Most of my clothes are ill-
fitting these days since I've gained muscle and weight over the past months and I'm now starting to
look like a normal and healthy twenty year-old rather than a scrappy scarecrow. I know I need to
buy new clothes. I just can't face that just yet. The idea of going to Lace for a new wardrobe feels
humiliating, even though I know she's a talented seamstress and will do a good job. Going to anyone
but her is out of the question; it will only lead to raised eyebrows and comments from people in town
about how I should take my business to her. Maybe I could get away with it right now since she is so
busy planning for the wedding but I haven't dared to look into it yet.

This is exactly the kind of issue I need to start to face and plan for. I cannot, I will not, rearrange my
life to avoid having to have more than absolutely necessary to do with Peeta's wife. I need to find
some way of coping with this and learning to be around her all the time and never let it show how
much I care about her husband.

I close my eyes hard when tears begin to burn in my eyes, willing the tears to go away. Why does it
have to hurt so badly? Why did this have to happen to me at all? I never wanted to fall in love with
anyone. I actively resisted it for as long as I could. There are so many people out there who want to
find love but never do, why waste it on someone like me who never wanted it to begin with?

Removing the last of my clothes I stand up and walk slowly towards the bathroom, feeling weary
with each step. Why can't I just get over him? That would be the by far best solution for everyone.
Peeta could marry Lace and live happily ever after and I wouldn't care at all, other than to be happy
for him. I more or less told Haymitch that I would get over him. In fact, I think I even told him it
would be easy. I pull the shower curtain aside and step in under the stream of hot water, thinking to
myself that perhaps what I need to do is simply tell myself that it will be easy, and maybe my heart
can for once follow my mind instead of doing what it chooses for itself.

Why shouldn't it be easy to get over someone? I've never had to try and to be honest I haven't actually tried getting over Peeta. I've been holding on to a hope I know is futile, and for what? It didn't turn out to pay off in the end. Better to move forward with my life. I should try to think rationally about this and formulate a plan and try to look at things from a logical standpoint. There's no use loving a man who loves another. It won't bring anybody any happiness. I just need a plan, a strategy, and then I will be able to do this.

All I have to do is look at him with the same eyes as before I fell. Maybe stop making apologies for his bad traits and weaknesses and instead focus on them and why they make him an undesirable partner. Instead of imagining "what ifs" where we are together and it's fulfilling and everything I long for and magical and perfect I ought to take it a step further and conjure up the image of what things would be like in the real, un-romanticized future. I need to stop thinking about how two people can share their whole lives together and never stop loving one another, like my parents would have if my father had gotten to live, and think about all those other people who start out in love but then things don't work out the way they thought they would. I imagine Peeta's parents were like that. There must have been something there at the start that made them want to marry one another and have three children. Even if Peeta and I could be together there's no guarantee that we would live happily ever after. Passion would cool eventually, we'd grow tired of one another, the spark would disappear… Would it really be lovely to wake up next to someone every morning for the rest of my life? Logically I should end up tired of seeing him beside me every morning and long for some solitude.

Yet still my heart says it would be, that any hardships would be worth it, and my mind slips back to what it would be like at the start. What it would feel like to be the one he kisses all the time, the one he caresses, the one he does things to that brings about sounds like those moans and mewls I try desperately to forget about. Knowing that I'm slipping into dangerous territory I reach for the knob that controls the water temperature and turn it significantly cooler.

I yelp when the colder water splashes over me, but at least it clears my head a little. Those passionate images aren't helpful because they cannot ever be reality. Peeta doesn't love me anymore and that's kind of a crucial detail. And even if he could learn to love me again what's to say we would still be in love five, ten, fifteen years down the line? People fall in and out of love all the time. Peeta himself is proof of that.

I will be proof of that.

I have to be.
I shiver slightly and run my hands up and down my arms to try and gather some warmth. Pulling my knees up I rest my brow against them for a moment, wondering to myself if there's any point in trying to go back to sleep. Then I scoff at myself for even thinking that might be possible.

Tossing the comforter aside I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stick my feet in my slippers. My right big toe gets caught in a hole and I groan, reminding myself to get a new pair. I've been telling myself that very thing since this winter when Buttercup was confined indoors during a snow storm and took out his frustration at not being able to hunt on my footwear. Grabbing my robe from a chair by the bed I stand up and wrap it around myself, deciding I should step outside for a few minutes and breathe in the cool, fresh air. Maybe it will help me fall back asleep.

Tiptoeing down the stairs I pull the robe tighter around my body, tying the belt sloppily. Then I head for the front door because it's closer. It doesn't matter much anyway since it's the middle of the night. Haymitch might be up but I actually wouldn't mind it if he saw me and came to check on me. Some human company wouldn't be the worst thing in the world right now.

As I step outside and close the door behind me I draw a deep breath full of fresh air. I love the way air smells at night time, especially during early summer. I begin to feel a little bit better already, my body relaxing as the horrible images from my nightmare slowly loosen their grip on me. I think I'm getting better at handling them. I can't expel the images from my mind but I can at least tell myself that they were not real.

Then my eyes land on a shape three houses down. Peeta, sitting out on his front porch, hunched over. My heart drops. What is he doing out here at this hour? Is his shoulder hurting him? Why is he all alone? He's engaged to be married, he shouldn't have to face things alone in the middle of the night.

Knowing that I probably shouldn't, but unable to stay away, I kick off the slippers and walk down the wooden steps to the grassy lawn below. I walk over the grass until I reach asphalt, following the road all the way over to Peeta's house. He doesn't hear me nor does he see me coming, his knees bent like mine were earlier and his good arm resting against them with his brow against his arm.

"Peeta?" I say the name gently but he still jolts, staring up at me with wide eyes full of fear. It pains my heart to see it. "Peeta… Are you okay?"

"Probably about as okay as you are" he answers in a raspy voice, looking me up and down and seemingly understanding why I'm out in the middle of the night.

I'm not sure if I should walk up the remaining few feet to him and sit down beside him. Am I allowed to do that? He's another woman's fiancé. I'm not sure what the exact boundaries are that come with that.

"Bad dream, huh?" I say lamely.

"Bad dream" he nods. "And you?"

"Horrible dream."

He smiles faintly though it doesn't seem happy in the slightest.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"So what are you doing out here all by your lonesome?" I ask nervously.

"Didn't want to wake her."
"You think she'd mind?"

He doesn't answer. I can see that he's shivering but something tells me it's more than just the temperature. He moves a little and his face winces in pain. His arm is in a sling and it doesn't look particularly comfortable.

"I'm surprised you didn't sleep through the night" I say. "Whatever they gave you for your arm ought to have knocked you out good. I know how woozy I get from morphling."

"All I'm on is acetaminophen."

The word falls out of his mouth so easily that it surprises me. I don't recognize it and I don't think I could pronounce it that easily without adequate practice. Whatever it is it seems to be only a mild analgesic and it annoys me that they didn't offer him anything stronger.

"You should have asked for morphling."

"Doesn't really go with the other meds I'm on."

I didn't even know he was on any meds. I'm compelled to ask him about it but the look on his face tells me this is not the proper time or place. Something about the look in his eyes makes me uncomfortable. It's dark out but the light on his porch is sufficient enough that I can tell that there's something more in those blue eyes than just the pain of a dislocated shoulder or a nightmare.

"What did you dream?" I ask.

"Doesn't matter. I don't remember. What did you dream?"

The images from my nightmare come back to me and I shiver.

"Nothing I would like to talk about."

The look in his eyes changes a bit, turns softer.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asks. "Want to come inside, have some hot chocolate?"

I feel tempted to ask if Lace won't mind but the thought of her being asleep in that house right now makes me unenthusiastic about taking him up on the offer.

"Thanks but I'm good."

He tilts his head to the side.

"You came all the way over here in the middle of the night… You sure I can't help you feel better somehow? I know I was the one who ended the whole sleep-over thing but you're here now…"

"I came over because I saw you sitting here. You sure you're fine?"

He sighs heavily and looks away, turning his face away from the light source. It's too dark to tell but I think I can see wetness in his eyes. It's clear something is pining him, more than just his arm.

"I lied when I said I had a bad dream."

"Okay" is all I manage in response.

"Never managed to fall asleep." He inhales deeply and exhales in a shudder. "I… remember how I
hurt my shoulder the first time."

He doesn't say anything else for almost two minutes and I don't dare to utter a single syllable. I don't know what I'm supposed to say. I don't even know how I want him to continue. Do I want to know more or would I rather never know? And would saying something now make him talk about it or clam up?

Finally he speaks again, offering me only the faintest details but still enough to make me sick to my stomach.

"After they… hung me up..." he says, still looking away from me, "they left me there. And went to lunch."

That is all he says about it. It's more than enough to make my mind try to fill in the rest on its own. Images worse than the ones in my nightmare begin to race through my mind. Hung him up how? Under what circumstances? Did his shoulder dislocate right away or did it happen during that lunch break? Was it just the one dislocated shoulder or was it both? How long did they leave him like that exactly?

"I don't think I can sleep tonight" he says in a small voice.

Without hesitating I walk up to him and sit down right beside him, close enough that our thighs and sides press together. Being this close I can tell for sure that he's shivering and I contemplate offering him my robe but I doubt he will accept the offer.

"You could call the doctor."

"It's the middle of the night."

"So? Who gives a damn, it's his job."

"I don't think he could help me much anyway... It's just... I don't remember much about being in the Capitol, you know? The things I do remember are horrid. Dr. Aurelius thinks I've blocked out the worst memories and if the things I remember are the good times I'd really not pick at that particular scab."

"Can you go on for the rest of your life just ignoring it?" I ask softly.

"I don't know" he sighs. He closes his eyes and now I definitely see a tear falling. "My shoulder hurts like hell right now. Remembering what it felt like just hanging there for however long..."

I move my arm to wrap around his shoulders, then retract it when I realize he probably doesn't want anything touching said shoulder at the moment. So I just sit there impotently, watching him cry, wondering what the really bad memories would entail. I wonder if they ever told him that they were subjecting him to it because of me and because of my appearances on television. No doubt they did. It would serve as buttering him up for the torture, no doubt irresistible to them.

He keeps crying, tears falling down his face and his chest heaving with the quiet sobs. Then suddenly his breathing changes, each breath coming in a fast huff, their frequency increasing. He opens his eyes wide and for a second turns his face towards me. What I see in his eyes has barely registered before he's flown to his feet and moved to reach the porch railing. I'm on my feet as well, instinctively keeping a couple of yards of distance between us, searching my mind for a way to quell the attack before it fully hits but coming up with nothing.

Peeta's left hand, the one not in a sling, grabs a hold of the bannister and grabs it so tight his knuckles
go white. The groans that escape him are terrible and he bows his head as he fights the viciousness that threatens to overcome him. It dawns on me that just one hand is not enough to help him hold on to reality and my heart begins to pound loud enough that I hear each beat resound in my ears but I can't seem to make myself move. Peeta turns to look at me again, his teeth gritted, and when our eyes meet I see no trace of the real him. Still my feet seem frozen to the ground.

"Peeta..." I say. "Peeta don't... Don't let them do this to you. Or to me."

He tilts his head back for a second and inhales deeply through his nose, some small measure of sanity coming back into his eyes. Before I can react, and in a move that seems entirely deliberate, he slams his wounded shoulder into the railing.

The cry that escapes his lips makes my blood freeze and I close my eyes hard, unable to watch. I hear a thud and open my eyes to see him down on the ground, passed out. I'm at his side, down on the wet grass, in a heartbeat, cradling his head in my lap.

"Peeta." Not so gently I give him a shake. "Peeta." I shake him more violently. "Peeta!"

Somewhere in the distance I hear a door slamming and shortly thereafter Haymitch comes running up and grabs me by the shoulders.

"Move away, sweetheart."

I protest but he grabs me harder and pushes me aside. The door to Peeta's house opens and Lace comes out, eyes wide and mouth open. From where she's standing she can't see Peeta but she must have looked out the window upstairs before coming down to the door because she hurries down from the porch and knees beside him the same way I was doing moments ago.

"Oh my God" she says in a trembling voice. "What happened? Peeta?"

Haymitch moves her aside too, ignoring her angry protests. Her face turns towards me and I see shock and confusion in her eyes but also accusation. I steel myself for her anger but she doesn't say a word to me, turning her attention back to Peeta. She begins speaking to him, shock and worry in her voice, her hands cradling his face. Haymitch grabs a hold of him and lifts him up and she rises together with him, her hands never leaving Peeta.

"Haymitch..." I say.

"He's out cold" he answers the question I haven't asked. He, and therefore also Lace, begins to move towards his own house and I take a step to follow them but he stops and gives me a hard look. "No."

"Haymitch I have to come with you" I insist.

"It was a flashback, yes?" When I don't answer his voice hardens. "Yes?"

I swallow hard and nod.

"Yes" I croak.

"Then I'd rather not set him off again once he comes to." Although it's dark he must be seeing the turmoil written on my face because he softens. "You go back to your house do whatever it is you do to wind down."

"He needs a doctor" I say in a trembling voice. "He... He slammed his arm in..."
"Then go call a doctor."

I nod. I know I ought to hurry but I can't bring myself to pass by them. Instead I follow a few steps behind as Haymitch carries the unconscious Peeta to his house, Lace keeping up with his pace. The door is open and I stop by the porch and watch Haymitch carry him inside. As I force myself to walk back to my own house I turn and see through the window how he lays Peeta down on the couch and how Lace kneels beside him and fusses over him. It is only now that I register the tears that are falling down my own cheeks. Even though I know Haymitch is right and I oughtn't to be near him when he wakes up again I still deeply begrudge that other woman the right to take care of him now and be beside him. I know his fiancée is probably perfectly capable of taking care of him but I find myself wishing that she wasn’t, especially since in this situation I'm not.

With a heavy heart and tear filled eyes I walk inside my house, closing the door behind me, knowing I won't be getting a single moment of sleep for the rest of the night. Still I walk up the stairs to my bedroom and crawl underneath the sheets, staring blankly at the wall, Peeta's cry of pain echoing in my ears for hours.

Eventually I do fall asleep. It doesn't happen until early morning when the sun has begun to rise and I sleep restlessly, free from nightmares but feeling nowhere near rested when I wake up. I have to force myself to get out of bed and get dressed and I don't feel like doing anything at all for the remainder of the day but sit around the house and wait for nightfall. Knowing it's dangerous to go down that road I grab my game bag and my hunting boots and put my hair up in a braid. If nothing else a trip to the woods will give me some fresh air.

When I step outside the door I freeze for a moment. Peeta is sitting on the porch steps, his back turned to me, not turning his head to look at me even though he clearly heard me open the door. I feel nervous as I close the door behind me and take a step closer to him.

"Peeta."

"I came by…" he begins, sounding nervous too. "I came by to… to apologise for what happened last night."

"Wasn't your fault" I say after a moment's hesitation.

"It most definitely wasn't yours."

I stop right beside him, unsure if I should sit down or if it's better that I stay out of sight. Is there a reason why he hasn't turned to look at me?

"How are you feeling?" I ask.

"Woke up at the medical station, in their intensive care section."

I swallow nervously.
"That bad?"

Finally he turns his head and briefly looks up at me.

"Well, obviously they let me go home so I'm not in any serious condition. They just decided to give me some heavy pain drugs and because of my other meds they wanted to keep me on a monitor to make sure I didn't... have a bad reaction or something."

"So you're pain-free?"

"Not exactly" he says. "Once I woke up I didn't want to stay there so they put me back on the lighter meds. The good news is I didn't re-dislocate my shoulder."

"Why did you do it?" I ask, even though I know the answer. "Why did you hurt yourself like that?"

"It was better to pass out or at least incapacitate myself than to have an attack and possibly hurt you."

"I could have defended myself against you."

"You should never have to and I cannot bear the thought of it." He closes his eyes and draws a shaky breath. "Katniss I can't stop thinking about what I remembered yesterday. I don't want to think about it. I don't know how to function thinking about it. And I'm scared. What worse memories have been suppressed? What did they do to me that is too bad for me to remember and what will happen when I do remember? Something worse than 'just' an attack?"

I sit down slowly but keep myself sitting behind him to give him a bit of personal space. Hopefully that will help prevent triggering another attack.

"So have you talked to Lace about this?" I ask.

"No, not really. Not at any depth. I've told her the short version, pretty much the same things I've told you, but beyond that..." He sighs. "I mean, what's the point? She can't help me with this. Nobody can."

I can't help but wonder if that's really the truth. After all, he's here, isn't he? He's seeking out my company. For all I know he could have been sitting here on my porch for hours, waiting for me to come out the door. Maybe it's just wishful thinking talking but I can't stop myself from wondering if he's here because he feels it too, the way I do after a nightmare, that only one person can truly understand.

Ever so carefully I scoot closer and wrap my arm around him, making sure I'm only touching his healthy shoulder and not the injured one. I lean forward a little so that our cheeks are side by side and I press mine gently against his, feeling the stubble on his cheek. He shivers a little but doesn't ask me to stop and doesn't move away. He seems in control of himself, no attack pending.

"Peeta promise me that you will call dr. Aurelius" I say. "He might not be able to help you either but it's worth a shot."

"Alright" he says. "If you want me to I will."

"I want you to."

We stay like that for a long while. Even though the situation that brought us here is horrible the feeling of his body close to mine, his cheek pressed against mine, brings me a kind of peace that I've never known with anyone but him. I don't want to ever move from this spot. Closing my eyes I
wonder if he feels the same way too.

Chapter End Notes

I mentioned this somewhere in the comments but figured it's worth a mentioning here too - dr. Aurelius will most likely not make an "on-page" appearance. I've yet to figure out how to write a scene with him in a way that keeps me interested so I don't see myself being able to write anything that keeps anyone else interested. He'll play a role, just not "on-page".

What Peeta alludes to have been subjected to is an actual torture method used in Medieval times. There's a name for it but I didn't feel like looking it up.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I like to refer to this as the "dinner chapter" myself, since it's basically centered around Haymitch, Katniss and Peeta having dinner. The first part was originally written for an earlier chapter but didn't work all that well so I removed it. I oftentimes save "deleted scenes" for a while and when I started working on this chapter I realized that if I re-worked the scene I could use it here.

Anyways, personally I think the last scene of the chapter is a little disjointed but since there's alcohol involved it's kind of meant to be so I hope it works okay.

As always, big thanks to all you amazing commentors!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Top of the morning to you, sweetheart!"

I roll my eyes at Haymitch's attempt at a witty greeting. It's almost five o'clock in the afternoon but I have no doubt he woke up less than an hour ago, skipped taking a shower and put on whatever clothes he discarded by his bed this morning. I know there's a reason why he gets most of his sleep during the daytime but sometimes I think it's time for him to start talking to dr. Aurelius, just like Peeta and I are court-ordered to do.

A month has gone by since the incident with Peeta's shoulder and the attack. In that time the weather has gotten hotter, Peeta's shoulder has healed and I have been persuaded to participate in the fundraiser which will be held a few weeks from now. I find myself missing going to the school house Mondays through Fridays, once again having more free time than what is good for me, and to avoid spending too much time out here in the Victors' Village I've started spending at least one day a week at the school to help out with various things that need to be prepared. I've made peace with Max and we're back to our usual banter, though sometimes I have to bite my tongue not to say something incredibly harsh. These days my desire to spew icy comments have less to do with him and more to do with Lace, who seems to be spending an awful lot of time out here. She's more reserved towards me now, no more talk of sisterhood, but she still tries to socialise with me and include me in the wedding planning on occasion, no matter how little interest I show. Then again, I don't dare to show too little interest.

Thankfully tonight it's just me, Peeta and Haymitch. We haven't had dinner together in over a week thanks to the heat but we decided to meet up today despite the overbearing temperature.

"You seem awfully chirpy this afternoon" I say to Haymitch, casting a glance at the dark clouds above. It's been very hot for several days now, a kind of oppressing, sultry heat, and by the looks of the skies it's going to culminate in thunder. I look forward to it. Once it's over the air will be cooler and easier to breathe.
"I'm always chirpy" lies Haymitch, giving me a smirk as I walk up to him.

"Did you bring something for dinner?" I ask. The weather is giving me a headache and I'm not in the mood for his witty banter.

"Yes" he answers, holding up a bag of groceries for me to see. "Fresh perch. Bought it from Shelly Sachs just this morning."

I nod appreciatively. Shelly Sachs is a woman who moved here from District 4. She owns a small shop where she sells fresh fish and seafood. Most of what she sells is cod or trout but every now and then she'll have something more exclusive that she imported from her home district, such as salmon, shrimp or perch. I like eating fish and Haymitch knows quite a few tricks for how to prepare them, having been taught by Maggs and Finnick and a few other District 4 mentors he used to associate with.

"You think we'll get thunder?" I ask, nodding at the dark clouds above.

"Seems like it" he answers. "Why do you ask? Grown scared of lightning?"

"No" I say. "I'm hoping we'll have a thunderstorm. The air is getting almost difficult to breathe."

"Wuss" snickers Haymitch under his breath, as we leave the road and walk the path up to Peeta's house.

I shoot him a look as I climb the three steps up to the front door, a little annoyed but at the same time a bit amused by his choice of derogatory word. Having spent time with Max I've grown accustomed to far worse things by way of name-calling, although Max never calls me by any of them. I knock on the door but don't bother waiting for an answer, opening it just in time to hear barking.

"Perfect" I groan under my breath.

We've barely made it inside before Shep, that big hairy dog, comes trotting in from another room, eagerly waving his tail and barking. Any measure I had of good mood today instantly vanishes and I almost wish I could turn around and go back home. We only meet up for dinner twice a week nowadays, and we've skipped the past three, and now we can't even have that? If the dog is here that means Lace is here and I really don't want to see her. I don't want her to join Peeta, Haymitch and me for dinner. She gets Peeta five days out of the week, does she have to join in on the two evenings I get with him? These two days of the week are a highlight to me. I look forward to them to an almost embarrassing degree, clinging to what remains of the life I'm used to. I won't be able to enjoy one moment of it with Lace here as a reminder that whatever time I have with Peeta is miles away from being as significant to him as it is to me.

"Shep!" I hear her voice calling. "Shep don't bark at them!"

The dog does stop barking, but hardly because she commanded him to. He's gotten a whiff of the fresh fish in Haymitch's bag and he's eagerly sniffing it, his tail wagging with almost furiously eagerness. I glare at the dog while I take my boots off, thinking to myself that dogs that size, and that hungry, are nothing but a nuisance.

"Don't tell me you're wasting as much as a fishbone on that thing" I scowl.

A loud whistle gets the dog's attention and he whimpers a bit but backs away from Haymitch and
goes back to whatever room he came from. I'm starting to feel even more annoyed. Peeta knows we're here but he hasn't said a word or come to welcome us. Right now I don't find him all that wonderful, rather I think he's being rude and ungrateful. We're showing up at his door to prepare food and he can't even bother to come to the door and greet us?

"Where are you, boy?" bellows Haymitch, sounding amused rather than annoyed, which makes me scowl at him.

"Sitting room!" comes the answer. "Just a minute!"

Haymitch cackles and I roll my eyes, shoving my boots to the side with my foot. Normally I'd put them on the shoe rack but I'm not in the mood for being nice.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"Nothing" grins Haymitch. "Just seems like we may have... interrupted something."

I turn my face away, feeling nauseous all of a sudden. Very reluctantly I follow Haymitch as he heads for the kitchen, wishing I could think of a reason not to move closer to the sitting room where Haymitch seems to think something private is going on. Once inside the kitchen Haymitch walks over to the counter and sets his bag down, gently swapping away the dog who's reappeared and is showing a lot more interest in the food we brought than Peeta has done so far.

The kitchen leads straight to the sitting room and there's no door to separate the two rooms, only an archway. Even though the last thing I would ever want to see is Peeta and Lace in a compromising position my eyes go in that direction, almost as if against my own will. I spot them immediately. To my surprise, and great relief, they are both fully clothed and sitting next to each other on the couch, focusing on something on the coffee table and not on each other. Curiosity draws me closer and I walk through the kitchen, stopping in the archway. A large box lies open on the table, the lid standing on end to show the picture painted on it, and the table is full of pieces to a jigsaw puzzle. They have finished the frame of the puzzle and a few other patches here and there but they are clearly at the early stages of laying the puzzle.

"Seriously?" scoffs Haymitch behind me, startling me. "Here I thought you were up to something fun and all you're doing is laying a puzzle."

Peeta looks up and my irritation comes flooding back. He doesn't look the slightest bit apologetic that he hasn't been a good host so far. If anything he looks a tad surprised that Haymitch doesn't seem to think they're doing anything worthwhile.

"What exactly did you think we would be doing?" he asks. "We knew you were coming at five."

He turns his attention back to the puzzle. I notice that the box looks a little worn and torn but the pieces themselves seem to be in pristine condition. No doubt it has been sitting on a shelf for years on end, never actually taken down and opened until today. Each house in the Victors' Village comes with three puzzle boxes, one with 500 pieces, one with 1000 pieces and one with 1500 pieces. The Capitol deemed the art of laying jigsaw puzzles a worthwhile pastime for victors and I know some actually found it therapeutic. Prim completed the 500 piece puzzle in my house during a snowstorm but personally I never took an interest in them. I didn't think Peeta had either.

"Were you extremely bored?" I ask dryly.

"Huh?" Peeta looks up at me with a confused face. "What? No, I've always wanted to get started on one of these but I never got around to it. I suggested we start with 500 pieces but wild-and-crazy
here," he says, stopping to give Lace a playful nudge with his elbow, "called me a sissy and insisted that we start with the 1000 piece one. We said we would only get started on it but it's strangely addictive."

"Peeta I'm seriously not interested" I say dryly. "We're getting started on dinner. Care to help or are you too busy working on your masterpiece?"

Without waiting for an answer I walk over to the counter and shove the dog away, thinking to myself that if I had my bow and arrows that dog would be forever out of this kitchen. Haymitch is giving me a look which I ignore. I reach instead for the packaged fish to start preparing it. I grab a sharp knife and get to work, hearing the first rumble of thunder in the distance as the knife cuts through the scales of the fish.

In the corner of my eye I see Peeta coming in to the kitchen and walking up to me but I wish he'd keep his distance. I don't feel like being admonished, no more than I feel like making pleasant small talk. I want to call him out on inviting Lace to join us for dinner without asking Haymitch or me first but Haymitch seems annoyingly fine with it so I can't afford to let my dislike of her show. Especially not when she's within earshot.

"Is something the matter, Katniss?" asks Peeta. His voice is low, as if he doesn't think Lace needs to hear this conversation.

"I'm hungry" I mutter. "This damn weather is giving me a headache." The dog buffs my thigh with its nose and I feel I might just forgo the bow and just use a knife instead. "And get that damn dog away from the kitchen!" I snarl, causing Haymitch to sharply turn his face towards me, apparently shocked by my failure to love the stupid pooch.

"Come on, Shep" says Peeta, snapping his fingers and pointing to the sitting room. "Out you go."

The dog whimpers but obeys. I let go of the knife and grab the edge of the countertop for a second, taking a deep breath to try and gather my composure. Making an ass out of myself isn't going to do me any favours.

"Here, I can do that" offers Peeta and reaches for the knife.

"I've got it" I say with a scowl, grabbing the knife before he gets a chance to. "Just… Just go back to your stupid jigsaw puzzle."

He looks confused, and a little hurt. I can see it even though my eyes are on the fish and he's only in the corner of my eye. I grit my teeth and hate myself for not having better control of my emotions. Oddly, at the same time I wish I had even less control of myself and would simply excuse myself, feed them some lie about feeling sick and then head out the door and go back home. What stops me is the refusal to cede even an inch to Lace. She might not know it but I am most definitely competing against her for Peeta's time and attention. It's painfully obvious that I'm losing by a landslide but that won't stop me from holding on to the mere fragments I have left. I want to move on with my life but not leave Peeta behind altogether. He's still my friend, part of my family. This is my evening with Peeta and I'll be damned if I'll give up as much as one minute of it.

"I'm not sure there's enough food here for four" I can't resist muttering, though I immediately regret it and quickly keep speaking to try and hide my jealousy and pettiness. "Good thing I'm not hungry."

"You just said you were" says Haymitch.

"Shut up, Haymitch, who asked you?" I snarl.
Peeta looks from me to Haymitch and back again. I seem to have successfully killed his good mood and I force myself not to sigh heavily. I didn't want to ruin his evening. I wanted to make it better. He's probably thinking of how much nicer it was before I walked through the door and behaved like the thundercloud was hanging over my head instead of over the district.

Without further comment I continue preparing the fish while Peeta rummages through the cabinets to find something to go with it and Haymitch grabs some fresh vegetables from his bag. Lace comes into the kitchen and joins us, setting the table and comfortably making small talk with the guys. She tries to talk to me as well but I only give monosyllabic answers. It's impossible not to notice the way she and Peeta seem to casually touch each other every time they pass each other by, or how Peeta runs his fingers through her hair whenever she's close enough, or just how comfortable they are around each other. Even I can't accuse them of behaving inappropriately around other people but the fact that keep their displays of affection small and yet they are still so noticeable bothers me.

When I'm done with the fish Peeta plops it into a frying pan and I put the cutting board and knife in the sink, reaching for a new set to start cutting up the vegetables. Haymitch's hand on my wrist stops me just as I'm about to get to work.

"I think we're all safer if someone else wields the knife" he says, ignoring my scowl.

Suddenly finding myself without something to do I excuse myself to go to the bathroom, just to get out of the room for a moment. Closing the bathroom door behind me I breathe a heavy sigh, wondering how I will be able to get through this dinner without having an outburst of some sort.

"Okay, let's have it" says Haymitch the moment Peeta's front door has closed behind us and we're back out in the hot summer evening where, despite one rumbling, no thunder has begun to roll. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing's bothering me" I snarl. "Except for you."

"Sweetheart, you have never been good at disguising a feeling" he replies, which I find to be a rather ironic statement all things considered. "You were a pain in the ass all evening and I want to know why."

I only scoff. Determined to ignore him I shove my hands in the pockets of my jeans shorts and walk homeward in long strides. Haymitch follows behind me but when I stride past his house he follows me instead of going inside. With a scowl I turn to look at him.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, you can tell me what the hell is making you act like such a sourpuss."

I scoff again at being called such a thing, something that seems eons beneath what I am feeling and how I am behaving. Unfortunately I know Haymitch well enough to know that when he's putting this face forward I won't be able to get him to drop it.

"I'm just exhausted and the stuffy air is getting on my last nerve. And that goddamn dog is the most
annoying thing on four legs I have ever encountered!"

"Is that so?" says Haymitch. It's clear that he's enjoying himself now. He can barely keep himself from grinning. "More annoying than the mutts in the arena?"

"Those were threatening rather than annoying" I retort childishly.

"There's still something more going on here" he deduces with little effort. "You might as well tell me what it is, or else I will show you I can be ten times as annoying as that dog, who for the record was rather fun to have around."

I get even angrier with him, crossing my arms over my chest.

"What's it to you?"

"Just tell me."

"I just…" I avert my eyes, tapping my foot against the pavement. I realize he's truly not going to give up this time and I might as well give him part of the truth. Hopefully it will be enough to keep him off the scent of the real issue. "I just wasn't in the mood for company. This weather is really bugging me and I wanted to just relax with you and Peeta but instead she's there. I mean what the hell is she even doing there on one of our dinner nights? Peeta has never invited her before and for the record I think it's wrong that he did so without asking us first."

Haymitch looks at me for a second with disbelief written all over his face. I begin to feel worried that he might have read the subtext but to my surprise he bursts out into a bellowing laughter that makes me fume with rage.

"You are just too amusing, sweetheart!" he manages between fits of laughter.

"That's it, you can just go to hell" I snarl, throwing my arms out. I turn on my heel and begin to stomp off towards my house. When I feel Haymitch's hand on my arm I spin around and barely keep myself from slapping him. "Don't you touch me!"

"Geez, sweetheart, I didn't know I hit such a nerve." He's still far too amused by my current mood but at least he's no longer laughing.

"Well what is so damn funny?" I demand, crossing my arms over my chest again.

"You, being annoyed that Lace is there when we have dinner. Has it not occurred to you that in a few weeks they will be married and she will be living there with him? Now, Peeta and I have already discussed changing our dinner venue because we probably need to have that space with just the three of us, though maybe just once a month or so. But no matter how you shake it that girl, and her cute little doggie, will be living under the same roof as Peeta until death parts them. Throwing a temper tantrum over her being there just one time seems a bit… Well, let's just say it's so typically you to fail to see the big picture and instead get worked up over the details."

I don't say anything at first. I feel like I have been hit with a physical blow. I don't know if it's the realization that she will indeed be living with Peeta soon or the fact that I haven't truly realized it before that stuns me the most.

"Of course I know she'll be there every night" I blurt out, trying my best to cover my embarrassment. "Which is why it bothers me so much now. We don't have all that many nights left to have dinner by ourselves at Peeta's. He should have asked us before he invited her over."
Haymitch is still grinning madly and betrayal is starting to rise inside me along with anger. Why is he doing this? He knows this is a sensitive subject for me. He has to know how hurtful this is, even if my claims of not being in love with Peeta were true. It's not like Haymitch to mock me this way, to be entertained by my pain.

That's when I realize what he's doing. He's trying to goad me. This is not about him being amused or insensitive, but that he doesn't believe me when I say I don't have romantic feelings for Peeta. He's trying to get me to slip up and confess where my heart truly lies. In realizing that I calm down significantly and I'm able to see that there's a glint of something else in his eyes, something more than just amusement. He's playing a game, calling my bluff. I'll be damned if I let him win.

I snort and cross my arms over my chest, shaking my head, trying to get into the right character. I know I suck at playing this sort of game but I do think I can fool him if I want to badly enough.

"It's just this weather" I sigh. "I wish the thunder would start rolling already."

"Uh-huh" he says with disbelief.

"You're absolutely right, though, Lace is going to move in with Peeta and be around all the time once they're married. I suppose I wasn't very… hospitable today. Perhaps I'm being childish even, expecting to have dinner with just the boys."

"You're being something, alright" he smirks.

"It's just been a rough couple of weeks, with the heat and agreeing to go to the stupid fundraiser and everything… I suppose we ought to invite Lace to join us every time we have dinner." I nod slightly to myself as if thinking to myself that it's a good idea. I really, really hope Haymitch won't call this bluff but I'm determined not to let him know how much I'm really hurting. "After all, if she marries Peeta she'll be family too."

"Let's not get carried away" says Haymitch, no longer sounding amused. "Like I said, the boy and I both agree we need some time just the three of us."

"It's fine either way" I say with a shrug but I can't stop myself from cringing at the thought of calling Lace family. "I mean, yeah, I wouldn't mind still having time for just the three of us but it's inevitable that things will change, right?"

Haymitch studies me intently and I look back at him, steeling myself to look sincere. We stand like that for several seconds. Somewhere in the distance I can hear the thunder beginning to roll.

"Okay, then" says Haymitch. His tone and the look in his eyes suggest that he knows I caught on to him and he can't decide if I'm outright lying or just overdoing it. "I'm going to go herd my geese in their pen before your precious thunder storm hits. You have a nice evening with your own bad mood, sweetheart."

"I'm sure my evening will be lovely" I say with a smirk. "Perhaps I'll dig up a jigsaw puzzle to entertain myself."

He snorts in amusement and I give him a genuine smile, feeling a bit relieved and honestly a little amused. I turn around and begin to walk towards my own house but his voice stops me before I've reached the door.

"It's when, by the way."

I turn and give him a frown.
"Huh?"

"You said if she marries him. It's when."

"Here's to dinner that none of us had to cook!" says Haymitch, raising a large tankard of ale. "May there be many more ahead."

"Here, here" says Peeta with a grin.

"Cheers" I add.

Peeta and I both lift our own tankards, about half the size of Haymitch's, and the three of us clink our jugs together and have a drink. It's the first time I've ever tried ale and I can't say I care much for it. Haymitch on the other hand downs at least six or seven large gulps before setting it down with a bang.

"That is good drinking" he declares.

"Well, it's a beverage" offers Peeta with little enthusiasm, though he follows it up with a grin that shows he's only teasing.

The three of us are sitting at a table in one of the restaurants, having decided to go out for dinner for once. It's implied, but not spoken, that it's a form of send-off for Peeta in lieu of the bachelor parties young men have lately taken to throw for friends who are getting married. The wedding is in two weeks but tonight nobody is talking about it. Even Peeta himself has said he doesn't want to talk about it tonight. This evening is for the three of us, and nothing else. I can't help but wonder if it's one of the very last we'll have, and if he believes it to be.

"How long do you figure before they bring the food out?" asks Haymitch, looking around for the waitress even though it's only been about five minutes since we placed our orders. "I need to go to the little boys' room."

"I'm sure you have ample time" says Peeta, sipping from his ale.

"Well you are the only one of us who would know."

He rises and heads off in the direction of the bathrooms. Peeta follows him with his eyes and then turns to me, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

"What do you say we play a little joke on old Haymitch?"

"A joke? Like what?"

"I don't know exactly. Something to put him on the spot a little, in a nice way. He's accused me of wanting to have dinner like this instead of a party so I can avoid getting publically humiliated per new traditions so I thought it might be fun to turn the tables on him a bit. A little friendly retribution for him shoving us into the spotlight over and over when we were tributes and victors."
I only need a second to mull it over. It would be fun to play a prank on Haymitch, to put him on the spot a little. I can't help but feel he deserves it. I cross my arms over the table and lean forward. Peeta does the same and we lower our voices as we engage in our conspirator talk.

"Any suggestions?" asks Peeta.

I take a quick look around the room.

"Well there's a microphone over there – we could announce that he's going to sing a song for everyone." Peeta's mischievous grin encourages me to go on. "There's a pool table. We could enter him in a contest or something."

"Although do we really want to place a pointy stick in his hands?"

"Good point" I chuckle.

"Let's see…" says Peeta, looking around the room. "You know, I think this place as a mechanical bull in the other room."

"A what?"

Peeta leans in closer and begins to whisper the explanation in my ear but he cuts himself off about halfway through, leans back and grabs his tankard. I'm confused for a moment until Haymitch comes plopping down on the seat next to Peeta's.

"Food not here yet?"

"Your powers of observation are sensational" smirks Peeta.

"If I were you I wouldn't speak in such mocking tones to somebody who's got a key to your house" replies Haymitch.

"Yeah, I might be asking for that back."

I roll my eyes at them but enjoy the comfortable smiles they share. It feels like it's been a while since the three of us had a good time like this together. All the issues we've been dealing with for the past months seem to have been set aside for the evening and we're all just focusing on having a good time together. Peeta launches into a long story about how the other day he was lying on the ground underneath a tree to try and sketch a squirrel sitting on the branch and almost got mauled when Buttercup came shooting over him to capture the animal. He's just finished with the story when the waitress returns with our meals.

"Veal ragout" smiles Haymitch, taking a deep breath through his nose. "I must say these restaurants aren't a half-bad idea. Sweetheart why don't you ever kill a deer and bring it home for supper?"

"Yeah, because you know how to make ragout" I snicker.

"I could learn."

"It would probably take you going through the entire deer to figure it out."

As we begin to eat our meals silence falls between us in that comfortable way it can only do with people you know very well. I'm about halfway through my pork chops when somebody comes up and stops by our table. I look up and see Max which brings an immediate scowl to my face. What is he doing here?
"I thought it looked like you from behind and that scowl tells me I'm right" he says with a slightly nervous smile, glancing at Peeta and Haymitch. "Never thought I'd see you at a place like this."

"Family dinner" I say.

"Oh."

"Which would be your cue to leave" I say in a teasing tone.

"Okay, I know when my presence is not wanted" he says with a slight smile.

"That would be the first time so far, then" I retort with a smirk.

"Charming as always" he chuckles. He turns to Peeta and nods. "Hey Peeta."

"Hey Max."

Max says something else directed at me but I'm momentarily too stunned to hear what he's saying. I really don't want anyone to pick up on my reaction so I hide my face behind my tankard as I take a few gulps of ale. How does he know Peeta? Well, how he knows who Peeta is doesn't exactly amount to a mystery, but how does Peeta know him?

When I don't respond to whatever Max is saying he turns from the table and begins to leave. I don't even notice until Haymitch nods in his direction and talks to me.

"So who's that?"

"He works at the school."

It's Peeta who answers. My mind is still working a mile a minute to figure out the connection between the two men but Haymitch moves the conversation over to other topics, seemingly having lost interest in Max already.

Dinner continues and Haymitch needs another bathroom break after we've ordered drinks and before they serve dessert. The second he's out of hearing range Peeta and I both lean over the table and continue to make our plots against him. This time he's gone for almost ten minutes which gives us ample time to work on our private little scheme. With Peeta's face so close to mine I completely forget about his connection to Max.

We stumble out of the restaurant half an hour later, Peeta and me, laughing like children. I can't remember the last time something made me laugh like this.

"Did you see the look on their faces?" Peeta manages through his fits of laughter.

"Haymitch is going to kill us" I say, doubling over to catch my breath.

"Worth it!" declares Peeta. "Completely, utterly worth it."
"Still, I'd rather have some distance between him and us by the time he gets out here" I say, nodding in the direction of the Victors' Village. "Come on, let's move."

Through laughter and giggles we head down the road that leads home. I'm beginning to wonder if the alcohol is to blame for us being in this mood, and if so I might understand why so many people enjoy drinking it. Up until now I've always disliked the feeling of losing control that alcohol brings but right now I'm quite enjoying my carefree mood.

Peeta takes a bad step on his fake leg and loses his balance, bumping into me.

"Oh, steady now!" I say, before erupting into a new fit of giggles.

"Look at me, I can't even walk straight" he laughs, grabbing a hold of me for balance. "Oh this is bad."

It doesn't feel particularly bad. His left hand has landed right next to my breast but he doesn't seem to be aware and I'm not about to let him know. He's still laughing and takes a moment to steady himself before he lets me go.

"Am I going to have to walk you all the way to your doorstep to make sure you make it home in one piece?" I ask with a chuckle.

"Oh goodness…" he giggles. He shakes his head to clear it, still chuckling a bit afterward. He sticks his hands in his pockets and stares up at the sky as we continue to walk. "I don't remember parties being fun like this."

"You remember parties?" I tease even though I know he does.

"Capitol parties, thank you very much" he laughs. "Big, bombastic events where the meaning of fun was to drink something that made you puke so you could eat even more of the bazillion dishes of food."

"Those weren't parties, those were disasters" I claim with a grin. "We had fun sometimes, though."

"Did we?" He sounds sceptical.

"Yeah." My smile becomes a touch sad at the nostalgic memories. "We danced together. I remember that was fun. We'd keep one another entertained. We'd try to come up with creative ways to 'sneak away'." With my fingers I make air quotes over the last two words. "That last one wasn't always so fun, but we had our occasional high points."

"I seem to remember a broom closet in the lumber district" says Peeta, his brow furrowed as he tries to reach the memory. "Did I lose my balance and end up in a sack full of sawdust or something?"

"You did" I nod with a laugh. "You did. Effie went hysterical when she saw you." I smile at him and give his shoulder a nudge. "You're remembering, Mr. Mellark."

"Yeah, some parts" he smiles. Then he shakes his head. "Was any of that really worth remembering, though? I'd rather remember nights like tonight."

I can't help but smile warmly.

"Me too."

Behind us we hear somebody shouting and we turn around. It's nothing more than someone leaving
one of the town pubs and calling out to their companion who's halfway down the block. We pay him no further attention and keep on walking.

"You know, if that had been after our Games it wouldn't have been some drunkard leaving a bar" I say. "It would have been someone with a camera stalking us to get great pictures for the news."

"Eh, we could have outrun him" says Peeta.

"Easy for you to say. I was always wearing five inch heels. All you had to deal with was a bum leg."

This causes Peeta to burst out laughing again and the sound is so infectious that he's got me going as well after a few seconds.

"What a wobbly pair of runaways we would have made for" he laughs.

"Unless we figured out a way to escape" I say.

"For instance?"

"You could have given me a piggyback ride."

"Oh excuse me?" he cackles. "You could take your five inch heels off. I'm stuck with this leg. You ought to have given me the piggyback ride."

"Yeah, because I can carry you on my back for more than ten feet without falling over" I scoff.

"Are you calling me fat?"

His comment sends me into another fit of laughter and spontaneously I wrap my hand around his arm, the way we used to walk when we were heading out from official functions together. His laughter dies and he gives me a look, one that's questioning but not exactly disapproving. My gut reaction is to let go of him but that would just seem like I was in fact doing something I shouldn't, which I refuse to believe that I am. We're friends, and friends sometimes touch each other in innocent ways. My hand stays where it is, unless he outright asks me to take it off of him.

Hoping to move past the awkward moment I chuckle lightly and shake my head in disbelief.

"I cannot believe you got Haymitch to go up there and sing a song."

"I can be a cunning brat when I want to be" says Peeta with a mischievous wink.

"For the record, nobody in there thanks you for this" I retort teasingly. "God, it was like hearing nails on a chalkboard."

"You don't even know what that expression means" he laughs, pulling his arm away from me to adjust the collar of his shirt.

"Oh, and you do?" I jibe back.

"Unlike some people I paid attention in English class."

I laugh at the jesting banter but I feel as if my heart skips a beat when he alludes to old memories, even though it makes perfect sense that the Capitol never touched childhood memories they had no access to.

"What else do you remember from English class?" I challenge, mostly to keep the conversation
"Uuuhm…" he says and it makes me laugh again, promoting him to laugh as well. "Oh shut up, like you remember everything we were taught in school."

"I remember a lot of things about coal that I still have no practical use for. Which is why I'm determined to teach the kids useful things that don't include chalkboards."

His brow furrows as if he's searching for a memory and then he breaks into another fit of giggles.

"Hey remember Mrs. Krow and her sex-ed class? I specifically recall a big speech she gave us that essentially said that children are a blessing that the Capitol expects us to bestow on Panem. Nothing more than a fancy way of saying that no, the Capitol won't provide us with birth control and yes, they want us to bear scores of children even though we couldn't hope to feed them."

"Need a steady stream of children for the Hunger Games" I answer, not nearly as entertained by the memory as he seems to be. Though it's more than memories that allude to the Games that is getting under my skin, it's the topic of sex and breeding when we're walking so close together.

"Yeah" Peeta says, his laughter coming to a halt. I miss the sound of it even though it's only been a few seconds so I try my best to move on to safer topics.

"Do you remember those awful horn-rimmed glasses our math teacher had?"

"Vaguely" he says in a dismissive tone. "You know, I always wondered why they had Mrs. Krow teach sex-ed when the mere mention of the act made her so uncomfortable. She must have been the only person in Panem who had issues with nudity and she gets to teach us all about sex."

My attempt at a smile turns into a frown. Yes I remember that, but I also recall that she wasn't the only person in the country finding nudity awkward. Peeta used to tease me about my innocence. I guess he's forgotten about that now, or if he does remember it's a memory that the Capitol screwed with in his mind.

"Who cares?" I mutter. "She's dead now and so are almost everyone in our class. Only a handful ever got to have any use of her… lack of teachings."

"Except not" scoffs Peeta. "As I recall people got rather… frisky in the weeks before Reaping Day."

"Huh?"

His eyes are wide as he stares at me and a grin that's far too big spreads across his face. He then laughs and this time I don't like the sound of it, feeling like I'm the butt of a joke that I don't understand.

"Do you seriously mean to tell me you weren't in the know about it?" he says. "I mean, I remember that I thought you hadn't participated, although I did have an unsettling suspicion that perhaps you and Gale had…" He shakes his head and laughs again. "But you're telling me you didn't even know?"

"Maybe there's nothing to know" I scowl, completely on the defensive now. "Are you sure this isn't the Capitol's machinations talking?"

"Oh definitely not" he says with mirth. "Katniss at least half of the kids that were post puberty would get very, shall we say invested in physical activities around the month of May, when Reaping Day started to loom around the corner. Fooling around at the slag heap, in the abandoned warehouse, in
our own bedrooms… Not everyone went as far as sex, especially not in the beginning, but over time…"

I hold up my hands to stop him for a second, trying to wrap my mind around this new information that seems to have sobered me up a bit.

"So you're telling me… that most kids went at it like maniacs before the reaping? Why the hell would they do that?"

"Because they might not be able to after" he spells out for me as if I were a total moron, sounding confused that I don't get it. "'You don't want to die a virgin, do you?' was practically a mating call in our class after we turned, like, fourteen. I cannot believe you missed that."

"Some of us were a little busy trying not to starve to death" I scowl, feeling idiotic and at the same time awkward for even talking about it.

"I know the thought crossed my mind from time to time that I could try that approach with you…” he says, suddenly getting my interest. "But you were with Gale, or at least so I thought, and…” He shrugs. "It didn't seem like a line that fitted you, anyway. I think I idealized you and probably felt it wasn't pure enough or something like that. Also it's a rather clunky opener with someone you've never spoken to except in passing. Honestly, I don't remember ever using that line, or anything like it, to any other girl either."

The implication of what he said last hangs in the air and I frown as I think about it, trying to bring back memories from those months every year before the blade would fall over two people's shoulders.

"But you did participate in… such things?" I say carefully.

"I did" he confirms.

"Oh."

I don't ask any further questions. I'm not sure if I want to know details or not. Peeta doesn't volunteer any further information either at first, lost in his own trail of thought. I ask myself how I could have been unaware that all of this was going on, that my classmates were fooling around en masse for several weeks before the Reaping each year. I can't for the life of me understand it either. How can the approaching Hunger Games make anybody in the mood for kissing and touching and… and having sex even? I haven't forgotten the hunger I felt on the beach of the quell but the two situations don't seem alike at all. How could anyone feel what I felt on the beach when they know they will be standing before the Justice Building only a few weeks later, praying that Effie won't draw their name? Peeta's and my moment of passion did happen in an actual arena but that was different.

Wasn't it?

"They're all dead now" says Peeta in a solemn tone.

"Huh?"

"The girls I…” He frowns again. "I can't remember all of it but I remember enough, I remember every person, though there weren't that many… All of them died when the bombs fell."

"All the girls you…” Nervously I pause and swallow. "Slept with?"

"No" he says. "I never went that far. I didn't want my first time to be like that. But the girls I kissed
or fooled around with, they all died."

"I'm sorry" I say solemnly, not knowing what else to say.

It's strange that I feel jealous of them and at the same time pity them. They are dead now. Did any of them have feelings for Peeta? Did any of them watch him kissing me on television, professing his feelings for me, feeling the same pain I feel when I think of him and Lace? I hope not.

"That guy Max…" says Peeta.

"What about him?"

"He likes you."

"People who are on friendly terms usually don't dislike one another."

"No, I mean he likes you" says Peeta with a pointed look.

I frown, feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"What? No he doesn't. We barely get along."

"Five seconds ago you said you're on friendly terms."

"Well, we get along well enough but it's no more than that."

"You can tell me if there is" he says and I think I detect something other than calmness in his tone but I'm not sure.

"Peeta it's none of your damn business."

"Fair enough" he nods. "For the record, however, if it's something that would make you happy I support it."

This gets on my nerves. Why would I need his support? Is he saying that because he doesn't feel he has Haymitch's and my support regarding the wedding? Would him being supportive that way be proof that his feelings for me really are dead and buried beyond hope of resurrection?

"I don't want to talk about it" I say sourly. "I think you've got relationships on your brain. Not everyone needs to be paired off in order to be happy."

"No I know." He offers me a smile that manages to make my anger fade a touch. "I just want you to be happy, Katniss. I don't know that guy really so I'm not going to say if you should like him or not but I do think he likes you."

"Why, because he's the only person outside of you, Haymitch and Greasy Sae who talks to me in public?"

"I think you have an effect you're not fully aware of" he says and that touches my heart more deeply than he could ever imagine. He's said similar words before.

"Peeta…" I say, feeling the need to know more about how he really feels about me being with some other guy. "Peeta if Max and I were to… to date…"

I find myself blushing, feeling really awkward all of a sudden. I've never considered anything like that with Max at all. A small smile appears on Peeta's face but I can't tell if the look in his eyes is sad
"So you are thinking about it?"

"I'm just curious… You said once before that you didn't know how you would feel in a situation like that…"

"I think I'm well past the point where I have a right to feel anything" he says, turning his face away. "Except, of course, that I want you to be happy."

I don't know what to say to that. Silence falls between us as we head down the road that leads from town to the Victors' Village. Most of my previous mirth has faded away but there's also a part of me that feels happy and hopeful. The part that will most likely replay Peeta's words over and over and over, ignoring everything else but the fact that he basically said I affect him.

Eventually Peeta breaks the silence.

"Maybe we should be moving faster, in case Haymitch is out to catch up to us."

I suddenly remember how we left him behind at the restaurant, and the murderous look in his eyes, and I stop and share a look with Peeta. The strange mood between us a few seconds ago is forgotten and there's a glint in Peeta's eyes that reminds me of the laughter we shared when we left the restaurant. As if on a given signal we take off running, both of us a little bit unsteady from the alcohol.

"Dibs on not being the one who goes to check in on him tomorrow morning!" says Peeta cheerfully.

"What?" I scoff. "You're a coward!"

"Oh, like you want to have the honours."

"If you want to get out of it you have to fight for it."

Without thinking I grab him by the shoulders to stop him from running away and I leap up onto his back in a playful attack, making him lose his footing and stumble to the side of the road.

"And I thought I was the crazy one" says Peeta, chuckling at my antics.

I have a witty reply at the tip of my tongue but he manages to grab a hold of me and through some kind of wrestling move I suddenly find myself back on the ground. He's trying to pull some other move but the alcohol makes us both too unsteady and uncoordinated so we both end up stumbling to the side and nearly colliding with a tree. We're both back to laughing even though the scene is more pitiful than funny.

"I could take you in a wrestling match any day of the week, Everdeen" says Peeta with a grin. "You sure you want to fight me on this?"

"Who said anything about deciding it through wrestling?"

"Hey if you're going to disrespect the dibs then I at least get to call the shots on how we settle it" he says with a very serious face, though the glint in his eyes shows his teasing and it makes me laugh again.

"Why don't we go together?"

"How about we just give him a phone call?"
We playfully try to push each other over a few times, laughing as we go, but then we just sort of stop and instead just look at one another. The laughter fades but we're still smiling at each other and the combination of alcohol and his close physical presence stirs a hunger in me.

"This is a little awkward" says Peeta with a slight cringe, sticking his hands in his pockets and nodding in the direction of home.

"I don't feel awkward" I challenge, though I keep a bit of distance between us as we continue to walk.

"I don't know, I just got a… weird bit of déjà vu or something…"

I nod slightly, though I don't have the faintest idea what he's talking about. He looks at me with a shy grin that causes another reaction in my heart and then he begins to make small talk about his old days as a wrestler and how he and his brothers could drive their parents crazy "practicing" at home. I listen to him talk, not saying much, but enjoying the moment with him.

Soon, far too soon, the Victors' Village comes into view. We reach my house and part ways, me going to my house and Peeta walking off to his. Once I'm through the door I look out the window and wonder to myself if he's coming home to an empty house or not.

Chapter End Notes

Katniss has to speculate as to how Peeta and Max know one another but you guys don't have to. Peeta painted the school sign and that's how they are acquainted. Also I guess it's not impossible that Max and/or his siblings or parents have bought clothes from Lace and run into Peeta at her store.

Peeta's shoulder is pretty well healed by this chapter, which I think is within the realms of possibility but if I'm wrong let's just assume they have ways of healing dislocated joints real fast just like they have ways of making a person able to walk, stand and run on a prosthetic leg mere weeks after amputation. Capitol medicine is awesome, quite honestly ;)
Chapter 18

Well my dear readers, this chapter is the last one I'll post before the new year! It is also the chapter that brings us to the 2/3 mark. I've mentioned before that I've divided the story into three separate sections and we've only got one more to go after this update.

Btw I think the last chapter was a new record for me in terms of comments - over 150! I never dreamt that anything I wrote would evoke that much interest and you guys have no idea what it means to me that you care enough to comment this much. I can't respond to each and every comment but I read them all and I fully believe that your constructive feedback has helped me evolve as a writer. You guys are the best, your support and your feedback means the world to me and if I could send you all a dozen loaves of cheese buns I would do it in a heartbeat =)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I thought the point was to gather money so we could complete another part of the building before the new semester starts" I say, sitting down opposite Max at one of the tables out on the school yard.

"It was, and it was fucking retarded."

"How so?" I frown, taking a large bite from my sandwich.

"First of all we came up with the idea in late May, meaning we had basically no time to organize a shindig like that in time for the money to be put to useful purposes before the new semester starts" says Max, picking the egg off his sandwich and tossing it aside with a frown. "Second of all we…" His eyes meet mine. "What's with the look?"

"Did you just throw that slice of egg on the ground?"

He rolls his eyes and lifts his sandwich to his mouth.

"The days of abundant poverty are over, Mockingjay dearest" he says. "Nobody's going to be worse off because I threw a piece of food I don't want on the ground. Bugs have to eat, too."

"Why would you put eggs on your sandwich in the first place if you're just going to throw it on the ground?" I question.

"I didn't. This is Milo's sandwich. We got each other's by mistake." He makes a face, grabbing another slice of egg and throwing it on the ground too. "Everyone in my family seems to have a passion for eggs for some damn odd reason. Seriously, eggs are gross. Just think about where they actually come from."

"I could care less when I was starving" I say dryly, taking another bite from my own lunch. "How many eggs have you just thrown away like that?"
He rolls his eyes, getting annoyed.

"A metric fuck-ton. Can we move on with our lives now please, miss World's Conscience? Anywhere, where was I?" He takes a bite and ponders while he chews. Then he swallows and nods. "Right, second of all. Second of all we realized it would be smart to not only try to bring in money for construction but for new books, a new board, new desks, et cetera. So we decided to move it to early September and have it, you know, kick off the new school year. They're not going to have any other construction finished in time anyway thanks to this whole 'paid summer leave' thing."

"When was this decision made?"

"Fairly early on."

I frown.

"And nobody bothered to tell me until now?"

"Gee, I guess your overbearing enthusiasm for the thing just had us all feeling a tad bit smothered and we wanted you to back off" he says, voice dripping with sarcasm.

I roll my eyes and continue to chew on my sandwich in silence, listening to Max yammering on about the fundraiser that is now, apparently, to be held next month. It surprises me a little but finding out that the event has been moved to a later date makes me a bit uncomfortable. I had counted on the fundraiser taking place before Peeta's toasting and have been focusing on participating in that rather than the upcoming loss of the boy I still love. The wedding is less than two weeks away and it's getting more and more difficult not to think about it.

"Are you even listening to me?" asks Max dryly.

"Huh?" I say. Then I smirk apologetically. "No, not really."

"Look, if you're really that un-invested then just don't attend" he says, sounding friendly even though it's an admonishment of sorts. "Honestly, you walking around sporting that vacant look is not going to make people loosen their purse strings."

"I'm sorry" I say, managing a smile. "I've got a lot of my mind."

"Yeah, like you've got problems" he scoffs playfully. "I've got two siblings who both have dates for this fundraiser and I'm apparently going stag. Do you realize how much nagging that results in from my parents? There's a problem."

"Your parents care about whether or not you have a date?" I ask sceptically.

"They didn't until I became the only kid without one."

"They don't seem like the type who would care."

"You underestimate every parent's innate desire to have grandchildren. Mine are starting to feel like they've been robbed, seeing as how all three kids are in their twenties and the grandkids number in zero."

"So, what? Their hope is that you and Milo will each bring a girl there and impregnate her?"

Max laughs and shakes his head, wiping his mouth with a napkin.

"That would be a fucking riot, wouldn't it? No, they're not too big on babies born out of wedlock but
apparently they feel our biological clocks ticking and, you know…”

I shrug.

"My mother doesn't seem to care all that much about things like that."

"You lucky bastard."

I chuckle and wipe away a few breadcrumbs from my shirt.

"So are we done with talking fundraiser?" I ask. "Your father wanted you to approve my curriculum plan and although I shall forever resent him for forcing me to compose one in the first place I'd rather get this over with."

I reach inside my bag and fish out a piece of paper that I hand to Max. He takes it and begins to read it and I feel quite awkward watching and waiting. I've never had to write, or even plan, anything like it before and I snuck in quite a few things that weren't part of what Mr. Matson and I discussed. Mainly, things that focus on basic survival and not just flora and fauna. I feel the children need to learn that as much as they need to learn about the animals and plants.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, Max looks up and smiles slightly.

"Looks good."

I spent hours this morning trying to decide what to wear for the evening. I don't own too many nice gowns or dresses which makes the selection rather slim. In fact, everything that I own in that category was made by Cinna, with the exception of two dresses Effie bought for me and sent me for my birthday. There is no doubt that Cinna's dresses are the most beautiful and that they fit me, and the occasion, the best. They should be the logical choice. I just can't help feeling like it's wrong, a sacrilege, to wear one of his gowns for the purpose of Peeta's wedding and the dinner that's being held tonight, a week before the event. Cinna and Peeta are connected in my mind, they can't not be, and wearing a creation of Cinna's to one of these events is more than I can bring myself to do.

On the other hand Effie's dresses are far too much Capitol fashion, not really my style at all, and they look a little gaudy. I feel like Peeta deserves more than that, this important occasion in his life deserves better, no matter how much it breaks my heart that it's happening.

Option number three has been to buy something new. Since the only seamstress in town who makes dresses for fine occasions is one Lace Bomull that idea made my stomach turn. After several weeks of inner struggle I finally did go to her and bought one of her dresses, though making sure it was one of the standard dresses she has made and not something she would custom make for me. It's simple but elegant, a pale purple colour she referred to as lavender and it reaches down to my ankles. It's what I will wear for the wedding. I've decided that the toasting will be the moment when I finally concede the loss, even though I was never even a contender after the hijacking. It seems fitting then, I tell myself, that I should wear a dress made by Mrs. Mellark herself. Peeta will no doubt appreciate the gesture.
But that still left the matter of what to wear for the dinner tonight. It's supposed to be a rather nice event where friends and family of the bride and groom meet and celebrate the event to come, a tradition from the Capitol that has become more and more popular. Peeta has put some time and effort into planning this evening. He's booked the large dining room in the finer of District 12's new hotels and I know he's put some money into the food and some other details as well, including importing wine from District 3. He's mentioned the planning to me in passing but thankfully not given me the full details or asked for my opinion. It's been clear though that this dinner is important to him. I really, really didn't want to go but my absence would be too noticeable and I don't want to take any attention away from the pair who should be in the spotlight.

After much debating back and forth I ended up going with one of Effie's dresses for tonight. It's bright red, a touch too red, and the front reaches to my knees while the back goes halfway down my lower legs. The design is fairly simple but the colour makes it stick out like a sore thumb. The top half had patches of bright green fabric here and there in some sort of "cool" pattern but I make quick work of finding my mother's old sewing kit and removing those parts. I also got rid of the bright yellow belt. What I'm left with is a dress that's still way too red but at least it's in just the one colour. For the first time since the eve before the Quarter Quell I am also wearing stockings in a not entirely successful attempt at hiding the scars on my legs. I had to shave my legs to not make it look strange which puts me in an even fouler mood.

Currently I'm standing in a corner of the hotel's main dining room, a flute with sparkling wine in my hand, trying to remember to smile while I look out at the group of people here for the dinner. We're not that big a crowd, maybe twenty or so people, but I feel out of place. It's a sad reminder to me that Peeta is taking one step further out of my life and that this will be his world now. Not dinners in dining halls but these people, Lace's family and friends. Peeta's side of the guest-list is pathetically short compared to hers. It's just me, Haymitch, Thom, Greasy Sae and Delly Cartwright, who is spending the summer in the district but who probably would have shown up anyway. Everyone else is from Lace's side and all of them seem so eager to welcome Peeta to their group. He won't be mine and Haymitch's and our little tribute family's anymore. He will belong to this world and these people more than he belongs to us.

"Chin up, sweetheart" says Haymitch in my ear, having just walked up to me.

"My chin is on the damn ceiling" I snarl, almost on autopilot.

He stands right next to me, leaning back against the same column as me.

"I thought you were okay with all this" he says, a touch of concern in his voice.

I know what he's referring to but I don't want to acknowledge it with words so I divert the subject.

"I just don't like fancy parties, even if they are only fancy by the district's standards" I say, sipping from my flute.

He seems to be about to say something else but he doesn't. Probably he knows he's lost my attention when my eyes have fallen on Peeta, who is making his way over to us. He looks good. Far too good to be out of my reach. My heart and soul and entire body burns with how unfair it is that I don't get to run my hands up his arms and wrap my arms around his neck and pull him in for a lovely kiss. That look in his eyes is reserved for somebody else now. Why does he have to look so painfully good, and so happy? He's positively radiating as he walks up to us, wearing a pair of black dress pants and a white shirt that I recognize as Portia's handiwork.

"Katniss, Haymitch, there you are!" he beams, stopping right in front of us. "I've been looking for you. I'm so very glad you are both here tonight."
"Where else would we be?" asks Haymitch. "Looks like you're going to have a great week, boy."

"Yeah, looks like" laughs Peeta. His eyes go to me and I feel a jolt of electricity when they meet with mine. "Wow, Katniss, you look…"

"Like a big flashing stop sign?" suggests Haymitch dryly.

"You're definitely a person who draws the eyes too them tonight" says Peeta. "Though don't tell a certain someone I said that. That dress looks lovely on you."

"Thank you" I say, my voice quivering just a bit. "You look very handsome."

"Thanks" he smiles.

His eyes trail over me for a few seconds and I wish we could spend the entire night like this. But of course we can't. The spell is broken when someone calls out to him and he excuses himself to leave. Less than a minute later I see him wrapping his arm around Lace's waist as they talk to someone I don't recognize, pulling her closer, and I feel bile rising in my throat. I toss my head back and down what's left in my flute, handing it to Haymitch before walking off, muttering something about needing to use the rest room. I head out into the corridor that leads to the bathrooms but instead of going in I stop outside, leaning back against the wall, wondering how I will be able to do this. How will I survive this night and the following seven days and the actual toasting and then the rest of my life without him?

"Just the party bothering you, eh?" says Haymitch, startling me.

"Geez, you scared me" I gasp.

He looks strangely sympathetic and takes me by the arm.

"Come. A word with you, please, before dinner starts."

Without protest I allow him to lead me inside the smaller dining room. It's empty for the night, priority being lent to Peeta's dinner, and we can talk in private.

"The truth now, Katniss" says Haymitch. "What happened in my kitchen the day he told you he was getting married, that was the real thing, right? And everything after that just your own brand of bullshit."

I want to protest but I know it will be no use. I worry that I might begin to cry if we talk about this so I hope he will at least allow me to hold off on this conversation until tomorrow. Tonight is hell enough as it is.

"Please, Haymitch" I say. "Not now."

"You're not going to be able to hold up the happy charade on your own all night" he says. "Much less the rest of the week. Be honest with me, and perhaps I can help you."

I wrap my arms around myself and look away, biting my lip to try and keep the tears at bay. I realize it's no use.

"She's getting everything that I want" I admit, a tear falling down my cheek. "Everything that ought to have been mine. That should have been mine. Peeta loved me, unconditionally, and…"

"This is all about you feeling proprietary of him?" asks Haymitch carefully, thankfully not sounding
I shake my head, more tears coming.

"It's so unfair, Haymitch. Why did I have to lose him just when I was beginning to realize I couldn't ignore the way I feel about him? It would have been one thing if I had died in the arena like I intended to do but to have to go on living without him loving me when I know that the way I feel about him…" I close my eyes hard, trying to force myself not to cry anymore. "Okay, I'm not as pathetic as I may sound. I've been getting along quite well lately, I think." I tremble slightly. "It's just unfair, that's all. He should have been mine. He would have been mine if they hadn't destroyed him. I wanted so bad to be the one who picks up the pieces but instead…"

Haymitch walks up and pulls me into his embrace.

"Okay. It's okay. We'll get you through tonight and then go from there, okay?"

I nod against his chest, finding myself wishing that I hadn't lied to him for the past few months. I don't even know why I did it. Did I really think that by lying to Haymitch I could make my feelings go away? Yet still there is that strong will to try and brush aside the pain and paint it as much less than what it actually is.

"Who knows, maybe I am just being proprietary" I say as I pull back from his embrace, wiping my eyes carefully with the back of my hand, grateful that I'm not wearing mascara. "Maybe I'm throwing a big scene over nothing. What do I even know about love, after all? We both know I'm as emotionally dense as they come."

"You're certainly less aware of your feelings than just about every other being on the planet, including cockroaches and earthworms" Haymitch not-so-helpfully says. "But you always act instinctively on your emotions. That's one of the reasons why you're usually so easy for me to read, though I admit you've kept this one pretty close to your chest. I was pretty convinced for a while during the Quell and in Thirteen but then I thought I must have read you wrong, or that your feelings changed. I'm surprised at myself that I didn't see this clearly before."

"And what does that mean?" I ask, snivelling a little but feeling a lot more composed.

"People say you can't define love. That's bullshit. Love is putting somebody else's needs, wants and happiness above your own. Like volunteering to be slaughtered to save a beloved sister."

The mention of Prim makes my emotions well up again. I think of her and I think of that day and how it was the first time Peeta and I really met – the day when our journey together began.

"That's different" I say. "I've always known I love Prim."

"Different, yet similar. You haven't tried to sabotage Lace or backtalk her or cause problems for her and Peeta. You're here today and you will be there at the toasting even though I can tell it's killing you. Katniss if you say you love Peeta, and not just as a friend, then I believe you. You coming to accept those feelings is a good thing."

"So what?" I say miserably, shrugging a shoulder. "What good does accepting it do? I would have been better off never realizing it, never falling in the first place. I should have stuck with the plan and never let someone into my heart that way."

To my surprise Haymitch guffaws.

"Right. Trust you to think you can decide not to fall in love. It was that line of thinking that got you
into this situation in the first place. If you hadn't been so damn stubborn you could have loved him back and let him know it before all of this happened. Then again they still would have hijacked him…”

"It doesn't matter now. They took it away from him. What he loved was probably just an illusion anyway, his idea of who I am inside. Because the moment he saw me objectively he stopped loving me."

"Objectively?" Haymitch reaches out and dries the last tear from my cheek. "Sweetheart they programmed him to hate you, fear you and want you dead. They put it in him on an instinctive level, like a phobia. That's not objectivity. Trust me, he saw your bad qualities way before that. Your grouchiness, unpleasantness, bad temper, emotional immaturity-"

"Thanks, I get it" I snarl.

Haymitch chuckles a little.

"He knows who you are. He knew it well before they got a hold of him. You have a lot of admirable qualities as well and he admired you so."

"Doesn't do me any good now" I sigh. "He's not in love with me anymore. He's in love with Lace. And he's going to marry her."

"Yes" nods Haymitch. He's not chuckling anymore, doesn't look amused in the slightest. Instead his brow is furrowed with concern. "Seriously, Katniss… Do you want me to make up an excuse for you? I can say that you're sick. You can leave if you need to. He's seen you and knows you came. Don't torture yourself or shed any more tears because of Lace. She's not worthy of your sadness."

"But she is" I object. I sigh and run a hand down my braid. "She's Peeta's girl. The one he chose. She didn't do anything wrong. She didn't try to hurt me. He was single, I definitely had my chances to be with him, and… and she makes him happy. Aren't you the one who always said I can never deserve Peeta?"

"I might have said that" he says with a kind, teasing smile. "Then again what has she done to deserve him?"

"She makes him happy" I repeat. "I was never able to do that."

He is silent, and that's all the confirmation I need. Lace makes Peeta happy and therefore she deserves him, far more than I ever did.

After a few minutes Haymitch runs a hand through his hair and sighs a little.

"She might make him happy but getting married so early on is a mistake" he says. "It sure is a fine drama my tributes have found themselves in. Here I am with one rushing into marriage when he's not in any condition to be making a commitment like that, and the other torturing herself over a love she's losing because of it. I was hoping the two of you might be able to live with some contentment and the possibility of bright futures. Not be stuck in the same kind of hell the rest of us victors faced after our Games. The world is a better place now, the Hunger Games don't exist anymore, and you both paid in blood and pain to make that happen. I'm really sorry that you have to be miserable even so. I wanted better things for you and Peeta, both."

"Haymitch he is happy" I point out. "He will be okay."

"I'm not so damn sure" sighs Haymitch. "I've tried to make him think twice about getting married so
soon but he's determined."

"Haymitch" I say. "Let's let him get married and be happy. If it is a mistake, let him be the one to make it on his own. Only he can decide if it's the right thing for him to do or not."

Haymitch snorts.

"Sure, because the pair of you have always been great at judging things like that. And what about you? Knowing that his would-be happiness is at the cost of your misery doesn't make me think this marriage is a better idea."

I have no answer to that. Instead of trying to come up with one I take Haymitch by the hand and move for the door, to head back out there to the party before anyone misses us. He accepts this as my cue that the conversation is over and follows me without a word. He doesn't really need to say much anymore, just knowing that I have him behind me gives me comfort and perhaps even the strength to get through the night without too much grief and heartache.

I make it through the dinner somehow, even managing to keep a small smile on my face. It helps to have Haymitch beside me, an ally and a friend, finally someone completely in the know of how I'm feeling. I watch Peeta and Lace together, see him run his hands through her hair the way he always seems to do, see them smile together and them as a couple being the focus of everyone's attention. Thankfully there are no speeches made, that portion of the program is saved for the dinner after the toasting, but still it's almost unbearable to watch everyone being so excited about this.

When dinner is over there's more mingling and music playing and once again Peeta standing with his arm around Lace's waist looking like they belong like that. I stay for about fifteen minutes of this and then I excuse myself. Haymitch for some reason has the keys to a hotel room upstairs, a fairly nice room at that, and he hands the keys to me telling me to go gather my thoughts for a while. I gladly accept the opportunity to flee from the party for a moment, leaving it up to Haymitch to make excuses on my behalf.

Walking inside the room I find that it consists of a large living room, a bedroom and a small balcony. I keep to the living room, leaving the bedroom door closed, and stand by the balcony doors and watch the night sky outside. This day has been an emotional rollercoaster and it's only the beginning of the week. God help me, it's going to get worse.

I've been there for a little bit over half an hour, just starting to wonder if I should be getting back to the party, when the door opens behind me. Surprised and a little uncomfortable I turn around and am even more surprised to see both Haymitch and Peeta walking in. My heart can't help but skip a beat at the sight of Peeta, looking so handsome and relaxed, but the look in Haymitch eyes keeps me from focusing too much on that.

"What's all this?" asks Peeta with a confused chuckle.

Haymitch puts a hand on his shoulder.

"The two of you need to have a little talk."
Peeta looks mildly confused but there's absolutely nothing mild or confused about the way I'm looking at Haymitch. I know exactly what he's trying to do and I cannot believe he's about to put me in the position I've explicitly told him I don't want to be in, and this only hours after he saw me in tears and appeared to be sympathetic to my plight. So before he can say anything else I make a point of looking at the big clock on the wall and feigning a yawn.

"Not tonight" I say. "It's late and I'm exhausted and I want to head home and get to bed."

"I'm sure whatever this is about it can wait" says Peeta.

"I'm afraid it can't." The stern look Haymitch gives me almost makes me falter but I know I can be just as stubborn as he, if not more so. "Katniss has something she needs to tell you and you have to hear it before the wedding."

"It can wait till morning, can't it?" says Peeta.

"Yes" I say sternly. "It can wait until morning."

Of course Haymitch knows I have no intention at all of bringing anything up tomorrow morning, or at any other point in time.

"No time like the present" he says.

"Haymitch drop it" I say coldly, furious with him for forcing my hand over something that's absolutely none of his business.

Peeta of course picks up on the tension between Haymitch and me. His brow furrows and he looks from one of us to the other.

"What's going on?" he asks.

"Nothing" I say firmly, glaring at Haymitch. "He's just being a rabble rouser and more likely than not he's dead drunk."

"And she's too much of a coward to tell you how she feels about you."

I stare at my old mentor in shock, surprised that he opened his mouth and said those words. Peeta's brow furrows even deeper and it seems he needs a few moments to understand what Haymitch is actually saying. Then he turns to me and looks confused. I can't meet his eyes, focusing on Haymitch instead, anger and even a bit of hatred burning in my eyes.

"Are you done?" I ask in a hiss.

"You told me earlier tonight that you knew Katniss has never loved you and never will" Haymitch says to Peeta. "I don't think the two of you have ever really known where you stand with one another and it's holding both of you back. You need to get all of this out in the open, both of you, before you have that toasting." His eyes go back to me. "He should hear it from you."

"Hear what from her?" asks Peeta, still trying to understand what is happening.

I refuse to do as Haymitch wants. I cross my arms over my chest and keep silent, my mind working a mile a minute to figure out how to dig myself out of this giant crater Haymitch has shoved us all into. If Haymitch thinks it's so damn important that Peeta knows how I feel about him then he can be the one to do the telling. And so he does.
"You were wrong about Katniss' feelings" he tells Peeta. "Even if she's too much of a coward to own up to it." He reaches for the doorknob. "I'll leave you two alone. You need to talk this out or it will only become a bigger and bigger problem."

With that he leaves, giving me one last look before he goes. I feel utterly betrayed and more vulnerable than I've been in a long time. It's like I've been stripped emotionally naked and all of my own agency has been taken away. This was not Haymitch's secret to reveal and I cannot imagine what makes him think it's necessary for Peeta to know about it. The only thing currently keeping me from forcefully removing Haymitch from my life is that I don't have all that many people in my life. And I strongly suspect I'm about to have one less now that Haymitch has told Peeta something he never ought to have known.

The silence stretches for so long that it feels like a lifetime. I can hear each and every beat of my heart pounding in my ears. The wide-eyed look of shock and, worst of all, sadness on Peeta's face is like torture. With every passing second I lose more and more of the already faint hope I had. Clearly this is not something he wanted to hear. Clearly this secret should never have been revealed. At some later point I will punish Haymitch severely for this but regret cannot make something undone. I can't turn back the clock and keep Haymitch from putting me in this position. I just want Peeta to speak already, for this all to be over. And, after that, I pretty much want to die.

"Do you love me?" he finally says, shocked disbelief still in his voice. "I mean, as in… in love with me?"

"I'm sorry" I say, wondering to myself if that's the most absurd answer that has ever been given as an affirmation to such a question. "I never meant for you to know… I don't want to ruin this week for you, you have to believe me!"

He looks so completely and utterly bewildered that I almost don't know if I feel sorrier for him or for myself. I draw a deep breath, my hands forming into tight fists, preparing mentally for the questions he will want answers to. I don't even know how to begin to answer them but what else can I do but try?

"What can I do, Katniss?"

The question is so far from what I expected that I completely lose my focus and stutter in confusion, having no idea how to answer a question I don't even understand. When I can't seem to formulate an answer Peeta begins to pace in the room, running his hands through his hair, messing up his carefully styled locks.

"We'll go to Eight" he says, providing answers himself when I can't muster any. "Lace might even prefer that to living here. She'll have her family close-by and I can have a real fresh start away from these streets haunted by my friends and family." He's rambling, and I still can't find a single word to say. "We can leave just a few days after the wedding. We'll move to Eight and you won't have to see us anymore and we can all just… go on with our lives."

"I can't ask that of you" I say. I realize in this moment that having him move away, far from my sight and reach, might be the only thing worse than having to see him live happily ever after with his wife. "Twelve is your home. She has made a life for herself here, too. If anyone should go it should be me."

"But you can't" he reminds me. It's true. There's no way Paylor will lift my confinement for this purpose. "Even if you could the very notion is absurd. District 12 is your home. No, Lace and I will go."
"Please don't" I plead.

He takes a few more steps and then he stops his pacing, looking at me with his beautiful blue eyes so full of pain and distress. It almost makes my own eyes fill with tears. This is supposed to be the happiest time of his life. Having to have him look at me like that because he knows I love him now hurts beyond words. It's worse than flat-out rejection.

"Why didn't you say something before?" he asks with sadness. "Why did you let me blab about my relationship to you, invite you to my toasting?" He takes a trembling breath. "Why did you even agree to come?"

"Peeta I couldn't say no when you asked me. It seemed so important to you." I want to elaborate further but I'm afraid that if I say more I will start to cry.

"If only you had told me sooner" he says, sounding not too far from crying himself. "God, how I wish you had told me sooner! I mean I never thought there was the slightest possibility of... Ugh, I'm such an idiot! I should have realized."

"What difference would that have made?" I ask with a defeated shrug.

"I would never have..." He takes a few steps in my direction then suddenly halts. "If only I had known I wouldn't have..." He shakes his head and looks upward, as if trying to force tears away.

"This is all ludicrous. It's downright ludicrous. I think... I think I was a good person before. Now I'm a corrupted half-mutt. It used to be that nobody was interested in me and now somehow two incredible women have fallen for me and I sure as hell don't deserve either one of them. Just thinking of how I have acted around you, knowing what I now know... I mean, clearly I'm an asshole!"

"Peeta don't do this to yourself; you haven't paraded anything in front of me" I say, hoping to ease his guilt. Him feeling that way doesn't make things better for me. "It's not your fault. Haymitch is the one at fault here. I didn't want you to find out, ever, and especially not this week. I want everything good in the world for you, whether I can share it with you or not." My voice seems frail when I continue. "It wouldn't have changed anything if you'd known except to hold you back."

"Katniss it's my fault that Haymitch did this."

"Don't be absurd." The last thing Haymitch deserves right now is being let off the hook. "He's been pestering me about this for some time now."

"We were talking earlier and... Well, I more or less said to him that I wouldn't have allowed myself to move on and start a real relationship with Lace if I had thought there was any hope that you would ever love me."

At first I don't even understand what he just said. He looks into my eyes, his warmth and his steadiness there as much as ever, and slowly his words begin to have meaning. If he thought there was any hope that I could love him he would have never started anything with Lace. Because...

"But..." I say. "You said you were no longer in love with me."

"I wasn't." He runs his hand through his hair again. I like it better the way it is right now, in disarray rather than perfectly styled. "At that point I wasn't. Then you... crept up on me again. I mean, it's you." He pauses and looks at me again. "You're still you. Whatever it is that existed between us once, whatever it was that made me love you, it's still there in you. I just didn't think there was ever a chance..."
Suddenly I'm not afraid. A warm and uplifting emotion begins to spread through my body. I step closer to Peeta and resist the urge to reach out and touch him. I fully intend to do so, but not yet. The words I have been dreading to say come tumbling out of my mouth with no hardship at all.

"There's more than just a chance" I say. "It's real. I love you, Peeta. And if I had thought there was the faintest hope that you might feel the same way again about me, believe me I would have fought for you, for us." We're standing even closer now and every breath he takes comes out hot on my skin. "Believe me, if you feel the same way I do I will go to any lengths… I want you to love me again, like you used to do, only now it will be better because it will be mutual."

His hands are on my waist all of a sudden and I momentarily lose my ability to speak. It feels so lovely, his touch and his closeness. My hands come up and caress him from his neck down to his shoulders.

"Katniss…" he says in a low, husky voice.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I'm leaving you hanging there =) Please don't wish for me to find coal in my stocking ;)

Some chapter comments first... I hope Haymitch doesn't seem like a douche here for supporting Katniss at first and then giving her secret away later that same evening. When he sent her up to the hotel room he only inteded for her to have some reprieve from the party. What changed in-between then and him bringing Peeta up there was a conversation he had with Peeta which is alluded to in the chapter and which will most likely be posted in early January as a "Lost Boy" chapter.

A bit of trivia for you, the confrontation scene between Peeta and Katniss was probably the first thing I ever wrote for this story. I often write bits and pieces for future chapters and half of them I never use. This one has been fleshed out a whole lot and re-written to fit where the story ended up going, and I wasn't always sure it was going to take place at all. I have to say though I'm glad I was able to use it because it was the very first part of TCYDT.

With that said I want to thank all of you again for staying with me throughout this story and for making this whole thing a really unique experience for me as a fic writer. I'll be offline for the most part over the holidays but I'll check in on the comments on my phone when I get the chance. I wish you all a Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays and a Happy New Year! Or if you don't celebrate any particular holiday at this time of year I wish you a great couple of weeks =) Thank you for 2014 and I'll see you again in 2015!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Hello again everyone!

I would have had this up sooner but work has been kicking by ass lately (work enough extra shifts and your bed begins to feel like a stranger) so while I finished this a few days ago I haven't had a chance to proof-read it until this morning. I also have a few comments that I haven't responded to yet from the last chapter and I'll get to that but I wanted to get this up as soon as possible to make up for leaving you all on a cliffhanger.

With that in mind I won't keep you occupied any longer, here's the new chapter:

I find it almost hard to breathe with him so close to me now. In a moment of surprising clarity I realize that while I can't yet understand exactly what the powerful combination of emotions rising inside of me is made up of it has the potential of being the closest I will ever come to a miracle, and that if I were to get to be with Peeta this would only be the beginning. The thought of how strong that feeling might end up growing makes me feel lightheaded. Never in my life have I wanted to touch another human being so much. I think I could settle for just the briefest brush of his skin against mine yet at the same time I'm quite sure that if I get the slightest touch I won't be able to resist having more and more and I will never be able to get enough.

Unable to resist the urge and the desire when he is so close to me and he knows how I feel, and feels the same way about me, I begin to move closer. My hands find his waist and my face is close enough that I feel his breath on my skin. Our noses gently brush. I look up into his eyes and find them half-closed but burning with what my heart tells me is lust and desire and want for me. I sigh with contentment and close my eyes, bringing my mouth to his. Finally. Finally.

Just as I feel my top lip graze against his he pulls back, gasping so quietly I'm not even sure I heard it. My eyes open to meet the wide, stunned look in his that has replaced the want and desire and the pain in my heart at his apparent rejection almost makes me recoil. Peeta takes half a step back, bringing his body further away from mine, and he swallows and blinks, shaking his head.

"I can't." There's a tremble in his voice and I can hear his regret and confusion and his growing desperation. "I can't."

"You can" I insist, taking a step forward. "You want this. As much as I want this." I don't know for sure if that's entirely true but I refuse to believe anything else.

"I can't do this to her. She is an amazing person, kind and smart and generous, and she saved me. She is a wonderful woman and I made a promise to her." He's rambling and I can hear from his voice that he's struggling with his feelings and I latch on to that. "I've betrayed her enough already tonight; I cannot kiss another woman just days away from our wedding. Not even if it is you.
Especially not if it is you. I cannot betray either one of you this way. She's my fiancée and you, you're… You're not… You're not somebody a guy kisses shortly before his wedding to another woman."

"If you feel that way about me, if you want to kiss me right now, then haven't you already made that betrayal?"

"No" he says passionately. "No, there's a world of difference between wanting to do something and actually doing it. Yes I am doing wrong by her right now but I cannot make it worse; I can't live with myself if I betray her even further."

"Peeta." My voice is steady now. I know what I want and I am not afraid of pursuing it now that I actually stand a chance. The only thing I'm afraid of is him walking out of this room and I will do anything that I can to prevent that from happening. "Listen to me. You feel the same way I do, I know you do." I take his hands in mine and thankfully he lets me, though I can feel his hand trembling. "Do you really feel for Lace what you feel for me?"

"Love? Yes."

I force myself to ignore the stab of pain in my heart.

"As much as you love me? You can't love us both equally. I don't believe that's possibly for anybody to do. If you love her more than me you wouldn't be having this conversation with me in the first place. If you love me more than you love her…" I move closer again, my lips moving towards his. "Peeta…"

"Katniss…" Again he sounds so desolate, so sad. He pulls away, avoiding my lips. "I'm so very sorry but I just can't. If only I had known how you felt before I got involved with Lace, or hadn't gotten involved with her at all, but we are so far past that now. She's not just somebody to warm my bed and keep me company. I've committed myself to her. I've asked her to commit herself to me. I will not wrong her further and I will not go back on my word to her." His tone has a touch of desperation to it. "What would you do if you were in my shoes? Could you do that to someone you care so much about? Is this even what you want, to kiss me when I'm days away from my toasting with another woman? Would you want to start something with me in that kind of way? What kind of relationship would we have if we started out like that?"

"Do you really want to marry her, Peeta?" I challenge.

"I wouldn't have asked her if I didn't." Perhaps it's wishful thinking but he sounds almost too convinced, like he's trying hard to convince us both. He pulls his hands away and takes a few steps back. "I'm really sorry… I hate myself right now for doing this to you but I already made my choice months ago. I may not have known all the variables at the time but the choice was made all the same."

"What if it's the wrong choice?" I don't know where I'm finding the courage to say these things but I know without a doubt that there's nothing I fear more than losing him now. "What then, Peeta?"

He looks deep into my eyes, tilting his head slightly.

"What if it's the right choice?" he challenges back. "I'm not sure what it is I feel for you, or even what it is you truly feel for me."

My shoulders slump as I'm beginning to understand that there's no changing his mind now. He's not going to choose me. Maybe he loves her far more than he loves me. Maybe he loves us both equally,
though I cannot fathom that such a thing is possible. Maybe he isn't sure and it's too much to ask to demand of him to walk away from her now. Maybe he just can't live with himself if he breaks her heart just a few months after asking her to be his forever, just a few days before the wedding. I can see in his eyes, hear in his voice, that whatever decisions he is making right now they're not easy.

"Please don't go Peeta…" I plead softly, hoping against hope that he's going to change his mind. I cannot have gotten so close to having what I dream of only to lose it all again, all in the span of one conversation. "This is you and me. This is us. You remember, don't you? All that we've meant to each other?"

"The crazy thing is I don't, really…" he says, closing his eyes hard for a second. "And all the same I can't help but feel this way about you…" Then he harks, his voice sounding more controlled when he continues. "But I shouldn't. We shouldn't. It's not right, not anymore. I don't know what I did to make you feel this way about me but I'm so sorry because I know I've hurt you already and now I have to hurt you again."

"You don't have to hurt me anymore" I say firmly. "You have a choice."

"The choice to hurt Lace instead. To go back on everything I promised, everything I offered. To humiliate her and break her heart."

Full of frustration I try to think of a reply to that, something that would prove to him that I am the right choice, I am the one he shouldn't hurt anymore, I am the one he loves more. I can't think of anything. I've never been good with words and all of this is happening so fast. I can't deny that he has a point but I cannot worry about Lace's feelings right now. If my happiness comes at the prince of her pain then I am willing to pay it.

"I understand if you don't want to be at the wedding" he says, his voice slightly distant. "I'm sorry. I have to go." He turns and walks to the door, stopping with his hand on the doorknob to turn and look at me. He doesn't look happy but there's no hesitation in his eyes. "I… I wish you all the best, Katniss. If you feel you can't be my friend after this then I will understand. I will miss you but believe me I will understand. I hope you can find it in you to forgive me at some point, or at least not hate me. I… I hope you will be happy. Take it from someone who knows… It is possible to love a person deeply and find love again in somebody else."

Finally the tears begin to fall down my cheeks.

"Take it from someone who knows…” I respond. "You don't want to look back and regret the chances you didn't take."

Probably I should be telling him that I wish him all the best, too, and that I hope he will be very happy with Lace. I just can't bring myself to do that. All I want is for him to rethink his decision and give us a chance. Knowing that he still loves me I cannot bear to think of how we'll never get a chance to be together for real. After everything we've been through, all the outside forces that have tried to push us apart, it seems so trivial that a promise he made to Lace is going to be the thing that prevents us from having each other. Are we truly going to be star-crossed lovers in the end?

Peeta's eyes leave me and he hangs his head briefly.

"Bye" he says, in such a low voice I can barely hear him.

"Stay with me" I blurt out in desperation as his hand touches the doorknob.

He stares at me for over a minute, tears falling down his face. I can see him trembling, reacting to my
words and remembering. If this doesn't work, then…

"It's not fair for you to ask that of me now" he finally says in a quivering voice. "I'm supposed to be getting married this week. Where was this a year and a half ago?" A tear falls down his cheek and he makes no move to wipe it away. "I will always… I…"

"Peeta…" I whisper but I know it's too late.

Without another word he leaves the room, closing the door carefully behind him. I walk over to the doorframe and lean my upper body against it, sobbing as my heart breaks all over again. An hour ago I was in pain because I thought he didn't love me anymore. Now I know he does love me and the pain I'm feeling now is so much worse. Damn Haymitch for doing this to me, for forcing me to have this conversation with Peeta. In all likelihood he won't regret marrying Lace instead of leaving her for me. He knows he and Lace work together but he doesn't have the first idea if him and I do. Even I don't have the first idea whether or not we would be able to have a real relationship or if we'd end up falling apart.

No, Peeta walked out of this room with a lot of regrets but choosing Lace is undoubtedly not going to be one of them. It will be me who has to live with the regret of never taking the chance of telling him how I felt while he was still single and could have still been mine.

There's no denying that this evening has changed everything. For good.

I end up sitting on the floor with my back leaned against the door, my arms wrapping around my knees, staring blankly into space. I can't tell how much time passes but it seems like the seconds are going by so very slowly. I don't even feel pain or desperation right now. All I feel is emptiness, numbness. It's a relief in a way, a much needed reprieve from the previous heartache, but a part of my mind wonders if I've simply used up all my capacity for emotion and will go the rest of my life without it. Would that be a terrible thing? Who needs emotions anyway? All the people I've loved are gone, one way or another.

I know I have to leave this room sooner or later. I would prefer it if that didn't happen until after the party downstairs has cleared out and everyone has gone back home but I doubt I'll be able to stay up here for that long. No doubt some of Lace's relatives are staying at this hotel anyway so I might run into them in the hallways even after the party is over.

My mind occupies itself with possible escape routes. I don't particularly like to think of it as running away but I have no intention whatsoever of coming face to face with anybody at that party downstairs. Particularly Peeta or Lace, though I suspect he's not eager to run into me either. How can I look at Peeta now? How can I look at her, that person who strolled into our lives and completely ruined mine, whether she intended to or not. I can't bring myself to feel like I owe her any courtesy right now or that I should think of her in any form of sympathetic terms. What does it matter that she never meant for me to get hurt? She is still what took Peeta away from me permanently.

Does he love her more than me? When I woke up this morning I would have readily agreed that he
does but knowing that he does have feelings for me too I can't resign myself to the idea that what he feels for her could be stronger. Peeta was willing to die for me in our first arena. He was willing to do it again in our second, encouraging me to move on and create a life with Gale, because that's how much he loved me. He was willing to sacrifice everything that mattered to him so that I could have a chance at happiness.

There's no denying he wasn't willing to do that tonight. He wasn't willing to sacrifice her, to break her heart.

Though what was I expecting, really? That he would kiss me passionately, wrap his arms around me, perhaps even carry me into the bedroom and show me what hunger like that can lead to? That we would be smiling happily at each other, whispering tender words of love to one another and that magically everything hurtful and all misunderstandings between us would just melt away and we would be a perfect team once again? A persistent voice inside of me tells me it could never have played out like that.

Him giving in to his feelings for me would have created a world of problems. He would have had to tell Lace he was calling off the wedding for the sake of another woman. No doubt the guilt he would feel over that would take a huge toll on him and make it much more difficult for us to be happy with our reunion coming at that cost. He pretty much said that to me. To me, though, that would still be the much better option. No matter how difficult it would get, no matter how terrible he would feel, we would have each other and we would see each other through it. I wouldn't need to sleep in his arms from the very first night or engage in kisses like the ones on the beach with nobody around to keep us from following the feeling to its end. As long as I knew we would get there eventually and that I would be by his side until we got there I could have waited.

Will he feel guilty over leaving me behind and breaking my heart? Will it take away from the happiness of his wedding day and of the start of his marriage? What is he going to tell Lace? He cannot hide his state of mind from her, not when he's as troubled as he was when he walked out this door. Peeta is an accomplished liar, he always has been, but there is a limit to how well he can put on the act. Especially in front of the person who is going to be closest to him from this point on and until the end of their lives.

Groaning heavily I force myself to rise to my feet, absent-mindedly brushing off any possible dust or dirt from my gaudy red dress. I can't hide up here any longer. At least I haven't cried for at least half an hour so my face ought to look okay. Just to make sure I find my way to the bathroom and stare at my reflection in the mirror. I suppose I look the same as always but I don't recognize myself. Who is this girl staring back at me? What is she going to do from this point on? There's nowhere to go now but forward. Peeta went on about moving to District 8 with his new wife but even if they stay here him and I will be going our separate ways now. There's no way, no way at all, that I will put on a brave face and pretend as if things are good and normal and him and I are just friends. No more dinners with him and Haymitch. No more spring cleaning or hangout days with just the two of us. No more private conversations. Just like Gale became part of my past Peeta will now have to be left behind. Perhaps it's not fair to say he made that choice for himself but I can choose whether to try and salvage our friendship or not and I think I choose to walk away.

I feel another lump in my throat at that thought. I look into my own eyes in the mirror, realizing the full extent of the decision I just landed on. If I hold to it I will end my friendship with Peeta, at least in the way it exists today. We will always be friends, anything else is unthinkable, but the kind of friends who care about each other from a distance and don't really interact in their day-to-day lives. Acquaintances, I suppose the word is. I have to take a gulp and a deep breath to force the tears away. This is what Peeta and I, the star-crossed lovers of District 12, the duo I never thought anything but death could separate, have been relegated to. What else can we be? The love that exists between us
can never come to any fruition. He will give everything to Lace instead. It's pathetic that we end this way.

I quickly shake my head to clear it and hark my throat, gathering my resolve. It's time I left the hotel and went back home. I have a week to gear up for the toasting and when that is over my new life will begin. Time to pick up the pieces and move forward. Time to finally grieve Peeta completely and then hopefully close that door and live the rest of my life for me and me alone.

Though as I leave the room and walk quietly down the hallway towards the stairs my treacherous heart can't help but hold on to hope that it might not have to come to this. It's unnervingly difficult to silence the voice inside that says I gave Peeta quite the shock and that once he's had a chance to digest this twist of events he may rethink and make a different decision. His wedding is still a week away and a lot of things can happen in that time. Who knows what he'll think and feel tomorrow when he sees Lace in private? Who knows what he will think and feel when he realizes the full extent of what he would be giving up if he ultimately chooses her over me?

Something tells me that until that bread has been toasted I won't be strong enough to let go of that hope.

The ticking of the clock is the only sound in the room. I sit in an armchair, staring out into space, my feet curled up underneath me. It is Peeta's wedding day today and though this day was always going to be difficult for me it's downright torturous under current conditions. Peeta hasn't spoken to me since that night I, or rather Haymitch, revealed my feelings. Neither one of us has tried to contact the other. I understand now that he's not going to leave her for me.

In just a few short hours I have to stand there and watch as the only person I have ever been in love with swears away his life to somebody else. Somebody who is inherently so much better than I am, possibly even good enough to match Peeta himself. After spending a few days thinking about it there's no real question in my mind whether or not she deserves him. She never intended to hurt my feelings, she didn't know, perhaps still doesn't. She's just a girl who fell in love with Peeta and I can't blame her for that, much as I would like to. Honestly I don't know how it took me so long to fall in love with him, or how anyone can spend time with him without feeling this way about him.

Before Haymitch forced us to have that conversation I knew that today would be a trial for me, but for me alone. I would have to bear it, smile and pretend to be happy, hear Peeta proclaim his love for her and Haymitch welcome her to the family. But it would be my pain alone and for everyone else it would be a joyous day. I know that by telling Peeta how I feel I've ruined this for him. The best case scenario is that he will feel a twinge of guilt and – worst of all – pity for me, the way I used to think I would feel for Peeta or Gale if I chose the other one. Worst case scenario Peeta will feel like his wedding, and consequently the start of his marriage, has been sullied by my love for him no longer being a secret to him. I wanted him to choose me but if he couldn't do that I think I would rather have it be because he doesn't reciprocate. The loss is that much bitterer when I know everything had the potential of being different if I had only made different choices. Peeta made his choice this week but I could have done differently a long time ago and kept us from being in this position to begin with. I know that now with the clarity of hindsight.
Then again, they're probably moving to District Eight so he won't ever have to feel tempted or
wonder what would have happened if he'd made a different choice. Deep down I know this is for the
best, giving us both a chance at a fresh start over. Not that I'm not determined to go on with my life
and find a place where I belong whether he stays three houses down or leaves the District but a clean
break might be just what I need. And yet…

Pain burns hot inside of me, like a sharp blade cutting my insides. Whenever I think about it, which
is just about every waking moment, my throat seems to close up and make it difficult to breathe. He's
going to leave. He's going to move to District Eight and I will lose him completely. And he will lose
Haymitch in a way and have to live among people who weren't his family before he met Lace. His
life will be built around her entirely and perhaps that's what he wants. But it hurts me so bad to know
that I won't get to see him every day. I won't be able to look out my window and watch him as he
tends to the garden or shovels snow or just walks down the street.

I no longer have a boy with the bread. I realize I haven't had that for a long time, not since the
Quarter Quell arena.

I ought to be getting ready for the big event. I need a shower and to have my hair washed and then
there's the applying of makeup and getting my hair ready and putting on the clothes I've decided to
wear, which is no longer something that Lace made but an old dress of my mother's that I found in
her closet. In spite of everything I don't want to be a no show; I want to assert my power and my
pride by not allowing this to break me. I want to stand up there and signal to Peeta that I will be
alright without him, that my life goes on. I only have about an hour and a half to get it all done. Even
so I can't seem to manage to move.

The phone rings. No doubt Haymitch calling to make sure I'm on schedule. The phone sits on the
end-table beside me and while still staring out into space I reach out and grab it, lifting it to my ear.

"Yes?"

I brace myself for whatever witty comment or snarl will be coming my way.

"The wedding is off."

When I hear Haymitch saying those words I finally snap out of my haze and nearly drop the phone
in the process. I get a hold of myself and press the phone to my ear, wondering if I heard him right.

"What?"

"I said the wedding is off." There's a pause. "Just stay at home. I'm with Peeta and I don't think you
ought to come here today. Understood, sweetheart?"

"What? What happened?"

There's a moment of silence.

"Just stay away, okay? You're the last person he needs to see today and vice versa. I'll be by later
and we'll talk then."

He hangs up and I stare at the phone for a while before setting it back down. The wedding is off. As
in completely cancelled or as in postponed? Did Peeta call off the wedding? Or was it Lace? It ought
to have been Peeta but if that's the case why would Haymitch tell me to stay away? Peeta's only
reason for cancelling would be to be with me instead and if that is what happened I should be the
person he wants to see the most. Unless Lace is over there and is raging mad or he wants to keep a
low profile today.
Little by little the overwhelming sadness I've carried around for so long now begins to fade and in its place comes an almost exhilarating joy. Peeta is not getting married today. Peeta called off his wedding. Against all odds it looks like I've gotten another chance with him and this time I do not intend on letting it pass me by.

Chapter End Notes

So... Bad news and good news, I suppose is how you could summarize this chapter. Chapter 20 will start off a few hours after this chapter ends so you'll get some more details at that point. Hope you all don't hate me too much for not letting Katniss and Peeta kiss...
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

So here's a head's up on something that might become an issue and might become nothing... My computer decided to start today by acting up like crazy. To make a long story short I'm strongly suspecting I might need to hand it in to be fixed or buy myself a new one. I've backed-up all my files so this might not seem to concern any of you but I felt I should give a heads up since if it does break down I most likely won't have time to have it fixed right away. Since I can't do any fic-writing on my iPad there might be a hiatus where my stories are concerned. Just so you're all aware! Keep your fingers crossed that today was just a scare and it will play nice from here on out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I spend the next few hours in a raging conflict of emotions. I'm unable to sit still but also unable to determine what to do instead. I pace around the house. I decide to go out hunting, only to stop two steps out the door and decide I should stay home in case Peeta tries to get in contact with me. I run laps up and down the stairs which annoys Buttercup and earns me a hiss. I clean everything in my kitchen. I pace some more. Several times during the day I walk over to the window and look out, wishing I could see what is going on over at Peeta's house. I'm even tempted to take a walk into town in the hopes of hearing something through the grapevine but I'm nervous that my own name might be involved so I think the better of it. Over and over I stare at the phone, willing it to ring, occasionally walking up to it to call Peeta myself but then remembering Haymitch's words.

Mostly I'm jubilant. The wedding is off. Peeta isn't getting married. There is no Lace Mellark and that is amazing news in and of itself. Part of me is also nervous. What does this mean for Peeta and me? The thought of getting to kiss him the next time I see him makes me tingle with anticipation but it also makes me nervous. There's a part of me that's anxious, even though I want to ignore that as much as I can. Haymitch said I was the last person Peeta needs to see today and I really need to know what he meant by that.

Finally I can't bear it anymore. I decide to ignore Haymitch and go over to see Peeta. Haymitch doesn't deserve to be listened to anyway after what he did earlier this week. With my mind made up I hurry out the door and take the bright shining sun and the tweeting birds as a good sign. I whistle as I walk, trying to imitate the melodies of the birds. This combination of nervousness and joy makes me jittery and even though it's a short walk to Peeta's house I feel like it takes far too long to get there.

It's Haymitch who answers the door and he immediately scowls at me.

"Didn't I tell you not to come here?"
"Didn't I tell you not to tell Peeta?" I retort, an eyebrow raised in challenge. "I want to see him."

"Wait a day."

He looks annoyed, frustrated and weary. I don't care. He's not Peeta's gatekeeper, he's neither my father nor Peeta's and he's not even our mentor anymore. Unless Peeta himself asks me to hold off until tomorrow I see no reason why I shouldn't be here right now. The cancellation of the wedding affects my life too, very much so, and I have patiently waited for far too long already where Peeta is concerned.

"Get out of my way, Haymitch." When he doesn't budge I lower my voice to a hiss. "You were the one who insisted Peeta know the truth."

He glances over his shoulder and I hope to see Peeta walking up but nobody comes. Haymitch sighs and looks at me again.

"You can see him tomorrow. I think it's better for the both of you if you spend this particular day apart."

"And I think none of this would have happened if it wasn't for you so let me deal with the fallout in whatever way I see fit."

"You won't be able to have any form of sensible conversation with him today. Whether you're here to yell at him or kiss him or anything in-between he's not… he can't keep it together for long enough for any of that. Give him a day."

"I can handle him" I say. "I need some answers."

"Answers which you won't get today. Are you listening to me? He's too frazzled. Wait until he's feeling better."

"Haymitch" I say icily. "Get out of my way or find out exactly how displeased I am with what you've been up to this week."

Finally he makes a face and moves to the side, allowing me to enter.

"Just for a brief moment, then. At your own risk. If he has an adverse reaction you get out of here as quick as possible."

I ignore his instructions and walk through the house in search of Peeta. He's not in the kitchen but I find him in the sitting room, leaning forward on the couch, his arms folded over his knees. I can see even from a distance that his eyes are red and swollen, dark circles beneath them, and that he doesn't look very happy. For the first time since I got Haymitch's phone call I start to feel a real touch of worry.

"Peeta?" I say.

"Sorry, boy" says Haymitch over my shoulder, sounding weary. "I told her not to come by but she insisted."

Peeta looks up at us and seems exhausted. He's quiet for a moment and then he shakes his head heavily.

"That's alright, Haymitch. Might as well see each other, anyway, I guess."
"That's just another brilliant decision you're making this week."

"Pot, come meet my friend kettle."

I'm not entirely sure what that's supposed to mean but I know I want to talk to Peeta alone, without a chaperone. I turn to Haymitch and give him a glare and understanding my intentions he sighs and shakes his head.

"I'll give you two a moment, then. I have to go pick up Effie, anyway."

Peeta's sudden frown matches my own.

"Effie?" he says.

"Well it was going to be a surprise but it doesn't matter much now."

"Please Haymitch..." says Peeta after a moment of stunned silence. "I'm touched by the sentiment, truly I am, but I don't think I can handle seeing Effie today. Can you take her somewhere in town? Just for the night?"

"She's got a hotel room, don't worry." He gives me a pointed look and lowers his voice to a whisper. "He's having a hell of a rough time. Don't pressure him today, okay? I know you want to get some answers, and you deserve them, but today is not the day." I give him a look but he continues. "Sweetheart for your own sake I really think you'd be better off going back home right now."

A poisonous reply is at the tip of my tongue but he leaves before I can actually say anything. The moment he is gone I forget all about him and focus only on Peeta. The worry is back. He looks so distraught, so unhappy. This is exactly what I didn't want to have happen. I wanted him to have his happiness. I'm happy about the reason he's not happy but I wish it didn't have to cause him this much distress.

"How are you feeling?" I ask as I slowly walk over to him.

"Not how I was supposed to feel today" he mumbles. "I'm surprised you're here. Didn't think you'd want to see much of me after how I left things when we last saw each other..." He lets out a short huff. "No, definitely not feeling good today."

I sit down beside him on the couch, unsure of what I should say to him. I wasn't expecting him to be this distraught. Then again this is Peeta and a warm rush of affection flows through me when I realize that this is just like him to react this way. A few days ago he wouldn't as much as kiss me out of respect for his fiancée. Leaving her so close to the wedding would undoubtedly make him feel terrible.

"Peeta it will be alright" I say softly.

He shakes his head and laughs unhappily.

"How? This was supposed to be my wedding day. I was supposed to have a wife, a toasting, a family. Instead I have really, really hurt people very close to me. Instead I have nothing. Except for a ton of guilt and..."

"You have everything" I object gently. "Or you will."

"Katniss..."
He says my name with frustrated disbelief. Only now does a new insecurity come creeping up inside of me. Almost unnoticeably I move further away from him on the couch, as if to shield myself from something I might not want to hear.

"How did you and Lace end things?" I ask.

Up until this moment I've assumed that Peeta was the one who called off the marriage but that might not be the case I now realize. And it makes all the difference in the world. If Peeta cancelled his wedding then he must have done it because he would rather be with me than with Lace. He would probably feel horrible about it and blame himself for all the pain it must be causing her but it would still mean good things for him and me. It would mean the possibility of a future for us. But if it wasn't Peeta, if Lace was the one to decide they shouldn't get married… At first I'm not sure why she would have done something like that. It's impossible to imagine that she, too, might have somebody else holding part of her heart. She's seemed so completely infatuated and so excited about becoming Mrs. Mellark. Nothing could possibly change that, except…

Except for her finding out about Peeta's feelings for me. And only one person could have told her. Haymitch wouldn't, there's a limit even for him to how much he would meddle in our affairs. But Peeta just might have been feeling guilty enough to tell her everything, which might have caused her to call off the marriage, even against his wishes. He could have chosen her only to have her leave him. If that is what happened it changes everything for me. I wouldn't be Peeta's choice, the one he wants the most. I would be the runner-up, someone he gets together with because the one he truly wants doesn't want him anymore. If that is the case I am truly done.

If he's even capable of doing that. I wasn't. When Peeta came back from the Capitol in his hijacked state I knew I couldn't have him anymore which meant that there was no choice to be made anymore between him and Gale. It would have been simple to choose Gale then, to be with him out of default, to cling to somebody who loved me and wanted me when the only other option was bitter loneliness and longing for a person who would never want to hold me in his arms again. But I was not able to make that choice of being with Gale. When faced with the options of being with him or being alone I chose being alone. My gut tells me Peeta would do the same and be lonely rather than settle for me if those were his options.

Perhaps we're all going to be miserable now.

He still hasn't answered my question. In fact, it looks like he didn't even hear it. He's staring blankly into space, twiddling his thumbs in an unnerving gesture. I place my hand on top of his to still his movements and he looks up at me. Despite everything I can't still the enormous longing to reach out and take what I want. I want to see if I can make the pain in his eyes go away. I want to lean in and kiss his sadness away. I want to find out if we can take away each other's heartache. I move just a tiny bit closer and look into his eyes to see if he knows what I'm contemplating and if he will accept it.

"Peeta…" I say, my hand coming up to caress his cheek. He's got stubble, like he hasn't shaved in a day or two. "Listen to me… This doesn't have to be all bad. You and me, we could…"

My voice trails off but I keep looking deeply into his eyes. My words seem to register with him and he frowns, pulling back a little.

"You and me could what?" he asks, his tone a touch angry. "I'm supposed to be newly married to Lace right now so what exactly is it that you and me could do?"

I swallow and move back a little, letting my hand fall from his cheek. I wish I knew what I was supposed to do in this situation and whether or not it's better to relentlessly pursue what I want and
need or if the best strategy is to give him some leeway right now.

"You and I could..." I begin, trying to figure out how to best end the sentence.

"What? We could what?" His voice is only angry now. "Kiss? Is that it? My supposed wedding day is not even over yet and you expect me to be in your arms?"

"No" I say. "I don't know. I just... That's why you're not married, isn't it? Because of you and me?"

"So what if that were the reason?" he asks, rising from his seat. He begins to pace back and forth in the room, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I don't know what makes you think I could just move forward with you on this day of all days." He scoffs. "Except I guess I do know. But I'm not like you."

"Peeta..." I say hesitantly. His demeanour is making me nervous.

He looks up at me and I can see his pupils dilating and contracting. This sends me to my feet, ready to flee. In his current emotional state he might not be able to fight it back. There's no wounded shoulder to smash against a bannister today.

"It's the kind of thing that's right up your alley, isn't it?" he hisses at me in a voice that holds nothing of the Peeta I know. "Exactly the kind of thing you did to Gale and me. Smooch one, then go smooch with the other. Who cares what any of us thought or felt, right? Who cares what Lace would think and feel if I gave you all you wanted tonight? She's just a little insignificant nobody in your eyes anyway, isn't she? Like an irritating fly you want to squish. But I'm not like you. I can't so much as think about anything related to you and me today. I'll be damned if I treat her with anything other than respect today when I've shown her so little of it lately."

Then, as if flipping a switch, his pupils go steady and he gasps and reels. His eyes then close hard and he turns and grabs the mantelpiece and lets out a long, painful groan, alternating between tugging and pushing at the mantelpiece as if it's the thing he's struggling with. I can see his body begin to tremble from his efforts.

"Peeta" I say, stepping closer.

"Please" he manages through painful pants. "I don't want this... I didn't want this... I don't mean the things I'm... You don't deserve... It's not fair to you..." He groans again, loudly, and his knuckles turn even whiter somehow. He continues through gritted teeth. "This is why you should have stayed away today. Why I asked them to keep you away. I can't trust myself. I'm afraid I might hurt you even worse. I'm sorry. I don't mean the horrible things I... I'm so damn sorry. I don't know if I can control it. Just go, Katniss. I have enough to regret as it is. I don't want to damage you too."

I don't want to go. I want to stay and take care of him through his agony. But I realize that my presence here is only going to make matters worse, not better. It won't help me at all either because clearly he's not in any shape to let me know what he's feeling deep down in his heart. There is nothing I can do here to help him. The best thing I can do is leave.

I can still hear him groaning and gasping and making agonized cries when the front door slams shut behind me. I sit down on the front porch, afraid to leave him completely alone, praying Haymitch will get here soon.
I don't know how long it's been when Haymitch finally comes walking up to me. Peeta has been quiet for a while and I've been leaning against the bannister for long enough that my neck is starting to ache a little. Haymitch doesn't seem particularly high spirited either. He looks depressed, like he's carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. He seems to have aged five or six years in the past few days.

"Didn't go so well, I take it?" he asks in a sigh. "He's been fighting attacks on and off all day long. All week, probably. He's smart enough to know he's messed things up and...e'HeH" He sighs again, taking a seat beside me on the porch steps. "I guess I don't have to tell you I feel pretty damn lousy for causing this whole screwed up situation. If his mind was a mess a week ago it's ten times that now. Or he's just in a state of panic, who knows?" He shrugs and wraps an arm around my shoulder. "How are you holding up?"

"I don't know" I mutter. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to fell. Exhilaration? Anger? Disappointment?"

"Did he say anything about... you two?"

"Nothing encouraging."

"He's not in any shape to start something with you right now" says Haymitch carefully. "Even if he might want to."

"No I know. It became quite glaringly obvious, if it wasn't before. I just... I got what I wanted. Didn't I? The wedding is cancelled and Peeta loves me." Keeping in a sigh I rest my head on Haymitch's shoulder. "So why does it feel like I lost anyway?"

"Because the boy really made a mess of things by proposing to someone he didn't love exclusively" says Haymitch. "I guess it's to his credit that he knows it, and he's having to fight off these attacks because he knows it, but all this could have been avoided."

A troubling thought occurs to me and adds to my concerns over how this wedding came to be cancelled.

"It's been almost a week since he found out how I feel. That night he told me his choice was Lace. It took him seven days to change his mind, apparently. What does that say?"

"The wedding wasn't called off today" reveals Haymitch, causing me to sit up straight and stare at him with wide eyes.

"What? Then when?"

"I don't know. He's not very forthcoming with information."

"Why not?" I ask warily.

"Sweetheart I'm not exactly Peeta Mellark's favourite person at the moment. I won't say he blames me for everything that's unfolded since that dinner but he's not very appreciative of my contributions..."
"He's mad at you?" I ask, silently thinking he might as well get in line.

"Well he thought I was being unsupportive eight days ago and that has only been amplified now."

"Okay, but he still called you here today" I point out.

"No, that would be Delly's handiwork."

"Delly?" I echo. I had completely forgotten she's even in town.

"She's the one he's been looking to since the wedding was called off. Only reason I'm here today instead of her is because she had to go into town and take care of some... business that comes with calling off a wedding less than a week before it's supposed to take place. She didn't want him to be alone so she called me over. Not sure my being here has done all that much good."

I let the news sink in and my brow furrows as I think it over. Delly Cartwright. I knew long before Peeta confirmed it that she would be coming to the toasting, she is his only surviving childhood friend after all, but it hadn't occurred to me that they have any form of closer relationship nowadays. I haven't forgotten the part she played when he came to District 13 but I guess I assumed they didn't stay in touch after that except for a phone call on birthdays or such. It's strangely comforting to know he's looked to her this week. She knows how to handle him when he's struggling with flashbacks and anything and everything else hijack related, probably she knows better than anybody else because she was there throughout the entire process in Thirteen. She can probably help him keep stable more efficiently than the rest of us in a situation like this.

It crosses my mind that once again somebody other than me is there for him when he needs somebody badly. He's again chosen to lean on somebody else but unlike previous instances with Lace this time around I feel only relief, truth be told. I don't particularly want to be the one he leans on when he's dealing with guilt and anguish over breaking another woman's heart. In fact I realize I don't want to be there for anyone at all at the moment. I'm exhausted, more so than I think I've allowed myself to acknowledge, and I want to be supported, not supporting.

When I step through my front door I freeze. I'm not alone. Effie is standing in the doorway to the kitchen, dressed in some ridiculous Capitol outfit that is significantly toned down from the things she wore before but still so much her own style. She's also wearing a red wig that's vaguely styled into a heart on top of her head. I guess you can never fully take the Capitol lifestyle out of Effie Trinket.

She stands there looking at me, wringing her hands, giving me a sad smile that is probably meant to be encouraging and compassionate at the same time. It's strange seeing her again. I realize I haven't seen her since the war ended, and we've only spoken on the phone a handful of times. Her being here without Cinna, without my prep team, is strange. All the same it's nice to see a familiar, friendly face.

"Hi Effie" I manage.

"Katniss" she says, her hand touching her heart, her voice full of emotion.
"I… wasn't expecting to see you here. Haymitch said you had a hotel room."

"Haymitch told me what has been happening. We thought you could use someone to be with you today."

"Thank you" I say. "I'm fine, though."

Effie makes a face like she's touched by how strong I try to be and under other circumstances I would have been annoyed but right now it just feels comforting to have somebody here with me, somebody who cares. I'm sure I'll be sick and tired of her before morning but at the moment I can't help but feel like in lieu of my mother being here Effie is a decent substitute.

She walks up to me and wraps me in a hug, the thick smell of her vanilla perfume making me a little queasy but the gesture itself is so comforting and reassuring that I almost begin to cry. Dear old Effie.

"I was rooting for you and Peeta" she says. "From the very beginning, I was. You are so right for each other." She rocks me back and forth like I'm a little child. "Oh I wish things can work out for the two of you."

"I wish that too" I allow myself to admit to her, whispering the words against the fur collar of her blouse.

She pulls back from the hug and I see a tear or two in the corner of her eyes. She smiles her bravado smile and gives me a light pat on the cheek.

"Now, what do you say we have a cup of tea and a nice little girl chat? I could use one after the long and dreary train ride out here. Did you know they don't use the trains we had during the Games? You'd think that at least when someone important is travelling here they'd find a decent mode of transportation. The things they cart people around in these days are downright awful."

She continues to prattle on as we head to the kitchen and I put on a kettle. Most of what she says is typical mundane things a Capitol native would care about but underneath it all I notice something else, a trace of concern and caring. I wonder if she would like to go see Peeta and make sure he is doing okay but if she does want to she keeps it to herself. I get to be the full focus of her attention all afternoon and even though it's the last thing I would have thought to ask for it might just be exactly what I needed.

We've just finished having dinner when the front door opens and steps I recognize as Haymitch's walk inside the house. I feel myself tense up, not sure if I want an update from him or not. It's not like he's going to waltz in here and tell me Peeta is now recovered and feels just dandy and wants me to come over and everything will be fine.

"Delly finally got back" Haymitch declares as he walks into the kitchen. He leans over the table and grabs a piece of bell pepper from Effie's plate, ignoring the displeased look she gives him. "He seemed to get calmer when she showed up and I sure didn't mind leaving her to deal with him for the rest of the evening. I lost count somewhere around the fifth time he had to fight back an attack and let me tell you, he was no fun in-between them either."
"I should think not" I mumble under my breath.

"I think we should see the positive" says Effie in another one of her attempts at cheerfulness. "He realized his mistake before it was too late. It would have been a lot worse if this had happened after the wedding ceremony."

"Just because that would have been worse it doesn't make this anything other than bad" argues Haymitch. He hops up on the kitchen island next to Buttercup who is rudely woken from his nap. "He's made precisely zero people happy this week. Not to mention thrown a lot of money and people's time down the drain."

"Of course it sounds bad if you look at it with that attitude" admonishes Effie.

"The boy agrees with me" says Haymitch. "Says it was too late once he had popped the question, that from that point on it would be a disaster no matter how it played out. He's in full-blown self-deprecation mode right now." He sighs, running a hand through his hair and then down over his face. "Ugh, I'm just… more than a little bit exhausted right now. I knew he was making a mistake getting married so soon. I told him he shouldn't rush into it."

"Yeah he fucked up" I say, not even realizing my choice of words until I hear Effie's shocked gasp. I look up to see her staring at me in utter shock, and Haymitch looking at me like I just sprouted wings.

"Why Katniss!" Effie exclaims.

"Well he did" I say stubbornly.

"Don't go getting up on your high horse just yet' says Haymitch. "If you had gotten over yourself months ago and mustered up the courage to say something to him things would have never gotten this out of hand."

I scowl at the accusation and turn my eyes to Effie instead, only to find her still looking horrified at my coarse language.

"I should wash your mouth with soap" she says dramatically, in a hushed tone.

"Fine, I'm sorry for my choice of words" I say, rolling my eyes.

"It's going to be an unpleasant couple of days" says Haymitch. He's managed to get engaged in a swatting match with Buttercup who wants the kitchen island to himself, and is barely looking at us as he speaks. "I know you're having it rough, Katniss. The boy's mind is chaos. Peeta already spoke to dr. Aurelius earlier this week but I think the useless old doc is going to have to actually do something hands-on this time around. Either that or Peeta needs to find himself someone who isn't just a voice on the other end of a phone line. He's been on the phone with the doc several times a week since the shoulder incident and fat load of good that has done."

I get up from my seat and walk over to the kitchen island, grabbing Buttercup who meows in protest but allows me to carry him over to the table where I take my seat again.

"It's going to be such a scandal" says Effie, looking like she's about to have a nervous breakdown. "Calling off a wedding on such short notice? It simply isn't done!"

"The scandal is the least of our concerns at the moment’ says Haymitch. "Effie I think tomorrow you're going to have to be the one who makes sure the boy doesn't bludgeon his forehead against the mantelpiece in one of his attempts at avoiding an attack. Delly still has things to get done in town and
clearly my presence wasn't doing much to help but I couldn't leave him alone either."

"No wonder your presence wasn't helpful" I say coldly, patting Buttercup on the head. "If you had only kept your big, drunk mouth shut none of this would have happened."

"And he would have been married to miss Sunshine-And-Bubbles and you would have been cooped up in here playing the violin to your own depression" snarls Haymitch in reply. "It was going to be a disaster no matter what but at least Peeta got the chance to make his decisions based on the truth."

"How do you even know it was Peeta who made the decision?" I challenge. "Could have been Lace. He could have told her what happened and she made the call to not get married now. Hell, for all we know the wedding has been postponed, not cancelled. Delly might be running around making rearrangements not cancellations."

"I think we should all calm ourselves a bit" says Effie, though she certainly doesn't seem very calm herself.

"I'm not going to calm down" I snarl. Buttercup looks up at me and grunts, apparently displeased with my mood, and jumps off my lap. I lean over the table and scowl at Effie. "A week ago I was miserable because the guy I love was marrying someone else. Now he's apparently no longer doing that but he's also not knocking on my door looking for a chance to be with me. For all I know he blames me for messing everything up! Maybe he thinks I'm just jealous and petty!"

"You're not to blame for everything but you did hold back some fairly vital information" says Haymitch and I turn and glare at him.

"Oh you've got some nerve" I hiss. "Who's fault is this all, anyway? I made the choice not to tell Peeta how I feel and-"

"It was a stupid, immature choice" interrupts Haymitch. "I was really hoping you'd get your head out of your ass and go tell him the truth yourself, or that he'd get his head out of his ass and recognize that marrying his new beau so damn soon is a terrible idea. Had I known you were both going to persist on being stubborn idiots I would have intervened a lot sooner."

"Who gives you the job, or the right, to intervene in the first place?"

"Perfect, and now I'm getting a migraine" complains Effie. She throws her hands up, rises and walks over to the sink. "Is the water safe to drink?"

"It's an outline district, not a Hunger Games arena!" I snarl.

A moment of silence follows and none of us make eye contact. I don't know how this mood ended up the prevailing one, or what the hell is up with Haymitch's newfound attitude against me. I get that he's had a rough day in Peeta's company but that doesn't give him the right to take it out on me. Then again I can't deny I'm taking my own frustration out on him and Effie. However, I think my situation is a far bit more trying and emotionally exhausting than his so if anyone gets to act out it should be me.

"Probably best I get you to your hotel room, Effie" says Haymitch finally, getting down from the kitchen island.

"Some room service and a hot bath would be marvelous" she replies in a flustered tone, rubbing her temples.

"Possibly some drinkable water too" I snarl.
Ignoring my comment she walks up to me and gives me a hug from behind, promising to be back tomorrow and telling me to get some rest. I remain in my seat, offering no parting words as they leave the house and presumably head for Haymitch's beaten down old car. It's a relief to be alone again and it's also sad and lonely. I wonder how many days of this we will have to endure before anything starts making sense again.

Then again it's infinitely better than watching Peeta and Lace toast a piece of bread.

Evening comes and darkness falls. I take a hot shower and put on a sweater and a pair of sweat pants, or cosy-pants as Peeta used to refer to them. I curl up in an armchair with a book on my lap and try to focus on reading but I can't bring myself to feel interested. No matter how hard I try it seems impossible not to wonder about the developments of the day. There are so many questions I need answers to and before I have those answers it's difficult to feel joy alone over the cancelled toasting.

I've been sitting on my chair for over an hour and read only two or three pages when a knock on the door interrupts me. With a sigh I put the book down on the coffee table and force myself to get up from the chair. My wet hair has made my sweater damp and it feels uncomfortable and as I walk to answer the door I make up my mind to head upstairs the first change I get and change into something else. Perhaps pyjamas. I might as well go to bed seeing as how I'm clearly not able to do anything worthwhile while awake tonight.

I don't know who I expect to find on the other side of the door when I open it, but Delly Cartwright never entered my mind as a candidate. I don't know what to say at first when I see her standing there on my porch with her face tilted downward and wringing her hands in an unhappy gesture. She looks up at me from underneath her blonde bangs and I suppress a sigh at the expression in her eyes. Is everyone miserable today?

"Hi Katniss."

"Hey Delly."

There's a moment of awkward silence between us but I don't care to be the one to break it. It's been nice having both Haymitch and Effie show their support for me today, regardless of how things ended, but it's been just as nice getting to be alone for a while. This has been an emotionally draining week and the last thing I need is even more difficult emotions to deal with.

"I hope you don't mind that I stop by" says Delly.

"I hope you don't mind that I stop by" says Delly. There's no good reply to that so I settle for shrugging and reluctantly moving aside so that she can come inside the house. She takes a few tentative steps and looks around the room she's walked into but I think I can read from her body language that she doesn't intend to stay for long and that makes me pleased.

"Peeta is sleeping" she volunteers.

"Okay."
"I… knocked him out with some sleep syrup."

This bit of information surprises me a little. I didn't know sweet Delly Cartwright would have it in her and I didn't know Peeta was in a state that he would need it.

"So why are you here, then?" I ask, trying not to sound unfriendly.

"Because Peeta wanted me to."

I scowl and cross my arms over my chest.

"Peeta asked to be given sleep syrup and sent you over here to do… what exactly?"

Her eyes widen and to my annoyance they remind me of the doe eyes of the woman Peeta didn't get married to today.

"No! No, nothing like that. He…” She blushes and looks very uncomfortable. "I put the sleep syrup in his tea. He caught on to me after the first sip but he finished it anyway." Quickly she begins to defend her actions. "He's been having such a rough week, today worst of all, and I'm scared all those flashbacks are going to take too big a toll on him! I really feel he needs to sleep properly for a while." She looks deeply unhappy. "Well, he'll probably sleep all day tomorrow too since I put extra sleep syrup in the tea just in case he would only drink a little of it."

I hold up my hands to stop her.

"Delly, Delly, slow down. I don't care why you gave him that or for how long he will sleep." It's not entirely true but I wish it were. I try to suppress the worry I feel about her feeling the need to drug him. The state he was in when I saw him earlier today was bad but she's seen him much worse. How bad is it really this time around? Do I even want to know? "You said you came here because he asked you to. I'm really tired myself and was planning on going to bed so if you don't mind…"

"Well he asked me in so many words…" says Delly, wringing her hands again. "He told me you stopped by to see him and that… Oh Katniss, please understand! This week has been hell on him and he's having such a hard time and…"

"This week has been hell on many people" I mutter.

"I know" she says, a strangely soft touch in her voice. "I know none of this is your fault. I don't think anybody blames you."

I wasn't worrying about that but since she mentions it the thought enters my mind. Perhaps Peeta doesn't blame me, in fact I really hope he doesn't, but there's one person who undoubtedly hates me for causing all this chaos.

"Delly, listen…"

"Katniss he feels terrible about having an episode in front of you earlier today" Delly says, barely listening to me. "He told me he was so happy that you showed up and then he got really scared because he was worried he'd have another attack and then he did… I don't know what things he said or what he did but I hope you know that it wasn't him. You know?" The fervently pleading look on her eyes fades into something that seems almost happy and hopeful, strange as it may be. "He loves you so much, I just know that he does, and this will all work out. Lace is just so upset and he's feeling so terrible about everything and…” Her soft hands grab mine and I don't know if I ought to allow her or pull my hands back. I remember that Delly has always been in my corner as far as my relationship with Peeta goes but I wonder how objective she really is. Does she know he loves me
deeply or does she wish that he does? "I hope you don't give up on him now. When all the dust has settled and everyone has had time to think things through I know you could be so happy together."

I can't help but feel a warm, happy feeling in my chest and a faint smile appears on my face. I really do want her to be right about this. All the same I think the best course of action is to proceed with caution at this point. No one knows for how long Peeta will be in the state he's currently in and until he’s gotten through it there can be no happy ending for us.

"I just hope he doesn't end up regretting the decision to leave her" I say. I choose my wording carefully, hoping that Delly's response will tell me whether or not it actually was him who called it off.

"He really regrets hurting her" says Delly, looking sad. "I don't think it was a particularly pleasant conversation… In fact I think it devastated him to have to have that conversation at all. I don't think he'll regret it, though."

"Delly…” I say, deciding to just be blunt. "It was Peeta who called it off… right?"

She nods and I exhale slowly, letting my shoulders sink down a bit. Peeta did it. Not Lace.

It's not until fifteen minutes later, after Delly has left, that another thought occurs to me. Did Peeta call it off because he wants to be with me or did he call it off because he felt wrong marrying Lace when he's got feelings for me too? The latter doesn't necessarily have to imply that he'll come knocking on my door when he's worked through his currently messy state of mind.

Then I decide it doesn't entirely matter. I walk up the stairs and begin to get ready for bed, mulling over that possibility. So what if he called it off because he's uncertain, not because he knows he wants me more? If that's the case I can convince him where his heart should lie. I will remind him that we have a connection that goes far deeper and far beyond anything he could ever have with Lace. I will make it abundantly clear to him that it was not a mistake to take the chance at a possible future for us instead of a certain future with her.

Chapter End Notes

Just to be overly-clear, Peeta is at the precipice of a flashback pretty much from the moment he and Katniss are left alone. He'll be in a more lucid state of mind next chapter. The argument between Katniss and Haymitch is mainly driven by their frustrations and weariness boiling over. I wasn't sure whether or not to include it but it seems like a very true-to-life reaction. Writing Delly was a challenge since I still haven't gotten my hands on an English language copy of "Mockingjay" (and it's been like two years since I read it in Swedish) so I can only hope she isn't OOC.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

This chapter was a bit of a struggle... I wrote the bulk of the scenes with Peeta a month or two ago and then I've re-written and re-worked and uuuugh... Then again I suppose that's what happens when you begin to write a chapter without having decided where you want it to end and which direction you want it to go. I decided to leave it a bit unfocused since I think the characters are too at this point, to a degree. Hope it's not TOO unfocused or it might come off as just a mess. It's also a very dialogue heavy chapter and I tried to re-work it to change that but in the end it just seemed like a whole lot of pointless filler in-between so I went back to the dialogue heavy version. It's times like these when I think perhaps I ought to get myself a beta... then I quickly remind myself I'm too impatient for that ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The time that follows the cancellation of the wedding ends up a bit of a blur. Days on end of nothing much happening, a surprising inactivity after all that drama. Effie stays in the district for five days, that's about as long as she can stomach being here I suppose, and she meticulously pencils in what hours of the day she spends with me, with Peeta and alone in her hotel room "recuperating". Under different circumstances it would have been kind of fun watching her fret over which one of us she should focus the most attention on and how exactly to behave with each of us but I can't find it amusing right now. I think she wants to be supportive of both of us equally but that's rather difficult to manage in a situation like this. All the same, having her around is surprisingly nice and it does feel a bit empty after she's left.

I don't see Peeta at all during this time. I've decided to let him come to me, however long that might take. Looking back I feel a little ashamed of my eagerness that day I found out about the cancelled wedding and I realize I was acting irrationally. I am determined not to make the same mistake twice so I give him whatever space he needs and try to put my focus on other things. My alone time is mostly spent out in the woods but I only hunt enough to feed myself, Haymitch and Effie. I have no desire to go into town and sell my game since I don't know how the talk goes among the gossiping citizens of the district. Is my involvement in the interrupted nuptials common knowledge or are people just wildly speculating? Are they even talking about it as much as I presume? For now I'd rather not know. There's also the risk of running into Lace or anyone in her family and while I don't feel like I have anything to be ashamed of or even apologise for when it comes to her I'd really rather not endure a public confrontation.

So I keep to myself, seeing no one other than Effie and Haymitch, giving the dust some time to settle and Peeta some time to pull himself out of the worst of it. Effie reports to me that apparently the worst came on the day of the cancelled wedding because he's been much more in control of himself when she's visited him, though it's clear that he's struggling. I want to be there with him, be there for him, let him know that whatever happens between us romantically we are friends at heart. I just don't think that's the wisest course of action right now.

So I stay away.
I sit on the steps that lead down from the back porch, lacing my favourite boots to head out hunting, when I hear his footsteps approaching. What feels like half a dozen different emotions run through me in an instant and the strongest one is relief and happiness, which immediately makes me angry with myself for having grown so needy for his mere presence that I would feel happiness at the thought of seeing him after what transpired between us the last time we saw one another. In the few seconds it takes for Peeta to actually come into view confusion wins out as the prevailing emotion, which makes sense since I have no idea where he and I stand and I am absolutely lost as to how to act from this point on. I choose to pretend I can't hear him coming until he stops a few feet away and harks.

When I look up and our eyes meet I feel a sense of guilt for doing this to him. Gone is the happy, healthy-looking Peeta and the man standing before me is one who doesn't seem to have slept much in days and who seems like he would like to do nothing but curl up in a ball on his bed and pretend the world doesn't exist anymore. A feeling I happen to be very familiar with.

"Hey…" I say, wondering why he's chosen to come see me when he's clearly not feeling very well at all.

"Hi" he says. "Going out hunting?" Without waiting for me to answer he continues in a short, pained tone. "Katniss I am so truly sorry for what happened the other day. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that. I hope you know I didn't mean all those horrible accusations I made."

"It's alright Peeta" I say, wanting to relieve his pain in any way that I can and thereby hopefully relieve my own as well.

"Like hell it is" he snorts. "I don't think it is and I don't think you honestly do either."

"You'd had a rough day…" I begin lamely, finishing the lacing on my boots. Then I shake my head and acknowledge what was really going on. "It was the hijacking… I can tell when you're getting an… episode. That's all it was, Peeta. I know it's not something you can control."

"Do you have any idea how much I hate that excuse?" he sighs heavily. He avoids my eyes and runs a hand through his hair while shifting his weight from one foot to the other in an awkward and impatient manner. "Oftentimes I'm not sure what the difference is between that and how my mother used to hurt me and my brothers."

"What?" I say, my brow furrowing in confusion.

"Come on, you know it's true." He exhales in a huff and stares upward to the sky, anything to avoid looking at me. "Just like my mother used to try and hand-wave it when she hurt one of us boys. It wasn't really her, she just got angry or concerned." He spits out the last sentence with what seems to be years of pent-up bitterness.

"I think it's different when it's the result of somebody mixing with your brain" I argue a touch too sharply.

"Who gives a damn why it happens?" he questions. "The end result is the same. If I hurt you, if I hurt Lace… All of it amounts to the same thing, regardless of why. Can you say it hurts any less because I have a reason? Can't say that 'it's not me' either because these days it is part of me."

"Peeta, slow down" I say. He seems to have been spending way too much time in his head since we last saw one another and clearly he's being hard on himself in a way that won't do anybody any favours. "I don't care about the things you said when you were like that. If you're looking for forgiveness you've got it."
He doesn't seemed placated in the least. I begin to wonder if he had an episode when he was with Lace between the dinner and the wedding and if that had anything to do with the cancelled nuptials.

"Thank you but you're forgiveness is not really of any consequence" he says, shifting awkwardly. Then he immediately cringes. "Wow that sounded awful, I'm sorry, what I mean is... I didn't come here to make myself feel better. You're kinder than I deserve to forgive me but I'm not here in search of an emotional band-aid. I need to take accountability, no matter how difficult it is, or I will never find a way out of this. I just wanted to tell you that I feel horrible about it. All of it." He looks down at his shoes. "And also to tell you that... for the next week, or weeks, I think it's best if you and I don't see much of each other."

I rise to my feet, feeling anxiety grip my heart and also quite a bit of anger rising inside of me. We've spent a week apart already and while I have no problem giving him space I don't like the thought of too much space. There's no denying he's developed a bit of a pattern of running and after coming this far I have no intention of giving him room to do so.

"I disagree" I say firmly.

"I need time to think" he says defensively, finally looking at me but taking a step back in the process. "I think you do, too."

"What's there to think about?" I challenge. Not because I don't believe there's anything to think about but because I want to know specifically what he means to think about. His feelings for me? His decision to call off the wedding? Whether or not he actually wants to be with me?

"Everything."

"Yes God forbid you should be sure of how you feel about me, or about her for that matter." I roll my eyes and then look away, feeling angry and sad. "Unfortunately I'm not perfect like she is so I'm having a little trouble being understanding of this."

"No you're not perfect..." he agrees calmly. "Which is what makes you perfect." He smiles slightly at the look I give him. "You're this strong-willed survivalist who volunteered to go into a death match she had almost no hope of surviving in order to save her sister. Your courage and determination inspired people to finally stand up against 75 years of oppression. It was because of you that many people joined the rebellion once it had begun. Because they looked up to your convictions and your bravery and your willingness to fight against what's wrong. They all sat around year after year ultimately accepting that their children were thrown into the Games every year but you did something active about it. If on top of that you had been flawless you would have been completely unbearable. It's your faults that make you human and vulnerable and make you special. Those are the things that make it so impossible for me not to feel strongly about you." He harks and looks away for a second. "Unfortunately they also make it hard for me to read you and I think I created this whole wrong idea of the way you think and feel and I read your actions and words based on it. Now it makes it incredibly difficult to know what is... real. That's not your fault. Right now I need to... reconfigure my brain or something. Work out what's really real and what is not real. For the record, Lace being perfect, if that's what you think she is, is not real. I just don't go around talking about her faults to other people very often, same as I don't talk about your faults." He shrugs his shoulders in a slightly resigned fashion. "Please, I need this space. I think we both need this space. Do you even know for sure what you want? It's really easy to think you want something that's out of your reach but maybe you haven't been seeing me clearly either and maybe..."

"You're right" I say shortly, crossing my arms over my chest. If he's going to insinuate that I only want him if I can't have him then he's clearly not in a good place right now and we should give each other some space. Though I sure as hell don't plan on letting him think I might not want him for real.
"We should take some time to think. Both of us." I shrug one shoulder and cock my neck. "I just finished my bit of thinking. Take however long you need with yours."

"Katniss I'm serious. I don't think I'm in any place right now to be starting anything with you, or with anyone. I need to take a step back and find myself again. You deserve that. I deserve that. Lace deserves it as well."

"What makes you so sure you can find yourself on your own?" I wonder. "The way I see it you tried that before and it landed you engaged with a seamstress from District 8. You ran. What's to say that won't happen again?"

"Can I ask you something Katniss?"

"What?"

"You say you're done thinking but I don't want you to make the mistakes I've made. I apologise for making assumptions but I can't help but wonder if you're really thinking about this or if you're letting your feelings get in the way of rationality. That didn't exactly lead to anything good when I did that and I have to ask... Do you love me... as in the person I am now, the person who has been... well, a jerk to you, and to Lace. Or do you love the person you lost in the hijacking? I'll never be that person again. If that's the boy you love then I will be nothing but a huge disappointment to you."

The question hangs in the air for several minutes. I have no idea how to answer him. I'm not even sure he expects an answer. A warm summer breeze brushes against my skin but I feel cold and begin to rub my upper arms with my hands slowly. There's legitimacy to his question but I don't care to acknowledge it because it cannot be answered so simply. I'm nowhere near apt enough with words to give him a good explanation.

"I should go" he says eventually, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to the other. "Lace is waiting for me."

"Oh?" I ask icily. The mentioning of her name and that he is going to meet up with her bothers me so much more than I would like to admit and I can't completely conceal it. Not now, when he knows the truth.

"She and I... have things to discuss."

"Yeah, because of course you can have a meaningful conversation with her but not with me, right?"

"I came to you first, didn't I?" He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before looking at his watch. "I need to go. I will be late."

"Wouldn't want that, would we?" I say bitterly.

"Katniss..."

"Just go" I scowl.

"Please just... promise me you'll think about all of this" he says, beginning to move slowly across my lawn to head back to the road. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry it all got so messed up."

I still don't know what he thinks he has to be sorry about, seeing as how the core of the problem is that two women love him and he never chose that, but I say nothing as he walks off to go meet with his ex-fiancée. I don't want to think about the possibility that she could still be his fiancée by the end of the day. For all I know they could end up having a toasting tonight, just the two of them,
depending on what is actually going on between them now. Nothing seems to be making sense anymore. With a tired huff I go back inside my house, not really in the mood for hunting, and decide to take my miserable state of mind out on somebody else.

Buttercup is getting a bath.

A welcome distraction comes a few hours later when Max comes knocking on my door. I don't recall ever telling him my address but I suppose it's not that difficult to figure out. Either way his surprise appearance is hardly the most astonishing thing to have happened to me lately so I decide not to think too hard about it. He says he has some things to discuss about the fundraiser, something I had completely forgotten was even going to take place, but I don't mind immersing myself in it for a while. It beats sitting around here with my thoughts, trying to analyse some sense into my current situation. It also beats the seemingly endless string of hisses from a very wet and sulky Buttercup.

"You can walk with me back to town and we'll talk along the way" suggests Max. "I'm guessing you haven't been to town in a few days. Judging by the look of you, you could use a good meal. Time to stop at the market and buy a bit of food perhaps?"

"I'm perfectly well-fed" I grumble, wrapping my cardigan around myself as I step outside and close the door behind me.

"Fine, if you say so" he shrugs. I fall in beside him and we begin to walk in the direction of town, the summer breeze bringing a fresh scent of summer that I usually love but which barely registers with me at present. "So here's the pickle. Your buddy Peeta had agreed to make a banner and this large 'don't be a cheapskate, donate some damn money' poster for us but he called the other day and said he couldn't do it anymore."

"Peeta was supposed to help out with the fundraiser?" That's new information. I find myself a bit irritated that nobody mentioned this to me.

"And now he's not anymore."

"What do you want me to do about it?" I ask grumpily. "I can't paint. I can barely draw a stick figure."

"I was hoping perhaps you could go knock on his door and point an arrow at his throat and tell him to help us out or die of shame. Or something."

I laugh unhappily.

"Peeta's not going to do it because I ask him to. Actually I think it's for the better that he bowed out of this one."

"Who the hell's side are you on?" snorts Max, brushing his brown hair away from his eyes as he glares at me.

"Why don't you just get some of the students to come in and make a bannister and a poster? That would be much more fitting anyway."

He sighs and opens his mouth to protest but then pauses. His scowl turns into a more thoughtful expression.

"Okay that's… that's actually not an awful idea."
"Stop, I'm blushing" I say dryly.

"No, I think you actually might be on to something."

"Great. Does that mean I can turn around and go home?"

He gives me a sideways glance.

"Everything alright there, Everdeen? You're kind of a drag today even for you."

"Solved your problem, didn't I?"

"Possibly."

He doesn't say anything else for a minute, the only sounds filling my ears being the rustle of the wind in the trees, the singing of the birds and our boots against the road. I feel oddly strange being outdoors without my hunting gear and game bag. In fact I feel almost vulnerable wearing a simple pair of slacks, a tank top and a cardigan. It's the kind of outfit I mostly just wear at home these days and it's a wonder Max hasn't commented since he's never seen me dressed this casually before.

After about a minute of silence my mind annoyingly enough begins to drift back to Peeta. Is he still with Lace? What is happening between them today? Will he be ceasing contact with her, or just with me? Will seeing her make him suddenly regret walking out on her? Has all of this been a monstrously bad case of cold feet and he will have a change of heart when they are together today? I really wish he could have just cut her out of his life entirely even though I know that's not at all reasonable.

"Did I tell you I met Milo's date?" asks Max, bringing me out of my thoughts.

"Huh?"

"Yeah, he brought her over for dinner last week. I mean, can you believe that? They've been out once and he's bringing her home to meet the parents? I most definitely hope it's a scare tactic to make her run for the hills."

"Wouldn't want to be supportive of brother dearest, would we?" I reply, kicking a pebble with the toe of my boot.

"I'm supportive, just not of her. I'm supportive of Milo dating people that don't annoy the living shit out of me."

"What's wrong with her?" I ask, hoping the conversation will distract me.

"It was as if she was born one day, took a deep breath and hasn't stopped talking since. Seriously, the woman never shuts up! I've heard her voice far more than I've heard yours and I've only spent four hours in her company."

I can't keep myself from smiling a little. The frustrated way Max brushes his hair away from his face adds a bit to the smile.

"Sounds like she's perfect for Milo then, seeing as how he hardly ever talks."

"Well I guess that's one way of looking at it…"

I shrug a shoulder and try once more not to think about Peeta. How he was always more talkative than I, how perhaps to an outsider it might occasionally seem like he did all the talking and that
therefore we were a good match for one another. I give a little shake to my head, trying to clear my mind of these thoughts, and don't realize that Max has gone on talking until he gives me a nudge with his elbow.

"Hey" I complain, rubbing my arm slightly.

"You know, even for you you're being alarmingly unsociable today" remarks Max, giving me a sly look. "Is this your female way of telling me you're mad about me over something? It had better not be that I haven't asked you to be my date for the fundraiser because I think you and I both know we wouldn't last the evening without clawing each other's eyes out. My eyes are too pretty to be clawed out."

Despite myself I laugh and actually feel the slightest bit lighter at heart.

"No don't worry, I had completely forgotten you were dateless."

"Oh jolly good, my deepest troubles and concerns have obviously been at the forefront of your mind for all of one minute. Seriously Katniss, this whole friendship thing must be uncharted territory for you because you're useless at it."

I give him a dry look but keep the smile on my face.

"Oh like you've been digging deep into whatever issues are plaguing my mind right now" I retort. "Wouldn't dare to. I'm worried you might castrate me. With the blunt end of one of your arrows."

"I think your parents would fire me if I robbed them of the opportunity to have grandbabies by you."

We continue to walk and he continues to talk about the upcoming fundraiser while I take care to actually listen. It's nice getting out of the house and getting some air, not to mention having some pleasant company. At least Max has no demands from me and seems completely unaware of all the drama that has unfolded in the past weeks. I have no clue how big a scandal the cancelled wedding is in town but judging by Max's demeanour my name isn't involved in the gossip. Or he's just being a good friend and keeping his mouth shut about it but I kind of doubt he has that ability. Perhaps he knows and simply doesn't care.

The sun shines brightly down on us, beams of sunlight trickling in through the leaves of the trees that otherwise shade the road. It's the height of summer and it occurs to me that I haven't been out to the lake in a while. This summer hasn't been nearly as scorching as last year's but it's still been warm enough that a good swim might be nice. I make the decision to head out there tomorrow and spend some quality time by myself, sorting my mind out or just enjoying a break from everything else.

"I've decided I'm going to stop calling you Katniss" says Max out of the blue, shifting expertly from one topic to the other. A second ago he was talking about the birds singing above our heads.

"What?" I ask. "Why?"

"Because it's a stupid ass name and it's annoying to say" he says, completely undeterred by my angry scowl. "From now on I'm calling you Kat."

"Just Kat?" I scoff.

"Yep. That's all you're getting out of me." He smirks in an annoying way. "Meow."

"Oh how I rue the day I first met you" I sigh, sticking my hands in my cardigan pockets and shaking
my head tiredly.

"Hey at least I'm not calling you Mockingjay" he grins. "Or any version thereof. Of course, if you'd rather, I could call you Mocky."

"I'd rather you call me Katniss" I say. "I don't like nicknames." I think of how I occasionally heard Lace call Peeta 'Peet' and how ridiculous I always found it. "Parents give their children names because they want them to be called that, not because they want to hear other versions of the names."

"You think no parent in the history of civilization has ever used a nickname for one of their kids?" chuckles Max. "I like how your world view is so narrow."

"You like everything that annoys me" I say.

"True, true... Tell me, was your sister named Prim or was that short for something?"

I glare at him, knowing I have no adequate comeback for that.

"No wonder you don't have a date" I say instead. "No sane girl could put up with that much time in your direct proximity."

He shrugs, seemingly not the least bit affected by my slur.

"Whatever you say, Kat." A pensive look comes over his face. "Or perhaps I'll call you Nissy. Do you prefer Nissy?"

I sigh heavily and give him a rather aggressive elbowing to the arm but he just laughs even though he rubs the spot I jammed.

That afternoon, just as I've started rummaging through my pantry trying to decide what to make for dinner, there's another knock on my door. I snort and turn my eyes to Buttercup who is sitting on the floor eyeing me, probably hoping I'm making something that involves either cheese or ham since in that case he can beg for a taste. It seems he's forgiven me for the bath, though just barely. The scratch marks on my hands and arms still sting a bit.

"Looks like Haymitch doesn't feel like making his own dinner today" I remark dryly to the cat, who hisses at me in response. So, not entirely forgiven.

I close the pantry door and make my way to the front door, deciding I will let Haymitch join me if he does the cooking. To my surprise I open the door to find Peeta, not Haymitch. I wasn't expecting to see him again today, or again in a month or so after what he said about needing space. He looks tired and a little haggard but not really any worse than he did earlier today. He doesn't look joyful at least, so I take it there was no reunion with Lace.

"What do you want?" I ask, more bluntly than intended.

"I know I said I needed some space but... I was hoping you'd agree to talk to me a bit more today first." He nervously shifts from one foot to the other. "There's something I need to say and... It feels like we didn't get to finish our conversation before."

"And who's fault was that?"

"Can I come in, Katniss?"

I think about it for a quick second. Letting him come inside the house is a bad idea. Staying out here
is much wiser. That way I can just up and leave and slam my door if I want the conversation to be over.

"I'm making dinner so make it quick" I say, stepping outside and closing the door behind me.

He shoves his hands into his back pockets and looks around for a second before settling on sitting down on the porch steps, his hands now on his lap instead. I walk past him down on the grass and remain standing, wanting to sit beside him but figuring it's not the best idea.

"When I say I need space I don't mean for you to feel like that's a slight against you" he says. "It's something I really need and as I said I think it would be good for both of us. You need to take some time and figure out what it is you want from me. If the answer is the Peeta you knew before then…"

"How is Lace?" I ask in an attempt to divert the question, my tone hopefully making it clear that I'm not asking out of courtesy or concern.

He sighs and runs a hand through his curls.

"Not good, I'm afraid."

"Well that's a shame" I say dryly.

"Believe me Katniss, the last thing I wanted was for either one of you two to be hurt. Yet here we are. I guess I can understand better now what it was like for you back when…" He doesn't finish the thought but the implication speaks for itself. "It's one huge mess and I haven't got the first idea how to fix it." His shoulders seem to slump. "Chances are we'll all end up miserable in the end."

"Because of me" I surmise dryly.

"No this is my fault" he says.

"Oh yeah?" I scoff.

He gives me a look that seems to be reaching into my heart, a look that captivates me in a way he used to be able to do so easily but now hasn't done in a long time.

"Listen to me, this is not because of you. I don't want you going around feeling responsible for my mistakes. This is a huge mess, a damn disaster, but you did not cause it nor is it your job to fix it. You weren't the one who proposed to Lace, that was me. You weren't the one who made the decision to call the wedding off just days before it was supposed to take place. That, again, was me."

"Because I told you how I feel about you."

"Strictly speaking it was Haymitch who told me."

"Technicality."

"I guess you could have denied it but I don't think I could have if the roles were reversed. Regardless, it was my job to handle what I found out and decide what to do next. You have enough burdens to bear without adding my screw-ups and wrongful decisions and the things I did that hurt people. You're one of the people who got hurt the most. You were right that night when we had that talk. Because I feel this way about you, even though I'm not sure what it really is or what it amounts to or what it means, I was in no frame of mind or heart to be asking another woman to marry me."

"You love her" I murmur, busying myself with drawing circles in the grass with the toe of my boot.
"Yeah… and I also have strong feelings for you. That's the whole crux of the problem. I have no business being involved with either one of you as long as I still feel something for the other. By the time I've figured it out you may both have moved on and neither one of you wants me anymore but if that's the case it's no more than I deserve." He rests his elbows on his knees and makes a face. "I tried explaining it to Lace but unsurprisingly she thought I was full of shit. I did, after all, pretty much tell her she was the only one for me by proposing and then I go change the tune at the last minute…"

"God, she must really hate me" I say. "I'm a little surprised neither she nor any of her brothers has come knocking on my door since the wedding got cancelled."

"She doesn't know of your involvement."

I frown.

"What? How is that possible? Peeta what exactly did you tell her?"

"I told her… Well, I told her a lot of things. It was quite a… long conversation." He harks and focuses his eyes on the ground. His shoulders are tense and it seems to be difficult for him to talk about. "The gist… I told her that I had become more and more aware of my resurfacing feelings for you and that seeing you at the party made me realize that I do love you again. I told her that I couldn't go through with the wedding when I couldn't give my whole heart to her. I didn't say anything about you admitting to having feelings for me too. Your feelings aren't the issue, mine are. After all you kept your feelings to yourself until they were forced out into the light and I'm guessing you would have gone the rest of your life without letting me know you love me if I had gotten married. I don't know, she might still blame you, but I didn't want to give her any tangible reason to." He laughs unhappily. "Breaking the hearts of two women who love me within a few days is just… Especially when I never thought anyone would ever… But it had to be done. I can't be the kind of partner either one of you deserve until I get my head straight."

I swallow, trying my best to get rid of the lump in my throat.

"Look, I understand that you need some time to work through all of this but in the meantime I'm not going to leave you completely be" I say. "I made the mistake before of giving you all the space in the world and I won't do that now. This time I will fight for you until you expressively tell me not to." I walk closer to him, stopping just a foot away. "I love you. It's not going to stop. It's not going to go away. I will continue to remind you how I feel, unless you give me the only reason I should stop."

"It's not that simple" he says softly.

"It could be."

He lowers his head, his shoulders rising and falling in a heavy breath. My heart is pounding in my chest but I'm feeling a whole new kind of strength and even an odd excitement. I am going to fight for Peeta. Fight with everything I've got. It might be a challenge but I look forward to it.

"Katniss I have made so many mistakes over the past few years" he says, looking back up at me. "I don't want to keep making new ones." He looks out over the Victors' Village and draws a deep breath, letting it out in a huff. "It's like I've been caught in a dream for ages and now I'm waking up. I can't deny that I would like to stay in that dream because it is more peaceful and it doesn't hurt as much and I don't have to live with all the trauma and the horrors… Except it's not real. I realize I can't live in that dream. I wouldn't really be myself if I lived that way, comforting as it might be, and I need to find myself again and deal with everything that has happened to me."

"Who you were, who you are, is somebody who loves me" I remind him but to my surprise he looks
annoyed.

"Katniss that can't be the be-all, end-all of me! I'm talking about finding my way back to who I was before they stuck a fork in my brain and scrambled it up. Yes I loved you but that wasn't all there was to me. It can't have been. I don't want to be defined solely by what I felt or feel for you, don't you get that?"

With a scowl I take a step away from him, feeling insulted by the tone of his voice.

"I could define you as being a coward now, if you'd rather prefer" I say icily.

"Do you want to be defined only by what you feel for me?" he counters. He looks away for a moment. "Anyway, I didn't come here to argue with you."

"You sure?" I reply dryly. "That seems to be what we spend most of our time doing nowadays. Arguing with one another."

He doesn't respond to my bating. There's a cooler, calmer demeanour about him that reminds me of the old Peeta but still frustrates me.

"I came here to tell you I'm leaving" he says after a minute.

My mouth feels dry as I cross my arms over my chest, keeping my face steely calm at his words.

"Running away?" I scoff.

"No" he says. "I'm going to the Capitol to undergo treatment. I've been contemplating it since the wedding was cancelled and I spoke with dr. Aurelius when I got home from seeing Lace today and we came to the conclusion that it's what I need to do. It's too much for me to deal with on my own, Katniss, and it's more than you or Haymitch can help me with. I've been talking it over with dr. Aurelius, quite extensively and we both agree that the best option is for me to go stay at his clinic for a while." He gives me a sad smile. "Look, I'm not fit to make any long time decisions at all right now. I almost got married for the wrong reasons and hurt Lace really badly, not to mention I've hurt you quite a lot too. I need to find myself again. I think I deserve the chance to do so."

"You deserve that… And what do I deserve? To be left behind again?"

"You deserve better than what you would be getting with me now. You and Lace both."

"Do you actually want to be with me?" I question. It's the core of the issue, really. I can wait if he needs time but if this is just an attempt to run away, to avoid having to face making a choice, then… I'm not so sure I can go through another long round of this insecurity game. No matter how determined I am to fight I still need to know there's something to fight for. "Because if you don't, if you want to be by yourself or even with Lace when all this has blown over, I'd rather you tell me."

"I can't give you the answer you're looking for" he says and my heart sinks to the soles of my shoes yet again. "Because I can't give you a definitive answer. That's… part of the point. Instinctively I want to choose you, it's something I've wanted for a very large portion of my life, but right now I don't trust my own brain or my own heart. I have to figure it all out and figure out what it is I truly feel for you. It's turned out to be too strong for me to ignore it and marry Lace but I wouldn't be fair to you if I promised you my love when I don't fully grasp what it is I'm feeling."

"A lot of fancy words for saying you don't want me" I challenge.

"I do want you but I also have feelings for Lace. I also don't know for sure what is real or not real
when it comes to you and I and our feelings." He tilts his head and squints just a touch as he looks at me. "The thought of the chance of being with you was powerful enough that I walked away from my wedding… Now I need to figure out who I truly am and what being with you would mean for us. My heart wants to choose you but can I trust it? Will I still feel that way tomorrow? A week from today? A year?"

"How are you going to be able to figure out what either one of us wants with regards to the other if you're all the way out in the Capitol?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest and tapping my right foot against the grass in a nervous gesture.

"I don't know."

"Why are you even suggesting that I would be your choice when in the next second you tell me you haven't got a clue if you will end up wanting me or not? So I will sit around and wait for you while you compare my virtues to Lace's?"

"All I'm saying is…" He hesitates for a second. "I won't blame you if you move on with your life. I don't even have a clue how long I will be gone. There's a part of my heart that still wants you but I understand that that is not enough for you to sit around and wait for me to make up my mind. I need some time away to find myself again and some distance from you and from Lace to be able to know which one of you I will go on loving and fall out of love with the other. I will not make the same mistakes all over again. I will not immerse myself in a relationship with somebody when there's another person in my heart. I hadn't begun to feel that way about you again when Lace and I first met and began seeing each other but when the feelings did appear I should have taken a step back and figured things out. I didn't and the end result was hurting her and you and myself."

"I will fight for you if you stay" I tell him. "I will support you as you try and find yourself and make it through this mess. What I won't do is put my life on hold for you while you're off deciding if I'm worth it or not."

"That's exactly what I'm trying to tell you" he says, rising slowly to his feet. "Don't wait for me. I guess I'm kind of thinking that if the woman I want when I come back home still wants me then it could be meant to be and there could be a solid future there and if she doesn't want me anymore then that's the price I pay for my mistakes." He gives me a sad look and walks up to me, placing a light kiss at the corner of my mouth and for a brief second pressing his cheek to mine. The sensation makes my skin burn in a way that I know will continue for hours after he's left. "You deserve a man who thinks only of you" he says. "All I can promise you is that I won't ask you for your heart until I can give you all of mine in return."

"How did we end up like this, Peeta?" I ask in a whisper, my eyes meeting his.

"I really don't know." Then there's a different light in his eyes. "But I do know that you're the strongest person I have ever known and you deserve better than what you've been getting or what I have to offer you right now."

"I know that" I say. "Which is why you are so damn frustrating." I'm not sure where the next confession comes from but it leaves my mouth all the same. "I really wish I hadn't fallen in love with you when all it seems to amount to is a world of pain. I hope you'll make it worth it in the end."

He looks down and turns his face away, dejected, and it's strange to know that in this moment I might be hurting him the way he's been hurting me over the past two years. It's not a good feeling. It's not a victory or a feeling of getting even. It's just sad.

He whispers a goodbye and shoves his hands in his pockets, beginning to walk towards his own
house with his head still hanging dejectedly.

"For what it's worth, Peeta" I say, stopping him for a second. "Today I've seen more of the old you, the real you, than I have in a long time."

He seems to ponder that for a minute and then manages an unhappy smile.

"I'll see you when I get back, Katniss."

Chapter End Notes

I hope that the chapter worked and that the amount of progress Peeta's made makes sense within the time-frame. I'm thinking he's been doing a hell of a lot of soul searching but still has a long ways to go, hence the trip to the Capitol.

Next chapter - fundraiser time!
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

So this is risky business... I barely have a working computer and I have to make do with whatever limited options are currently available to me. I could either update this today or it might be a week, if not several weeks, before I get the chance to. This means I'm updating this chapter without having proof read it or even read it at all since I wrote it. In other words be wary of great imperfections. I can only hope it won't be too bad and I won't regret uploading it without giving it at least a read through. If you find any blatant errors please let me know! Story-wise I'm afraid we'll have to make do with what is basically first draft.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Peeta leaves. Two days after our conversation. It's strange how a place can seem so lonely when a person is missing, even when you didn't see them all the time when they were there. The Victors' Village seems empty somehow, like the same way my house seemed empty without my mother and sister even though they were not in every room all the time before. Knowing that Peeta isn't in his house, won't come walking past my house, won't be there for dinner with Haymitch and me makes the place seem deserted. As I've found to often be the case, the largest space is taken up by the person who is no longer there.

I have to admit though that this might be for the best. As much as I miss Peeta there's also a small sense of liberation and relief. With him all the way over in the Capitol I don't get to see him or interact with him and he cannot say or do anything further to confuse me whenever I seem to be starting to figure things out. I can use this time to think, really think about what I need and what I want and what Peeta means to me. In fact I aim to use the time to think about my entire future and what I want from it, with or without Peeta. Do I want to continue working at the school? If not, what do I want to do with my time? How much do I still have left to process after the loss of my sister? What do I like about myself and what do I feel I need to work on? Those thoughts and more begin to scratch the surface of the walls I've put up to protect myself over the years. It's time to really break it all down and start figuring things out. When Peeta returns I want to be a lot more sure of who I am and where I'm going. Only then can I meet him on an honest and healthy level and figure out if my life will be better with him in it or if I'm in fact better off without him.

That thought hurts though. I know I'm not ready yet to envision being without him. I'm still in love with him and want him badly and I need to work on all the other things before I can come to a conclusion as to whether the best thing for me is to try and get over him or if love could conquer all.

The day of the fundraiser arrives and I find myself actually looking forward to it. It's a chance to put Peeta out of my mind for an evening and focus on something else that matters a great deal to me. Raising money for the school so we can have better and larger classrooms and more material for the students feels important on several levels and while I don't know that I can personally contribute much to bringing in the cash I can at least attend the fundraiser and show my support for the cause. I feel a little bit apprehensive being out in public for the first time since the cancellation of the wedding, still not knowing how much of my involvement is known to the common crowd, but I've decided I don't care. I have nothing to be ashamed of. I didn't cause the revelation of my feelings to
Peeta and even if I had instigated it I'm not responsible for how he reacted to it. I intend to hold my head high if anybody has an opinion.

I've tried to get Haymitch to agree to be my date for the evening, figuring that another Hunger Games Victor and key figure in the rebellion would be helpful to bringing in money, but he blankly refuses. Says he's done with public fiestas for a while now, though he doesn't explain to me what a fiesta is. Presumably he just doesn't want to be parted from his bottle for too long. Since Peeta left he's been spending every single day nursing a bottle of white liquor like it's an oxygen tank and he's underwater.

I've dug up a dress in my closet, one that Effie sent me. As much as I love Cinna's creations they're a bit too glamorous for an occasion like this. I don't want all the attention to be on me. Not that that isn't a risk I'm taking wearing something Effie sent me but I've managed to modify this dress too and make it passable. It's floor-length, canary yellow and once I've removed the big red poppies sewn on to it the thing kind of works. I've also washed it with bleacher three times which has made the brightness of the yellow somewhat matted. It's not perfect but it will do.

As determined as I am not to think of Peeta tonight I can't help but long for him when I arrive at the event. This has usually been something we've done together, him and I, attend fancy parties. I think most of the instances in my life where I've worn a pretty dress I've had Peeta by my side. I have to force myself to cock my neck and relegate him to the back of my mind as I open the door to the hall where the fundraiser is held and step inside.

At first I stand in the doorway and just look around, taking it all in – the noise of the crowd, the music playing, the banners and decorations and the result of the Matson family's hard work. Then somebody pushes me from behind and makes a dry remark about being in the way and I step aside, instinctively staying close to the wall where I can be somewhat obscure. I really don't want to be the focus of the evening, especially if people know about my involvement in Peeta's and Lace's cancelled wedding.

Max finds me there after about half an hour, looking dapper in a dark brown suit that is almost the same colour as his hair. To my annoyance he hasn't slicked said hair back and as always it falls over his eyes and he keeps pushing it aside. He looks happy to see me though and offers me a glass of some alcoholic beverage before taking me away from the wall and walking me around the room. He can't seem to shut up about the money they've made so far and the various events during the evening that will hopefully raise more and I do my best to pay attention.

"You guys have done a great job with the venue" I say when he finally pauses to inhale. "Sorry I wasn't more helpful."

"Never expected you to be, Kat" he smirks, making me roll my eyes. "Though feel free to, you know, sing a song or something and help bring in the money."

"No" I say firmly, shaking my head for added emphasis. "I told you, I'll attend but I don't want to be in the spotlight. Those days are over."

"Can you at least smile? That dreary look on your face doesn't make people loosen their purse strings."

"How about I loosen my own purse strings?" I ask, reaching for my handbag.

"Excellent idea."

He places a hand on my bare back and leads me over to two large plastic tubes at the centre of the
room. One holds bills and the other coins. They're about two meters tall and you have to step up on a ladder to put money in, which is supposed to be attractive I suppose – everyone can see your generosity. I eye the ladder with scepticism and think of the high heels I'm wearing and wonder if I'll end up stepping on my dress.

"I'd loose the shoes if I were you" says Max.

"Really? Genius you are."

He chuckles good-naturedly and offers me a hand while I balance on one leg to remove first one shoe and then the other. People nearby start to cheer and applaud as I grab on to the ladder, gather as much of my dress as I can in one hand and then climb up it. I've been hearing cheers and applauds at various intervals ever since I arrived so this seems to be the standard reaction whenever someone donates but still I feel a bit uncomfortable in the spotlight. I look down at Max and my eyes convey in no uncertain terms that if he tries to call attention to the *Mockingjay* donating money he's in for a world of trouble. Luckily he settles for applauding and cheering as I reach inside my purse and fish out a stack of bills from my own Hunger Games winnings and some that I took the liberty of stealing from Haymitch. I drop them in the bill tube and the cheers get higher before dying down as I climb back down.

"Perfect" says Max. "Now feel free to get the hell out of here. We've gotten what we wanted out of you if you're not going to perform in other ways."

I smirk and give him a playful elbowing in the side, again holding his hand for balance as I put my shoes back on. We step away from the ladder and I can hear new rounds of applauds and cheers as someone else steps up to donate money.

"That noise is going to get very old very fast" I say.

"It's the best noise you've heard all year and you know it."

We walk over to the refreshments, the best part of the shindig as far as I'm concerned, and I dig in from the food while Max makes small talk with people around us and occasionally leaves to announce a performer or do other things. I partake in a conversation or two but mostly I just eat. I'm hungry and the food is free. Seems like a no-brainer to me. For the most part Max and I stand there by the refreshments and watch as various people put on performances on a small stage to help raise money and to our relief we see the tubes fill up with more bills and coins. At one point we dance together but I find I don't enjoy that activity very much and we retreat to the refreshment table.

Maybe two or three hours into the evening Max lets out a slow whistle. I look at him with a scowl.

"What?"

"Possible chance of awkwardness when you turn around."

"And what does that mean?" I ask in a tired sigh, popping an olive into my mouth.

"The not-mrs Mellark is here."

My eyes widen and I turn my head around but quickly turn it back again when I indeed spot Lace.

"Damn it" I mumble under my breath.

"You look alarmed" says Max with a touch of entertainment in his tone. "Don't tell me Katniss Everdeen is afraid to run into some other woman? We all know you could take her, and every other
person here, in a fight. You never told me, by the way."

"Told you what?" I ask, pondering to myself if I should take the drink from his hand and finish it
myself.

"What the deal is between you and Peeta these days." I tense up and he clearly notices. "Oh come
on, Katniss, I saw the Games. You can't get mad at me for it either because it was mandatory
viewing. You guys were all in twu wuw and clumsy fool that he is he got you knocked up before
your second turn in the arena. I heard he went insane after that and you lost the baby and I know you
guys aren't together anymore but there's got to be something more than indifference and you've never
given me the specifics of your relationship to him these days."

"Well you've never asked" I mutter, finding to my own surprise that I don't feel annoyed by his
question or his interest in my personal life.

"So if I'm now asking?"

"This really isn't the place" I mutter, nervously glancing at the people around us. Has she been here
long? Is she going to come up to me? What's going through the minds of the people around us?

"You're not too fond of that gal, are you?" surmises Max with a surprising touch of sympathy in his
voice. "I know I wouldn't be. Ex-fiancés new… well, ex-fiancée. That's got to be awkward."

"I don't think she's particularly fond of me right now" I mumble, trying to take focus away from my
own feelings.

"Want to step outside for a moment?"

I find myself nodding, feeling like I could really use a breath of fresh air, and grab a glass of
sparkling water to wash the food in my mouth down. Max heads off towards the back doors that lead
to the small garden outside and I follow.

"Ladies first" he says, holding up the door for me. As I walk through it I can just barely head him
add under his breath: "At least when there's deep snow or thin ice."

Once we're outside and the door closes behind us I feel myself relax a little. The air is warm but
there's a cool breeze that feels great after the rather stuffy air inside and the commotion from indoors
becomes muted. It feels like a relief to my ears. I walk slowly through the small garden, stopping
beneath an apple tree, and reach out my hand to touch the bark. There's something soothing about
feeling the texture of a tree beneath my fingers. I almost lose myself thinking about it before Max
harks and I turn around, remembering that he's with me.

"Feeling better?" he asks, brushing the hair away from his eyes before taking his jacket off, exhaling
in relief when the warm piece of clothing is removed.

"Yeah" I manage.

"So what's the deal? With you and Peeta, I mean. And, I suppose, the sewing lady."

I scowl, wondering why he's interested in this all of a sudden. He's never asked about me and Peeta
before, not that I can recall. Why would my love life have any interest to him? Then I look around,
taking in our surroundings. A small, beautiful garden under a moonlit sky. Both of us dressed in fine
clothes. Rather… romantic. Is that what he is after? Is that why we are out here and he is asking
about my ex-fiancé? I've never thought of him in romantic terms before but there's no denying that
his chiselled features are easy on the eyes and I do enjoy his company.
Our eyes meet and I begin to wonder. It's been so long since I've been in someone's arms, been kissed, been appreciated like that. I've only wanted that to happen with Peeta for the past few years but Peeta is not here and might never be an option for me to share that with again. Max, however, is right in front of me. The two glasses of alcohol I've had make me feel warm and slightly relaxed and not entirely sure what to make of all of this.

"Katniss? You… haven't answered me and it's been like five minutes."

I don't want to answer him. I don't want to talk about that right now. I just want to forget and feel and be somebody other than the girl who sits at home pining for a boy who chose another and who might still choose another when he comes back. So I quickly step up to Max, stand on my tippy toes and kiss him.

"Oh" he mumbles against my lips. "Okay."

His hands come up and cradle my face as he presses his lips to mine and I register that even though he likes carpentry his hands are soft, not calloused like Peeta's or Gale's. He tastes of cheap alcohol and the melon-wrapped-in-ham he must have eaten a dozen of. I don't worry my mind over whether or not this is a mistake. It just feels good to have some physical contact with another human being. I've been starved for it for far too long.

His mouth slates against mine and he tilts his head a bit to allow for better alignment. I wonder briefly if I should be feeling guilty for doing this. But Peeta told me I could do whatever I wanted. Besides, he was engaged to marry someone else. If he has any objections he can take them and shove them.

Our mouths part and Max pulls away an inch or two.

"Kat…" he whispers.

"It's Katniss" I reply in a normal tone of voice.

His hands move down my face in a caressing motion and then fall down to my upper arms. It takes a second for me to realize that he's not saying anything – or doing anything. I look up at him and find his eyes searching mine but not with the longing look I used to find in Gale or Peeta.

"I never pegged you for a casual kisser" he says.

"Huh?" There's a bit of a conflict inside of me as to whether I should wrap my arms around him or around myself. "You're not the first person I've kissed besides Peeta."

"No I get that… I would just like to know why you're kissing me now."

What does he want to hear? Would he accept the truth – that I'm longing for some physical connection and for anything that might take away the aching emptiness Peeta left in his wake? A chill runs down my spine as I'm reminded of a similar moment with Gale and I push it aside by placing my hands on his shoulders and moving in closer.

"Does it matter?" I ask in a murmur.

"There are a million possibilities in which it wouldn't" he answers. "But if there's any part of you that's currently thinking of, or trying your damndest not to think of, Peeta Mellark then it does matter."

I'm not entirely sure what he means but I don't think I'm a good enough actress to lie to his face. Not
when it's so close to mine and we're in a situation like this. Then again I don't have to tell him the whole story either.

"Peeta's not here" I say. "He's in the Capitol. He hasn't shown much interest in kissing me in the past two years."

I mean for it to sound casual but Max obviously reads something different into it. He looks deep into my eyes for what seems like several minutes, his brow furrowed, and I'm starting to get both confused and a bit uncomfortable. Then he leans in and kisses me again and I close my eyes and try my best to forget everything else and just immerse myself in it but I can't completely shake the thought in the back of my mind that wishes it were Peeta's lips against mine instead.

Max, apparently a mind reader on top of everything else, pulls away, lets me go and shakes his head with a snort.

"You know what, Everdeen? I'm not getting dragged into your whole mess with your ex. He doesn't want you anymore? Why don't you cry me a river, build me a bridge and get the fuck over it."

With that he walks away, leaving me standing there feeling like a fool. A very confused fool. I watch his retreating figure, not at all sure what just happened or what it means. He heads back inside and after standing there for about five minutes or so I slowly begin to walk in the other direction, heading back home.

I don't feel any sting of rejection. All I feel is the bitter realization of knowing I've just messed up another friendship.

When I wake up the next morning I am determined to go find Max and talk to him. It's not like I can avoid him in the future, unless of course I quit my job at the school but that is not an option. I need to speak with him about what happened last night and I need to do it as soon as possible, before things become even more awkward. Unfortunately for me I realize I don't know where he lives and I have absolutely no idea at what time he will be up today. Hopefully he will be at the venue cleaning up from last night or at the school.

Thankfully I find him sitting alone on the grass outside the school, a concentrated scowl on his face as he works with a knife on a block of wood. I don't have the first idea what he's doing but it doesn't really matter. I need to have this conversation out of the way. I've had too much unpleasantness hanging over my head in the past year or so to last me a lifetime.

"Hey" I mutter when I approach him. To my great annoyance my voice doesn't really hold up so I have to hark it and repeat the greeting.

He looks up and moves his hair away from his eyes. Under different circumstances I'd feel a barely controllable urge to grab that knife from his hand and slice that hair off but I'm feeling a bit too humbled today for such urges.

"Yo Kat" he says, his tone a touch awkward. He looks up at me with an expression I can best describe as… pondering. "What brings you by today? You don't have any work to do before Tuesday." He continues as if I'm an uncommonly slow-minded first grader. "Today is Sunday."

"I wanted to apologise about last night" I blurt out quickly. As soon as I've gotten the words out I don't feel like I need to be looking at him anymore so instead I look down on the grass.

"So then apologise."
"I just did" I say testily, feeling more than a little uncomfortable. "What, you want a balloon and a cookie along with it?"

To my surprise he chuckles. He sheathes the knife and gets up on his feet, brushing sawdust off himself.

"Want to tell me what the hell last night was really all about?"

I cross my arms over my chest defensively.

"No." I swallow. "It's complicated and private."

"Yet my mouth starred in the show."

"Look I get that you don't want to be my buddy right now but do you have to be such a jackass about it?" I snarl, giving him a scowl he probably doesn't deserve.

Again his reaction surprises me. He grins, widely.

"Heh, I got you to say jackass."

"Max…"

"Look, Kitty-Kat Mockingjay…" He steps closer and puts a hand on my shoulder. "Have you ever had a friendship with a guy that didn't include kissing at some point? That old geezer living next door to you devoting his life to dying from pancreatitis doesn't count. A guy your own age."

"Of course I have" I answer with an offended scowl, Finnick's face appearing before my inner eye.

"Okay, just checking… 'Cause I know you bumped premarital uglies with Peeta and I'm aware that hunting buddy of yours tasted your tonsils at some point."

I barely understand what those expressions mean but all the same I begin to feel a bit relaxed. He doesn't seem wounded the way Peeta once did when realizing my affections hadn't been entirely genuine, or wronged the way Gale sometimes reacted when I couldn't offer him loving feelings. Instead he seems remarkably casual about it.

"Now I'm not one to look down on tongue-twirling without it being accompanied by declarations of love and roses and sparkling wine and all that jazz" he continues. "In fact I think it's pretty damn fun to be kissing, whether I want to possibly marry the girl at some point or not. But, there are friendships that don't need to include that particular hobby."

"You… You're not upset with me?" I have to ask, just to be sure.

"I know my quest to not make you turn red with anger and basically have steam shooting out of your ears whenever I was around required so much effort and danger to my own well-being that it must seem like the end goal was to have you flat on your back at some point but I assure you, Katniss, that wasn't the case."

"Could you please just explain whatever it is you're trying to get across without doing it in a way I can barely understand?" I sigh. He seems to be off on his babbling expression-packed rants even more than usual today.

"I'm not head-over-heels in love with you. I think you're hot and despite the fact that you have the temper and personality of a pregnant rattlesnake I kind of enjoy your company. If, at some point, our
I can't stop myself from smiling.

"I would like that."

He smiles back at me and pulls me into his embrace.

"Good." Then he gives me a hearty pat on the back and pulls away a touch. "Now just to be clear, I am all for you getting your casual kicks if you feel you need it. I know a couple of guys who do not fear their own mortality who might be interested in some casual canoodling with you. You do not murder after mating, do you? I like my friends."

With blushing cheeks I pull back fully and give him a light slap on the upper arm.

"Not usually, no. And thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Days turn to weeks. Weeks turn to months. Life begins to find some form of normalcy even without Peeta, though every day that goes by without him makes me long for him a little bit more. The last time we were parted this long were when he was Snow's prisoner and the thought of that makes me shiver. Everything changed during that time spent apart. I'd rather not think about it at all. I'd rather he would just come back home already so we could find out where we stand, once and for all. I don't want to miss him anymore. I've missed people, him included, enough to last me the rest of my life.

In the meantime I keep working at the school. We raised enough money during the fundraiser to complete the outside structure of two more classrooms before the first snow falls in late November and the money is also enough to fund some more supplies for the students. Mrs. Matson tells me that when the new classrooms are ready to be used I'll be getting to teach my own classes, all by myself. It's a little daunting even though I do the same basic thing out in the woods every week. Something about standing in a classroom holding a class all on my own is frightening yet at the same time exciting. I'm glad they see the potential in me.

While summer turned to autumn the gossip about the cancelled wedding died down but I can't seem to shake the feeling that people know I was involved in it. I don't mind as much anymore. I don't feel like I have anything to be ashamed of. I don't know if people do believe I was directly involved but because Peeta never said I was and I haven't said or done anything to allude to that either I suppose the fuel to that particular fire died out. What does make me uncomfortable is any time I see or run into Lace. District 12 has a small town and it is inevitable that we should run into one another on occasion. Clearly she doesn't like seeing me but she never says anything, only gives me a short nod out of mandatory politeness. Eventually I decide that I don't want to keep feeling that uncomfortable any time we come in contact with one another and I realize there's only one thing I can do about it.

It wouldn't be a lie to say I've never felt comfortable visiting Lace's shop, not counting that very first time when I didn't know who she was going in. I'm certainly not comfortable now, steering my steps towards the small green building with it's beautiful sign featuring a dress and a suit dancing together as painted by Peeta. The difference this time around is that I'm feeling a bit nervous which usually
hasn't been the case. The ground is covered in slushy snow turned grey from the sand and gravel they use to make the roads less slippery and it seems to go hand in hand with my current mood.

Drawing a deep breath I reach for the door handle and pull the door open, the ringing of the bell announcing my entry. There are four customers in the shop, two of which turn to see who the newcomer is, and I think they both look like they disapprove of me. I am determined to ignore it and I draw another deep breath through my nose and begin to straighten my back when Lace looks up and sees me. The smile that was on her face, strained yet kind, goes away and her eyes seem to darken for a second. My confidence deflates a bit but I know I have to do this. I have to have this conversation with her. For my own sake.

Sparing me only a brief glance Lace goes back to tending to her customer, a man I know to be a friend of Thom's. From what I can hear they seem to be discussing what kind of buttons he should get to replace the lost one on his autumn coat. One of the other customers, also a man but one probably two decades older than the one Lace is currently talking to, passes me by on his way out of the shop. He touches the brim of his hat in greeting and I give him a faint smile in return, glad to see a friendly face.

I silently hope that no other customers will walk in until I've gotten a chance to speak to her. It's late afternoon, about ten minutes before the time Peeta says is her closing time. I let her tend to her customers and walk slowly through the store, studying the various fabrics and the ready-made clothes lying in neat stacks in the middle of the shop.

Five minutes after six the last customer leaves and Lace flips the sign at the door that says whether the shop is open or closed. She then turns to me, all friendliness gone from her face.

"I wasn't expecting to see you in here" she says, sounding reserved but not angry. "I doubt you would turn to me for new clothes so what brings you here?"

Now that I'm here I suddenly hesitate. What I really wanted to do was to come here and tell her that I'm sorry for the pain I know I've caused her but because I don't have Peeta's talent with words I don't know how to phrase it.

"Peeta claims it's all on him, how our wedding plans fell apart" she says when I don't speak up. "That's not entirely true though, is it? See I know Haymitch brought you two together that night of the party and that's when everything changed. I think you did something, made some move, and jerk that he is he's trying to protect you by not implicating you. That's what the pair of you do, isn't it?" There's considerable bitterness in her tone. "Protect one another?"

"I just…" I begin. "I wanted to… I just wanted to say that I never meant to hurt you and I'm sorry." The words seem so bleak, so meaningless. I've been wrapped up in my own pain and heartache for the better part of two and a half years now but I have to admit that her heartache might be just as bad as mine. She thought she and Peeta were going to be together for the rest of their lives and all of that was taken away from her in an instant.

"Katniss…" she says, still in that reserved tone. "You're not here to apologise to me. Nor are you here to check up on me and make sure that I'm okay. You're here for yourself, to make yourself feel better. I don't want to hate you but I'm not going to smile and tell you all is forgiven so you can walk out of here without a guilty conscience."

It hurts to hear her say it. The fact that she somehow manages to sound somewhat polite makes it even worse. If she reacted with anger or tears I would at least have some idea how to handle it. I can see the pain in her eyes and her movements are a bit rigid as if she's holding back but she's not letting her emotions get the better of her. She's in control.
"It wasn't my intention to hurt anybody" I say, hearing how lame the words sound as they come out of my mouth. "I didn't plan on telling Peeta at all."

"Well you did" she says, her tone implying that she already suspected what I just confirmed. "Days before our wedding." Finally there's a tremble in her voice. "How is that fair? How is that worthy of forgiveness?"

"Love is never fair" I reply. "I acknowledge that it wasn't fair to you, what happened, but it wasn't fair to me either that another woman came along before I even had the chance of letting him know how I feel."

"You had years to do that" she replies, crossing her arms over her chest.

"I didn't realize what my own feelings were until it was too late."

"Do you know what I think?" There's another tremble in her voice but beneath it there's steely resolve. "I think it's the most amazing coincidence that you're so-called realization of your love for my fiancé happened when he began dating me. You had your chance. You had chance upon chance upon chance and you never took them. How much in love can you be, honestly?"

"I love Peeta" I say icily.

"Maybe you do" she says with a sigh and a shrug, letting her arms fall down her sides. "Maybe you _think_ that you do. The only thing I know for sure is you didn't realize you wanted him until you couldn't have him anymore. Now his engagement to me is in shambles, I don't know what will happen between us from this point on, but I do know that Peeta left and went to the Capitol instead of to your embrace and the two of you are not lovers." Her voice has risen a bit and it trembles worse than before, a single tear falling down her face when she says his name.

"You could never understand my relationship with Peeta" I say. "Even I haven't always understood it. I didn't fall in love with him fast or easily, it happened over time."

I want to explain to her how impossible it is to profess your love for someone who is still recovering from brainwashing designed to make him hate you. I want to explain my wants and fears so that she can understand. I realize though that she's right, I'm not here for her benefit, what I really want is to make peace with her so I don't have to carry the guilt of ruining her future. There's too much guilt weighing me down as it is.

Instead I say something I realize is a mistake the moment the words come tumbling out of my mouth.

"Your problem is not with my feelings for Peeta, it's with Peeta's feelings for me."

Her jaw drops a touch and she looks at me with complete incredulity. Her big doe eyes stare at me for a few seconds and another tear rolls down her cheek. She snivels, gathers her composure and speaks without trembling.

"No Katniss, you're wrong. Peeta broke my heart and trust me, I'm not letting him off the hook. But it's you who is my _problem_, if that's the term you wish to use. I don't know if Peeta actually does love you or if he got cold feet or if he's desperately trying to win back what they took away or both. What I do know is that if the reason I'm not married today is because he loves another woman more then it will be one of the most awful thing to ever happen to me but in time I hope I can move on and I will be so much better off without him. If the reason my wedding didn't happen is because of a woman who can't stand to see him with anyone else, but doesn't actually want him for herself, then that's a whole other thing entirely because not only will my heart have been broken but Peeta's will
have been too. For someone who claims to love him you don't seem to give half a damn about his future or his happiness."

"Believe me, that is all I care about" I say in a tone that ought to leave little room for doubt.

"Oh is it?" she scoffs. "He hadn't been gone three weeks before you were off getting off with another guy."

My jaw drops, not only from the implication.

"You mean Max?"

"I should hope so" she says icily. "Unless you've got other men lined up?"

"He's a friend" I say, my cheeks burning red at the realization that she must have seen us dancing. "That's all he is."

She tilts her head.

"Having platonic male friends is a strong suit of yours, would you say? Let's see now, there's Peeta, Gale, Max… If you love him so much you wouldn't be letting some guy with an obvious crush on you… you wouldn't be leading him on."

I want to object to the inference but I can't bring myself to do so when I think back of the kiss. She doesn't even know about that part. Then there's her claim that Max has an obvious crush on me, which throws me for a bit of a loop. Is she bluffing? Instead of objecting I forget about my intended goal of making peace with her and instead go on the attack.

"If he loves you so much it wouldn't have made a difference that he found out how I feel about him."

That one clearly hurt. For a split second I feel bad about causing her that pain but the feeling goes away when she squints at me and retorts.

"If he loves you so much he never would have asked me to marry him. I don't know what to think where you are concerned. I don't even know about that part. Then there's her claim that Max has an obvious crush on me, which throws me for a bit of a loop. Is she bluffing? Instead of objecting I forget about my intended goal of making peace with her and instead go on the attack.

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"Who the hell are you to judge whether or not I love him?" I snarl.

"Who the hell are you to come between two people who are days away from getting married?" she snarls back. "I think the only thing you fear right now is him returning and you still losing."

A sliver of doubt suddenly runs through me.

"What has Peeta said to you?" I ask, suddenly nervous that he might have led her to believe things are not over between them.

Lace looks away for a second and fidgets a bit, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"That he loves me and he's sorry because he loves you too. That we can't go on planning a wedding
and trust me, I have no arguments there. That he can't be with anyone until he knows she's the only one." She draws a deep breath through her nose and I can see this is difficult for her. "That he's realized he will probably always choose you in the end and that he's sorry it took him so long to realize it." Her voice breaks a little but she carries on. "The way I feel right now I would slam the door in his face if he came knocking here. I was wrong about a lot of things when it came to him and... No, forget it, you don't deserve to know about that." She's quiet for a moment, struggling with inner demons, and I don't know what to say so I say nothing. "All the same I think he's making the biggest mistake of his life and that instead of the chance of a happy life with me he's going to end up miserable, whether with or without you. I think that's his curse. You are his curse. And if I'm right about you then you're far too damn selfish to let him go and let him have the chance of happiness."

"I didn't make him call off the wedding" I respond carefully, remembering how hard I tried to do so. "Do you really want to be married to a man who feels that way about another woman too?"

"Do you?" she immediately shots back. She studies my face and snorts. "I bet you think he'll give his whole heart to you again because deep down you can't imagine anything else than Peeta Mellark being devoted to you, your personal toy at your beck and call. Perhaps the pair of you deserve each other. I'm not going to take him back, not anytime soon. But I do still care about him and I think without your interference he could have been happy. What have you ever brought him but misery?"

The words hurt as I realize the truth to them. Going back as far as to our very first real interaction when Peeta got himself a black eye on my account it seems I've always brought pain and misery to his life. At least Lace can say she's brought some happiness and comfort to him.

"I want you to leave my shop" she says. "And stay away. I have nothing further to say to you and somehow I doubt you have anything worthwhile to say to me. I hope I'm wrong about you and that he won't be miserable for the rest of his life because of you but I would be very surprised if this turns out in any way good for any of us."

She turns and walks hurriedly to the back room of her shop, effectively ending the conversation. I remain standing in place for a few minutes before slowly moving towards the door, stepping out onto the slushy streets outside.

"She hates me" I say darkly, shoving a forkful of salad into my mouth with a gloomy expression on my face. It's a day later and I'm sitting by the wooden tables in the school yard, trying to enjoy my lunch break but I can't get yesterday's confrontation out of my head.

"Well you did have the audacity of being more amazing than she is, thereby causing that curly-haired mayhem machine to ditch her ass about a minute and a half before their wedding" replies Max, leaning back against the back of his chair and spearing a tomato on his plastic fork. In the months that have gone by I have little by little told him more about me and Peeta and what has really been going on all this time. It's actually quite relieving to have somebody else in the know, somebody closer to my own age whom I can talk to. A friend.

"Curly-haired mayhem machine?" I echo with little energy.

"Hey I saw that clip of him attacking you and then throwing some poor fucker into a capsule of barbed wire. I know you think he's all cookies and rainbows but the guy gives me the creeps, not gonna lie."

"That's not the point" I say. I'm weary and emotionally downtrodden and more than a little frustrated after my meeting with Lace. "Doesn't matter how much I love him – if he didn't have feelings for me in return I could have spent every damn night serenating him outside his window and he still would
have married her."

"Exactly." Max sighs heavily, picks up an egg with his fingertips and throws it over his shoulder. "Her beef is with him, not with you. Not your fault he dumped her when he found out he could possibly become Mr. Mockingjay someday instead."

"All the same she hates me" I mutter.

"Eh, who the fuck cares what she thinks? She's a non-entity. A boring seamstress from District 8. Her opinion doesn't matter a damn bit."

"She matters to Peeta" I point out, shivering slightly in the wind. It's only about a degree or two above freezing and my fingers are starting to get cold.

"Not enough, it seems." He shoves some lettuce and bell peppers in his mouth and talks with his mouth full. "You need to stop worrying about what matters to that douche."

"Could you please stop using derogatory words about him?" I ask. I don't know what that particular word means but it's safe to assume it's not a compliment. "Whatever mistakes he's made I still really like him."

"Which goes to show that I will never understand women. I mean I know the heart wants what the heart wants but how did a guy with scrambled eggs for a brain end up with both you and Seamstress Chick pining after him?"

"What did I just say about speaking derogatively about him?"

"You can't deny that the dude has so many loose screws that if you shook his head it would make an awful clatter."

"Then what do my feelings for him say about me?" I ask dejectedly.

His tone is surprisingly serious when he answers.

"That you still have faith that the guy you knew before he got tortured is in there somewhere... wanting to come back to you." I look up at him and he looks back at me with a kind of compassion I'm not used to seeing in him. "He's really lucky to have you being this devoted to him. He must have been someone really damn special before he got... changed."

I look down into my food, willing myself not to well up. Just thinking of the Peeta I had before Snow intervened is painful, a little bit in the same way as thinking about Prim and my father.

"For a while I convinced myself that I held on to hope because I was responsible for what happened to him" I confess. It's the first time I've ever opened up to Max about something like this but it feels right in the moment. "I mean, Snow wanted to hurt me. Peeta got torn apart because of me." I look back up at Max who seems about to protest. "At this point I know I hold on to hope because... because I just can't accept that he could be really gone. Too much of him has come back. He's not an entirely different being, the way he was when he was first rescued."

"Whatever you had it must have been special" says Max softly.

I nod, smiling despite the fact that I could start to cry.

"It was... But only Peeta knew it before it was too late."


"As much as I know you get off on blaming yourself," says Max in a tone more like his usual self, "don't forget that Peeta holds accountability too."

"Yeah" I nod. "I just wish I knew when he was coming back. I'm too damn tired of missing him and…"

I'm cut off by one of the third grade students who comes running up to me to ask me about a twig he found on the ground. I share a quick look with Max, knowing our conversation is over for the moment but grateful that we had it. I do feel the tiniest bit better now. I really don't know how it came to happen but Max has turned out to be someone in my corner, one of those rarities that is a person that I trust.

Now if only the person I want to trust the most were to come back home already.

On the day that marks the fourth anniversary of Prim's death I leave the house early and go out into the woods. I won't be going to the school today. I mentioned it to Milo in passing last week, using a tone that made it absolutely clear that it's not something I want to talk about, and he just nodded. That's one of my favourite things about Milo Matson. He doesn't say much when he's not teaching and he seems to understand my need for personal space. If I had talked to anyone else in that family they would have asked questions but Milo simply received the information and left it at that.

Once I'm in the woods I consider walking all the way out to the lake and spending the night there but I soon dismiss the idea. I'm trying to find better ways of coping than secluding myself. It's better to spend the night at home, where Haymitch is nearby and where there's a phone. I ought to call my mother. Really, my mother ought to call me, but on this particular day she never manages to.

I have no luck hunting, though that's not surprising given my lack of focus. My mind is on Prim and comes dangerously close to sending me to a very dark place. I'm trying so desperately to think of my sister with fondness and to remember how blessed I was to get to be her sister for fourteen years but it's difficult to not think more of how badly I miss her, how unfair her death was and how much better everything would be if she were still here. I think one of the reasons why I didn't want to be at the school today is that it would be so very painful seeing the students who are sisters with one another and envying them that bond and that privilege. I also don't know how I would feel today seeing the group of eighteen year-old girls, knowing Prim would have been in that class if she had lived. If she hadn't been somewhere else in Panem studying to be a doctor, of course.

By lunchtime I give up on hunting and make up my mind to go back home, take a hot bath and then go over to rouse Haymitch from sleep. I wouldn't mind spending the rest of the day in his company. I never have to try and explain to him how it feels to have lost a loved one and I don't have to put on any façade in front of him. We could make some food together, play a card game and just sit around and be in each other's company. Perhaps I could ask him if he's heard any news about Peeta.

When I reach my house I check the mailbox and find a card from the post office. They leave these cards when you've received something that's too big to fit in the mailbox and you bring it to the post office and hand them the card in exchange for the mail. I wonder who it's from. My mother rarely sends me things but Effie sometimes sees something in the Capitol that is just *so me* that she has to buy it and send it to me. Usually I'm utterly bewildered by her gifts but on a day like today it might cheer me up a little. So instead of going inside I turn around and head back to town.

Forty-five minutes later I walk through my front door, package under my arm. It's a large, flat box with no return address and I can't help but wonder if it's something sent from the government, since this is the time of year when they like to either make a big fuss and remember the time of our victory or to admonish us for something they feel we did wrong at the time of the victory. I usually tune all
of it out, letting it be mere white noise, but I'll have to at least open the package first to see what it is before I dismiss it.

Buttercup comes trotting when I remove my outerwear, brushing against my legs and walking slalom between them over and over. I give him a smile and lean down to pet him. I suddenly feel like I really want him around right now, finding some solace in the company of my sister's treasured pet. Buttercup seems to be of a like mind because when I walk to the sitting room and plop down on an armchair he is right behind me and up on my lap a mere second after I've sat down. He doesn't purr but he rubs against me and walks in a circle three times before lying down and curling up. I scratch behind his ear and he sighs heavily, almost like he's about to go to sleep but he keeps his eyes open.

"Maybe we should get you one of Prim's bows" I muse, stroking his coat with one hand while the other adjusts the box I've placed on the armrest. "Wouldn't that be rather fitting, huh? Wearing one of her bows on Prim's day?"

The cat naturally doesn't offer a reply but he doesn't growl and move away either when I lean forward to grab a pair of scissors to help me get the box open. It's a bit tricky to open it with Buttercup on my lap but eventually I get it done and remove the lid. Inside it is just a sheet of paper, the same size as the ones in Peeta's preferred brand of sketchbook. It's wrapped in thin, brown paper to protect it and I carefully lift it up, drop the box to the side of the armchair and ever so gently remove the brown paper. Buttercup half-heartedly swats at the wrapping with his paw before I toss that, too, over the side.

I got the blank side up so with reverence I turn the paper around, recognizing the weight and texture of it as definitely being from a sketchbook. What I see when I turn it over sends a jolt of both pain and warmth through my heart. It's a simple yet very beautiful watercolour portrait painting of my sister, perhaps especially beautiful because it is so simple. Nothing overdone, nothing exaggerated, just my sister immortalized in watercolours. Her blonde hair, her blue eyes, what looks like one of her favourite blouses, the shape of her mouth, all of that has been captured beautifully but it is the expression on her face and the look in her eyes that speaks to me the most. Anyone can probably copy the shape and colour of something if they tried enough but to capture the look in someone's eye is a whole other thing. Looking at this watercolour rendition of my sister almost makes me feel like looking at her for real. Oddly enough it doesn't hurt as badly as I would have thought. Instead it feels comforting, like a sign that she's still here somehow.

"Look" I say to Buttercup, holding the picture so that he can see. "Can you see? It's Prim. It's Prim…"

Buttercup leans in and carefully sniffs the painting but I'm not sure he knows what he's looking at or what it means. He doesn't show much interest in it, resting his head back on his paws, but I like to think that he does understand.

At the bottom right corner I see something written in Peeta's neat handwriting.

"I love you. I miss you."

I feel tears falling down my face but the hint of a smile is on my lips. I'm not sure if the words are Peeta's to me or if it's meant to be Prim's but it doesn't matter. For my own part it's equally true of both of them.

Time keeps going by, winter giving way to spring and eventually the earliest stages of summer. Still no word on when Peeta will return. His time away affirms two things I already knew deep down – that I can get by just fine without him but that I will also miss him terribly when he's not here. I
cannot deny that I am waiting. Waiting for him to return, waiting to hear what he thinks and feels now but also waiting to see how I will feel when we're together again. Is it really for certain that I will choose him when he comes back? I love him still, I do, but is a love affair really what is best for us? I've begun to make up my mind that I won't rush into anything when we are reunited. If he wants us to be together I will need some time to feel the situation before leaping into anything. If he doesn't want a future with me, if he chooses Lace or solitude, then at least now I know I can move on with my life. Perhaps I needed this time apart from him to see that I can make a clean break if I have to.

Eventually the school year begins to near its end and I realize it's been nine months without him. In this time a lot of things have happened, not the least of which is the new classrooms being made ready, though it's been decided that we'll hold off on using them until the new school year. I've built a life for myself, one with a job I enjoy and a surprising friend in Max. It's not everything I had hoped for but it's better than I thought things could be when I first came back here after the war. Having Peeta by my side would be the thing that could make my life happy and not just alright but at least I don't think I'll be miserable without him.

When my birthday comes around Haymitch makes me dinner and we sit in his kitchen with the kitchen door wide open, letting the fresh scent of spring flowers and new grass fill the air while we eat. It's a beautiful day and I'm feeling at peace. Effie sent me a gaudy purse for a birthday present and Haymitch roars with laughter, asking when in the world I will have any use for it, before asking if he can have it to carry him white liquor in.

After dinner I head back home just before the sun will begin its slow descent. I use the back way, walking up the porch steps to find the cat lying there, and I stop and take a look around. It's a lovely evening and I don't want to go inside just yet. Buttercup complains when I lift him onto my lap but since I begin to stroke him he decides to stay. With my sister's cat on my lap I look out over the blossoming spring, wishing Prim was here to see how beautiful everything is. She only got one spring in the Victor's Village, far too little time to see and appreciate the beauty before my eyes. It's getting chilly as the sun sets but I don't mind. The sky is being painted in pink and purple and orange and it only adds to the beauty.

As I sit there and think of Prim I'm reminded of my father and the songs he used to sing. It's been nine years since his death, almost to the date. He never got to see the Victors' Village at all, or see me as the Mockingjay. He never had to watch Prim get killed either and live through the loss of her. In some ways he was the luckiest one in the family.

I don't even know why but I begin to sing to myself. My voice is a touch hoarse and out of key at first, having not carried a tune in well over three years, but after a few verses it finds its old strength. I sing one of the songs my father used to sing to us in springtime and then I move on to the Valley Song. I sing it to its end with Buttercup purring on my lap and experience a rare form of peace inside.

When the song is finished something makes me turn my head to the left and I see Peeta standing there on the lawn, a couple of yards away. He looks at me in silence, tears falling down his face, a small and peculiar smile on his lips.

So he's back. He's come home. Warmth and relief floods through my veins almost like an injection of morphling. Yet strangely I don't feel like shoving Buttercup aside and running up to him to throw my arms around him. Well, that desire is there, but in this moment I feel great just sitting here watching him, our eyes meeting, communicating without words.

Peeta is home.
So, what do I have to say to wrap things up? Well I can barely remember how I started this chapter so I don't think I have all that much to say... I know it jumps ahead in time a lot and skips over a lot but that was intentional and meant to reflect on Katniss' state of mind at this point. I might revise the scene with Lace later on when I get a chance to read it (honestly it doesn't feel good uploading that particular bit without taking the time to re-work it if need be but I figure you've got to live on the wild side every once in a while ;) ).

Thanks for reading!
The following morning, when it's early enough that a soft mist still covers the ground, I step outside and wrap my cardigan closer around my upper body. It's a touch chilly but I like it. The air seems fresher when there's a slight bite to it and the moisture from the mist and the dew gives a lovely scent. I'm dressed already so the temperature doesn't really bother me anyway. I walk carefully down the porch steps and go to the mailbox to get my paper. Usually I don't bother getting it until the afternoon when the mailman has been by but I'm just the slightest bit too energetic to sleep this morning. It feels like there's something hanging in the air, something that's going to unfold, which of course stands to reason. Peeta is home. Now is the time for us to realize, once and for all, if there's a chance for something to happen between us.

Without really knowing why I turn my face from the mailbox in the direction of Peeta's house and I'm not entirely surprised to see him approaching, hands tucked in the pockets of the loose jersey he's wearing. I don't know if he's been up for a while and saw me through the window or if he just came out to get some air or if it's just some sort of fateful coincidence. Either way it's a relief. I feel my shoulders slump slightly as I relax and a smile plays on my lips. Regardless of what he has to say to me I like knowing that the months of insecurity are at an end. That one way or another I will be able to close the chapter on an unpleasant part of my life.

"You heading out hunting?" asks Peeta when he gets closer, the hint of a crooked smile on his face.

"No, just… getting the paper." We both smile at each other as he stops a few feet away from me. "Welcome home."

"Thank you" he says. "Have a moment to spare for an old friend?"

"I could squeeze you in between reading the paper and having breakfast." He nods and I search his eyes for some sign as to whether I'm going to like the conversation that's about to unfold. "Do you want some breakfast?"

"No, that's okay, I already ate… You go ahead though."

For once I don't feel particularly hungry so I shake my head.

"Breakfast can wait. I'd rather find out why you're at my door at six-thirty in the morning on your first day back."

"There's a simple answer" he says, averting his eyes for a moment in a way that makes me think he's nervous. "I, uh…" His eyes find mine again. "Look, before I say anything else I want to tell you that you don't have to say anything back. You know? Unless you want to." He pauses before continuing. "I'm here because I wanted to come see you first. I didn't want to bother you last night but I don't
want to squander any time today either. I want you to know that there's no ambiguity in me anymore, no doubt or wavering. The time away in the Capitol made me realize what I already knew… that my heart won't allow me to choose anyone else as long as you're alive in the world." The nervous look returns and he fidgets a little, the toe of his prosthetic foot drawing random patterns on the gravel. "I know that sounds completely crazy coming from me after I almost got married to somebody else. I was so afraid of loving you again when I thought there was about as great a possibility that Haymitch would turn out to be my biological father as there was that you would ever feel that way about me. I tried to silence that part of my heart, thought my emotional survival depended on it, but now I know I can't ignore it. Whether or not you want me, or even like me at all anymore, can't change the fact that I love you and I want to be yours someday, every day, if you'll have me."

Something about what he's saying resonates within me, going deeper than the joy of hearing him tell me what I was hoping to hear. There's undeniably a touch of bittersweetness to hearing he wants us to be together when it comes after everything that's happened but I recognize myself in part of what he's saying. For as long as I possibly could I tried to ignore my deepening feelings for him, not only because I swore never to have a romantic relationship that might lead to pregnancy but because I was petrified of loving and losing the way my mother had. I didn't think I could survive a loss like that. Perhaps I ought to feel offended that he tried so hard not to admit to himself how he felt about me but I was once guilty of the very same thing in regards to him.

Yet there's a lingering voice of doubt in my head. Do I know for absolute sure that he is being completely sincere?

"How is Lace?" I ask.

"She's… fine, I hope" he says. "I haven't seen her, or had any contact with her at all, in a long time."

"And if I tell you I don't want you anymore and she wants you back?"

He looks sad, his blue eyes drifting to some spot beyond my shoulder.

"My only hopes when it comes to her is to salvage some measure of friendship. I won't regret having been with her but I do regret taking it to the level I did. She's been an incredible friend and I'd hate to lose that but at the same time it's not so easy to imagine how we could be friends at this point… I suppose it would be easier to do so if you tell me to go to hell but what I feel for her now is a different kind of love. No romance, just… friendship and gratitude."

I'm relieved to hear him say that yet I'm not entirely satisfied with the answer. He wants to salvage his friendship with her? How is that going to work exactly? He wants to be with me but hang out with her on occasion? I don't feel comfortable with that.

Then I realize he hasn't gotten much of a reply out of me when it comes to his declaration of feelings. It's odd to stand here like this, hearing him say the things I've daydreamed about hearing for so long, and not responding in any of the ways I've been imagining I would. In my fantasies my reactions have usually included a lot of kissing or at the very least a tight hug. Things are just not ever as easy in real life as they are in daydreams.

I want him still. Standing here with him there's no question about it. He's been gone for so long and all I want to do is wrap my arms around him and make sure he never ever leaves my line of sight again. I want to make up for lost time, get all those kisses I've been missing out on, immerse myself completely in what could exist between us. I just don't feel safe enough to do so just yet. When have I ever gotten to have something wonderful and gotten to keep it? I want to be as sure as I can be that Peeta and I are on the same page and that he is ready to jump in with both feet before I allow myself to take what I want the most.
I need to say something though. Something to make him stay and not go back to his own house yet.

"I'm glad you're home" I hear myself saying, earnestly and with a light tremble in my voice.

He smiles slightly.

"It feels good to be home." There's an intensity in his eyes that makes me shiver inside. "I've really missed you, Katniss."

"I've missed you too."

We end up sitting out on the back porch watching the sun rise, me on the hammock and Peeta on the top porch step, his back leaning against the bannister. It's good to have him back. Great, in fact. He looks so much better now. More calm and at peace. More like his old self. It's all I can do not to have a wide, silly grin on my face at the sight of him. Not because I expect his presence here to mean we're going to end up in each other's arms but because it feels so good to know he's doing alright. In fact I don't think I've seen him looking better and more at peace since the day I lost him in the second arena.

"How have you been?" he asks, a soft smile on his face.

"Oh, you know…" I shrug. "Busy with work, busy with hunting, busy keeping Haymitch from drowning in his own vomit…"

An amused frown appears on his face.

"Like hell I do" I scowl. "I hired a guy from town to check in on him once a day and get him cleaned up if necessary. I'm busy. I've got the school."

Peeta chortles softly and looks thoughtful for a moment. Then his eyes meet mine again, those calm blue eyes I love so much.

"It's great that you're still working at the school. I always knew you had it in you to be good with kids. You have a natural ability to care for them and make them feel like your equal and not like they're down here and you're up here."

"I don't know about that…" I protest.

"No it's true. Like in our first arena. You didn't just take care of Rue and make her feel inferior. You became a team-mate with her, an equal. That's why she cared so much about you."

The mentioning of Rue brings tears to my eyes and I draw a heavy breath, letting it out in a tremble.

"Yeah" he nods. "She deserved to. At least her death meant something, more than just as entertainment I mean. Thanks to you." His smile becomes warm again. "Anyway, what I was going for is that you have a natural ability of making kids feel at ease and important and like they're being taken seriously. I think those are pretty good qualities in a teacher."

"I don't really think of myself as a teacher" I confess. I enjoy what I do but I don't see myself as
being what Max or Milo or Moira or their parents are. I'm just someone who likes to show kids things that will be helpful to them. I decide to change the subject since it makes me feel strangely awkward. "So did you find yourself while you were away?"

He laughs shortly, with only a touch of mirth.

"I don't know. You tell me." He runs his palms up and down his thighs for a moment, looking pensive. "It's… surprisingly hard when you don't know who it is you're trying to find again. Everybody seems to have a different opinion of who I really am. Out of the people still alive I suppose you or Haymitch or Delly would know the best. Even so, all three of you would probably give a different answer." He smiles crookedly. "Well, you'd all say that who I am is someone in love with you, but… I mean, don't take it the wrong way, I just need to be something more than that. If all I am, all I was, is in love with you then I… Well, what would there be for you to love in me? If the only thing one can say about me is that I have feelings for you, and that's the whole of it. I guess what I'm getting at is that I need to figure out who I am outside of that. It seems to be my destiny to think you're the most incredible woman ever born but there has to be something else about me, too. You know?"

I nod slowly, pulling my feet up on the hammock and wrapping my arms around my legs. The movement makes the hammock rock slightly back and forth but it will soon still. Before when he said he needed to be more than that I felt insulted but now I can understand his reasoning. It's not that loving me is not good enough, it's that Peeta was, and is, a complex person with many different sides to him. The kind-hearted soul who possessed the physical strength to kill someone but only did so as a last resort when everything else had failed. The talented painter and baker. The charismatic persona who could woo people with just a sentence or two out of his mouth. That's what I want from him. I want that man to love me. I don't want some shell of him who walks around having no thoughts or interests or desires outside of me. That wouldn't be Peeta.

"Why did you come back?" I ask carefully. "If you're not sure you've found yourself yet, I mean."

He looks out over my back yard for a moment as if pondering the question. His hands land on his knees and his left hand fingers absent-mindedly drum against the metal of his prosthetic.

"I realized eventually that while I made a lot of progress there as to stripping off layers of who I'm not, the answer to who I am has to come gradually. That it's not merely about who I was before but that now I'm a combination of the two. I wanted very badly to put all the darkness and pain behind me, to be someone other than that person I thought nobody loved, and because of that I… well, I made some choices I was in no position to make. There's nothing I can do to undo that. Then when I first got to the Capitol again I tried for a while to find out who I had used to be and just be that…" He pauses, absent-mindedly swatting a fly away. His brow is furrowed and he looks more troubled than I've seen him since he got back but then the lines smoothen out and he smiles a little."Now I see that what I need to do is just be what comes natural for me to be. Not try and play a role anymore. Not try and ignore the things that hurt or frighten me. Not to try and act how I think I'm supposed to act." He looks at me and I feel something stir deep inside of me when our eyes meet. "I do want to find my way back to who I was before… but incorporate that into what I am today. Does that make any sense?"

"Yeah" I breathe.

"Will you help me?" he asks in a low, soft voice.

"Yeah."

His smile grows a touch and my heart beats a little faster.
"You're such a good friend to me. I can only regret not having been the same for you. I want you to know that I'm more than willing to make up for that."

"There's a time for that later" I say gently, softly shaking my head. "Right now I think you should focus on one thing at a time."

He nods.

"Hopefully though who I was and who I still am is someone worthy of your friendship. Someone capable of being a good friend to you in return. If there's ever anything I can do... Whether it be tend to your primrose bushes or bake you cheese buns or open my home to you when you've suffered another nightmare..." His head leans back against the bannister but he doesn't break eye-contact. "I really am sorry I asked you to stay away during the night. I thought I needed to because I was with Lace but I should have figured out a way of still being a good friend to you despite my relationship with her. The truth is I missed having you come over. Couldn't admit it to myself though."

I want to reply that I missed coming over too but that moment between us when he told me I shouldn't do so still stings and I don't want to make it seem like it was okay when it wasn't truly. I don't want to say something to change the pleasant mood right now either so I smile and tilt my head a bit.

"I have missed the cheese buns..."

He laughs and the sound warms my heart. Then I hear footsteps on the grass and with a scowl turn my attention from his face to my lawn. It doesn't sound like Haymitch's steps and indeed it turns out to be Max. I sit up straight and feel uncomfortable all of a sudden. I don't know how I feel about blending the part of my life that holds Max with the part that belongs to Peeta.

"Why hello..." says Max, looking from one of us to the other with a rather puzzled expression.

"Hi Max" says Peeta.

"Did you forget we were supposed to go out into the woods and scavenge for pine cones and the like?" asks Max, still glancing back and forth between the pair of us. "So the kids can make pine cone animals" he explains to Peeta. "It's all artistic and shit."

I did forget. Completely forget. I really wish he hadn't reminded me either, or that we could reschedule. I was having such a lovely moment with Peeta, one unlike any we've had in far too long, and I'm not ready for that to be over just yet. I haven't even seen Peeta for months and I want to be near him right now. We still have a million things to talk about and I still haven't given him an actual answer to the unspoken question of how I feel for him now. Pine cones can wait.

Peeta, however, rises to his feet, adjusting his prosthetic a little. He brushes off his pants even though he hasn't been sitting on the ground and takes the few remaining steps down to the lawn where he ends up standing beside Max. Seeing the two of them side-by-side is more confusing than the first time I saw Peeta and Gale together, even though I know for sure I love Peeta and Max and I are strictly friends.

"Good luck pine cone scavenging" smiles Peeta. "I'll bring you cheese buns next time."

He nods at Max and then puts his hands in his jersey pockets and walks off in the direction of Haymitch's house. Reluctantly I get up from my seat and nod for Max to follow me through my own house. I'm going to need my hunting boots, hunting jacket and preferably my game bag if we're going to go trekking through the woods. It seems though that my mind is elsewhere because I can't
seem to find my game bag until Max holds it up, dangling from one of his fingers.

"You know the eye is the first organ that goes blind, right?" he says dryly.

"Where was it?"

"On the end-table, hiding in plain sight."

I nod absent-mindedly and take the bag. I suppose my lack of enthusiasm for going out isn't going unnoticed and since he's not an utter moron he'll be able to easily guess where I would rather be and where my mind is. Leave it to Max though to express it in the least subtle ways possible.

"So Mr. Brainwashed And Axe-Crazy is back in town" he notes with a complete lack of enthusiasm as I put my boots on. "Awesome."

I give him a look, not appreciating his dry tone.

"I think I'd prefer you calling him Peet."

"Why the hell would I do that?"

"Because you excel at lame nicknames."

"Clearly it was your otherworldly charm and kindness that drew him back" replies Max in a droll.

I resist the temptation to throw a cold remark back to him and grab my game bag with one hand and the hunting jacket with the other. Max manages to keep his mouth shut for five whole minutes while we leave the house and head off towards town but then he starts talking and doesn't seem to intend to stop any time soon.

"So he's back for good, huh?"

"Yep."

"Not just for a vacation or…"

"He lives here" I point out.

"And are we happy about his return?" Before I can answer he continues. "Well you are I bet but I don't really buy that an extended trip to our nation's glorious Capitol is going to cure him from his own personality, or sometimes lack thereof. If I were you I'd be cautious. Of his mind, his motives and his sweet-talking tongue."

"Excuse me" I say angrily. "First of all you don't know the first thing about his personality, which so happens to be a hell of a lot better than yours, nor do you know anything about his mind, motive or... body parts. All of which I prefer to yours."

"You're in love so you're biased."

"And you're incurably stupid so you don't know what you're talking about. Second, I don't need you to tell me to be cautious. Since when do I need you to look after me? I know Peeta very well and I know myself and I know what I want to do now that he's back."

"Yeah, Kitty, the bugs in your yard could see what you want to do now that he's back – him. Doesn't mean it's a good idea."
"Doesn't mean it's any of your business."

"Look…" His features turn serious, if only for a brief moment. "I know he was a really great guy once. I know what they did to him was not his fault. But I also know that that doesn't mean he won't end up hurting you real bad. He already has hurt you. You probably think he's worth the pain, people tend to think that way when they love someone, but that's why we have friends around – to tell us when to pull the breaks."

"I don't need anyone to tell me anything when it comes to Peeta" I say sullenly. "I know myself and I know him and I know when to proceed and when to hold back. I may be in love but I'm not a swooning idiot. I've felt this way about him for so long and thus far the only proof that it might have made me go insane is the fact that I put up with you."

He just grins at me, not taking the bait.

"Loving from a distance is one thing and having the opportunity to jump someone's bones is a whole other matter. The urge to merge tends to make common sense go right out the window. All I'm saying here is that while you may normally be a rational human being, friendship with me aside, the moment you start looking at someone with the do-me eyes rational thought tends to leave the mind in a heartbeat."

"You sound well experienced in the matter" I retort dryly.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" He smirks and gives me a nudge with his elbow. "Back to point, I don't think you should be trusting him in the love department just yet. Take a cold shower before you meet with him."

I sigh heavily.

"Seriously Max, why is sex the only thing you imagine is on my mind?"

"Because as far as I can tell you haven't been getting much of it. While he, might I add, has gotten plenty over the past couple of years. Or am I to assume that the jolly seamstress could have worn white to her wedding without dishonesty? I suppose that would explain why he seems to be so frustrated at times."

I will myself not to blush and try my best not to think of Peeta having sex with Lace. Mustering as much dignity as I can I hold my head high and give Max what I hope is a condescending look.

"I don't want Peeta for sex. I want a life with him. And no, I'm not dumb enough to rush in to anything before I know it's safe."

"Huh" says Max, nodding slowly with a pensive expression. "You're saying you want a life with him… without sex? Here I thought Mr. Smooth Talk would be a marvel in the sack, based on all the women vying for him. Now you're telling me you're meh on the whole sex-with-loony-baker thing?" His hand goes to his heart and he looks comically dismayed. "I've got to say, I… It's like my hero worship has been shot in the heart, here."

I open my mouth to tell him I don't know what Peeta is like in bed but at the last second I stop myself, remembering that he doesn't know Peeta and I haven't been together that way. I don't know why but it's important to me that Max doesn't know this. Maybe it's so he will continue to believe we really had a genuine love affair before things turned bad. Maybe it's to avoid the endless ribbing I would no doubt get if he found out I've got my virginity intact. Maybe it's just too private, none of his damn business.
"Peeta's perfect as a lover" I hear myself saying instead. I can only imagine that it's the truth. Remembering how it felt when he kissed and touched me on that beach it's practically unfathomable that he would be bad where it really counts. "Yet I want his heart far more than I want his body. If that makes sense."

Max smirks and rolls his eyes.

"Aren't you a romantic?"

"You sure aren't."

"Oh I have depths you haven't come close to swimming yet, Kat. I hope, though, that along with being a swooning romantic you are also still a realist. Even when it comes to your knight in freshly baked armour."

"We're done talking about this" I say firmly. "What happens between myself and Peeta is our business and nobody else's."

"You're forgetting one thing" says Max. "I've had front row seats to your heartache over the past few months. Trust me, I know you want him. In most other matters I would trust your judgment. When it comes to love, however, I don't trust anyone's judgment. That's one of the reasons why we have friends. To tell us the ugly parts we don't like to see."

"I appreciate the sentiment" I mutter. "You just don't understand."

"Uh-huh" he snorts. "Because you and Peeta are the first lovers to ever love and I am a mere foolish spectator who could never understand the-"

"Will you stop being you for five seconds and listen to me?" I say, elbowing him in the side. "There's a lot of history between him and me. It's up to us to figure out if there can be a future as well. If I want your input I will ask for it."

"Fine." He gives me a snide look. "I still say you want to jump his bones, though. Perhaps you should find yourself some guy on the town to jump instead and get it out of your system. Or, failing that, a cold shower before seeing old Peet."

I sigh heavily and change the subject to pine cone animals, hoping this will be the last I'll hear about Peeta from Max in a good long while.

That evening we have dinner together, me, Peeta and Haymitch. Haymitch is so thrilled to have Peeta back that he even offers us some of his finest liquor and won't take no for an answer. It's downright incredible seeing the old man so happy to have Peeta back. I had somehow managed to forget that Haymitch must have been missing him too. In fact I have spent far too little time with Haymitch myself these long months. Now it's as if the family is back together again and the spirits are high all around. Peeta looks much more light-hearted than I can remember seeing him in years and all three of us are smiling and laughing as Haymitch cooks us dinner and we eat it together.

As if by an unspoken agreement Peeta says nothing of where his heart lies nowadays and I say nothing about my own feelings either. Haymitch of course does not ask. For this one evening I don't think he particularly cares. We're just three people who care deeply about one another, finally getting to share a meal together after a long winter apart. During the course of the evening I often catch Peeta's eye and there's definitely something there, an unspoken promise that he's thinking of me and dreaming of me. It's almost as intoxicating as the alcohol served by our former mentor.
"Cheers!" says Haymitch once the food has finally been eaten and all that remains are dirty dishes and about half the bottle of liquor. He raises his glass and tips it slightly in Peeta's direction and then mine. "Here's to resuming dinner on a regular basis."

My eyes dart to Peeta, curious to know if this is something he wants. Haymitch and I certainly haven't been keeping the tradition going in his absence but we'd both like to start it up again. Peeta has consistently been the one to want to scale back or make other arrangements.

He doesn't look back at me, instead smiling at Haymitch as he takes a sip of the liquor and sets the glass down.

"So will Katniss be hosting next time or should I?"

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding and try my best to hide a smile and seem nonchalant about the whole thing.

"You do it" I say. "And while you're at it, bake us something spectacular. I think you owe us that after leaving us to buy factory baked bread shipped here from District 11. What would you like, Haymitch? Apple pie? Cinnamon raisin loafs?"

"A cake spiced with some brandy wouldn't be too shabby" grins Haymitch, leaning back in his chair.

"When have I ever baked you that?" laughs Peeta.

"Well I've got brandy if you've got… flour and sugar and whatever else goes into that baking stuff of yours."

Peeta doesn't reply except to shake his head and laugh a bit more. He rises to get started on the dishes but Haymitch, for once in his life, tells us both to leave the cleaning up to him later. The three of us retreat to the sitting room and enjoy tea and the last of the liquor while Peeta wants to know more about what we've been up to while he's been gone and we in return ask him about his time in the Capitol.

It's almost midnight by the time Peeta and I are both yawning with every other breath and we decide to call it a night. It's a fresh, lovely night we step outside to, a light breeze bringing the scent of the primroses from my house. Peeta and I walk slowly together down the gravelled path that leads from Haymitch's porch to the road and once we reach the mailbox we both stop and turn to face each other. Again I feel intoxicated, not quite sure if it's the alcohol or the company. It's thrilling to feel this way. I barely remember what it's like to feel happy and above all hopeful. Perhaps it's the hopefulness that is the most intoxicating. For once standing with Peeta knowing that there can be a chance for us in the future.

"I've really missed all of this" he says softly. "Evenings with you and the old man…" He looks around with a smile and puts his hands in his pockets. "The smells and the sounds and the views of this place… Funny how I could come to feel like this is home. It never felt that way before the war and afterward there was just so much else going on."

"Peeta…" I say, hesitating a bit before I continue. "I haven't really told you where I stand. You made your feelings clear to me this morning but I've kept you waiting."

"That's alright" he says hastily. "I told you, you don't have to say anything back. Not until you're sure." He swallows and looks nervous. "Unless of course you are sure and want to tell me you no longer feel that way about me or you've decided being with me is not what's best for you. If that is the case I hope you'll still want me in your life, as friends."
"It's… complicated" I say. "Are you really sure? Really, really sure I mean?"

"Katniss I was sure before I even left District 12" he says. "I just couldn't admit it even to myself under the circumstances, it didn't seem fair towards Lace, plus I wanted to avoid making promises I might not be able to keep. No matter how sure I was I didn't trust my own mind enough not to…" He looks miserable. "I'm sorry. I know how contradictory that must sound."

"What was it you were so sure of?" I ask carefully, smiling slightly because I know the answer is about love for me. "That you are still sure of?"

"I told you this morning. While I could feel love for someone else and be content enough with them… nevertheless I could never be truly happy with anyone else as long as you are alive in the world. If you don't love me or want me I could probably have a good enough life with another woman but it would never be all a love affair could be. For that I need you." He smiles crookedly. "You have no obligation to want or choose a life with me and I don't want you to feel responsible for my happiness, or lack thereof, because of what I just told you. You do, however, deserve to know that as far as great loves go I will only ever have the one and that person is you."

The warmth and joy that washes through my body is almost enough to counter all the misery I've felt over him in the past years. Almost. I can't stop the smile from spreading across my face but I am able to hold back the urge to wrap my arms around him and kiss him deeply.

"I think you might be my great love, too" I tell him and the smile he rewards me with is brighter than the sun. "I just… I need some time. I don't… I need to…" My smile fades a little as I struggle to put my thoughts and feelings into words. How do I tell him that I still want him as much as ever but I need time to figure things out and I need to spend more time around him to know if he truly means everything he's saying to me now, without hurting him or making him back away too far? "I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't know that I feel safe just yet. I know you never cheated on me or anything but it still feels like a bit of the trust has gone away."

He nods and shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

"I understand. Take all the time you need. All I ask is… that you don't make any promises either before you know for sure that you can keep them."

I nod slowly. His request makes sense. I don't want to ask him to wait for me until I feel ready, I want him to give me time to figure out if I will ever be ready, and that's exactly what he's giving me.

"Max thinks I should be playing the field a little" I reveal, happy that the darkness conceals my blush. "Specifically… Well, sowing wild oats I suppose is the way to put it."

Peeta lets out an astonished laugh, probably not expecting to hear innocent old Katniss Everdeen talking about something like that.

"Well that guy is a… breath of fresh air, I suppose" he then says, his tone warm and friendly but with some undercurrent of discomfort hidden inside. I can only assume that he's surprised by how close I've grown to Max while he's been away but if he has any thoughts about it he keeps it to himself for now, focusing instead on Max's advice. "If that's something you feel the need to do then that's up to you. I can't say that I'd be best pleased but who am I to object? Only you can decide what's best for you."

"And what if I do go out there and… well, date other guys?" I ask, wanting to know exactly where he stands on this issue. "What would that change?"
"A whole lot, I should assume" he answers which makes my heart sink. "Relationships, including those of the casual sex variety, tend to do that to a person. It won't, however, change how I feel about you. Katniss if you want or need to go out there and be with other men I will of course be sad about it but that's my heartache and not your concern. You've made no promises to me; you're not my girlfriend. I will still want you just as much as I do right now. Don't deny yourself anything you want to do or experience because you're worried I might not be okay with it. I'd rather grit my teeth and bear it now than have you resent me down the line because you never had the opportunity to, well... sow wild oats, if you want to do that. If you choose me in the end nothing else will matter and if you don't then what difference did it make?"

The smile is back on my lips and the warmth and happiness back in my heart. For a moment I really, really want to choose him right here, right now and just go right ahead with the possibility of a happily ever after starting tonight. I'm not even sure I want to date other guys, in fact I'm fairly sure that's not for me at all. I've never sought to have that in my life; loving Peeta is something that just kind of happened and if I'm going to experience a relationship and physical relations with somebody I want it to be with him. What stops me from reaching for whatever I can have with Peeta right this moment is the sobering realization that happily ever after has never seemed to be in the cards for me. What guarantee do I have that I will ever get to have that? It seems I only lose the things that matter the most to me. I need to take some time to decide if I truly do dare to take the risk of being with Peeta when I know life can take it away from me at any time. If there is any chance for us to last I think we have to grow back together first before we upgrade our relationship.

My hand reaches out and caresses his cheek and I lean closer, pressing my brow to his in an affectionate gesture. Our noses brush slightly and I get the oddest feeling as we look into each other's eyes but it's a positive feeling.

"I should go to bed" I mumble.

"I should too. Goodnight Katniss."

"Goodnight Peeta." I feel his every exhale on my skin and it makes me shiver. His mere closeness makes me shiver with delight. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you are back" I say in a whispered exhale.

"I'm really glad I'm back here with you, too" he whispers back. "Come what may."

His eyes move down towards my mouth and then back up again but he doesn't move to kiss me, likely leaving it up to me to decide when I'm ready for that. Instead he moves away and begins to walk backwards towards his house, his eyes not leaving mine.

"Oh, and Peeta?" I say as I begin to move towards my own house. "Don't feel like you have to stay away. If you want to bring me cheese buns or flowers or flatter me with compliments then go right ahead."

My tone is light to hide the nerves behind. I really wouldn't mind feeling courted by him, like he's making an effort to win me over. I don't think I dare ask him outright but hopefully he understands the underlying message of what I am saying.

Even from a distance I can see that he is smiling when he replies.

"I will keep that in mind. Sleep well, Katniss. And don't feel like you have to stay away either, if you have a nightmare and want some company."

"I will keep that in mind."
Chapter Notes

Look at that, I managed to get a chapter done without it taking a month! In fact my biggest problem with this chapter is that it exceeded my page limit and had to be trimmed down a lot. So apologies for any bits that might seem rushed. I've re-worked it as best I can and hopefully it runs smoothly.

On the day that would have seen the Reaping for the 80th Hunger Games a memorial celebration is to be held at what used to be the square by the Justice Building. It's an informal event in that it's not organized by the government, being instead the result of an initiative taken by Chuck Andrews, the mayor. It is to coincide with an opening of sorts of the Meadow as a place of tranquillity and remembrance. In the years since it was turned into a mass-grave flora has slowly begun to return to that particular piece of land, first with grass covering the ground and then little by little various flowers, bushes and a pair of willows that were brought in from another district. The event is going to be a small ceremony with a speech or two, a minute of silence, the reading of a prayer from one of the old religions and then a walk to the Meadow and the opportunity for people to mingle and enjoy some refreshments. It's been in the workings for a while now but I haven't paid much attention to it, focusing instead on the end of the school year and Peeta's return home.

The subject comes up early one morning when Peeta is cutting slices of a freshly baked loaf of bread in my kitchen. He's taken to showing up in the mornings with breakfast for me and for Haymitch, who has been remarkably consistent about attending.

"Will either of you be going?" asks Peeta, moving a slice of bread over to a dish.

"I will" says Haymitch to my great surprise. He's leaned back in a chair, one leg resting over the other, chewing on a slice of bread with his mouth open as he speaks.

"What about you, Katniss?"

"I don't like formal affairs" I mutter, busying my mind trying to figure out why on earth Haymitch seems keen on being there.

"It's not formal affairs" argues my old mentor, still with bread in his mouth. "It's a public honouring of everyone who's ever had their name in a reaping ball and in particular to those whose names were drawn."

"All the same it doesn't sound like fun."

"No it probably won't be fun" Peeta agrees, carrying the dish with the sliced bread over to the table. Haymitch immediately snatches another piece. "I'm gonna go, though. It feels right to be there." He makes a sad face as he takes his seat opposite me at the table. "In particular I want to be there for the thing with the Meadow…"

I nod silently, my thoughts going to his family whose remains are in all likelihood buried there. He's been reluctant to go to the Meadow in the years after the war and I hope it's a good sign that he feels ready now.
"We'll go together, then" concludes Haymitch. "I've been asked by Andrews to say a few words. Maybe you should think about whether you would like to say something too?"

"No" says Peeta, slowly shaking his head. "I don't want to be in the spotlight. I just want to be there."

"I'm not much of a speaker myself" says Haymitch. "I feel I owe it, though, this time. To all those kids I stood with up on stage who never made it back."

An unpleasant shiver runs through me when he says that. Just the thought of how many dead children he's mentored is enough to make me sick. I guess I can understand why he feels he needs to be there. Why, really, we all ought to be there.

"Well if both of you are going..." I say hesitantly.

"You don't have to, sweetheart" says Haymitch gently, taking a large bite from his second slice of bread.

"No... But I think you're right. The least I can do for the tributes who died is to show up to honour them."

"Will the school kids be going?" asks Peeta with an intrigued expression.

"What? No, I don't think... Why would we drag them to something like that? Especially when it's only ten days before the end of the school year!"

"To remind them of what used to be and what must never be again" answers Peeta. "It's going to be up to their generation, and the generations they raise, to make sure the Hunger Games stay in the past. We cannot let them forget."

"Yeah but it's an awful gloomy thing to drag them to when they're supposed to be getting excited about summer break."

"Gloomier than the kids who came before them who had to actually stand there and wait to hear if their name would be called?"

"Well either way it's not my call" I say grumpily.

"If the Matsons value their health they won't have mentioned to you if the school kids are going" chuckles Haymitch.

"Oh so now this is a laughing matter?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to start a fight" says Peeta, looking from me to Haymitch with a worried frown. "I was just curious. It seems like an ample opportunity for the kids to learn more about the Games but what do I know, I suppose."

Nothing more is said about it that morning but once breakfast is over I usher the boys out of the house and head towards the school. It's later than the time I usually arrive but with only a few weeks left of the school year and Peeta's return home I have asked to start later in the day for the remainder of the semester. It's not like I do anything of value before the first recess anyway.

All the same I feel uncommonly tired as I walk towards town, hiding more than one yawn behind my hand along the way. I get up earlier in the mornings to have Peeta and Haymitch over for breakfast even though I'm not the one doing the cooking and I stay up later in the evenings, whether it's
because the three of us are having dinner or because I'm sitting out on the hammock to watch the sunset and end up staying there long after it's gotten dark. There are so many thoughts going through my head and so many emotions to process that sleep doesn't come easily these days.

I reach the school about twenty minutes before the first recess. Construction workers are busy with the new parts of the building, their job expected to be finished by the time the next semester starts in September. It's a little strange seeing the building transform in this way and even stranger to think that when the next school year begins we won't all be gathered in one room anymore. The plan is to separate the students into three groups for now, and then as the building expands over the years to divide those groups even further until each class has their own room. Eventually it might turn into a school like the one I attended, where each classroom is for a specific class and the students move around from room to room during the day. It's strange to picture it. I'm so used to the school being a small, homely place where everyone is gathered together.

I am aware that when the school expands so will the number of children who can attend, which is positive, and accordingly also the need of more teachers, which I'm much more ambivalent to. This school is the Matson family's. At least that's how I see it. Mr. and Mrs. Matson run it and they and their three children teach with some assistance from me. The thought of adding more people to the mix doesn't sit very well with me as it would disturb the dynamic. I'm reminded of what Peeta said the day after he came back, that I'm a teacher now, and while I don't think of myself in those terms I suppose that's what I am in the eyes of my employers. Soon I might only be one out of many and I can only assume that the people they recruit will have some form of background in teaching, giving them a clear edge over me.

I walk quietly up the stairs and open the door, sneaking in while making as little noise as possible. At the board Mrs. Matson is going over grammar with a group of children around the grades of four to six while Milo is kneeling by one of the desks helping one of the girls who is having a hard time with it. Mr. Matson is grading homework by the desk and Moira is on the floor with a group of younger children using building blocks to explain basic subtraction. Max is moving about in the room, assisting kids who are working with various assignments. Without saying a word I sneak over and hang up the bag with my lunch sandwich. Then I walk over to Moira and join her on the floor and immediately little Lilac gets up on my lap. I share a smile with Moira and get to helping her explain the math to the children. I've come to feel rather at home here with these people and I'm fairly sure they like having me here. If they didn't they could have gotten rid of me ages ago. It feels very nice to belong in this way, especially someplace I never expected. I don't want all of this to change but I know that change is inevitable and I also know it's for the best. The more kids who can go to school the better.

My good spirits fade when I begin to wonder if there will still be a place for me as new teachers come in. When they get more staff, people who are real teachers to boot, will they have any need for me? Perhaps they will want me to still come in once a week or so and take the students out to the woods but most of the other things I do around here now could easily be done by more qualified people.

The thought stays in my mind when we follow the kids outside to keep an eye on them during recess. I must have a rather sullen look on my face because Milo gives me one look and then steers clear and even Max seems hesitant to bother me.

"You look characteristically grumpy this morning" he finally says after standing beside me on the steps for several minutes, giving me the occasional questioning look. "Except with extra grumpy." I don't bother replying so he gives me a gentle nudge with his shoulder. "Something the matter?"

When I don't reply, simply because I don't know how to express these concerns to him, he looks concerned. "Nothing bad happening I hope. Nothing to do with someone whose name begins with P"
and ends with ta."

"Everything's great with Peeta."

"Well they're not exceptionally great or you wouldn't be sporting that expression. Did something happen with your mother?"

I can't help but feel a sudden rush of emotion when he asks me these questions. Max and I know each other fairly well by now and he's become a good friend to me despite how much he annoyed me when we first met and still annoys me at times to this day. I don't think he would stop being friends with me if they told me they no longer need my services at the school, that's not the kind of person he is, but I cannot deny that I would miss spending my days in his company.

Sooner or later I will have to talk to him about my future here, unless someone else in the family brings it up first, but this is not the time. I don't want to think about it at all, truth be told. I've just gotten Peeta back from the Capitol and at long last I have the possibility of a future with him and right now I want to think of my future in bright terms and not in terms of what I stand to lose. In order to deflect his questions I decide to lead him down a different trail, one that is also on my mind since breakfast.

"Are the kids going to the memorial thing next week?"

"We haven't decided yet." He holds up a hand to shield his eyes from the sun as it peeks out from between two clouds. "We've talked about simply giving them the day off and letting the parents decide for themselves whether they want their offspring to be there."

I ponder the idea. Max and I both have our eyes on the playing children and as usual I feel a strong relief that they are carefree and have a positive outlook for the future. This time of year especially, when spring is giving way to summer and nature is at its prettiest – the time of year when everything comes to life, which was of course the time of year chosen for the Hunger Games. Unlike our childhoods these kids can enjoy the season to its fullest without the threat of death looming above their heads. To my surprise I find myself agreeing with Peeta's line of thought earlier in the morning.

"We should keep them in school that day" I say. "And we should bring them to the ceremony. They should know how precious this freedom that they take for granted truly is. We cannot let them forget about the Hunger Games."

"Nobody has forgotten about the Hunger Games" objects Max gently. "The eighteen year-olds were in a reaping themselves. The year you were reaped, or, well, your sister was."

My eyes very nearly well up with tears at that thought. The oldest students at our school were born the same year as Prim, the same year as Rue. Rue could have possibly been a student of mine here had she not been in the Games and survived the war. There's something strangely sentimental about the thought that the last ever litter to be in a Reaping will very soon have become too old for the Games. Next year every child between the ages of 12 and 18 will be too young to have ever had their names in reaping balls. They won't know the horror of that day unless maybe if they had older siblings whose name they feared to hear called. There should be nothing but joy and relief coupled with that realization, and for the most part there is, but Peeta's words come back to me. There's danger in forgetting. We cannot let them forget.

"Still, they should be there" I say. "It should be as vivid as possible in their memories. They should pay respect to the children who went before them who never came back home."

Max gives me a long look, slowly letting his hand fall as the sun hides behind another cloud.
"Alright, if that's how you feel."

"What, no argument just for the sake of it?"

"I have never argued a day in my life" he lies. "I'm gonna talk to my family, see what they think, but if you feel the kids should be then I suppose they should be there. You ought to know. You're the only one here who's been in the Games."

I nod and manage a half-hearted smile.

"Thank you, Max."

The day of the memorial arrives and it's with a very tight knot in my stomach that I leave home in the morning and walk into town with Haymitch and Peeta. Mr. Matson gave me the day off, said I shouldn't have to bother with the students on that particular day and instead be with my fellow tributes from Twelve. At first I was happy about it but now I'm mostly just nervous to attend at all.

We walk side by side into town, neither one of us saying much, each lost in their own trail of thought. When we arrive at the square a large crowd has gathered but it's fairly quiet. Not in that eerie way it used to be on Reaping Day, more as if everyone is paying respects by not babbling and making a ton of noise, but it feels odd all the same. Instinctively I find myself drawing nearer to Peeta and when I look up at him I see that his jaw is clenched. His arm finds its way around my waist, almost as if he's not even aware that he's doing it, and I find that very reassuring. An old instinct that was once dormant now coming back to life. I sigh a little and allow myself the luxury of resting my head against his shoulder.

"I have to get to the stage" says Haymitch in a low voice. "I might call you both up to stand there with me if it feels right. You both sure you don't want to say anything?"

"Quite sure" answers Peeta.

"Sweetheart?"

I know it must be a mere courtesy question but I shake my head anyway. Haymitch moves ahead in the crowd and I stay behind with Peeta, the crowd slowly urging us forward a step here or there as more people come to the square. We manage to stay fairly anonymous, either because people don't notice us, don't care about us or want to give us the space. I find myself looking around for the students, wondering to myself how Mr. and Mrs. Matson plan to keep an eye on all of them in this large crowd. The students might not number in much more than twenty but all the same they could easily get scattered. When I do at last spot them I see that each of the smaller children is holding the hand of an older one and they are all standing closely together. I lift my head from Peeta's shoulder which draws his attention and he turns to look in the same direction as me.

"Maybe it's just me…" he says, his voice shaking slightly. "It feels odd seeing them here. I know I advocated that they should be here but…"

I nod, having an odd lump in my throat. Seeing them here makes me feel a bit like I'm watching another reaping. The eighteen year-olds seem to be especially uncomfortable. They've done the real thing once.

"At least it's breaking the pattern" I manage. "They're not going to get called up and sent to the Capitol. They are safe."

"We are too" he says softly.
I turn and look at him. There is sorrow in his eyes but also a calm that I find reassuring. I suppose he's right. We are safe. As safe as anyone can be, I guess.

Our attention is turned towards the stage where Mayor Andrews opens the event. The whole thing in the town square takes maybe twenty minutes and is very low key and solemn. It feels right. It feels respectful. Haymitch gives a short speech that honours all the children who have stood here and waited to hear their name called and especially those who did hear their names. At the end of his speech he asks Peeta and I to join him on stage and we do, not for ourselves but for all our predecessors who never came back. As I stand up there I can see a lot of people have tears in their eyes and I have to fight to keep my own from welling up. After everyone participating in the three finger salute, which follows the minute of silence and the prayer, Mayor Andrews calls for us all to head to the Meadow and the crowd begins to shift in that direction. Peeta is the first one of us to leave the small stage and I see Haymitch putting his hand on his shoulder and asking him something and Peeta giving a brief reply.

As we move towards the Meadow I lose track of them in the crowd. It makes me feel uncomfortable and I consider simply making my way out of the crowd and going back home or waiting at the square for the two of them to come back. I don't need to go there and pay any homage. I pass by the Meadow regularly anyway. Peeta is the one who needs to have a moment for his family and since I've lost track of him I won't be able to support him.

Then I feel a small hand in my own and I look down to see Charity, one of the girls from school. Her other hand is held in a firm grip by one of the eighteen year-old girls, Cybil, who experienced a Reaping. I can see her eyes being red from crying but she says nothing. Charity doesn't seem to have fully grasped what is going on, at least not on the emotional level, but she holds my hand tightly and I can tell she wants to say something so I lean down to get closer.

"Were you sad when you were in the Reaping?" she asks in that innocent way one can only manage as a child.

"Yes" I nod, not knowing what else to say.

"Were you scared?"

"Terrified" I answer, swallowing hard. "Everyone was."

"I'm glad I don't have to be in one" says Charity.

That almost makes my tears come. She was born in District One. She would have been entirely safe up until the age of eighteen. At that point it would have been her choice to volunteer and she would most likely have felt like a failure if she didn't get to be in the Games. I haven't given any thought to it before but it feels nice beyond words that the children from the career districts no longer have to grow up with that mentality.

With Charity's hand in mine I walk with the rest of the crowd until we reach the Meadow. A small memorial stone has been raised on the northeast end and behind it there are some planted flowers and large metal emplacements where candles can be put. Since none of those who lost a loved one in the bombing has a marked grave to go to, and indeed the Meadow itself is a mass-grave, the idea is that mourners can light a candle there for the people they've lost. A handful of people born in this district who lost family members and friends that day have taken rocks roughly the size of a fist, taken them to the people who made the memorial stone, and had the names of their deceased engraved. The rocks have then been placed among the planted flowers.

Through the crowds I am able to locate Peeta who is kneeling to read the inscription of the memorial
stone. He didn't get a chance to have a rock engraved with the names of his parents and brothers. I wonder if he will have it done after today. I cannot see his face from here but I can tell from the tension in his shoulders that he is struggling, grieving.

Since Charity and Cybil have already found me I decide to stay with the students and let Peeta have a moment alone. The children got a bit scattered during the walk over here but now they are all gathering again around the tall, looming figure of Mr. Matson and with Charity's hand still in mine I walk up to them. The children seem to be aware of my mood and perhaps they are moved by the whole event themselves because they are all very well-behaved and for once I'm not subjected to an onslaught of questions about everything and nothing. I find Milo standing beside me, offering me a bit of silent support, while his family members give me a bit of distance.

We stay for over an hour. Once the initial moments of reverence have passed people begin to walk around on the Meadow and take in the surroundings. Most of them seem uncomfortable being here, even those from other districts, and I get the sense that this place will continue to be scarcely visited by the general population. I don't mind. I kind of like that this place is more secluded, someplace I don't have to share with everyone else. I hope to be able to still come here and not be crowded.

Haymitch finds me very early on and tells me he's heading home to get drunk. I wish he wouldn't but I know better than to argue with him. It could be argued that he should stay sober on a day like today but I know he doesn't have the strength to face his demons without alcohol and there will be a lot of demons today. All I can do is ask him to come see me or Peeta if it gets to be too much.

Slowly I begin to feel a bit more at ease and I force myself to take up my usual role with these children, showing them various plants and telling them what I know about them. We don't talk about the fact that this place is actually a graveyard. I see no point in it. They know it already and there's a nice sentiment to how this place of death is now covered in grass and flowers and life.

"Alright everyone, time to head back to school" says Mrs. Matson finally. A chorus of protests immediately arises but she begins herding the students together without paying attention to it.

"Are you coming back with us?" asks Moira, walking up beside me together with her brothers.

"No" I say. "I think I need to head home. Reflect on the day." I sigh heavily. "Also make sure Haymitch hasn't drunk his bodyweight already."

"I spoke with Peeta while you were busy explaining something or other about the trees over there" says Max, immediately getting my attention. "He didn't want to disturb you so he asked me to relay a message."

"Well then relay it already" I say. I haven't seen Peeta in a while and a thought makes me scowl. "How long ago was it that you spoke with him?"

"Thirty minutes or so" shrugs Max.

"Max!"

"Oh hold your horses, Kat" he scoffs. "He didn't say it was an urgent message and if it was super important I think he would have spoken to you directly."

"Just give her the message already so we can go" says Moira impatiently.

"He said to tell you he went home and to ask you to stop by his place on your way back. Says he's got a surprise for you." Max scowls and crosses his arms over his chest. "I hope it's a good surprise on a day like today but I suppose he of all people wouldn't dump a heap of unpleasantness on you
after the memorial."

"I should head back home then" I say, impatient to see him and impatient to know what the surprise is all about. I'm already racking my brain trying to figure out what it might be. He hasn't given me any hints that he's planning anything.

"Always the eager beaver where he's concerned" notes Max as we walk across the Meadow to reach the road.

"Bye Max" I say pointedly.

It takes me almost half an hour to get back to the Victors' Village with the large amount of people out and about in town. During the walk I have ample time to try and come up with ideas about the surprise but it's as if my mind can't focus enough to decide on anything. Part of me wants to be giddy with excitement and hope that it's something romantic he's got in store for me. The realistic part of me acknowledges that on a day like today he's not likely to be in a wine-and-dine kind of mood and truthfully nor am I. The pessimistic part of me worries that it's going to be something that hurts, like when he brought me along to get his new coat and it turned out he was a lot more interested in the seamstress than the garment.

With all that in mind my heart is pounding and even though it's a cool afternoon I'm sweating as I walk up the stairs of his front porch and knock on the door. It feels like it takes an eternity for him to open the door and I find my mouth is strangely dry when he does open and I attempt to speak.

"Hey" I manage.

"Hey yourself" he says, looking weary from the emotional day. "Got my message?"

"Yeah, something about a surprise…"

"Oh it's a surprise alright" he says and he steps aside to let me enter.

"Should I be alarmed?" I can't help but ask as I kneel down to unlace my boots.

"I wouldn't go that far… Let's just say there was someone at the ceremonials today I hadn't expected to see."

For a brief second I pause, then I try my best to act like his words haven't affected me. They have though. My mouth is even dryer and I feel another unpleasant knot in the pit of my stomach.

Someone he hadn't expected to see? He couldn't have run into Lace and then brought her here and asked for me to come over as well – could he?

I rise again and step out of my shoes and try to look calm and confident when I meet his eyes.

"Well where is this mystery person?"

"Kitchen."

He leads the way and I draw a deep breath before following him.

"I never know what to say to people when I run into them paying respects to their dead family members by some rock." I don't know what startles me more – the sound of Johanna's voice, the sight of her or her random greeting. She's sitting on a chair, her feet up on an adjoining one, and a wide grin is plastered on her face. "I'm kind of glad I'm seeing you again here and not out on town because if nothing else that look on your face would make everyone stop and stare." Her feet move
from the chair to the floor in a heartbeat and the next thing I know she's standing up, hands extended. "Ta-da! Bet you weren't expecting to see me. Blondie blinked at me like a lighthouse for like five straight minutes when I found him in the crowds. He needs a haircut, don't you think?"

"Johanna…" I manage, my chin somewhere down on the floor.

She laughs and walks over to me, giving me a hug. Still gaping I look over at Peeta who also seems shocked that she's here but who's had probably at least an hour to let it sink in and looks quite happy about it. Despite the obvious emotional weariness there's a smile on his face and just the hint of a spark in his eyes.

"I don't understand" I manage as Johanna pulls back from the hug.

"How about we let Peeta relay the story" she suggests, throwing an arm around his shoulders. "I've already told it once, I really need to go pee and we all know who the storyteller is around here."

She gives him a kiss on the cheek and then goes off to find the bathroom. I'm left staring at the door she exited through, wondering to myself if I've fallen asleep or been hit over the head and am simply hallucinating.

"You had no idea she was coming?" I manage.

"None whatsoever" says Peeta, walking over to the pantry to find something to serve along with the tea that's boiling in the kettle.

"Any idea how long she plans on staying? Where she plans on staying?"

"Not yet." He grabs a box of store-bought crackers, thinks it over and then puts them back in the pantry. "She came for the memorial."

I nod slightly and take a seat, trying to suppress the strange disappointment I feel at her being here. Without offering to help him prepare for tea I sit and listen as he gives a short run-down of the events that brought her here. I already knew she had been in the Capitol at the same time as him for about ten weeks; she goes there every year to see dr. Aurelius. Today must of course be an emotional day for her, just like it is for us, and Peeta tells me that District 7 wasn't making note of the day so when she heard that Twelve was doing so she decided to come. Without telling either one of us about it.

Peeta has barely finished telling me this when she comes back into the kitchen and plops down on the seat opposite mine.

"So those little hooligans you were hanging out with, are those the school kids Peeta tells me you're teaching?" she asks, her fingers absentmindedly plucking petals from the bouquet of flowers on the table.

"Yeah."

"Huh. Never would have pegged you for the teaching type."

"I guess I'm just full of surprises" I mumble. It's been so long since I last saw Johanna that I barely know how to act around her anymore.

"And what about you?" she asks Peeta who has just come over to hand us our teacups. "Found your calling yet? Or still pathetically unemployed like yours truly?"

Peeta chuckles and deflects the question. With a scowl on my face I lean back in my chair and watch
the two of them interact with a lot more ease than I would be able to muster. I barely partake in the conversation at all while we have our tea and eat our cookies. I feel like a bad friend, not to mention bad co-victor, for not being more excited that she is here on today of all days but I can't help but dislike it on some level.

Finally once the tea has been drunk Johanna asks about Haymitch and then heads off to his house to see if he is still awake or if he has passed out in another drunken stupor. Once she's gone I turn my eyes to Peeta who meets my gaze with warmth and a touch of curiosity. He's obviously picked up on my lack of enthusiasm. I hope Johanna hasn't.

"Anything the matter?" he asks carefully. "Besides all the crap that comes with a day like today."

"That's enough, isn't it?" I say, nervously biting my finger nails.

Of course he sees through my poorly attempted nonchalance.

"I thought you and Johanna were on friendly terms."

"Yeah we get along."

"But…"

I avert my eyes as to not see the encouraging look in his eyes that goes along with the leading word. Then I shrug, figuring it's better to just lay it out there. He's seen the worst, most selfish of me before and hasn't been scared away. If him and I are going to have a future together he might as well know the unpleasant stuff as well as the good stuff.

"This is supposed to be our time" I gripe. "Yours and mine, to figure things out together. We've barely even begun to do that. Now she's going to be around all the time? For how long?"

"I know there are a lot of conversations we need to have, you and I" says Peeta gently. "We'll have them. I promise. Even if she is here. She's not going to be around us all the time. Even if she were, I don't think it's just about the two of us needing to talk. We need to figure things out on all levels."

"Yeah I know" I scowl.

"The thing is, I feel bad for her. We suffered through a lot together and in Seven she has no one to be there for her."

"Then she should move" I say, petty as it may be.

"She doesn't have a lot of friends left alive anywhere. I want to focus on sorting things out between you and me, truly I do, but it goes against my instinct to turn her away when she shows up out of the blue like this and is clearly distressed."

"Clearly?" I echo. "She seems a tad forced in her cheerfulness but…" I stop myself and shake my head a little. "I get why you don't want to send her away. I don't either, really. I just dislike the… timing."

"A week here or there is not going to make much difference in the long run."

"True" I nod, thinking about what the upcoming couple of weeks will entail. "Plus, I have a few other commitments these next two weeks that will take some of my time so until the summer vacation starts I suppose we'd both be busy on our own ends anyway." A slight smile crosses my face. "Max and Milo have roped me in to help arrange a small celebration after the school semester ends. Just us,
their parents and sister, the construction workers and a handful of parents who have helped out on occasion during the year."

"Sounds like fun. Are you excited about it?"

"Knowing Max it's going to be slightly crazy" I chuckle. I can't resist adding something that will probably make his mind work overtime. "The last time we went to a party together it sure was memorable."

The small smile stays on his face but there's a bit of a shift in his blue eyes. If he asks me upfront I won't lie and tell him there's something romantic going on between Max and I but on the other hand we did kiss. Peeta should know about that at some point. He doesn't ask though. He rises from the table and begins to gather up the dirty dishes. It's closing in on dinner time and he asks if I'll be staying to eat with him and Johanna. I suppose she will be staying at his house. I find that annoying but I can't very well protest. At least I know that the risk of anything sexual or romantic happening between the two of them are pretty much on par with anything happening between me and Johanna.

It's surprisingly chilly, the evening when we gather outside the school to cook food over an open fire and celebrate that another school year has come to its end. I'm wearing a cardigan and even so I'm shivering, even though it's the month of June. I stay close to the fire to garner some of its heat, every now and then casting longing glances at the blankets Moira brought for anyone who might get cold later into the night. It was my idea that we be outdoors but I hadn't expected to be so annoyingly cold.

It's been a busy week and a half, what with school ending and Johanna visiting. She's still here and hasn't said a word about when she's leaving though I'm not sure what she does with her time. She doesn't spend it all with Peeta or Haymitch and I've been busy at the school. Tonight I know she's out having dinner at one of the restaurants together with Peeta. I find myself wishing I was at a restaurant with him rather than freezing out here though apparently I am the only one not celebrating tonight. Everyone else seems to think it's a wonderful time of year but I don't understand why. It's not like the Matsons' work has ended and at least for my own part I know I will miss coming here every day and spending time with the students.

"Gloomy, gloomy" notes Max as he takes a seat beside me on the bench. "This is a party, in case you didn't pick up on that when you helped organize it." When I don't respond he tries a different strategy. "You know there's food to be had in about five minutes, right? You know, the one thing you love more than the guy whose first name starts with a bodily function?"

I pretend not to hear him and instead rise from my seat and walk over to the table and help set up the last things for the meal. We then sit together and eat, everyone but me in high spirits. Thankfully the food is soon gone and we return to the fire where it's at least a little warmer. I fake a smile and engage in conversation with Moira and one of the aiding parents, wondering to myself if I have to stay for long. I thought this would be a fun evening, in fact I was looking forward to it, but for whatever reason I'm not in the mood.

I look up when I hear one rather drunk construction worker howling and everyone turns their attention towards the school yard gate. The source of the commotion appears to be Peeta and Johanna, passing by on their way home from the restaurant. My smile becomes a tad more genuine and I get up on my feet and walk over, thinking to myself that I can probably come up with an excuse to head home with them.

"A little campfire in the middle of town" remarks Johanna, grinning at me. "How quaint. You people in Twelve sure know how to throw a bash."
"Johanna Mason" says Max appreciatively as he appears beside me. I resist the urge to roll my eyes. There really is a fan boy inside this guy.

"The one and only" she replies cheekily.

"Johanna this is my friend Max" I say. "His family. Various other people who work here." I shrug. "I assume they all know who you are. Heading back to the Victors' Village?"

"Yeah neither one of us was in the mood for dessert" says Peeta.

"Well why don't you come join us for a while?" suggests Mr. Matson who has also appeared right behind me. 'Friends of Katniss' are always welcome."

I groan inwardly but Johanna lights up at the suggestion and before I know it I am back on the bench with Johanna on one side, Max on the other and Peeta on Johanna's other side, warming his hands by the fire. I share a brief look with him but he seems in a fairly good mood and doesn't pick up on my desire to leave. Milo offers him something to drink and he gets up to follow him to see the selection of beverages, promising to bring something back for Johanna as well.

Max and Johanna make small talk. Ostensibly in order to hear her better he places his hand right beside my thigh and leans in slightly over me in a gesture that I wonder if it's meant to make us seem more intimately comfortable with each other than we normally are. I decide to leave it be since the presence of his body beside mine brings some bit of additional heat.

Johanna, of course, picks up on the physical closeness.

"So you're the replacement Gale, I take it" she says dryly.

"I'm older than he is so I'm the original, toots" he says, sounding amused.

"I hope you're not going to follow in his footsteps regarding this one" she says, nodding in my direction which makes me scowl. "Not because Katniss tells me you're a lunatic. Most good people are, including yours truly."

"Then what do you care?" chuckles Max. "For the record, no, I have no intention of nesting with any mockingjays."

"Good" smirks Johanna. "Under normal circumstances her love life is beneath my interest but torture cell roommate honour code makes me be on Peeta's side."

"You are both aware I'm sitting in-between you, right?" I point out angrily.

"Hush, this doesn't concern you" says Max, probably just to irritate me.

Luckily Peeta appears at this moment, handing a bottle to Johanna who throws her head back and takes several large gulps at once. Peeta's eyes go to me and he seems to sense my desire to leave because his eyes go towards the road and then back to me as if to ask a silent question. I nod slightly and he responds by nodding slightly back.

"I'm tired" I say. "And freezing. And tired of freezing. Max I'm going to head home."

"Dullest person ever" he sighs.

"Dullest party ever compared to the bashes we've been to" replies Johanna. "Who planned this so-called bash? I wouldn't mind staying though, if that's okay with everyone. I can't finish this drink in
ten seconds anyway."

"Stay if you want to" says Max, looking offended at her dismissal of our party. "More people are coming over later anyway."

"I'll go home with you" says Peeta to me.

As I'm about to stand up Max leans in and whispers in my ear.

"Word to the wise, don't let that one beer you had go to your brain. Keep it in your pants, smitten kitten."

I ignore him and ask Peeta for a minute to say goodnight to everyone. Before long we are walking home together in silence, side by side, so close that the back of our hands keep brushing against each other. Peeta removes his jacket and hands it to me and it feels nice and warm and smells of him. We haven't had a chance to talk in private while Johanna has been here and so without a word spoken between us Peeta follows me to my house and helps me brew some tea. We take refuge in the study, the warmest room in the house, and he perches on the writing desk while I sit down on the loveseat.

"Did we ruin your evening?" he asks.

"No. I was cold. Wanted to go home."

He nods and looks down at his mug. The moment is a little awkward, neither of us knowing what to say or do next. Then Peeta looks up at me with a warm smile and I feel that familiar twinge in my heart.

"You look beautiful tonight" he says. "More than usual, I mean."

I smile and blush slightly, not quite sure how to respond to the compliment. It does, however, seem to make the awkwardness go away and we fall into conversation more easily. Conversation that soon turns towards us, our past and our possible future. We skirt around a few issues for a while until we've both finished our tea but by then I've reached the point where I feel I can say what is truly festering in my mind nowadays.

"I just don't... see how things could ever be the same" I admit, taking care not to look at him though in the corner of my eye I can see that he looks up. "How they can be as they should have been between us. The way they were supposed to be."

"If I hadn't screwed it up, you mean."

"However you want to put it. We're not the star-crossed lovers of District 12 anymore – the kids who saw only each other and had no experience with any others. You have an ex-fiancée now, a woman you've kissed and held in your arms and made life plans with and whispered words of love to and been..." I have to swallow down a lump in my throat before I can finish the sentence. "Intimate with. You know I'm right. It can never be the way it ought to have been with us."

"Right."

There's an icy undertone that makes me turn my head and look at him. He's hunched forward, his hands resting on the edge of the desk as if to be ready to get up and leave, and there's anger in his eyes. That stirs something in me. Why does he seem angry? I'm the one who should be angry here.

"What, you want to deny it?" I challenge.
"No I suppose you're right" he says testily. "Everything is all screwed up and ruined forever. All because of me. Because I forgot that my life is not meant to have any purpose without you at the centre of it."

"You know that's not what I'm saying."

"Oh I do, do I? Then why is it that you talk like I've committed a sin by not throwing my life away on something I believed would never happen? Something I had no reason to ever believe would happen! You didn't tell me you had feelings for me. You didn't show me."

"I said I love you" I shoot back angrily.

"When? If you did you didn't say it in any context that made me think you meant it romantically. Perhaps that was my bad, mea maxima culpa as Plutarch says, and if I misunderstood you I can only hate that I hurt you and was blind to something that could have avoided a lot of future pain. But you can't look me in the eye and tell me you fought for me. You ignored me when I was brought to District 13. It took you forever to help me recover but if our roles had been reversed I would have been there with you every single day. I wouldn't have given up on you. Even if I'm unfair in that judgment you didn't give me any reason to believe you wanted me when we were back here in Twelve. If you were in love with me all along you didn't show it. So what was I supposed to do? Resign myself to a life that had no meaning because you didn't want to star in it?"

"You know-" I begin, afraid of the allegations he is making and the possibility that there might be even the slightest grain of truth to them, but he cuts me off.

"If you want to punish me for causing you pain then that's fine, be angry with me, punish me, deal with however you must. I know I was insensitive even though I didn't realize it and I hate myself for it; I hate that I caused you pain. But you cannot punish me for having had a life without you, not when you didn't tell me you wanted to be with me. I loved her, Katniss. I knew how painful that must be for you but I will not be punished for having allowed myself the opportunity to have a life again. I had lost everything and she was something that mattered."

"Would you shut up about her?" I yell. "I don't want to hear you talk about her, I don't want to hear her name ever again in my life, I sure as hell don't want to be reminded how you feel about her!"

"Felt" he corrects me. "And you do need to hear about her. We need to talk about her. You think the pain is going to go away by not talking about it? We need to deal with it, not just bury it. I won't let it sit there and fester and return to destroy us some years down the line. We bury it when we've worked through it." He's a little bit calmer now but still angry. "Why am I not allowed to live, to be considered me, unless my life revolves around you? Sooner or later you are going to have to accept that my life did go on, that I did develop feelings for somebody else, because if you can't then we can never have a functioning future together. You realize that, don't you?"

Even though I know exactly what he means I shake my head, tears falling down my face from anger and sadness.

"You just want to blame me for everything" I accuse. "Because I couldn't open up about my feelings, which I might add was not exactly easy when you cheerfully told me you no longer loved me, I have only myself to blame for what happened between you and her. Is that it? Huh?"

"Nobody is to blame, it's just life."

"That's real damn easy for you to say. You weren't the one forced to stand on the sidelines and watch."
"Maybe not this time but that hasn't always been the case, now has it? I'm not the only one who's had romance outside of us" he replies, scooting a bit further back on the desk. "I do know what jealousy feels like. While I was being tortured in the Capitol you were kissing Gale. You weren't even sure which one of us you liked. I went from thinking you were in love with me too to finding out you weren't and that Gale was not just a friend to you. Do you think that wasn't painful for me? And Max, you want to tell me nothing's happened there?"

It takes me a couple of seconds to respond. Part of me wants to lie and claim nothing has happened in order to keep some moral high ground on the issue, another wants to go with a full-out lie and sell it as much more than what it really was.

"There have been things happening with Max and I" I say, feeling a hollow form of victory when I see him reel almost as if he's been slapped. "But I didn't have a long, ongoing relationship with him. Or with Gale. I didn't ask either one of them to marry me. I didn't *sleep* with either one of them."

"You're shaming me for having had sex?" he asks. "You want me to apologise for not coming to you as a virgin?"

"Well, would have been nice if there had been something you saved for me" I say weakly, wiping tears away from my face.

"Well I'm not a virgin" he says with a resigned shrug. "What can I do about that now? Look, I'm sorry, so very deeply sorry for all the pain I've caused you. I loathe myself for not seeing things clearly and I'll probably never forgive myself for hurting you so badly. I know very well how much it hurts when the person you want wants somebody else. I cannot even imagine what it was like for you when I came here and happily announced I was going to marry Lace. If I could take those moments away I would but I can't. Like I said, you can hate me for hurting you so much all you want. I can only hope you can find it in you to forgive me or I don't see how we can work as a couple. I can't deny either that you are right, things will never be the way they could have been. That doesn't mean they can't be amazing." His fingers grip the edge of the desk hard, his knuckles turning white for a moment before he releases the grip somewhat. "I never meant to hurt you. I thought you didn't care. I wanted a life, a future, a family. I didn't think anyone could ever love me but she did. And even though I know it must kill you to hear it I did love her, too. Never as strongly as I love you but I wasn't with her just to avoid loneliness. That's the truth. I don't believe in sugar-coating it or lying to you. You need to have all the facts and decide if you can live with that and if it is enough to you that you are the one I chose. That I love you more. That you are the only one I love now. If there is such a thing as *the one* then that is you."

Suddenly it's as if something snaps inside of me, like a floodgate that can't be controlled anymore. Rage and hurt and sadness well up inside of me and all of it, every last bit, is directed at Peeta. In this moment I don't feel love, all I feel for him is anger and hurt and I cannot keep it all inside of me.

"You think it is that easy?" I snarl through gritted teeth. "That you know what these years have been like for me? Do you have any idea how much you've hurt me? Do you even begin to comprehend? Does that messy excuse of a brain you carry around have the capability of understanding that?"

I take a pause, drawing deep, heavy breaths, glaring at him with fury. I wait for him to respond back, to remind me again of the many times I have hurt him. I think I will welcome hearing it. Hearing him say those things would only fuel my anger further and give me more to pour over him right now.

He doesn't say it. He says nothing at all. He just looks at me and waits for me to continue because he obviously can tell I'm not done. I get up from my seat and take a step closer to him, my fists clenched.
"Do you know what it felt like to suddenly not be welcome at your place at night anymore? To know I had to make all sorts of damn accommodations for miss Lace while she never had to do a damn thing to make room for me in your life?" Rationally that's probably not true, seeing as how he continued spending one-on-one time with me and invited me to the toasting, but I don't care. All my anger and hurt and frustration is coming out now. "Do you know how much it hurt to see you kiss her? To know she slept over? You've never had to experience that with me and Gale or Max or anyone else for that matter." I begin to rattle of one thing after another, everything I can think of that broke my heart during their relationship, whether it be big or small. My voice rises steadily until I've worked myself up to an uncharacteristic crescendo. "Peeta do you get how painful it was to be your minor priority? To see you giving everything I wanted and needed to her? To tell you how I feel and not have you hear it?"

The last words leave my mouth in an outright scream. Then it's as if the energy just goes out of my body and I sink down on the floor, trembling and gnashing my teeth. I don't cry. I'm still far too angry to cry. This moment is not about sorrow, it's about anger.

I look up when I feel Peeta's hands land gently on my shoulders. He kneels in front of me and only now do I notice he's been crying. I don't know how he knows I won't push him off me right now but he seems to be sure that I won't and when his hand cups my chin and lifts my face to meet his I understand he's right. I'm not going to fight him off. I don't want to and I don't have enough energy to.

"There's nothing I can say or do to make any of that undone" he says, voice brimming with emotion. "I never intended to hurt you and it's horrible to know that I did. I can't make it undone… but if you'll let me I will do everything I can to make it up to you. No matter how long it takes. The only thing I can't do is apologise for allowing my life to go on when I had no idea how you truly felt because that just isn't rational."

My own voice trembles as I answer, feeling bad all of a sudden for unleashing that much anger on him. I do realize he's right. He didn't know how I felt. If I hadn't been in love with him there would have been nothing wrong with him getting involved with Lace nor with how he acted around me. And I have hurt him in the past, fluttering between him and Gale without knowing how I felt, which is something I did with full knowledge of his feelings for me.

"I'm sorry for the things I've done that hurt you, too."

"Never mind that" he answers softly. "We're talking about what I did to hurt you and all this needed to come to light. You needed it off your chest and I needed to hear it. All that is left to do now for you is to decide if you can move past this or if you will never be able to forgive me."

I lean in to his embrace and bury my face against the nape of his neck, inhaling deeply. His arms wrap around me and his steadiness brings comfort to me.

"What if I can't?" I ask, not because I think I might not but because for some reason I need to know his answer. "What then?"

He's quiet for a moment, his hand coming to cradle the back of my head.

"Then I suppose I really did ruin everything."

"No…" I say, pulling back to meet his eyes. "You are right in that you had no obligation to me." I hesitate before asking another question I much would like to know the answer to. "When did you fall in love with me again?"
"I honestly couldn't tell you" he sighs. "It happened gradually. I didn't want to acknowledge it to myself when those feelings began to appear. Looking back I suppose I already felt that way long before I knew it. Which is so confusing because I was never unsure in the past."

I recognize myself far too well in what he is saying. When did I know I was in love with him? Not when Snow announced the rules for the Quarter Quell and I decided to give my life for Peeta. Not when we shared those kisses on the beach. Not when we were torn apart at the end of the Quell and I lost the will to live. Not even then. But when I did know I could look back and realize that I had loved him when those things took place. I was just blind to see it.

"I don't know that I care" I hear myself saying. "If you love me now I don't care about when those feelings came back, or if they did come back or developed fresh."

He places a soft kiss on my brow and I relax into his arms. We stay like that until his legs start to cramp and then we move to the kitchen to wash our tea mugs. Both of us exhausted and emotionally drained we end up in the guest bedroom, lying side by side facing each other on the bed. We don't talk, both of us all talked out for tonight I guess. I end up falling asleep after only a few minutes and he stays beside me through the night, sleeping soundly when I wake up after half an hour from being cold. Carefully I scoot off the bed and find a blanket, wrap it over us and lay back down, soon falling asleep again.

Neither one of us has a nightmare that night.
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

Phew! Took me ages but finally I got this chapter ready. In addition to my computer problems I got hit hard with writers' block (for this story and for "Labyrinth") plus I'm hoping to contribute a story for Fandom4LLS and I've been giving that priority. Ironically enough another big problem I had with this chapter is that it ended up way longer than my chapter limit. It goes to show that writers' block does not equal one's best writing since upon reading through the whole thing I found several sections that were easy to lift out. However, there are some parts that would definitely have been better if I'd had the space to flesh it out more.

But, I'm guessing you didn't click on this chapter to read my opening ramblings so I won't ramble any further. Hope the read is worth the wait!

I wake the next morning and don't immediately realize that something is out of the ordinary. My nose fills with the smell of freshly baked bread and scrambled eggs and I only open my eyes a little bit, letting my body slowly come out of slumber. Then I become aware that my neck is in an uncomfortable position and it dawns on me that I never awake to the smell of breakfast being made. I open my eyes fully with a frown, momentarily confused as to why I'm in the guest bedroom downstairs. As I sit up I feel a wryneck on my left side and I groan, rubbing the aching muscles. Peeta is gone though the smell of breakfast would have to be the product of someone's efforts so that makes sense. I can't quite make up my mind if it annoys me that he got out of bed without waking me.

The door pushes open and Peeta comes walking in with a tray. He's got eggs, teacakes, a glass of orange juice and tea ready for me. Not quite sure what to do or say I scoot further up on the bed to make room for the tray, which is of the kind that my mother used to use for patients who stayed overnight here, the kind that has legs that can be folded out allowing it to serve as a tiny table of sorts. Peeta sets the tray across my lap. He then leans in and gives me a soft kiss right on the corner of my mouth.

"Good morning. I hope you don't mind I made you some breakfast in bed."

Mind? I had no idea this was a concept that could be implemented for people not in a sickbed and it's a very pleasant surprise. The only thing I'm not so sure about is that there's only food for one here. Did he already eat? Are we eating separately? Is Haymitch here? Johanna too?

"It looks great" I offer. "Smells even better. What about you? Did you eat already?"

"No" is all he offers in response, sitting down on the edge of the bed. No inclination as to whether he plans on joining me here or in the kitchen.

"How come?" I ask.

"I wanted to finish making breakfast for you before you woke up." He smiles, one of those smiles that sends pleasant shivers down my spine, and his eyes are so blue in the morning light that it's
almost ridiculous. "I'm just going to run out and get the paper if that's okay by you."

"Then are you going to eat? I feel stupid eating alone when you're the one who made everything."

His smile grows a touch wider.

"Clearly you haven't been pampered enough in your day" he says, getting up from where he's sitting. "I'm going to have to remedy that. Be back in a flash!"

He leaves the room and through the slightly open door I can see him throwing on his right shoe with little ease and struggling a bit with getting the left one on the prosthetic. He leans forward and quickly ties the shoes, double-knotting the laces. I feel the slightest breeze of fresh morning air as he opens the front door and a second later I hear it close behind him. Careful not to knock the tray, or anything on it, over I reach behind me and arrange two pillows behind my back so that I can sit more comfortably. Then I lean back and sigh with contentment, smiling to myself as I enjoy the moment. Waking up with Peeta in the house. Would have preferred waking up with Peeta in bed beside me but I can live with this arrangement too. I allow myself the luxury of a daydream, picturing this becoming a habit, having Peeta bring me breakfast in bed. It's hard to silence the longing inside to thank him with a kiss, a real on-the-lips kiss, when he comes back but I know this is not the time. There will be no such kissing until it serves to seal our decision to build a life together.

I think back on our long talk last night. Difficult as it was, not to mention emotionally exhausting, I feel rather good about it. It feels like it was something that needed to happen, a threshold we needed to cross, and now we can progress. I suppose Peeta was right – I did need to hear some of what he had to say about his thoughts and feelings about his ex-fiancée and I needed to tell him about all the things that have hurt. It wasn't fun while it was taking place but now in the aftermath I feel liberated.

I'm drawn from my thoughts when the front door opens and closes again. Quickly I take a bite from the teacake, moaning slightly at the rich flavour, the melted butter and the orange marmalade Peeta has put on it. I can hear him rustling about in the kitchen for a few minutes and then he comes back with another tray, this one for himself. Tucked under his arm is the newspaper. I rarely read it in the morning but I know he likes to. I scoot closer to the wall, lifting the tray to bring it with me, and make room for him. We smile at each other as he sits and I arrange a pillow for behind his back while he gets the tray in position.

"I almost forgot" he says, picking up a small flower from his tray and placing it on mine. "The lady should have a flower. This was the only kind I could find, though."

Speechless I take the stem of the flower between my thumb and index finger and hold it up closer to my face. A dandelion from my yard. I let them grow wherever they want around the house, not caring in the slightest that they're technically a weed. My fingers gently graze the yellow petals and a strange surge goes through me. I look at Peeta, wondering if he knows the significance of this flower, but while he gives me a pleased smile he doesn't seem to connect anything in particular to the flower itself. He opens the paper and holds it with one hand, digging in to his scrambled eggs with the other. My eyes return to the flower and reverently I set it back on the tray. He gives me a sideways glance and then in a slow and hesitant fashion, allowing me for ample opportunity to tell him to stop, wraps his arm around me and pulls me closer until I find myself comfortably cocooned against him. We then eat our breakfasts in silence but my heart is full with warmth and hope and I allow myself a few more moments of pretending this is our normal morning routine.

Peeta stays until lunch, inviting me to come over for dinner before he leaves. I spend the afternoon watching television with Buttercup, not feeling like going outside since it's still kind of cold. As the hours go by I process the events of the previous night, going over every little detail as far as I can
remember them. Our conversation late in the evening was difficult and it needs to be dissected in my mind again and again before I can put it aside. For the most part though I feel good about it. Even the difficult parts eventually did lead to something good and I know that there's no way we can ever get to where we want to be without facing the things that hurt.

Truth be told I am a little glad that Johanna will most likely be there for dinner. As I change into a warmer shirt and put my shoes on I decide it's kind of nice to know we'll just be having a normal dinner and evening and the subject of Peeta and I – Us – won't be a factor. We can just spend time together.

It's windy out and despite the short distance to Peeta's house I'm freezing a little when I open the door and hurry inside. I can smell food cooking and I hear Johanna's voice talking with Peeta only answering with a word or two here or there. Kicking off my shoes and casting a glance at myself in the mirror I call out a greeting and receive one in return from Peeta. Johanna seems too busy talking to him to send a word in my direction.

I walk into the kitchen and immediately freeze. Johanna looks the same as always but Peeta does not. The Peeta I woke up with this morning had ashen locks that, yes, might have grown a bit too long. This Peeta does not sport those locks. In fact he barely has hair at all. When he sees my reaction he makes a face that's a cross between a cringe and a crooked smile.

"Yeah I know. I told her not to cut it quite that short."

"Well what's the point of cutting the damn hair if you're only going to chop off a millimetre?" questions Johanna. "You were the one who whined that it was too long anyway."

"When you said you would cut my hair for me I didn't realize you planned on balding me."

"Oh boo-hoo, you're not bald" snorts Johanna and tends to something in a pot on the stove. "I left a good half a centimetre."

"It looks terrible" I blurt out, earning me an offended look from Johanna.

"Cry me a river, it will grow back" she snorts.

Peeta rolls his eyes at her and walks over to me, nodding in the direction of the sitting room. We head there together and he stops in front of me, wrapping his arms around my waist but I'm too preoccupied with his new look to enjoy the closeness. With a deep scowl I reach up and run my hand over his head, disliking the new feel and really missing the curls my fingers ought to be tangling in.

"You hate it" he states in a low voice, trying to keep Johanna from overhearing.

"It's… I mean… You're supposed to have curly hair."

"It's the last time I trust her with something like this" he mutters. "I wore it this short when I was in the Capitol after the war but that was different… Johanna's been in a weird mood all day, though."

"How long until it grows back?" I complain.

"Too long" he sighs.

"Hey Peeta!" comes Johanna's voice from the kitchen. "I thought you said you had milk at home!"

"No, I said I'm out of milk" Peeta answers her in an annoyed tone.
"Well I need some damn milk!"

Peeta makes a face and looks at me.

"You wouldn't happen to have milk at home?"

"No, sorry."

"You're going to have to do without, Johanna."

She appears in the doorway, leaning against the doorpost with a scowl as she taps a large wooden spoon against her arm.

"You'd better be kidding me, blondie! I'm making dinner for you and Katniss and you can't even go buy some milk?"

"You do realize it will take me more than half an hour to get the milk and come back here?"

"Then you'd better leave right away."

With a sigh Peeta caves and takes his arms off me, sending me an apologetic look before he heads for the door. Johanna berates him for not having milk at home when he's a baker but he ignores her as he laces his shoes and grabs his jacket. He gives me one more look before heading out and the second the door closes behind him Johanna turns to me, tosses the spoon on the kitchen table and ushers me back into the sitting room.

"I don't actually need any milk" she reveals. "Just wanted to get rid of him for a while. We're long overdue for a girl talk, you and I."

Oh boy. There's no way this is going to be fun. I find myself feeling quite annoyed, angry in fact, realizing I won't be getting dinner in a long while yet. With a scowl and my arms crossed over my chest I demonstratively plop down in an armchair and make no effort to seem the slightest bit accessible.

Johanna could of course care less.

"Peeta doesn't say much about the status of your current… relationship" she says, giving me a pointed look on the last word as she sits down on the couch. "He's all 'blah, blah, blah, it's private, I'm not going to discuss with you the things Katniss and I talk about'. He so clearly doesn't grasp the concept of sharing the dirt with your friends. You, on the other hand, have no such qualms so I figured I'd get the skinny from you."

"Excuse me?" I say.

"That friend of yours from last night sure seems to be in the know" she says, giving me a pointed look.

"Max talked to you about Peeta and me?" I ask, a strong feeling of discomfort developing in the pit of my stomach. I hadn't pegged him for someone who would talk to others about the private things I discuss with him. Besides, he doesn't really know all that much.

"Not per se. I definitely got the feeling though that he knows more than I do." She makes a face. "You know, he's quite the asshole."

"For knowing more about my feelings for Peeta than you do?"
"No, for being an asshole."

My irritation turns to confusion. I suppose I figured Johanna and Max would get along splendidly. They are similar in several ways and Max seemed appreciative of her last night when she first showed up with Peeta. I almost wonder if Johanna is being sarcastic and I'm just slow on the uptake, as per usual.

"Why?" I ask. "What's wrong with Max?"

"He has vocal chords, for starters" snorts Johanna. "Which he uses to showcase his less-than-stellar attitude. You should have heard the way he talked about Peeta, for one."

"That's just Max" I say, rolling my eyes slightly as some of his more colourful comments come to mind. "He doesn't mean anything by it. He likes getting a reaction out of people and he-"

"And he's an asshole." She gives me a displeased look. "I don't know how you stomach listening to him."

"Because I know he doesn't mean it" I say. "And, because I don't want to give him the pleasure of knowing he's gotten a reaction out of me."

"Well he got a reaction out of me" snorts Johanna. "I clogged him."

"You did what?" I ask, my jaw dropping.

She smirks, not even trying to hide how pleased she is with herself.

"He deserved it. I doubt he'll be making any further comments about the guy I was tortured alongside with, at least not while I'm around." Then she looks less pleased. "Although once I hit him his dad, who clearly has no sense of humour or justice, kicked me out."

"Yeah I should think so!" The thought of it makes me groan. "Johanna those people are my employers."

"Whatever" she shrugs, a slightly distant look on her face. "Though I admit it would have been nice to stick around for a while longer. Why aren't you friends with Mr. Asshole's brother instead? Much nicer, much less talkative…"

I touch the three middle fingers of my hand to my brow, shaking my head slightly, wondering if this is all a joke. Johanna punched Max but apparently took a liking to Milo? I had no idea leaving her among other people would be so dramatic. What are Max's parents going to say about the friend I introduced to them? And what exactly did Max say? I find most of his comments to be harmless, no real venom behind the words. Either she misread him completely or he must have said something that he's never said to me.

"Anyway…" says Johanna, slowly snapping out of the slightly dreamy look on her face and turning her eyes to me. "I noticed Peeta didn't come home last night. He wouldn't say anything about it when he showed up today but he didn't look like a guy who spent the night having wild sex so I'm guessing you two indulged in that tired old brand of platonic bed-sharing you practically patented back in the day?"

"Johanna what's it to you?" I ask with a sigh. "You weren't there when Peeta returned to Twelve and told me he no longer loved me. You weren't there when he had a pre-toasting party. You weren't there in the aftermath when it all turned into chaos."
"Yeah, neither one of you updated me on the status of his feelings for you when he came back to this dump, I was a little bit busy undergoing therapy for a rather crippling phobia of water on the week when he dumped his bride-to-be and I was recuperating back in Seven in the days that followed. I'm here now and it's plain to see that both of you are woe-ing over the messy status of your love affair. I'm guessing you haven't had that many people to talk it over with other than drunk old Haymitch and Mr. Asshole so from the goodness of my heart I thought I might lend an ear." She sees me rolling my eyes and her eyes narrow. "Maybe you've listened too much to that guy and become more callous than you used to be."

"Max has not made me more or less callous than I already was" I reply. "You don't know him. You don't know how much he's helped me. Yes he's crude and uncouth and has quite the mouth on him but have you ever heard yourself talk? I don't want to talk about Max and I'm not too sure I want to talk to you about Peeta."

"Do you talk to Peeta about Peeta?"

"Okay I don't even know what that means."

"You spent last night talking, right? I mean, that's pretty much as close to action as the pair of you ever get, yes?" Without waiting for me to give a snarling reply she continues, her hand waving as if to tell me to be quiet. "Did you start off by opening up to him about everything he does, and did, that's pissed you off?"

"No" I grumble.

"Shocker" she says dryly.

"None of what was said between us is any of your business" I snarl. "I don't find it easy to just spell out my every inner emotion and stuff that's been bottled up for months and years doesn't unravel easily for me. I'm not like Peeta."

"And is Peeta like?"

"He didn't seem to have any problem letting me know all that's been bugging him" I mutter, turning my face away.

To my surprise Johanna guffaws.

"I'll bet blondie just got tired of waiting for you to dish out the stuff you've been holding back and decided to provoke you." She leaves me no time to wonder if there's any truth to that before prattling on. "Look, you and Peeta need to stop being so damn polite around each other because that's always been what keeps you from getting to the fun parts. One of you needs to get a spine and start charging ahead after what you want, whether it is to bang the other person into oblivion or simply give an 'I love you but you suck for all the following reasons'-speech. What are you both so afraid of anyway? By now you know Peeta wants you and he knows you want him."

I groan inwardly, frustrated by all the thoughts and emotions that fight for dominance inside of me. Right now I need some space to think and feel after what we talked about last night and the last thing I want is a load of advice I never asked for.

"That means a lot coming from someone in a loving, stable relationship" I say icily, feeling a little bit bad when I see in her eyes that my words hurt. "I've told you already I don't want to talk about this. If you want to have a girl talk why don't you give Delly Cartwright a call? Hell, if anyone knows what goes on in the heart and mind of Peeta Mellark it will be her." I get up from my seat and take a
few steps towards the kitchen, stopping to give her a look. "And don't hit my friends."

"Don't associate with assholes and I won't have to." Her rebuttal is quick but half-hearted, her eyes still seeming hurt from my previous comment. "Just sit down and shut up if you're not going to talk about anything worthwhile. I'll finish dinner."

I do as instructed and take a seat by the kitchen table, counting the seconds until Peeta comes back. Johanna opens the oven and checks on the chicken then gets to work with the vegetables. She doesn't say much else, her irritation clearly not going anywhere anytime soon. I hear her curse under her breath when she cuts her fingertip on a knife but I figure she won't allow me to help her wash off the blood and put on a band-aid so I don't offer.

Finally the front door opens and Peeta comes back. I resist the urge to fly to my feet and greet him. Johanna doesn't react at all. He walks into the kitchen and looks from one of us to the other, puzzled by the unpleasant atmosphere. He hands Johanna a bottle of milk and she doesn't bother looking at it.

"Don't need it after all. Put it away."

Somehow he manages not to look incredibly annoyed at this and obediently puts the milk in the fridge. He casts another glance at her, seems to determine that she's not worth bothering at the moment, and walks over to me instead.

"The weather's real nice out there" he says. "Want to join me on the porch while Johanna finishes dinner?"

I know the weather is anything but nice but staying in the kitchen with Johanna isn't much nicer so I nod and follow him out the front door, taking a seat beside him on the porch steps. It's still as windy as before but the house shelters us to some degree so at least I don't feel as cold as I did walking over. I wrap my arms around my knees and look at Peeta, trying to get used to the absence of his locks.

"Looks to be a bad summer" I comment.

"Yeah I guess…" He gives me a look and a crooked smile. "So I kind of have an ulterior motive asking you to step outside for a moment. Besides getting out of Johanna's sight. Did you two fight or something?"

"She's meddling" I say sullenly.

"I guess she doesn't have a lot going on in her own life…” he says in a tone that makes me almost feel bad for her, especially considering my jab at her lack of a boyfriend. "Do you want to talk about whatever you two got into?"

"No."

"I'll talk then, if that's okay. I was out of line last night."

"No, Peeta, it's fine" I sigh, not wanting to talk more about this.

"It's not fine" he argues gently. "There were some things I really needed… I mean I… I guess I just needed for you to hear me, you know? And you did. You heard me. I could have handled it much better, I'm afraid. You didn't deserve everything I said to you. Some of it was about my issues and insecurities and I took it out on you."

"And I did the same towards you."
"Yeah but it's not the same…" His hand comes to rest on my shoulder and he brushes his brow to mine for a brief second. "All in all I've had it easier than you in these past years. I needed for you to hear some things but I shouldn't have said it like that. So I'm sorry. I want you to know I have no intention on dwelling on whatever you may or may not have done towards me in the past and I was way out of line making any sort of comments about you and Gale or Max. Who am I to judge whatever you might have done with or felt for them?"

I say nothing because on a rational level I know he's right. He has no right to judge, no right to feel jealous. He was with someone else for a long time and then he left, telling me I was free to see anyone I wanted to. I cannot deny though that I want him to care about that. I really want him to wish I hadn't kissed anybody else or ever been interested in anyone else. I want it to bother him the way it bothered me seeing him with Lace, knowing of him and Lace as an item.

"Anyway…" he says, sighing and turning his eyes to the sky. "I hope that-"

"You two useless faux-lovebirds going to come inside and eat or what?"

We both startle at the sound of Johanna's voice, accompanied by the door banging against the wall as she throws it open. Quickly I'm on my feet, not really in the mood to challenge her temper at the moment, but Peeta hesitates. He seems a little annoyed at the interruption and doesn't back down at her challenging glare. I say his name and nod in the direction of the kitchen and he gets up, one hand on the bannister steadying him.

"Are you okay? Are you going to be nice for the rest of the evening?" he asks Johanna as he passes by her on his way inside.

"I'm not going to punch the devil on Katniss' shoulder again" she answers. "Well, most likely not. Consider that my set level of niceness for this particular evening."

"Wait, who did you punch?"

"I don't want to hear that whole tirade again" I say, grabbing Peeta by the hand and dragging him with me into the kitchen. "Let's just eat."

We spend most of the meal in silence, Johanna and I shooting grumpy glances at one another and Peeta knowing better than to get in the middle of it. It's not until the end of the meal that I think of something to say that I hope might turn the mood brighter, though I'm led in by a remark of Peeta's.

"Don't think I've had a meal this silent since the last time I ate alone" he remarks, scraping up the last of the gravy with his knife.

"I bet even Milo Matson talks more than this at the table" I comment, trying to sound as casual as possible. As I had hoped there's a glint in Johanna's eyes. A part of me almost wants to smirk at her for having such a quick reaction to the mention of a person she only met for a few hours the night before but it occurs to me that she might just be that lonely and even though she's gotten on my nerves tonight I don't want that for her.

"Bet he never gets a word in edgewise with that blabbermouth of a brother" she says but the jab against Max lacks edge. The grumpy look has gone from her face and she's got a sly smirk on her face as she gets up from her seat. "I cooked for you losers so you guys can do the dishes. I think I'm gonna head out and see if… I think I'm going to go for a walk." Obviously she's got something else in mind and I wonder if that something is going to find Milo. It seems outrageous but then again this is Johanna Mason we're talking about. She heads for the kitchen door and stops on the threshold, sending us a smirk. "Bye blondie, bye brainless. Go ahead and not behave yourselves while I'm
I think a good, hot romp on the couch would do you both a world of good."

Cheerfully she slams the door shut behind her, leaving Peeta and I startled at the quick shift from grump to upbeat. I almost want to ask Peeta if he thinks she's going to pursue a guy she only met yesterday and barely knows but his expression is a mix between confused and concerned.

"Seriously, what was that all about? What's gotten into her?"

"You know what? I don't really care tonight" I decide, reaching out and placing my hand on top of his. "Let's just enjoy the fact that we're alone right now."

We clean up after dinner. Peeta prepares the dough for tomorrow morning's bread. We then end up lying together on the bed in the downstairs guestroom, the one I used to sleep in after a nightmare. We lie side by side facing one another, close enough that he rests his arm around my waist but not so close that our faces touch. They could though, if we wanted to close that gap. I like having the option, no matter how sure I am that it's not going to happen tonight. I don't mind waiting a little longer for that and Peeta seems fine with it too.

"I hope we have no more interruptions tonight" he says.

"Maybe we should have locked the doors. It would deter Haymitch, though I assume Johanna would just axe her way in."

He chuckles.

"Like she axed my hair off?"

"Seriously, never let that woman cut your hair again." I let my hand run over his scalp, scowling at the unfamiliar feel. "I like the curls. I don't like this look on you."

"The thanks I get from her for giving her food and shelter" he sighs in a feigned dramatic voice. "But let's not waste more time talking about her tonight."

"What do you want to talk about instead?"

"You."

I smile at the warm feeling that flows through me but I know there's actually something else I would rather talk about. Well, there's someone else I feel we ought to talk about. I don't exactly want to but I'd rather get as much of the unpleasantness out of the way as soon as possible so we can focus on the rest later.

"Actually…" I say, my hand leaving Peeta's head and together with my eyes travelling to the collar of his shirt. "I want to know… I still don't know everything that went on between you and Lace those last days before you left, or… now that you've been back."

"I didn't think you wanted to hear about that."

"Honestly I would mind never even hearing about the fabric lace again. But you said you want to stay friends with her and I want to know… well, how things are progressing in that department, I suppose."

"They aren't. Not yet anyway. Once Lace gets back to the district I'm going to go talk to her."

"Gets back?" I echo. Where has she gone, when did she leave and how does Peeta know about it?
Has he wanted to spend time with her? Has he been in contact with her?

"Yeah she left for Eight with her brother the day after I came back. Don't care to speculate as to whether or not that was a coincidence. We really need to talk, though."

"I know" I nod, not liking the prospect of the two of them alone together, talking things out. He said he wants to salvage his friendship with her. What else might happen when the two of them are alone?

"Katniss?" Two of his fingers land on my chin and tilt my face up to meet his eyes. "I don't know what thoughts are passing through that head of yours right now but let me be clear about this. I have to speak with her to get closure for us both, and for you I suspect. I want to know that she is doing okay and I think I deserve to be on the receiving end of whatever anger she wants to dish out on me. Maybe after that we could be friends again… but you don't feel comfortable with that, do you?"

"That's not up to me" I protest sullenly. "Don't put it on me if you can't be best buddies with her after all of this."

"I didn't mean it like that" he says gently. "I just meant that… that as much as I would like to be friends with her I want more for you to feel comfortable and secure."

"Well then you can't want to be friends with her anymore" I say bluntly. "I don't want you wanting that. I don't want you wanting anything more to do with her."

"Okay" he says, the hint of a tremble in his voice.

"Oh… okay?"

"I suppose that's what would be best for all of us anyway. She probably wouldn't want to be friends with me for that matter."

"No, you screwed her over good."

I almost regret saying that at the dejected look on his face but then he manages a sad smile and his hand moves briefly from my waist down to my hip and then back up again, distracting me.

"I'm glad you're here with me tonight" he says. "After everything."

"Johanna thinks we should stop walking on eggshells around one another and just… dive into the deep end."

"I know" he nods. She's probably been pestering him with this too. "It's very Johanna-like to think of it that way."

"Max…" For a moment I hesitate, wondering if it's unwise or unsuitable to bring him into a conversation like this. But since I've already said his name I might as well say the rest. "Max thinks we should take things slow. I'm not sure which one of them is right."

"That would probably be Max" says Peeta with no hesitation. "Johanna's suggestion is more passionate, I'll grant her that, but erring on the side of caution can't hurt."

"Aren't you tired of waiting?" I have to ask. "We've lost so much time already… I mean, I don't want to rush into anything but at the same time I'm so damn tired of the things I want always being in the future. That I have to be so damn patient."
"I know."

"Is there no part of you that wants to do as Johanna suggests? Forget all about caution and taking our time and just... going for it?"

I'm not fully buying into Johanna's ideas on this subject, knowing that my heart needs more time and that we have to grow back together step by step, but all the same something about what she said resonates with me. How wonderful it would be to end all this waiting right here and now and kiss him, give in to the longing and the hunger. How bad could the consequences be? Can we not grow together while being together? Most importantly, is Peeta taking this slow because he thinks it is the right thing to do or because deep down he still isn't sure? I know he might never recover from the hijacking and for all I know that might mean that a part of him will always doubt me.

"I want to be with you, very much so" he says and there's no hesitation in his voice and the look in his eyes is steady. "I just don't want it to... I want to deserve you."

"It's up to me to decide whether or not you do" I point out.

"I know from personal experience that when you want something very much you want to grab on to it with both hands if you get the opportunity but later on you might realize you shouldn't have been so hasty. It is up to you to decide what's best for you but if you'll allow me one more selfish moment it's up to me to decide what's best for me. What's best for me is the chance to be with you with no foreseeable end. I believe that in order to achieve that we need to take things slow and I've still got some amends to make." He gives me one of those looks that make my heart beat faster. "Katniss I want you to choose to be with me and to never look back at that decision and regret it. I'm petrified that if we get together too hastily you'll wake one day when the haze of new love has faded and you'll wonder to yourself why you're with this nutcase who isn't the same person you knew before the war. I'm terrified that you'd feel stuck with me, that you can't walk away from me because we're Katniss and Peeta and because I've got so many issues and-"

I cover his mouth with my hand to stop him.

"Just so you know..." I say. "Being tortured and brainwashed does not make you unworthy or undeserving. Mistakes you made after that don't either. We both have issues and I understand if you need more time to work on yours. Once I have you I will not let you go. I've longed for you for far too long to do that."

His smile resonates in my heart and his face moves closer to mine. When he rubs his nose against mine I do not know where I find the willpower not to kiss him. He then rolls over on his back and pulls me close and instinctively I rest my head over his heart, feeling its reassuring thuds through the fabric of his shirt. I close my eyes and enjoy this moment, hope and reassurance filling my mind and heart as I begin to drift off to sleep.

The warm weather finally arrives, though thankfully not as scorching hot as it can be some years. My woods are at the height of life and I find myself more and more often spending time there without doing any actual hunting. It seems wasteful to kill when our stomachs are full; I only lay down prey when our supply of meat or fish has run low. I gather a lot though, various berries and plants that are nutritious and good to eat. I kind of like it, being more of a gatherer this year than a huntress. A more peaceful me.

Johanna ends up staying another eight days after the party, much to Max's dismay. The fact that she seems to be getting along splendidly with Milo doesn't brighten his spirits either. I'm spared most of the drama since unlike the Matson family I don't have much work to do right after school has ended
for the summer and consequently I don't spend much time with any of them. Instead I spend time
with Peeta. We do normal, everyday things like prepare our meals, go for walks, play card games
and watch television on cloudy nights. Peeta gets his hands on an old radio that plays music from the
Capitol and sometimes we just sit around listening to the mix of familiar and unfamiliar songs.

Some of the time we talk. It's a slow process to tread through everything that's happened and it takes
time to really get into the depth of everything. Aside from my one outburst that night after the party I
have trouble expressing my feelings so Peeta spends a lot of time carefully, gently coaxing things out
of me at a pace I can be comfortable with. It feels good to be able to open up to him. I'm beginning to
feel like I have my best friend back and I know that's got to be the foundation for us to build
anything else on.

In July Lace returns to the district and Peeta goes to see her. He doesn't come to see me afterward
and when I go over to his place that evening he's sad and emotional. I make the offer to talk about it
but he says he isn't ready yet and I suppose I have to respect that. All he will say is that he hopes they
can be cordial to each other if they run into one another on the street but beyond that they're not
likely to be in contact much. I don't show it openly but I find it to be a relief. The less she wants to do
with him the better.

As the summer weeks go by I begin to grow a little restless. We're growing back together, yes, but
I'm definitely getting to the point where that isn't enough. I understand why Peeta wants for us to
take our time but how much longer should we wait? It hasn't been all that long in the grand scheme
of things but I'm so tired of waiting. I keep wondering if I should mention it to him. At this point I
could almost worry he's reverted back to only wanting to be friends with me, he so rarely talks about
how we feel about each other now and what lies ahead for us, but then he will give me one of those
looks or touch my hand in just the right way and that spark will ignite and make me almost lose my
breath.

One evening in late July we decide to go out for a walk together after an early dinner. Haymitch
denies to go with us, longing to be back home with his bottles I suppose, so it's just Peeta and me.
Buttercup actually tags along, trotting beside us for the first couple of hundred yards before he sets
off down one of his hunting paths. Peeta's hand is in mine and his voice is filling my ears, telling me
stories he read while in the Capitol when he had access to libraries. The air is just the right
temperature, just the right touch of humid, and the scent of flowers adds to the ambiance. The sun
hasn't really begun to set yet but aside from that detail I would say it's the perfect evening walk.

"Do you want to continue?" asks Peeta when the town comes into view in the distance. "Or go back
home?"

"Let's go back" I suggest, stopping and turning my head in the direction we came from. "We can
listen to the radio. Play some cards. Maybe just talk."

He nods. We turn and go back to the Victors' Village hand in hand, though I begin to wonder to
myself if we are two friends out for an enjoyable evening walk or if we are a couple enjoying the
romance of a night like tonight. I decide not to raise the question and I follow Peeta inside his house
once we arrive back, kicking off my shoes and taking a seat on the armchair while he turns the radio
on and then heads to the kitchen to prepare tea and some sandwiches for us. The sun has begun to set
outside the window and the colours could take your breath away. I'm beginning to understand why
sunset orange is Peeta's favourite colour. I wonder if he's ever been able to recreate a sunset on paper
or canvas.

Peeta comes walking in with the tea and bread on a tray, humming along to a familiar song on the
radio. He puts the tray down and follows my gaze out the window, smiling at the sight. He walks
over to get a closer look and takes a deep breath through his nose.

"I love sunsets."

"I know you do" I say.

He turns to me and smiles, a glint in his eyes that I didn't see a minute ago. Slowly he walks over to me, his humming stopping as the song on the radio ends and another, unfamiliar one begins. He extends his hand to me and sends me one of those smiles that touches something deep in my heart.

"Dance with me?"

Smiling shyly I take his hand and let him pull me in for a dance. We haven't done this together since the Victory Tour and at the back of my mind I wonder if Peeta still remembers how to dance the way we were taught, but he seems to have no trouble with how to hold me and falls into rhythm as easily as taking a breath. It's odd for the first few seconds, memories of previous dances flashing through my mind, but then it all seems to just fall into place and feel natural. My cheek finds his shoulder. His hand is splayed on my back and it presses me just a touch closer, close enough that we're not just acquaintances dancing but not so close that it feels too intimate.

Together we sway to the music, Peeta leading and me following. I remember having a bit of trouble learning that part, wanting to be the one to take the lead, much to Effie's chagrin. Now it feels good to let Peeta have that control, to not have to think about it and just follow his movements. I close my eyes, enjoying his warmth and his scent. When the music comes to an end we pull apart and our eyes meet. I wonder if it's going to be awkward but Peeta is looking at me with warmth and contentment.

"Thank you for the dance" he says and leans in to place a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth.

My lips part on their own accord even though the kiss is not full on my mouth. His kiss lingers a second longer than necessary and it feels warm and gentle and full of Peeta's steadiness. I feel myself tremble pleasantly.

In the first week of August the chilliness returns. Gone are the warm sunny days and in their place is a series of rainy, windy days with temperatures more like what we're used to see in October. In spite of the weather life continues on much as before and as per usual I head over to Peeta's house to have dinner with him and Haymitch three to four days a week.

One such evening I wrap my arms around myself in an effort to warm up a bit in the cold wind while I wait for Peeta to answer the door. When he does I'm not sure what warms me up more – the heat from inside his house or the smile on his face. He steps aside and lets me in.

"Is Haymitch here yet?" I ask, feeling hungry.

"He's not joining us" says Peeta, closing the door. There's a slightly bashful look on his face that wakens my curiosity. "I, uh… was actually thinking it could be just the two of us. Like a date."

"A date?" I echo, pleasantly surprised.

"We've never been on one. I would much like for us to have one, if it's alright by you."

"Sure" I say with a smile, already wondering which restaurant he has in mind and envisioning the two of us at a candlelit table together, his right foot nudging my feet underneath the table. "I'll keep my jacket on, then."
"No go ahead and take it off" says Peeta.

"But…" I say with a scowl.

"I wasn't thinking a restaurant" he says. "I did that with, well, you know who I did that with…" He takes my jacket as I somewhat reluctantly shrug out of it. "I want to do that with you, too. Just not for our first date. I wanted to do something different, something more… well, more us."

So just another dinner at his house, only this time without Haymitch? Even if Peeta does all the cooking, and I notice there's no smell of food in the house, it will still be much like our ordinary dinners together. In fact we've had dinner together just the two of us before. How would tonight be any different? I try to hide my disappointment as Peeta takes me by the hand.

"Come" he says, a smile on his face that seems both excited and nervous at the same time. I try to make my own smile seem genuine but when he leads me to his sitting room the smile is gone and my chin drops with surprise. "I hope you like it. I hope you think it's okay."

I can't bring myself to answer at first. Peeta has transformed his sitting room for the occasion, pushing back the armchairs and the coffee table to make room for a large blanket and a collection of candles in candlesticks which together with the cackling fire in the fireplace serve as the only source of light in the room besides whatever daylight comes through the clouds. On the blanket he has set out wine glasses and a bottle but also a pitcher of ice water and large glasses to go with that. He's brought out the silverware that belonged to his parents which is not very fancy compared to what the Capitol provides us with but it was special to his mother and father and they kept it at his place for safe keeping. What it lacks for in financial value it makes up for in sentimental. There is also a large picnic basket beside the blanket and the radio is on a low volume, just enough to add some ambiance. It is all lovely and the thought of how long it must have taken him to arrange this more than makes up for the fact that he's not taking me to a restaurant.

"What will you do if Haymitch comes walking over in the hopes of scoring dinner?" I hear myself blurting out.

"Ask him to come back at another time, I guess" he chuckles, running a hand through his hair in a nervous gesture. "Although actually I would probably yell at him, seeing as how he knows about this. I needed a bit of help moving some of the furniture."

"Oh" I say with a little chuckle.

"Yeah, he, uh..." Peeta makes a cringing face. "He also gave me some fairly lewd advice. Followed by some more fatherly advice. He doesn't really seem to be able to make up his mind on the issue. It was weird. In fact, let's not even talk about it."

"You're the only one who is" I tease.

He laughs a little and takes me by the hand, leading me over to the blanket. We sit down together and his hand caresses my cheek, moving up in a circular motion behind my ear, as if tucking an invisible strand of hair back into place.

"You're very beautiful tonight" he says in a tone that sends a thrill through me. I blush, however, glancing down at my casual attire.

"You didn't give me any warning" I say. "I would have worn something prettier. Something more special."

"No, you're perfect the way you are right now" he smiles. "I like the real, everyday Katniss the best,
although you do look awfully pretty in a fancy get-up as well."

I notice he hasn't dressed up much for the occasion either. A nicer pair of pants and a shirt he knows I like. It's not something he just threw on without thinking but he also didn't overdress and make me feel too common for the evening. The shirt hikes up a little and reveals a patch of his skin as he shows me what is in the basket – a delicious salad, various cold-cuts, some freshly baked bread and freshly picked strawberries. He's also made some mini-cupcakes with my favourite frosting and when he sees the grin on my face at the sight of them he laughs and asks if I want to start with those. I do.

Despite the fact that I've been engaged and fake-pregnant I've never been on a date before and I'm not entirely sure what to expect on one. Peeta seems to have a better idea and holds the reins which I am very comfortable with. There's a slightly bashful look that keeps appearing on his face every now and then, one that seems to have a direct line to tug on my heartstrings, and I think it's that detail that I like the best. He seems to have put a lot of thought and work into tonight and he's in his most charming mood. Without that bashful look that tells me he's nervous on the inside it might all seem too neat and perfect. I like the crack in the veneer, that tell-tale sign that when it comes down to it he's still just a young man on a date with a girl he likes, nervous that he might mess up or that she might not like what he's put so much effort into.

Once we have eaten we sit close together, side by side but facing one another, our hips touching and our upper bodies aligned to each other. Our brows are touching lightly, Peeta's hands have found their way down my side and into my hair and my own rest on his shoulders. We speak in low voices as if the words we say should only be heard by us even though no one else is here. The sun has set outside, the room is only illuminated by the candles and the fireplace. I realize the music has stopped playing at some point. When did that happen?

"So this is a date, huh?" I mumble with a smile. "It's nice."

"It's a first date, anyway" he mumbles back, mirroring my smile. "Let's try to make each one better than the last."

"Mmm. Quite the sights your setting." I let my hand run through his hair, some length having returned to it but not enough for it to properly curl. He sighs contently at the touch. "This is all lovely, Peeta."

"You deserve the best."

"I like to think we both do."

He gives me another one of those smiles but this time there's something more underneath. His eyes are more serious and I can tell that he hesitates for a second, as if wondering to himself if this is the right time to say whatever it is that's on his mind. I'm just about to encourage him to do so, wanting him to feel comfortable enough to tell me anything on our date, when he begins to speak on his own accord.

"I wish I had half your strength" he says softly, his hand reaching up to caress my cheek. "You are so brave. For a long time I've struggled with my own insecurities and that voice inside my head that tells me no one can love me. That irrational voice that won't seem to shut up no matter how well I know that what it says is bullshit. It's been nagging at the back of my mind, suggesting that because you didn't try to win my heart your feelings may not have been strong enough. I've never faulted you for it because that voice keeps saying that I'm not capable of evoking strong enough love in another person." The hint of a crooked smile flashes across his face but the look in his eyes is dead serious. "Anyway, the point is not woe is me…"
The point is I was blind to your bravery and I couldn't see that if anything your actions spoke more strongly of love than if you had told me how you felt over and over and over. I cannot imagine what it took for you to put on a mask of platonic friendship and be happy for me. I cannot believe that someone could love me enough to do that for me. And all the while I just kept hurting you, adding weight to your burden. I don't know if I will ever be able to make it up to you but I want you to know that I'm starting to see now. That I recognize what you have done for me and that it makes my heart…" While he's been speaking his arms have slowly moved to wrap around my waist and pull me closer, brows and noses brushing, looking deep into each other's eyes. "I don't actually know how to properly express it. Just know that I love you and admire you for it and that… that I might not be able to full grasp what that must have been like but you amaze me."

I cannot seem to find any words at first so I nuzzle my face against his neck, breathing deeply to fill my nose with the scent of him, feeling his arms wrap tighter around me and cocoon me. After a moment I pull back and look into his eyes.

"You haven't exactly had it easy either" I say in a low voice. "You know what it's like to… when you love someone who…"

"That was different" he says softly, his hand brushing through my hair a few times in a comforting motion. "And I didn't handle it with the selflessness that you did."

"I don't know about that" I say, remembering how he watched over Gale after the whipping.

"I do." He smiles at me and I smile back. "I've made a lot of mistakes. A lot of them. Loving you was never one, though."

I laugh slightly, surprised that I feel relieved to hear him say it. I hadn't thought about it before but it's comforting to know he doesn't regret his feelings for me despite the difficulties it has put him through over the years.

I long to kiss him. We look at each other and it feels like electricity sparks between us. Like we're waiting for something to happen. His hands find their way to my cheeks and I move a hand to rest behind his neck. Our noses brush. Then our brows. He's not in any rush though. He closes his eyes for a second and sighs contently.

"Katniss…"

Just do it already. What is he waiting for? His eyes open again and his tongue darts out to wet his lips, sending a jolt through my body all the way to my core. My heart is beating like crazy. His eyes go to my lips and then back up to my eyes. I feel about ready to burst.

Finally, finally he moves his mouth towards mine. Just as our lips are about to touch something comes over me and I find myself pulling back. I'm not even sure why at first. In the back of my head I hear Max's voice warning me not to move too fast and I have an instinctive feeling that this is not the right moment. I'm not ready, now that the opportunity actually presents itself. I want to wait. For what, I'm not sure. Maybe it's knowing that when our mouths do meet there will be no turning back. I'm definitely ready to kiss, I realize, but I'm not sure I'm ready for everything that comes with it.

When I pull back confusion and pain at the rejection flashes in Peeta's eyes. He smiles though, trying to reassure me that it's okay.

"Not yet" I breathe against his cheek.

"You're going to be the death of me" he says, groaning then chuckling. "I guess I deserve it. I can
"Can you?" I challenge.

"Yeah. I don't really want to" he laughs. "But for you I can wait. You're worth it. And I want it to feel right. I want you to feel ready for it. We've had far too many kisses for all the wrong reasons."

I can't help but wonder if it's a mistake placing so much significance into one kiss. Perhaps we're on the wrong track here. Perhaps we could indulge in kissing and let forever be something that happens later. Hanging it all up on our new first kiss might just be creating an expectation we can't live up to.

Peeta has pulled back a little however and seems disappointed but not discouraged. There's another part of me that thinks waiting might be good. If he can wait to kiss me again then surely he can also wait to one day take our relationship to the nudity stage. Because he might be experienced but I am not and I know I will have to take that particular part slow. Although at the same time I cannot deny that some primal part of me is excited and curious and can't wait for the day when we're touching each other in the most intimate of ways.

Our date continue for a little while longer and we spend most of that time lying together on the blanket, our arms wrapped around each other. Then I decide it's time to call it a night before that thing I can only interpret as sexual tension rises further between us and overshadows everything else. We get up on our feet, Peeta rejects my offers to help him clean up and we walk to the door. We stand there for a while, the door open and me halfway out of it but unwilling to leave. Again our faces are so very close, noses almost brushing, and by now my heart has been beating heavily in my chest for so long I almost worry about health effects. Our voices are still low as we thank each other for the evening we're shared and bid each other a good night. Peeta kisses my brow, his lips pressing against my skin for a long time, and that is as close as we get to a goodnight kiss.

Reluctantly I pull away and walk back to my own house, feeling warm and happy and excited while also pleasantly exhausted and ready for bed. I turn around right before I open my door and as I expected I see Peeta still standing on his front porch, waiting for me to go inside my house before he goes back inside of his. I smile but I know he probably can't see it in the darkness. Then I go inside and close the door.

A short while later, when I am in bed, I relive all my favourite moments from my first date. My hands begin to move over my body on their own accord and for a while I try to imagine that my small, dainty fingers are actually Peeta's stronger, thicker ones caressing my skin. My hand ends up reaching inside my panties and I gasp at the sensation, gently biting down on my lower lip. Blushing even though I know nobody saw me I pull my hand back and try to settle in for the night but it's difficult to relax and I don't really want to let go of this wonderful feeling. I fall asleep with a smile on my face. I don't know when that happened last.

Chapter End Notes

I can't recall if Katniss ever mentions breakfast in bed at any point of the book... I choose to believe she doesn't :) Not sure if Johanna will return or if I'll do anything with her/Milo, I had plans to but there wasn't room for it. Anyways, thanks for reading and I hope I'll have the next chapter up soon but I want to update "Labyrinth" first, not to mention get the Fandom4LLS story written.
Here's another chapter I haven't properly read through before posting. I worked and re-worked the first half so many times that by the time the whole thing was done I didn't want to read through it again... There's one scene in particular that I must have re-written and re-worked two dozen times. Still not happy with it but since when has that ever stopped me from posting something? ;)

"So what will loony baker boy do with his time now that the school year is starting anew and you're coming back to work?" The question comes while Max and I are sitting together on the steps of the school house, sorting through pencils, crayons, scissors and all such utensils to get a rough inventory before the children come back next week. "You are coming back, aren't you?"

There's a different tone in his second question and a new look in his eyes as he says it. I smile slightly. Yes I am certainly coming back. I've come to love it here and see it as a part of my everyday life. Having the summer to myself, and especially to Peeta, has been great but it's time to return to my routines. Besides, I'd miss the students and I'd miss the Matson family if I didn't come to school five days a week.

"I'm here right now, aren't I?" I say lightly, picking up a purple crayon that's been broken in half. The top half can still be used so I put it back in the box, tossing the bottom half in the trash bin by our feet.

He nods slowly, squinting in the bright sunlight. We haven't seen each other much this summer. I wonder if he's missed me. I wonder what he's been up to. The few times we have met up we haven't had much chance to talk. Truthfully I've been avoiding situations where we might end up discussing my relationship with Peeta at any length but the downside to that is being out of the loop with what's going on in my friend's life. Most likely he's been busy working anyway. The Matsons are not built for rest. All five of them seem to grow restless if they have more than two days off with nothing on the agenda. Also I know that this fall Max will finally get to teach the classes he's been wanting to teach from the beginning – physics, geography and language. It's an odd mix but it suits him. Preparing for these classes has probably taken up a lot of his summer.

"Well good" he says. "We're counting on you, weirdo. It's surprising how many of our new staff are spooked by the thought of going out into the damn forest. Like, what? They think a leaf is going to attack them? Idiots."

"Leaves, no. Animals, possibly."

"Please, you just want it to sound dangerous so you can pretend to still be all heroic and shit for venturing out there all the time. Anyways, the kids love the outings to the woods and the survival lessons are good for them. We would like to have you on board indefinitely but I think you know that already."

My smile widens a bit. I've been hoping for an offering like that but I haven't dared to hope, not with the school finally expanding this year. It's taken far longer than planned but a total of three
classrooms are now finished and now all we're waiting for are the last of the benches to be made. The first month of school will be the same students as every other year with the standard addition of five new first graders. After that the kids will be divided into three groups based on age and as a result of the new classrooms we will now be able to accept three times the amount of students. Four new teachers have been hired part-time, each one to teach a specific subject. They all have fancy degrees in teaching, something I lack and probably will never get, or years of experience. Or both. The fact that Max and his family want me to stay indefinitely anyway makes me feel welcome and appreciated.

"Well I have nothing better to do" I say, trying to sound casual. "Sure I'll stay on."

"Nothing better to do right now" says Max dryly, swatting away a persistent fly. His hand moves to brush his brown hair away from his eyes. Maybe Johanna should have given him a haircut instead of Peeta. "Just wait until you and your crazy painter-baker decide to paint up a marriage license and bake some babies. You'll be out of here so fast there'll be a mockingjay shaped hole in the door."

"Please" I scoff, tossing the end of another broken crayon at him. "I don't think I'll be getting married anytime soon and as for children?"

"Oh you'll get there, trust me." Then he grins and pokes me with a ruler. "But, for the time being it's good to know you're on Team Education. It's like I always like to say: Friends and employers before crazy people. It's one of the rules I live by."

"It is not" I snort, scowling at him. "Do you want me to get Johanna Mason to give you another shiner?"

"No thanks, that woman's an asshole" he says, his expression darkening.

"Yeah but so are you, so…" Then I chuckle at the thought of what he just said a minute ago. "One of the rules you live by?"

"I happen to have three."

"Oh really? And what are the other two? Jump into bed with strangers to get off but don't jump into bed with people you're in love with? Don't eat eggs?"

"That last one is actually solid advice" he says, waving the ruler a bit to emphasise the point. "But no, actually, if you must know."

"So what are the other two?" I ask, grinning as I look up at him with squinting eyes. I have missed his company and his banter.

"Better make use of your time because you'll never remember the days when you did nothing, and thus those are a total waist." He places all the rulers he's found in a new box next to the scissors. "And don't forget that the toes you step on today might be directly connected to the ass you have to kiss tomorrow."

"I'll remember that" I say, smirking at him. "Especially in case you ever find yourself having to kiss Peeta's ass."

"Never stepped on that dude's toes" claims Max. "He doesn't even have all that many toes to step on. Fake ones don't count."

I roll my eyes and toss another crayon at him.
The first day of school comes and almost immediately I realize how much I've missed this during summer. I've missed the students most of all but also the whole experience of spending a day at the school. It won't be long before it's all different, new classrooms and new teachers, so I do my best to soak up every moment of the old school days I'm used to. I spend most of the day with Milo, looking after the first graders who are all both very excited and feeling very grown up to get to go to school and at the same time nervous and insecure. I think I like the younger kids the best. They are so eager to learn, so full of imagination and wonder and they have a way of accepting you into their hearts that I know will soon go away. Max prefers the older students, the one you can reason with and have discussions with, but to me there's so much more charm in six year-olds than sixteen year-olds.

"You know, it's funny" remarks Max as we take our seats out on the grass to have lunch. "When you first started here all the kids adored you. They knew who you were. It was like hero worship for the first few weeks until they became used to having you around. But these kids who start now? They don't have that reaction."

"Your point is?" I ask, picking up a boiled egg from my bag and taking a big bite.

"You're not secluded out in the Victors' Village anymore" he says with a good-natured smile. "You were such a hermit back in the day before yours truly came along and dragged you kicking and screaming into the world of socializing. They're used to seeing you out on the streets. It's not so uncommon anymore and therefore not as exciting."

"They're also probably too young to remember seeing me on television" I point out with a chuckle.

"Maybe. Good grief Mockingjay, don't breathe in my general direction when you're eating one of those things." I roll my eyes and he smirks. "So how are things in lovey-dovey land? Getting it on with your baker yet?"

"We're dating."

"Yeah, smitten kitten, I know that already."

"So why do you ask?" I question, smiling slightly. Something about the tone of his voice is different today and I'm curious as to why. Hopefully it's something I can tease him about. He deserves it.

"It so happens..." he begins, pausing to drop his apple on his lap and smack a mosquito. "I've begun to complicate my own life over the summer by getting my eye on someone. Someone I have as of yet not decided whether or not I should try and date or if I should just try and sleep with her."

"Here's a novel idea, why don't you do both?"

"Wow, you just, like, invented the wheel, right there."

I roll my eyes and toss a piece of my egg at him.

"So who is she?"

"A friend of one of the new teachers we hired. She seems nice enough but she's from District One and call me prejudiced but a quality District One citizen is as common as a black swan. Don't give me that look, Kitty, you know it's true. When you've been conditioned from an early age to want to be in the Hunger Games you stand very little chance of growing up normal. I worry her morals and set of priorities might be completely fucked up."

"Then why do you want to date or sleep with her?" I question.
"Because she's really charming" he says, cringing a little. "I'm leaning towards seeing if she wants to go out and then see if we can stand each other's company." He laughs a little and gives me a grin. "Her name's Vanity. Got to love those District One parents."

"Well good luck with charming Vanity" I say, brushing off my pants and rising from my spot on the grass. "I've got to get back inside and prepare for the after lunch colouring session. Be on your best behaviour."

"I always am, for fuck's sake."

I make a face at him and head for the school house. The room is empty when I step inside and that suits me perfectly. While I bring out a sheet of paper large enough for all first grader's to colour on at the same time I try to ignore the unpleasant feeling in the pit of my stomach. Why should Max having his eye on some girl bother me? I know for a fact that I don't want to be the girl he dates or sleeps with. The feeling isn't anything like how I felt when Peeta first met Lace.

When lunch break is over and he comes back inside with the children I look over at him and return his smile and I realize I already know the answer. He's the only real friend I've got outside the Victor's Village. What happens if he gets a girlfriend? I've barely seen Max all summer because I've been so preoccupied with Peeta. Hypocritically I have to admit that I would hate to be on Max's side of that. I should hope for good things for my friend but right now I really wish this Vanity person will turn out to be everything his prejudices predict.

As I walk home from school that day my thoughts about Max and the effect any future relationships might have on our friendship are interrupted by a familiar sound. I look up and see Lace about a hundred meters ahead of me, her big dog wagging its tail and barking in my direction. Does it recognize me? I never spent all that much time around the animal and my experience with dogs is fairly limited so I'm not really sure if they remember people that well. I stop in my tracks, not sure if I ought to keep walking. The last thing I want is an encounter with Lace. I have no idea what kind of bitterness and animosity she feels towards me, if she does feel anything like that at all. Hard to believe she wouldn't. No matter what I will always be the first love of her former fiancé and the woman he left her for.

It seems clear though that her dog is barking at me and his body language seems to scream that he's happy to see me and wants to come over and say hello. Naturally Lace notices that something is up with him and she looks in my direction and sees me. She's close enough that I can see that she noticeably freezes. For a moment we both just stand there, looking at each other over the distance that separates us. I'm not sure what to do. Continue walking and simply nod at her as I pass her by? That will be difficult when her pooch seems to want to properly say hi to me. Turn around and take another route? I'd rather not. Just stand here and wait for her to move? That might take a long time.

Before I can make a decision she turns her head in another direction, says something to the dog and keeps on walking. She disappears down another street and the barking stops. Tentatively I begin to walk again, feeling a bit rattled. I didn't need this today of all days. Honestly I wish she'd just up and move, head back to District Eight or any other place in the country. Why does she have to stick around here? Yes she's done a great job starting up her own business but she can relocate that business can't she? This was mine and Peeta's home before it was hers and if it's going to be awkward to bump into one another she ought to be the one to go.

Instead of going home I go to Peeta's house and he joins me on the steps to his front porch. The questioning look he gives me suggests that he knows something is bothering me but when I don't volunteer any information he doesn't pressure me. Instead he asks about my day at the school and to my surprise my mood brightens a bit as I tell him about the new students and how it was seeing some
of the older students again. It amazes me how much they can grow over just a few short summer months. The first graders I knew a couple of years ago are becoming proper little people, not too far away from pre-teens. It's remarkable to be able to watch them grow and develop.

Peeta goes inside to make us some tea and he comes back out with a tray that also includes cookies and biscuits. We eat and drink mostly in silence and my mind wanders back to my near run-in with his ex-fiancée. I think it's time I knew more about what has been said between them since I stepped on to the stage as a contender for his heart. It's difficult for me to put her entirely in our past until I do.

"Peeta?" I say. "What exactly happened between you and Lace after our talk at your party? Did you call it off right away? Did she? How did you leave things?" I pause for a second. "I need to know."

He seems to think about it for a moment.

"I'm not comfortable revealing everything about..." he begins. Then he draws a breath and exhales in a huff. "I've hurt Lace enough. I will tell you some of it but I don't know how much I can say about it without betraying what little remains of what we had."

"I need to know" I insist.

"Katniss I owe you a lot but not full disclosure to things that are very private and hurtful to her."

"How much did you tell her about the talk you and I had?" I challenge.

"Not everything. Nothing that felt too private."

"I think I have a right to know what happened. Did you make the decision to call it off because of how you felt for me or did you just postpone it while things were crazy and that eventually led to the break-up or... or did she decide she didn't want to marry a guy who was in love with two women?"

He looks towards the sun, squinting in the bright light.

"I called it off but... it wasn't so black and white. Not at the time. I didn't even know for sure how I felt or if I could trust my heart. In the interest of full disclosure, Katniss I wasn't sure either if I could trust your heart. Once the floodgates had opened though it became impossible to deny how I felt. The truth is I felt happy knowing that you cared for me and for that I felt like the scum of the universe. It was clear though that I couldn't wed Lace under such circumstances." He pauses and shifts a little, turning his eyes downward. "I told her about yours and my talk, not in detail but I gave her the gist. She..." He takes a slow, deep breath. It's obvious that this is painful for him to remember. "I can't tell you everything we said to one another. But some of it you do deserve to know about, I guess."

"Well then?" I ask when he's been quiet again for over a minute.

"She asked me if I kissed you. I told her no. She asked me if I wanted to kiss you." A new pause. "I told her yes. She asked..." I see on his face how he's battling with himself about what to tell me and what to allow Lace to keep for herself. "She demanded to know the true nature of my feelings for you."

"And what was your answer?" I ask.

"That I was in love with you when I was younger" he answers, staring off into the distance as if he doesn't want to meet my eyes. "That I had an idealized image of you in my mind. That I kept on loving you after getting to know you." Another pause. "That the hijacking ended all of that." He
swallows and closes his eyes for a few seconds. "I told her that I wasn't in love with you when I came back here. Or maybe I had forgotten how to be in love with you. That little by little those feelings crept back but I kept them at arm's length because I damn sure wasn't going to go through all of that again. That I came to think of it as nostalgia more than anything else."

"How did Lace take that?" I ask.

"She… She wanted to know if I ever truly loved her."

"And?" I ask, holding my breath as I await the answer.

"I did. But love has many aspects. I do think I could have been happy with her. Under different circumstances we could have…" He shakes his head and sighs. "Well that's the gist of what I told her." He pauses again. These pauses are beginning to drive me insane. "I told her how I had been struggling to figure things out between the talk you and I had and the talk she and I were having. Today it seems so self-evident that I'm meant for you if you will have me but it was different then. My memories, they… Plus, I mean, when you've gone years believing it's downright impossible that a person could fall in love with you it's not so easy to suddenly understand that they have. At the time it felt like a gamble no matter what I did. What if you were my intended? What if she was? What if neither of you were, if there is no such thing as meant to be? Everything was a mess in my heart and my mind and I had to make a decision real fast because there was a toasting coming up. Was I more prepared to give up the future she and I were planning together, with five children and me running a bakery in town while she ran a sewing shop from our house out here so she could be with the children a lot like she wanted to?"

"Five?" I echo, failing to understand how any woman would opt to go through childbirth more than once, maybe twice.

He ignores my comment and looks into my eyes.

"Or was I more prepared to give up the chance of having a future with you, now that I knew you had feelings for me too?" He diverts his eyes again, seemingly having trouble focusing his gaze on any one thing. "That pretty much clinched it, I realize now. She and I already had everything planned out. Still I couldn't decide if that would be a bigger thing to give up than the uncertainty of a future with you. That's how much you mean to me. Looking back it seems so obvious but it's not as clear when you're right in the middle of it."

I place my hand on his leg. I suddenly feel like I don't want to keep being fixated on the past and what I feel he owes me. It's clear to me that everything that's been weights heavily on him. I don't want him to have to feel that way anymore. I want us to move forward.

"Peeta I can't offer you the kind of stability you would have had with her" I say, feeling I owe him complete honesty after how much he's just revealed to me. "I certainly can't offer you five kids, in fact I don't think I can offer as much as one. My life is a mess and I often wake up in the middle of the night screaming from a nightmare. I'm not compassionate and I'm not nice and I am a killer."

"Katniss, no…" he protests. "That's not who you are."

"I don't know the first thing about being in a real relationship and I will probably screw up all the time and do things the wrong way or freak out. What I can offer you though is a true understanding of your past because I was there. I lived all of that hell with you until they took you and I was there for your recuperation afterward. I think you and I understand each other's souls in a way I don't think I can with anyone else. And I can offer you loyalty. Loyalty unto death. That, and all my love and my devotion. It's up to you whether or not that is enough. I'm not worried that you will regret
choosing me over her but I feel I should be honest with you about this all the same." I move my hand off his leg. "And for what it's worth, Peeta… I would not have had things be this way. I didn't want you to feel torn or uncertain or anything like that. I just wanted you to be happy, even if it couldn't be with me."

His eyes meet mine again.

"I just… Ever since I was a little boy I've been wanting to know what it feels like to be loved by you."

My hand finds his cheek. When I speak my voice seems deeper than normal.

"It feels like this."

I touch his lips with mine. It's as if we both take a second to savour the initial feel of it before he opens his mouth and my tongue plunges inside, my arms wrapping around him and pulling him closer, closer. The kiss feels like those ones on the beach and yet different. It feels better than anything I have ever experienced and my mind seems to spin and my heart pounds in my chest.

We pull apart for air and look into each other's eyes, both of us breathing heavily. Peeta wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"I like it" he says.

My hands find his collar and pull him close for another kiss, almost as lovely as the first. I am absolutely thrilled, almost so much so that I can't understand what is happening. Finally we are together for real. I can be the one who makes him happy. I can be the one he chooses.

He can be the one I never have to lose.

The kiss grows sloppy, uncoordinated. Our noses bump, our teeth occasionally clash, there seems to be a lot of saliva that I don't know what we're supposed to do with. My hands roam clumsily over his backside and neck while his cradle my face steadily. None of that matters though. All that matters is that we get to do this, finally, after all this time and so much longing.

"Mmm…" he says as he pulls away from me slightly. His eyes are a touch darker than normal and there's a sensual smile on his lips that sends a pleasant shiver down my spine. His hand reaches up and gently brushes my chin. "Worth the wait."

I feel myself blush.

"Speak for yourself, I could happily have done that years ago."

He laughs and leans in for another kiss.

It's well past dinner time when I leave Peeta's house and his embrace. I would have liked to stay for longer and he was more than willing to let me but I picked up some supplies for Haymitch earlier and the cat needs to be fed. Besides, truth be told I could use the rest of this evening to myself. So much has happened today that I need a bit of time to digest it all. I don't think I'll spare more than a fleeting thought to the negatives of the day but it has been years since I last kissed a boy until I forgot all time and space and I want to let the experience sink in.

Practically skipping I head to Haymitch's house and walk inside, calling out a greeting. Not even the stench in here seems to bother me at present. My old mentor calls to me from the kitchen, grumpy
that he's had to wait this long for me to stop by and looking like he's suffering through a particularly rough hangover.

Haymitch takes one look at my blushing cheeks and my uncharacteristic grin and immediately figures it out. He groans and rolls his eyes, reaching for a bottle of liquor with one hand while the other sets down the knife he's been slicing jerky with.

"What?" I manage through my smile. "I thought you'd be happy for us."

"What would have made me happy is if they had chemically neutered both of you after the Games" complains Haymitch. "Leave me out of whatever the current status of your relationship is."

"Vibrant" I tell him with a satisfied smirk, enjoying how uncomfortable this is making him. I set the bag of supplies down on the table in front of him. "That would be the current status of our relationship."

Haymitch snorts.

"That will pass in time, just wait and see."

Once I'm in bed that night I begin to imagine Peeta being here with me. Like those nights on the train where we sought comfort in each other's presence, only now so much better. I imagine resting my head over his heart, being soothed to sleep by its steady beats, comforted and protected by his arms. I imagine kissing him goodnight and feeling the way I did earlier today.

My face feels flushed when I think about what might happen after that. I can't even imagine the things Peeta must be able to do with his hands and his mouth and his body but instinct tells me I will like it. I imagine the look on Peeta's face when we are together like that. He has been dreaming about this from early adolescence and finally I am at a place where I'm ready to make those dreams come true.

The thought pulls me to a halt. Dreaming of this since early adolescence. Peeta has imagined my kisses, my touch, my naked body for years. For practically all of his life, even. I can hear his voice whispering how perfect I am but it doesn't make me feel as good as it ought to.

Perfect. In Peeta's eyes I was perfect for so long. He's had years and years to build the fantasy of me in his head and I worry that the hijacking might have only put that on pause and that later on he's picked up right where he once left off. Not that I mind that he thinks very highly of me but it's very daunting to imagine trying to live up to a fantasy, an other-worldly image.

I lift the covers and look down at my body. Still a touch bony, covered in scars and skin grafts, bosom small and hips that don't strike me as particularly feminine. I let the covers fall and feel dread slowly rising in me. Peeta thinks of me as perfection. A fantasy built over five, maybe even ten years.

How on earth am I to live up to that? How can anybody live up to that?

And if I fail to live up to it, what will happen then?

I feel nervous the next day when I see Peeta, my mind still troubled with the thoughts from last night. I even contemplate bringing it up to him but I don't know if I feel comfortable doing that. He comes over to my place and when I go to answer his knock I feel butterflies in my stomach. Is he going to go straight for the kisses? Do I want him to? I would love to spend the better part of the night kissing him but is that all we're going to be doing now? I have no experience with this kind of thing. When
you move on to this stage does that mean everything else gets put on hold for a period of time? I'm not so sure that's what I want, no matter how badly I want his mouth on mine.

He's beaming at me when I open the door and we've barely exchanged hellos before he leans in and captures my lips in a kiss that leaves me a little weak at the knees. Then he pulls back and holds up a paper bag.

"Freshly baked cookies."

"Oh" is all I manage. I step aside to let him in.

"How are you feeling today?"

"Oh, uh…" Suddenly feeling that I'm being ridiculous with all my worries I laugh a little, closing the door behind me. "I feel great. Fantastic, in fact."

"I do too" he says, giving me a look over his shoulder.

Pretty soon we're sitting together in an armchair in the sitting room, me on his lap, sharing cookies and sharing kisses. Peeta asks a million questions about how I slept last night, how my day has been, how I like the cookies. We share several quick kisses, each one better than the last, but not until he's been here for a couple of hours and we've exhausted all topics of conversation we feel inclined to discuss do the kisses turn deep and delicious. We kiss like we did yesterday, like we did on the beach, losing ourselves in the hunger and the want. I don't want it to stop but I don't want to rush anything either. I'm not ready for that yet.

For the next week we spend every evening together, always engaging in long make-out sessions at some point. Finally one night we find ourselves on Peeta's bed, though how we got there I'm not sure. As we kiss I move my leg a little and it brushes against the front of his jeans, revealing a large bulge. It's not unfamiliar to me. You don't spend countless nights sleeping in a boy’s arms without feeling his hardness from time to time. This is different however. This isn't physical reactions during a sleep cycle. This is caused by me. By me kissing him. My initial reaction is to be thrilled that I can evoke such a response in another person, Peeta especially. It's a kind of power that appeals to me and it's proof that I'm attractive despite my scars and everything. The thrill soon mellows out though and is replaced by nervousness. He is aroused. Does that mean he wants, needs, to move on to the next step?

"Do you, uhm…" I say between kisses, hoping he's too preoccupied with my lips to notice the blush on my cheeks. "Do you… Is this too slow? Do you… want to take… it to the next step?"

He makes a "nuh-uh" sound that's muffled against my lips and he shakes his head. Then he takes his mouth off of mine and caresses my cheek with his hand, his eyes opening to look into mine.

"No rush" he mumbles. "I want to take this slow. I want to enjoy every step along the way. I want to have the full experience with you – the hours of kissing, the long time spent just touching… I want it all. And since I'm the one who's been further down the road I want to let you set the pace. I will be happy just kissing you until you feel ready to move to the next step. Waiting, taking our time, is going to make it so much better."

I grin widely and lay myself down on the pillows, pulling him down on top of me, letting him nestle between my legs. It feels really good but even better is the picture he just painted. Let’s take our time.

"Then kiss me" I say breathlessly. "Kiss me until we have to stop because our lips are too swollen."

He laughs and captures my lips once more.
"As you wish…"

"So here's to… a new school year, a new school house and a school staff member who will be with us indefinitely!"

I feel my cheeks blush as I smile bashfully, feeling privileged and happy and just a tiny bit tipsy from the half a glass of wine I've already downed. Moira raises her flute of sparkling wine and her brothers and I do likewise, clinking the glasses together before all of us taking a sip. Milo gives me a friendly nudge with his shoulder as we both set our glasses back down and the smile that goes with it is welcoming and friendly. I smile back at him. I can't believe they invited me to join them tonight and I almost welled up a little when I first arrived to the restaurant. I can't remember the last time a group of people outside the Victor's Village made me feel this included.

It's a tradition the Matson siblings have had for years now, going out to dinner together to celebrate the start of the new school year. This year it's happening later than usual so that they can also celebrate the new classrooms opening but other than that I believe everything is the same. Except that I'm here too. It was Moira who asked me to join them and at first I protested since I know it's a sibling tradition and I don't want to interfere with that. Milo was the one who convinced me to come, pointing out that since all three of them want me to come it's obviously not an intrusion. Though what made my heart swell was that he said they felt I belonged at the dinner with them since I have been at the school for a few years now and am part of what they feel is the original group, even though they had been running the school for a while before Max roped me in.

Apparently we are also celebrating that I have been offered, and agreed, to stay on indefinitely as a faculty member. That is definitely something worth celebrating in my eyes. I wish I had a way with words so that I could tell the three of them, and their parents when I see them, how much it matters to me to get to stay on and how important the school has become in my life. I never would have imagined that teaching would be something I could be good at, or interested in. Looking back it's hard to imagine how I would have made it through these difficult years without something like that to focus on. And then there are the students. I love the group of kids and teens we spend our days with. I feel blessed to get to be part of it all.

My eyes catch Max's across the table and we share a look that makes me think he understands. I think back to that day when we first met and how annoying I found him. Thank goodness he persisted and wasn't deterred by my off-putting demeanour. I have often been grateful for Max over the past years but never more so than right now. All this is because he called out to me that day on the streets.

"So how are things going with that girl you're sweet on?" I ask, hoping to see a bit of a blush on his cheeks or any other sign that he's getting those special feelings. I want that for him. I want him to fall in love with someone and get to feel the way I feel when Peeta is near me and Peeta's lips are on mine.

To my surprise what passes over Max's face is a cringe.

"Yeah, that's one fancy that turned sour real quick" he says.

"Why?" I ask with a scowl. "What happened?"

From the corner of my eye I see Milo and Moira exchanging a look and barely keeping smiles at bay, which makes me even more confused.

"Let's just say her name ought to be Insanity, not Vanity" says Max. "Well, that or she's really skilled
at how to get rid of a guy for good and real quick."

"Meaning?"

He sighs and takes another sip of red wine. He seems to be debating with himself whether or not to tell me the story and I contemplate giving him a kick on the shin to get him to start talking. I'll find out anyway, won't I?

"Oh come on, just tell her" says Moira.

"We were on our… I don't know, seventh date? Something like that? About a month into dating, anyway." He crosses his arms on the table and leans forward a bit. "And she looks me in the eye and actually says to me that she wants me to be the father of her children."

"Wow" I say. "That's… That's a bit early."

"Gee thank you, Kitty" says Max dryly. "Eloquently put. For your information, though, it's not early. It's about a year sooner than early." He shifts again and reaches for the popcorn sitting in a wicker basket on the table. "Which is why I haven't entirely ruled out that she was eager to get rid of me and thought that would be the best way. Which it was."

"Oh come on, you haven't told her the good part" laughs Moira.

"I've told her enough."

"Don't be a coward" chuckles Milo, grabbing some popcorn. "Go on, tell Katniss what you answered her."

I look from one sibling to the next, my curiosity peaked. Milo and Moira are fighting hard not to burst out laughing and Max looks uncomfortable. All in all it's probably my favourite moment of these three together.

With a heavy sigh Max gives in and tells me the rest.

"When she told me she wanted me to be the father of her children it kind of caught me off guard and I didn't know what to say, so I… Well I blurted out something to the effect of "good grief, woman, how many do you have?"

Milo and Moira can't hold it in anymore and burst out into hysterical laughter. Judging by Max's reaction it's not the first time they've roared with laughter over this and I can imagine it won't be the last. They both have actual tears falling down their faces and Milo's palm bangs against the table a few times. I'm not exactly the roar-with-laughter type but I can't help but laugh a little as well, both at Max's answer, the uncomfortable look on his face and the mirth expressed by his brother and sister.

Out of nowhere the thought of Prim comes to my mind and I have to force the smile to stay on my face. I will never get to laugh like this with her ever again. I don't even know for sure if I ever did. For as long as I've known them I've admired the Matson siblings for their relationship to each other, close-knit but with a lot of friendly jibes. It's different than my relationship with Prim and Gale's with his siblings and it suits them so very well. I wonder if they know how lucky they are to have one another. Their entire family survived the war. They moved to a new district together, all five of them, despite all three children being legal adults. I admire that, envy it even, and right now it pains me desperately that I will never get to hang out with Prim as a pair of adults.

I'm about to get lost in dark thoughts when a waiter brings by our food and Moira and Milo pull themselves together. There's still a giggle or two between their first bites though and Moira has quite
the Cheshire grin as she nudges Max with her elbow.

"My poor brother" she says. "No luck with the ladies."

"No luck with the one insane lady" objects Max, adding some salt to his food. "Don't you worry, darling sister. I have sufficient charm and I'm by far the hottest one in the litter so I'll find myself a nice, non-insane lassie in due time."

"Or if nothing else you'll be able to talk some girl half to death and confuse her so much that she'll agree to go out with you" shrugs Moira, spearing a chanterelle with her fork and dipping it in sauce.

"The talk is all part of the charm."

"Oh I wouldn't be so sure" I smirk, deciding to take more active part in the conversation in the hope that it will help me think of anything but Prim. "Milo says approximately one word for every one hundredth you utter and he's had better results while I've known you."

"That's interesting" says Moira, giving me a nod and pointing her fork at me. Clearly she's enjoying ribbing Max tonight.

"How have you had better results than me?" scoffs Max, eyeing his brother who just smirks and continues eating.

"Well he had an actual date to the fundraiser while you went stag" I remind him. "And Johanna sure seemed to like you, Milo."

"We got along" nods Milo.

"Doesn't count if you don't get lucky" says Max in a ton that suggests playful sibling banter rather than him actually meaning it.

"Then it counts" says Milo casually.

I can't help but give him a wide-eyed look.

"Seriously? No, actually don't tell me. I don't need to know details."

"Sleeping with her probably counts as the opposite of luck" says Max sullenly, taking a sip of wine.

Milo shrugs and gives a lopsided grin.

"All I know is I had a good time while you sat home alone, so..."

Moira all but applauds this statement and Max looks increasingly irritated. I grin and chuckle, deciding I'll focus on my meal rather than get more involved in this little scene. I don't even need to partake in the conversations all that much. I'm just happy to be here, enjoying their company.

As the evening continues on I come to think of Peeta, who is also out and about tonight. He's gotten involved with a project to start up a library in town and since there's no building available this means starting from the construction. They're having a big meeting tonight and he was excited to go. I think it's good for him. He needs something to do with his time.

We move on from main course to dessert and while we eat I can't help but wonder if Peeta's new project and my new obligation to the school means we won't be spending as much time together. I wish he could get to know Max, Moira and Milo better. If I'm going to be a teacher at the school for the indefinite future my boyfriend ought to be friends with my co-workers, not to mention I would
like for him to truly know these people who have meant such a difference in my life. Before we've
finished with our meal I've begun to figure out a plan to make that happen.

The following evening we sit together in an armchair, watching television with Buttercup giving
himself a thorough washing on the floor beneath us. Peeta's hand plays with my braid and I'm leaned
back against his broad chest, enjoying the calm moment and the closeness. Out of nowhere I turn my
head and look up at him.

"Come spend a day at the school with me."

Immediately a frown appears on his face.

"I don't know about that."

"Oh come on" I say, giving his arm a playful punch. "What, you're scared of a bunch of kids?"

"Terrified" he says in a dead serious voice but he can't keep from cracking up at the last second.
"No, it's just… That's kind of your thing, you know?"

"My thing?"

"Yeah, the whole… being at the school thing. It's something you do that doesn't involve me and I
don't want to… I don't know… meddle in it. It's good that we have things in our lives that the other
isn't a part of."

"Easy there, eager beaver" I retort. "I'm not asking you to take up a job as a teacher. I've got enough
competition in that department joining us in a few days. Just come there with me for a day before the
library construction starts and give the kids an art lesson or something. I think they'd really enjoy it."

He studies my face for over a minute, a faint smile on his lips and a very focused look in his eyes.
His hand brushes aside a strand of hair that's gotten loose from my braid.

"I'm just not sure it's something I'd be good at and it feels like I would be intruding."

"You wouldn't be."

"Have you asked the Matsons if they want me there?" he challenges.

"Peeta. It's just a day. Doesn't have to be that even. It can be just an afternoon. I run my hand
through his still too short hair. "It's something very important to me, the school and the people I work
with there. I would like to show it to you."

The look in his eyes softens and he leans in and presses a light kiss on my lips.

"Okay then. If it's important to you."

Two days later Peeta comes with me to the school house, mr. and mrs. Matson having agreed to
devote the second half of the day to what they refer to as "arts and crafts". Just as I had suspected
Peeta takes to it like a duck to water, being a much more open and sociable person than I could ever
hope to be. An hour in to his visit he's on the floor with the younger students, showing them how to
draw a tree on a large piece of paper. They all flock around him, their natural curiosity winning out
over their shyness, and some of them even keep quiet and try to listen.

"Do you know you have the same look on your face as those smitten fifteen year-olds?" asks Max,
giving my shoulder a nudge and nodding towards a group of older students, a few of which are
casting interested looks Peeta's way.

I roll my eyes and smile good-naturedly.

"I think it's too late to deny that I like him" I reply.

"Like him?" scoffs Max. "Right now this is what's going through your mind:" He harks and raises
his voice to sound feminine. "Oh I can just imagine those kids being our kids, except ours would be
cuter and more well-behaved and probably smell of cheese buns."

I give him a shove with both hands but he just laughs.

"If you think I intend on having even one kid then you know me about as well as you know how to
paint" I scoff.

"Oh painting, that was the key to making you swoon!" he exclaims as if he's had a major epiphany.

I decide to simply ignore him and turn my eyes back to Peeta. I can't hear what he's saying but I
think he's having some problems with his prosthetic leg because he rises in a manner that's stiff rather
than graceful and gives some instructions to the children before letting them loose on the three he's
outlined for them. There's an immediate ruckus as the kids who want to paint tree leaves all want to
pain them on the exact same spot and it takes an intervention from Moira to settle the matter.

Peeta walks over to the older students, specifically to the girls who are waving him over. He places
his hand on one girl's desk and leans over to see what she is drawing and seems to be offering some
suggestions and comments. Then he walks over to the head of the classroom and begins to talk to mr.
Matson.

I'm distracted from looking at him by young Lilac who comes over to me with a picture she's drawn,
wanting me to look at it. I appraise the picture, though not entirely sure what it is she's tried to draw,
and follow her to her desk to help her write her name at the bottom. Some of the children are still on
the floor with the tree painting but others have lost interest and returned to their own desk, working
with crayons and pencils and watercolours. It's getting a bit messy but they seem to be having fun so
I don't intend to put a stop to any of it. I'm just happy they like Peeta and are enjoying his visit.

After I've helped Lilac I go up to Peeta who is now standing by the whiteboard, looking at the
painted pictures of birds and plants and historical figures that line the board. The new government
send a few of these over each semester and some of them seem to be quite old, perhaps even from
before the Dark Days.

"See anything you like?" I ask.

He turns around and smiles at me, one of those smiles I can't help but return.

"All of it" he says. "This… Students being able to try their hand at drawing and painting, whether or
not they actually turn out to be good at it. They can use as much paper as they want, they can even
try watercolours! I could only dream of things like that when we were in school."

"So are you glad you came?"

He chuckles softly.

"Yes it's nice." His eyes drift over my shoulder. "Your friend Max is giving you a look."
I turn my head to see Max looking at me with raised eyebrows, apparently trying to make some point about me being smitten. I shake my head and turn back to Peeta.

"He can't help being obnoxious. Best to ignore him."

He steps closer and lowers his voice so that nobody but me can hear him.

"I, uh… wasn't sure he'd want me to be here."

The insecurity in his voice surprises me. He pulls back again and the look in his eyes underscores his words and his tone. Somewhere far back in my mind I recall him once saying he thinks Max likes me. Is it possible that Peeta thinks Max has feelings for me and is jealous?

Before I can say anything in response one of the first grade girls comes up and yanks Peeta by the end of his shirt sleeve. She's a small little girl with naturally bright red hair in twin braids and freckles all over her face and as if her hair was coloured to match her personality she is definitely the spunkiest of the first graders this year.

"I want you to draw for me, my name is Daisy, I want you to draw a daisy!" she exclaims in one breath.

"Oh" says Peeta. "Alright." He walks over to a nearby empty desk and sits down, the little girl in tow. "Daisy, huh? What a lovely, lovely name."

"It's my name" she says proudly and without any hesitation climbs up on his lap.

"Okay then" he laughs.

For the next fifteen minutes he sits there with the little girl, painting a daisy for her in watercolours, letting her choose which colour to use for the background and nodding with a smile when she chooses five different ones. Studying them together I begin to wonder if there's any element of truth to what Max was teasing me about earlier. Little Daisy looks nothing like I did at that age and acts nothing like it but the two braids are similar to how I wore my hair that first day Peeta noticed me. Seeing her on his lap, the pair of them talking comfortably with each other while he draws and she gives probably very unhelpful instructions here and there, makes me wonder if that is something I want for the future. To see Peeta with a child of ours on his lap, drawing a picture for her.

I almost blush at the thought. I'm getting way, way ahead of myself here. We're only at the kissing stage and there is a whole laundry list of issues we need to work out before we can make any long term plans together. Even if we end up having a toasting I definitely don't know if I want to have children.

At one point Peeta looks up at me and winks and smiles warmly and in that brief moment I feel completely sure that I do want a family with him one day. Then one of the third-graders comes running into me from the side, probably giving me a bruise, complaining that I need to come tell his classmates that their pictures aren't as good as his. That sends me right back to deciding I don't ever want to have kids of my own. I enjoy working with children and being around children but being somebody's mother is definitely not on my list of wants and wishes.

As we walk together back to the Victors' Village that afternoon Peeta seems in a good mood, a soft smile on his lips and a happy, if somewhat distant, look on his face. His hands are in his pockets but when I wrap my hand around his arm he turns his face and smiles at me, leaning in to kiss my cheek.

"I knew you'd enjoy it" I smirk.
"It's hard not to" he chuckles. "Those kids are a lot of fun. Pretty creative, too."

"Honestly Peeta I can't tell what half of the first- and second graders were drawing" I admit with a shrug.

"You should have seen the things I drew at that age" he laughs. "I used to doodle in the margins of those green-cover notebooks they gave us at school. Most of the things I produced were gibberish."

"Abstract art" I generously correct him.

"Okay then, abstract art" he chortles.

"Any chance you'll choose to come back to school?" I ask, trying – and failing – to sound casual.

"I told you beforehand, Katniss" he says calmly. "It was just a one day thing. I've got the library project and I don't want to interfere with this. The school is your… turf, if you will."

"They want you to come back, you know" I say, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. "Milo asked me to talk to you. There are two older students, one if seventh grade and one in ninth, who like drawing and are pretty good at it." When he doesn't seem to catch my drift I continue on. "They could use someone to teach them."

"There are other people in District 12 who know how to paint" objects Peeta.

"No one I know who's as good as you are" I retort. "Peeta you're not hesitating because of Max, are you?"

"No" he says. "Though I am not sure he would want me there."

"Why?" I ask. "You don't still think he's got a thing for me, do you?"

"I don't know if he likes you that way but it's plain to see that he cares for you a great deal. Why should he want to have me around his work place? The guy who put you through so much heartache." I scowl and am just about to tell him that he needs to start letting that go when he continues. "Besides, he thinks I'm completely insane. I've heard a couple of colourful ways he's expressed this belief in."

"He's exaggerating" I say with a touch of exasperation.

"He doesn't trust me much. If you tell me he has enough faith in you that if you vouch for me as your love interest he'll accept it then I'll believe you. That doesn't mean he'll think I'm the kind of person who should be around children."

"He doesn't think you'll do anything harmful to the kids" I protest.

"Katniss he thinks I'm insane. Even if he doesn't think I'll harm them I bet he doesn't think I should be around them much." His arm wraps around my waist, bringing me a bit closer. "Besides, you know I won't have the time to be an art teacher or art coach or anything like that. Where is all this coming from? I thought you enjoyed having the school as your thing. Why do you want me to be a part of it all of a sudden?" He stops for a second and leans in to kiss me. "You know we don't need to do everything together, right? You've always had your hunting and I've had my baking and…"

"I know, Peeta" I say. "That's not what this is about."

"Then what?"
I begin to walk again, biting my bottom lip for a second. I feel strangely vulnerable admitting this to him even if I don't understand why.

"I guess I just want you to know them" I say. "To be on good terms with them. Max and his family, they… they mean so much to me."

"I know they do. And I assure you, I have no problem with them. I think it's great that you have them."

"I don't want my life to be made up of several different fractions. I don't want to have my school life and my home life. I want to be able to mix the two."

"You want me to be able to spend time with them and not be like total strangers" he surmises and I nod. "Sure. I don't have to teach art for that to happen. Invite them over and we'll have dinner. I want to know the people who are important to you."

With a smile on my face I lean my head against his shoulder.

"Thank you."

"Well thank you for inviting me into this part of your world."

My smile widens a little.

"For the record, Mr. Mellark… I think you would make a great art teacher for those girls. I think it's a shame they shouldn't get the opportunity."

"Perhaps the library can offer some space for those kinds of extracurricular activities when it's done."

I chuckle warmly.

"Sounds perfect."

Chapter End Notes

I hope I won't get too much criticism over the Katniss/Peeta talk concerning Lace. That's the one that took umpteen re-writes and at this point it has exhausted me. I'm happy enough with the rest of the chapter though, so there's that.

We're getting close to the end now... I have one more chapter planned plus most likely an epilogue. Now comes the nerve-racking task of writing a finale chapter that won't leave all of you feeling like you wasted your time reading the story.

Until next time, thank you for reading and I'll see you in the comments!
Chapter 27

So here we are at long last. The final chapter.

I can't tell you how long it took me to edit this since it was far too long and needed to be shortened by around three pages. In the end I read through it and removed anything I didn't feel I absolutely needed but afterward I was kind of sick and tired of the chapter so I couldn't make myself re-read it one more time. So there might be some bits that are clunky or otherwise odd. If you find any, let me know and I'll look it over. There is also one segment that ended up shortened to just a few paragraphs even though it covers several months. I'm not happy about it but something had to go...

The first snowfall of the winter season comes in large white puffs that take their time fluttering towards the already frozen ground. It's been a few degrees below freezing for over a week but no snowfall until today. It excites me to see the snow fall and I hope it won't melt away but stay on the ground and make the world seem lighter. Peeta has told me this type of snowfall his favourite kind. I wonder if he's in great spirits too.

Instead of going to my own house I head for Peeta's. I went out hunting right after work and I got a wild turkey and I'm eager to show it to him. I'm already imagining how we can cook it, smelling the wonderful scents of the things we'd make to go with it. My stomach growls and I know I won't be able to wait until we've plucked and prepared the bird. Hopefully Peeta's been home long enough to bake something I can eat right away.

A thin layer of snow has already begun to coat his porch steps and my boots leave tracks with each step. I stop to drum my shoes against the brick wall to knock off what little snow is on them and then I open the door without knocking. Immediately the smell of something freshly baked greets me but I can't quite place what it is. It smells sweet though and I smile. Quickly I shed my outdoor clothes, eager to be in Peeta's vicinity. We've gotten quite domestic during the course of the last few weeks, spending almost every evening and night together, and one of the things I love the most is coming home to him. I didn't realize until just recently how I haven't felt like I've come home when I've walked through the door for a long, long time. With Prim and my mother gone my house has always felt so empty but now at the end of the day I come home to someone other than an old cat. It's a feeling I've missed sorely without even realizing it.

When I walk into the kitchen I find Peeta by the kitchen island, forming dough into little S-shaped objects. There's a grate covered with a towel on the counter and another tin in the oven and I assume they have the same treats as those he's working on. It smells lovely but unusual and I notice that the dough his working on is very yellow.

"What's that you're making?" I ask, walking over to him with the turkey's legs in a firm grip in my left hand. I wrap my free arm over his shoulders and steal his attention long enough for a kiss.

"Saffron buns" he tells me. "I finally got a hold of some saffron, or, Effie did. I've wanted to try and make these ever since I was a little boy."
"What's saffron?" I ask, pinching a bit of dough from the bowl and putting it in my mouth. The taste is sharp and new but I like it.

"It's a spice. Sometimes used in food but this family has been using it in baking for generations, and I mean many generations. Or we did, until the Dark Days, after which it became more like a legend in the family. It's expensive and not easy to get a hold of and Effie tells me that even in the Capitol it was considered a luxury item." He grins. "Didn't stop the Mellarks from remembering it though. My aunt was named Saffron."

"So you're baking… aunt buns?"

He chuckles and gives me another kiss.

"I see you brought dinner."

"Not sure where to prepare it, though" I say, eyeing the encumbered kitchen. I walk over to the kitchen door and open it, swiftly tying up the bird on a hook by the door. I put a string there a while ago to hang and preserve game in wintertime, similar to the arrangement I have at my own house.

"How was work?" asks Peeta when I close the door.

"It was great." A grin spreads across my face. "Max has laryngitis, can't get a word out. It's the best work week of my entire life." Peeta chuckles and wipes his hands on his apron. He walks to the oven to remove the tin and on one of his steps he falters, the prosthetic seeming to give way a bit. Immediately I scowl with concern. "What's wrong? What's with the leg?"

"Nothing's wrong with the leg" he says calmly, opening the oven. Heat flows from it and the scent of freshly baked saffron-whatever gets more pronounced but neither interests me right now. I cross my arms over my chest and wait while he sets the tin down on the stovetop and closes the oven again. "I had a little accident at the construction. Thom dropped a screwdriver and it landed on my foot."

"Peeta!"

"On my fake foot, Katniss" he says calmly. "Luckily there are some perks with no longer being entirely flesh and blood."

"Peeta don't joke about this. How badly damaged is it? Do you need a new one?"

"It will be fine" he says, utterly calm. He's begun to pick up the hot buns by his fingertips and moving them over to a grate to cool.

"You shouldn't work at the construction site" I say, finding a vacant spot on the clattered counter and lifting myself up to sit there. "Not during winter at least. What happens if you slip on some ice? You could dislocate something again."

"I'm just saying, you're not invincible."

"It's a construction site. Not an arena. And I like it there. I like the work, I like the camaraderie…"

"The camaraderie of people throwing screwdrivers at you?"

"Dropping" he corrects me. "Besides, what do you suggest I do otherwise? Go back to doing
"Nothing worthwhile?"

"You can bake. You're baking right now."

"It's not something I want to do full-time." He shrugs. "I mean, I would be okay taking a job at a bakery but I don't want to run one. I don't want to spend half my time doing bookkeeping and other administrative things, or working out in the shop. I'd want to bake or decorate the cakes."

"So do that."

He gives me a pointed look, moving the last pastry over to the tin. He walks over to the island to put the next batch in the oven.

"You show me a bakery in town where I could get employment and I'll consider it. Problem is there is no bakery in town."

"Well can't you at least stay away from the rickety ladders and rigs and all that? Does everyone have to... hammer and build? I'm sure they'd all be very appreciative if you focused on providing them with freshly baked bread and..." I look over at the pastries, not as bright yellow now that they're baked but still a more yellow tone than I'm used to. They smell good but they look kind of freaky. "Jaundice pastries."

"Katniss, come on."

"All I'm saying is that you have a bad leg and apparently a tendency to dislocate your shoulders and who knows what else and maybe you shouldn't be subjecting yourself to construction hazards in the dead of winter!"

"I'm not loving all these implications that I'm a physical liability" he says, giving me a look that under other circumstances would have made me feel bad. "I want to work at the construction site. It's a huge part of the whole process. And you are aware, right, that you can't tell me what to do?"

"I'm not!" I argue. "I'm telling you what not to do."

"Actually you're doing both and neither is your call."

"Then come work at the school." He makes a protesting sound but I ignore it. "Just for the winter, while the weather is bad. Just this year while they're doing construction. Once that library is under roof and you're dealing with books and stuff I won't argue."

"We've been over this. I had a good time at the school but I don't want to work there. We both know they don't need me for anything. They've got several new teachers and they can't paint every day. Most of them probably don't even want to."

"We'd get to spend the whole day together, every day" I point out.

"If that's what you're after then why don't you quit the school and come join me at the library?" he challenges, the look he gives me underlining the point. He doesn't want to give up his any more than I want to give up mine. Not that I think it's a fair comparison.

"I've been at the school for years. You're just starting at the library."

"And I want to be a part of it the whole way through. I don't want to sit out the difficult parts and come waltzing in when the easier part starts." He pauses. "You can understand that, right?"
"Of course I can" I sigh, reluctant to admit to it.

He wipes his hands on his apron and walks over to me, placing his hands on the counter on either side of me.

"Why don't you tell me what's really going on?" he says, his voice a touch lower. "You've never wanted to put me in a protective bubble before and treat me with silk gloves."

"Actually I've kind of wanted to do that since I found you by the riverbank" I answer, wondering if I should try and make a joke to lighten the mood but his eyes are very serious. "I just don't want to see you get hurt. It's taken us so damn long to get this far and…"

"It's just my prosthetic."

"This time."

He looks deeply into my eyes and I get the feeling he's searching for something in them. He tilts his head a little and one of his hands comes up and caresses my cheek for a few seconds before it falls back down to the counter.

"I can understand where you're coming from" he then says. "I love that you don't want me to get hurt – that you're protective of me. But I assure you that I'm not taking any stupid risks. I kind of love life right now and I don't want to jeopardize anything." His hand reaches up again, his thumb flickering my bottom lip gently. "This is just something I have to do."

"Fine. But if the weather turns really bad or the site gets really icy I'm dragging you with me to the school building instead, whether you want me to or not."

"I think they'd close things down for a while if conditions turned dangerous" he says with a soft chuckle. "Times are different. Safety matters these days."

He gives me a kiss and I'm just about to deepen it when the oven timer buzzes. Peeta pulls away from me and walks over to take the batch out, again faltering in one of his steps. Despite what he's been saying I can't stop myself from scowling.

"I still want you to have that leg looked at."

"If it gets worse I will" he says calmly, grabbing the oven mitt.

"You mean if it breaks down while you're walking?" I play with the end of my braid, trying to sound as casual as possible. "You know, you could stop by my workplace to have that checked out. Max is a bit of a handyman. Maybe he could patch the leg up."

"Thanks but no thanks." He puts the tin from the oven on the stovetop and turns to get the next batch, suddenly realizing he didn't finish it. With a sigh he closes the oven, removes the mitt and walks over to the island. "It's a bit… intimate to ask that of some guy I barely know."

"I know him."

"I don't mean to be rude" says Peeta, rolling a ball of dough between his hands. "You want me to get to know him better, am I right? I can do that. Just… not through entrusting him with my means of walking. My dear, you're just going to have to come to peace with the idea of me working at the library even before it's an actual library. If you're a nice girl about it I may invite your students over to borrow some books when the whole thing is done."
"I can picture you having story time with the youngest" I say, having already had that thought before. "Gathering them around, reading from some old book of children's tales…"

He snorts and shakes his head.

"I have a hard time picturing that, myself… The only kind of scenario I've pictured myself reading stories to small children is bedtime stories for my _own_ children. Not sure I'm ready for something on a larger scale."

He grabs more dough and works it into an S-shape. The smile on my face falls but he is too preoccupied with his baking to notice. I walk over to the kitchen table and take a seat, biting my nails as I watch him, wondering if that's a scenario he's pictured often. Is that something he expects from me in the future? Kids? Apparently he pictured Lace as a baby making machine, and she did too. I seem to recall him mentioning planning a large family with her.

He finishes the next tin, which is also the last, and gives me a bit of dough that was left over. I much on it without noticing the flavour much, trying my best not to picture him handing dough and freshly baked goodies to little children with combinations of our features but once the thought is in my head it's near impossible to get rid of it. Peeta has told me that he chose an uncertain future with me over the plans he had made with Lace and that he doesn't regret it, and I believe him. The problem is I'm beginning to wonder if he has expectations of what life with me would be like that I can't live up to. Specifically, does he assume that if things work out between us we'll be having kids? He can't possibly think I would be willing to give birth to five but he might expect it to happen at least once.

The question lingers in my mind throughout the evening. Peeta finishes his baking and I wolf down two saffron buns and tell him I love them even though I don't really feel their flavour either. I'm still entirely preoccupied with these thoughts when we walk up the stairs to go to bed. I try my best to hide it and once we're both underneath the sheets I take action to try and distract myself. It almost works, his mouth and wandering hands very hard to not be distracted by, but maybe he senses that I'm not one hundred percent in the moment because after only a minute or two of deep kisses he pulls back. His hand cups my cheek, his blue eyes staring at me with warmth but there is also the hint of a question there. I stare right back at him but I'm not quite so comfortable as he is. The nagging thought won't go away and I can't relax and enjoy him until it does.

"Peeta I can't stop thinking about all those plans you had made with Lace" I blurt out, feeling a bit odd mentioning her name while we're in bed.

"What about them?" he asks, his finger drawing a pattern on my cheek.

"Specifically…" I swallow. "The whole… big family thing. You said you were going to have five children."

"That was then."

"Yeah but…" I swallow again. I decide it's now or never. "I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to have five of your babies. I don't think I'll have as much as one."

His finger reaches the corner of my mouth and traces the lines of my lip.

"Don't care."

I scowl.

"Are you listening? You can't want umpteen babies one day and not care if you have any at all the next and I'm saying that a life with me will mean no kids."
"Katniss I don't care." He leans down and kisses my lips softly. "I want kids, sure. But I want you more. Simple as that."

"It's not simple" I pout. "You may feel very differently a few years down the line."

"You know, this isn't new information. I've known all along how you feel on that subject. Trust me, I didn't change my mind overnight. I've had ample time to weigh one against the other and every single time I've come to the same conclusion. I want children but I want you so much more. In fact I'm no longer sure I want kids at all if you're not their mother. You're it, no matter how you shake it." He props himself up on his elbow and looks at me calmly but intently, his fingertip again drawing patterns on my cheek. "I want this. I want you. If we have children together at some point I will be ecstatic but if we don't I will still live the rest of my life knowing I'm with the woman who makes me happier than anyone else."

"Smooth talker" I say grumpily, though feeling a lot better.

"I used to be" he says with a crooked smile and a shrug. "Nowadays I seem to be putting my foot in my mouth a whole lot. I try to be completely honest though."

I smile slightly and reach up my hand to caress his cheek.

"I know." Looking into his eyes right now I feel that maybe I can agree to procreation at some point in the future. All that really matters though is him and me together, working things out. My smile grows wider and I pull him down for a long kiss. "By the way, I think you should take it as a compliment that I'm not sure I want kids" I say when we part. "You alone is all I need and more."

He chuckles and leans in for another kiss.

"Now who's the smooth talker?"

About a month later Peeta and I are in his kitchen preparing dinner when there's a knock on the door. Peeta goes to answer it and I'm surprised to learn who it is.

"Hey Max" I hear Peeta say. "Come on in. Looking for Katniss?"

"Yeah. Knocked on her door and got no answer so I figured since she's become so domestic lately she's probably over here playing house."

"Something along those lines" chuckles Peeta, leading the way into the kitchen. I turn my head and look at Max, giving him a nod in greeting. I wonder what he's doing here but no doubt I'll find out any minute.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" asks Max, looking around the room, his tone a touch insecure. It occurs to me that he's never really spent time with Peeta in a home setting.

"No, not at all" Peeta assures him, walking up to me. "We're about to have dinner. Would you care to join us? There's grosling cooking in the oven and Katniss is making mashed potatoes." He stops beside me, glancing into the pot. "Slash… wallpaper glue." I glare at him but he doesn't seem to notice.

"What's on your mind, Max?" I ask.

"A double-whammy of frustrating things. Part business, part… not business."
"What things?" I ask, unable to keep a sigh away as I eye what was supposed to be mashed potatoes but indeed looks more like paste. Very stick paste. "And what business?"

Max hesitates for a second but then launches into a monologue about the troubles his parents are having getting the supplies they've ordered from District Seven, including the last desks for the new classrooms. While he talks Peeta sets the table for three people and I put the potatoes aside and focus on something I can't screw up, namely preparing a salad. I take the bird out of the oven just as Max rattles off a long and quite colourful description of why everyone in District Seven is a complete and utter idiot.

"Some of them are alright" says Peeta with a small smile.

"I hope you're not talking about that lunatic woman who shamelessly bedded my brother, thereby probably decreasing his value on the meat market" snorts Max.

"Talking about a close friend of ours" answers Peeta, sounding like he's thoroughly uninterested in taking the bait.

"So what's the other thing?" I ask, hoping to divert Max before he picks a quarrel.

He exhales in a huff, making a face and leaning against the kitchen island where Peeta is slicing up bread. After a moment's silence, during which his eyes go from me to Peeta and back again over and over, he speaks.

"Actually… Well I wasn't going to tell you all of this once I figured your bread baking half was present."

"Was that my cue to leave?" asks Peeta good-naturedly.

"Nah…" says Max. "I suppose she tells you everything anyway."

"I can keep secrets" I frown.

"Maybe you can but I'm questioning whether or not you do."

"It's okay" says Peeta with a soft chuckle, putting the bread slices in a basket. "I've got to pee before we eat and if I take my time walking to the bathroom in my bedroom and back you have a few minutes."

He carries the basket over to the table and sets it down before walking out of the room. I finish chopping tomatoes and give Max a look.

"So what is it?"

"Moira might be leaving."

I stare at him in confusion, not sure I heard him right. Barely aware of what I'm doing I carry the salad bowl to the table and then pull out a chair to sit.

"What?" I finally say. "What are you… I don't understand."

"You know her new boyfriend, that stupid head from District Nine?"

"The best derogative you could come up with is 'stupid head'? You must be upset." I know the guy he's talking about. He's been working as a substitute teacher this semester and he and Moira hit it off immediately. What I don't understand is the implication that she's considering leaving the school.
because of him.

"He wants to go back to District Nine, although no sane human being knows why. I mean the grain district?" He sighs and pushes the hair away from his brow. "He wants to go back and start up a school in his old part of the district and he's asked her to come with him."

"I can't believe it" I say, scowling at the thought. The Matson family has in my mind always been a tight-knit unit. Max and his siblings were adults when the war came to an end but they chose to move here together with their parents, as a family. It wasn't long ago that his sister toasted the fact that I was going to stay on indefinitely and now she might be leaving? I feel abandoned, even though I have no right. "Why hasn't she said anything to me about this?"

"Don't know. She's in District 9 with him right now" Max reveals, adding to my surprise. "They left Friday after school. All day yesterday they were in some sort of meetings with district officials over how large a school it could be and how it would be run and everything. We haven't heard from her yet but…" He pauses when Peeta comes back into the room.

"Should I go for a short little walk upstairs again?" asks Peeta.

"No" says Max with a sigh. "Whatever, really. I was just finished telling your girlfriend that my sister might be jumping ship to play Schoolhouse Of My Own with some random District 9 weirdo who, come to think of it, probably only went for her in the first place because he knows she could be valuable if he's going to start a school of his own."

"I… don't quite follow" says Peeta, giving Max a hesitant look. He walks over to the stove and grabs the ceramic ovenware with the steaming hot bird.

"Moira's been asked by her boyfriend to move back to Nine with him and work at a whole new school" I clarify.

"I'm sorry to hear that" says Peeta. "Sorry for you two and everyone who works with you. But this is good news for her, though, isn't it?"

"Oh hooray" says Max snidely.

"You don't really think he's involved with her just to get her help, do you?" I ask worriedly. I haven't met the guy too many times so I haven't gotten a good read on him yet.

"I don't think he would ask her to move to another district with him unless he really likes her" says Peeta as he carries the bird over to the table. "Katniss get the mashed potatoes, will you?" He gives Max a sympathetic look. "I know this is all none of my business. I'm sure your sister's a great girl, though, and that it's not beyond the realm of possibility that this guy is besotted enough with her already to not want to leave her behind when he moves."

Max stares at Peeta for almost a full minute.

"I don't like you when you're being too agreeable for me to make fun of" he then says.

"Maybe it's time for the food to shut you up" I say, setting the potatoes down and taking my seat again. Peeta set the extra plate next to me and I nod for Max to sit there. "Have some dinner and you might feel better."

While we eat the conversation stays on safer topics. Aside from my failed mashed potatoes it's a nice meal and I'm glad to see Peeta and Max talking with relative ease. Max compliments the food and it makes me happy. I've been wanting to have a meal with both of them and hopefully more will
follow. Next time we could have Haymitch join us.

Towards the end of the meal Max starts to get quiet, which can't be a good sign. I share a look with Peeta who offers to do the cleaning up so that we can talk but I suggest instead that Max and I take care of the dishes and clearing the table. I have a feeling he needs to occupy his hands with something, given how he's currently turning a napkin into confetti. Peeta gives me a kiss on the cheek and goes to the sitting room, leaving me and Max alone. I can hear the television being turned on and I wonder if Peeta is watching mostly so we can talk more freely. It doesn't take long for Max to start to rant about the situation with Moira and I find myself reminded of Gale and how he would go off on long tangents about the Capitol and the oppressive government.

"Max maybe we should hold off on the fury until we know anything for sure" I suggest as I fill the kitchen sink with water. "Maybe she'll decide she doesn't like District 9? Maybe she'll decide it's too much work? Maybe she'll come to the conclusion that she hasn't know this guy more than a few months and it's too soon to move away with him?" I'm not at all happy about the news, knowing I will miss her if she goes. It seems there are so many changes going on at the school lately. I wish things could have stayed the way they were but for Max's sake I force a smile and try to sound positive. "Moira is a practical person. I don't think she's going to rush into anything."

By the time the table has been cleared and the dishes have been done Max has calmed down again but we haven't come to any helpful conclusions. I'm not sure there are any such conclusions to come to. It all depends on what Moira decides. I know I won't be the one to try and talk her out of it if she decides to leave. If she really loves this guy I can't blame her for wanting to be where he is. I tell Max that and he scoffs.

"The romantic side of you is very unappealing" he says.

"All I'm saying here is I can't judge her if she wants to follow her boyfriend. I'd move to another district for Peeta."

"Except you can't. You went and killed a president and now you're stuck in this place." He leans back against the counter, gripping it with his hands. "Speaking of moving, is nobody living at your house anymore except for that furry thing that hisses at me all the time?"

"I haven't moved in here. Peeta and I spend some nights together and some alone."

"Right…" he says, sounding sceptical. "Tell me, when was the last time you spent a night alone?"

"Yesterday."

"And will you be spending this night alone?"

"No." I smile, thinking about going to sleep wrapped in Peeta's embrace, the sound of his heartbeat bringing me comfort. "And before you obnoxiously ask, yes, I do prefer spending the night with him."

"I bet you do" says Max, wiggling his eyebrows in a very odd way. "Tell me, which one of you is the mattress and which one is the covers?"

"Don't make this dirty, Max" I warn, scowl in place.

"I'm doing no such thing" he replies, voice brimming with innocence. "This was dirty before I got here."

Rolling my eyes I leave him behind and head for the sitting room to join Peeta now that the
conversation about Moira and her plans for the future has come to an end. Max follows me but immediately goes back on that topic.

"Hey Peeta, you mind if I use your phone in a while and call my parents? They're expecting a call from my delinquent sis right about now and I want to know the latest news."

"Sure, go ahead" shrugs Peeta. He's watching one of those insipid cooking shows from the Capitol, this time around apparently learning what shapes of pasta goes best with what kind of sauce. I take a seat on the couch and reach for the remote.

"The waiting around is torture" grunts Max, slumping down in an armchair.

"Quite right" says Peeta with a distant tone in his voice that makes me look over at him. There's a detached look in his eyes that makes me worried. "Waiting… and building anticipation. No, not anticipation – I can't think of the word. Whatever the negative equivalent is. Dread, I suppose."

"Peeta?" I say carefully. Is he going to have a flashback right here in the sitting room, with Max present?

"I always thought the majority of the drama they build and create in the Hunger Games came from the gamemakers but President Snow had quite the feel for it. His hands grip the sides of the armchair. "He had me for almost a week before they physically hurt me but that time was well spent. Hinting at what was to come… Detailed descriptions of ways one could be executed. I distinctly remember that if you are to be flayed alive they pour boiling water over one patch of skin at a time so that it will come loose more easily… to make the executioner's job easier."

"Peeta you don't have to" I say, a shiver of fear running through my body. I don't want to hear whatever it is he's going to say. I don't want to know what they did to him.

"They liked making me watch" he continues, his voice and face distant. I'm not even sure he's speaking to us. He seems almost in a strange trance. "When you're in that moment, watching someone get tortured and being powerless to stop it, you think it's as bad as being tortured yourself. Then then do it to you and you would give anything to be the observer again." His brow furrows as another memory comes back to him. "They would… take me to the torture room and sometimes just show me different kinds of equipment and tell me what they were for. Sometimes they'd strap me in and be just about to start when someone came in and told them to hold off. I suspect the only reason was to torture me in more ways than just physical." He swallows and then smacks his tongue, the dry sound making me wonder if he's got any saliva at all right now. I don't seem to. He speaks again and his voice sounds pained, fragile. "They… told me about what hijacking is before they started doing it. They wanted me to know that when the process was complete I would fear you Katniss. That I would be sent in to kill you and that I would be the deadliest weapon they could conjure…"

"I don't want to hear anymore! Stop!"

He doesn't look at me, he keeps staring into thin air with that detached look in his eyes, but at least he stops talking. If he starts again I will press my hands to my ears because I can't listen to another word. Why did he have to say what he just said? I never wanted to know that and now I can never not know it. That Peeta knew he was going to be changed. He knew he was going to be brainwashed into falling out of love with me, fearing me, being determined to kill me. I cannot even fathom what that must have done to him. How perverse those people were to revel in his pain and humiliation and fear.

Then he does speak again, though there's the tiniest shift in his tone, as if he's coming back to me again.
"It's what it's designed to do. Torture. Strip you of everything, leave you completely naked in every sense of the word, and then get to work with the instruments."

Looking at him I can see that he's shivering, his grip on the armrests tightening. The things that happened to him in the Capitol scare me and I don't know if I can cope with it all if I know more about what they did. Seeing him like this though, outwardly calm but fighting things in his mind I can't even imagine, makes me set aside my own fear. I rise to my feet and walk over to him, leaning over and wrapping my arms around him as best I can. He's wound so tight that it seems he might snap.

"It's okay…" I mumble into his hair, pressing him closer to me.

Still staring into space he keeps trembling but slowly relaxes, little by little, until he can lean against me too. He sighs heavily and closes his eyes, his lips pressed together so tightly that they're white.

"I'm sorry" he manages. "I didn't mean to…"

"Hush" I say, pressing a kiss against the top of his head.

"No… I didn't mean to… ruin the conversation. I don't know what came over me. The memories just… Some of those things I haven't even remembered or thought about in…"

"I think I should take my wee little problems elsewhere" says Max, by the sound of it feeling uncomfortable. From the corner of my eye I can see him rising from his chair. "I don't think you need me around right now."

"It's no problem" says Peeta, sounding a touch more normal but still frazzled.

"No I should go" Max insists. He makes a face, gives me a little wave and then hurriedly goes for the door. "Thanks for dinner and everything."

Peeta looks up at me, his eyes thankfully his own but the amount of pain in them frightens me.

"Katniss I… I could use a minute" he says.

I can't be sure if he really means it or if he's giving me an out to say goodbye to Max before he leaves. I don't want to leave Peeta right now but some treacherous part of me also doesn't want to stay and see the look on his face. I make the decision to give him a bit of space since he did ask for it. Before I go to catch up with Max I press my lips to Peeta's, feeling him shudder slightly but respond back to me a little bit. I leave the sitting room and walk through the kitchen to the front hall just in time to hear the door close. Grabbing my coat in my hand I open the door and step outside, calling out to Max just as he walks down the porch steps.

"Wait a second" I say.

"I really think I should go" says Max, turning around to face me. "And you should be inside, with him."

Worried that he might have gotten the wrong impression about what just happened I shake my head and wave for him to come closer. I put my coat on and ignore how cold my hands and ears feel, not to mention my feet since I forgot to put on shoes. I take a seat on the porch steps and Max reluctantly sits down beside me.

"Look I know you like to joke that he's a lunatic but he's really not" I say.
"Katniss I know." He sighs and looks up at the starry sky above. A cold wind is blowing, making that damn hair of his come over his eyes again. "I can't make any jokes about what just happened. The things he said… I never really knew how much he must have suffered. I still don't. I know I say a lot of things and I like to call people by nicknames and stuff but I've never meant to…"

"Yeah" I say with a nod. "Trust me, if I thought you were serious you would have been on the business end of my bow and arrows long ago."

"He is a nice guy" Max concedes. "Annoyingly nice in fact. That whole engagement-to-the-wrong-gal, breaking-my-friend's-heart-over-and-over snafu notwithstanding."

"I think he's amazing, but you knew that already" I say.

"You want to know something?" A crooked smile comes over his face and he turns his eyes to me instead of the sky. "When you and I first got to know each other I was jealous of him."

"I thought you said you were never romantically interested in me" I frown.

"Oh please, Mockingjay" he chuckles. "You flatter yourself. I mean I was jealous of him because I wanted to be your friend and you had this attitude about not needing more friends. And nobody can compete with him in your eyes. It's obvious that Peeta Mellark is the most important thing ever to you. Even though he was hurting you, you still wanted to be his friend. You wanted to screw his brains out, too, but if all you could get was friendship you were damn well determined to have it."

I give him a smile, amazed that he would admit to feeling jealous over something like that. In fact I'm amazed at this whole conversation, mostly free of Max-isms.

"I would have gone crazy without you" I tell him with sincerity. "I probably haven't said it to your face but… thank you. For being my friend."

He smiles and wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me closer. We sit out there for a few minutes but then my hands and feet feel like they will turn into icicles so I tell him I'm going back inside. We get up and I give him a hug. I'm glad I went out here and had this moment with him. I feel I needed it after the intensity of the things Peeta said. Once back inside I head straight to the sitting room where Peeta is leaned back in his armchair, tears falling down his face. Immediately I feel terrible for having left him alone. So much for being a close friend to him, much less a loving girlfriend. Not knowing what else to do I sit myself down on his lap and wrap my arms around him. With my face nuzzled against his neck I can't read the look on his face but his arms wrap around me and his breaths come out steadily, no trace of a tremble.

"Are you alright?" I ask.

"Yeah" he answers, his hand stroking my back. "Yeah I needed a moment to… to come back into myself again. Then I was okay. Now that you're here I'm good."

I curl up in a more comfortable position and kiss his neck softly. We stay like that for a long time, until he's almost fallen asleep. Then we head up the stairs and into bed and he dozes off instantly while I lie awake for a long time, listening to each breath as it enters and leaves his body, frightened and amazed by the fragility of the fact that he is here with me, safe and loved, even after all that's happened.

A few weeks later Peeta's prosthetic breaks completely. The only place where he can get a new one is the Capitol so I have no other choice but to watch him go, feeling his absence even worse now than I ever have before. He ends up being gone for months, the technicians having trouble not only
making a new prosthetic fully functional but also making it fit right. The winter brings a lot of heavy blizzards that cause shipment problems which means they oftentimes have to wait for days or weeks even to get some part or other that's needed. All the while Peeta has to get by with just the one leg, getting around with the aid of crutches. We talk on the phone almost every night during his Capitol stay and while I know he tries to downplay the difficulties I also know he's sick and tired of it all.

Finally Peeta calls and tells me he's coming home, right around the time when the school year will come to an end. We've been apart for far too long by that point and I admit to myself that I'm not solely thrilled that he's coming back, I'm also a bit nervous. But when I see him stepping off the train, his gait seeming lighter than ever before, all my apprehensions melt away. I throw my arms around him, he laughs and kisses me and Haymitch has to make a biting remark about us going back to putting on public shows in order to get me to take a step back so he can hug Peeta as well.

The evening of his return the three of us have dinner together and then Haymitch heads home, leaving Peeta and me and Buttercup sitting out on the front porch. I hold Peeta's hand between both of mine and lean my head against his shoulder.

"I don't want to have to go away again" he says.

"I hope you never have to" I answer.

We pick up where we left off. Lots of kisses, lots of caresses, and during this time apart I've begun to long more and more for what comes after the kissing and caressing. It's only a matter of time now before our relationship becomes physical in every sense of the word.

Shortly after Peeta's return an early heatwave hits the district. We woke up early this morning to find the sun shining hot in the sky and the thermometer showing 23 degrees, climbing higher than that as the hours ticks on. Peeta wanted to go swimming and I agreed that it would be a good idea.

We're out at the lake together. Peeta had his heart set on the pool, preferring the clear water with a visible bottom where he doesn't have to worry about his so-so swimming capabilities. The lake was my idea. I haven't visited the pool yet and I have absolutely no desire to do so, finding it far too unnatural with its turquoise water that smells of chlorine. It will be crowded and noisy and we'll have to keep an eye on our belongings while being in the water. The lake is secluded and natural and with much lovelier surroundings. We ended up having something of an argument over it but the only argument Peeta gave that made me consider letting him have his way is that the pool is a thirty minute walk from the Victors' Village and the lake is over two hours away. I won the argument by pointing out that we have no idea who we might run into at the pool. Lace loves the pool as much as Peeta does and from the look on his face he doesn't want to run into her there while he's with me.

I'm glad I got my way. If I am to be honest with myself I think of the pool as Peeta's and Lace's place, which automatically means I don't want to be there. The lake can be mine and Peeta's and we can be all to ourselves and pretend that the world around us doesn't exist. Out here there isn't another human being within miles and we can shut out the world and pretend it doesn't exist. After living several important moments of our relationship on national television it feels good to have moments that belong only to us.

When we arrived at the lake it was almost noon and Peeta headed straight for the water with me in tow. We splashed water at each other for a while and played around in the shallow part but then I felt the desire to stretch out and swim so I did just that, going out to the middle of the lake by myself. Peeta stayed on shore, keeping an eye on me, not entirely comfortable with me being out so far and so deep. Even though I knew it made him nervous I stayed out there for a while. I can't explain the feeling that fills me sometimes when the sun is hot above, the lake is dark and cool and the only thing
that disturbs the calm of the surface is my body moving through it. Knowing that I had Peeta waiting for me back at shore made it even lovelier.

Once I got back on shore I was exhausted and I flopped down on my towel and almost fell asleep, ignoring Peeta's suggestion that we have lunch. After a few minutes he got tired of waiting for me to finish resting and he went back to the water. I must have drifted off for a few minutes but now I'm wide awake again, laying on my back and lifting myself up on my elbows. My eyes are on Peeta, practicing his swimming technique. He's gotten much better but he won't be as comfortable in the water as I am for a long while yet.

I let my eyes feast on him, reveling in the luxury of knowing that he's my significant other. I wanted it so badly for so long and I had given up on ever getting to experience it for real. He was supposed to be married now, to a cute and bubbly young woman with mahogany hair and big doe eyes and the most contagious laughter I have ever heard. Yet instead of being at the pool with his wife he is here at the lake with me. The wild joy I feel now almost makes up for all the months of heartache and pain. Almost.

Out in the water Peeta tires of his swimming exercises and moves towards the shore. His feet land on the sand below and he rises, the water reaching to just below his waist. His ashen hair is dripping wet and glistens in the sunlight when he shakes his head to get some of the water out. His hands run over his face, wiping water from his eyes and slicking his wet hair back and I admire his strong jaw, the curve of his perfect lips, the beautiful blue in his eyes. His upper body carries marks from the bombs together with a few from the torture sessions they put him through but he's recovered remarkably from everything he's been put through. He's young and he's been keeping in shape, using physical therapy as means to keep his mind together. I love looking at the muscles that he has built on his chest and stomach and arms. Most of all I love that the man I'm seeing in the water is healthy and happy, so far from the broken shambles they wanted me to have when they let him be rescued by District 13. It helps to wash away some of the guilt of my part in his torture.

He notices me looking at him and a warm, beautiful smile spreads across his face, making my heart beat faster. I stand up as he comes walking up from the water, needing to feel his skin against mine right now. I take a few steps in his direction, meeting him about halfway between the water and our towels, and I yelp when I feel the cool water on his body against my skin. Peeta chuckles and I wrap myself around him, not caring in the slightest that he's getting me wet and deciding I can absolutely live with the cold. My own body is warm from the sun and he presses me closer, letting my warm skin warm his.

"My Peeta..." I say in a sigh, closing my eyes and feeling like my heart could burst from happiness and love. I feel his heart beating hard inside his chest and the thin fabric of his swim trunks does nothing to hide that he is becoming aroused. It makes me a little nervous but I don't mind it. I know I'm not entirely ready for that step right now, not out here with buzzing insects and just a towel to cushion the hard ground and the sun shining hot enough that we really ought to apply more sunscreen to avoid getting burned. But I think to myself that perhaps later on, perhaps tonight...

Peeta pulls back form the embrace and his lips find mine. His cool, wet lips press against my dry, warm ones and I like the contrast. I wrap my arms around his neck and whimper slightly. The hunger is almost overpowering and my hand finds Peeta's hair, grabbing some of it as I form a fist, trying to tug him closer even though he's about as close as he could possibly get. Peeta's hands roam from my back down to my behind and then up again. He's eager, every bit as hungry as I am, and I know I should tone this down. It's not fair to get him all excited. I just can't seem to bring myself to stop.

Finally it is Peeta who pulls away, gasping for air, leaning his head back. His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows and then his eyes are on me.
"Damn, Katniss…" he pants.

"What's the matter?" I manage in a breathless chuckle. "Overwhelmed?"

"That… And in dire need of a cold swim."

I chuckle again and follow him back into the water. The cold temperature does indeed quench some of the heat inside of me but it's difficult to look at him without feeling it all rise to the surface again.

When evening comes we sit side by side on the small stretch of sand that separates the lake from the grassy glade. The sun has begun to set and I lean a bit closer to Peeta, loving the feeling of his body side by side with my own. It's getting a bit cooler now but with him next to me I can't say that I feel particularly cold. I turn my head slightly to look at him, feeling my heart beat faster at the look on his handsome face. He's looking out on the surface of the lake and on the sky, probably admiring the beautiful colours. Sunset orange is his favourite colour but so far it's mostly pinks and blues.

"We spent another evening sitting by a body of water together" I hear myself saying, wondering if I'm playing a dangerous game calling to mind our time in the arena. But it's a memory I treasure and have often revisited and I want so badly for Peeta to remember it too. I take his hand in mine and his eyes leave the sunset and he smiles softly at me.

"The sun had already set that time, yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Pity." His eyes go back to the colourful display. "Sunset is my favourite time of day. Particularly in the summer when they last a bit longer and there are more colours." The hand that's not held in mine reaches out and he points to the sky. "See how the clouds there are being coloured pink, turning softly orange? See how there's a rim of light at the edge? Like the proverbial silver lining?"

"To be honest I don't really want to look at the sunset" I say carefully. His eyes return to meet mine and he looks a bit confused, tilting his head slightly. "I think about that night during the Quell and just… In hindsight it's so obvious. Why couldn't I see it then?"

"See what?" he asks softly.

"We hadn't brushed our teeth in days. We had both eaten raw fish since the last time we did brush. We were in a life and death struggle which would claim at least one of us. The entire country was watching us live. Those kisses couldn't have tasted good." My hand reaches up and brushes through his hair. "I can't remember that detail, though. All I remember is that… that I didn't seem to stop. That I didn't want to stop. That I wanted to go on, go further, feel you, touch you. Continue to taste you. If that's not a sign that you've got it pretty bad then I don't know what is."

"What happened in the end?" he asks. "I can't… They tampered with that memory…"

"Midnight happened. Lightning hit a tree in one of the sections. It kind of broke the spell."

He nods slightly but I can tell that he doesn't remember. It makes me so angry that they took that from him, a moment so significant in our history, but I don't want to feel anger. Not right now. Not in this moment.

"Got it pretty bad, huh?" says Peeta then, his charming smile making me feel a desire that is starting to become familiar.

"Looking back I… I must not have been falling per se but… already have fallen. Much more than I
realized."

"No wonder they tampered with that, then. I do remember it, just not... not the way it actually was. It's all... shining and shimmering and..."

My finger lands on his lips, an ancient gesture to shush someone, and he complies. He's still got a faint smile on his lips and I can't resist any longer. Knowing that I don't have to resist either makes me happier than I know how to express.

"To hell with that" I say. "I cherish that memory but... what's to say we can't make new, even better ones?"

I've barely finished speaking before he presses his lips to mine. Instinctively I close my eyes, sighing against his lips. The kiss immediately turns heated, more passionate, hungry like the ones we shared on that beach so long ago. His hands travel down my braid and pull away the rubber band holding it together, combing through my tresses until my hair hangs in messy waves down my face. Then his hands find my cheeks, tangling my hair between his fingers in the process, and I feel an exhilarating joy. He held me the very same way that night in the arena. He's never done it since. Not until now.

My eyes open as the kisses deepen and the hunger begins to grow. In the corner of my eye I can see the sky and the surface of the water changing colour, turning more orange and shifting towards blue. We part for air and then our lips meet again, tongues tangling, our heads tilting slightly for a better fit. When Peeta shifts us and lays me down on the ground, his upper body covering mine, I begin to feel that I don't want us to have to stop tonight. Maybe this is how it's supposed to happen. Maybe this time around I will get to satiate my hunger without any interruptions. There's only him and me out here. No lightning tree. No cameras. No other tributes. Just Peeta and I and our passion for one another.

I close my eyes again and lose myself in the sensations, moaning into his mouth every now and then, my hands grabbing fistfuls of his shirt, wanting to pull it off of him so that he's bare chested like he was earlier in the day. Then all of a sudden he pulls away, panting heavily. I open my eyes, frowning slightly, wondering why his mouth is suddenly at least a foot away rather than a few millimetres.

"The sun..." he pants.

"What of it?" I ask impatiently.

"It's set. It's dark."

"Bummer. Where were we?"

"Katniss I want to... I want to so badly... But not like this."

"This is perfect" I object. "What more can you want?"

"For you to be comfortable." He brushes the hair away from my face with a gentle touch. "To be able to rest with you afterward, go to sleep if we want to, and not have to get up and head back into town or get the cottage in order. Not to mention I would feel a lot better if we had some birth control."

My cheeks turn red and I sit up. I hadn't given a single thought to protection. It's not like me to be this thoughtless. I feel embarrassed that I let my lusts run rampart like that. Peeta wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me closer, kissing the side of my head.

"If you feel ready... we can always just head back to the house."
I look at him and even in the now dim lighting I see his eyes burning with desire and love. It makes me grin and without thinking more about it I nod.

"Okay. Let's do that."

He rises to his feet and holds out his hand to me.

We lay beside each other on the bed, my leg wedged in-between Peeta's. Both of us have an arm wrapped around the other, our noses just barely touching, eyes looking deep into one another's. It's a moment of reverence, unlike anything I have felt before. We've been in beds together plenty of times but it's never seemed quite like this.

Then he closes the gap between us and kisses me. His lips slant against mine, finding my bottom lip and drawing it into his mouth. When he pulls back I leave him no room for hesitation or for lingering in the moment. My mouth is immediately back on his and the kiss is more forceful this time. I seem to feel it everywhere in my body when our tongues meet, but most of all I feel it at my core. Without even realizing it at first I grind my pelvis against him, earning me a moan that sends pleasant chills down my spine. How I've waited to hear him make such sounds because of me.

Then I am on my back with Peeta settled between my legs, our bodies grinding towards each other, our kisses heated and determined, my arms moving everywhere I can possibly reach. His hands begin to roam over my skin in what is definitely not a tentative manner. Somewhere in the back of my mind it reminds me of seeing him paint, or seeing him bake, like he's touching me in that same way he goes about everything that he's talented in.

That thought brings me to a halt. There is a reason why Peeta isn't as nervous as I am, a reason why he isn't tentative or inexperienced. He's done this before. Probably more times than I can count and definitely more times than I want to think about. And then the image of Lace is in my head and that turns my excitement into something much less pleasant.

Peeta's eyes go to mine when he feels my body turn rigid.

"Are you okay?" he asks. "Should we stop?"

I don't want to stop. I've waited so long to feel his touch and to be as intimate with him as I can imagine two people being. But I can't seem to shake the new thoughts in my head either. It's not a combination that works well.

"No, I just..." My nose scrunches a little and I bite my bottom lip. "This is the first for me. I hate that it's not the first for you."

I keep my eyes fixated on a spot on the wall, knowing I can't meet his eyes or see the reaction on his face. Then he places a wet kiss on my neck. My eyes close as if on their own accord. I feel Peeta's hand on my cheek and I open my eyes to meet his.

"Do you think you can settle for being my last?" he asks.

It's impossible to miss the deeper meaning behind his words. Lace might have had him first but I have the chance to have him for every instant from this point on. It ought to frighten me to think about such a commitment but it just makes perfect sense. I knew from the first moment that if we became a couple there would be no letting go of that.

"I can do that" I say hoarsely, relaxing as the jealousy starts to be replaced by the thrill of knowing that the most wonderful boy I have ever known can be mine for the rest of my life.
Peeta smiles and kisses me, moving back on top of me. I trust him to take the lead in this. I'm a little too overwhelmed and inexperienced to be able to right now, and he delivers.

Afterward I'm more content than I knew I was capable of being, feeling like I could burst with joy and love, wanting to never stop caressing the boy who's resting in my arms. One thought keeps coming to my mind but it's too trite for me to share with him. Instead I tuck it away somewhere in a corner of my mind, ready to bring it out and reshape it into something more sensible, less saccharine, for whatever milestone moment it may be suited for.

But for tonight the thought remains crude and unpolished, in its original new-born state, floating around in my mind.

*I wish I could be your last everything.*

Chapter End Notes

Epilogue will follow but hopefully before that I'll be able to complete that "Lost Boy" update I've been babbling about for ages now.

About the chapter at hand:
* What Peeta is baking is a traditional Swedish Christmas pastry called "lussekatter" (Lucia cats). They look as such: http://images.sweetauthoring.com/recipe/50103_674.jpg. In an amusing coincidence they're traditionally eaten today - December 13th. If you like baking and want to give them a try (seriously, they're delicious) here's a recipe in English: http://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/st_lucia_saffron_buns/
* I know I never say what happens with Moira. It probably won't come up in the epilogue either since I plan on having that set a few years down the line.
* So, yeah, Peeta's prosthetics trip to the Capitol is a very brief segment but hopefully it doesn't seem unnecessary or out of place. Originally there was a whole thing where Katniss and Max (while talking about Moira possibly leaving) discuss that if Peeta ever leaves District 12 Katniss won't be able to go with him. This then comes back when Peeta actually has to go. In the end I kept the trip to the Capitol in part because I didn't want to rewrite the lake scene to take place indoors somewhere during winter.

Before I "sign off" I want to once again thank everyone who reads, comments and in any other way has chosen to devote time to my story. You have all been amazing and I personally feel your comments have helped me improve my writing (though I can't exactly objectively tell whether or not there's been improvement). Thanks to all of you for the time, energy and thoughts you've devoted to my story. I'm really grateful to you.

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