His lips brushed impatiently at her neck, her hand pressing him closer. A low moan escaped her lips, swollen & red from his hungry, almost feral kisses.

He let out a moan of his own. It echoed in her ears, silencing the small part of her brain that was telling her to slow down, that it shouldn't happen like this ...

As the sun rose higher in the morning sky, Katniss returned from hunting to find Peeta in her kitchen, standing at the sink without a shirt on. Flour covered his hair and face, and the water was running as he washed his hands and forearms. His biceps flexed and relaxed as he rinsed the white powder off of his right hand.

The sight of a shirtless Peeta paralyzed her. Lately, her awareness of his body had been in overdrive: of his hands as he dexterously rolled dough for cheese buns, of the collarbone that peeked out of the neck of his t-shirt as he painted, of the hair that curled behind his ears. It left her with a surging, rolling warmth in her core, one that she did her best to ignore.

At least once a day she had to stifle the part of her brain that wanted to reach out and touch him, hold his hand, or curl up in his arms while they sat in the couch. Before the Capitol had ruined them both, there were kisses that burned with a hunger that had nothing to do with food. She had been sure that he loved her then, and she knew now that she had been falling in love with him as well.

But then Snow has destroyed Peeta's mind. Any love that may have remained was buried, underneath false memories, confusion, anxiety, and so much anger. Anger at Snow, at Plutarch, at Haymitch, at the rebellion, and most of all, at her. He had stopped her from killing herself with the nightlock pills, and they were friends now, spending almost all of their waking hours together. But some nights, she'd wake up with her throat burning, his dream-hands still around her neck, though
the bruises had faded long ago.

He didn't have flashbacks as often anymore, not like when he had first returned to District 12. His head doctor told Haymitch that as the false memories faded, they would ease in their intensity and frequency, but they would never completely go away. The times Peeta did have them were terrifying. Katniss wasn't just afraid for herself - every time it happened, she feared that this would be it, that this time they would lose Peeta for good, the memories and pain in his head too much to bear. Just two days before, Peeta had cracked the back of one of his kitchen chairs as he clutched it, the attack on his mind so violent that he had bit his tongue and bled.

Afterwards, he was always apologetic, filled with shame and still twitching from aftershocks. He couldn't look Katniss or Haymitch in the eye for an hour or more, not until after he had disappeared to draw and commit the flashback to paper, purging it from his mind. Only then would he truly come back to himself, rolling up his sleeves to bake or paint in the memorial book with a smile and levity that reminded Katniss of the old, pre-hijacking Peeta.

It made her ache. The two versions of Peeta that lived across the street from her tore her in two. The Peeta who had planted evening primrose bushes in front of her house and the Peeta who had ripped a tree - complete with roots - from the ground during a flashback were superimposed on each other, never one without the other in her mind. The shame and guilt she felt, that it was her fault because of the rebellion and those stupid berries, was corrosive. The boy she loved was in so much pain because of her, and she focused on trying not to hurt him any more.

She reminded herself daily that he didn't love her any more; they were friends, neighbors, companions. His love had been a constant since she was sixteen, a steadying influence ingrained in her worldview. But it was gone, and she refused to be the cause of a flashback or more pain.

Though in moments like this - his face smooth and hurt-free, humming softly to himself with his shirt on the table, his chest bare and glistening with errant drops of water - it was nearly impossible to stop herself from wrapping her arms around him. As it was, she was rooted to the spot, her game bag dangling unnoticed in her hand as she stared, eyes wide and mouth pulled into an unconscious smile. She had seen him shirtless before - had seen him only in his underwear, in fact. But that was in the arena, with millions watching and survival the only thing on her mind. It was hardly ever this intimate, with Peeta shirtless in her kitchen. A few weeks prior, he had started to bake in her house rather than his, claiming that he liked having someone to talk to while he kneaded. She suspected that he was coming to check up on her, to make sure she didn't fall off the deep end again; it certainly wasn't easier to bake in her kitchen, given that all of the supplies were in his. She loved him for that, for the kindness and effort.

Now, however, she wished that he had stayed in his own kitchen, if only to save her from the longing that opened like a maw within her. Her fingers itched to touch his chest, smooth and toned, and her lips had parted, her breathing heavier.

She must have made a noise, as not a moment later he looked up and turned to her, hands dripping as she stood in the doorway.

"Hey," he greeted softly. "Good morning."

She shook her head slightly, trying to clear the cloud of longing and love and want from her brain.

"Morning," she replied, equally quiet. She didn’t move.

He looked at her, a small smile playing on his lips. "Are you gonna stand there all day?"
Her eyes lingered on his ribs, and the scars from countless Capitol knife cuts that criss-crossed them in a grotesque pattern. Her heart sank in a familiar path down to somewhere near her navel. My fault, she thought. My fault, my fault, my fault, my -

"Katniss?" Suddenly Peeta was standing in front of her, drying his hands with a towel, concern in his impossibly blue eyes. "Are you okay?"

Her grey eyes met his. She could get lost in them, fall in so deep that she would never have to leave. Their blue matched the color of the lake in the woods, clear and open. His eyes weren't cloudy with doubt and agony, like they were during the flashbacks. They were soft and free from pain, and filled with a kindness that stirred something within her.

"Katniss," he breathed, stepping closer. He reached a hand up, pausing halfway to her cheek. Her brain lurched.

They hadn't touched each other in so long, not since she had bitten him when he stopped her from taking the nightlock pills after she shot Coin. He hadn't tried and she had resisted for fear of bringing on a flashback.

She jolted out of her stupor, mentally kicking herself as she walked to the table. It was covered with baking supplies, flour and rolling pins and bowls. She cleared a patch and placed her bag down.

Conceal, don't feel, she chided herself, repeating the mantra that she had used so many times in the past few weeks to stop herself from doing something stupid. It was new territory - thinking before she acted, long and hard. You can't do this to him. Stop acting like a lovesick idiot.

She removed her hunting jacket and placed it on the back of her chair. It had been cool in the woods, but between the rising sun in the window over the sink and the suppressed emotions, Katniss felt unbearably hot in the kitchen.

Peeta's eyes followed her movements, his face unreadable.

Katniss risked a glance at him. He returned to the sink, draping the damp towel over the faucet.

"I'm okay," she replied at last. "Sorry, I was still lost in thought."

She shook her head again, this time able to compose herself. She looked around the kitchen, which she realized was an enormous mess. Flour covered the floor and table. Broken eggs laid in a cracked bowl under a chair, the yolk oozing into the tile grout.

"What happened here?"

Peeta looked down, apologetic. "I'm sorry about the mess. I was going to clean up before you got back."

"Game bag filled up quickly." She gestured at the overstuffed bag. "It's autumn, we need to start saving for winter."

He nodded.

"So what happened?"

Peeta looked at her and smiled sheepishly. "I tripped over Buttercup."

She chuckled. "Are you okay?"
"Everything is intact, except for my dignity."

"And where is the little terror?" She looked around for Prim's cat. They had developed a sort of mutual affection, born of grief. At night, he curled up next to her, making sure she was safe. When she woke up screaming from a nightmare, he was always there, nudging her hand and purring.

"He's fine - he's in the sitting room, hissing at me every time I look at him." To demonstrate, he looked to his right; a hiss quickly followed.

She laughed.

He threw the towel at her. "Be nice."

She laughed harder, pulling out a chair at the table. "I'll make it up to you - I'll help you clean up after I'm done skinning."

She pulled the bag closer and slipped the knife from her jacket pocket, flipping up the blade. As she pulled rabbits and squirrel from her bag, Peeta grabbed the mop and bucket.

An easy quiet settled. He cleaned while she skinned, the sun rising higher and brightening the kitchen. This was how most mornings went; Katniss would return from hunting and clean her catch while Peeta baked, occasionally chatting but mostly enjoying the soothing effect of each others' company.

After half an hour, Peeta's voice broke through the silence.

"I had a dream about you last night."

Katniss' hand holding the knife slipped, the blade biting deep into the heel of her hand.

"Shit," she breathed. The blood began pooling in the wound and threatened to overflow.

"Katniss?"

"Get me a towel, please." Peeta grabbed a clean towel from under the sink and brought it over to her. As she grabbed it, he saw the blood.

"What-"

"I cut myself," she said, more curtly than she meant. The pain wasn't bad but what he had said was rattling around her brain.

"The skinning knife?" He looked at her, forehead creased with worry.

She nodded, pressing the towel to her hand to stop the flow of blood.

"You should go wash it out."

Katniss nodded. "Yea, I'll be back."

She left the kitchen and walked up the stairs to her bathroom. She kicked her pajamas that she had left on the floor early that morning out of the doorway and stuck her wounded hand under the faucet. She turned on the water, and when it hit her hand, she bit back a yelp. The blood mixed with the water and drained, and she turned it off when she was satisfied that the animal blood and hair had been washed out of her wound.
She opened the cabinet above the sink with her good hand, looked inside, then cursed. She didn't have saline or antibiotic cream; Greasy Sae had cut herself last week when she had made lunch for Katniss and Peeta, and Katniss hadn't refilled her first aid kit.

Taking the box of bandages off of the shelf, she closed the mirrored cabinet door and mulled over where she could get some more. Haymitch's liquor shipment usually came at the end of the week; maybe she could get him to order some.

After a few moments, she lifted her head and looked at the mirror, then jumped, startled. Peeta was standing in the doorway, his chest still bare, and holding a small plastic bag.

Her stomach leapt as it always did when she saw him unexpectedly, without any time to steel herself. She turned away from the mirror to him.

"I'm out of stuff to clean it with."

"I know. I went and grabbed what I had at my place." He opened the bag; inside was saline, cream, gauze, and medical tape. "I don't think bandages will do."

She placed the box on the edge of the sink. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it. My mother wasn't a healer, but I know that animal blood isn't the most sanitary thing to get in a cut."

She grabbed the bag with her good hand and placed it on the tank of the toilet. Taking out the saline, she held it over the sink and tried to open it.

"Let me," Peeta said from right behind her. She turned again; he was less than a foot away, closer than they had been since Coin's death.

Her eyes wide, she nodded. When he grabbed the bottle from her hand, his fingers brushed hers. Her entire hand tingled at the touch, and her face grew hot. I'm blushing, she realized.

"Sit," he commanded, gently, nodding at the toilet. She closed the lid and sat down, wrapping her hand in toilet paper to stop the fresh blood.

She watched him open the bottle, her head spinning. His touch was achingly familiar but so foreign that she could hardly make heads or tails of what was happening around her; the warmth on her face spread to her chest and stomach, enveloping her. She began to tremble. She had blocked off these emotions for so long that when they came upon her unexpectedly, she didn't know how to respond.

Peeta knelt down in front of her. "You're shaking," he observed, his voice soft.

"It hurts," she managed to whisper, unsure whether she was referring to the cut on her hand or the longing surging through the hole in her heart.

"Give me your hand."

She looked at him. The words didn't register.

"Katniss, I can't clean it if you don't give me your hand."

Slowly, she held out her hand. He turned it over, palm facing up. He held the bottom of her hand in one of his and unwrapped the paper covering the cut with the other. She saw stars; she had been craving his touch for so long that the want of it had become a part of her.
He held up the saline. "It's going to sting."

She nodded; she knew, her mother had cleaned her scrapes and cuts a thousand times, but she didn't know what would come out of her mouth if she opened it to remind him. Probably something stupid, like 'I love you.'

Slowly, he poured a few drops into the cut; she winced, the burning sensation making her bite her lip. A particularly strong surge made her whimper.

"I'm sorry," Peeta whispered, focused on her hands. He placed the bottle on the floor. "I'm sorry that hurt."

"It's not your fault."

He grabbed a hand towel and gently patted the wound dry. She tried not to make a sound; she didn't want him to feel like he had to apologize again.

The silence grew deafening. He finished patting, as as he placed the towel aside, she burst out, "So what was the dream?"

It had been burning in the back of her mind; they never really talked about his nightmares, just like they never really talked about hers. Those nights of comfort in his arms when she woke up from a nightmare were long gone; now they tiptoed around it, never mentioning how the terror they both managed to keep at bay during the day came roaring back at night.

He smiled. "We were on a rooftop, in a garden."

Katniss relaxed, relieved it hadn't been a nightmare.

"Real." This was another daily ritual, something they carried over from the final battle. Peeta would recount a memory or a dream, and she would tell him was true and what the Capitol and made up. The memories were mostly about what happened in the arena; they had never really broached their private moments together in depth.

"It was sunny."

"Real."

"And your head was in my lap." His voice dropped to a whisper, and Katniss felt a familiar leap of anxiety.

"Real." She felt his hands tense, and she clenched the fist of her uncut hand. The tension in the bathroom stretched, and she could see the muscles in his shoulders harden. His breathing became uneven.

"And - and I said that I wanted to freeze the moment. And live in it forever."

"Real" she whispered, the memory bursting to life in her mind's eye. Those precious hours of happiness before the Quell, when they were together, able to be with each other without thousand of eyes watching; she regretted not cherishing the moment more.

Unbidden, tears sprang to Katniss' eyes: for what she had, lost, and could never get back. She swallowed a sob and blinked, cursing herself. Peeta needed her to be in the present, not wallowing. He was dangerously close to something - a break-through, a flashback, she had no idea, but she needed to be cautious.
"Are you okay?" she asked. His shoulders were still tense.

"Yea," he answered, after a pause. "Here, let me finish."

He put some antibiotic cream on the gauze, and placed a square of it on the cut, then wrapping medical tape around her wrist and in the space between her thumb and fingers to keep it in place. Katniss exhaled; he seemed better now.

"There, you're good." He didn't let go of her hand.

"Thank you," she smiled. Her eyes flicked upward. "You still have flour in your hair."

Peeta reached a hand up and laughed.

"I meant to take a shower, but then I got distracted by someone bleeding all over the kitchen."

She laughed too "Well, you had plenty of time before that. You were just humming at the sink instead."

The next question spilled out of her mouth without a thought. "What were you singing?"

"The Valley Song," he answered. Then he paused.

"You sang that song when we were in school?"

Katniss' eyes grew wide. We just dodged a flashback; why did I ask him that?

"Real."

"And your voice - the birds stopped to listen."

"R-real," she stammered. His eyes were growing dark, his mouth hard. "Peeta, please, let's -"

She made to get up, but he was still kneeling in front of her. She realized that he hadn't let go of her hand. "Peeta -"

"And that's when I - that's when I fell in love with you."

He looked up at her. His eyes were stormy now, looking for an anchor.

"Real," she gasped out. His hands had clenched, and her cut was stinging all over again.

At her gasp he looked down, his eyes softening. "Oh! Oh, Katniss, I'm sorry."

Her eyes filled with tears, again unbidden; today was not a good day for her emotional well-being. Her hand hurt, but it was her heart that was causing the most pain; the happiness that could have been ate away at her. He was remembering happy times she cherished, but wanted desperately to forget. She had never been a crier, but the absence of the Peeta she had known left a gaping hole in her psyche, especially when his presence was so constant. She loved him, really, truly loved him and to know that now and not be able to tell him, to keep it bottled up so that she could spare him some pain, any pain, made her ache. How he must have felt when she was unsure of her own feelings gnawed at her- she could have given him everything he deserved, but now it was too late.

A tear escaped and fell, landing on his hand.

"Katniss?!" he yelped, releasing his grip and rubbing the back of her hand. "I am so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."
He looked so guilty, so ashamed and so broken in that moment that couldn't help herself. She reached down and touched his cheek, gently moving his head to look at her.

"Peeta," she sniffed, her voice thick. "Peeta, it's not my hand. You didn't hurt me - I've just been thinking a lot and have a lot on my mind."

He leaned into her hand. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you. I can't, I -"

Her hand never leaving his cheek, she clambered off of the toilet and knelt next to him. He turned to her.

"Peeta, you didn't hurt me. You aren't hurting me. I just - I just can't seem to stop hurting myself."

He covered her hand on his cheek with his own and sighed deeply, his face emptying itself of tension but filling with concern. He met her eyes again.

"Don't hurt yourself. Please."

"I can't stop," she whispered, the words tumbling out. "All I think about, all I focus on every day is how I can't bear to hurt you again."

She rubbed her thumb along his jawline, feeling the stubble. She how his skin felt under her fingers; she had wanted to be near him for so long, it was intoxicating.

"Katniss, you haven't hurt me."

She didn't respond, but bowed her head. Another tear escaped.

He let go of her bandaged hand and wiped away the tear with his thumb, his hand lingering on her cheek. Her breath hitched and the skin under his hand tingled, the nerve endings on fire.

"Katniss," he breathed, his head moving closer to hers. Their foreheads bumped lightly.

More tears. "Katniss, why are you crying?"

The pain in his voice broke her. She couldn't let him think she was crying because of something he did, that he was in any way responsible for this. Before the final battle, when the Rebellion was in full swing, she had been mad at him, for being different, for being cruel, for being aware of exactly how horrible she was. But that had long since vanished. None of this was his fault.

"I don't want to hurt you," she whispered.

"You won't," he breathed. "Please, tell me."

She pulled back slightly. His hair was still covered in flour, and his forehead was wrinkled with worry. His eyes were searching her own for some sort of signal, for any sign that she was okay.

She had never been good with words. She kept everything bottled up until it exploded. There was no way she could express the breadth and depth of what she felt. She had to show him.

She leaned forward.

"Katniss, what -"

Her lips met his. He stiffened, and she shrank back - but then he was kissing back.
She drank him in - he was kissing her, his hands were on her waist, he was really, truly kissing her. Her heart felt like it would burst through her chest. She had wanted this, wanted him for so long. And he was here, holding her, his lips on hers.

She felt him pull back and she opened her eyes. His face was inches from her own, his eyes closed.

She paused. A small part of her brain reminded her that this was different, that she needed to be cautious, careful. She shifted - and he hugged her to him, burying his nose into the space between her neck and her shoulder.

Neither of them said a word for a few moments. Then she pulled back.

"Peeta - "

She was cut off by him kissing her, fiercely, hungrily. Her head spun; his kisses were dizzying, nothing like she had felt before.

His hands brushed her hips as she trailed her fingers down his spine. He pressed his hands into the small of her back, pulling her closer. She leaned into him and ran her fingers through his flour-y hair.

He pulled away again. She began to protest, until she felt his breath at her throat.

His lips brushed impatiently at her neck, her hand pressing him closer. A low moan escaped her lips, swollen & red from his hungry, almost feral kisses.

He let out a moan of his own. It echoed in her ears, silencing the small part of her brain that was telling her to slow down, that it shouldn't happen like this.

"Katniss," he whispered, the last syllable stretching into a hiss.

His breath caught. In an instant, he had let her go and was standing up, his whole body rigid. He clenched his eyes shut, covering them with his hands.

She scrambled to her feet, head still swimming from his kisses. "Peeta?!"

Oh no.

"Katniss," he hissed again. He grabbed the back of his head and cried out. A strangled yell burst from his lips and he lumbered from the room.

"Peeta!" she screamed, lunging after him. She was quick, but he had a head start; by the time she reached the bottom step, he had fled out the front door.

No, no - what did I do, what did I do?

She took off after him, looking around wildly. She had no idea where he had gone; he had never fled during a flashback before. Options flashed through her brain, and he had just made up her mind to get Haymitch when she heard a crash from Peeta's house.

She bolted towards it, stopping at the front door. It had been torn off the top hinge.

Shit, Peeta - please be okay, please be okay.

She entered the foyer tentatively. She heard a crash to her left, in his sitting room; she ran to it, to him. She paused in the entryway. He was leaning on the far wall, a broken picture of him and his parents at his feet. He had wrapped his arms around himself and was muttering to himself.
She approached quietly, unsure of what to do. She needed to make this right, make him better. It was her fault.

A floorboard creaked beneath her feet. He stiffened again, stood right, eyes still slammed shut.

"Peeta?" she tried.

"Katniss? Katniss, what are you doing here?!" He lurched forward, not opening his eyes. He reached the cabinet that held the television and grabbed a door so tightly Katniss heard it crack.

"Peeta, please - "

"Katniss, get out of here! Get out!" he roared, ripping the door off and snapping it in two.

She panicked; backing up she muttered apologies over and over and over. She stumbled over the threshold, caught herself, then tore out of his house. It wasn't until she reached her own and had stopped in her kitchen, half of it still covered in flour, that she realized she was crying again.

She tore up the stairs, leaving the door wide open. In her bedroom, she flung herself on the bed, burrowing under the covers, her boots still on.

She was supposed to protect him, protect the boy she loved from her caustic, corrosive presence in his life. And what had she done? She kissed him, touched him, did everything she swore she wouldn’t, and sent him spiraling into a flashback.

She still felt his kisses on her lips, and she groaned. She had hurt him again; she was always, forever hurting him, and he deserved so much better than her mucking up his life again and again.

She laid in her bed, the same two words on loop in her head: my fault, my fault, my fault. The sky grew dark and the sunlight faded; soon, rain began to pelt the windows. She shuddered. The memory of his voice, pained and frightened, pierced through her.

She lay shivering, alternately sobbing and panicking, torn between wanting to go find him, help him and knowing that her presence would only make it worse. He had told her to get out; the least she could do was listen.

Hours crawled by. As morning turned into the afternoon and then to evening, she quieted, numbed by her own stupidity and thoughtlessness. That morning, they were at least friends. Now she didn't know if he even could be in the same room with her. Now, she may have broken him completely.

The rain continued to pour. A large clap of thunder shook the house.

When it was over, she heard his voice.

"Katniss?" Peeta called. She heard him shut the front door. "Are you here?"

She shuddered and burrowed deeper. She couldn't see him. The shame, the guilt - all she could think to do was hide, keep him from finding her.

“God, katniss, why did you leave the door open? Where are you?”

She stifled a sob that was bubbling up her throat. She couldn't bear the concern in his voice.

She heard him move around downstairs, the movements increasingly frantic as he searched for her. She clenched her eyes shut when she heard his uneven footsteps on the stairs, then open the doors to the other rooms, until finally pausing in the doorway to her own.
"Katniss," he murmured, "please be in here, please - "

Another clap of thunder, this time followed by lightning.

His footsteps moved toward the bed. She felt his hand touch her back. Even through the comforter, his touch made her skin tingle. She shivered, suppressing another sob.

"Katniss!"

He grabbed the covers and gently pulled the off of her. She tried to protest but no sound came out.

He sat on the edge of the bed, gathering her to him. She didn't, couldn't resist as he pulled her onto his lap, wiping the tears from her cheeks. He gently pulled her head to rest on shoulder.

"I'm so so sorry," he whispered into her hair.

She gasped for air, muttering apologies over and over again, flinching away.

He stroked her hair, pulling her toward him again, "Katniss, why are you apologizing? You have nothing to be sorry for."

He moved his hand and rubbed her back. Apologies were still spilling from her mouth.

"Why are you sorry?"

"For hurting you. For before. I can't stay here, I can't cause you any more pain," she croaked out.

"Before?"

"The - the flashback."

He shook his head as another flash of lightning lit up her bedroom. She shifted off of his lap and onto the bed, and he grabbed her hands. She tried to jerk away.

"Katniss, do you not want me to touch you?"

"I do, but I don't want to hurt you. I don't-"

"Want to cause a flashback. You think that the stuff before - what we were doing in the bathroom - that that caused it."

She nodded miserably.

"It didn't."

"But I kissed you, and-"

"Katniss, this time I was back in the pipes below the Capitol and the lizard men were coming after us. They kept hissing your name. And I whispered your name. I triggered it, not you."

He rubbed the back of her hand with his thumb. "I remembered the lizard men and how they were coming after you. I couldn't let them get you, but I couldn't stop them. And then I heard you call my name and I thought that you were going to get hurt."

The words he had roared echoed in her head - "Get out of here! Get out!"

"You didn't cause it Katniss, you didn't hurt me. I did. I was terrified of losing you and I lost control.
I am so sorry I scared you. I didn't mean to; I thought I was protecting you, in the twisted, fucked up way the Capitol left me with. I'm so sorry - did I hurt you?” He asked, shame and worry twisting his voice.

She shook her head.

He breathed a sigh of relief. "I couldn't live with myself if I did it again. It might kill me. I never want to hurt you again - and I really can't tell you how sorry I am for scaring you."

Her eyes searched his face; his own were open wide, searching hers. She felt her shoulders relax and the anxiety ebb as she realized he wasn't lying.

"Forgive me?” he asked.

She nodded.

He let go of her hands and drew her back into him, her upper body resting on his chest, his chin on top of her head. This was real, it wasn't a dream, it wasn't going to turn into a nightmare that woke her, screaming at the top of her lungs. He was holding her, and he was okay. He wasn't lost in a world of flash backs and pain. She was still scared - not of him, necessarily, but of what the flashbacks could do, to him and to her. But there was a feeling of completion, of being whole, and she allowed herself to relax into him. She shivered again, her entire body tingling.

"You okay?"

She nodded again.

He chuckled softly. "You can talk if you want to, you know."

She nodded, trying to suppress a smile.

He started to rub her back again. She was so relaxed, so enjoying the feeling of not being on guard and on watch for once that she didn't realize it when his fingers began brushing her sides.

Once, long ago during the Victory Tour, on one of those nights when he slept in her bed to battle the nightmares together, he had been rubbing her back to calm her and had accidentally rubbed her side, near her ribcage. She had erupted into uncharacteristic giggles. He was the only person who knew she was ticklish; he was the only person who had ever gotten close enough to know after her father died.

Now, he was using that knowledge to full effect, his fingers dancing across her ribcage.

A laugh burst from her lips, its warmth melting away the lingering numbness. Another laugh followed the first and then she couldn't stop; she was writhing on his lap, gripping his shirt with both hands as she giggled uncontrollably.

Suddenly, she was laying on her back. Peeta had slid her off of his lap and onto the pillows. He lay next to her on his side, still tickling her.

Soon, it stopped; she opened eyes she hadn't realized she had closed and saw him looking at her. His face was flushed and he was smiling at her. It was a wide genuine, happy smile that she hadn't seen since before the Quell. Her breath caught in her throat. Against all odds, he looked happy.

"I love hearing you laugh like that," he murmured.
She turned her body towards him, laying on her side. They were inches apart, and her whole body continued to hum with longing, to touch him again. But she stopped herself; she couldn't get past the fear that she had been living with for months. She shouldn't touch him again without being completely, totally sure that she wouldn't lose him and send him spiraling into his own private hell with a touch, look, or whisper.

He watched her face settle into worry.

"Katniss, talk to me."

He reached out and touched her hair, fingers playing with a lock that had fallen loose when she was tickling her.

"What are you thinking?"

She breathed in and out deeply.

"I'm - I'm scared, Peeta."

"Of me?" He looked crestfallen, and her heart lurched.

"No, of hurting you." He opened his mouth to argue, but she plowed on. "I know you said this one didn't happen because of me. But what if the next one is? Or the next? I can't put you through more than I already have."

He stroked her hair. "Katniss, you haven't been the trigger for any of my flashbacks since I came back to Twelve."

"But what if me holding your hand makes you remember something? What if kissing you, or hugging you, just me humming makes things worse?"

He gently placed his hand on her cheek, his thumb caressing the skin.

"Do you want to do those things?"

"What things?"

"Hold hands, kiss, hug?"

"Yes." Her hand reached up, covering his. "But-"

He leaned forward so their foreheads touched; she inhaled sharply.

"I want you to, too. I've wanted to hold you, kiss you, everything we never got a chance to try, because there was always something bigger than ourselves hanging over our heads. But now it's us, here, with no Games or Tour or Quell. I have loved you for so long, Katniss. Even when the Capitol tried to destroy it, they couldn't - they warped it, used it against me, but I never stopped. It was always there, it stayed with me. I've loved you from the moment you sang the Valley Song and I'll love you long after we're both gone."

He stroked her cheek. Her heart was racing, her brain was singing.

"I know that there are no guarantees. I know these flashbacks will come for the rest of my life. I can't promise you that you will never be the cause."

He paused, and she reached out a hand to touch his cheek.
"But I can promise you that I want this, and that not being with you would hurt worse than anything."

For a moment, the world stopped. Everything she wanted, everything that made her complete, made her happy in the wake of the rebellion and its ugly aftermath was lying in front of her. But months of suppression, of ignoring and pretending and pushing away were hard to override, and she was still so cautious. She always had been.

"Katniss?" His voice was pained. "Say something."

I'm not very good at saying something, she thought.

She kissed him. He responded in kind, his hand sliding to her neck to pull her closer, the other pressing against the small of her back.

He rolled onto his back, taking her with him so that she was lying on top of him, bodies flush together. She felt his lips leave her mouth and press against her closed eyelids, tenderly.

"I thought you would never love me again," she whispered.

"But I do. Always."

She opened her eyes. Their gazes locked. "Always."

Then she crashed her mouth down onto his. He gave a muffled moan and pressed gently on the back of her head, deepening the kiss. His tongue touched her lips and she parted them.

His fingers traced her spine from her neck down and she arched her back, pressing the length of her body into his. He moaned again, then rolled them both over so that he was on top.

She gasped and he pulled his head back.

"Is this okay?"

"Yes."

He kissed her again, then brought his hand up to her breast, stopping just before touching it.

"Is - is this okay?"

Her insides were swirling; anxiety and desire were roiled together in a giant ball, but she knew that she wanted this. She wanted more than this.

She nodded.

He lowered his hand and kneaded gently. The fleeting thought that crossed her mind - that this must be how the bread dough felt - was erased as little waves of pleasure rippled from her breast to her core.

She made a noise of satisfaction, and he smiled.

"Should I stop?" he teased.

She shook her head, then lifted her head up. If he was going to be bold, then she was too.

Her lips brushed at the exposed skin of his neck, starting at his jaw and trailing downward, where
she gently nipped at his collar bone.

She heard his sharp intake of breath and did it again, this time eliciting a deep moan. She felt something harden against her thigh.

"Katniss," Peeta choked out, his voice breathless. "We should slow down."

She pulled away from his neck and looked at him in confusion.

He looked back up at her. "I just don't want to rush into things and ruin it. It - it feels like we are only just starting to be okay, and I don't want the pressure of this to break it apart."

His eyes flicked downward. "How do I know you'll be here when I wake up? That you won't run away, even if it gets hard? That you'll stay?"

She hadn't, before. After Peeta had arrived in District 13, hijacked and traumatized and broken, she ran. Ran to District 2 and got herself injured, then refused to have anything to do with him until the invasion of the Capitol.

She was always running from the emptiness that the loss of him had created. Then the hole had gaped wider with every new loss: Finnick, Prim, Gale, her mother. She had returned to District 12 as a shell, hollow.

Then Peeta had returned. Being with him was healing her. It was watching him plant the primrose bushes the day he arrived. It was laughing with him as Haymitch attempted to catch an escaped gosling. It was chatting about nothing - anything - when Greasy Sae served them stew. It was coming into her kitchen and seeing him at her sink, completely at ease and at home. Like he belonged there.

She reached up a hand and stroked his cheek. She wanted him in ways she didn't know she was capable of wanting another person. She felt warm and golden, complete and whole. She belonged here, with him, his arms around her. She belonged here, where she could taste the peace that had eluded her for so long.

She gently tilted his head, drawing his eyes back to her face. Doing would not be enough - she needed to say it, to put into words what she had felt but never spoken.

"Because no matter what happens, it's always you. You are always here, even when I don't deserve it. You the one I want to be with, the one whose arms I want to be in. I couldn't run even if I tried - you are part of me. I've stayed because I need you. And I always will be."

She kissed him gently. As it ended, he held her face in his hands.

"You love me, real or not real?"

Nothing holding her back, nothing giving her pause. The only thing that mattered in the world was that she was with him, lying with him.

"Real."

He pressed his lips to hers, and she could feel his smile as he kissed her. Soft, fluttery kisses traced her lips and jawline, then trailed down her neck. Between each, she could hear him murmur the same three words.

"I love you."
She answered back every time.

"I love you too."

She felt her skin growing hot; his kisses had left a trail of heat, and before she could think properly, she was sitting up. He backed away as she took off her t-shirt in one swift motion, exposing a white bra.

She swore he gulped audibly. He sat up, then leaned forward and trailed kisses down her shoulder, following the scars. She wound a hand into his hair. One of his hands cupped her breast and she moaned softly.

He drew her onto his lap so she was straddling him. She arched her back as he nipped at her collarbone and kneaded her breast. She reached down and grabbed the hem of his shirt. Pulling upward, she made him pause as she lifted it over his head, then tossing it onto the floor beside her bed.

She leaned into him, relishing how his bare skin felt against her own. He was deliciously warm. She traced her fingernails down his back and he shivered, drawing her downward to touch his lips to hers.

Her tongue brushed his lips and he parted them, deepening the kiss. She reached behind her back and unhooked her bra. She tossed it in the same direction as her shirt, then looked down at him.

His eyes were dark and shining, and he was smiling wickedly up at her. He leaned back onto the bed, shifting himself so that he was lying on the pillows. She glanced down and smirked with a sudden idea; she bent down to placed a kiss right below his belly button, where a trail of fine, blonde hairs began then disappeared in the waistband of his pants. He arched his back as she languidly moved upward, her lips gliding over the planes of his abdominal muscles, then over his chest and up his neck, nibbling as she reached his jawline.

He clutched her to him, and she stretched, pressing the entire length of her body into his. He ground up into her, and she felt him hardening against her thigh.

He leaned forward and placed a kiss between her breasts, and she gasped. She tugged at his waistband and he paused, looking up at her.

She had no experience with this; before the Games, she had never so much as kissed a boy, and Peeta had never done more than kiss her when they shared her bed during the Tour. As far as she knew, he wasn't experienced either. It wasn't as if they didn't know how it worked or what to do; the Capitol, surprisingly progressive, had explained the mechanics of sex and various forms of birth control in a mandatory class when they turned twelve. Looking back, Katniss saw why - no one wanted to risk reaping a pregnant girl and fermenting a riot. The Capitol mandated that every girl receive a birth control shot every three months until she was 18, and issued condoms to every boy.

"You sure?" Peeta asked. He was breathless, panting slightly as he looked at her.

She looked at his shirt and her clothes on the floor of her bedroom, at the rumpled comforter, then at the boy with the messy golden curls in her bed. She raced a hand downward and felt his length through the cloth of his pants, hard and pulsing. She felt a pull deep within her, a stirring of that warm and golden feeling that surged through her chest and settled between her legs. She leaned forward and nipped at his earlobe.

"Absolutely."
She tugged at his waistband again, and slid it downward, exposing deep green boxers. He reached down and slid them off all the way, then kissed her again, hungrily.

"Do you have something?" he murmured as he fumbled with her belt buckle.

She nodded.

"Hold on."

Climbing off of the bed, she padded into the bathroom. Her mother had kept extra condoms in her first aid kit, for when the Seam boys ran out. She grabbed one and reentered her room.

Peeta was laying on her bed. His eyes were closed - and he was completely naked, the boxers added to the ever-growing pile of clothes on the floor. He was fully erect, and held himself in one hand. His face looked tense.

"You okay?" she asked.

He opened his eyes and looked at her, then smiled. "Definitely."

She smiled back, then tossed him the condom. He caught it deftly. She unbuckled her belt slowly, aware of his eyes following her every move. She unbuttoned her pants and slid them down with her panties, and heard his sharp intake of breathe. She bent down to remove them completely, then straightened as she added them to the pile.

He was looking at her in awe, and she suddenly felt shy.

"Katniss," he breathed. "You're beautiful."

She forgot about the scars, about the burn marks and the skin grafts. He was looking at her in a way that made heat pool in her belly and she knew that it didn't matter what she looked like, as long as he looked at her like that.

She climbed into bed and laid on her side next to him. He kissed her again, deeply. Her hand brushed against the head of his penis and he jerked, groaning. She did it again, running her thumb along the head.

"Katniss, I need you," he panted.

She grabbed his hand and guided it between her legs; she was wet and he moaned when he felt it. "I need you, too."

He ripped open the wrapper and edged closer to her. She gasped when his penis brushed against her thigh.

"Careful."

He saw the fear in her face and reached a hand up.

"It's okay," he soothed, gently caressing her cheek. "I'm sorry, I promise I'll be careful."

He removed the hand from her face, looked down and rolled the condom on, pinching the end.

He felt her tremble and looked back up at her. Goose pimples rose on her arms and legs, and her eyes were closed.
"We can still stop," he murmured.

She shook her head and opened.

"I'm just a little nervous."

"We'll go slow," he promised. He kissed her forehead. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Come here," he urged, and she moved so that she was on top of him.

She could feel his erection against her thigh, the lube from the condom cool and slick. She kissed his neck and ran her hands down his shoulders to his hips, tugging at them. He ground up into her almost instinctively and she ground back. She needed this, needed him inside of her.

"How-"

"You on top?"

She nodded and sat up, balancing on her knees above his erection. She looked at him, a smile on her lips.

He looked at her eagerly and she guided him into her. They gasped simultaneously as he filled her. She had never felt so full; it was a puzzle piece locking into place, and the sensation was heady.

She moved her hips slowly in a figure eight, stretching and easing herself into it, becoming comfortable with the fullness. Peeta's eyes rolled back into his head and he groaned. She did it again and felt him buck beneath her.

"Katniss," he breathed, his voice almost a whine. "Please-

She began to move up and down, and after a few strokes he joined her, pumping as she rode him. It was slow at first. Each thrust left an almost satisfying ache deep within her, pushing her closer and closer to an edge she hadn't known existed.

His hands were on her hips as he thrust. He pumped faster and she matched. She moaned. The anxiety ebbed and ceased as she felt Peeta within her. The edges of her vision were blurry with a golden haze, as the warmth between her legs and deep within her belly began to spread. Without thinking, she grabbed one of his hands and brought it to her mouth. She kissed his fingertips and he moaned; with sudden inspiration, she licked his index finger, placed it in her mouth and sucked on it. He cried out.

"H-harder," she panted.

He complied, panting as he thrust harder up into her, his eyes never leaving her face. She began to rock faster, and they both moaned, echoing each other. Nothing had ever felt this good.

She felt herself teetering over that edge deep within her. He rubbed his thumb over her clit and suddenly she was gone, her mind swirling as stars burst behind her eyes. Her vision swam; her hands tingled and her legs felt like jelly as the warmth flooded through her. She felt like she was made of molten gold - and when she cried out, she felt him release.

She laid down on his chest, feeling him pulse deep within her as she buried her head in the crook of his neck. He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her back lazily, breathing hard.
They lay wrapped up in each other as the aftershocks rolled through them, basking in the afterglow. Katniss made a noise of contentment as their heartbeats slowed.

When she opened her eyes, he was smiling at her, the widest smile she had ever seen. She smiled back, and he kissed her.

"We made love. Real or not real?" he whispered dazedly.

"Real. Definitely real."

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