The Lover and the Best Friend

by writersblock700

Summary

When Katniss is forced to marry Peeta after the 74th annual Hunger Games, she longs for the life she wants with Gale. But when the unexpected happens and everything is called into question, she has to face the possibility that she may lose the man she loves forever.

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Chapter 1: Star-Crossed Lovers

It was the type of night he usually enjoyed. The charcoal sky above District 12 was riddled with stars that winked at the earth below. It was March, early spring, so the chilly evening air made for good sleeping weather under warm blankets. And for those like Peeta Mellark who were wary of the stillness of night, the wood frogs provided a soothing chorus.

But he couldn't rest. No matter how hard he tried, he could only wonder where she was. Katniss. His wife.

Five months ago, Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen disembarked the train from the Capitol to a cheering District 12 crowd. They'd won the 74th annual Hunger Games, the first time in Panem's history that there were two victors. Peeta had admitted to the entire nation that he was in love with Katniss. And in the arena, when she nursed him back to health and kissed him ardently in a cave, he and all of Panem thought their 'star-crossed lovers' moniker was real.

But it was not real. She'd acted for the cameras. And before they'd stepped off of the train and returned to District 12, Peeta realized heartbreakingly that they weren't on a path to becoming lovers. They weren't even friends. He moved into the stately home next door to hers in Victor's Village with a new survival strategy: avoid Katniss Everdeen at all costs.

That lasted about 24 hours.

He was at his kitchen table, slicing into a loaf of pumpernickel when his phone rang. It was Katniss asking him to come to her house immediately. Her voice sounded strained; he was hopeful that he would arrive to find some need that required a (sober) man's strength (that would eliminate Haymitch). Even if it were something as simple as fixing a faulty lock or lifting a heavy piece of furniture. He just needed her to need him.

He didn't expect to see President Coriolanus Snow seated in Katniss's den, stroking the tail of Prim's cat. What President Snow said next made Peeta lightheaded. Rebellion in the districts… because of Katniss's defiance… the actions of a girl in love with her fellow tribute… she and Peeta were to be married immediately… a grand Capitol wedding in two weeks.

"Let me be clear," President Snow said gingerly, his voice an abyss. "You are not doing this for me. Oh no, dear children..." An image of Gale kissing Katniss behind the Hob flashed on the tabletop viewer. Then Peeta's father and oldest brother at the front counter of Mellark Bakery. Then Prim and Maura Everdeen picking fresh herbs in the meadow. Even Delly, Peeta's best friend, swinging her arms lightheartedly as she walked home from school. President Snow's voice lowered menacingly. "You're doing it for them."

They both sat in shocked silence for nearly an hour after President Snow left. Prim brought the ringing phone to Katniss; Effie Trinket was on the other end, chirping about planning her nuptials to Peeta with less than two weeks to make the arrangements. Peeta stormed out and returned to his home where he put his fist through a wall. She didn't need him. She didn't want him. And now, she would be forced to marry him.

Cinna, Portia, Effie and the rest of their prep teams arrived the next day. Peeta contacted his family and asked that they meet at his house immediately after closing the bakery. Peeta's mother was thrilled by the news because she saw opportunity in her son's impending nuptials.

"Daniel, we could sell wedding cookies as favors for months," Nance Mellark said excitedly. "We'll
make a lot of money from the Merchants who wish they could attend the big wedding."

But Daniel Mellark solemnly watched his stone-faced youngest son as Portia examined the fit of his ivory-colored suit. Daniel was Peeta's confidante, and Daniel already knew that his son was heartbroken over Katniss's deception in the arena. This elaborate wedding and fake marriage would only deepen his pain.

President Snow sent a camera crew to film the excitement leading up to the big wedding. The camera crew followed Katniss, Peeta and their immediate families for four days, taping their scripted "private" conversations and watching as Katniss tried on a series of wedding dresses that were never meant to be the dress. Every evening once the cameras finally stopped filming, the star-crossed lovers quickly retreated to their respective homes where they locked themselves in a closet or bedroom and wept bitterly.

President Snow spared no expense on the wedding. The most ornate church in the Capitol decorated in glistening white mini-lights, elaborate ivory and gold décor and fragrant flora that reached halfway to the vaulted ceilings. Dignitaries in matching cobalt stoles with Panem's seal stitched on the front. The wealthiest Capitol citizens in their pastel-colored skin and attire. Capitol children holding figurines of Katniss and Peeta in their Hunger Games uniforms.

Peeta waited at the front of the church with his father as his best man, Katniss's wedding band in Daniel Mellark's coat pocket. Prim walked that extremely long center aisle as the sole bridesmaid, Peeta's wedding band tucked into her palm.

Peeta had practiced his facial expressions for this day so his face wouldn't betray him in front of all of Panem. After all, this wasn't a joyous occasion; he and Katniss were doing this under duress. Then the church doors parted and she stepped into view on Haymitch's arm. And through some miracle, Peeta managed to live the next few moments without a beating heart. The sight of her stopped it, and he wasn't acting when tears streamed down his face as she approached.

When they returned to District 12, Katniss moved into Peeta's home. For the first few weeks, Katniss played by Snow's rules. She only left home for a solo trek into the woods and it would seem that she and Peeta were behind closed doors so much because they were enjoying each other as newlyweds.

But in reality, he was sleeping in the downstairs guest bedroom and she was in a secondary bedroom upstairs. They barely spoke, rarely ate together, and they very often cried in isolation.

Then one day, she was defiant again. She spent her Sundays hunting with Gale and they traversed the Hob during the week when his 12-hour shift ended in the mines. She would usually return home around 7 p.m., just before nightfall.

She and Peeta had several heated arguments about her actions. She was being selfish and endangering everyone, he'd shouted. Snow wasn't going to hurt anyone because he needed them all to advance his star-crossed lovers agenda, she'd argued. They ended up slamming doors and widening the chasm in their relationship. Shortly before New Year's, Haymitch sat them both down for a stern talk. Snow was always watching, Haymitch cautioned, producing a nauseatingly perfect long-stemmed white rose that was on his doorstep that morning. Snow's silence shouldn't be mistaken for lack of surveillance.

Peeta brokered a truce with Katniss. He apologized for resenting her actions in the Games. He thanked her for what she did to save both of their lives. He told her he only hoped that they could be friends and survive their new lives outside of the arena.

Her eyes softened and she said, "I'd like that."
There was much improvement in the months that followed. They made an effort to eat dinner together every night and they each took turns asking questions about one another—a learning process. They planned walks into town, holding hands to show Snow and anyone watching that they were indeed a couple. Her tormented screams sent him running to her bedroom one night, and she asked Peeta to stay with her and hold her while she slept. They migrated to the king-sized bed in the master bedroom upstairs.

Peeta went on a personal mission to make her laugh more often, and he was winning. With each smile, she warmed up to him and he let down his guard gradually slip. They were surviving and becoming friends. This was working.

But in the past two weeks, there had been a marked difference in Katniss. She was again aloof, distant, and short with Peeta. She'd been avoiding their walks into town and she started coming home after nightfall. And now, as Peeta turned again to watch the stars from the open bedroom window, it was after 11 p.m. on a Sunday, and Katniss still hadn't returned.

The clock on the nightstand mocked him with each passing minute. She'd left home at daybreak to hunt with Gale. The previous Sunday, she'd been gone all day but returned home around 8 p.m. Technically, if Gale was her "cousin," as Snow told everyone, there was no harm in them spending time together on Sundays, which was Gale's only day off from working in the mines. Ironically, Sundays were Peeta's only day off from Mellark Bakery, where he continued to work for his parents.

He couldn't stand it any longer. He flung the covers off his body and trotted downstairs to call Maura Everdeen. Maybe Katniss had gone to her mother's instead. It didn't even matter, so long as he knew she was safe.

The phone receiver was in his hand when the front door creaked open. Katniss trudged in, a scowl shaping her lips when their eyes met.

"Hey," Peeta said, his voice tinged with concern. "I was just about to call your mother to see if you went there for the night."

"Why?" she shrugged, brushing past him into the kitchen and half filling a glass with water.

Peeta followed, staring in disbelief. "Katniss, it's almost midnight and you hadn't made it home. I was worried about you."

"I can handle myself, Peeta," she snapped. "You don't need to worry about me."

Peeta dragged his hand roughly from his forehead to his chin. He'd had enough with this silly and potentially dangerous game she was playing.

"What's going on, Katniss?" he said pointedly, his tone causing her eyes to snap to his. "You and I were doing fine the other week and lately you've been treating me like I offended you and I don't even know what the hell I did."

She rolled her eyes, gulped her water, and placed her empty glass in the sink.

"I've had a full day and I'm in no mood to argue with you, Peeta," she said, tightly, brushing past him toward the living room. Peeta reached for her arm and she spun to face him, yanking her arm away.

"What are we arguing about?" Peeta stretched his arms in exasperation. "I would love to know what I did or what I'm doing to cause you to treat me this way."

Her gray eyes glowered. "Not everything is about you, Peeta. Do you realize that all of this," she
circled her hands in the air, "is your fault? Because you told all of Panem about your so-called feelings for me, we had to get married and live this farce!"

Pain and confusion vied for control of Peeta’s face as he stood there, his mouth agape.

"So-called feelings? Farce?" He stepped closer to her, his anger surfacing. "Katniss, I've been nothing but honest with you. In fact, I'm the only one in this house who's been nothing but honest."

She had a response on her lips but clamped her mouth shut at his words. He was right; she'd lied about her feelings for him during the Games and had broken his heart in the process.

"And where is all of this coming from?" Peeta demanded. "It sounds like someone else is filling your head with these thoughts."

She found her voice again. "Don't you dare bring Gale into this."

"I never said who, Katniss. You just told on yourself." He mounted the first two stairs and then glared over his shoulder. "Let's try to make to the next reaping in six months. Then hopefully someone else will have the Capitol's attention and you and I can quietly annul this – what's that word you used? – oh yeah, this 'farce' of a marriage."

She watched him until he was out of sight and jumped when the bedroom door slammed shut.
Chapter 2: An Evening at The Hob

If morning sunlight weren't so rude, Katniss could have slept longer. But the translucent rays were dancing insistently on her eyelids, prying them open.

She rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand, realizing that she hadn't had a nightmare. Instead, she had that recurring dream where her father, James Everdeen, was taking long strides to greet her after his shift ended in the mines. But this time, the figure she thought was her father turned out to be Gale. Like her father, Gale wrapped her in his arms and spun her in circles.

She sat upright, forcing her eyes to focus on her surroundings. She was in Peeta's house – what she was now supposed to refer to now as 'their house' – and she was on the three-seater couch against the window that faced the fireplace.

Memories from the night before flashed through her mind like scenes from a Capitol drama. The furrow of his brow as he clutched the phone receiver in his hand. The ire that must have illuminated her pupils when she accused him of manipulating her and all of Panem. The anger mounting his face before he took to the stairs. His unexpected words that shook her to the core: Let's try to make it to the next reaping in six months... you and I can quietly annul this 'farce' of a marriage.

She fingered the delicate necklace her father had given her for her 10th birthday, an heirloom from his mother. That was what she wanted, right? An annulment. If she and Peeta weren't married, she would be free to continue what she and Gale started before the Hunger Games interrupted their lives – even if they had to do it in secret for a while.

Still, if an annulment was the end goal, it didn't produce the feeling of hope that it should have, something she could hold onto like a gem and gaze at whenever she needed to be distracted or reminded. Instead, remorse doused Katniss like ice water. Her careless, insensitive words were an arrow that shot straight to Peeta's heart.

8:49 a.m. The silence in the house was deafening. There was always a stillness, a loneliness here. The clock above the fireplace was a prime example. Katniss had the same clock in her house, above the fireplace. The Capitol hadn't put much thought into varying the décor or layout of the homes in Victor's Village. But at her house, the clock made an insistent ticking noise with each jerk of the second hand. Here, the clock did its job in silence.

"8:49," she said aloud.

He'd probably been at the bakery for the past three hours, helping his father prepare breads and pastries for the merchants and Justice building officials who stopped by on their way to work. By the looks of it from where she sat in the living room, the kitchen was untouched from the night before. She wondered if he skipped breakfast to avoid waking her, interacting with her.

Katniss pulled herself from the couch and shuffled to the hall shower upstairs. She peeked into the master bedroom; the bed was made, and Peeta's pajama pants were neatly draped over the side of the loveseat against the opposite wall.

"Life goes on," she told herself before shutting the bedroom door and heading to the shower down the hall.

As the hot water rinsed the remorse from her bones, she couldn't stop thinking about her conversation with Gale the day before. He'd been so disparaging toward Peeta, increasingly so over
the past few weeks.

Gale. Her Gale.

Hours after she'd returned to District 12 from the Games last fall, she met Gale at The Hob and they sat outside at the deserted back entrance eating a piece of fudge like they'd done so many times before. Gale told her in no uncertain terms that he wanted to be more than her best friend.

"I'm sorry I didn't say anything before, but I thought you and I had more time to let things build slowly." He stared intently into her eyes, pleading with her to understand. "But you can't deny that you felt it too, Katniss. You already knew that we were becoming more than we'd ever been before."

He was right. And she nodded and leaned into his kiss, allowing his arms to wrap possessively around her waist.

President Snow was in her den the next day. Telling Gale about Snow's house call was one of the hardest things she ever had to do.

Snow had seen their kiss behind The Hob. He knew that Katniss and Peeta were not the star-crossed lovers that they professed to be in front of the cameras. And now, the girl on fire had to make a choice. Either she quieted the growing rebellion in Panem by convincing everyone that her defiant actions in the Games were those of a teenaged girl in love with her fellow tribute, or she and Peeta would be placing the lives of their families and loved ones – including Gale and his family – in imminent danger.

They couldn't have that conversation behind The Hob. Katniss walked Gale deep into the woods before she told him.

"So what does this mean?" he asked with furrowed brows. "What does Snow want you to do? Visit the districts? Talk to the rioters?"

She stared at the trees for several minutes, unable to speak. "I have to marry Peeta," she said hoarsely. "Our wedding is in less than two weeks."

She couldn't watch as Gale raged against the earth, angrily kicking, throwing, destroying whatever he possibly could. When he finally slumped to the ground, his head in his hands, she inched beside him and they held each other, crying silent tears for hours.

With Effie's planning and connections and Cinna's prowess with fabric, Peeta and Katniss's wedding was pulled together in a matter of days. It had taken nearly two weeks for them to return home after the Games. Then, two weeks after they returned to District 12, Katniss and Peeta and their immediate families were boarding a train to the Capitol for the big Everdeen–Mellark wedding.

The ceremony was absolutely stunning. And absolutely contrived. At least it had been for Katniss. When Peeta recited his vows, tears streaming from his eyes, she knew he meant every syllable of his promise to love and honor and protect her for as long as he lived. And just like Gale's rage, Peeta's sincerity was painful to watch. Still she felt worse for Gale who was probably forced to watch the wedding on one of the monitors in the mines or in the town square.

It was so very unfair, to all involved.

When Katniss first returned from her wedding, Gale's comments about Peeta were callous but fairly benign: You're the real victor, Katniss. He's pathetic. He would never have survived in the arena without your help. He knows that. We all know that.
Then, his comments became more vitriolic.

It's all an act, Katniss; Peeta is a manipulator. He's still playing the game. I know how those merchant men think. You'll always be a Seam girl to Peeta and he's trying to get in your pants. Don't trust his good-guy act. I bet he's already bragged to his brothers and his friends that he finally got what he wanted.

And most recently: This is all Peeta's fault. If he hadn't professed his so-called feelings for you to all of Panem, you and I could be together. Instead, you and I have to play along with your farce of a marriage.

Katniss knew she should have defended Peeta, but she always lost her nerve around Gale. So instead, she allowed herself to be convinced by Gale's 'Peeta-Mellark-Conspiracy-Theory.' And now, as she stepped out of the shower and slid into her warm bathrobe, she felt entirely foolish.

Still, she looked forward to seeing Gale that afternoon when his shift ended. They'd made plans to meet at his mother Hazelle's house where Gale lived with sister, 4-year-old Posy, and brothers, 10-year-old Vick and 12 year-old Rory. The six of them spending time together would provide a nice diversion to her real life, and she could still be seen going home to Peeta.

She finally started to relax. She would just have to take her life one day at a time. And at some point, she would have to make sense of what she wanted to happen in the next six months.

Katniss walked up to Mellark Bakery, hoping to see Peeta through the window. Instead, Nance Mellark stood at the counter, her shoulder-length brown hair hidden beneath a scarf.

Katniss groaned. Nance had made her disdain known for all things Everdeen during their train ride to the Capitol for the big wedding. She disliked Katniss because with her dark hair and gray eyes, Katniss looked like a girl from the Seam and Nance's blonde-haired, blue-eyed Merchant son was in love with her. She disliked Maura because she once dated Daniel Mellark. She even griped about Prim, the least threatening person in all of Panem, because the 12-year-old offered her an enthusiastic greeting one morning on the train. According to Nance, "No one should be that perky this early in the morning."

Nance wasn't much nicer to her own family. She had a reputation in District 12 for losing her temper with her three sons, Thatch, Rye, and Peeta, whom she'd been known to hit with her open palm or with a rolling pin when they were younger.

Katniss would always remember being 11 years old, starving, and in search of food scraps in the Mellark Bakery trash bin. Nance Mellark ran her off, and Katniss made it as far as an oak tree in front of the bakery where she collapsed from hunger. Then Peeta walked out with two partially burned loaves and tossed them to her instead of feeding them to the pigs. It was an act of compassion that many adults in District 12 hadn't mustered for a hungry child whose father had recently died in a mining accident.

When Nance saw what Peeta did, she stormed out of the bakery, rolling pin in hand. The next day in physical activities class, Katniss saw the indigo bruises on his forearm and shoulder. His concern for her had cost him.

Another icy tingle shot down Katniss's spine when she realized that Peeta's concern for her was still costing him. His happiness. His peace of mind. His leg, part of which was amputated after an attack in the arena where he shielded her from a fellow tribute's knife that sliced into Peeta's thigh instead of slicing into her.
Katniss squared her shoulders and approached the door. She owed Peeta an apology. And that was more important than avoiding Nance.

The bell hanging from the top of the door chimed. Nance looked up, ready to offer the standard smile and Mellark Bakery greeting. Her lips twisted in annoyance when she saw it was Katniss.

"Is Peeta here?" Katniss asked quietly, not bothering to greet Nance. She never returned the greeting anyway.

"No," she said curtly before walking to the back of the bakery, out of sight. Katniss pursed her lips and rushed out the door.

Peeta lobbed his keys on the kitchen table and washed his hands in the sink. It had been a particularly busy day for him, as he was tasked with making all of the deliveries in town.

When he first returned from the Hunger Games, his mother had repeatedly mentioned that they needed a motorized cart for all the deliveries they needed to make for the bakery. There actually weren't a whole lot of deliveries normally: the occasional birthday party, baby shower, social gathering, Peacekeeper function. But he offered to purchase a cart with his winnings from the Games. It was an amenity his parents would never be able to afford otherwise.

Today he was glad they had the cart. His leg would have been aching if he had to make the numerous trips to and from the bakery by foot. Plus, his mother wanted him to make the deliveries. She was still peddling her Capitol wedding cookies from his and Katniss's wedding.

His brother Thatch usually made the cinnamon-flavored shortbread cookies that were dusted in powdered sugar. Thatch convinced Peeta to try one of the cookies once, about four months ago. Despite his mother's distasteful gimmick, the cookies were pretty good.

When the work day finally ended, Peeta walked home from the bakery with three loaves of wheat berry bread, and when he got home, he started a vegetable stew that contained carrots, leeks, potatoes, green beans, and tomatoes. Even with all of her hunting with Gale the day before, Katniss hadn't returned with a single piece of game. That wasn't lost on Peeta.

Soon, the savory smell of the stew filled the entire house. He ladled stew into three containers. One container and a loaf of bread went to Haymitch, who bit into the loaf as soon as Peeta handed it to him. The two other containers of stew and a loaf of bread was for Maura and Prim, who lived in Katniss's old house next door.

Despite his weak relationship with Katniss, Peeta had developed a solid relationship with Maura and Prim Everdeen. Since his marriage, he'd spent many days alone in his house. Maura and Prim would sit and talk with him on his porch, or he would stop with bread or to see if they needed anything done around the house.

"I love your vegetable stew, Peeta," Prim said excitedly when he set the containers on their kitchen table. Maura nodded in agreement and asked him to stay and have dinner with them. But he declined the offer because he had some things to take care of around the house.

Back at his kitchen table, Peeta ate his stew and bread in silence. He deliberated about whether or not to put some into a bowl for Katniss, but he decided against it. She would probably eat with Gale anyway.

Peeta let the remaining stew cool and put the entire pot in the refrigerator. After dinner, he threw a small pile of shirts and slacks into the laundry, changed a few air filters around the house, tightened a
door knob on a bathroom cabinet door, and cleaned up the kitchen. As his clothes were drying, he
turned his attention to an unfinished painting on the screened back porch where he often awaited the
sunset.

Around 10 p.m., Katniss still hadn't made it home. But after their argument the night before, he didn't
expect her anytime soon. Peeta knew Katniss wasn't in love with him, but he hoped they could at
least be friends. That didn't seem likely at this point. Now, all he could do was pray that President
Snow wasn't watching too closely. At least there hadn't been any more white roses left as warnings.

He shut off the lights on the back porch and was halfway upstairs when the phone rang. Prim's voice
was panicky on the other end.

"Peeta, someone just called and said they saw Katniss collapse near The Hob. We have go get her."
Prim had barely finished her sentence when the phone dropped from Peeta's hand.

*Katniss collapsed near The Hob.*

He'd heard more than enough.

In a matter of seconds, his boots were laced and he was rushing out the front door, shoving his arms into the sleeves of his jacket. Maura and Prim waited anxiously on their front porch. The elder Everdeen clutched her medicine bag to her chest like a lifeline. The younger wrung her hands for warmth and chewed nervously on her bottom lip. Apparently, no one bothered to call Haymitch, who was usually completely drunk by this time of night.

The biting night air stung their cheeks like tiny pin pricks. Parts of the path to town were dimly illuminated by streetlamps and other parts were completely dark. But they could walk this familiar road with their eyes shut, and any uneasiness about what could lurk in each stretch of darkness was swallowed by fears of what could have happened to Katniss.

Peeta's mind raced with the troubling news set to Prim's voice.

*Katniss collapsed near The Hob.*

Why did she collapse? She was in good health, despite the wear and tear the Games inflicted on her body. He needed more information. He needed to strategize. If there was one valuable thing he learned from the Games it was how to strategize with meager resources and minimal information.

"What exactly did the caller say?"

Prim recounted the story, starting with the ringing phone that she'd run downstairs to answer and the man's voice on the other end saying that the "victor girl" had passed out behind The Hob.

"Did he say anything else? Anything at all?"

Prim gnawed on her lip as she considered Peeta's questions. "Oh! He said Greasy Sae told him to call."

Maura huffed a short sigh of relief, her breath forming a cloud in the night air. Greasy Sae was as much a fixture in District 12 as the woods that surrounded the district. The older woman from the Seam was a good soul, barely more than five-feet tall with a haggard exterior. She was known to be a tough bargainer at The Hob, and her hearty bowls of stew usually included meat from game Katniss killed.

To watch Katniss and Greasy Sae interact was fascinating. After years of bartering game for bowls of stew and supplies, the two could communicate with very few words. But, they also shared an unspoken camaraderie and mutual respect. On the evening after Katniss was reaped, Greasy Sae stopped by the Everdeen household with two bowls of stew and a few supplies donated by other traders in The Hob who had been moved by Katniss's sacrifice to save her sister. Greasy Sae sat on the tattered couch with Maura while she held a handkerchief to her eyes, her shoulders heaving with each sob. Greasy Sae never spoke, and a few minutes later, she stood and quietly exited the house.
Maura needed to see Katniss for herself, but she felt relieved knowing that Greasy Sae was there.

But there was no relief for Peeta. His mind raced with unanswered questions.

Why was she behind The Hob this late at night? Why was she alone? Where the hell was Gale? Didn't he have the decency to at least walk her back to Victor's Village since he kept her out so late? What happened to her? Was it Snow? Dear God, please don't let it be Snow.

If Snow harmed her, I'll kill him myself.

As they neared town, Peeta communicated his strategy. Maura would perform a cursory check to gauge Katniss's condition. Depending on the severity, they would either take her to Hazelle Hawthorne's house nearby so Maura could administer immediate medical attention, or they would bring her back to Victor's Village. Prim would talk to Greasy Sae to get more information about what happened and what Katniss had been doing before she collapsed. That information could be useful in treating her. Peeta would carry her.

"The most important thing once we know that she is okay is to get her out of public view," Peeta said. "She's a recent victor, so she's got the nation's attention. Word will spread fast about whatever happened tonight, and we'll need to shield her as soon as possible."

Their anticipation rose as they neared the old ramshackle warehouse; they began to jog toward the crowd that formed an arc at the often-deserted southern exit of The Hob.

"Everybody stay back please, stay back." They could hear the Peacekeeper Darius's voice as Peeta pushed through the thick crowd, Maura and Prim in tow.

Darius, a younger Peacekeeper, was well liked in District 12, unlike the Head Peacekeeper Cray who had a penchant for Seam prostitutes.

Peeta emerged at the center of the arc first, and his mouth dropped open in disbelief. She lay prone on a patch of grass only a few inches from the concrete, her legs and arms spread-eagle. But that wasn't what shocked him – or Maura or Prim as they emerged through the crowd. Gale was lying face down on top of Katniss, his body partially covering hers. The distinct smell of alcohol radiated from where they lay.

Peeta's entire strategy stalled as he stared dejectedly at his wife. She was drunk. She'd put herself in a compromising situation. With another man. In public. Peeta stood immobilized, a familiar constricting pain in his chest.

Maura lowered beside Katniss and Gale, checking their pulses and crawling around them to lift their eyelids and examine their pupils.

"What happened tonight?" Maura said, glancing over her shoulder at Darius and Greasy Sae. Just then, Gale's mother and brother parted the crowd and rushed over, gasping at the sight and smell before them.

"I had to get Posy and Vick situated before we could leave. What on earth happened?" Hazelle Hawthorne said, clutching her son Rory's wrist for support.

"Bottom line, Katniss and Gale and some other miners were having drinks at Ripper's," Darius said. "Gale was becoming belligerent; he'd probably had too much to drink. Katniss stood up to leave, and stumbled out the back door of The Hob. Gale got up a minute later and followed her. By that time, I'm told that a few people were already coming to get Sae because they saw Katniss collapse. By the time Sae got out here, Gale had also passed out, on top of her."
Hazelle’s shoulders slumped. Gale’s father, who died in the same mining accident as Katniss’s father, had been a good man, but he’d been far too fond of alcoholic drink. At least Emory Hawthorne’s problems were kept behind closed doors. Gale’s public display was far worse.

Other voices came from the front row of the crowd. "I saw her come stumbling out The Hob. She passed out right there," said a short, pudgy guy from the Seam who pointed to the spot where Katniss lay. "Good thing she wasn't on the concrete. She could've hit her head."

"Yeah," said another Seam man, slightly taller with rosy cheeks and a pot-belly. "And her friend stumbled out a minute later and fell on top of her."

Darius looked between Hazelle and Peeta. "We didn't want to move either of them until Maura arrived, just in case there were other injuries. Especially with Katniss being a victor. As a Peacekeeper, I'd hate to do anything to make either of their conditions worse," he lowered his voice, "even if this just seems to be a case of public drunkenness."

Maura stood and nodded discreetly, confirming Darius’s assessment. "They're fine. It's as Darius said."

The two men from the Seam were close enough to hear them, and they started to joke with one another.

"I guess you can go all the way to the Capitol, but you can't take the Seam out of a person," the pot-bellied man laughed heartily. "Yeah," the pudgy man cackled. "Maybe she wasn't star-crossed after all. Maybe she was just drunk!"

Greasy Sae stepped closer, scolding the two men who immediately stopped their banter.

Embarrassment covered Maura, Prim and Hazelle's faces. Rory lowered his eyes.

But Peeta was now livid. He had half a mind to turn and walk away, to leave her lying on the cold ground. But he wouldn't do that to Maura and Prim. So a new strategy was suddenly in effect – remove himself from public view before he lost his composure.

"Darius, please clear this crowd," Peeta said tightly. The Peacekeeper began dismissing the onlookers.

"Mrs. Hawthorne, Rory. Can you pull Gale off of Katniss and carry him home, please?"

Greasy Sae drafted the two Seam guys to help Hazelle and Rory lift Gale, and the four of them carried him further into the Seam toward Hazelle's house. Then, Peeta rolled Katniss onto her back and scooped her in his arms. He began the walk back to Victor's Village. Maura and Prim ducked their heads as they followed him through the still dispersing crowd. They were halfway to Victor's Village when Maura broke the silence.

"Thank you, Peeta," she said quietly. It was an apology. "No problem."

He refused to look at Katniss who dangled in his arms, his anger escalating with each step. By the time they reached Victor's Village, he was sure his blood was at a steady boil.

"Prim, please open the door to your house."

Prim stared at Peeta in confusion. "Mom said she checked out okay. Aren't you taking her home?"

"No. I'm not," Peeta said tersely. "I don't want Katniss in our home in this condition. She'll have to
stay at your house or with Haymitch."

There was an authority in his tone that made Maura and Prim refuse to question him. So he laid Katniss on the living room couch in Maura's house. Then, he walked out the front door, his fists clenched at his side.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks for reading this story! I am having fun writing it, and I definitely have a plot in mind with some surprises in store. Reviews are welcome. Happy reading!
Chapter 4: Lost and Found

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter is longer than any of the others thus far, and it was a doozy to write and edit. But hopefully it advances the story. I hope you enjoy.

She was again on the living room couch with the sunlight forcing her awake. Only this time, Katniss was yanked into reality by the unbearable pounding in her left and right temples.

She squeezed her eyes shut and with a hoarse groan, she pressed her palms to either side of her head. She instinctively knew that she wasn't on Peeta's couch. She was home – at the house she once shared with her mother and Prim.

"Maaahm." Her voice strained as she called for Maura and tugged at the comforter, struggling to sit up.

Then she felt it. The burning sensation of bile surging from midway her chest to her throat. Her eyes flew open as she pushed off of the couch. But in her haste and disorientation, her foot caught in the comforter, and she landed unceremoniously on her hands and knees beside the coffee table.

She didn't have time to mourn over the pain. Gagging, she crawled and stumbled to the downstairs bathroom and lifted the lid on the toilet seat just in time to vomit into the porcelain bowl.

Maura entered with soundless footsteps. Katniss only heard the squeak of the faucet, the running water creating a backdrop to the sound of her retching. It seemed like an eternity passed before she could slump miserably beside the toilet. Her mother extended a damp wash cloth.

"Good," Maura said brusquely. "You're up."

Katniss looked like the snow creature District 12 parents told their children about when they were old enough for scary bedtime stories. Her raven-colored hair, oily and limp, was in stringy disarray around her face and shoulders. Her olive-hued skin was clammy and ashen. Her lips were chapped, and her gray eyes were clouded with confusion. She lay on the cool tile floor in hopes that the room would stop spinning.

"What happened, mom?" she croaked. "Why am I here?"

Maura reached over and flushed the toilet, her face devoid of sympathy.

"Well, my dear, you and Gale got so drunk last night that you both passed out on top of one another behind The Hob," Maura said matter-of-factly as she half-filled a glass with water. She swung open the medicine cabinet above the sink and began inspecting three pill bottles.

"Oh no," Katniss groaned, pulling herself to a sitting position on the floor.

"Oh yes," Maura retorted, setting the bottles down and folding her arms across her chest. "Your sister and I got a phone call after 10 p.m., from someone who saw you pass out. So Prim, Peeta and I —"
Katniss winced, looking pleadingly at Maura. "Please tell me Peeta doesn't know about this."

"He went with us to get you," she said pointedly. "And he carried his drunken wife whom he found lying underneath another man all the way here. He was too angry to take you home. And I don't blame him."

"No, no, no." Katniss buried her head in her hands.

"Oh that's not the best part, Katniss. The best part was when two guys from the Seam started making fun of you. 'You can't take the Seam out of a person. Maybe she wasn't star-crossed. Maybe she was just drunk.'"

Katniss's shoulders slumped as tears of humiliation welled in her eyes. Maura spoke slowly and with emphasis.

"Do you have any idea how embarrassing that is for me and Prim and Peeta? Do you have any idea what your father would say if he could have seen you?"

Katniss sobbed now, warm tears creating paths down her cheeks. "Mom, I'm so sorry," she mumbled. "I don't know… I don't know how this happened."

Maura let her cry for a moment before she responded.

"Katniss, you've been through a lot – too much even – and you've done your best to handle it all. I get that," she said, nodding. "But you're not the only one. Peeta has been through just as much as you. And whether you appreciate it or not, that boy loves you and would move heaven and earth to make you happy."

"I know," she whispered amid snifflies.

"Then why do you hate him so?" Maura pressed. "You treat him like he's your enemy."

Katniss squeezed her eyes shut. She wasn't sure which hurt more – her headache or her heartache from the pain she'd caused.

"I don't hate him, Mom. I'm just upset." She fiddled with the edges of the wash cloth. "He started this whole 'star-crossed lovers' thing and now we're forced to be married, and Gale and I can never be together."

Maura jerked her head back in realization, a short burst of laughter escaping her lips.

"Gale?" She unfolded her arms and placed her hands on her hips. "You're talking about the Gale who had years to ask you to be his girlfriend, but he only became romantically interested in you once Peeta expressed his feelings. That Gale?"

Katniss's lips parted but she was too stunned by her mother's words to form her own.

"Katniss, I've been loved by a good man, so let me tell you something about a man in love. When a man wants you, he will risk his life, his sanity, his health, his wellbeing, his money, his time, his everything to make you his. Gale has only operated as your best friend because that was all he wanted you to be. Now, he realizes that he's waited too long, and he's probably trying to convince you that his lack of action is somehow Peeta's fault."

Maura turned back to the medicine bottles. "Don't get me wrong, Katniss; Gale has a lot of good qualities. But right now, he's manipulating you and you're falling for it."
Katniss was still stunned when Maura knelt down with the water and two tiny, pink pills, instructing her to swallow them.

Katniss’s mind raced with questions. *Is Gale manipulating me? There is a mutual attraction between us, yes, but would he have asked me to be his girlfriend if I'd never been reaped? What if Peeta never said he had a crush on me; would Gale have wanted to be with me then or would we have gone back to being friends as usual?*

Maura watched Katniss’s face contort in confusion. She lowered to the bathroom floor with a sigh.

"Honey, you can always come home to me, no matter what. You're my daughter and I want you to have all you want in this life. But I hope you know what you're doing when it comes to your treatment of Peeta. I think he can accept that you don't love him. But that's no reason to disrespect him, to hurt him. I don't think he'd ever do that to you."

Katniss broke, her entire body shaking with her sobs as she buried her head in her hands.

"I've made a mess of everything, Mom," she mourned.

Maura stroked Katniss's arm.

"You can still make things right. Talk to Peeta. Who knows what will happen in the future? Maybe you'll learn to love him. Maybe you two will be allowed to part ways in a few years. But right now, you both need to be able to live together in peace. Leave the war in the arena."

The medicine Maura gave Katniss worked wonders on her headache and nausea. And as they sat on the bathroom floor talking for another hour, Katniss also began to feel better emotionally. When they finally stood, they embraced. Both the conversation and the hug were long overdue.

Katniss didn't expect that level of strength from her mother. She'd already defined Maura Everdeen as weak, passive, helpless. But as she listened to her mother's wisdom – and accepted her mother's apology for the period of time when Maura was in the catatonic state that almost caused them to starve to death – Katniss realized how strong her mother had become. Maura's sheer will to live and to be a part of her daughters' lives was worthy of respect.

Maura made breakfast for Katniss and straightened up the living room while she ate. Then, Maura headed into town for apothecary supplies and groceries. Katniss headed upstairs, hoping that a hot shower would help her piece together the night before.

She'd never been drunk in her life. She remembered drinking the night before, but she didn't remember any tipsy feelings of intoxication. But was that how it worked? Maybe drunkenness hit like a tidal wave. One moment you're on the shores of sobriety and the next, you're caught in a rip current, stumbling and collapsing in public places.

Haymitch would know. She would go talk to him. And maybe he'd spoken to Peeta since the incident. If so, he would have a sense of how angry Peeta was and whether or not he could ever forgive her. Plus, it had been a few days since she'd seen Haymitch, so she needed to lay eyes on him. He'd been unusually reclusive lately.

Later, she would try to talk to Peeta. Her mother was right. Regardless of how she felt in her heart or how they acted behind closed doors, she and Peeta were legally married. And she'd been acting like a single woman.

Katniss stood at the bathroom sink and, out of routine, she reached behind her neck to unclasp her
necklace. She always removed it before she showered and replaced it after she dried. Even when they were starving, Katniss refused to barter it. And during the Games, she would only entrust it to Cinna, even though the mentors were tasked with securing their tributes personal effects. The necklace, a tiny opal at the center of a delicate sterling silver chain, was a family heirloom, a gift given to her father from his mother, and the most valuable thing she owned.

And it was gone.

Katniss's eyes flipped to the mirror above the sink to confirm what her fingers felt. The necklace was missing. "Oh no," she whispered, anxiously patting her chest. She immediately dropped to her knees, scouring the bathroom floor, but it wasn't there.

*Don't panic, Katniss. Don't panic. It's here somewhere. It has to be.*

She spent the next two hours on hands and knees, frantically searching the entire house and the front and back porches. The necklace was nowhere to be found.

*I must have lost it at The Hob last night... while I was drunk.*

She swore under her breath. Anyone who found it would surely trade it.

She darted back upstairs and showered as quickly as she could. One outfit she still had at her mother's house was a long-sleeved, navy-colored jersey dress that flared at the waist and reached to the back of her knees. It was one of the few items in the wardrobe Effie sent home with her from the Games that wasn't completely conspicuous in District 12.

Katniss didn't waste time braiding her hair. Instead, she quickly brushed it and gathered it into a damp ponytail. She slipped on her boots, slung her messenger bag across her body and rushed out the front door.

Best case scenario, she would find her necklace on the path into town. Maybe it fell off after they carried her from The Hob.

Worst case scenario she not only lost Peeta's respect; she lost a piece of her father, forever. And with Gale's motives under scrutiny, Katniss feared that the men who formed her past, her present, and her future could exit her life all at once.

Nature had done its perfect work yet again. The air smelled more like mountain laurel than coal dust and the woods was reclaiming its verdant canopy. The temperate weather was a welcome departure from the brutal cold that chastised District 12 and its residents only months before.

At one time, a walk outdoors in the spring was all it took to change Katniss's mood from sullen to hopeful. But that was before she was reaped. Now that President Snow knew her by name, Katniss understood that hope was a hoax in Panem. Snow ruled with oppressing force, regardless of the season.

After a fruitless search at Maura's house, Katniss started the trek into town in hopes of finding her necklace. She wasn't far from Victor's Village when she met her mother whose eyes grew sympathetic when Katniss told her the necklace was missing.

James Everdeen had been so excited that their first child was a girl. He talked of giving their daughter his mother's necklace as a 10th birthday gift. Opal Everdeen had died suddenly when Maura was six months pregnant with Katniss, so the grandmother and child would never meet. James had hoped their little girl Katniss would have Opal's resilience and independent spirit. If not,
she would at least have her necklace.

Katniss already knew the story, and the importance of that piece of jewelry. There was no replacing it. She would never forgive herself if she didn't find it.

Maura offered to walk back into town with Katniss after putting away the groceries and apothecary supplies. They moved quickly and were on the path toward town in a matter of minutes, their eyes sweeping the ground for any glint of the silver chain. At one point, Katniss thought she saw the petals of one of Snow's immaculate white roses, but they were just torn bits of fabric. Her lips curled in disdain. The fear of white roses would have to postpone its terror until she was asleep. She couldn't handle much else at the moment.

When they reached The Hob, they searched the perimeter of the warehouse and then stopped at every booth inside, moving their fingers about their necks like a pendulum as they described the look and length of the necklace. No one had seen it or traded for it. Maura left her phone number at every booth and asked each trader to call if they found it.

They finally left The Hob, empty-handed. Maura feared that this new sadness in her daughter's eyes was permanent, adding to the sadness that was already there.

"It's gone, Mom. I've let him down. He gave me the best he had, and I let him down."

*I'm such an idiot. I'm no good to anyone, not even my father's memory. I wish I'd never made it out of the arena. Peeta should have won. I shouldn't have shared the nightlock."

"Katniss?"

She jerked her eyes to her mother's questioning gaze and tilted head. "Huh?"

"I was asking where you went before going to The Hob on last night. Are you okay?"

Katniss swallowed hard and nodded. "Umm... Yeah. Hazelle's house. I went to Hazelle's house to wait for Gale's shift to end."

"Do you remember having it while you were there?"

Katniss chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip. Posy always commented on her necklace. She always said when she's a big girl, she will have a pretty necklace just like Katniss's.

"Yes!" Katniss said suddenly remembering. "Posy noticed it like she always does." She turned to Maura, her eyes wide with optimism. "Mom, do you think I lost it there? While I was playing with Posy and Vick?"

Maura smiled. "There's only one way to find out."

They walked farther into the Seam where the Hawthorne house stood, a dilapidated structure that was clearly inadequate for a family of five. Hazelle and Posy shared the sole bedroom. Rory and Vick slept behind a curtain – a makeshift bedroom – on a mattress. Gale slept on the floor or, when it was deathly cold outdoors, on the worn couch in the living room.

No one was home. It was approaching 2 p.m., and Hazelle was probably still at a merchant's house doing laundry or ironing clothes, Posy at her thigh. It was all the work Hazelle could find until Posy started school in the fall. Then, the slender woman who gave Gale his eyes and grin had hopes of finding better work with steady pay.
"I bet the necklace fell off while you were here," Maura said reassuringly. "We'll call Hazelle later this evening and ask her to search her house."

It was implied that Katniss and Gale should not be seen together until the public drunkenness incident blew over. Katniss already planned to keep her distance; she could hear Haymitch's voice in her head saying that Snow was always watching.

Katniss nodded, trying to latch on to the optimism in Maura's eyes. "Okay. We'll call Hazelle later tonight."

Maura lifted her arms slightly and let them flop at her sides in resignation. "I guess we should head back now."

But Katniss stood with her back to the Seam, facing the Merchant side of town. She turned to Maura. "Mom… Could we walk farther in?"

Maura looked perplexed. "Do you think you came all the way into the Merchant Quarter on last night?"

"No," Katniss said quietly, staring forlornly at the ground. Maura understood.

"Of course we can, honey."

Minutes later, they were approaching Mellark Bakery. Katniss stopped abruptly along the side of the building, just shy of the entrance.

"What if he hates me, Mom?" She looked helplessly at Maura. "After everything… I would hate me."

Maura smiled sympathetically. "I think Peeta would literally have to lose his mind in order to hate you, Katniss." They stood in silence for a moment, Katniss wrestling with doubt.

Maura linked arms with her. "Besides, we have an excuse. You want to apologize to Prim, and what's the best way to make Primrose Everdeen smile?"

Katniss grinned. "Strawberry shortcake."

"Come on."

The bell above the bakery door announced their arrival. The front of the shop was vacant; there wasn't even a Mellark at the register. The sound of quick footsteps grew louder.

"Welcome to Mell—" Daniel stopped— in mid-stride and in mid-sentence— when he saw Katniss and Maura on the other side of the counter. He cleared his throat, awkwardly rubbing his floured hands on his apron.

"Katniss. Maura." He nodded politely in each direction.

Suddenly, Katniss lost her nerve. It would have been easier to deal with Nance's hostility. It would have even been better to face Peeta's disappointment, to search his eyes for any possibility of forgiveness. But Daniel Mellark? Katniss had always respected him for his fair trading, was always fond of him for his kind nature. She feared she'd lost his respect. Her voice cracked when she started to speak.

"Mr. Mellark, I want to apologize to you and Mrs. Mellark for the shame my actions on last night
brought to your family. I'm truly sorry, and it won't happen again. I promise."

Daniel's expression was unreadable at first, and the silence was thick. Then, he levied a gentle, crooked smile that was identical to Peeta's.

"Thank you, Katniss," he said genuinely. "Mistakes happen. All is well."

She didn't realize she was holding her breath until she exhaled loudly. "Is… Peeta here?"

Daniel glanced over his shoulder. "You just missed him. He and Rye went to make some deliveries."

He noticed that Katniss's smile fell. "He should be back in about 20 minutes… if you want to come back."

"Umm… No thanks. I'll talk to him… at home." At least she hoped she would. Depending on how angry Peeta was, she could be spending another night at Maura's house.

Sounds of running and laughter pulled their eyes to the bakery window. The first group of school children were making their way home – some to Merchant homes and others to the Seam.

"Prim will be heading this way soon," Maura said to herself. She turned to Daniel. "Dan, could we get a slice of strawberry shortcake for Prim? It's her favorite thing on earth besides her cat."

They all shared a laugh, which pushed aside any remaining tension. But now Katniss noticed a redness creep onto Daniel's neck. It only happened when her mother addressed him. The same blush appeared on the train ride to the Capitol for the big wedding when he and Maura spoke briefly. Everyone could hear Nance arguing with Daniel later that night from their sleeping quarters.

"Sure." He cut two slices of cake and Maura protested thinking he misunderstood. "The other one is for her friend," Daniel said with a knowing grin.

Maura and Katniss exchanged puzzled looks. He packed each slice of cake in a separate container and included a plastic fork in each. Daniel only charged them for one slice, and Katniss and Maura were out the door moments later.

When Maura's comment about Daniel's generosity went unanswered, she glanced at Katniss who was again deep in thought.

"Daniel will tell him you stopped by," Maura said knowingly.

Katniss nodded. Soon, they spotted Prim in the distance, walking hand-in-hand with Rory Hawthorne.

"Hey Hawthorne!"

Gale waited in line to punch his timecard when a familiar voice turned his head. Allister Canty was meandering his way through the line of miners, nodding politely at a few, until he stood beside Gale.

Allister, a thick-built man in his early 20s with sandy brown hair and brown eyes, warmly slapped Gale's back in greeting.

"Congrats on finishing the shift and mandatory overtime. You must be beyond tired."

Gale yawned, his eyes watering. Normally, he would welcome the chance at overtime pay. But he still felt a faint throbbing in his head from his hangover, and his body ached from exhaustion.
His morning began when his mother shook him awake an hour before he was to report to the mines, scolding and sobbing and begging him not to take on his father's habit. That could only mean one thing. He'd gotten drunk.

"Katniss," Gale had questioned Hazelle, interrupting his mother's lecture. "She was with me. Is she okay?"

Hazelle had drawn an aggravated breath. "Katniss is fine, Gale. You both got drunk and collapsed on top of one another outside The Hob. Her husband came and carried her back to Victor's Village."

Katniss had gotten drunk? Her husband carried her home? Gale wasn't sure what to think. He cringed every time someone referred to Peeta as Katniss's husband, but in that moment, he was glad Peeta found her – found them – together. So what if they were legally married? None of it was real.

Gale turned his attention back to Allister as they exited the mines. "Hey man, you were with us last night. I know I probably had too much to drink. But Katniss? I don't remember her drinking a lot."

Allister nodded ruefully. "She finished two glasses of brew after Thom left."

Thom Norwick, Gale's close friend had been with them the night before, but he'd only stayed a short time before heading home.

"Two large glasses?" Gale questioned in disbelief.

"Yeah," Allister nodded. "She kept drinking and staring at the table. She seemed to have a lot on her mind. Maybe she wasn't paying attention to how much she'd had."

Gale clenched his jaw. He knew that vacant look in Katniss's eyes far too well, and he blamed President Snow and Peeta Mellark.

"Yeah, she's been pretty unhappy these days." They walked in silence to the clank of their lunch pails. "So how did we end up on top of each other?"

"I think that was my fault, Hawthorne."

"What do you mean?"

Allister shrugged. "When I saw that you were hammered, I was going to ask her to help me get you home. Then, I planned to walk her back to Victor's Village to be sure she made it home safe. Honestly, I was hoping that once we made it to your house, your mom would insist that she say until her husband came for her."

Gale snorted. "Husband. Whatever. He needs her more than she'll ever need him. He's pathetic."

Allister stared quietly at the ground. "I saw the Games – we all saw the Games – and I always wondered if their relationship was real. She never looked… happy. Even though she seemed distracted last night, it was obvious that she wanted to be there with you."

Gale's brow furrowed. He wanted to tell Allister – to tell someone – that Katniss and Peeta's marriage was a sham. She wanted to be with him, not Peeta. It was all for show, for undermining a few riotous districts. But he couldn't say anything. He wouldn't betray Katniss's confidence. He'd already said too much.

"So then what happened?"
"Well," Allister began. "You said something about the Capitol and a conspiracy and she told you to shut up. She was clearly angry. About five minutes later, she said she wasn't feeling well and she jumped up and headed for the door. Not even a minute later, you were heading out the door behind her. I couldn't stop either of you and I assumed you were with her. So at that point, I just went home."

Allister lived alone in a small house not far from The Hob.

"I heard about what happened this morning. I felt bad because I should have stayed with the both of you."

Gale shook his head wearily. "It's not your fault. Thanks for being concerned."

"There's no need to thank me, Hawthorne. I wasn't much help."

They neared Gale's house.

"I guess none of us saw that coming. I just hope my mom gets off my back long enough for me to call Katniss and check on her. I'm sure there's a part two to the lecture she gave me this morning."

"Well if you want, I can run interference with your mom while you call Katniss," Allister offered.

Gale looked interested. "It won't be too much trouble?"

Allister shook his head. "Not at all. I'm just going to The Hob for a bowl of stew and then I'm heading home. And after last night, it's the least I can do."

The second hand on the clock counted another minute, advancing the hour to 7 p.m. It was already dusk outside and within the hour nightfall would completely cover District 12. Katniss sat on the couch, alternating between watching the robotic movement of the clock and glancing out the window to see if there was light shining from the house next door. Peeta still hadn't made it home. She felt a vacancy in the pit of her stomach that didn't come from hunger; it came from dread. He was avoiding her.

She tried turning her attention to something else. Her mind flashed to an image of her necklace. That was certainly no comfort.

Earlier that afternoon, Katniss placed a phone call to Hazelle Hawthorne. As with Daniel Mellark, Katniss apologized to Hazelle for her actions the night before. After a deep sigh and a brief lecture about the evils of alcohol, Hazelle accepted her apology.

Then she told Hazelle about her necklace, and Hazelle promised to have her entire household search for it. She called back an hour later. Katniss heard Maura on the second phone call. "Thank you all so much for looking, Hazelle. We do appreciate it."

Maura shook her head sympathetically when Katniss approached, anxious for the update. The necklace had not been found. She stood at the window now, resigned to the fact that her heirloom was gone. She fought silently against an immense sadness. She needed to save energy for her conversation with Peeta. Then later tonight, she could fall apart.

So Katniss replayed Prim and Rory's reactions to the slices of strawberry shortcake. Katniss didn't know the last time she saw Prim bounce up and down or a smile that wide on Rory's face. It was a redemptive moment on a day of shame, uncertainty, and loss. And she was at least grateful that as a Hunger Games victor she could afford to purchase something as simple as a slice of cake. It was the
things money couldn't buy that woke her in the middle of the night.

Rory ran off to share his slice of cake with his mother and siblings. Prim started eating her slice on the walk home, lifting her fork in offer to Maura and Katniss.

"No that's yours Prim," Katniss said. "I'm really sorry about last night."

"It's okay," Prim said resolutely, licking whipped cream icing from her thumb. "Just don't do it again, okay? That was scary."

Katniss smiled gently. "I promise I won't ever do that again, little duck." Katniss made a mental note to tease Prim later about being caught walking hand-in-hand with Rory.

Just then, the phone rang, shaking Katniss from her reverie. Maura and Prim were washing and drying the dishes from dinner. Katniss ran for the phone. Maybe someone had found the necklace.

It was Gale's voice on the other end. Katniss took the phone onto the back porch for privacy.

"Hey Catnip," he said quietly. He sounded absolutely exhausted.

"Hey," she said warmly. "Are you just getting home?"

"Yeah. Overtime."

Katniss felt a twinge of guilt. If Gale's hangover was anything like hers, he'd had an extremely long day. There was a moment of awkward silence and then they both apologized to each other for their behavior the night before.

"I guess I had too much to drink," Gale said sheepishly. "Get me talking about conspiracy theories when there's booze around and…watch out." He tried to joke, but Katniss could hear the concern in his voice.

"But I'm worried about you, Katniss. Honestly, I don't remember you drinking as much as you did."

Katniss's ears perked at his words. "What do you mean," she asked. She wanted to forget all about last night, but there were actual gaps in her memory.

"I thought you only had a few sips of beer, but you must have had more than that," Gale said. "When we first arrived, we were talking and you'd drank less than half of your brew. Thom and Allister came up, and Allister went to get him a brew and he took our glasses to get refills from Ripper. Thom didn't stay long and Allister came back to the table to join us. I remember you taking a few sips and staring at the table while Allister and I talked. At some point I got hammered, you said you weren't feeling well, and I tried to follow you. I don't remember either one of us passing out."

Katniss slowly shook her head. "You remember far more than I do, Gale. I remember not feeling well. And the next thing I know, I was waking up on my mom's couch."

Katniss pressed the side of her fist to her mouth, instantly regretting her words. Even in his exhaustion, Gale didn't miss a beat.

"Your mom's couch?" Gale questioned. "You didn't sleep at Peeta's last night."

Katniss hesitated. "No."

"What, is his Merchant blood too good to share quarters with a smashed Seam girl?" He said angrily.
"I thought that was how most Merchant men liked their Seam women."

"Cut it out, Gale," Katniss murmured wearily.

"Or maybe he had his way with you and then dumped you on your mom's couch when he was done."

"Gale – " Her tone rose warningly. She wasn't in the mood for this. He didn't seem to notice.

"What a high and mighty shit he is. He thinks he's so much better than you and –"

"Gale!" Katniss shouted so loud that she was sure Prim and Maura could hear her from the kitchen. There was immediate silence on the other end. Her words spilled out before she lost her nerve.

"Listen, I know you don't like Peeta. But I don't like it when you talk bad about him. He's been nothing but kind to me and he and I have been through a lot together. And like it or not, he is my husband. So lay off the insults. Okay?"

Gale huffed. "You can't possibly be that naïve, Katniss. What did he have to do to win you over? Cry? Bake cheese buns? You'll see that I'm right, and by then it could be too late to get me back."

The fire burning in her chest spewed from her lips. "I never had you Gale! Never! Stop trying to act like Peeta broke us up. I was only your best friend because that's all you wanted me to be."

"I can't do this with you tonight, Katniss. Have it your way. Just don't come running to me when Peeta Mellark makes a fool out of you. And he will make a fool out of you."

Then, he slammed the phone down. About ten minutes later, the phone rang again. She was still fuming, ready to continue their fight.

"Don't bother calling back unless you plan to apologize," she snapped.

There was a pause on the other end. Then an unfamiliar voice. "Katniss?"

"Umm… yes," she stammered. "Who is this?"

"This is Allister Canty," the voice said. "You and I met at The Hob last night when you were there with Gale."

Katniss shook her head as if to clear it. Allister worked in the mines with Gale and Thom. Why was he calling her?

"Yes?" she asked cautiously.

"I don't mean to bother you. I'm calling because I found a necklace just like the one you were wearing last night and I think it might be yours."

Katniss rushed into the kitchen where Maura and Prim were now creating elixirs from the apothecary supplies.

"I've got my necklace back!"

Maura and Prim looked elated.

"What? Where?" Prim asked.
Katniss was already slipping on her boots. "A friend of Gale's who was with us at The Hob found it. He asked me to meet him at The Hob, so I'm going to get it from him now before it gets completely dark outside."

"We can walk with you if you want," Maura said while screwing the lid on a bottle of eucalyptus oil.

"Mom, you've already walked all the way back into town with me today to look for it. I really appreciate all you've done. And Prim you have homework to finish before bedtime. I'll only be gone a few minutes. Maybe Peeta will be home by then. I'm still hoping to speak with him tonight. If he'll talk to me."

Katniss slipped on a cardigan that belonged to Maura. She knew she should have changed into a pair of pants to compensate for the chilly spring nights. But that would require going next door where nearly all of her clothes were and she didn't want to waste time. Besides, she would jog there and back and she wouldn't be gone long enough to need her jacket.

"I'll be back before you know it." Then she bounded out the side door next to the kitchen.

Getting her necklace back would be nothing short of a miracle. Maybe there would be another miracle in store for her relationship with Peeta.


Maura was reclining on the couch around 8:15 p.m., when a knock came on the front door. Peeta stood on the other side, a tired smile on his face.

"Hi Maura. May I come in?"

"Of course Peeta," Maura said warmly. He stepped through the door and Maura motioned to the living room but he declined.

"I'm not going to stay long," he said. "I just got home a few minutes ago. We had to do monthly inventory tonight and that takes forever."

"I can imagine," Maura said. "You all make it look so easy, but I'm sure there's a lot of work involved in running a business."

"Yes there is," Peeta nodded. Then, he stared at the floor, gathering his words. "My dad told me that you and Katniss stopped by while I was out making deliveries. He told me what she said."

Maura smiled softly. "She meant every word of it, Peeta. She feels terrible about what happened."

Peeta was again looking at the floor. "I know," he said, a bashful grin playing on his lips.

Maura marveled at how apparent Peeta's love was for her daughter. He wore his heart on his sleeve. Just like his father.

"Is she here? I was hoping to speak with her."

Maura furrowed her brow. "No she went to The Hob around 7:30 p.m. I expected her back by now. I guess she's running a little late."

"Oh."

"She kept checking to see if you were home," Maura quickly added, trying to dispel his disappointment. "She really wants to speak to you too."
A faint smile returned. "Well, when she gets back, please tell her that I'll be at home."

"I will."

Peeta headed to the front door. Then, he stopped abruptly.

"Oh! I almost forgot." Peeta reached into his pants pocket. "This is Katniss's necklace from her father. It was hooked to the sleeve of the shirt I wore yesterday. It must have come off when I carried her home. I just noticed it a few minutes ago."

Maura stared at the necklace, her mouth agape. The color drained from her face.

"What's wrong?" Peeta asked. Maura's throat was suddenly so dry that she had to swallow before she could speak.

"A guy who was with them last night called and said he found her necklace. That's why she went to The Hob, Peeta. She went to meet him and get her necklace back."
On her tenth birthday, he took her to a lake deep in the woods and taught her how to swim. It was exactly what she wanted: a full day of fun with her father, in their favorite place.

She didn't expect to receive an actual gift.

Katniss remembered James Everdeen's words on that May afternoon as he clasped the chain around her neck.

"This is an Everdeen family heirloom," he whispered furtively. "It's worth more than what money can buy." He made her promise not to part with it, unless she was giving it to her own daughter someday. When they returned home that afternoon, Katniss stood at the mirror, admiring it for hours.

Now, as she jogged the path leading to The Hob, she whispered a prayer of gratitude that all wasn't lost. If Peeta never spoke to her again and if Gale walked away, she would at least have one lasting comfort – a tangible reminder that she'd had a father who loved her.

Katniss reached The Hob in record time. Allister asked her to meet him at the busy eastern entrance. Seam residents mainly used this entrance. The occasional merchant and other infrequent visitors tended to use the main entrance, the northernmost doors at the front of the warehouse. The southern doors, where Katniss and Gale collapsed the night before, were exit only.

As usual, people were filing in and out of the eastern entrance doors. But Allister wasn't there. Katniss waited on a nearby concrete slab that doubled as a bench.

Her eyes lifted to the skies; in about 20 minutes there would be no trace of daylight. She didn't like walking the darker parts of the path to Victor's Village alone; Gale usually accompanied her to the village gates after nightfall. But given their fight earlier that evening – and because he'd worked 12 hours plus overtime on a hangover – getting Gale to walk her home that night was out of the question.

The wind was picking up, causing her ponytail to whip against the side of her face. But more intense than the wind were the stares and whispers of passersby. After last night's spectacle, she was the talk of District 12. Their whispers were infuriating, and she had half a mind to mount the concrete slab, announce that she was the drunk "victor girl" who'd made an ass of herself and her husband, and tell everyone to board the next train to hell. But her mother would surely hear about it when she traded at The Hob. And Katniss didn't need to get into any more trouble.

She stood as Allister approached several minutes later with an apologetic smile. He wasn't in his work clothes. Instead, he wore a dark blue thermal Henley shirt and black slacks. His hair was damp and neatly combed and his face looked freshly scrubbed of the soot that came from working in the mines.

_Did he shower before coming here? Why bother?_
"Hi Katniss," he said softly, a warm smile shaping his lips and eyes. "I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"It's fine," she shrugged, peeling her windblown ponytail from her face. He spoke again before she could ask for the necklace.

"I got my days mixed up." He spun on his heels and walked briskly down the side of the warehouse, away from the eastern entrance and toward the southern end of the building. Katniss's brow furrowed in confusion, but she followed behind.

"I'm meeting my future in-laws tonight," he said nervously. "So I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"Yeah, I'm in a hurry too." Katniss stopped walking before they reached the back of The Hob. "Where are you going, Allister?" she asked pointedly.

He turned and flashed a sheepish grin. "Sorry; I'm a bit frazzled. I guess I should explain. I found your necklace in the clearing as I was taking a shortcut to work this morning, so I hid it out there."

In the clearing? How the hell did it get out there? Did someone take it after I passed out? Regardless of why the necklace was in the clearing, his story made no sense. "It's a necklace," she said matter-of-factly. "Why not slip it in your pocket?"

"We're not allowed to wear jewelry or have it on our person in the mines."

That's right, Katniss thought. Her father could only wear his wedding band on his day off.

"I could lose my job if I got caught with it, and I didn't have time to take it back to my house."

Katniss eyed Allister guardedly. He had an easy manner and a seemingly kind disposition. But she had a nagging feeling that something wasn't right.

"Well, couldn't you have gotten it before you called me out here?"

Allister nodded. "That was my plan. But then I was reminded that I had to meet my girlfriend's parents tonight, and I needed to shower and get dressed."

The skies were darkening and Katniss was growing impatient. "Look Allister," she said frankly, "I really appreciate you contacting me. I'll wait here while you get my necklace. I really need to get home."

The reassurance in his eyes was disarming. He lifted his hands in a placating gesturing.

"Katniss, I understand your concern. I know you don't know me very well." He placed a hand momentarily on his chest. "But I'm a friend of Gale's so I can't be half bad. I found your necklace this morning. I couldn't take it with me to work; I would risk losing my job. But I wanted you to have it back, which is why I called you, why I didn't just trade it." He lowered his head. "Goodness knows I could use the money," he mumbled wistfully.

Katniss's expression softened. All Hunger Games victors were wealthy for life due to their generous winnings. But she would never forget the immense poverty of the days following her father's death and the fear that she and her mother and her sister would slowly starve because they lacked resources.

"Plus," Allister continued, "It's been a really long day for me with my regular shift and overtime, and
it would be so much easier if you would follow me out to where I stashed your necklace. From there, I can take a shorter path back to my girlfriend's parents' house and hopefully make a good first impression."

Katniss felt her doubts dissipating. He was Gale's friend. His reasons for not having the necklace with him made sense. He was already dressed to meet his girlfriend's parents. He had been honest enough to let her know he had the necklace instead of trading it. And she really wanted the necklace back.

So she ignored the voice at her core that told her something was wrong. Very wrong.

"Okay. Okay." Katniss pulled her cardigan tighter and folded her arms across her waist as the wind slapped her bare calves. "Just... walk ahead of me."

"Thank you," he said gratefully as he rushed toward the clearing, glancing over his shoulder when he spoke to her. "I know this is an inconvenience, Katniss. We should hurry. Gale wouldn't want you out too late by yourself."

She kept a safe distance. Katniss never had a reason to travel through the clearing so this was unfamiliar territory. The wide tract of land was littered with remnants of downed trees from stump to limb. Further ahead, the clearing diverged into multiple paths. She could see that the left most path led to a section of woods that was obviously sparse from overuse. She couldn't determine where the other paths led.

Allister chatted the entire time, mainly about meeting his girlfriend's parents. He said he planned to propose to her next year.

"Maybe I could get you or Gale to kill a wild turkey for the celebration," he said hopefully. "And we'll need to buy bread from your husband for the toasting."

"Uh, sure. No problem." Katniss was only half listening. She was starting to worry that someone could have found the necklace, that it might not be where Allister stashed it.

The gray shroud of nightfall was quickly blanketing District 12. Katniss and Allister were now approaching the point where the clearing diverged. The terrain had changed; the ground was rocky and harder to navigate.

She didn't realize where she was.

She grew impatient. "Are we getting close, Allister?"

Allister pointed ahead. "Right over here," he said. "Wait right there."

She stopped walking, and he rounded the right side of the path to an isolated area fortified by discarded coal waste. She shivered against the night air, a wave of relief washing over her when Allister gave a 'thumbs up' sign and jogged toward her with one hand cupped.

"Here it is!"

In that moment, she was relieved and distracted by the necklace that she thought was in his cupped hand. And she was completely vulnerable to the man who had lured her to a deserted area.

"Thank you, Allister," she said with extended hand. "I--"

Suddenly his body hurled against hers, knocking the air from her lungs as she collided with the
ground. Dazed and alarmed, Katniss hoped he'd tripped and fallen into her.

But he hadn't.

It took a split second for him to shove her arms above her head and secure both of her wrists in one of his large hands. Her eyes widened in fear. Gone were the diffident smile and humble demeanor. Now, wicked amusement darkened his features. He'd tricked her. And no one knew where she was.

"You son of a bitch!" she growled as she struggled to free herself. He pressed his free hand roughly to her mouth, and she inhaled his coal dust mixed with perspiration. The crags of the rocky terrain pressed into her back and scraped painfully against her calves.

"Finally, I've got you alone." He grinned darkly, rubbing his cheek against parts of her face not covered by his hand. "I've wanted to fuck you since the reaping. The way that dress hugged your body… I jerked off to visions of you in that dress every night."

She could feel the pounding of her heartbeat in her ears. She tried to calm herself so she could think, so she could recall every survival strategy she'd learned from her father or in preparation for the Games. First, get a sense of place. Then, determine the available resources. Finally craft an immediate strategy that moves you away from the point of danger.

But she couldn't think straight.

*How far am I from The Hob? Did anyone see us come out here? I can't free myself. Oh God, what am I going to do? He'll rape me! He'll hurt me!*

Allister moistened his lips with his tongue and lowered his mouth to her ear.

"I just want you to know that it's okay if you challenge me." His hot breath on her ear thickened the saliva in her throat. "I'll enjoy the struggle. But you should know that I always win."

*He's done this before. This was a sick game for him. I can't be a pawn in someone else's sick game.*

She screamed, but her voice was muffled underneath his palm. She fought as best as she could to break free, but she was only tiring herself. The huntress had become the hunted, and she was completely trapped in his snare.

His face was again inches from hers. "Now if you promise to be good, I'll move my hand away. Okay Katniss?"

She nodded. She would try bargaining. Something had to work.

He slowly uncovered her mouth and her pleas spilled forward.

"Allister, please let me go. If you want money, I'll give you money. Just let me go."

"Shh." He pressed a finger to her lips. "Look where we are, Katniss. Right over there," he nodded his head backward, "is one end of the slag heap. I called you and you came running to The Hob to meet me and then you willingly followed me out here. People at The Hob saw that. Now why would you have a necklace out here unless you've been here before? Huh?"

She was furious, with Allister and with herself. She struggled angrily to pull her hands free and he tightened his grip, his fingernails digging painfully into the sides of her wrist.

"Stop it," she seethed, ignoring the pain of his grip. "I barely know you. I'd never go to the slag heap
with you and everyone in District 12 knows that."

His easy laughter was unnerving, but so was the instant darkness in is tone. "No, Katniss. What everyone knows is that you're capable of public drunkenness and being found in a compromising situation with someone who is not your husband." He shrugged. "An appearance at the slag heap won't phase anyone."

Her mind traced back to Gale's words that she didn't drink enough brew the night before to get drunk. Realization hit like a wave, causing her chin to quiver in anger. "You're behind this? All of this?"

His lips were again at her ear. "Guilty as charged," he said proudly, placing a wet kiss behind her earlobe.

"No!" she shuddered at his kiss. His hand again covered her mouth.

"All I had to do was slip something in your drink last night and wait for it to take effect. Gale was already getting drunk; I just had to keep him talking about all that stupid conspiracy shit he spews. That and talking about your husband. Either one sets him off. I gave Gale a little for good measure, but not nearly the dosage I gave you."

Tears spilled from the corners of her eyes.

"But my plan failed," Allister continued. "You left sooner than I thought you would, and I didn't have a chance to get you alone. Still, your public spectacle yesterday worked in my behalf. It makes my story more credible." He started to rock his pelvis into hers. She could feel his growing erection through his pants. Her breaths became shorter, more frantic.

"See Katniss," he grunted, "I followed Gale home tonight, and I overheard the argument you two were having about your fake husband, Mellark. And Gale's mom told me about your missing necklace. That's a shame that you lost a family heirloom. I have no idea where it is."

Her tears flowed faster, weaving paths to her ears. He licked each wet trail from her cheeks and quickly pressed his lips to hers when he removed his hand from her mouth. His tongue pushed for entrance and she violently twisted her head left and right, trying desperately to deny him access.

His lips trailed to devour her neck. The sounds of his moans as he continued to rock into her made her tremble with dread.

"Please stop," she sobbed. "Please… There are women in the Seam who will sleep with you tonight. I'll give you all the money —"

"Shut up," he snapped with enough fury to make her cower. The smirk was back in an instant. "I've had enough Seam sluts. But you, you're a different level of whore."

Anger took the lead. "You son of a bitch," she sobbed, struggling against him. He seemed to enjoy it.

"Help! Please someone help me!" His free hand gripped her neck, roughly forcing her head back and locking her cries in her throat. "Now you can't keep doing that," he snarled. "Not when you came out here at night in your pretty dress to meet me by the slag heap for some rough sex. Your sweet baker husband doesn't do it for you, huh? Well, you've made sure everyone knows that he's too much of a punk to satisfy a whore like you."

Oh Peeta, I'm so sorry. You may never know this, but I'm so sorry.
Allister released his grip on her neck and she gasped for breath. His next movements were quick and practiced. He shoved his tongue into her mouth while his free hand squeezed her left breast. She screamed and sobbed against his lips. His fingers trailed up her outer thigh underneath her dress and momentarily hooked the side of her underwear. Then he reached into his pants pockets. There was suddenly a silver glint that she knew was a switchblade. Her eyes grew wide as she watched him place it on the ground beside them. He pulled his tongue from her mouth and she gagged.

"That's if you try anything," he winked. He used his free hand to unbutton his pants, wriggling them past his hips and managing to keep her pinned beneath him.

"No," she whimpered. "Please don't do this."

He grinned. "Maybe I will let you pay me... to keep quiet, to not tell everyone that you cheated on your sweet husband at the slag heap, you dirty whore." He laughed viciously. "And Gale will never want you after this. Dirty whore."

He reached for the switchblade, and held it to her pulse point as he maneuvered between her legs. She started to hyperventilate. He then used the knife to sever the left side of her underwear. With deft movements, the knife was between his teeth as he changed hands on her wrists and cut away the right side of her underwear. His fingers grazed her vagina as he reached between their bodies and pulled her underwear off. She wished he would just kill her.

"You'll enjoy this... eventually," he said gruffly.

She felt his fist rhythmically tapping her inner thigh and she realized in horror that he had his free hand in his underwear, priming his penis. Urgency brought clarity, and Katniss tried frantically to think of something. Anything.

Suddenly, she remembered a technique Haymitch taught her when they were training for the Games. It was all she had. It had to work.

She trained her eyes over his left shoulder. "Thank goodness you're here. Help me!" she shouted with all her might.

Allister spun his head in response, his hand releasing his member. In his efforts to look behind him, he shifted his weight to one side. It was enough for her to kneel him in the crotch as hard as she could. And as he doubled over in pain, freeing her wrists, she head butted him, shoved the heel of her hand under his nose and swiped at his left cheek, leaving a nasty gash on his face. He was now on all fours, dizzy and bleeding from his nose and face.

Katniss sprang to her feet and sprinted toward The Hob. She didn't realize how far she'd traveled from the warehouse.

"Fucking whore," he winced in pain.

She glanced fearfully over her shoulder to see if he was behind her. He was still where she left him, stumbling to his feet. In that moment, she tripped over a small tree stump and went flying into discarded wood and debris. Her right boot flew off and she bruised her hands and knees as she crashed. But she was on her feet in an instant. She didn't go back for the boot, and she ignored the pain shooting from the bottom of her right foot that was bruised on the ground with each stride.

When she finally reached The Hob, she ran wildly to the path that led to Victor's Village. Her sobs grew were louder on the vacant road, and she was terrified that Allister would somehow jump out in front of her.
Soon, Victor's Village was in view. She continued to run as hard as she could, stumbling again but not falling.

Then Katniss saw him in the distance, running as fast as he could toward town.

He's looking for me. He knows. He's coming to find me.

And in that moment, Katniss only needed to get to him. He was safety.

"Peeta!" she shrieked.

He heard her, and her anguished cry made his heart ache. But he couldn't see her, he couldn't tell if she was in the darkened path up ahead or somewhere in the brush along the side of the road.

"Katniss?" He called desperately. "Where are you?"

Just then he heard her approaching. He could sense the terror in the footsteps racing toward him, and when she barreled into the light, there was uncharacteristic terror in her widened gray eyes.

Neither Peeta nor Katniss relented until she was in his arms.

"Katniss," he gasped. "What happened? Did he hurt you?"

His frantic questions went unanswered. She was breathless and in shock; her entire body trembled and any verbal effort was incoherent and guttural. And for the second night in a row, Peeta gathered his wife in his arms and carried her to safety.

She sobbed through squeezed eyelids, her warm tears flowing against his neck. Peeta was unnerved by thoughts of what could have happened to her. But it wasn't about him right now. He needed to hold her together.

"It's okay, sweetheart. You're safe. I've got you now. You're safe." He buried kisses in her hair and hoped his words calmed them both.

Maura waited anxiously at the kitchen window, her arms tightly folded. The moment of dread when she realized that someone had lured her daughter to The Hob under false pretense was almost too much to bear.

Why didn't I insist on going with her? Why didn't I go looking for her when she didn't make it back when she said she would? Why do I keep failing her?

Maura buried her face in her hands as she choked back a sob. A creaky floorboard at the foot of the stairs announced Prim's presence. She'd been in her room, finishing her homework.

"Mom? What's wrong?"

Maura beckoned for Prim to come closer, and she held her younger daughter as she explained what she and Peeta discovered about the phone call Katniss received earlier that night.

Prim panicked. "We have to go find her mom! We have to go!"

Maura guided Prim to sit at the kitchen table and knelt in front of her. "Listen to me Primrose," she said calmingly. "Peeta has already gone to find her. He will find her. We need to stay here for when they get back."
Prim dissolved into tears. "But what if he doesn't find her? What if someone hurts her?"

Maura shook her head defiantly. She watched Katniss volunteer for the Hunger Games. She watched her fight to survive, fight to keep Peeta alive. She watched her win. Katniss was a fighter. She had to be okay. Maura couldn't lose her after all they'd already been through.

"She'll be okay, honey," Maura said, forcing herself to believe her own words. "She'll be okay."

It felt like hours, but it had been under 20 minutes when Maura saw Peeta approaching with Katniss in his arms. It was just like the night before. Only this time, it was clear that she wasn't drunk. She was hurt.

"They're here."

Maura clicked the latches to unlock the kitchen side door as Prim's chair squeaking against the hardwood floors. They raced into the night air, insufficiently dressed, but unable to feel anything but fear. What they found was their daughter and sister, trembling and sobbing in Peeta's arms.

Maura begged for answers while Prim was speechless, a familiar fear of losing her sister showing in her eyes.

"We don't know what happened yet, but she's safe now," Peeta soothed. "You're safe now, sweetheart."

Peeta sent Prim next door to get Haymitch, instructing her to bang on his living room window instead of entering his house. If Haymitch were drunk and passed out, he was liable to hurl a knife.

Maura followed Peeta to the living room where he attempted to lay Katniss on the couch. But just as he was releasing her from his arms, she emitted a disturbing cry and clamored for him, forcing him to sit and receive her. She scrambled onto his lap, trembling as she straddled him, whimpering and sobbing as she tucked her face into the crook of his neck.

She was completely traumatized. And as Maura and Peeta stared at each other, aghast, they knew they would have to be their absolute strongest for the sake of the girl they both loved.

Prim appeared with Haymitch, who – thankfully – was still sober. Maura sent Prim upstairs to fetch her medical bag, and Maura rushed to the downstairs bathroom to gather towels and to fill a basin with water.

"What the hell happened?" Haymitch asked in disbelief at the sight of Katniss on Peeta's lap.

Peeta stroked her back. "We don't know all the details yet, but we think someone lured her to The Hob and attacked her," he said quietly.

Haymitch moved closer.

"Katniss? It's me, Haymitch. You okay, sweetheart? Can you turn around and look at me?"

She managed to shake her head while trembling. At least she was responding.

"Who did this?"

"I don't have a name yet, but I will," Peeta said. He planted another kiss to the side of her head. "Maura said he's a friend of Gale's. They'd all been together at The Hob last night."
Earlier that afternoon, Greasy Sae told Haymitch what happened the night before. He was angry that Katniss had been so careless as to get drunk and pass out in public with Gale. He'd already told her—both of them—that Snow was always watching. But his lecture would have to wait. Figuring out what happened to her tonight was top priority.

Maura and Prim returned with items to treat Katniss. Katniss's only obvious injury at that moment was her bloodied right foot. But that was easily treatable. It was the unseen injuries that frightened them, those deep scars that turned an unusually courageous girl into a cowering mess on Peeta's lap.

"Katniss, honey?" Maura said. "I need you to turn and sit on Peeta's lap so I can get a better look at your foot. It's bleeding badly, honey."

Peeta encouraged her to do as Maura asked. Katniss formed actual words although they were muffled against Peeta's neck.

"I'm so ashamed," she whimpered.

"No, no, no," Peeta soothed. "None of this is your fault. We know that. And no one here will judge you. You can tell us what happened, Katniss. No matter what, you can tell us."

She drew a deep breath, as if she was considering his words. But she didn't budge.

Prim walked to the kitchen and returned with a glass of water.

"Katniss?" Prim's voice was small. "I brought you some water." The glass shook in Prim's hand. "Please talk to us and let mom take a look at you. Please? I'm really scared, and I need to know you're okay."

A sob welled in Katniss's throat. Prim was the only person on earth who could force her to action. A minute later, she loosened her grip on Peeta and twisted to sit crossways his lap, groaning in pain as she moved.

Other injuries became apparent. Her knees and palms were badly bruised. There were gray bruises on either side of her neck. A knot was forming on her forehead. Maura pulled an empty compress from her medical bag and rushed to the kitchen to fill the compress with ice cubes. When she returned, Katniss was alternating between taking deep breaths and sips of water.

"Do you feel dizzy or nauseous, Katniss?" Maura asked.

"No... My head hurts a little." Maura retrieved pills from the medicine cabinet in the downstairs bathroom and gave them to Katniss.

After a few more deep breaths, she mustered the nerve to tell them what happened. His name was Allister Canty, and he'd joined her and Gale at The Hob the night before. They agreed to meet at The Hob so she could get it back.

She thought it would be a quick exchange, and when he showed up showered and dressed, she was skeptical. But he told her he'd gotten his days confused and he was meeting his girlfriend's parents that night. He said he found her necklace in the clearing on his way to work that morning and he stashed it there because he couldn't have jewelry on his person in the mines.

Katniss took another sip of water and drew another deep breath. No one spoke, afraid of what an interruption might do to her train of thought.
She asked him to get the necklace, told him that she would wait at The Hob. But he said he could take a shortcut to his girlfriend’s house from the clearing. He said he was a friend of Gale's and he didn't trade her necklace for money although he needed it because he was being honest.

"So like a fool, I decided to believe him," Katniss said, self-loathing in her voice. Peeta rubbed her back reassuringly.

She made him walk ahead of her, and he led her down the clearing. He kept talking about his wedding next year and needing her to kill a wild turkey, needing bread for a toasting. They walked to where the clearing diverged into paths.

Haymitch shut his eyes in realization. He knew every road in District 12. He knew exactly where this guy had lured her.

Katniss shook her head. "I didn't know where I was. I didn't know it was the slag heap."

It was getting dark, she said, and he ran ahead and said he had the necklace; she showed them how he approached her with his hand cupped, as if he were carrying the necklace.

"Then he lunged at me and pinned me to the ground." She drew a shaky breath. "I threatened him, I begged him, I tried to reason with him. I even offered to give him money for a Seam prostitute." Her lips trembled. "He said he'd been watching me since the reaping."

Katniss started to hyperventilate. Maura guided the glass of water to her lips.

"It's okay, honey," Maura said. "You're doing just fine."

Katniss spoke through jerking breaths. "Prim… I don't… think… you… should hear… this part."

But Prim refused to leave. "I was reaped last fall, and I would have been the one fighting for my life if you hadn't taken my place. If I'm old enough for the Games, I'm old enough to hear this."

Katniss managed a weak smile at her sister's tenacity. Katniss continued. The glass of water shook violently in her hand when she mentioned the switchblade he used to cut off her underwear. Peeta covered her hand in his to stop the shaking.

"He was going to rape me," she sobbed. "He said I was a dirty whore. That I deserved it. He said no one would believe me because everyone thought I passed out drunk the night before. But..." Her voice trailed off.


"He drugged me," she said angrily. "I barely drank anything at The Hob last night. He drugged me. That's why I passed out. And Gale did drink too much brew, but Allister drugged him too, to make sure he couldn't help me."

Stunned silence filled the room. She wasn't drunk last night; she was drugged. It was all orchestrated. Allister planned to assault her then. And Maura knew that depending on the type of drug, it could have the effects of a hangover.

Prim was now on her knees in front of her sister. "Katniss, you're not a drunk or a whore," Prim sniffed, wiping away angry tears. "You're beautiful, and smart, and caring, and good. Everyone knows that."

Katniss shook her head mournfully. "No, little duck," she said softly. "Everything thinks I'm a drunk
who cheats on her husband. The way everyone stared and whispered when I got to The Hob tonight..." She laughed ruefully. "He said I would need to pay him to keep him from telling everyone that he had me behind the slag heap. I've never been to the slag heap with anyone. I've never been with anyone."

Peeta blinked slowly, his lips parted as he processed her words. He just assumed that Katniss and Gale had been intimate several times during the course of his marriage. But they hadn't? Why hadn't they? Peeta tried to silence a small voice that said he was the reason; maybe Katniss cared for him more than she admitted. He felt guilty for even harboring the thought at a time like this.

Then, her eyes were on him. "I'm so sorry for what all of this did to you, Peeta," she said tearfully. "I'm so sorry I embarrassed you as my husband."

He wiped tears from her face. "It's okay, Katniss. We're okay," he whispered. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to protect you tonight."

Katniss continued to share the details of her attack. She then told them how she got away at the last possible moment by using the technique Haymitch taught her.

"Good girl," Haymitch grinned in approval.

"And I didn't stop running until Peeta found me." She rested her head against Peeta's shoulder, finally relaxing in his embrace.

Maura planted a kiss on Katniss's cheek and told her how brave she was. Maura also kissed the top of Peeta's head and thanked him for going to find her daughter. He managed a small smile, but his mind was elsewhere.

"Haymitch. Will you call Darius and ask him to come out here, please," Peeta said quietly, staring intently at nothing in particular. "Tell him we need him, not Cray."

Haymitch headed for the phone. Maura and Prim worked together to clean and treat Katniss's foot; Katniss gripped Peeta's forearm a few times when the pain was intense.

Haymitch returned and announced that Darius was on his way. After bandaging Katniss's foot and treating her knees and palms, Maura sent Haymitch and Prim into the kitchen while she examined Katniss.

Maura said the gray bruises around her neck would heal over time. She reminded Katniss to hold the cold compress to her forehead; Maura checked again for signs of dizziness or nausea. She asked if Allister gave her anything to eat or drink.

Then the hard question.

"Honey, I've got to ask this question because I need to be absolutely sure. Did Allister force himself on you or penetrate you in any way?"

"No." Katniss swallowed hard. "I got away from him before he could rape me."

Maura performed a cursory examination nonetheless, and Katniss checked out fine. Maura emptied the basin of water and returned moments later.

"I have something for you." The heirloom necklace dangled from Maura's wrist. Katniss was so excited that she tried to stand, forgetting that her right foot was bandaged and sore.
"Whoa. Careful." Peeta grinned as he steadied her on his lap. Maura leaned in and clasped the necklace, explaining how Peeta found it when he came home from working late at the bakery. That's when they realized that she was in danger.

"Thank you for everything, Peeta." Katniss sighed wearily, fingering her necklace. "I'm so glad this day is over."

Peeta tucked her head to his shoulder.

_No Katniss. This day is far from over._

Peacekeeper Darius's eyes grew sympathetic when he saw Katniss. She was curled on Peeta's lap, holding a cold compress to her head. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying, and the various bandages on her hands, knees, and foot indicated that she'd had a rough night. Maura, Prim, and Haymitch helped retell the ordeal so Katniss wouldn't have to repeat it again. Peeta remained strangely quiet.

Darius asked Maura to document Katniss's injuries on a separate page that would be included in his report. Maura knelt at the coffee table and began writing.

"How did you get away?" Darius asked.

Katniss told him about the technique Haymitch taught her.

"Hence the knot on your forehead," Darius said. Katniss nodded. He examined her fingers since she said she scratched Allister's face. Dried blood was under her nails.

"Did you get this, Maura?" Darius asked. Maura shook her head, and added it to the report.

When the report was complete, Darius explained that he would find Allister and question him about the attack. He said an arrest was likely.

"Darius, can I speak with you, please," Peeta said. He planted another kiss on Katniss's temple and told her he'd be right back when she was reluctant to move from his arms. Maura and Prim sat on either side of Katniss and enveloped her in their arms.

Peeta led Darius and Haymitch to the kitchen, out of earshot of Katniss, Maura, and Prim.

"I'm going with you to find Allister," Peeta said determinedly.

"Peeta…" Darius began, slowly shaking his head. "Let us handle this one."

But Peeta was adamant. "Katniss is my wife and a man tried to rape her tonight," he said tightly. "People can say whatever they want about me or about our relationship. But I made a vow to her. And I _will_ defend her honor."

Haymitch studied Peeta; there was no way of changing his mind. "I'll come with you," Haymitch said.

"No. I need you to stay here. To make them feel safe."

Peeta locked eyes with the Peacekeeper. "Let me be clear, Darius. I will pay you any amount of money you ask to look the other way."

Haymitch ran his hand roughly over his face. He knew the level of combat training Peeta received as
a Hunger Games tribute. Plus Peeta had natural strength and superior wrestling skills. People underestimated him, but Peeta was a weapon. And Katniss was his trigger.

Darius tilted his head to the ceiling, obviously struggling with his decision.

"Okay," he said finally, heaving a long sigh. "But I can't let you kill him."

"I don't plan to kill him.\" Peeta's chilling smile gave Darius pause. "I want him to live with it."

Peeta walked back to the living room with Darius and Haymitch in tow. He knelt in front of Katniss, who was still nestled between Maura and Prim.

"Katniss, I'm going to ride with Darius. I'll be back shortly."

Her eyes widened in alarm. She knew what he was going to do.

"No Peeta, no," she protested, sliding to the edge of the couch. "He has a knife. He could hurt you.\" Peeta had taken a knife for her once, and it cost him his leg. What would this cost him? His life?

Peeta stroked the side of her face. "I'll be fine. Haymitch will stay here with you and Maura and Prim, and I'll be back before you know it."

Tears rolled down her face; this was all too much. She gripped his wrist. "Don't go, Peeta. Please," she begged. "I'm okay now. Stay with me."

He stood and kissed the top of her head. Under any other circumstance, he would have stayed. But he had to go.

"Shh," he soothed. "I'll be right back. I promise."

But she wouldn't let go, so he gently loosened her grip on his wrist. And the front door shut behind him, locking her sobs in the house.
Like most Peacekeepers, Darius was from elsewhere. He grew up in an affluent family in District 1, a region whose wealth was only rivaled by the Capitol's.

Unlike most Peacekeepers, Darius enlisted in the Capitol's local militia program for reasons other than power and authority. He wanted to see more of Panem, and his desire to travel resulted in him being stationed in Districts 4 and 9 on previous stints. But he requested placement in impoverished District 12, an unpopular assignment among his peers. Hence his other reason for becoming a Peacekeeper: he wanted to help others.

Darius enjoyed living in District 12. It was an interesting challenge getting the people to accept him. But when they saw that he was willing to hand out candy to children at the annual harvest festival, or help a Merchant haul supplies from the afternoon train, or sit on a porch in the Seam and engage an old timer in a game of chess, District 12 residents began to claim him as one of their own.

As a result of his genial nature, Darius knew the details of many residents' lives. Peeta asked for information about Allister Canty as they drove out of Victor's Village.

Allister's mother died when he was 17 years old, and he and his stepfather moved to District 12. Three years later, his stepfather passed away. Allister remained in District 12, having secured a job in the mines. He was viewed as being agreeable and polite, but he was a loner. He didn't have a girlfriend or wife or any known family.


In the past six months, Darius said he'd interviewed two Seam women who'd been lured to the slag heap and raped. But both victims were too afraid to give the attacker's name or even a physical description. In each case, the women said the attacker admitted to studying them from afar before becoming an acquaintance and luring them to an isolated area.

"If this is the same guy who's been assaulting other women in the District, what Katniss went through tonight won't be in vain," Darius said, glancing at Peeta. "We can stop Allister before he hurts someone else."

Peeta sat in the passenger seat with his eyes shut and his head tilted against the headrest. The look of terror in Katniss's eyes as she sprinted into his arms replayed in his mind, and he could still feel the way her traumatized body quivered against his. Reliving those moments fueled his rage.

"Park a few houses away from his. I'll go the rest of the way on foot. And give me a five minute head start before you come in."

Maybe it was because Peeta was a Hunger Games victor, or maybe it was his confidence. Or perhaps Darius wished he could retaliate himself. But for whatever reason, Darius, an adult Peacekeeper, was following the instructions of a 17-year-old and accompanying him to break the law.

They drove a short distance past The Hob, which bustled with activity this time of night. Darius veered to the side of the road and shut off the engine.
"After this row of houses, it's the second free-standing house on the left," he said. A dim light burning inside Allister's house gave the windows a tangerine glow.

"Now Peeta, remember what I said about – "

"Got it," Peeta said offhandedly, as he climbed out the car. He passed Seam residents who slowed their steps and commented, curious about what could have drawn the baker's son to this part of town at this time of night.

"He looks really mad."

"He might be looking for his wife, the victor girl. Poor guy. She's probably drunk at The Hob."

*That helps*, Peeta thought, the chilling grin returning as he approached the home.

Then, with one violent kick to the front door, Peeta was inside the one-room shack. Allister was seated at a small round table midway the room, holding a bloodstained handkerchief to his nose. Two large cloth bags, stuffed with clothes and supplies, were on the tabletop along with a smattering of coins. He was planning to leave.

Allister startled at the invasion, knocking his chair over as he stumbled backward in his effort to stand. But Peeta was on him in an instant, unleashed rage flying with his fists, flaring in his eyes, and forming in his words.

"You fucking bastard! You attacked my wife? You drugged her? I'll kill you!"

Peeta sent Allister flying across the room, leveling a shelf that broke his fall. Disoriented and dazed, Allister had no defense as Peeta descended on him, punishing him with a severe beating to his face.

When Peeta finally climbed off, a deep gash across the bridge of Allister's nose produced garnet tributaries of blood that mingled with the garnet puddle in his mouth. His cheeks were purple from the beating and his left eyelid was indigo and nearly swollen shut. Allister leaned on his side and spewed blood and a tooth onto the bare, wood floor.

"I'm sor… sorry man," he winced. "I thought… she wanted it."

"You're a fucking liar! Get up asshole." Peeta gave Allister time to stagger to his feet. But before he was fully upright, Allister charged at Peeta, switchblade in hand.

"That whore deserved it," he snarled.

Peeta leapt backward, narrowly escaping as the switchblade ripped a long tear down the side of his jacket. With swiftness and skill, Peeta seized Allister's wrist and spun behind him, twisting Allister's palm to the ceiling and forcing him to drop the knife. Peeta sent the switchblade spinning across the floor, out of reach, and placed Allister in a tight chokehold. When he released him, Allister collapsed to the floor, gagging for air but Peeta didn't relent, kicking him in his stomach, his side, and his legs.

"Is that all you've got, you piece of shit?" Peeta growled. "You want to attack someone? Come on. Attack me."

But Allister stretched his palms in surrender. "Please," he groaned in pain, inching away from Peeta.

"Did my wife ask for mercy?" he shouted. "Did she beg you to stop?"

Enraged, Peeta kicked Allister in the stomach, the ribs, the legs, and the crotch. Allister writhed on
Just then, Darius came running into the home with Trolly and Lester, two additional Peacekeepers he must have radioed for backup. Trolly and Lester pulled Peeta away from Allister.

"That's enough Peeta," Darius said sternly as Peeta tried to fight his way back to Allister.

"Allister Canty, you are under arrest for assault and attempted rape, use of illegal drugs, brandishing a weapon, and holding an individual forcibly against her will," Darius said. Allister was still writhing on the floor when Trolly placed him in handcuffs.

"He needs medical attention," Lester said. "Maura Everdeen is the best in the district, but clearly we can't call her. Who else is there?"

Darius sighed. "There's Jinx Hampley, the old timer a few houses down," he said discreetly. "He's not nearly as good as Maura Everdeen, but he knows a thing or two. Get Allister in the cart. We'll hold him in a cell and bring Jinx to him."

Lester and Trolly carried Allister to their Peacekeeper vehicle. "Clear a path, please. Clear a path," Lester shouted.

Peeta's face was still hardened with anger when he glanced out the broken front door. A large crowd had formed outside Allister's house. For the first time, Peeta heard their voices.

"Allister Canty tried to rape his wife tonight. Katniss Everdeen Mellark, the victor girl."

"That's the other victor Peeta Mellark, the baker's son. He beat the shit out of that guy."

"I heard Allister call his wife a whore and say she deserved it. He must have done it. That's a shame; they've been through enough, surviving the Games and all."

"And Allister drugged her too? Was that last night? When we thought she was drunk?"

"But that's exactly what Mary Lewison said happened to her. She was drugged and raped. I heard the same thing happened to Nova Dennis. It must have been Allister Canty who did it."

Darius's voice drew Peeta's attention. "Are you injured, Peeta?" Peeta gave a quick shake to both hands, the pain of his bruised and bloody knuckles finally registering.

"I'm fine," he said, his chest still heaving.

"I gave you six minutes, for good measure," Darius whispered, a smile ghosting his lips. "You really gave it to that son of a bitch."

"Name your price," Peeta murmured, unflinching.

"We'll get straight on another day. Right now, let me get you back home to your wife."

Thom banged on the Hawthorne's front door. He knew Gale had had a rough 24 hours and was probably asleep. But he would want to know about the commotion in the Seam tonight. It involved Katniss.

Bleary eyed, Hazelle opened the door.

"Thom? What's – "
"I'm sorry to wake you Mrs. Hawthorne, but I thought Gale would want to know this."

"Want to know what?" Gale appeared at the door with heavy lidded, bloodshot eyes and disheveled hair.

"Allister Canty," Thom began. "The word is that he tried to rape Katniss tonight."

Gale outran Hazelle and Thom to the thick crowd gathered outside Allister's house. They arrived just as Trolly and Lester were carrying Allister to the Peacekeeper vehicle. By the looks of it, Allister had been beaten to within an inch of his life.

Gale felt as if his head were underwater. This made no sense. Allister was just at his house a few hours ago. Gale had just spoken — argued — with Katniss a few hours ago.

"What happened?" Gale was breathless as he turned to the Seam couple on his right.

"Allister Canty tried to rape the victor girl tonight. And he tried to drug her last night," the woman said, craning her neck to see the inside the house.

The familiar and revolting feeling of powerlessness that had shaped Gale's entire life churned his stomach.

He seemed like a decent guy. Katniss... I put her in harm's way. How could I have missed the signs?

"Well someone certainly got a hold of Allister," Thom said in response to the Seam couple. "Did one of the Peacekeepers beat him up?"

"No." The woman shook her head in amazement. "Her husband. The baker's son did that."

Gale's jaw went slack.

"Good for Peeta Mellark," the man said approvingly with a swift nod of his head. "Any man who loves his wife would do the same. I certainly would have done the same thing if someone attacked my wife."

"And now they're saying that Allister Canty has done this before." The woman shook her finger at his house. "I always knew there was something off about that young man."

Rage flared inside Gale like an open flame to kerosene. He began to push through the crowd toward the Peacekeeper vehicle that held Allister, and neither Hazelle nor Thom's protests mattered. But Gale stopped short, midway the crowd when Peeta emerged from Allister's house with Darius at his side. Peeta's jaw was clenched and his knuckles were badly bruised.

Otherwise, there wasn't a scratch on him.

It soon became obvious that no one but Peeta could comfort Katniss.

Maura tried. Prim tried. Even Haymitch tried. Despite their best efforts, Katniss was still distraught that Peeta was putting himself in harm's way. And she was the reason.

Maura drew a bath of aloe and lavender and helped Katniss lower into the tub. The hot water massaged the tension from her muscles, but she was silently tormented by thoughts of Peeta's demise.

"If something happens to him, I'll never forgive myself," Katniss said aloud as Maura changed her
bandages after the bath.

"He will be back soon, honey. He won't let you down."

You're right. I'm usually the one who lets him down.

Katniss sank into herself, her shoulders slumping. "Mom? Why does he love me?"

A gentle smile turned the corners of Maura's lips. "He just does, Katniss. The heart wants what it wants. And his heart wants you."

Katniss stared at the ostentatious wedding ring on her left hand, the work of some cerulean-skinned Capitol designer whom neither she nor Peeta ever met. Everything about the ring was forced, unnatural, and burdensome; it had always been an apt symbol of her marriage.

But as she took a closer look, she realized that the ring was quite lovely and durable despite her rough treatment. And although it wouldn't have been her first choice, now that the ring was hers, she would miss it if it were gone.

She would definitely miss it if it were gone.

Gale watched as Lester and Trolly drove away with a severely injured Allister, and Darius drove off with Peeta.

Gale's mother had him by the wrist. She was pleading, trying to get Gale to meet her gaze. But he couldn't comprehend her words. The only thing that made sense was finding Katniss. She needed him. He had to get to her. He must have said this aloud because Hazelle's grip tightened on his wrist.

"Gale, you don't need to go to Victor's Village tonight. You need to rest. We're all worried about Katniss, but there's nothing any of us can do. She's with Maura and Prim, and it looks like Peeta has taken care of Allister."

Gale turned pleading eyes to Hazelle.

"You don't understand," he argued. "She needs me. She needs me, mom. Not Peeta."

Hazelle's eyes were sympathetic, but her tone was firm. "She needs her family, Gale. You care for Katniss a great deal, but she is Peeta's wife. She's his responsibility, not yours."

Gale bristled.

"Gale, your responsibility is to our family, to me and Rory and Posy and Vick. We need you. And you need to rest so you can make it to work tomorrow."

He shifted his eyes to Thom, who nodded in agreement. "She's right Gale. You need to rest. Katniss is strong, and she's not alone. Check on her tomorrow."

Gale ran a hand roughly down his face and stared at the sky. Then, with anger still flaring in his eyes, he briskly walked home.

Peeta asked Darius to make one stop before heading back to Victor's Village. They pulled up to Mellark Bakery a few minutes later.

"I'll only be a few minutes."
Peeta unlocked the back entrance and took the stairwell to the apartment above the bakery. He lived there all his life until he returned from the Games and moved to Victor's Village.

Inside the apartment, his middle brother, Rye, was lying on the living room couch watching television. His oldest brother, Thatch, moved out a year ago when he married Natalie Minson, a Merchant's daughter.

"Peet." Rye turned a surprised glance to the wall clock. Then, he noticed his brother's hands and sat upright. "Aww hell. What happened to you, man?"

"Are mom and dad asleep?"

"Uh, yeah. They went to bed about an hour ago. What did you do, kill somebody?"

"Almost," Peeta said flatly.

Rye followed him to their parents' bedroom. Peeta tapped lightly on the door.

"Dad, mom. Could I speak to you both in the living room, please?" He heard his parents rustling on the other side of the door.

Peeta stepped to the bathroom and used cool water to rinse the blood from his knuckles. He and his parents entered the living room at the same time.

"Peeta it's late and your father and I have to be up early in the morning," his mother griped.

"I know it's late, mother, and I apologize," he said quietly. "This will only take a few minutes." He heaved a sigh. "Katniss was assaulted and almost raped tonight by a guy from the Seam – Allister Canty."

They reacted with drawn breaths and wordlessly parted lips.

"Is she okay?" Rye asked, concern creasing his brows.

"She's shaken up pretty badly."

"How did this happen?" Daniel asked.

Peeta told them about the missing necklace, Allister's phone call, and finding the necklace on his shirt sleeve when he returned home earlier that night. He omitted the details of her assault, but told them that Allister admitted to drugging Katniss the night before.

"This guy was trying to get his hands on her yesterday," Rye said, clenching his jaw. "Katniss would never have known what happened to her."

Daniel exhaled, slowly shaking his head. Nance's expression was unreadable.

"She was able to get away from him before he raped her," Peeta said. "She has bruises and a knot on her forehead, but no lasting physical damage. Emotionally," his voice softened, "she's traumatized."

"That poor girl," Daniel whispered, running a hand roughly down his face.

Nance folded her arms across her chest. "All Seam are trash," she said tersely. "That's why I don't associate with them."

Peeta glared at Nance; Rye shook his head in disbelief. "Nance please," Daniel pleaded.
"I'm here for two reasons, Dad," Peeta said, choosing to ignore his mother's presence. "First, could I have tomorrow off? I need to be home with my wife."

"Oh no –" Nance began. But Daniel interrupted her.

"Of course you can," Daniel said resolutely. "Let me know tomorrow afternoon if you need another day or two."

"Thanks Dad," Peeta said warmly.

"The second thing is this: I went to Allister Canty's house tonight and beat him up for what he did to Katniss. He's in pretty bad shape, but he'll recover. I wanted you all to hear this from me first. Everyone will probably be talking about it tomorrow."


Daniel rubbed his eyes. "You know I don't condone you boys fighting, but if I were in your shoes, Peeta, I would have done the same thing."

"Don't you mean if you were married to Maura Everdeen you would have done the same thing?" Nance retorted.

"Don't start, Nance," Daniel warned.

"I'm sick and tired of Everdeen women! It seems that Mellark men are fools for them, but they are all Seam trash."

"Stop it," Daniel seethed, glaring at her. "Our son does not need this right now." She turned and stormed out of the living room, slamming the bedroom door behind her.

Peeta stood abruptly. "That's all I had to say. Darius is downstairs waiting to take me back to Victor's Village."

Daniel stood and faced Peeta. "Son, I'm concerned about you too. This is a lot to deal with. Let me know what you need. Even if you just need to talk. Let me know."

"Thanks Dad." Peeta embraced his father.

"And take these." Daniel walked to the shelf in the corner and opened a large book that was hollowed inside. The book contained several plastic sleeves of discs, illegal music from before the Dark Days. Daniel selected three sleeves that each contained two discs, about 60 songs in all.

As children, Peeta and his brothers listened to this music on Sunday afternoons during the carefree hours when Nance was out visiting friends. Daniel always made his sons promise to never speak of these songs outside their home.

"Music can help soothe, especially if she's frightened," Daniel said. "There are some really great songs on those discs."

Peeta smiled gratefully and promised to return the discs. He slipped them into his jacket pocket.

Rye's eyes twinkled mischievously. "And if you ever need me to help you kick butt, come and get me. I can be ready to go in a moment's notice – after I shower, get dressed and do a few pushups to get limber."

Peeta laughed at Rye's humor, and they playfully shoved each other. "Shut up, idiot," Peeta grinned.
The chilly wind numbed Peeta's cheeks as he trudged back to the Peacekeeper vehicle. "Thanks, Darius. I'm ready to go home now."

The clank of the mug against the coffee table sent Buttercup trotting from the living room into the kitchen with Prim and Haymitch. Prim had a science quiz the following morning, and Haymitch agreed to help her review her flash cards. It was better than watching Katniss braid and re-braid her hair or fidget with the tassels on the couch pillows.

Maura stood from the couch to offer support to Katniss who was maneuvering to her uninjured foot. The sitting and waiting was maddening, so she hopped to the straight chair across the room and stared at the flames twirling gracefully in the fireplace.

"What time is it?" The clock over the fireplace could have answered her question, but she was too anxious to look.

"Only two minutes have passed since you last checked, honey."

"Where are they?" Katniss ran a hand nervously through her currently unbraided hair. "I never should have let him go out there. I'm such an idiot."

"Hey sweetheart." Haymitch appeared at her side. "No one gets to call you an idiot except for me."

She burst into laughter but quickly dissolved into tears.

"Come here, kid." Haymitch embraced her. "Peeta is a smart guy. Don't tell him I said this, but he's twice as smart as I was at his age. He's not going to put himself in danger."

Katniss pulled away and looked at Haymitch, heartbreak in her eyes. "That's exactly what he would do when it comes to me. He would put himself in danger."

Haymitch sighed. She was right. During the Games, Haymitch was baffled by Peeta's incredibly risky strategy of aligning with the Careers. They had no loyalty to him and could have killed him at any moment. Plus he'd already professed his love for Katniss, so it was a wonder that they believed that Peeta wanted her dead. But he did it to keep her safe.

Come on, Peeta. Hurry up and get back here, Haymitch pleaded silently. She will be damaged beyond repair if anything happens to you.

Several minutes passed with Maura and Haymitch watching Katniss from the couch, and Prim, holding Buttercup on her lap while she flipped through flash cards and glanced worriedly at her sister. The knock at the front door drew everyone's eyes.

"I'll get it." Haymitch lifted his palm to Katniss. But she was already on her feet when Peeta stepped inside with Darius following behind.

"We're back," Peeta said easily. Katniss hopped to him and he hastened to her. They locked in an embrace.

"Hey you," he grinned, placing a light kiss to her temple. "What are you doing on your feet?"

"I was so worried, Peeta," she whispered against his neck. She pulled away to examine him. "Are you okay," she demanded. "What happened?"
She saw the long, jagged cut on the side of his jacket. Her eyes widened in horror.

"He tried to stab you?" she gasped, beginning to unravel.

Peeta cupped her face in his hands and steadied her with his gaze. "Allister Canty will never bother you again. He and I had a... a convincing talk."

Darius guffawed, ignoring decorum. "Allister Canty can't see out of one eye, is missing at least one tooth, and definitely has a broken nose, a broken jaw, and broken ribs. And he may never have children. And that's putting it lightly."

Maura, Haymitch, and Prim beamed proudly. Katniss just stared in disbelief.

"You did that to him... for me?"

Peeta tucked a raven lock of hair behind her ear. "Best reason in the world as far as I'm concerned."

Katniss rested her head on his shoulder and released a trembling breath.

"Are you sure you're okay, Peeta?"

"Yes." He rubbed her back. "I'm okay."

Maura stood in Peeta's line of sight, pointing to his bruised hands and shaking a bottle of ointment. Peeta nodded in understanding, and helped Katniss to the couch before placing his hands in Maura's. As soon as her mother finished treating Peeta, Katniss curled into his arms. They sat silently on the couch as Haymitch, Maura, Darius and Prim talked animatedly in the kitchen.

Katniss's ordeal produced a bond that Peeta never thought he would share with his wife. Still, he didn't want to make any assumptions about what would happen next. He turned to her.

"I'll do whatever you need, Katniss," he said, stroking the side of her face. "I can stay here with you tonight, or I can go back home. Whatever you're comfortable with."

But Katniss didn't want either option. "Home," she said looking squarely at him. "With you. I want to go home."

Peeta's exhaustion was evident in the buzzing tension he felt behind his eyes as he rode back to Victor's Village with Darius.

But when Katniss, who was curled in his arms on her mother's couch, said she wanted to go home with him, Peeta felt as if he could run all the way to the Capitol that night, non-stop, no sleep required.

This time when he lifted her in his arms, he wasn't angry because he thought she was drunk, nor was he desperately trying to soothe away her torment. This time, he was simply a man in love with his wife, a man who didn't want to go home without her.

Maura and Prim draped a blanket over Katniss. Haymitch walked beside to unlock Peeta and Katniss's front door. She fell asleep in Peeta's arms in the short distance from Maura's house, and he carried her to the master bedroom, hoping she didn't wake before he showered.

Twenty minutes later, he lay beside her and pulled her weary frame into his protective embrace. Now he felt it, equal parts hungry and exhausted. Yet, he lay awake for another hour, inhaling the lavender in her hair, counting the seconds between every rise and fall of her chest, studying the curve
of her hips, the swell of her breasts, the expanse of her legs.

She was Katniss Mellark. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding their marriage, she bore his name, and word would spread like wildfire about what he did to Allister Canty. The message was clear: no one would harm his wife and get away with it.

If any good came from tonight, it was in the effortless intimacy they shared when it mattered most. The way she looked at him, clung to him, only found safety in his arms. The way he instinctively knew what to do to soothe her, to avenge her, to restore her. That level of need and trust were direct precursors to love. And that was the infusion of hope Peeta desperately needed.

They slept peacefully through the night. He'd just pulled a pan of cinnamon buns from the oven the next morning when he heard a terrified scream and a loud thump. The pan hit the countertop with a metallic clang, and he took the stairs two at a time, the oven mitt still on his hand.

She'd fallen out of bed to a vision of Allister's menacing grin, the gleam of his switchblade, the burn of her breast beneath his palm. Peeta found her wedged between the wall and the nightstand, sobbing in anguish and frantically clawing at her arms, her neck, her shoulders, her chest.

She was trying to get him off of her.

Peeta lowered to his knees and kept a non-threatening distance.

"Katniss, sweetheart. It's Peeta. Open your eyes sweetheart. Open your eyes."

It took several tries. When his blonde curls and blue eyes came into focus, she bawled and rushed to him. He pulled her onto his lap, his own eyes filling with tears.

"No one will ever harm you again." He tenderly kissed her face. "I promise, Katniss."

Two hours later, Peeta carried her downstairs to the kitchen table. She'd agreed to eat something, and he knew his window of opportunity was small. The cinnamon buns went back into the oven to warm, and he quickly put on a pot of tea.

Katniss wouldn't let Peeta leave her side for the rest of the day. She even made him promise to stay in the living room with her while she napped on the couch. He pulled out his sketchbook and captured her in its pages.

Late afternoon, Maura, Prim, and Haymitch stopped by to check on Katniss. She was still asleep on the couch, so they talked in hushed tones. Maura got closest, rubbing her daughter's forehead and planting a kiss. Katniss stirred and made a funny chewing motion, causing everyone to snicker under their breaths. Peeta thought it was adorable.

Hours later, Maura and Prim returned with a meal of squirrel and steamed root vegetables. The four of them ate amid light conversation and easy laughter. Katniss smiled weakly from time to time, but she was mostly distant and quiet. After dinner, Peeta called his father and took another two days off from work.

The next morning, Katniss backed herself against the headboard and thrashed violently at an invisible threat. The bathroom mirrors were still frosted from Peeta's shower, and he'd just dried his hair and pulled on a pair of pants and a shirt when he heard her struggle.

He was at her side in an instant, urging her to open her eyes. When she did, she buried her head in shame and wept bitterly. His arms encircled her.
"You did nothing wrong, Katniss," he said earnestly. "None of this is your fault."

"I can't... get... him off me," she hiccupped through her sobs. "I need... to get... him... off me."

Peeta held her to his beating heart, stroking her back and whispering words she didn't have the energy to comprehend, until she grew silent and still.

After his interview with Caesar Flickerman before the Games, it was obvious to all of Panem that Peeta could endear people with his words and his winsome smile. But no one on earth could lay claim to what Katniss had experienced in recent days. Peeta also had the gift of touch. His hands and his arms could communicate with her deepest pain and coax it all away.

She had to ask; her relief was literally in his hands.

"Peeta?" She swallowed hard. "Will you touch me?"

He seemed to calculate her words, as if he were trying to solve a mathematical equation.

"Say that again?"

Katniss pulled out of his arms, nervously chewing on her bottom lip.

"All I can think about is the way it felt to have him on me, grabbing me, kissing me." She cringed. "I've soaked and scrubbed and medicated myself, and I can't get him off."

She took Peeta's hand in both of her shaky ones. "I need you Peeta, and I trust you more than anyone. Please?"

His brows furrowed in concern. She obviously had no idea how much he desired her, how vigilantly he fought thoughts of pulling her into his arms and making love to her for fear that he would confuse fantasy with reality and one day act on impulse. Now she wanted him to touch her intimately, to restore her. He wasn't sure he could handle so great a charge.

But the vulnerability in her eyes reminded him that he could deny her nothing.

"Lie down, sweetheart," he said softly.

Katniss pressed into the mattress, her eyes serenely trained on Peeta. He lay on his side and slid an arm underneath her neck to cradle her. He already knew the details of the assault. But she needed to be in control; she needed to guide him.

"Show me where."

Katniss drew shaky fingers to her lips. With steady fingers, Peeta traced the outline before softly pressing his lips to hers. Her chest deflated at his touch, and she slowly exhaled through her nose.

Next, her fingers touched behind her ear and trickled down the side of her neck. Peeta's fingers and lips followed, tenderly pinching bits of flesh between his lips as he slowly, methodically worked his way from behind her ear down the length of her neck. She turned her head to give him better access and pulled a long row of air through her nose; she didn't expect his lips to feel so good.

Katniss didn't know when she'd gathered her breast in her hand, cupping her fingers around the supple flesh. Peeta's hand ghosted her forearm, sliding up her wrist and covering her hand, which she let fall to the bed. He bit the inside of his cheek for composure as he delicately squeezed her breast, her nipple hardening underneath his palm.
Their eyes met in realization and yearning, Peeta's chest heaving and Katniss biting the corner of her bottom lip. It was as if they were suspended in a time and place where their carefully-crafted truisms about their relationship were false. Katniss didn't look away. She didn't want to. Something was finally starting to make sense.

And that's when she saw Peeta. His blonde eyelashes awash in the golden sunlight that streamed through the bedroom window. The muscular definition in his arms when he positioned his body above hers. The unyielding line of his jaw that complemented his solid chest, but contradicted the placid depths of his crystal blue eyes.

She was suddenly filled with desire for him, with awareness of him. She shied away from their gaze, but she needed his touch all the more.

So she lifted the bottom of her nightgown, where her only covering was the downy hairs between her legs. He took her in, watching her hand tremble as she touched there.

"It's okay," Peeta whispered. He kissed her forehead as his hand carefully replaced hers. She was virginal and sensual, devastated and pristine. He loved her contradictions. He loved her more than he ever thought he could.

His warm touch slowly healed the invisible scars left by Allister's cold fingertips. With eyes shut and silent tears, she covered his hand with hers, holding his palm in place. But her eyes fluttered open when she felt water drop to her face. Peeta smiled weakly through tears he couldn't dry, his mountainous love on full display. With a grateful smile, she ran her fingers and the back of her hand over both sides of his face.

"One more place," she said hoarsely, uncovering his hand between her legs. "He shoved his tongue… Will you kiss me? Deeply?"

"Yes," he whispered.

She was still cradled on his arm, and he pulled her slightly off the bed to meet him. Their lips interlocked in a simple kiss that surged deeper and deeper until their tongues rolled against each other's.

Peeta's kiss was his most powerful touch. Katniss swooned in his embrace. When their lips parted, she could feel the thumping of her own heart and a faint throbbing between her legs – what she could only describe as a hunger.

_I want more. I need more. What's happening?_

Peeta lowered her to the mattress. He wanted to press her body to his in a tight embrace, but he was completely hard and his erection would be obvious. So he remained on his side, carefully reaching over her to stroke her face and her arm.

"You are so brave, Katniss. I'm so proud of you."

She could only nod in response, still broadsided by her desire for him. And when she drifted asleep to his touch, he crawled out of bed and went to the bathroom to release his desire for her.

The clock had just ticked silently past 7 a.m., on Peeta's third day home from work following Katniss's assault. He sat at the kitchen table with a mug of tea, anticipating the day ahead.

Maura had stopped by the previous afternoon to check Katniss's injuries, which were healing.
quickly. The bandages were no longer needed on her hands and knees, and she could put weight on her foot. The knot on her forehead was diminishing.

Before they went to bed, Peeta told Katniss that he had a surprise planned for her the following morning and that she should come downstairs, dressed comfortably and ready to go, by 8 a.m.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. I'm not telling you."

She scowled; she didn't like surprises.

"You're not taking me to the woods, are you? Because you're too loud to be a hunter."

"Nope. Not the woods. And I could be a great hunter if I wanted to."

"Yeah. And I could be a great baker. By the way, will cheese buns be a part of this surprise?" Mellark Bakery cheese buns were her favorite.

"You'll just have to wait and see, huntress." He planted a quick kiss to her temple and lay back in the bed, shutting his eyes to signal the end of their banter.

She scowled again, resting her head on his chest, their usual sleeping position. "Better be cheese buns," she grumbled. He grinned in response.

At 7:40 a.m., Katniss descended the stairs in a sleeveless, teal-colored linen top and denim shorts that stopped midway her thighs. Since she'd lost one foot of her favorite pair of boots during her escape from Allister, Katniss wore a pair of soft-soled, strappy sandals that was a part of her wardrobe from Effie. They were surprisingly comfortable and were a much cooler option for warm spring days.

Peeta was wearing a three-fourth length sleeve gray Henley shirt with navy blue sleeves and dark denim jeans, also from his Effie wardrobe. He was writing in a small notebook when she approached.

"Hey you," he said warmly. "Ready to go?"

"Yep," she said flatly. "Just let me get some tea."

"No need." He stood and walked to the countertop beside the stove. Just then, Katniss noticed the large picnic basket. "I've got everything in here."

She couldn't help but smile. No one knew this other than her mother and sister, but Katniss and her father and Prim would have candy picnics. He would purchase candy for his girls from The Hob, and when they left for their picnic, Katniss would run ahead to find an ideal spot. They would lay on the grass and she and Prim would eat their candy and talk about whatever they wanted to. Their father would always listen.

"We're going on a picnic?"

"Yes ma'am. And to make sure you don't beat me up in the meadow, I've packed cheese buns in our picnic basket and left a few here at the house."

She grinned slyly. "Well that depends on how good the cheese buns are as to whether I beat you up or not."

"You scare me," he deadpanned. "Seriously. I'm scared of you."
She laughed. He savored the sound.

Peeta insisted on carrying her to the meadow, piggy-back style. It would be fun, he told her. And if she didn't enjoy the ride, she could carry him back home.

She shrieked when he spun in circles with her on his back, causing them to collapse, dizzy, on soft blades of grass and wild daisies. In that moment, Katniss was content. She had no responsibilities, no obligations, no fears, no doubts, no sorrows. Life was good again, and she was a carefree girl in a lush meadow enjoying a beautiful spring day.

Peeta gave her that.

Soon, she was making a beeline for the picnic basket. Her eyes grew as big as saucers when she lifted the lid. There was a salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, black olives, goat cheese, chickpeas, and herbs; garlic crusted seared lamb chops; creamy mashed potatoes; iced tea flavored with sliced peaches; strawberry-rhubarb hand pies; and cheese buns. Two plates and two cups were strapped to the interior of the basket, and each cup held a set of utensils.

"Holy… You made all of this, Peeta?"

He shrugged bashfully. "Let's just say I made a mess in your mother's kitchen this morning. And Prim has a really good lunch today at school."

She stared at him, her mouth agape. Then, she flung her arms around Peeta's neck, knocking him to the ground.

"You're welcome," he laughed as she scampered back to the basket, removing the dinnerware and eagerly preparing plates of food for her and Peeta.

Amid the morning breeze that carried whiffs of mountain laurel, Katniss and Peeta ate and talked and laughed for hours. At one point they lay beside each other on the grass, giving ridiculous names to the clouds using Effie's Capitol accent. At another point, Peeta lay with his head in her lap, making a crown of daisies for Prim. She silently watched him work, fixated on his glowing eyelashes, his crooked grin, his firm chest. And in those moments when she stared at him, she heard nothing he said.

Peeta's favorite moment was when she napped with her head nuzzled against his neck, clutching his shirt while he rubbed her back. It was quality time. And it was therapeutic.

They returned home before noon, hand-in-hand with a nearly empty picnic basket.

"There's one other thing we have to do," Peeta said when they'd unpacked the picnic basket.

She watched quizzically as he slid the coffee table closer to the fireplace, creating space in the living room. He went to the closet near the front door where his slashed jacket still hid his father's music discs. He placed the first disc – "1a" – into the music player in the living room, and grabbed the remote.

Before she knew it, he had pulled her to his chest, his lips at her ear. "This is illegal music from before the Dark Days," he whispered. "It belongs to my dad. We can't tell anyone."

She nodded dutifully; his warm breath on her ear caused her to hold her breath. She bit the corner of her lip, wishing his lips would trail to her neck like they had the day before.

But he released her, and the sound of a guitar blared from the stereo, followed by the sound of an
insistent, upbeat drum.

"May I have this dance, my lady?" Peeta bowed at the waist, extending a hand to Katniss. She froze.

"Oh no," she shook her head. "I'm not a dancer."

"Just try," Peeta coaxed, reaching for her hand and pulling her to the makeshift dance floor. She might as well have been a statue.

"Come on," Peeta urged, sexily biting his bottom lip as he snapped his fingers and danced toward her in an exaggerated fashion. Her lips parted surprise. Peeta was a pretty good dancer, even with his antics. This certainly hadn't come up in any of their learning process/get-to-know-me talks.

The song was catchy, but she was intimidated and wouldn't move.

"Dance," Peeta ordered playfully, "Or you'll have to clean up Haymitch the next time he pukes."

"I'll embarrass the hell out of myself."

Peeta shrugged. "Well it's a good thing no one here will judge you."

She looked unsure, so he placed his hands on her waist.

"Just look at me and do what I do," he said. He stepped from left to right, and she followed, reluctantly at first. But then, with his encouragement, she almost kept up with the beat.

You make a grown man cry
You make a grown man cry
You make a grown man cry

Peeta knew this song. He sang along, terribly. She burst into laughter.

"Do you love my singing?" he joked. "The more you dance, the less I'll sing."

"Okay," she grinned. "Okay, you win." He reached for her hand and twirled her, pulling her back to him just when she felt like she was spinning out of control.

The next song was just as fast.

I don't know what this is
Cause you got me good
Just like you knew you would

I don't know what you do
But you do it well
I'm under your spell

Maybe it was Peeta's bad singing, but she was really enjoying herself. The house no longer felt lonely. It felt like a safe haven.

After two more upbeat songs, the next song was lazy, set to a wailing trumpet, a woman's satiny lilt and a man's gravelly tenor. Peeta pulled her close – he'd finally stopped singing – and she draped her arms over his shoulders.

One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing
And you'll spread your wings and you'll take to the sky
But till that morning, there ain't nothin' can harm you
With daddy and mommy standin' by

"These songs are beautiful, Peeta," Katniss whispered. "I've never heard anything like them before."

He kissed her temple in response.

But it was the next song, a mellow cadence and an ethereal voice, that made Katniss want to sing. She had Peeta repeat the song three more times.

_You're the warmth in my summer breeze_
_You're the ivory to my ebony keys_
_You would share your last jelly bean_
_And you would somersault in the sand with me_

By the third repeat, Katniss had learned the chorus. She rested her head on Peeta's chest and wrapped her arms around his waist. She didn't realize she was singing along.

_You put my feet back on the ground_
_Oh, did you know you brought me home_
_You were sweet and you were sound_
_You save me_

"You have a gorgeous voice," he whispered in her ear. She absorbed the tingle his breath sent up her spine.

When she responded, he knew it wasn't just to his compliment.

"Thank you, Peeta. Thank you."

Gale called Maura's house every day since Katniss's assault in hopes of speaking with her, but Katniss was never there. And he never had the phone number to Peeta's house.

"She's doing much better, Gale," Maura said during his third phone call. "What she went through was terrible, but you know as well as I do that Katniss is resilient."

"It's all my fault," Gale said. "I should have known that guy was up to no good."

Maura was adamant. "Gale, I do not want you to blame yourself. You would never knowingly put Katniss in danger. She knows that. We all know that."

Her words were of little comfort.

"Is she angry with me?"

"No, dear, no. She's not angry with you. She just needs time to recover. Peeta has taken some days off from work, and he's at home with her. She's getting better every day."

Gale clenched his jaw in resentment. He wished he could take days off from work like a Merchant's son and be with Katniss. Who knows what Peeta was saying about him, about his role in what happened to Katniss. She probably would hate him by the time Peeta was finished manipulating her.

"Well, when you talk to her, will you tell her that I called? And will you ask her to call me when she can?"
"I will, dear," Maura said.

Hazelle watched quietly as Gale replaced the receiver.

"She'll be back to normal in no time, Gale. You'll see."

He nodded solemnly, hoping that she hadn't created a new "normal" that didn't include him.

The next morning, Saturday, Katniss was wide awake when Peeta batted his eyes open, her fingers intertwined with his.

It was a record two days since she dreamt of terror, and they both felt rested and renewed. She smiled softly, asking him to stay in bed a little longer, to hold her before he got ready for work. He willingly obliged, and she curled into him, nuzzling against his neck for another 15 minutes until the clock forced him to peel back the covers and start his day.

The grin Peeta wore throughout the day wasn't missed by his family. He caught his mother's snarl and his father's amused smirk out the corner of his eye.

"Somebody looks happy," Daniel Mellark said later that morning as he helped Peeta finish a batch of garlic knots.

Peeta looked over both sides of his shoulder to see if they were alone.

"We've gotten so much closer dad," he said excitedly. "It just feels right. I know my wife and I can make it work, dad. We can make our relationship work."

Daniel trained his gaze on the garlic knot. He knew that feeling once, when he held Maura Kenner in his arms in the meadows of District 12. But Peeta was elated. And Daniel didn't want to spoil his son's happiness with a warning produced by his own heartbreak.

"That's great, son. Is she doing better?"

"So much better," Peeta gushed. "My wife is a fighter. I think I love her fighting spirit most."

This time, Daniel furrowed his brow in concern. Peeta kept using the words "my wife" whereas he would normally say "Katniss." Not even a week ago, Peeta had asked his father about the process to get an annulment.

"Yes," Daniel agreed calmly. "She is a fighter."

For the rest of the day, anytime Daniel and Peeta were alone, Peeta spoke only of his wife and the promise their relationship held. When it was time to leave, Peeta rushed through his part of the cleanup, anxious to return home.

As Daniel watched him nearly jog away from Mellark Bakery, he said a silent prayer that Peeta wouldn't get his heart broken. Again.

The aroma of a meaty stew greeted Peeta before he unlocked the front door. It was a welcome surprise. Returning home to the smell of dinner after a long day at work was more than he could ask for.

During one of their learning process talks, Katniss told Peeta that she knew how to cook and that after her father's death, she learned how to make almost anything appetizing. This was the first time
she cooked in their home.

"Hey you," Peeta grinned as he rounded the corner into the kitchen. She stood at the stove, using a ladle to transfer the stew from a large stock pot to an oversized container. He had waited all day to see her smile, to smell the lavender that lingered in her hair from her shower, to feel her nose rub against his neck.

She didn't even look up as he approached.

"Hi," she grumbled, barely audible. She reached for the lid and angrily snapped it on the container.

Peeta tensed. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

"Is everything okay?" he asked cautiously.

"Does everything look okay?" she snapped.

He blinked slowly, completely taken aback. She was turning on him again, just like before. And just like the last time, he had no idea why.

She didn't wait for his response as she gathered utensils from the counter and noisily dropped them into the sink.

"Gale nearly lost his job today. For no apparent reason! He's being scaled back to part-time labor, 15 hours a week. Fifteen hours, Peeta!"

She rubbed her forehead and sighed heavily. "He can barely make ends meet for his mother and siblings on a full-time salary. There's no way they can manage on those wages."

Peeta stared at the floor. Honestly, the last thing he wanted to do was talk about Gale. But the change in his work hours in the mines was a crisis for the Hawthornes. And Katniss cared about them. Peeta knew he wouldn't be a good husband if he didn't make his wife's concern his own.

"I smell Snow all over this," she said, aggravated as she packed containers of stew and supplies from their kitchen into two large canvas bags on the kitchen table.

Peeta came closer. "We'll figure out a way to help them, Katniss," he said reassuringly.

"How? Gale would rather die than take a handout. These groceries will be hard enough for him to accept." She paused, gripping the back of the chair with locked arms. "This is all my fault, Peeta. If I hadn't hung out with him the other night..." She stopped short. "I just keep seeing Posy's little face in my mind that way I used to see Prim's when we were in need. This is so unfair."

Peeta placed his hand on her forearm.

"Hey," he said gently. "We'll figure something out. He dipped his head, insisting that her eyes meet his. "Don't put all of this on your shoulders. We'll figure this out together. Okay?"

Katniss nodded slowly, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Vick and Rory are coming to pick these bags up from my mom's house in a few minutes. I'll ask my mom if we can invite them over for Sunday dinner. We can give them more supplies then."

"That's a great idea," Peeta said. "And I can prepare and refrigerate some dough for them to take home. They can bake fresh loaves throughout the week."

Katniss had maneuvered her arms through the straps of the totes and was about to lift them from the
table. She stopped at his words and withdrew her arms, walking quickly to Peeta and flinging her arms around his neck. Given her angst moments before, he was caught off guard. His arms quickly doubled around her waist, pulling her close.

"Thank you, Peeta," she whispered against his neck. "You're amazing."

Suddenly, he had her back. The woman who trusted his touch in their bedroom, tumbled with him in the meadow, and danced with him in their living room. The woman she was becoming. His woman. His wife.

"I'll only be at my mom's for a few minutes. Then I'll be back home to eat dinner with you. And I want to hear about your day. Okay?"

He buried his lips in her hair. "Okay," he whispered lovingly.

Then she walked out the kitchen side door, the canvas bags hanging from her arms and his heart in her hands.

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She sat in bed later that night answering his questions about the ingredients in the stew she prepared for dinner. There was a savory ingredient he just couldn't put his finger on.

"Rosemary." Katniss spoke loud enough for Peeta to hear her through the bathroom door that was slightly ajar after his shower. She breathed in the sandalwood and vanilla from his bath soap that wafted into the room.

"Ahh, rosemary," he said with realization. The door opened wider and he walked into the bedroom wearing nothing but his drawstring pajama pants. "It was really –"

His words caught in his throat when he laid eyes on her. She sat in bed with her knees drawn to her chest, wearing the gray t-shirt he normally wore to bed and a pair of shorts that reached just below her hips. She brushed her long, thick hair, which was finally dry after the shower she took earlier that evening. Peeta swallowed hard.

"…delicious."

Her face flushed and she dropped her gaze. She realized that he was no longer talking about the stew. And she also realized that the tingle running up her spine was because of his bare, muscular chest.

She bit the corner of her bottom lip. She could feel his eyes on her. When she looked up, his gaze was intense, ready.

"You're, umm… wearing my shirt."

Katniss glanced down. "Oh, your shirt. I hope you don't mind. I meant to do laundry today and with everything with Gale, I forgot—"

Peeta flashed his palms. "No, it's okay," he said, not wanting to bring any discussion about Gale to the bedroom. Their bedroom. His lips curled in a bashful smile. "Trust me, it looks a lot better on you."

Their laughter lightened the atmosphere. Peeta pulled another t-shirt from the drawer and slipped it over his head. He lowered to his side of the bed.
"May I?" He held an open palm to her hair brush. She placed it in his hand and turned her back to him. He began to brush the length of her hair, watching her raven locks glide through the bristles.

Peeta guided the conversation to anything except Gale – the outcome of Prim's science quiz the other day; where rosemary could be found in the meadow; an herb bread that would be even better with rosemary added.

She told him that she'd listened to more songs from the music discs. He remembered that he had a portable music player that she could also use the play songs during the day, if she didn't want to be confined to the living room. He told her where to find the music player.

When they were ready to go to bed, Peeta watched her plait her hair into two long braids, the way she wore her hair when they were five years old. She said she wanted to go hunting tomorrow morning, to find a wild turkey for Sunday dinner. Peeta told her that was a great idea for her to hunt again. She nestled beside him and easily fell asleep.

Four hours later, Katniss screamed and lurched forward. This time she saw Rue, falling into a pit of pointed arrows that impaled her small body. Peeta woke instantly, with soothing touch and comforting words. He brought her water from the bathroom sink, and when she returned her head to his chest, she clutched a tuft of his shirt in her trembling hand that soon became still underneath his steady palm.

When her body finally surrendered to sleep, Peeta whispered the words he wanted to say to her for so long, but only now felt he could.

"I love you Katniss Mellark. I'm so glad you're my wife."

His eyelids fluttered open when he felt her pull from his arms and climb out of bed. As Katniss padded to the bathroom, Peeta studied the way the seam of her shorts dipped between each perfect cheek of her ass and the way her nipples poked his t-shirt that was too large for her frame.

You are so damn beautiful. And I am so damn hard.

This time Peeta didn't resist the fantasies.

He saw himself pulling her back into bed on a lazy Sunday morning, peeling off her clothes, spreading her legs, and savoring her nectar until she hurled his name against their bedroom walls. He imagined placing a kiss on each eyelid before kissing every square inch of her neck, her shoulders, her chest, her torso, and her thighs, leading him back to where he started. When his tongue coaxed her to another climax, he saw himself burying inside her, thrusting until he left an intimate deposit between her folds.

Then he would repeat the entire process with his wife on her hands and knees.

He drew a shaky breath, wishing this was the morning they made love. But he knew better. They weren't there yet, but he had no doubt in his mind that they were on their way. She was becoming his.

At the rattle of the bathroom door knob, Peeta bunched part of the comforter over his penis to hide the tent he'd made of the bed sheet. He shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep. He would never force himself on her, but after that fantasy, he just might venture a kiss – a real one, not a peck to the temple.

Peeta cracked his eyelids to watch her move about the room. In front of the dresser, she stepped out
of her shorts and pulled his t-shirt over her head, standing stark naked as she folded the clothes and placed them in a drawer.

Shit, fuck, dammit, fuck, shit… Please stay naked. Please, please, please stay naked.

She quietly pulled panties and a bra from another drawer and put them on before pulling a pair of pants and a top from the closet.

He shut his eyes, not wanting her to catch his voyeurism. He didn't expect her to lower to his side of the bed moments later.

"Peeta?" she said softly.

He pretended to stir. She smoothed a lock of hair away from his face.

"Peeta?"

His eyelids fluttered open. "Hey you," he smiled sleepily.

"Hey," she grinned. "I'm heading into the woods. I hate to wake you, but this is my first time out since… I just, I didn't want to leave without letting you know."

He pulled the back of her hand to his lips.

"Thank you," he smiled. "I'd hate to be a wild turkey this morning. Are you sure you don't want my loud ass to come with you?"

She burst into laughter. "Absolutely sure. But if it's any consolation, you are a dance master, a total twinkle toes in the living room.

Peeta grinned slyly.

That's nothing, Mrs. Mellark. Just wait until you see what I have planned for the bedroom.

Two hours had passed and Katniss hadn't returned from the woods. Peeta stood at the kitchen window, only half concentrating on the dough he was preparing for the Hawthornes.

He knew it was ridiculous to worry. Katniss had her bow and arrow, and if she could defend herself in the Hunger Games arena, she could defend herself in the District 12 woods she knew so well. Nonetheless, if she wasn't back home within the hour, Peeta vowed to look for her.

About 35 minutes later, Peeta had just finished preparing the dough when there were three kicks to the front door. Katniss beamed proudly on the other side, a large wild turkey in her arms and a heavy game bag hanging crossways her chest.

"Victory!" Peeta cheered.

He cleared the countertop beside the sink; she lowered the turkey from her arms and dropped her game bag, which was filled with three squirrels, two rabbits, and a pheasant.

"It felt so good to be out there, Peeta," she gushed. "The air was so fresh and everything was so peaceful. I felt alive. After our meadow picnic and the dancing, this was the missing piece I needed."

Peeta smiled in response, gazing lovingly, helplessly at her.
They were supposed to be at Maura's at 11:30 a.m. Peeta assisted her with cleaning the game and cooking the wild turkey, and they chatted as they worked. But her mind drifted to Gale, whom she hadn't spoken to since Monday night, before they stumbled from The Hob and collapsed.

Her mother told her yesterday that he'd called daily to check on her, that he wondered if she was angry with him for what happened. She wasn't angry, but her mother was right. Katniss needed time to recover, and she and Gale needed to let everything blow over, especially with the likelihood that the Capitol was watching. Plus, she had all she needed in Peeta's care.

In Peeta's arms.

The kiss she and Peeta shared on Thursday was like a powerful antidote with dangerous side effects. It made her forget Allister's touch, but now, all she could think about was how safe she felt pressed against Peeta's chest, how she had wanted to tangle her fingers in his hair as they kissed, how she didn't expect him to unlock a hunger inside her that wasn't yet satisfied.

And then there was Gale, whose eyes were just as captivating as Peeta's, whose perspectives and insights enlightened her, whose hand on the small of her back also sent a wild tingle up her spine. She and Gale shared the same defiant, survivalist spirit, and he understood her better than anyone.

She bit the inside of her cheek and stole a glance at Peeta. She would eventually need to decide – if only for her own knowledge – which man held her heart. Fortunately, she had time to figure things out, but not a lot of time. Each passing day brought them closer to the next reaping.

Peeta and Katniss made it to Maura's house with the bread, refrigerated dough, and a wonderful-smelling wild turkey by 11:15 a.m. Maura and Prim were already setting the table. Peeta was tasked with carving the turkey, and Katniss prepared a plate of food that they would take to Haymitch later that afternoon.

They were a family. And Peeta belonged. He could see himself having Sunday dinner with his wife and Maura and Prim and their growing families, for the rest of his life. This could work. He and Katniss could make this work.

The Hawthornes arrived on time. Prim introduced everyone to Peeta: Hazelle, a slender woman with a pleasant demeanor who resembled Gale; Rory and Vick, the younger brothers with good manners; and Posy, the adorable, free-spirited four-year-old with a charming personality.

Dread churned Peeta's stomach, and he silently prayed that he and Katniss and Haymitch would never have to mentor any of them in the Games.

Gale wasn't there. Hazelle answered the unasked question.

"Gale is on his way. He insisted on stopping by a merchant shop so he could contribute to the gathering." The Hob wouldn't open until later that afternoon.

Katniss rolled her eyes, but she understood Gale's sense of pride.

Posy ran up to Peeta. "Do you know any fun games?" she asked with shining eyes.

Peeta lowered to his good knee, coming eye level with Posy. "Actually, I do. Have you ever played tag?"

Posy bounced on her toes, an excited smile on her face. Rory spoke up.
"You've done it now. That's her favorite game."

Peeta laughed at her excitement. "Well, after dinner, maybe we can play a game of tag."

"Yes!" Posy stretched both arms in the air. "Rory and Prim can play with us. Peeta, you can be on my team because you're the best."

"What about me?" Vick said in mock protest.

"You and Gale can help mama clean up," Posy said resolutely. "They always beat me. We can't let them play," she whispered too loudly to Peeta. Everyone laughed at Posy's failed attempt. And again, Peeta felt like he belonged, even among the Hawthornes.

Everyone took a seat at the table, not wanting the food to get cold and unsure of how long it would take Gale to arrive. Maura sat at the head of the table with Katniss and Prim on either side. Rory sat next to Prim and Peeta was next to Katniss. Posy insisted on the seat next to Peeta and Vick sat next to Rory. Hazelle was opposite Maura at the other end of the table, and Prim had already wedged a chair between Hazelle and Posy for Gale when he arrived.

They hadn't long started the meal when Gale walked in bearing a small jar of blackberry preserves.

"Gale, you didn't have to do that," Maura said, receiving the gift.

"I figured there would be bread," Gale said. Peeta's eyes flashed to him.

And there he was. The only person in the room attempting to make Peeta feel like he didn't belong.

Katniss stared at her plate, her face masked behind an unreadable expression. Prim cleared her throat.

"Well it's about time you got here," she said lightly. "I had to make sure Rory and Vick didn't eat all of the bread before you arrived. Peeta made it."

Gale was now forced to acknowledge his presence. "Peeta," he grunted in greeting, not bothering to lift his eyes.

"Good to see you, Gale."

Still nothing from Katniss. Peeta stole a glance. Her lips were pursed, and she continued to concentrate on her nearly empty plate. Was she upset? Annoyed? Anxious? Peeta couldn't tell.

Posy turned to Gale. "Peeta and Prim and Rory and me –"

"And I," Hazelle corrected.

"And I," Posy said, "are going to play tag after dinner. You and Vick have to help with cleanup."

"Hey, no fair," Gale protested, tickling Posy's side. The girl giggled and Peeta finally saw a smile ghost Katniss's lips.

"Well what about Katniss?" Gale lifted his eyes in a penetrating stare to where Katniss sat past Posy and Peeta.

"Oh, Katniss," Posy said in dismay. "I forgot about Katniss."

"It's okay, Posy," Katniss said gently.
"Well, Katniss can stay here and help Vick and Gale clean up," Hazelle said. She was clearly advocating for Katniss spending time with Gale.

"Okay, Katniss?" Posy said. "You can help with cleanup, okay?"

"Yes ma'am," Katniss smiled at Posy.

And as they finished eating and assumed Posy's assigned places, Peeta couldn't help but think that this dinner would be so much better if Gale hadn't shown up.

It was another gorgeous spring day, complete with golden, warm sunshine tempered by a gentle, fragrant breeze.

Posy ran around the backyard placing different objects she'd collected with Prim's help. There was a small, empty flower pot, two books, a bowl, and a candle holder. Whenever someone would run to one of these "safety zones," they couldn't be tagged by a member of the opposing team.

Posy insisted on pulling Peeta aside before the game began.

She again whispered loudly. "We have to have strategy, Peeta. Strategy."

He smiled. *I really like this kid.*

"Right," he nodded in mock seriousness. "Strategy."

"You tag Rory. I'll tag Prim. Then we come back to our safety zone. We've got to always come back to the same safety zone so we can strategize all over again. Okay?"

Peeta couldn't help but laugh. "Okay."

The game started, and the sounds of their laughter drew everyone in the house to the screened back porch. During a pause in the game, Posy realized that someone needed to keep score. So she pulled Vick from cleanup duty and had him referee. Maura and Hazelle sat in matching rocking chairs on the screened back porch, and Katniss and Gale stood behind them.

Peeta saw Katniss grinning at him as he and Posy plotted against Rory and Prim. Gale watched Katniss more than he watched the Game.

Even with the rigors of the game, Peeta noticed when Katniss and Gale retreated into the house, probably to finish cleanup. He tried not to mind. She'd been assaulted earlier in the week by a friend of Gale's who'd been with them at The Hob. If the tables were turned, Peeta would want a chance to talk to her, to see if she was okay.

"Peeta!" Posy screamed in warning as Prim's hand slapped his arm.

"Tag!"

"Aww, you got me!" Peeta fell dramatically to the grass behind one of the safety zones. Maura and Hazelle laughed from the porch.

Posy stooped over Peeta with her hands on her knees. "Let's take a break and get some water," she whispered. "I've got a plan."

Posy reached for one of his hands, and Peeta mounted to his feet. He thought they were heading for the back porch, but Posy led him around the side of the house. Her plan, whatever it was, involved
trickery.

"If we go this way, Prim and Rory won't know which way we'll come back out. Either the back door or the front door," she explained.

"Oooh," Peeta nodded with a grin. For a four-year-old, this was the pinnacle of strategy. He again hoped she would never need to strategize her way out of a Hunger Games arena. That would surely break him.

At the front door, Posy placed a finger to her lips and quietly entered. Even with Prim and Rory out of view, she was still in stealth mode. They tipped to the kitchen where Peeta quietly poured two cups of water. He tried to fill two additional cups of water for Prim and Rory, but Posy shook her head in protest.

"Strategy," she mouthed.

Peeta nodded in agreement. After several gulps of water, Posy took Peeta by the hand and led him carefully, quietly toward the back door.

They'd just passed the living room when Peeta saw them. Near the den. In the threshold of the hallway that led to the guest bedroom.

Gale's arms were wrapped tightly around Katniss's waist, pressing her to his chest. Her head was tilted, their lips eagerly interlocked. Her hand was resting lightly on his forearm. Their eyes were shut in concentration.

Peeta froze, blinking in confusion and disbelief. Then it was as if tiny cracks raced throughout his heart, shattering it into a thousand jagged pieces. When Posy glanced over her shoulder, tugging at her immobilized partner, she too saw Katniss and Gale.

Her finger instantly pointed in the air.

"They're kissing!" she squealed. "Look Peeta! They're kissing!" Posy ran giggling to the back porch to tell Hazelle.

They parted abruptly at Posy's announcement, Katniss's eyes widening in horror at the sight of Peeta. Gale held her tighter, meeting Peeta's brokenness with a defiant stare.

Suddenly, Peeta felt entirely foolish. She'd done it again. She'd broken his heart. Even after all they'd experienced in the past few days, all the love and affection he'd showered on her, she still belonged to Gale. She would always, always belong to Gale. Peeta finally understood.

Posy ran back to his side, Hazelle and Maura in tow. Maura deflated at the anguish and rejection on Peeta's face.

"I... I forgot I needed to do something for my dad this afternoon. I've got to go," Peeta said hastily. "Next time, okay, Posy." He rushed out the door, and Hazelle led the protesting girl to the back porch.

Maura shook her head sadly and returned to the back porch. Katniss felt like she would be ill.

"No," Katniss whimpered, her head in her hands.

He saw us. I devastated him. What the hell am I doing?
She felt disoriented. "I need to… Peeta… I need to talk to him." She pushed against Gale's arms, but he wouldn't budge.

"Stay here with me. He'll be fine."

"Let me go, Gale," she retorted, and he dropped his arms. But his hand reached for her wrist as she turned to leave.

"Please," Gale begged, his eyes pleading. "He gets you every single day. This is all I have, and I miss you so much. Please, Katniss. Please don't go."

She shut her eyes, her chest still heaving. *What a colossal fucking mess I've made. What am I doing? Who do I want to be with?*

She still didn't have an answer. But Gale was standing in front of her, and she couldn't deny his impassioned plea. She nodded sadly.

"Thank you, Catnip," he said, pulling her back into his arms. "Peeta will have to realize sooner or later that this is what we want," he whispered into her hair. "Some way, somehow, you and I are meant to be together."

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Sunday afternoons were Daniel Mellark's favorite time of the week. Nance Mellark and several Merchant women met for brunch and afternoon tea – a thinly-veiled gossip session. Rory was often out with friends. Thatch was married and in his own home. And Peeta usually stayed in Victor's Village, fully utilizing his one day off from the bakery. Daniel had grown accustomed to the solitude.

When his sons were little children, he would play with them in the yard. As his sons got older, they spent more time indoors, listening to music, sometimes dancing around the house, most times doing whatever hobby each one loved. Rye read adventure stories. Peeta sketched. Thatch liked woodworking, as did Daniel, so they would often embark on projects together.

These days, Daniel usually read books and listened to music. He shook his head knowingly when he heard footsteps on the stairs and a knock at the apartment door.

"Rye, how many times do I—" Daniel stopped short. Rye hadn't forgotten his keys again. His youngest son was on the other side of the door, and from the look on his face, something was very wrong.

"Peet," he said tentatively, stepping aside to let him enter. "This is a nice surprise."

Peeta trudged in and flopped down on the couch, staring dejectedly. The door clicked shut, and Daniel sat beside him.

"Tell me what happened, son. What's wrong?"

Peeta shook his head, swallowing hard, unable to speak at first.

"She loves him, dad," he said hoarsely, brokenly. "She loves Gale. She never wanted me. She broke my heart again."

Daniel deflated. This was exactly what he feared would happen.

"I'm listening, son," he said quietly.

Peeta relayed the entire story. He slowly shook his head, his brows pinched in utter confusion.
"Dad, I really thought she and I were growing closer. It all felt so real this time, so right."

Peeta stood abruptly from the couch and angrily paced the room. "I just don't understand how she could do this to me. She must really hate me."

Daniel chose his words carefully. "Son… Did Katniss ever say that she wanted to be with you?"

Peeta's eyes snapped up to Daniel's. "Yes! Well… not exactly. But everything we shared, everything we've been through—"

"Peeta, Katniss doesn't hate you. She cares for you. But she may want a romantic relationship with Gale. She may need you to be her friend and nothing more."

"Well I don't want to be her friend," he spat. "In fact, I don't want to see her again. I'm moving back home."

To Peeta's surprise, Daniel laughed.

"I'm sorry son. I just thought of you choosing to live back here with your mother. I'd love to have you back home, but you'd probably move back to Victor's Village a day later."

Peeta knew he was right. Although they worked together at the bakery, Peeta's relationship with his mother was strained at best and non-existent at worst. He grunted ruefully. He guess he already had practice at living day after day with a woman who didn't love him.

He wandered back to the couch, his eyes filling with tears.

"What do I do, dad?" he asked wearily. "We have to be married. How am I supposed to hold her in my arms every night as she falls asleep knowing that she's thinking of Gale?" He slowly shook his head. "That's just too much."

Daniel gripped Peeta's shoulder reassuringly. "Well, son... I think you need to give up."

"What?"

"I understand this is especially difficult given the circumstances - and very unfair. But give up. Let her go."

Peeta stared quizzically at the floor.

"You look for any sign to feed your hopes that she will reciprocate the love you have for her. And each time, your heart gets broken. You have to guard your own heart. No one will do it for you."

Peeta swallowed thickly. "So… I just give up… On there ever being an 'us'?" The words tasted bitter in his mouth. "She's the only woman I've ever loved, dad. And I hoped that our marriage – although forced – would make her see how much I'm committed to her. How much I want to be her husband, in every sense of the word."

"I know you do," Daniel said quietly. "But Peeta, if you love her, you'll let her be happy. And you won't make her feel guilty because she didn't choose you. Love is sacrificial. That's the true test. Can you give her what she needs, even if it's not what you want?"

Peeta bowed his head in contemplation, and everything began to make sense.

_I did this to myself. She was never becoming mine. She only needed me as a friend._
"So what do I do to love her sacrificially? Let Gale come over and spend time with her? I don't think I can do that."

"No son. Respect your marriage because it is legal and binding. But you need to set some boundaries for yourself, even in the midst of being married to Katniss. What amount of physical interaction are you comfortable with? What do you need to live in peace while respecting that fact that she's in love with another man?"

Peeta nodded slowly.

"And here's the thing Peeta," Daniel said. "You have to be firm. You're also making a decision that will help you heal and move on. Katniss may not realize how she affects you, so you can't allow your emotions to be pulled at every turn. If it's your decision to just be her friend, then just be her friend. Nothing more."

Peeta took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He nodded in understanding.

"Son, I don't know how, but you won't have to live like this forever. Every year, the Capitol makes a big deal over the latest victor. Maybe one day President Snow won't care as much as he does now, and he'll let you and Katniss annul your marriage. Hey may want to televise it, but it could be worth the fanfare if it means you both are free to move on. And I promise you son, there's a girl out there for you who will love you and need you and you'll feel more strongly about her than you do about Katniss. That girl is out there Peeta. And you two will find each other and you'll have everything that your heart desires."

"So I should keep hoping, just for someone else?"

"I think it's safer that way. Don't you?"

Peeta smiled weakly. His father was right. It was time to move on. Clearly, Katniss wasn't his soulmate. So someone else was.

It was early evening when Peeta started his walk back to Victor's Village. The comfortable warmth of the day was steadily losing its battle with the growing evening chill. Peeta wasn't wearing a jacket, but he walked slowly nonetheless. The chill felt good on his forearms, neck, and face.

The talk with his father did Peeta a lot of good; he had a new perspective on his relationship with Katniss. He'd been fighting a losing battle, making a futile attempt to win her heart. She belonged to Gale. It was time for Peeta to let go.

Still he struggled with pangs of bitterness as he replayed the morning in his mind.

*She wanted me to see her kissing Gale. She didn't have the decency to just come out and tell me she'd chosen him.*

*She knew I was going to my dad's house. If she cared about me at all, she would have come after me. But it's been one-sided all this time. I've been giving enough love for the both of us.*

Daniel's voice soon replaced Peeta's thoughts, keeping Peeta from traveling down a path that hardened hearts and created resentment. He would only be hurting himself if he let this experience prevent him from loving someone else, his father had said. Somewhere there was someone else.

He entered through the kitchen side door and dropped his keys on the table. The entire house was dim, lit only by the waning natural light. She wasn't home.
Don't be disappointed. She's not yours. She's not supposed to be here waiting on you. She's Gale's. She loves Gale.

Peeta jogged upstairs to the master bathroom. He sat on the bench in his shower for nearly 30 minutes, letting the pelting hot water relax him. Then, he changed into a new white, v-neck t-shirt and a pair of light gray cotton lounge pants that Portia had insisted he have in his wardrobe. He examined himself in the mirror. The pants were a perfect fit for his physique and extremely comfortable.

"One more point for Portia," he mused. "I'll have to call her and tell her she was right again."

Peeta went to his back porch with renewed interest in finishing the painting he'd been working on for months. He began mixing paint colors to try and achieve that elusive shade of sunset orange. This time, he added a touch of brown to the red, yellow, and white pigments. It was finally the right hue.

"Perfect."

He started to take the painting in a new direction. He added Victor's Village underneath the setting sun. At some point, he realized that he was smiling as he worked.

_I can do this. I can let her go. I can just be her friend._

And a weight that he didn't know existed suddenly lifted from Peeta's shoulders. There was an overwhelming sense of peace, and he knew beyond any doubt that he would be okay.

About an hour later, he heard the front door shut and the sound of keys resting on the kitchen table.

"Peeta?" Her voice sounded uncharacteristically small. Lights were on, but the house was so still that she didn't know if he was home. Or if he'd speak to her.

"I'm on the back porch."

She took a deep breath before she moved. Moments later, she stood behind him, nervously chewing on her lip. He took a step back from his canvas, eyeing it critically.

"I think I finally mixed the right colors to get the shade of orange I need," he said proudly. He turned to face her. She looked solemn, pensive. "What do you think?"

She had to clear her throat before she could speak. "It's beautiful," she whispered, barely audible.

"Peeta, about earlier –"

"You don't have to explain, Katniss," he shrugged.

"No, I should."

"No." He lifted his hand to stop her. "No. Don't."

She looked as if she were holding her breath. She'd been bracing herself for his anger, been preparing to have to explain herself, her actions. This wasn't going like she thought it would.

Peeta put down his paint brush and wiped his hand on a rag. "Katniss, I'm the one who needs to explain."

Her eyes narrowed in confusion.
"I was hurt earlier today. But then I realized that you hadn't hurt me. I hurt me. You didn't lie to me. You never said it was me you wanted."

She stared at him with parted lips.

"Katniss, I've been so hopeful that it could be us, that we could truly be together. I've been ignoring what you want, who you want. But now I understand." He briefly turned his gaze to the ground.
"You were content in Gale's arms today. I could see that."

"Peeta—" she began hoarsely. But he stepped closer and took both of her hands in his.

"Katniss, you don't need me as your lover. You need me as your friend. And I will always, always be your friend. We'll find a way to make this work, and I promise you, I'll find a way to get you to Gale. He's your family, and I want you to be happy. That's what a true friend does."

She was speechless and in complete shock over his words. She nodded dumbly.

We're just friends. Nothing more. Just friends.

Peeta released her hands and returned to his canvas, dabbing more marigold on his chromatic sky.

She quietly retreated into the house.

This is for the best. Gale and I are meant to be. This is for the best.

And she'd almost convinced herself, until the first tear hit her cheek. Then another. Then another.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope you enjoyed this chapter, despite the ending. I'm having fun writing this story, and there's much more to come. By the way, if you're wondering about the songs mentioned in this chapter, they are as follows: Start Me Up by the Rolling Stones; Mercy by Duffy; Summertime by Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong; and, Somersault by Zero 7.
A/N: This chapter is super long and was a doozy to write. I know how I want this entire story to end; the challenge has been in all the details. Anyway, I hope it advances the story. Thank you for your interest in this story, and happy reading! Reviews are welcomed.

He must have come in the middle of the night to retrieve the pillows from his side of the bed. Katniss fell asleep waiting to hear the stairs creak under his weight, hoping he would still lie beside her and give her access to his beating heart, her lullaby.

She drifted asleep to the late evening rainstorm that sounded like a symphony of twigs battering the house, and she woke a few hours later for no apparent reason, patting his side of the bed before lifting her laden eyelids in the black, blaringly silent bedroom.

That's when she noticed that his pillows were gone. He was gone.

Now she was fully awake, her body tensing with realization. With hands pulling and feet pushing, she freed herself from the covers and climbed out of bed, determined to find Peeta.

*I have to make this right. He has to come back. I need to fight this. I have to fight this.*

But after more than five years of one fight after another, Katniss Everdeen Mellark had absolutely no fight left. She made it as far as the door knob, clutching it as she sank to the floor, landing in a pile on her knees, void of the fire that an entire nation thought always burned.

She'd fought to suppress her own sorrow after her father's sudden death so she could pry her mother from her catatonic state. When her mother remained unresponsive, she'd fought to provide food so they wouldn't starve.

She'd fought to walk with her head held high and to appear unfazed by the whispers and snickers of Merchant children who hadn't lost the breadwinners of their families and who were clearly better dressed and better fed.

With only a moment's notice, she'd fought her fears and sacrificed her own life to keep Prim from reaching the stage after the younger girl's name had been called at the reaping. She'd fought for the judges' respect and for sponsors' support while training for the Games.

She'd fought to survive the arena. She'd fought to memorialize Rue with dignity. She'd fought to keep Peeta alive. She'd fought - and was still fighting - to keep President Snow satisfied. She'd fought to keep Gale happy. She'd fought to keep Allister from raping her...

And like fragile glass in freefall to the ground, Katniss shattered. She clamored back to the bed, gasping for breath, her face crumpling in a heart-wrenching sob that she unloaded into her pillow as she weakly beat the mattress with her fists.
I can't fight anymore! I'm too tired! I should have died in the arena and this would all be over! I wish I'd died! I can't take anymore!

Nearly two hours passed before she quieted. She rolled onto her back in stages, pausing after each effort. She was empty - physically, mentally, and emotionally depleted.

Suddenly, behind her closed eyelids flashed an image of the cabin deep in the woods - the one her father had taken her to, the one no one knew about. It was like an answer to prayers she didn't know she'd prayed.

Her mind raced with the possibility.

*I can disappear. I can leave before dawn and never come back. I just need supplies until I reach the cabin, and I can hunt for food once I get there. This can all be over.*

Maybe it was an answer to someone else's prayers, but in that moment, Prim's face flashed in Katniss's mind, replacing the fading image of the cabin. And Katniss knew she had to stay for the sake of the one person she knew she loved. She couldn't leave Prim.

So just like she'd done countless times before, Katniss collected her broken pieces, leaving behind what she couldn't carry. Hers was a life where she was powerless to make her own choices, yet powerful enough to break Peeta's heart. Again.

"I'm so sorry Peeta," she said hoarsely into the silence, her eyes still squeezed shut. "You deserve so much better than me."

Exhaustion soon took the role of her husband's heartbeat and in the absence of the symphonic rain, Katniss fell asleep to the sound of her own jerking breaths.

Peeta went to bed on Sunday night feeling encouraged and empowered - like he could successfully reassemble his heart and safeguard it from Katniss, who'd made a habit of breaking it.

But by morning, his resolve had abandoned him, and his own habits betrayed him. As soon as he opened his eyes, he glanced to his right, to where she was usually nestled beside him with the hand that clutched his shirt as she fell asleep resting lightly against his chest. He'd made a habit of planting light kisses on her forehead until she stirred and made that adorable chewing motion in her sleep.

It was one of the habits he had to break.

He'd already broken one habit when he decided to sleep in the bedroom across the hall. He'd made the decision as he stood at the kitchen sink, rinsing his paint brushes. He watched vibrant globs of paint fall into the sink, then he emptied the murky jar of water where paintbrushes had been swirled free of color while he painted.

It all became so clear. Separately, the colors were stunning and rich, and when they were used together on the canvas, they complimented each other. But when dipped into the jar of water, all the vibrant colors morphed into something murky and undesirable.

That's like me and Katniss. We work well together in public, when we need to. But this house is like the jar of water. When we are alone together, when we share a bed, things get murky, and I get confused. I don't ever want to be so confused again that I miss the truth staring me in the face. We have to go back to sleeping alone.

As he lay in bed, he draped his forearm across his eyes and sighed deeply. He'd been so convinced
that Katniss was becoming his. But it only took Katniss two minutes alone with Gale for Peeta to realize what a fool he'd been.

*I've been fighting a losing battle all these years. Katniss will never be mine. It's Gale she wants. It will always be Gale she wants.*

Peeta scoped the powder blue walls of the unfamiliar bedroom. It was smaller than the master, but it easily fit a full-sized bed, a dresser and chest of drawers, an armoire, and a recliner that was positioned underneath a brass, curved-neck floor lamp with a stained glass shade. And then there was the window, all he really needed, which he'd left open during last night's rainstorm. This room was simple and comfortable and a perfect size for him.

If the bedroom lacked anything, it was an alarm clock. Peeta regularly set an alarm as a fail-safe, but his internal clock always woke him before the alarm had a chance. He made a mental note to move the alarm clock from the guest bedroom downstairs where he'd slept during those tumultuous early weeks of their marriage.

*I guess we've made some progress since then,* he thought ruefully. *At least we're no longer at each other's throats.*

Peeta's anger surged as his thoughts shifted to Gale. Whenever Peeta and Katniss were at each other's throats, whenever there was upset in their relationship, whenever there was tension in their home, Gale was at the center of it. Katniss didn't have to admit that Gale had been influencing her. Peeta was far more perceptive than either Gale or Katniss gave him credit for.

He threw off the covers and headed to the bathroom inside the master bedroom. She was still asleep, curled in a fetal position with her arms wrapped tightly around her waist. She didn't look comfortable at all. Just yesterday, if he'd seen her sleeping like this, he would have pulled her into his arms.

That was yet another habit to break. He couldn't touch her when he wanted to, like he'd grown accustomed to doing. It was a murky area, and he would only confuse himself.

Inside the bathroom, Peeta detached the lighter weight prosthesis that was custom designed for sleeping.

Like most 12-18 year olds in Panem, Peeta never wanted to be reaped for the Hunger Games. And when he was selected as Katniss's fellow tribute, he certainly didn't want to win. But when both things happened, he had to admit that he'd received the best, most advanced care possible in the Capitol. Peeta returned to District 12 with several styles of custom-fit prostheses - one for rigorous physical activity, one for sitting for long periods of time, one for standing for long periods of time, one engineered for multipurpose use, and one for sleeping.

He was most grateful for his sleeping prosthesis. Being a tribute in the Hunger Games heightened Peeta's sense of danger, and he was most wary of the night when sleeping already put him at a disadvantage. If he ever needed to protect Katniss or defend their home in an instant, he didn't want to have to stop to re-attach his prosthesis - another disadvantage.

"I'm told that sleeping in a prosthetic leg had previously been discouraged in the medical community, but this is brand new technology that changes all of that," Effie had announced proudly as she tottered around his hospital room after his surgery, adjusting the blinds to let sunlight in while Haymitch squinted from a chair in the corner. "Nothing but the best for our victor."

Each prosthesis was a perfect fit and, save the initial days of getting use to the artificial limb, Peeta had very minimal pain. Soon, he'd gotten use to not having part of his leg.
The only prosthesis that didn't exist was one for showering. His physician had explained that Peeta needed to "let his leg breathe" every day and to thoroughly wash the stump and apply cream to prevent infection.

So when he'd returned to District 12, Peeta and Daniel set up the master bathroom with everything Peeta needed. They installed a plastic bench inside the shower. They placed a pair of crutches and a padded wood bench outside the shower door so Peeta could sit while drying. Peeta stored his prostheses in the spacious linen closet inside the bathroom.

His physician also told him to expect his leg to swell after he showered. It wouldn't be anything noticeable to the naked eye, but the swelling would be obvious when he tried to reattach his prosthetic leg. Then, the physician showed Peeta how to operate the adjustable top on each prosthesis, which was designed to accommodate temporary swelling. This meant that he didn't just have to restrict his showering to night time to accommodate swelling. Peeta liked to shower in the evenings to help him relax after a long day, but he also liked showering in the mornings to help wake him up. Once the swelling went down, he could easily readjust the prosthesis as needed.

Now seated under the spray of hot water, Peeta reached to the shower ledge for his body wash that was positioned behind a bottle of lavender-scented shampoo. He recoiled and quickly turned his face back to the water, hoping it was enough to save him.

But it was too late. His sorrow swelled and crashed like a tidal wave, and he finally broke down, sobbing bitterly into the heels of his hands, the shower water pelting the back of his neck.

*I just want to go get her and pull her into my arms and make her see that she belongs with me. Why can't she see that she belongs with me? Why can't she want this too?*

He cried for several minutes. When he found his resolve, Peeta chastised himself.

*You've got to be stronger than this. She loves Gale. Katniss loves Gale. She doesn't want a romantic relationship with you. Just let go. Let her go.*

As he sat on his drying bench, he marveled at how easy it was for him to desire her, to love her in a way that she couldn't reciprocate. And in that moment, Peeta knew what he had to do to truly let Katniss go and to reassemble his own heart.

He had to have a talk with Gale.

From the other end of the prep table, Daniel watched silently as Peeta angrily pounded his fist into a pile of dough. Across the room, Thatch and Rye had also taken notice.

"Here son, let me." Daniel approached with a hand to Peeta's shoulder, causing Peeta's eyes to widen in realization of what he'd done to the dough, which probably couldn't be saved. Peeta stood listlessly with flour-covered hands.

"There's a cake in the refrigerator that needs to be decorated," Daniel said. "The order form is in the basket on the counter."

Peeta rinsed his hands and retrieved the cake and the order form. The "Special Occasion" box was checked, and in his mother's handwriting was the word "Anniversary." The customers wanted a large lavender-colored flower atop the cake with lavender piping along the edges.

Peeta noisily ripped the top off the plastic vat of icing and began scooping some into a separate bowl so he could add purple food coloring and then fill a pastry bag.
"Why do they want this stupid purple icing all over their cake," Peeta grumbled as he angrily stirred in the food coloring. "And what's so special about anniversaries? It's completely ridiculous to buy an entire damn cake for some dumb anniversary. None of it matters anyway. None of it! It's all a stupid, meaningless, pointless —"

Daniel turned abruptly.

"Peeta." His tone was firm, but his eyes were full of concern. Peeta’s eyes flipped to his father's. "Tell me what's wrong." Daniel lowered his voice to a whisper. "Did something else happen?"

Stone faced, Peeta went back to mixing the icing. "Nothing’s wrong."

"Something's wrong." Thatch's voice came from behind Peeta's shoulder. "You've been brooding all morning. Are you alright?"

Just then, Peeta surveyed the faces of his father and brothers, taking in each quizzical expression.

"Sorry," Peeta mumbled. "I'm fine now."

From their conversation the day before, Daniel already knew that Katniss had broken his son's heart again. Given Peeta's angst, Daniel assumed that his son and Katniss had had a bad confrontation the night before. But Thatch and Rye weren't privy to the details of Peeta's marriage. They exchanged quizzical glances. Peeta was usually the calm, even-tempered one.

"Listen little bro," Thatch said with a sigh. "I'm no expert, but I know firsthand that marriage can be hard. It's a challenge learning to live with another person. But at the end of the day, if you two love each other, you have more than what most people will ever have in their lifetimes. And I believe that you love Katniss and she loves you, and —"

"What do you know, Thatch?" Peeta bellowed at his eldest brother. "You don't know a damn thing about my marriage or what the hell I'm going through! So keep your shitty advice to yourself!"

Thatch's jaw dropped and all eyes widened in surprise at Peeta's outburst. The kitchen door swung open.

"What the hell is going on in here?" Nance hissed, trying to control her volume. "We have customers out there."

Peeta again surveyed each face, but this time he felt instant remorse. The people in that room were the only true family he had. And he needed them now more than ever. He took a deep breath.

"I'm... I'm sorry mom," he said hoarsely.

Nance eyed him with tight-lipped suspicion before she backed out the door. They could hear her chirping that it was a false alarm, that all was well.

"I'm sorry," Peeta mumbled. "I'm fine now."

Peeta felt his father's arms encircle him on his left as Rye pressed in on the right. And in that moment as they encircled him, for the first time in a very long time Peeta didn't feel alone. They gave him strength for what he had to do that day, the hardest thing he ever had to do.
"This is bullshit!"

Gale slammed his fist on the kitchen table. It was early Monday afternoon, his first day of working part-time hours in the mines. He was the only one on his shift whose hours were cut, and he'd been given no explanation why.

He ran his arm across the kitchen table, sending utensils, pots and pans crashing to the floor. Then, he stared absently at the mess he made.

It wasn't the only mess he made recently.

The day before, his well-orchestrated kiss with Katniss had caused an upheaval, drawing the ire of their mothers, the disapproval of their siblings, and an embarrassment and confusion so strong that it sent Katniss fleeing to the woods.

Shortly after Peeta witnessed Katniss and Gale's kiss and rushed out of Maura's front door, Maura and Hazelle returned to confront Katniss and Gale.

"I will not allow you to betray your husband in this home, Katniss," Maura said fiercely, causing Katniss to pull ashamedly from Gale's arms.

Hazelle's words were even more damning.

"And how dare you interfere in their marriage, Gale? We are here because they are trying to help us survive, because your hours have been cut in the mines. And this is what you do? Kiss another man's wife? With him right outside? I don't know what's gotten into you lately!"

By the time Hazelle turned her attention to Katniss, Posy's incessant cries for Peeta – whom Hazelle had given Posy to - and Rory and Prim from the outdoors.

"And Katniss, I expected more out of you. Peeta is your husband. You made vows to Peeta, not to Gale. Did you see the look on your husband's face? That poor boy is devastated."

Katniss looked completely stunned. Her lips parted wordlessly as she took in the accusing stares from everyone - even Posy who now understood that Katniss and Gale were to blame for Peeta's sudden departure.

But the look on Prim's face was most unsettling for Katniss. At first Prim looked perplexed, like she hadn't met this version of Katniss before, this insensitive, selfish person who would carelessly hurt the man who clearly loved her and who'd done all he could to rescue and avenge and heal her. Then, Prim's face darkened with angry realization. That look rattled Katniss to her core.

Katniss jerked, as if she finally understood the magnitude of what had transpired, the damage she'd done to Peeta. She ran tearfully out the front door, mumbling that she had to get to the woods.

Gale apologized and insisted on taking the blame. After all, it was his plan.

Gale didn't want to accept handouts, but Hazelle had insisted that he attend the gathering to show his appreciation. The Hawthornes had taken out too much tesserae already, and she didn't want to increase any of her children's chances of being reaped for the Games.

But Gale insisted on bringing something to the gathering, and since it was early Sunday afternoon
and The Hob hadn't yet opened for trading, Gale was forced to spend coins at some Merchant shop buying a jar of preserves.

When he arrived at Maura's house, Katniss didn't even lift her eyes to acknowledge him. He was furious when he handed Maura the jar of preserves, when he made the quip about there being bread at the gathering, an obvious slight at Peeta. In Gale's mind, it was warranted. Peeta had obviously been taking advantage of Katniss's vulnerability in the days following her assault. Gale knew needed a chance to talk to Katniss alone, to dismantle the lies Peeta must have been telling her.

After the meal, the sounds of joyous laughter drew them all to the back porch to witness the rousing game of tag between Rory, Prim, Posy, and Peeta. And Gale watched jealously as Katniss smiled affectionately at Peeta as he and Posy executed the four-year-old's brand of strategy against Rory and Prim.

She was falling in love with Peeta. If no one else could see it, Gale could.

He had to do something. Quick.

So Gale touched her arm and motioned for her to join him inside the house. They sat on the couch and he asked a barrage of questions about how she was doing and what transpired on the night of the assault. He felt completely shut out and offended when she said she didn't want to discuss the assault, but that she was getting better, stronger every day.

Gale already knew the answer to his next question, but he wanted to observe her response.

"Has your mom been watching over you non-stop?"

"No. I mean she's stopped by every day to check on me and change my bandages, but Peeta's been taking care of me."

Gale watched her eyes dip to the carpet, the corners of her lips twitching into a furtive smile. She was reliving a memory that only she and Peeta knew about. It sickened Gale. He wanted to shake her from her stupor and demand that she not be lulled by Peeta's manipulation. But given the grin on her face and the fierce argument they'd had about Peeta on the night of her assault, Gale knew disparaging Peeta would backfire.

He had a more effective tool in his arsenal.

His pain.

He knew Katniss would respond, instantly and affectionately, to his pain.

Gale pulled out all the stops. His eyes filled with tears as told her about the agony and guilt of learning that one of his "so-called friends" had tried to rape her. A fat tear hung from his bottom eye lash when he told her how powerless and worthless he felt because he couldn't protect her. That tear rolled down his cheek when he said he was more in love with her than ever and that he would move heaven and earth to keep her safe. He wiped at the tear when he admitted that it hurt like hell to not be able to talk to her on top of everything else he was dealing with now that his hours would be reduced at work.

Everything Gale said was absolutely true. But he chose to use his emotions against her.

So when Gale stood abruptly from the couch with his head in his hands, and walked to the threshold of the hallway - out of direct view of the back porch where Maura and Hazelle sat in rocking chairs - he knew Katniss would follow him, longing to comfort him.
When she lightly touched his forearm, Gale slowly slid an arm around her waist and easily pulled her chest to his chest, her lips to his lips. She didn't resist. He only wanted to reclaim her, to make her realize that what they had would always be more powerful than anything Peeta could offer.

Moments later, they were surprised by Posy's squeal. And there was Peeta, looking like he'd lost the game he'd been playing for far too long. Eventually, Katniss was rushing out the front door to escape into the woods. He hadn't spoken to her since.

Gale began collecting the items he sent crashing to the floor of this mother's kitchen.

I know I could have handled that differently. But she felt it too; she knew our kiss was real. And as long as there's something to fight for, I'll fight as long as it takes.

A rapid knock on the front door pulled Gale from his thoughts.

"Just a minute."

Gale didn't expect to see him standing on the other side of the door.

"Peeta."

"Gale," he said, his face hardened. "We need to talk."

Gale watched apprehensively as Peeta took a seat at the kitchen table. He chose the seat opposite Peeta, the chair scraping the floor as he pulled it from the table.

"If you're looking for Katniss, she's not here," he said curtly. "You should try the woods behind Victor's Village."

Peeta remained eerily silent, his fingers lightly drumming the table as his eyes fixed intently on Gale who looked defiant but increasingly uneasy.

Finally, Peeta spoke.

"I'm here for three reasons, Gale. The first reason is Katniss. I don't appreciate you kissing my wife."

The chair again scraped the wood floor as Gale stood abruptly from the table, his lips twisted in a smirk. He walked to the sink and half-filled a glass with water. He didn't bother offering any to Peeta.

"Your wife kissed me back," Gale retorted. "I think your wife would rather be with me."

"I know she would. That's why I'm here."

Gale slowly pulled the glass from his lips. He eyed Peeta skeptically. "What?"

Peeta leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table. "I'm here to let you know you've won. She wants to be with you. You have her heart."

Confusion and suspicion played on Gale's face.

Peeta sighed deeply. "When I saw Katniss kissing you, she looked like all was right with the world. She looked content in your arms. I have no doubt that she wants to be with you. That she'll always want to be with you."
"And you stopped by to tell me this because…"

"Because I want you to know that I'm no longer trying to win her heart. It's unfair enough that she and I were forced to marry – and I know she told you about Snow's demands – but it would be even more unfair to confuse her about who she wants. You and I both know who she wants. It's you."

He pondered Peeta's words. This was not the conversation Gale was expecting.

"Is this a joke? Why are you giving up so easily?"

"Easily?" Peeta laughed humorlessly. "I've carried a torch for her since I was five years old. There's nothing easy about this. I'm just here because by telling you, I'm also making it official for myself. I'm letting her go, and there's no going back now. Katniss and I will only ever be friends trying to survive a life neither one of us asked for."

Then Gale saw the honesty and heartbreak in Peeta's eyes. It was like staring at the sun; at some point, it was too much to handle and Gale had to look away.

"Here's what I'm saying Gale," Peeta continued. "I will do everything in my power to see Katniss safe and happy. At this point, that's all I want. I believe you want the same. Am I right?"

Gale nodded lowering back into his seat at the table. "Absolutely."

"My hope is that once the new victor is named in this year's Hunger Games, I can get a meeting with President Snow. My plan is ask him to let me and Katniss divorce and to make it a big national story with cameras and scripts and drama. I'm hoping he will agree to let me, not Katniss, take the fall for the failure of our marriage, and that certain families will be shielded in the midst of all this. That includes my family, Maura and Prim, and your family. If I can figure out a way to make him look good in this and promote the Capitol's agenda, I'm hoping he will go along with it."

"And if he lets you two divorce –"

"Katniss will be a free woman. Free to love whomever she chooses."

"But Snow has told everyone that I'm her cousin."

Peeta shrugged. "You don't need a legal marriage like I have. The Capitol won't need to be involved if you and Katniss have a traditional District 12 toasting."

Gale nodded deep in thought, an eager smile creeping onto his face. "And she can be mine," he said as if to himself. "She can finally be mine."

"And, hopefully, despite all of the bad press, I can still find my true soulmate. Everyone wins."

Gale leaned forward, fully engaged. "What do you need me to do?"

"I know Snow watches Katniss and me. Doggedly. Until talks of rebellion die down in the districts, we are under surveillance. So until I can get that meeting with Snow and until he approves of our divorce, I need you to act like you're Katniss's cousin and nothing more. She needs to spend more time with me at home than with you. We have to play by Snow's rules until we can get from underneath them."

"Does Katniss know about this? Is she on board?"

"No, she doesn't know. And she can't know."
Gale's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Why can't she know?"

"I want Katniss to emerge from this as unscathed and as innocent as possible. The less she knows, the better."

Gale stood again and anxiously paced the room. "How many months until the next reaping?"

"Six until the reaping. September."

Gale chewed thoughtfully on his bottom lip. "And you think this plan with Snow could work?"

"I think it's worth a try. It won't be easy by any stretch of the imagination. But unless you or I come up with something better, it's all we've got." Peeta extended his hand in Gale's direction. "Are you in?"

Gale walked back to the table and firmly clasped Peeta's hand in agreement, and a smile Gale couldn't contain crept onto his face. "I'm in."

"Good." Peeta stood from the table. "Here's my second reason for stopping by." He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a neatly rolled paper bag. A dozen sugar cookies were inside.

"These are for Posy. I owe her for not finishing our game of tag yesterday. Will you tell her that I left these for her and that we will have a rematch soon? And ask her to share with Rory and Vick." Peeta smiled. "Tell her it's part of the strategy for our next game."

Gale grinned at the bag. Normally he wouldn't accept a free gift from anyone, much less Peeta Mellark. But Peeta knew what he was doing when he said that he owed Posy. It wasn't a free gift if it was repayment for a debt.

"I'll make sure she gets it." Gale placed the bag of cookies on the kitchen table.

They walked to the front door and Peeta turned to face Gale. "There's one other reason I'm here."

"Okay," Gale shrugged. "What is it?"

Then without warning, Peeta reeled back and launched his fist squarely against Gale's jaw, sending Gale to the floor in pain and shock. He shook his head as if to clear it and touched his fingertips to the corner of his mouth, which was oozing blood.

Peeta stood over him, his eyes smoldering. "That's for kissing my wife and for manipulating her. You've got her heart, Hawthorne. You'd damn well better know what to do with it."

And with those words, Peeta stepped out the front door, shutting it behind him. Gale couldn't help but grin with newfound respect for Peeta while still catching the trickles of blood from his lip.

I guess I deserved that.

Just then the phone rang. Grunting, Gale stood to his feet and reached for a napkin for his lip.

"Hello?"

"Gale, it's Katniss." Her voice sounded strained on the other end. "I've only got a minute. I'm calling to say that I can't see you anymore."

Rye met Peeta at the back door of Mellark Bakery.
"Haymitch called while you were out. He needs you to come home as soon as possible."

Peeta froze. *Oh no. What happened to her?*

Rye deciphered his look. "Haymitch said Katniss was fine, but you should hurry."

"Okay," Peeta gathered his scattering thoughts. "Will you tell dad –"

"Already done. He said you can take the cart. We've got everything under control here. Go."

"Thanks Rye," Peeta said as his brother lobbed him the keys.

*What now? What could possibly be wrong now?*

For Peeta, not knowing what to expect was the hardest part. If he had more information, he could at least formulate a strategy.

He was again grateful for the motorized cart. Having to make the walk home under these circumstances would have been maddening.

When he barreled through the kitchen side door, Peeta's eyes landed on a frustrated Haymitch pacing the living room. Then, relief washed over Peeta when he saw Katniss perched on the couch, her arms wrapped tightly around her waist. She looked distraught, but at least she was safe. He wanted her safe and happy, but at the very least, he wanted her safe.

"What is it?" Peeta demanded, breathless from worry, his eyes shifting from Haymitch to Katniss and back to Haymitch. "What's wrong?"

Katniss wouldn't meet his gaze. Peeta notice then that her signature side braid was messy with wayward locks of hair escaping at odd places. He assumed that she'd folded her arms to keep her fingers from dismantling her braid.

"These." Haymitch stepped aside and gestured to the two long-stemmed white roses at the foot of the fireplace.

Peeta's face grew ashen. He swallowed to moisten his suddenly dry throat. "Where did you find these?"

"Katniss found them on your front doorstep this morning after she came back from the woods." Haymitch sounded aggravated. "There's more, Peeta. You'll want to sit."

Peeta walked to the chair opposite the couch, staring at Katniss as he passed. She chewed nervously on her bottom lip and kept her eyes trained on the carpet.

Haymitch extended the folded white note card with the Capitol's cobalt-colored seal embossed on the flap. The five simple words inside the card, probably in Snow's handwriting, made Peeta gasp for breath.

*Till Death Do You Part*

Peeta angrily ripped the note to shreds, his eyes flaring and his chest heaving. Suddenly, his temples throbbed and he swore he could feel his blood pressure rising. He buried his head in his hands.

"Yeah. You see the severity of it," Haymitch said bluntly. "Katniss called me as soon as she found them, which is the best decision she's made in the past 24 hours."
They all knew it to be true. Katniss's kiss with Gale at her mother's house the day before had prompted Snow's special delivery. She lifted her eyes pleadingly to Haymitch. She'd begged him to let her go upstairs before Peeta arrived because she didn't want to be there the moment he realized that her careless actions had put them all in danger. But Haymitch was adamant that she stay to hear what he needed to say to her and Peeta.

"Katniss told me what happened at Maura's house yesterday. I think I've already had this conversation with you two. Snow is always watching. Always. He doesn't give a damn what you two do behind closed doors. It's all about what happens in public or when other eyes are watching."

Like Posy's, Peeta realized in horror, lifting his head from his hands. She saw everything. And Maura and Prim and Hazelle and her family know what happened. And so does my dad. They could all be in danger.

"Shit!" Peeta began pacing the room. Katniss's fingers were again in her braid. Her eyes never left the floor.

"What happens now, Haymitch?" He asked tightly.

Haymitch looked between Katniss and Peeta as he spoke. "Every single day, you two need to be in public and you need to be in love, dammit. Hold hands, kiss, snuggle – I don't give a fuck, just do something affectionate. Forget how you feel or what you want or who you want. This warning is too serious to ignore. And unless you two have a death wish, you need to get your asses in gear."

Peeta fumed. He was trying to learn how not to love her. The absolute last thing he needed was to be affectionate with her. But in that moment, he didn't want to be in the same house with her, much less the same room.

"You don't have a choice," Haymitch continued. "Do I make myself clear?"

Katniss nodded, still staring at the floor. What Peeta said next caused her eyes to flash to his in surprise.

"What about our families and the Hawthornes? Especially the Hawthornes. Should they take extra precaution since she was kissing Gale?"

She squeezed her eyes shut at his words, as if in pain.

"I had Katniss call him shortly before you got here and break things off. She won't be seeing him anymore."

Peeta's brow furrowed. She must have called right after I left his house. I'm glad I talked with Gale when I did. Nothing's changed for me; I can't let her continue to break my heart. I've just got to find another way to make this plan work.

"You two really lucked out to have one another," Haymitch lectured. "There's usually only one victor at a time. Everyone else has had to weather the aftermath – particularly the first year after winning the Games – alone. But you two have drawn the ire of the Capitol. So your job now is to do what you need to do to stay alive and to keep the people you care about safe. Okay? Can you two manage that?"

"Yes," Katniss whispered hoarsely.

"No problem," Peeta said tersely. He brushed past Katniss on his way to the door. Her eyes followed him.
"Peeta?" She spoke now, her voice shaky. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going back to work, Katniss." There was hostility in the way he said her name, and it made her heart drop. "We'll do what we need to do for the sake of the people we care about. But I don't need to be here right now."

The door slammed shut, rattling the entire house. Katniss was on the verge of tears. She'd created a whole new fight that she didn't have the energy to withstand.

"He hates me, Haymitch," she whispered mournfully. "I've ruined everything."

She drew his sympathy, and he slowly exhaled air from his cheeks. Haymitch wanted to tell her that things would blow over. But by the way Peeta stormed out, her assessment could be correct.

When his shift ended at the bakery later that afternoon, Peeta wasn't ready to go home. But everyone else was. So he walked as slow as he could back to Victor's Village.

He was still furious with Katniss, and he didn't want to see her. He wasn't angry that she'd chosen Gale; Peeta was quickly coming to terms with that, especially now that he'd "given" her to Gale. He was angry that she'd placed everyone in danger by kissing Gale. It was Gale's fault too, but as a survivor of the Games, Katniss knew Snow's brand of evil firsthand.

Peeta's intentionally slow gait led him to Haymitch's front door. His mentor stepped aside and Peeta stepped over the array of empty liquor bottles that were turning gray with dust.

Haymitch's house was always a deplorable mess. Aside from the minor infractions of extreme dust and dirty dishes piled in the sink, there was the more offensive issue of the rancid odor, probably from the numerous times liquor betrayed Haymitch and surged a fiery path back into his mouth and onto the carpet.

"Let's sit on your back porch," so I can breathe.

Haymitch shrugged with indifference and followed Peeta through the house. They each took seats in the rocking chairs, tilting back and forth in silence and staring blankly at nothing in particular.

After several minutes of this - and of turning a square glass bottle of clear liquid to his lips - Haymitch broke the silence.

"So let me guess. You're furious with her, and you don't want to go home because you'll have to face her. Am I right?"

Peeta nodded, continuing to stare ahead.

The bottle was again at Haymitch's lips. "She is maddening, I'll give you that."

Peeta unleashed his complaint.

"This is all her fault, Haymitch! Everything was good - we were good - until she kissed Gale.

I mean, this is one fucked up life I have. First, I'm reaped. Then, we survive and I'm led to believe that the only girl I've ever loved loves me back. Then, she breaks my heart, and I plan to just avoid her and live my life. But, I'm forced to marry her. Then, we fight all the time and when we finally start to become friends, she is convinced by Gale that I'm her enemy, and she and I grow apart. Then, she's almost raped and all I care about is comforting her and making her well. Then, like a
complete moron, I mistake her vulnerability for love, but that goes down in flames when I see her kissing the guy she really loves. And now, I have to live every damn day learning how not to love the girl I've always loved - when we're behind closed doors - while at the same time being more affectionate with her in public. And all this while knowing that she never loved me, and she never will."

Haymitch listened quietly to Peeta's rant. Then he turned the bottle to his lips.

Peeta sighed deeply now, his shoulders sagging. "Haymitch, my parents have been pretending to care about one another for years. My mom married a man who was in love with someone else, and she's bitter for it. All I ever wanted was to have the relationship my parents never had, with real love and a stable home. I wanted to have kids who would never be abused and teach them to be good, kind people."

Peeta shook his head tiredly. "I never wanted this. I'm trapped in this marriage, and so is she. And at Snow's whim, all of Panem could be watching us live out a love story that is absolutely, positively not real."

Haymitch took another swig from his bottle, the clear liquid settling between his lips as he swallowed.

"Go ahead and say it, Peeta."

"Say what?"

Haymitch looked him squarely in the eyes. "Say that you resent Katniss. That you're afraid that being married to her will change you, make you into someone you're not. Say that you're realizing that you're still a pawn in Snow's games, and you can't tell what is real and not real anymore. Say that you wish you'd never met Katniss Everdeen, that you'd never loved her."

Peeta mind reeled at the accuracy of Haymitch's assessment.

"Say it, Peeta," Haymitch pressed. "Say it!"

"Fine," Peeta spat. "I resent her! I wish I never met her! I wish she'd grown up in a different district. I wish I weren't attracted to her. I wish –"

"That she'd died in the Games?"

Peeta froze, his mouth and eyes widening incredulously. "What? No!"

"Well wouldn't that have been a solution? If she died in the Games, you would be a free man. All of your problems would be solved. Wouldn't you rather her dead?"

Peeta's eyes filled with angry tears, his chest heaving. "That's not what I meant, Haymitch. You know I was willing to die to save her. And even now, it would kill me if anything happened to her."

"Exactly." Haymitch pinned Peeta with his stare.

"Listen, your life is pretty fucked up, and trust me, I understand what it's like to be a victor who returns home to his world in shambles. But neither you nor Katniss know what it's like to do this alone. You two have each other. So what if she loves Gale? Let her love Gale. If you truly care about her, appreciate the fact that she didn't return to District 12 in a body bag for Maura and Prim to bury her remains."
Peeta's blood chilled at his mentor's words. He may not have gotten what he wanted in his relationship with Katniss, but Haymitch was right. They did have a miracle happen when they both survived the Games. His father had given him good advice when he told Peeta to let Katniss go, and Haymitch was giving equally good advice when he said to appreciate that at least she was still alive.

Haymitch leaned forward in the chair, his hands and the glass bottle dangling between his knees. "Peeta, every year you and I and Katniss will have to stand by and watch two children get reaped for the Hunger Games. Chances are, we will ride back to District 12, the three of us, with those children in body bags. Year after year of that..."

His voice trailed off. Peeta regarded his mentor with compassion.

"It's inevitable that you and Katniss will grow closer over time, Peeta. But, if you know that she truly loves Gale, then focus on building a solid bond of friendship with her because you two will need each other to survive the rest of your lives, regardless of whom you're in love with."

Peeta flopped back in his chair. He'd been so focused on winning Katniss's heart, he'd forgotten that for the rest of his life, he would have to mentor District 12 tributes. Haymitch was right. He and Katniss would need an unbreakable bond if they hoped to survive life outside of the arena.

After several contemplative minutes, Peeta stood, preparing to leave.

"Thanks Haymitch. Thanks for everything."

Peeta made the short walk from Haymitch's house with his mentor's words replaying in his mind.

Would you rather her dead?

He ran his hand roughly across his face, unnerved by the thought.

No! Absolutely not. I need her safe and happy. I would have died if she came back to 12 in a body bag and I lived.

Peeta clutched the door knob and drew a deep breath, his house keys dangling from his other hand. His anger had diminished, but it wasn't completely gone. After a long moment, he quietly unlocked the kitchen side door.

She waited at the kitchen table fidgeting with the handle on a mug of tea. Her hair was now free of its braid and billowed over her shoulders. He wasn't sure what she was waiting for. Maybe she thought he would call and tell her to meet him somewhere so they could be publicly affectionate. Peeta knew they needed to make haste, but he just didn't have the energy tonight. The same distraught expression from earlier was etched on her face, and Peeta wasn't sure if any phony public affection would conceal that look.

Their eyes met, his unreadable, hers contrite. She swallowed hard, her lips parting wordlessly. And as Peeta's chest rose and fell with his next sigh, he released whatever remained of his anger.

"Come here," he whispered.

She was out of her chair in an instant, rushing into his arms, her body trembling with each sob against his neck.

"I'm so, so sorry, Peeta. I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry for this whole mess."
And for that moment, Peeta wrapped both arms tightly around her and held her close to his chest. It would be one of many times when they would truly need each other to endure the lives they were forced to live.

"It's okay," he whispered, his lips grazing her hair. "Everything will be okay."

His arms felt so good. So impossibly good.

Given the way Peeta stormed out earlier, Katniss didn't know what to expect when he returned home. He was more than an hour late when his key finally turned the lock. She'd been bracing for the reality that she might have to spend the night alone in their oversize house.

But somehow, he forgave her. Again. And she apologized profusely as she clutched him as tightly as she could, dreading the moment when she would have to let go.

It was then that they started playing in her mind - lyrics to a song from one of Daniel's music discs.

_I wonder why it is_  
I don't argue like this with anyone but you  
I wonder why it is  
I won't let my guard down for anyone but you

And suddenly, Katniss was transported to that realm where everything made sense, the place she first discovered when Peeta's touch was healing her in their bedroom only a few days before.

"I'll always be your friend, Katniss. No matter what, I'm your friend."

Her eyes popped open. His words made absolutely no sense in this realm. More lyrics from the song played in her mind.

_Now I have come to understand,  
The way it is,  
It's not a secret anymore,  
'cause we've been through that before,  
From tonight I know that you're the only one,  
I've been confused and in the dark,  
Now I understand_

Her breaths quickened. And this time, it had nothing to do with white roses.

Peeta didn't have to continue working at Mellark Bakery, but he didn't see a reason not to. He wasn't there for the money; his winnings from the Hunger Games would support him for life. But his father insisted on paying him a salary for his work, and Peeta insisted that his salary be so small that it was laughable.

It was a lot of hard work, but it offered routine and normalcy. After surviving the Games, he desperately needed routine and normalcy.

Neither he nor Katniss were allowed to return to secondary school. It was explained to them that given their _life experiences_ (meaning, since they were trained killers) they were now adults who were advanced beyond what secondary school could offer them. At-home tutoring was presented as an option, but they both declined. They were only a year-and-a-half from finishing school, and surviving their lives as newlyweds was enough to deal with.
So he shaped dough and decorated cakes during the day, and at night he worked on capturing the brilliance of a sunset that was as elusive and peculiar as his wife.

Monday night was no different. As usual, he had a good seven minutes with the sky at its full vibrancy before it began fading to complete darkness. And like his relationship with Katniss, things were often dark far longer than they were vibrant.

This had been a long day - from his breakdown in the shower that morning to Katniss sobbing in his arms when he finally returned home - Peeta had experienced almost every emotion in one day. Now, he stared blankly at the canvas, squandering his opportunity with the sunset, trying to determine how he would do the last thing he needed to do before going to bed - something he couldn't bring himself to do the night before.

There were four minutes of sunset left when he gave up, dropping his paintbrush into the murky water jar and heading upstairs to shower. Katniss had gone to Maura's to help Prim with homework, so he had the entire house to himself.

After his shower, he realized that he'd forgotten to bring his lounge clothes from Portia into the bathroom. He stepped into the bedroom rubbing a towel across his damp hair, wearing nothing but his boxers.

He froze when he saw her seated cross-legged on the edge of the bed, her gray eyes fixed on the bathroom door. She was again waiting, just like he'd found her earlier at the kitchen table.

Her eyes washed over him with obvious interest, pausing at his muscular chest and lingering on the bulge between his legs before traveling back to his crystal blue eyes. She'd never allowed herself to study him before. Her body buzzed with something she couldn't explain and she involuntarily contracted between her legs.

He shifted uncomfortably but tried to sound casual.

"I didn't think you'd be back this soon." He walked to the dresser and could feel her eyes on his back. "I'll just grab some clothes and get out of your way."

Her words stopped him in his tracks.

"Peeta, I don't want to sleep in separate rooms."

He blinked slowly, his brow furrowing. Having this conversation with Katniss was what he couldn't bring himself to do the night before, what he needed to do tonight before going to bed. It was also the reason he couldn't focus on his sunset.

"I want you to stay in here with me."

He drew air through his nose and out his mouth.

"I can't Katniss," he said quietly, shaking his head. "We need to sleep in separate rooms from now on."

"Peeta, this is a king-sized bed. It's plenty big enough for the both of us." Her eyes pleaded with him. "I don't have to touch you. I won't touch you. I just need to know you're here."

"I know, which is why I'm not sleeping in the guest bedroom downstairs. I'm right across the hall."

"So can I come in there with you?"
Peeta turned his eyes to the floor. This wasn't easy for him either. "I'd rather you didn't."

Katniss stared helplessly at him. Then her words gushed forth.

"Are you mad at me? If so, I can completely understand why. But don't take it out on me this way. There's room for the both of us here. We slept together in a cave, Peeta. We can survive this bedroom."

His eyes flashed to hers. She had no idea that for him, their bedroom was his most challenging battle ground. He moved wearily to the couch and sat facing her.

"Katniss, do you remember what we were doing the Sunday night before last, just over a week ago?"

Lately her thoughts only went as far back as her assault the Tuesday before. She looked perplexed and slightly annoyed by his seemingly irrelevant question.

"No," she shrugged. "What?"

"We were having a terrible fight." Peeta stared sadly at the floor. "It was late, later than it is now, and you were just coming home after spending the entire day and most of the night with Gale. I was downstairs with the phone in my hand, about to call your mother because I was worried."

Katniss swallowed hard, wearing a look of dejection.

"Our fight wasn't long, but as usual, it was epic. I mean we covered everything from our farce of a marriage to the possibility of an annulment."

Katniss momentarily squeezed her eyes shut. "I remember," she said hoarsely.

Peeta looked squarely at her, his eyes intense.

"Yesterday morning you were focused on going hunting, and I was proud of you for getting back out there. But if I'm being completely honest, I wanted to pull you back into bed and make love to you."

His words sent a tingle from the base of her stomach to her chest. She bit the corner of her bottom lip.

"I would never force myself on you, Katniss, you know that. But because of how close we'd gotten over the last few days, I truly thought you were becoming mine. And since I was five years old, that's all I've ever wanted. Then, I saw you kissing Gale."

"Peeta, please stop. I apologized. We don't have to relive -" "You apologized for hurting me, Katniss," he said firmly. "You apologized for the roses and the note from Snow. You never apologized for kissing Gale. You wanted to kiss Gale."

Katniss's mouth dropped open as she searched her thoughts. He was right. She'd never apologized for kissing Gale. And she couldn't figure out why.

"You didn't see yourself in his arms yesterday, Katniss. It didn't matter that I was right outside." Peeta swallowed hard and shifted his gaze to the floor. "I mistook your vulnerability after a terrible ordeal for affection. I managed to confuse myself. I don't ever want to do that again now that I know you want to be with Gale."
She unfolded her legs and slid to the edge of the bed. "I don't know that I want to be with Gale," she argued. "I care about you both. I care about you deeply, Peeta."

He smiled ruefully. "I gave you the best of me these past few days, and you still ended up in Gale's arms. Even if you don't know it yet, I do. It's Gale you want. And I don't want to confuse you. You're not in love with me, Katniss. You're not mine. And finally, I can accept that."

Her shoulders sagged in defeat. "So what does that mean?"

"It means that you and I are just friends behind closed doors," he said quietly. "We are two people who care about each other's friendship and well being, and we will face some difficult challenges ahead. We don't have to be miserable; we can enjoy life as friends. But our hearts belong to other people."

Her breaths quickened. "Are you... Have you..."

"No. There's no one else, if that's what you're asking." He shrugged noncommittally. "I'm not looking. Even if I met her, I wouldn't act on it because I'm a married man. But, Katniss, I have so much love inside me that I have to believe that one day, even if I'm 80 years old when it happens, I'll meet her, and I'll know her as soon as I lay eyes on her." He rubbed his eyes of unshed tears. "Until then, I'm saving my heart for her."

Katniss felt as if she was imploding, and her own tears bathed her cheeks.

"One day we'll be free, Katniss. You will have Gale, and I will have her. He's your soulmate, and she's mine. I don't want to get confused again, and it will confuse me to sleep in the same bed with you, or to call you 'sweetheart', or to kiss you behind closed doors."

She hated that she understood his reasons, but she did.

Peeta returned to the dresser where he pulled an armful of clothes to take to the other bedroom.

Her eyes lifted sadly to his as he headed for the door.

"Peeta, wait," she blurted. "What if I have a nightmare? I know it's selfish. But.."

Peeta levied a close-lipped, reassuring smile. "Then I will come in here and stay with you until you fall asleep. That's why I'm across the hall."

She heard his bedroom door click shut, and she tried to assess what she lost in the fire sparked by her kiss with Gale. But even as her heart ached, her mind was stuck on something Peeta said.

I wanted to pull you back into bed and make love to you. I wanted to pull you back into bed and make love to you. I wanted to pull you back into bed and make love to you.

The familiar throbbing between her legs returned. It was more than a tingle or a sensation. It was a hunger. And it was evident that only one person triggered this appetite.

Hunger.

Throbbing.

Realms where everything made sense.

No Katniss. You can't do this to yourself. It's already too late. You can't fight this one. He's already gone.
When Katniss finally fell asleep, she was awake two hours later. It was 2:38 a.m., Tuesday morning.

After several minutes of staring at the ceiling, she decided a warm cup of tea might help. When she opened the bedroom door, she didn't expect to see light coming from the kitchen. She tipped downstairs and found Peeta facing the stove and lifting the tea pot before it began to whistle. He filled a mug with steaming water and was reaching for a tea bag when he spoke.

"Full cup or half cup?" He didn't bother to turn around.

"Half. How did you know I was standing here?"

He grinned over his shoulder. "It's one of my many super powers."

"Oh." Her voice lifted in mock enlightenment as she approached the stove. "Like making cheese buns?"

He shook his head pityingly, as if there was no help for her. "Yes, mortal. Like making cheese buns."

They took seats at the table where he declined the spoonful of sugar she offered. Her hair was in a messy top knot; she hadn't bothered to braid it as usual before going to bed. And she was still wearing his t-shirt. He didn't know how he felt about that.

"You couldn't sleep either, huh?"

"No." He signed. "I figured a cup of tea would help."

"My thoughts exactly." She sipped from her mug.

He traced the handle of the mug with his thumb and forefinger. "I'm glad you're here. We should talk about how we plan to be publicly affectionate. If we don't get started tomorrow, Haymitch will have projectile diarrhea."

She had just taken a sip of tea and had to cough and slap her chest to keep from choking. Riotous laughter escaped her lips. Peeta grinned and asked if she was okay. She was better than okay. She was extremely grateful that he could make light of a dire situation that was caused by her lapse in judgment. It made her feel safe with him on a much deeper level.

When her laughter subsided, she proposed a solution. "I could meet you for your lunch break. We could have lunch together."

Peeta snorted. "Lunch breaks are a misnomer at Mellark Bakery. We're workhorses; we eat while we work and only take short breaks if business is slow."

She thoughtfully tilted the mug to her lips. "What if we meet somewhere every day after you get off work."

Peeta snapped his fingers. "That could work. Would you be willing to come to the bakery? I can call you about 15 or 20 minutes before I get off so you can start walking. Then, we can be seen together in the Merchant Quarters and in the Seam during our walk home."

Katniss nodded thoughtfully. "That sounds like a great idea. The only problem is your mother. You can't leave me alone with her for too long - if I arrive and you're not ready."

His eyes danced impishly from behind his mug. "Dammit. I planned to lock you and my mother in
the storage closet together until you two called a truce."

"And once I made it out of that storage closet, you would have to use all of your super powers to keep me from finding you."

Peeta looked appalled. "Note to self: scratch the wife-mother storage closet bonding idea."

She laughed heartily.

"But seriously clown face, do we have a plan?" He lifted his mug in a toast.

She clanked her mug against his. "We have a plan, silly."

He studied her as they each gulped tea. He liked making her laugh and seeing her smile. That was one habit he could keep.

"We're going to be just fine Katniss," he said quietly. "This will be a happy home, and we'll make this work until we can have the lives we want. You believe that, right?"

She contemplated his words. Maybe this wasn't the life she was supposed to have, but in that moment, Katniss could find no fault with it. She only wished she could somehow correct her actions from the day before. The hot cup of tea was soothing, but it was no substitute for sleeping in Peeta's warm embrace.

She answered his question in the affirmative. But deep down, she knew that one day they would have to revisit this talk about the lives they wanted. Maybe they weren't so far off from it after all.

Katniss descended the stairs around 3 a.m., Wednesday morning. Without Peeta lying in bed beside her, she was only sleeping in spurts. It was exhausting.

Like the night before, she was hoping she'd find Peeta in the kitchen making tea. But, there were no lights on downstairs, and she didn't have the patience or energy to wait for water to boil. Instead, she planned to try sleeping on the couch. Maybe if she weren't in the king-sized bed where Peeta's absence was obvious, she could trick herself into sleeping longer.

As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she was met with a wave of chilly night air that came from the direction of the back porch.

*Peeta would never leave the back door open. Something's wrong. Something's very wrong.*

She had almost made it to the coat closet at the front door where she kept her bow and arrow when the knob clicked on a side table lamp in the living room. She froze in mid-stride her legs becoming heavy as pillars when she saw their faces, yellow and gray in the dimly-lit room.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the victor slut. I'm so glad you could join us."

Katniss swallowed to force down the lump that formed in her throat. Allister stood behind Peeta with his arm locked around her husband's neck. She couldn't control the acceleration of her heartbeat when she saw the gleam of the switchblade in Allister's right hand. And her eyes widened in horror when they saw the side of Peeta's shirt, soaked in a dark red hue. He'd been stabbed. Peeta was fighting to keep his eyelids open, but Katniss could tell that he was drifting in and out of consciousness.

"Peeta!" She rushed toward them.
"Stay back!" Allister shouted, brandishing his knife.

"Okay, okay." Katniss lifted her hands in a placating gesture and kept her eyes trained on Allister.

"Please." Her eyes filled with tears. "Please let Peeta go. He's bleeding a lot, and he needs help." Fat tears dropped from her eyes. "Allister, I'm begging you. Please."

He looked amused. Then he shook his head. "Nah. We were just getting to know each other – on my terms this time. I think Peeta and I need more time to get better acquainted."

He tightened his grip on Peeta's neck, causing her husband's eyes to widen as he gasped for breath. Katniss called to Peeta on a sob, her voice breaking in time with her heart. His eyelids were again growing heavy.

The words that usually flowed artfully from his lips were now slurred and jumbled. "Katniss. You get... You have to... out of here. Sweetheart. Now. Don't worry about me. Go."

"I'm not leaving you," she said fiercely. "I won't do that. I won't leave you."

Allister's laugh made Katniss's skin crawl. "Isn't this sweet? You do care about him. And all this time, I thought you were fucking Gale at every opportunity without a care in the world. You can't blame me for wanting a piece of that, now can you, victor slut?"

Peeta tried to push against Allister's arm. "If you touch a hair on her head... I'll slaughter you."

"Shut up!" Peeta gagged as Allister again tightened his grip. Katniss pleaded.

"Now this presents a dilemma. See, I was going to let your husband here watch me rape you right before I kill you. But he seems really upset, so I think I'll have to kill him first."


Allister grew agitated. "What do you take me for? A fucking idiot! I am the only one leaving this house alive."

This time, Allister's eyes held new desperation, new fury. She knew she had to move quickly. She sprang forward, determined to somehow wrestle the knife away. But before she could reach them, she watched in horror as Allister took a step backward, pulling Peeta with him, and sank the blade into Peeta's neck.

Breath was sucked out of Katniss's body like a vacuum, and she watched Peeta's blood gush from his neck like water from a faucet. Her legs gave way and she fell to the floor, mere feet away from where he convulsed to the ground.

She was too frenzied to scream, too panicked to cry. She crawled to him, her heartbeat thundering in her ears as her trembling hands became coated dark red from pressing them to his neck. Allister watched with heinous satisfaction from the couch.

"Peeta. It's okay. You're gonna be okay. Just stay with me. Just look at me, Peeta. Look at me!"

But she was seeing less and less of the crystal blue in his eyes as they were fluttering, rolling back in his head.

"Please God no! Please no! Peeta! I can't lose you! Peeta! Peeta I lo—"
But she felt him breathe his last, and she saw the last trace of blue. He was gone. And she scurried backward in horror, covering her mouth with hands drenched in his blood.

She shook her head vigorously, refusing to accept that he was gone. She rushed back to his body and angrily beat his chest.

"Wake up! Dammit, wake up! No Peeta! No! No..." She dissolved into guttural sobs that wracked her entire body, and when her voice was suspended in her throat, it reemerged in an otherworldly wail that pierced the night air.

She didn't feel the hands locked around her arms, gripping her, shaking her.

"Katniss! Katniss! Katniss!"

Her eyes widened in terror then crinkled against the brightness of the overhead lights. She was back on the king-sized bed. His breath touched her face as he pinned her to the bed. And there was blue. There was crystal blue.

"You're having a nightmare. It's not real, Katniss. It's not real."

He straddled her. She was unable to comprehend the meaning of his words, her mouth wide open in shock and her chest heaving. Suddenly it clicked and she tried to sit up. He released his grip and climbed off of her, but sat beside her on the bed.

Fresh tears drenched her face. He was alive. He was safe. It was only a dream. And like she'd done the week before after she narrowly escaped her attacker, Katniss clamored for Peeta, nearly causing them both to tumble off the bed as she strapped her arms and legs around him.

"You're okay," he whispered, his arms encircling her quivering frame. "I'm here. No one has hurt me, and I won't let anyone hurt you. I promise. No one will hurt you."

Her tears drenched his neck. Suddenly, she shoved him away, her eyes filled with alarm.

"I have to see! I have to see!" Peeta looked confused but complied as Katniss roughly pulled his t-shirt over his head and left it dangling from one arm as she frantically examined him his side and neck for stab wounds.

"See? I'm okay," he soothed. "No one has hurt me. We're safe."

He was blindsided by what happened next. With urgency, she planted a flurry of feverish kisses on his face, his lips, his neck, his shoulders, his head – wherever she could reach – while mumbling gratefully that he was okay.

He activated his defense mechanism, his inaudible chant to remind himself that she was only a friend, that her actions while she was vulnerable should not be mistaken for true affection.

At some point, she became aware of his stillness, which made her aware of her actions. She pulled away abruptly, pleading apologies.

Peeta swallowed hard and slipped his shirt back over his head. "It's okay." She couldn't help but think that the polite smile he'd applied to his lips was practiced.

He tried to get her to lie back down, but she was still trembling and too afraid to sleep. So Peeta had another idea. He wrapped her in the blanket and lifted her in his arms.
"Come with me."

Downstairs on the back porch, he lowered into a rocking chair with her on his lap. They adjusted the blanket and nestled underneath to keep warm from the chilly air coming through the screened porch. Peeta began to rock them back and forth.

They sat like this for hours, rocking in comfortable silence until the sky began to lighten with shades of powder blue and yellow. He couldn't see her face, which was partially concealed by the blanket, but he knew she wasn't asleep.

When he asked if she was alright, she nodded and nestled closer. A while later, when he told her that he should get ready for work, but that he would call Maura so Katniss wouldn't be alone, she again nodded, and again she didn't move. He waited patiently with a lopsided grin for nearly another hour before she released him to get a late start to his day.

Later, when he descended the stairs, dressed for work, Maura was with her in the kitchen, reaching past two cups of tea to squeeze her daughter's hand and tell her that she was the bravest girl in all of Panem. But Katniss's eyes followed Peeta out the door, intensely aware of the dimple in his cheek when he smiled and his muscular arms that had kept her from falling apart so many nights.

And his neck. She had a new appreciation for his neck.

Peeta was so focused on replenishing the slices of zucchini bread in the display case early Thursday afternoon that he didn't realize his mother had stepped away from the register, and he was the only employee at the front of the shop. He didn't look up when the bell chimed.

"Peeta."

Gale stood before him in his miner's uniform, his face and clothes smudged with soot. He looked uneasy, as if he felt out of place in a Merchant shop.

"Gale," Peeta said, surprised. He glanced at the unmanned register. "I thought my mom was still out here. I wasn't paying attention. What can I do for you?"

"Can we talk for a moment?"

Peeta studied him quietly. "Sure. Let me finish restocking this bread. You can have a seat at one of the tables."

Gale surveyed the shop. He and Peeta were the only two there. Gale stood at a two-person table in the corner until Peeta walked over.

"You can have a seat," Peeta said, sitting opposite of where Gale stood.

"I'd rather not. I'm a little dirty."

"It's fine," Peeta said, gesturing to the chair. "Please, sit."

Gale reluctantly lowered into the chair. Peeta couldn't recall seeing Gale act so awkward before.

"I, uh..." Gale reached into his pants pocket. "I stopped by to give you this." He handed Peeta a folded sheet of paper. "It's from Posy. To thank you for the cookies."

A smile spread across Peeta's face. Posy had drawn a picture of her and him surrounded by grass with a bright sun in the corner of the page. In large, childlike letters, the words "I Luv Yoo Peeta"
"We made sure she spelled your name correctly," Gale said lightly. "The rest was all her."

"She is by far the sweetest four-year-old in all of Panem," Peeta grinned. "This deserves some cookies."

"No," Gale said firmly. "We can't pay for them. We don't want any handouts."

Peeta considered Gale's words. "Okay. Will you tell Posy that I love her picture and I'll draw one for her very soon?"

Gale nodded. "I can do that."

They sat in silence for a brief moment. When Gale spoke again, Peeta noticed the weariness and concern in his eyes.

"How is she?"

Peeta slowly nodded his head. "She's good. She's been spending time with her mother during the day and with Prim when she gets home from school. And hunting, of course."

Gale stared at the table. "I miss her. Does she ever ask about me?"

Peeta released a short burst of laughter. "Well she wouldn't ask me, now would she?"

Gale grinned sheepishly. "No, I guess not." He lowered his voice. "Have there been any changes in light of… you know."

Peeta glanced around the bakery, shifting in his chair. He and Gale were still the only ones at the front of the shop. "I haven’t thought of anything else." Peeta shrugged. "I'm still hopeful that somehow the original plan will work. It may take a little longer, but I'm hopeful that I can change his mind nonetheless."

Gale heaved a sigh. "And she still doesn't know?"

"No."

"And you've not gone back on your word? You're not -"

Peeta shook his head. "No. I get my heart broken every time. But we have to maintain a certain image."

Gale was now bouncing his knee anxiously. Peeta tried to put himself in Gale's shoes. If the tables were turned and Katniss was in love with him but forced to marry Gale, Peeta knew he would feel the same way.

"One way or another, I'll do whatever I can to see her happy," Peeta whispered.

Gale quietly studied Peeta. He admitted to himself that he'd misread Peeta. He wasn't the weakling Gale thought he was. Peeta was smart and capable. And he truly loved Katniss. Gale couldn't help but appreciate that.

"Peeta." Nance Mellark was back at the front, calling sharply to her son. "Can I have a word with you in the kitchen?"
"Sure, mom. I'll be there in a minute."

Gale stood abruptly to leave, understanding the tone in Nance Mellark's voice. This time, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a small envelope, folded in half. As he shook Peeta's hand, he passed off the envelope.

"Could you give that to her? I'll send other letters through Rory and Prim. I just need to communicate with her, even if she can't communicate back right now. I need her to know that I'm always thinking about her."

Peeta cleared his throat, and quickly slid his hand into his pants pocket. "Yes. I can do that."

"Thank you." Gale nodded and quickly exited the bakery, nearly colliding with two Merchant women who were dropping by for an afternoon chat with Nance.

*Thank you,* Peeta silently prayed, grateful that the women would occupy his mother and delay her lecture. At least for a little while.

Gale and Hazelle hurried to the Justice Building before it closed. After he left Mellark Bakery earlier in the day, Gale stopped by several shops in search of work. He desperately needed something in addition to his part-time hours in the mines, and he'd been searching unsuccessfully for days.

Merchants were not likely to hire a man from the Seam, unless the job called for menial labor, things they didn't want to do themselves and could afford to pay someone else to do. But someone in town mentioned that they were hiring a new cleaning team for after-hours work at the Justice Building.

For many years, the job belonged to Nessie Theisby and her two nieces, all Seam residents. However, Nessie had quit that morning on account of her severe arthritis, and the rumor was that her two nieces bragged that they could support themselves and their aunt on the money they made from "visiting" Head Peacekeeper Cray.

Gale showered and changed clothes after working in the mines, and waited for his mother to return with Posy from cleaning Merchant homes. The job at the Justice Building called for a cleaning team, and applicants had to apply in person. Hazelle put on her best dress, left Posy in the care of Rory and Vick, and she and Gale hurried to the Justice building before it closed at 5 p.m. They only had a few minutes to spare.

Gale ran ahead of Hazelle. He had almost reached the glass front doors, when he saw a girl with honey blonde hair that fell past her shoulders step in front of the doors from the inside, a bronze key in her hand.

She was locking the door.

"Wait! Please," Gale waved his hands to get her attention as he took the exterior stairs leading to the building two at a time. The girl looked startled, but slipped the key back into her pocket. She recognized him.

He was Katniss's friend.

She cracked open the door. "Can I help you?"

Gale was almost out of breath. "Yes. My mother and I would like to be considered for the cleaning job that came open this morning. We're great workers and my mother already has a solid reputation as an excellent cleaner around the Merchant Quarters."
Hazelle caught up to Gale and stood behind her son.

The girl behind the door glanced over her shoulder to look at the clock. She'd found out when she came to work at 3 p.m., that she'd been given the task of hiring for that position, which only become available that morning. There was four minutes left until 5 p.m.

"We have a few minutes left for me to talk with you about the job," she said. "Come in."

"Thank you so much," Hazelle said. Gale offered a grateful smile.

She took them to a table in the corner where they all sat.

"I'm in charge of hiring for these positions," she said politely. "We had three people cleaning this building before. It is a three-story building, so there's a lot of work involved. You'd have to clean all the bathrooms, all the offices, vacuum, mop, dust – the works. And we can only pay you for three hours of work, 5-8 p.m., Monday – Friday, and weekends when we have a function."

"That sounds perfect," Gale said, glancing at Hazelle. "My mother and I can have this entire building spotless. If you'll just give us a chance, you won't be sorry."

She studied them pensively. The mother was slender but appeared strong. She was far younger than Nessie Theisby. The son was very obviously strong and eager for the job. And his gray eyes were arresting.

She moistened her lips with her tongue. "Okay. You've got the jobs. You can start on tomorrow and you will need to work on Saturday for a function. I'll introduce you to your supervisor when you arrive tomorrow, so please be here no later than 4:45 p.m. This first week you'll be on a trial basis. If you do well, I'll see if I can split that third salary between the two of you."

Gale and Hazelle smiled in excitement. Gale reached to shake the blonde lady's hand.

"Thank you so much. Thank you."

She smiled. "You're welcomed. What are your names by the way?"

"Oh, yes. I'm Hazelle Hawthorne."

"And I'm her son, Gale Hawthorne. And we didn't get your name either."

"I'm Madge. Madge Undersee."

Katniss scrambled to unlock the kitchen side door so she could get to the ringing phone.

It was Friday, a few minutes before 4 p.m. Katniss was returning from her mother's house – where she was helping Maura and Prim prepare dinner – to await Peeta's phone call. He normally called around 4:15 p.m., so she could begin walking to Mellark Bakery to meet him. They walked home together, hand-in-hand, exchanging a few light kisses on the cheek or forehead. They hoped it was enough to keep President Snow at bay.

She grabbed for the phone.

"Peeta?"

Katniss was surprised to hear her voice on the other end.
"Katniss? It's Madge."

Katniss lowered into a chair at the kitchen table. Madge had been her only friend at school, the sole person she ate lunch with and one of the few people Katniss spoke to. After Katniss volunteered for Prim at the reaping, Madge presented Katniss with the Mockingjay pin that had been the symbol of the rebellion that she unintentionally fueled.

"Madge. It's been so long since we've spoken."

"I know." Katniss could sense Madge's smile through the phone. "You're a grown up married woman now. How have you been?"

"Good. I'm... Good. How have you been?"

"I've been doing well. I miss seeing you at school."

"Well, you should come out to Victor's Village sometime. Peeta and I can have you over for dinner." The words left Katniss's mouth before she had a chance to think about them, but they were oddly satisfying. She did feel like a grown woman, talking to her friend who was still in school and saying phrases like Peeta and I.

"That sounds great, Katniss. Maybe I could bring a guest? I mean, if he would come with me."

"I don't see why not," Katniss shrugged. "Who is this special someone?"

"You know him well. It's Gale Hawthorne."

Katniss fumbled the receiver, nearly dropping the phone to the floor.

What?

"Hello? Katniss are you there?"

Katniss recovered the phone and took a deep breath before placing the receiver back at her mouth. "Umm... Yeah. I'm here, Madge. Did you say Gale Hawthorne?"

"Yes." Madge sounded excited. "I'm way ahead of myself. We're not dating, and I just met him yesterday when he stopped by with his mother for a job. But I think there's definitely a connection there. He and his mom start today working at the Justice Building after hours. And earlier this year, I started working there after school. At least in passing, I'll get to see him almost every day." Madge stopped abruptly. "You don't mind do you, Katniss? I mean since you're married to Peeta, I just assumed--"

Katniss interrupted her. "No, Madge it's fine." She didn't want to give any indication that she and Gale were more than friends, that she could one day be his.

"Katniss, he's hot. I don't know how you could choose between Peeta and Gale."

"What?" Katniss asked, taken aback.

"Let's face it Katniss, they're both amazing. Gale is tall and dark with those beautiful gray eyes. He has this mysterious way about him, this sex appeal that drives women crazy. And, if you don't mind me saying so, Katniss, Peeta is equally hot with his curly hair, that dimple in his left cheek, those eyes and that body. He's a lover and a fighter. You don't often get all of that in one package. You're one lucky girl."
Katniss’s mouth dropped open in amazement. "You noticed Peeta before the reaping?"

"Noticed him? I was crazy about him. You and I never really talked about guys, but I wasn't the only one. Half of the school had a crush on Peeta."

"What? Where was I?"

"Probably staring out the window, Everdeen – whoops – Mellark."

Katniss shook her head. Had she had such tunnel vision that she didn't realize just how many options Peeta had? Why was he ever interested in her?

"So why didn't you go after Peeta, Madge," Katniss asked honestly. "I mean, if you were crazy about him and all."

"You're kidding, right?" Madge said flatly. "Peeta couldn't see past you. He was always watching you, sketching you, trying to gather the nerve to talk to you. He was smitten. It was a lost cause. We all knew that. He only wanted you."

Katniss weakened at Madge's assessment. Katniss missed everything. She was so concerned with herself that she'd missed all of the signs of Peeta's affection. She felt like a complete idiot.

The sound of voices invaded the background. "I'd better run, Katniss. I've got people coming in. We'll talk again soon, okay?"

"Okay. Take care, Madge."

Katniss was still in a stupor a few minutes later when the phone rang. This time, it was Peeta.

"Hey Katniss." Now that they were just friends, he'd stopped greeting her with Hey you or calling her sweetheart. She missed those greetings. "I'll be done soon. Are you almost ready to start walking?"

"Yes, Peeta," she said quietly. "I'm almost ready."

Katniss hated the bell above the door at Mellark Bakery because it announced every visit.

She understood the purpose of the bell; it was practical for a business. Still, she didn't want her arrival announced. In fact, she would prefer to wait for Peeta outside, so she didn't have to levy a smile for her in-laws or endure Nance's spiteful glare.

But she couldn't be standoffish. She and Peeta had a job to do to convince everyone that they were a couple – for the sake of those closest to them.

Thatch was at the register. His eyes shot to the door as she entered.

Thatch Mellark was the eldest son of Daniel and Nance. It was no secret that Nance used Thatch to trap Daniel; she'd gotten pregnant a few months after graduating secondary school. Daniel had graduated the year before, and they were forced to marry when Nance found out that she was pregnant.

All of the Mellark men closely resembled each other, but Thatch had a few more of Nance's features. His sharp nose was his mother's, as were his full lips and the chestnut brown highlights in his curly blonde hair. Fortunately, none of the Mellark sons inherited Nance's boorish mannerisms. They all took after Daniel in that way – pleasant, affable, agreeable.
Thatch offered Katniss a temperate, close-lipped smile that Katniss always sensed was genuine.

"Hi Katniss. How are you?"

"I'm good," she said forcing a smile several watts brighter than what came natural. "How are you?"

"Great now that this day is almost over." He shook his head tiredly. "I'll tell Peeta you're here."

But Peeta was already walking through the kitchen door, his apron already removed, with four loaves of wheatberry bread in a paper sack.

"There she is," he said lightly, planting a quick kiss on her cheek. A middle-aged woman and man spied on them from a table near the window.

"Hi," Katniss said, matching the airiness in his tone. "Ready to go?"

"Yep." Peeta turned to his brother. "Good night Thatch. See you tomorrow." Katniss lifted her hand in a polite wave.

"Goodnight you two."

Peeta held the door open for Katniss like he did every day, and she felt the light press of his palm on the small of her back as he guided her forward.

Every time she felt that touch, her smile was genuine.

They walked through town with hands clasped inside each other's, talking companionably about their day. As they approached The Hob, Peeta surprised her when he said he needed to go in. Katniss had been there earlier that day to bring game to Greasy Sae in exchange for a bowl of stew. Katniss wasn't hungry enough to finish the stew, but she wouldn't insult Greasy Sae by appearing to offer the game as a handout, without seeking something in return.

Still holding hands, Peeta led Katniss back to Greasy Sae's booth. He pulled out a loaf of bread.

"Sae, I owe you for having someone place that phone call last week for us to come for Katniss. Thank you for looking out for my wife. She's the most important person in the world to me."

Katniss's lips parted in astonishment as she stared at Peeta. This wasn't for show. He was being sincere. And this was an incredibly kind gesture. Greasy Sae could greatly increase her trades if she added a piece of fresh baked bread with each bowl of stew that night. Also, this was just in time for the miners who were getting off of their 12 hour shifts.

"You don't have to do that, boy. It was my pleasure." Sae offered Peeta a wide grin that Katniss had never seen before. But if anyone could elicit such a response, it was Peeta.

"Yes, I did. It's not nearly enough, but please accept it. From a grateful husband." He held out the bread until Greasy Sae accepted it, dipping her head in an awkward nod, her bottom lip pushing her top lip into a sincere, crooked smile.

As they walked away, Katniss noticed that people were staring and whispering. She was becoming annoyed when an aged man whose back had been bent by time, stepped in their path as they walked toward the eastern exit.

"Mellark." His voice was gruff, gravelly.

"Yes sir?" Peeta said respectfully.
"You did a good thing last week to stick up for your wife against that loser Canty," the old man said adamantly. "A real good thing. Back in my day, that's what real men did – stick up for their own. Your parents and your wife here should be real proud."

The man extended a weathered hand to Peeta. Katniss glanced to her left and right. The whisperers were smiling and nodding in agreement with the old man. They weren't whispering about her. They were whispering about Peeta.

Peeta nodded and shook the man's hand. "Thank you sir. I appreciate your kind words."

Katniss's heart raced. Had I even thanked Peeta for all he did for me? Or did I only thank him by kissing another man? Katniss, what were you thinking? How could you?

She felt an urgency to say something.

"I am." She blurted out. Peeta and the old man looked at her quizzically. "Proud," she said, trying to make sense of her thoughts and words. "I am proud of my husband." She turned to Peeta, looking him squarely in the eyes. "You're an amazing man, and I'm lucky to have you. Thank you for taking good care of me."

The old man grinned and nodded as he stepped aside. Peeta's expression was calm but unreadable. She'd meant every word, but Katniss couldn't tell if he'd taken what she said to heart.

Then she remembered. She no longer had access to his heart.

Late Saturday afternoon, Peeta blinked slowly, trying to process her words. He had to ask again because they still didn't make sense.

"You what?"

"I want you to go with me tomorrow morning. Into the woods," Katniss repeated matter-of-factly.

Drops of amethyst from the paintbrush poised in Peeta's hand hit the wood floor of the back porch as he continued to stare, his mouth agape.

"You're dripping Peeta."

"Oh…" He dropped the brush into the jar of murky water.

"You want me to go hunt with you?"

She shook her head. "No. We're not going to hunt. I'm just going into the woods, and I want you to come with me."

His eyes narrowed skeptically. "Are you planning to kill me?"

"What! No!" She laughed now, completely caught off guard. "Why would you say that?"

"Just curious," he deadpanned.

Katniss took him by the shoulders and turned him to face her. "Listen, silly. The woods – my woods – are my sanctuary. If I go too long without them, I feel like I'm suffocating. I just want to show you this part of my life, that's all."

Peeta dipped his head, a smile curling his lips. "Okay. I'd like that."
On Sunday morning, Peeta met Katniss downstairs around 8:30, as she'd instructed. She was already sipping tea, her signature side braid hanging over her shoulder.

"Do you want some tea?"

"No thanks. I'll wait until I come back."

As they headed toward the front door, Katniss reached into the coat closet for her bow and arrow. She felt his perplexed stare.

"We're going into the woods, Peeta," she answered his unasked question. "This is just for protection. It's only a precaution."

"If I don't make it back, give all my paintbrushes to Posy."

Katniss chuckled. "Shut up, silly." She slid her hand inside his. "Come on."

For the next two hours, Katniss and Peeta ventured into the woods. She pointed out various wildlife and trees, including one she used as a landmark. She showed him where some of her traps were located. She hadn't set any the day before since she'd caught plenty of game from her hunting that week. Then, she walked with him to the brook deeper in the forest and showed him the boulder where she liked to sit and watch the water glaze the rocks in the stream.

Peeta leaned against the boulder, wincing slightly. "I think I need a quick break."

Katniss's eyes widened with worry. "Are you okay? I didn't think about what all this walking would do to your leg."

"No, I'm okay. I just –"

She became agitated. "This was so stupid of me. I'm such an idiot. A stupid, inconsiderate idiot. I should have known better, I should have -"

"Katniss-Katniss-Katniss." Peeta cupped her face in his hands, steadying her, forcing her eyes to meet his. "I'm fine. I'm having a great time. I just need a quick break, that's all. Are you okay?"

She was a ball of emotion. On one hand, she was angrily berating herself. On the other, she felt disoriented by his eyes, which suddenly made her feel like she was rising and falling at the same time. She nodded vigorously, her eyes welling with tears.

"No, you're not," he said softly, his voice full of concern. "What's wrong? You can tell me."

For a split second, nothing was wrong. The dimly lit part of her heart that she couldn't discern before was fully illuminated and as clear as the water coursing the brook. She invited Peeta to the woods. She'd found Gale in the woods, but she invited Peeta. She finally admitted it to herself.

*I'm falling for him. I'm falling in love with Peeta.*

Then like a swift arrow to the heart, reality hit. There was something wrong. And it was all her fault.

*Oh no. I'm falling in love with Peeta.*

Katniss had insisted that she was fine. Then, she'd muttered that she would be right back, and she quickly disappeared behind the boulder where she left Peeta to rest. He'd known at that moment, she was probably using the back of her hands to wipe the water from her eyes.
She'd returned with the same artificial smile that he'd seen her wear when she knew others were watching the star-crossed lovers interact. It was the only smile she had that Peeta wasn't fond of.

For the rest of their trek in the woods, he had quietly studied her when she wasn't looking. He was worried about her; she had a tendency to internalize everything, and that behavior usually resulted in explosive nightmares that rattled her to her core.

Now, as Peeta sat in the living room with his mug of tea, she stood in front of the kitchen window absently watching the late afternoon downpour, her arms folded tightly across her chest. Peeta instinctively knew that someone – not something – was on her mind.

She misses him. She can't even talk to him ri— Oh, the letter! I forgot to give her Gale's letter.

Peeta stood abruptly and took to the stairs. He returned with the letter shoved in his back pocket and a strategy to lighten her mood. He walked into the living room and turned on the stereo, playing the next upbeat song on his father's music disc.

She turned her head to him as an infectious beat hopped through the air. He approached her dancing with his usual antics that couldn't mask his ability, and she instantly grinned at his cocked eyebrow and his lips puckered in mock intensity.

She placed her hand in his extended palm, and to his surprise, she needed no coercing this time. She instantly started moving back and forth to the song.

"Baby whether you're high or low
Baby whether you're high or low
You've got to stay on the tightrope"

He danced them back to the living room, and they were soon lost to the rhythm. At times, he pulled her close, their bodies almost touching, their faces inches apart. But that only lasted a moment. He soon spun her away from him, each time without warning, holding onto her hand so he could twirl her back to him. She couldn't help the giggles escaping her lips.

"You've got moves, Katniss," he said, clearly impressed. Her dancing had improved now that she lost her inhibitions about dancing in front of him.

"Oh please. You have an artificial leg and you still dance better than me." But she was smiling broadly at his compliment.

"That's because I'm awesome!" And with those words, Peeta spun her again. But this time, her hand slipped from his and she went flying, narrowly missing the coffee table as she landed face down on the couch.

"Oh shit," Peeta gasped, rushing over to her. "You okay?"

"You did that on purpose," she groaned into the chair cushions.

"No! No, I promise I didn't. I'm so sorry, Katniss. Are you hurt?"

Katniss sat up slowly, her hand pressed to her side. "I think I pulled something." She winced and Peeta's eyes were filled with alarm and remorse.

"I'm sorry, Katniss. I really didn—"

But with quick reflexes, she grabbed a toss pillow from the couch and pounced on Peeta, who was
completely caught off guard.

Her eyes danced with mischief as she straddled him and beat him relentlessly with the pillow. "I think I pulled a fast one on you, Mellark." She hovered over him, laughing triumphantly.

His mouth widened in surprise and realization.

"Wait," he begged through his laughter. "I'm an unarmed man! I come in peace!"

But she wouldn't stop. So he found another method. Peeta pulled her waist to his and quickly wrapped an arm around her shoulder to support her as he flipped her onto the couch and freed himself.

She screamed in surprise at his quick movements. He'd already grabbed a toss pillow and was returning the assault.

"You're going down, Mellark" she said defiantly. Clearly, he wasn't fighting her as hard as she was fighting him, and she was able to regain ground.

"I've got a secret weapon," he said huskily. He managed to get close enough to tickle her. She moved jerkily, protesting and laughing joyously as his fingers danced between her underarms and ribs. She ran for the stairs to escape him, and squealed in delight when she saw that he was right behind her, still in hot pursuit.

She ran to the master bedroom where the pillows were bigger and they had more space for the fight. But he was on her so quickly that she didn't have time to regroup before he was half assaulting her with the pillows, half tickling her with his fingers.

Katniss stumbled back onto the bed, pulling him on top of her. They squirmed now, breathless and laughing, their bodies pressed together. It started out innocently, but they'd soon fallen into that realm where everything made sense. And as their bodies idled down from their pillow fight, their eyes locked helplessly and with mounting intensity.

Then she felt him. Growing against her thigh. They both sucked air into their lungs, but his gaze was one of alarm and hers was one of anticipation. She bit the corner of her bottom lip.

Peeta quickly rolled off of her, looking unhinged. But she didn't want him to go. The hunger - the throbbing - was back, and she didn't know how to tell him that only he could satisfy it.

She propped herself on her elbows, trying to sound casual although she was desperate for more. "You're not conceding defeat, are you Mellark?"

But he'd already climbed off the bed and was heading into the bathroom. "I'll be right back," he mumbled. "I have something for you."

Katniss's heart rate quickened as she thought about what his words could mean. And her hunger grew exponentially, the throbbing intensifying between her legs.

He returned a moment later, having regained his composure. "I come in peace," he grinned with his hands lifted in surrender. But there was something strangely artificial about his smile. He didn't climb back into the bed. She pulled herself to a sitting position.

"I have something for you. I forgot to give it to you two days ago. I apologize." Peeta offered a small folded envelope that he pulled from his back pocket. She stared at it, flipping her quizzical eyes to his before accepting the envelope.
"I'm glad I could make you smile," he said quietly, "but I know this will really make your day."

And with those words, Peeta exited the room, leaving her to slowly open the envelope.

Her eyes grew solemn when she realized it was a letter from Gale.

He said that he would wait for her, that he would continue to fight for their love, that somehow they would be together one day despite Snow’s demands.

Katniss quickly refolded the letter, every fiber of her being aching for the man in her own home, the man who made her feel hungry and alive. The man she lost.

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Gale's cleaning cart had an annoying, squeaky wheel that he always forgot to oil until his shift had already started. But since getting the job three weeks ago, he and his mother were so focused on completing all of their assigned cleaning that Gale never had time for anything else.

This included talking to Madge. She worked the reception desk from 3-5 p.m. on weekdays after school, and on weekends when there was a function. Gale and Hazelle usually arrived at 4:45 p.m., so they could talk with Cottrell – Anson Cottrell – their supervisor who was in charge of facilities and maintenance.

Sometimes Madge stayed past 5 p.m., and Gale suspected that she wanted an opportunity to talk with him beyond their standard 'hello.' But she never pressed. From their interview, Madge could tell how important this job was to the Hawthornes, how badly they needed it. So she kept her distance and let them focus on completing their work.

But lately, Gale was finding notes left for him in conspicuous places on the first floor, the floor he cleaned (his mother took the second floor, and they worked together on the third floor). All of the notes were from Madge, all signed with her loopy signature, all positive words, all with a smiley face at the end. It surprised Gale that he appreciated them. He thought he would have found them to be immature, but they weren't. Madge's notes made him feel like someone noticed his hard work and effort, like someone appreciated him.

Gale had felt overlooked since his father died. Emory Hawthorne had invested a lot in his eldest son. He taught Gale how to hunt, how to survive life in the Seam, how to be a man, how to treat his younger siblings and mother.

"We have a lot of kids, your mother and I, and another baby is on the way," Emory Hawthorne said days before the mine explosion that claimed his life. "I know we ask a lot of you son, coming home after school and finding work instead of spending time with your friends. But we appreciate your help. And hard work never killed anyone."

Then he laughed in his deep, booming voice. And days later, he was killed while working hard in the mines.

Gale didn't take a lot of time to grieve. He was now the man of the house. Gale took to the woods in search of game so his mother would have to take out tesserae as infrequently as possible. But there was never enough to feed them all, so they often had to rely on the Capitol's rations in exchange for their names being entered additional times for the reaping. He also dropped out of school and took a full-time job in the mines.

Then one day, Gale saw her in the woods. He didn't know her name was Katniss, and when he approached her to tell her that her aim was all wrong, she was startled and frightened when she said her name. It sounded like "Catnip," so that's what he called her until they parted ways later that
morning and she sheepishly told him her name was Katniss.

"That's an odd name," he quipped, not expecting her to respond. But she did. Defiantly.

"Well Gale isn't much of a name either."

Gale grinned. She had some fire in her after all. "Well I have an idea. Why don't you call me Gale, and I'll call you Catnip?"

She grinned and rolled her eyes at his one-sided proposition. "Whatever works… Gale."

They became fast friends. Her father, who died in the same mine explosion as Gale's father, had taught Katniss how to hunt, but Gale gave her some tips that improved the accuracy of her shots. He helped her to hunt, to survive. And although she rarely thanked him verbally, he knew she appreciated him every time she glanced into his eyes with that slightly bashful, slightly defiant grin that he believed was reserved just for him.

Years passed and he realized that Katniss would one day be his. He never asked, they never talked about it. Sure, he'd dated other girls. He had a reputation for his visits to the slag heap. But Katniss was not some girl he wanted to take to the slag heap. Katniss was the real thing, and he knew that despite his flings of youth, he would be content with Katniss by his side, loving her only, for the rest of his life.

Gale also liked the fact that Katniss wasn't superficial like most girls. She was always by herself or in the company of her sister. He never heard of her dating anyone or even holding hands with anyone, although she was blossoming into a beautiful girl.

There was this one guy, though, the baker's son. Everyone knew Peeta Mellark had a thing for Katniss – everyone except Katniss, it seemed – and Gale always caught Peeta staring at them when he and Katniss ventured past Mellark Bakery to the woods on the other side of the district or when they traded with Peeta's father. For Gale, it felt good to have Katniss by his side and to have a Merchant kid staring jealously. Gale never had anything that bested what a Merchant kid had. Katniss wasn't his girlfriend, but Peeta Mellark didn't know that.

Everything was fine until the last reaping. Gale knew when Effie Trinket placed her heart-shaped lips to the microphone and said "Primrose Everdeen," that his entire future, all his plans, were about to drastically change. Gale could feel his heart pounding in his chest.

If Katniss would just remain quiet, he told himself, I'll volunteer for whichever male tribute is called. I'll make sure Prim comes back home.

But he knew better. And he watched her gather her nerve and step out of the crowd to volunteer for her sister. Gale knew, instinctively that Katniss needed him to watch over her mother and sister, just like Emory Hawthorne had needed Gale to watch over his mother and siblings.

Gale was speechless when Peeta Mellark's name was called as the male tribute. Well, at least he'll get to talk to her before he dies. They're bound to interact. And he'd better not come home. He'd better make sure he helps her win.

Gale was forced to view the Games, forced to watch the girl who had his heart fight through pain and injury to survive. Forced to watch her grieve a young tribute whose death had shaken her to her core. Forced to watch Peeta risk his life to save Katniss. Forced to watch her employ an even stronger level of defiance than he'd ever seen as she fought to keep Peeta alive. Forced to watch her kiss Peeta a cave.
By some miracle, they both returned home, victorious and supposedly madly in love. But Gale knew better. And when her eyes met his over the cheering crowd at the train station, he knew her heart was fluttering too. She was still his. And he was ready to be completely hers. Then…

"Gale?"

He jerked his head up at the sound, whacking it on the side of the sink he was cleaning.

"Oh goodness," Madge gasped in alarm. "I wasn't trying to startle you. I'll be right back."

Gale sat on the bathroom floor to get his bearings. Madge returned with an ice pack for his head.

"Sorry," she grimaced. She knelt beside him on the bathroom floor, clearly unconcerned that the belted cream-colored dress she was wearing would get dirty. His hand brushed hers as he reached for the ice pack that she was holding to his head.

"No let me; I've got it," she said, and Gale lowered his hand. "Do you feel dizzy or sick?"

"No. It just stunned me for a second. I'm fine."

"Well that's probably because you have a rock head."

Gale stared at her in surprise, but then a playful smile filled her face, and his shoulders shook with laughter. Madge seemed sweet, bold, and unpretentious – nothing like the snobbish Merchant girls that he'd gone to school with.

"I just wanted to tell you that there's a can of oil in the top cabinet of the storage room. I know the sound of that wheel must drive you crazy. I didn't mean for you to injure yourself."

Gale grinned in response. "Thanks Madge." He started to get up. He had too much work to finish to take too long of a break. She shielded his head as he stood, and their eyes met in bashful grins.

"Well, thanks again," Gale said. "For the ice and for my notes. I appreciate them."

"We appreciate you and Ms. Hazelle," she said. Then she turned to leave, fluttering her fingers in the air with a wave before she turned the corner, out of view.

For the rest of his shift, Gale's thoughts volleyed between Katniss and Madge. He didn't think it was possible, but after his interaction with Madge, Gale realized that Katniss might not have been the only girl he would never have taken to the slag heap.

Five weeks had passed since Peeta witnessed Katniss's kiss with Gale.

Four weeks had passed since Katniss realized – too late – that she was falling in love with Peeta.

She'd invited him into the woods that day when she knew. She wanted to tell Peeta how she felt, but she remembered that they were just friends, that he had his heart set on a soulmate he'd never met. Plus, it had only been a week since she was caught kissing Gale. If she declared her feelings for Peeta, she would seem fickle at best, mentally and emotionally unstable at worst.

She decided to keep her feelings a secret. She would tell him in a few weeks, when the sting of her kiss with Gale blew over. But later that evening four weeks ago, Peeta gave Katniss Gale's letter - the first of several she received with the rest coming by way of Rory and Prim - and Katniss knew that Peeta was serious about them just being friends. He would never have given her Gale's letter otherwise.
As if it were punishment, Katniss's feelings for Peeta had grown exponentially in the past month. She was now hopelessly, desperately in love with him. Even the most mundane interactions held promise and meaning - or could set the stage for her own scandalous imaginations.

On a recent night, Maura and Prim joined them for dinner. Peeta and Prim volunteered to do the dishes since Katniss and Maura prepared the meal.

Katniss sat at the kitchen table with Maura, engrossed by how the muscles flexed in Peeta's arms when he handed Prim a plate to dry. This led to her lip-biting reverie of his lips and hands exploring her body as she panted, moaned and screamed with pleasure and relief. Katniss didn't realize that Maura had been carrying on conversation with her until her mother waved her hand in front of Katniss's face to get her attention.

Katniss had tried dropping hints to Peeta. Instead of resting her palm lightly against his when they held hands, she now interlocked their fingers, clutching his hand possessively. At one time, she avoided high traffic areas on their walk home; now, she sought them out, eager for the kiss on the lips he would give her when many eyes were watching. At home, they were rarely apart. Katniss even began sharpening her arrows on the back porch while Peeta painted, so she could be near him.

Peeta didn't seem to notice.

But it was becoming increasingly harder for Katniss to suppress her feelings amid the hunger she now grappled with on a daily basis. Most nights, after they retreated to separate bedrooms, she would slide her hand between her legs and rub until she gasped into her pillow and her body sank with temporary relief.

But she knew there was more beyond what she could do for herself. And she yearned for more. With Peeta. She didn't know how to tell him. She didn't know if she should.

Now, on this warm April day, Katniss was glad to see several customers at Mellark Bakery when she arrived to meet Peeta.

Daniel turned briefly from a conversation to greet her.

"Hello dear." Katniss always appreciated Daniel's kindness, despite how her actions had broken his son's heart more than once. She greeted him warmly and asked if Peeta was ready to go.

"Probably not," Daniel said sympathetically. "He got stuck decorating a cake last minute. Why don't you have a seat and wait on him. Nat is over there." He motioned to a table in the corner. "You should join her, Katniss."

Katniss noticed the odd emphasis in Daniel's words. She looked across the room and spotted Natalie Minson Mellark, Thatch's wife. She was seated at a table near the kitchen door, her arm draped lazily over her swollen belly. Nance was standing beside the table, talking enthusiastically.

Great. This should be loads of fun.

As Katniss neared, her eyes locked with Natalie's.

"Oh look, it's Katniss. Katniss!" Natalie waved her over. Katniss tried to temper the scowl on her lips. Katniss didn't know much about Natalie, except that she was a Merchant's daughter and she'd married Peeta's eldest brother. Katniss and Natalie met briefly on the train to the Capitol for the big Everdeen-Mellark wedding, but their interaction had been non-existent, save a warm "congratulations, Katniss," and a cool "thank you."
Natalie was a pretty girl. She had long, dark blonde hair, almond-shaped turquoise eyes, and a distinct dimple in her chin. She was of equal height with Katniss but was slightly curvier, even before the pregnancy added a few pounds to her frame.

"Hi," Katniss said blandly, shifting her eyes from Natalie's to Nance's, then to nothing in particular.

"Natalie, it's always good to see you dear," Nance chirped, ignoring Katniss's greeting. "Don't forget to let me know about you and Thatch coming over for dinner next weekend." Nance turned and walked into the kitchen without as much as a 'hello' to Katniss.

When Nance was gone, Natalie turned to Katniss with over-widened eyes. "Please. Sit. I'm so glad you came when you did."

Katniss eyed Natalie suspiciously but lowered into a chair. "Why is that?"

Natalie lowered her voice discreetly.

"Because your mother-in-law was talking my head off about some baby name she adores." Natalie protectively rubbed her stomach. "She wants us to name our kid Jonesy. Jonesy Mellark!" Her face froze with a look of disgust. "What the hell kind of name is Jonesy?"

"Not a good one," Katniss said flatly.

"I swear. That woman is bat shit crazy."

Katniss was surprised by her own burst of laughter. On the train, Nance clearly adored Natalie. Katniss had just assumed that Natalie felt the same way about Nance, and that Natalie also shared Nance's low opinion of Peeta's Seam wife.

"I always thought you really liked Nance."

"Are you kidding me?" Natalie said emphatically. "Ask Thatch. He'll tell you what I think of his loon of a mother. That woman is delusional and intolerable and insufferable and an overall pain in the ass."

Katniss's mouth dropped open in surprise, grateful for Natalie's candor. At least she wasn't the only daughter-in-law who disliked Nance. "Well she certainly hates me."

"I can see that. But if she were a good mother in the least, she would back off because her son loves you."

Katniss shifted her gaze to the table. *He doesn't love me anymore. We're just friends.*

The kitchen doors parted and Peeta emerged, his eyes immediately landing on her. Katniss stood to greet him, hoping for a kiss even though they were out of direct view of most of the customers. He lifted her chin and gently pressed his lips to hers. For Katniss, it felt like a drop of water hitting parched ground.

"Hey," he said lightly, grinning. "I'm almost finished. Give me another 10 minutes, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, their faces inches apart. Spontaneously, she leaned forward and stole another kiss, her lips interlocking with his. Peeta offered a tentative smile as she pulled away, but his eyes questioned.

"Forget you two. Is my husband ready yet?"
"Thatch is still adding up receipts, Nat. He might be another 20 minutes. Do you two want some water or tea or anything?"

"Cheese buns," Natalie said firmly. In that moment, Katniss decided that she liked her sister-in-law.

Peeta chuckled. "You two must be related, and I don't mean by marriage. I'll be right back."

Katniss lowered back to her chair. "Those are my absolute favorite."

"I would bathe in them if I could," Natalie said wryly. "And little one here likes them too," she cooed.

"Congratulations, by the way Natalie. I'm really happy for you and Thatch."

"Thanks Katniss. We can't wait to meet him or her. Our little anti-Jonesy."

Katniss was still laughing when Peeta returned with several cheese buns piled on a plate. Rye followed carrying two glasses of water.

Natalie pretended she didn't see Rye standing there. "You are my favorite brother-in-law, Peeta. Just don't tell Rye I said that."

Rye smirked, mouthing "fuck you" to Natalie. No one saw Daniel approaching until he'd swatted Rye on the head without breaking his stride into the kitchen.

"Oww!"

"Busted," Peeta laughed.

Natalie leaned closer to Rye once Daniel was out of view. "Thatch already fucked me," she whispered and winked.

"Ohhh!" Peeta pressed the side of his fist to his lips. Katniss gawked at Natalie. She'd never met someone so brazen, so uninhibited.

Rye grinned, shaking his head disapprovingly. "You should be more of a lady, like Katniss, my favorite sister-in-law."

"Sorry," Natalie retorted over a mouthful of cheese bun. "Sometimes my inner slut comes out in public. But don't be fooled Rye. All women who are ladies in public are sex maniacs behind closed doors. Ain't that right, Katniss?"

Katniss froze amid a mouthful of cheese bun. She reached desperately for her water. Peeta, who had been doubled over in laughter at Natalie's inner slut comment, came to Katniss's rescue.

"You don't have to answer that Katniss," he said through laughter. "Nat and Rye spare no one when they go at it."

"We have no idea what we're going to do with her, Katniss," Rye laughed. "She's a live wire."

Peeta nudged Rye and told him they'd better get back to work.

"I love you Rye," Natalie said sweetly.

"Love you, Nat," he mimicked her, grinning as he followed Peeta, who was still laughing, back into the kitchen.
Katniss was completely caught off guard by their exchange. She'd had such a non-existent relationship with her in-laws that she didn't know this type of relationship was possible. The Mellark men had a lighthearted, playful side, and they were truly a family. Unlike Katniss, Natalie had found her place in it.

"I give Rye a hard time. He knows I'm crazy about him, just like I am about Peeta and Daniel, and of course, Thatch." She took a few sips of water to digest her cheese bun.

"So, Katniss," Natalie whispered conspiratorially. "For real. Is Peeta taking good care of you?"

Katniss nodded. "I always feel safer when he's around. He takes good care of me."

"No. I mean is he taking care of you."

Katniss tilted her head in confusion as she reached for another cheese bun.

"You know, Katniss," Natalie leaned even closer. "He's a Mellark. Is he taking care of you?"

Katniss stared at the table for a moment. "I don't know what you're asking. We both do chores around the house. I have my own money, so I don't depend on his. We—"

"Sex, Katniss," Natalie said bluntly. "How's the sex?"

Katniss's cheeks reddened, and she looked like she wanted to sprint out the door.

"Oh," she said dumbly, taking another long gulp of her water. "Wait. What do you mean when you say he's a Mellark?"

Natalie looked at her in wide-eyed amazement. "Are you two not having sex, Katniss? Have you and Peeta ever made love?"

Katniss stared anxiously at Natalie, at a loss for words.

"You haven't!"

"Shh!" Katniss glanced over her shoulder. No one seemed to notice. "No. Not exactly."

Natalie started counting the months they'd been married on her fingers. She sat back in her chair, completely flabbergasted. Then, she leaned forward.

"Katniss," Natalie said slowly, "your husband is a Mellark. All Mellark men are known to be – in Peeta's case assumed to be – well-endowed down there."

Katniss's mouth dropped open. "What?"

"Most of the women in District 12 would give half of their husband's balls to have the attention of a Mellark man. They're good-natured, hardworking men, and they can really satisfy a woman in bed. And I know this firsthand." Natalie patted her belly with satisfaction.

Katniss sighed, frustrated. So half of the school wants to date Peeta and most of District 12 wants to fuck him. And I'm married to him and we're doing nothing.

She felt Natalie's hand on her wrist. Her tone was suddenly serious.

"Hey, I know you two have been through a lot. When the time is right, it'll happen. I don't want you to think something's wrong with your relationship. You and Peeta clearly are attracted to one
another. That's half of the battle."

Katniss lowered her gaze. Peeta had been attracted to her, but now they were just friends. Now, Peeta gave her love letters from another man and talked of finding his soulmate one day. And it was all her fault.

"Do you and Peeta ever hang out with other couples?"

"No. If it's not the two of us on the back porch, we eat dinner with my mom and sister. And maybe Haymitch."

Katniss felt like a total failure.

"You look like you need some girl talk," Natalie said quietly. "Tell you what. Come to my house tomorrow around 1 p.m. It'll just be the two of us... unless Nance stops by during lunch. Bring your bow and arrow just in case she does."

Katniss laughed heartily; she was feeling better already. "Okay. I'm looking forward to it."

The next morning, Katniss was just past the tree line, training her bow and arrow on a pheasant that was in view when she heard the footsteps. She turned around, startled, but he was already standing behind her.

His footsteps were always just as quiet as hers.

"Gale," she said breathlessly. She hadn't seen him since their kiss at her mother's house, five weeks ago. He'd stayed away, just like she'd asked.

He grinned, his eyes deep with affection. "Hi Catnip."

Before she knew it, she'd flung her arms around his neck. She didn't realize how much she missed him until he was standing in front of her. He held her close.

She pulled away, nervously glancing around. They hadn't had another scare of white roses or notes from President Snow. She didn't want to break that streak.

"How have you been? How's your family? Wait, what are you doing here? Shouldn't you be in the mines?"

Gale grinned at her barrage of questions. "The mines are closed today for annual inspection." Annual inspection was a formality the Capitol instituted after the blast that claimed both of their fathers' lives. It was an empty goodwill effort that did nothing to improve safety or working conditions. Another falsehood of President Snow's regime.

"Oh. I didn't realize that was today."

Gale studied her quietly, and she felt jittery under his gaze. "Have you been getting my letters?"

Katniss swallowed hard. Gale had written her several times. Each letter professed his love for her, reassured her that he would wait as long as it took for her to get out of her marriage. She'd destroyed each letter in the fireplace for safety reasons. But she'd only responded twice, and each letter was brief and general with empty, noncommittal wording.

"Umm... yes, I've gotten them. I've just—"
"Katniss, I'm not upset with you. I know this is hard for you, and you have to be so careful given the threat from the Capitol. I came out here today just to let you know that I'm still here. Nothing has changed for me. I'm still in love with you. I still want you to be with you."

The sincerity in his eyes validated his words. Relief washed over her. She'd been so focused on the absence of Peeta's love that she'd forgotten that Gale's love for her hadn't changed.

He stepped closer. "I'm not going anywhere, Katniss. I believe wholeheartedly that one day you and I will be together and have the lives we want."

Oh Gale. How am I going to tell you that I already have the life I want.

"I know this is dangerous for you, so I'll leave you alone now. Just remember that no matter what, somehow, you and I will make this work. We will be together one day. I know it."

She nodded quietly, feeling terrible. She would have to figure out a way to tell him that she'd fallen in love with her husband, and she wanted their marriage to work.

Gale turned to walk away, and she took a step toward him.

"Are you okay, Gale?" she asked, truly concerned. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah," he smiled warmly. "We're all fine. I'll see you again as soon as I can, okay?"

"Okay."

And he was gone, deeper into the woods.

Around 1 p.m., Katniss reached Natalie and Thatch's home. They lived in the Merchant Quarters, in a tiny blue house with two bedrooms and a modest backyard. It was a far cry from her and Peeta's Victor's Village home, but it was much nicer than anything the Seam offered.

Natalie opened the door before Katniss knocked. Her hair was pulled in a top knot and she wore pajama pants, a tank top, and slippers. Her smile was there, but her eyes looked tired.

"Is this a bad time?" Katniss asked.

"No, come in."

"You look like you don't feel well."

"I've been up part of the night puking."

Katniss's eyes questioned.

Natalie waved her hands dismissively. "Morning sickness is all. From the pregnancy. It'll be over soon. Come in."

Katniss stepped inside the home, her eyes absorbing what she saw. The walls were painted in warm beige tones. The furniture was mismatched, but clean and neat. There were numerous photos of Natalie and Thatch – on the coffee and side tables, on the walls, on a bookshelf in the corner – and they were either smiling or kissing in all of them.

Katniss was reminded that she and Peeta were given a photo album of pictures from their wedding as well as a large wedding portrait. She'd tossed the photo album in a bedroom closet in the early days
of their marriage. The larger, framed image lived in their attic. Now, seeing the warmth photos added to Natalie's home, Katniss vowed to put more photos around her house.

"Your photos are really nice."

"Thank you. The day I married Thatch was the happiest day of my life." Natalie smiled down at her stomach. "Well, it will soon be one of the happiest days of my life."

Katniss silently envied Natalie's contentment.

"Let's talk about you, Mrs. Peeta Mellark," Natalie said as they both took seats on the couch. "I know you've been through a lot lately and I could tell that you needed someone to talk to. I'm glad you're here. What's been going on?"

Katniss stared quietly at the floor. She had no idea where to begin. She felt Natalie's hand on her forearm and Katniss looked into sincere eyes.

"Prim has you. You're her big sister. But who do you have? Peeta? Your mom? That Haymitch guy? They're all great people, but sometimes a girl just needs another girl to talk to. And you and I are both married to Mellark men. I won't tell anyone what you tell me, Katniss. Not even Thatch."

A weight lifted from Katniss's shoulders, and she realized that she needed Natalie's support.


"It took me all this time to realize that I want to be with him. And now, he's out of reach. He doesn't want to be with me."

Natalie chewed thoughtfully on her lip. "Katniss, sometimes we don't fall in love at the same time, but it doesn't mean the love gone. I think Peeta still cares about you very much. It just sounds like he's scared shitless. He doesn't want to get his heart broken again."

"I know," Katniss groaned. "This is all my fault. But he's all I can think about. When he looks at me, I lose my train of thought. And don't let him whisper something in my ear. I get all tingly and weird and—"

"Where at? Down there?" Natalie motioned with her head toward Katniss' crotch.

"Yes! It's like a hunger or throbbing or something. I don't know what to do about it. I've never felt like this before."

"Did you feel this way when you kissed Gale at your mother's house?"

"Never," Katniss said, explaining how Gale had surprised her in the woods that morning. "Gale hugged me in the woods this morning and all I could think about was how much I missed Peeta's arms."

Natalie smiled knowingly. "Katniss, you are in love with Peeta, but it's beyond that. You love him. And you're ready for love."

"What do you mean, ready for love?"
"You want to make love to your husband. That's what happens naturally with romantic love. You want to express it. Intimately. There's nothing wrong with that."

Katniss pondered her words. *I want to make love to my husband.* Katniss liked the sound of that.

"You're at your wit's end because you're horny," Natalie continued with a smirk. "Listen, when I'm horny, Thatch is not leaving this house until I'm satisfied. I don't care if a Peacekeeper comes to the door and orders us to evacuate. We are staying right in that bedroom until we are done."

Katniss laughed riotously. "So how do I get un-horny."

"Well," Natalie said. "Are you certain that you want to be with Peeta? I mean are you completely sure?"

"Yes. I am completely sure." Katniss stood and paced the room. "He's the strongest, funniest, most generous, amazing guy I've ever met. And I'm absolutely attracted to him."

Natalie smiled. "Well, you'll have to convince him that what you feel for him is real and that things are completely over between you and Gale. He might come around without much effort on your part, but I think it will take time."

"So should I just come right out and tell him?"

Natalie shrugged her shoulders. "You could do that. But it may be better for you to show him first, to give him clues that you want to be his wife."

Katniss pondered this; Natalie continued.

"Do something unexpected for him. Consistency is also key. He'll come around if he thinks you're all in."

Katniss smiled and nodded quietly. She had an idea, and it involved buying several photo frames from the carpenter shop on the way home.

"What are you guys doing on Sunday afternoon around 4 p.m.? Come have dinner with me and Thatch. We can hang out, just the four of us. Two couples having a good time. And it'll give you more face time with Peeta," she winked.

Katniss grinned. "Okay, Nat. Unless Peeta has other plans, we'll be here."

When Peeta called that afternoon, she told him she couldn't meet him because she was "working on a surprise." He sounded cautiously optimistic.

When his key turned in the lock, she'd just finished. She drew a deep breath and tucked wayward strands of hair in place. Then she met him at the door, demanding that he close his eyes.

"Take my hand. I'll guide you."

Peeta grinned and shut his eyes. "What's going on? I don't like closing my eyes. I have trust issues."

"Shut up, silly," she laughed. "Do what I tell you, and I promise I won't walk you into anything."

He was still cracking jokes when they reached the living room. She told him to open his eyes. When he did, his grin slowly dropped from his face.
Above the fireplace in a large matted mahogany frame was a portrait from their wedding reception. In this photo, she wore her reception dress - white lace with cap sleeves and a fitted bodice. He remembered the photographer positioning them for that photo. Her head was resting on his shoulder, her eyes were shut, and a subtle smile curled her lips. He gazed lovingly at her, his lips almost grazing her forehead.

He swallowed hard.

"You hate it," she worried, still clutching his hand. "I can take it down if -"

"No. No." He squeezed her hand reassuringly. "It's amazing. You've done an amazing job. Thank you."

She smiled in relief. "I have more to show you upstairs."

She pulled him to his bedroom. His lips formed the letter "O" in surprise as he took in the sight of his sunset painting, which he'd completed weeks ago, hanging above his bed.

"You paint these amazing canvases, and you stack them in a corner on the back porch. They need to be on display."

Peeta slowly shook his head. "Wow," he grinned. "This looks so good, Katniss. I appreciate it."

"There's more."

He was again ordered to shut his eyes; she led him to the master bedroom.

"Now."

Peeta's jaw dropped. Above the king-sized bed was the largest portrait, a horizontal black and white photo of their wedding kiss. It was yet another one of the staged photos they'd taken immediately after the marriage ceremony. Her left hand was resting lightly on his chest so her wedding ring was visible, and her head was tilted to his as their lips gently interlocked.

His eyes clouded with sadness as he remembered how she'd repelled immediately after the photographer said he had the shot.

"Do you like it?" She asked hopefully. Peeta studied her. She wasn't the same woman he'd married. And, given all the highs and lows of their relationship, he didn't know what to think about that.

He nodded, concealing his tangled emotions. "I've never seen this one before," he said quietly. "Where did you get it?"

"We've always had it and others. In the trunk Effie sent after the wedding. They were just sitting in tubes waiting to be framed."

He turned to her now, his curiosity laced with skepticism. "Why did you do all of this?"

She shrugged bashfully. "You work so hard, and you're so good to me, Peeta. I want us to have a happy home too. And in order for that to happen, it has to feel like home."

"It does feel like home," he said quietly. "Thank you, Katniss."

But Peeta sensed another motive, and he quickly silenced the familiar voice in his head that said she was becoming his.
She thought he hadn't noticed the hints she'd been dropping in recent weeks - the intense hand-holding, the strategic kisses, her following him throughout the house. His plan was to remain unaffected; after all, it was only a phase. It was always just a phase when it came to her affections for him.

But with this portrait signaled something different, unexpected. He was being hunted. He was becoming his wife's prey. And Peeta had no intention of allowing his heart to be captured.

Riotous laughter flooded Thatch and Natalie's modest dining room where the four of them sat around half-empty serving dishes.

They'd prepared a meal of roasted duck, green beans and sweet potatoes. None of these foods were typically found in District 12. Thatch said he'd ordered them especially for Natalie and the baby.

"It was the first meal he made for me when we got married," Natalie said, staring lovingly at Thatch. "I knew right then that I'd married the right person."

They all went into the living room, Natalie and Thatch refusing to let Katniss and Peeta help with the dishes. Peeta and Katniss sat on the loveseat, his arm draped behind her on the back of the chair. Natalie and Thatch sat on the couch, his hand on her knee, her arms encircling one of his arms. They looked like they belonged together. Katniss wondered if Peeta was looking at them and thinking about finding his soulmate one day. The thought saddened her.

Fortunately, the conversation turned to funny stories from Peeta and Thatch's childhood. Katniss found herself doubled over in laughter as Peeta and Thatch recounted some mishap that they could have – should have – gotten into huge trouble for but didn't.

"We had a strategy," Thatch said, his shoulders shaking with laughter. He and Peeta exchanged knowing glances.

"Blame Rye," they said in unison.

"Poor Rye," Katniss laughed. "He doesn't stand a chance, does he?"

"Nope," Natalie said. "He's such a playboy. It's just fun to give him a hard time."

"But he's like a superhero in our family, because he can get on our mom's last nerve," Peeta laughed, "and she never knows what to do about it."

"What does she always say?" Thatch said. "Dammit Rye. If you had half a brain you'd be dangerous."

They all burst into laughter again. Katniss wiped tears that were now dripping from the corner of one eye.

"I'm sure seeing her aggravated is worth it," Katniss said.

"It truly is, sis," Thatch said. The word 'sis' rolled from his tongue. Katniss liked it. It made her feel like she belonged. "Our mom isn't all bad. She's just a pain in the ass. So whenever you can annoy a pain in the ass, it's the best thing ever."

Then Natalie started talking about Nance's choice for a baby name.

"Jonesy?" Peeta said in distaste. "What the hell is a Jonesy?"
Natalie and Katniss exchanged excited, emphatic looks of agreement. "That's exactly what Nat said yesterday at the bakery!"

"This is a job for Rye Mellark, Ass Pain Annoyer," Thatch said in a theatrical voice.

"That's a great idea, baby! If anyone can get her off that trail, it's Rye." Natalie leaned closer to Thatch, planting a slow peck to his lips. "You're so smart." Kiss. "And handsome." Kiss. "And funny."

Thatch cupped her face for a longer kiss. "Thank you gorgeous."

"Am I still gorgeous even though my ass is spreading?"

"You're more beautiful now than ever. I absolutely love all of you."

Peeta and Katniss shifted awkwardly. She stared at the floor. But he began to notice all the framed photos on the wall...

"Sorry you guys," Thatch said sheepishly as he and Natalie pulled away. "We'll try to behave."

Katniss slid her hand inside Peeta's, interlocking her fingers with his. She could feel his gaze.

"It's okay," Katniss said, giving him a kiss on the lips. "We're good."

The following evening, she sat on the floor of the back porch, sharpening her arrows while he worked on another canvas. He said he wanted to try his hand at something abstract.

She was intensely focused when his words stopped her.

"So your birthday is in a few weeks, May 8th, right?"

Her eyes flashed to his. "Uh, yeah. May 8th."

"What do you want for your birthday?"

Sex, she thought ruefully. I want sex.

"Umm... I don't know," she shrugged.

Peeta continued. "Well, I was thinking it would be nice to leave 12 for a few hours. There's an actual sit down restaurant in 10, not too far from here. We could make it a day trip. We could bring Maura, and Prim, and Haymitch, if he wants to go."

Katniss stared at him in disbelief. "You've thought about what we could do for my birthday?"

"Of course," he smiled with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's your birthday. Why wouldn't I?"

She was gripped with sadness and shame.

"Peeta... When is your birthday?"

He turned to look at her, his expression unreadable but calm. Then he turned back to the canvas. "February 25."

He'd had a birthday while they were married. She hadn't even thought to ask. She was probably somewhere with Gale while Peeta celebrated alone.
"I'm sorry, Peeta."

"It's okay," he shrugged. "My parents never made a big deal over birthdays anyway. Well, my dad would make us some cookies. But my mom didn't want to waste ingredients on us."

_How the hell am I any different from Peeta's mother? I'm a terrible, terrible person._

She sprang to her feet.

"I want to have a picnic in the meadow. Just you and me. No one else. And I want it to be a joint birthday celebration. Yours and mine."

"You don't have to do that Katniss. It's your day."

"I want to, Peeta. And I promise you, I'll never miss your birthday again. Okay?"

He smiled. "Okay."

She lowered back to her arrows, and he continued his brushstrokes on the canvas.

_________________________________________

Peeta knew when she had a nightmare involving Prim. Katniss's screams were different, more intense and laced with protests. Katniss's love for her sister was always on display, even when she was asleep. He forgot that Katniss had had an equally fierce reaction more than a month ago when she dreamed that Allister fatally stabbed him.

Peeta was groggy but was at her side in a matter of seconds. It was early Wednesday morning, hours away from any trace of daylight. There was another heavy downpour in full concert outside the open window, and moonlight cast shadows on the opposite bedroom wall.

Depending on the severity of her nightmare, he might need to restrain her until she woke. But tonight, she'd hurled forward in bed, her eyes as wide as saucers. Gentle words and strong arms were what he always used to find her, to guide her back and keep her from falling apart. He would lie beside her until she recovered, sometimes watching her for 10, 20, 30 minutes after she'd fallen asleep. It all depended on where he was in his own recovery. When he was at greater risk of forfeiting his heart again, Peeta was back in his own bedroom within minutes. When he felt stronger, he stayed longer.

But on this night, he didn't have much choice. He was exhausted, and he fell asleep as soon as she quieted on his chest. He was still asleep, still cradling her two hours later when her eyes fluttered open. She hadn't had a nightmare or been startled by a noise. She was simply awake.

For several minutes, her tired eyes focused on the wall that showcased the moonlight. Then, she tilted her head to watch the blueish-gray tint frolic on Peeta's eyelashes and the bridge of his nose.

Suddenly, she realized why she awake.

Lately, the throbbing sensation between her legs bypassed subtlety and screamed for attention. But it had never woken her… until now.

She was hungry. And he was here. And she was hopeful that all the words she hadn't been able to voice in recent weeks could finally be communicated in a different language.

Katniss pulled from his relaxed embrace, careful not to wake him. Her eyes slowly washed over him, grateful that they could linger without fear of him catching her.
He's beautiful. Absolutely beautiful.

Emboldened, she lightly ran her thumb underneath the covers that stopped at his waist and carefully lifted the bed sheets so she could peer underneath.

She gasped and quickly cupped her hand over her mouth. He was very clearly erect, his manhood making a sizable tent of his pajama pants.

Katniss lowered the covers, but her chest was heaving; she bit the corner of her bottom lip, her mind trying desperately to rein in her emotions.

But it was too late. She wanted him. Once again, she was starving, and Peeta had what she needed to stay alive.

She was panting when her lips interlocked eagerly with his, when one hand trailed from his firm chest to the side of his neck.

His eyes flipped open in groggy confusion at the lips, lavender, and long tendrils of moonlight-blue hair grazing the side of his face. She was persistent, but he managed to pull away. They both panted, staring at each other's dim representations.

"Katniss?"

She nervously moistened her lips with her tongue.

"I know you're tired and you need your sleep. But I am so hungry for you, Peeta. I want you so bad. Please. I'm so hungry."

He was caught completely off guard, and she was kissing him again before the words left her lips. His chest rose and fell rapidly underneath hers.

Then there was a moan at the base of his throat, and Peeta was kissing her with matched intensity. Like dry leaves to an open flame, they quickly caught fire with Peeta rolling her onto her back, and Katniss's fingers tangling in his hair. She'd caught him in a moment of low resistance, when his heart could easily volley back into her hands.

Her lips were on his neck, and her hands were pushing against the waistband of his pants when Peeta came to himself, his internal alarm carrying the same warning message throughout his senses: Danger. You risk capture.


But she was persistent. So he climbed off, flipped on the lamp, and sat on the edge of the bed facing her. She sat upright, her hair in disarray around her shoulders, her hardened nipples pushing against his t-shirt. She was still trying to catch her breath.

"What's wrong?"

"What's going on, Katniss?"

She swallowed hard and moved to her knees. "I want to, Peeta. With you."

His eyes narrowed skeptically. "You want to… make love?"

His words sent an electric current from the source of her hunger through her chest. She inched closer, nodding.
"Yes. I want to make love."

He stared blankly at nothing in particular, his brows furrowing. His eyes shifted to where her hands had reached for his, then back to her eyes.

"I know this seems unexpected, but it's been on my mind for a long time. Peeta, I'm crazy about you, and I've been trying to tell you how I feel for weeks now. And then there's this hunger." Her breaths quickened. "I only feel it when you're near me, when you touch me," her lips were again on his neck, "when you kiss me."

Peeta sat motionless on the side of the bed as her kisses devoured his neck.

"Please," she moaned. "Make love to me. I want to. I want to so bad."

"You want to." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes," she said breathlessly. One of her hands still held his, and the other was now underneath his shirt advancing toward his chest. "I want to."

She felt his throat bob underneath her kisses as he swallowed.

"So I guess what I want doesn't matter."

She tensed and slowly pulled away. His face and eyes were hardened, emotionless.

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that you don't care if this is what I want or not."

She blinked in confusion. "Peeta, you said you wanted to make love. Not even two months ago. And I wouldn't have been ready then, but I'm ready now." She swallowed hard. "We're husband and wife, Peeta. There's no harm in us being together like this."

"Unbeliev –" Peeta stood abruptly from the bed and angrily paced the room.

Katniss climbed out of bed, completely perplexed. "Peeta," she said cautiously. "I don't understand why you're upset. I thought you'd be –"

He spun around to face her, his eyes at a controlled burn. "Tell me Katniss, why? Why do you want to make love to me?"

"I told you. I've wanted to for a while. You make me want to. It's like a hunger. That's the best way that I can explain it. And I trust you. I trust myself with you."

His eyes still glowered. "So those are your reasons?"

She was growing exasperated. "Yes. Peeta, I don't understand." She stepped closer to him. "Please. I don't want to fight. I'm just trying to understand."

"Ask me why I wanted to make love to you, Katniss."

"What?"

"Ask me why!"

"Why did you want to make love to me?!"
"Because I fucking love you!"

She startled at his words, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Peeta," she whispered.

His voice broke. "I love you, Katniss. That's why I wanted to make love. But your reasons are different. You want to make love to satisfy yourself. Because you're selfish."

She stood in stunned silence, her mouth agape.

"And you have the nerve to say that I wanted to make love not even two months ago? What about this Katniss? Not even two months ago, you were wedged in a corner kissing another man when I was right in the fucking backyard! What about that?"

She felt completely panicked and lifted her hands in a placating gesture. "You're right," she said tearfully. "I was wrong. It was my fault. I wish I'd never kissed Gale. I made a bad decision that day, and it completely derailed us. I've been trying to get us back ever since."

"There's nothing to get back, Katniss! I've made that perfectly clear. You and I are friends. Nothing more! And for you to try to seduce me while I'm asleep – I told you my boundaries and you completely disregarded them. You obviously have zero respect for me!"

Hot tears streamed down her face. "I'm sorry." Her voice was small. She lowered her eyes in humiliation.

"And another thing. You only want me because Gale is not around. I'm not your first choice. I've never even been a choice for you. I'm just available."

"That's not true, Peeta," she insisted.

"Whatever, Katniss."

"It's not!"

"You only want Gale. It's always Gale for you. That'll never ch—"

"No it's not true! I saw Gale in the woods and all I could only think about was how much I wanted to be with you!"

Her eyes widened in fear as soon as the words left her mouth. Peeta's eyes were raging.

"You were with him in the woods?" he said darkly.

She tried to backpedal, to explain what happened. But it was too late.

"Fuck it. I'm going back to bed – my bed. In public we have to act like we love each other, but we both know the truth. We'll keep up appearances for the sake of our families. But behind closed doors, I want you to stay the hell away from me! Pretend I don't exist, and I'll do the same for you."

A sob escaped her throat as his bedroom door slammed shut. And she sank to the floor, ashen faced, her lips quivering, knowing they would never, ever recover.

Around 4 a.m., 20 minutes after Peeta slammed his door, Katniss ambled to the bathroom and washed her tear-streaked face. Then, she slipped on a pair of sweatpants and a jacket and walked
downstairs, out of the kitchen side door, and to her mother's house where she spent the rest of the night in the downstairs guest bedroom.

Peeta heard her quiet footsteps on the stairs. Then he heard the kitchen side door click shut. From his bedroom window, he watched her step into the rainstorm and move unhurriedly to Maura's house.

Peeta had watched her carry burdens for many years. Each time, she was defiant, strong, and formidable. But as she braved the rain with downcast eyes, this burden looked too heavy for her to bear.

He sat heavily on the bed, trying to justify his anger.

"How dare she say that to me?"

But these words replayed in his mind: *I'm hungry for you, Peeta. I want you so bad. Make love to me. Please. I'm so hungry.*

He shook his head vigorously as if to clear it. "No. She wants Gale. She was with him in the woods. She said so herself."

*All I could think about was how much I wanted to be with you. I want you, Peeta.*

"She's just selfish. She wants to break my heart again. This is a sport for her."

But then he remembered the look of brokenness and vulnerability on her face. Admitting her feelings was probably hard for her. She wasn't trying to break his heart. She was trying to give him hers. And he'd crushed her.

He ran his hand roughly over his face, feeling like he was in a tailspin. He still wasn't willing to give her his heart. But he wished she was still in the bedroom across the hall. He would apologize and try to talk things over, calmly this time.

But maybe it was for the best that she left. Because he couldn't stop reliving the feel of her lips on his neck, the sight of her nipples poking through his shirt, the sound of her soft moans as her body pressed against his.

And then there was the true danger, the resurging tightness in his pants. His own, insatiable hunger.

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Three squirrels. Three lousy squirrels. After six hours in the woods, it was all Katniss had to show for her hunt.

She'd escaped into the woods around 6 a.m., for two reasons. She needed to get game for Greasy Sae, and she needed to think, to sit on her boulder by the brook and sort out what happened between her and Peeta.

It was less 'sorting out' and more 'coming to terms with.' He'd made himself painfully clear. They would never be lovers. She was selfish, confused, disrespectful, and he wanted nothing to do with her unless they were in public putting on a show to satisfy President Snow.

She tilted her head upward, soaking in the sunlight that sliced through the thick canopy of trees. It was a dazzling late spring day, the type that could easily re-energize even the most forlorn soul. Yet, her shoulders still sagged.

She understood why Peeta was angry, and after giving it much thought, she realized that everything
Peeta said about her was true. She didn't deserve him or anyone else. She didn't deserve to be happy or to be in love. That was for other people, good people. Not her.

So in some twisted way, Katniss looked forward to punishing herself, to aching for his affection but knowing it was out of reach. She'd taken advantage of him and squandered all the love he'd so freely given her. Now, all that she'd enjoyed from his bounty was no more. No more laughter, no more dancing in the living room, no more spending time together on the back porch. He'd had enough. And she had absolutely no fight left.

Back at home, Katniss quickly cleaned and refrigerated the three squirrels before trudging upstairs to shower. She had a game plan: shower, do her laundry, move her clothes and belongings to the guest bedroom downstairs.

On any given night, she could wake up screaming; she didn't want Peeta's sympathy, his obligatory support. But, it would hurt even more if he heard her in the bedroom across the hall, and he didn't comfort her. So she vowed to get through each nightmare alone. To get through life alone.

She stood in the shower, staring blankly at the wall, not even applying body wash until the water began to cool. It took great effort to towel dry her body and her hair. She hadn't eaten all day, but she wasn't hungry. She had smelled the breakfast her mother was cooking in the kitchen, but Katniss had slipped out the back door, completely unnoticed.

Alone. That's how she would survive whatever remained of her life. Alone.

And maybe one day soon, Prim would be established and in her own family. And she wouldn't need her big sister anymore. And her mother could let her go, since they'd already said goodbyes when she left for the games. Maybe then, Katniss could disappear.

She wept into her palms, but quickly dried her red-rimmed eyes. She couldn't waste time crying, not when being alone would be her reality. She pulled her hair into a top knot, secured her opal necklace, wrapped the oversize towel around her lithe frame, and pulled open the bathroom door.

She froze when she saw him. Sitting on the edge of the bed, looking expectantly at the bathroom door, his hands clasped between his knees. She nervously pushed wayward strands of damp hair from her face.

"I- I'm sorry. I shouldn't use your bathroom." She lowered her eyes to the floor and pursed her lips. "I'm moving all of my things downstairs. If you'll give me a few minutes, I'll be out of your way."

She hurried to the dresser and started to gather her clothes.

"Katniss." There was an intimacy in how he said her name. She felt rooted to the floor. "Stop."

He stood from the bed and slowly walked to her. She quickly wiped at a tear, willing herself not to shed another.

"Can we talk?"

"There's nothing to talk about. You've already told me how you feel, and I appreciate your honesty."

"Please."

She lifted her eyes to his; they were as tortured as hers. She nodded.

"Just let me put on some —"
"No. Just like this."

He led her to the full-length mirror near the dresser and steered her to stand in front of the mirror. He stood behind her and enveloped her in an embrace, his arms encircling hers.

"Katniss, I'm so sorry for how I spoke to you last night." He swallowed hard. "You didn't deserve that."

She silently cursed the disobedient tears that ran down her cheeks. She turned her eyes to the floor.

"Look at me," he said softly.

She lifted her eyes to the mirror.

"You are the most desirable woman in the world. There's absolutely nothing wrong with you. I was angry with myself because despite my best efforts to get over you, all it took was one touch, one kiss, and I was gone again." He sighed deeply. "Katniss, only two things frighten me. One of them is the thought of something happening to you."

"And the other is loving you."

Tears streamed down his face. Her breath caught in her throat.

"I know that sounds odd, but it's true." He sniffed. "When I'm in love with you, I'm all in. You have no idea what I would do for you, how madly and deeply I love you. I just can't risk it anymore, not with our track record. I would be utterly destroyed."

She nodded sadly.

"But you're right. We are married, and we will be married for a long, long time to come. And I don't want you to be trapped in an unfulfilled marriage."

She squinted quizzically, hanging on his every word.

He planted a gentle kiss to her bare shoulder. "There are some things I can do to give you relief without us going all the way. But I'm not there yet, Katniss; I need you to be patient with me. I'm trying to get there because I want you to be satisfied. And I don't want us to avoid one another. I still want this to be a happy home."

Her face crumpled in a sob. He stepped in front of her and pulled her into his arms.

"I hurt you, Katniss, and I'm sorry. Please forgive me. I'm truly sorry."

Her words spewed forth without restraint.

"You were right. I don't deserve you. I don't deserve to be happy. I wish I'd just taken the nightlock in the arena, Peeta. I know you would've taken care of my mom and Prim. You would've looked out for them. Everyone would be better off if I wasn't here."

He pushed her to arms length, his eyes widened in alarm amid fresh tears.

"No! You don't get to think that way. I need you, Katniss. I need you to be alive and safe and happy. We all need you. Don't ever let me hear you say those words again. Do you understand?"

She nodded still sobbing as they clung to one another. In that moment, they both realized the same truth. It wasn't their own happiness they were after; it was each other's. They would sacrifice for the
other, to make sure the other was safe and happy and well.

Ultimately, it was all that mattered.

Peeta and Katniss ate dinner that evening with Maura and Prim. When he pulled Katniss into his arms and she rested her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist just before they tackled the dishes, their affection wasn’t pretense.

They were in a good place, somehow recovering from their latest bout and emerging with an even stronger bond.

Later, Peeta helped Prim with her homework on fractions, while Maura and Katniss refilled bottles of ointments and oils from the apothecary supplies.

The phone rang shortly after 6 p.m. Daylight was still streaming through the windows and unlike the night before, there were no signs of a late evening rainstorm.

Everyone stood and walked slowly to the phone when Maura gasped, clutching the receiver in her hand.

"Are they okay? Are they all okay?"

Katniss and Peeta exchanged worried glances.

"We'll be right there."

Prim was questioning Maura before she replaced the receiver.

"It's the Hawthornes. There's been a fire. Gale and Hazelle were at work; Rory, Vick, and Posy made it out alive. But they're homeless."

Katniss, Peeta, Maura, and Prim rushed to the Seam, toward the smoke billowing above the smoldering pile that once was the Hawthorne home.

There was the typical crowd of onlookers to push through, but at the front of the crowd several men in miners' uniforms had formed an assembly line to pass the buckets of water that had extinguished the home. Gale was standing closest to the house running his hand roughly over his face. Thom was standing to Gale's right with his hand on Gale's shoulder.

"Gale."

He turned at Katniss's voice as the four of them rushed over.

"It's all gone," he shrugged forlornly. "It wasn't much, but it's all gone."

"Is everyone okay?" Peeta asked. "Where are the kids and your mom?"

"Thankfully, everyone's safe." Gale pointed across the street. "They're over there."

Prim darted through the crowd to Rory, who was walking toward them with Vick, Hazelle, and Posy in tow. Posy took off running toward Peeta, who lifted her in his arms.

"Peeta, my house died," she said sadly. "We lost everything." He tucked her head to his shoulder.
"Everything is going to be alright, sweet girl," he said. "Don't worry about anything, okay?"

Maura embraced Hazelle.

"Why do these things keep happening to us, Maura?" Hazelle could no longer hold back her tears. She began to sob on Maura's shoulder. Posy wriggled from Peeta's arms and went to comfort her mother.

Peeta approached Katniss and Gale and Thom. "Do you know what caused the fire?"

Gale sighed in exhaustion. "I have no idea. My mom and I left for work and we'd been there about an hour when someone came to the Justice Building and said our house was on fire. We left immediately and people were already trying to put out the flames, but it was completely engulfed. It was too late."

Just then, Katniss saw a familiar face pushing through the crowd and calling for Gale. It was Madge. She reached for his forearm and pulled him into a supportive embrace that he willingly received. Katniss looked unaffected, but Peeta stared curiously at Madge and Gale.

"I just heard," Madge said. "Are you all okay?"

"Yes. Thankfully, no one was hurt."

She turned to greet Katniss and then Peeta.

"Where is Ms. Hazelle? I want to check on her too."

Peeta pointed to where Maura and Hazelle and Posy stood several feet away, and Madge maneuvered through the crowd.

"She's a good one, Gale," Thom said. "You don't find many Merchant women willing to come into the Seam to check on people in need. Especially not the mayor's daughter."

Gale responded to Thom, but his eyes were trained on Katniss. "Yes. She's a good friend."

Katniss looked away, not wanting to give any hope – any false hope – to Gale. Peeta quietly watched their exchange.

Two Peacekeepers pulled up to take an official report. It was Trolly and Lester. They approached Gale and then asked to speak with Rory, who was home with his younger siblings at the time of the fire. Hazelle and Madge also walked over, leaving Posy and Vick with Maura and Prim.

Katniss, Peeta, Thom, Gale, Hazelle, and Madge all exchanged confused glances when Rory reported that the stove wasn't on at the time of the fire; they'd all assumed a kitchen fire was probably to blame. But Rory said he saw flames outside the home. Then, he rushed his brother and sister to safety before he ran to get help. The flames quickly spread.

"We'll investigate Mrs. Hawthorne," Trolly said. "Do you have a place to stay tonight?"

Hazelle nodded. "Maura Everdeen offered to take us in."

Gale stared dejectedly at the ground. "Gale, you're always welcomed to stay with me, if you want to be closer to the Seam," Thom said. "I know you may want to come back here and see if anything can be salvaged."

Gale nodded gratefully. "Thanks Thom. I think I'll take you up on that for a night or two, until I can
find us someplace else to live."

"And I'll check the listings," Madge offered. "We get them first through the Justice Building. There's something else out there."

Hazelle embraced and thanked Madge. Gale smiled gratefully.

Peeta pulled Lester aside. Katniss followed them.

"Where's Darius," Peeta asked, glancing around the crowd.

"Oh, didn't you hear? He was re-stationed," Lester said. "He's in the Capitol now."

"The Capitol?" Katniss asked uneasily.

"Yeah. No one knew he was leaving. One day, we went to check on him because he didn't show up for work, and there was an official order from President Snow on his kitchen table. His house was completely cleaned out except for the order and a ton of long-stemmed white roses strewn all over the floor."

Katniss gripped Peeta's arm to steady herself. Both of their hearts raced.

"Lester," Peeta asked slowly, carefully. "Have you seen those roses anywhere else around town?"

"Only at Darius's house and on the doorstep of that low life Allister that attacked you Katniss," Lester said. "And then there's the one over there that the little girl is playing with."

Katniss and Peeta looked up in horror to see Posy, standing near Hazelle, stooping down to pick up the long-stemmed white rose that lay beside the smoldering home.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: If you're wondering, the songs mentioned in this chapter are Like a Star by Corinne Bailey Rae and Tightrope by Janelle Monae. Thanks again for reading!
The melody, indistinct at first, waltzed from some dark corner of Katniss's mind, slowly making its way to the forefront.

It was The Meadow Song, an anguished version in her own soprano. It was Rue's eyes, closing for the last time, acquiescing to death as a cannon blast announced that she would never be a victor.

And now, in the waning daylight of District 12 with the thick black smoke from the charred Hawthorne home twisting through the air, Katniss was immobilized as she watched Posy - sweet, innocent Posy – twirling the long stem between her fingers, eyeing President Snow's death threat of a white rose with fascination.

The four-year-old loved pretty things. She always noticed pretty things – like Katniss's opal necklace or a ribbon in Prim's hair. And every perfect curve of the alabaster petals was beyond pretty. The rose was evil in its loveliest form, a reminder that Snow had no problem killing children.

The Meadow Song grew louder, and louder, and…

"No," Katniss gasped, panic jolting her from her momentary stupor.

Only Peeta, who'd studied her movements and moods for years, could react in time. He hooked his arm around her waist just as her body made its initial arc toward a sprint through the crowd. Before she could resist, she was leaning, slightly off balance, against his chest. To anyone watching, it was simply an act of affection between a husband and wife. But he pinned her with his gaze, his eyes demanding her full attention, willing her to understand the urgent message he couldn't speak aloud - especially not in a Peacekeeper's hearing.

"Everything's fine," Peeta said mildly, glancing over his shoulder to respond to Lester's question. His eyes were immediately back to Katniss. "My wife loves white roses because they were a part of her wedding bouquet, and it's been hard finding them here in District 12," he explained.

Katniss fought for equanimity as she tried to follow Peeta's clues. He rubbed her back with long, reassuring strokes.

"Sweetheart, why don't you see if you can get that rose from Posy without upsetting her and causing a scene. Tell Posy I'll bake her some cookies to make up for it."

Suddenly, Katniss understood. Peeta knew she would storm through the crowd and snatch the rose from Posy's grip. But that reaction wouldn't go unnoticed by the crowd or by President Snow who was probably watching and waiting for some misstep. She had to remain calm.

Katniss forced a smile and nodded before swiftly and silently navigating the crowd. But beyond
what any eye could see, the fire she thought she'd lost was catching in her heart, consuming every trace of fear with an intensity that could destroy an entire government and its army.

It was almost 7 p.m., in District 12. Before the next hour came, the skies would be cloaked in shades of indigo and pepper gray that ushered in nightfall.

After giving his account to the Peacekeepers, Rory trudged back to where Prim stood, adjacent to the Hawthorne home with her arm encircling Vick's shoulder.

If every raven-haired, gray-eyed male in Panem were squeezed into District 12, it would still be easy to pick out the members of the Hawthorne family. Rory was practically a carbon copy of Gale with the only difference being a smattering of freckles across the bridge of Rory's nose and cheeks. All of the children inherited Hazelle's argent-colored eyes, but the boys had Emory Hawthorne's chiseled features and olive complexion, which made them look like progressive versions of the same person. Posy shared the same complexion, hair, and eyes, but her face was heart-shaped and she carried a long dimple in her right cheek that appeared when she smiled and chewed.

Prim had known Rory since the first day of school. They were the last two students to arrive that morning, and since they both were nervous, their mothers made them hold hands as they walked into the classroom. They clung to one another's side for the rest of the day, and later that afternoon, they partnered for a rousing game of tag that sealed their fate as friends.

But eventually, their missing-tooth smiles became crooked, bashful grins, and they were holding hands as often as they could, for as long as they could. Now, Prim slid her hand inside Rory's, and he responded by clutching her hand, soft and warm, as if it were a life source.

She watched him gnaw on his bottom lip, his brows squeezed with worry. She'd seen a version of this look in math class, when he hunched over one of Ms. Flynn's quizzes. But this was different, damning, and far more intense.

"There was nothing you could do, Rory," Prim said quietly, knowingly. "This wasn't your fault."

He didn't respond. Instead, his eyes locked on Gale who was still on the other side of the home, surrounded by Thom, a lady named Madge whom Rory had just met, and several of Gale's miner friends who had helped extinguish the flames.

Gale had no idea how closely Rory watched him, how much Rory admired his older brother's strength and leadership, how desperately Rory wanted to be Gale's confidant and the person he trusted most. Rory even weighed his own actions by how he thought his older brother would react. If he thought something would be met with Gale's disapproval, Rory immediately changed course.

Rory had always looked up to Gale, but everything changed when Emory Hawthorne died in the mine explosion. Their father was hard working and dedicated to his family. But Rory, the middle child at the time, got little of Emory's attention. When he wasn't at work or at The Hob, Emory spent most of his time with Gale. Their mother, pregnant with the child Emory hoped would be a girl, came in as a close second. Vick, the youngest at the time, always had a spot on Emory's lap at the end of the day.

But Rory's role was to assist. Assist his older brother with cleaning the game. Assist his mother with putting on her coat. Assist his younger brother with tying his shoes. And Rory always moved quickly, dutifully, never having to be given an order twice. Occasionally, Emory would affectionately tousle Rory's hair as the elder Hawthorne ambled to bed. But most nights, Emory had consumed so much brew that he probably didn't know which child's head he'd touched.
The sudden loss of their father was devastating, but Gale didn't cry, so Rory didn't cry. And with the chasm left by their father's absence, Rory was determined to silently prove to Gale that he could be to his big brother what Gale was to their father – someone he could trust, someone he could rely on. Someone he could be proud of.

But now, every smoke-tinged breath Rory inhaled reminded him of his failure, as did the distress on Gale's face. Gale would never rely on him after this.

*I should have gone back and tried to put out the flames. Now we're homeless because I wasn't brave enough to go back on my own. If Gale were home, the house wouldn't have burned to the ground and we wouldn't have lost everything. This is all my fault.*

Prim gently squeezed his hand, and he nodded absently, not sure if she was waiting on his response. He followed her gaze through the crowd to her older sister, the person Prim admired most, the person whose strength she wished she had.

And in that moment, Katniss looked absolutely horrified.

Prim and Rory watched Peeta pull Katniss to him. He turned briefly to Lester, but his focus was quickly back to his wife. Whatever he said next seemed to steady her. Moments later, she was walking briskly, purposefully to... to... Posy?

Then Prim saw it, and her breath stuck in her throat. A white rose. A *perfect* white rose. One that Prim had seen only twice in her life before now: on the lapel of President Snow's jacket when he surprised Katniss at their home immediately after the Games, and filling the church and Katniss's bouquet on the day of her marriage to Peeta.

And now Rory was staring quizzically at Prim, unsure of why the color had suddenly drained from her face.

It was called the trade-off game. Katniss created it shortly after her father died as a way to "trade" Prim's worry over their mother's unresponsiveness for laughter – usually the result of Katniss's tickles to Prim's neck and ribs.

Now Katniss was playing a different version of the trade-off game with Posy. And if there was anything that could rival Posy's love for pretty things, it was her love for sweets.

Katniss squatted, coming eye level with the girl. *One, potentially poisonous white rose for...*

"Cookies, baked by Peeta," Katniss said with just enough cheer in her voice to fool a four-year-old.

But Posy stared at the rose, silently analyzing the terms of the trade. Her nose wrinkled in dissatisfaction.

"I love cookies, but this is a special rose, Katniss," Posy argued. "It's worth more than cookies."

Katniss blinked in surprise at the girl's refusal. *Shit. Posy drives a hard bargain. She needs her own booth at The Hob.*

"Okay then... one whole cake, baked by Peeta," Katniss spouted, desperate to separate Posy from the rose. "The flavor of your choice."

The rose dropped from Posy's grip as the girl lifted both arms in the air in excitement, bouncing on her toes in happy acceptance of the offer.
"There's just one other thing," Katniss cautioned. "I need to give you the secret pass code for your cake."

"Pass code?"

"Yep, the secret pass code."

This was Katniss's way of quickly inspecting Posy's hands to be sure she hadn't been scratched by any of the thorns. Katniss kissed each palm, designating one for a butter cake with chocolate icing and the other for strawberry shortcake.

"Now don't decide just yet, Posy. This is a very important decision. You're going to Prim's house tonight. Right before you go to bed, let me know what you decide, and I'll personally put in the order with Peeta. Okay?"

"Okay Katniss," Posy nodded excitedly. "I'll give it a lot of thought."

Posy rushed to Hazelle and Maura, several yards away, to share the good news. And Katniss used the toe of her sandal to gingerly shove the white rose underneath a blackened plank of wood, watching as the petals flared a luminescent blue before disintegrating into a brittle, grayish black.

Trolley had asked the Hawthornes not to touch, move, or remove anything belonging to the home until he and Lester completed an incident report. So Gale just stood there staring at the ruins, his mind trying to piece together how this happened.

_This doesn't make sense. Rory said he saw the fire outside, not inside. How could it have started outside? And how did our home burn so fast? Everyone says it was engulfed in a matter of seconds._

Gale scrubbed his hand through his hair. Tension spread like a wave from the nape of his neck down to his shoulder blades. It was hard enough making ends meet when they had a roof over their heads. Now, they were homeless with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Thom and Madge stood on either side of Gale. Four other miners faced them, forming a makeshift circle, tin pails with residual drops of water at their feet. They were also marveling at the speed and intensity of the flames when Gale's mind drifted to a memory of his father's throat bobbing with laughter.

Gale silently ached for him. If his father were alive, at least they could figure this out together. Now, Gale had no one.

The singsong lilt in her voice pulled him back to reality. Madge was responding to something about types of wood, noting that softwoods such as pine tended to have more resin and would burn faster than other types. By the looks on the men's faces, they were thoroughly impressed by this smart, engaging, comely Merchant girl who stood among them, unfazed by the soot on their faces and the dirt underneath their fingernails.

Gale didn't expect the subtle smile that curled his lips. _Thom was right. She is pretty amazing._

"Gale."

Peeta was standing behind him; something in his eyes didn't match his placid expression.

"I need to talk to you for a moment. In private."
Peeta led Gale around the side of the house, behind the wall of a storage shed that had been attached
to the back of the house. That wall was one of the few that hadn't completely succumbed to the
flames.

Peeta's eyes darted around them. He seemed to be in search of something he hoped he wouldn't find.

"What is it?" Gale asked, his eyes jumping along the path Peeta set. Gale's hair was peaked
haphazardly, the result of frustrated hands scrubbing through his closely cropped mane. "What's
wrong?"

Peeta studied him pensively. Ever since he visited Gale's home several weeks ago, there was an
unspoken truce between them. But Peeta didn't trust him. And he hoped Gale could handle the
sensitive information he was about the share; it was a matter of life or death for the Hawthorne
family.

Peeta's voice was barely louder than a whisper. "You cannot react to what I'm about to tell you. We
are probably being watched."

"Okay," Gale shrugged dismissively, exhaustion embedded on his face. "At this point, nothing you
say will make this day any worse."

Peeta drew a deep breath. "This was no accident, Gale. This was arson. The Capitol made an attempt
on your family's lives."

Gale was wrong. An already terrible day instantly became worse. A parade of emotions flashed
across his face. Among them was a look of revelation that made Peeta uneasy.

"What?!"

"Shh!" Peeta glanced around them. "You have to keep your voice down and stay calm."

Gale paced slowly with his eyes squeezed shut. "How..." He stopped pacing and rubbed both hands
up and down his face. "How do you know this was Snow?"

"There was a white rose left beside your house. It's Snow's calling card. Posy found it, and –"

"Shit!"

Gale spun on his heels, his eyes wild with panic. Peeta tailed him, and as Gale raced around the side
of the house he nearly collided with Katniss. Madge had pointed her in the direction where Peeta and
Gale had walked.

"Posy," he said breathlessly, attempting to sidestep Katniss in his haste. But she blocked him, her
palms lifted in front of his chest.

"No, Gale. Don't make a scene. She's fine."

He tried to sidestep her again, but this time she reached for his face with both hands. Madge and
Thom, who were now in their line of sight, watched with discreet curiosity.

"Look at me," Katniss demanded, keeping her volume low. His eyes frantically scanned what little
he could see of the crowd from where he stood. "Gale, look at me."

He reluctantly lowered his eyes to hers. And she immediately wished he hadn't. The ruined
Hawthorne home paled in comparison to the devastation she saw in his eyes. This wasn't just the
fresh pain of losing his home. This look was built from years of disappointment, layers of hardship, sacrifice, and sorrow that had permeated the depths of his being. It was a reality that Katniss knew too well, a memory that no amount of winnings from surviving the Games could erase.

"I got it from her, and I destroyed it."

Gale's eyes watered. "If anything ever happened to her, to them…"

"She's fine, I promise. I wouldn't lie to you, Gale," she said with conviction. "You know I wouldn't lie to you."

Her words stung in Peeta's ears. No, you wouldn't lie to him, he thought wistfully. But you would lie to me. And to yourself. No matter what you say, your heart will always belong to Gale.

Katniss dropped her hands but held her gaze, willing him to trust her. And finally, after drawing and releasing a long breath, he did. Katniss watched his anxiety yield to a familiar look of longing that she couldn't reciprocate. She didn't want to.

So there she stood, Gale brimming with confidence that she belonged to him despite their circumstances, and Peeta also confident that she didn't belong to him – that she would always find her way back to Gale.

Neither of them knew how wrong they were.

Katniss slid her hand into Peeta’s, their fingers interlocking. Both men assumed she did it just in case there were cameras. Again, neither Gale nor Peeta knew how wrong they were.

The three of them stood listlessly, wearing fatigue like heavy garments. Peeta broke the silence. "Did she say what kind of cookies she wants in exchange for the rose?"

"None," Katniss said flatly. "She wants a whole cake."

Peeta gawked at her, his jaw dropping in stunned silence. Then, he doubled over with laughter. Soon Katniss and Gale were also laughing uncontrollably, fighting to keep their voices down.

Peeta was nearly breathless. "Katniss… I think Posy might be the real girl on fire." He wrapped his arm across his stomach and sighed. "You might need to give her the title."

"That's my baby sister," Gale laughed. "My sweet, demanding, little…"

His eyes latched on to a silver trail of smoke twisting toward the sky. And as Katniss and Peeta’s laughter subsided, the events of the day caved in on Gale. His level of anxiety belied his stoic nature. A rushed plea escaped his lips.

"I know Thom offered to let me stay with him, but I can't stay in the Seam tonight or any other night. I have to be with my family. It's my job to protect them, to keep them safe, and they shouldn't have to pay for this. I'll sleep outside if I have to. I just need to be –"

"Wait a minute." Peeta held up his hand, his eyes narrowing on Gale. "What do you mean 'they shouldn't have to pay for this'?"

Katniss heard it too. She stared worryingly at Gale who'd fallen silent.

"Gale." Peeta's tone was deliberate. "Is there something you're not telling us? Do you know why your home was torched?"
"I just need to be with my family. That's the point I'm trying to make."

But Katniss knew him too well. He was hiding something. "You're not answering the question, Gale. We, of all people, need to know if something is going on."

The truth was that Gale had known as soon as Peeta said it was arson from the Capitol. He averted his eyes from Katniss's quicksilver stare, focusing on where Madge and Thom stood in the distance. The other miners must have left because Madge and Thom were alone, talking to one another.

"Gale," Katniss demanded.

He swallowed hard. "Lately, I've been telling some of the guys that District 12 should be more active in the rebellion. That we should show our support for the effort by gradually cutting off the supply of coal to the Capitol. That we should lead the way because... because the girl who sparked the rebellion is from our district."

Peeta and Katniss's eyes widened in horror. Gale was inciting rebellion against the Capitol, in the worst possible place in all of Panem: the home district of the two rebellious winners of the most recent Games. President Snow was already doggedly watching Katniss and Peeta, and Gale had tied Katniss to grassroots efforts to overthrow the government. Suddenly, it all made sense; the near loss of his job in the mines had been a warning. And now, the burning of his house with his family inside was much more than a threat.

"You what?!" Peeta bellowed, startling Katniss and drawing stares from Thom and Madge. "Are you fucking kidding me?! You could have gotten her killed! You could have gotten us all killed!"

Katniss was just as ready to rip into Gale, but she needed to tend to Peeta first. He'd come undone, completely abandoning his "don't cause a scene" strategy. The crowd had started to dissipate, but a few people walked up to Madge and Thom and tried to peer around the side of the house. Madge and Thom instinctively acted as gatekeepers, telling the others that everything was fine.

Katniss laid her palm on her husband's heaving chest. "Peeta, calm down. You have to calm down."

But he didn't. He couldn't. Not when it came to her safety and wellbeing.

"Why the hell would you bring her into this?! Not to mention your entire family!"

Gale humbled himself, his eyes and his words heavy with remorse.

"I realize that now, and I'm so sorry. I would never intentionally put Katniss or my family in danger. I was angry. I didn't think Snow was watching me, and I didn't think it would result in him trying to kill my family."

"Well it did! And you know what we're up against. You already know –"

Suddenly, Katniss grabbed Peeta's face and pressed her lips to his. His body tempered, but when their lips parted, they were still tethered by their gazes, full of vulnerability and longing and unanswered questions. A force stronger than gravity pulled them back into each other's arms, back to each other's lips, residual passion from what almost happened in their bedroom the night before. And in those moments, there was no rebellion, no President Snow, no danger, no dread of white roses... no one else in the world. They were in that realm where only they existed, and everything made sense.

But none of it made sense to Gale. He watched with furrowed brows, trying to convince himself that this was yet another act for the cameras. That Katniss still belonged to him, and Peeta was still firm in
his decision to not pursue her. That these were desperate times and desperate measures were necessary.

But that kiss was real. The way they looked at one another was real. And there was something disturbingly intimate about the way she clutched a mound of shirt at his chest in her hand…

"I'm okay, Peeta," she whispered.

He drew a shaky breath. "After all we've survived… I can't take the thought of anything happening to you –"

"Nothing will," she said resolutely, her hand back on his chest. "Nothing will. We have to stick to your original plan. We have to stay calm and think this through."

Peeta steadied his emotions. "Excuse us," he gritted at Gale before pressing his hand to the small of Katniss's back and guiding her out of earshot.

"Turns out your cousin is a complete idiot."

Katniss chuckled despite herself.

"I know he wants to be with his family, but I don't know if he should be in Victor's Village. Having him there could do more harm than good for everyone else."

The thought had already crossed Katniss's mind. Her first concern was for the safety of her family – her sister, her mother, and her… husband. Peeta was family. The thought didn't surprise her mind; it surprised her heart. She watched his lips move, but for the next few seconds she didn't hear a word he said.

"I'm just not sure, Katniss." She caught this part. "What do you think?"

Gale's actions threatened everyone associated with him. This could have been Snow's plan all along – get the Hawthornes and the Everdeens together with Katniss and Peeta nearby, and make examples of them all. So much could go wrong.

But she couldn't deny shelter to the Hawthornes, and she couldn't deny Gale the chance to protect his family, despite his incredible lack of judgment.

"He made a really, really stupid mistake, Peeta. He thought he didn't matter to Snow, and he probably wouldn't if he weren't associated with me. But I think he clearly sees how serious Snow's threats are, and now he just wants to keep his family safe."

"So you think we should let him stay in Victor's Village," Peeta said matter-of-factly.

"I think he'll find his way there no matter what we say."

Peeta pressed the heels of his hands into his eyelids to relieve the buzzing tension.

"You're probably right," he conceded. "And I can understand him wanting to protect his family, especially since this is his fault."

Peeta stared at the ground, deep in thought.

"I can't believe I'm saying this…" He shook his head in disbelief. "What if Gale and his family use our home for the next few days until they find another place. If you and Maura agree, you and I can move in with your mother. That'll keep him and his family together in one place, and we can watch
over Maura and Prim. But Gale will have to keep his distance from you; we do not need to aggravate Snow. And one word about rebellion, and he's gone."

Katniss gaped at Peeta. "You would do that for them? Peeta… that's a huge sacrifice."

"I'm 98 percent sure it's the worst idea I've ever had." He reached for her hand. "But I have two very special people to consider."

"Really?" A smile twitched on her lips. "And who are those special people?"

"You're number one." He shrugged as if no explanation was needed. "You care for him and for his family. You won't be in any peace if they're not okay. And Posy is number two. She just lost her home; it might upset her if Gale were suddenly gone too."

"And you owe her a cake," Katniss grinned sheepishly. "She'll tell me what flavor later tonight."

Peeta chuckled and shook his head. "Remind me to talk with you about your negotiation skills."

As they walked back to Gale – hand-in-hand – Peeta thought of another, more strategic reason for agreeing to have Gale so close. Like Katniss, Gale was good with a bow. And if Snow had something major planned, it couldn't hurt to have another skilled shooter nearby.

It was a few minutes before 7:30 p.m. Soon, the wind would start to pick up, adding whiffs of coal dust to the scent of charred home.

The crowd had mostly cleared, some on their own accord and others by way of the Peacekeepers. All who remained were Madge and Thom, Peeta, Katniss, and Gale, the Hawthorne and Everdeen families, and a few men who approached Gale to offer support with clearing the debris from his home.

Lester approached and gave Gale a copy of the incident report.

"We could find no just cause for the fire, but nightfall will catch us soon. We can take another look on tomorrow."

"No, thanks." Gale signed the incident report. "I'll just focus on recovering what we can and finding another place."

Thom again offered to let Gale stay at his house. But Gale fabricated an excuse about Posy having nightmares and needing him to calm her. "I'd better stay close to them for a while, especially since she'll be in an unfamiliar setting."

"Do you want to start sifting through the rubble tonight? I'd be happy to lend a hand while there's a little daylight left."

"You're a good man for asking, but I know you've worked all day, and you need your rest. I'll get started tomorrow morning after my shift ends in the mines. If you feel up to it when you get off, we could use your help. If not, I completely understand."

Thom vowed to return the following afternoon. Then he shook hands with Gale and Peeta, nodded his head politely to Katniss and Madge, and headed home.

Katniss wandered a few steps, her arms tightly folded across her chest as she watched the Hawthornes and her family in the distance. No matter what Gale did to attract Snow's fury, Katniss
know that all of this – this entire rebellion and the danger they all faced – was her fault.

If she'd died in the arena, there'd be no rebellion. Peeta would be the victor, and his life would be much simpler without her. Everyone would be safer.

She began to fantasize about how she could have ingested the berries without Peeta knocking them from her hands to stop her. When the game maker reverted to having only one victor, she could have taken aim at Peeta with her bow and arrow; he'd told her to shoot him. But while his eyes were shut and awaiting death, she could have pulled the nightlock from her pocket and swallowed them. She'd be dead before he opened his eyes and –

"Stop it."

She startled, coming face-to-face with Peeta's arresting stare. He knew what she was thinking. How could he possibly know? Like earlier; how did he know she was about to run through the crowd to get to Posy?

She decided to be defiant. "You don't know what I was thinking."

He seemed amused. "I've watched you come and go every day for over a decade. For an entire year when we were in the seventh grade, I traded lunches with Nate Ewell – whose name was after yours in the alphabet – so I could sit right behind you. Believe it or not, until I was severely injured in the arena, I knew where you were 98 percent of the time. And now that we live together, I know that stare, the one you get when your mind is condemning you and you think no one is watching. So just stop it. This isn't your fault."

Her lips parted wordlessly. And she knew that despite their disaster from the night before when he vehemently refused her advances, Peeta's love for her was more real than the ground on which they stood. He only needed to be able to trust her again. And she would do whatever it took to regain his trust.

A soft grin shaped her lips. "Doesn't that make you a stalker?"

"I prefer the term 'number one fan.'" He glanced at the darkening skies. "It's getting late. You should head back to Victor's Village, get everyone indoors before nightfall."

"What do you mean I should head back to Victor's Village? Aren't you coming with us?"

"I need to check on my family. And I want to grab some of my old clothes for the boys. I'll be along in a few minutes."

"Peeta," she stepped closer, "it's not safe out here for you after nightfall. You're just as much of a target for Snow as I am."

"I know, but I have to be sure they're okay," he lowered his voice, "that there are no white roses at the bakery or Thatch's house. I won't be long, and I'll feel better knowing that you're heading indoors."

"That's hypocritical! You can be concerned about my safety, but I can't be concerned about yours? How is that fair?"

"That's not what I..." Peeta rubbed his eyes in exasperation. "Well what do you think we should do Katniss? Should we all walk to the Merchant's Quarters together? All of us take the walk back to Victor's Village in the dark? I know it's unfair, but when it comes to your safety and wellbeing, I won't apologize for being unfair."
"That's the thing, Peeta," she said in a hushed tone. "I won't be well until I know you're okay. We're a team. We protect one another. It's what we do."

"I'll go with Peeta."

Neither of them saw Gale approach, his expression unreadable. "I'm walking Madge home. I can wait for Peeta at the bakery. We'll walk back to Victor's Village together. That'll be safer."

Katniss looked dubiously between them.

"But I agree with Peeta," Gale continued. "You need to get indoors before nightfall. And I greatly appreciate you getting my family and yours indoors as well."

Katniss tried, fruitlessly, to think of a suitable counterargument. Then, she huffed in annoyance.

"Fine," she said tersely to Peeta. "You have exactly 30 minutes to make it home. If you're not back by then, I'm coming out _alone_ to look for you." She shifted her eyes to Gale. "Both of you."

"Deal," Peeta smiled softly.

Gale turned to Madge and told her he'd be ready in a minute. Then, he beckoned to Rory who rushed over.

"Listen, Rory. You, your mother and your siblings are going back to Ms. Maura and Prim's house. I need you to stay by Katniss's side and be her helper. Whatever she needs you to do, do it, okay?"

"Okay, Gale," Rory said, eagerly. "I won't let you down again."

Gale and Katniss exchanged quizzical looks as Rory waited dutifully at Katniss's side, rolling a pebble with the toe of his shoe. Gale quietly watched his younger brother.

"Rory."

The boy rushed over.

"What do you mean when you say you 'won't let me down again?' You do know that none of this," Gale gestured toward the destroyed home, "Is your fault. Right?"

Rory shrugged uncomfortably. "I was just thinking that maybe if I'd gone back to try to put out the fire, we'd still have a place to live."

And Gale saw the depths of his brother's brokenness. Rory was so self-reliant and dependable that Gale never checked on him. Rory probably felt just as overlooked as Gale did.

Gale gripped his brother's shoulders. "If you went back in there, you would have died. And if you died," Gale's voice cracked with emotion, "it would have killed me." Gale cleared his throat. "You did the right thing, Rory. You saved all that mattered in that home – your life, Vick's life, and Posy's life."

Madge's soft voice came over Gale's shoulder. "He's right, Rory. I just met you, but it's obvious to me that you're a hero."

Rory basked in her reassuring smile. Peeta and Katniss were also smiling and nodding in agreement. Rory looked to Gale.

"Really?"
"Really," Gale nodded. "I'm so proud of you and so glad you're my little brother." He pulled Rory's head to his chest and wrapped him in a long-overdue hug. Rory beamed.

"Now go ahead and help Katniss get everyone indoors safely, okay? Peeta and I will be there soon."

As they parted ways, Gale glanced over his shoulder. He felt overwhelming relief that his family was safe, and he promised himself that he would be more of a father figure to his younger siblings. But deep down, Gale wrestled with a nagging dread over the kiss he witnessed between Katniss and Peeta.

With one last look, Gale saw her glance over her shoulder. And his heart sank when he realized that it wasn't his eyes she was looking into.

It was Peeta's.

Lester and Trolley compared notes.

"It's strange that there were no witnesses," Lester said. "Someone had to see something, especially if the fire started outside the home."

"Uh, yeah," Trolley said absently.

Trolley was glad that much of his face was shielded by his helmet. It was harder to see his distress. His mind raced.

*When I got the call, I had no idea there'd be fire. It was just supposed to be another warning, like the rose and the notes to Victor's Village and the roses at Darius's house. What if I tipped someone off to set fire to the home? What if the Hawthorne children died in the blaze? I couldn't live with myself.*

Trolley stole a glance at the Hawthorne children. The older boy was taking the lead, walking with purposeful steps toward Victor's Village. The younger boy was at his mother's side, and Hazelle Hawthorne carried the little girl in her arms. Katniss, and her mother and sister brought up the rear.

Trolley felt relieved... and resolute.

*I've got to tell him tomorrow. I don't know what's going on, but I can't do this anymore. I can't be a part of whatever twisted game Haymitch is playing.*

On the walk to Victor's Village, Prim quietly told Katniss that she knew there was danger. She knew the significance of the white rose that lay beside the Hawthorne home.

Katniss pursed her lips but didn't break her concentration on the path ahead. "I never wanted you to know this fear, little duck."

"I'm with you Katniss," Prim whispered. "Mom and I are with you. You don't have to bear all of this alone."

Maura was walking on the other side of Katniss. "She's right," Maura whispered, still staring ahead.

Katniss looked between her mother and her sister, her heart filling with gratitude. Haymitch was right. She did have much more than what many victors had. She had family - her mother, her sister... her husband. She wasn't alone. And for that, she was infinitely grateful.

"Thank you," she murmured, grasping both of their hands as they continued to walk.
"By the way," Maura whispered, "did I ever tell you where James took me on our first five or so dates?"

Katniss turned surprised eyes to her mother. Maura never talked casually about their father, and she never spoke his name.

"Where?"

"To the woods," Maura smiled at the memory. "He said that he planned to make me an Everdeen one day. And as an Everdeen, I would need to know how to shoot. I'm not as accurate as you, but I'll be damned if I miss."

Maybe she was worried or happy or sad or proud or flat-out exhausted. But for reasons she couldn't quite explain, Katniss's eyes filled with tears.

Haymitch tried to ignore the banging at his front door. It was either Katniss or Peeta. And now wasn't a good time.

But they had a spare key to his home. If he didn't think Haymitch was lying in his own vomit and in need of help, Peeta would have the decency to come back later. Katniss, on the other hand, would bang at the door long enough to annoy him, and then she would go home, get the spare key, and barge in with a mouthful of insults.

He couldn't risk having her barge in. Not today.

Haymitch grabbed the liquor bottle and headed to the door, angrily snatching it open. He stumbled onto the front porch and blocked the entrance with his body. Katniss wasn't alone. A boy, Gale's replica but Prim's age, stood at her side, a cautious look in his eyes.

Haymitch turned the bottle of clear liquid to his mouth and smeared the sleeve of his shirt across his lips.

"What'd you do sweetheart? Shrink Hawthorne so you can keep him in your pocket?"

Katniss quickly grew incensed. She needed Haymitch to know what happened in the Seam that night and to help them strategize. Now was the worst possible time for him to be drunk.

"Dammit Haymitch! We need your help and look at you! You're a sorry mess. Move out the way. I'll make you a pot of coffee. Maybe you can sober up and be useful for a change."

He refused to move. There was no way he was letting her into his house.

"Go to hell, sweetheart," he slurred, pointing his finger menacingly. "Take your little friend with you."

She slapped his hand away.

"You'd better be glad my little friend is here or else I would have broken your finger off the moment you pointed it at me. Now move aside and let us in. We need your help."

"I don't give a damn what you need! You can go off into the woods and die for all I care!"

Katniss was stunned silent. They'd had their squabbles, but she knew deep down that Haymitch would do all he could to keep her and Peeta alive. Something wasn't right about the way Haymitch was acting. And lately, both she and Peeta noticed how reclusive he'd been.
"Maybe we should go, Katniss," Rory said, eyeing Haymitch warily.

"Fine!" She hurled the word at Haymitch. Then, as she seemed to be turning away, she spun around and snatched the liquor bottle from his hand, shattering it when she slammed it to the porch. Some of the clear liquid sloshed over her hand in the process.

"Let's go Rory," she gritted, turning and stomping down the steps. Haymitch didn't bother to clean up the glass. He receded into his house, slamming the front door resoundingly shut.

Back inside, he secured his front door and hoped he'd offended her so deeply that she didn't return. It was for her own good. Then, he rushed back to where they all were waiting.

"Is everything secure?" A woman with a curt, authoritative manner asked from one monitor.

"Yes. Threat averted."

"It's still your call since they're your victors," a hefty man said from a different monitor. "We are in position with our plan B –"

"Which is a damn good plan B, I might add," came a younger man's voice and dazzling grin.

"What do you want to do Haymitch?" A younger woman's voice asked from yet another monitor. "Do you want to go forth with Operation Slay the Mockingjay and put an end to this rebellion?"

Haymitch gnawed on his bottom lip. There was so much risk, so much at stake. But it would always be dangerous. Three versions of the plan and a slew of contingencies had been ready for months. It was now or never.

"Do it," Haymitch said. "Proceed with Plan B. Let's put an end to this rebellion."

"What's with that guy?" Rory sounded aggravated as he and Katniss walked back to the Everdeen home.

"He's an ass."

"If I tell my brother, he'll put him in his place for talking to you like that."

Katniss was about to respond, to tell Rory not to bother and that Gale didn't need to defend her when she instinctively sniffed the clear liquid on her hands.

She stopped in her tracks.

"Rory, do you know what liquor smells like?"

Rory looked confused by her question. "Umm… yes. My dad kept some in the house."

"Smell this."

She lifted her hands to Rory's nose.

"I don't smell anything, Katniss. It certainly doesn't smell like liquor."

She touched the back of her hand to her lips and tasted. "That's because it's not liquor, Rory. It's water. Haymitch was drinking water."
Gale paced anxiously outside Mellark Bakery while he waited for Peeta to emerge. The final trace of daylight would only survive another 10 minutes before surrendering to nightfall, and Gale wanted to get back to his family.

Peeta appeared from the back stairwell of his parent's bakery maneuvering out the narrow doorway with two stuffed duffel bags – presumably clothes for the boys – and two folding chairs.

"Whoa," Gale said, lifting a hand as Peeta approached. "We appreciate everything but that's way too much. The boys only need a couple of shirts and pants to carry them for a few days. I'll go hunting and trade for the rest."

Peeta shrugged and loaded the bags and chairs into the motorized bakery cart. "I don't need these clothes anymore, Gale. Besides, we don't know if any of this will fit them. If the clothes fit, let the boys keep them. If you want to return them when they no longer need them, that'll be fine."

Gale lowered into the passenger seat. "I'll pay you for use of the clothes and for use of your home. I'll find us another place as soon as possible."

Peeta started the cart and began navigating toward the Seam. "Do whatever you think is best."

Gale stared mournfully as they passed his house, which was now surrounded by warning tape and signage promising arrest and punishment to unauthorized persons. But his mind was still on the side of the house, watching Katniss and Peeta lose themselves in a kiss that neither of them should have wanted.

Peeta started to strategize.

"Katniss has an extra bow at her mother's house. I'm sure she'll want you to have access to one of them. When we get back, you and I can make sure my house is secure before we – No. On second thought, we'd better let Katniss know we're back so she doesn't come looking for us since we're getting close to our 30-minute limit. And I think you and I should take turns keeping watch over both homes tonight. Just a precaution. My dad gave me tomorrow morning off, so I can take more than one shift tonight. Katniss will want to take a shift, but she's exhausted; she'll probably fall asleep as soon as she sits down, so let's plan to help cover her rotation. And –"

"Are you sleeping with her?"

Strategy died on Peeta's lips. He stared incredulously at Gale.

"Excuse me?"

Gale's eyes flared. "I'm no fool, Peeta. I saw that kiss. I saw the way she looked at you – "

"Gale, you are way out of line –"

"Have you gone back on your word, Peeta?" Gale pressed angrily. "Are you and Katniss having sex?"

Peeta slammed on brakes. They were on an illuminated part of the path to Victor's Village.

"Let me tell you something, Gale," Peeta seethed. "My marriage and what my wife and I do in our home is none of your damn business. You are not entitled to an explanation of our lives or our decisions. And right now, you should be more concerned with how President Coriolanus Snow feels about you and your family, and stop worrying about Katniss Everdeen Mellark."
Gale, not wanting to jeopardize his invitation to stay with his family, dropped the issue. But his absolute resentment for Peeta grew deeper roots.

*This was his plan all along, to keep me at bay so he could lure her from me. And I fell for it. Now, with all that's going on – I have no way to get to her. I'm losing the girl I love.*

Peeta sped along the path to Victor's Village. He needed to get out of that cart with Gale as quickly as possible; after tying Katniss to the rebellion and his question about his and Katniss's intimacy, Peeta couldn't take much more of Gale Hawthorne.

But he and Gale did have one thing in common: they both realized that the kiss in the Seam was more than a show for the cameras. It was… real. And Peeta's whole world was in a tailspin.

*She kissed me in front of Gale. She meant it. I could feel it.*

Peeta thought back to the night before when she kissed him awake, the supple warmth of her body rolling underneath his like a wave, the heat of her kisses trailing his neck.

*Please, Peeta. I'm so hungry. Please make love to me.*

And in that moment, as Victor's Village came into view, Peeta couldn't think of a single reason why he'd turned her down.

Katniss stopped gnawing on her bottom lip and staring out the window when Peeta and Gale pulled up in front of Maura's house.

*You got the cart so you two wouldn't have to walk back.* She nodded with approval. *Great idea.*

Gale marched in carrying two duffel bags, and Peeta followed with two folding chairs. Their faces were tight with disdain.

She followed Peeta to the bathroom inside the downstairs guest bedroom.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah," he said, unconvincingly. He placed one chair inside the shower and another outside the shower door. "Everything's fine. How are things here?"

"Fine. Rory and I checked everything out."

Earlier, Maura insisted that the Hawthornes eat dinner and pack food for Gale. Prim gathered some of her old clothes for Posy to wear, and Hazelle bathed Posy and dressed her for bed before Peeta and Gale arrived.

Katniss and Peeta rejoined the Hawthornes in the living room, where Posy slept in Hazelle's arms.

"Let's go next door so you all can get settled in," Katniss said, leading the way to her and Peeta's house. Peeta lagged behind to check the perimeters of both homes.

"What a beautiful portrait," Hazelle said, admiring the wedding picture above the fireplace in the living room.

"Thank you," Katniss said distractedly as she quickly checked all the rooms downstairs. "I hung it myself." She caught Gale's stone-faced stare. And again, she was gnawing on her bottom lip.
"I'll show you all to your rooms."

With the exception of the master bedroom, all of the bedrooms had full-sized beds. Katniss started with the unused upstairs bedroom, where Hazelle laid Posy. Then, Katniss pointed out the hall bathroom as they walked to the bedroom where Peeta had been sleeping.

"The boys can sleep in here," Katniss said.

Although the room looked untouched, Katniss pulled fresh linen from the closet and handed it to Hazelle. At that moment, Katniss realized that Gale had disappeared.

"Wow," Vick gushed at the painting above the bed. "That sunset looks so real."

"It's beautiful isn't it? Peeta painted it."

While Hazelle, Rory, and Vick buzzed about Peeta's artistic ability and began changing the bed linen, Katniss quietly gathered Peeta's clothes from the dresser drawers. She was surprised to find Gale across the hall in the master bedroom, scowling at the intimate portrait above the bed. She quickly headed to the closet, where she placed Peeta's clothes, unnoticed by Gale. For everyone's safety, it was best if they didn't know that she and Peeta had been sleeping in separate rooms.

"You can use the guest bedroom downstairs," Katniss said quietly. "Being on the ground floor will give you a better advantage should you need to defend the home."

"I guess you hung this one too, huh."

And here it was. The confrontation she knew was coming.

"Don't start, Gale. Please."

"Either you've become one hell of an actress, or he's better at playing the game than I thought. But I can't blame you; he even manipulated me for a while."

Katniss glared in disbelief. "Peeta's the reason you're here. Are you really going to disrespect him in his own –"

"I'll pay Peeta for his hospitality," Gale said caustically. He stepped closer. "Just tell me one thing, Katniss. What was that kiss about? And don't tell me it was for the cameras because there wasn't a damn camera in sight—"

"I'm in love with him, Gale," she blurted, her heart drumming in her chest. "That's what that kiss was about."

He looked as if his walls were crumbling, and Katniss couldn't take it. "Listen. I'm sorry. I know this is the worst possible time to tell you. But it's real for me. This," she stretched her arms wide motioning to her home, "is real for me."

Gale moistened his lips with his tongue and stared for several moments at nothing in particular.

"Katniss," he said quietly. "People fall in and out of love every day. Being in love is a temporary, useless emotion. It's based on circumstance, like being forced to marry your fellow victor and live with him in some lavish home purchased with the Capitol's wealth. You and I have a love that has developed over time, over good days and bad. Before you were reaped, I was your fellow tribute and you and I lived a game of hunger and survival every day." He took another step closer. "Don't let this illusion of a life with Peeta make you forget what's real. You and I are real, and our love will
outlast your temporary feelings for Peeta."

Katniss grew somber at his words. She wasn't prepared to say that she loved Peeta. The only person
she was certain she loved was Prim. But she knew she wanted to be with Peeta and she wanted her
marriage to work. And for now, that was all she needed to know.

"I'm sorry, Gale," she whispered. "I've hurt you, and I'm sorry."

She fidgeted under his intense gaze.

"That's the other thing about love. It holds on until there's nothing left to fight for." Their eyes met.
"Be careful, Katniss. Otherwise, Peeta will make a fool of you. Mark my words."

As Gale headed downstairs, the front door shut with Peeta's entry. And Katniss lowered to the bed,
trying to push Gale's words from her mind.

Peeta found her seated on the side of the bed, staring aimlessly. Now it was his turn to ask.

"Is everything okay?"

She snapped her eyes to his at the sound of his voice. She hadn't even heard him climbing the stairs.
But then again, the house wasn't as quiet as usual.

"Yeah. I'm just a little tired."

Peeta pulled her into his arms. Her entire body sank with relief.

"It's been a really long day, but it's almost over," he murmured.

"I'm so glad," she smiled against his chest. She reluctantly pulled away. "We should probably start
packing."

"Ugh. I hate packing," Peeta wrinkled his nose in a look that Katniss thought was completely
adorable.

"Come on," she chided playfully, pulling him to the bathroom. They collected two of his prosthetic
limbs, his crutches, and their toiletries. They placed everything except the crutches into one oversized
suitcase along with several pieces of clothing. They could always come back for things they needed.

"Are you going to let Gale use the bow you have here or the one at Maura's house?"

"The one here. I don't want Snow to see me transporting weapons. The less he knows the better."

"Good idea."

Downstairs, Hazelle and Gale were sorting through Peeta's old clothes, holding individual pieces to
the boys' bodies to gauge the fit. Peeta and Katniss descended the stairs with the packed suitcase and
the crutches.

"You're incredibly generous, Peeta," Hazelle said. "Thank you so much for letting us borrow the
clothes and use your home for a few days."

The boys chimed in with thanks.

"It's no problem," Peeta smiled warmly. "I'm glad we could help."
"Peeta," Vick said excitedly. "Your painting upstairs looks just like a sunset. Can you teach me how to paint like that?"

"Peeta's busy," Gale grumbled. *Busy manipulating everyone.* Gale held a short-sleeved gray shirt to Rory's chest.

"I'd be glad to," Peeta said to Vick. "Maybe we can start in the fall. The colors are prettier in the fall."

"Can we start before you leave for your Victory Tour?" Vick asked hopefully.

Katniss's eyes widened in realization.

The Victory Tour… She'd forgotten all about it. Two whole weeks away from District 12, just her and Peeta (Haymitch and Effie and their prep teams). She didn't look forward to visiting the districts and eulogizing the fallen tributes. But, this tour could mark a new beginning for her and Peeta. They could leave District 12 behind for a couple of weeks and focus on their relationship.

They were in a good place despite what happened the night before when he'd rejected her advances. But by his own admission, Peeta was still afraid to love her, still saving his heart for someone else. Katniss realized that while she may not have clear answers about love, she knew one thing for sure – she didn't want him to want anyone else.

*The Victory Tour,* she thought as she bit her lips to suppress her grin.

Prim was already in bed when Katniss finished her shower in the hall bathroom upstairs, but the light was still on in Maura's room.

Her knock was faint, just in case her mother had fallen asleep with the light on, which she was known to do.

"Mom? You awake?"

"Yeah, honey. Come in."

Katniss climbed onto the edge of the bed, facing Maura who sat with her back to the headboard. She was rubbing a lightly-scented lotion the length of her arms. Her wetish hair was twisted into a low bun whereas Katniss's damp hair hung in lazy tendrils.

"I was hoping I could talk to you about something."

Maura studied her quietly. "It must be something serious. Your hair is drying and you haven't started untangling the knots." Maura patted the vacant side of the bed. "Come. Prim doesn't let me do this anymore."

Katniss crawled higher on the bed, turning her back to Maura who reached for the hairbrush on the nightstand. She started brushing at the end and working her way up her daughter's tresses.

"What's on your mind?"

"It's a heavy question."

"Okay."

Katniss sighed. "Mom, how did you know you loved dad and not Daniel Mellark?"
Maura stopped brushing for a moment. "Oh, that's easy," she said softly. "Sacrifice."

"Sacrifice?"

"I was willing to give up everything for your father. That's how I knew I loved him."

Katniss glanced over her shoulder, catching Maura in the corner of her eye. "I'm not entirely sure what you mean."

"Love is about sacrifice. If you're not willing to give up something meaningful, something you can't replace, then it's not love. For me, I gave up everything for your father. Friends, family, status - everything. And there hasn't been a single moment when I've regretted my decision."

Katniss smiled wryly. "You make it sound so simple."

"It's not that hard."

Katniss hugged her knees to her chest. "Is there a difference between being in love and loving someone? Is one more real than the other?"

"I think it's possible to have one without the other. Some people think that being in love is mere infatuation, but that's not necessarily the case. We should want to be in love and we should want love. If we're lucky, we'll find both with the same person."

Katniss nodded.

"By the way, are we talking about Peeta or Gale?"

"Peeta," Katniss said, a bashful smile playing on her face.

"And you're trying to decide if you love him?"

Katniss nodded.

"I see." Maura fell silent for several moments as she worked the brush through the other side of Katniss's hair.

"You know, Katniss, I was pretty mad at you during the Games."

"What? Why?"

"When you and Peeta were in the cave and the announcement was made, I'll admit that I didn't want you to go to the cornucopia to get his medicine. It was clearly a trap, another bloodbath to weed out tributes. But you went. Why did you do that?"

Katniss shrugged her shoulders. "What choice did I have? I couldn't just let him die, mom."

"You couldn't?"

"No," she said, growing exasperated. "I couldn't."

"Katniss," Maura said gently, turning her daughter so they were face to face. "That was the whole point of the Games – for people to die. I watched you risk your life for him. You could have been killed."

"I couldn't live with myself if I let him die. As much as I wanted to come home, if it came down to it,
I would die so... he could... live...

The revelation set in. Maura lifted an eyebrow, a knowing look on her face.

Katniss swallowed hard. "Mom, are you saying that I—"

"You were willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for Peeta. Based on everything I've learned about life thus far, that sounds like love to me."

Katniss chewed thoughtfully on her bottom lip. "Well what about being in love? Where does that fit in?"

Maura grinned girlishly. "Oh, well that's when you start thinking about him the moment he leaves your presence. That's the goofy-looking grin that's plastered to your face when you think about something he said or did that made you laugh. That's the tingle that shoots up your spine when he touches the small of your back and guides you into a room."

Katniss dipped her head, a smile trembling on her lips.

"That's the goofy smile I was talking about."

They laughed generously.

"Honey, love can seem confusing at first because we don't want to get it wrong. But I think you love Peeta. I think you've loved him for longer than you've even realized. And if you're wondering if it's possible to love Gale too, it is – but in a different way. You can care very much for Gale and want to see him happy. But your heart can only belong to one person."

And that person was on her mind. The boy with the dimple and sunlit eyelashes. The boy who had endured abuse but maintained his gentle nature. The boy who became a man in the face of danger, who would risk life and limb to defend and protect her. The boy with the bread.

"Thanks mom."

"You're welcome honey."

As they continued to talk, Maura sectioned Katniss's hair into two long braids, just like her daughter wore when she was little, long before the nation knew her name.

Peeta didn't hear her until the floorboard creaked at the foot of the stairs. Katniss was suddenly nervous, averting her eyes when theirs met.

But Peeta couldn't look away. His eyes scanned her body – her bare olive skin, the racerback tank top and those shorts she wore to bed on warm nights, her hair plaited into two long braids instead of one. His manhood responded with great interest, and he was glad the lower part of his body was hidden beneath the table.

She chose the seat directly in front of him.

"Just so you know, I'm gonna kick Haymitch's ass as soon as he falls out of bed in the morning."

Peeta emitted a short burst of laughter. "I almost feel sorry for the guy. Like I should warn him or something."

"No. Don't warn him." She said flatly with an impish grin. "I don't want him to see this one coming."
"What did he do now?"

Katniss proceeded to tell Peeta about her and Rory's hostile interaction with Haymitch earlier that night. How he refused to allow her entry into his home. How he'd cursed her out on his front porch and told her he didn't care if she died.

Peeta frowned. "Something weird has been going on with Haymitch lately. I've gone by twice in the past week, and I've gotten as far as his front porch."

"That's not the best part." She leaned forward conspiratorially, unaware that her cleavage was showing. Peeta ached with need but willed himself to keep his eyes on her face. "The weirdest thing was when I grabbed his liquor bottle and some of it got on my hand. It wasn't alcohol, Peeta. It was water, or at least something non-alcoholic. Haymitch was behaving like he was drunk, but liquor wasn't in that bottle."

"I'm at a loss," Peeta slowly shook his head. "Maybe he's on some medications that are affecting him? Maura could tell us if medicine would have that effect on him."

Katniss sighed. "I don't know. I guess I'll give you a chance to check on him before I assault him. Just in case something is really going on."

"How kind of you," Peeta smirked. She grinned in response.

They sat in heavy silence, each of their minds preparing their mouths for something the needed to say. Katniss shifted in her seat.

"Peeta… about the kiss tonight in the Seam."

His eyes shot to hers. He'd been thinking about the same thing.

"I wasn't trying to disrespect your boundaries. I know we just talked about boundaries on last night. I hope I didn't offend you."

Offend me? That kiss was real for me. Maybe it wasn't real for her if she feels the need to apologize for it. Okay, wait. You don't need to start confusing yourself again. She still doesn't love you. You don't have her heart.

"It's okay. I wasn't offended." He feigned apathy. "It was a really, uh… a really smart and strategic move, you kissing me in front of Gale." He took a sip of his water and waited for her to disagree with him, but she just listened quietly. "Snow should love that."

Her heart sank at his words. Their kiss felt so real; she was hoping that by bringing it up, they could talk about what happened between them. But Peeta saw everything as strategy – even her affections. She didn't know if she would ever regain his trust.

"Yeah." She lifted her eyes to his. "I guess he should."

This time, the silence was awkward.

"You're dressed like you're going outside," she said. "I thought you took a shower."

"Oh, I did. I got dressed again. I'm going to keep watch for a few hours."

"I'll stay up with you."

"No." His reply came more abruptly than he intended. "I know you didn't sleep well last night
after… I saw you leave and come over here."

"Oh."

"You should get some rest."

She swallowed hard and took a chance. "You don't have to sleep on the couch, you know. When you get tired, you can come to bed. I'll stay on my side. Or I'll come out here and keep watch, if you want."

"Thanks, Katniss. Since my dad gave me the morning off, I may be out here most of the night. Besides, you'll need your energy for that colossal ass-kicking in the morning."

She smiled weakly, trying to hide her disappointment. "Yep, I will." She pushed from the table, wishing he was ready to give her another chance – especially now that she knew she loved him. But she would have to be patient like Natalie said and work on convincing him. It felt like yet another fight…

"Good night, Peeta."

"Good night, Katniss." Their eyes met, his crystal blue to her gray. And there was no doubt in her mind that he was worth fighting for.

Peeta thought he saw a hint of dejection as she walked away, and she swore she felt longing eyes on her back. They were stuck in the same misunderstanding, and they desperately wished the other was ready to love or trust enough to move forward in their relationship. Because despite all the uncertainty that constantly shaped their lives, they were both certain of one thing on that spring night: they wanted to make love.

Peeta lifted his head from the kitchen table around 2:30 a.m., his plan to stay awake thwarted sometime after midnight.

*So much for keeping watch,* he thought as he ambled to the living room window. His house next door was completely dark. All appeared to be well. He wished he could say the same for his unstable emotions.

The past two days had caught Peeta completely off guard. Katniss's advances in their bedroom. His outrage, accusations, and subsequent remorse. The shambles they made of their emotions. Their tearful reconciliation. Her brokenness as she confessed that she wished she'd died in the Games…

Peeta shook his head as if to clear it. He couldn't think about that outcome. Ever.

Then there was the way she looked at and soothed Gale when they were in the Seam the evening before. Any fool could see the depth of their bond. As soon as he had convinced himself that her heart belonged to Gale, Peeta's entire defense system short circuited when he and Katniss kissed, reawakening a torrent of emotions and validating her advances from the night before. And Peeta realized that it wasn't over for him, that despite his every attempt to safeguard his heart, she still had an access code that even he didn't know.

He wanted more. He thought she did too, until a few hours ago when they talked in Maura's kitchen.

*Everything in me believed that kiss was real. But I've been wrong before. She's forced to be here with me. If she had a choice, she would be with Gale. She's in survival mode, and she's gotten use to playing the game – in public and in private.*
But that's not fair to her. Look at how far Katniss has come. She's warmed up to me far more than I expected. She just needs time. Maybe one day she'll make room for me in her heart.

But I can't even think about taking things further with her knowing that her heart is with someone else. It's not just sex for me; I'd be setting myself up for a major heartbreak. It's like dad said: I can't allow myself to be swayed by her emotions. And I shouldn't do anything to confuse her about who she really wants, even if she can't have him right now.

But it's not her emotions that worry me. It's my own. I mean, she wears a tank top and I fall in love all over again. So how am I supposed to do this? How am I supposed to live with the woman who has my heart and never give her my body?

I don't know. I'm tired. I need to lie down. Maybe I should sleep on the couch tonight. I shouldn't be alone with her right now.

Peeta pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes in frustration.
"This is ridiculous," he said aloud. "You're tired, go to bed. It's as simple as that."

He carefully twisted the door knob and entered so as not to wake her. She lay facing the window, curled in the fetal position, a diagonal swath of moonlight across her back. It was as if she were trying to hold herself since his arms were no longer there.

He removed his shoes and set them aside. Then, he slid underneath the covers, his body idling down as he watched her unsettled breathing. He yearned to hold her.

Just close your eyes, Peeta. If you were at your house, you two would be in separate rooms. Just close your eyes and go to sleep.

But he couldn't stand it. If they were together in the same bedroom, he needed to have her in his arms. He rolled onto his side and wrapped one arm around both of hers, spooning her. She took to him like a remedy, sighing in her sleep, her body relaxing into his.

I don't know how do this. I don't know how to not love her.

He inhaled the lavender in her hair like it was an indulgence. Moments later, she twisted in his embrace. He was again on his back, her head on his chest, her hand reaching for his shirt, his arms wrapping snuggly around her willowy frame.

He exhaled in relief. This… This is when I'm happiest. This makes sense.

"Peeta?" She was awake.

"Yeah," he said softly.

"I wish we'd gotten the small radio and a few music discs. I want to dance."

"You what?" He chuckled lightly. "It's almost 3 a.m., and you want to dance?"

He could feel her smile against his chest.

"Mmm, hmm. I want to dance."

He thought for a moment, allowing his lips to graze her hair.

"Well, let's dance then."
Katniss lifted her head so their eyes met.

"You're not going back over there tonight for the radio are you?"

"Nope. We'll dance right here, in this guest bedroom in the wee hours of the morning."

"What are we going to do for music?"

"Why do you think I keep you around?" He poked her side playfully. "You can sing for us. Not unless you want me to sing. I mean, I'd be happy to –"

Katniss threw off the covers.

"No," she said as she climbed from bed. "No, I'll sing."

Peeta stifled a laugh. She met him on his side of the bed.

"So, what good early morning songs do you know?"

A song was already playing in her head. It was the same song she'd heard when she first realized she was falling for him.

"It's a slow song. Is that okay?"

"Sure. Whatever you want."

They smiled sheepishly, unexplainably awkward as they got into position, his hand resting lightly on her waist and her hands laid gently on his shoulders. She shut her eyes, and began to sing.

*Just like a star across my sky*

Just like an angel off the page
You have appeared to my life
Feel like I'll never be the same

*Just like a song in my heart*

Just like oil on my hands
Honored to love you

Her voice was scratchy from sleep, but Peeta was mesmerized, just like he'd been when he heard her sing the Valley Song in school all those years ago, the same two long braids in her hair.

*Still I wonder why it is*

I don't argue like this
With anyone but you
We do it all the time
Blowing out my mind

*You've got this look I can't describe*

You make me feel like I'm alive
When everything else is a fade
Without a doubt you're on my side

He yearned to pull her closer, but he couldn't stop staring at her as the moonlight played on her features and her voice caressed each lyric.

*Heaven has been away too long*
Can't find the words to write this song
Oh, your love

Still I wonder why it is
I don't argue like this
With anyone but you
We do it all the time
Blowing out my mind

She didn't want to seduce him or disrespect his boundaries. But she had to take a chance. So she opened her eyes and held his gaze making the next lyrics a personal serenade.

I have come to understand
The way it is, it's not a secret anymore
'Cause we've been through that before
From tonight I know that you're the only one
I've been confused and in the dark, now I understand

For Peeta, every internal alarm was muted. He desperately needed to kiss her. And before he could stop himself, he'd cupped her face in his hands, their lips colliding in a voracious kiss that nourished them and stirred their appetites for more. Her soft, supple breasts contradicted the firmness of his chest, and their feet inched them closer to the bed without waiting on their minds to grant them permission.

The back of her knees hit the side of the mattress, causing her to plop down in a sitting position. She reclined, propping on her elbows, biting the corner of her bottom lip, her eyes reflecting the inferno in her heart. He stood over her as the moonlight illuminated one side of her face and neck and the hardened peak of one of her breasts.

But the brief intermission was long enough for reality to fill the space between them. Peeta sobered to what they were doing – what they were about to do. He would never recover. He breathed her name with uncertainty.

She wanted to tell him that it was okay. That she wanted to make love… because she loved him. But would he believe her? She couldn't say those words two nights ago. If she said them now, would he think that she was telling him what he wanted to hear so he would sleep with her?

No. I can't afford to rush this. I want him, but I have to earn his trust. I can't give him another reason to doubt me.

"Katniss." He squeezed his eyes shut. It was obviously that he was fighting with his desire to make love to her and his urge to walk away before he did.

"It's okay, Peeta," she reassured, still trying to regulate her breathing as she pulled herself back to a sitting position. "We can take our time like you said. We don't have to rush into anything."

Their eyes met in the moonlit darkness. Finally, he nodded in acceptance, drawing a deep breath to steady himself as he backed away from the bed.

"I promise; I will make sure you're satisfied. Just like I said I would."

"What about your satisfaction?" she asked. "I want you to be satisfied too."

He cast a sideways glance as he reached for his shoes. "I want more than just satisfaction, Katniss."
His words were an indictment, and she held her breath. Should she tell him? Was now the best time? No. It wouldn't seem genuine. She had to wait. She had to work on restoring his trust, not just blurt out an 'I love you' that he might not believe. The Victory Tour. She would tell him during the Victory Tour when they were truly alone.

"Where are you going?"

"To the living room." He exhaled air from his cheeks. "It wasn't a good idea for me to be in here with you. I should have known better."

"Peeta."

Her tone stopped him.

"I'm just as scared as you are."

She sounded completely defenseless, as if her heart was also unguarded. Peeta didn't know how to respond; he just knew that he was still in danger of pulling her back into his arms. And this time, he wouldn't stop unless she told him to.

"Hhmp," he grinned, using humor to lighten the mood. "And here I thought you were only scared of my singing."

She smiled softly. "Your singing is what I'm most afraid of."

"Good one, Everdeen," he said offhandedly as he reached for the door. He didn't even realize he'd called her by her maiden name. The door clicked shut.

"Mellark," she whispered, crestfallen. "My name is Katniss Mellark."

Katniss didn't know which was worse – sleeping or staying awake.

Before Peeta lay beside her, she was having that nagging recurring dream where she was running to meet her father after his shift in the mines, only to find herself in Gale's arms. Lately, Peeta appeared in her dream, just out of reach, with downcast eyes.

If she stayed awake, she would obsess about what just happened in her mother's downstairs guest bedroom.

She crawled higher on the bed, sitting with her back to the headboard and drawing her knees to her chest. Just like two nights before, Katniss wanted to make love to her husband. And unlike two nights before, this time Peeta initiated their physical contact. His fervent kiss that captured her lips, his hands held her face to his. But ultimately, he wasn't ready; he didn't know that she'd realized her love for him, and she had no real way of telling him.

But then, on his way out the door, he called her by her maiden name. She hated the effect he had on her, the emotional riptide that she couldn't save herself from. Maybe what he said meant nothing, just a slip of the tongue. Or maybe it was a sign of emotional withdrawal. Although he desired her physically, maybe his heart was out of reach – just like he was in her dream.

Sleeping was the less agonizing option. She laughed bitterly at the irony.

Her head had barely touched the pillow when she heard it. Intense banging on the front door. Then came Peeta's hurried, heavy footsteps. His was a matching look of uncertainty and dread.
"Stay in here," Peeta ordered, twisting the lock on the knob and shutting the door behind him.

"Not a chance." She clamored out of the bed and reached for her bow and arrows beside the nightstand.

The banging was relentless. Katniss aimed her bow as she as Peeta crept closer to the door.

"Hey Sweetheart! Boy! Open up! It's me. Haymitch."

Peeta swore under his breath. "If he's drunk, you have my blessing to shoot him on sight."

He yanked open the front door. "Haymitch, you'd better have a damn good reason for being here right now."

At the top of the stairs, Maura glanced over her shoulder at Prim. "It's only Haymitch." They descended the stairs hurriedly. "Haymitch, what's wrong?"

"We've got to go to my house. Right now. Until we get the all clear."

"What are you talking about?" Katniss snapped, her bow still trained on her mentor. "Are you drunk? Because Peeta won't stop me from making a wall ornament out of you."

But there was actual urgency in his eyes. "I'm not drunk now, and I wasn't drunk earlier." She lowered her bow, baffled.

"Look, I'll explain later, but for now, we're going to my basement."

"What about the Hawthornes?" Prim asked worriedly as she and Maura slipped on their shoes. "They're right next door."

"Peeta," Haymitch said. "Go get them. Bring them all to my house right now. Enter through the back door." Haymitch shot Katniss a withering look. "There's broken glass on my front porch."

"I'm going with Peeta," Katniss said, reaching for her sandals from the coat closet. "Gale has a bow and arrow and no reason to shoot me."

"Good point," Haymitch said. "Remember, get to my house pronto. Don't stop to grab anything."

Peeta pulled off his top shirt and gave it to Katniss as a covering, leaving him in his short-sleeved undershirt. And they rushed to the back door just as Maura grabbed her medicine bag and followed Haymitch and Prim out the front.

Haymitch gestured for Katniss, Peeta, and Gale to follow him out of the basement where the children and their mothers had just settled on comforters and patchwork quilts.

They reached the main level of the home.

"What's going on, Haymitch," Katniss asked tiredly. "Are we in danger? We still have family in the Merchant's Quarter. Are they safe?"

Peeta regarded her tenderly at her concern for his – their family. Gale simply looked annoyed – by her concern for her in-laws and because she was wearing Peeta's shirt.

"They're fine. Lester is with Peeta's oldest brother and Trolley is with Peeta's parents."
Gale exhaled loudly. "So what's going on?"

"We have to wait for the all clear." Haymitch's lips twitched into a smirk. "Follow me."

The four of them traipsed through his unkempt living room to his unkempt kitchen, and to the pantry door. But Haymitch's home didn't have the standard four-shelf pantry that was in the Everdeen and Mellark homes. His was a walk-in pantry. Inside, he tugged on a string hanging from the ceiling that turned on the light bulb.

"Our home doesn't have a walk-in pantry," Peeta noted, admiring the long, narrow room lined with countertops and floor to ceiling cabinets and shelving.

"I built it myself."

Katniss looked amazed. "I didn't know you were a carpenter. This is pretty good work."

"My father taught me," Haymitch mumbled. "Before I was reaped."

"I've never heard you talk about your father before," Katniss said absently as the three of them continued to ogle the pantry.

"He died before I made it to the Capitol. Seeing me reaped was too much for his heart."

They fell silent in respect to his father's memory.

But nothing could prepare them for happened next. On one of the bottom shelves was an oversized silver canister labeled "Grains." Haymitch got down on all fours, pulled out a long rattan basket beside the canister, and pushed the canister to the opposite end of the shelf. He grunted as he pulled himself to his feet. Then, he lifted his foot to touch the wall behind where the canister had been. There was a light beep, then the entire set of shelves opened like a door. It was a secret passageway.

"Right this way."

The low ceiling caused Haymitch, Gale and Peeta to have to crouch for three or four steps. But then, surprisingly, they entered another room, dimly-lit and much wider than the pantry. Their eyes widened at the nine, flat-screen monitors affixed to the wall in three neat columns and rows. A long, clear table with soft white backlighting was in the center of the room, in view of the monitors. The surface of the table was marked with intricate scribbles and arrows and notes. A handful of colorful markers and several headsets with attached microphones were piled on one end of the table. In an opposite corner of the room sat a vertical rattan basket that held several large, rolled papers, probably floor-sized maps.

"What the…" Peeta blinked slowly.

"Welcome boys and girl to my control room."

"Haymitch…" Katniss gawked. "What is all this for?"

He grinned. "Ending the rebellion. You, my disagreeable junior victor, provided the spark for a national revolt. You're Panem's Mockingjay. This is the control room for Operation Slay the Mockingjay."

They all tensed.

"What?" Gale took a menacing step closer to Haymitch. Peeta didn't believe Haymitch would harm
Katniss, but he stepped in front of her, protectively, nonetheless. Katniss folded her arms across her chest defiantly, but she felt uneasy. Because Haymitch had been acting strange lately, she had no idea what he was going to say next.

Haymitch didn't seem to notice. He turned and walked to the table and picked up one of the headsets. "Yeah, it's not the best name, I agree. I didn't come up with it, but it is clever. Although there have been times – "


He turned to face them, propping against the table. "We've ended the rebellion and the need for our girl here," he gestured to Katniss, "to be the Mockingjay."

"How's that?" Katniss asked, stepping from behind Peeta.

"Simple, sweetheart," Haymitch grinned darkly. "We just successfully executed our plan of attack on the government of Panem. President Snow is dead."

First there was stunned silence. Then confused silence. Then silent disbelief. Katniss, Peeta, and Gale just stood there like statues, unsure of how to react.

"Haymitch." Peeta stood shaking his head. "Did you just say that President Snow is dead?"

"Take a look for yourself."

Haymitch pressed a button on the side of the table, and instantly, all nine monitors came to life, working in tandem to form one large, segmented screen.

"This is a recording of the internal feed from earlier tonight. Snow's dinner meeting with his cabinet to finalize plans for the 75th Hunger Games – also known as the Quarter Quell."

"Weren't you in a Quarter Quell?" Katniss asked.

Haymitch nodded. "The 50th Games. If you can even fathom it, the Quarter Quells are more insidious than the regular Games."

Katniss regarded Haymitch with compassion. Sometimes she forgot that he knew this pain firsthand.

There was no audio. Snow stood before his entire cabinet who were seated around a massive mahogany conference table. He gestured to his left, and a pudgy man with wispy hair stood, a smug grin on his face.


"After Seneca Crane, I can't imagine that he had much competition for that job," Peeta quipped. Katniss grinned but kept her eyes on the screen.

Snow said a few words, and then he waved his hand ceremoniously. Several Avoxes appeared carrying round silver trays with plates of food and served everyone in attendance. Snow took his seat, unfolding his napkin in his lap. Plutarch stood and reached for his glass.

"What is he saying?" Gale peered at the screens.

"He's making a toast to the success of the Quarter Quell and to the continued reign of the Capitol among the districts. Watch what happens next."
After the toast, everyone started their meals, nodding and smiling collegially. But mere moments later, there was pandemonium as Snow's entire cabinet – with the exception of Plutarch – pushed abruptly from the table, clutching their throats and dribbling blood into their plates of food. Snow sprung from his chair, panicked. But Plutarch crossed his legs and swirled his glass in his hand, a wicked smile creasing his lips.

"Plutarch is an architect of the rebellion. He's on our side," Haymitch explained to Peeta, Katniss, and Gale, who stared at the screen with widened eyes.

"Why isn't Snow choking?" Gale asked.

"Snow's food wasn't poisoned. Alma wanted the pleasure of executing him herself."

"Who's Alma?" Katniss asked.

"Alma Coin. She was the leader of District 13."

"District 13?" Peeta asked the question on all three of their faces. "There is no District 13. It was obliterated after the first rebellion years ago."

"They rebuilt," Haymitch said, watching the screen. "They formed an entire community underground with weaponry that rivaled the Capitol's best. Alma had been planning an attack on Snow for years, but she knew it was a suicide mission to act alone. She needed the support of the districts. She needed something to move us all to action." Haymitch turned to Peeta and Katniss. "Your stunt with the nightlock berries was just the ticket. It galvanized people, inspired them to rebel."

Two Peacekeepers had their guns trained on Snow.

"I would never have thought that his soldiers would turn against him," Katniss said to herself. "Normally, they wouldn't. But we, ah, unearthed Snow's plans to kill all the existing Peacekeepers and replace them with a high-tech, mechanical militia... robots. He also planned to reap Capitol children in the Quarter Quell, and supposedly, Snow was going to relocate the capitol to another region of Panem – one that was richer in minerals and natural resources."

"Here?" Gale asked incredulously. "He was moving the capitol closer to District 12?"

"Perhaps." Haymitch shrugged, feigning innocence. "Then again, maybe we made the entire thing up, made it all look like official communication from Snow's desk to get his faithful to turn against him."

A smile crept onto Peeta's lips. "Brilliant."

On the screen, an Avox with an intricate head covering approached and struck Snow squarely on the jaw, sending him crashing against the wall and sliding to the floor. The double doors of the banquet room flung open, and in rushed Snow's family and all the family of every member of Snow's cabinet under the scope of Peacekeeper guns. They seemed to wail at the sight of their loved ones who were spewing what remained of their lives into their plates.

"Snow and is cabinet deserved what was coming to them." Haymitch's voice grew somber. "But I don't take any pleasure in what happens next."

Snow's granddaughter entered, a girl with chocolate brown hair hanging in a side braid over her shoulder. She looked to be about 10 years old, and she was visibly upset. She screamed when she
saw her grandfather on the floor, broke free of the woman who clutched her hand, and ran to Snow. Her white satin nightgown exploded with bursts of crimson amid the orange fire of gunshots. She fell, lifeless, at his feet.

Katniss drew a shaky hand to cover her mouth and looked away. Peeta held her to his side.

"All's fair in war," Gale whispered, his jaw clenched. Katniss looked at him warily.

"We can skip this part. More bloodshed." Haymitch reached to the side of the table and the footage sped through what appeared to be a mass execution of the family members.

"Here's the part you'll want to see."

A woman with even sheets of silver hair approached slowly, taking care to step on the dead bodies in her path. Plutarch stood and gestured to the woman. Snow who had been staring in shock at his granddaughter, looked completely unhinged as he turned his eyes to Plutarch then to the woman – Alma Coin. The Peacekeepers guarding Snow pulled him to his knees and one of them cuffed his hands behind his back. Snow was babbling angrily, almost foaming at the mouth. She nodded to one of the Peacekeepers who tied a gag between his lips.

Then, Alma Coin crouched in front of Snow and seemed to whisper words that amused her. She stood and aimed her gun directly for his head. Just as she was about to pull the trigger, a member of Snow’s cabinet who wore a variation of a Peacekeeper's uniform had enough life remaining to lurch to his feet and fire several shots. The Peacekeepers riddled his body with bullets.

"Romulus Thread. Head Peacekeeper," Haymitch explained ruefully.

Thread had fantastic aim. The Avox who had punched Snow dropped to the floor, and the side of Coin's gray uniform was blossoming in the same crimson as Snow’s granddaughter's nightgown.

"I warn you," Haymitch said. "This may be hard to watch although it's worth seeing."

None of them looked away. Coin fell to her knees, her gun still aimed. With her last shot, the side of Snow’s head exploded. And Coin fell atop his granddaughter, dead.

Katniss's breathing was ragged, as if she'd just woken from a nightmare. "Let's sit down," Peeta whispered, pulling out a chair for Katniss and taking the seat beside her. Gale and Haymitch continued to stand, but they both watched Katniss carefully.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Haymitch asked.

"Yeah." Her breathing normalized.

"Now's not the best time, but I should mention that the Avox who punched Snow and was just gunned down was Darius. After that Allister Canty guy assaulted you, Katniss, Darius bent the rules to allow Peeta to beat him up. Snow sent for Darius to transport Allister to the Capitol for punishment, and he told Cray that he was awarding Darius for arresting the man who assaulted a victor. But Snow had other plans. He questioned Darius for information about your involvement in the rebellion. When Darius couldn't offer anything of value, Snow made him an Avox."

"Oh no," Peeta buried his face in his hands. Katniss leaned her forehead on his shoulder and stroked his forearm, her eyes welling with tears at the memory of her assault.

"Darius cared about people," Gale said quietly, in a rare show of support for Peeta. "If he had it to do all over again, he would have done the exact same thing." Peeta stared sorrowfully at the screen.
Katniss smiled at Gale with gratitude.

Gale turned his focus back to Haymitch. "So if Coin is dead, who's in charge? Who's running the country?"

"We're in the capable hands of Salima Paylor, a commander in the rebellion from District 8. I don't trust many people, but I trust Salima. She's good and ethical and humane. There won't be another Hunger Games, which means you two will never have to be reaped again or mentor —"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Peeta looked alarmed. "What do you mean reaped again?"

"That was Snow's plan, Peeta. He wanted Katniss dead, but it would only stoke the rebellion if he just killed her. So his plan for the Quarter Quell was to reap past victors. Katniss, you would have no choice but to return and either I or Peeta —"

"I never would have let her go back into that arena without me."

"I know," Haymitch nodded. "And Snow knew that too. He was banking on both of you returning to the arena. If you two were among the last three remaining tributes, Snow planned to send a parachute to Peeta with a liquid that would stop his heart — for a few hours. Peeta, when he lifted you from the arena, he planned to torture you for information. If Katniss won the Quarter Quell, Snow was going to publicly execute Peeta unless Katniss called off the rebellion and turned herself in for treason."

"He was pure evil," Peeta gritted.

"And you know this because of Plutarch Heavensbee," Gale said.

"Yes. Plutarch had to be barbaric and outlandish in designing the Quarter Quell to gain a measure of Snow's trust." Haymitch folded his arms decisively across his chest. "But Gale, you almost blew our entire plan."

"How?"

"You incited Snow's fury by trying to bolster support for the rebellion in District 12. Our initial plan was to storm the Capitol later this summer before the next reaping, but when you linked Katniss to the rebellion, Snow was planning to bomb the entire district, to make an example out of rebellious 12. And he was going to start with your home."

Now Gale lowered to a seat at the table. Haymitch continued.

"You see, all the white roses that you two received," he gestured to Katniss and Peeta, "were left by Trolley at my and Plutarch's direction. Snow didn't know I was involved; he thought Plutarch was taking initiative in sending them. Trolley sympathizes with the rebellion, but he wasn't involved in the planning."

"I don't understand Haymitch. Why would you send white roses to me and Peeta?"

"To keep you both on script. Happy marriage. Togetherness. Star-crossed lovers. That was the role you both needed to play. You had no idea how precarious things were with Snow. Several times, Plutarch had to think of a plausible reason to keep Snow from giving an order to kill you both. Snow needed to believe that he had you two under his control. That you both feared him and feared for the lives of your loved ones, so you'd have no part of the rebellion."

"And the white rose at my house…” Gale looked as if he were piecing clues together. He shot from
his chair. "Were you responsible for burning my home and almost killing my siblings?"

"No," Haymitch said. "But that's why we had to carry out our plan B. Plutarch knew Snow's plans… until he didn't."

"Come again?" Katniss asked.

"Snow ordered the reduction of your hours in the mines, Gale, and that was just for your drunken rants in the Hob about Capitol conspiracies. When you started trying to gain support for the rebellion when you were sober, Plutarch and I sent a white rose to your house with a threatening note attached, hoping it would quiet you for a few months, at least – until we could overthrow Snow. But Snow must have been suspicious of Plutarch because he ordered a parachute like the ones from the Games to descend on your house without Plutarch's knowledge. Fortunately, Beetee Latier – a former victor who is a tech genius and is responsible for our underground communications and this control room – spotted the parachute on his radar. He wasn't able to intercept the GPS, but he did remotely disarm much of the bomb. Otherwise, it would have decimated your house, your family, and anyone within a five-mile radius at the time of impact. What was left was the smaller detonation. And that was powerful enough to start the fire outside your home and consume it in seconds."

Gale plopped back down in his chair, overwhelmed. "Thank you," he repeated, resting his head in his hands.

"It's over," Peeta said, the realization landing. His eyes flashed to everyone in the room. "We're free." A smile mounted his face and spread to the other sets of lips. "No more Games, no more reapings…"

"No more unequal distribution of wealth," Gale added.

"No more mentoring tributes," Haymitch continued. "No more arenas. No more Victory Tours. We're free!"

Joy erupted in the control room. Peeta and Haymitch embraced. Peeta and Gale even embraced. Katniss was pulled into three sets of arms. They thought she was just in shock, but she was stunned by another reality.

No Victory Tour. No more of Snow's mandates… My marriage. What'll happen to my marriage?

The all clear came about 10 minutes later.

Beetee, a middle-aged man with thick-rimmed glasses appeared on one of Haymitch's monitors, smiling broadly. Haymitch put on a headset.

"All deaths have been confirmed, Haymitch. And my radars haven't detected any explosives or traps in District 12. We are officially a free Panem."

Haymitch turned to Peeta, Katniss, and Gale and gave the thumbs up sign.

Peeta and Gale couldn't contain their excitement. Peeta rushed out of the room to call his father and brother. Gale hastened to the basement to tell their families.

But Katniss didn't budge from her seat in the control room. She stared at the blank monitors and gnawed distractedly on her bottom lip.

Haymitch removed his headset. "You look awfully worried for a free woman."
"I guess I'm still in shock," she lied. Now wasn't the time to share her fears.

Katniss followed Haymitch out of the control room. Everyone had converged in his living room, so elated by the news that they overlooked the smell. A groggy Posy was in Gale's arms, her head resting on his shoulder. She lifted her head when she saw Peeta.

"Butter cake. With chocolate icing," she said, her voice still hoarse from sleep.

They all laughed. "Well can you say good morning first?" Gale asked, planting a kiss on her forehead.

She smiled sheepishly. "Good morning." Posy wriggled from Gale's arms and reached for Peeta who immediately hoisted her into the air, prompting a round of giggles.

Katniss watched their interaction, each of Posy's squeals bringing a smile to her own face.

_He would make a great father._ Katniss's eyes watered and she didn't know why. She slipped quietly onto the back porch.

Katniss knew her mother's footsteps. She quickly pushed a stubborn tear from her eyelash.

"This is amazing news, isn't it honey?" Maura's tone was celebratory, but her eyes were watchful.

Katniss nodded.

"My only regret is that this didn't happen sooner. So many lives lost. But now, we can all hope for a brighter future. A new Panem."

Katniss had never allowed herself to dream of a new Panem before. It always seemed impossible, like the odds were against them, and she wasn't one for getting her hopes up. Now, even with the end of Snow's reign, she still wasn't sure what she should hope for. All she could think about was Peeta and all the uncertainty that lie ahead.

"Mom? Now that we're free, can the Hawthornes stay with you tonight?"

It was nearing 5 a.m., and everyone was still gathered in Haymitch's living room. At one point, they all laughed as the children made up silly songs about freedom. Posy even got Haymitch to sing along.

Hazelle started to clean. She began by boiling a pot of water and simmering sliced oranges, lemon and cinnamon sticks to naturally freshen the home. Then, she cleared the empty liquor bottles from the floor, took a straw broom to the carpet, and used oils to remove layers of dust from the coffee table and fireplace mantle. She took ownership of the house, freely opening cabinets and draws in search of cleaning supplies.

"You should hire me," she quipped as she brushed past Haymitch in the kitchen to replace the broom.

"Done."

Hazelle spun around to face him, a hopeful look in her eyes.

"You do good work," he shrugged as if no explanation was needed. "Name your price."

"Well… For cleaning your living room, two pairs of pants and two shirts for Gale. All his clothing
was destroyed in the fire."

"Done. And your salary for your cleaning services?"

"Let me finish cleaning the downstairs first." She flipped on the faucet over the collection of grimy dishes in the kitchen sink. "I'd rather talk price after you see what I can really do."

Haymitch went to gather the clothes for Gale.

Around the coffee table, Peeta was teaching Posy and Vick to draw a turkey with the outline of their hands, Prim and Rory sat together on the floor in a conversation of their own, and Maura had retrieved her medical bag from the basement when Gale rubbed his shoulder and winced in pain. He tried to tell her that it was probably nothing – he'd pulled a heavy box from a top shelf at the Justice Building the day before. But Maura wouldn't be dissuaded; she made him pull his arm from his shirt sleeve, and she applied a mentholated salve to his shoulder.

"Thanks Maura," Gale said. "Unfortunately, I'll need to wash it off in a few minutes. I need to get ready for work."

"No need," Haymitch said, appearing with the clothes and handing them to Gale. From the kitchen, Hazelle nodded to Gale to accept them.

"Every school and Capitol-influenced business is closed today. That includes the mines and the Justice Building. They'll be an announcement from our new president at some point today. But, I do want you to sit in on the meeting Katniss, Peeta, I will have at 6 a.m."

"What meeting?" Katniss asked, the same perplexed look showing on Peeta's face.

"Now that we're free, we have to rebuild Panem. Victors are the most visible among us, and believe it or not, we tend to have influence with others. We have to take the lead, blaze the path for others to follow. Gale, you're not a Hunger Games victor, but Beetee wants to meet you. He was impressed by something you'd said to the miners about integrating technology and defense something-or-the-other."

Gale's eyes flashed with excitement. If Haymitch's control room was any indication, he really wanted to meet Beetee Latier – and he wanted a seat at the table with the architects of a new Panem. "That sounds great. I'll be here."

Peeta stood. "I think I need to blaze a path to a bed before the meeting. I'm exhausted."

"We'll just go home," Katniss said a little too eagerly. "I mean… Hazelle and the kids are going to be at my mom's house. You and I can go home."

"Well, why don't we stay put until tonight," Peeta suggested in his typical easy manner. "We can revisit all the sleeping arrangements then."

Katniss overanalyzed his words, her mind racing through scenarios.

*Does that include us? Our sleeping arrangements? If we revisit all the sleeping arrangements, could he and I end up back in the same bedroom? Maybe it's just the opposite. Maybe he wants to permanently sleep separately. Maybe he wants to find his soulmate. Damn it! What is happening to me? I'm not myself right now.*

"Katniss?"
She didn't even realize that Peeta was still talking to her. His hand was extended to her.

"We could both probably use a power nap before our meeting. Are you coming?"

She nodded and bit her lip to try to contain the smile spreading across her face. Yet another instance of the goofy grin her mother had mentioned. Her hand slid into his.

"We'll be back in a few. Haymitch," Peeta said as he followed Maura and the children out the back door. Hazelle stayed behind to clean, and Gale walked out behind Katniss and Peeta.

Gale's resentment for Peeta resurged with the smitten look on Katniss's face. And suddenly, he realized that everything had changed with Snow's death. Everything. He didn't have to lose the girl he loved.

And Gale knew exactly what he had to do, no matter how much he hated the thought of hurting her.

We're free. This is a brand new Panem. It's time for new beginnings.

Now that the children were wide awake, they didn't want to go back to sleep. Maura took them all to her house, where she made them breakfast.

Katniss and Peeta went to their house since Maura's house would be noisy with the children. Gale also went to the Mellark home to shower and dress in the downstairs guest bedroom. He'd spend the night on the living room couch in his efforts to guard the home. And, he didn't want to accept any more of Peeta's hospitality than he needed to. His jealousy burned as he glanced Katniss and Peeta climbing the stairs to their bedroom.

Inside the master bedroom, Peeta had just enough energy to remove his prosthesis before flopping face first in the bed, fully clothed. Katniss set the alarm and lay beside him, watching him snore gently into his pillow.

Using the back of her fingers, she gently touched his jawline. There was no time to talk now, but she realized that she needed to tell him how she felt. There would be no Victory Tour. She was out of time, and there was no incentive to wait.

Sleep was about to pull her under when she rolled out of the bed and opened the window, just like Peeta liked it. She returned to her spot, happily inhaling the trace of him that lingered in his shirt as she began to fade.

This time, her father approached to an incessant blaring noise that confused her. Effie and Cinna were dancing to it, some ridiculous, stilted set of moves. The sound grew louder. Now Portia was dancing too. And… Caesar Flickerman was washing his hair?

Katniss lurched forward in the bed. The alarm. She almost slept right through it. And Peeta was still face first in his pillow. They only had seven minutes to get to Haymitch's control room.

"Peeta." She shook him gently. He groaned and mumbled something incoherent.

"Wake up, Peeta. It's time to go."

Something else, incoherent.

"We have our meeting with Haymitch. It's almost six."
Peeta lifted his head from the pillow, bleary eyed. He rolled to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

"Crap." His voice was gravelly. He reached to the side of the bed for his prosthesis. "I don't think I've overslept a day in my life."

"The past few days have been exhausting." Katniss disappeared into their walk-in closet. She emerged wearing a wrinkled pair of pants that were slightly too large for her frame and a loose-fitting gray t-shirt. The clothes she usually wore were in the suitcase in her mother's guest bedroom. Peeta lumbered to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face and comb his hair. They plodded down the stairs, Katniss calling out to Gale.

"He must have already left," she said as they rushed out the front door.

Nightfall was steadily rolling back its covers, but the skies were still dim. It was sizing up to be a warm day, and – with the news of President Snow's death and a free Panem – a perfect day. They reached Haymitch's back door at exactly 6 a.m.

The door was propped open, and Haymitch was at the kitchen sink. Washing a plate...

"I must still be dreaming," Peeta said, exchanging a dumbfounded look with Katniss at the sight of their mentor with a scouring sponge in hand.

"Yeah, yeah." Haymitch grumbled, but he looked positively happy. "Joke if you must, but my home looks amazing."

Katniss smirked. "And you're washing a plate in tribute?"

Peeta snickered.

Haymitch shut off the water and propped the plate in the dish drain on the cabinet.

"Take a look at what Hazelle did to my house since you all left."

It was amazing. Hazelle had mopped, vacuumed, dusted, polished, freshened, and sanitized every square inch of the downstairs portion of Haymitch's home. She'd also cleaned the broken glass from the front porch.

"She even took my jackets that were piled on the floor of the coat closet and put them all on hangers. She's got a load of clothes going, and she's upstairs now, vacuuming."

"Where has she been all our lives?" Peeta said drollly as Katniss bit her lips to suppress a laugh. Haymitch ignored their amusement.

"Well, I couldn't let outsiders in – lately I couldn't let you two in either. I didn't want anyone to discover my control room. Anyways, it didn't feel right to leave the dirty plate in the sink."

Katniss glanced at the clock on the wall. "Aren't we late for our meeting?"

"They moved it 15 minutes."

"Has Gale been here yet?"

"He came back at 5:30. Prim and Rory brought over breakfast for me and Hazelle, but they didn't realize Gale was here. He walked over to Maura's house to eat. The kid's pretty excited to talk with Beetee."
"Well, he's had no opportunities here in 12," Katniss said fondly. "He deserves a break."

"You two have time to get a quick breakfast if you want. We still have about 10 minutes before the meeting starts."

Katniss and Peeta exchanged glances. Breakfast sounded great, but rushing next door, eating, and rushing back to Haymitch's house would take precious energy that neither of them had. They decided to wait until after the meeting.

Back inside the control room, a few of the monitors were broadcasting empty sofas in rooms of varying décor. So far, there was a plush red sofa with an intricate black and white tapestry hanging on the wall. A set of built-in shelves could be seen behind a tufted, leather couch on another monitor. A slate blue couch with oversized pillows and a wheat-colored throw was accentuated by the warm glow of a round-bottom lamp on a side table. Most interesting thus far was a black couch in front of a wall that still dripped with fresh black spray paint. Katniss squinted, and she could make out the letter "F" and the curve of an "e."

It was now 6:10 a.m. Haymitch's headset was hanging on his neck, and he was separating the other headsets.

"The microphones on these things are powerful," Haymitch explained. "They'll pick up just about anything once Beetee turns them on, so you don't have to put them on until the meeting starts. And when this first meeting ends, I want us all to sit on Beetee's meeting with Gale, just in case there's something Beetee needs us to do."

Haymitch handed a headset to Peeta, who was seated next to him at the light table, then Katniss. He placed a headset on the other side of Katniss for Gale.

The leftmost monitor on the middle row flashed, and Beetee reappeared. Haymitch pulled on his headset and the two men spoke briefly. "Gale Hawthorne will be joining us for the first meeting, and then we can meet with you afterward."

Katniss couldn't hear Beetee's response since she wasn't wearing her headset, but from the look on his face, Beetee seemed just as excited to talk with Gale as Gale was to talk with him. Gale had never said as much, but Katniss knew he desperately missed the mentorship he received from his father. Katniss decided in that moment that she liked Beetee.

More people started to appear on the monitors. On the first monitor on the top row, an older woman with long, languid, silver tresses took a seat on the slate blue couch and pulled the throw over her shoulders.

A slender pair of legs scurried past the red sofa, but quickly reappeared with another pair of legs in tow. They settled onto the couch, hand-in-hand: a young woman whose hair was a few shades lighter than the couch, and an attractive guy with an impressive physique and perfectly-coiffed amber-bronze hair.

_Finnick Odair._ Katniss recognized him instantly. He'd been the youngest winner of the Games and the most marketable and popular. Whenever she did care to turn on the viewer, Katniss usually saw Finnick Odair endorsing something on the Capitol's behalf.

_He is a leader of the rebellion? I never would have guessed it._

A stately woman with austere features lowered onto the leather couch, the last monitor on the bottom row. She waited, poised and silently drumming two fingers on her lips.
Underneath Beetee's monitor appeared a woman, late twenties perhaps, with flowing blonde hair and a dazzling smile. At the top right, another woman in her mid-to-late 20s carried a confident gaze and a sleek, brown ponytail. She perched on the edge of a navy blue wingback chair.

The black sofa was still unoccupied. Two monitors on the middle row remained blank.

Haymitch pulled his headset back down to his neck and turned to Katniss and Peeta. "I'll introduce everyone once we get started. We have a few more folks to go."

The far right monitor on the middle row flipped to a man with hazelnut skin and dark, piercing eyes. "Hey, look who it is!" Haymitch cackled as he and the man exchanged enthusiastic waves.

"Chaff Douglas. Good guy. Gotta watch him though. He'll come to your house and drink up all your liquor."

"Birds of a feather," Peeta whispered to Katniss. They exchanged quiet, mischievous laugh.

Haymitch pulled on his headset and was again talking to Beetee. "No Plutarch... Well that's understandable. And what about Ju –… Oh good. Any word from – … Uh huh. Okay. Sounds great."

Haymitch removed his headset. "Everyone should be here in the next two minutes. I wonder what happened to the kid. Maybe he –" Haymitch snapped his fingers in sudden realization. "I had the door propped. Did it shut behind you two when you came in?"

"I think so," Peeta shrugged.

"It locks automatically now. Another safety feature I installed. We won't be able to hear Gale at the door from in here, and if Hazelle is upstairs vacuuming, she won't hear him either. Sweetheart, go check and see if he's outside."

Katniss found Gale knocking at the back door.

"Hey. Come in. We just realized tha —"

He pulled her to him, their faces inches apart.

"Gale…" She protested, her voice a mixture of tiredness and frustration.

"I know," he said in a hushed tone. "You're in love with him. I just want you to remember that no matter what, I'm here for you. I've always been here, and I'm not going anywhere. Okay?"

It wasn't his touch that made her uncomfortable. It was his words. They felt cryptic. She nodded in response and tried to dismiss the nagging feeling that he knew something about her life that she didn't.

They entered the pantry and were meandering through the short corridor when they heard Peeta's voice.

"Who is that?" His level of interest and intrigue made Katniss feel a sudden jolt of insecurity. She stilled, instantly going into stealth mode as if she were approaching an animal in its natural habitat who was oblivious to her presence.

Haymitch responded, but Katniss didn't process his words.
"She's beautiful," Peeta said quietly, his eyes riveted on the girl who'd appeared on the center screen in the middle row.

Katniss could see her from where she stood just past the doorway of the control room. Strawberry blonde hair infused with honey brown, falling in soft waves just past her shoulders. Hazel green eyes that shone like diamonds on the screen. High cheekbones, plump lips and a slight dimple imprinting her chin. Her almond-shaped eyes were darkened by makeup to her lids and lashes. Her lips were glazed in something the color of the caramel cakes on display at Mellark Bakery.

She was absolutely stunning.

Katniss couldn't move. It was as if her chest and stomach and head were constricting at the same time. And there she stood, suddenly hyperaware of her own mussied twin braids, her wrinkled, oversized clothes, and her drab features.

Peeta still hadn't noticed that Katniss and Gale were in the doorway, that they'd heard what he said. But Haymitch caught it all.

"Great timing." He motioned to Katniss and Gale. "We were just about to get started."

From the corner of her eye, Katniss could see Peeta turn to look at her. She took her seat without acknowledging him, her face like stone.

They each put on a headset and angled the microphones to their lips. There was a light buzzing noise at first when Beetee turned them on. Haymitch started the meeting with introductions, beginning with their top row of monitors.

The silver-haired lady was Magdalena "Mags" Bronson, the oldest living victor. Finnick Odair and Annie Cresta were on the red sofa in front of the tapestry. Enobaria Garu was the woman with the sleek ponytail and the self-assured eyes. Her smile revealed that her teeth had been filed into fangs.

Haymitch moved to the bottom row. Cashmere Dennis, the blonde with the sparkling smile waved from the left monitor. By stark contrast to Cashmere, Johanna Mason, a girl with dark hair and blunt-cut bangs smirked from the middle monitor. Johanna was the owner of the black couch and the spray-painted wall. The stately lady on the leather couch was Commander Paola Lyme from District 2.

"I've already mentioned Beetee Latier, our technological guru extraordinaire. We'll talk with him after this meeting. Chaff Douglas, my old friend, is to the far right. And last, but not least…"

Her name was Julianna English. Everyone affectionately called her Jules.

"I must say publicly that Jules is amazing," Haymitch gushed. "Aside from Plutarch and the late President Coin, Jules is the only non-victor to serve as an architect of this rebellion. She's been working voluntarily as Plutarch's logistics coordinator and she single-handedly managed underground intel nationwide. She's incredibly brave, one of Panem's finest, and she's only 17 years old."

Finnick catcalled and howled "Jules," which prompted a round of spirited applause for the girl whose cheeks colored so red that she looked like she could burst into a fireball and disintegrate.

That would be fine by me, Katniss thought sourly.

"Okay, that's enough. Stop. Stop." Jules lifted her palms, a dimple ghosting her cheek when she smiled. "You all are the victors, not me. I'm just glad I could do it." She smiled wistfully. "For
Drayton. And for a free Panem."

Haymitch covered his microphone with his hand. "Her boyfriend was reaped two years ago and died in the Games. She's been a supporter ever since."

"I and all of Panem should be thanking you guys, especially Katniss and Peeta. You two are the brave ones to publicly defy President Snow, and your actions ignited this successful rebellion."

This time, the applause was for them, and neither Katniss nor Peeta expected it. Katniss sensed Peeta's soft smile on her cheek. But she refused to look at him.

*Let him smile at Julianna – excuse me – Jules.*

Jules's voice was singsong, like a melody, especially when she laughed. "Haymitch, I bet they almost gave you a heart attack when they defied Snow, huh?"

Everyone laughed except Katniss.

"They sure did. Speaking of which, I guess I should properly introduce them. Peeta Mellark and Katniss Everdeen Mellark. The last Hunger Games victors ever."

Another burst of applause. Peeta's smile was now morphing into a mild look of worry because it was obvious that Katniss was ignoring him.

_Did something happen between her and Gale? Something must have happened. She was fine before she left the control room, and now she seems upset with me, and I don't know why._

Peeta decided to speak up so he could test the waters with Katniss.

"Katniss and I are very grateful to everyone." He paused and looked at her to let her speak or at the very least, he was prompting her to look at him. She offered nothing. "And we want to especially thank Haymitch who's done a great job of keeping us alive, and keeping us out of the way of the rebellion."

More applause, for Haymitch.

"Katniss and I had no idea all this was happening."

"You couldn't know," Commander Lyme said. She seemed more personable than her exterior and mannerisms suggested. "Snow's eyes were on you, but he was also trying to locate the source of the rebellion. Every time he watched you two, he needed to be convinced that no rebel activity was happening on your end because you two were his main suspects."

"Which brings me to our final guest," Haymitch grinned. "Besides Jules, he is the only other non-victor in our closed circuit room. Gale Hawthorne."

A round of greetings went forth for Gale. He nodded and smiled politely.

"I've chided Gale for haphazardly attempting to bring the rebellion to District 12, but what Gale did forced us to take action. As you all know, our initial plan was for the victors to storm the Capitol with 13's militia later this summer, and take down Snow. Because of Gale, we moved to Finnick's plan B, using the Avoxes and turning the Peacekeepers and the Capitol citizens against Snow. There are always casualties in warfare, but I think there was far less bloodshed as a result of going to plan B."
Finnick grinned smugly from Annie's side. Haymitch uncapped a marker and used his shirt sleeve to erase some of the writing on the light table. "Okay Jules," he nodded. "I'm done with introductions. It's all yours."

Katniss bristled. Jules? She's leading the meeting? With all these victors, she's leading the meeting? Oh please! I survived a fucking bloodbath arena. Little miss wonderful Jules wouldn't have made it past the cornucopia.

"Alright everyone. I know this is a pretty early meeting for some of you depending on your time zone, so thank you all for being here. As you've probably guessed, Plutarch couldn't join us because he's planning the memorial for our fallen leader, Alma Coin, and he's working on President Salima Paylor's message to Panem that will broadcast later this afternoon."

"So this is where we are now," Jules said. "Now that the rebellion has ended and we were successful, we need to begin rebuilding our nation and making it what we all hoped it could always be."

Katniss quickly realized that she hadn't given Jules enough credit. The girl was smart, engaging, confident, passionate, and able to take charge and provide leadership beyond her years. Everything about her seemed effortless. And every time she gingerly tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear, Katniss swore she heard Peeta's breath hitch.

Gale glanced at Katniss; he'd heard what Peeta said about Jules, and he'd watched Katniss's entire demeanor change. She met Gale's gaze, and she knew he knew exactly what she was thinking. It brought her a strange sense of comfort.

"As victors, you have respect and influence throughout Panem," Jules continued. "As a result, I've been able to garner enthusiastic support within communities nationwide and with leaders who would be honored to work with the fiercest among them to make this nation whole."

"And how do we know none of these leaders were Snow supporters," Katniss interrupted, a sharp edge to her voice.

"Nearly all of Snow's support came from the Capitol, where children were never reaped and their quality of life was immensely better than in the districts," Jules explained. "So as part of the rebellion, we made sure to turn enough people against him. If Snow had any support, it died with him and his cabinet."

Peeta didn't realize he was nodding in earnest agreement. "This all sounds fantastic, Jules," Peeta grinned. "I'm excited."

"Oh now you're calling her Jules too? For fuck's sake, Peeta, you just met her."

"So am I, Peeta," Jules responded warmly. His eyes fluttered from the screen, bashfully.

"Hey Jules." There was an impishness to Johanna's voice. "Be sure to call me after this meeting and tell me how it felt to finally speak to Peeta Mellark."

Johanna made obnoxious kissing noises. Katniss's eyes flared with a level of anger she should could barely contain. Peeta's eyes darted involuntarily to Julianna, then to Katniss.

"Jo," Jules said pleadingly.

"You know you're her favorite victor, right Mellark?" Johanna continued. "Not that I blame her. You are hot."
Jules looked absolutely mortified and Peeta looked trapped. Katniss gaped at the screen, offense stamped on her face. Haymitch found it amusing. So did Gale, but he did a better job of hiding it.

"Stop it, Jo," Annie scolded.

"Yeah," Finnick said slyly. "We all know our newest victors are happily married of their own accord. Right? Or was Snow behind your nuptials?"

Annie turned on the couch and swatted Finnick on the arm.

"Owww!"

"Don't you get started," Annie warned.

"What?" Finnick said in his own defense. "We all have been wondering that since their engagement was announced."

Johanna folded her arms across her chest, decisively. "I vote that Snow was behind it."

Katniss was fuming, but she still wouldn't look at Peeta. *Now would be a great time to say something, Peeta, to stop them from making a mockery of our lives.*

Mags spoke up, sweetly but with authority. "Johanna, Finnick, that's enough. It's their lives, and it's none of our business. Jules?"

Jules cleared her throat, trying unsuccessfully to hide her mortification as Johanna snickered.

"Back to our meeting. With the rebuilding, we have, umm…” she fumbled with several sheets of paper. "We have suggested assignments for everyone. Umm… everyone here has agreed to them already." She drew a deep, shaky breath. "Mellarks, you two are the only ones who couldn't receive prior notice."

Katniss's eyes narrowed on Julianna as if she were her prey.

"And what do you want us to do, *Jules*?" Katniss said, mimicking the girl's voice. Haymitch and Peeta shot Katniss a disapproving look.

If Jules noticed Katniss's tone, she didn't let on. She was steadily regaining her composure. "Katniss, I know you're close to your sister, and you spend a lot of time in nature –"

"Yes," she said tersely. "I love my sister, and I love the woods. What's your point?"

Jules didn't appear fazed. "Well, I was thinking that you could work with Madge Undersee and her father, the mayor in District 12, to determine the needs and resources for your district to include a younger viewpoint. Your district would benefit from job opportunities other than mining, so you three would be determining what those other opportunities could be. Also, it's important that the lush forests of District 12 be conserved for future generations. I know you'll work to protect them, to keep them from being destroyed. Is that something you'd be interested in?"

*Shit. I hate to admit it, but that sounds perfect for me.* "Sure. Whatever."

"Awesome," Jules smiled good-naturedly. "You'll report to Commander Lyme who will oversee the rebuild for districts in your region."

"I look forward to working with you, Katniss," Commander Lyme said with a nod.
"Likewise."

"And Peeta," Jules continued, nervously clearing her throat. There was more rustling of pages. "You seem like a natural-born leader, but you also seem patient and kind."

*What the hell is that supposed to mean?* Katniss seethed. *Am I not patient and kind?! Am I not a natural-born leader?!!*

"You're creative and you have a personality that would be great with children. Now that no child will have to fear or train for The Hunger Games, the children of Panem need someone who will consider a unique facet of their needs. I was thinking that you could work with each district to build youth centers – safe places outside of schools where students could go to play, learn, practice their creativity, and prepare for a more well-rounded life."

"Like painting," Gale spoke up, to Katniss's surprise. "My brother wants Peeta to teach him how to paint."

"Exactly," Jules said emphatically. "Painting, dancing, writing, music, theatre, design, tutoring… you would be assembling a team of people to help you, and these youth centers would be entirely under your command."

Peeta gawked at Jules. The brightest smile Katniss think she's ever seen spread across his face. "Wow… That sounds… amazing. Absolutely amazing."

"But there's good news and bad news," Jules cautioned. "The good news is that with this job, you can live anywhere in Panem. It's not district specific."

Peeta nodded. "Okay."

"The bad news is that this job requires a lot of travel, at least for the first couple of years, until all the centers are built and staffed. And… if you choose this job, you must come to District 2 in two weeks to start three months of training before you can begin. That will take you away from your wife and family for the next three months."

Katniss wanted to go punch the monitor that held Jules's perfect little face. *What does she mean by wife and family? It's one and the same! I am his family! And if you think for a second that Peeta is going to just walk away from me and his father and his… family and that you'll get your hands on him while I'm forced to stay here in 12, you've got another thing coming!*

"If that doesn't work for you, Peeta, that's completely fine," Jules quickly added. "You can turn down this offer for another one. There's plenty to be done. An immediate alternative is to work with Katniss and Madge and Mayor Undersee to improve District 12. And you could still serve as a local contact for establishing a youth center in 12 without having to leave home and travel Panem."

Peeta nodded contemplatively. "Thank you. I'll talk them over with my family."

Katniss overlooked Peeta and addressed Haymitch. "So what did Jules find for you to do, Haymitch?"

"Katniss," Peeta said in low admonishment. Her eyes locked angrily on his. And if it weren't for wanting to hear what Beetee had in store for Gale, Katniss would have stormed out right then. She fastened her eyes back to the screen. Peeta sat up straighter in his chair.

"I'll continue working on a national level as needed," Haymitch explained. "I'll get marching orders from President Paylor."
Jules reached for something someone was handing her off camera. Her eyes quickly scanned the sheet of paper.

"This just came in from Plutarch," she said. "First, he wanted me to say 'go team' and to thank everyone for the role they played in Operation Slay the Mockingjay."

*That name was probably Jules's idea,* Katniss decided.

"He also wanted me to make two announcements: President Paylor's address will be at 11 a.m. Capitol time. If possible, he's asking for all the victors to be present at their town square for the remote live broadcast – did you get that Beetee?"

"Yep. I'm on it."

"And announcement number two is that Alma Coin's memorial service will be held tomorrow at 3 p.m., Capitol time – that's 7 p.m. for the latter time zones of districts 13, 12, 10, and 8. She will be placed in the burial plot that was a part of Snow's estate. The service will be broadcast live, but given the time zone difference and all the work that's ahead for all of us, everyone can watch from their homes or from their town square. Oh, and please reach out to the other living victors you know and let them know that I'll be getting in touch with them soon to discuss the rebuild effort."

Everyone agreed, Johanna, with her signature smirk.

"Well, I think that does it," Jules said. "Either I or someone from Plutarch's team will be in touch in the next two days. Peeta, you can tell us at that time which assignment you'd prefer. Does anyone have anything else to add for the good of the whole?… Well then, meeting adjourned. Thanks everyone!"

The other screens went dark and then Beetee's face was segmented across all nine monitors. Katniss was beyond ready to leave. Thankfully, Beetee wasted no time.

"Gale, one of my jobs in this operation was to monitor talk of rebellion in the districts and to… mask any significant banter from Snow's radars and audio feeds. That's how I overheard some of your conversations with the miners. You have strong opinions and good ideas. Are you interested at all in learning about digital interfacing, military technology, and defense strategy? We still need a trained militia to maintain order in our country, and I think someone young and passionate such as yourself would be a great asset to our efforts."

"Absolutely," Gale said eagerly. "It would be an honor."

"You would have to stop working in the mines and the Justice Building, but like the victors, you would be on the national payroll. Are you okay with that?"

"Ab, uh, sur, uh, yes!"

Katniss smiled and squeezed Gale's forearm.

"Okay. I'll be in 12 four days from now rewiring the Justice Building. We can meet in person. That'll give you a little time to focus on personal matters, clearing your home and all. And I'll see if Lieutenant Absalom Boggs, head of District 13's militia can join us for the meeting. He's someone you want to know. Stop by the Justice building anytime between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. By the way, Haymitch, Boggs and I might need to stay at your house for the night. Would that be alright?"

"Absolutely!" Haymitch beamed. "My house is a damn masterpiece right now."
Beetee chuckled. "Well, that sounds great. Gale, I'll see you in four days."

"Thank you, Mr. Latier. I really appreciate this."

"It's Beetee, son. Just call me Beetee."

"Thank you Beetee. Thank you very much."

The meeting hadn't ended a second when Katniss ripped off her headset and rushed out of the control room. Peeta caught up to her on the main level of Haymitch's home. Gale and Haymitch weren't far behind.

"Katniss." He reached for her hand just as she was heading to the front door. She spun to face him.

"What's gotten into you? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Peeta," she said sarcastically. "Why would anything be wrong?"

"You wouldn't even look at me during the entire meeting. And you were pretty rude to Jules. I know she's not a victor, but she's doing good work on behalf of—"

"Well you were nice enough to her for the both of us," Katniss spat.

Peeta looked completely baffled. "What does that mean?"

Gale didn't feel good about what he was about to do, but he saw his opportunity to win back the girl who had his heart. And he had to take it.

"Peeta's right, Katniss. You were a little rude."

Katniss turned glaring eyes to him. "This conversation does not concern you, Gale."

"But," Gale continued, "I wouldn't worry about it if I were you. I wouldn't worry about Peeta if I were you."

"Excuse me?" Peeta didn't like the insinuation in his voice.

"What are you talking about Gale?" Katniss demanded. "You keep hinting at something. What is it?"

Gale stared at Peeta. "Do you want to tell her, or should I?"

"Tell her wha—" Peeta's eyes widened with realization. "Gale," he said threateningly.

"Peeta was planning to leave you. He was planning to meet with President Snow behind your back to try to sell him on a public divorce. Cameras and storyline and everything. Granted, he did say he would try to take the blame for it all, just so long as he was out of his marriage to you."

Katniss looked as if she'd been slapped. Hard. Haymitch looked as if he didn't believe a word Gale said.

"Peeta," Katniss's voice faltered. "Is this true?"

Peeta was completely broadsided. His eyes were already pleading with her. "Katniss, I…"

"It's true?" Her lips curled bitterly around the words, her face contorting with a look of pain that twisted in Peeta's chest. "You wanted to be rid of me so bad that you would put us through a national
scandal to do it?" She started to tremble. "After everything we've been through with the Games and our lives being public, you wanted to drag me and my family through that? Behind my back?"

Haymitch sighed Peeta's name in disappointment.

"It didn't happen that way," Peeta pleaded. "Katniss it didn't happen that way. I just wanted you to be happy."

"I think his words were, I'm giving her to you," Gale said quietly.

Fat tears dropped from her eyes. She was shaking even harder and backing away from Peeta as if he were a mutt, and she never noticed it before.

"To hell with you," Katniss shouted. "Gale told me you'd make a fool out of me, but I always defended you!" She pointed a finger at Gale. "And you knew all of this and you didn't tell me? To hell with all of you!" She screamed. "I don't need any of you! I don't need anyone!"

And she yanked open the front door and ran to the tree line in the distance, hoping each step silenced the sound of her husband desperately shouting her name.

Peeta turned slowly, with murderous eyes fixed on Gale. Whatever Haymitch was saying, Peeta couldn't hear it over his blinding rage.

"You fucking piece of –"

Peeta crouched and rammed his shoulder into Gale's torso, sending both men slamming against a wall and tumbling to the ground. They clamored back to each other, fists connecting with each other's jaws, cheeks, chests, stomachs. Peeta landed a blow to Gale's shoulder, which made Gale shout in pain. Gale clawed his hand over Peeta's face, pushing his head back and leaving long, bloody scratch to his cheek. Peeta landed on his back, and Gale pinned him to the floor. Peeta kicked Gale away with both feet, but the separation was short-lived. They tussled again, sending a rack and pieces of glass crashing to the floor beside them. Peeta spun Gale on his back and was landing repeated blows when Haymitch's arms hooked underneath Peeta's and pulled him off of Gale.

Hazelle was hysterical. She must have run next door for Rory, who was now using his body to block Gale, who had stumbled to his feet and was staggering toward Peeta. Maura was there, and she had an arm wrapped supportively around Hazelle's quaking shoulders, but Katniss's mother looked just as unnerved as Hazelle.

There was a pool of redness in the corner of one of Peeta's eyes, and in addition to the deep cut to his cheek, there was an indigo welt right below his eyelid, and the corner of his lip was bleeding. There was a deep gash across the bridge of Gale's nose and blood oozed from one nostril. He had a blackened eye and a bruised cheek.

"How fucking dare you!"

"How dare I what? Tell her the truth! I didn't say anything that wasn't true and you know it!"

"After I've tried to help you and your family," Peeta said in disbelief, "you try to destroy mine?!"

"She was never your family," Gale growled. "Your marriage is a fucking farce and now Snow is dead, and she sees you for the manipulator you are, Mellark!"

"Stop it!" Haymitch bellowed. "Stop!"
"She'll never love you, Gale," Peeta snarled. "Katniss is my wife, and –"

"She doesn't love you! She doesn't! She's been putting up with you because she had to. She wants no part of you."

And before he could think twice about what he was about to say, Peeta's lips curled into a sardonic smile. "That's not what she said last night."

Gale stilled, his eyes flaring with outrage. Then, he knocked Rory aside to get to Peeta. Haymitch positioned himself between them, and Hazelle rushed in, pressing herself against Gale.

"Stop it!" She screamed at the top of her lungs. "Stop it! Just stop!"

Hazelle's pleas reached them. And for the first time, they saw the mess they made of Haymitch's home: a toppled armoire with its glass door and other contents shattered around them, and a sizable dent in Haymitch's wall. Rory was slowly climbing to his feet, but he didn't appear injured. Maura rushed to the boy to help him stand.

Hazelle's legs grew weak, and Gale caught her before she collapsed to the ground.

"Mom?" His voice quivered. "Mom."


Hazelle was sobbing as Maura and Rory led her to the kitchen table. Maura instructed Rory to pour her a glass of water, and she wet a dish towel with cold water to press to her forehead.

Haymitch walked over to the broken glass and shook his head mournfully. He began to collect the shards of a yellow porcelain plate that was painted with blue roses. Peeta and Gale stood there, immobilized.

"Haymitch, I'm –"

Haymitch lifted a hand to silence Peeta. He turned slowly to face both Peeta and Gale, his voice eerily calm.

"This plate was in this armoire because this plate was the most valuable thing I owned. I worked for an entire summer with my father so we could buy this one plate for my mother's birthday." His voice trailed off, and he exhaled a long, weary breath.

Peeta looked stricken and Gale couldn't meet Haymitch's gaze.

"But you know what bothers me even more than a broken plate that is older than both of you two combined? The broken look on that girl's face when she ran out the door." Haymitch shook his head wordlessly. "A plate can be fixed. But that? I don't know if that can be fixed."

"And I for one am tired of seeing her broken." Maura was standing there, angrily, both hands clutching her waist. "She loves one of you, she told me so. But I'm not sure either of you deserve her. Peeta your father would never condone this behavior, and Gale, your father didn't raise you this way." Both men dipped their heads in abject shame. "And I know I speak for Hazelle and Rory and Haymitch when I say that we are very disappointed in you both."

Maura went back to the kitchen, and she and Rory returned with a broom and a dustpan to clean up the glass. The armoire was too heavy for either of them to lift.
Haymitch went back to collecting what he could of his mother's plate. "Gale, I don't want you in my home right now. Your mother and siblings, they are welcome here."

Gale swallowed hard.

"Peeta, I don't want you here either. Go back to your own house and pray that your wife finds it in her heart to speak to you again."

Peeta nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry," he said quietly as he exited the front door.

Gale also apologized, but Maura and Rory and Haymitch didn't respond. He walked to the kitchen and kissed the top of his mother's head.

"I'm sorry, mom," he whispered. Hazelle clutched a handkerchief to her mouth, silent tears still coursing her cheeks. "I'll stay with Thom for a while."

Gale trudged out the back door, desperately wishing he could go next door and hug his little sister and tell he would be gone for a few days. But his blackened eye and bruised face would frighten her. So he bypassed the house, starting on the long path leading from Victor's Village, glancing at the tree line where his selfish words sent the girl he loved.

Since the mines were closed in celebration of a liberated Panem, Gale knew Thom would probably be home. Still, he kept walking past Thom's house, past the remnants of the burned Hawthorne home, and onward to the Merchant's Quarters.

He knocked on the door, not even sure why he was there. Everything in him was telling him that this was a mistake.

There were light footsteps. Then the locks clicked on the door. Her hair was still wet, and he was reminded that it was only around 7:45 in the morning. Still, she was already wearing a lavender sundress.

"Gale." Her surprise turned to alarm. "What happened to your face? Are you hurt?"

He bowed his head, shook it quietly.

"I just need somebody… to talk to."

And before he knew it, she'd wrapped her arms around his neck and tucked his head to her shoulder. He stilled at first at the gentleness of her touch. Then, his arms enveloped her waist, clutching her like gravity was in her petite frame and without her, he would slowly disappear into the clouds.

"It'll be okay," she reassured. "Whatever it is, it'll be okay." She pulled away, her eyes carefully inspecting his face.

"Come inside. First, let's get you cleaned up."

Gale felt like he could tell Madge anything. So he told her everything. He started with the fight at Haymitch's house, but quickly filled in the blanks: his love for Katniss, how they met in the woods, her forced marriage to Peeta, the kiss at Maura's house, Peeta's plan for a public divorce, white roses, responsibilities, tesserae, Capitol arson… Emory Hawthorne's death.

He was so broken that the words continued to spill. For three hours they sat on the swing in her
parent's backyard. Madge listened quietly, her brows pinching some times more than others. She asked very few questions, and periodically, she lightly touched his forearm to let him know he was not alone.

"I know I was wrong to say what I did. But I couldn't just stand by and lose her, not when everything has changed now with Snow's death."

Madge nodded quietly. "It sounds like you really love her, Gale. And you think she's worth fighting for."

He looked relieved that someone understood him. "Yes, exactly."

"But there's a difference between fighting for her and fighting over her."

Gale's eyes flashed to Madge. He shifted on the swing so he could look squarely at her. "What do you mean?"

"Well," she began, "Katniss is not like everyone else. She has plenty of her own fire. She doesn't need anyone to fight for her. And it would probably offend her just as much to know that you and Peeta were fighting over her."

"So how do I reach her?"

Madge chose her words carefully. "I think the question is, does she want to be reached? If you fight for her, are you really fighting against her."

*Does she want to be reached? Am I fighting against her?* Madge's words circulated in his head.

"Have you ever asked her what she wanted?"

"No," Gale admitted.

Madge smiled warmly. "Start there. Have an open, honest conversation with her. Let her know how you feel and ask her how she feels. But Gale, regardless of how it happened, Katniss is Peeta's wife, and based on what you've just told me, she has enough of her heart invested with him for what he did to really hurt her."

Gale exhaled a long breath. "So you're saying don't get my hopes up."

"I'm saying that she needs you to be her friend. And if that's all she needs, you have to be okay with that."

Gale stared absently at the ground below for several minutes while they swung. "I got another job today," he said. "With the rebuild. I don't have all the details yet, but I'll need to leave the Justice Building when I start with the rebuild." Madge's face lit up, but before she could respond, the realization hit Gale; he wasn't the only one with a rebuild assignment. "And so did you! Congratulations Madge."

"Thanks," she laughed. "Someone called in the middle of the night to speak to my father. I had no idea he supported the rebellion or that he'd been contacted in the past. It was his idea to include me on the District 12 rebuild effort."

"Well, he's a smart man… You're pretty amazing, Madge Undersee."

"Aww shucks," she grinned pretending to fluff her hair. They both laughed and slowly fell silent.
"By the way, did you say Katniss ran to the woods straight from her mentor's house?"

"Yeah."

"Does she have her bow? Just in case she encounters a feisty deer or something?"

Gale sat up straighter. "No, she doesn't. She doesn't keep her bow in the old log anymore, and I changed the hiding place for mine. I didn't even think about that."

"Well," Madge said with a quiet smile. "It sounds like you have a reason to go find her."

Shortly after 11 a.m., Gale entered the woods from the edge of the meadow where he stashed his bow. He knew where she was. Even more than the trees, she loved the water.

He found her sitting beside the boulder at the stream, her knees tucked to her chest, her head resting on her knees. She didn't lift her head, didn't hear him approach even though he was only a few steps away. Gale deliberately stepped on a twig, which produced a loud 'crack.' She startled and their eyes met. She tucked her head back to her knees.

"Go away, Gale."

He came closer. "No."

"I mean it," she glared at him. "I want to be alone."

He held out his bow. "You don't have any protection out here. I brought you my bow, so you can stay out here until nightfall if you want."

She shifted her eyes to the weapon, and wiped a tear with the back of her hand.

"All I need is five minutes. That's it, and then I'm gone. I promise."

She turned her eyes back to the stream. It was as good as an offer to sit. Gale approached carefully and lowered beside her to the ground. He placed the bow and his arrows next to him, and he fished in his pocket.

"I brought you a piece of dried meat from the Hob. Had a few coins in my pocket."

Katniss's stomach growled as if on cue. She grudgingly reached for the jerky and yanked a piece with her back teeth. She sighed slightly at the rich, salty flavor. They sat there for a moment, chewing in silence.

"You've got about four minutes left."

Gale nodded. "I realized that I never asked you what you wanted."

Her head spun to his.

"What do you want, Katniss?"

She sat quietly for a moment, just staring at him. "I want a life where I don't have to fight. I'm tired of fighting."

Gale breathed a humorless laugh, his eyes on the stream. "Yeah," he said quietly. "That would be nice."
"Katniss… you're not a possession to me. I know you can't be bought or traded like goods at the Hob. I'm sorry if I ever made you feel that way."

Her eyes were back on the stream.

"It's just that… I see my life with you in it." He shrugged. "I just can't see anything else."

She wiped away a stray tear from her cheek. They sat in silence for several minutes.

"What happened to your face? As if I don't know."

Gale laughed humorlessly. "Peeta happened to my face. And I happened to his."

She shook her head, a tiny smile pulling the corner of her lips. "Morons."

Gale laughed heartily this time. "Yeah, that would be an accurate assessment. Incidentally, my mother and brother may disown me, and I'll be staying with Thom for a few days."

She fell silent, deep in thought. "Why would Peeta do that? Why would he give me to you? Am I that terrible?"

"No. No you're not… Katniss, he came to my house the day after he saw us kissing at your mother's house."

"Oh."

"He said… he didn't want to confuse you about who you wanted and that your heart was clearly with me. He devised that whole divorce plan as a way to get you to me. He said he wanted you to be happy. He was going to try to talk to Snow after the reaping or during the Victory Tour. One or the other. I forget."

Katniss laughed at the irony. She and her husband had very different plans for the Victory Tour.

Gale thought of Maura's words about Katniss loving one of them. He silently rehearsed what he was about to say next. "Katniss, I… I hope it's me that you love." Her eyes shot to his. "But if it's just friendship between us… I mean, I won't be thrilled about that, but I'll take what I can get."

Katniss could see the sincerity in his eyes. She nodded quietly.

"Well," he announced. "I don't want to overstay my welcome. That would be rude. And trust me, I've been rude enough for one day."

"Apparently, so have I."

Gale stood and brushed off his pants. "I'll see you." He started to walk away.

"Gale." Their eyes met. "Thanks. For the jerky and the bow."

He smiled. "You're welcome, Catnip."

She watched him until he disappeared through the trees.

Around 1:30 p.m., Peeta heard the hum of the motor outside his house. He'd been sitting at the kitchen table for hours, his head in his hands. The knock on the front door pulled him from his chair.
Daniel Mellark stood on the other side.

"Dad."

"The one and only. Can I come in?"

Peeta stepped aside. Daniel took a seat at the kitchen table, opposite the chair that was pulled farthest from the table.

"That must have been some victory celebration with your face looking the way it does."

Peeta bowed his head in shame.

"Look at me."

Peeta met his father's stern gaze.

"I understood when you fought to defend your wife. But this time, your pride and anger got the best of you. I taught you better than that."

"Yes dad," Peeta said quietly.

They sat in silence.

Daniel exhaled a long breath. "So, you want to tell me what happened or do I have to put Rye on the case? You know that boy can find out anything. He should be a detective."

Peeta breathed a laugh. "All those adventure stories from when we were kids."

"I guess so." Daniel took a long look at Peeta. "What happened son?"

Peeta recapped the entire morning from when Haymitch banged on Maura's front door at nearly 3 a.m.

"The pain on her face and the way she looked at me… I just saw red, dad. I looked at Gale and I saw red."

Daniel ran a hand roughly down his face. "Have you spoken to your wife since?"

Peeta shook his head. "No."

"What are you going to do?"

"Give all I've got to get her back. We were making progress, dad. Real progress. I never should have done what I did, but I was trying to make her happy and keep myself from getting hurt again."

"I know."

"What do you think I should do?"

Daniel clasped his hands atop the table. "I think you should do whatever you think is best, Peeta. I think only you know what is best."

Peeta's eyes locked on his father. Daniel Mellark smiled, and so did Peeta.

"How did you know to come here?"
"Maura called the bakery. Thatch answered and she asked to speak with me."

"Oh. She's pretty mad at me."

"I think she'll forgive you. This will blow over."

"And how did you get away from work? It's usually busy this time of day. Sorry I never made it in, by the way. I didn't even think to call."

"We only opened for a half day, in honor of our liberation from President Snow. Incidentally, your mother now has Thatch making freedom cookies."

Peeta laughed riotously. "Mom…" He shook his head wearily.

Daniel stood. "I better be getting back. I promised Thatch I'd help him start building a crib since we have some time off this afternoon." Peeta stood and rounded the table to face him. Daniel pulled his son into a tight hug. "I love you unconditionally, Peeta. You know that. And I'm always here when you need me. Just remember that. Okay?"

"Thanks dad. I love you too."

Peeta stood in the doorway until his father climbed into the bakery cart and pulled off. Then, he returned to the kitchen where he pulled out the canister of flour, the jar of buttermilk, a stick of butter, a jar of salt, the block of cheese, and the cheese grater.

When she came home, he wanted them to be waiting on her.

The house was so still. It was as if the four walls and everything in them were holding their collective breath, awaiting her return.

Peeta sat and paced and cooked and stared out the window for hours, hoping to hear her footsteps on the porch, to see her hand turning their door knob.

Maura had called twice, the last time around 5:30 p.m. Still no Katniss. She had been gone since before 7 a.m., and although there would be good daylight until after 7 p.m., Maura and Peeta's voices carried the same twinge of worry.

They decided on 6:00. If she wasn't back by then, Maura would send Rory to Thom's house to get Gale, and the three of them would go look for her. Peeta's strength. Maura's ability to heal. Gale's knowledge of the woods. Peeta didn't care if Gale cloned himself a thousand times; all 1,001 of them could come with him into the woods if it meant Katniss was safe.

The hour hand ticked to the second minute. 6:02 p.m.

Peeta went to the stove and shut off the low heat that was keeping the barley stew warm. The cheese buns had long gone cold, but could easily be reheated when she got home. He had to remain optimistic or the uncertainty would drive him crazy. Hunched over the kitchen sink, he splashed cold water on his face, his body reminding him that he'd had about three hours of sleep the night before, and only about five hours the previous night.

*I'm fine. I'll sleep when she's home.*

With a sudden burst of energy, Peeta took to the stairs, to the master bedroom where he straightened the covers on the bed. She would be exhausted, he reasoned; it would be one less thing for her to
have to worry about.

He was making his way back down the stairs when he heard the whine of the kitchen side door. And there she stood with their suitcase and his crutches from Maura's house, her hair cascading around her shoulders.

His love shown in the suffering on his face. "Katniss." Her name carried on a breath. "I've been so worried about you."

She set the suitcase beside the door and propped the crutches against the wall.

"Have you eaten? I made barley stew. It's still warm. I also made cheese buns. It'll only take a minute to warm them up."

As he spoke, her eyes shifted to her hands, the floor, the dark walnut kitchen hutch in the corner. Anywhere but to his loving gaze.

"No. Thank you." She swallowed hard. "Your prostheses, and clothes, and toiletries are all in here. I left my hairbrush upstairs. I just came to get that, and the duffel bags with the clothes for the boys."

"Katniss."

Her eyes flashed to his. And through the glossy film left by her own tears, she could see his devotion and his entire world teetering on the edge of devastation.

"I know you're mad as hell at me, and you have every right to be. But please don't shut me out. Please don't leave."

She steeled herself, training her face to hide any emotion.

"Just let me explain," he continued, sensing the need to get his words out quickly. "I went to Gale's house after I saw you two kissing. I was upset, and I thought –"

"I know."

His lips parted wordlessly.

"Gale found me today in the woods. He explained how everything happened. I don't blame you for what you told him."

She maneuvered around him and headed for the stairs. Peeta followed her to the master bedroom.

"I don't get it." His eyes narrowed in confusion. "If you understand and you don't blame me for what I did, then why are you only here for your hairbrush?"

Now she spun to face him with eyes like embers.

"It took me several hours to come to terms with what you told Gale, and I'm not upset about that anymore. But what does upset me, what I couldn't come to terms with was how you interacted with Julianna – excuse me, Jules."

"What?" he asked in disbelief. "What do you mean 'how I interacted with her?' I was only being polite."

"Don't. Don't bullshit me, Peeta. When I walked back into the control room, you were asking who she was and staring at the screen like some lovesick puppy, gushing about how beautiful she was."
And Peeta realized why she wouldn't speak to him during the meeting. She'd heard what he said about Jules. "It was an offhanded comment about someone I've never even met until this morning."

"It may have been offhanded, but you meant it. And don't tell me you didn't."

She darted to the bathroom. Drawers slid open and hurled shut. She re-emerged with the hairbrush; she rolled several ponytail holders onto her wrist. Peeta was pacing, the heels of his hands pressed to his eyelids.

"Okay," he conceded. "So I said she was beautiful. My headset wasn't on. She didn't hear me. I never –"

"I heard you."

"Katniss… This is ridiculous. I don't know her. Nothing I said to her meant as much as you thought it –"

He stopped abruptly.

"It didn't mean 'as much as I thought it did,'" she repeated, "but it did mean something. Just admit it, Peeta. You felt something for her."

"That was a poor choice of words –"

"Admit it!"

His tiredness, frustration, and angst swirled into defensiveness and anger. "Why are you doing this, Katniss? Why are you so determined to make this what it's not? Why are you doing this to us?"

"Why am I doing this to us?" She said incredulously. "Why am I doing this to us? Two nights ago, you were screaming at me in this same bedroom and telling me there was no 'us,' that I was delusional and disrespectful of your boundaries! Until late last night, we were sleeping in separate bedrooms because that's what you wanted. We could have made love in my mother's guest bedroom last night, but you were clearly uncomfortable. And before you went back into the living room to sleep on the couch, you called me by my maiden name!"

"Wha… maiden… I don't remember doing that."

"You said 'good one Everdeen.' Not 'good one, Katniss,' or 'good one Mrs. Mellark.' You don't think of me as your wife Peeta. Not since that kiss with Gale. You've been unwilling to forgive me for my mistake so we could move forward. And to hear you call Julianna beautiful and to see the way you looked at her?" Her lips trembled and tears raced down her cheeks. "Peeta you've never looked at me like that. You've never called me beautiful."

She turned her back to him, impatiently wiping tears that wouldn't stop flowing. Peeta lowered to the bed his face stuck in desperation and disbelief, his eyes darting from side to side as his mind raced.

*Was she right? That can't be right. I love her with all my heart, and I think she is hands down the most beautiful girl in all of Panem. I had to have told her that, many, many times. She had to have known how I felt.*

But he couldn't think of a single time. And he realized that instead of boundaries, he'd built walls that kept her out. She wanted to be his wife as badly as he wanted to be her husband.

He walked to her, filled with remorse.
"Katniss." He drew a shaky breath. "You're right. I'm so sorry, baby. I'm so sorry."

She sunk her teeth into her bottom lip, willing herself not to shed another tear.

"Katniss." His voice was pleading, fragile.

"Katniss." This time, his hand was on her arm, slowly turning her to face him, gently pulling the hairbrush from her hand and placing it on the dresser. She silently imploded when she saw the tears coursing his face.

"We have everything to fight for." He sniffed, his voice choked with emotion. "Don't leave. Don't give up on us."

He cupped her face in his hands, drawing her eyes to his. "Don't, baby." He placed a gentle kiss to her lips. "Don't give up." Another kiss, this one parting her lips. And for the first time, both of their defenses were down at the same time. They pressed into each other, the intensity of every emotion coming out in their kiss. Both of her hands were on his chest, clutching his shirt. His arms were around her waist, clutching her to his body. She felt him growing against her and he didn't pull away. She ached with a hunger that as long overdue.

They greedily drank in each other's kiss. But only she knew that it had to end soon. She slowly tore herself away, her eyes downcast.

But Peeta was convinced. That kiss, the kiss in the Seam, every living room dance, every laugh, every time she fell asleep in his arms, her refusal to let him die in the Games – all of it pointed to the same thing. Maura had been referring to him earlier. He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was man Katniss loved.

He moistened his lips with his tongue and guided a lock of hair behind her ear. "I know, Katniss," he whispered. "Everything in me knows it's me you love. I just need to hear you tell me it's real. Just once."

And this was the moment she feared. All day, she knew it would come to this.

She loved Peeta beyond what she could describe. But if she told him she loved him, he would stay. He would take the assignment in District 12. He would forfeit the opportunity to build youth centers throughout Panem, the assignment that made his face radiate excitement. If she told him she loved him, he would never get to know the girl whose beauty had captivated him, the girl whose presence had arrested him before he knew her name. If she told Peeta she loved him, he would settle for a life with her in District 12. He deserved so much more.

And she finally understood her mother's definition of love. For this sacrifice, it was her own heart on the altar.

He was patiently waiting, with confident eyes. Her heart drummed in her chest.

"I know you love me," he whispered. "Just tell me it's real."

She wished the earth would swallow her whole and leave Peeta standing. She wished that by some miracle, one of her perfect-aim arrows would pierce the walls of their bedroom and slay her where she stood.

She had to do it. For him.

"Not real."
His gaze didn't falter. He must not have heard her.

She mustered all the courage she had and looked into his eyes. "Not real, Peeta."

He stilled, his brows furrowed.

"What do you mean? What do you… Are you saying you don't love me?"

She was almost shaking. She nodded wordlessly. He stared at her for a moment, then he shook his head defiantly.

"I don't believe you. I don't think you believed a word you just said."

"Not real."

"Katniss, stop saying that."

"Not real!"

Peeta gasped, his mouth agape.

"You were right about your soulmate. You said you'd know her when you saw her. You owe to yourself to go to District 2, to see what's there for you. But you and I? We were forced into this life." She swallowed as much of her sorrow as she could. "We're just confused, Peeta. We're not lovers. We're friends. We're best friends."

She turned her back so she couldn't see what her words were doing to him. There was a long silence.

"This is about Gale isn't it? You want to be with…" His words trailed off. She didn't respond. But her silence was his answer.

Finally, he cleared his throat and exhaled a cleansing breath.

"I can't make you love me if you don't," he said with quiet conviction, almost as if he were talking to himself. She turned around. "And I won't try to make you love me ever again."

He stepped forward and placed a gentle kiss to her forehead as if he were laying a wreath at a memorial.

"Goodbye Katniss."

She watched him shove his hands into his pockets and walk out the room. And when the front door shut behind him, she crumbled to the floor, shaking and sobbing inconsolably because Peeta Mellark had her heart. She only hoped that her heart was something she could survive without.

Haymitch was seated on his couch with the television turned to the Capitol News. He was still marveling at how immaculate his home looked.

After the incident with Peeta and Gale, Haymitch, Maura, and Rory cleaned up the broken glass, and he re-positioned the armoire. Haymitch piled a few large shards of the porcelain plate on his cabinet and the rest went in the trash.

It took another 45 minutes, but Hazelle finally regained her composure and insisted on finishing the upstairs. Two hours later, she was done, and Haymitch was as astounded as he had been with the downstairs.
She told him her salary, and Haymitch doubled it, which she could hardly believe. When she asked him how much he would charge for the damage to his home from the fight, Haymitch waved his hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it."

Later that afternoon, he walked to the town center to view President Paylor's address. Katniss and Peeta didn't attend, but after what happened that morning, he didn't think they would. Haymitch sighed in frustration. This was supposed to be a good day – for Peeta and Katniss if anyone. But she'd probably spent the day crying by a tree while he'd spent the day crying by his stove.

When his initial anger and disappointment subsided, Haymitch understood Peeta's rage. What Peeta had said to Gale was foolish, but Gale was clearly using that to destroy Peeta's marriage. Haymitch hoped Gale's attempt hadn't worked.

There was a knock at the front door. Haymitch pulled himself from the couch in stages. "I have no idea who that could be."

It was Peeta.

"Haymitch, can I come in?"

Haymitch stared pensively. Peeta looked exhausted, but Haymitch couldn't detect any dominant emotion on Peeta's face. He just looked… resigned, resolute.

"That depends. Are you going to try to tear down my home again?"

"I'm so sorry for what happened earlier, Haymitch. I'm here to ask you if we could place a call to Julianna. I want to leave 12 as soon as possible."

With the four-hour time difference, it was after 2 p.m., in District 2. Like Peeta and Haymitch, Julianna hadn't gotten much sleep in the past few days. Still, she greeted them with a warm, welcoming smile.

It didn't take long for her smile to disappear. Peeta looked like he'd been in a fight. Her mind instantly flipped to Gale, and she wondered if he was really Katniss's cousin. Peeta told Jules that he and Katniss had decided to part ways. He said he wanted to take the national youth center director position, and he wanted to leave for District 2 as soon as possible.

She touched her screen, and beside her face a grid popped up with rows of listings. Plutarch had a vast network of connections, Jules explained, including a team of Capitol developers who turned a collection of five-story abandoned warehouses into furnished dwellings. Most of the apartments were held for victors who would assist with the rebuild, should the rebellion be successful.

"Our training center is within walking distance of the warehouse district, so these units are great," she explained. "This listing is a two-bedroom loft right across the hall from where Mags Bronson will live. This one is great because it offers amazing natural light, which would be great for painting. If you wanted the national job, I had a larger apartment planned since you're in a pretty large home now, but that unit won't be ready for two weeks."

"No, the two-bedroom loft is more than enough space," Peeta said. "How soon can I arrive?"

She touched the screen again and a calendar appeared beside her face. "Most of the units are ready to be occupied. But it's been a few months since this particular unit was finished, so I want to send out a cleaning crew. But this unit has never been rented, so it'll probably just need some light dusting… I'd say you could leave as soon as the day after tomorrow."
"Jules, give us a quick minute," Haymitch pulled off his headset and motioned for Peeta to do the same.

"Are you sure you want to do this? Katniss was probably just upset. You know how she gets when —"

"She doesn't love me, Haymitch," Peeta said matter-of-factly. "She made that clear. I can't just stay here and watch her love someone else."

Haymitch's brow was furrowed with concern, but he saw that Peeta's mind was made up. They both replaced their headsets.

"Jules," Peeta said politely, "I'll take it."

She asked about special accommodations for his home, and Peeta mentioned his shower rails and benches. "Otherwise, I'll be fine with whatever."

"Okay." She fell silent. "Peeta… I know I risk overstepping my boundaries by saying this, but I hope Katniss wasn't offended by what Johanna said today. Johanna is a loose cannon, and those of us who know her know not to pay her any attention. If that was a problem, I'd be happy to apologize to Katniss and explain everything to her."

Peeta smiled gratefully at the offer.

"You're very kind, Jules. Thank you. But neither you nor Johanna have anything to apologize for. Katniss and I just couldn't make things work."

When they ended the video conference, Peeta had a confirmation number for his train ticket, leaving District 12 at 8 a.m., the day after tomorrow.

"Please," Peeta said to his mentor. "Not a word of this to Katniss."

Peeta cleared his front door, Posy and Vick's laughter ringing in his ears. They were in Maura's backyard, so Peeta exited Haymitch's house from the front. Posy would want him to play if she saw him. Right now, he just wanted to be alone.

And alone he was. She was gone. There was a finality to this silence.

He didn't have time to be emotional. He was always the emotional one. He needed to be wise with his time and energy. There was a lot to be done before his train left on Saturday morning, and he was too sleep deprived to accomplish any of it that night.

Except for two things. There were two things that couldn't wait until tomorrow. Peeta picked up the phone receiver.

"Dad? It's me. Have you got a minute?"

Peeta gave his father an abridged version of what happened after Katniss returned home. He also told him about the victors' role in rebuilding Panem, the job opportunity, and the training in District 2. He was leaving 12.

"Dad, I have to get out of here. I can't stick around and watch her live her life with Gale. I just want to put this entire chapter behind me."

"Peeta, I wish you didn't have to go through this. You've been through enough."
"I'll pay the salary for my replacement."

"No you won't," Daniel said. "I don't want you to worry about us. I want you to live your life and be happy."

"But I know you depend on me around the shop, dad. I'm just leaving with no advanced notice, no time for you to find someone else. That's not fair."

Daniel fell silent. "This has happened with you before, you know."

"What? When?"

"When you were reaped." Daniel cleared the lump that formed in his throat. "It's okay if you're not in District 12, Peeta. We're just glad to know you're somewhere. You survived the Games. That's all we ever needed."

Peeta was overcome. He covered the mouthpiece while he composed himself. "Thank you, dad. Thank you for always being there when I need you."

"And none of that will change no matter where you are. Just remember that, okay?"

They talked a few more minutes. Despite all he needed to do, Peeta wanted to work the next day. Daniel suggest that he arrive early and leave before the lunch rush. Daniel offered to help him pack, but Peeta decided that he needed to do it alone.

They ended the call. There was one more thing to be done that day.

He pulled a silver canister from the highest kitchen cabinet shelf. Stuffed inside was a large white envelope.

Peeta ran his hand roughly down his face. This was really happening.

The packet of papers was titled *Legal Issuance for Annulment and Dissolution of Marriage*. He'd gotten the paperwork from the Justice Building after she came in late that night, after she blamed him for his 'so-called feelings' and their 'farce' of a marriage. He'd desperately hoped that by the next reaping, they would have found their way, that he wouldn't need to flip to the last page and sign above the line designated 'Husband.'

He did it hurriedly, his neat penmanship a hasty scribble. And minutes later when he climbed into bed underneath the portrait of their wedding kiss, Peeta was grateful that sleep would come quick.

Katniss shut herself in her mother's guest bedroom before the sun went down. She could hear Posy and Vick playing near her window. She drew the curtains and prayed for a dreamless sleep that would carry her far from her new reality. One without Peeta.

At 1 a.m., and she still hadn't slept. The house had grown still hours ago. 2:45 a.m. Nothing. Finally, she got up and walked to the living room window that faced their – Peeta's – house. The house was dark. For a whimsical moment, she wondered what he would say if he woke up with her in his arms, fisting a mound of shirt at his chest while she slept.

It was too much to hope for, and far more than she deserved.

Finally, around 4 a.m., she dozed off. Two hours later, her eyes flipped open, and instinctively, she hurried to the bedroom window. He was almost out of view, but she caught a glimpse of him,
walking toward the path that led out of Victor's Village. He was going to work. Faithful Peeta. Steady Peeta. He truly deserved the world.

She wondered if he had decided to stay in District 12 after all. If he made that choice on his own, maybe they would grow back together. Maybe one day he would allow her his presence. Then, in time, his arms. Then, by some miracle, his lips. Maybe he would give her yet another chance. Or, even if he went to District 2 for training, maybe he would return to the oversized house next door and march dedicatedly to Mellark Bakery on the days when he wasn't traveling Panem and building youth centers.

She was wide awake but no less exhausted. She showered, dressed, and headed out the back door for the woods. At one point, she fell asleep on top of her bow, beside the boulder at the stream. She woke up with grass and soft, wet mud pancaked to her face and embedded in her braid. She didn't know how much time had elapsed, but the sleep did her some good.

She didn't want to run into Peeta. Not yet. So she returned to her mother's house before 4 p.m., before he would begin making his way from Mellark Bakery. There was a pang in her chest when she thought about his afternoon phone calls home so she could start walking to town to meet him and they could walk back together, hand-in-hand. But Katniss forbade her tears because as soon as her mother saw her, she made her sit at the kitchen table and finish a piece of roasted pheasant and a bowl of vegetable stew. She ate quickly, so she could go back to hiding in the guest bedroom, avoiding everyone. Even Prim.

Later that night, she fell asleep shortly after 11 p.m. She dreamt of Rue and Marvel and Peeta and Snow, and if she weren't so exhausted, her body would have fought itself awake. But all she could do was whimper and wail in a room where no one could hear her, where there was no one across the hall with arms strong enough to save her.

The curtains glowed against the intensity of the sunlight at the guest bedroom window. Katniss sniffed, sighed, and slowly pulled herself to a sitting position, resting her head in both hands. The clock read 7:26. It was the longest she'd slept in ages.

At some point, the nightmares stopped. She could feel the tears that had hardened on her face before she reached the bathroom mirror, which showed the nest of raven hair she didn't bother to untangle after her shower the night before. She reached for a wash cloth, but there were no clean towels. She would have to get one from the linen closet upstairs.

Katniss lumbered from the guest bedroom, noticing for the first time how quiet the house was for a Saturday morning with two 12-year-olds, a 10-year-old, and a four year-old. But when she reached the kitchen, there was only her mother and Prim, loading apothecary supplies into the medicine bag. Based on the supplies, some woman's contractions had started.

"Is somebody due?" Her words came out on a yawn.

They startled, pausing in the middle of loading.

"Katniss," Prim said. "Are you just waking up?"

She nodded sleepily.

Maura and Prim exchanged glances. "We thought you were in the woods, honey," Maura said. "We said you weren't here."

"Good. Whatever Haymitch needs can wait until—"
"It wasn't Haymitch," Prim interrupted. "It was Peeta. He's leaving."

Katniss's lips parted before her mind could supply the words. "What do you... mean... he's leaving."

"He came by this morning with Posy's cake and art supplies for Vick," Maura explained. "He gave me a loaf of bread and said it was a parting gift, that he decided to move to District 2."

Katniss's mind went numb. He wasn't supposed to leave yet. It wasn't supposed to be over this soon. "When?" she practically shouted.

"About 30 minutes ago," Prim said. "His train leaves at 8."

Her heart was racing, her chest heaving. She turned in a disoriented circle, still clutching the washcloth.

"I got. I got to. Say goodbye. I didn't say goodbye."

The clock read 7:36. Maura took charge.

"Primrose, go get your sister a pair of pants and her sandals." She pulled out a kitchen chair. "Katniss. Sit."

Prim ran to the guest bedroom. Maura pulled the washcloth from Katniss's hand and drenched it in warm water. She wrung it dry and rubbed it across her daughter's face, removing the tear stains and the remnants of sleep. Prim was running back with a pair of linen pants and the sandals, just as Maura went back to the sink to re-wet the wash cloth. This time, Maura squeezed the water onto Katniss's hair and vigorously finger-combed her tresses. Prim placed her sister's feet in each foot of the sandal, and Maura pulled the ponytail holder from her own hair and used it to secure Katniss's messy but acceptable topknot.

Katniss kept repeating that she never said 'goodbye.' Maura urged her to take deep breaths.

They helped her step into the pants, and she didn't waste a second. She sprinted out the front door, and ran with all her might toward town. It was 7:43.

"Please be late," she said aloud. "Please be late. Please, please be late."

But if Katniss's silent prayers were answered, the train to District 2 would never come.

Her chest felt like it was on fire, but she refused to stop running.

She took an alternate path, cutting through yards along the edge of the Seam, bypassing the high-traffic areas. From a distance she caught a glimpse of Rory and Vick among a group of men clearing debris from the Hawthorne home.

The train whistled as she entered the Merchant's Quarters. It was just the motivation she needed to keep going. When she was finally within view of the station, some passengers were already boarding.

But he was still standing there, next to his father and Rye on one side and Hazelle and Posy on the other. Posy's arms were wrapped snuggly around Peeta's good leg. The conductor was sliding Peeta's two suitcases into a bottom compartment of the train.

Katniss was far too winded to yell, so she waved her arms wildly above her head, hoping to get someone's attention. With the noise of the train, no one noticed.
Rye and Daniel stepped forward for a final embrace, each of them maneuvering around Posy to hug Peeta. Peeta saved the girl for last, lifting her in his arms for a goodbye hug.

"I'll miss you because I love you Peeta," she pouted.

Peeta marveled at his luck. The only female to ever say those words to him wasn't his mother or his wife. It was a four-year-old girl whom he never had to prove himself to.

"I love you too, Posy. Take care of everyone for me, okay?"

He would send for his family so they could visit. And unless it was work related, he didn't plan to return to District 12 ever again.

"Okay," Posy agreed.

The conductor made a last call for passengers, and Hazelle pulled the girl from Peeta's arms. He stepped onto the train and turned around for a final goodbye.

And that's when he saw her. Running as fast as she could, her arms flailing in the air. Had he forgotten something? Was she in trouble? He couldn't tell. He found himself stepping back onto the platform, his eyes fixed on her. Her hair was piled atop her head; she was wearing the tank top that she wore to bed, the one that mesmerized him. The thought crossed his mind that Gale was a lucky man.

When she reached him, she could hardly breathe. She bent at the waist, her hands on both knees as her entire body begged for air. Peeta offered his hand to help her stand.

"Are you okay, Katniss?" His brow furrowed with concern. "Is something wrong?"

She gulped air. "You were just… gonna leave?" Anger, alarm, injury, and disbelief vied for control of her face.

Peeta turned his eyes to the ground. "I figured that we didn't need a longer goodbye than we already had."

Their eyes locked on one another and they just stood there, not knowing what was supposed to happen next.

"Umm, I left some things for you on the countertop at my house. One is a parting gift."

"Better be cheese buns," she quipped, unable to smile for fear of crying.

"You guessed it," he smiled.

"Sir, we need to leave," the conductor said.

"Okay," Peeta glanced over his shoulder.

"I've got go. Thanks for coming to see me off."

Now, she was blinking furiously, trying to keep the tears at bay. Before he could fully widen his arms, she flung herself into them. He held her carefully; she belonged to another man.

"I'm so sorry, Peeta," she whispered.

"You don't have to apologize for how you feel," he said quietly. "I understand. We're not lovers,
we're friends. And I will always be your friend, Katniss. Always."

"I'm sorry, sir," the conductor said. "We really have to go."

"Take care of yourself," he whispered. Then, he stepped onto the train.

"Goodbye everyone."

Posy's voice was loudest in the chorus of farewells. Peeta's eyes landed on every face. He offered his last smile to Katniss. Then, he disappeared.

And like the train, Katniss's tears rolled slowly at first, but steadily gained speed until she was silently crying into her hands. There was a supportive pat to her shoulder and she looked into Daniel Mellark's sympathetic smile, so much like Peeta's. Then, small arms wrapped around her leg.

"Don't cry, Katniss," Posy soothed. "I understand. I love him too."

Katniss's next breath snatched from her body.

What have I done? Even a four-year-old can see it. I love him. And I destroyed my marriage. Oh no! What have I done? I love him. I love my husband.

She backed away from the platform with the horrible revelation that everyone knew except the one person who desperately needed to know, the person she just let walk out of her life. And she ran. She ran as her limbs ached. She ran as tears retched from her body. She ran all the way back to Victor's Village, even as her heart was breaking.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I know, I know; this ending sucks. But stay tuned. There's more to come! Comments are greatly appreciated. Thanks for reading, and I hope to post the next chapter very soon.
Chapter 9: Survival

Chapter Notes

A/N: I am so very frustrated with how long this update has taken. Thank you for staying tuned and caring about this story. I absolutely love writing it, but so much in my life has gotten in the way of my clarity and creativity. This chapter doesn't cover much ground, but I needed to post it for progress sake. I hope you enjoy it, and I hope you'll stay tuned for all that's ahead.

"We're about to start moving, sir. You'll want to hold on."

The conductor motioned to a metal pivot hand strap that was attached to an overhead guard rail. "The first jolt can come as a surprise."

Peeta almost laughed aloud. Surprise? He'd already had his biggest surprise that morning when he saw Katniss running with all her might to the train station. He could have jumped onto a moving train, and it wouldn't have nearly the same impact.

Since his last conversation with Katniss in their bedroom, Peeta had been preparing to leave – District 12 and her life – as covertly and as quickly as possible. It was the only plan that gave him the best chance at survival: avoid further interaction with the girl he loved – the girl who was his wife – but whose heart belonged to another.

He'd almost pulled off his plan. Then, moments ago, he saw her sprinting to the train station with a wild look in her eyes that he'd only seen once before – a September morning seven months earlier when the ballot in Effie Trinket's hand read Primrose Everdeen. That day, Peeta and all Panem witnessed just how fiercely Katniss Everdeen would fight for someone she loved.

But Peeta wasn't among those she loved. She'd made that painfully clear. She only came to the train station to say 'goodbye.' And that was the absolute last thing Peeta needed. But this was goodbye. And he was standing in the dim, enclosed connector between two passenger cars, inhaling coal dust and diesel fumes so strong he could taste them on his tongue.

The train jerked to a roll, and Peeta briefly shut his eyes, wishing he didn't have to physically feel himself leave the only home he had ever known. But behind his eyes were the faces from the platform – his father and brother, Posy and Hazelle… Katniss. He had no choice but to face his departure with his eyes wide open.

"Sir?" The conductor's eyebrow arched with inquiry.

Peeta shook his head as if to clear it. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"We're moving now." The conductor stated matter-of-factly. The corners of his polite smile slowly curved with amusement. "You can proceed to your seat, 8W, just past that sliding door, near the front of the passenger car. You don't have to stay here. You're free to move forward."

The words coursed Peeta's veins, numbing his sorrow like anesthesia.
You don't have to stay here. You're free to move forward. You don't have to stay here. You're free to move forward.

This time when Peeta shut his eyes, he forced himself to see his face and his happiness.

It's time to move forward, he reaffirmed and drew a deep, steadying breath. It's time to forget.

He thanked the conductor, let go of the hand strap, and reached for the sliding door.

In the Mellark household, it was called the 'Rye Why Look.' Whenever Rye was baffled, he would stand with both arms crossed over his chest, his head tilted and eyes squinted, and his lips puffed. Not a sour pucker. More like his bottom lip lifting his top lip toward his nose type of pucker. It was a look of pure mystification that only the middle Mellark son could pull off. Every time Thatch and Peeta tried to imitate him, they would succumb to laughter instead.

Rye assumed his signature look Saturday morning as he watched his sister-in-law sprint from the train station. She ran like something was chasing her, like standing too close to the moving train would take part of her with it.

Midday Friday, after the breakfast rush had subsided, Daniel assembled his wife and sons in the kitchen for an announcement. As Peeta removed his apron and stared at it with downcast eyes, Daniel proudly told everyone that the youngest Mellark had received an amazing job opportunity with the rebuild of Panem that would require him to train for three months in District 2, starting immediately. Peeta would be leaving 12 by train on Saturday morning.

"Peeta told me about this as soon as he decided, and your mother and I give him our blessing."

Nance wrapped her arms tightly across her chest and cast an aggravated glance at the floor.

"We will miss him, but he is safe," Daniel added. "We are all safe, and that's all that matters."

Thatch grinned as he approached Peeta. "That's right. Congrats little bro." He wrapped Peeta in a back-patting hug. "I'm glad one of us can explore the world outside of 12. Natalie has me pinned here for life, but I love every minute of it."

"That's the story you're sticking with, huh," Peeta joked.

"Hell yeah," Thatch said. "I've learned that it's best to stay on a pregnant woman's good side."

They all laughed. Peeta and Rye embraced next.

"Just make sure you or Katniss set me up with one of those victor career hotties. I have a thing for the Cashmere chic, but Enobaria would not be a disappointment."

Peeta ignored the mention of Katniss. His father, Haymitch and Jules were the only ones who knew his relationship with his wife was over.

"Those women would eat you alive," Peeta retorted.

There was more laughter when Rye sighed dreamily and said, "I know."

Peeta thanked his family for their support, apologized for the short notice, and asked them not to mention his departure to anyone since he still needed to "finalize" paperwork. But, in actuality, he didn't want Katniss to find out.
Now it was Saturday morning, and Peeta said his goodbyes to his mother and Thatch and Natalie at
the bakery, and his father and Rye accompanied him to the train station. On the way, Peeta told Rye
more about the job and its national reach. Rye assumed that Katniss would be meeting them at the
train station. So, when he saw her running to the train station – literally like a girl on fire – he thought
that she must be late.

But she wasn't dressed for a train ride. And, she had no luggage. Then, Rye overheard their
exchange.

"You were just going to leave? Without saying 'goodbye'?

"I'll always be your friend, Katniss. Always."

What?

Admittedly, Rye wasn't privy to the details of his brother's marriage. Peeta confided in their father,
but never in him or Thatch. There was a reason; the brothers once had a big fight concerning their
differing take on relationships. And by differing, it was Rye and Thatch's viewpoints versus Peeta's.

As a child, Peeta always tried to keep up with his older brothers, but was often left behind because
he was told he was "too young" or "just a baby." When they would spend time with Peeta, it was
usually to torment him in the benign way that older brothers do. As a result, Peeta developed
independence and his own identity. As they aged, the tormenting stopped, and the three Mellark
boys grew closer and held a strong bond.

But there was one area where they didn't connect: relationships. As children, they teased relentlessly
about Peeta's love for the girl from the Seam with the dark braids, and Peeta hated it. He soon
realized he couldn't go to his immensely popular brothers for advice on how to get Katniss to notice
him.

Then, on Peeta's 13th birthday, Rye and Thatch held a 'rite of passage' to educate Peeta on 'The
Mellark Method.' They shared, in explicit detail, the three "S's" of the method: how to seduce a girl,
have sex with a girl, and separate from a girl without getting your feelings involved. They dubbed
themselves 'Mellark men' and said 'Mellark men' didn't fall in love. Relationships were about having
fun, avoiding commitment, and exiting the relationship with their 'desirability quotient' still intact.

"Leave 'em wanting you, leave 'em wanting more. That's our mantra," Rye said proudly. "You're 13
now, and you need to know our techniques before you start dating."

But to Peeta, the whole 'Mellark Method' sounded callous and ridiculous. He wasn't the least bit
interested in becoming like his brothers who changed girlfriends faster than he could learn their
names. It was the one thing about Thatch and Rye he didn't admire. What Peeta said after they'd
finished their lecture stunned them.

"No thanks," he shrugged. "I already know who I love, and one day I want to marry her."

Rye's face twisted with disdain. "Marry?! Did you hear a word we just said?! First of all, you're way
too young to even want to marry someone much less know who that someone is. And second of all,
who is it? We never see you with anyone except Delly, and we know she's just a friend."

"Yeah," Thatch scoffed. "You and Delly have no sexual energy at all – which, by the way is a
requirement of the Mellark Method. So, who is it?"

Peeta's eyes shifted to the floor. He wished he hadn't said anything. "Don't worry about it," he
mumbled.
"C'mon! Tell us," Thatch chided. Then, his eyes widened in realization. "Wait. Don't tell me it's still that girl from when we were kids?"

Peeta's eyes flashed to Thatch. "Her name is Katniss," he retorted.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Peet, snap out of it!" Rye exclaimed. "After all these years, you're still hung up on one girl? And she never notices you. You never even speak to her! Now you're saying you love her and you want to marry her?"

"Rye's right," Thatch added. "You've had a hard on for that girl since forever. It's time to let that go."

Peeta looked injured. Thatch sat beside him and draped an arm around his shoulder.

"Listen, Peet. Girls can be brutal. They can be indecisive and complicated and mean, and they will drag us into their craziness if we lose self-control. Falling in love is losing self-control. That's why I created this method and passed it on to Rye."

"And it works," Rye nodded his approval.

"And now," Thatch continued, "We want to teach it to you so you'll know how to operate as a self-controlled Mellark man. It's what makes us different – well, that and other things, of course," he grinned slyly. "Our goal is maximum enjoyment – for ourselves and our girl. And when it's time to move on to someone else, we know how to make a smooth exit."

"In other words, you trick her into thinking it's all her fault that you two broke up," Peeta concluded. "Just the other day, I saw Hannah – or Anna – or was it Ada? I saw the girl with the curly hair crying to her friends about things being over with Rye, and I overheard you two talking about tricking her into a break up."

"Ah, Anna," Rye said fondly. "She was a wild one. I almost hated for that one to end."

"That's what I mean," Peeta implored. "I'm not like that. I don't want to be with a lot of girls."

"Well, you'd better change your mind because that girl doesn't even know you're alive," Rye joked and he and Thatch laughed. Peeta pushed Thatch's arm from his shoulder.

"For the last time, her name is Katniss," he said hotly. "Katniss Everdeen. I will speak to her eventually, and one day, I will ask her to marry me. Will she say 'yes'? I don't know if she will or not. But I'm gonna ask her."

"So, you're not even gonna try The Mellark Method?!" Rye argued.

Thatch tried a calmer approach. "Here's the thing, Peet. The three of us are a unit in people's minds. We live together, we work together, we all wrestle. We're brothers. We need solidarity in how we approach relationships or it'll fuck up our entire system. Mellark men don't fall in love, Peet, not for real anyway. It's our thing, and we need you to get on board."

"And," Rye continued, "If you break method and refuse to date other girls because your dick is pointed in Seam girl's direction –"

"Her name is Katniss! And I don't care where she lives!"

"I don't care what the hell her name is or where she lives! You're gonna mess things up for us! Once girls see that one of us can fall in love, they'll expect the same from me and Thatch!"
Thatch lifted his hands in surrender. "Just leave it alone, Rye. Peet needs some time to think it over."

"He's been in love with this girl since he was like 5 years old! He's never had the nerve to speak to her, and he thinks he's going to marry her one day!"

"I'm gonna ask her, Rye. So shut up!"

"Oh yeah?!"

"Yeah!"

"Well good luck with your proposal because when you finally get the balls to ask whatshername to be your wife, she'll be in the middle of bouncing up and down on that guy she's always in the woods with! What do you think they really do out there?"

That did it. Peeta hated the jealousy he harbored for Gale Hawthorne and that Katniss seemed happiest when she was with him. Peeta feared that Gale would claim Katniss before he had the chance. And, in that moment, he took all his anger out on Rye. Before Peeta knew it, he sprung from the bed and hurled his fist at Rye's nose. They fell tussling to the floor.

"Shit! Stop it." Thatch got on the floor to separate them but appeared to be part of the battle when Daniel burst through the door. He pulled them apart and ordered all three to sit on the edge of the bed. He wouldn't hear a word of explanation. It was one of the rare times when Daniel Mellark raised his voice.

"Quiet! I don't want to hear it! Just fix it! You're brothers. I do not condone you boys fighting outside our home, and I will not allow it in my house!" Then Thatch got an even more severe tongue lashing for being the oldest and allowing this to happen.

Peeta and his brothers didn't speak for a little over a week when they finally made amends. But something unspoken was understood among them – there would be no talk of relationships. Thatch and Rye would do their thing, and Peeta would do his.

Years passed and Thatch started dating Natalie Minson. She was the girl who sent his heart into a freefall, the girl who made his Mellark Method unnecessary. On a late June morning, he gave Natalie his last name, and one Mellark man was officially off the market.

Rye continued on his own, vowing to never marry, to never fall in love. At his core, Rye was a pragmatist, and if his parents' tepid relationship was any indication, love was two parts misery and one part tolerance, and he would never commit to that.

Then last year, Peeta was reaped. And that changed everything.

Worst of all, he was reaped with Katniss Everdeen. Rye knew he would have to witness his brother's death in The Hunger Games; there could only be one winner, and he knew Peeta would die to keep Katniss alive.

So. That was love.

For Rye, Reaping Day happened too fast, and he felt like he was coming apart at the seams. He couldn't even bring himself to bid Peeta farewell. Part of it was guilt; he could have volunteered to take his place, but he didn't. He wasn't as brave as Katniss Everdeen, and as his punishment, he would never forget or make fun of her name again. But worst of all, Rye knew Peeta would never marry the girl he always loved, would never get the love he so richly deserved. So Rye had another reason to never marry. Because Peeta would never get the chance.
Then came a miracle. Peeta and Katniss survived. And they were in love.

*He must have finally told her how he felt,* Rye mused as he watched Katniss and Peeta hold hands and gaze lovingly at one another during Caesar Flickerman's interview with the victors. And when Peeta returned to District 12, Rye hugged him the longest.

Peeta and Katniss were married. Immediately. Rye suspected that Katniss might be pregnant due to the speed of their nuptials, but he never felt he had the right to ask. But when Peeta should have been at this happiest, Rye noticed that Peeta seemed defeated, withdrawn, and distracted by silent thoughts that squeezed his brows. Rye didn't automatically attribute Peeta's sadness to his marriage. After all, his little brother had been in a war and had experienced firsthand all the horrors that most of Panem watched on broadcast screens.

But now, Snow was dead, and Peeta was leaving, and Katniss was running, and they were saying goodbye, and the train was moving, and she was sobbing… And now she was fleeing with the same intensity with which she came.

"Dad?" Rye said, his eyes still squinted on Katniss. "What just happened?"

Daniel watched with a discerning stare. Finally, he exhaled a long, weary sigh. "Well, son. It looks to me like we've just witnessed the most unnecessary break up in history."

There was a tug to the tail of his shirt. He peered into a tiny, heart-shaped face with gray doe eyes.

"Are you Peeta's daddy?"

Daniel squatted to come eye-level with the girl. "I sure am. And this is Peeta's brother, Rye." Rye leaned over and slapped hands with Posy, making her smile. "You must be Posy," Daniel continued.

"Yep," she nodded. "And this is my mommy." Hazelle smiled and exchanged handshakes with Daniel and Rye.

"So," Posy said, her face pinched with curiosity. "What's a break up?"

The sliding door was metal, trimmed with heavy black rubber so it shut soundlessly behind him. For several moments, Peeta stood at the back of the passenger car, taking it all in.

The last train he boarded was opulent, spacious, and modern, splayed with mahogany tables and leather tufted couches and silver fixtures so polished they glowed like candles. But the last train was from President Snow's private fleet, a taste of wealth and privilege for the children he reaped before he forced them to massacre one another with the entire nation watching.

Peeta much preferred this train. Aged and unadorned; rows of burgundy velvet seats that had been worn pink in spots; dull wood armrests that had been etched by previous passengers during moments of boredom. The passenger car was filled with travelers, their heads dotting the tops of almost every seat on either side of the narrow aisle. The last row where he stood – seats 59 A and W to his left and seats 60 A and W to his right – were empty.

*I'm guessing 'A' is for aisle seat and 'W' is for window seat. The even numbered rows are to the right. So, I have a window seat ahead on the right. 8W. He started walking and silently counting.*

58… 56… 54…

Peeta gripped the edges of the seats for balance as the train steadily gained speed. He noticed that
most of the passengers wore variations of the same ash gray uniform. Something about that uniform was oddly familiar.

50... 48... 46...

The travelers in gray started to whisper, the buzz of their voices spreading like wildfire on either side of the aisle. He couldn't hear what they were saying, so he nodded politely at several sets of widened eyes as he passed. Rows ahead, travelers twisted in their seats to get a better look as he approached.

*I guess this is what happens when you're late to take your seat,* he mused.

38... 36... 34... 32...

A young woman in row 30's aisle seat popped to her feet as Peeta approached. She wore gray, but her lips were the color of pomegranates and the edge of her eyelids were thick with the color of coal. She flipped her hair over one shoulder and blew Peeta a kiss.

*Ohh-kay... What's with these people? You know what, nevermind. Just keep walking. You're almost there.* 20... 18... 16... 14... 12... 10...

He breathed a sigh of relief that no one was seated in 8A. He slid into the row, to his window seat, sensing several sets of eyes at his back and glimpsing more gazes from travelers in the rows ahead.

But all he wanted to do was sleep. With all he had to do to prepare to leave 12, Peeta hadn't slept the night before. It was a nine-hour ride to District 2. If he could somehow manage to shut out the world for the next several hours, he would wake up in a new city, far from home. He had just shut his eyes and rested his head against the window pane when he felt someone lower into the seat next to his.

Peeta turned to see a man in his early 20s whose wavy brown hair was tapered to the nape of his neck. He was fair complexed with hooded eyes, amber-colored freckles sprinkled over the bridge of his nose, and a genial though tentative smile. He wore a gray uniform, and a large, black portfolio was tucked underneath his arm.

"Is this seat taken?"

Peeta stifled a groan. He had been the last traveler to take his seat in the entire passenger car, so he knew this guy must have already been seated elsewhere. But Peeta shook his head in response, offering the seat before turning back to the window and shutting his eyes.

His new riding partner didn't take the hint.

"I'm Gaige Logan."

Peeta turned to see the man's hand extended. He returned the handshake.

"Hi. I'm – "

"Peeta Mellark," Gaige answered, excitement mounting his face. "I know. We all know."

Peeta sat up straighter in his seat, unable to hide the wariness from his eyes. "Forgive me; I'm operating on zero sleep. I don't know what you mean."

Gaige's gaze turned perceptive. "I had a feeling you didn't, which is why I came to sit with you. You're probably wondering why all of us in uniform were staring at you when you walked down the aisle, right?"
"Right."

"Please forgive us if we seemed rude. All of us in uniform are from District 13, and we've never seen a victor in person before, not to mention the last male victor of Panem. To us, you're a celebrity."

The thump of her footsteps pounding the earth synced with pounding of her heartbeat in her ears. She could barely see through her tear-blurred eyes, but she knew this path all too well. She'd walked it thousands of times and run it once, her foot bruised in her escape, hoping and praying that Allister wouldn't catch her before she reached Peeta…

*Peeta. He left. He's gone.*

She didn't know which was more painful – running from the train that carried him away or running to the empty house that had been their home. But she had to get there, to see what he left behind. Peeta never intended to say 'goodbye'; whatever he left for her was meant to speak in his absence.

So, she didn't stop running until she reached his kitchen side door where she collapsed, her legs as limp as wet noodles, her lung pleading for air, her temples throbbing. The door was locked, and she stumbled to each door and twisted each knob. One of them had to be open, she thought. She was at the final door, the back door, when the reality hit her.

*Of course they're all locked. He's gone, you idiot! He's gone, and he's never coming back.*

She sank to the back-porch steps and snatched the ponytail holder from her hair to relieve her head which seemed to be swelling with pain. Her tangled tresses landed past her shoulders in a disheveled mess.

*Wait! I have a key! Where is my house key?*

But, her thoughts were scattered. She squeezed her head in her hands to steady her thoughts.

*Think, Katniss. You have keys to this house. Where are they? Think… How did you get inside last ni –*

"I slept at my mom's house! They're at my mom's house!"

Katniss ambled to Maura's back door and whispered her thanks when it opened. Inside, she pawed her way past the living room, cursing the wall clock whose ticking pulsed in her head. She'd grown accustomed to the silent movements of the clock next door.

Her keys were on the nightstand in the guest bedroom where she slept the night before. The silver key turned the locks at her mother's house, and the bronze key belonged to the Mellark home.

Back at Peeta's kitchen side door, Katniss's hands shook as she tried to insert the key, and the entire set fell to the concrete steps with a clank. Her angst crested, and she erupted with a slew of profanities loud enough to reach the tree line in the distance while she assaulted the door with her fists and feet.

She didn't notice him approaching until he scooped the keys into his hand.

"Here, sweetheart. Let me."

Katniss watched, mute and sheepish, as Haymitch unlocked the door and held it open. He couldn't help but frown at her red-rimmed eyes, her labored breaths, and her jitteriness that made her an
emotional wreck.

She had more resolve in the Games.

Despite her haste to get inside the home, Katniss entered with slow, ominous steps. The house wasn’t just quiet; it was lifeless behind its drawn blinds. Haymitch waited just inside the door and watched Katniss approach a white cardboard bakery box, neatly tied with red and white striped twine, on the kitchen counter.

The box was large enough to hold an entire sheet cake. It reminded Katniss of her walks past Mellark Bakery with Prim when all they could afford were the delicious smells. Once, Katniss vowed that by Prim's 18th birthday, she would save enough coins to buy a whole strawberry shortcake for her. But secretly, Katniss was always intrigued by the sheet cakes on display and what lay beneath their elegant, sugary frosting. She stared blankly at the bakery box, baffled that she never ordered either cake after she won the Games. She had the money. And until today, she had the baker.

With a sudden burst of energy, she vigorously untied the twine and lifted the lid. Inside, four cheese buns were neatly arranged in one corner, but much of the space in the box was occupied by a large white envelope that wouldn’t lie flat. Atop the larger envelope was a smaller, announcement-style gold envelope trimmed in cobalt.

Her heart sank. The smaller envelope was one of the Capitol-issued 'Thank You' cards from her wedding that she never bothered to send. Peeta had written words of appreciation, signed 'Peeta and Katniss Mellark,' and mailed them to Effie's list of Capitol elites who attended their wedding and gave gifts.

She tugged the ivory-colored notecard from the gold and cobalt envelope. Their initials – an elegantly cursive "M" in the middle with a smaller "K" and "P" on either side – were embossed in gold on the front flap. What awaited her inside the card sent her trembling hand to cover her mouth. Haymitch moved closer.

Peeta had sketched her. Her likeness peered from inside the cover with defiant eyes and the hint of a smile. Her braid hung over one shoulder, and behind the opposite shoulder were the winged tips of her arrows.

Warm tears spilled down her cheeks, moistening those that had hardened. His words started on the opposite flap and continued to the back cover. She read aloud with a quivering voice.

**Katniss –**

*My guess is that you'll be in the woods when I leave, so you'll probably get this after I'm gone. I've decided to leave 12 and take the national job in District 2. I'm leaving on Saturday morning so I can get settled and ready for training. Hopefully, my absence will make it easier for you to move forward with the next chapter of your life.*

She glanced helplessly at Haymitch before continuing.

*I've cleaned the entire house. All the bed linen has been washed and is in the clothes dryer. I have all the clothes I want and need, so you can discard or donate whatever remains in the master bedroom closet. The chest from Effie with wedding photos and gifts are still here, and you can do with them as you like. My father or brothers will come by to pick up the sunset painting and the abstract painting I was working on, which are on the back porch. I also left*
the music discs so you'll have the songs you liked most. My dad is okay with you keeping them. They are beside the music player in the living room.

I want you to know that I'm grateful for the time we had together and the time I spent as your husband.

Her voice broke, her breathing jerked, and her tears coursed faster. Haymitch rested his hand on her shoulder.

It makes me happy to know that you can finally have the life you want, which is the life you deserve. I've signed off on everything in the big envelope, so you should be all set.

She froze, a look of dread descending on her face as her eyes locked on the larger envelope. Haymitch slid the notecard from her hand and continued reading.

I wish you well on the rebuild of District 12. I know you'll transform this place into something amazing.

Take care of yourself.

Peeta

With a surge of defiance and urgency, Katniss tore into the larger envelope. Her lips moved as she silently read the title. Then, she scrambled to the last page of the document where Peeta had signed and dated.

And Haymitch witnessed the very moment her heart broke. He caught her as she sank to the cool tile floor, her body wracked with sobs. He had no comforting words, so he wrapped his arm around her and guided her head to his shoulder.

They sat that way for hours.

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Peeta slowly nodded as the realization dawned. "Everyone in gray is from District 13." *That's where I'd seen it before. Alma Coin was wearing that uniform on the video footage of Snow's execution.*

"And we all know who you are," Gaige said. "We may have lived underground in 13, but watching The Hunger Games every year was mandatory viewing."

That sounds like one of Snow's mandates, Peeta thought wryly. He listened with fascination as Gaige talked.

"Now that we're a free Panem, there's been a mass exodus from 13. Many of us have dreamt of lives above ground, and now we have our chance to experience it." Gaige's look turned somber. "We were always told to be grateful that we would never be reaped. But the irony was that so many of our children died in the outbreak that we wouldn't have yielded many tributes."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Peeta said quietly. "And I'm sorry you all were made to watch the Games. No one should have to live the way this nation was forced to live for the past 70-something years."

"Well, we owe you and your wife a debt of gratitude," Gaige said. "Nothing would have changed in Panem if it weren't for the last Games. And, I want you to know that the people of 13 are good, hardworking people – for the most part. They're just enamored with you and your wife."
Gaige chuckled as he continued. "Most of our young women started to braid their hair like Katniss's after the reaping. And almost every girl in District 13 wished they were Katniss when you two kissed in the cave." He glanced over his shoulder and lowered his voice to a whisper. "I know at least two of these girls – three actually – would try to make you break your vows at some point during this trip."

Peeta blinked in disbelief. When he returned from the Games – aside from the initial round of people who stopped by the bakery to congratulate him on winning and on his marriage – no one from District 12 had treated him or Katniss like celebrities. None of the girls they'd been in school with had shown special interest in him after the Games, and he was fine with that. Katniss was the only girl he wanted.

But the people of District 13 were complete strangers, yet they knew all kinds of details about him and Katniss – and the same was true for everyone in Panem. The realization was unsettling.

Gaige's eyes scanned Peeta. "By the look on your face, I'm guessing you have no idea how popular you are."

Peeta heaved a sigh. "I guess not." He twisted in his seat to face Gaige. "Tell me about your life in 13."

Gaige's face lit up. "I'm a photographer. Well, by trade, I was a cook, but this" he tapped the portfolio, "this is my passion. I even got to photograph our late Commander Coin once. I'm leaving 13 to find work in the daylight – that's what we call life above ground, the daylight. My camera is a little dated, but it still shoots. I plan to get a job as a cook, save enough money to buy a new camera and equipment and start my own business on the side. I will take any photo. I don't care. It's all I want to do."

Peeta smiled at Gaige's enthusiasm. "Do you have photos in there?"

He nodded eagerly. "Yeah. I'll show you." He unzipped the portfolio and carefully handed Peeta a collection of 8x10 black-and-white photographs. Gaige proceeded to tell Peeta the story behind each one – when he took it, how he got the assignment, what he learned while developing the film. However, his work needed no introduction. His images were haunting, powerful, and told their own stories.

One photo was of a boy with yellow-hazel eyes and skin the color of maple. He stood in uniform, his arm erect, his fingers reaching for the branches of a tree. Peeta wondered if it was the boy's first encounter with nature. The entire photo was black and white except for the boy's honeyed eyes and the tree's verdant leaves.

"These are amazing, Gaige. You are really good."

He beamed. "Thanks. They're the best examples of my work, so I keep them with me in my portfolio. My favorite, though, is a portrait of my grandmother. When she finally allowed me to photograph her, she loved it. I left that one in 13."

Peeta's eyes narrowed with his question. "Why didn't you bring it with you?"

"It's part of the promise I made to my grandmother and my parents," Gaige smiled. "Once I establish myself in the daylight, I have to come back to 13 to visit them and let them know I'm doing well. Then, once they know I've made a life for myself and I'm happy, I can get the photo back and keep my grandmother with me wherever I go."
Peeta nodded. He and Gaige were both seeking new lives far from home. The only difference was that Peeta never planned to return.

"What district are you heading to?" Peeta asked.

"I'm going straight to the Capitol." Gaige shrugged. "I know I have high hopes given I'm from 13 and know nothing about life outside of 13, but I couldn't stay where I was at. I had to see what was out here. And what about you – if I may ask? Why are you leaving 12?"

Because there's nothing left for me in 12. Because I can't stay and watch her love someone else.

"I'm going for training to help rebuild Panem," Peeta said. "My job will be creating youth centers." Peeta launched into the same speech Julianna had given him about the need to redirect Panem's youth now that the Games were defunct.

"Wow. That sounds great," Gaige said with equal admiration. "Will you build a youth center in 13?"

Peeta's brow furrowed. "I honestly don't know. I didn't know District 13 existed until two days ago. Tell me more about District 13. What is life like there?"

Gaige began to talk about the measured lifestyle underground, the emphasis on discipline and rationing. He talked about their arms being stamped with their daily schedule, and the drab walls that the youth of every generation detested after seeing vivid images of fluorescent-colored Capitol citizens. To Peeta, it sounded like an underground prison.

"So, what are your thoughts?" Peeta asked. "I know you said there aren't many young people in 13, but for those who are there, what are their needs? How can the new Panem help them lead better lives?"

"Bring them to the daylight," Gaige said without a moment's hesitation. "My parents, my grandmother, so many of our older residents have been in 13 so long that they're scared to leave. They are afraid of what is above ground. The few children we do have will be steeped in that fear now that so many of us young adults are leaving. But our children need exposure. We lived underground because we had to. We have a choice now. They have a choice now. Our lives can change for the better."

Peeta nodded. "And if there's one thing that I've learned thus far it's that sometimes change is necessary."

Gaige also nodded, a smile spreading across his lips. "Very necessary."

Early Saturday morning, before the darkened sky yielded to sunlight, Gale reported to the mines. After clocking in and gathering their tool belts, he and the other miners headed to the elevators that lowered them three or more stories down to the man trip, the segmented rail car used to transport men deep into the earth.

Normally, Gale was near the middle of the row of miners filing to the man trip. He usually sat in one of the middle cars, sharing it with Thom and Riles and Blanding and a few other miners he had developed camaraderie with over the years. The ride was clamorous, the incessant clack of the rails clashing with the earth's sonorous groans. Still, most of the miners shouted above the noise during the hour-plus ride, griping about things above ground or sharing off-color jokes that could only be spoken below.

But Saturday morning, just like the day before, Gale needed to be alone. So much was unsettled in
his life, and he was growing impatient for resolutions. And even though he lay awake on Thom's couch most nights, there was never enough time to think. So, Gale waited for the end of the line and climbed into the last car, next to a potbellied miner named Earl who was always asleep and snoring three minutes into the ride to the underground worksite.

First, there was the unresolved issue of housing for his family. Finding them a place to live and getting them out of Victor's Village was his first priority. He hated that his brothers were wearing Peeta's hand-me-down clothes and that they all were dependent on generosity of others.

Next, there was the prospect of new employment, which should have been exciting. But, he had begun to worry that his fight with Peeta could threaten his opportunity. Haymitch and Beetee Latier were good friends, and despite Haymitch's anger at both him and Peeta after the fight, Gale knew that Haymitch would side with Peeta when relaying details of the fight. Still, Gale planned to submit a leave request for Monday so he could arrive early to the Justice Building to meet with Beetee. Hopefully, a national-salaried job was still on the table. In District 12, the only people on a national salary were Hunger Games victors. If all went well, Gale could resign from mining, and he could easily support his family – even if he was paid at the lowest end of the national salary scale. But none of that could be resolved until Monday.

And then there was her. The girl forced to take the baker's last name. The girl Gale wanted for his own.

Much of Gale's insomnia on Thom's couch was due to what Maura said that day in Haymitch's house after the fight.

*She loves one of you. She told me so.*

Gale shut his eyes as his body swayed with the movement of the man trip and saw Katniss at the brook, wiping tears, accepting his bow and arrow and a salty piece of dried meat. He told her he would accept her decision – whether it was him or Peeta. But with each passing moment since he uttered those words, Gale could only accept one outcome.

*It has to be me she loves. I mean, she said she was in love with him, but that doesn't mean she loves him. Being in love counts for nothing. That farce of a marriage to Peeta has confused her, but she has to see that we belong together. That she belongs with me.*

For the rest of the ride, Gale wracked his mind for telltale signs of Katniss's choice. Did Maura stare at him longer than Peeta when she said it? Did Katniss not want to break the bad news to him when he found her in the woods after the fight? Or, maybe she was only crying because she trusted Peeta and he betrayed her – after all, they were allies in a death match. And she could have said then, before Gale left her in the woods that she loved Peeta. But she didn't.

Gale had come to a conclusion by the time he reached the worksite.

*Hunger Games or no Hunger Games, nothing can replace the years Katniss and I spent together, surviving, feeding our families, being there for one another. She can't throw all that away, not when Snow is dead and we're finally free. We belong together, and –*

"Hey Hawthorne!"

Gale turned to see Jimmy Burman, one of the older foremen approaching with his uneven gait. It was as if Jimmy had legs from two different bodies, one long and one noticeably shorter when he walked. Jimmy was what Emory Hawthorne called 'a good soul,' and if it hadn't been for severe inflammation in his right hip five years ago, he would have met the same fate as Emory and James Everdeen and
Jimmy held a clipboard. "Son," he said in his high-pitched, scratchy voice. "Can you work a full-shift today plus three hours' overtime, just like Friday? Pay is time and a half, same as yesterday."

Gale didn't hesitate to accept. He couldn't turn down the money, despite what he hoped would come from his meeting with Beetee. However, the longer shift meant that for a second day, he would miss whatever remained of the clean-up at the site of his destroyed home in the Seam, he wouldn't see his family, and, he would miss his shift at the Justice Building. But his mother would be there. And, she would probably take Rory to help.

Gale nodded. "I can do it."

"And we have the same shift with overtime available for Sunday."

"I'll take it."

"Great. I'm happy that son of a bitch Snow is dead, but I'll be damned if closing on Thursday didn't set us back a shitload."

"Well, I can really use the money, Jimmy, so thanks."

Jimmy mumbled something irreverent about a miner's pay and tottered away. Gale called after him.

"Jimmy. Could you ask someone in the front office to get word to my mother that I'm taking a full shift with overtime – just like yesterday?"

"Already on it."

"Oh, and I need to take my annual day on Monday, all day. To handle some personal business."

"Got it," Jimmy said, waving a hand dismissively in the air as he waddled off. "I wish I could take every day off from this hell hole."

Gale grinned because miners like Jimmy made the workday tolerable. But if all went well on Monday, Gale's days as a miner would soon be over, and every unsettled issue in his life would be resolved – except for one.

*I've got to see Katniss on Monday,* he decided. *The longer she stays with Peeta, the more he will manipulate her. And I've got to hear it from her lips. I've got to know it's me she loves.*

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Hours had passed when Katniss slowly rolled to her knees, pulled herself to her feet, and shuffled to the stairs. "I'm gonna lie down," she mumbled.

Haymitch lifted himself from the floor. "Have you eaten?"

"No."

"You should eat something. Get some food in your system."

"I'm not hungry." She was almost out of view.

"Are you going to be okay, Katniss?"

His words stopped her because he never called her by her name. She glanced over her shoulder with
the look of a convict accepting her fate.

"I'll never be okay," she said, her eyes brimming with tears. "But I'll survive. I always find a way to survive."

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Peeta and Gaige talked for another two hours, and then Peeta slept for nearly four hours.

He woke to hear Gaige whispering in a heated exchange with a girl in gray uniform who was crouching beside his seat and holding onto the arm rail for balance. It was the same girl who blew the kiss when Peeta walked down the aisle to his seat. Now, her hair was braided over one shoulder. Peeta quickly shut his eyes.

"No! Leave him alone. You mean him no good."

"Shut up, Gaige," she hissed. "I saw you jump up to sit next to him just as I was approaching. The least you can do is introduce us." She cocked an eyebrow. "I'll do the rest."

"He's married, Susannah. I know that didn't matter to you in 13, but you can't live that way in the daylight."

"Well where is his wife?" She whispered with equal fury. "Hell, where is his wedding ring? If he were my husband, I'd never let him out of my sight, much less let him travel across Panem without me and without the symbol of our union."

Peeta's mind raced. He had placed his wedding ring at the back of one of his kitchen drawers in the pre-dawn hours while he waited for Posy's cake to cool. He meant to concoct a reason for not wearing it, but he thought he could at least make the train ride without anyone noticing.

"Just go away. I'm serious, Susannah! You mean him no good, and if I did introduce you, I would tell him about the kind of person you are."

"Fine," she spat. "I'll talk to him myself when we get to the Capitol. I don't need you." She huffed with indignation as she made her way back down the aisle.

"A friend of yours?"

Gaige startled at Peeta's voice. His eyelids opened.

"I'm sorry about that, Peeta." Gaige sighed with frustration. "I've known Susannah all my life. She's underhanded and disloyal. Trust me, she doesn't just want to say a neighborly 'hello.'"

"Well, thanks for that. Like you said, I am a married man," Peeta turned his gaze to the window. No one needed to know – at least not yet – that Panem's star-crossed lovers were no more. His mind flashed back to the sight of Katniss running to get to him at the train station.

She was there to say 'goodbye.' Not 'can we talk things over' or 'I want you in my life.' Just... 'goodbye.' It was just that easy for her to let go.

"Peeta?"

"Uh, sorry, Gaige. What did you say?"

Gaige motioned toward Peeta's hand. "You don't wear your wedding ring?"

Peeta shrugged, trying to appear casual as he put his newfound explanation into words. "Our rings
came from President Snow's regime, so we've decided to no longer use them as a symbol of our relationship."

"That makes sense," Gaige agreed. But he sensed a guilelessness in Peeta, a willingness to trust people's motives and intentions. After considering his words, he decided to speak up.

"Peeta… You're only a few years younger than me. And I know you've had some harrowing life experiences that I could never imagine. But can I give you some unsolicited advice?"

"Sure," Peeta shrugged.

Gaige chose his words carefully. "You are a brave, strong, attractive guy with a great personality and a good head on your shoulders. But don't forget that you're also incredibly rich. And everyone knows it. Be very careful of people, Peeta. Make them prove themselves. I'm not suggesting that you become paranoid, but take nothing at face value. Remember that you've got more to lose than they do, no matter where they're from."

Gaige's words turned in Peeta's chest. Suddenly, he felt wholly unprepared for what was ahead, just like he felt when he was on stage at the Capitol, trying to charm the crowds in hopes of sparing his life in the Hunger Games. But just like the Games, there were no loyalties outside the arena. Everyone played their own game.

He thanked Gaige for the advice, but secretly, he was already missing home.

After another hour, Gaige and everyone in gray uniform in the passenger car got off the train in the Capitol. Gaige and Peeta shook hands and parted as friends. Susannah kept glancing over her shoulder at Peeta as she was forced down the aisle of disembarking passengers, dismayed that he was not getting off in the Capitol.

Peeta felt infinitely grateful that Gaige decided to sit with him; otherwise, he would have had seven hours of Susannah.

Now, seat 8A was empty. Peeta was alone with thoughts that echoed Gaige's admonition.

He was right, Peeta told himself. I have to stay guarded. I'm no longer in District 12 where people had their pride even if they had nothing else. I need to focus on work and keep to myself. Make people earn my trust over time. Over a very long time. Stay guarded and stay focused. That's my plan.

Two hours remained of his trip. Districts 2, 7, and 4 were on the other side of the Capitol, and with the time change, it was only 11 a.m. It was 3 p.m., back home. Peeta decided to stay awake for the last leg of his trip, wary of being recognized while asleep. But as soon as the train started to move, his eyelids shut and his head rested against the window pane.

He was still asleep when the train pulled into the District 2 station. She saw him from the platform and asked the conductor to allow her to retrieve a sleeping passenger.

Peeta didn't respond to her voice, so she gently shook his forearm.

"Peeta. Peeta."

Her voice was a paradox – calming like a sedative yet spirited with notes of confidence and amusement. He groggily lifted his head and opened his eyes to a stunning shade of hazel green eyes that he'd first seen in Haymitch's control room.
"Oh." He quickly sat up in his chair, his eyes locked on a smile that arrested him. And before he could stop himself, his mind told him that she was even more beautiful in person.

"Hi Peeta," she said softly. "I'm Jules. Welcome to District 2."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I intended for this to be a much (much) longer chapter, and that part is already in the works. I hope you enjoyed this chapter even though much ground was not covered. I will do my very best to update soon. Thanks for being patient with me and for staying tuned. Comments are welcome!
Maura hated still moments, those unpredictable times when her mind roamed, and she became cornered by memories that threatened to drain her emotions and derail her sanity.

She was on the verge of one of those still moments as she waited at the sink in the narrow strip of kitchen, mesmerized by the trickle of water that slowly filled the rusted cast iron pot. She absently slipped one hand under the faucet, letting the cool water coat her wrist, palm, and fingers.

In this stillness, she could hear his morning song. The song he hummed each morning after finishing his oats and before reaching for his dusty miner's helmet that she complained about whenever he left it on the kitchen table. His quick apology and slow kiss to her temple as she stood at their sink, washing his bowl. The ease with which he turned the corners of her mouth into a smile.

She had no idea that one morning, it would be their last.

Don't Maura, she silently chastised, shaking the memory from her head. Don't go there. You promised yourself you would never go there again so long as your girls need you... Why am I even thinking about losing James?

"Mom?"

Maura's eyes flashed to one of the versions of herself and James – admittedly more her than her late husband. Primrose was Maura's likeness; Katniss had claimed most of James's features.

"Yes, honey."

Prim lowered her eyes to the gentle grip she had on Maura's stopwatch, her brows knotted. "The contractions are three minutes apart."

"Already?" Maura blinked in disbelief. "This little one must have an appointment to keep. Help me lift this pot to the stove so the water can get to boiling."

Grateful for renewed focus, Maura twisted the faucet shut. She and Prim hoisted the pot to the wood stove, and Maura placed the lid atop the pot to hasten the boil. She didn't anticipate Prim's next question.

"Were you just thinking about how upset Katniss was this morning about Peeta leaving?"
This time, Maura stilled, her mind reaching for the thoughts she dismissed moments before. The morning had been so rushed preparing for the baby to arrive that neither she nor Prim had spoken about Katniss.

Was I? Did what happen this morning with Peeta leaving and Katniss running after him make me think of James? Of losing my husband?

Prim wore worry in the crinkle of her nose. "I haven't seen her that upset since she volunteered for me at the Reaping. Do you think she's alright, mom?"

"I think it surprised her is all. When something happens that you don't expect, and everything changes suddenly," Maura drew a deep breath, hints of her own sudden losses coming out in her exhale. "It can throw you for a loop."

"But your sister is strong, Primrose," she reassured. "She will be fine."

Prim nodded, but her eyes brows were still knotted, her nose still crinkled. Maura could read her like a book.

"Tell you what. Once Lalie Mays delivers this anxious little guy, you and I will go straight home and check on Katniss. Okay?"

Maura watched the tension lift from Prim's face, leaving behind the quiet calm that reminded Maura so much of James.

"In the meantime, grab a few blankets and towels and make sure my bag is at the foot of the bed. Oh, and –"

A series of loud knocks hit against the front door.

"Reset the timer," Prim said, anticipating Maura's unfinished thought. "Got it."

As Prim rushed to gather the supplies, Maura dried her hands in the hem of her dress and hurried to the front door. On the other side was a man, nearly twice her age, with a weathered face and leathery skin stretched over large knuckles. Maura had seen him before at The Hob, but they never met.

"Ma'am." He dipped his head and removed a tattered pageboy cap. "My daughter-in-law is calling for you. She's paining awful bad with that baby, and she said to go find the healer. Someone told me to look here. That would be you, right ma'am?"

"Yes. Maura Everdeen. How many months pregnant is she?"

"Almost nine. David – her husband, my boy – works in the mines. I'm too old for that work anymore, and his mother is no more, so he asked me to stay with the girl during the day. Can you come see about her?"

"I will be there as soon as I can, Mr. …"

"Briston. Corbin Briston And the girl is Lucy Briston."

"Yes, Mr. Briston. Until I get there, prop her up on some pillows as high as she can go without being uncomfortable. And fill a couple of pots for boiling water. I can handle the rest once we get there."

He dipped his head, this time in appreciation. "Much obliged, ma'am. We can only offer you a jar of pickled vegetables for your help."
"I'm putting you to work looking after Lucy until I get there. You owe me nothing."

Lalie's groans were now full-on wails. Mr. Briston's throat bobbed with a heavy gulp, his eyes following the tormented sound.

"I need to go. Please tell Lucy I will be there as soon as I can."

They parted, and Maura rushed to Lalie's room. This was sizing up to be a longer day than she expected. But, she intended to keep her promise to Prim.

_We'll be there soon, Katniss. Just as soon as we can._

The warm glow of her smile reminded him of the day he stood on his back porch, finally mixing the right colors to capture the sunset on canvas. He followed her down the train's narrow aisle, still stuck in the moment of opening his eyes to her smile.

He was already starting to lose focus.

But for a modest baker's boy from District 12, focus could easily be lost in a place like District 2. He had barely stepped off the train when he beheld the train station about 30 yards ahead, on the other side of the platform. It was a gothic structure of intricately-carved, pearl gray stone and three stories of prismatic, stained-glass windows. The platform was a carpet of mud-brown cobblestone, and evenly-spaced Victorian street lamps flickered with orange flame, even in broad daylight.

The train station reminded Peeta of his first, mesmerizing view of the Capitol when he arrived for _The Hunger Games_. But, Capitol architecture was ostentatious and overblown by comparison; District 2's train station was simple yet stunning, and it quickened every creative synapse in Peeta's body. He wished Gaige was nearby with his camera.

"This train station is gorgeous," he said, unable to look away. "I would love to paint a rendering of it… One… Day…"

He thought Jules was standing beside him. But, she was several yards away, speaking with the conductor who responded by tugging Peeta's suitcases from the bottom compartment of the train. As Peeta rushed over, embarrassed for the second time since his arrival, amusement formed on the conductor's lips.

"I see you have a knack for delaying trains, sir."

Jules guided a lock of hair behind one ear and ventured a curious glance between Peeta and the conductor.

"I see you have a knack for delaying trains, sir."

Jules guided a lock of hair behind one ear and ventured a curious glance between Peeta and the conductor.

"I'm really sorry about that," Peeta apologized. "I guess I am more tired than I realize."

"It's no problem, sir. We are actually a few minutes ahead of schedule." The conductor grinned good-naturedly. "But you may want to hurry back to the girl in 12. She was the real delay. She would still be holding onto you if we had nine hours to spare."

"Posy," Peeta said, stepping back into the memory of how she'd wrapped her tiny arms around his leg and refused to let go until it was time for him to board the train. "She's hands down the sweetest four-year-old in Panem."

The conductor cocked his head, his eyes narrowing as if he were trying to remember who Peeta was talking about. "No, I mean the older girl, the one your age. She was the one who didn't want to let
Instantly, Peeta's heart sank like a boulder in deep, restless waters. And he was at the threshold of a yet-to-be-explored place of mourning for the life he wanted that didn't want him. Little did the conductor know, Katniss had let go long before she reached the train station. She was only there to say 'goodbye.'

His grief waited at his temples, pressed upon his neck, rested on each shoulder. But he remembered his conversation with Gaige: He had to remain focused, to handle his pain in private. He promised himself he would.

As the conductor stepped away and made his final call for passengers, Peeta made intentional work of gathering his luggage from the platform. He only had two suitcases, one heavier than the other. But, he could carry them both. Together, they weren't nearly as heavy as a 100-pound bag of flour. He'd resented lifting those bags of flour for years. Then, he and Katniss were reaped. And he knew that if he ever needed to carry her to safety in the arena, his arms would be strong enough…

"I can carry one, if you'd like."

Jules's voice, more tentative than before, cut through Peeta's reverie. For the first time, his eyes washed over her. She wore a light blue chambray shirt, a snug-fitting pair of dark pants, and a navy cardigan. On her feet were beige flats, and in her ears were gold studs. Her hair, parted in the middle, extended past her shoulders in languid waves. She carried the scent of honeysuckle and something earthy and warm. She was lovely. Feminine and confident and lovely.

Peeta sat his luggage back on the platform a blush tinged his cheeks for more than one reason.

"My parents taught me better manners than to delay trains and to not properly introduce myself." He extended his hand and offered a self-deprecating smile. "Please forgive me, Jules. It's nice to meet you in person. And thanks for getting me off the train and collecting my luggage. I'd hate to sleep my way back to District 12."

Her laughter was like a reward, her hand like velvet in his. They held each other, hands and gazes, a moment longer than either of them intended, and they quickly retreated with averted eyes. Peeta shoved both hands in his pockets and cleared his throat. Behind them, the train jolted to a rolling start.

"This is some train station. It started speaking to me the moment I laid eyes on it."

Jules clasped her hands in front of her and grinned. "If you think the train station is something, wait until you see The Nut."

"What's 'The Nut'?"

She gestured past Peeta's shoulder. He turned, his head slowly tilting back to take in the mountain that loomed above them. There were two sets of train tracks. One was for passenger transport. The other set of tracks meandered inside the mountain, which was almost close enough to touch.


"That was my first reaction too. This is a mountainous region, but The Nut is so close that you can't help but be in awe of it."

Peeta's eyes were still wandering the mountain. "Why is it called The Nut?"
Jules told him that the mountain is named Arura Peak. No one was standing near them on the platform, but Jules lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "In our meetings, we started calling it 'The Nut' because it would be a tough nut to crack. One of our plans called for seizing The Nut should our efforts lead to a conflict. But it's not your typical mountain; this is Panem's Peacekeeper headquarters and training station. It's also where Snow kept much of the Capitol's weaponry and high-tech toys and aviation."

Peeta turned to Jules. "Is all of District 2 like this? Jaw-dropping, I mean."

She shrugged and smiled. "It's like anywhere else, I guess. It has its prizes and its problems."

"It's nothing like home," Peeta said quietly, casting another long glance at the train station. Given the subtle clench of his jaw and the mourning that briefly shone in his features, it seemed as if Peeta couldn't return to 12, even if he wanted to.

"Speaking of which," Jules said with intentional levity, "I hope you like your unit. It's about seven miles that way." She gestured with a tilt of her head. "Right now, it's a few minutes past 1 pm. We could either catch a coach from inside the station and ride the entire way, or we could walk for a few minutes, see more of 2, and catch a coach in Bridgeview."

Peeta looked beyond the train station to the cloudless skies, which spoke its blessing into the sundrenched day "It's a nice day," he said, reaching for his luggage. "Let's walk."

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Posy held Hazelle's hand and skipped alongside her, causing a gentle yank to her mother's wrist with each step.

"Mama, what time is it where Peeta is?"

This was the umpteenth time Hazelle had answered that question since Peeta boarded the train earlier that morning. Most times, Hazelle made up an answer to appease Posy. But this time, she knew for sure. She turned her head toward the sun, gauging its place in the sky.

"Well, it's right around 4 o'clock here. So, it's one o'clock there."

"Oh," Posy continued to skip, but twisted to look over her shoulder at Vick, who trudged several yards behind, scowling at the ground and kicking pebbles in his path.

"Mama, what's wrong with Vick?"

"Don't worry about Vick. He will be fine."

Posy again faced forward. "Where are we going now? This is not how we get to Miss Maura's house."

"To the Justice Building. Where Gale and I work."

Posy's brows pinched as her mind worked to make connections. "Oh, I remember. That's where I have to go to get picked for the Games when I'm big, right?"

Hazelle stopped, causing a yank to Posy's wrist. The new president of Panem made a public promise that there would never be another Hunger Games, that parents and communities would never again have to sacrifice their children. Still, Hazelle was wary. What if things changed? What if the Games were re-established? The very thought of one of her children being reaped made her eyes water. It was bad enough last year, hearing 'Primrose Everdeen' from the Capitol escort's mouth and watching
Katniss mount the stage in her sister's stead. She had her own nightmares about one of her children's names being called.

The fear inside Hazelle shone like anger in her eyes. "You are to never say that again, do you understand me?"

Posy stared at her mother in wide-eyed surprise.

"Do you understand me?!" Hazelle bellowed.

Posy's bottom lip quivered, and she shrank into herself. "I'm sorry, mama. I just wanted to win you a nice house like Ms. Maura's."

Hazelle gasped, her hand cupping her mouth as her eyes stung with unshed tears. She lowered to one knee and secured Posy in a tight embrace, letting the tears fall past her cheeks.

"I don't need a big house. I have you and your brothers, and that's all I need. Okay?"

Posy, still squeezed to Hazelle's chest, managed a muffled 'okay' although she did not understand. By that time, Vick had almost caught up to them, still downcast but wondering what caused his mother to shout at Posy moments before. Hazelle stood, quickly wiped her eyes, and pulled both of her children to her side.

"Come on," Hazelle said. "Let's walk the rest of the way together."

Just beyond the fortress of the train station, the day was awash with sunlight. The streets bustled with more people than Peeta had ever seen outside of the Capitol. But, unlike Capitol citizens, the people of District 2 seemed to be of the working class. They were wealthy by District 12 standards, but no one Peeta saw invested in bouffant hairstyles or pastel-colored skin.

The train station bordered a four-way intersection of wide streets clogged with vehicles. Pedestrians and a smattering of bicyclists took to the sidewalks, rhythmically yielding to one another without making eye contact or breaking stride. A throng of people waited on the other side of the intersection, presumably needing the traffic light's permission to cross. But even standing still, they were fascinating in how they gathered, a sliver of air between them but never touching or engaging with the person on either side.

Peeta studied what he could and challenged himself to make their energy reappear on canvas. A flick of the traffic lights made vehicles roll to a stop and sent the throng walking across the street. Peeta and Jules were nearing the intersection.

"This area is Arura Square. Locals call it 'The Square.' It's the unofficial capitol of the entire district, the center of transportation and commerce..."

Jules's head turned to slowly pan around them. Peeta followed her gaze to find the wave of pedestrians who just crossed the street with their necks craned and their eyes fixed on him. The people kept a respectable distance, but Peeta and Jules overheard what they were saying. And, breaking the protocol that was in effect moments ago, they were speaking to one another.

"Is that Peeta Mellark?"

"That's Peeta Mellark! The victor of Panem!"

"He and his wife, Katniss Everdeen Mellark, are the star-crossed lovers. They won the last Games."
"Are they moving to District 2? They should. Victors belong in 2, not in that forsaken District 12."

Peeta lowered his voice to a whisper. "I would think they wouldn't want me here since I had a hand in killing their native son." He quickly suppressed the gruesome memory of Cato's death.

"There is no loyalty to the fallen," Jules returned, also a whisper. "You are the last male victor of Panem. They want you here."

Jules's words reminded Peeta of his conversation with Gaige. And two things became painfully apparent: First, he realized he might as well be back on stage in the Capitol because the crowds were watching his every move; second, he realized that living anywhere other than District 12 meant he would probably be on stage for the rest of his life.

He nodded in polite acknowledgement of the crowd as he and Jules proceeded to the corner to wait on the traffic light to change.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this," he confessed to a backdrop of their voices. "I'm just an average guy who –"

A high-pitched squeal pierced the intersection. All eyes whirled, and a petite woman with fluffy turquoise hair, rhinestone-adorned eyebrows, and abnormally high wedge-heeled shoes came trotting across the street just as the light was changing. One hand gripped an iridescent suitcase, and with her other hand, she pointed at Peeta.

"Oh no," Peeta groaned under his breath.

She was on him in a matter of seconds, wrapping him in a surprisingly tight bear hug despite her size, a collection of gaudy gold bracelets clanging on her wrists. Jules couldn't help but be amused at the sight of it. She pressed the side of her fist to her mouth to stifle a laugh and stepped aside to give the woman ample room. The woman released Peeta from her embrace but held to his forearms.

"Peeta?! It's really you! Oh, I can't wait to tell everyone back home that I met Peeta Mellark!!"

Her enthusiasm was endearing. He could not avoid the audience she created, but he did not need a Capitol stage to release the charm he'd once exhibited to the nation.

"Hi there," he smiled warmly. "You know my name, but I don't know yours."

"Oh yes, yes of course." She had Effie's affected accent, but she was younger than his Hunger Games escort. And she spoke a mile a minute.

"I'm Antonia. But everyone calls me Tini – as in the smallest. When I was little, my brother called me Ant instead of Antonia, and I dumped my dessert flan on his head. Then, we all decided that I liked Tini much better."

Peeta nodded, his lips parting wordlessly at the speed by which her words escaped. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Tini."

She let out another strangled squeal. "Peeta Mellark just called me Tini!" Her hair didn't move, even as she bounced with excitement, her fists making quick circles in the air. Peeta laughed, but others in The Square did not. They had resumed their pace, some glaring disapprovingly at Tini. She did not seem to notice.

"You've made running away from home worth the trouble!"
Peeta lifted an eyebrow. "You're running away from home?"

She drew a nervous breath and took a step back, releasing his arms. "Oh, I, umm... Well, yes. Yes, I am. I mean, everyone knows where I am. No one's looking for me or anything like that."

She poked at an overly curled tendril, silent thoughts casting a cloud of worry across her face. "Now that all Panem is open for travel, I decided to travel before returning to the Capitol. You see, my suitor is intent on proposing marriage, but I want to go places," she gushed. "I'm entirely too young to get married."

Peeta's smile slipped, and Tini froze, suddenly aware of her words.

"Not that I think you married too young, Peeta," she quickly amended. "I'm sure you and Katniss didn't need to wait a moment longer to start your lives together, not with the love you two have for one another." She leaned closer. "I've hoped that my suitor and I could have that type of love. And maybe we can. It's just all happening so fast. So, I hope the separation will do us some good. I know he loves me more than anything in the world."

Peeta swallowed hard. "And do you love him?"

Jules detected the sadness in his voice.


"Listen to me babbling on about myself. You've made me feel like I'm the only person in the world. And if you've made me feel this special in a matter of minutes, I imagine Katniss must feel like the luckiest girl alive."

Peeta bit down on the inside of his cheek to suppress the emotion welling inside him.

"Is she here?!" Tini's face lit up. "I would love to meet her."

"No," Peeta cleared his throat. "She's, uh. She's back home. We're all doing our part in rebuilding Panem."

Tini cocked her head and grinned. "Well, we're in the same boat, you and I. Absence makes the heart grow fonder. Your time apart will make your love that much stronger."

Now, Peeta felt like he could implode. He had to remove himself from that conversation and the public eye as soon as possible.

"Tini, you are smart and brave and you will take Panem by storm." He managed a smile. "I wish you happiness and safety in your travels."

"Thank you," she said earnestly, clasping his hand in hers. "You're as kind as everyone believed you to be, Peeta Mellark! It's been such a thrill meeting you in person."

After enveloping him another tight hug, Tini grabbed her suitcase and tottered toward the train station, excitement plastered on her face. But in her wake, Peeta drew a long breath and cast a long, morose gaze to the ground.

"Peeta?" Jules's voice covered him like a warm blanket. She was one of the few people who knew his marriage to Katniss was over. "Are you alright?"
But he didn't want to talk about it, not with her or anyone. He vowed to deal with his pain in private and to make people earn his trust. And that was exactly what he intended to do.

"I'm fine," he said, recycling the same smile he gave Tini. "Let's go. I can't wait to see my new home."

"Okay you two. Have a seat at that table." Hazelle gestured with her head. "Over there."

Posy scampered, and Vick trudged. Hazelle joined them for a few moments, gingerly lowering herself into an empty chair. She had already cleaned two homes since leaving the train station that morning, and the dull ache in her lower back was becoming harder to ignore. She inhaled deeply, her hunched shoulders lifting before she released a sound that was both a sigh and a yawn.

She knew her back pain was not due to cleaning alone. It was from years of sleeping on the thin, lumpy mattress that had been in her and Emory's bedroom. Now, at Maura's house, she'd had her best rest in decades, but she feared the damage had already been done to her back.

"Alright," she began, shifting between each set of gray eyes. "Sit here quietly. Rory is still clearing the old home site, and Gale is working overtime in the mines. When I'm finished here, we'll go back to Ms. Maura's house, and I'll make something to eat.

Vick's face contorted to an even deeper frown. "But mommy, why can't I finish helping Rory? I was already helping clear stuff this morning."

"Because I need you to sit with Posy. Some of the cleaners here are too strong for either of you to inhale, so I can't take you two with me while I work."

Vick snapped both arms across his chest and slumped in his chair. "So, I have to sit here and watch little baby Posy." His low grumble was just loud enough to be heard.

"Hey! I'm not a baby!" Posy thrust a tiny finger toward her brother. "You take that back Vick!"

"Hush! Both of you." Hazelle further silenced them with a stern glare. "Absolutely no arguing. And if I hear it again, I'll be sure to let Gale know."

The threat of informing Gale was enough to quiet them. Vick and Posy were both too young to remember their father before he died, so Gale became their father figure. They could push their limits with their mother, but the two youngest Hawthornes wouldn't challenge Gale's authority.

"Do I make myself clear?" Hazelle asked.

Vick and Posy nodded with downcast eyes but traded heated glances when Hazelle disappeared down a first-floor corridor.

But moments later, they perked up at the sound of keys twisting in the front door locks. Hazelle hurried back to the front just as Madge stepped inside.

"Madge!" Posy and Vick greeted her in unison, hopping from their seats and rushing to embrace her. Madge's face lit up with her smile. She knelt to greet them with open arms.

"Hey guys! I didn't expect to see you here. How's it going?"

In a matter of seconds, Vick relayed that he was in charge of Posy while his mommy worked, Posy vehemently interjected that she was not a baby and to prove it, Peeta made her a whole cake before
he said 'goodbye' and left on the train that morning.

Madge quirked an eyebrow at Posy's comment about Peeta saying 'goodbye' and leaving, but she decided to let her question pass.

"Okay, you two," Hazelle interrupted, her palms against each child's back. "To your stations." Vick and Posy returned to the table but twisted in their seats to watch Hazelle and Madge who greeted one another with a light embrace.

"Are you and Gale working today?" Madge asked as they parted. "You know you didn't have to come in until Monday since everything was closed yesterday."

"I know, but I couldn't let this building go without a proper cleaning for start of business on Monday."

"Gale's not here," Posy chimed in. "He had to work longer in the mines."

"And Rory's still cleaning up our house that burned," Vick added. "I helped too."

Madge cocked her head and tapped a finger to her lips in mock contemplation. "Well, it sounds to me like you two need jobs as well. Wouldn't you two agree?"

Posy and Vick agreed earnestly.

"I'll be right back," Madge said, disappearing down the corridor. Less than a minute later, she reemerged with two files tucked underneath one arm and two oversized books and three smaller boxes cradled in the other arm. They were coloring books and boxes of colored pencils. Vick's eyes widened as Madge approached, and Posy knelt in her seat to get closer to the table.

"When I was a kid and had to wait on my dad to finish work, I would color pictures for him and my mom. There are a ton of pages in these books that still need to be colored. So, I'm giving you two an important task. Your mommy and Rory and Gale are working really hard, and you guys should work hard at coloring pictures for them."

"Cool!" Vick gushed. "I can make it look like one of Peeta's paintings."

"Even better," Hazelle encouraged.

"Me too! Me too!" Posy bounced in her seat.

"You too," Hazelle affirmed.

"Well then it's settled," Madge said. "You two can keep the books in exchange for your hard work. Deal?"

They echoed their agreement, but their attention had already turned to dumping the colored pencils from their boxes and searching the numerous blank pages in each book.

"Thank you for that," Hazelle whispered to Madge. "They've never had a coloring book, so this will definitely keep them entertained." Hazelle sighed. "They're just so restless and ready to be settled, and I can't blame them. We all are."

"And with that in mind, this is for you, Ms. Hazelle." Madge handed her one of the files. Inside were the most current listings of properties for sale in District 12."

"I told Gale I would generate an updated list after your home burned. Housing is scarce in the Seam,
so there may not be another home that's large enough for your family. But, there are several vacant homes and lots in the Merchant's Quarters and even more on the outskirts of 12."

Hazelle flipped through the packet, silently deciding that there was no way they could afford a home in the Merchant's Quarters. "Thank you, dear. I will take a look and pass this on to Gale."

At that moment, the throbbing resurfaced in Hazelle's lower back. Madge watched as Hazelle squeezed her eyes shut, her entire body stiffening to manage the pain.

"Are you sure you need to be here right now, Ms. Hazelle?"

Hazelle sucked in a slow breath. "Oh, I'm fine. It comes and goes." Hazelle didn't want Madge to question whether or not she could perform her duties at the Justice Building. Her family needed this job. She changed the subject.

"How have you been, Madge?"

"Grateful," Madge nodded thoughtfully. "I have a few weeks until graduation and a full-time job lined up with the rebuild effort. And best of all, no child will ever be reaped for The Hunger Games again."

"All wonderful news," Hazelle smiled broadly. "As soon as we find another home, we will have you over to celebrate your graduation."

"I would like that," Madge said. "And I know everything will work out for you and your family. There are so many bright days ahead. You'll see."

Hazelle reached for Madge's hand and squeezed. "Thank you, dear. I hope Posy is as smart and as kind as you when she's older. You're truly a gem, Madge."

Madge beamed at the compliment. Then she said her goodbyes to Hazelle and the kids and exited the front door, locking it behind her.

Hazelle silently watched a contented Posy and Vick as they colored. Then, Hazelle disappeared down the corridor. She was still within earshot and overheard the conversation that ensued.

"Madge is so nice, Vick. Gale should kiss her now because Katniss is sad."

"Gale can kiss Katniss if he wants," Vick shrugged. "It doesn't matter if she's sad."

Posy rolled her eyes. "Well of course it does, Vick. Gale can only kiss Katniss if she isn't crying, and Katniss can't stop crying until Peeta comes back."

After Peeta was recognized by Tini and the crowd of onlookers, others also stopped to whisper and stare as Peeta and Jules passed by. Jules chose less populated streets whenever possible, to avoid drawing attention to Peeta.

The street they now walked offered a direct view to a few of the most impressive high rises in The Square, and they held Peeta's attention. The entrance to one building was guarded by a row of massive, marble columns. Another building was paved with glass that gleamed orange and teal in the afternoon sunlight. Jules pointed out a few buildings and began talking with Peeta about the types of industries that were headquartered there.

It took 12 minutes to reach Bridgeview, what Jules called a 'bedroom community' of The Square.
They crossed a two-lane road, reaching a welcome sign and a pedestrian suspension bridge that arched over a wide strip of river. The river's banks were adorned with multi-colored stones, and its waters were dotted with chunky gray boulders of varying sizes.

The river reminded Peeta of visiting the brook in the woods with Katniss the day the rain drove them indoors. He quickly diverted his gaze to a grass-carpeted amphitheater facing the bridge, adjacent to an open-air brick pavilion.

Bridgeview nestled in the shadows of The Squares high rises, but, Bridgeview was characterized by quaint shops no more than two stories tall, 'Welcome' signs and the chime of bells suspended from entrance doors, and whisk brooms propped outdoors for sweeping fallen leaves from the shade trees lining the sidewalks. Bridgeview held a tranquility that Peeta did not expect to find anywhere in District 2.

Jules could see his questions forming.

"District 2 was once a collection of villages built around mines and quarries," she began. "The Square and the Warehouse District where your unit is located, are two areas that aren't central to either natural resource."

"So, if the Warehouse District has no mines or quarries, what does it contribute to the economy of 2?"

"Historically, The Warehouse District was where young men trained in masonry and blacksmithing. In recent decades, those industries relocated to Bridgeview. They're now operated from small storefronts that sell custom pieces from the front of the shop and conduct apprenticeships in the back. Masonry and blacksmithing use to be hard labor for little pay –"

"Like coal mining," Peeta interjected.

"Exactly. But, the Capitol created an overwhelming demand for decorative bricks and ornate metalwork. Over time, many laborers left the warehouses to start their own businesses and apprenticeships – especially in the stonework that District 2 is known for. And, many of those businesses received funding from the Capitol."

Peeta stopped walking. "What?"

Jules nodded in earnest. "Yep. It's true."

They continued their walk. "So, President Snow, who was fine with starvation in District 12, gave money to District 2 residents to start businesses?"

"Outside of the Capitol, District 2 was his favorite. Of course, it was a strategic move. He didn't like having his weaponry so far removed from the Capitol, but 2 was his best option apart from District 13 – which he thought he obliterated. Snow wanted to keep people of District 2 satisfied."

"So… I don't get this," Peeta grappled. "Do the people here agree with Snow's fate? Aren't they loyal to him – especially given the preferential treatment they received?"

Jules exhaled a long breath. "It's complicated. The people here yielded to Snow because he was in power and their economy benefitted from the preferential treatment. But there was never staunch loyalty because at the end of the day, they are a district that is punished like all the others with the annual reaping."

"The people of 2 are loyal to their victors," Jules continued. "So, we had Enobaria and Brutus and
Commander Lyme broadcast their support for ending The Hunger Game and overthrowing the government of Panem. That sealed the deal."

"And that's another thing," Peeta added. "I always assumed the careers – or victors who had been careers – were also Snow's loyalists. I never expected them to rebel."

"Most of them would not have rebelled if it was a standard reaping this year. But this was a Quarter Quell, and in an effort to get you and Katniss back into the arena, Snow planned to reap victors. All the victors were angry; Snow had promised that victors would live in peace and wealth. Their one obligation was to mention future tributes."

"So even the victors who had grown comfortable with Snow wanted him gone," Peeta said.

"Exactly. They realized he had too much power and was too dangerous to remain in power."

They reached a brick sign at a two-lane road welcoming them to Bridgeview Heights, which proclaimed itself to be the 'premiere neighborhood of Arura Square.' Either side of the street was lined with nearly identical single-story homes with precise squares of manicured front yards. Jules explained that these had been government-issued homes for quarry workers. Now, the neighborhood was populated by families who could afford to live close to The Square. From a distance, Peeta spied a couple in their mid-to-late twenties excitedly waiting with open arms as a tow-headed toddler stumbled between them on unsteady legs.

Emptiness widened inside him like a chasm.

"That's what I want, Peeta thought. A family of my own... A wife who loves me."

"Are you sure I can't carry one of your suitcases?" Jules asked with a companionable smile. "I'm a lot stronger than I look."

Peeta smiled good-naturedly. "I don't doubt it. But no, thank you. I packed light."

The transit stop was a block away. On the corner was a kiosk, a square box about six feet from the ground with a keypad for scheduling a coach or metered ride. Coach rides held up to five passengers, and meters were busses that could transport up to 60 people. Jules typed '2' for the number of passengers and pushed the 'New Trip' button under the coach setting.

Less than a minute later, a white vehicle with a green bulb glowing in the back window pulled up to the curb. The driver's door and the trunk opened simultaneously, as if a single button could have sprung them both. The driver, a sinewy man whose wispy brown ponytail was streaked silver, reached for Peeta's luggage and hoisted them into the truck.

"Where to?" The driver asked once they were all inside the coach.

"Warehouse District. Arsenal Hill section, twelfth block, please," Jules said. She turned to Peeta. "It's a short ride from here."

The coach carried them out of Bridgeview and increasingly, the area became more industrial. Peeta saw a trio of identical black brick, five-story buildings, each with a hanging banner that read 'Available Office Space – Great for Capitol Satellites.'

He read and re-read the banner until the buildings were out of view.

"Capitol satellite offices in District 2?" He asked Jules.
Jules nodded. "Snow was developing parts of 2 as vacation spots for Capitol elite. The wealthiest Capitolites could afford extended vacations for their families, so many of them would need satellite work spaces."

Peeta laughed humorlessly. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I am surprised that any Capitol elite would want to vacation in any district, even one as nice as 2."

"How can I put this…" Jules cocked her head, considering her next words. "Capitol residents – most Capitol residents – are completely out of touch with the reality of life in Panem. They view the Districts and its inhabitants as novelties. It's a mindset perpetuated by the Games. Take for example the lady who approached you in The Square."

"Tini," Peeta said.

"Yes. She was super sweet and sincere and so excited to meet you. But did you notice how she assumed she had a right to touch you, to embrace you, to make you her audience? You were absolutely gracious to entertain her, but did you notice that none of the locals did the same?"

Peeta reflected on those moments in The Square. "I hadn't noticed. But you're right."

"Capitol culture is far removed from life in the districts. Capitol citizens have a sense of entitlement. Vacationing in one of the nicer districts would be a quaint experience for them. And of course, District 2 tolerated this because Capitolites would boost the already strong economy here."

Peeta turned his gaze back to the window until another question surfaced.

"So, if The Square is focused on commerce and Bridgeview is small business and family-oriented, what is The Warehouse District's vibe?"

"It's energetic, eclectic," Jules said. "Warehouse tends to draw a younger crowd – 20s and 30s mainly, people who were never reaped and are unattached. The cost of living is higher – even higher than Bridgeview – so most residents either have good-paying jobs or an apprenticeship and a roommate to share housing costs. It was the ideal location in 2 for rebuild work."

"Again," Peeta said good-naturedly, "This is nothing like home."

They exchanged a smile. Peeta could tell that she was again weighing her words.

"Peeta… I would love to learn more about District 12 – if you want to talk about it sometimes. I'm sure there are things you'll miss, being here."

Peeta sensed sincerity in her words, and he acknowledged her offer with a nod. But his connection to District 12 suddenly seemed too private, too personal to share with her. He reminded himself to stay guarded and to make everyone earn his trust. Besides, Jules already knew things were over between him and Katniss. And at that point, Peeta decided, she didn't need to know anything else.

For the rest of the ride, Peeta stared out the window, playing a silent game of chess with his emotions. He increasingly felt like the earth was spinning too fast, and he was taking the brunt of all its dizzying force.

*I left. I left 12. I restarted my whole life because of her, and I would have given my life for her.*

He took to watching the white dashes in the pavement as they sped alongside the coach. What he could see of The Square had curved to his left. Bridgeview was behind them.
Jules must have sensed his need for silent reflection. She deferred to it, choosing to watch the district on fast forward from her window. Ironically, the driver was in full song, completely off-key, behind the wheel.

The coach exited the freeway at a dingy sign announcing The Warehouse District. Peeta quickly understood why this part of 2 was called The Warehouse District. Staggering the skyline at about 3-6 stories tall were drab-colored, soot-stained, seemingly abandoned warehouses of various shapes and widths. Most of the buildings were sprawling structures that anchored modest-sized offspring. Some buildings were single-story storefronts, a hint of light behind its wide windows. All of the buildings sat on heather gray concrete outlined by broken sidewalks.

The area was depressing and completely detached from the energy of The Square and the comfort of Bridgeview. And in that moment, Peeta wanted to go home. But he didn't have a home.

*I have a house in District 12, but I don't have a home.*

"You can take the next left at Persis Avenue."

Her voice drew his eyes, rescuing him from the path his thoughts were taking. She'd leaned forward when she spoke to the coach driver, but her body was back against the seat. She offered a tempered smile that Peeta returned before shifting his gaze back to the window.

Persis Avenue lifted Peeta's spirits. Persis was a four-way intersection with a steady stream of vehicles and a handful of pedestrians dotting each block. Brick buildings lined either side of the street, but none of these were the drab color from miles past. Most were an appealing red brick, but a smattering of others were painted. Peeta saw vibrant hue of cinnamon, alabaster, navy, marigold, and teal.

Moments later, they passed a slate stone sign with the words "Arsenal Hill" in gleaming brass. The road narrowed, a two-lane interruption of the verdant expanse of grass that stretched on either side. It was a massive park with brick walking paths, well-spaced rows of shade trees, neatly-trimmed shrubs, yellow and ivory flower beds, a smattering of wood benches, and a round stone fountain that Peeta spotted in the distance. Peeta guessed the park was as large as the entire Merchant's Quarter, and he hoped its size would afford him a way to hide in plain sight; maybe he could sit outdoors some days and paint or sketch.

Jules directed the driver to turn left at Averii Crest Drive. The park ended at the curb to Peeta's left, and he was so mesmerized that he didn't look to his right.

"We're here," Jules said with the same smile as before. Then, she reached in her pants pocket, extracted a silver card, and handed it to the driver to pay the fare. Peeta, embarrassed yet again, fumbled in his pocket for coins.

"No," Jules lifted a hand to stop him. "Plutarch is covering all relocation costs." Then, her eyebrow arched mischievously. "But this time you can gather your own luggage."

He didn't expect her humor, and it took him a while to catch on. But he did, and they both chuckled good-naturedly and climbed from the vehicle. The driver was already unloading Peeta's bags, his song reduced to a hum.

The coach pulled from the curb as Peeta collected his luggage.

"I know it doesn't look like much, but… I hope you like it."

Peeta turned to the right, his back to the park. The sign read "The Warehouse Dwellings."
Clearly it had been a warehouse – three sizable red-brick buildings surrounded by a decorative black metal fence. The shortest building was positioned in the foreground, five stories high, looking at the world through large, black-trimmed, rounded-top windows. Remnants of the red, yellow, and black Ammon Masonry logo was still painted on its facade. Two identical but slightly taller buildings stood behind it on either side, facing outward from the main building. From where he stood, Peeta could see that the buildings in the background were lined with balconies – something the main building did not have.

The fence opened to a cobblestone path. Jules led the way to an opening the size of a loading dock that was outfitted with black metal double doors.

"You're in the main building, the building in front," Jules said. "The units in the main building don't have balconies, but there's access to a rooftop deck for all residents, and each individual unit in the main building has loft space. The loft space will be like having a story and a half."

*I'll be living alone, so I won't need a story and a half,* Peeta thought. "Sounds great," he said aloud.

They stepped into a spacious lobby with black concrete floors, medium gray couches and chairs, and a vibrant, round orange ottoman. The lobby led to a half-arc receptionist desk, metallic gray on the bottom with a speckled white and gray stone counter.

There were three frosted glass doors. The one to the far right of the desk read 'Staff Only,' and probably led to the frosted glass door located behind the receptionist area. The other door was on the far left, read "Residents Only," and was outfitted with an intercom system and keypad.

"Our receptionist and office manager is Merritt Lashley. Plutarch hired her on Friday. She'll be here from 8-1 tomorrow, and on most days, she works from 7 until 3."

Jules continued. "Once things are more settled, Plutarch plans to hire a few more receptionists so the building is manned 24 hours a day. But it took weeks to vet Merritt. We hoped the rebellion would be successful, so we made sure she wasn't connected to anyone from Snow's regime. That same vetting process will happen with all new hires. Oh, and three, newly-trained Peacekeepers, one for each building, will work and live on site for security purposes. They'll be placed in the next 60 days."

"Nice," he said quietly, his heart sinking when he silently wished one of those officers could have been Darius.

Jules walked into the 'Staff Only' room and returned with a folder bearing the Warehouse Dwellings logo. She held open the folder for Peeta to see.

"There's information in here about the property. I can point out a few things as we walk, if you'd like."

"Sure."

Jules pulled a palm-sized plastic blue card from the folder, "this is your access chip. It'll get you past the lobby doors, into your unit and into any of our amenity rooms. I'll also give you a code you can use, so you won't need to carry the access chip with you."

Jules had Peeta swipe his card on the keypad at the frosted glass door on the left to be sure the card worked. Peeta followed her through the door to a perpendicular, spice-colored, carpeted hallway. They turned left.

"Since this is the main building, the facilities here are shared with all residents. Right here," she
pointed to a glassed room on the right with four computers and a printer, "is our computer room. There's space for four more computers, and those will be added over time."

She glanced over her shoulder as they continued down the hall. "At the opposite end of the hall behind us is a community room that can be used for gatherings of up to 75 people." They passed the elevator ahead on the left, next to a stairwell door with an exit sign. "Let me show you one other thing."

Around the corner and further down the hall was another frosted glass door, this one bearing the name 'Wellness Room.' They stepped inside to an array of free-standing machines, workout equipment, free weights, balls and resistance straps. The entire room was lined with mirrors and ceiling fans circulated overhead.

"Now this is cool," Peeta whispered as he took in the space. "I never imagined having a training facility where I live. I've only ever had access to equipment when I was training for the Games."

"With the exception of the community room, all amenities are available to residents 24/7," Jules said. "Just use your card or code to get in anytime you want."

"This is really nice," Peeta nodded his approval as they backed out of the room.

They took the elevator to the fourth floor. "By the way," Jules said, "Brutus and Enobaria and Commander Lyme live in Victor's Village, which is located on the southern outskirts of 2, a 20-minute ride from here. They also have access to these shared spaces, but Brutus rarely leaves his house during the day, so you may never see him. Enobaria is more social, but she's often in District 1 with Cashmere and Gloss, and her rebuild work is based there. Commander Lyme will be traveling to different regions for her rebuild work, so you may see her on screen for joint meetings more than you'll see her in person."

"Joint meetings?" Peeta's mind flashed to saying goodbye to Katniss at the train station; he hoped that he wouldn't be forced to see her – in person or on screen for joint meetings. He needed to completely remove himself from her life – and her from his.

"How often are those held?"

"They're twice a year. Since we're just getting started, there will be one at the end of this year and another one six months later. Plutarch hates meetings, and he conducts them as quickly as possible. He's less talk and more execution; make a plan, delegate responsibilities, and trust his team."

"He sounds like a good leader."

"He is."

Peeta stole a glance at Jules. He had even more questions about her since stepping off the train. She wasn't a victor, so why wasn't she actively enrolled in school? She couldn't be if she single-handedly managed logistics and communications for the rebellion. And what was her connection to Plutarch? Sure, Plutarch proved his mettle when he orchestrated Snow's assassination, but what was his true angle? Why was he, a Capitol insider, so motivated toward a free Panem, and what made Jules become such an avid supporter of his?

From the elevator, they walked a short hallway and turned right onto a longer hall. His was the second door of three on the left.

"So, will Capitol residents be moving to these units, as originally planned," Peeta asked as they approached his door.
"No. Those were Snow's plans. Plutarch decided to re-purpose these units for victors – relocating or visiting – and rebellion staff. He said over time, others could be added, but that would be years away. We have enough to focus on now with the rebuild, and we want everyone to be comfortable where they live. Right now, you're the only one on the hall. Mags will live in the unit across from yours, but the other two are unoccupied."

**Good. I just want to work hard, keep to myself, and blend in. Somehow.**

Peeta set down his luggage to swipe his access card, and the light on the keypad blinked green. He stepped aside to let Jules enter first. She flipped a set of light switches on the wall just inside the door, and she held the door open as he filed in with his suitcases.

He noticed that she drew a hopeful breath before she spoke. "Welcome to your new home."

Peeta lowered his suitcases, his eyes absorbing the space. Just inside the door was a short foyer; against one wall was a black console table with a pewter bowl a notepad and pen. On the opposite wall was a door that led to a half bathroom.

Just past the foyer, the entire right wall, as far as he could see, was exposed red brick. A long wood table with counter-height wood and metal barstools was in front of one of the large, tinted windows Peeta noticed from the outside.

Directly across from the dining table, was a spacious kitchen, bordered by an L-shaped granite island whose four barstools were taller than but otherwise identical to the seating at the dining table. From the other side of the island, he could see the silver curve of a goose neck faucet and a refrigerator. Facing them were a double wall oven and microwave, a range-top stove, an expanse of counter space, and a row of overhead cabinets, some with frosted glass doors. Past the kitchen was an opening wide enough for floating stairs that Peeta assumed led to the loft space, which could not be seen from the main floor.

He continued to the living room, which was furnished with a navy leather sectional and accent chair. A four-level wood and metal bookshelf at one end of the sectional matched the wood and metal coffee table that rolled on metal casters. The walls were bare, save a metal clock the size of a tire that had dashes to indicate each hour. The ceiling was a maze of aluminum ducts. For Peeta, the best feature was the huge windows, nearly floor-to-ceiling, overlooking the park across the street.

The unit was modern, mature, and masculine. And he loved it.

"Jules. This is amazing." He slowly shook his head. "I never expected it to be this nice."

"You're creative, so I made sure the designer left plenty of room for you to hang your own artwork. As you can see, this unit is furnished, but we can have any piece removed."

"No. No, I love it," Peeta assured. He turned his attention to her. "Thank you for everything, Jules. From my last-minute request to move here to meeting me at train station and accompanying me here. I appreciate all of it."

"It's my pleasure, Peeta."

He followed her back to the front door where she pulled a Warehouse Dwellings pen from the console table and wrote in his folder. "I'm going to leave you to explore your new home. If you need anything, just give me a call. I'm in the southwest building, the one to the left behind yours. Unit 528." She wrote her apartment number underneath her phone number.

"Will do."
"Oh, and your refrigerator is stocked with deli meats, bread, condiments, fruit and vegetables. Merritt and I shopped for a few basics this morning; we guessed you would be hungry and tired after a long trip."

"Seriously?" Peeta blinked in disbelief. "Thank you. I will return the kindness. This is far beyond anything I expected."

After parting with meek smiles, Peeta was alone. He tossed his access card into the pewter bowl on a black console table at the door.

He explored the rest of the main level. The same color scheme carried throughout the home; touches of wood and metal, and navy and steel gray punctuated each room's stylish décor.

The sight of the king-sized bed in his room rolled in a bout of sadness like a passing cloud. He wished he'd remembered to ask for a twin or full-sized bed instead, since he'd be sleeping alone. But his mood elevated when he saw his bathroom – spacious with black and white mosaic-tiled floors, a standalone tub with door access, and a glassed door shower at the very back that spanned the width of the bathroom. Outside was a gray-cushioned wood bench and a pair of crutches. Inside, surrounded by alabaster-tiled walls and floors was a wide, built-in ledge for sitting, and a stainless steel detachable shower head.

"This is perfect," Peeta whispered as he opened the linen closet and found a navy bathrobe and neatly-folded stacks of fluffy white towels and wash cloths.

Down the hall, he searched the smaller second bedroom and a hall bathroom that included a modest shower with metallic gray curtains. He loved it. All of it. And he knew he could retreat here and find a new direction for his life.

He'd planned to check out his covered loft space next, which was accessible from a set of floating stairs between the kitchen and the living room. But his stomach growled, so he went to the kitchen instead. He found paper-wrapped packages of deli meats and cheeses, a bag of sliced carrot sticks, a head of broccoli and cauliflower, tomatoes, milk and heavy cream, red apples, a huge cluster of red grapes, various condiments, and bottles of carbonated water – something he'd never tasted before.

He pulled the deli meats, a package of cheese that he soon discovered to be provolone, a bottle of brown mustard, and the cluster of grapes and set them on the counter. Then, he rinsed his hands and searched his cabinets for bread. A loaf of sliced sourdough and a loaf of pumpernickel rye awaited him, and in his search, he also discovered a wire bin of red potatoes and another of yellow onions, cartons of chicken and beef stock, and a few cans of stewed tomatoes.

"Amazing," he breathed.

His hunger made him work with haste. He assembled his sandwich, added tomatoes, and retrieved a bottle of carbonated water. And moments later, after discovering his drawer of utensils and knives, he was seated at the barstool on the other side of his kitchen island, devouring a hearty pastrami, turkey, and ham sandwich.

"Best. Sandwich. Ever."

He unscrewed the top from the carbonated water, noticing the words "Do Not Shake," and was pleasantly surprised by its bubbly, lemon-lime flavor. After his sandwich, he'd barely made a dent in the grapes. He was satisfied. And sleepy.

After his meal, he cleared the kitchen countertop, gathered his luggage from the front door and carted
them into his bedroom. He searched for his alarm clock, one of the few things he'd taken from his home in Victor's Village. He set it on the nightstand, reminded of the decision he'd made the night before to sell his house in District 12 when he was settled permanently elsewhere.

He would give it some time to see if this was where he wanted to be. But as he reclined on the bed, his head sinking into the collection of neatly arranged pillows, Peeta realized that he might have found his new home. Right here. In District 2.

That evening, when he climbed into the last car of the mantrip, Gale slept, knowing that when he reached the surface, he would need all his energy to continue clearing his home site. At the surface, Thom waited on Gale to shove his timecard into the clock and hear the 'clack' that officially ended the workday.

"I am exhausted," Thom said, rubbing his eyes. "All I want now is a bowl of whatever Sae is serving and a hot bath – in that order. You wanna join me for that bowl? We'll have to take separate baths though."

Gale laughed sardonically. "Noted. I'll have to pass, though. I'm heading to my old home site to do some clearing."

Thom tilted his head to the skies, then looked questioningly at Gale. "Are you sure? It's almost 8, and it'll be dark soon. I'm sure if you talk with Trolley, he'll give you the time you need to clear it."

"He probably will, but I don't want it to just sit there. Plus, I slept on the trip up. I've got a little more left in me."

Thom scrubbed his face, his eyes red with exhaustion. "Okay. Let's do it. It'll go by faster if I help."

"No," Gale shook his head resolutely. "No, you're exhausted, and you're doing more than enough by letting me stay with you. I can handle it between tonight and tomorrow night. You stick with your plan. Get some stew and rest."

"Are you sure, Gale?"

"Yes, I'm sure." Gale slapped his back a few times. "Now go. Sae's stews are nice and hot this time of night."

They parted ways just outside the mines with Thom heading toward The Hob, and Gale trudging further into the Seam to his old home site. Daylight was aging, bleeding across the horizon. Gale formulated a plan of action. *Rory has probably been stacking the small stuff. There's still enough daylight left for me to get the heavier boards and beams set to the side. I'll need to request a disposal bin from the Justice Building – I should have thought of that when this happened. If I can get the heavy stuff in a pile tonight and get word to Mom to get a disposal bin delivered tomorrow, I can load everything tomorrow after work, and sweep the –*

Gale stopped abruptly, his eyes landing on the footprint of his destroyed home. Not only was the site completely cleared, it was swept clean. A large disposal bin sat on the edge of the property, and all debris – including the heaviest boards and beams – were piled inside.

"Holy..." He shut and reopened his eyes to the same sight. His jaw hung open.
Instinctively, he turned in a complete circle, looking for some explanation of how this happened. And that's when he saw him heading toward Victor's Village, almost around a bend that would have put him out of sight. A straw broom in one hand.

"Rory," Gale called.

His younger brother didn't hear. Gale jogged to catch him.

"Rory!"

The younger Hawthorne's head whipped over his shoulder, his eyebrows creased with uncertainty. Gale tried again.

"Rory! Wait up."

This time, Rory turned around, his eyes searching before they found Gale, jogging from the Seam. He waited, expressionless, until Gale reached him.

"Hey," Gale said, almost out of breath. "I just left the home site." He pointed his thumb behind him. "Do you know who cleared all the debris?"

"I did."

There was a moment's pause. Then Gale laughed. The staid look on Rory's face stopped him.

"Wait. You're serious?"

Rory nodded.

"What? How?"

Rory shrugged. "I've been working on it all day from first thing this morning until a few minutes ago. I got some old timers and some early shift miners to help this morning, and we got the bigger beams set to the side. Vick helped with the smaller stuff for a long time today before mom took him with her to the Justice Building so he could watch Posy while she worked. And this afternoon, Trolley brought the bin I asked for and helped me lift the heavy stuff."

Speechless, Gale could only stare at Rory. Before Gale could find the words to say, Rory turned and continued his walk toward Victor's Village. Without as much as a 'goodbye.'

And that's when Gale remembered. He hadn't spoken to or seen Rory since the fight with Peeta at Haymitch's house. Not only had Rory seen the worst of Gale that day, Gale had shoved his brother to the floor to get to Peeta.

With everything I've had on my mind, making amends with Rory should have been at the top of the list.

"Rory. Wait."

Rory kept walking. "I'm tired," he mumbled. "I'll talk to you later, Gale."

Gale came alongside him and placed a hand on Rory's arm. "I screwed up, Rory. Big time. And I owe you an apology for all that's happened lately – especially for the fight and for shoving you. I'm very sorry."

Rory looked like he didn't know what to say. He shifted from foot to foot, weighing Gale's words.
Gale waited, his stomach growling with hunger. It gave Gale an idea.

"Rory, have you eaten?"

Rory looked quizzically at Gale. "No..."

"Great. Come with me to The Hob. Let's sit and have a bowl of stew."

"Me? Tonight?"

"Yes and yes. I worked hard today and so did you. Let me buy you a bowl of stew to say 'thanks.'"

"You don't have to thank me," Rory said quietly.

"I want to," Gale took a step closer. "And, to be honest, you would be doing me a favor. I need your help with something."

Rory's expression softened.

"Will you come, Rory? Please?"

Rory nodded. And with their backs turned to Victor's Village, they headed back to the Seam, side by side, in comfortable, promising silence.

She dreamt of Rue's smile and falling apples and watching the skies for Peeta's face amid a canon blast. The first time she woke, her body lurched to a sitting position at what she thought were screams from some dying tribute. But, it was only Posy and Vick, squealing in pursuit of one another in her mother's backyard. Katniss's eyes shot to the nightstand for the alarm clock Peeta always set but never needed.

It was gone. Just like Peeta. Gone.

She didn't want to sleep anymore, but it took too much effort to be awake. So, she rolled to her stomach on the bare mattress, buried her face in an uncovered pillow, and tried desperately to forget the day that still had hours before its end.

She drifted to sleep, her mind revisiting her dream of running to greet her father. But this time, he didn't turn into Gale, and this time, she didn't see Peeta at all. It was just her father. Finally, she had him to herself.

But when she reached him, he didn't lift her into the air like he used to. That's when she looked down and saw that she wasn't the scrawny-legged girl James Everdeen left behind. She was her present self. Her father's smile held the tenderness she'd basked in as a child.

She opened her mouth to tell him everything. There was so much she needed to tell him, starting with how much she – they – needed him. Surely, he would stay this time. He would find a way to stay, to survive. She kept trying to say "stay with me," but she could make no sound. Her father held his smile, but, in her inability to speak, Katniss's frustration grew.

Then, with his smile unwavering, he issued a stern rebuke.

*Have you forgotten what I taught you? I taught you how to survive.*

She stiffened, her eyes wide and pleading, her lips communicating that she would never forget what he taught her, that she knew how to survive, that she *had* survived and that her mother and Prim
were safe. But still, she could make no sound.

Just then, there was banging. Loud, repeated banging. And behind her father, in the distance, the mine was imploding. It was enough to pull her eyes from her father's face for a moment, and when they rested on him again, his eyes reflected the fire of the explosion.

"I have to go back to the mines now," he said softly. "This is my shift."

"No!" Katniss screamed soundlessly, panicked. The banging continued.

"No, it's exploding! It'll hurt you! Please Daddy! Stay with me!"

And he was gone. Katniss stood immobilized and stricken, watching Seam families race past her toward the mines, fears for their loved ones etched on their faces. She was a child again. Trembling. Afraid. Her heart constricting in her chest.

Bang, bang, bang!

She sprang forward with a gasp, her body and breath arrested with panic. She cupped her hand to her mouth, trying to control her ragged breathing. As she climbed from the bed, her eyes landed on her and Peeta's wedding portrait. It took a few moments for Katniss to realize that someone was banging on the front door.

"Just go away." She didn't recognize the hoarseness and brokenness in her own voice.

The skies were darker now, and soon the banging ceased. Posy and Vick were indoors, and the bedroom where she sat on the floor at the foot of the bed, was heavy with shadows.

Katniss buried her head in her hands, trying to salvage what she could of her dream.

Have you forgotten what I taught you? I taught you how to survive.

She spoke those words aloud, bidding them to cement themselves amid the chaos in her mind. But her father had taught her so much... And all she'd been doing since he died was surviving. She murmured a prayer for understanding.

Minutes later, the banging at the front door resumed. Annoyed, Katniss pulled herself from the floor and stomped toward the stairs. He mother wasn't one to bang on a door. It could only be one person.

Oh for fuck's sake, Haymitch, go away! And if you want to get in that bad, use the key Peeta gave you. I know he gave you a key.

She made it halfway down the stairs, and she planned to shout at Haymitch through the door when she heard another voice.

"Katniss? It's Hazelle. Are you in there?"

Shit.

The last person she wanted to see was Hazelle, who had witnessed her meltdown at the train station earlier that morning.

"I have a key, Katniss. I'm coming in."

"Uh, umm... Just a second," she stammered. "I'll be right there."
Her feet barely touched each stair in her haste. She hastened to the kitchen where she'd left the card and the annulment; there was zero chance in hell that Haymitch cleaned up.

She wondered if it was illogical that she didn't want Hazelle to see the annulment. It had been obvious that her and Peeta's parting was 'goodbye,' not 'see you soon.' But seeing the annulment would spur too many questions and draw too many sympathetic pats on the hand. Maybe that's exactly why Hazelle was here.

To Katniss's surprise, Haymitch had picked up the papers and placed them back in the bakery box on the counter. And two of the cheese buns were missing. She rolled her eyes and reached for the box, shoving the entire thing at an awkward angle into an empty lower cabinet.

With the announcement of the demise of her marriage safely concealed, a fresh batch of weariness sank into her bones. She barely wanted to move much less open the front door. But she had no choice; somehow Hazelle had a key.

Katniss made a futile effort to smooth her wild hair. She cracked open the front door, wide enough to wedge her head through.

"Hi Hazelle. Is everything alright?" The frailty in her voice belied her attempt at an impassive facial expression.

The sides of Hazelle's face were sallow in the yellow porch light. Both brows were bent with a mixture of frustration and concern. "You weren't at your mother's house. I was afraid you weren't here either. May I come in?"

Katniss wanted to simply shut the door with Hazelle still on the other side, but she knew better. She stepped aside, widening the door and flipping on a light switch. Hazelle carried a plate of food and set it on the kitchen table.

"Do you have Haymitch's key?" Katniss asked before Hazelle could explain the reason for her visit.

"Yes." Hazelle dragged the corner of one of the chairs from the table and lowered gingerly into a seat. It must be her back, Katniss thought.

"I ran into your mother and Prim in the Seam after leaving the Justice Building this afternoon. They delivered a boy earlier today, but another woman is in labor. They probably won't be back until some time tomorrow. Maura asked me to check on you and to be sure you eat."

"Thank you," Katniss said, trying again to perfect a casual tone. She waited near the front door, hoping to hasten Hazelle's departure. "I'll eat in a little while. I'm not hungry right now."

"I'm going to sit here and watch you eat. Prim's orders."

_Dammit, Prim._

Katniss was still trying to figure her way out of this when Hazelle spoke again, her tone brooking no argument. "Let's go, young lady."

Katniss trudged to the table, taking a seat and unwrapping the plate of food. Hazelle pushed her palms to the table to help herself stand. Then, she pulled two glasses from an upper cabinet and held each of them under the running faucet before rejoining Katniss at the table.

Katniss shoveled forkfuls of roasted vegetable pie into her mouth, silently admitting that it was warm and delicious but still hoping to get the meal over with as quickly as possible. She didn't realize how
intently Hazelle was watching her.

"So, it's Peeta you love. Not my son."

Katniss's eyes widened on Hazelle, who locked her in a pointed, penetrating stare. Katniss swallowed, casting her gaze back to her plate.

"It's okay, Katniss," Hazelle said, her voice as calm as still waters. "I've known for a while that your heart is with your husband."

Suddenly grateful for the glass of water at her fingertips, Katniss took a long, slow sip, still avoiding looking at Hazelle. But curiosity got the better of her; how did everyone seem to know how she felt before she did?

"How?" Her question included a sheepish glance. "How did you know?"

Hazelle exhaled deeply as she shifted in her seat to accommodate her throbbing back. "When life gets hard or complicated, we tend to run to what's safe, to what makes the most sense."

"Like the woods?"

"The woods make the most sense to you, but they're not inherently safe. You need a bow and arrow to be in the woods."

Katniss watched her for an explanation.

"Katniss, when I heard about your assault, it shook me to my core. That vile man had been in my home, with my daughter. With me. And he was capable of terrible, terrible things. I couldn't help but wonder what I would do if I were in your situation. And if I were in your situation and I escaped, I would have sought safety in the place the made the most sense. My house."

Katniss squinted, puzzled. She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Katniss, after you were assaulted, you were much, much closer to reaching my house in the Seam than you were to Victor's Village. It made more sense for you to run to my house for safety. But you didn't. And you didn't because Peeta was your safety. It was Peeta you needed. Not Gale. Peeta made the most sense to your heart and to your mind."

Katniss's eyes filled with tears, and as each one dropped, she quickly brushed them away. She didn't want to do this. She didn't want to cry again. She didn't want to talk about her assault or what Peeta meant to her. She just wanted to stop feeling.

Hazelle touched her hand. "Katniss, it's clear to me that Peeta loves you. Why did you let him leave if you love him too?"

"He deserves to be happy," Katniss said, momentarily shutting her eyes to stem the drops of tears. "I want him to be happy."

"And what about you? After all you've been through, don't you deserve to be happy too?"

"I deserve to be alone," Katniss retorted without thinking. "I mean… I'm better alone. It's just that… I'd gotten use to him. That's all. I have my sister and the woods, and honestly, they're all I need to be happy."

"And what about Gale?" Hazelle asked. "He still hopes that you two can be together. What does he
deserve, Katniss?"

Katniss knew a conversation with Gale was long overdue. She wiped what she vowed would be the last tear from her eyes.

"The truth," Katniss said with fresh resolve. "Gale deserves the truth."

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Rory had visited The Hob plenty of times during the day, a handholding chain with his mother and Vick when they were younger. The daytime Hob was bright, like the transparent sunlight that filtered through the holes in the roof and the cracked window panes. The Hob bustled in daylight, a city of bartering and gossiping and vendors determining an item's worth by holding it in the air for clearer inspection.

The Hob at night was its alter ego. Rory had only heard of it – dreamt of it, even, when his father and brother returned some evenings with stories and code words and inside jokes.

Rory used his imagination to fill in the details. Bursts of raucous, table-slapping laughter to the backdrop of Old Man Needham's festal strumming on his fiddle. Yellowed bulbs of waning light dangling between booths. A few 'loose women' at shift change, as his mother would say, looking for miners capable of getting a 'second wind' despite the grueling day's work. Rory imagined a night time scene so lively that it rivaled the brilliance of what the day time offered.

As it turned out, his imagination wasn't far off. The bulbs, never needed in daylight, blinked on and off, producing spasms of yellow light. There wasn't the chorus of laughter, but there was a choir of male voices, a symphony of conversation, grumbling, joking, and an occasional hearty laugh. Old Man Needham wasn't there, so the voices provided the only soundtrack. And there were women – servers – who cleared table when a spoon clanked with finality against an empty stew bowl.

Rory stole a glance at Gale. Never in a million years did he expect Gale to invite him to The Hob tonight. Rory had hoped that when he was older, he and Gale could have the relationship that Gale and their father had. And, going to The Hob together seemed integral to that.

They got their bowls of stew and sat at the table with Thom and another miner. Both were finishing their meals. They soon left, scrubbing their hands across their faces in exhaustion. Rory and Gale ate in silence for several minutes, Sae's savory wild dog stew coating his tongue.

"Thank you again for clearing our home site," Gale finally said. "You have no idea how much you've helped me out."

"It's alright," Rory shrugged. Curiosity was getting the better of him.

"You said you needed my help," Rory began. "With what?"

Gale took a long look at Rory, then sat back in his chair. "Love."

Rory paused in mid-lift of his spoon to his lips. "...What?"

Gale cleared his throat. "President Snow made Katniss marry Peeta. They're friends and he has a thing for her, but she and I want to be together. And now that Snow is dead, we can. But this has been hard for Katniss, and she's been confused, and... I guess what I'm trying to say is that I need some tips on how to let Katniss know that I want us to be together. I've told her, but... I feel like I need to show her, and I can't come up with any ideas."

Rory blinked in disbelief. He never expected those words to come from Gale's lips. "Why me?"
Rory managed to ask.

Gale grinned. "Seriously? You've got a good little romance going with Prim. Do you think I haven't noticed?"

Rory lowered his head, a blush warming his cheeks, a smile quivering on his lips.

"Obviously, you're doing something right," Gale continued. "I on the other hand, have never had a real relationship. So, what do you think I should do?"

Whatever anger Rory had toward Gale was long gone. He was too focused on the fact that he was better at something than Gale, and Gale needed his help. But, he didn't know what to say. He reflected for a few quiet moments.

"Well, I can't afford to give Prim what she wants, so I try to give her something she needs."

Gale cocked his head, his question in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Rory shrugged, "She wants a slice of strawberry shortcake whenever she can get it. I can't give that to her. But, our books are heavy, and she needs me to carry them for her, so I do that. Or, if she is nervous about a test, she needs me to make her laugh to distract her. Things like that. I try to give her what she needs."

Gale plopped back in his chair, stunned by Rory's response. He didn't expect Rory to say anything useful; his main goal was to get back on Rory's good side. But his brother's words were churning in his head.

"Give her what she needs," Gale said aloud, trying to figure out what that could be. "Give her what she needs," Gale said again. He still had no idea what that could be, but at least it was a start. He nodded his approval at Rory who smiled broadly when Gale added, "Best little brother ever."

More than an hour later, Gale walked Rory through the gates of Victor's Village, nightfall having fully set in. They'd bonded over talk of girls and mining, and Gale had even shared funny stories from their father, Emory. Rory basked in the attention he received from Gale, and becoming his older brother's confidant became Rory's goal.

As they approached, they saw the porch light burning at Maura's house, and a slender figure with arms tightly wrapped around her, standing on the porch. Gale and Rory exchanged knowing glances. Their mother was worried about Rory's whereabouts.

She heard their footsteps, her expression changing from worry to relief to steely annoyance.

"Where have you been, Rory? I have been worried sick. You two had better have a good explanation."

"It's my fault, mom," Gale said. "Rory was on his way, and I asked him to go with me to The Hob for a bowl."

Hazelle stared at them, dumbfounded. "Just come inside," she said, spinning on her heels and heading toward the front door.

"I don't want to cause any trouble," Gale said. Hazelle turned around. "I just wanted to walk Rory back and bring you some of my pay. For what you and the kids need."
Hazelle released her frustration with a long exhale. "We're the only ones here. Come in."

Inside the door, the house was quiet and smelled like roasted vegetables and warm dough.

"Sorry to worry you, mom," Gale said, receiving her embrace after she hugged Rory and sent him upstairs to get ready for bed. "Are the kids still up?"

"Vick and Posy are in bed. They're wiped out. How have you been? I can tell you just got in from work."

Gale rubbed his eyes. "Yeah, and I'm really dirty." He reached in his pocket and handed most of his coins to his mother, who accepted them with thanks.

She exhaled again, taking a long look at Gale. "Are you eating? Is everything alright at Thom's?"

Gale smiled. "I'm fine, mom. All is well. Rory has done an amazing job at the home site, so that's a huge help. Have you had help with the Justice Building?"

Hazelle shook her head. "I've been able to handle the Justice Building alone."

"And Vick and Posy?"

"They went with me today. Fortunately, Madge gave them some of her old coloring books, so they were occupied while I worked. Oh! That reminds me."

Hazelle walked into the kitchen and returned with the printed listings. "Madge left these for you today. They're homes for sale or rent in 12."

Gale flipped through the listings. There were only a couple of Seam vacancies, and those homes were much smaller in square footage than what his family had. He didn't bother to look at the Merchant home listings.

"Thanks mom, I'll do my best to get you all out of here as soon as possible."

Just then, small footsteps pounded the stairs.

"Gale!" Posy said, sleepy but excited as she bounded to her brother. He kneeled to come face to face with her.

"Hey! I'd pick you up, but I'm a filthy mess. How's my Posy?"

"Good," she nodded. "I colored pictures today from Ms. Madge's book. Well, she gave the books to me and Vick, so they're ours now."

Gale smiled. "Good. And what else did you do today."

"Ummm... Mommy, was it today that I said goodbye to Peeta?"

Hazelle stiffened. She had no intention of telling Gale. Not yet. But Gale's eyes had already shot to Hazelle wild with inquiry.

"Yes, honey. That was this morning."

"Did he leave for training in 2?"

Hazelle opened her mouth to find the words, but Posy responded sooner.
"Nope. He said goodbye. Katniss came running and told him goodbye too. Peeta's daddy said it was the most un-ness-cee-serwy breakup in history."

Hazelle heaved a sigh. "Okay, go on back to bed, Posy. You need to rest."

"Was that Rory I heard upstairs? I wanna show him my picture. It's not finished yet, Gale. I'll show you too when it's finished. Okay?"

"Okay, Pose," Gale said. But his mind was swirling with this new revelation. He asked about it as soon as Posy was out of sight.

"Mom. What happened? Did Peeta leave?"

Hazelle nodded. "This morning on the train."

"So, he's not coming back? He left for good?"

"It seems so," Hazelle said.

Gale grabbed Hazelle in a bear hug. She squeaked in surprise.

"Gale, I wouldn't get too excited—"

"Mom, don't you know what this means? It means she choose me. She loves me! She wants to be with me, not Peeta."

"Gale, that's not what it means—"

"Mom, I know Katniss. She would never have let Peeta go if she loved him. And the only way Peeta would leave her is if she told him she didn't love him. Don't you see? We're a free Panem, I'm in line for a great job, Peeta is gone, and Katniss and I can finally be together."

Hazelle tried again. "Katniss was pretty upset that Peeta left, Gale. I don't know what happened between them, but she still wants to be with him and—"

"Mom, stop!"

Hazelle stilled at his tone.

"Stop trying to ruin things for me and Katniss."

Hazelle looked completely astonished. "I'm not trying to—"

"If I didn't listen to you when she was assaulted, if I went to her then, she and I would be closer today. But you told me she needed Peeta, and against my better judgment, I listened to you. And that only confused her about who she wanted in her life. I should have been there for her then, and I wasn't. Now, I won't let you or anyone else stop me. Katniss and I belong together, and the mere fact that Peeta is gone tells me that she knows it too."

Hazelle nodded in agreement with her silence on the matter, not in agreement with Gale.

"Do what you think is best," she conceded with palms lifted in surrender. "Just one thing I ask. Don't do anything tonight. It's been a long day. Let her rest. Let her come to you. And listen when she speaks. Okay?"

"Okay," Gale said distractedly, halfway out the door, a plan formulating in his mind.
Give her what she needs. He glanced at the list of homes rolled in his hand. I think I know exactly what she needs.

Peeta's alarm sounded at 6:10 p.m. He didn't want to sleep too long because he still needed to call his father to let the elder Mellark know he'd arrived in District 2.

He decided to shower first. He set his prostheses in the linen closet in the bathroom, leaning the lighter weight appendage he used for sleeping beside the bench outside the shower door.

Like his sandwich, his shower was amazing. The shower head, he quickly discovered, had various settings that adjusted water pressure and speed. Thanks to the length of the metal hose attached to the shower head, Peeta could sit comfortably on the spacious shower ledge with the shower head in hand.

He emerged with relaxed muscles, but his home was entirely too quiet. He guessed that wood frogs wouldn't frequent this part of the nation, and he made a mental note to buy a radio or two.

Peeta was heading to the phone in the kitchen to call his father, when he detoured to check out his loft space. He climbed the stairs, rounded the corner, and froze, his jaw going slack.

Awaiting him was a collection of blank canvases of varying sizes, two easels, a collection of paint brushes, and tubes of paint in every color imaginable. He squeezed his eyes shut and reopened them, certain that he must have imagined it all. He hadn't.

On one easel was a red bow and an announcement-style note card. His name was written on the card in loopy cursive.

Peeta –

Surprise! Welcome to the rebuild effort and to District 2. I hope you enjoy these art supplies, and I hope they help this place feel more like home.

From this loft, you have a great view of our skyline and great natural light.

Peeta looked up and saw the trio of windows.

I hope you take these blank canvases and bring something amazing to life, just like we will do with the rebuild of Panem.

- Jules

For a few moments, he couldn't move. Then, a slow-spreading smile formed as he tapped the notecard to his lips. He walked downstairs to the number on the notepad on the console table. He had another call to make before calling his father.

It rang twice.

"Hello Jules?"

Daniel Mellark was in his recliner, watching the wall clock when he dozed off. That was around 9:22 pm. When the ringing phone woke him, his eyes instantly flashed to the clock. 10:40 p.m.

He cleared his throat, but his "Hello" was still raspy from sleep.
"Hi Dad. Did I wake you?"

"Peeta," Daniel said with joy. He sat up straighter in his recliner. "No, I'm just here waiting on your call. How are you, son?"

"I'm doing much better than I thought I'd be doing, dad." Peeta gave Daniel an abridged version of his day, including the art supplies he discovered on his loft.

"I've never experienced such kindness from complete strangers before. Meeting Gaige and Antonia, and Jules… I never would have expected that."

Daniel beamed on the other end. "I am so happy to hear that, son. So happy. You deserve all the kindness in the world."

"I invited Jules over for a sandwich, just to say 'thank you.' She said she hadn't eaten dinner yet. She should be here in about ten minutes."

"Good," Daniel said. "And thank her from me as well. Tell her if she's ever in District 12, I'd love to return the kindness. The same goes for the young man you met on the train, and the other young lady from the Capitol. If you see them again."

Peeta smiled over his father's doting.

"So, how's everyone there?"

"Oh, we're all doing well. We miss you already," Daniel said. He told Peeta that he enjoyed meeting Posy – whom he dubbed a firebrand – and that they'd had a busy day at the bakery. He stopped short of mentioning Katniss's tearful reaction to the train leaving the station. Peeta was in such good spirits that Daniel didn't want to dampen his mood.

But Peeta's mind had already flipped back to what the conductor said about Katniss not wanting to let him go. And instantly, he saw her running with all her might to reach him at the District 12 station only to tell him 'goodbye.'

"Dad… Did Katniss say anything after I left?"

Daniel pulled a long row of air through his nose and quietly exhaled. "No son. She didn't. But she became pretty emotional as the train pulled away."

Peeta listened with pinched brows. He reminded himself that she didn't love him.

"She'll miss me. I'm her friend. That's all."

Daniel toyed with telling Peeta that he sensed Katniss was feeling something more – something contrary to what Peeta said she'd told him a few nights before. But Daniel chose to keep silent. His son had moved clear across the country to escape his feelings for Katniss; there was no point in introducing what could be false hope.

"I was just wondering," Peeta continued with a shrug of his shoulders. "I won't ask about Katniss again. Now that Snow is dead, we're as safe as we've ever been. I made Haymitch promise to look out for her, and she has someone in her life. I need to move on."

"I understand, son. If you ever need to talk – about anything – I'm here to listen. Oh, by the way, before I forget, Thatch and Natalie said to check the inside zipper of your suitcase. They left a surprise there for you."
Peeta chuckled. "Okay, I'll take a look." Sudden sadness set in with hearing his father's voice on the phone and not in person. "I already miss you all. Tell everyone I said 'hello.' I'll call again in a few days."

They ended the call with "love you," and Peeta went to his suitcase to find the gift from Natalie and Thatch. He discovered four oversized freedom cookies in a plastic bag, each cookie iced with part of the message: "We'll Miss You Peeta!" Knowing the precision of Thatch's work, it looked as if Natalie iced them herself.

Peeta grinned, but there was still sadness to unpack like the clothes in his suitcase. He didn't have long to ponder; a doorbell he didn't know he had was ringing. She was here.

She must have stood outside his apartment for five minutes before she rang the doorbell. Admittedly, she was a few minutes earlier than the 6:45 p.m., time he'd given her, but time wasn't the reason she waited.

She was nervous. Not nervous like going into a dangerous situation nervous. More like giddy nervous, that feeling from being around someone who makes you hyper aware of your every action because you desperately want to make a good impression. Peeta did that to her.

She drew a deep breath. Jules had mentally prepared herself for meeting Peeta in person. He was arriving earlier than everyone else due to the sudden and mysterious demise of his marriage to Katniss. And she knew he would carry more than luggage with him from District 12. So, she'd made sure to semi-stock his fridge – he did have the longest commute of everyone heading to District 2 for training and she didn't want him to have to worry about food on the day of his arrival. And, she ordered the Gold Standard Artist's Package from a craft exchange, arranging the supplies in his loft herself. Given whatever he was going through, she hoped it would be a source of inspiration.

But Jules never expected his phone call. His offer to join him for dinner. At best, she thought he'd thank her the next time their paths crossed.

And so here she was, outside of unit 22, ordering herself to 'pull it together.' All her mental preparation had abandoned her when she found him asleep on the train. When she saw his golden eyelashes sparkling in the sunlight, his rugged jaw, his startled, crystal blue eyes when they opened to find her waking him. She'd wanted to flop into the empty seat next to his, just to give her knees a moment to regain their strength. But she'd held it together and remained pleasant and professional. Pleasant and professional. Pleasant and professional. You can do this Jules. Pleasant and professional.

She rang the doorbell and heard his footsteps approaching the door. And she drew a deep, shaky breath, hoping one last mantra would bury her nerves until she was back in the privacy of her own unit.

Peeta was smiling. It had been a long day, but the nap, shower, discovery of the art supplies, conversation with his father, and surprise cookies from Natalie and Thatch had revived him. He arranged the cookies on a paper plate and set them on the counter just as the doorbell rang.

But as soon as he pulled open the door and laid eyes on Jules, his smile faltered. Her hair was piled atop her head in a messy bun. She wore a pale pink, oversized sweater that reached just past her hips and bared a peek of one shoulder, and her black leggings adapted to her slender, feminine curves. Her entire look was simple and understated – something comfortable for winding down at the end of
yet, she managed to make it look so incredibly…

Beautiful. She is absolutely –

And suddenly, Katniss's voice was in Peeta's head, wroth with accusations about his attraction to Jules. Attraction that Katniss assumed was powerful enough to end their marriage. Anger seized him, and he turned abruptly from the door, leaving Jules standing on the other side. He was almost in the kitchen when he mumbled a terse "Come in," over his shoulder.

Jules froze at the sudden change in his demeanor. She quietly shut the door behind her and took tentative steps toward the kitchen island. Peeta was on the other side, tossing bread, deli meat, and produce onto the countertop. She wrapped both arms around her waist, her natural pose when she felt uncomfortable or defensive. Dalton had once pointed that out.

"Thanks for the invite," she said, trying to maintain some levity in her voice. But she was speaking to his back; Peeta had completely tuned her out. With palms flat on the countertop and arms locked, tried to refocus. Be kept reliving Katniss's scream of "Not real!" to his face. He could feel himself unraveling.

"This dinner invite was a stupid, stupid idea, he berated himself. You haven't processed the past 72 hours, and you need to be alone. You need to handle your pain in private."

"Peeta?" She stood at a barstool, her eyes questioning him.

Peeta tried to compose himself, but he felt like he'd already started to implode. Just make the damn sandwich and ask her to leave. Tell her you're not feeling well or you're tired or something. Just hold it together for a few more minutes.

"Yeah, so I have, umm, deli meat and. Bread. And vegetables. You know what I have. What kind of sandwich… What do you... Just… Just tell me what you want, Jules, and I'll make it."

Every ounce of logic within her told her to recuse herself, to make up an excuse and leave. But she realized what was happening. Peeta had just lost the love of his life, and the realization was sinking in. Against her better judgment, she decided to stay, to try and draw him from the emotional ledge he was teetering on.

"Peeta." She said his name so strongly that his head whirled around, his tormented eyes landing on hers. "Tell me what happened."

For a moment, Peeta just stared at her in stunned silence. Then, he ran a hand roughly down his face and shook his head distractedly.

"What the hell, Peeta! He told himself. You're supposed to be guarded, to handle this in private. Can't you hold it together for another 5 minutes?!

Jules watched cautiously, awaiting his response. After a few silent moments where Peeta seemed to be silently grappling with himself, Jules decided to follow her gut instincts. This would be uncomfortable, and she had no plans of ever mentioning it, but he needed the shock. Maybe she did too.

"Everything Johanna said about my feelings for you is true, Peeta."

Now she had his full attention, and his widened eyes locked on hers. She mustered her courage and held his gaze.
"But here's the reality. Your marriage has just ended. And you've changed careers and left your family and your home and moved clear across the nation to start a new life. Any one of these things can be super stressful and scary and overwhelming."

Peeta's eyes watered.

"So let's agree to forget everything else. Completely. You need a friend right now, and more than anything else," her tone softened, "I want to be your friend because I'm familiar with pain, and loss, and having to start over. I have no hidden agenda or ulterior motives. I promise I don't. So, will you let me in, Peeta? Will you let me be your friend?"

He fell silent for several moments. Then, he sunk his teeth into his bottom lip as warm tears slipped down his face. "I tried so hard," he murmured, the words catching in his throat. "I love her so much, Jules."

Jules's own eyes filled with tears, and she rounded the island to where he stood. "I'm a hugger, Peeta, and I think you need one. Can I give you a hug?"

He nodded, and she embraced him chastely so their chests did not touch. He lowered his head to her bare shoulder and silently and briefly wept, while she told him that everything would be okay. It was what he'd done for Katniss time and again, and he didn't know how desperately he needed gentle arms to do it for him.

"I'm sorry." He pulled away with downcast eyes and accepted the napkin she offered. "This is tearing my heart out."

"Come. Let's sit down. Let's go to the couch. I'll grab some water."

As he made his way to the living room, he noticed the back of her hand brushing tears from underneath both eyes as she pulled two bottles of water from the fridge. She was crying with him, sharing his pain. For as long as he lived, he vowed to never forget that moment.

She joined him on the couch, handed him the bottle of water.

"You can say whatever you need to say, Peeta. It will stay in this room. I promise to never repeat it."

He saw no hint of deceit in her eyes. He told her of his longstanding love for Katniss, their mandated marriage from President Snow, a synopsis of Katniss's relationship with Gale, and what happened after Snow's death. He included Katniss's anger over his reaction to seeing Jules for the first time, her words of "Not real" in their bedroom, and their parting moments earlier that day on the District 12 train platform.

Jules looked crestfallen. "Peeta, this was all a big misunderstanding. Just say the word, and I'll call Katniss and talk to her. It's not too late to make her see that your heart belongs to her. She was just upset. I'm sure she didn't mean what she said."

Peeta shook his head in refusal.

"Or, you can invite her here to 2 to stay with you for a few days until her rebuild work begins in 12," Jules implored. "It'll get her here in 2 with you. And you won't have to worry about the details; I'll take care of everything. Maybe if you two had a different atmosphere, you could talk things through and figure things out."

Again, Peeta silently said 'no.'
"Or, you can go home for now and work things out with Katniss," Jules tried again. "I'll hold the job for you, and I'll work everything out with your training. You'll catch on quickly, and I can send you home with the training manual so you can do some reading on –"

"Jules." His voice was resolute. She looked to him with mournful eyes.

"There's no point." He managed a self-deprecating smile. "Katniss doesn't love me. If she did she wouldn't have let go. She never lets go of those she loves. Her heart simply isn't mine."

He turned his gaze to the paper towel in his hands. "Gale was right. The first opportunity she had to walk away, she took it." He drew a shaky breath. "And you know what? I'm proud of her for going after the person her heart wants. Katniss is a fighter. Even when it hurts, she fights for the people she loves, and, like I said, she doesn't let go."

Jules sat in quiet defeat. Peeta seemed like such a good person; she hated to see him so unhappy, especially when she herself was connected to his pain.

"Jules."

She looked at him.

"I don't want you to take responsibility for any of this. That's not why I told you. None of this is has anything to do with you."

She must have looked uncertain.

"Okay?" Peeta pressed. "I'll feel worse if you take this to heart. That's not how I want to start our friendship."

His tired smile maneuvered a smile from her lips, and she nodded in agreement.

"Now," he announced as he stood from the couch and extended a hand to help her up. "Let me make you a sandwich without the threat of tears."

"That's my favorite kind," she quipped.

He chuckled, still holding on to her hand. Now, it was somehow the most natural feeling in the world.

"I feel like I've known you for a thousand years, Jules. And I'll never forget all you did for me today. Thank you for letting me share something so difficult and personal with you. I feel much better now that I've finally let it out."

"Everything is gonna be alright, Peeta," she said with quiet confidence. "You'll see."

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"I do have one favor to ask of you."

Peeta's eyes were trained on the pastrami-turkey-ham sandwich he was making for Jules on his kitchen island. She sat on a barstool on the other side of the island, facing him.

"Name it."

"Keep me busy. I mean really busy." He reached for a sliced tomato and carefully lowered it atop a mound of pastrami on one half of the sandwich. "I know you can't be in charge of me 24 hours a day, but if you could give me something to do every day to shave off several hours, I would greatly
appreciate it."

Jules breathed a short laugh. "I don't think that'll be a problem. So far, you and I are the only two here, and I've been tasked with getting all the technology and logistics set up in the training center. I could use your help every day leading up to the start of training."

"Perfect," Peeta nodded. "I'm there."

"We can get started on Monday. And tomorrow, I can show you around Commerce Row. It's where all the shops are located in the Warehouse District."

"That'll be great. I need to learn my way around the area."

He reached for a knife, bending to come eye-level with the countertop. With concentration, he pressed the flat of the knife to one side of the sandwich and carefully flipped it to lay on top of the other half.

His eyes were back on her, the knife poised in his hand. "Sliced or whole?"

"Sliced, please. And by the way, Finnick and Annie and Mags arrive on Wednesday from District 4. I could use your help with moving them in. Well, Finn and Annie only have a few suitcases, but Mags is having several boxes and a couple of chests shipped. Comforts of home."

"Sure." Peeta sawed diagonally across the sandwich. "Viola." Peeta guided the plate across the island to Jules. "Your very own hand-crafted sandwich."

She turned the plate, inspecting the sandwich. "This almost looks too good to eat... Is there anything I can do to help while you make yours?"

"Umm... yeah. You can grab some grapes and carrot sticks from the fridge. We already have water in the living room. And here are some cookies from our bakery. I'd like for you to try them."

Jules rounded the counter, sliding past Peeta to get to the sink where she washed her hands. Then, she went to the refrigerator and stacked each plate with carrot sticks and grapes. Peeta quickly assembled his sandwich, not putting nearly as much precision into his. Soon, they were carrying their plates to the dining table and the plates with the fruit and vegetables and the cookies to the dining table.

Jules hesitated. "Would you mind terribly if we ate in the living room? Dining tables are so formal. I usually sit on the living room floor."

Peeta shrugged. "Lead the way to the floor."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he grinned.

They set their plates on the coffee table and lowered to the carpet, leaning their backs against the couch.

"Hmm," Peeta nodded approvingly. "This whole floor dining thing isn't half bad."

"Oh, it's the best. And wait until you get a television in here. You'll never go back to sitting at a dining table again."

"What I really need is a radio," Peeta said. "Two actually. One for the kitchen and one for my
Jules sprang from the floor and headed to the wood and metal bookshelf where she retrieved a small remote and a glossy rectangular notecard. She brought them to Peeta.

"You have digital immersion audio, my friend. It's in every unit. All you have to do is select a pre-set station. There are about 45 presets, and they're organized by types of music. You can even customize your own playlists and control your music room by room. Or you can set it to play the same station throughout your unit."

"Really."

Peeta pushed a red 'On/Off' button. And the mellow sounds of a percussion-heavy tune with a man's tenor danced through the air.

She leaned closer to see the notecard. "See? These are the stations you have, and they're all interruption free. And would you believe Mags prompted all this? The 80-year-old loves for music to play in her home at all times. Finnick request it be added to her unit as we were renovating these buildings in hopes of a successful rebellion. It made more sense economically to wire the entire complex with what we'd pay for to wire one unit."

"This. Is. Amazing!" Peeta gushed. "So all I do is..." Peeta glanced at the notecard and hit another button, and faster music played. He soon found a station called Upbeat Instrumentals, with an energetic array of horns, drums, and piano keys. He cocked an eye brow at Jules for approval and she nodded.

"Jazz," she said. "It's one of my favorites. So, I take it you like music?"

"I love music. When I was little, my dad and my brothers and I would dance around the house on Sunday afternoons to songs from the before the Dark Days that he had on discs." He stopped short of mentioning his living room dances with Katniss, chewing on a carrot stick instead.

Jules's jaw dropped. "There's a dance club here called Sill, and on Friday nights, they only play music from before the Dark Days. I go sometimes."

"What?" Peeta asked in disbelief. "Were they open when Snow was alive? We hid all our music."

"They've been open for years. Like I said, outside of the Capitol, District 2 was his favorite."

"Well District 12 was his least favorite," Peeta said. "It must be nice coming from a district that had the Capitol's favor."

"Oh, I'm not from 2." She popped a grape into her mouth. I moved here two years ago."

"Really," Peeta said with interest. "Where are you from?"

"District 1."

Peeta's brows lifted. "That's the wealthiest district in all of Panem. You must have given up a lot to be a part of the rebellion, to move here at age what... 15?"

She nodded, but from the look in her eyes, she was momentarily transported to another place. She returned with a gentle smile. "It was all worth it. Now, we're a free Panem." She motioned to her room."
plate. "Now, if I can just figure out how to make a sandwich that looks this good."

Peeta grinned. "Shall we eat?"

"Absolutely." With perfectly trimmed and polished mauve-colored fingernails, Jules gathered half of the sandwich with both hands. Peeta couldn't resist watching as she took her first bite. Her eyelids lowered, and she hummed with satisfaction.

"Oh my goodness," she mumbled over a mouthful, her hand gingerly shielding her lips as she chewed. "Peeta this is incredible."

His smile widened. "You like it?"

"Hell no. I love it." She took a sip of water. "How did you do this? Whenever I make a sandwich, it tastes like… like I made it."

Peeta chuckled as he chewed. "So, I'm guessing you don't cook?"

"It's best for all involved if I don't." She inhaled happily as she chewed. "And all I had planned for tonight was trail mix."

"Seriously?" Peeta couldn't hide the amusement in his voice.

She nodded, smiling as she took another bite.

"Then let's consider tonight's sandwich an appetizer. I will make you a hot meal to continue this 'thank you dinner.'"

She took a sip of water. "As much as I want to be a lady and say 'Oh, Peeta, that's not necessary,' if your sandwiches are this good, I'll be here for a cooked meal."

They laughed. And Peeta memorized the honesty in her eyes and the melody in her voice. They sat on the living room floor and talked long after their last bites of food and second bottles of water. Theirs was a rare combination of ease and humor and effortless conversation, and the more they talked, the more they wanted to.

Hours passed before they noticed.

It was Sunday morning, late enough for the skies to have partially woken but early enough for most of District 12 to still be asleep.

Maura and Prim returned to a slumbering house, and the elder Everdeen sent her daughter to bed with a tight hug and a kiss to her forehead. After 24 combined hours of labor, they both desperately needed rest. And, the dull ache pulsing down the curve of Maura's neck and shoulders begged for the grip of skilled hands.

As usual, she thought of him.

James Everdeen had been the love of her life. There was no doubt about it. But Maura would be lying to herself if she said she didn't remember the strength and skill in Daniel Mellark's hands – more than two decades after he last touched her.

She'd thought of Daniel four nights ago, when she watched his youngest son pull her oldest daughter into a tight embrace in front of the kitchen sink. Maura had spied the total contentment on Katniss's face while Peeta held her, and Maura knew this Mellark boy had gotten his girl.
Then, everything changed overnight. Panem's government was overthrown, and President Snow was assassinated. Peeta and Gale exchanged blows at Haymitch's house. Katniss emerged from the woods looking distraught, and without explanation, Katniss continued to sleep in Maura's guest bedroom instead of returning home. And yesterday morning, Peeta knocked on Maura's door to say 'goodbye' and leave parting gifts. His words were positive and carefully placed, but his eyes were somber.

None of it made sense. Katniss recently admitted to her mother that she loved Peeta, and anyone with eyes could see how Peeta felt about his wife. Their separation made even less sense when Maura remembered how Katniss raced to the train station before the locomotive came to carry Peeta out of her life.

From the corner of her eye, Maura saw a note on the kitchen counter.

**Maura –**

_I checked on Katniss. She cleaned her plate and chose to sleep at her house next door. She's sadder than she's willing to admit, and she wanted to be alone. There are meals for you and Prim in the refrigerator. We'll keep the house quiet so you both can rest once you return home. Let me know if there's anything else we can do._

_Hazelle_

Maura heft the notecard as her weary mind tried to piece together a cogent response. She rummaged through one of the kitchen drawers and found a pen.

_I appreciate everything, Hazelle. I'm heading next door to check on Katniss; Primrose is asleep upstairs. I may fall sleep next door for a few hours, but I'll be back soon. If anyone needs me, please let me know._

_Maura_

She placed her medicine bag in the coat closet and locked the front door behind her. More than she needed to sleep, Maura needed to be present as a mother. She owed that to her girls. Especially Katniss.

Maura heard the knocking in her dreams before she realized someone was at the door. She freed herself from the blanket on Katniss's couch, her eyes immediately landing on the wall clock.

_It's been five hours already?_  

Earlier, when she reached the Mellark home, Katniss was already gone, probably for the woods. Maura laid on the couch and slept. She wanted to be there when Katniss returned. There was another knock.

_Katniss has a key, so she wouldn't knock, Maura reasoned sleepily. Well, maybe she shot a buck and needs me to open the door. But wait a minute. She doesn't know I'm here._

Maura had almost reached the door when it flew open. It was a face she didn't expect to see. "Dan," she gasped, her hand resting on her chest. "You scared me."

He looked equally stunned; then came his genial smile and the telltale red blush on his neck. "You scared me," he joked. "What are you doing here?"
"Waiting on Katniss to get back from the woods. What are you doing here?"

"Peeta asked me to stop by and pick up his paintings from the back porch. We're going to hang them in the bakery."

"Oh," Maura smiled sheepishly. "That's nice. Why did you knock?"

"Just in case. I didn't want to alarm Katniss if she were here." There was an awkward pause. "Well I'm sorta already in, but can I come in?"

"Yes, of course." Maura stepped aside and let Daniel enter.

He headed through the living room. "How have you been, Maura?"

She smiled politely, her mind traveling back a day when he never called her by her first name. It was always 'MK.'

"I've been doing well. And you?"

"Can't complain," he said. She watched him emerge from the back porch with one large painting of a beautiful sunset. He propped it by the front door, then went back for the other.

"Dan?"

"Yeah." He kept walking and soon reappeared with the other, smaller painting.

"Do you know what happened between Peeta and Katniss? Why Peeta left so abruptly? I've been delivering babies, and I'm completely in the dark."

Daniel pursed his lips. He wanted to say it was the same thing that happens every so often. Peeta got his hopes up for something real with Katniss, and she crushed him. Thankfully, for the last time.

"He didn't have a reason to stay after what Katniss told him."

Maura's eyes narrowed. "What? What did Katniss say to him?"

"That she didn't love him. She loves the other guy, Gale. Peeta said she made that perfectly clear."

Maura looked as if her head were spinning. She didn't want to say too much and risk betraying Katniss's trust. "Are you sure?"

"Of my son's latest heartbreak? Yeah, I'm sure."

Maura detected the annoyance in his voice, and she felt defensive. "I don't think Peeta's the only one with a broken heart, Dan. I think this has been tough on both of them. And maybe it was a misunderstanding. Maybe they could have talked things over, but Peeta left so fast that he left no room for reconciliation."

"Well, that's what happens when the love of your life choses another guy over you. You move on as fast as you can."

Maura swallowed hard, their eyes locked in a moment of rawness and honesty. "We're not talking about our kids anymore, are we?"

Daniel diverted his gaze. "I guess not."
She looked at him through pained eyes. "I fell for him so quick and so hard, Dan. It was all so unexpected and –"

Daniel lifted his hand, a weak smile on his lips. "After all these years, you don't have to explain now. You did the right thing for you, and I did the right thing for me."

Maura wrapped her arms around her waist. A nagging question she'd dismissed long ago resurfaced.

"Did you really care about me? You married her so quick…"

He looked surprised. "Of course, I cared about you."

"Well I guess your love for Nance was just as instant as my love for James."

"I learned to love her," he said without a hint of apology. "And she has given me three of the most amazing sons a man could ask for."

Maura's close-lipped smile was full of agreement.

"And you didn't do so bad yourself." His smile was like an olive branch.

"No, I didn't."

"Well, I'd better be on my way. It's nice to see you, Maura. Please tell Katniss that I have a taste for squirrel stew, so if she wants to trade, she should come by the bakery sometimes."

"Thanks Dan. I will."

Then he exited, leaving Maura with more questions than she had before.

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Saturday turned out to be a good day. There was Gaige, and the stranger's thoughtfulness made him and Peeta friends by the time they reached the Capitol. Peeta also thought fondly of Tini's enthusiasm.

And then there was Jules. Her smile and kindness and wit had proven to be the biggest surprise. Peeta walked her home late that night and returned to his unit, laying across the bed in exhaustion.

He woke in the middle of the night, half asleep and reaching for his wife, for the reality he thought could be theirs. He saw her eyes in the moonlight, heard her plea that she was so hungry, that she wanted him. Every ounce of his being craved her, and his desire turned into his throbbing need for release. He primed himself with visions of pulling her tank top over her head, tugging her shorts from her lithe frame, and claiming every inch of her body as his. And he felt overrun by shame when he came with Katniss's name on his lips and his unrequited love dripping over his hand.

So he showered. And unpacked. And dabbled in the various colors of some of his paints. And tried to busy himself in his new home until 10 a.m., when he was supposed to meet Jules in the lobby for their walk to Commerce Row.

He made it downstairs at 10:01, not accounting for the time to wait for the elevator. Jules leaned against the front desk; she wore a navy drawstring dress and black flats, and her was pulled into a high ponytail. Her smile widened Peeta's. As he approached, a woman emerged from the back office.

"Peeta, this is Merritt Lashley. Merritt Lashley, Peeta Mellark."
Merritt was probably in her early thirties, round-faced with wispy brown bangs and hair that hung to her shoulders. Her smile was fueled with excitement, but her eyes carried a thin watery film, so it always looked like she just finished a good cry.

They greeted one another warmly, Peeta thanking her for grocery shopping on his behalf.

"My pleasure," Merritt gushed. "We're so happy you're here! This is an exciting time for Panem, isn't it?"

"Yes," Peeta nodded. "It truly is an exciting time. By the way, I want to repay the kindness to you and Jules. What do you ladies like? Muffins, scones, brownies…"

"I love scones," Merritt said.

"And I'll eat anything," Jules grinned.

Peeta laughed. "Scones it is. I will make sure I bring a plate of warm scones to the front desk each morning this week."

Merritt and Jules burst into cheers and applause, prompting another laugh from Peeta.

"So where are you two off to today?"

"I am taking Peeta on a tour of Commerce Row so he knows were to buy more flour for our scones."

"Right," Peeta agreed. "More flour."

"Well it's a beautiful, warm and breezy day. Excellent weather for May 1st."

Peeta's smile would have dropped if he weren't mindful to hold it in place. It's May 1st. Katniss's birthday is in one week. She wanted a picnic…

"We'd better get going then," Jules said. She and Peeta parted ways with Merritt and headed out the door.

The sunlight was dazzling, causing them to squint when they first stepped outdoors. Their eyes soon adjusted, the warmth of the sun coating their arms.

"Do you have a favorite season?"

Peeta heard Jules's question, but he was still stuck in thoughts about Katniss's birthday. It took him a moment to respond.

"Umm… No, not really. I just like seasons of balance, when it's not too hot and not too cold. How about you?"

"Warm but not miserable. But it too hot around here. So, aside from the beaches of District 4, this is my ideal climate."

As they walked, they talked about scones and something called creamed fruit drinks that Jules swore by.

"By the way, do you know how to type, Peeta?"

"I don't," Peeta admitted. "I can use a cash register, but we didn't have much technology in District 12."
"You need a typing course. So much of what we'll do is computer based. Your life will be much easier if you learn how to type."

"Where do I learn?"

"The lady who taught me won't be here for two weeks, when all the trainings start. But I can teach you. I still have the teaching manual that Beetee gave me when I learned. It takes patience, but it's worth it to learn."

"Sounds great," Peeta agreed. "And it'll keep me busy."

"If you're open to it, we can start on Monday after we're done at the training center. It'll take about a week to learn. We can plan an hour each afternoon for me to show you the technique, then you can continue to practice whenever you want."

"Will I have time to buy a computer by then?"

"Probably not, but we can use the computer room at the Dwellings. I can order you a personal computer, if you'd like. We can charge it to the rebuild because you'll be using it for work purposes. If I order it tomorrow, it should arrive by the end of the week."

Peeta grinned. "You're really on top of things, Jules."

Her smile faltered, and for a fraction of a second, Peeta saw that faraway look in her eyes again. Like she was staring at a future she would never have.

"I like to stay busy too," she said, quietly.

Peeta understood. Jules was as haunted by the loss of Dalton as he was by the demise of his relationship with Katniss. But her pain was chronic; Dalton's life was over. At least he knew Katniss was safe. And happy.

"Jules?" He touched her arm; they stopped walking.

"Yeah?" she said, turning to face him. The light had returned to her eyes, but he'd already figured her out; that light was manufactured, and she and all her sorrow were hiding behind it.

"You need a friend too. Don't you?"

Her tears were at the ready, and she furiously blinked them away, all the while propping a smile on her lips.

"Whenever you need to talk about Dalton, I'm here for you. Just like you were there for me last night when I needed to talk about Katniss. But I know our situations are different; you must miss him terribly."

She bowed her head, and a few tears dropped to the ground. She sniffed and quickly wiped them away. "You have no idea."

"In the words of a wise young woman, 'will you let me in,' Jules? Will you let me be your friend?"

She drew a deep breath and smiled. "Yes. Thank you, Peeta."

"Hug?" he asked with a grin that made her laugh.

"Yep."
They embraced on the sidewalk, drawn by the painful vacancy of an incomplete heart.

Neither one of them noticed the woman lingering on the other side of the street at the edge of the park, her camera covertly poised to capture their exchange.

"I'll probably need to take you up on those talks," Jules sniffed as they pulled away.

"Anytime," Peeta said. And Jules knew he meant it. They basked in each other's smiles. And with a series of quick clicks, the camera caught that too.

Commerce Row was a seven-minute walk from the Warehouse District at a casual pace. About four minutes in, Jules pointed out a side street and said the training facility was "a block that way."

The park was still in view as they walked, and people were making their way outdoors. One couple rode bicycles on the brick path, and a group of three sat on a blanket, talking animatedly amid opened books.

Peeta felt like he was in some alternate universe. He saw firsthand the gluttonous luxury of the Capitol, but he never expected any district to have these simple pleasures. Life here was lighter, markedly different from the oppression that lingered over District 12.

They passed several small shops along the way, most of them with "Coming Soon" signs as part of the area's revitalization. One occupied shop caught his attention.

"A jeweler?" Peeta asked. "Isn't that a District 1 thing? I wouldn't expect to see that in 2."

"You're right; jewels and luxury items are based in District 1. But keep in mind that District 2 was becoming a vacation destination for Capitol elite."

"So the plan was to give Capitol elite access to the best of what the districts could offer?"

"Pretty much. Not every district would be included, but most would be represented."

Commerce Row officially started at Monarch Street. Jules pointed out a few shops. The confectionary sold candy. The meat market didn't keep a variety of meats in stock, but they could have almost any cut shipped within days.

Really? Peeta marveled. This could have helped Katniss when she was younger. If she had a connection to 2 to sell her kills, that would have been instant profit to feed her and her family.

He realized he was thinking about her again. And he forced himself to stop it.

"And here is Sweet Cream, the place I told you about that serves creamed fruit drinks." Jules's face brightened. "That place is addictive. I'll need to stop in on our way back home."

"Gotcha," Peeta said.

"And over there," Jules pointed to the largest shop on the street. It had a green awning and several brown crates of neatly stacked produce extending from the front entrance. "That's Winston's Market. It's hands down the best grocery store in all of 2."

They walked past wide glass entrance doors. Inside was well-lit, creating a pleasant atmosphere amid neat aisles of food.

"Nice," Peeta said.
Jules grabbed a shopping cart. "Wanna share? I only need a few things."

"Sounds good."

They walked through the store, Peeta accumulating most of the items in the basket.

"Here," Jules grabbed a small clear plastic cup with something that looked like brown ribbon from a sample table. "Try this."

"What's this?" Peeta asked.

"It's called fruit leather. Like dried fruit."

Peeta bit into it, a sweet burst of flavor filling his mouth. He nodded with approval.

"Good right?"

Peeta was already talking with the clerk behind the counter, who told him that the fruit leather flavor was pomegranate. Jules chuckled when he gathered a handful of packs and dropped them into the cart.

"So, do you have something like Winston's in 12?" Jules asked.

"We have a small market in the Merchant's Quarters, where I lived. There's a larger warehouse in another part of town called the Seam. But everyone barters more than they use coins. Maybe with the changes coming to 12 from the rebuild, something like this could be built there. It would provide jobs which would change the way of life for so many people."

Peeta's love for District 12 was obvious. For a fleeting moment, Jules thought that he could have a more active role in the rebuild of 12, but she remembered that Katniss was working that area. And Peeta was not open to reuniting with Katniss.

"You really care about your hometown, don't you?" She said softly.

"I can't help it." Peeta swallowed hard. "People I care about are there. And there's so much need."

"One day, soon hopefully, things will be much, much better. And I'd like to hear about District 12, whenever you want to talk about it."

A day earlier, Peeta would have avoided sharing any information about 12. But a lot had happened in a day.

"I'd like that," Peeta smiled. "I'd like that very much."

After Dan left, Maura sat at the kitchen table, deep in thought, folding and refolding the solitary cloth napkin that lay on the counter beside the sink.

Dan's visit had upset her. Not the kind of upset where she needed to let her anger simmer and cool. It was the type of upset where hard glass is neatly arranged high on a rack but topples and chips with one careless move. Or, in her case, a few careless words.

Dan didn't mean to be careless. She knew that. She knew he didn't anticipate seeing her at Peeta's house just as much as she didn't anticipate seeing him walk through the door. Neither of them expected to have those minutes alone for an honest and long-overdue talk.
But she was upset. Upset that after all these years, she felt the need to defend her decision to choose James over Dan. Upset that she felt the need to defend Katniss, who was clearly more heart broken at Peeta's departure than Peeta seemed to be. Upset that the last two times she'd seen her daughter, Katniss was an emotional wreck, fleeing to the woods or the train station.

*Dan must be mistaken. Katniss loves Peeta. She told me she loves Peeta. Why would she say she didn't? There must be a misunderstanding.*

Maura pressed the heels of her hands to her eyes. Regardless of what happened between Katniss and Peeta, Maura hoped Katniss came back soon. Maura needed to know she was okay. Plus, the day was wearing on, and Maura needed to return to the Seam to check on Lalie and Lucy and examine their newborn sons.

Maura smoothed the napkin on the table to its perfect square and folded it in half. Less than a minute later, the key was turning in the lock. Katniss entered looking downcast, distracted.

"Mom," Katniss startled, her eyes a widened steel gray and bloodshot pink. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting on you," Maura smiled. "I helped myself to some tea and honey a little while ago. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course not," she said quietly, unhooking her messenger bag from her body and placing her bow and arrow in the corner.

The silence meant they both knew the conversation that was about to happen, and neither of them wanted to be the one to start it.

"Were the babies born?"

Maura nodded. "Two healthy boys. One five pounds and one nine pounds."

Katniss washed her hands in the sink. "At least they'll never be reaped," she mumbled.

Maura heaved a sigh. She would have to be the one to start.

"How are you, honey?"

"Fine," Katniss said abruptly, still washing her hands.

"You've been so upset lately. And yesterday… What happened? Why did Peeta –"

"I don't want to talk about it."

Maura sat there, watching Katniss's back as she stood hunched over the sink, scrubbing her hands. The sound of the rushing water was as telling as the silence had been.

Maura stood from her chair, walked to the sink, and stood beside Katniss.

"You love him, honey," Maura said gently. "Why did you say you didn't?"

Katniss heaved twice as she tried to corral her emotions. But she couldn't, and soon, her hand flew to cover her face, her chin tucked to her chest in a shoulder-shaking sob.

"Oh, Katniss." Maura reached for her, pulling her daughter's head to her shoulder. "Let it out," she soothed. "Let it out."
It took a few moments, but they sat at the table, Maura offering Katniss the half-folded napkin. Katniss told her about Peeta's job offer in District 2 and how it would be a better opportunity for him.

Maura nodded, reading between the lines. "So, you sacrificed for him. Because you love him."

Katniss nodded. "It was the only way he would leave, and... have the happiness he deserves."

Maura understood. Still, after all Katniss and Peeta had been through – and how they'd grown together – a job offer didn't seem like enough to tear them apart. There had to be another reason.

"I don't know how I'm gonna do this, mom. I miss him too much already. I hate myself for telling him that I didn't love him. And I hate myself even more that I'm acting like a stupid school girl who can't stop crying."

Katniss drew a quick breath. "Hazelle said I should reach out to him. Do you think I should, mom? Maybe it's not too late. To get him back, I mean. I know my reason for letting him go, but I didn't want him to leave. I don't think I can ever be as happy as I was when he was here."

Maura was looking straight at Katniss, but in that moment, she saw a girl she had never seen before. She saw the burden of heartbreak in her daughter's eyes, the sorrow of losing love pressed on her daughter's shoulders. And she heard her daughter's belief that her happiness was wrapped in someone who was gone.

Maura saw herself. After she lost James.

So, while she was prepared to tell Katniss to go after Peeta if it would make her happy, Maura quickly repelled that thought. She clasped Katniss's hand in both of hers and looked into her daughter's eyes, overriding the hum of James's morning song that was again playing in her head.

"Remember the other day, when I told you your father took me to the woods for our first few dates?"

Katniss sniffed and nodded. "Yes."

"After he told me I needed to know how to hunt if I were going to be an Everdeen, he told me the first rule of hunting in the woods."

Katniss's eyes narrowed as her mind searched. Then, her eyes refocused; she knew the answer.

"Leave what you cannot carry," they both recited.

Maura continued. "Sometimes, things that were once light becomes heavy. Too heavy. If we are going to survive, we have to leave what we cannot carry."

Katniss remembered her words to Haymitch the day before. *I'll survive. I always find a way to survive."

"You love Peeta; this is true. But if your love for him keeps you from surviving, then you have to leave the emotions you can't carry."

"Stop loving him?"

"No. You never stop loving. You just can't let loving him keep you from living. If you can't move beyond a moment from your past, then you stopped living at that moment."

Katniss nodded slowly, as if her mother's words were making sense. "How do I stop feeling something for him? I just want to stop feeling." Fresh tears coursed her face. "And he'll never know
that I do love him."

"Deep down, I believe he knows. But right now, you need to focus on you. Your life now is about you now, Katniss. Your life is finally about you."

Merritt pulled a planner from her purse underneath the receptionist desk and flipped it open to the dates for the coming week. Not that she needed to be reminded; she couldn't forget them if she tried.

Three bills were coming due. But the one she was most worried about was circled in red. It would be past due by two months, and they could face eviction. She couldn't let that happen. Not with her ailing father and twin six-year-old nephews depending on her. But she needed to use the money she had to purchase his medicine.

This wasn't the life Merritt asked for. She had been a great student with great opportunities in education. Once she survived reaping age, she planned to become a teacher of young children. And one day, she wanted to marry and have a family of her own. But her father became ill; she had to stop her studies and go to work to provide for him and her younger sister, Lia. Then, seven years ago, Lia became pregnant with twin boys. After giving birth, Lia ran off with her boyfriend who did not want children. Merritt was forced to make ends meet on her own.

Somehow, they were managing. But Merritt's job closed five months ago, and she was unemployed. She secured her current job four months ago, but the hiring process was lengthy, and she fell behind in her bills. Now, she needed to find a way to earn more.

The sound of the door chiming startled her. She shoved the planner back into her purse, slapping on her warmest smile for the girl who approached the desk with a camera hanging around her neck.

Peeta and Jules each brought a creamed fruit drink, talking and laughing and sipping as they lugged their groceries back to the Dwellings. He asked about her plans for dinner, and she said she'd probably have a sandwich and a piece of fruit leather. So Peeta offered to make her dinner, just like he said he would. She agreed, and they decided on a time of 6:30 p.m.

Later, when Jules arrived, Peeta's apartment door was propped open. She knocked lightly as she entered.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," Peeta smiled. On the stove was a simmering pot of meaty stew and on the counter was the warm aroma of fresh-baked bread.

"Wow, it smells amazing in here, Peeta. I wish I knew how to cook like you."

"I could teach you," Peeta shrugged. "There are some basic rules, and then it's either following recipes or instinct."

"Well, I hope I'm not someone who can do none of the above. I'm really terrible. I can program computer code, but I don't know about following a recipe."

Peeta hesitated. "Can I tell you a secret?"

She slid onto one of the barstool chairs. "Of course."

"I'm a little nervous about learning how to type. We're so far behind the rest of Panem in District 12
in terms of technology. I hope I can learn quickly."

"You will," Jules reassured. "I have no doubt."

"So, let's make a deal," Peeta said. "If you'll be patient with me as I learn how to type, I'll be patient with you as you learn how to cook. Deal?"

Peeta extended his hand, and Jules met his in a hand shake.

"Deal," she smiled her sunlight.

"Can I help do anything? I'm superb at pouring water into glasses."

"Actually, I was thinking we should invite Merritt to join us. I've cooked enough for a small army, and there's only two of us."

"That sounds great. She was still downstairs a moment ago; I'll call to see if I can catch her."

Jules slid past Peeta, her perfumed scent causing his nostrils to involuntarily flare.

"Hi Merritt! This is Jules. Peeta and I were wondering if you wanted to join us for dinner tonight. We have a lot of food and would be happy to share... Uh huh. No that's understandable."

"Tell her she could take some with her if she can't stay," Peeta whispered.

"Would you like to take some with you? We could package... Okay. Okay, cool. See you in a few."

Jules hung up the phone.

"She has a commitment tonight, but she said she'd be happy to take some with her."

"Cool," Peeta said. "Would you grab a bowl from the cabinet? I have foil in one of these drawers to my left."

"Still getting use to your new home, huh," Jules chided.

"I'm loving it here, but yes. I am still getting situated."

They worked together to plate Merritt's food, laughing and talking as they stood beside one another at the stove. Peeta's door was still ajar, and as Merritt approached, she heard their murmuring voices and bursts of laughter. Soon, she noticed how closely they were standing to one another.

Merritt tapped on the door after she entered, unnoticed.

"Hi," she said warmly. "Thanks for inviting me. I'm sorry I can't stay."

Jules was wrapping the plate. "Peeta saved me from another night of trail mix."

"And fruit leather," Peeta added with mock sincerity. Jules lightly punched him in the arm. He pretended to be stung by her hit, and they laughed again.

"Well thank you both," Merritt said. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," they echoed as Merritt left.

"Okay, Jules. Let's eat."
While Jules and Peeta prepared their plates, Merritt made her way downstairs, back to the front desk to gather her belongings and to the business card she had received earlier. She turned it in her fingers before she placed it in her purse and snapped it shut.

Vega Sampson was her name, and there was her phone number above the words 'Flick Media.' She had entered earlier that day with her camera, offering to pay a sizable amount for information about Peeta Mellark and the mystery girl with him. And now, Merritt was off to meet Vega.

She didn't know what type of information Vega needed, but Merritt knew she couldn't pretend she didn't need the money.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you again for reading. There's more to come, so please stay tuned! Comments welcomed :)

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