The Actor and the Victor

by BodoniBold

Summary

Peeta Mellark is stuck in our world being harassed by fans, strippers, and Jennifer Lawrence while Josh Hutcherson has been zapped into the crapsack world of Panem where everyone thinks he is Peeta...and the 74th Hunger Games are starting.

Hunger Games: AU with Joshifer and Everlark (plus Peetifer and Everhutch just to mix things up)
I hate this dream, it’s always the same. The Hunger Games. I never dream about any of the other movies. I never wake up in Firehouse Dog or Bridge to Terabithia.

I thought it was gone for good, I hadn’t had it in months, but getting to dye my hair blonde again for the last scene, stepping back into that world one more time, must have triggered it. And it’s always the first movie, my mind seems stuck here, the story always ending right before my character’s name is called at the reaping.

Which means it always starts in the bakery. Not the bakery. The bakery from the movie was just a shell, this is the sepia tone one my mind conjures up during these episodes. It’s what top restaurants in Beverly Hills would call “rustic,” a room full of rickety, half peeling furniture and rows after row of baking bread—and this was the kid who was supposed to be well off—anyway, I resign myself to the dream and walk over to “Dad” who is bent over one of the tables slicing away at bread. The movie didn’t cast the character, but that doesn’t stop my mind, I guess. He’s nothing like my real dad, but blond and heavyset.

“You ready for the reaping, boy,” the man asked. “Bout time to get going.”

For some reason, my dreams always give the characters strong Kentucky accents.

“You know that’s really fuuc…I mean messed up, right? Letting the government murder kids every year?” Dream dad or not, it doesn’t seem right to curse in front of him. The man gives me a hard look.

“You know better that to talk like that,” the man huffed. “You’ll get us all dragged off to the gallows if anyone heard you say that.”

“As you, are you coming to the tree,” I sing tunelessly.

The baker grabs my forearm in a vise grip and clamped his hand down over my mouth. “What is wrong with you,” he hisses. “Have you gone crazy, singing that here? Today of all days?”

I pull my arm out of his grasp, the skin still throbbing. “Fine,” I say, rubbing my tender skin. “Didn’t know fictional characters were so touchy.”

He ignores this and walks toward the stairs. “We’re leaving in five minutes.”

My dream family emerges from upstairs moments later. Two other blond brothers and a small graying woman with cold, mean eyes. In these dreams, it’s usually the actress who played my mother for about a minute, a nice lady who had me sign a copy of the Hunger Games for her daughter. A few time it’s been Julianne Moore. Once it was my actual mother and that dream freaked me out. But this woman is none of them. I avoid her. Even in a dream, I don’t want to be near her.

We head out of the door and into the town square. I congratulate myself on having a better imagination that the guys in our design department. The other District 12 shops, the banners hanging from the roofs, even the smells are sharp and distinctive. As we walk along, I go over to one of my “brothers.”
“Hey, you ready for today,” one of them says. I’m guessing it’s the middle brother.

“I’ve always wanted to know… what’s your name? The book never says,” I say. “I thought of asking Suzanne, but never got around to it.”

“What,” he stammers. “You know my name.”

“Stop being an idiot, Peeta,” the other one says. He looks older, maybe twenty, which still makes him two years younger than me. I sigh out loud. I really do have to stop playing teenagers.

We enter the square where they have the kids penned off. One of the… peacekeepers… I almost forgot what they’re called… uses the butt of his gun to force me into one of the lines. I end up separated from my dream brothers and with surrounded by a group of kids somewhere in the middle. The tension is almost palatable and my own heartbeat ratchets up.

I’m really hating this dream now. I bit my tongue, trying to force myself out of this dream, but nothing happens. A man gets up and goes to the microphone.

He go through the whole story about the dark days and the war and the Hunger Games. It takes forever, but I’m barely listening because this should be over. I should be waking up. None of the dreams have lasted this long. I start breathing hard.

The Effie Trinket character, who is Elizabeth Banks, trots up to the microphone. She looks like Elizabeth, but her voice is bizarre, not at all the pseudo British accent Elizabeth goes for. Full of nasal sounds high enough that your ears ache, this speech is almost unintelligible, but I do make out the name “Primrose Everdeen.”

The crowd gives a collective gasp. I roll my eyes. It’s amazing this shit is so popular.

I see the girl walking toward the stage and she is not Willow. This girl looks smaller, more delicate than Willow ever did, tiny and alone. I’m look around, ready for Jen to pop up and say, “I volunteer as tribute.”

“I volunteer as tribute,” a soft lyrical voice calls out right on cue. A very, not Jennifer Lawrence voice. This girl is short, from here it looks like she’s barely dusting five feet. And damn, did Ve get the hair wrong. The braid is gorgeous, swept up from her aquiline features and elaborately wrapped high. For the first time since this dream started, I smile. Jen would have hated sitting still long enough to get that done.

The peacekeepers usher her onto the stage and dream Prim is carted away by dream Gale who is not Liam. Effie talks to Not!Jen Katniss and everything follows the book. A drunken Haymitch who is not Woody falls off the stage. Effie Trinket asks for applause, the audience refuses and gives the three finger salute instead.

It really is touching, so touching that I find myself raising my own hand in respect. But then I look at my arm. The one dream dad grabbed. There are bruises. Bruises shaped like a hand. Bruises you don’t get in dreams. A strange buzzing fills my ears as I stare down at these darkening marks and the impossibility of what they mean.

“Peeta Mellark,” Effie announces from the stage.

Meanwhile…
“Josh, Josh” a voice calls. I shut my eyes tighter to block out the harsh white light seeping in under my eyelids.

“Josh,” the voice calls out again. “I’m so sorry. How was I supposed to know that horse would kick you? You have to wake up, Joshy.”

Warm drops of water splash down on my face, dripping down my cheek. I finally open my eyes to see one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen, leaning down over me. That is, beautiful until she rears back, her face completely contorted. She reaches for something hanging down alongside the bed. A bright red button. She grabs in in both hands and presses the plastic button repeatedly until a short, dark skinned woman races into the room. Her eyes dart to the girl.

“Ms. Lawrence?” she says, her voice making it a question. The woman pulls up short when she sees me.

“Oh, he’s awake. Good,” the woman says. “How are you feeling, Mr. Hutcherson? You’ve had a pretty serious concussion.”

I turn around to see if she could be talking to someone else, but she’s looking directly at me. I open my mouth to tell her she’s got the wrong person, when the girl speaks.

“What’s wrong with his eyes?” the girl asks. “They’re a completely different color.”

The woman, who must be a doctor, comes over and peers into my eyes. Then lifts up my arm to read the plastic bracelet on my wrist.

“This says his eyes were blue when we got him and they’re blue now,” the woman says. She’s close enough that I can read the name embroidered on her white coat: Joan Mathers M.D.

“Josh’s eyes are hazel,” the girl says. “I know because I’ve been looking at him for years.” She pulls out a small rectangular box. Doctor Mathers goes over to the girl and the girl swipes repeatedly at the screen. “See.”

The doctor frowns and comes back over to the bed, this time with a miniature flashlight in hand. I wait in silence as she passes the light over my eyes. When she’s done, her frown has only deepened.

“I don’t know what she’s talking about,” I get out. “My eyes have always been blue and my name isn’t Josh. You have the wrong guy.”

The girl standing in the corner makes a strangled noise, but the doctor raises her hand, silencing her.

“And what is your name?” Dr. Mathers asks quietly.

“Peeta Mellark,” I answer.
Chapter 2

I sit hogtied in a cluttered, forgotten room in the Justice Building. A single naked light hangs down, casting half the room in long shadows. I rock against my restraints, doing my best to hang on to the last of my sanity. This isn’t happening. It’s not happening. It can’t be happening. I have a plane to catch today. I have to meet my brother Conner at his school. We’re going skiing.

I stop rocking.

Or maybe, we’ve already gone skiing and I crashed into a tree. Maybe this is a hallucination and I’m in a coma somewhere. But aren’t comas supposed to be like dreams? You aren’t supposed to feel anything in a dream and I’m absolutely feeling something right now.

The rest of the reaping hadn’t gone like in the book. Dream, coma, whatever this is—I am not Peeta Mellark and I would not just calmly walk up to the stage. I’d tried to tell them I wasn’t Peeta Mellark that in fact, I’m 22 and therefore ineligible for the reaping, but they didn’t listen.

There’d been some yelling and a little running, a few punches thrown at those white clad peacekeepers, but in the end there were more of them than me and they’d dumped me here.

The door to the room slams open and Book!Mother storms into the room ahead of the guards. She reaches out a hand, slapping me hard across the face.

“What did you think you were doing out there?” she hissed. The woman is truly scary, cold blue eyes, sparse grey and blonde hair. With a mother like this, it’s a wonder Peeta Mellark wasn’t more traumatized.

“You put all of us in danger. The whole district. They could kill us for a stunt like that,” she continues. “They could kill the whole family. Me. Your father. Your brothers. Is that what you want, you selfish pig? Us to go down with you?”

She’s more worried about herself than anyone else. Perhaps she should be. In a way, what she said is what happens in the books. Peeta sides with Katniss and his whole family ends up dead, along with most of the district.

I almost tell her she’s dead anyway, that is, if you could call a fictitious character alive in the first place. But I don’t say it. It’s difficult to debate philosophy when that fictitious character is standing right in front of you. Instead I say, “What did Peeta ever do to make you so vicious? The kid’s nearly a saint.”

She stops short and squints at me. “You’ve really gone insane,” she whispers. She begins to back out of the room, shaking her head slightly. “Maybe it’s for the best. If you’re crazy, maybe you won’t realize what’s happening in the Games. Maybe you’ll be the first to die.”

Book!Mother bangs on the door to be let out and disappears into the darkened hallway. No one else comes to see me. I don’t know if it’s because Book!Father and brothers refused to come or if the guards thought better of letting them in.
The silence drags on for ages before the door is opened and the peacekeepers untie my feet, but not my hands. They lead me to a battered minivan with tinted windows. The scarred badge on the back door reads Dodge. I can barely make out the worn ram logo. Good to know American cars lasted long enough to make it into the dystopia.

I slide in next to Book!Katniss. She looks numb, staring out of the window, her face expressionless. Effie and Haymitch occupy the seats in front of us.

The ride is quick and we get to the train station in minutes. The place is crawling with paparazzi—or rather what pass for paparazzi in dreamland. I assume the position—head slightly bent to avoid the flashing, but turned just enough so that they still get a good picture and don’t start heckling you. It’s the worst kind of symbiotic relationship. They need you and you need them but that doesn’t stop either side from hating the other. I’ve had years to perfect my strategy.

Katniss freezes in the spotlight and I find myself herding her towards the platform just like I would do if any of my normal friends get caught up in the frenzy of a pap walk. I give her hand a gentle squeeze as I help her onto the platform. Haymitch and Effie bring up the rear. Haymitch disappears down the corridor, murmuring something about taking a nap while Effie turns to us.

“Now, we won’t have any more trouble from you, Mr. Mellark, will we, hmmm?” she says in her Capitol accent.

I don’t say anything, but she sighs and nods to one of the servants on the train who produces a thin blade from somewhere. The man deftly cuts the ropes from my hand. The ropes have left sore spots on my wrist. I stare at the reddened flesh and the hope that this is a dream gets less and less likely.

I’m being carted off to the Capitol.

**Meanwhile…**

They’re discussing me like I’m not even in the room. The doctor, the blonde girl, and a middle aged man with graying hair are crowded in the corner of the room arguing frantically.

“Shouldn’t we be calling his mother to fly down here? He’d want his mom here and his brother.” the blonde says.

“That might distress him more,” Dr. Mathers says. “Push him over the edge. And probably his mother, too. Not being recognized by her son would be agonizing.”

The doctor flips through her notes again. “I have to say, this is a fascinating case. I’ve heard of instances of dissociative disorder where the patient’s eye color changes to match an alternate personality, but I’ve never seen it. To be honest, I always thought the doctors who claimed it were hacks.”

“I don’t care how fascinating it is, Josh is my…my friend, one of my best friends and he needs help, now,” the blonde says, her voice sounding teary.

“We’re doing our best to help him,” the doctor says, closing the patient file. “What’s best for him now is to rest and slowly acclimate to a few familiar faces. We need to minimize stress and monitor his concussion. Too much physical or emotional stress combined with multiple concussions can lead to permanent effects if we are not careful.”
“Will he be able to finish his role,” the middle aged man says. “I mean, I don’t want Josh to jeopardize his health, but is there a timetable on when he’ll be able to get back to work? It’s only this last scene.”

The doctor pursed her lips and looked the older man up and down. “The boy doesn’t know who he is right now. I don’t think learning movie lines is something I can recommend.”

“I know who I am,” I say. The others turn around to look at me. “And I can hear you.”

“Hey, how are you feeling?” the blonde says, coming over. She looking a little like she’s about to pet a frightened rabbit. “We thought you were asleep.”

I feel my lips curve. “It’s pretty hard to sleep when everyone’s yelling at the top of their lungs.”

The girl smiles. “You almost sound like yourself.”

“I am myself,” I say. “But I’d like to know who all of you are and where I am.”

“You’re in a hospital in Atlanta,” the girl said. “You have a concussion. There was a… little accident.”

“With a horse,” I say. I don’t know where Atlanta is, but some districts are large enough to have more than one town and those towns sometimes have names. It might also be in the Capitol.

A hard ball of dread drops into my stomach because I know this being the Capitol is the most likely option. It is some experiment or trick from the Capitol, some way to punish me because of the Games.

“You remember,” the girl asks, sounding both pleased and surprised.

“I remember you saying it earlier. Something about a horse kicking me,” I say.

“I knew I shouldn’t have let you ride a horse,” the gray haired man mutters.

“It was an accident and nothing like that has ever happened to me before,” the girl say, nearly screaming.

“You’re yelling again,” I say. I pinch the bridge of my nose to ease my pounding headache, but it doesn’t help.

“Sorry,” the girl says. “But that’s why you think you’re Peeta Mellark.”

“I am Peeta Mellark,” I say.

“Peeta Mellark is a fictional character,” the doctor says soothingly. “You’re an actor and you play Peeta Mellark in the movies.”

“The movies are based on a series of popular books. Millions of people go to theaters to watch,” the grey haired man says. “It’s big entertainment.”

“That doesn’t make sense. No one would want to watch a movie about me,” I say.

“Well, you’re probably right. No one would sit through a movie just about you, I mean Peeta,” the gray haired man says. “But it’s not only about Peeta. It’s about Katniss and Gale and all the other characters.”

My eyes narrow when they mention Katniss and I can’t believe I haven’t thought about her.
“Where is Katniss?” I ask. “Is she here too? Do you have her here for your movie? I want to see her.” I sit up too fast and a wave of dizziness almost takes me under.

The doctor gently forces me to lay back on the bed. “Don’t make me have to restrain you,” she warns.

“Where’s Katniss,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Ta-da,” the blonde girl deadpans. “If you want Katniss, I’m the only one in the real world.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Jen plays Katniss in the movies,” the gray haired man says.

I look over at the blond girl with her fair skin and bright blue eyes. “How can she play Katniss? She looks nothing like her.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again. I appreciate every view, every kudos, and every comment.
In which Josh drinks and Peeta shares a bed with Jennifer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3

Okay, so I’m not drunk. I’m not high. I’m not asleep. The coma thing is still an option, but it’s looking less likely. A nervous breakdown? That’s possible. I could be shaving my head a la Britney Spears right this moment, but I don’t think Britany got sucked into one of her music videos. Or rather the book version of her music video. Because that’s what going on now.

“Your mentor has a lot to learn about presentation. A lot about televised behavior,” Effie says. She looks at me expectantly, like she thinks I’m supposed to say something here, like there’s a script.

But this scene wasn’t in the movie. I try to think back to the books. I read them twice before I first got the role, but it’s been a long time, too long to remember exact quotes.

“Sorry, don’t remember the line,” I say.

Katniss looks at me, mystified for a moment, before turning back to Effie. “He was drunk. He’s drunk every year,” she says.

I snap my fingers. “Yeah, that was the line. And now you say something like ‘every day.’”

Katniss smirks a little. “He is drunk every day.”

Effie begins to speechify about the perils of a poor mentor when Haymitch lurches into the room with the look of a man who’s gone on a twenty-year bender.

This, I do remember.

I take Katniss’ hand and pull her to the far side of the room. “You won’t want to be standing there in a second,” I say.

“I miss supper?” the man slurs. The words hang in the air for a moment before he vomits all over the carpet. Since it’s mostly alcohol, the mess spreads quickly, coating the dark finished hardwood at the edge the room. I point to it.

“And I bet that’s mahogany,” I say to Effie, shaking my head sadly.

Her eyes become narrow slits and she storms away, hopping over the growing pool of vomit.

A pair of the ever presence Capitol servants come and haul Haymitch away while I walk back to the dining car. Despite that display and the reek of vomit, drinking suddenly sounds like an excellent idea. I think I saw a bottle of whiskey or whatever passes for it in fictional novels on the sideboard. I head over to it, skirting around the vomit. A few seconds later, Katniss follows me.

“You’re not going to help him?” Katniss asks. “Haymitch, I mean?”

“No,” I say pulling out a glass. “He’s scheduled to put his foot on my chest or punch me or something in a few hours. I’m not feeling charitable. At least, not right now.”

“But, if you help him, he might help you in the arena,” she says. She boosts herself up onto the
edge of the sideboard and tilts her head up at me inquisitively.

“I’m not planning on going into the arena,” I say. “This…whatever it is… better end before that happens.”

“Are you planning to kill yourself?” she asks.

I look over at Katniss, her dark gray eyes serious in her angular face. “No, I’m not going to kill myself. I’m not sure what that would do in this shitty dream. I’m going to have a drink,” I say lightly. I pour the amber brown liquid into one of the glasses. “Would you like some?”

Katniss wrinkles her nose, “After seeing what happened to Haymitch? No thanks.”

I shrug and bring the glass to my lips. The whiskey goes down smooth and earthy. And, unfortunately for me, it tastes very, very real. When I set the glass down, Katniss is staring hard at me.

“You’re not Peeta Mellark, are you?” she asks.

“Try telling that to millions of screaming fans,” I say, then pause. “Although some of them might agree with you.”

“Your eyes,” Katniss says. They’re not the right color.”

“So I’ve heard,” I say.

“I remember…Peeta Mellark’s eyes are blue, like my sister’s,” she says. “Yours are brown.”

“Hazel,” I correct automatically. “What can I say, those contacts hurt like hell.”

Meanwhile…

“Are these contact lens supposed to hurt?” I ask the stylist. I look in the handheld mirror she’s given me and stare into hazel eyes. They look strange in my face, not like me at all.

“This is just a trial pair,” the blonde woman named Ve says. “For the color test. The real ones will be approved sometime in the next few days.” She lays her hands on my shoulder. “It’ll only be for one scene. Hopefully, you get your normal eye color back before that.”

I smile at the woman. She’s nice, probably the nicest person I’ve met since coming to…wherever I am. This place where I am supposedly a fictional character.

I try to think back to the last thing I remember. The fight at the Cornucopia, Cato dying, and the berries. They declared us both victor, then…nothing. What happened? There’s nothing there, just a blank chasm where my memories should be. And I feel like I should have memories, like more than a few days have gone by since then, like I might be missing years of my life.

The face reflected in the glass goes pale and Ve takes the mirror away.

“It’s going to be okay, Josh,” she says quietly. “You’re one of the strongest people I know. You’ll get through this.”

“That’s not my name,” I say, then regret it. She’s trying to be kind. The world’s not full of people who try to be kind. Not my world.
I run my hand through my hair, which feels somehow shorter. Maybe I’ve gone insane. Maybe the Games have turned my mind. Or maybe the Capitol’s done something to me and this is all one of their experiments, some kind of new Game where they break you by playing with your mind. They couldn’t have two victors, so they decided to play with the spare.

And where is Katniss? Do they have her, too?

I think about the other Katniss, the blonde one, the one whose real name is Jen. She disappeared, too, about two hours ago along with the man. I wonder what her role is in all of this.

Ve sighs and pulls out a camera. “I just need to get a couple pictures, then you can takes those contact lens out.”

She takes my picture, first head on and then in profile, the flashing light hurting my already stinging eyes. Afterwards, she hands me the little plastic contain filled with liquid. I peel the contacts off my eyeballs and slide them into their designated trays. Left then right. They float there, brown lens flecked with gold and green, sightless and unnerving. I wonder who this Josh is, with his hazel eyes, if he’s even real.

Ve has just finished packing up her stuff when the door swings open and Jen walks back in, holding two red, yellow and white paper sacks. She flings them down on the rolling tray in the corner of the room before grabbing the older woman in a bear hug.

“So, they’ve got you in on the big secret, too,” Jen says.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure how long the secret’s gonna last since you know, too,” says Ve.

“Hey, I’m not that bad,” Jen says. “I can keep a secret if I have to.”

“Un huh,” Ve says, doubtfully. “I seem to remember the last thing that was supposed to be a secret. How’s that going?”

“And the studio has my hands tied,” Jen says, disregarding the other woman’s question. “So I have to keep it. They don’t want this incident leaked at all. Not with the movie coming out in six months.”

Ve laughs, shaking her head. “It’s always good to see you, Jen. I’m just sorry about the circumstances.”

“He’ll come back to himself,” says Jen.

“Let’s just hope it’s soon,” Ve says. “They can’t hold off production for long. Every delay costs money. And I have to leave for the West Coast in a week.”

“Josh will be okay” Jen says. “I wouldn’t put it past him to be faking this, anyway. He loves trolling me.”

“Is that what you call it, now?” Ve asks before giving her wink. “Anyway, I have to go. I’ll see you soon.” Ve kisses her cheek and slips out the room.

Jen comes over to me with the two bags on the rolling tray. The scent of fried food hits me and my stomach starts to rumble. She sits down on the bed and kicks her long legs up. I realize she’s tall, much taller than Katniss, and her legs are covered in a pair of soft floral pants. I shift over to make room for her.

“I brought your favorite,” she says, waving the bag. “Normally, they wouldn’t let you have
outside food, but I convinced them that this might trigger your memory.” She leans towards me and wiggles her eyebrows. “One quarter pounder with fries.”

She pulls the food from the greasy bags and puts it on the tray before popping one of the fries in her mouth.

I open the small square container holding the sandwich. The bread, spongy and covered in tiny white seeds, covers a browned disc of meat and cheese so shiny and yellow it looks like plastic. This is not the always elegant and refined Capitol food. Whoever made this didn’t seem to care that none of the condiments actually made it into the sandwich.

I shake my head, prepared to hate it, and take a bite. The flavor explodes in my mouth and I open my eyes in shock. How could a sandwich taste so good?

I turn to Jen, who’s still sitting next to me on the bed, her mouth closing over a huge bite of her own.

“What is this?” I ask.

Her brows come together in confusion before she’s scrambling from the bed. “Who the hell are you?” she says, her mouth still full. “Josh might forget who I am, but he sure as hell wouldn’t forget McDonald’s.”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t usually see book Peeta as Josh, but in the case of this story, they are basically identical except for eye color and a slight variations in hair texture.
In which Josh ends up in bed with Katniss

Chapter 4

“Roots, roots, roots. Who would have guessed they even have hair dye in District 12? I thought they barely had running water,” the prep woman, named Aconia, tsks above my head. She’s a nice woman, friendly and talkative, which is kind of impressive since she has what look like diamonds for teeth.

She flops my longer-than-I-remember-it hair around, examining the dark roots. This is a normal, having a stylist complain about the upkeep I never do., but the ordinariness makes everything else feel more surreal.

I went to sleep the train, fully believing that whatever this is—a dream, a hallucination, a breakdown—would be over and I’d wake up at somewhere that’s not the decade’s most successful young adult series.

I was wrong.

And nothing in the book fully prepares you for the annoyingly high pitch of Effie Trinket’s voice. The sound of her shrieking “Up, up, up! It’s going to be a big, big, day,” sent me careening out of the bunk and onto the floor.

At that point, I knew I was seriously screwed.

I spent the rest of the day desperately not being Peeta Mellark. I found out that if I say what he’s supposed to say, the others go with it and the “scene” goes exactly the way it does in the book, but if I don’t, they sense something is off and try to correct it. After I ignored his alcoholic breakfast of champions, Haymitch threw his own glass across the room.

Strangely entertaining, yes, but is doesn’t tell me what the hell is happening. And I can’t figure out how much the characters know about what should be happening.

But on the plus side, I did avoid that black eye.

Now it’s almost time for the parade thing and becoming a human torch has never appealed to me. Well, actually, I tried out for the Human Torch in the Fantastic Four reboot, but that’s not the point. The point is that the fight-to-the-death Games start in one week. And shit’s looking permanent.

There’s no way I’m going into the Games, not willingly, so I have to get out. But how? And, more importantly, where? Anywhere I run will still be in the Twilight Zone. But there’s a difference between just being in book world and being in the Games. I could hide out somewhere not in the arena until I find a way home.

Now, who in the Capitol would help a runaway tribute?

Of course, there’s everyone in the secret-rebel faction, but there’s no telling when they became rebels. People like Plutarch and Cinna might have joined the rebellion after the first Games. They might still be Team Capitol right now. And how would I start that conversation, anyway? Hey, you’ve never met me, and as far as you know I’m an unimportant tribute, but can you risk your life smuggling me out of the Capitol?
Okay, so who else?

In the movie, Tigris the cat-rebel had a shop a few blocks from the President’s mansion, which is supposed to be somewhere nearby. Now her character seemed to have a long standing grudge against the Games. Bitter is good. Maybe she’d actually would put me up, get me to District 13… where there’s another crazy dictator waiting.

Still, Coin isn’t actively trying to kill Peeta, so that’s doable. And Peeta isn’t supposed to know District 13 exists so going there will throw things off the balance. Maybe off balance enough that the universe or God or whatever this is will send me home.

Or not.

Since I’ve been acting, I’ve seen enough time travel/alternate dimension screenplays to feel a doubt niggling at the back of my mind that says changing the story might not be the best plan. Wasn’t there one screenplay where, if you change the past, it rips apart the universe? But, then *Detention* was about changing the past and things worked out there, right?

I let out a long, slow breath. I can’t believe I’m taking advice from old screenplays, but right now they’re the closest things I have to my new “reality.”

Who knows if any of the other fake worlds apply in this one, though? The Hunger Games isn’t the past or even really the future, it’s a book. What happens if you change a book?

The questions swirling around my mind finally consolidate on one single point: this is the book and in less than three weeks, the book says Peeta Mellark loses his leg. Loses. His. Leg.

That settles it, there’s no way I could explain losing my leg to my agent.

I look around the Remake Center for an exit. Security is kind of lax here in the heart of the Capitol. There aren’t any guards that I can see and the door is just one of those ordinary motion detecting ones like they have in malls. It’s sad that the people are so used to being oppressed that they don’t even try to escape.

When Aconia’s turns around, I race for the door, wishing for the millionth time that I’d never started smoking. I hear one faint shout, but I keep going. I’m right on top of the door when I remember that the Capitol doesn’t need human guards or locked doors to keep people in. That this is a dystopian novel about the future.

And one thing dystopian novels about the future always have are force fields.

Damn you, Suzanne Collins.

My body slams into something impossibly hard and invisible. I breathe in the scent of burned toast mixed with violets before the world goes dark.

________________________

“You’re an idiot, you know that, Peeta Mellark?” A voice calls from above me while a small hand tentatively runs through my hair.

“I’m not Peeta Mellark,” I say automatically and then crack open my eyes. It’s a mistake, a
terrible, terrible mistake. Pain blossoms behind my eyes as soon as I open them and I can’t stop a low groan from escaping my lips. Gray eyes, framed by thick ebony lashes look down into mine, frowning. So, yep, still in the book.

I sit up and look around, ignoring the way the world tilts around me. I’m in something like a hotel room, but with ultra-modern lights and a curved bedding. This must be in the Training Center.

“Then, who are you?” she asks. “Are you one of his brothers?”

“Good guess, but no,” I say, rubbing what feels like a humongous knot on the back of my head. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“You don’t know what I’d believe.”

“Trust me, I know more about you than you know about yourself.”

Katniss snorts, “I doubt that.”

“So what happened, again?” It’s hard to concentrate through the pounding in my head. It feels like something is trying to force its way through my cranium. I hope the *Hunger Games* hasn’t morphed into *Alien* and some tentacled nasty isn’t about to come bursting through my forehead.

“You ran into a force field, you idiot. I didn’t see it, but apparently you flew about ten feet in the air before coming down.” Katniss’ face take on a speculative look. “I wonder what they would’ve done if you’d died. Would they have had another reaping in 12 or just went on with twenty-three tributes?”

“You were much nicer to Peeta when he ran into force field,” I mutter.

Her nose scrunches up in confusion, “And what’s that supposed to mean? Look, I don’t have time for…whatever this is. I’m going to dinner. Effie asked me to see if you wanted to eat. They’re still sending you into the Games, injured or not, so you might as well keep up your strength.”

“Nay,” I say around a yawn. “I think I’ll just stay here. That whole dinner and the rooftop scene after is just foreshadowing, anyway. And it doesn’t even pay off until *Mockingjay*. That’s why they dropped it from the movie.”

Katniss’ eyes suddenly narrow into slits, “This is your strategy for the Games, isn’t it? Pretending to be crazy so people underestimate you?”

“I told you, I’m not going to the Games.”

“And how are you going to accomplish that? You’re a tribute, even if you’re not Peeta, and the Games start in seven days.”

For the first time, I feel something like resignation, a creeping fear that I’m really and truthfully stuck here. “I don’t know,” I say softly.

Katniss’ features soften and for one split second, her expression reminds me of Jen. “Well, at least you’ll be memorable. I don’t think anyone’s going to forget the boy who tried to get away. Twice.”

She gets up from the bed and heads for the door. Her hand is on the knob when she turns to look at me again, her face wistful. “And who knows, maybe you’re worried for nothing. You might be the one to win.”
Katniss says it like my winning wouldn’t mean her death. Like the whole experience is all normal. The reality of this world, how all of it is really happening, how I’m in a place where the government kills children for entertainment, hits me like a punch in the gut and I can barely breathe.

It’s one thing to understand that a fictional story is an allegory for war, it’s another to have a girl, a seemingly real girl casually talk about her own death right in first of you.

“Katniss,” I call as she’s about to leave. “At dinner, you’re going to see a red-haired girl you know. You might want to keep it to yourself.”

Her eyes widen in shock and confusion. I don’t know why I’m warning her. Peeta got her out of that conversation in the book and I’ve sort of made it my goal to be anti-Peeta as possible, but I don’t want to put her in a situation that might turn dangerous just because I’m boycotting the role.

Katniss looks at me for a long moment, before closing the door firmly behind her. As I listen to her footsteps echo down the hall, I realize something else. Peeta Mellark was right. Fictional or not, Katniss Everdeen does have an effect.
In which Peeta has an existential crisis

Chapter 5

The folder feels thin and limp in my hands. Through the clear page protector I can see the only word typed on the first page: epilogue. In between these sheets is the epilogue of my life, a summary of everything that will happen to me in the next twenty years. And they want me to read it, act it out for some movie they’re making about the Games that nearly killed me.

“Of course, under normal circumstances we would never ask anything like this while you recover,” says the man in the gray suit.

“But, we’re in a bit of a bind,” the second man finishes.

He and his partner have brought the script to this out-of-the-way apartment, as the dark-haired woman who brought me here called it. These two men, the woman—no one really introduces themselves to me, they just assume that since Josh Hutcherson knew who they were, I would know as well.

“The studio is losing thousands every day we don’t get the epilogue filmed. Francis, he says that you are a necessary part of the epilogue. We’ve asked, brainstormed ways to get around it, but he won’t budge,” the first man says, his face twisted in regret.

It’s strange, the only real difference between the two men is the color of their suits, one wears gray while the other favors blue. They both have the same look of polite interest, though, like their personalities have been stripped and replaced with masks.

“Francis says the fans will revolt,” the man in the blue suit adds.

“Yes, think of the fans,” says the man in the gray suit, nodding solemnly to himself. “And this movie needs to gross at least half a billion dollars in ticket sales.” He pauses. “Of course, we wouldn’t want you to do anything to jeopardize your health.”

“We plan to have a neurologist on set every moment you are there,” the blue suit says. “One of the best in the country.”

“And a psychologist… anything to make you feel safe,” the gray suit says. “Your safety is our primary concern.

My body gives an involuntary shudder as these two continue to talk. They sound so much like the people in the Capitol, glib and smooth, mouthing words they don’t believe just to get what they want.

But I know I’m not in the Capitol.

I’ve never taken a car ride like the one between here and the hospital. Of course, we didn’t have time to sightsee in the Capitol before the Games, but I saw enough to know none of it looks like this city. There are none of the Capitol’s candy-coated buildings here, just sleek, angular towers of gray steel.

There are districts that have tall buildings like this. I’ve seen them during televised broadcasts, reapings mostly, but in other stories, too, like when they announce that there with be a shortage of something or other. District Three has buildings this tall and Seven as well, but those building are much shabbier than these, worn down by time and then put back together with rusting scraps. The
buildings here are newer, better kept and brightly lit with the kind of electricity the districts rarely get.

But looking at the pair in front of me, I can imagine that this is still some trick of the Capitol, their way of punishing me for staying alive. It’s either that, or I’m really stuck in a world where my life and everyone I know are part of some book.

It’s almost enough to make me wish for a Capitol experiment.

The idea that I’m only a character in a book is…impossible, unthinkable. I force myself to take in a deep breath, to feel the air expanding my lungs, the thrum of my heart as it pumps blood through my veins. In my mind I picture my district, my home, I smell the scent of freshly baked bread in the morning. I call up Katniss’ face during the opening ceremonies, shining in the flames. These aren’t things I’ve made up, they’re not figments of some writer’s imagination, my life is real.

“We’re going to take this slow, closed set and everything,” one of them, I’m not sure which, drones on.

“And there are only four actors: you, Jennifer, and a couple of kids. You walk around a meadow, look at a book, say a couple lines and that’s it. Simple,” the gray suit says.

“Simple,” the other echoes.

They both look at me with bland, indulgent smiles that tell me they expect to get what they’ve asked for, that these two haven’t heard the word “no,” and I realize it doesn’t matter whether this is a Capitol mind game, because the rules are still the same. I don’t have a choice.

My time for objecting must have run out because the two of them stand simultaneously and head towards the door. The man in the gray suit comes over to me and puts him hand on my shoulder, “Read over the material. New rehearsals start day after tomorrow.”

Then they disappear through the door, leaving me alone in the apartment, lost in this strange world with my life’s epilogue sitting in my lap. I pick up the folder again, its plastic cover sticking to my fingers, leaving a rippled smudge where I’ve gripped it too hard. How can my life have an epilogue? I’m only sixteen, I haven’t lived any of this yet. An uneasy feeling oozes its way through my body, tightening my throat and chest. Everything in me doesn’t want to read the words written between these pages. What if it says I die?

Music blares to life from somewhere in the apartment, shaking me from my morbid thoughts. I search the room and, in a few seconds I find its source lying on the couch. It’s a small rectangle, incredibly sleek and smooth. The music sounds once more before the device vibrates and a message appears: On my way up. I touch the concave button at the bottom and the screen changes, filling with an image of the girl from the hospital, the one that plays Katniss in the movie. Jen

I’d wondered what happened to her. Jen vanished after she figured out I wasn’t Josh, nearly running from the hospital room when I insisted that I really was Peeta Mellark. She’d been my most frequent visitor before they dumped me here. Not that I can complain about the apartment. It reminds me of the rooms at the Training Center, beautiful and impersonal.

She knocks moments later, trailed by a tall man with dark hair. He takes up a position outside as she breezes in wearing an oversize floppy hat over her blonde hair.

“I didn’t know they were letting you out today,” she says, flinging the hat onto one of the nearby tables and finger combing her hair.

“I didn’t either,” I can’t explain why, but I can’t deny that a part of me is relieved to see her.
Maybe it’s because she’s the only person who knows who I really am. I give her a smile. “I thought I was the only one they keep in the dark.”

She looks at me, staring at me blank-faced, before reaching fingers out to brush along my jaw. “It has to be you,” she breathes. “No one else has your smile.”

I catch her hand and pull it down from my face. “I’m not him,” I say.

Jen pushes against my chest, not hard, but enough to send me a step back. “You have to be Josh, because if you’re not, that means…that means.” She shakes her head in denial before continuing in a hoarse whisper. “It means I don’t know where he is.”

Her blue eyes fill with tears and there’s nothing I can do, but pull her into my arms and she buries her face in my shoulder. “So, please just be Josh,” she murmuring into the fabric of my shirt. “You have to come back to me.”

“I’ll help you get him back,” I tell her, smoothing her hair. “I promise.”

She sighs, her breath tickling the tiny hairs on the back of my neck. “I guess that’s all I can ask.” She leans back, taking her arms from around my neck to wipe her eyes. “Even though I usually ask for a lot more. That’s the first thing you need to know about me. I’m very demanding.”

“That’s okay. I already kind of noticed it,” I say.

She lets out a laugh, an open-mouth laugh that belies the tears she just shed. “So, do you have any food? I’m starving.”

For a moment, she sounds so much like Katniss, I’m the one staring, but she isn’t paying attention to me anymore. She looks around before heading in the direction of the small kitchen. Someone must have stocked it before I got here because fruit and various baked goods wrapped in plastic are sitting on the countertop. Jennifer opens the refrigerator and it’s full, too.

She pulls the plastic dome off a platter of sandwiches to get one out. “Want one?” she asks, taking a bite. I shake my head. I haven’t been very hungry since I work up in the hospital. I don’t know what it means, considering how little I had to eat that last week in the arena.

“I don’t know why they had to set you up all the way across town from the other apartments we’ve been using,” she says. She grabs the other half of the sandwich and a soda before heading back to the living room where she curls up on the couch. I trail her back, not completely sure what to do with this whirlwind of a girl.

“I didn’t come all the way over here just to eat your food,” Jen says.

“I was wondering about that,” I say.

Her eyes narrow and she points a purple-tipped finger at me. “Don’t be a wiseass.”

“Sorry,” I say, but I’m fighting a smile.

“Wiseass,” she repeats. “Anyway, Francis thinks we need to go over the script together first, before the rehearsal. There aren’t going to be a lot of crew there and they’re not supposed to say anything about what happens on set, but the studio doesn’t want rumors.”

I pick up the script I left on the chair. “If this were your future, would you read it?”

“Josh…can I call you Josh? Because the other’s just too weird,” she asks.
I shrug, it doesn’t really matter and I can tell it makes her feel better to think of me that way.

“It can’t be your future, it’s a story. I’m as open-minded as anyone, I believe in ghosts and everything, but it’s not possible. Peeta Mellark isn’t real.”

“I am real!” I say, my voice too loud, even in my own ears.

“Look,” she says just as loudly. “You have to calm down.”

I rake my hand through my shortened hair and try to fight back the frustration.

“Either way, it’s not a bad future, all things considered,” she says. “After the Games and all the destruction, it’s a miracle any of the characters make it to an epilogue, at all.”

“What destruction?” I mutter, finally taking a seat in the chair I’d vacated earlier. It’s tempting and terrifying, talking to someone who knows your future. What exactly is a not bad future? One like Haymitch, shepherding tributes to the Games year after year? Being with Katniss?

She looks over at me and frowns. “What do you mean, what destruction? The three books and four movies worth of crap these characters go through.”

“The last thing I remember is Claudius Templesmith announcing that Katniss and I were victors. We spit out the berries, the hovercraft appeared, and I blacked out. That’s it.”

“That’s all you remember? Why’d you stop there?”

“That’s all I know happened.”

“Well, that’s…damn I’m trying not to say the word crazy, but this is a boatload of crazy. And I’m usually the crazy one,” she says almost to herself. “I guess it could be worse, you could think you’re Mockingjay Peeta.”

“I think,” I say slowly. “I need to see this movie or read this book…maybe then something will…I don’t know…click.” It’s strange, I can’t stand the idea of reading the epilogue to my life, it’s too much like seeing your own grave, but hearing about other events doesn’t seem as bad.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Jen says, cautiously. “Not without doctor clearance. Besides, it would take at least a couple days to read all the books.”

“What about the movie?”

“There’s four of those and we’re just finishing up the last one. After the epilogue, we’re done”

“If the doctor cleared me to be in the movie, then I don’t think I need some kind of permission to watch the other ones.”

“I don’t really like watching old movies of mine,” she says frowning. “And I don’t want to leave you here alone, either.”

“Maybe I’ll see myself in the movie and remember that’s I’m Josh,” I say. There’s no way in the world that’s going to happen, mostly because I’m not Josh, but I say it anyway.


“Just tell me where I can get it.”
She gets up and goes to the door and says something to the man out front. He leaves and comes back with a small duffle bag.

“This is Gil,” Jen says, “He’s my bodyguard.”

I shake hands with the man, who looks kind of confused before hiding the expression. He must have known Josh. A bodyguard...huh. I don’t think I’d realized how big all of this is. Jen must be very famous to need someone trailing her around everywhere. There are movies and rich actors in the Capitol, but it’s always been a purely Capitol phenomenon, most people in the districts don’t have time to bother with celebrities.

She takes the bag from Gil. “And mama likes to get comfortable watching television.”

Jen goes off towards the bathroom and Gil stations himself discreetly in the corner. When she comes back out, she’s dressed in tiny blue shorts and a long tank.

“You came prepared to get comfortable?” I ask.

Her cheeks turn softly pink. “I thought you might want me to stay.” She turns away from me and gets the backpack they gave me at the hospital. There wasn’t any time for me to look through it, but Jen immediate unzips the side pocket and pulls out a wallet.

“You’re still getting the pizza,” she says, taking out a silver plastic card. Jokes on her, though, all of that stuff belongs to Josh.

The food comes and Jen orders the movie on the television, again thanks to Josh’s little silver card. I sit next to her on the couch, her long smooth legs brushing against mine, when I’m hit with a wave of nervousness as the first words appear on the screen. I almost tell Jen to stop the movie, that I can’t take seeing it after all, but I bit my tongue and the movie begins.
"How did you know she would be here?" Katniss' voice calls out, waking me with a start. I close my eyes against the reality of this new unreal world that I keep waking up in and try to will myself home. What do I need, the Wizard of Oz?

I feel the bed shift under her slight weight and open my eyes to see her leaning over me, none of the hesitant sympathy from earlier visible in her face.

"How did you know what happened in the forest?" she demanded. And that's when I feel the blade at my throat.

"Are you some kind of spy?" she asks, angling her body across mine, holding me to the bed. "And I want the truth this time."

"Any other time, waking up to a girl on top of me…" The blade bites a little more into the sensitive skin of my neck and I swallow. Okay, so now's not the time for jokes.

"Shut up and tell me the truth." In the dimmed light of the bedroom, her eyes have taken on a slivery glint, giving her a predatory look and I find myself breathing hard for an altogether different reason.

"You wouldn't believe…"

"You know, I was ready to write you off as crazy," she cut in. "Or at least pretending to be for the Games. But something is going on here. Something weird. And I want to know what it is."

I try to shift away from her, but her left hand shoots out, trapping me, and I realize, unless I want one or both of us to get hurt, I really am pinned. Have to say, this is first time I haven't completely enjoyed it. Surprise attacks kind of take away from the pleasure…sometimes….

"I can't think with you on top of me like this," I say, derailing that train of thought before it goes any further.

She eases back, cautiously, with the knife still pointed at me, her eyes tracking my every movement and I remember that this is the girl who fed her family by hunting for years. I sit up slowly, keeping my hands up, nice and visible. The alarm clock by the bed, just numbers floating in the air, show it is now four in the morning. Great, Effie Trinket will be here to tell us about our 'big, big, day' in a couple hours.

"Now tell me how you knew."

I shrug. What's the use of lying? "I read it in a book."

Katniss frowns. "What book? Something here? Has someone been watching me and Gale?"

"No, well, yeah, probably, seems like they have cameras everywhere, but that's not what I meant. All of this," I spread my hands to encompass the room and everything else. "Your world, it's not real. Not really. It's part of a book."

"A book," Katniss says flatly, the words dripping with incredulity.
"Yeah, a critically-acclaimed, actually-not-badly-written young adult book. All of the people here are well, kind of not real either. Not the best news in the world, but that's what's going on."

I risk looking at her and sure enough, she's looking at me like I'm crazy. "And so what does that make you?"

"I'm an actor. The book got made into a movie and I was in it. My real name's Josh. Josh Hutcherson."

Her eyes search mine before she shakes her head. "Either you're the craziest person I've ever met or the best liar. I'm not sure which."

I give her a faint smile. "Well, I am an actor, so it's possible I'm both."

That earns me a smile and some of the tension dissipates from the room. The knife is no longer pointed at me, just resting lightly in her lap. I can see it now, just one of the steak knives from the dining room, but a sharp and shiny dagger in the right hands.

"If this is an act, then it's a good one. I just don't see how you could know…" she starts then trails off.

No, no, no. She's going back to thinking this is some kind of trick and she can't. With sudden clarity, I realize I need her to know what's going on, that as the lead character, she might just be my ticket out of here. If I can get her to believe me maybe that will trigger something that will send me home.

"Listen," I say taking hold of her now empty hand. "I need your help."

"You need help alright, just not mine," she says, pulling her hand out of my grip. "I've got to go."

She makes to get up but I grab her hand again, pulling her back down on the bed.

"Hey," she yells, leveling the knife at my chest.

I show her my hands again. "Look, you're the one who said there was something weird going on. You can feel that everything that's happened since the reaping is…off. You have to feel that."

"All I've wanted to do since the reaping is protect my sister," she yells. "And you're trying to convince me that she isn't real. I was there the day she was born, Peeta…Josh…whoever. I know what's real. This is real. The Games are real. What you're talking about…that's not real."

She gets up again and I let her go, but when she gets to the door I can't help calling out. "If what I'm saying isn't true then how did I know about the red-haired girl? How do I know about the conversation you had with Gale the morning of the reaping? When you talked about running? How about the day you got that goat for Prim's birthday? The goat she named Lady, the one who licked her cheek that first night?"

Katniss slowly turns away from the door to look at me. "How do you know those things? Have you been…following me?"

"Yeah, I've been tramping through the forest after you without you or Gale ever noticing."

"Then you've been recording us. Getting evidence for the Peacekeepers," she counters, her voice shaking a little.

"You mean the same people who buy your squirrels in the Hob?" I say softly, less sarcastic. I remind myself that this is her life, the only life she's known. I walk over to her, standing close...
enough to touch and I try to make my words kind. "I know because this is a book."

I take her chin in my palm and tilt her face up toward mine. "You have to believe me."

She snatches her face out of my grasp and shakes her head. "No." It is an emphatic whisper, full of emotion. A complete denial of everything I've said. She steps away from me.

I close my eyes, resigned to this defeat. The air moves around me as the door opens and then she's gone. A few seconds later I hear a door slam in the distance.
"I guess that proves this isn't some Capitol trick," I say, my eyes scanning the long stream of names rolling down the television screen. "The Capitol would have had better effects."

The girl sitting beside me tilts her head to look into my eyes, her face caught somewhere between offended and amused. "Looks like bread's not the only thing you burn."

"You know it didn't happen like that, not really," I whisper. "Not the bread from when we were kids. None of it." There's a hollowed out loneliness in the pit my stomach and I can't stop staring at the names. So many names. Who are all these people that they should know about my life, even this twisted up version?

And about Katniss?

The victor always watches a recap of the Games afterwards, but so much happened to her that we never talked about—fighting with that boy during the bloodbath, the wall of fire that almost killed her. She told me about Rue and about what happened at the Cornucopia, but to see it, even a version of it, had my stomach twisted in knots.

And the movie implied that there was something between her and Gale…and that everything between us in the arena was a plan she cooked up with Haymitch. But there was no way for him to communicate with her, right? Not like the notes fake Haymitch sent in the movie.

I want to ask, but I don't know if I could take the answer. I squirm a little, thinking about the real Katniss and the one Jen plays. How much of what I saw is true?

So much of it wasn't right—the how, the where, the little facts—but it was never completely wrong, either.

Jen picks a circle of pepperoni off the top of a cold pizza slice, gesturing with it as she talks. "This is a movie. We're actors. There is no 'really happened.'" She sighs and bends forward to touch her forehead to mine. "It's just you and me on the screen, reading lines and pretending."

"Was Katniss just pretending with me during the Games, like in the movie?" I look into the blue of her eyes. They're an odd shape, tilting down at the corners and I find myself swallowing thickly.

She pulls away from me, giving a breathy laugh. "This is why I don't take characters personally. Josh, we only have a little while together and this isn't how I wanted to spend it."

Jen collapses against me, wrapping her arms around my waist, her head buried against my shoulder. It's intimate and I'm not used to girls, well, expect Katniss, but it doesn't feel strange with her, which might be because everything she does is a little strange.

Not to mention, personal space is apparently a foreign concept to her.

The credits finally stop rolling and the screen turns a faintly glowing black. I look down at the top of Jen's blonde head and try to imagine it the wavy nut brown from the movie and compare it to the straight raven black of the real Katniss' hair. "You didn't answer my question."

"I'm trying to sleep here," she mumbles against my chest. "I can't remember the last time I got to
sleep like this."

I wonder exactly how close she and this Josh person are. Close enough to sleep wrapped up like this, close enough for her to recognize the differences between him and me almost immediately. And I have to admit, Josh looks like me. It was strange seeing him answering to my name, knowing he wasn't me.

"Jen…"

"It's complicated, okay? All mixed up with outsmarting the Gamemakers and getting sponsors and keeping you alive."

"Did Haymitch really tell Katniss to kiss me?"

"No, not like in the movie, but he made it clear that's what the audience wanted."

"How?"

"I don't know… with the sponsors' gifts? The timing?"

"And neither of you could have let me in on it? You had to keep me in the dark. Why?"

She sits up, her face inches from mine. "You might have noticed you're still alive! I risked my life to save yours. You think I would have done that if I didn't love you."

We're both staring at each other, breathing hard, eyes huge with shocked awareness, when Jen shakes her head and gives another of those husky laughs, the spell broken. "What am I doing?"

I feel my lips curve a little. "I thought you didn't take characters personally."

"I don't, not usually."

I pause before asking my next question. "You really think Katniss loves me."

"I fucking hope she loves you…I mean if she were real, which she isn't... God, you've got me sounding crazier than you!" Jen yawns and settles back against me, closing her eyes. "Just read the epilogue script."

I pick up the script from where it sits on the end table, weighing it again in my hand. The light is fading outside, but I can still make out the words. It's less scary somehow, after seeing the movie. I take in a deep breath and open the first page to Katniss' words:

**SUNSET. MEADOW ON OUTSKRITS OF D12.**

A silhouette walks through a field of grass, caressing the tall blades as she goes. The light is soft and the weather is mild.

**KATNISS IN VOICE OVER**

*After everything that's happened—the Games, all the bloodshed—can anything ever be good again? For months, even years this question haunted me.*

The person walking through the grass is slowly revealed. It's Katniss, her dark hair hanging down in waves. There is a sense of peace about her movements that hasn't been there before.

**KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT'D)**
I do know nothing will ever be the same…

In the distance there are small figures dancing around. They are just out of focus, but the voices are high and playful.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT’D)

The arenas have been completely destroyed, the memorials built, there will be no more Hunger Games.

The figure in the distance come into focus—a dark-haired girl and a toddler boy with blond hair. They are dancing, smiling, playing.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT’D)

But there are too many missing, so many who did not live to see the peace we fought for: Rue, Thresh, all the victims of the Games…

There is an illustrated book laying on a blanket with images of the dead from the Games. The pages flip, highlighting Rue, Foxface, Thresh.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT’D)

Victims of the war…

The book now shows images of Finnick, Boggs.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT’D)

And Prim, who will never meet her niece and nephew…

There is an illustration of Prim next to a pressed primrose.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT’D)

…my children, who don’t know they play on a graveyard.

The children are still playing, picking flowers, happy and oblivious to all the destruction that has come before them. The words of the meadow song can now be heard.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT’D)

The nightmares will never fully go away. And some days I am so afraid everything will be taken away, that I will never be able to explain to my children what happened without terrifying them, but on those days Peeta is there to help me and, like always, we fight the darkness together.

Katniss, a faraway look on her face, watches the children play along with Peeta, who is sitting with her on the blanket. They are holding hands. Bread, round goat cheese, and the book lay nearby.

PEETA

(puts his arm around Katniss, kisses her)

We'll teach them, make them understand in a way that makes them braver.
KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT'D)

So we live, remembering those we have lost, loving each other, taking pleasure in the sweet, fleeting moments…

Peeta stands up and goes over to his daughter, picks her up and swings her in the air. She's brave, just like her parents. The toddler climbs into Katniss' lap and she holds him close.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT'D)

We make it a game, a list of every act of goodness we've ever seen someone do. It's a long game. Tedium. Maybe even boring after all this time, but…

Screen blurs slowly then fades to black.

KATNISS VOICE OVER (CONT'D)

There are much worse games to play.

I calmly nudge the girl sprawled across me, trying hard to ignore the banging of my heart, the prick of tears in my eyes.

"What?" she asks sleepily.

"Is this real… is this what's really going to happen," I ask, completely calm.

Jen squints a little and sits up to look at me. "In the epilogue?"


"Katniss has my babies?" I do my best to keep the words even.

Jen rolls her eyes. "Yes, Katniss has your babies."

"And she loves me?" I press.

Another eye roll, "Yes."

Before I know what I'm doing, I've rocketed to my feet and Jen tumbles out of my lap onto the floor.

"Ouch!" she yells disgruntled.

"I'm sorry," I say, reaching out a hand to help her up and then I'm turning in circles. "I have to go. I have to find a way back home. Katniss needs me. I mean she's going to need me and nobody ever needs me, but she does."

I know it's not a perfect fairy tale ending. I can tell that the Games were not the end of our problems and that there's probably more pain and bloodshed in my future, but it has to be worth it. Katniss Everdeen loves me and somehow, someway, there are no more Hunger Games and our children are safe.

"What?" Jen asks, she grabs my shoulders and I realize how fast I was talking.
"To District 12," I say slower. "I have to find a way to get back to Katniss. If Prim dies and all the rest of the epilogue is true, I have to be there to help her."

Jen looks over at her bodyguard, who I'd forgotten was even in the room and pulls me into the other room. "I knew letting you see the movie was a mistake…I think I need to call the neurologist." She reaches for the bag she brought with her from the other room.

I put my hand on top of hers. "Please don’t. I need your help, Jen. Will you help me?"

Jen closes her eyes and lets out a long sigh. "What can I do?"

"Help me find a way home."

"And if there is no way home?" she asks.

I let out my own sigh and sit down on the bed. "Then I'll admit I'm Josh Hutcherson and I'll be him."

"And you'll do the epilogue in two days?" she asks, sitting down next to me.

I snort softly. "It's only one line."

"Yeah, but it's not the size of the part, but the size of the actor's part that matters."

"What?"

"So how do I help you find home?"

"I need to meet the person who wrote these books."
Chapter 8

“And now, for my next trick,” I mutter, hauling myself up the knobby gray surface of the climbing wall.

The past few days, I’ve trained with the other tributes in one of the best gyms I’ve even seen, and I’ve seen a ton of gyms. The only thing it doesn’t have are cool holograms and everyone knows a futuristic place needs holograms.

I guess that will have to wait until I get sucked into Catching Fire.

All this would’ve been fun except for the sense of impending doom—the Games are in two days. And I’ll admit I might be stuck here, might possibly end up in the arena, but I refuse to let them have everything their own way. What was that line from the books? Something about if desperate times call for desperate measures, then I’m free to act as desperately as I wish.

Damn, I’m a nerd for remembering that.

So, it’s time to be desperate and come up with something that works. I haven’t tried escaping since getting barbequed by the force field. Katniss won’t listen to me and Haymitch, Effie and the others behave as if everything is normal. They have their lines down and they’re going to stick as closely as possible to them, no matter how much I improv, so that’s another dead end.

I reach the top of the climbing wall and look down over the gym. There are guards and Avoxes wandering around, but other than that, the gym is deserted on the ground floor. The Gamemakers, older men and women wearing purple robes and drinking themselves into oblivion, are stationed maybe three feet down and directly across from where I stand.

I think it’s time to pay them a visit.

I unravel the rope wrapped around my shoulder and send it up and over one of the rafters jutting out of the ceiling and then retrieve both ends. I jump up and down, testing the rafter, ensuring it can hold my weight before leaping forward, swinging and then jumping into the swarm of purple robes in the elevated box.

The Gamemakers stare at me, most of them with mouths open, wine glasses halfway to their mouths. I give them a little wave and, as one unit, they take a great step back, huddling together like a herd of cowering purple cows.

I get the feeling they don’t see tributes up close very often.

Peeta did something boring with weighs during his private session, but I figure if Katniss is going to get away with shooting at arrow at them, having a little chat wouldn’t be too risky.

I put on the smile I reserve for studio execs and television hosts. “Hi guys, mind if I stop in for a drink? Dying tribute’s last request and all.”

They stare at me in confusion. The Gamemaker with the fur-trimmed collar is the first to crack, giving a little laugh and motioning for one of the servers to bring me a glass of wine.

I realize this must be the Head Gamemaker, Seneca Crane. And unfortunately, he doesn’t have an awesome beard like Ve gave Wes in the movie. He’s a middle-aged man with thinning hair and a
paunch belly.

I sit down on one of the velvet lined chairs and take a wine glass from one of the servants. I’m not really a wine guy, but you take what you can get.

The other Gamemakers, seeing I’m not a threat, go back to drinking and talking, some raise their glasses in my direction, chuckling a little.

“That was either very brave or very stupid, young man,” the Gamemaker next to me says, but he’s smiling.

“What do I have to lose? This way I get to shake hands with my executioners,” I look around at the drunk mayhem around me. "You guys having a toga party here?"

The man raises one eyebrow. “What’s your name? Wouldn’t want to make a mistake and bet on you.”

“Josh Hutcherson. And shouldn’t it be illegal form you to bet on the Games, since you basically control the outcome?”

The Gamemaker squints at me and puts down his drink. “Rules are meant to be broken.” He motions to one of the other men who is telling some kind of joke to one of the female Gamemakers, his face animated. “Gaius, what’s the name of this boy from 12?”

The other man stops joking and picks up a clipboard from a nearby table. “Peeta Mellark.”

The man next to me smiles smugly, “That sounds more like it. Nice to meet you, Peeta Mellark. I’m Plutarch Heavensbee.”

Good. Heavensbee’s the man I did all this to get to. He might be my last chance out of here. “I’ve heard a lot about you. I’m a big fan.”

And I am a fan of him—as a fictional character. He’s just the kind of character any actor would love to play—his motives are murky, his morals gray. He’s a character you can have fun with, chew a little scenery.

But in a world where he’s a real person, asking for help from an amoral, child-murderer just shows how desperate I am.

“I didn’t know I had a lot of coverage in District 12, let alone fans.”

“I’m sure you have fans everywhere, even District 13.” I pause. “If it were still operational.”

“Which it isn’t,” Plutarch says before picking up his drink and taking a long sip. “But, I know very little about it. The rebellion was decades before my time.”

I pick up my glass as well. “But, I would’ve thought you knew a lot about the rebellion. It’s the reason you’re here, isn’t it?”

Plutarch goes very still, “What do you mean by that?”

I shrug. “Just that you wouldn’t be a Gamemaker without the rebellion. No rebellion, no Games.”

Plutarch relaxes, just a little. “I’m just glad the Capitol destroyed those traitorous bastards.”

“But you can’t really blame the rebels, can you?” I say. “Weren’t they just fighting for their rights,
the same rights people in the Capitol enjoy?”

Plutarch chokes on his drink, turning it into a laugh when the other Gamemakers turn to look at us.

“Boy, you are hilarious! What are they teaching out there in District 12?” he says, loudly and then, more quietly, an edge to his voice. “Only fools talk like that. Citizens of the Capitol and citizens of the Districts have the same rights—none at all. It’s just that most people in the Capitol are too ignorant to notice.”

Then he stands, wrapping his large jeweled fingers around my arm, towing me along with him. “I think it’s time we bid our guest goodbye. We still have one last tribute to score,” Plutarch announces. The Gamemakers erupt in loud groans while one of the servants comes and basically pulls me down the hallway to the elevator.

I slam my fist against the clear glass of the elevator, angry at myself for not getting more information out of Plutarch, for making him too jumpy to hear me out. I always knew it was a long shot, but I’m running out of time.

When I get to the District 12 floor, I wander around, thinking about what Plutarch said, trying to remember if he said anything I could use to get out of this.

After about twenty minutes Katniss shows up, clearly upset. She dashes down the hall and I follow her, catching her before she slams her door shut.

“What do you want?” she asks. She’s trying to sound strong, but her eyes are already red-rimmed from crying.

“Wanna hug it out?” I say, holding my arms out.

“You’re crazy,” she says, sniffling a little.

I don’t do anything, just keep my arms out. Katniss looks at me, hesitates for another moment, before crashing into to my arms.

“Everything’s fine,” I say, pulling her into a hug.

“I shot an arrow at the Gamemakers,” she whispers.

“At the apple in the pig’s mouth on the Gamemakers’ buffet,” I correct. “There’s a difference.”

She steps back, wiping her eyes. “How did you know?”

I sigh. I’d spent every training session trying to convince her about the book, and failing. She’s convinced that I’m some kind of serial stalker.

“The book?” she asks flatly.


“And the Gamemakers don’t care? They won’t hurt my family?”

“They’re going to give you an eleven.”

She lets out a long, shaky breath. “I can’t believe I believe you.”

“Why shouldn’t you believe me?” I ask. “I’ve been right about everything else.”
Katniss scowls and turns toward her room.

“Wait!” I say, stopping the door with my hand. “I’m sorry, I really am, but you’re just so fun to
tease….” The door tries to close again. “And I need your help.”

She sighs like I’m the difficult one and opens the door wide enough to let me in.

“So what do you need?” she says.

Suddenly, I’m unsure about talking here. I don’t think the book’s likely to have its stars rounded
up for government execution this early, but it might be better to take some precaution when talking
about fuck-the-government plans.

“I think we should go to the roof,” I say.

Unsurprisingly, she scowls at me. “Why?”

“Oh, you know you want to go,” I say. “Because of me, you’re already missed a scheduled, semi-
romantic interlude in the rooftop gardens.” It makes sense. If events always try to revert back to
the book, Katniss should be craving a little rooftop confess with Peeta.

“I don’t want any kind of romantic interlude. Not with you or anybody else.”

“Okay,” I say, shrugging. “You don’t have to come up to the amazing rooftop garden overlooking
the city. You can stay here, in this airless room, wasting the last free hours you have left, crying
into a pillow and worrying about the Gamemakers.”

She bites her lip all Bella Swan-style. “There’s a garden?”


Her eyes light with understanding. “Fine, we can go.”

She follows me out the room and into the hallway where I take a guess at which door leads to the
roof. After first stumbling into a broom closet, we find the way up the short flight of stairs and
onto the roof.

It’s a gorgeous space, fairytale-like, with a gossamer lined gazebo surrounded by miniature fruit
trees all draped with tinkering wood chimes. The walkways have flowers running down each side,
filling the air with fragrance. It’s beautiful, but, a little too arranged for me, too orderly. I like
things a little more rustic.

We amble around for a while, visiting a few flower beds before I turn to Katniss. “What do you
know about the government, I mean how it’s run?”

“They starve us. They send us to our deaths for entertainment. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yeah, but I talked to Plutarch Heavensbee and he…”

“Who’s Plutarch Heavensbee?” she interrupts.

“The Gamemaker you knocked into the punch bowl,” I say.

“I was provoked!” she grounds out.

“You’re a hothead,” I counter and when she starts to bristle in annoyance, I add, “But that’s
good. You have a good reason to be angry.”

Katniss looks away from me and wraps her arms around herself. “What did the Gamemaker say?”

“He said that the citizens of the Capitol and the Districts have the same rights. How is that possible?”

“That’s just lip-service. We’re supposed to have the same rights, but we don’t. The districts—at least the poor ones, like at home—are starved, robbed, treated unfairly while here in the Capitol and in the rich districts—they have everything they need and desire.”

“But, legally, the people in the districts are citizens of Panem?”

“If you think this will somehow get you out of the Games, you’re wrong. The Treaty of Treason gives the Capitol the right to take us and kill us.”

We don’t talk much after that, both of us lost in our thoughts, but we stroll around the gardens until it starts to get dark. I’m taking her back to her room when Katniss turns to me. “You really are from somewhere else, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Is it nice, this place you’re from? They don’t have the Hunger Games or anything like that?”

“They don’t have the Hunger Games—it’s just a book and a movie there—but not everyone has the same rights and there’s violence and poverty and hunger, just like here.”

Katniss’ eye takes on a soft, wistful look. “I knew there were no safe places,” she murmurs before slipping into her room.

After dinner, we all head to the television room where they announce the tribute scores. When they get to my name—Peeta’s name—I’m not surprised to see a flashing 8. Of course, the book would have reverted to this score even if I’d shot the arrow at the Gamemakers.

I’m even less surprised when they show Katniss’ 11. As the others congratulation her, her eyes find mine, and in her stunned gaze I see that she finally believes me—about the book, about the Games, about everything.

She believes me and I’m still stuck here.
Chapter 9 (Peeta)

'There are so many places I want to take you," Jen says. "There's this lounge here you like and we used to go all the time when we were filming—even though this old lady there assaulted me…"

"I thought we were going to try to contact Suzanne Collins again," I interrupt. In the light of sunrise, I watch the scenery go by as the driver takes us away from the tall steel structures of the city, to an area with long stretches of trees and wide grassy fields.

Jen frowns, a little crease settling between her eyebrows. "I tried calling yesterday after the read-through, Josh. We don't need to drive the woman crazy."

"Yeah, I'm sure you're right," I say, giving her a smile. Jen had been great over the last two days, manic, but great and I know she's trying to help. She doesn't fully believe me, doesn't want to believe me, but she's still trying and that's more than pretty much anyone's ever done from me—well, except Katniss.

And in less than an hour, Jen will be Katniss, transformed into my future wife, our future children playing around the meadow. It's weird trying to wrap my mind around that. Jen will pretend to be Katniss and I will pretend to be Josh pretending to be me.

Jen snakes her hand out, capturing mine. "I'm always right. That's something else you have to learn about me," she says teasingly. Her thumb slips up my wrist in a caress, but then stops dead.

"Josh," Jen says, her voice strained. "Where's your Libra tattoo?"

"I don't have any tattoos," I say. Most people see tattoos as a Capitol thing. People in the districts who get tattoos are harassed, called out for wanting to look Capitol.

"You have, like a ton of tattoos!" Jen says, reaching out and pulling on my shirt.

"Hey!" I say, trying to wrestle the fabric out of her hands.

"How could you have…I mean…I would have noticed earlier…" she says, before her eyes meet mine.

She clicks something and a light springs on above our heads. She searches my wrist again. She licks a finger and starts rubbing the skin.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"You covered it, didn't you?" Jen asks.

"No, Jen." I cup her hand in mine. "We can't keep pretending that nothing's happened. You know I'm not Josh."

"Then what's that?" she asks stubbornly. She jabs her finger at my wrist. In the yellow light, I see the blueish-gray mark on my skin.

"Probably a bruise," I say, rubbing my now sore hand.

"In the shape of a star?"
I look at my wrist again and I see it, a mark shaped like a star. And then I see a second and then another pair of stars on the other side. The marks are faded and gray like print on old newspaper. And I've never seen them before in my life.

"What are those?"


"That doesn't mean I'm Josh!"

Jen leans forward and kisses me, a quick brush of our lips. "Yes, you are."

The truck pulls off onto a grovel road and parks. Before I can do more than blink, Jen is already opening the door. I stare after her, my mind a muddle of confused thoughts. I don't know what to make of that kiss, whether it was a friendly sort of kiss between friends, whether I should feel guilty for liking it.

Is there such a thing as a friendly kiss?

I shake my head and follow Jen into a meadow busy with workers setting up equipment.

I guess it doesn't matter because I'm going to have kiss her again, anyway. In front of all these people. In front of a camera.

Maybe it was an icebreaker kiss.

"Bear," Jen calls out. She launches herself up, and he catches her, swinging her around, a wide smile on his face. That's when I remember him from the movie. This is fake Gale Hawthorne. I don't know if Bear is his real name or a nickname, but it suits him. He's tall and burly with shaggy dark hair.

And I know it's stupid, but I have to fight down a prickle of jealousy. What makes it even worse is I don't know if I'm jealous of him because of Gale and Katniss or because of the way he's holding Jen. I let out a slow breath and walk over to them.

The guy lets Jen go and grabs my shoulder, giving it a friendly shake. "Josh, what are you doing here," he asks. "And blond again." His accent is strange, like nothing I've heard before, nothing like the real Gale at all.

"What do you mean what's he doing here," Jen says. "What are you doing here? I didn't know you were coming down."

"I'm here for the epilogue shoot," fake Gale says. "You know, you and me riding off into the sunset together."

Jen laughs. "Did somebody send you another gag script? Damn, Bear, I told you to read the books."

"Why read the books, when you have the script," he says, waving a leaflet of papers. The cover looks the same as the one I have, but it seems a little thicker.

Jen jumps, snagging the script from him and flips through it. "What is this?"

"The script," fake Gale says, snatching the papers back. "Might remember it from the read-through yesterday?"
"You weren't there," Jen says.

"Yeah, I was. I remember it like it was yesterday," he crosses his arms over his chest. "You two been taking mind-altering substances?"

"Oh, you know we would've invited you if we were," she says, patting his arm and he snorts. "But, really, Bear, what's going on?"

Just then, the gray man from the hospital comes up to us, giving Jen a squeeze. "Ready to be Katniss one last time?"

"Don't say that Francis, you're going to make me cry, again," Jen says, swatting at him.

The man turns to me, "Hey, Josh what are you doing here?"

"He's here for the epilogue," Jen says. "For Peeta's part."

Francis looks from her to me, his eyebrows raised in confusion. "Well, it's nice to see you, Josh, and you're always welcome on my set," he says, slowly. "But… you know your character's been dead for three movies now."
In which Josh paraphrases Nabokov and Lucille Ball

“Relax,” I say, shuffling the deck of playing cards in my hands. The cards are the same as they are back home, down to all the different suits. “Do you know how to play poker?”

Katniss glowers over at me. “I should kill you. If we survive long enough to make it to the arena I will kill you.” She’s sitting cross-legged on the bed in our new guest suite/prison cell in President Snow’s mansion, watching the re-cap of the tribute interviews on the large screen that dominates one wall of the bedroom.

“It’s going to be okay,” I say. “If it weren’t for me, we would be going to the arena in the morning.” I waggle the card deck at her again and she shoots me another deadly look. I decide to play solitaire instead.

“If it weren’t for you, Peacekeepers wouldn’t have come and dragged us here,” Katniss yells. “You should have told me what you were going to say in your interview. That way I could have killed you before you got me turned into an Avox.”

“It’s all part of the book,” I say. And it is, mostly. Getting the Games postponed was my addition. I’m hoping it will buy me enough time to get out of here.

On screen, Caesar Flickerman with his blue wig, blue lipstick, and ghost pale face is interviewing Katniss and everything proceeds like it does in the book: the twirling, the giggling, the part about her sister. And then Caesar is calling my—Peeta’s—name.

I hate watching myself on screen; it’s more nerve-racking than actually doing the interviews. You see all your fuck ups and you can’t go back and do another take like when you’re doing a movie. But, I watch this one. I want to gauge the audience reaction.

It starts just the same as it does in the book. Caesar asking about the Capitol and I tell that story about the shower and smelling like roses, remembering my lines from five years ago. The crowd laughs and Caesar plays it up. Personally, I think Stanley is a better Caesar than the real Caesar.

Caesar asks about my family at home, so I make up some stuff about my loving brothers Rye and Whole Wheat (we call him W). I rip-off the plot to an old episode of I Love Lucy and tell Caesar about the time I adding too much yeast to some flour and the dough filling the entire bakery. The audience titters loudly.

Then we get to the part where Peeta’s supposed to talk about Katniss.

“Handsome lad like you, there has to be some special girl waiting for you back in District 12? Come on, tell us her name,” says Caesar. For some reason, the television screen makes him look more ghoulish than he did in real life.

“There is a girl, but she’s not waiting for me at home…she’s here,” my on-screen self says.

“But that must mean…” Caesar starts.

My on-screen self nods sadly. “She’s a tribute with me in these Games.”

The crowd gasps and the camera pans over the shocked faces.

“Tell us, Peeta, who is she?” Caesar says.
Caesar leans into me and the camera pans into a close-up of our faces. I look directly into the camera like this is a telenovela. “It’s Katniss. I’ve loved her forever. She is the light of my life, the fire of my loins.”

The whole audience breaks out in sympathetic sighs at these words.

At this point, I know I was trying to hold back laughter, but I managed to make it look like I’m holding back tears on screen. Quoting Lolita seemed appropriate considering the age difference between Katniss and me.

“That is why, as a citizen of Panem, I’d like to petition President Snow to postpone the Games so that Katniss and I can get married. It’s our dying wish.”

The camera cuts to a shot of Katniss. She’s looking dazed, but her eyes are downcast, demure in a way I’ve never seen the real Katniss act.

The crowd roars in agreement, clapping and stumping until the stage shakes. Caesar tries to calm them, promising he’ll do everything in his power to get this petition to the president, but the crowds are so loud, the shouts drown out the anthem.

As soon as the anthem went off, a dozen Peacekeepers came and escorted us to the president’s mansion, locking us in this room with the promise that the president will see us tomorrow.

Beside me, Katniss clicks the television off. “If I tell them you’re insane, do you think they’d let me go?”

Yawning, I stretch my legs on in front of me on the bed and lay down.

Katniss scoots a little closer to the edge of the bed. “I’m not marrying you.”

“Trust me. I know more about fauxmances than you. This is going to work in our favor.”
In which Peeta learns he has a team

I stare at the amber colored liquid in the plastic glasses and swallow another mouth full. It's harsh, burning my throat on the way down, but after the third glass, it's not as bad. The roar of the crowd around the bar picks up as a woman in a frilly pink and white dress climbs up onto the bar. She's maybe fifty-years old—with gray streaked blonde hair done in curled pigtails. They start a new song and the woman sways to the music. I ignore the whole thing and focus on my little plastic glass, running a finger down the rigid on both sides.

I was too hard on Haymitch. Drinking is good. It numbs everything up nicely.

Like the fact that you're dead. Or that Gale Hawthorne has somehow hijacked your future.

I eye the dozens of bottles perched around the inner rim of the large rectangular bar. They come in almost every color from clear to blue to blood red. I wonder if any of them could wipe my memory completely.

I spent the morning sitting in a folder chair next to Francis while Jen pretended to be Katniss and fake Gale—Liam—walked off into the sunset. Together.

It took them a while, because Jen didn't know the script, but they got through it. It wasn't the same script with Gale inserted, no happy frolicking children, no kiss. But from the script fake Gale—Liam—lent me, Katniss and Gale have gone their separate ways for years and this is their first meeting. Not much happens, but there are a lot of meaningful looks and glances.

I hated it.

While Jen went off to record the voice over part, fake Gale—Liam—dragged me to this dark, hot, underground place, populated by sweating people who would fit in well in the Capitol.

I look over at fake Gale and try to make the two pulsating images become one. "Do you think she's happy?"

Fake Gale, turns away from one of the pretty girls from the film crew—most of the people here seem to have had something to do with the movie—and looks at me. Everything white glows in the throbbing lights of the lounge and for a second, the white of fake Gale's eyes and teeth blind me. "What?" he calls over the music.

"Do you think she's happy," I say again, forming the words around a tongue that seems to have gone limp.

"Who?" fake Gale asks.

"Katniss!"

Fake Gale scraps his chair closer to my and leans over me and I'm forced to look up to meet his eyes.

"Josh, you can quit it with this gag. The two of you could never prank me and it's not going to work now."

A pair of high white boots suddenly appears in front of me. I look up to find that the boots are attached to the woman in the frilly pink costume. She unhooks her top and throws it the short distance to me. I catch the lace and bow-covered thing before it hits me in the face.
"There's no frowning during my dance, Doll Face," the now topless woman says, wagging her finger at me. "Besides, I was always Team Peeta." She blows me a kiss and the bar erupts in wild cheers and whistles. *Team Peeta?*

She winks at fake Gale and he waves her over, slipping a crumpled green piece of paper—some kind of money I guess—into her waistband of her skirt. She collects her top from me and lightly pats my cheek as she leaves to gyrate at the other end of the bar.

Seeing my first topless lady should probably have had more of an effect on me, but the whole week has been so bizarre it's just another one of those things.

"She reminds me of my aunt," fake Gale says conversationally and I laugh, not sure if it's funny or perverted. Or maybe I'm just drunk.

I'm thinking about ordering whatever is in a green bottle in front of me when Jen comes in surrounded by a gaggle of other people I don't know. She spots us, hugging fake Gale before turning to me.

"We need to talk," she says. She grabs my hand and half pulls me out of the chair, down a hallway, and into another room. It's quieter here, but not by much.

"Something's wrong," Jen says.

"Yeah, I think I might pass out," I say. The abrupt standing and walking wasn't a good idea. The room keeps tilting at sharp angles and I have to hold onto a wall.

Jen leads me over to a plush purple velvet couch. I collapse into it and she sits down next to me.

"What happened this morning—that wasn't how the movie was supposed to end. Yesterday at the read-through, the epilogue ended the way it was supposed to, but now no one remembers it." She pauses to take a breath. "And I think Josh is in the book."

"Huh?" I ask. Her words come faster than my muddled mind could process.

"You were right, okay? Josh is in the book, you're here. Some kind of freaky Friday fuckery happened and I swear to God if anyone had sent me a script with this plot I would've chucked it in the garbage in a heartbeat."

"So you don't think I'm Josh anymore?" I ask.

"No, and I think Josh is changing shit in the book and that's why you weren't in the epilogue," she pulls out her mobile phone. It's just like the one I—Josh—has, but with a different case. "I downloaded the first book to my phone and things are different."

She holds the phone out to me, but the tiny type is impossible to read. Right now, words in general might be impossible for me to read and I shake my head. "I can't read it."

"I don't have time for your sensitive guy, emo bullshit about not wanting to know the future, Peeta!" she yells.

The yelling actually sobers me up a little—that and the fact that it's the first time she's called me by my real name. "I meant I can't see the words. You might have noticed I'm not in top form at the moment."

"But what were you doing drinking anyway, you're like sixteen," Jen chides. "Rotting your liver
is for those of us over twenty-one."

"I've got a license that says twenty-two," I say. "But I don't drink, not usually." The cushions on the couch are so comfortable, I sink into them and close my eyes.

"No, you're not going to sleep," she says, shaking me back to wakefulness. "I'll read it to you. She takes the phone away from me and starts reading Katniss' words.

_I stroke the hair out of his eyes as he lays in bed, unconscious, his head angled in my lap. I'm sure that this is his strategy, pretending to be insane. Or maybe he is insane. No sane person would run headlong into a force field or even try to escape, knowing what would happen to any family or friends at home._

_And he claims not to be Peeta Mellark at all. Part of me hopes he isn't. If he's not Peeta, if he's not the boy with the bread, I owe him nothing. He would be just another tribute standing between me and going home._

"Is she in bed with him?" I ask. "Because she sure didn't get in bed with me. Not unless you count sharing a sleeping bag in the arena."

"That's not the point," Jen grouses. "The point is this didn't happen before and the Peeta in the book claims he's not Peeta."

"Did he say he was Josh?" I ask.

"No, but Katniss doesn't always remember names. Some characters never get identified."

"Katniss is really stuck on that bread thing from when we were kids, isn't she? I can't believe she calls me 'the boy with the bread' in her head."

"Yeah, that is kind of weird," Jen agrees and then groans. "We have to focus! Josh is changing things and it's going to get him killed. Or you. I can't keep that straight."

"It's him, since he's the one in Panem. Why is he changing things if he knows what I did?"

"Maybe because doing what you did means bone-deep sword wounds and monster wolves chomping off hunks of your…." Jen reaches over and pulls up one pant leg and then the other before looking at me. "If you're from the book, one of those is not supposed to be there."

"I'd wondered why I didn't have any scars from the mutt attack," I say. That last night in the arena, I knew that leg couldn't be saved, not after the sword injury and the mutts. I reach down and rub my left leg. _Not supposed to be there._ The alcohol in my stomach churns and I have to force myself not to throw up. "I still have my leg because Josh is changing things?"

"I guess," Jen says. "I'm not an expert on this stuff. All I know is that we have to get Josh back."

"And I have to get my leg chopped off," I whisper.

"Oh, Peeta…I didn't," Jen says.

"No, it's alright," I say. "At least I managed to stay alive. Whatever Josh is doing, it's going to get him killed."
In which Josh is attacked by a snake

Chapter 12

"Why aren't you drinking your tea, Mr. Mellark?" Snow studies the gold-edged tea cup before taking a very precise sip, unhurriedly, his unblinking eyes watching me over the rim. Cold eyes.

Snake eyes.

Oh yeah, the book got that one right. It's like being watched by something that wants to devour you—and not in the good way. When I was younger, this kid I knew had a six foot long albino python as a pet. The snake was big and move slow, but once it wrapped itself around your ankle and squeezed…well, then you understood how dangerous a big snake could be.

And that's what Snow is, a big snake. Compared to this guy, Donald Sutherland's Snow was jolly-old Saint Nick.

"I'm good, thanks." I leave the tea sitting on the small table next to me. I'm not drinking anything handed out by Snakey McPoisonface.

Even if there were nothing nasty in the tea, I still wouldn't drink it. The powdery, old lady smell of roses is suffocating in the closed-up room. I breathe through my mouth to spare my nose, but it's like huffing potpourri. The stench is overpowering, heavy enough to be a physical weight in the room. Sweet enough to make me want to gag.

Against my will, I have to suck in a breath. And yep, this time I inhale the handful-of-pennies blood scent lurking under the roses. Blood and roses.

Thank you Suzanne Collins.

With a clink, he places the teacup back onto its saucer, but the liquid-black eyes never leave my face. "First the Reaping, then your escape attempt, and now your…declaration during the interviews. You've caused us quite a lot of problems, Mr. Mellark. And I'm sure you can guess how we take care of problems here in the Capitol."

My eyebrows hike to my hairline. No one's ever threatened to kill me before. Since my heart has turned full-on jackhammer, my body knows I'm in danger, but my mind can't catch up. The whole thing is so ridiculous—I mean I'm sitting here, in a fucking book, while President Snow spouts James-Bond-villain threats at me.

Snow steeples his fingers in his lap, a long-suffering father admonishing his son. "I'm a reasonable man, but I have never hesitated to do what I must to keep the peace."

Okay, so that's pure bullshit. Every last dictator thinks they're doing what's best for humanity. They're all willing to rape and murder and pillage in order to remake the world in their twisted image, but that's not peace. That's slavery.

I rub a sweaty hand back and forth against the fabric of my pants, weighing my options.

On the one hand, I'm sitting here with the fictional equivalent of Hitler and he could kill me at any moment. On the other hand, I have the chance to tell Hitler to fuck-off. You don't get an opportunity like that every day.

I don't know what dying here would do—for all I know it'll send me home, so I might as well say
what's on my mind. "So, killing innocent kids keeps the peace?"

One white eyebrow rises. "I take it you disagree."

"Most of the time, I'm a pretty agreeable guy, but the way I see it, if you want peace, then maybe you should stop killing kids and starving people and generally being a hateful bastard. Might make folks feel just a tiny bit more peaceful."

Snow's lips crease into what I'm guessing is a smile, but it's so frightening it's hard to tell. "It has been a long time, Mr. Mellark, since anyone has dared tell me the unvarnished truth. I am a...great admirer...of truth. I never lie to myself and I can spot anyone else's a mile away."

Huh. Plutarch Heavensbee and all those other secret Capitol rebels must be out of range. Or else Snow is just full of it. I'm guessing he's just full of it.

"I like you." His hand stretches out for his teacup, bringing it back up to his puffy lips for a long sip. "Unfortunately, I cannot sanction a marriage between two underage children. A pity considering how much you love her."

Underage marriage is bad, but underage murder is okay. Yeah, that makes sense. I wouldn't be surprised if Snow were the descendent of some Kentucky politician from back home. That kind of non-logic has to be hereditary.

"As consolation, the Gamemakers have approved a...rule adjustment. If you and Ms. Everdeen are the last two tributes alive in these Games, both of you will be crowned victors and, when you are of age, the Capitol will host your wedding."

I should have realized the damn book would try to auto-correct itself. "I've read the book and seen the movie, Mr. President. You're just going to revoke the rule change at the end and make us try to kill each other."

An elegant lift of the shoulder. "Perhaps. You'll only find out if you live that long. With your objection to killing, you shouldn't be too concerned. And... since District 12 will receive an unprecedented advantage, the Gamemakers thought it only fair to provide an addition...handicap."

Snow makes a hand gesture and two of his guards clip in, sharp and efficient. They loom on either side of me, each clamping a hand down on my shoulder, forcing me deeper into the plush chair. Both guards have that weird, expressionless, surgery-enhanced, model-face thing going for them, but there's something sinister behind the eyes. They both look ready to inflict some damage.

A new jolt of fear races down my back and I remember that the Capitol has more than execution and death in its wheelhouse. They have rape and torture and brainwashing. Adrenaline pours through my system and I fight against the hands holding me down, but I can't shake their grip.

The door bangs open and two more guards drag in Katniss, the silver of her eyes bright with fury. She isn't struggling, but she is stiff with anger. The men basically carry her across the carpet and drop her on the floor next to me.

"Don't hurt her!" I struggle against the hands holding me down.

Katniss shoots me one of those angry, silver-eyed looks. "As soon as they let me go, I'm going to be the one hurting you!"

One of the guards holding Katniss reaches down to her ankle. It's cuffed with a wide silver band that trails a length of chain.
Before I can make sense of what I'm seeing, the guard has clamped the other end of the chain to my own ankle.

It's a shackle.

I'm shackled to Katniss.

"The 74th Hunger Games start tomorrow morning." Snow draws his lips back in another horrible smile. "May the odds be ever in your favor."
Chapter Summary

Peeta received a phone call that Jen finds amusing.

Chapter 13

‘Why does my mouth taste like I’ve been eating moldy bread?’ My voice sounds cracked, the words croaked out. I’m spread out on something soft, maybe a cushioned seat, and even with my eyes closed I can feel the jostle of motion beneath me. I’m going somewhere and I don’t remember leaving the place with the half-naked women. I decide not to open my eyes, just float along in the dark. Who knows what’ll happen if I open my eyes?

“I can’t believe you just said that.” A voice drifted to me through the hazed, half-incredulous, half-laughing and a name came along with the voice. Jen. I crack open an eye and in the flashes of passing light, I see her sitting across from me and she’s grinning.

“What?”

“You’re going to start doing bread puns now, aren’t you? Like they always make us do during those stupid games on press junkets.”

I stretch my legs out on the long seat. “I think I’m still drunk because none of those words made any sense.” How Haymitch lives drunk like this is a mystery. I feel worse than I did when Katniss drugged me with the syrup during the Games—and I was three-quarters dead then. The movement and flashing lights aren’t helping much, either. “Where are we?”

"We're headed to the Atlanta airport,” Jen says. "We're going to Connecticut, to talk to Suzanne Collins."

"The author?” I'd been asking for days to see this woman, figure out how she got a hold of our story and if she knew how I could get back home, but now there's a lump of anxiety in my stomach along with the burning slosh of alcohol.

Everyone here thinks she made me up, that I'm a figment of her imagination, that the world I came from and everything I know is fictional, not real. What if they're right?

The sound of music, bass heavy, thrummed through the dark compartment. It's coming from my back pocket, the sleek metal device I found in Josh's backpack, it's like a phone, but not connected to the wall like we have back home. I think they have something like this in the Capitol and maybe in District 3, but I'd never seen anything like it.

This morning, Jen had charged the thing with a white cord and demanded I always keep it on me so I stuck it there.

I sit up and pull it out. An image of a middle-aged woman covers the screen, her smiling face pleasant, her hair the same blonde as mine, but chopped at sharp angles. There's a green button that says accept and a red one that says decline. I touch the green button and hold the instrument up to my ear like I've seen other people do.
"Josh? Josh, is that you? Oh my God, I thought you were dead. Everyone's being calling. Your brother's been waiting hours for you to pick him up."

"What?"

"It's just not like you not to tell us when you're taking one of your breaks. You disappear off the map for a few days, that's fine. You're grown now and what you do with your time is your business, but when you promise your brother the two of you are going somewhere and then don't show up, well, Josh, the people who love you are going to worry."

"What?" I repeat dully. My eyes cut to Jen and her eyebrows are hiked up, but there's a mischievous grin on her face. She mouths the words "Josh's mother." On some level, she's enjoying this.

"And everyone's worried, fearing the worst, trying to decide what to do without alerting the media and the rest of the drones and then I get a call from your publicist saying that pictures of you and Jen are all over the internet."

"Internet?" Jen's smile falters when I say this word. I have no idea what it means, but it means something to her. She pulls out her own phone and starts tapping on the screen.

"You shouldn't blow off your brother when both of you are in the same city, even for Jen. Plus, you told me you and Jen weren't going to..."

Jen grabs the phone from me. "Hey, Michelle. Yeah, he's still with me."

There's a pause while she listens to whatever Josh's mother is saying.

"Josh lost his phone and we had to get another one and have everything re-installed. I think the dates got all messed up on his calendar. We'll call Conner and tell him sorry."

Another pause.

"Drunk, really drunk. Like that time in Saint Tropez," she says. "But I'm going to nurse him back to health."

A pause and Jen laughs.

"Yeah, I'll keep that in mind."

Josh's mother says something else and Jen wilts a little. Her face is so expressive and changeable, it's interesting watching the emotions cross her face. "No, unfortunately not. Everything's the same. I already got in touch with Liz, she's dealing with it. Really, it was just a teeny-tiny wrap party for Mockingjay epilogue. Most of the crew was there, Liam, too."

Another pause.

"I'll tell him. See you soon, bye."

Jen hands the phone back to me and she suddenly looks younger, like a little girl’s that's just gotten away with the last cookie.

"Didn't know you were such a good liar," I say, closing my eyes and laying back crosswise on the seat. "That was a lot of fast talking." Nothing like Katniss who got flustered pretending I wasn't dying back in that cave.
"Excuse you, I get paid very well just for lying. And it isn't like you don't lie, Mr. If-it-wasn't-for-the-baby Mellark."

"What?"

"Never mind."

"Anyway," she says. "I thought you were supposed to be the charming one. Kinda bombed there on the phone."

"Talk to me when my head stops throbbing...wait...did Katniss say I was charming? Was that in the book?"

Before she says anything else, the car comes to a halt and I sit up. The driver opens his door and pulls a small rolling suitcase out of the trunk.

"We'll use the VIP entrance, but we need to go separately. Draws less attention," Jen says. "I'll go in this way and Russel will drive you around to the other entrance. Wait ten minutes and then have the VIP person take you to the lounge next to our gate."

She pulls a little blue beanie out of the pocket of her jeans and slips it over her blonde hair. She waits until the area is almost deserted before slipping out of the car and heading into the building, walking with long, fast strides, almost a jog, like she wants to get it over.

The car pulls around the corner and parks in a line with a bunch of nearly identical polished black cars. I take the phone back out and watch until ten minutes have passed. The driver Russel points me to the right entrance and I get out into the humid night's air.

I've gotten all the way to the sidewalk when a voice behind me says. "It's really you, isn't it?"

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!