Among The Ruins

by Dolwakeorsleep

Summary

This story is an expansion of Chapter 27 of Mockingjay. Further chapters take the story up to the Epilogue because I thought 'so after' missed out quite a lot! I have tried to make the characters true to how Peeta and Katniss are in the book. It concentrates on how they get together and stay together, and what they may aspire to do. There's a non-con in Chapter 3 but it's not gratuitous. There's some Peeta POV in various Chapters and some original characters. I have also linked some descriptions to some of my favourite poetry verses, just because...

"'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat.' - I slept very well that night."

I originally wrote this as E rated but cut it down for M rating. I'm going to put up the E rated ones separately so it's possible to read both versions. New chapters added 22, 28-31.
Gradually, District 12 began to find its new normality. Returning families, or fragments of them, came initially to share the surviving houses in the Victor's Village as most of the surrounding areas retained but crumbled memories of homes. Then temporary camps were built in the town as rubble was cleared and now these are being replaced with wooden homes, establishing a sense of community that was suppressed before the war. Nine hundred and fifty one people out of a population of ten thousand had survived the bombing of District 12. We had no idea yet how many had survived the war, but so far about 400 were back and helping to return the District to life. Perhaps a few hundred more would follow: some, we had been told, had decided to stay in the Capitol, to be involved in its regeneration. Others, including my mother, had dispersed into different areas, looking for a new future, or trying to forget something in the past. But Peeta and I live with haunted memories and half-healing hopes in our old District which Snow tried to destroy. I want 12 to become something better, but what the future holds, I do not know. For now, I cannot think of things beyond today or tomorrow. Peeta tells me he can see a little further.

We share the house that was given to me after the 74th Hunger Games. Peeta's home at the bakery was destroyed along with the one in The Village. We have dropped the 'Victor' label and between ourselves call our home 'Hope End' - a play on words, to suggest this is where our hopes start to become our reality. I'm not sure if either of us are ready to believe that yet though. Maybe we are even being a little self mocking...It is very natural for us to be together though, to support each other. Haymitch stayed with us from time to time too as his house needed repairs, which we carried out together. It's good to have him with us. He has returned to the drink after a brief respite in 13, but seems more in control, so perhaps, if he wants to one day, he may be strong enough to stop. For now he seems content: he teases Peeta and me by calling us his kids, and annoys me as much as he ever did. His jokes are always at my expense and as funny as they always were, to him. Peeta and I spend a lot of time in each other's company: he reads to me, we go for walks, but often we just sit quietly, as we know each other so well. Words, anyway, are still not my thing, but Peeta often knows when I'm thinking about my old life, the Games, or Prim without the need for me to articulate my thoughts out loud. He senses my moods and I think it can only be so because he still loves me, like he did before. But he hasn't spoken of it since he has returned here and though he tells me he is better now I don't want to hurt him by making things move too fast. Perhaps he thinks the same about me, because I sometimes feel that we are both waiting for the other to make a move, to take things further. When we sit together by an open door or window, watching the rain, I wonder what Peeta may be thinking. I catch a look in his eye, and then mostly I can tell. I'm looking to see if a storm is coming, but Peeta watches for things to be washed away and made new. Sometimes when I sense the silence within the walls growing - reminding me of what, and whom, I had lost, then more than ever I am glad that Peeta is here. He keeps his bedroom door open at night, to listen if ever I call out in my sleep, and he holds me in the night till the darkness inside me fades away. I know Haymitch was right I didn't - I don't - deserve him.....But Peeta is as constant as the orange orb glowing in the hazy sky - he protects me as he always did. I just wish that he would remember how he loved me before too.

No one minded that both Peeta and I, and Haymitch, still had our gifted homes. We have money too, so we would never need to work. We have retained our special status under the new establishment, which makes me nervous. It worries me that it is a tithe, that I will have to repay in kind if, as Plutarch suggests, this calm is the honeymoon period for Paylor's government. The Mockingjay is gone - she did her work. I am Katniss, Katniss Everdeen again. But when I grow uneasy I wonder, do people blame me for whom they have lost? Would they have preferred to live under the old oppression, but still have their loved ones with them? It's what I think too, when I
think of Prim... But though words are seldom spoken, the way I am treated by my fellow townsfolk makes me believe that we had fought our fight, and won our peace together. Any lingering doubts about my worth I try to put behind me by working as hard as I can in getting the medicine factory started. A lot of infrastructure and knowledge was lost in the Districts and in The Capitol in the war and many things have had to start again. Our medicines rely on natural remedies, rather than the miracle science of The Capitol - many of those secrets are gone along with its games and pod technology, or so I have been told. It's a price worth paying. I am glad those terrible things that caused immeasurable pain, the mutts, the pods, are gone. I wish I could say the same for the guns, the bombs, the fighter planes. But they nestle back in the hills, asleep for now.

Hunting is more of a hobby than a necessity now: a marked change from my illegal actions under the former regime. And perhaps unsurprisingly, I'm less keen to do it. Often I go into the woods in order to hunt with my bow and come back empty handed, not knowing where the time has gone. And then it's vegetables and bread for dinner, but Peeta and Haymitch don't question why. We occasionally entertain official visitors from The Capitol who are studying each of the Districts. Paylor's government has initiated lots of programmes to try to establish a more equal society. Now that the destruction is over, it's time to create something new. Having been pardoned, these official visits are perhaps a way to rehabilitate me. I'm curious but keep my distance. Peeta engages more with them, and will offer his own insights and suggestions but neither of us want to be drawn into that world again. In politics there is too much disconnection between what is said and unsaid, what is seen and unseen and what is real or not real. I do not want manipulation, deception or mistrust to be part of my life anymore. I want to feel the soft wind in my hair as I walk in the woods, the sweat on my back as I work in the sun and the linking of Peeta's hand with mine when we talk. Those are the things I trust. But I cannot forget how I would not be here, how Peeta would not be here, if it were not for so many of our friends whom we have lost. I try not to think how Cinna, Finnick or Prim died, but how they would want others to live - it's difficult because it doesn't seem right that I am here without them. For they each showed self sacrifice that I did not, though I tried to redeem myself when I aimed my bow on Coin. At that moment I thought not of my own survival, nor even Peeta's, but of all the people who had dared raised the three fingered salute.

Thinking a little more outwardly has been helpful for me: I have been able to work and live alongside everyone much more easily now: there is no threat of retribution from peacekeepers anymore and we grow more food to feed ourselves. The first harvest since the war was successful and agricultural supplies are shared more evenly between districts rather than going straight to The Capitol. People are no longer hungry, though we will always be careful. Memories of deprivation run deep in all of us but Peeta reminds me that there is no need for anyone to be looking over their shoulders anymore. He says District 12 is turning into a good place.

Peeta works harder than most. He was able to salvage the ovens from the ruins and rebuilt the bakery, for the time being like all the new buildings, it's made mostly of wood. He bakes the bread for the majority of the district. He is helped by two apprentices, Jennaveeve and Lilo, whom he teaches patiently, and well. When the bakery shuts in the afternoon he joins others to build new homes and I can spot signs of his work around the District. Carvings around a window frame or a porch suggesting beauty as well as practically are both testament to the pride and care he shows in his craftsmanship. I am constantly in awe of how his strong hands, which can cut lumber swiftly or heave sacks of flour effortlessly, can handle such intricate work: in carving wood, or in his painting. I sometimes wish he would use his hands to reach out to me as he did before. When he used to sweep my hair from my eyes, or hold me in his arms as he kissed me. I know I took his devotion for granted, but I remember each time we kissed, and how each one meant something different to me. We don't kiss anymore. I can't help but feel scared of letting him know how important he is to me, I need him now as much as I ever did, I hope he recalls all that I have told him before because I can't put it into words to him now. I cannot remove the feeling that the
people who are most important to me are taken away forever. Though Peeta is trying to show me that the world does not have to be like that, I know we are both scarred. The Doctors call it survivor's guilt, but giving it a name doesn't make it go away for either of us. Some nights old fears come back to me so that the day starts again with me trying to make sense of things. What seems to help is making the most of the simplicity of each day.

It was on one of these ordinary days that Peeta came back home tired from a long day's work, and settled by the wood fire in the kitchen. 'I have finished helping Thom build his house' he explained. I took his jacket from him and hung it up, and gave him a cup of tea I made from the mint he planted by our back door. 'He is very pleased' he continued 'We are going to fence off a yard for him tomorrow so he has a place for his chickens and goats' My hand fell from the back of the chair where he was sitting. I tried to compose myself, I get cross with myself when I let him see I am stirred by memories of the past - in this case Prim's goat. But I can't help picturing how happy Prim would have been with a yard full of goats to care for. We all have our memories, and I want to be less selfish and stop wallowing in mine, but Peeta has noticed, like he always does, because he cares. There was a nervousness to his speech which alerted me to the fact that I might not like his words and my skin prickled: 'Sorry Katniss I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable,' he began 'You must get fed up with me. Perhaps with Thom's place finished, I should get to work extending the bakery' he added. I was not sure if I understood him properly and this gave him time to explain: 'I thought you might like to have more space, and if I'm closer to the bakery I can get more work done' Could Peeta really have mistaken my inaction during these last months for disinterest? 'Peeta!' I exclaimed, 'Are you saying you want to leave? You know I don't want you to... I couldn't live in this place without you.. But if you want to go....' I should have said more perhaps, but I sat down at his feet and looked at his worn hands and held them firmly in mine. 'No Katniss, I don't want to go.' he conceded. I felt guilty that he could think he was not needed here, whereas just being with him fills a void in me that no one else ever could. But I don't know how to tell him. 'This is our house, not mine;' I emphasise. 'You said you would stay - with - me' I reminded him, though I felt it was wrong to recall this promise now. I was annoyed with myself for not being able to express myself properly so I tried to deflect any discussion away from me. 'Always" he returned, 'as long as you need me' He added that qualifier, I guessed, for me - as if I would ever want him to relinquish that bond. Or is he alluding to the time I told him on the beach that I needed him? Why can't I tell him that again? What am I afraid of now? I felt he sensed my disquiet and he didn't pressure me to say anything more. Instead he leant forward and ran his fingers through my hair that fell loosely round my shoulders 'You know,' he added 'I enjoy my work at the bakery, I really do, but the best part of my day is coming home, to you. And if...' He paused momentarily, and I looked up at him. 'And if...' He hesitated again. It wasn't like Peeta to be lost for words, so I finished the sentence for him 'And if you come back to me every night, then I promise I will do a better job keeping the place more tidy and warm. I'll even try to fix dinner more often.' I'd said enough to change the tone: much as I liked being at home with Peeta I was never going to be good at housework: I was too spontaneous and loved being outdoors for that. Peeta knew it and smiled at me again. How he would have finished his sentence, I do not know, for we sat quietly and contentedly by the fire after that for a long time and I could not imagine ever being without him. Perhaps he had just suggested he would leave to remind me of what I could lose. If that was his plan then it had worked. For I realised that Peeta had suffered far more than me. He had lost all his family and had been tortured by Snow. As well as all the physical pain he endured they very nearly changed him into someone he wasn't meant to be. But he had fought against it and had reclaimed the kindness and goodness that has always been part of who he is. I wish I could be that strong. I knew if Peeta and I were ever going to regain what was lost between us and move forward then I had to change too. Sitting with Peeta's arms around me I felt stronger and more confident than I had done for a long time.

We had dinner together, Haymitch too, and watched some of the news on the holoscope. We usually just make small talk, though Haymitch will be more vocal if he doesn't like something that the politicians say or imply. Peeta will then try to rationalise things, and I will keep quiet.
Haymitch was speaking about Plutarch for the nth time and I must have drifted off into the middle distance for I clicked back mid-sentence when I heard my name 'Katniss? Were you even listening to a word I said? I must say you seem unusually happy today. What's changed?' probed Haymitch. I was about to thank him for noticing when Haymitch yelped. Peeta had evidently kicked him in the shin under the table for goading me. 'So do I seem happy or not?' I asked, a little petulantly. 'Katniss you are always a little dour, sweetheart, but we are used to it. If you cracked a smile we may have to call the doctor though' Haymitch contended. 'Leave her alone, Haymitch' interrupted Peeta 'I see Katniss looking happy plenty of times. Perhaps it's just when you are around that she's not,' he argued. 'Well, I can take a hint' replied Haymitch, rising from his chair. 'Thanks for the lovely dinner and conversation. Next time tell me in advance when you don't manage to bag any wildfowl, Katniss, and I will bring round one of the geese. Mind you I have given them names now so I may just keep them for eggs.' I wasn't sure if he was being serious. 'And,' he added to Peeta, 'if she smiles for you, that's good enough for me.' He patted Peeta on the back. He went to give me a peck on the cheek. I hesitated, but let him. Haymitch had a point. I'd been told to 'cheer up' ever since I was a girl, which would make me scowl all the more, as I never had Prim's ease or grace. But I was aware that when I could actually separate the past from the present- achieving something, however small, in my work or keeping house with Peeta and seeing that he was contented too, that's when I would smile. Had Peeta really seen that, or was he just coming to my defense? I have thought for a long time he knows me better than I know myself. And after our conversation before dinner I knew I had to make the first move, but didn't yet know what to do or say. My natural awkwardness is something that's hard to deal with, without a prep team to show me how.

Peeta usually went to bed first, because of his early starts at the bakery, though I know he stays up later than he should to keep me company. After he went up stairs on this occasion, I drafted a letter to my mother who is now nursing in District 4. I recounted a few events I thought she may be interested in but kept in brief. I know she doesn't ever want to come back here - Prim was her favourite and I don't blame her for that. She thinks I am strong enough on my own and in a way she is right - I can manage without her, but I'm not alone. She has done very well to start her life over, without Prim. So I'm careful not to write anything that may trigger old memories, and it ends up being rather impersonal. Then I stick a photo of Annie's and Finnick's son Gawain into the book Peeta and I are compiling of all the good things we find in other people. Gawain, who looks like he will be as handsome as his father and as gentle as his mother is one of the very best. After that I go upstairs.

Peeta sleeps with his door and window open, whatever the weather holds. I know he does the former so that he can better hear me cry out in the night when the nightmares come. Peeta has them too, but wakes silently so I am never there for him. I peep into his room and see him resting peacefully. I do this every night - I don't tell him so. It makes me feel better knowing he is sleeping softly. I put on my nightdress, a District 12 original design: grey thin cloth, shapeless, covering my form. It has a few buttons, which I leave undone. Effie had quickly returned to the Capitol's extravagant dress code when she returned there from 13. It was part of her identity, so why not? Likewise I once again favoured my District's muted tones and simple clothing in spite of, or rather because of, the role fashion had played in presenting a different version of me. I looked at myself in the mirror, I looked similar to the girl who had left for the 74th Hunger Games, but I was not the same person anymore. I slipped into bed, but was restless. I had taken Haymitch's words to heart more than I thought I would. If I was feeling happier but not showing it was it really fair to Peeta to expect him to really know how I felt? I decided I should keep my window open today too. It might help clear my thoughts. I got up and pushed up the wooden frame, but felt an unexpected chill, so shut it quickly. I got back under the covers but was now more awake. I tried to think about the sequence of the day's events - a technique the Doctor had suggested to me to help me sleep. But it was not working for me tonight. I kept dwelling on the things Peeta had told me about his day, and that lead me to think about other things about him, how I'd held his hand by the fire - and how he'd defended me from Haymitch. It made me smile to think how he is still
protecting me - even just from Haymitch’s sarcasm. I started to feel more relaxed but not sleepy. So I tried to remember a song I had not thought about for a long time, one my father used to sing to me when I was little and he came back late from the mines. My mother would sometimes let me sit on the doorstep waiting. It's strange because I was always certain that he was would come back. I knew he worked in the mines and people said it was hard, dangerous work. I had seen my mother anxious sometimes when he was late. But I always had complete faith that he would be home and I wanted to be the first person to see him. And every time I was right, he came home, except once, when I was at school... I haven't thought about the song for ages. It was a homecoming song, so there was no place for it after he died. I tried to recall it and could hum the tune but the words alluded me as if I had deliberately locked them away. I kept humming, I could just grasp some of the chorus. And then some of the words came flooding back. But when they came, I didn't think of my father anymore, but Peeta. I thought about how Peeta had - briefly - brought up the idea of him leaving home. Why would he say that? I wanted to be sure...I know he always puts me first. Did he really think leaving would be best for me? Perhaps he believes I could never act on that feeling we shared in the cave and on the beach, and he will never make the first move again. I know I have hurt him before, and maybe he is more vulnerable now after what they did to him.

So, I reaffirmed, it has to be me who takes the first step. I sung the words of the chorus out loud, and I felt a sensation of calm. But the room was chilled. I was concerned, I thought to myself, that Peeta will get cold tonight. I should go and close the window for him. I got out of bed again and walked along the hall to Peeta's room, holding my lamp. The door was open and the light from his own lamp glowed softly. I couldn't see Peeta's face now, he had turned towards the cold breeze. I stepped softly so that I would not to wake him. I pushed the door a little wider to enter, but it made a sharp creak. Peeta turned over quickly as if ready to jump out of bed, but instead saw me and paused, surprised. He was rested on his forearms, the same position he was in when I had to strip him down and bathe his wounds in the cave. Though it was cold now, he wore only a short sleeve shirt, and the dim glow of the lamp cast shadows that illuminated his physicality. His body was more muscular than when I had, in spite of the circumstances, been made aware of him in the cave, and I liked it. I had never come into his room in the night before. He always comes to me, if I need him, so this was very different, and I think we both knew it. But I didn't pause. I kept walking, but not to the window - I could admit to myself now that that wasn't the reason I had made the daunting journey from my bedroom to his. Peeta didn't say anything to me or make any attempt to move. He just watched me. So when I got to his bed I had to turn down the covers and slide next to him. I felt the warmth of his body next to my skin, and moved closer so that we could touch. Peeta lay on his back and moved his arm around my shoulder. I reached for his other hand which he had moved onto his chest and I laced my fingers with his. He responded by breathing deeply and stroking my arm gently. He has held me close in the night so many times before, but this was different. His hands did not rest on my covered shoulders this time, instead he lightly caressed my bare arm. Such a slight gesture that hinted at so much more possibility. It was not protection or comfort I needed from him now, but something else. I looked up at him and I hoped he knew then how I felt. He raised his eyebrows slightly, not in surprise but as if to encourage me to say something. My eyes met that beautiful blueness for as long as I could, and in that stillness I knew what he wanted me to say. My lips parted but instead of the words tumbling forth I leaned in towards him and kissed him, short sweet kisses to let him know, without words what I felt. He held me close, two hands drawing me on to him, so that I could feel more of his body, and he mine. He tilted my chin up so that our lips could meet again. He kissed me tenderly yet I sensed his hunger, it was the same as mine. The tingling to the tips of my toes and into the depth of my body was the same as when we had kissed on the beach. But there was a difference, for in the arena there was an urgency drawn from the knowledge that this moment together could be our last. This kiss though felt as if it was the beginning of something more. We could take our time, and we had nothing to prove to anyone - this was for us. This was the real fire that burned in me now, and in Peeta too. His hands slipped under my clothes and I did the same to him. I felt the muscles on his arms and abdomen and could trace the outline of his deep scars, which I kissed. He
stroked the curves of my hips, my back, my breasts. And I had a huge longing to know more. But I didn't want to rush this discovery of each other. Having waited so long it made it sweeter still to pause. Discovering how we could make each other feel was a pearl I wanted to treasure, and keep secret the final surrender just a little longer. For it did seem to me to be a surrender: I wanted to show Peeta that I needed him as much as he needed me. I would not have to be a survivor or a victor anymore. All pain would pass, together not only we would be stronger, but we would be complete.

I could tell Peeta wanted more. It was difficult to ignore. But I explained to Peeta how I wanted to wait, because this was not just how I felt now: this is what I would feel for him always. So when I stilled Peeta's hands from circling my breast he did not really object. He just drew me closer and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, and kissed my forehead. I understood, then, what it is to chose to love someone unconditionally. I know what the world is like and I know what people can do. But there is nothing that Peeta can ever do that would make me love him less. I know that is how Peeta has always loved me and now I can reciprocate and let him understand I feel the same. I had now found the moment that I can live in forever. If Peeta had asked to make love to me then, I would have said no. I would have said yes and I know I would have loved every part of it. But as always Peeta respects me and lets me decide. So we lie together on the edge of a precipice but there is no fear, just a thrill of anticipation and an intense awareness of every one of my senses. I love the look in his eyes, the scent of his sweat, the sound of his breathing, the taste of his lips and the touch of his skin. There's also that new sensation rushing through my body making me intensely aware of myself. It was difficult for me to stop from wanting more too. But I feel secure in Peeta's strong arms and we stayed in that embrace until I sensed Peeta was growing tired. So I asked Peeta if I could sing him my half remembered song and he smiled and nodded 'yes.' And I began: 'There's a place where I go, where I go all alone, where I go all alone without you. Without you I'm all alone, all alone, all alone without you I'm all alone until I'm home' and kissing once more, we fell asleep together
I woke when it was still dark outside. I know that when Peeta stays with me, when my nightmares come, he quietly leaves me before the dawn so that he can start work in the bakery. This morning I was awake before him, so when he went to slip out of the bed unnoticed I took his hand and pulled him to me to kiss him, to let him know that I did not want to forget about last night. He stroked my cheek gently and our eyes met. I rose up, and touched his steady lips gently with mine and it felt warm and good. 'We can talk together when I get back from work,' he said, perhaps trying to hide an eagerness in his voice. I nodded and smiled, 'I will see if I can finish a bit earlier,' he continued, before he said goodbye. How I disliked that word! I remembered other times when we had parted: when I turned back in the Quarter Quell to see Peeta for the last time before heading to the beach with Joanna. I tried to absorb everything I could see, everything I knew about Peeta with one glance as if to keep him with me. If I had hesitated one moment longer I wouldn't have been able to go - and things may have been so different for all of us. But now there was another feeling linked to his leaving, and I wasn't afraid of it. I pulled a pillow into my arms to fill the void of Peeta's absence in my arms. I watched him as he readied his clothes for the new day, studying the outline of his body in the dim light. His movements and gestures were so familiar to me, yet today there was more. I had known what if felt like to be held in Peeta's arms, but today I woke up knowing what it was to be embraced by them. It was as if nothing outside of this room mattered while Peeta was here with me, yet knowing he had to go I tried to make every moment of observing him last, so that I could remember it more fully. I listened to his footfall as he left the room and tried to make sense of the muffled sounds of his movements downstairs. It was going to be a long day waiting for his return as I was so conscious of his absence already. In fact I realised I had often felt like that. Gale had known it when we returned from the 74th Hunger Games as victors though I was in Gale's company I wasn't truly with him. I tried to ignore Peeta then because I had not wanted to be manipulated into a relationship by Snow. But in fact it was Peeta's genuine feelings for me that had won me, though I still denied it to myself. It was only in the Quarter Quell itself when I sincerely believed that I would not get out of there alive that I was able to tell Peeta that I really needed him, in the way he wanted me to. And then of course was our separation...I didn't want to think of the pain I felt during that time as it is nothing compared to the physical and emotional pain Peeta had to endure then. He has never spoken to me about all that took place, and I don't ask. I have seen the scars where he was tortured - some cuts were too deep even for The Capitol's healing creams to disguise. Then there was the emotional torture from which he has mostly recovered, probably because he is able to so easily see the good in people, and find beauty in the smallest or most ordinary things. He can look at the sky at dawn and know what the weather will be, he will find plants for me that are struggling for life in the ruins of the town and nurture them so they multiply in our garden. He has hundreds of different words for the taste and texture and colour of things. All of this helps him find peace and help him be the man he wants to be, not the person they tried to create. I don't know if I could be as strong as that if our situations had been reversed, I can be too impulsive, too willing to see the dark.

I remember when Peeta was still in confinement in District 13 after his hijacking I cried into Gale's arms despairing about how they had tortured Peeta by suggesting I was responsible for all the painful things that had happened to him. And then Gale told me that the Doctors thought that wasn't the only mind games they played on him...they had linked pain to pleasure too. I was wary about what he meant - what else his torturers had done to him. I have an uncomfortable feeling there may be something else, some other reason why though he is so attentive to me and seems so contented in my company he never tried to take things further - never asks for more from me? But last night he seemed to want exactly what I wanted so maybe I am just overthinking things. We are so close to having that moment together which, I realise now, was always going to happen.
Whether it was my singing, his kindness or the dandelion of hope that lead us together we would have eventually found each other in our old lives. I know that now.

The best time for hunting for me is at dawn, when the night skies turn pale and I can catch a glimpse of the woodland animals before they draw cautiously deeper into the verdant undergrowth. But usually when I wake up even at an early hour, I am too late to see Peeta rise. This morning, even though I have seen him leave, I miss his presence more. I stay in bed - Peeta’s bed - a little longer and think about what happened here last night. I smile to myself and could happily stay in bed just replaying in my mind each touch, each kiss that we shared. I also realise I had no bad dreams last night: I remember I was walking in a meadow with lupins growing tall and in all their coloured grandeur. The sky was dappled pink and a bear was walking amidst the trees on the cusp of a glade. I don’t remember feeling frightened... I did not have my bow with me. I think I felt at ease, it was warm. Yes, the bear looked at me, yet walked on. She let me be, and I watched her go. Behind me there were voices, gentle sweet singing, was it Prim? No I can’t remember, perhaps I woke, that’s all I can recall. That feeling made me want to venture into the woods myself, I almost believe it’s my natural home. Besides, I have to collect a range of specimens that we need in the factory. Some plants that used to grow quite freely in undisturbed areas of The Seam that we used for fevers have been lost after the earth was scorched by the bombing. So I have to search further a field to find a new source. I also have a few requests from the medics in The Capitol who have sent some drawings of plants that they think will grow around District 12 and which they want to use for pain relief and memory loss. That’s ironic I think. I wish there was something to take to make memories fade. But I correct myself - Haymitch has been imbibing alcohol for 25 years for that reason and it hasn’t helped. And if I suppressed the bad, the good memories would be lost as well and I don’t want that. I take my bow with me, as I always do, and I think I will be able to hunt today. I respect the animals I shoot, and kill them cleanly and quickly, when I decide to do so. Nevertheless, when I pick up my bow when I leave the house it feels strangely heavy on my shoulder after all.

When I reach the woods the sun has risen a little more and I can hear the world waking around me. The leaves rustle in the breeze, yet there’s an unseasonal humidity in the trees even though on my approach through the meadow the air tasted crisp and fresh. I wonder which way the weather will turn, I hadn’t set any fires at home this morning as at the season’s change it can be hard to predict if it will be necessary. Sometimes I like the certainty of the cold winter, but Fall can be exciting: a warm day mixed amongst the colder ones seems like a greater gift than the incessant summer sun. I hear a distant chirrup and lower myself to the ground. I make out the curved backs of 5 or 6 grounderlings - still with their mottled juvenile feathers which given them protection in the crumbled grey brown leaves on the forest floor. Their size gives them away though, and they make more noise as they still travel in their family group. My arrows will not have a clear path to them where they currently wander, turning over the leaves and moss looking for food. But I wait, predicting their onward path. Sure enough, they venture forward and I do not hesitate to let an arrow fly, as soon as I release it I set another arrow to my bow within seconds and let it go too - not randomly but with all the precision I have gained from watching these birds when my hunger acted as a strict master. Sure enough I bring down two grounderlings as the rest fly noisily away low through the scrub. I pick them up and put them in my bag. I will take one to Haymitch - Greasy Sae will pop one in a stew for him. She has been cooking and cleaning for him, much to his annoyance at first. But I have noticed him walking around the town recently, perhaps less afraid now of meeting people's eyes. Nearly twenty five years of feeling like he was responsible for sending children to their doom weighed heavy on his shoulders. That feeling of failure perhaps can begin to fall away now.

I did have a plan about where I would search for the feverflee plant today, but I take a longer route to my destination than I need. I savour my lunch - a sunflower and honey roll that Peeta had shaped into a wreath for me, and some sweet goat's cheese. It is perhaps the last time I will be able to sit on the grass this season before it gets too damp and I find a clearing. Normally I am watchful
I haven't learnt the animals new territories which they use since the bombings re shaped the land. But the strange weather - it decided to be warm after all- has a soporific effect on me. Or perhaps it was my dream, when I felt safe in the bear's presence, or the desire I have to think about my night with Peeta that causes me to do what a hunter never should - I stretch out and fall asleep on the grass. A lovely sleep, not long enough to dream vivid images but long enough to feel the sensations of colours and feelings blending into one....A cracking branch in the near distance wakes me with a start. Sleeping unprotected, with the smell of my half finished lunch drifting on the breeze is dangerous, never mind what happened in my dream. I look around, and sure enough there is a creature not far from me, beginning it's feast - but I am fortunate, is a deer, a female, peeling off some bark from a young tree. She is surprised by me - she may have seen my body stretched out and, not stirring, felt I didn't present a risk to her. She looks at me for a split second longer than she should, which makes her vulnerable, but I have no urge to shoot her today. I look at her and let her be. I have my grounderling today. I let her retreat into the undergrowth and ready myself for the rest of my trip, a little annoyed that I was careless, but nonetheless feeling refreshed by my rest. I carry on to the next clearing which I know lies beyond the ridge of the blue hills. I did not travel this far before the second rebellion but now that there is no danger from peacekeepers or electric fences I travel further for my own pleasure and to map the land methodically for others who venture forth. There is a pool in this clearing, I call it the black pearl because of its strange colour and almost perfect shape. I'm not sure why it is so round: perhaps long ago before remembered time people attempted to shape it so? I plan to investigate its banks one day to find out, but for now I travel there as I saw some plants growing beyond its banks which were new to me and which I think match the pictures of The Capitol's pain relieving plants. It's a long steady walk. There are no pathways as such except natural ways made by previous forest fires or where herds of deer may have trod a more accessible route. Where the light enters the wood sure enough I find some feverflee plants. It's a scrappy little thing, but should multiply quickly so I ease a few out of the ground and pack them away. I press onward. I have to be careful to familiarise my journey - I look behind me as I tread forward from time to time so I can make sure where home lies for my return. Some of my journey takes me to higher ground where the view is spectacular - I see mountains far beyond with their tips covered in snow and I see forests stretching into the distance. I can see the whole extent of District 12 - and I can also detect random dark holes in the countryside where bombs missed their target and the green natural swell of nature has yet to grow back and submerge the scars completely. When I reach the pool I see growing round it some Katniss plants, no longer in flower they still bear their erect arrow shaped leaves. But this is not what I came for. Beyond the pool on a slope facing into the afternoon sun is a mossy feathery plant which on my last visit bore little white yellow flowers. This is what The Capitol has ordered. It is abundant here, yet perhaps uncommon to them. In District 12 I have to re-stock even the lavender and rosemary that were common, as the ground was burnt back. Both are important medicines and in fact both are used by Peeta in the bakery, so those were two which I endeavoured to find many months ago. Both grew well from cuttings over the summer months, both domestically and in the propagation units in the factory. I take a trowel and lift 12 initial specimens with mud to protect the roots, wrap them carefully in paper and bind them together before placing them in my backpack. I look at the sky. The days are getting shorter, but I have plenty of time left to make my return journey and if I take a shorter route I could perhaps meet Peeta at the bakery before he closes for the day. The plants are secure enough for me to drop them off to the factory tomorrow. For the main part of the journey I follow the same route that I took uphill back again. The downward path means that I make good time. The nearer I get home the more familiar I am with the terrain, so I decide to take a different path back which should lead me nearer to the market end of town. I haven't explored that area since I returned as I have been concentrating on the northern edges. I also know from my view from the hill that this will lead me to one of the charred black spots I could see which scarred the forest. I don't know why I am drawn to it, but I am. I think I want to see with my own eyes nature crawling back, reclaiming the damage done by the bombs. I have seen plenty of damage caused by people - since Coin suggested I visited District 12 for myself just after the bombing. And then there was District 8,
District 2 and The Capitol. But the regeneration I have seen since in some of those places has been done by people. I think I will almost find it more satisfying to know that nature can recover, by itself. But that is not what I find, I must have taken a wrong turn. For approaching the town I stumble onto a path - more overgrown now, but it shows signs of natural boundaries of brambles. I nearly trip up over a brown tattered heap of clothes, or fabric. My first instinct is to gather it up, but as I do so it falls away and underneath I see bones...disjointed bones. Not a whole body - animals have clearly feasted here, but undoubtedly a body. The head is missing, and perhaps strangely, I look around for it. Looking along the path I see further shapes, some pieces of fabric have become torn and cling to the brambles. In other places bare bones, a leg, a skull, lie by themselves. None of these bodies, or parts of them are full sized - these must be children. Even with the ravages of decay and predators I can see that their bodies form a line more or less heading down hill. They must have been running away from the bombing. But why are they all lying like this? I look at one of the skulls - red hair still attached in places - and I see a clean bullet hole through the back. The same in another, and another. These little children were running for their lives and had been shot one by one as they tried to flee. I felt giddy and nauseous and had to turn to be sick in the bushes so that I didn't fall over one of the bodies. My body felt feverish and I stumbled up through the brambles tearing my hands on the thorns. I could picture not only the deaths of Rue and Prim but hundreds more faceless children reaching out of the earth to grab me and pull me down with them. I stumbled forward blindly. I had seen destruction on massive scales, but seeing this human loss again, on my own, brought everything back. I wanted to escape. I wanted to find Peeta.

I made it back to the town quickly, or at least time seemed to blur. I fell over more than once, with my giddiness and cold sweat overpowering me. The electric fences were down, but here and there wires remained, and I tangled myself at the perimeter, cutting my leg on some that gathered loosely by its old retaining post and I collapsed. Mud and leaves marred my clothes and hands. Wiping my face of my tears I realised my face was probably grimly soiled too. And I cared about that. How pathetic. I had just seen the unburied remains of children and I cared that earth marked my face. I was only yards from the Mellark Bakery, so got up and made my way there. The layout of the District is changing slightly: where new homes and shops have been built before old masonry has been cleared, roads have deviated like a meandering river. So I now approach the front of the bakery along the road that used to lead round to the back gardens. I have walked along here hundreds of times, as a shortcut to the Hob in the years before the Games, and many times since as I surveyed the town being rebuilt. But now my thoughts are on the past. The tree where I sheltered in the rain when I was starving is no longer here. The pigs that belonged to the Mellark family are gone. But a new boundary fence has been erected at a distance slightly away from the bakery. It is bordered by a bush bearing the tentative purple blooms of late summer, flowers that are are soon destined to fade, curl and die with the coming frosts. But for now, they hold on and I decide to sit with them and wait for Peeta, I'm not ready to see him yet. I glimpse movement behind the glass frontage. A blind comes down. One of the apprentices, Lilo, a strong boy of about 16 years, much like Peeta was at his age, exits the shop and walks down the hill towards what used to be The Seam. Peeta follows, carrying two full bags of bread, with extra tucked under his arm. He puts the bags down, and locks the door, then balances the bags in his hands again. I am slow to rise and call out to him. He seems to be walking with purpose and I almost don't want to distract him. He takes a few paces when his path is crossed by a mother holding the hand of her skipping little girl of about 3 years old. Peeta seems to make small talk, crouches down to the child's level and produces a roll from his bag to give to her. He gives the mother the loaf under his arm, she smiles and takes it from him and he goes on his way. He has not gone many steps when an old man - old for District 12 anyway, waves at him. Peeta acknowledges him with a raise of his arm to waist height, as his hands are not free. He paces over to the man and hands over one bag of bread and receives a pat on the back in return. He doubles back and passes where I am sitting, hidden, on the other side of the road. I let him get ahead of me before I raise myself. I follow him maybe 40 paces or so before he knocks on a door and hands over the second bag, emerging with what looks to be one carefully wrapped loaf. I begin to quicken my pace but at that moment Peeta
waves to Roan who is on my side of the road, half way up a ladder, seeming to be about to engage in some work on a timber frame. Peeta darts across the road, puts down the bread and beckons Roan to come down the ladder. Peeta hands him his own jacket and takes a saw from him and climbs the ladder. I don't want to stop Peeta and decide I'm not ready to talk after all. I turn to the right and start back to The Village on my own.

When I arrive home I strip off my clothes and place them in the wash basket. It feels cool again but I don't immediately chose to dress myself. I feel grubby because of what I have seen and wash and scrub myself at the sink until parts of me grow red and I stop. I walk around in my underwear carrying out small pointless tasks. I light a fire in the kitchen and also in the living room and our bedrooms. We won't use much else of the house today, so I just close some doors to the other rooms. One of the plans for the District is to bring some centralised heating but that won't happen for awhile. It's not something I'm eager for, I prefer to start the fire myself and watch the orange flames dance and turn, and I do that for a while now. I loosely unwrap my new plants and place them on the porch. I notice the cut to my leg from the wire again now: it's minor so I don't know why it stung so but I go upstairs to bathe it with salt water. Feeling better, I slip on a loose muslin shift and tie my hair back. I lie on the bed waiting for Peeta, wondering how I can tell him about what I have seen. I feel tears welling up, but I brush them away. I realise I mustn't tell him - I don't want him to know. It will open his old wounds and I don't want him to lose the hope he has so carefully secured. He will feel pain for the children and for me and I don't want that. I resolve to slip a note to the new District governor anonymously tomorrow so that the children can be laid to rest. But I won't tell Peeta I found them. I will try to be strong for him.

I go downstairs. It doesn't take long, Peeta must have only been an hour or so behind me. He comes through the door with his remaining loaf of bread tucked under his arm. He extends it to me as I begin to hasten over to him. 'I made this for you, with the rosemary you gave me - it's taken really well by the bakery, so I picked some today. I hope you like it' he explains. I jump up and put my arms round his neck and kiss him lightly on the cheek as I take it from him. 'Steady on,' he says 'you haven't even tried it yet!' He looks at me with his clear blue eyes and I see his laughter lines gather round them. His bright smile makes him look boyish and untroubled, but surprised. I can understand why. I have a mixture of extreme emotions running through me: excitement at having Peeta home and despair that I want to conceal. This seems to have caused a rush of adrenalin that must make me appear a little coquettish right now, not my usual self. My feet feel like dancing, not something that comes naturally to me at all as I realise how lucky I am to have Peeta. A few hours ago I walked through a true pit of despair with evidence of all the worst aspects of human kind's inhumanity towards their own before me. Yet within a few minutes of watching Peeta in the town I saw all that was good. No one starves in District 12 anymore, but neither are we wasteful. Some people, bereaved mothers with children, the elderly, the sick they still need help. And Peeta helps them. He doesn't work hard for the same reasons as me, to absolve himself of guilt. He does so because he cares. I have been pleased with myself for making an effort to get along with people more, Peeta doesn't have to try. I realise I don't have to talk to him about the pain I feel today, just being with him reminds me of Rue's lullaby. Though I had been thinking of Peeta for most of the day, I hadn't planned what I would say or do once he came home. Luckily I don't have to. He stills me with his arms, wrapping me warmly inside them like a cloak of leaves so that I feel safe and warm. He kisses me on my lips and he leading, our tongues touch too. I close my eyes and put my troubles aside.

Peeta prepared the grounderling for dinner, and I gave the second one to Greasy Sae when I saw her pass by the window, which pleased her. I enquired after Haymitch, and she told me he was his usual self, which didn't tell me much especially as his usual self seems a bit different these days. It must be fun at Haymitch's house I thought. Greasy Sae has few words and little humour, and Haymitch is entertaining enough if he has just had a few but if he is drunk tonight , that grounderling will be the liveliest of the three I thought. I went back inside and helped prepare some vegetables. I'm not as experienced as Peeta with flavours but I am efficient and it's a time I
enjoy being together. We recounted our days, he filled me in on who came into the shop, what's happening in the town and who he bumped into after work. He didn't mention handing over the bread, I expect it's just something he does every day and doesn't warrant a mention, and he doesn't talk about people in a way that makes them seem needy or him seem benevolent. He laughs about Roan's handiwork though, and says he might mention to Sherwood Boulter, our head carpenter, that Roan needs some more help. I told Peeta about my day, though I left out the fact that I fell asleep in the meadow, for he would be disappointed with me. And I closed off all thoughts about the children as I planned as I didn't want to think about it now.

It's not till after dinner that Peeta takes me by the hand and leads me into the living room and pulls me onto the sofa with him. He said in the morning we would have a talk when he got home but I'm glad he has decided against it. We continue to kiss each other, not just on the lips but on our unconcealed skin: he kisses my neck, my collar bone, my shoulders. I have to undo his shirt buttons to kiss his chest, circle his nipples and reach along his abdomen. I sit astride him and can feel his excitement. Peeta's hands are already underneath my shift tracing my outline as we kiss. I know my body wants him as much as he wants me. I have nothing on underneath except little lace panties - the only items that I kept from The Capitol, and I want my skin to touch Peeta's very, very much. So I go to lift my clothes away but pause. I know what will happen next if I do, and though I so want to know what it will feel like to have Peeta inside me - my body is starting to ache for it - I cannot do it. I do not want this moment to be connected with what I saw today. Peeta sees my hesitation. He can't know why I pause, but he is intuitive and realises I cannot go further. His hands continue to explore my body, though he looks at me to check that it is ok. Of course, it is. I wish I could tell him why I stopped - I actually have to bite my lip to stop myself not only from wanting more but from telling him about what I saw today too. He subtlety repositions me on the sofa - I assume it's not fair to him for me to arouse him so if I'm not ready to take things further. And I don't really know if there is anything else I could do for him. I have never had any intimate experience with boys - my half hearted kisses with Gale are all I know. Neither did I take part in the giggling conversations at school, though I was intrigued by some of the comments my prep team revealed as they prepared my body for the Games. I don't know if Peeta has had any more experience than I have, but there's something about his behaviour that suggests he has. I wonder who it could have been? I had rejected him in those few months after our victory in the games, and Peeta had probably thought I was with Gale. Delly Cartwright perhaps? No, she was too sweet and seemed to want me and Peeta to be together when we were in 13. Perhaps when we returned to The Capitol for the Quarter Quell? There were plenty of perfect, beautiful girls there. But no, we were already playing the part of lovers again for Snow - at least I was, or thought I was, so that too was unlikely. I don't know why I was preoccupied by these trivial ideas: Peeta was with me now and whatever he had or hadn't done before was irrelevant. But it served to calm my desire, which is what I wanted to do right now. It seemed more difficult for Peeta, and we continued to kiss, more gently than before until he made an attempt to change the mood by reaching for a book that sat opened and upturned on the side table next to us.

In the old days books were restricted. In school, we were only taught about those things which would make us productive workers for The Capitol. We learned to read and write, and studied some mathematics and science. The history which we were taught gave a glowing report of The Capitol's success but we learnt very little about what happened in the centuries before. We gleaned that from bedtime stories, folk songs and the occasional teacher who wanted us to know more than the curriculum allowed, and thus didn't last long in the job. Some families had access to books of their own - Madge had shown me some of hers that she kept in a locked cupboard behind a curtain, and I had handled their delicate pages in awe. Peeta's family, being better off, had some too. Though his mother strictly controlled their access Peeta told me he used to sit and read them - mainly poetry and prose- after he had finished his schoolwork and chores in the bakery when he could.

I found out that books were restricted in all Districts, and The Capitol - it's easier to control people if they cannot learn from others or see the world in different ways. Snow had his own extensive
library (I wonder if he ever read from it?) but most books were kept in restricted underground vaults, and their treasures, some from long forgotten places, are only now being reprinted and dispersed. Plutarch himself always sends Peeta first editions of books that he thinks will interest him. I think he knows how important language and sentiment are to Peeta. If it had not been for his way with words, and how he won over the people in the 74th Hunger Games, I wouldn't be here today. Peeta turned the pages of the book. 'You'll like this one' he says softly. He begins: "Ode to a Nightingale" by John Keats.' He often reads passages to me, stories of ravens or rings to rule them all; excerpts from plays about star-crossed lovers, the Prince of Denmark, or Thane of Cawdor. I love to hear his voice as he retells these tales from strange lands, and sometimes, I don't think he knows, I like to watch him from the other side of the room just to see him reading, so engrossed and content. District 12 had its own arts - song and music - which people could share, for it was less easily controlled by the Capitol. Written art forms were restricted - and reading these books now is a sign that everything is different. We can learn from the past, and make the future better. So Peeta begins to read, 'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk....' his lilting tone and the melting words make my feet tingle. Yet as he reads I could not help but recall the Games. The 'forest dim' and 'verdurous gloom' was a landscape I recognised. Did Peeta just mumble the words 'white hawthorn'? He should know now Gale is no longer his rival for my affection, but maybe his name recalls a former insecurity. Then Peeta paused, he must know this poem well, for he read the next line assuredly and says 'thou was not born for death, immortal bird' without looking at the page - and as he returns to the written words I grow drowsy in his arms. The fire was warm, his embrace so tender. Do I wake or sleep?

Chapter End Notes

Ode to a Nightingale by John Keats. Had to include it as it actually contains, sort of, the words Gale Hawthorne. Besides the unrequited love, the gloomy forest and the immortal bird all seem to fit rather well.
Katniss fell asleep in my arms as I read one of the poems to her from a book Plutarch had sent me from the Capitol. It seemed to me to not describe a Nightingale, a bird unknown to me, but a Mockingjay. For that's the one whose song is so sweet to me. I hope Katniss could sense how much she means to me then, I know that is what she wanted to show me when she came to me in my room. I loved kissing her then because it was so normal - no threats, no desperation, just two people, together. As I look at Katniss curled up peacefully I wonder if an observer might not guess how much she's been through. But there are scars left from where she chose not to have them erased by the medics, which serve as a reminder of the games, the hunts, the battles. And I know how the memories can suddenly sting and burn...

I gather her up in my arms and carry her to her bedroom upstairs. She wakes a little, I don't know if she really sees me, but she smiles as I put her into her bed and briefly pulls at my shirt as I cover her. I long to kiss her again, but it's not the right time now. Besides I have sensed her hesitation, and I understand her desire to wait until she is ready to take things further. When I have had her in my arms though I have felt her body respond to my touch so I truly believe I could persuade her to make love to me. But that's not how I want our first time to be. I want Katniss to be absolutely sure that she wants to give herself to me, only then could I really believe what she feels for me is true. I thought she loved me in our first Games, but I was wrong. Then when I was tortured in the Capitol even what was real was distorted. If it wasn't for Finnick physically supporting me through the maze of pods in The Capitol I know I would have killed myself, or Katniss as I was in such fractured torment. And then Katniss tried to pull me back and I started to see more clearly again.

But though I cannot stop my physical longing for Katniss I have a secret pain that I keep to myself, which also stops me for asking her to commit herself to me now. I could not even talk to my doctors about it, though I think they may have guessed. My reluctance to be forthcoming was one of the reasons the Doctor kept me in the Capitol for so long after the end of the War. Sometimes at night when I think of Katniss as I drift off to sleep I cannot forget what happened to me during my hijacking. They told me Katniss was a mutt, that she killed my family. But they also did other things to me, things that shamed and debased me. I know what they wanted me to believe is not true but I'm frightened that I could lose control if I got too close to Katniss. If I could not separate what was real - in that moment, could I hurt her? They strapped me down and made me watch films of beautiful, perfect women and men having sex. I was already bruised and beaten but I could not help being aroused. So they sent in women - sometimes one, sometimes two at the same time but they all looked like Katniss. First they were tender, and showed me how to touch them. For the first moments I even enjoyed it. But then their faces changed, they become crazed, mutt like creatures, yelling hysterically about how they hated me, how they lied to me, how I would die...cutting me with their sharpened finger nails, shocking me with electric rods. This happened many times, I don't want to know for sure how often, I didn't count. Each time I gave in, hoping it would be real, wanting some human comfort, even though by then I thought Katniss was evil, had deceived me, I let her lead me. Hoping this one time would be different. But it would always end in pain, they would beat me and use blinding lights along with their words of humiliation. If my hands had not been tied down even in my weakened state I would have tried to kill them. Once the mutt-women seemed to dissolve into hordes of biting ants crawling across my naked body, a hideous nightmare turned real. I don't even know if any of this really happened...had they just implanted ideas in my head? Even now it sickens me. It only stopped when a new Doctor joined the team. Her job ironically was to see that I did not die- that I received just the right amount of pain to survive till the next session. She cut one episode short saying 'What's the point of this exercise? He's programmed to kill her before they get a chance to do anything like this. It's a waste of time.' Was she trying to protect me? I will never know. It seemed
like very soon afterwards, Boggs and Gale rescued me.

So I have kept my distance from Katniss, even though my memories are restored and I know that I love her, I always have. But now that our relationship teeters on a sensual one every time I hold Katniss a fear grows in me. Making love to her may be what I need need to heal - it may finally remove the memory of the mutts who assaulted me in the Capitol. I want to cleanse my body with a real act of love. But on the other hand what if I get lost in the moment and get confused- if those images that I have managed to lock away are set free?

Perhaps I'm too damaged. Maybe it goes back even further, back to how I was brought up. I have always tried to be the person I want to be, not the person others tried to make me, even as I grew up. But maybe I am not as strong as the boy with the bread anymore... I was not used to the loving relationship Katniss had with her father and Prim. My father was a good man and he cared for us all. But he was busy - so busy running the bakery. The job was good - unlike other people we always had enough food to eat, but as well as restricting the price of bread, Cray charged a tax for running the business. I don't even think that was sanctioned by the Capitol. Whenever Cray had been on a drinking binge, with his own style of reaping - the exploitation of young women - the tax would rise. I think it was overwork that killed my father. When I left for the 74th Hunger games I noticed that he was getting thinner. He was a grey, shadow of a man on my return. And during the Victory Tour he wasted away, like something was growing inside him, eating him away. Though I was the youngest in the family I had become the strongest and in those months that I wasn't there to help him he faded away. It wasn't war that killed him, but I did not get to say goodbye.

My mother was never popular in the District. She was a hard woman, I know. I frequently felt the back of her hand when she was in a temper. Perhaps having three boys close together in age and running the bakery was too much for her. She never said she loved me, and seemed blank when I was first leaving for The Games, predicting my demise. I don't know that I ever understood her, but I used to think if I ever had children that they would grow up knowing they were loved, always.

When I was preparing for the Quarter Quell I saw little of my mother. She stayed in our house by the bakery after my father died, still trying to run it with my brothers and two apprentices chosen by the mayor to finally make up for my absence after my father's death. I helped when I could but had a lot of time taken up working on my 'talents' as required by Snow. So when I passed by the bakery one day after a training session with Haymitch and Gale, I decided to say goodbye then. I didn't want a repeat of her last effort, and I was confident it would be me rather than Haymitch who would go to the Games - we had a deal that I could best help Katniss win. My mother looked worn, her hair was wispy across her face and her arms, though strong, looked old. Flour dusted her apron and skin, giving her an ethereal presence, as if she wasn't wholly present. For the first time I felt sorry for her: perhaps it was the only time I really saw her with something approaching an adult's eyes, maybe I knew she couldn't hurt me any more. She didn't look up at first when I entered, and started to turned dough already shaped into a plait back into a ball. 'I wanted to say goodbye now, mother ' I said, 'in case we don't get time at the reaping, I don't know if they will put on the same show this year, with just the three of us.' Still my mother did not look up, and busied herself with the dough. I was about to go, I didn't feel any rejection - preparing for the quell I was stifling all my emotions at that time, good and bad. But then my mother stopped what she was doing and said to my brother Rhyan:'Tell Peeta we love him.' She paused, half turned her head towards me but stopped, pushed her hand out to stop me moving forward and said 'I'm busy, I'm busy, go now.' She dusted her apron down and walked out the back door into the store, without looking back at me. My brother turned to me and shrugged. I hesitated, perhaps I should have gone after my mother but I did not. After years of not feeling a mother's love I could not reach out to her. I never saw her again so I don't really know if this second-hand expression of love really had any truth behind it. Perhaps she thought it was her last chance to speak to me and this half hearted attempt was the best she could muster. But I like to think, and it's all I can
manage, that here was a woman who had had been ruined by the threat of reapings of her sons year in year out, damaged by the ostracism our relative wealth in the district assured and hardened by her own inclination towards isolation. Perhaps she was aware, as I was, that she was her husband's second choice. She was afraid to give any greater indication of love.

I think that's probably why I tried to be different. When Katniss and I were reaped together I didn't want to hold back anymore, I wanted to let her know my feelings and I opened myself up and let her know that I had loved her for a long time. Of course I know that was an immature, half-formed sense of love then. I had watched her for so long from a distance, admiring her as she proved herself by her actions, whereas I did not. I dared not speak to her that day in the rain but weakly threw spoiled bread in her direction. But she was so strong: she supported her family every day, hunting for them, dealing in the Hob. Hers was bravery on a daily basis, so being successful came naturally to her in the Games. Her physical strength, her drive to succeed, her determination not to give in was everything I had seen in her before. So there must have been truth in my feelings. And since that time my love for her has only grown and I know I love her not for whom I think she is, but for whom I know her to be. But if Katniss had not made the first move yesterday, I don't know if I would have ever been able to do so. I don't know if I can believe in myself anymore - I try to tell Katniss that Panem is going to be a good place but I don't know if I can convince myself. Maybe this generation has suffered too much - it will be the next generation who can turn the world into something better. I try to compensate for my self doubt by being as busy as I can, and it helps. Katniss copes by finding solace in the woods by herself. I think it's the same for everyone in the town: we have all suffered, we all need something that keeps us going, to find something good among the ruins.
The next morning the sky is already a greyish blue - the best we can hope for for a while now I suspect. I reach out my hand to find Peeta, but he is not there. That was the night before that I was in his bed - my dreams have confused me. Peeta must have already left for work, so I get up too to start my day. I have a cup of tea and an apple and get dressed as normal. I write a note to the Governor - Angella Penge - about the children, telling in as much detail as I can where they will be found. I try to disguise the fact that the note is from me by claiming that it was my first trip into the woods. If my directions aren't good enough, they will send someone for me anyway, but hopefully they are clear enough. I don't know that I want to go into any part of the woods today, but I know I will forgive it soon for harbouring that secret. Luckily I have other tasks to do today: I have to take the specimen plants to the medicine factory, so that is where I head.

On the way I meet Haymitch. He is taking his geese for a walk. Six geese follow him dutifully, like little children, but probably even with their honking, not as noisy.

'Good morning Katniss,' he said, and bowed. He didn't fall over, so that was a good sign even for this time of day.'thank you for the grounderling. Sae made a delicious stew last night.She's going to add some of her secret ingredients to it today so it lasts another two days. Why don't you and Peeta come over?' he asked

"You do know what those ingredients probably are don't you?" I teased, Sae didn't need to add wild dog anymore, but Haymitch liked to pretend that's all she fed him.

"I certainly do - delicious“ he replied, patting his stomach.

"I'll have to pass today, Haymitch. We have something to do tonight" I responded. And though I felt guilty for turning Haymitch down, it actually wasn't a lie - there was something Peeta and I had to do tonight. Haymitch evidently didn't mind.

"Very glad to hear it. About time, Katniss." He said winking. He loved his innuendos - so I don't think he knew this time he was actually right. We said our goodbyes, and I looked back at Haymitch with his geese family waddling after him. I thought that there was something actually charming about seeing him tend to those geese, and for a moment was sorry that Haymitch had never had the chance for a family of his own. I guess that's why he had taken Peeta and me under his wing. I owed him so much - my life in fact - in both of the Games. Though I had punished him in District 13, blaming him for saving me and not Peeta, I had forgiven him. I will never forget how when Coin gathered all the Victors round the table to vote for reinstating the Games, Haymitch seemed to read my mind.or even more than that, without knowing my plans, he had complete faith in me and said 'I'm with the Mockingjay'. In doing so he enabled me to be in the entrusted position of being armed in the stadium with an arrow I was supposed to fire at Snow. Of course, that didn't happen. For better or worse, I took down Coin. I resolved to treat Haymitch much better.

The Medicine Factory is at the northern end of the District, so not too far a walk. It's called a factory to make it seem bigger than it is I think. At the moment it's a couple of large wooden barns with glass rooves to let in light with shades to block out a hot sun. The walls are insulated with special insulating foam from District 2. It's just a prototype at the moment, but thanks to the bombing there will be plenty of room to expand if we need to and extensive clearings for us to grow plants outdoors. It could end up being rather attractive for an industrial area so I like to be involved in its growth.

When I enter the building I go and find Edina Martell who runs the place. She lists my items and I pot them up at a bench and put them to one side. They shouldn't need any heat so I may return to plant them outside tomorrow, when Edina has decided which plot is best for them. I spend the rest of the day digging outside alongside my fellow workers, and having a lot of energy today, make good progress.
Around 4 o'clock I pack up and go past the Governor's offices. These are wooden buildings too at the moment, but we don't actually have that much administration anyway, given the size of the population. The Governor is a nominal title: Angella Penge basically sorts out a lot of paperwork, dealing with what is needed in the District and what we can give back, with a team of part time assistants. I post the note through the door and head back through the town. I see if I can pop into the Bakery but it's already shut. I quicken my pace as I want to see if I can get home before Peeta. Hopefully he is helping someone in town. I know I'm grubby from my labours and I want to clean myself up. However when I reach home, the door opens. Peeta is already there. He takes me in his arms and pulls me inside, pressing me against the wall.

"I missed you" he says. I can tell he doesn't care about my appearance at all. We kiss in the hallway and he leads me into the kitchen. Will it always be like this I wonder? Does the fire ever die out? It doesn't seem to matter now. I go to put my hands on his face but notice that my hands are far too muddy. 'I have to clean up' I tell Peeta. He pulls an exaggerated face of bewilderment and let's me go. He has started cooking anyway so I go upstairs and run a bath. I want my body to be very soft and silky tonight. I must have been a long time because Peeta calls me down, and we eat together. Peeta has had enough time to create a layered vegetable terrine with barley on the side, and an attractive berry dessert too. Lucky me, it's delicious.

When we sat in the living room after dinner, Peeta said he felt warm from cooking and wanted to put out the fire. I wanted to let it burn, so we compromised. He opened the window and we sat on the sofa together as the fire continued to smoulder. Peeta relaxed with his legs outstretched along one side and I lay fully extended in the opposite direction, with my hand supporting my head next to Peeta, and my body stretched along the other half of the L shaped piece of furniture. We don't actually stay in the living room that much in general. I prefer the kitchen which has room for a dining table, and chairs, and seems more homely. The proper Dining room we use for guests. There's a study where Peeta keeps his books and has his painting easel. I complete our journal with him there too. A living room was not a place either of us had been used to growing up. I had a kitchen and a dining space with bedrooms above ( Prim and I shared) and Peeta lived in his brick built house which was a little bigger, with separate downstairs rooms and three bedrooms above. All of our furniture was provided by the Capitol, and though thankfully not representative of their own style it is a heightened example of their idea of opulence for District 12. We have given many pieces of furniture away, though this large sofa fits us both comfortably so has remained. We settle down easily. Peeta asked if I enjoyed the poem yesterday, with a smile on his lips as he knew as well as I did that I had fallen asleep. But I was genuine in my response, saying that I had loved the tone of the poem ( though I did not add, the tone of the reader's voice) and could even recall some of the words which pleased him.

'I have a couple more for you today ', he said. His first choice was different to last night's: not so melodious, but I knew why he had chosen it. It was called 'The Island' by John Donne. One line stood out to us both:

'Each man's death diminishes me' he read. 'Wasn't it too late,' Peeta asked, 'to be diminished after someone's death? Shouldn't something be done beforehand?' And it seemed to me then that he had managed to detach himself from the things he had absolutely had to do to survive in the Games. I remembered when Coin had called together the council of Victors to vote on reinstating the Games he did not hesitate in saying 'No'. He was not going to be diminished by someone's death. He was not going to let it happen. I agreed with Peeta's sentiment about the poem, although as the Mockingjay, the face of the revolution, I had participated more actively in the deaths of the opposition, so how diminished should I be? I think Peeta sensed this as he finished quickly saying I would prefer another one more. This one he introduced as 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' by Wordsworth. He rested his hand on my shoulder as he read:

'Man is dear to man: the poorest poor
Long for some moments in a weary life
When they can know and feel that they have been
The fathers and the givers out
Of some small blessings: have been kind to such as needed kindness, for the single cause That we have all of us one common heart'

When he finished he put down the book. Tears were welling in my eyes, but I didn't want to let them flow.

'Was that one better?' He asked, gently. 'I thought you would like it, - it reminds me of Rue' 'No,' I declared 'it's reminds me of you.' and my tears gushed out. They weren't tears of anger - I had them plenty of times - even just seeing that Buttercup had made her way back home after the war had made me furious. These were tears of letting go, of connecting what had happened in my previous life to my life today. I had felt like they were two separate people, but now I realised I could bridge that gap because the constant in both those spheres was Peeta.

Peeta I could tell was embarrassed and tried to coax me out of my sentimental mood. When that didn't work he added 'Rue acted selflessly. I didn't. I did what I did for you'. That seemed to work, in stopping my tears at least, for I looked at him directly and said 'I know'. He looked at me and I realised this is our moment. It will not stop. I have to commit to him. I kissed him on his lips and neck as vigorously as he kissed me. My hands slid under his shirt and he peeled it off. His muscles shone in the glow of the fire. He slipped his hand down my back pulling me closer and on top of him. Everything seemed to be moving fast and I wanted to savour every moment. This time I let him help me remove my shift so that my naked body could rest against his. The speed at which I was prepared to reveal my body to him seemed to take him by surprise, and made us slow down our kisses. I could feel his arousal against my underwear, and I liked it.

'I watched you yesterday when you left the bakery' I confessed. He didn't seem too interested in making conversation, his lips and tongue were too busy exploring my neck, my shoulders, my breasts. My hand reached between my legs to release his belt. But I fumbled at it so Peeta stopped what he was doing 'Spying on me were you?' he laughed. I tried again, I managed to use just one hand, keeping the other steady on his chest. 'Yes' I said back. 'I watch you all the time, when you read, when you work, when you paint' and I pushed him down so I could taste and feel his body too. He raised my head from his chest and pulled me nearer. He placed his lips firmly on mine and pushed his tongue into my mouth. I had never been kissed like this before. Even in his bed it had not felt like this. It was obvious to us both that we needed to fulfil a very primal need. My body felt new and strong, but Peeta took control.

'Well it sounds as if you know me well, so perhaps I should know you better.' He slipped his hands into my underwear, producing a sensation I had not been prepared for, and my eyes rolled back, and I cried out. So is this ecstasy? I thought. Or is there more?

I knew what had to happen next but I liked waiting. Peeta seemed to know what he was doing. I must have been right - he has done this before. Then he looked at me with such intensity I knew that this was absolutely what was meant to be. I said nothing but looked at him and nodded. He repositioned himself on the sofa into an upright position drawing me into his lap. I drew my legs around him with my arms his neck as he stood up with his hands keeping me close. He turned to avoid the curve of the sofa but as he did so his feet got tangled in my shift and the ridiculously fluffy rug from The Capitol which I supposed he planned to lay me on. I laughed as I became conscious that we were falling together. But in that moment Peeta seemed to want to protect me and turned so that he could not stop himself from tripping more awkwardly. I could see what would happen next.

In slow motion I saw him fall back and hit his head heavily on the stone edge of the fireplace with a terrific thud. His eyes closed and I feared for one, two, three seconds that he might not open his eyes. But when he did, they were not Peeta's eyes. He narrowed them and seemed repelled at my nakedness. I instinctively drew my left hand across my breasts. 'Mutt, mutt!' he cried. 'Get off me!' He slithered backward as I tried to remove myself from on top of his body. This only took him closer to the fireplace and he threw me off him and tried to raise himself by holding onto what was nearest to him, which was the metal grid of the still burning fire. He yelped in pain and momentarily held his singed hand. It all happened so quickly. His eyes
widened, glowing orange in the fires reflected light. He grabbed the iron poker, which was next to him. He now stood above me. I was lying on the floor now on my back, shuffling away.

'Back mutt, back! I know what you are!' he yelled. He waved the poker above and in front of him, flailing around he knocked vases and lamps from the mantelpiece. I shuffled back just in time to get under the table before the poker came flying down at me. One, two, three times I saw it come crashing down. Splinters of wood shattered off the table, Peeta's strength was unrestrained. More furniture caught the blows - a glass side table shattered and as I moved sideways I felt a sharp pain and wetness down the back of my forearm which touched the wooden floor. I could feel a sharp fragment of glass about 2 inches wide protruding from my arm, and blood began to issue forth from the rupture.

'Stop Peeta! Please! It's me, it's really me!' I pleaded. From my position I was vulnerable in terms of where his blows may land, yet to come out fully would take valuable seconds which would place me in greater danger before I could attack. Attack? What was I thinking? I was not in the arena now. This was not a rival tribute, this was Peeta. There was a pause in the mayhem, so I made a decision to come out from the table as quickly as I could, not to attack but to negotiate - and maybe comfort. But it was the wrong decision, Peeta had just been gathering his strength for another assault, when I stood, practically naked, before him. The sight of him enraged with his arm raised holding the iron aimed at me rendered me motionless, as if I was watching him in one of the Capitol's props, and not the real man. So as he brought the iron towards me I did not dive for cover or try to destabilise him with an unexpected move. I stood there, turned my face away from the coming blow and crossed my chest with my bloody arm raising my other hand as best I could to protect my face. But the blow did not come, Peeta dropped the iron to the ground. It fell half on the wooden floor and half on the soft white rug with a muffled clang. As I looked down I could see a puddle of blood being soaked up by its fibres. The drips were falling from my now extended arm. Blood was smeared across my breasts and ran down to the roundness of my stomach.

'Katniss, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's not me,' wailed Peeta. He looked at me briefly, his eyes were not narrowed, or widened now but saddened. He lowered them from my gaze, it seemed, in shame. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry' he repeated. I reached forward, to try to comfort him, but was aware of the pain in my arm now and drew back. Peeta looked up at me. He reached for his shirt which he had discarded, and made a move towards me. I was not scared now so did not flinch. He gently, but swiftly wiped some of the blood off my breasts and stomach, checking to make sure the blood did not mask any other wounds. He looked relieved when he could confirm I was uninjured anywhere else. He did not look at my face and there was no sensuality in his touch now. I let him hold my arm, but I had to ask him to remove the glass. He carefully lifted it out, and more blood was briefly released. He tore his shirt and wrapped my arm, not too tightly, but securely. I was aware of my own nakedness, but Peeta I think was not. He remained seated on the bloody rug and lowered his head. I raised my arms around his neck and drew his head towards my shoulder, and he let me hold him there, as he cried. I watched my bandage colour red, but then stop. I did not let go whilst he sobbed, distraught, and cradling him like this I finally guessed what they had done to him in the Capitol.

I kept hold of him. I saw the sky turn dark outside, and Peeta's sobs turned to whimpers. He begged me to lock him in his room, but I insisted I would not - I would not be his jailer. I felt like the stronger one again. I had drawn my shift over me, though it was undone to the waist. Peeta had replaced his torn shirt, stained with my blood, as the room grew colder. It too was undone, so our bare bodies could still touch. I had left him only briefly to get the medical chest from the kitchen that contained some of The Capitol's healing cream. This was a special item Haymitch had managed to procure - again- as the decimation of the Capitol's infrastructure meant that some of their most miraculous items would not be in production any time soon. Peeta had not seemed to notice my absence, and still sat, with hunched shoulders on the rug. I applied the cream to my cut and it instantly felt soothed. I then smeared a little on Peeta's scalded hand, which he let me handle freely. He kept repeating his apologies, but I tried to reassure him that he had done nothing wrong,
it was Snow.

'But I hurt you Katniss - it could have been worse' he exclaimed

'No Peeta, it was an accident my arm got cut - you stopped yourself. You trashed the furniture, that's all. We can fix anything.' I said, consoling him. He shrugged his shoulders.

'I don't know what they did to you Peeta but it won't affect you and me. I liked what you were doing to me. We mustn't let them stop us. Not now.' He looked up, surprised. But I remembered how good it felt when he touched me and I imagined how much better it could get. I don't know if I was being brave or foolish. Perhaps I was just overcome by the new sensations Peeta had created in my body, for I said my thoughts aloud: 'You mustn't back away from me now. Snow would win. Don't let him change you. We mustn't miss this moment Peeta, we have waited too long. We must do this, for us.'

Peeta seemed surprised at my words, but perhaps not as surprised as me. For years I had been waiting for the right moment, hesitating, feeling that Peeta and I were pushed together by Snow so what we felt for each other could not be true. But having had my body awakened by Peeta's touch I realised the depth of my feelings for him, and all my natural responses were proof that whatever I felt for him was very, very true.

'I don't know Katniss, I want to, but I don't know if I can,' he replied,

'Let's go into your room tonight and see what happens.' I said, needing to take control. This seemed the right thing to say, for he stood up and let me lead him by the hand. He seemed like a boy again, but that's not what I needed. So when we got to his room I decided to be more assertive.

The curtains were open and the moon was bright, so we could see each other well. I drew Peeta onto the bed and slipped off my shift and my underwear quickly by myself and bade Peeta to undress too, though I had to help him. He seemed hesitant - I don't know if he was taken aback by the 'pure' Katniss' eagerness to disrobe or whether he just felt cautious about what would happen next. I decided that we best proceed more quickly, so that any doubts of his could not grow. He lay on top of me, and we kissed fully. He began to kiss down my neck and breasts as before, luckily he was getting in the mood quickly.

'Can I?' He asked. I didn't know what I was agreeing to, but so far everything felt good.

'Yes...no... yes' I managed to say.

'So what is it, yes? Katniss?' Checked Peeta.

'Yes, please' I said, which sounded a little awkward. My plan was to make Peeta enter me quickly, and this was a distraction, but an exciting one. I felt nervous for the first time. Peeta was preoccupied with making me feel good with his tongue and his fingers and he sent a delicious shudder through me. I felt blood rise through my body and prickle at my chest. Peeta sat up and watched me.

'Peeta now,' I pleaded. I tried to hide any worries I had. He took my cue and pushed against my body. He seemed to know what he was doing. Bit by delicious bit he worked deeper inside of me with each thrust.

'Is it ok?' he managed to ask.

'It's good, it's good' I answered, gratefully. Our bodies moved together perfectly and it felt so right. I felt completely aroused yet completely peaceful. A combination of sensations that I had never felt before. I hoped Peeta felt the same.

I was thinking of this when suddenly Peeta stopped and stilled my hips. He raised one arm off the bed and tilted himself away from my breasts but he was still inside me. He had a look of concentration in his face. For a brief moment I thought, if he is going to hurt me, it will be now. It will be now when he is on top of me and inside of me and there will be absolutely nothing I can do.

But before I could think any more he said 'Is it ok if I... ' And I realised why he had stopped.

'Yes,' I said, relieved, delighted, thrilled. 'I have medicine, from the Capitol' I added guessing that this was the reassurance he wanted. He nodded.

'Then I want you to watch, with me,' he said this so beautifully and with such conviction that I
would have done absolutely anything. He lifted himself and keeping one hand next to me he moved the other to the headboard so I had a better view as he was slightly raised up. I propped myself up on my forearms. I looked at the taught muscles of his abdomen. He was not boyish to me anymore, but a commanding, perfect man who knew exactly what to do. I followed the lines of his body, that glistened with sweat in the moonlight to where he was entering me. Once, twice, three times he thrusted and with the fourth thrust I felt him shudder inside me. Three more shorter thrusts followed along with his gasps, and I knew.

He was still inside me when kissed me on the lips with such loving passion that I truly felt we were at that point one being. He then withdrew himself from me and looked at me with his beautiful eyes in a way which I can only describe as love. I wanted to say those words to him, but because of something which I guess can only be some flaw in me I did not. But maybe I conveyed just enough of what I truly felt, for Peeta gave me the opportunity to tell him so, without saying the words. So after, he referred back to that game we had all played to help him come back from his hijacking. 'You love me, real or not real?' It was a real question in his voice, could he have the slightest doubt about my answer? I did not hesitate. 'Real.' I replied. I did not need to add my own question to Peeta - I had long known that he loved me. So, to make him understand the depth of my feelings for him I added 'it's been real for a very long time.'
Real

Everything about today began in a perfectly ordinary way. I couldn't have known what was to happen. I went to work, the day was crisp but a little cooler than the previous days. I didn't help in town much after work today. I hadn't said goodbye to Katniss in the morning, and though I usually don't, it felt uncomfortable today. I realised I simply missed being with her. I was pleased to find I arrived home first so started to get dinner underway as most of the food is provided by her, the preparation falls to me most days. Katniss came in not long after me, and all my worries about my past faded away just by being with her. She looked so beautiful, her hair was dishevelled, with wisps falling away from her plait, just how I like it. I could see where sweat and mud had marked her brow due to her active work, and I wanted to make the marks disappear with my kisses. But Katniss was self conscious and wanted to bathe, and I thought it would be a good idea for her to have a chance to relax, so I didn't call her down till dinner was ready. I had tried to impress her with something special but it ended up looking like an inferior copy of something that would have been offered at The Capitol, but Katniss seemed to like it. I prefer Katniss' cooking to mine. Hers is simpler and all the flavours are true.

We shared anecdotes from our day, minor interactions with other people, the colours and surprises that made the day different from the previous one. People from the Capitol of old would be surprised how we could find pleasure in things that they would have found mundane, but the small things- a late flowering shrub, the smell of the morning rain bring us both pleasure. Later I read some new poems to her. I thought they may be too sombre, but Katniss understood their meanings and shared some new insights with me. I hoped that today Katniss would feel more confident, more trusting, but I was prepared to wait. But I don't know if it was something I said or did but Katniss was ready to take things further. We didn't need to use words. She signalled to me in such a way that I knew, at last, we could be one. I became consumed with the idea of holding her body close to me. I was so eager. I had waited so long for this. But though I was pretty sure Katniss was a virgin I was not. That was robbed from me by the Capitol's mutts. So I wanted to cleanse every part of me in Katniss' body. All the parts of me which I had been forced to use on the mutts- I wanted every part to feel Katniss like it was new for me. I wanted to start again. Maybe the mutts were too much in my mind. They don't come to need in my sleep, But in the day sometimes a strange noise, a sudden movement, will make me think of those assaults. So I was thinking of them and was perhaps being too rough with Katniss.

I picked her up from the sofa: her legs wrapped around me. At first my plan was to have her on top of me on the rug, but then I thought I might be asking too much of her so decided it would be better to have her beneath me. It was probably these ideas, and others, swirling in my head, which made me lose my balance and we began to fall. I thought Katniss' head would hit the ground first so wanting to protect her I twisted as we fell making my fall more awkward. I hit the corner of the fireplace with such force I thought I had cracked my head. I forgot for a moment not only where I was but who I was too. I don't know if I blacked out, but when I opened my eyes there was a pain in my head and seeing Katniss before me - perhaps it was her nakedness that tricked me, but I thought it can't be real, it must be one of those things, those mutts that crawled on top of me in the Capitol, forcing me to.. Ugh! And I thought her face will change: she will beat me, she will morph into something that will devour me. I pushed her - it - off and I stupidly moved back blindly, grabbing hold of the hot grate which sent a shudder through me.

This is my chance I thought. I'm not tied down, I can break free and I picked up the rod next to me and started hitting out at the furniture first to see if it was real or if I was just imagining being in Katniss' house. The vases seemed to smash, they were real or was it another of the Capitol's tricks? Then the mutt moved away from me, half naked it didn't look fierce or mad, but vulnerable, it didn't hit back. But I wanted it to disappear. So I crashed down time and time again on the
wooden table, then catching a glimpse of the glass table shining in the light I thought if I smash this maybe every aspect of this mirage will shatter and dissolve and I will find myself back in the Capitol cell, but at least this hallucination will be over. There was a loud crash and I closed my eyes to avoid the splintering glass. When I opened them the creature began to emerge from the table. I raised the rod, thinking, this is my last chance: I will be trapped in this half world unless I kill this mutt right now. I expected to see a face of evil come slithering out from under the table, but instead I saw Katniss, I was sure it was Katniss, looking more vulnerable than I had ever seen her. She was half naked, but covered in blood.

Everything false slipped away and I fell to my knees. I remembered our former intimacy, the sweet taste of her lips, the feel of her body, and I collapsed. So this is Snow's final punishment I thought, that I can never enjoy that which is most special to me, that I could kill Katniss at the point where I love her the most. And like a pathetic fool I just crumbled to the ground. How Katniss could bear to approach me, let alone comfort me, I do not know. But she whispered to me so sweetly and held me so tenderly but with such authority I did not argue when she said she would not let me go to my room and lock me away from her. The pain in my body fell away when she treated my hand, and the pain in my mind drifted away as she stroked and rocked me, wiping away the tears of shame and regret that trickled down my cheeks. I will never know what it is to love her, physically love her again I thought. Perhaps I should leave District 12...After this Katniss will know I will never be really cured. I won't tell her though, one day soon I will just leave, forever. With these thoughts in my mind, I still couldn't bring myself to leave her embrace, for I was convinced this would be the last time. She slipped on her shift and I pulled my shirt back on wanting to separate my nakedness from hers, to draw a line between our former intimacy and the knowledge that we must part.

But still Katniss came back to me and held me close. I don't know how long we sat there, but it was dark outside, except for the moonlight. I began to wonder that even though she had not said anything, and I knew in my heart she never would, but at that moment I wanted to name all the kinds of love she had shown me. I wondered if even in the games she had protected me not put of duty as I had first thought, but maybe there had been a kindling of love there, certainly there had been something behind that kiss on the beach, young love perhaps? Then just moments before she had been willing to give me her body so completely that I felt guilty. It had been me rushing to fulfil my needs, preparing her body to feel me, rather than considering her needs that had made me stumble and fall. After all this waiting I overtook by lust, and maybe in the way she submitted to my every touch, perhaps that was the signs of the first stirrings of physical love? I will never know now. She held me in such a soothing embrace - more of a cradling really, it made me think that this was what I had never had with my mother. The fact that Katniss would hold me to her even though I had directed the most shameful violence towards her, she still kept me near. Perhaps this was like the maternal love I had never experienced. I didn't want to think of Katniss in a sexual way as I had ruined that with my violence.

I think I would have just stayed with her like that all night, thinking if I part from her now, it will be forever. And then she said something I did not expect at all, she said 'Peeta, let's try again' I moved apart from her. I had just tried to beat her, but she still would trust me? I looked into her eyes and she tried to convince me - I hadn't landed one blow on her, it was the furniture that had suffered. Even in my rage I had avoided hurting her. I was not convinced, I knew I had come close to using a savage blow. But the certainty in her eyes and that fact that she, after all this time was asking this of me... My eyes drifted to her breasts which though partly covered hinted at their lovely roundness through her shift that seemed sheer in the fire's glow. Her body, still athletic and taught had a softness to it now. Her breasts were fuller, her hips wider with a more defined curve leading from her small waist. Her body was at once strong and yet feminine and I longed to take her in my arms despite the dangers that I felt lurked beneath the surface. So perhaps it was the eagerness of my body that made me so quickly put my plans to leave her to one side...for as she rose I followed her and let her lead me to my room.
I followed her up the stairs: a light at the top of the hall shone through her shift and I saw the full
glorious shape of her body in front of me. The anticipation of exploring her body again already
aroused me. But then I stopped - this is what had gone wrong before, I had been thinking to much
of my own physical need. I vowed to think, as far as I could of Katniss' pleasure, of satisfying her.
So when we entered my room I already had a plan. I would make her feel an ecstasy she had
never felt before.

Katniss disrobed quickly, before I could make something sensual out of peeling each layer off her,
but she helped me with mine. Every brush of her skin to mine felt like a beautiful moment in time,
at once too fleeting and yet because I was so aware of it seemed to last an age. I lay on top of her,
wanting to keep it as simple as possible. We kissed and my fears seemed to fall away. I gently
kissed a path along her body, not stopping too long as I wanted Katniss to feel something new.
Although she had, I'm convinced, never tried anything like this before she
had seemed confident
to try anything I had suggested. So I sensed that she would allow me this next step in our
intimacy, but I wanted to make sure. I asked her if I could take my lips, my tongue, to the most
intimate part of her body and I was thrilled by her nervousness and her trust in me. 'Yes, no, yes'
she whispered so sweetly. I could almost forget that she was the stronger one, the one who had
readily sacrificed herself for her family, had been the face of the revolution and had saved me so
many times. For now I felt as if she was mine I wanted to mold her body, to be the one, the only
one who could give her pleasure. Her gentle cries were sweet music to my ears encouraging me to
go on. She pulled at my hair and I watched her arch her back. 'Peeta, now' she begged.

My trance gazing at her beautiful body was broken and I managed to push into her and I felt her
warm body close around me. Tender is the night! I have thought of this moment many times and
Katniss was absolutely everything I thought she would be. She committed fully to me, moving her
hips to help me get deep inside of her. Even though she had never had a man in this way before
she urged me on, so I could be as strong and hard with her as I liked. It felt so good I knew I could
not last long and did not want her to be disappointed. I wanted her first time to be special. And I
wanted to wipe the torment of my past experience away and count this as my first time too. I
wanted not just to savour this, but to share it and know we were sharing it together.

I drew back so that she could look down our bodies. A look came over her face and I was worried
that she thought our lovemaking had not lasted long enough. So I tried to control myself and asked
her to watch our bodies move as one. She looked so beautiful lying there...She raised herself up,
keen to watch, but I didn't want to do anything wrong. I asked her if I could come inside her. I
think that right then, though I had never thought of it before, if at that moment our lovemaking
could lead to my seed growing in her, if I could make a child with her now only that could surpass
the absolute happiness I felt at that moment. But perhaps she misunderstood my concerns for she
added, I think rightly after all, that she could sort things out with medicines. I was perhaps carried
away by my emotions for when we have a child together, and I so hope we do, we should chose
the right moment together. For now Katniss is all mine and I am all hers and I returned to what I
was meant to do, I knew I was close, a wave was begin to grow through me. I tried to concentrate
on a number so I could make it last as long as possible, one, two, I pushed as hard as I could then
pulled out so that she could see everything. 3, 4, I knew that I had to let go. We moved as one
through my final thrusts and I spilled into her. I collapsed and felt an absolute glowing peace. It
had felt so much better than I could have possibly dreamed, because I was with Katniss. I knew
then that I absolutely loved every part of her being... But surely she knows that? When I looked at
her I felt that we were equals now, we had made love to each other as one so maybe no words
were needed. But I didn't want to feel lost ever again. I wanted to put all my vulnerability behind
me so I asked, just to make sure, but I think I already knew. I asked her, 'you love me, real or not
real?' And she held my gaze and said the word I longed to hear and to make sure I understood she
added 'it's been real for a very long time'
The Sun Rising

When I woke in the morning I could tell just by looking at the dappled dawn that I would be late to start the ovens. Any other day I would have paused to look at the colours and tones of this pinkish blue sky but not today. I embraced Katniss with my eyes, not wanting to disturb her. I visually covered every inch of her exposed flesh so I could keep that image with me. I didn't want to leave Katniss who looked so beautiful sleeping, and I was cross that the sun was intruding on us. But then I thought to myself of course the sun would want to be here with us. There is nothing else in the world. Everything I needed was here in this room.... I couldn't count how many times we had made love last night. I liked thinking about it though so tried to recall on my fingers. Seven? Or did that make it eight? I have to admit I was pleased with myself. I didn't want to wake Katniss in part because she was so peaceful and secondly because I knew if I did I would want to make love to her again and the District would be without bread until the afternoon.

I couldn't count how many times we had made love last night. I liked thinking about it though so tried to recall on my fingers. Seven? Or did that make it eight? I have to admit I was pleased with myself. I didn't want to wake Katniss in part because she was so peaceful and secondly because I knew if I did I would want to make love to her again and the District would be without bread until the afternoon.

I skipped breakfast, not hungry after my special feast last night and half ran to the bakery. Jennaveeve and Lilo were already there before me, a first. I made muffled excuses for my tardiness and we got to work. I can't say that the first batches of the day were my usual standard, I had to rush, but the District got fed. I determined to accelerate Jenna's and Lilo's training in case I was ever incapacitated again, so I really emphasised how well they had been doing and how they needed some more independent practice. I shut up shop promptly and helped Thom with his new fencing. Again this was not my best work, but Thom seemed grateful just to have an extra pair of hands.

'You've got a spring in your step today' he said, as I made my excuses to leave - and that wasn't the first time that day that had been said to me.

"It's been a lovely day' I replied - unconvincingly since the unseasonal warmth had of a few days ago been defeated by a heavy gloomy mist for most of the day. But it rather pleased me that other people could see how I felt, and I smiled to myself as I ran the last part of the way home.

I must have been early because Katniss complained about her state of dress, but she looked perfect to me. Her hair had been tied to the side but wisps had fallen from it, like last night, gently framing her face. She had just a long shirt on, so I asked her rather tactlessly if she had been out today? She responded rather sharply that she had been to the clinic to help with some archival work based on 12's own medicines and was collating it with that from other Districts. In the past information from District to District even over matters as small as this had not been shared, as another means of control, suppressing knowledge. But now that District 12 was going to be the centre of medical research everything was being methodically recorded. After that she had come home a little early because 'Someone had to tidy up.' I suddenly felt guilty. My light cheerful mood that had been with me all day had made me selfishly forget all about the destruction I had caused the previous night. It should have been me who had cleared it up, I didn't like to think of Katniss going back into the room I had wrecked on her own. I took off my coat and went into the living room to see if there was anything left for me to do. Katniss followed me. She had done a great job. The broken vases, lamps and glass table had gone. The wooden table had been moved and covered with a muslin cloth so the damage from the iron could not be seen. If anything the room looked better now. As if reading my thoughts, Katniss said ' I like it better this way, less trash from the Capitol. I don't know why we kept so much' I nodded in agreement.

The fire was burning, and in front of it Katniss had moved the sofa so that the rug could be placed over it. I could see she had scrubbed out the blood stain and had put it there to dry. 'Is it ok?' I asked, wondering if it's long fibres had trapped any of the shattered glass. Katniss explained she had beaten it outside over the line and was convinced it was fine.'

'I was going to throw it out but I thought it might be good to have it near the fire, after all.' She offered. I put my hand out and stroked it, it had a softness I hadn't appreciated before when it was
just under my feet. It was already dry so I pushed the sofa back into place and lay the rug on the floor by the fire. 'Well do you want to try it out?' I beckoned. Katniss loosened her hair and unbuttoned her shirt letting it fall open from her shoulders. 'What do you think I have been waiting for all day?' she smiled, teasing me, I think... I lay her down on the rug, wanting to be gentle with her as I knew I had demanded a lot of her last night. She quickly responds to my touch, but I take things slowly. I'm in no rush. The second time, she bade me to roll over and she climbed on top. I loved the way she bent her back, arching into me. Her naked body looked so beautiful in the fire's light I thought she must be from some magical place, not bound to the earth like me. It was because of this, and the sensation of her gliding over my body that I turned away from her, clenching my fists even as I held on to her so that I did not finish too soon, enjoying the wave spreading over me. It was then that I saw the rod placed back near the fire as it was yesterday. Why had she not got rid of it? The sight of it reminded me of how I had used it so dangerously as a weapon against her.. Katniss must have seen where my eyes had glanced and took both my hands in hers, using them for support. I looked into her eyes, she was telling me without words that we would be ok. She has shown me so many kinds of bravery, but this act of complete trust was just for me. We held our eyes steady and were united in pleasure at almost the same time. We made it upstairs a few hours later. Though I slept peacefully again I woke up once or twice, just to check that she was really there, that she was mine. I realised that I hadn't asked her today if she had her medicines, but she didn't say anything so I guessed she was taking care of it. The next few days went on much the same - although there wasn't much time for poetry reading or painting, after this first day we at least found time to eat.
The past few days have been a blur, a beautiful blend of tangible sensations. How many days has it been since Peeta and I made love for the first time? Not even 10. And already the townsfolk are talking about us...according to Haymitch.

It all started with Peeta's grand plan of getting his apprentices to open up the bakery as we have both been exhausted by our sessions that last half the night. I don't know how long we can continue like that, but for now exploring each other's bodies and learning how to move together is almost all I think of even when we are apart. So when we are together it's a hunger we both need to satisfy. However, I told Peeta, I thought he should show more responsibility to his apprentices, which annoyed him. Anyway this morning, he woke up so late that I was only sleeping lightly and was awakened by his movements. That should have been a sign that I should have let him go, but seeing him try to gather himself together after another busy night made me want him again. I pulled him back to bed. I got on top thinking if I did all the work it would be okay. It was sublime and reminded me of the sensation I had when I fell asleep in the meadow, and I knew we shouldn't really be doing it but we were enjoying every stolen moment. I was caught in a half world between waking and sleeping but kept moving steadily until Peeta gripped me tighter. Then I curled into his arms and we both closed our eyes, just for a minute... The next thing I knew there was a commotion outside: Haymitch was haggling about the price of fish – literally- with one of the traders and I knew then we had both overslept badly. Peeta jumped up, tripping over whilst putting on his trousers and throwing on the first shirt he could find. He was cursing himself but made time to stop and kiss me tenderly. He was out the door before I was even dressed. I heard Haymitch call after him 'And where's my bread!' But I didn't catch Peeta's reply.

Luckily I had been due to work from home today, so my late start was not noted by anyone. I also managed to complete some field work – we used to have Winter Flowering Jasmine growing through The Seam, but it seemed to have been eradicated. However I knew it was a vigorous plant and thought that even bombs and missiles couldn't really destroy it completely? Sure enough I found a small plant reestablishing itself near to where the old school used to stand. I collected it so that it could be nurtured at the factory before propagation next spring. My work there concerns using as much of the old knowledge about natural remedies as possible. And I am experimenting with herbal oils myself, which Peeta likes. However I make an exception with birth control, and I get those pills from the new clinic, luckily these are simple enough to still be produced in the Capitol and are sent out to the Districts. My mother used to use her knowledge to help young girls who had been forced to lie with Cray and provided them with remedies, but they didn't always work. There was more than one young woman who we all knew bore him an illegitimate child, whom he never acknowledged. They faced a lot of hardship as a single parent – and I know one little baby of his was taken ill, and got no special care. He died before he was one...

My work done I returned home and found that Peeta had returned home before me, and he had a visitor in the living room. Haymitch. 'Look what the cat's brought in,' Haymitch exclaimed on my arrival. "We don't have a cat' I retorted obstinately. 'Buttercup walks by herself now'. It was true, without Prim Buttercup had become more feral, though I still left food out for her she had turned into quite a good scavenger and hunter. Maybe we had something in common after all. 'Mmm huh, that's right, that's right,' he murmured as he surveyed the room. Peeta was trying to catch my eye, but I didn't know what he was trying to get me to do, so when Haymitch looked at me Peeta and me we appeared to be looking shiftily at each other. This seemed to delight Haymitch, who was now on a roll. 'There was a lot of talk in the town today,' he advised 'Really?' I said. 'That must have been nice for you, you love a bit if gossip.'
'Gossip, I don't deal in gossip. I am all about the facts,' he replied. I had a feeling I knew where this was going, but I wasn't going to make it easy for him.

'So what are the facts?' I asked.

'Well the fact is I didn't get my morning loaf for breakfast. Fact is the bakery was closed,' he informed me.

'Yes, that's right. Peeta was ill this morning,' I said, jumping in too quickly. Peeta shot me a glance.

'Is that right?' said Haymitch leaning forward in his chair. 'Fact is, I heard he was late because he was doing important work for the Capitol. Fact is, that's what you told Jenna isn't it?' He directed that comment at Peeta, who nodded sheepishly.

I tried to save the situation. 'Yes that's right, that too' I replied with more conviction than the lie deserved.

'Mmm huh, I see. When you're ill too? Good boy. Must be important work your doing there Peeta. Keep it up. I caught you dashing to the bakery this morning didn't I ? With your clothes half on? Mmh huh.' I could tell Haymitch was going to make the most of this. 'So what work have they got you doing Peeta?' He paused and looked at us both but as we both looked blankly at him, I knew he couldn't resist causing a stir. 'Oh come on!' he looked exasperated. 'You going to make a granddaddy out of me? What work you got going on? Making babies?' He laughed so much at his own jokes I thought he would fall out of his chair. To make things worse he slapped Peeta on the back as if he had won a prize. I felt my cheeks flush red.

'Nothing like that yet' but I drowned him out with my admonitions.

'Firstly, it's none of your business – and that's a fact, you old gossip. Secondly you can't be a grandaddy – you are just the drunk next door.' I regretted saying that, but Haymitch seemed to take it in good spirits, mockingly filling out his chest and hissing. 'And thirdly, I won't ever have kids so sorry to ruin your plans of happy families.' As soon as I said it I realised I had said too much – not to Haymitch but to Peeta. I saw his face whiten and he looked away from me.

It was actually Haymitch who broke the silence 'Ah, love's young dream. Seems like you two may have something to talk about one day...Anyway, I like what you've done with the place,' he motioned with his hands round the room. 'But you might want to have a tidy up, in case you have visitors.' He pointed at the heap of my clothes – underwear on top of the pile that had carelessly been discarded the night before. I shot him a glance that seemed just to inform him that he had won a little victory over me He chuckled to himself then rose from his chair, patted Peeta more gently this time and whispered something in his ear, so it must have been about me. Pretending he hadn't spoken behind my back he made a theatrical bow and said, deliberate loudly 'And thanks for the bread,' picking up a wrapped loaf from the table. 'Maybe it can be ready on time tomorrow, lovebirds?' Then he added to me, this time attempting to be out of Peeta's hearing, 'Don't be too hard on him, sweetheart, you've got a good one there.' And this time I got a surprisingly reassuring pat on the shoulder, and maybe I even saw a wistful look in his eyes. But when he tried to peck at my cheek, I pushed him away, playfully though as I felt maybe I had hurt his feelings with my comment earlier about him being just a drunk – and I didn't mean to. I know Haymitch is a good friend and mentor to us still. Haymitch let himself out.

'So how was your day?' I asked Peeta, wanting to break the heavy silence quickly. I didn't want to have that conversation Haymitch had alluded to.

'Fine, thanks' he said, gathering himself together and leaving the room.

'Oh dear,' I thought to myself, 'looks like we'll have to have that conversation after all.'
Things are of course, more complicated than I thought. I was so wrapped up in being with Katniss, discovering her body, letting her learn about mine, that I lost sight of our real lives... I began to selfishly put to one side the day to day tasks we have to do in order to play our part in society. I began to spend less time helping others and more time thinking of my own needs. Perhaps I was losing sight of myself – absorbed with an idea of a oneness with Katniss. So this morning when I overslept and knew I had left Jenna and Lilo in charge of the bakery for hours, just so I could stay in bed with Katniss, she didn't have to tell me I had been irresponsible – I already knew.

When I got to the bakery Jenna had been struggling for hours to relight the fire, but had been too cautious with the wood. Lilo had put the dough in too soon and the bread had failed to rise, staying as a heavy unpalatable lump. I asked them why they had not come to get me sooner – but they reminded me that I had told them if I was ever late in the morning this week it would be because I was expecting to link up with someone from the Fisheries and Agriculture Department. I didn't feel proud to have told this lie, especially since I wasn't very good at it. I had to turn away many disappointed customers that morning, some of whom were told my excuses by Jenna and Lilo. One of those customers was naturally Haymitch, who had hollered after me as I sprinted out the door late this morning. I had cursed him then, so I apologised and said he could have a special delivery when I finished work later. There's no hiding anything from Haymitch about Katniss and me, but I knew she would at least like me to try. Having had to parade a 'fake' relationship for all of Panem I sensed it would be natural for Katniss to want to keep 'us' private for a while. I don't think many townsfolk would have taken too much interest anyway – we were as a people inclined to mind our own business – it had been safer that way under the regime. Perhaps they already had thought as we lived together, we were 'together' even when that was not the case, but it was never remarked upon apart from by way of a friendly conversation by Thom or Roan. But Haymitch is something else. If he could grab hold of the slightest hint of a relationship he wouldn't let go. In part it would be genuine interest in us I don't doubt, but mostly it would be all about having a laugh at our expense. So when he mentioned while we talked at the bakery about my working too hard for the Capitol, that he suspected I was hard at it when he passed by in the evening during the week I could not help but cringe, but had no retort. He could see my awkwardness so naturally for Haymitch he was not going to let it drop. Instead he enquired whether Katniss was helping me with it? I replied that she was, which made him smile broadly and wink. I wanted to curse the dumbass again, but I maintained by cool – just.

'I will pop round to yours later' he said, 'and collect my bread. Make me something nice, will you?' 'Wonderful,' I thought, that will please Katniss no end. I wanted to get home earlier to tell her to steer clear if she wants to avoid Haymitch's banter.

I tried to catch up with demand for bread as efficiently as possible, and went home as early as I could. I thought if I delivered the bread to Haymitch's house he would let the matter drop. No such luck, instead as if he had been waiting for me, he came out if his house as soon as I approached mine.

'Well, son. That's good timing. I think it's time we had that chat, man to man. Don't want you getting into any trouble. Or am I too late for that?' Laughter followed – his.

'I'm not sure I know what you mean ...' I replied, refusing to play along. 'But you can come in for a drink if you must,' I told him because I knew there was no getting rid of him. 'Well thank you for that very kind invitation,' he said in a tone reminiscent of the way the elite in the Capitol used to speak. 'I think, at you insistence, I must.' He bade me enter my own house then walked through to the living room, plonked himself on a chair, kicked off his shoes, placed his feet on a stool and lounged back in his seat.

'So let's wait for Katniss, shall we?' he sighed. Thankfully, or perhaps unfortunately, it didn't take
I had just provided Haymitch with a drink, alcoholic of course, when Katniss came in. It was impossible to warn her in time about Haymitch's banter, and I knew she would fall for the bait. I tried to gesture to her to at least pull a chair in front of our clothes discarded from last night, but she failed to respond. Perhaps she thought I was dilating my eyes and flicking my head because I had suddenly developed a nervous tick... Any way, too late Katniss fell into Haymitch's trap. I knew Katniss would not be able to control herself against Haymitch's jibes like I could. She is feisty and hot headed- differences that generally complement my more placid nature. But she is so warm and loving to those that are important to her Prim, Cinna, Gale ..and me, that I didn't expect to hear her say what she said, and it hurt me to the core. She was at once cold, harsh and direct. True, Haymitch deserved what he got, though he's always up for banter anyway, so didn't seem to mind the comment she threw at him for being a drunk. But when Haymitch addressed the topic of children even in this mocking situation I wanted to give the topic it's due consideration. I wasn't going to lie or deny that I wanted children, sooner rather than later. And there wasn't any doubt in my mind that I wanted to be with Katniss for ever so it followed that I wanted her to be the mother of my children, who we could shower with love, and protect together. So I conceded 'not yet' to Haymitch when he brought up the subject, for that was for me, the truth. But Katniss did not even stop to consider my words. Instead she spitted out that she never wanted children ... That was in itself a huge disappointment... But worse was her comment about playing happy families which seemed directed at me more than Haymitch. I was desolate thinking surely this is something to talk to me about in private? And if it's too soon – neither of us is really thinking of babies now – then why not just leave it. She knows enough about me to understand how important a family is to me. So why did she just then in those few words hang all my dreams?
I left Peeta alone for an hour or so. He couldn't really be mad with me could he? We had only been 'together' for less than a fortnight so the idea of making babies was ridiculous. I therefore decided to go and talk to him and found him in the kitchen, chopping some artichokes and peppers.

'What are you making?' I asked hoping we could just go on as normal.
'I don't know' he answered, sulkily. 'I'm not hungry'
'So why are you cooking now?' I asked. 'Leave it.'

He looked up at me and banged down his knife.

'I just wanted to do something' he shouted – which was completely unlike Peeta. 'Did you have to talk to Haymitch like that?' he yelled, and I knew there was hurt in his voice so I tried to soften things. Unsurprisingly I wasn't very good at it.

'Haymitch was just messing with us ok? I just wanted to shut him up.' I explained, roughly.

'So you didn't mean it?' he asked. 'About children?'

'Are you serious? We have been together 10 days!' I retorted.

'Yes I'm serious – I said not yet and you specifically go and undermine me and say never. And,' he continued, getting more and more agitated 'What the hell do you mean that we have only been together 10 days? Is your coming into my bed the only significant thing to happen between us? Because I feel like we have shared more in these past years than most people do in a lifetime.'

'Don't be ridiculous' I yelled back – trying not to concede I seemed shallow. 'That's not what I meant.'

'So what did you mean?' he challenged.

'Ok. So I meant I just don't want children. Can you really ignore what happened in the whole of Panem? What happened for years...' 

'Don't try and talk about the past. We were both there you know. Did you really have to share that with Haymitch now?' he said, angrily. I could see he wasn't going to give up, so I tried a different technique.

'I'm sorry I hurt your pride' I said, but I didn't sound sorry and Peeta knew it. So I added bluntly: 'This is my body and I can chose to do with it what I want. And I choose not to have children. And if you don't like it you can...' I trailed off because I was leading somewhere I didn't really mean to go.

'I can do what Katniss? Say it.' Peeta demanded.

I refused to answer.

'I'm not saying anything... I'm saying I'm not in control of you and you are not in control of me.' I thought that seemed fair.

'You just don't get it do you?' Peeta asserted, his eyes piercing me. 'You just don't get it. You are in control of me. You know that. So if you don't want children, if your mind's made up then that's it for me. Don't you know I could never imagine being with anyone else? I just think you could have thought it was important enough to have a discussion with me first before you start telling everyone else. Katniss, don't you care at all?' He shrugged his shoulders and I really felt that he was disappointed in me. I couldn't change what I felt about having children, but he was right I should have shown more empathy about how and when I told him. I don't think I'd ever seen him like this except when they brought him back to 13 after his hijacking and that didn't count because that wasn't him. And he was right I did know that he wanted a family of his own to love. But I also knew I couldn't give it to him.

'Peeta,' I said trying to begin to apologise.

'Not now Katniss, I've had a pretty rubbish day. I'm going to bed.'

'Ok' I replied and added with my classic insensitivity 'I will just tidy up and come and join you.'

'No Katniss, not tonight, I'd rather be alone' he said, and left the room.
I lay in bed after my first argument with Katniss. No that's not right. We have had disagreements before. Like when I told her she should not go for medicines for me to the cornucopia. She didn't argue, she just drugged me, put me to sleep and did what she wanted. Maybe I have faired better this time I thought, mocking myself, at least I'm still conscious. But even my attempt at humour couldn't make my negative feelings fall away. Yes, my pride had been hurt. It may not have been Katniss' intention but I felt emasculated – and angry. Of course Katniss could make a choice not to have children but surely there were other things to talk about too. If she didn't want to bring a new life into the world couldn't we take in a child, maybe one orphaned in the war? There were bound to be many. Or would that be 'playing at happy families'? I imagined scenarios of me and Katniss together, with a child to hold between us but I couldn't. Could I live like that?

I deliberately thought of all the ways I had had Katniss in recent days and thought about how she had fulfilled me. Would that be enough? We would be as one sexually, but our minds would be apart. It wasn't like me to be quick to anger but this issue was so important to me. Truthfully I had always felt that Katniss was better, stronger, more perceptive than me. I would always be an 8 to her 11, and I had never minded before. When I was growing up my brothers would try to set me up with some of the girls in town, but I was never interested beyond a few fumbled kisses. Katniss was superior to them as she was to me. And it was Katniss I wanted then, and now. But in the last 10 days or so there has been a change in the balance of our relationship and I liked it. I had finally experienced being able to teach her something, being able to control her with my body, my hands, my lips. Is that selfish? Perhaps I confused what it meant for her to give herself to me and for a moment I wanted to possess her mind as well as her body. But that is not what I really want. If I controlled her I would diminish her, and I want her to be strong, fiery and to challenge me. I felt calmer but there's no doubt that my pride has been hurt. I heard Katniss walk upstairs and I wanted her to come into my room and say something to me, not an apology, we were beyond that, but something I could believe. She always says we protected each other, that it is me who comforted her whenever she needed me, in the dark. But she knows, she always has known, how I am in awe of her. She just has never exploited it till now. She told Haymitch her views with me present because she didn't expect any confrontation. She thought I would just acquiesce. She did not come to me - she went to her own room as I had stupidly requested. What did I expect? No one is as stubborn as her. As if I could lie here without her now. I was restless in the dark, trying to still my desires, yet at the same time wanting Katniss so badly. I knew I couldn't sleep without settling this so I threw off my covers and went across the hall to her room.
Pain and pleasure

I didn’t feel like staying up after Peeta stormed off. It wasn’t late but an early night would make up for the sleep I had lost in recent days. I took off my day clothes and didn’t put anything else on, I didn’t wear anything in bed anymore and wasn’t going change that because of Peeta’s rejection of me tonight. I got into bed and lay on my back looking at the ceiling. I couldn’t or wouldn’t sleep. My mind was too active. I hated myself for belittling Peeta over something as important as having children. But not wanting children had nothing to do with wanting him. It’s always been children who have suffered the most: starvation, illness, the Games, I could go on. And a few months of peace can’t erase more than a hundred years of suffering. The Games only started after the rebellion 75 years ago, but what were they rebelling about then? Famine? Exploitation? Persecution? I know them all well but I won’t bring any child into this world to experience that. Can’t he see that? I know what it is like to have love in a family. Prim was my world and the whole world knows I would have died for her. But I don’t want to replace that love by having a child. That’s not how it works. Peeta never had that. Peeta craves a love he doesn’t know - but he knows now how I love him, doesn’t he? I would make sure that was always enough.

How ironic, today I cannot sleep because of Peeta, usually it’s him I can call out to to comfort me if I wake in the night. He knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep without him now. If we were in bed together we could soothe each other, make these feelings pass. But I will not call to him. I will not go to him tonight. He has angered me – I may not have been tactful but I had been honest and I wasn’t going to say sorry now. I listened for any sound coming from Peeta’s room but heard nothing. He must be asleep I thought. I turned around but couldn’t settle. Before Peeta, I had hardly explored my own body. Not only was it practically difficult – I shared a room with Prim, I also couldn’t afford the indulgence of spending time learning about my self. But now I had the time, and Peeta had certainly shown me some of the skills. I tried to do it to myself but it didn’t feel the same like it does when Peeta touches me. Is it because he is so good at it or is it because of the way I feel about him? I gave up, but still felt like something was missing. I was adamant I would not go to Peeta to sate my desires. He’s angry with me? Well I’m angry with him too. The more I thought about it the angrier I became. It is my body. And I can make my own choice about what to do with it. And if Peeta thinks me being in his bed is not so important let’s see how he likes it if we stop.

I didn’t have time to reflect on the unlikeliness of this happening as at that moment Peeta walked with purpose into my room. I turned my back towards him. ’Go away’ I said. ’No’ he said. ’No I won’t.’ He got into my bed and slid his hand down my naked back, and further still. He knew what he could do to me with his hands and I didn’t want to send him away. ’If you think you can determine what I do with my body, here it is. Use it’ I said, turning over. His anger matched mine: ’If all you want is my body you can have it but I’m not going to make love to you ok?’ He was clearly angry with me still, but aroused. I felt much the same. But I wasn’t ready for him and I knew this was going to hurt me. Peeta tried to kiss me fiercely on the mouth, at first I turned aside from him but he was insistent, biting my ear and neck. I turned my face back to him and let his tongue deep into my mouth. Usually he starts gently, but not this time. I had to pull my mouth away from him and gasp. I clenched my hands and I dug my nails into his back as hard as I could. This only made him use more force and I couldn’t move with him as much as I wanted to. He then scooped me up with one arm and I went limp like a cloth doll, letting him arrange me as he liked because I could tell Peeta wasn’t pleasuring me now. This was all about his needs. But right then, that’s all I wanted too.

When he finished he lay on his back, not taking me into his arms. So I moved into them. ’Peeta,’ I said ’do you know how much I love you?’ He didn’t acknowledge the question. ’I want you to
understand that I love you more than I could love anything else in the world. Not just because you are stronger, wiser and kinder than me. But because of how you love me, like you always have. I love you more than I have loved anyone, ever. Never doubt it.' He turned to look at me. Did he know what I meant? I had been prepared to die for Prim, but for Peeta too. And in the lives we have lead that is how we could measure love. And I wanted Peeta to realise the love I had for him was the greatest love I had ever had.

'I don't want you to feel sorry for me,' he replied turning on his side and twisting one of the strands of my hair that had fallen around my face. 'You know I would want to have a baby with you more than anything in the world. But, if that's not what you want I understand. I cannot be without you, so I will not talk about children again, because I love you,' he said, stressing the last word. I looked into his eyes which reflected mine and yes, he understood. He took me in arms and kissed me tenderly this time. It was cold tonight so I drew myself under the covers, and curled next to his warm body. I slept soundly next to him. We woke only once in the night and made love gently that time before drifting off to sleep again.

Everything went back to normal. We enjoyed each other's company in many different ways and our lives were richer because of it. I would take Peeta on hikes through the forests and mountains whenever I could. He took an active interest in my medical work and I grew to share his love of poetry and would sit and read while he painted. In everything we seemed fulfilled. And as I anticipated Peeta was true to his word. He never raised the subject of having children – for 5 years
Spring

This was our 6th spring since returning to District 12. The past few days had been warm, after a cold start to the season. I watched the sky glow from our bed, with Katniss sleeping next to me. It started out a glowing peach colour, which intensified before the blue starts to fade in. I don't have to rush to the bakery in the dark hours every day anymore and I savour the slow starts to the morning. Jenna and Lilo are now skilled bakers and we share the shifts – Lilo actually lives on site with his wife since we had the bakery remodelled in brick. We have also extended the team now that the District is growing and have two more apprentices, Dillan and Baela. So I have today off work – I may just take care of the ordering and administration from home. But even so I'm going to have a lazy day.

I set up my easel on the balcony. From the back of the house there's a view of the forests to the mountains, though wooden and slate rooves can be picked out some young trees are beginning to offer coverage. Anyway, I like to see those signs of the town developing and growing. I wash my paper and begin to plan my scene. I want to capture the shimmering sky, before its hues change. We overlook Haymitch's garden, which is quite verdant and lush towards the back, but there's a lawn and some fruit trees beginning to bud near the front, and some others already in leaf. I hear whistling, a soft happy tune than changes into a low hum. The sound is masculine... So can that be Haymitch singing such a sweet tune? It seems unlikely.

Haymitch shares his house with Greasy Sae, who must be one of the oldest residents in the District, along with her granddaughter Ariane, who is about 14. Before the war she was left alone much of the time - not ill treated, but a little wild. She didn't go to school because no one there could help her, and she used to flit around, ignoring most of the conventions others followed. Her mother and father were already dead and Sae had her hands full working in the hob but did her best for her. Since the war ended she has had some support, attends school and seems to concentrate much better on things. She was interested my painting so I gave her some too. She will sit day after day painting the same tree, exquisitely. You would think she is producing the same painting every day but when I went to see Haymitch at home I saw 30 pictures of trees each indicating how the tree subtly changed over a month during Fall. She has never had to experience the threat of the Games or the desperation Tesserae and though she seldom speaks, seems happy and smiles easily.

Haymitch allowed (or did he ask?) Greasy Sae and Ariane to live with him about a year into our return. Sae was living in a hastily built timber house that was small and draughty. Every day she came to cook and clean for Haymitch. He has never been house proud so it was obvious that he was doing so in order to help Sae without hurting her pride. She has a limp following a beating she took from Thread, and is probably one of the oldest in the District so any other work would be impractical. They seemed to get along fine.

That unlikely grouping was joined two years ago by Greasy Sae's great niece, Columbine. I had never heard of her before she arrived - from The Capitol. What I know about her comes from second hand sources - Greasy Sae, Haymitch, Jenna's mother, and the occasional comment from customers in the bakery when she passes by. She never talks about her past herself.

By all accounts Columbine was a beautiful child: tall, long blonde hair that had a tighter curl than others in the district and misty blue eyes that stood out, contrasting the duskiness of her skin. The fact that she had a fraternal twin, Dana, the masculine counterpart to her own evident beauty meant that they were renowned throughout the District. He shared all her characteristics in both looks and personality. Always together, they were known for their appearance and their enjoyment of life, as if untouched by the drab existence that engulfed 12 at that time. Because of their looks and colouring their parentage was doubted by most townsfolk, but they were clearly doted on by both parents so gossip died down, people eventually assumed that the twins inherited
their looks from an ancestor from way back. It was Haymitch who told me the story of their birth, which Sae had told to him. Columbine is around 30 now, and in those years before her birth there was a Head Peacekeeper, Mack, who seemed to be an amalgamation of Cray and Thread: he was known for both his sexual exploitation and his violence. Columbine's mother, Amma, was an attractive young woman of 18 - delicate features, auburn hair. As part of Sae's family, she was well known and the one celebration that was noted in the District were weddings. So her impending marriage to Dorran Lea was an important event. Greasy Sae said my father made them a most beautiful cake, though unusually for the time, because of what happened, much was eventually wasted. For Amma had caught Mack's eye. Perhaps that's why she rushed to get married at such a young age, to avoid his advances. Not to be thwarted, after the wedding, Mack said as a special prize from The Capitol, Amma and Dorran were going to be gifted one of the houses in Victor's Village for a week's vacation directly after the ceremony. Both were taken there immediately, before the festivities were even complete. No one lived in the Village in those days - Haymitch was yet to have his success- so the place was isolated. In order to give the married couple some privacy, Mack declared, the Village was to be guarded by his Peacekeepers. It was only close family that ever found out the truth, a long time later, for to speak of it would have meant death. Amma was repeatedly raped everyday not just by Mack, but by any of the Peacekeepers who were 'rewarded' by Mack in this way. Dorran was locked inside and beaten, and heard his wife's screams. They were actually held there for nearer three weeks - to allow obvious bruising to fade and in the next few months had to talk to people about their happy stay at the Village. However Sae suggested that one of the Peacekeepers must have informed on Mack, for he and many of his Peacekeepers were removed shortly afterwards. Snow would have had no sympathy for the victims - he was responsible for as much, and worse himself- but he would have wanted control of his minions and therefore punished Mack for his unauthorised violence. He was replaced by one of Cray's predecessors, who did his job as he was instructed to do, and the Leas were left alone. The twins arrived 9 months after their parent's marriage. Sae says they could not have been more loved by their mother or their father. For though to the family Dorran confided that he knew the children could not be his, he considered himself to be their father absolutely. Amma likewise only thought of the twins as as a gift, who cleansed her of the pain she had suffered. I am impressed, but not surprised that both parents were able to find the redeeming nature of love, through their children. Greasy Sae says not only were the twins beautiful but they were the gentlest, sweetest creatures, who found joy in everything and brought joy to everyone they met. She says she always feared that there was no place for them in the grim surroundings of District 12. She likened them to faery folk from bedtime stories, and imagined that the twins were like the changelings who would be taken back by their own. And she was proved half right, for they were indeed taken away, by Snow.

Columbine and Dana were much like Prim at their first reaping, they had but one ticket each to be drawn, the odds therefore being in their favour, and indeed, their names were not called. However, when the film of the reaping was broadcast to Panem, Columbine's beauty – captured in the crowd - was the talk of the Capitol, and overshadowed much of that year's Games. When they investigated and found there was a twin, the people were delighted. A campaign was started, no doubt orchestrated by Snow, to see that the pair were 'rescued' by the Capitol and brought into service there. Over the years beautiful or talented children were regularly snatched from their families and taken to work there. They made out it was a huge honour, but of course the family did not have a choice. I wonder if Cinna had been one of them? Obviously talented, he had not shared The Capitol's beliefs nor did he have any of the affectations that would have been difficult to avoid had he grown up there all his life....Virtually nothing was heard about the children after they were taken. Their parents were, after a few years, given an annual allowance, a share they were told, of their children's earnings that their opportunities in The Capitol allowed. They gave every coin away. Occasionally, at a reaping or Victory Tour some snippet of information would be given if anyone knew them. Columbine had her name changed to Aquilegia, to be more fitting in the circles she now mixed. She worked in the service sector as did her brother, which was a huge honour. Their mother had quickly become a shell of herself, because the light of her life had
been taken away. Sae said she died of a broken heart. After about 10 years this was the only news, deliberately vague, until a short message was received by their father that his son was dead, no explanation forthcoming. Their father, a broken man, took his own life and no more was heard about Columbine. Greasy Sae says she expected that her great niece had died in the years since. She didn't think to ask after her after the war, so many people had been lost. She concentrated on bringing up her granddaughter, the only member left of her family. So when a statuesque beauty came looking for Greasy Sae one long summer evening 2 years ago, no one remembered the young girl who would had been stolen, but they curious why someone from The Capitol would come looking for Greasy Sae. When Columbine returned, her long hair was tied back, with a ray of colours, pink, blue, green, in the style of The Capitol growing out. She wore a utilitarian dress and carried with her just one old tattered suitcase, the kind which many in the District have to store blankets under their beds. But though she had the stylised poise that indicated that she was a citizen of The Capitol Greasy Sae knew who she was straightaway, just by looking at her eyes.

So she had returned, and to the surprise of many, she stayed. She has always had a reserve, which I would think unusual for one with such beauty, but knowing just a little of her story, I understand. She is gentle and kind to her Great Aunt, and coaxes Ariane to talk and to join in with ordinary things with her. She works at the school with children of different ages supporting the teachers. I notice when she is in town she shuns any attention, and keeps herself to herself. At home she is more outgoing, and has many accomplishments in art and music. There was a forgotten piano in Haymitch's house, in an unused room, locked away. When Haymitch invited Katniss and I round one afternoon we heard her playing, a sweet song, all alone. When we went to join her Haymitch found some music books, likewise untouched and asked if she could play something. She started to do so, her talent was obvious, but she stopped abruptly, closed the piano and excused herself. All three of us know how hidden memories can resurface and try to pull you down... Columbine may not have been in any Games, but she suffered at Snow's hands in different ways, for years. I wish Katniss would befriend her more readily, I think in many ways they are similar, but Katniss keeps her distance.

When Columbine first arrived, Haymitch was beside himself. He couldn't believe that such a beauty would ask to stay with her Aunt, and him. If you didn't know Haymitch well you would have been surprised that he had negotiated with Greasy Sae that she should live and work for him. Although everyone in the District works, Haymitch is rather the exception. He keeps a small holding of geese, sheep chickens and goats, rather casually, and Greasy Sae does the work at home. He's fond of Sae I know and treats her like his own batty old aunt and the affection seems to be mutual, though they moan about each other constantly. I know there is more to Haymitch than he likes to talk about – in one lucid moment he told me he takes responsibility for all those years of failure as mentor – during those years he said he removed himself from the District as he could not bear to see the faces of the parents of the children who he had let down, or the children he would fail and cursed himself for living. So when Columbine asked to stay with her aunt- in Haymitch's house, he finally had something positive in his life. He was like a 13 year old boy. 'I knew I would get rewarded for all these years of putting up with that old crone!' He chuckled. 'Columbine certainly struck it lucky in the gene pool – look at what she was up against!' he laughed. And whenever I happened to talk to him he would have some comment about Columbine which was completely inappropriate. Though he's stopped doing that these past few months. Her presence at least made him want to clean up his act, he seemed to drink less and less. I noticed it was me who offered him a beer, rather than him demanding one, or he'd leave his drink unfinished. He seemed to take greater care of his appearance now. He had always looked older for his years – he was barely 40 when we met but looked older – unshaven and unkempt. Now he's over 45 but actually looks better. Even Katniss told him she was proud of him, which pleased him.

So as I surveyed the garden, I caught sight of Columbine hanging out the washing, the sheets will dry quickly in this warm light breeze. The wind also catches her hair and falling loosely round her
shoulders it lifts back and shines in the sun. Her muslin dress is thin and billows then clings to her body, making out the shape of...her rounded belly? At that moment the singer comes into view, parting the sheets he comes up behind her and puts his arms round her tenderly caressing her pregnant body and gently kissing her neck. It is of course Haymitch. Feeling like I'm intruding on their private moment – and surprised by what I have just seen (who'd have thought Haymitch could keep a secret?) I tried to retreat and stumbled over my easel sending it clattering. Haymitch and Columbine looked up at me, unruffled. 'Lovely day for it, isn't it?' he called up at me. 'I'll pop round and see you tonight.'

When Haymitch came round he was surprisingly bashful. He said he hadn't planned anything but as they had both suffered at the hands of The Capitol, they used to talk, and one thing lead to another, and yes they did love each other. Her beauty didn't hurt, but what she saw in an old dog like him he really wasn't sure. The baby, he said, was due in 4 months time. I asked why he hadn't told us before, and he said they just wanted to keep it special to themselves for as long as they could. They had both lost ones they had loved and it just seemed the natural thing to do. I agreed with him that in truth I would do the same.

'So how's that coming along then?' Haymitch asked. 'I remember the last time I brought up the subject of you and Katniss making babies it made quite a storm. So who won out in the end?' he continued, seeming genuinely interested.

'Well it's fairly obvious, there's no pitter patter of tiny feet here, Katniss has her way' I replied. There was no point trying to skirt round the issue with Haymitch – he'd only dig deeper so I was blunt.

'But if I recall,' he began 'if I recall, you said 'not yet' and she said 'No'?'

'That's right,' I confirmed.

'Well if I do the Math, we're still in 'not yet'. There's nowhere to go with 'no' - till it turns into yes. I should know,' he continued and he seemed unusually sincere. 'What has she said about it lately?' he enquired.

'I haven't asked,' I revealed 'Haven't asked? How old are you? Something as important as that and you don't ask?' he exclaimed. 'You are beyond help, boy, the faith you place in that girl. You've been together what 5 years? People change son. I'm proof of that. If it's something you want, Peeta, the very least you have to do is ask her what she thinks now. She's proud, but things have changed, maybe she might need a little coaxing' I nodded, but must have seemed hesitant. 'Why don't you try her out tonight with my news? I give you permission. My secrets out as far as I am concerned.'

Though I wasn't convinced I appreciated his concern.

'Well I best get back home, someone might be missing me,' he added, and he winked at me 'Yes,' I agreed 'Sae needs someone to grumble at, you best get back'

Haymitch picked up the nearest thing to him – my book- and threw it at me, muttered something, again with a smile and stomped out.
Fears

Haymitch was right. For years I felt it was honourable to respect the sentiments Katniss had expressed, at age 20, about not wanting children. And because I knew how she had suffered, I had not discussed the matter at all. I just hoped she would change her mind, and tell me so. But five years later, could I raise the issue and let her see my point of view again? Perhaps, deep down, she may have changed her mind? It's possible... However in those years nothing had changed for me. I loved Katniss completely and still wanted desperately to father a child-children – with her and bring them up in a happy loving home together. Maybe I should reassure her after our fractured experience of family life that I would never leave her? To make her understand that in the world we live in now we would be safe? So I decided to have the talk while still buoyed by Haymitch's motivation. He had just left when Katniss came in.

'Haymitch told me you had some news?' she asked, having passed him on our steps. I explained that he was having a baby, with Columbine, and Katniss was surprised, and pleased for them. I felt encouraged.

'I know I promised never to ask, but do you still feel the same? About having children?' I could tell that made Katniss feel awkward for she pulled away from my side on the sofa.

'Peeta, you and I both know how things work. I know you haven't forgotten Snow. But what about Coin, do remember her? Things would have been as bad, if not worse under her. More innocent lives lost, more revenge.'

'But they have gone,' I countered. 'No one can say Paylor's doing a bad job. Things are improving, there's no shortages, we have more freedoms, we are all equals.'

'Yes, Paylor's fine for now,' agreed Katniss, 'but it's only been 5 years. Who can say what will happen in even 10 or 15 years? You say we are all equals, but are they really saying that in the Capitol, or in District 1 or 2? We are not in the loop so much any more Peeta, we don't know how people think,' she asserted.

'Surely, we have to give it a chance: you can't say things might happen, without any proof, and live your life like that. I thought you were a bit more spontaneous than that?' I questioned.

'You can't be spontaneous about the ones you love the most,' she replied. 'Do you remember when I told you I had wanted to run away with Gale into the forest-'

How could I forget?

'We could have made it and maybe then nothing would have changed- but I couldn't do it because of Prim. She was a child and she wouldn't have managed that life and I couldn't let her down. You cannot be spontaneous when you have responsibility' she claimed.

'So you are frightened?' I reasoned, but that was a weak shot.

'Of course I'm not frightened for me. I'm frightened that we could make a beautiful little baby, whom we would both love like nothing else. And we would watch her grow. She'd have your curls and my eyes and when she cried we would comfort her, and you'd make her laugh and teach her how to bake bread and paint and you would be the most wonderful father in the world. And I'd plait her hair and sing her songs and teach her to climb trees and she would be everything to us....' She paused and looked at me just for a moment, as if she had really meant those words. I so wished to hold that image in my head, but as if recognising my thoughts she shook her head too soon, pulling that vision away from me. She drew a breath, as if she had thought this scenario over in her mind before and didn't want to go on. But I didn't want to interrupt her - the images she described were just what I had wished for too. I wondered what she could imagine could ruin that ideal, now.

'But,' she continued, 'Paylor's government is overthrown. And a new regime of the old Capitol demagogues would come back, strengthened by those in the ranks from District 13 who'd tasted but had been denied power. And their rule would be revenge. First they would get rid of District 12, their former allies, who had dashed their hopes government and a new Games because I killed Coin. So they'd think of something they could film, not bombings but a cage they could build in
the night, trapping everyone in 12 inside, filling it with mutts.'
'No, Katniss, that wouldn't happen...' I said and reached out to her, but she wouldn't come to me. Her voice was shaking now.

'How do you know Peeta? How can any of us know? The Games seem like a perversion now, but for 75 years they were accepted, one person's warped idea controlled everyone.'

'But you're imagining they still have the technology...Plutarch told us, it's gone. Don't you trust him?'

'If I was going to trust anyone, it would be him. But he could be deceived, or they could start it over again,' she seemed convinced. 'They'd fill the cage with mutts and there would be nowhere to run. That would be wonderful entertainment for them. And no one would need to be told to kill anyone – because no one would need to be told. Killing your loved ones would be the kindest thing you could do, before we were all ripped apart by mutts. So if we were caught outside we would run down to the river and put our little girl in the water and hold her down. And if you could you'd try to kill me next just with your hands, to spare me and then if the mutts hadn't got you by then, you'd have to kill yourself too,' she cried, collapsing into my arms.

I pulled Katniss closer to me, 'It wouldn't be like that Katniss, it won't be' I said desperately trying to reassure her.

'But it could, and I won't take that chance of losing anyone else. I have thought about it Peeta. Really Peeta, I have. I have wanted so many times to make you happy, but that's all I can see.'

I kept her close, and didn't speak, I just soothed her like I used to do in the night. Only this seemed worse - these were fears that followed her in her waking hours. It seemed to me that her thoughts were similar to mine, when I had been hijacked.

The scenario Katniss painted was extreme and I sincerely believed something like that could not happen.... But I could not doubt the sincerity with which she held her beliefs. I wondered if Katniss had ever had the kind of help I had been given by the Doctors to deal with my emotional torment? I know Katniss had been regularly treated for her physical injuries, but had they ever helped her mind? She always seemed so capable, she had hidden these terrible fears even from me, and had tried to get on with her life. I should have talked with her more, but I thought our mutual understanding of what we had been through was enough. I had failed her. But even so I saw a little hope. She didn't say she didn't want a child with me, she said she didn't want to lose one. But the conviction in her voice and her dark thoughts made me realise that I had to concentrate on loving and healing Katniss. I didn't need to love and care for a child right now. Not yet.

When we went to bed I held her tightly in my arms. When Katniss has anything troubling her I can usually make her cast it aside by making love to her. I know her body so well now I know what it needs. But she had been so distraught earlier I did not want to suggest anything to her now. Soon, though, she kissed me and ran her fingers through my hair and round my neck. 'I'm sorry Peeta. I'm so sorry. I really am.' She said simply, and I knew she spoke truly. She looked so sad and disappointed with herself that I felt guilty. Guilty that I could still want to impose my dreams for the future on her.

'Don't say that. It will be ok. We have each other.' I emphasised, returning her kisses. It was Katniss who made the first move, making love to me with so much energy as if she wanted to prove herself to me, which of course she did not have to do at all. She fell asleep first, her head on my chest and her arm across me. The moon was waxing brightly in the sky and her skin, wet with perspiration, sparkled. She looked flawless, as if she was made of the finest porcelain. It suddenly struck me that I have always described Katniss to myself as strong, commanding, even stubborn. But all I saw now was fragility and vulnerability. I thought I could not be more complete, I have the woman I love here with me. But though I was sure that both she and I could not love each other more, I wondered if that was enough? Perhaps another man - Gale? - could have healed her better than I have? I knew I had to put Katniss first, and somehow show her that we can shape our own lives, not so we can start a family but so that she is not haunted so, so that she can live as I do, without shadows. So that was my new plan. But as I began to sleep I saw images of the family
I had pined for fading away.
Haymitch's Happy Family

The years passed. District 12 was no longer the grey town it had been in its coal mining days. Now these had shut, we generated most of our own power, using wind turbines in the surrounding mountains - a technology developed in 13 - for some municipal heating and lighting alongside wood which we had started to plant as a crop in unreclaimed areas since the town was now smaller than it had been before the war. The medicine facility is now renowned throughout Panem, and supplies treatments to every District.

Who would have thought, back in the old days, what a vibrant community we could become? As if needing an explosion of colour to free it from its bleak past, the area formerly known as 'The Seam' had become a cornucopia (I'm not afraid of that word anymore) of arts and crafts. The area had itself been renamed as Sylvania. Plutarch had visited it as part of his yearly tour to each District and suggested the new name it as it meant being of the forest in one of the old languages. Some people thought the name sounded too much like something from The Capitol, but Plutarch argued that the old languages had never belonged to The Capitol anyway and besides reclaiming and being aware of the best parts of the past - it's knowledge and wisdom, is a way to change the future. Plutarch’s charisma would have carried the argument anyway. So the name was adopted. Trees trunks were wrapped with long colourful knitted scarfs. Art installations hung from the trees - giant flowers made from metal scrap and glass, lanterns lighting up the dark. Though wonderful and bright, Sylvania did not seek to emulate the strangeness of The Capitol – very few of the townsfolk had ever been there, accept as foot soldiers. Our crafts came from the heart, though not perfect, they indicated each person's expression, which seemed to me to be one of hope and light. Which ever time of year you walk there you can hear gentle ringing of the wind chimes, and see the lanterns glow. It's deliberately higgledy piggledy – a direct contrast to the mundane, restricted town of the past. It's really quite magical. I have thought sometimes I would like to live there but I know Katniss prefers the relative isolation of The Village where not more than 20 people reside, as several of the buildings towards the end of the row were converted for administration. The District's reputation for crafts encouraged visitors now that movement between areas was not restricted. Some people stayed, causing our community to continue grow.

Haymitch was now a father of 4, with one more on the way. Perhaps he was making up for lost time. The eldest was a boy, Hamnet aged 5. He had his mother's colouring and was a lively outdoor child. Next were the twins, just over 3, a girl Evee and a boy Dana. Next was a baby girl Lettie, not yet walking, and the next due in a few months. Haymitch and Columbine were clearly in love, attentive and tactile with each other and fulfilled by their ever growing family. Haymitch is a wonderful father – though he claims exhaustion from time to time he is completely devoted to them. He expanded the small holding and works hard, which in the past would have been remarkable. I often see him take the eldest riding on a small pony – the first in the district for a long time. He concedes that neither he nor Columbine need to work. Besides his own money, the one suitcase she brought from The Capitol all those years ago contained no trappings from it – no clothes or finery to remind her of those days – but mountains of cash and jewellery, which she has never worn but which she sells. It doesn't seem to make an impact on their standard of living though. She helped provide Ariane with her own home - she lives independently in her own way in Sylvania now. As it can still take time for projects to get the go ahead she also paid for a new community building where the elderly or the youth can meet. She volunteers regularly, particularly with the elderly – and I have been there organising lunches when she would glide in with some or all of the children and at once the sophisticated demeanour with which she carries herself would fall away and all I could see was her gentleness and genuine warmth. It was no doubt because of her that Haymitch started coming to the hall to support the men and women who have been trying to give up their drink. Lots of the townsfolk carry burdens, and in the old days cheap liqueur tricked an empty belly it was full so many of the problems go back years. In the past, Haymitch in the throes of his own addiction, would have mocked this place, had it existed. Now whenever he
turns up, the mood palpably changes. He doesn't seek to patronise or reassure. He comes to entertain, to regale the audience with tall tales. He doesn't treat the people there as outcasts, but as friends. He too sometimes takes his eldest boy there – making the whole atmosphere of the place one of belonging, not shame. I'm very proud of how he has changed – who would have thought all this time after the games he could still be a mentor to me?

I continued to work at the bakery, as I enjoy the balance between physical labour and creativity. Katniss also works long hours, so now that Jenna and Lilo both have young families I have gone back to covering most of the early shifts. Sometimes it seems that Katniss and I don't see so much of each other as we used to. I leave for work before she rises and tend to fall asleep in the chair while I wait for her to finish in the study for the day. We each know each other so well perhaps I have been taking her for granted?

I most look forward to the days when Haymitch comes round with any number of his brood and throws them at me - 'They are driving me mad! You have them,' he will say, and march off with no information or instructions – sometimes for the whole day. Then I'm free to spend my time with them as I chose. Katniss will come with us when we go into the woods, but she is rather formal with the children when she is around me. I have seen her sitting on the lawn next door when she goes to visit Haymitch or Columbine and she is much freer and friendlier with them then. Perhaps she thinks if I see her too happy, too involved, my thoughts may return to that old question.

It was Haymitch who brought it up again, when he came round to collect the twins. I had taken them to the bakery in the morning – Jenna made them each a bun shaped like a flower, and we had eaten it as part of our picnic in the meadow, where they ran about and played around me. Haymitch had kept the eldest with him, and Columbine the baby. Greasy Sae still helped out, but she was getting on in years, and still liked to keep an eye on Ariane. I don't think Haymitch set the kids any kind of boundaries, though Columbine seemed to be able wave her hand magically to control them, she often seemed to just let them be free. It had been a surprisingly tiring day – it was impossible to turn your head without them getting up to mischief, maybe that was just how twins are. Haymitch turned up to collect them, holding baby Lettie but was in no rush to leave. He passed the baby to me and picked up his golden boy and girl who nestled in his arms giggling. 'Have you missed your daddy you bad little babies? I've been looking everywhere for you,' he said playfully. They just giggled. 'What did you get up to today sweetheart?' he asked his little girl. 'I don't know' said Evee, yawning.

'What about you Dana? You got a better memory? You tell your daddy what did you do all day?' he asked. I think he knew he wouldn't get a straight answer. 'Peeta gave me a bun like a foot and I ate it all up' replied the boy, proudly. 'A foot?' cried Haymitch in mock horror. 'What are you feeding my babies?' 'Jenna made them each a rather lovely bun shaped like a daisy,' I offered as explanation 'First mistake, Peeta, don't go to any trouble with these guys. Just give them lots and lots of love, that's all they remember.' He squeezed them again and they giggled on cue. Then to me Haymitch asked, 'Where's Katniss today? Made herself scarce?' 'I think she's just had a lot of work to do,' I explained, unconvincingly. 'Yes, work, work. It doesn't keep you warm in bed though does it?' he emphasised. I shrugged my shoulders. 'So, Peeta, will you ever be having any of these of your own? I'm keeping up production but I won't be able to lend them out indefinitely,' he guffawed. I decided to be frank. 'Haymitch, Katniss doesn't want them, and I want to be with Katniss so that really is the end of it. I have tried, believe me. But when I think how things could have been, I'm just relieved she is content, and we are together. There's no 'not yet ' anymore.' I didn't feel happy myself though, articulating the truth to him.

'That's a real shame, Peeta, but if that works for you, fair enough, I couldn't be without these bundles of love.' He planted a kiss on his little boy and gave the little girl a tickle. They giggled and snuggled closer to their father.

'Well each to their own,' I said to Haymitch, handing him back his smallest offspring, so the twins
had to reluctantly leave the security of their father's arms. 'Anyway I'm happy with my life as it is, these kids seem like too much hard work.' I don't think that lie fooled Haymitch at all. 'Well I'm glad you have made a choice that's right for you, son. And you are right. They are little monsters, but damn cute ones,' he said as he gathered his family to take back to their home, leaving me alone in mine.
It's been ten years since Peeta and I got together. Perhaps we should have an anniversary or something, except we don't really mark time like that. Any time we have had is precious to me, and thinking about things like that just makes me remember those we lost, Prim, Finnick, Peeta's brothers. I've also lost touch with others. My mother seldom come back, not wanting to remember this place and I have not visited her for a couple of years, though I mean to. I used to hear a little about Gale, but that has subsided. He works in the government, in security. He is married and has two boys. Plutarch is the one who keeps in touch the most, which surprises me. He will make a point of visiting us when he comes on his yearly tour of the District. He talks to both Peeta and I about all kinds of things. He is still behind the scenes in the government – inclined to talk about his work with vague allusions rather than directly. I know Peeta enjoys talking to him about cultural things and he always seems to value my opinion, though I'm sometimes surprised he asks me. I'm flattered, and although I don't tell him so, I'm grateful for the almost paternal interest he takes in me. When I have read some of the history books that have been written about the revolution, I don't recognise the Mockingjay about whom they write, the symbol who helped unite the people. When people arrive to work in the administration blocks they sometimes try to seek out their once famous neighbour – and I think they are disappointed when they find me. I'm just Katniss now, just going about my day to day life like hundreds of others in the District. Early on I turned to Plutarch when the government wanted to resurrect the Mockingjay for anniversary of the revolution events, my assignation against Coin being reinterpreted to fit in with the required story, to once again be part of their propos. With his support I was able to separate myself from that icon and turn down all requestst to make speeches or attend functions. The symbol endures but I am less and less attached to it. I think that although Plutarch helped create the Mockingjay, he always was able to see me as a person. So, I am grateful for that. And I sense he reciprocates, and sees beyond the Mockingjay and is grateful that all those years ago I helped achieve the outcome he wanted in his revolutionary plans.

Another person who makes regular twice yearly visits is Effie... She has changed: her hair will always be a different shade but less vibrant and without all the decoration. She works in The Capitol as an advisor in presentation. Every politician needs that. She has no children – she says her work is her life, and to do it well she must make sacrifices. She views each additional Abernathy child with a look of complete horror, but always makes a point of spending as much time in Haymitch's house as ours and showers the children with curiosities. She is also very fond of Columbine, though she looks at her like a wounded deer- it turned out she met her in The Capitol after the war, and it was she who encouraged her to go back home.

I must admit Columbine has always has intrigued me. On the one hand she has the natural ease with people and gentleness that Prim had. On the other, so Peeta tells me, she is very much like me and at times will keep herself apart. Mainly I see how people are drawn to her, like moths gathering to a light. Ariane has thrived since she arrived, Haymitch is a new man and even Peeta seems to light up in her company. When we go next door on an evening, we will sit in the garden as the light fades with the children still playing around us - neither parent ever seems in a hurry to put the children to bed. I can predict where Peeta will chose to sit - next to Columbine, who is completely relaxed with him even as she nurses her youngest baby. That leaves me to banter along with Haymitch - he hasn't changed that much to stop enjoying teasing me. Or I will play on the grass with the older children, letting them climb on my back or helping them up the nearest tree. But I hold back from being too involved, though they are sweet little things whom I love dearly, I think it would be unfair to make too much of my role as Auntie while denying Peeta a family of his own. So often, when I know Haymitch is planning to drop some of the children round to ours I give Peeta space to spend time with them. I know it's not the same as having his own, but it's something. And it's all I can do.
It was when Effie was on one of her fleeting visits that I asked her more about Columbine. Effie had been with us in Haymitch’s garden, but both she and I had left to return to my house as Effie was leaving the next day and needed to pack. Perhaps she was so forthcoming because she had noticed me watching Peeta and Columbine together and had mistaken my interest for jealousy. Columbine had taken Lettie, who had been suckling at her breast and passed the now sleeping infant to Peeta, thanking him with a kiss to the cheek. Peeta smiled warmly back at her and held the baby tenderly and naturally - she could have been his own child. Columbine stood up and stretched, arching her back - her body very pregnant now - and picked up a sleepy Dana to sit with her. She sat close to Peeta, their bodies loosely touching, one hand extending to reach his shoulder and then stroking his face with the back of her hand. Anyone looking at that scene could easily have assumed that Peeta, Columbine and the children were a happy little unit. But I didn't feel threatened, I can tell the difference between love and affection, friendship and sensuality. Besides the scene ended with Columbine calling over to Haymitch who came to her and kissed her tenderly before按摩ing her shoulders while whispering gently into her ear, making her laugh and kiss him again. Then Peeta beckoned Haymitch to take his seat - and his baby. He came over to me and sipped from my glass of wine before sitting by my feet, taking my hand in his and playfully pulling me towards him to kiss him. The way he looks at me even after all this time is unlike the way he looks at anyone else, and I hope he sees the same in my eyes too. Perhaps we don't look at each other in that way as much as we used to, but it's there still, and our love for each other is strong. But maybe Effie had thought I may have been troubled, for as soon as I enquired about Columbine she was very defensive.

'You know my dear, you have nothing to worry about,' she began. 'Columbine is such a very lovely girl, such manners, such poise! And the way she has changed Haymitch, what a beautiful love story,' she said, wiping, or pretending to wipe? -a tear from her eye.

'You know I think Peeta just likes to be with the children, Katniss. He has such an incredibly soft heart, even when he was a boy...' I think the tear she wiped then was real.

'And besides Columbine has such a terrible, terrible story...How much do you know?' I could tell Effie was in the mood for revelations, and I unusually was curious. Perhaps I was one of the moths too. I told Effie I knew all about her birth, and how she was stolen, but nothing about her life in The Capitol.

'You know very little,' she whispered, as if pleased to know she had some secrets. 'I will tell you as much as I know, so you realise what a dear sweet person she is, and how very terribly she suffered. But you must absolutely promise me you will never, ever tell Haymitch. He wouldn't understand, and would be very disappointed in me.' I promised that easily for I know that was true. Haymitch and Effie always had an unlikely bond, but it was there all the same, so I appreciated Effie's confidence.

Effie told me that she never had reason to meet Aquilegia, as she was known then, in the years when she visited the District for the annual reapings. Besides, in those days she conceded she didn't understand that certain things were wrong and she regrets it now. If she had made the connection, she would have at least tried to bring some information to the family. But in any case she only heard stories later, and this is what she told me.

When Columbine and Dana arrived at The Capitol, they were twelve years old. It turned out, said Effie, that a friend of a friend of hers, Lorelai, was responsible for them for a while. They were preened and groomed, much like I was before the Games and given a wonderful education. They were not, Effie stressed, mistreated in any way as children, except of course they were punished when they tried to run away. But they had fabulous opportunities, and would give piano recitals at the Concert Hall, and attend many public events as darling little mascots. She said this as if still in thrall to the old Capitol, that she used to know. Absolutely everyone loved them, and you could even buy cups with their pictures on, and children would buy little dolls in their image. It must have been such a happy time, Effie said - but I was already sceptical.
Then Effie's face changed as if realising that she too had been betrayed by The Capitol. For at their 18th birthday Snow organised a public auction for their 'companionship' as a service to the people of The Capitol. Of course there was nothing alluding to sexual encounters, it was billed more as an escorting service, but she realises now that's not what it meant. Columbine and Dana had been so molded into being icons of The Capitol that the money Snow could raise from them on a regular basis was phenomenal. It was on the first day the bidding ended that Lorelai, who truly loved those children, organised their escape. Effie did not know the details, except to say it was unsuccessful, and Lorelai was turned into an Avox. She took another deep breath.

Things went on like that for a few years, until gradually the twins were replaced by newer, fresher faces. But she added, perhaps with a sense of shame that it got worse as the treatment of them was removed from public gaze. Effie said she didn't want to go on...But I bade her to continue, perhaps I was caught up in the grimness of the situation, intrigued perhaps that Columbine had suffered so much, and yet was so happy now.

'Well,' said Effie, 'You have to realise that a lot of people in The Capitol would have had no idea that this sort of thing went on. Even in those days I would have been appalled.' I nodded, though I believe no one should hide behind their own ignorance. She continued, explaining that the sexual services they were required to provide then became even more debauched, and their treatment worsened. It was inevitable said Effie that the most perverted amongst their clients would want them to act their twisted fantasies together as siblings, but they refused for as long as they could, despite beatings and threats of death. It was Dana who managed to make sure such things would not happen, and that Columbine would not be hurt anymore. He was aided by his former governess, Lorelai, who by some ingenuity had managed to stay close. Dana was a particular favourite of Snow, who treated him savagely. He managed to get a message to the underground via Lorelai to help him in his plan. Dana believed one day very soon, because of what Snow liked to do to him he would be killed, and he wanted that evidence to be filmed in order to protect his sister. Sure enough - Effie spared me the details- that is what happened. Dana was killed at Snow's hands and he was made aware of the tapes existence by the underground resistance. Sure enough, Columbine's life improved, to some degree. She was removed from her 'personal duties' as Effie called them, and put on housemaid duties so that Snow could keep a watchful eye. Lorelai's role was discovered though and she was killed, Effie said bluntly.

'Does Columbine know about all this? I asked, 'What her brother did for her?'

'Not from me, dear, but I believe someone told her. After all it is untold secrets that hurt us the most, don't you think my dear?' she explained, I thought, very incisively. 'Besides can't you see how Haymitch and Columbine look at each other? It's as if they experienced the very worst in life yet found the very best in life together.' The tears that began to fall down her face were genuine. 'You know my dear, you and Peeta used to look at each other in exactly the same way. So very beautiful,' she said gently. I ignored the 'used to' for I knew it was true, but thanked her for telling me the story.

'So how did you meet her?' I asked.

'Sheer coincidence. After the war, The Capitol was in absolute ruins. So many lives lost. And such confusion, I really didn't feel safe for awhile. Everyone who was from The Capitol stood out - I think our breeding was so obvious- so there was some retribution from the soldiers from other districts in the first few weeks. But that really changed when..' she paused as if thinking how to rephrase something: 'when Paylor replaced Coin. She did an absolutely fantastic job of uniting everyone. quite marvellous.'

'So is that when you met Columbine?' I asked.

'Oh no, a couple of years later. I was working for the news department, and we were filming a segment at the orphanage. It's a very lovely place, Katniss, those dear little children are so very well looked after. I even thought I could perhaps take one in for a moment. But some of us are not cut out for motherhood are we Katniss?' I nodded, but wished I hadn't. 'That's where I noticed Columbine. I have a very good eye for beauty, even when it is hidden. My friend, Nala, had told me Aquilegia's story when she had been trying to find Lorelai after the war - information was
much freer so she learnt everything as I told you. Columbine was looking after the children, just like you see her now, an absolute natural,' she said almost wistfully. 'She was dressed in nothing more than a sack really. Terrible flat shoes, and her hair pulled back and not a scrap of makeup at all. Rather like you, Katniss' I took that as a compliment. 'But I could see that she had the most radiant natural beauty. Who wouldn't want to be in her company? No affectation at all. I know how you in 12 think we were all silly preening fools in The Capitol, Katniss, but it is how we were raised. But I do know real beauty, inside and out, and I recognised both in that girl.' I had never known Effie to express such awareness and I was sorry that she was right, I was one of the ones who judged her.

'So by then I put two and two together: I remembered the famous twins and their connection to my favourite district. So over the coming weeks I went back to the orphanage to meet her several times. She mentioned her family and I did a little digging and found out her parents had died. But she told me that she had an old Aunt called Sae, and I was so pleased to tell her immediately that she lived with a very dear friend of mind, Haymitch. I had to persuade her quite a lot to come back though. The poor girl I think was ashamed about what had happened to her. But I convinced her by saying that her Aunt and her little cousin needed her. And I told her about how very similar you were Katniss, not because of how you suffered but your personality. Both so delicate and reserved! I said you would be marvellous friends' I knew Effie was gushing now. She had called me reserved before, but never delicate. 'And the fact that I brought Haymitch and Columbine together,' she sighed. 'I think that is my greatest masterpiece' she enthused.

I sensed congratulations were in order, so did so. I thanked her for telling me Columbine's story. She told me that my story with Peeta was just as beautiful. It was perhaps not the best word choice, but I understood what she meant. We did have something very special together. I hope that's enough. Before she went upstairs, Effie took both my hands and said to me, 'you know you deserve to be happy too, Katniss, more than most. Don't be frightened of it.' I realised then how perceptive Effie was.
A dream and an argument

I had a dream about Katniss. She was walking along a sandy beach, somewhere we had never been before, much like the place where I imagine Finnick had grown up. She wore a long simple dress, that shimmered in green and blue and gold, like she had emerged from the sea. She didn't belong to the earth anymore, she was new. She smiled at me, as I extended my hand back to her. She had a shyness to her though as she lowered her eyes and passed one wisp of her hair behind her ear. As she playfully splashed in the water the fabric clung to her body, outlining her lean shape, and her breasts firm and round. Her skin was tanned and glistened, sparkling in the sun. She reminded me of all the characteristics in her that I had ever known: how I had loved every one. The vulnerable child to whom I threw the bread, the strong young woman who won the games, my tender lover. I wanted to draw her closer to me, but as I extended my hand, and Katniss stepped forward to embrace me I realised the man I saw wasn't me at all. Dark hair, perhaps like Gale, but a smile and features of someone I didn't even know, and then she leaned in to kiss him and looked so happy...I woke up and could see Katniss sleeping peacefully as she always did, but she had the faint hint of a smile on her lips. Perhaps she was having the same dream?

I don't know why I had the dream that night. Maybe it's because I was thinking about how long we have been together. Is it 14 years now? We had gone to bed separately, after an argument. And though I sensed Katniss was awake when I climbed into bed next to her much later, I did not reach out to touch her, to say it was all right, or that I was sorry. Because none of those things would have been true. Our arguments nowadays are, though not frequent, marked with bitterness and regret - mostly mine. I annoy Katniss with my inconsiderate time keeping and changeable moods. And she infuriates me with her stubbornness and silence. Usually it starts over the smallest things: if Katniss tells me she is camping in the woods, first I'm angry that she hasn't asked me to go with her, then when she does, I tell her I'm too busy anyway. Katniss gets annoyed because she doesn't know where I will be at any given time. Before, if she finished work early she would come and meet me at the bakery so we could walk in the woods before going home. Now I deliberately leave at different times and head to see friends in Sylvania after work. It's all pointless and immature, but I can't seem to stop myself. Katniss has become the more placid of the two of us - her weapon now is silence. Maybe that's just as well as sometimes I feel like I have nothing left to say, either.

Of course I know, and so does Katniss, that my frustration stems from the issue of us not having children. For the first few years I avoided the subject, then I tried to coax her, then I pleaded, and finally pined over the issue. But she would not, could not give way. So these last few months I have just been angry - with her and myself. I understand that she feels frightened for the future. I understand that she was hurt. But she cannot see my view that without children there is no future, that without children the hurt remains. I suppose I would be able to support her more if things were different. But all around us in the District the answer for so many people since the war is to marry young, to have children and lots of them. This celebration of life and love draws a line between the past and the present no matter how people suffered, whoever they have lost. But Katniss doesn't see it that way. If I hadn't lost my family maybe I would have those bonds in tact. I wasn't close with my mother, but who knows how I could have changed that as an adult? And if I hadn't faced death, time and time and time again, maybe I wouldn't want to celebrate new life. But I did and I do. I'm not proud of myself. I know it's petulant, unkind, selfish and arrogant. But I can't see any way forward. There is no compromise. It's impossible to meet half way. And yet through all of this the one thing I know is I love her. I love Katniss as much as I ever did. That's why it hurts so much. If I didn't love her, I would leave, but I do, so I can't. I told her I would stay with her always. But once I remember I added 'as long as you need me.' If I could believe she didn't need me anymore, then maybe...
The next argument we had was just a few days later. It started over me not coming home until the early hours. It was about 2am in the morning when I got into bed but Katniss must have noticed. I'd had some drinks and Katniss probably had smelt it on my breath, for she had let me sleep in - so I was late for work. I ran down stairs as soon as I realised and found Katniss in the kitchen, acting completely normally.

'Why didn't you get me up?' I yelled

'When have I ever needed to get you up?' she asked, truthfully. 'Besides if you can bring yourself in when you like, you can get up when you like, can't you?' she added

'Oh so that's what this is about, is it?' I replied, childishly.

'No. I didn't say anything, you did,' she said.

I could have easily left it there but I didn't. 'So you want to know my every movement do you? You want to control me do you?' I shouted 'There's not a lot I could be doing here in this town is there?' I said, unprovoked.

'No, I don't want to know what you do. It's always the same anyway. But it would be nice if you let me know. We were meant to be next door last night, they cooked us dinner,' she replied.

'So you want to know my every movement do you? You want to control me do you?' I shouted 'There's not a lot I could be doing here in this town is there?' I said, unprovoked.

'Always the same? Whose fault is that?' I said, ignoring the fact it was clearly me who was in the wrong.

'So we're back to that are we?' said Katniss wearily. She put down the books she was holding and looked straight at me. I felt she was daring me to continue.

'Yes. We are back to that. So let's hear your old argument. You were in the Games. Well so was I. You were frightened. So was I. You were nearly killed. So was I. But you know what I was tortured too. But I got over it. I'm still here.' I came up close to her, shouting and pounded my fist on the table.

'Well, you've got me there. I wasn't tortured, so let's go upstairs and make a baby.' She looked at me as if she was disappointed, and I didn't like it, so I wanted to hurt her more.

'We all lost people we loved, everyone in this town lost someone, but for you it's always Prim, Prim, Prim.' I hated myself at once for saying it.

'You don't understand how I loved her. She was my whole world until..' she stopped what she was going to say and instead added 'besides you never loved your mother did you?'

'I probably deserved that but instead I countered. 'I was just a boy. Of course I loved her..she didn't love me.' I wasn't shouting now, and perhaps the argument could have changed but instead Katniss took advantage of my vulnerability.

'Oh yes, what does it feel like to love someone, and not be loved back?' she snapped.

'What? What are you talking about?' I questioned, desperately. In all our arguments, whatever we had thrown at each other we had never said we didn't love each other. We never used that as a weapon to hurt and wound. But I wasn't sure what she meant. Was she saying she didn't love me now, or worse was she referring back to those painful times after our first games when I had come back hoping, hoping that all we had been through had counted for something. That her kisses were real, that she loved me. Instead she had ignored me completely, spending all her time with Gale and acting as if everything she had said and done meant nothing. I think she read my thoughts.

'No, no. I didn't mean that. I meant..' She came over to me, but I brushed her aside. She continued: 'I just meant, Prim loved me back. But it was wrong anyway. I'm sorry.' But old wounds, once they are open, are harder to close. I sighed. 'Katniss, I just don't think I can do this anymore. I'm tired of it.' I said.

'No, Peeta. You don't mean that' said Katniss. She looked at me gently, and held out her hand. I could so easily have taken it, and drawn her to me. But then what? Perhaps I should have told her straightaway that the reason I had been late was I had been working on the books, teaching Lilo how to do things properly. I had forgotten our commitment with Haymitch and Columbine, it's true, but was on my way home when I met Thom. He was pulling everyone he could find into the Hall to celebrate - his wife had just given birth, after three miscarriages, to a baby boy, and Thom was buying drinks all round. I have celebrated friends becoming fathers so many times it didn't take much persuasion for me to have a drink, and another, and another. I think it was news of
Thom's baby that had made me on edge in the first place. But it was too late now. I didn't take hold of Katniss. Instead I said 'No Katniss, I just don't think I'm me anymore. I think we need some time apart,' Without waiting for a response I walked out the door to go to work.

When I got back from work my mood had softened. Katniss however seemed agitated. She was doing the kind of things she never does, ironing sheets and towels into colour coded piles. I wanted to tell her that I knew she had loved me, that she had given me everything she could. But I felt as if I always knew our love was fragile, transient, because I loved her so much. Maybe that's why I had so much longing for her in the early years, why I sought to consume her when our relationship became intimate. I think I always feared that something so powerful could burn out, would fade away. But I didn't want to hurt her. So I knew I had to bring up the subject I raised this morning. I wanted to let her think that I wasn't leaving for good - that maybe two weeks apart would be good for us, for it's true I didn't know if I could go through with it anyway. She seemed relieved, because she didn't know that in my mind I was thinking if I could manage two weeks apart from her I could extend two to three, three to four and so on until she realised that she didn't need me anymore. That two weeks apart could turn into always.

When we went to bed she lay naked in my arms for a long time. At first that's all I wanted to do, I felt to do anything else while I had these thoughts in my head would be cheating her. But I still loved her and I couldn't let go just yet. I kissed her cheek and stroked her bare skin, pressing my nose into the bend of her neck so that I could breathe deeply and smell her, taste her, touch her. Would it be for the last time? She turned round and put her arms round my neck and stroked my face, I wonder did she see anything in my eyes, did I give anything away? She covered me with small kisses and I almost thought she needed me like she used to, before we grew apart and had ceased to be one. I responded to her, and she to me. I closed my eyes and remembered all those years ago, all that time I had hoped and waited for her to be mine. I had tried to be all that she needed, but perhaps we had shared too much in the games...instead of making our loneliness disappear perhaps we had just been lonely together. I had to admit that there was a void in my life which I felt having my own child would fill. I had believed that knowing that Katniss loved me would be enough. But it was not. Was that selfish? I had not been able to convince her that we could hope, the world was better, we would be safe, we could live, love and raise a family together. So the failure was mine... Katniss moved on top of me and made love to me beautifully, she knew my body so well. I loved her so much but I had to go. I remembered a quotation I used to say over to myself when I still feared the past: "Never look back unless you are planning to go that way." Now I said it over in my head to give me strength to leave the woman I loved behind.
Breaking away

Peeta and I have been together for nearly 15 years. He often returns to the subject of having children, but it's been impossible for me to compromise, and I know that's unfair to him. He gets frustrated with me more often now and I can't talk to him about friends who are expecting babies - it makes him withdraw from me. It's bad enough that Haymitch and Columbine have a house full of children next door. But at least he seemed happy to act as babysitter for Haymitch's brood, so I gave him space to do that. Besides we are so busy we wouldn't have time for children so I hoped for a while that he was resolved to my point of view.

I had realised that I had not been paying attention to Peeta. He had taken on more work at the bakery, but then I had been working too. I didn't think that was wrong - we both in our own way want to make the District the best it could be. I know he spends more time with friends in Sylvania or helping out in the Community Hall – but Peeta has always been the people person. He will seek others in a way I do not. I know I have been working on my book on herbal medicines into the small hours – I wanted to ask Peeta to join me, perhaps to help with the illustrations, but so many times I would find him waiting for me, exhausted after a long day at work, asleep in the chair, that I did not burden him with more.

We didn't make love as frequently – or as vigorously- as before, but surely that was normal? I still liked to soothe his muscles using the scented oils I prepared especially for him - rubbing and kneading the knots in his back, breaking down the areas of tension in his body. I used to enjoy looking at him while I did so, the muscles being developed from the heavy work in the bakery, and through his construction work. I particularly loved the look of his arms, which tensed when he was working, but held me so sweetly at night. In the spring and summer months when he used to spend a lot of time helping with building after his work in the bakery I would sometimes see him hammering or sawing with his shirt discarded. His tanned skin shone as he mopped his sweating brow. I saw many of the young women of the town stop longer on the other side of the street just to look at his handsome form. If I would go to meet him at the site, to see how he was getting on, or to bring him something to eat if he was working late, he was oblivious to the attention he would get. He would throw passers by his sweet, friendly smile, nothing more. I used to tease him about it, but he was convinced I was making things up. That lovely body, his beautiful mind, was all for me. We used to be so happy...

When something comes on the info channel bulletin which shows positive news about the government – some new policy or successful economic scheme Peeta will always raise the matter afterwards. I think he wants me to believe that everything will be all right. Perhaps he has forgotten how much I know about propaganda? I have been there...So, although I sometimes have worried if Peeta is truly happy with me I felt that things were rolling along as they should - that we were ok. He only needed once to ask if our love was real. He knows how much I love him. He is the better part of me, together we are complete, I thought. But then over the last few months he has been getting angry with me, starting quarrels over nothing. I try not to engage with it, to ignore what he says but that makes it worse. I think sometimes he just wants to punish me.

The last argument was the worst, I let Peeta coax me into answering him back, but even so, he misunderstood what I meant. I think he just wanted an excuse to say we needed time apart. When he said that I felt as though something inside me had broken away. Like I wasn't complete anymore. He went straight to work so I couldn't talk to him. I wasn't sure what he meant, a break from each other, or forever? I don't want him to go at all, I don't need a break from him, so how could I manage for ever? I felt sick most of the day, waiting for him to come home and couldn't concentrate on anything.
I went for a walk, and of all things saw a marriage procession - two people promising to spend their lives together. Peeta and I have never married. In the past marriage was expected in the District. And to me to get married would be inviting the government into our personal lives – it has no place there. I love Peeta and he loves me – I don't need a piece of paper to validate that. Haymitch and Columbine aren't married either, so perhaps they feel the same. There are often weddings here and I must admit the celebrations are wonderful, particularly in the spring and summer. Parades are lead from the meadow and through the town. Invariably the bride will have flowers through her hair – whatever is in season, and a cast of supporting characters dressed as fancy folk or as animals accompany them. The whole scene is a myriad of colour, noise ribbons and smiles. It is especially lovely when little barefooted children dance along beside them. So I watched for a while, and wished the couple happiness and peace together. I returned home and occupied myself as best I could. I had to make myself a herbal remedy because I didn't feel very well and guessed that it was because of my worries in the day.

When Peeta came home he was thankfully in a better mood and explained he only meant to be away for a couple of weeks in The Capitol. I felt such huge relief I nearly cried. When we went to bed I was worried because for a long time he just held me and I wondered what he was thinking. But it gave me a chance to consider my own thoughts too. I thought about Haymitch’s children. How funny, sweet and good they are. How the world is a better place because they are in it. And how happy Haymitch and Columbine are, because they have their children. Doesn't everyone deserve that? So though I am still wary of the future I wanted to turn round to Peeta then and say 'Peeta if it means you won't leave me then I want to have a baby with you.' I hesitated as I knew that wouldn't be enough for him. But if he hadn't started to kiss me then, I don't think I could have stopped myself from making promises to him.

When he took me in his arms I felt whole again. The piece that had broken away was fixed. We made love like we used to, with tenderness and consideration for each other, but there was something in the way he held me, the way, he touched me that made me nervous. When he went to sleep next to me I looked at him for a long time, and I thought that yes, maybe a break will be good for him. And though it's true that the thought of being without him made me change my mind, I realised that when he comes back I really do want to say to him that if he thinks he can protect me like he used to, if he really believes that he can help me overcome my fears then I want to have a child with him, because I love him so...
Plutarch had suggested I come to the Capitol for several years, to join a team of business owners he had organised to share their experiences with others. So I used that as an excuse to get in contact with him, shortly after my final argument with Katniss. Plutarch has always taken an interest in Katniss and I so it was surprisingly easy to get in touch with the man behind the government. I had told him in the past that I was not a business man but a craftsman but I made excuses to him saying I was able to leave the bakery for a couple of weeks now so if he wanted any input from me, now was the time. He was very accommodating. He said I could come to The Capitol in the next day or two, accepting too readily my explanation that my work at the bakery made the hasty timing crucial. He said he would talk with one of his assistants to arrange a preliminary tour of the Districts. I spent the rest of the day arranging rotas at the bakery. Jenna and Lilo were experienced themselves and I had full confidence that the District would be adequately catered for under their stewardship. I drew up a two week rota for them, but did not tell them it could be a repeating one...I felt detached as I organised these plans. I remember being so keen to get back home to Katniss in our early days together it was all I could do to stop myself from running back through the town to her. I smiled to recall the enthusiasm of my younger self...when I had pretended to Jenna and Lilo that I had to work in the Capitol just so I could stay in bed with Katniss. I could forget all the world just by being with her. Then, being in bed with her, the whole world fitted within those four walls - nothing else mattered. All that I was became entwined with her. I thought it would never change.

I think Katniss knew something was different, I didn't respond to her kisses in the morning as I felt an overwhelming guilt. I discouraged her efforts to make love too – saying that I was too tired – an excuse that both of us make far more regularly in recent months, so that wasn't completely unusual. Katniss didn't protest as she said she didn't feel too well anyway, but needed to get better quickly as she was going on a camping trip to prepare a route for some teenagers and she wanted to scout out a new area for them to try. As they had already become comfortable in lower level trips she wanted to organise something more challenging. So I just cradled her in my arms for a little while, not knowing how to say goodbye. I didn't want to hurt her. I wanted her know that I wanted her to find someone who deserved her better, but I couldn't say that to her now. I had not been really present with her for a while and if she thought she owed me too much to leave, I had to be the one to go. She had always told me that I was skilled with my words, but now I had none to use to say goodbye, and I felt I was cheating her. I left for the Capitol that afternoon. Katniss and I had not been apart from each other for more than a couple of days at a time, and as I kissed her goodbye I didn't know if I could ever see her again.

When I arrived at the Capitol, Plutarch sent someone to meet me, his assistant, Marcus. He seemed a bit flummoxed, as if he was a man who liked order, and my unplanned arrival had ruined his day. He took me to my accommodation. Nothing like the luxury I had last experienced at The Capitol and I was grateful for that. It only took Plutarch a few hours to greet me personally, which surprised me as from what I have heard he is still the man who keeps an eye on all the small details of government. He took time to ask me in detail about Katniss and I think I put on a convincing show that everything was very good for us, though I turned perhaps too quickly to the work he had in mind. He explained that he wanted more input from ordinary people in the practical workings of government, hence his scheme of getting business people involved in policy making relevant to them. The committee he had invited me to join had already been up and running for several months so I would have to do a basic tour to each of the Districts to get up to speed. He suggested I visit half the Districts over the next 2 weeks, to see whether I had any ideas and whether the the scheme was right for me. It wouldn't mean leaving 12 should I wish to join, but I should expect regular trips to the Capitol and other Districts. "Would that be alright with Katniss?" he asked. I explained that would be fine, not letting on that if my plan worked out I
would not be going back to her at all. He apologised for having to leave me – he would be available by data link should I need him on my trip, but otherwise Marcus would be my guide for the duration and it was scheduled to begin tomorrow. I could enjoy all that the Capitol had to offer tonight, he told me. It was nothing like the old days, he offered, but suggested with a twinkle in his eye, more in recognition of himself, than directed at me, I suspected, that I may like to go easy even so.

After he left I had a few hours to myself when I could explore the city, Marcus said he would meet me back in my rooms afterward to go over the schedule for the next day. For the first time I looked around it as citizen and not as a tribute. I felt detached as I wandered down The Avenue that lead into the stadium. Like District 12 much of the area had been rebuilt, due to the damage in the war. The parade where our chariots had driven at the opening of the games had been grassed over to create a park. Trees were planted and there were wooden castles for children to play on, and coloured fountains for people to sit beside, next to radiant flowers. Families gathered informally and couples sat having picnics, and single people sat on the benches reading newspapers and books, while I walked along the pavement to its side. It all seemed wonderful, but not in the ostentatious style of The Capitol of old. It seemed that people were just going about their normal day, and I was pleased by the ordinariness of this. Katniss, if she were here with me would have been worried that it indicated that the past was too easily forgotten, but I thought change was good.

Some distinctive Capitol architecture had remained, or had been rebuilt. Whereas in our District the homes had a quirky look each representing the style of the builder, here there was a definite uniformity. It also looked as if money was spent on its construction and upkeep. Did that indicate that money was not shared equally through the Districts? Katniss would be interested in that I thought, I knew she hoped the Districts would become more equal. But that was not why I was here..... The people too were obviously of the Capitol. Hair colour was no longer as brash – though there was an array of muted reds, greens, purples and blues, something we never see in 12. The styles were more simple, not the works of art that were Effie’s trademark. There was less adornment, of both hair and body, and skin colour was mostly natural, with shades of soft orange or rosy pink being the only distinct colours I noticed between the normal blacks, browns, yellows and pinks. Altogether, although I didn't find it particularly attractive, there was always room for differences I believed. The only thing that I found difficult was that young women were still adapting and inflating their bodies. Naturally slim girls who would have been otherwise pretty had enlarged their lips, and breasts to look like some school boy's or old man's bad drawing of what femininity should be. I thought of Katniss with her untouched, perfect form. She was leaner now than when she first returned to 12 after the war, when I appreciated her softer curves. She had a wonderful physical presence, at once strong and defiant and sensual. But she didn't walk as if she knew this -perhaps I should have told her more, as I know so well now how this apparent self reliance and confidence masked her feelings from me.

I walked around for a few hours, in general pleased with how things had changed, and I was thankful to all the friends we had lost who made it so. In this mood I entered the nearest bar, 'Florrie's' it said in bright electric lights. I was in no hurry to return to Marcus, though I was aware that I should not disrupt his day further. Just one quick drink, I thought, to toast those lost comrades. But if I thought The Capitol I had seen so far had changed, here in the bar I found the old world lived on. Everything spoke excess, the furnishings, the people, it all was reminiscent of the decadence that used to pervade the whole city. I felt uncomfortable and was about to leave when a woman with braided pink hair and make up that made her eyes resemble a bird of paradise took me by the arm.

'You are new here?' she purred, 'let me get you a drink.' Against my better instincts I agreed and let her take me to the bar. She beckoned the bartender to me and said to him to give me a 'Tristar' on the house. He proceeded to mix a green and a blue liquid which together turned red. It gave off a steaming sparkling glow though the drink remained cool, without ice. He then dropped in three
solid gold stars that fizzed and exploded in sparkles. Passing the drink to me he turned to check that he wasn't observed and winked at me as dropped in two more.

'I remember you,' he whispered. 'You're the boy with the bread aren't you? My sister and I were rooting for you every time. We were so pleased you lived.'

I hadn't been called that for years – was I really still that person? I thanked him for his interest and downed the drink in one. I was not much of a drinker at home, but I think even Haymitch at his most inebriated would have been knocked back by this concoction. The room spun and all the noises suddenly sounded louder, the music pulsating in my head. I felt wide awake but all my movements seemed slower as if I had to work at controlling myself. The nostalgia that was with me when I had entered the bar was gone and I felt a rush of excitement: I felt very, very good. I saw the bartender nod to two women – twins perhaps, in matching outfits of figure hugging blue and purple bodysuits and wearing headbands with kitten ears. They approached me, and I smiled broadly at them. I think I ordered them a drink, and my self another, at least more drinks seemed to appear in front of us. The woman in purple was the more demonstrative of the two. Both were attractive and lacked some of the artifice I had seen on my walk here which made them immediately more interesting to me. The second woman was engaged in stroking my hand and my hair and I let her do it. The other talked to me about The Games, telling me how strong I was, how brave, how marvellous, that I was still a legend to some people in the Capitol. I answered her as if it was a different man speaking, as if I was pleased at the attention my participation in The Games warranted– I did not mention the deaths, the murders I had committed, the fear I was in, the horrors. Nor did I mention Katniss. I felt as if I was no longer me, and hated myself for it, but I couldn't stop. The woman in purple told me her name was Silk. She kept eye contact, reaching out to stroke my face, before she leaned in to kiss me. I did not stop her, but responded, parting my lips to meet hers. I felt myself become aroused and placed my hands on her body. The other woman took my hand and they beckoned me to follow them, through some sheer curtains to a lounge away from the bar and I got up and let them lead me. There were various booths- semi-circular dens slightly raised from the ground, with a multitude of cushions and fabrics of different shades. Some of them were already filled with half naked women pleasuring their clients and although I was excited I loathed myself. I didn't want to do this for my own pleasure I told myself, but so that I could diminish myself in Katniss' eyes, for I was already diminished in mine. I knew that Katniss had been on my mind since I had left her, and I knew deep down that I had pretended I was just leaving for two weeks as much as for myself as for her as I did not know if I would have the strength- or weakness? -to actually leave her. But if I had sex with these women here now, I would no longer be the man Katniss trusted and loved. It would make it easier for me to part from her. I had never felt I was a coward before, but even though the Tristar had messed with my inhibitions and my ego, I felt like a coward now.

Silk sensually began to unzip her purple suit to her waist revealing her nakedness to me, and I felt a surge of lust run through my body. I wanted to peel the rest of her clothes of her, yet something made me hold back. Her twin, who had remained silent began to unbutton my shirt and started to help me remove it. Perhaps Silk saw some hesitancy in my eyes, for although the other booths were open she stopped undressing for me, and turned around to draw the translucent curtains around us. I looked at the curves of her hips and her waist as she did so. She was beautiful, but I'd never wanted to rush and get sex over with like I did now. As she began to reach for the curtains they caught the light of the lamps which glowed around the room. They were shimmering shades of blue, green and gold. Whether the drink was wearing off or the coincidence that the curtains matched the fabric of the dress Katniss had been wearing in my dream, I don't know. But suddenly I felt a mixture of regret and heartache that was too much to bear. I knew I could not do this. I sat up and grabbed my shirt - apologising to the women - and stood up. The bartender seemed genuinely concerned that I was okay, and offered me a drink, I declined at first, but he said it was water, so I drank. Whatever it actually was, it seemed to help and I became steadier. I regained my composure and as soon as I could I crawled out of the bar.

I made some wrong turns as I retraced my footsteps, but returned as quickly as possible to my
rooms, where Marcus was waiting to go through schedules with me. He didn't look particularly pleased to see me, I had been out longer than he had expected. 'I have your train tickets here,' he said officiously, handing over a metal rectangular chip. 'We will have two days per District, working on 1-6. I have a list of people we will be meeting, and the manual is held on this palm gear which shows train times, places to visit etc. It is very thorough indeed,' he added, proudly.

'Your work?' I asked

'Of course, not that your rather spontaneous trip allowed for much time to do so, but I do have rather a lot of connections,' he replied.

'That's very kind of you to go out of your way for me. But look, Marcus, if all the details are here, are you sure that you need to come with me? You don't have time to waste babysitting me, do you?' I asked with hopefully the right amount of praise and pleading.

'Well, Plutarch has arranged....' he began. But I interrupted him - I could see that he wasn't keen to spend time in my company and I said I had troubled Plutarch enough. I'd use the manual but, I didn't tell him, I would see more on my own.

'Well have you got your Video-com with you?' he asked. I confessed I had left mine at home.

Those communication devices were so indispensable to the administrators who visited our District they might as well been grafted onto their hands. I had been given one years ago, and I kept it in my desk, using it to communicate with Plutarch and others in the Capitol occasionally. There was no point carrying one round with me, no one else had one in 12 except for Katniss and she used hers less than me. Haymitch said he had flushed his down the toilet years ago. In 12 we tend to talk face to face, make plans with each other that we keep to and use rough approximation of timings using unsophisticated clocks. Marcus said he would allow me to use the one he had with him now, and Plutarch would like daily updates – but sensing that he didn't really want to be parted from it and knowing that I would rarely use it, I declined. Wherever I went, I told him, someone would be able to give me access I said, and I was planning a weekly rather than daily report so as not to waste his, or Plutarch's, time.

He reluctantly agreed, and inputted Plutarch's office contact code into the palm gear as this at least had a text messaging system I could use. He showed me how to use it as he was concerned that I was a novice, but luckily I learned quickly. As he left I called him back and asked if I could send a quick message to Katniss using his video com. He let me do so, but my message was cold and factual and I regretted sending it immediately. I really wanted to tell her I missed her already, if I had done so I would have added that I would be back soon, and I couldn't say that to her, not yet.

I slept the restless strange sleep that perhaps only the after effects of Tristar can provide – no dreams – just whirls of colour pulsating through the night. I woke up to hear the sound of Marcus hollering on the door impatiently.

'Are you sure you won't need me? he asked. 'You must hurry or you will be late for the first train!' I told him it would be fine and made a conscious effort to get ready efficiently and assured him I was competent with the palm gear. I had little luggage with me, all that I needed would be waiting in for me under my own name at the stations. He escorted me, just to make sure I was really going I think, and then I took my seat on the train. First on the list was District 1. I was due to meet the mayor. I used the palm gear to message him that there had been a change if plan, I was heading to District 4. I likewise cancelled all other meetings. I noticed I got a few replies to say that my cancellations had been noted and turned off my palm gear. If Plutarch seriously meant what he said, that he wanted an ordinary person's honest opinion, he wasn't going to get it from someone on a guided tour. I intended to do my work thoroughly, but in my own way. That's partly why I changed the schedule around as to what District I would visit when as I didn't want interference. Maybe it was a hangover from the past, but I didn't want my movements tracked. Plutarch, I understood, would not care how the work was done as long as it was done well. Besides, I wanted to visit the home District of Finnick, a friend who had paid with his life in protecting Katniss and me. It was a debt I could never repay. Though we had kept in touch with Annie with photographs and letters, we had never met up in person since the end of the war, and I wanted to see her now, for some closure.
District 4 looked as beautiful as Finnick had told us. I had left cold grey skies in 12, but here the skies were blue and the wind warm. The train circled the coast at speed but I could see how the sea reflected back the blue light and was bordered by sandy beaches and rocky outcrops. When I disembarked, I noticed the station was pristine, but amongst the video boards were some printed posters drawing attention to government cuts, or bearing information about the next anti-government protest meeting. I shuddered, this was the discontent Katniss had feared. I would not tell her about that I thought...then had to check myself that I may never have a discussion with her on those topics again. However, as I walked away I saw a young couple stop and look at the poster and dictate a reminder to themselves to attend the meeting into their palm gear. Isn't it right, I thought that people can feel free to gather and protest, if they wish? It's impossible for all government policies to please everyone and here the posters are freely displayed in what must be the busiest concourse into the District. I realised that signs of protest were a triumphant sign of change, and nothing to be feared at all. I made my way through the District, talking to businesses, local people and fisherman, asking what their problems were, and what they took pride in. Mostly they were happy, but overall there was a tendency to believe they didn't get a fair trade with other districts, that their products were undervalued. Some lamented that young people were drifting away to District 1 and the Capitol in particular, and felt that the government needed to encourage more visitors to the area to enhance their businesses. I studied my data manual to link the information together and then used my palm gear to look up Annie Odair.

She was at home and was excited to meet with me, and asked me to come round straight away. Annie looked almost the same as I last saw her all those years ago, not much after her wedding day. Time had been kind to her. Her hair was long and wavy but she looked more assured. Her home had a magnificent view across the sea, and was simply furnished, with decorative items made from sun bleached driftwood, eroded bottles and other distorted objects which I suspected had been washed ashore. I noted to myself that this home was not part of a Victor's Village – that had probably held too painful memories for her. One of the last times I saw Annie I had been recovering from my high jacking, and I apologised if my behaviour had ever been out of turn. She was soft spoken, but adamant that no wrong had been done. She reminisced about her wedding to Finnick, and it was clear that it was a moment of joy for her, and her enduring love was evident and she expressed no sadness that her marriage was so brutally cut short. She seemed to concentrate only on the good. I looked at the photos she handed me of herself and her son together. And though it was probably impertinent, I couldn't help but ask her, if it was their son who had made the difference to how she felt now. She looked at me with those eyes Finnick said could see right into his soul and said to me, their son Gawain made her happy every day, he was so like his father in every way. She loved him more than words could express. But the reason she was able to be happy and love at all was because of Finnick. He had made her whole, and even though she had lost him all those years ago she lived her life with hope and love because that is what he would have wanted.

Aware of how I had treated Katniss recently, I had no reply to that, and sensing my awkwardness Annie changed the conversation. We had only been making small talk for a few more minutes as I looked around the room when Gawain, ran in from the beach, laughing. He was a tall blonde boy of about 15. There was no mistaking who his father was. It was clear that he had that perfect smile that would break hearts, or mend them, just like Finnick. Running up behind him was a man, a little younger than Annie, perhaps 30 years old, clearly from the District but with a darker complexion. Not noticing me, he bounded over to Annie and hugged her and kissed her. Your boy is too strong a swimmer for me now! He beat me again! I feel like an old man!' He laughed, pretending to pant. Gawain plonked on the sofa next to his mother and laughed 'You owe me a credit,' he said. The man flipped him a coin from his pocket. At that point he noticed me, standing partially obscured by one of the sculptures that adorned the room. Annie introduced us – he knew me by name, and Annie explained this was her husband to be, Rafe. She seemed to me to be the very opposite of the old Annie I had met all those years ago. But perhaps this new Annie I saw now was the one Finnick had known of old, before she was damaged by the Capitol. He would
have been incredibly proud of her. It was clear that she and Rafe were very happy and relaxed together, and Annie said both Katniss and I must attend their wedding next year. I said goodbye and feeling conflicted in my emotions took myself down to the sea.

On the one hand I was pleased to learn that one could be so in love with someone, as I knew was the case with Annie and Finnick, yet be able to find love again. It made me think that Katniss may be able to move on, find someone who deserved her. On the other hand, I knew that Annie had been damaged and delicate, yet seemed to have put the horrors behind her. Both Katniss and I - who appeared outwardly strong - still carried the burden of the a Games and the War with us, more than we perhaps could admit even to ourselves. Why was that so? I wanted to assume that it was down to the the power of love Annie had for her child as I had told Katniss for so many years that that was the magic, the redeeming love a child could bring to us. But Annie seemed to suggest that it was her love with Finnick that had been enough to heal her so long ago.

I stayed longer than I had scheduled in the District, spending an extra night in the town and walking on the beach at dawn and dusk. I thought of all the tributes who were reaped from their home towns for all those years and pitted against others. As citizens we were encouraged to think everyone was different in order to encourage divisiveness but it was very clear to me we were all the same.

My next stop was District 7 where I investigated the logging industry. This area need revitalising too and as I spoke with some of the managers who showed me around I suggested building closer links with 12. They currently send us wood for our buildings, but more people should come too. Our craftspeople could learn from them, and they from us, developing both industries. I visited some of the plantations, and although most of the trees were evenly spaced, quick growing pines, I knew Katniss would have been interested to hear the different birdsong and to see the giant sequoias I was shown that must have been older than Panem itself.

The next District was 2 and here I really had to listen to the people – as this was the site of the mountain that was destroyed in the war, with little industry created to replace it this was where I heard the most vociferous discontent. However I could see that money was being spent here so needed to check with Plutarch about what plans for this region were. I spent longer than I planned here too, so thought that I should really out of courtesy contact Plutarch now, to tell him I was enjoying the work but would need longer to do it properly.

However something else was clear to me. I realised my plan to leave Katniss had been nothing of the sort. I just needed some time to myself to draw a line between what I thought I wanted and what I really knew to be true. Visiting the beach at District 4 had reminded of the time I had told Katniss if she died and I lived I would have nothing. That was true then and now, for I was nothing without her. I realised over the years I had become absorbed with the idea of having a child because I thought that would make all our past fade away, that we would ourselves be renewed. But being preoccupied with this idea I had been ignoring all that I already had. I hadn't been loving Katniss properly, and that wasn't love at all. I realised that what I really wanted was not to imagine what life could be, but to live in the life we had, together. I felt the weight fall away from me. All I wanted was Katniss, no more than that, for that was everything.

So buoyed by these positive feelings, I dared to make my call to Plutarch. The District administrators in 2 connected me directly. I had been out of contact, save for brief memos for 9 days, had rebuffed the assistant who had been assigned to me and had gone completely off schedule. However even so, perhaps too used to being in charge of things myself, I had not expected the direct tone in Plutarch's voice. 'Peeta, you have to go home immediately.'
Peeta had been gone to the Capitol for but one day – we have been apart for longer, when I visited my mother or when I went camping on my own Districts but not often. And now it seems so long already. Our argument made me uncomfortable, but more than that I saw a sadness in his eyes, a regret in his touch, that made me fearful. I knew I was going to find these two weeks very difficult. There was a knot in my stomach, a physical pain caused from being without him.

My cold was getting worse, and the weather looked heavy and grey. I might have ordinarily thought about postponing the preparatory trip, but had never done so before. With Peeta away, I wanted to keep busy. I was too conscious of his absence at home. I had already planned a route, but wanted to take in some extra supplies to the base – this was to be an extension of the teenagers’ outdoor experience, so I wanted to make sure I had medical supplies for most eventualities with me – I didn't want them to have a negative experience. I also wanted to check that the areas where I had selected for camping remained bear free – these further afield destinations were less well known to me so, although I was pretty sure they were safe, I needed the most up to date information when being responsible for the safety of others. So the day after Peeta had gone to the Capitol, I left on my reconnaissance trip. My only contact with Peeta in that time had been brief, it didn't seem like him – a video com message he left while I was at work, telling me he was going on a tour of the Districts and may not be able to be in touch because of his schedule. I half wished that he had not been in touch at all.

The beginning of the hike was uneventful, as I covered land well known to me. I had stopped and talked with Columbine before I reached the woods - she was returning home with Hamnet after seeing to the animals just after dawn. 'You don't look yourself,' she said gently. I explained to her that I was fine, and that Peeta had gone away to The Capitol for a bit. I think she sensed those two statements did not fit very well. 'If you need anything, any company just pop in to us,' she said kindly as she took her son by the hand and waved goodbye... Apart from them I saw a couple of people out hiking for pleasure a few miles from town but no one else. My pace was a little slower than usual, my cold was having an effect on my breathing, and I made extra stops to boil some water and drink something warm, which helped. The air was misty at higher levels which made visibility deteriorate earlier than I predicted, so I had not made it to my first base before I needed to stop for the night. I was used to camping out though so settled for the night somewhere new. I was beginning to feel quite hot so kept most of my blankets as pillows and just lay a thin covering over me. I had built my bivouac rather hastily but managed to fall asleep quickly as I was so tired. I kept waking in the night. The bivouac was shoddily and the night had brought rain, which had soaked through my sheets. In the dark, I was uneasy, feeling sure I heard something – an animal treading heavily, but in the distance? Surely there could be no bears here? Though it was not yet sun up, I gathered my things together and made my way as quietly as I could through the trees. I felt the early morning rain on my face which helped to cool my body which I realised had grown uncomfortably feverish. I stopped: the only sounds I could hear were my own feet that were growing increasingly heavy, my head felt fuzzy and my ears were pained, distorting sounds. I should have turned back but thought I must be close to the base now? I did not want my trip to be wasted and so forced myself onwards. But halfway through the day I realised I wasn't sure where I was so decided the best thing to do was to get to higher ground so I could have a good view, and plan a route back as I didn't feel well at all now. My head was thumping and I felt giddy every time I bent down. I couldn't seem to walk for more than 20 minutes at a time, before I needed to rest. I kept telling myself not to go to sleep but I couldn't help it. I must have done this 3 or 4 times. It was growing dusky, but luckily it was not raining today. It wasn't late but I knew I had to make camp for the night. I was seldom ill for long at home, so in the morning I would go straight back to recover. I was glad Peeta wasn't at home or he would worry that I was late. I didn't have any appetite but I needed some of my medical supplies I had brought with me. I reached into my
pack—but they were gone. I must have left them behind at my last stop. My tin cup was gone and one of my blankets too. Luckily I still had one blanket left. I would just lie here for the night, and look at the stars. Maybe Peeta is looking at them too?

I don't know how long I slept... I woke up and saw the day light sky – still grey and dark, but daylight all the same. I closed my eyes again. Suddenly, I saw a bear. Was it a dream? A big male brown bear rustling through the leaves, he stopped when he picked up my scent. He looked hungry and began to increase his pace. I reached for my bow, I would have to be quick, it would take more than one arrow to fell this beast. But my bow was not there. The bear was within striking distance of me, if this is a dream I want to wake up now. I tried to scream but no sound left my lips. I started to run, leaving all of my belongings behind, but the bear ran too, faster, faster. I closed my eyes waiting for the killer blow but it did not come. I opened my eyes and there was Peeta standing by a clearing in the trees. The bear was gone. Peeta looked as he did years ago, boyish again, was it really him? I smiled back at him and waved. But he didn't see me, and turned and walked away into the trees. I could not run after him. My feet felt like they were stuck to the ground. I waved my arms trying to free myself but that only made me sink further and further into the earth. Then nothing...

All I felt was a sensation of drifting, floating - no someone was carrying me, gently in their arms. 'Lucky you left such a mess, sweetheart, or we may never have found you.' I heard other voices mingling together behind me, but I recognised this one. It was Haymitch and he had come to take me home.

I have a vague remembrance of being placed in my bed, my head was heavy and every movement swirled and was magnified. I saw glimpses of various faces as my eyes opened and then closed. Columbine, the Doctor, my mother? There were attempts to make me drink, but I couldn't keep it down. Then I heard Haymitch's voice again talking urgently to someone. Columbine maybe? 'Where the hell is Peeta, why is he taking so long. We have to get him here. Now.' And then I couldn't listen any more, I felt so tired and weak. I thought if this is it, let me go and I felt happy that it was over that I didn't have to try anymore. I heard Prim's voice calling for Buttercup like she used to, and I wanted to call out and tell her I was here too. But I wanted to stay a little longer, I would just say goodbye, then I would come. 'Buttercup!' Prim called again, and I wanted to turn and go but instead of calling out to her I struggled to call out a different name 'Peeta' I whispered hoarsely. And instead of Prim's voice I heard that sweet voice I love so much. 'I'm here Katniss, I'm here, always'

I didn't know what was real and what was a dream. I opened my eyes briefly and saw the sun through my window. Peeta was sitting by our bed and jumped up, taking my hands. 'Katniss' he whispered anxiously but I was too weak to respond and closed my eyes. I felt a soft wet cloth stroking my forehead and wrists, and went to sleep. I woke again, it was dark now but I felt more awake. I saw the form of someone slumped asleep in the chair. This time I tried to reach a glass of water next to me, but could not move my body. It took a huge effort just to move my arm and being so awkward all I achieved was to push the glass along, making it clatter to the floor. The sleeper rose, it was Peeta, and he quickly refilled the glass propping me up gently and trying to get me to take some sips. I managed one or two then fell back exhausted. Another time I heard my mother's voice, but she looked different – her hair was tied back in a way that was unfamiliar to me and I didn't like it...she was sponging my forehead and I asked her: 'Wil I be late for school?' And she told me no, it was all right, there was no school today. Then I was walking, pleased to be outside at last. At first I trod upon stubbled ashen ground with grass struggling to grow in thin clumps and even the thistles fighting to raise their heads. Then a wood: my footsteps were unusually heavy yet I could hear no sound of birds or leaves but could see through the trees to a murky light. Here was a marsh, I hesitated at its borders not knowing how deep my feet would sink, but I walked on. The water and mud were cool on my feet which I noticed were without shoes. Then the earth became dry again, the stones did not hurt my feet and I seemed to continue with purpose. All was flat and bare around me except in the distance I could see one house built of
wood ahead. As I approached I saw it was my old house in The Seam. It looked as it always did, drab and brownish grey, but with newer planks used along the windows and doors in an attempt to make it better and a porch around it which I did not recognise, with flowers carved upon it. Then I heard some pretty little wind chimes, made from wood and shiny metal. Twinkling irregular shapes of coloured glass also hung from the porch and caught the light from the sun which was emerging from the gloomy sky. I had to put my hand to my eyes to see who it was who was opening the door. His ashy blonde hair tumbled over his forehead, and his eyes turned from blue to hazel as if reflecting the colours of the glass twirling above him. The corners of his mouth began to lead into that sweetest smile that I know so well and I smiled back as I approached him, just knowing he was there, waiting for me. I felt that my quest was over, I was home. I held out my hands to him and Peeta took hold of me, drawing me inside.

More episodes followed each was blurry – I could barely keep my eyes open, let alone speak or move. Then one night - was it the next night? - I can't tell... I woke up and felt much better. The dreamlike state was gone and I felt restless though my body was too weak to move. This time when I looked to the chair I could see it was not Peeta, but Haymitch. 'Hay... ' My voice creaked, I couldn't even get out two syllables – but it was enough to make Haymitch startle and come over to me. 'Hey Sweetheart, would you like some water?' I nodded. With as much care as he showed when cradling his children, Haymitch helped me sit up and propped a pillow behind me. I managed a few sips from the glass.

'How are you feeling? You gave us quite a scare,' he said, feeling my forehead and looking relieved. 'I'll go get Peeta, I just sent him to get some sleep'. He went to make a move but I succeeded in reaching his arm as he stood up.

'No...' I managed to say, 'He's been with me?' I questioned. The water and sitting up made it easier for me to talk. 'Of course sweetheart,' he replied as if it was obvious.

'What... happened?' I asked trying to make sense of how awful I felt. Haymitch told me that I had been missing in the forest for five days – although no one had noticed for three. Haymitch chastised me for keeping to myself so much... It was Columbine who had grown curious, seeing the house quiet and knowing that I was planning to make just a short trip to the forest. Haymitch said he had feared I had been attacked by a bear and gathered a party to look for me. It was lucky I had trained people as trackers over the years, he told me, and lucky I had made such a mess, leaving a trail of my belongings. He tried to laugh, but instead started to stifle tears.

'It was touch and go for days Katniss, you had been outside too long, nothing the doctors could do helped.' Tears began to well in his eyes but he tried hide them from me, rubbing them away with his sleeve. 'Children should never go first,' he stammered. 'We thought we were going to lose you.' He held me close and I pictured him as a young man being burdened with the fate of 23 sets of children he could not save. I pictured too how in the years since my own survival he had, whilst fighting his own demons, as far as I could possibly imagine replaced the father's love which I had lost all those years ago with his own. Like an ungrateful child I had treated him badly over the years, but like a father he had always forgiven me. He wiped his tears which had now fallen freely down his cheeks, feeling perhaps that he had said too much, whilst I regretted that I could not say enough. He insisted on getting Peeta, and left me sitting up.

Peeta came in looking worn, tired and anxious. 'Katniss, how are you?' He seemed wary to take hold of me.

'I'm okay,' I said weakly.

He helped me to the bathroom, and I could hardly recognise my face in the mirror – my hair was tied back plainly, revealing a hollowed face. My body, clothed in a vest and underwear, looked crumpled and thin. I tried to walk some more but could not, so Peeta carried me to our bed. Someone, Haymitch I guess, had already changed the sheets, and their freshness made me feel better. Peeta lay me on the bed and covered me up. He asked if two sheets were enough, and I said it was. He went to sit on the chair but I beckoned him to come in the bed next to me. He of course did as I asked, as he has always done, and put his arms round me. It felt right and I almost
fell asleep. But then I remembered a horrible feeling I had had in my restless dreams that Peeta had left me and I felt distressed again. Peeta calmed me, and reassured me it was really him. And he asked me if I there was anything more he could to make me feel better. So I asked him, for I really wanted to know, just then I wasn't sure ... I asked him: 'You love me, real or not real?' He answered without hesitation and with emphasis so I understood 'I love you Katniss, it's real.' So I curled into him and replied 'I love you too' Such simple words we each still longed to hear from each other still after all these years. How easy, how very easy it was to say them.
Recovery

It was a few days more before I was even able to walk by myself and even then it was more of a shuffle, holding on to the furniture as I made my way round the room. When I removed the cotton nightdress that covered me to put on something clean I saw my naked body and traced the outline of my ribs and hips that seemed more prominent, I didn't recognise this body, it looked weaker and thinner than even in my childhood. Peeta came in, and helped me dress, looking concerned. 'It's time you got outside,' he said. He was right, I longed to feel the fresh air on my skin. He carried me downstairs through the lounge and into the garden, and helped me onto a chair, which had a cushion ready for me and covered me with a blanket. He went inside and brought me out a bowl of thin soup and a slice of bread covered too thickly in butter. 'You have to try to eat a little more, for me Katniss', he suggested and I nodded. I fed myself as much as I could, but when my arm grew tired he offered to help me, and spoon by spoon I managed to finish nearly the whole bowl. Later he took me by the arm and walked me round the beautiful garden he had created for us over the years, and he pointed out how the evening primroses were in flower, their stems looking so tall, strong and upright, with their delicate paper thin yellow petals. As the evening warmth began to subside, Peeta helped me back inside our home.

So it continued, day by day. I managed to move more freely by myself, indoors and outside. Peeta noticed the slightest sign of progress, such as when I was interested enough to plait my hair and managed to do it, or when I changed the cut flowers in the vase on the kitchen table by myself. He was proud of me, and so was I.

I was seldom by myself, which was a new experience for me, but I actually enjoyed the company. All the visitors seemed preoccupied with bringing me food. Columbine came and sat with me in the garden bringing Lettie and Penn, the second youngest Abernathy who is about 5. Lettie gave me some sweet biscuits they had baked and I nibbled one or two, thanking them. Even Ariane popped it to see me, giving me some fruit and one of her paintings. She found it difficult last year, as did everyone next door, when Sae passed away. But they all knew the last 15 years of her life had been so different, so happy for her, they all took comfort in that. After Sae passed away Columbine told me how grateful she was that she had managed to have these years with her old Aunty. She said over the years she couldn't remember a day that went by that Sae didn't mention that she always knew I was special and she thanked me for making her Aunt happy. It made me start to realise even then that I had always thought of the lives that had been lost, the damage that had been done in the war. I had lost sight of what had been won.

In spite of our steady flow of visitors, mostly it was just me and Peeta together and I knew I couldn't have loved anything better than spending time with him. At first I knew he was avoiding talking about certain things, but as I was growing stronger I wanted to really understand what had happened before I was ill as I didn't want him to keep anything from me. So one evening when Peeta was just finishing putting away his paints – he's been painting many garden scenes lately – and I had been reading some poetry I closed the book and asked him, 'Peeta, when you went to The Capitol, were you going to leave me?'

Plutarch made arrangements for me to go back to 12 directly. He told me Katniss was sick, and I was needed back home immediately. I appreciated it was serious. The journey home took too long, but there was nothing I could do to bring me back to Katniss any faster. When I arrived at 12, I ran as quickly as I could – I must have left all my belongings on the train for I was unencumbered. When I reached the door it opened, Haymitch was there, frowning darkly. 'About damn time,' he thundered. 'She's upstairs..for now,' he said, pushing me through the door. I didn't like the ominous tone in his voice. I raced upstairs to our room and saw Katniss on the bed.
Her mother was standing by her side, sponging her forehead. Katniss looked so peaceful, like a child, but her skin was flushed.

‘How long has she been like this?’ I asked.

‘It's three days since they found her...’ her mother told me, without taking her eyes off her child. ‘And how is she...?’ I asked again, but I already feared the answer.

She told me the fever would not break, Katniss had been fitting and had pulled the drip out of her arm. They had needed to sedate her – perhaps that was a good sign - perhaps she was getting some fight back. Her mother turned to me, ‘It didn't seem like Katniss,’ she said, ‘I thought she was going to give up.’

Throughout the next few days I stayed by Katniss side, the Doctor and Haymitch filled me in on what had happened and about Katniss' condition. She had been very weak when they found her, and lack of equipment in the district meant delays in her care. Haymitch was the most vocal – cursing me when he pulled me out of the bedroom when Katniss' mother took over from me. He said he wanted to know where the hell I had been when even Plutarch, who practically runs the country couldn't track me down. But then when I tried to tell my story – which would have seemed self indulgent anyway – he said actually he didn't want to know. He said he once told Katniss that if she lived a thousand lives she wouldn't deserve me, now he thought it was the other way round. And he added when -if- Katniss pulls through this I better make damn sure I clear things up. 'If you have any problems, you talk about it. You don't run away,' he yelled. I didn't contradict him. He was right. I wouldn't hold back from Katniss anymore.

At last the fever seemed to subside, I was there when Katniss called my name, the first word she had spoken in days, but she drifted off again too soon – I don't know if she knew I was there. It wasn't until two nights later that she gained consciousness properly, Haymitch was beside her, which seemed fair since it had been he who had saved her, after all. But when I came to her side it was as if years had fallen away, she looked so young. And I knew that if I could have it all again, I just wanted to be the man whom she deserved.

It took weeks for Katniss to regain her strength, she was eating so little. But everyone rallied round – the house has never been so busy. Each of us coaxed her to eat a little more, walk a little more. I don't think Katniss knew how much people cared about her. Eventually her mother felt confident enough to leave her in my care. Haymitch seemed to continue to prowl around me like a wolf protecting his cub, but conceded that what Katniss really needed was love as much as she needed the soup which she was just managing to eat by herself. So he retreated too.

Katniss seem to enjoy our walks in the garden and we spent more time together than we had in years. Jenna and Lilo had the bakery running by themselves and told me they didn't want to see me there till at least the end of the month. So I went back to painting, spending many days and evenings in the garden as that's where Katniss wanted to be. My best work though was of Katniss as she slept gently by the fire. Her unadorned face, beginning to get back its colouring was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She was getting healthier, though not nearly back to herself. We were able to just sit together, talking and simply being together as if we were starting all over again, but it was better. I was actually glad when she asked me if I had planned to leave her, as I didn't want anything to be unsaid anymore.

I told her, directly, yes, I had wanted to see if I could leave her, to see if I could live without her. Katniss did not look surprised or resentful. I added that I had been foolish and immature – I told her about my 'work' for Plutarch, and couldn't guess what he must think of me now. My descriptions of how I had completely gone against my schedule actually made Katniss laugh. I then told her of some of the things I'd seen, the political posters, the regeneration, and Annie. And I told her that I thought the world was good, or at least good enough. She listened and listened as I talked on and on about myself. I told her that I knew she had never wanted children. But I was the opposite, I had always pictured being a father. Whereas I could compromise on when to have
them, how many, her 'never' could not be breached and for me it had become a physical barrier between us that I couldn't tear down. She could not compromise without compromising herself, I understood that now. And I didn't want her to, not anymore. Seeing Haymitch's growing family so close next door had made it difficult for me. But even before my trip had been called short I knew, more than ever, what was important to me, to us. I told her being apart from her made me realise that I didn't want to have children any more. It wasn't simply that I wanted what she wanted. I wasn't making a sacrifice. We wanted the same thing. I realised now that what I felt for her, just her, even as I boy was true. She was everything. She turned away from me to look past the flowers in the garden to the distance beyond, and I was worried that I had said too much. So I emphasised that going to The Capitol gave me space, to think. I assured her I would have come back to her anyway, and I had not just returned because of her illness. She said she understood, and that it had been right for me to go. She just wished she hadn't been such a fool and gone to the woods when she was already unwell. She said she was pleased to be able to talk together more like we used to and that we shouldn't hide things from each other anymore. I still felt the way I had undertaken my trip to The Capitol had been wrong though, and didn't want to think about it again in the future. So I decided to tell her everything now.

'Katniss,' I murmured, trying to gain my confidence. 'When I went to The Capitol I went to a bar....' I hesitated. 'What was it like? she asked. 'Like the Capitol used to be. Strange drinks, strange women.' I answered, truthfully. 'And did you like it?' She seemed to know where this was going. 'At first I didn't, but then...' I stopped myself, wondering if I should have started this conversation. But Katniss had always treated me as if I could do no wrong, as if I was better than her and I wanted her to know that wasn't true. I had my own faults and weaknesses. It was she who made me a better man. 'Oh ....' she said, and looked away from me. 'I want you to know-' I added quickly, but she interrupted me before I could finish. 'It's okay, whatever you did... You are here with me now.' She lifted her eyes to mine and kissed me so delicately just once on my lips. For a moment I closed my eyes, remembering her touch. 'But -' I tried again, but she stilled me with her lips again. 'It's okay....you don't need to say it, I understand.' She said this so very gently and put her finger to my lips. I realised that she believed that if I had been unfaithful to her it had been her fault, but she needed to know that wouldn't have been true. I had been reckless and stupid - the fault would have been all mine. But at least I hadn't betrayed her, in the end. 'No,' I managed to say, 'I didn't.... I couldn't ... Never.' Katniss breathed a heartfelt sigh and I could see she was trying to stop the tears that were starting to well up in her eyes. But I held her face in my hands and she let them fall. I kissed every one. 'I want you to know even then, all I wanted, all I could think about was you....' I told her what had happened and she laughed when I said how foolish I must have seemed when I let them talk about 'the boy with the bread' who was 'a legend' in The Capitol. I don't think we had ever laughed about anything to do with The Games before. I think finally, like Annie, we had managed to put it all behind us. I was glad I had told Katniss and so relieved she could forgive me, though she said there was nothing to forgive at all. But, she added, I probably shouldn't have one of those Tristar drinks again.

She asked for more details about my trip, and I filled her in as best I could - it seemed so long ago now. I was aware I had been talking on and on about the sea, the sky, the trees... all the things I said kept reminding me of her when I was away. Perhaps Katniss was asleep, I thought. Her head was leaning on my chest with her arms round me so I couldn't see her face. But when I stopped, she looked up at me. 'Yes,' she said, your problem is you are always thinking about me, always protecting me. When I am better, when I am feeling strong, we will talk.'
Renewal

It took a few weeks but eventually I began to realise I felt stifled in the house – I must be getting better. I wanted to surprise Peeta that I was getting stronger so got Haymitch to help me walk round The Village whenever Peeta went out, though that was rare. He didn't seem to want to let me out of his sight. So one morning when he lay sleeping next to me I crept down the stairs, I could manage them now, and not pausing to get dressed I just slipped Peeta's coat on and walked outside. I deliberately did not put on any shoes, wanting to feel the soft earth beneath me. How lovely to be free! The birds were singing in their chorus and I let out a laugh so happy to be outside with them. A mockingjay picked up the sound and carried it off, and I heard my laughter go over the houses and into the forest. I just wanted to quickly go to the forest boundary and see it- I would not be so foolish as to step inside its domain, I had no idea how long this burst of energy would last. So I quickened my pace, as much as I could, until I could see those old strong trees. How lucky I thought that the forest had not been damaged by the war, that it was not scarred, like people had been. But I stopped myself – I didn't want to become self absorbed in sadness like the old Katniss. I think my illness had changed me, or perhaps it was just the passing of time.... Peeta had shown me that living and loving was enough after all. Maybe it was because I finally accepted that I deserved to be loved by Peeta and I understood that the love I had to share was not just about protecting him or being united by our past, but really about giving him more than I thought I had in me to give. I realised I had to return home quickly, Peeta would miss me. I just managed to get through the door, flung Peeta's coat on the hook and grabbed a piece of bread and began to stuff it in my mouth - rather too enthusiastically- because I heard Peeta running down the stairs. His hair was ruffled and his eyes bleary – I think he still spent hours in the night just watching over me as I often woke to see him doing so, and he would just stroke me back to sleep. 'There you are,' he said pleased to find me ' I'm glad you've got your appetite back' he added, smiling. I just nodded, my mouth over-full. 'I had a lovely dream, you were laughing,' he said. 'I think it's going to be a beautiful day.' If he noticed that my feet were muddy, he didn't say...

The day past happily, Peeta commented that I seemed to be making good progress, he joked that he would have no excuse to avoid the bakery much longer. However there was truth in what he said, this extended period of togetherness was going to have to come to an end soon. But I didn't want to go back to the feeling that we would take each other for granted again. Somehow there seemed to be a new understanding between us that made me believe we would not. So I asked Peeta if he would come with me into the forest soon – maybe we could take a picnic and see how far I could walk? Peeta readily agreed that was a good idea and we both looked forward to it.

That evening I chose a poem to read to Peeta – Plutarch was still sending him books, he had apparently forgiven him his waywardness, though his assistant Marcus had not. I read one to him that he did not know, one I had read to myself the day he had gone away - 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.' It tells of a knight travelling through nightmarish landscapes to find the eponymous tower.

'Trust you to find such a dark tale,' he teased.
'I thought you would like it ....' I offered
'Grottesqueness and woe'? What was it a 'suicidal throng' ? I think we could both do with something lighter,' he laughed.
'Well, we can both be quite serious sometimes Peeta," I protested.
'Not anymore, life's too short. Anyway what was the knight trying to find in the tower anyway?' he asked.
'I don't know, I think maybe it was something inside himself he was trying to find really.' I suggested.
'Well it's unlucky for him that he didn't enjoy the journey,' he said and he pulled the book from my hand and dropped it to the floor, squeezing me, making me laugh and my toes curl. I was glad he
wasn't treating me like a delicate flower anymore. He picked me up and carried me upstairs – there was no need to anymore, I could manage them perfectly myself, but I liked being held in his strong arms, and I think Peeta knew it.

'No more poetry for you,' he said 'You need an early night tonight, we are going to have a busy day in the forest soon.'

We set off fairly early as Peeta thought I would have more strength at the beginning of the day. He prepared a picnic, carried the basket and held my hand as we walked. I told him there was a specific route I wanted to take him on so when we entered the forest I lead the way. From our entry point we walked till we reached the point where the path that had lead from the town used to start. The old schoolhouse used to back onto it, though the new one had been built elsewhere. 'Didn't there used to be a path down here?' Peeta asked. Although we had been banned from entering the forest I knew teenage boys had been the ones to dare each other to go down here after school if the electricity was off, and that had been the extent of his knowledge of the forest until after the war.

'Yes,' I explained, adding that this was the path where they had found the bodies of the fourteen children, shot in the back, after the war, did he remember? Of course he did, he had gone to their funeral. Some of the children had been identified by their clothes and all had been given individual graves in the town as a memorial, not part of the mass graves that loss of 9000 people had necessitated. There had been an enquiry - amongst all the senseless deaths I think people wanted closure which could only be found by knowing what had happened to these poor children shot in the back as they tried to escape into the forest: a place of which they would have been frightened yet tried to claim as sanctuary. Details were vague – survivors were few, so it seemed the circumstances would never be known. But one day a few months after the funeral a visitor came to town. He was one of our former peacekeepers, a friend to Darius called Phaedra. I did not know him well – but he had never stood out as being officious in his job. Besides if he had been Darius' friend I understood him to be one of the good ones. He didn't need to return to tell his story, but the fact that he had come back to tell it meant that every word of his story was accepted as the truth.

The Quarter Quell was being broadcast in the square. Thread ensured there was always a constant audience watching, so that scenes of an enthralled, or horrified town could be broadcast as required. The rest of the town went on with its business, be it down the mines or at school. When I fired my bow at the arena, bringing it crashing down, the power was cut and people ushered into their homes, as Gale had told me. There was scuffling and some people were shot making more of a commotion. Instead of going back to their homes, some people came out into the streets. The school teacher, Lidda Grey, tried to control some of her older pupils who were running out the front of the building. Phaedra was one of the peacekeepers nearby. He went over to talk to her to tell her to keep the children inside, he would escort the children to their homes when everything had settled down.

Outside one of the peacekeepers, Phaedra did not recognise him in his uniform so his name was unknown, was pushed by one of the older boys who was probably trying to get home. The peacekeeper shot him in the head. As another boy tried to tend to his friend, he too was shot. Phaedra hastened to Lidda to get inside and stay inside and tried to restrain the peacekeeper. But he in turn was restrained by two more. He saw the first enter the school and heard a round of shots. Then a pause. Breaking free he ran into the school and saw bodies of children of all ages on the floor. By the back door, as if trying to bar the exit was the body of Lidda Grey. Phaedra stepped over her body, the peacekeeper was not inside and some children were clearly missing. Through the door he went and could just see a child climbing over the fence and dropping down. The peacekeeper was just a few yards behind. Phaedra had lost his weapon in the scuffle, but ran after him. He reached the border to see the peacekeeper following the children who were running away. Phaedra made it to the fence, but the power flickered on and off, throwing him back. He lost precious moments, but, hearing shots, tried again to cross the fence, and got through. He
followed the path, and a few hundred yards in saw the first few bodies of the littlest children, shot in the back of the head. He went on, finding more bodies, which had dropped, one by one, like little dolls cast aside. He then caught sight of the peacekeeper, standing at the top of a hill. Ahead of him were four or five children, maybe ten or eleven years old. Then just before they were out of sight, perhaps they thought they had got away - he took perfect aim and shot every one of them down. He then casually turned back and shoved Phaedra who said he must have been standing in shock. 'Do your job better' the peacekeeper told him. Phaedra said he let him walk away - at that moment he could only think about taking one of the littlest children, a girl in a pale pink dress and carrying her back to her home. But seeing the peacekeeper climbing over the fence, swaggering away, he composed himself as much as he could. Phaedra ran quickly and crossing the fence ran at him knocking him to the ground. He had no weapon but used force he did not know he possessed and almost strangling him, managed to get the gun off him. He used it to smash the peacekeeper's helmet and his face, again and again. So even though he tried, he could not tell who this man had been- his face was unrecognisable and his voice had been unfamiliar. He gathered himself together and like all the other peacekeepers withdrew to safety as they were ordered to, so they could escape the oncoming onslaught which destroyed the district.

That was all we got to learn from Phaedra, as the following day his body was found hanging from a tree. He was buried within the town boundary, a little distance from the children's graves. There was some protest in the community, as people thought our former oppressors should not be remembered in this way. Others spoke in favour of him, and said that Phaedra had never done anything to harm anyone, and those fragments of families who had lost these children may find some peace in knowing what had happened, so he had shown courage in returning to tell his story. It was agreed then to bury him as a reminder that we would forgive but never forget. I don't know if I was the only one who wondered if perhaps the unknown peacekeeper who killed the children was in fact Phaedra himself. For we can all turn into monsters when surrounded by fear and violence, if we do not hold on to what is right and good, if we forget who we should be.

Peeta knew this story. What he did not know was that I had found them, but I told him now. I hadn't wanted to tell him before and I didn't go to the funeral, but there was no surprise in that. It was as if I wanted to keep that little secret pain inside me, so that there was a barrier Peeta could not reach, so I could still say I still hurt, because I wanted to hurt, I deserved to hurt. If I hadn't fired that arrow at the arena, these children would have lived. What I did do over the next few years was hack away at the brambles that lined the path, opening it out into a clearing. Deers and nature had done the rest, so now it was a little glade where wild flowers and long grass grew. I had seen people sitting here, oblivious to its past and was glad. As the land healed, perhaps I began to heal myself. This is what I wanted to share with Peeta. He was nervous, I could tell, that my thoughts would turn dark, that my sadness would return. But I put my finger to his lips to hush his concerns. I didn't hurt anymore. I deserved love now, I felt it and I could give it. I lead him through the grass and told him I wanted him to know everything I knew. Yes we both knew too much about terrible violence, but I wasn't going to carry it with me anymore. I was going to live my life as I wanted, with him. We didn't pause long in the glade, but Peeta said I had turned it into something beautiful.

We managed to walk on to the old quarry, which I used to visit many times with my father and where Cressida had first filmed the hanging tree song. But today it was just me and Peeta. We enjoyed our picnic and laughed together. Looking at the blue water and the tall white cliffs I thought how lucky we were to be able to share this place. We had been out longer than we anticipated and I moved away from the rocks to sit in the shade. Peeta lay a blanket down for me. 'Would you like to have a rest?' he asked, concerned.

I pulled him closer. 'No,' I said. 'I want you.'

Peeta was reluctant – briefly – he wondered if I was strong enough. But it was more than a month since my sickness began, since he had left for the Capitol. And I needed him, and he I could tell needed me. First we kissed and I realised how much I longed to have him, how much I wanted to
feel his touch. He took off his shirt and I caressed his body generously, so conscious of having been denied him for so long. I was self conscious though about my body, so Peeta just undid the buttons of my dress so I could feel his skin next to mine. I was more tired than I thought so Peeta took control. It felt so good that I couldn't stop myself from calling out. Peeta laughed when a mockingjay copied my cry and repeated it across the quarry. Peeta didn't last very long but neither he, nor I were disappointed, I just loved being with him. He lay back down next to me. 'Peeta,' I said , I have been thinking about what you told me.' He looked at me innocently, probably unprepared where this conversation was going. 'Are you really sure, that we want the same thing?' I asked.

He sat up. 'Of course. I told you, it's not an issue anymore. Not at all. I only want what you want, always.' He said that with complete conviction so I did not doubt him. 'Good. That makes it easier for me, because I have changed my mind about something,' I explained.

The look Peeta's face made me think that he now realised what I was saying. 'I have decided - it's not just what you said, but it's how I feel. I know I will be frightened and I know I won't make it easy for you... But if you still want to have a baby, what I really want is to have a baby with you,' I told him.

The look on his face was worth it. I knew he believed me. He kissed me and picked me up in his arms.

'Are you sure?' he asked

'Yes,' I kissed him, 'yes.'

'When you are better, when you are really better, we can talk about it,' he said joyfully between kisses.

'Well,' I said, I haven't taken my pills for a month so who knows, maybe it's too late for talking,' I said hoping to reassure him. He was however annoyed and cursed himself for not thinking. 'No Katniss, you're not well enough yet. We have to get your strength back first,' he insisted. I reassured him that it was unlikely I would get pregnant now, having been ill and just recently off my medication but I just wanted him to know I wasn't afraid anymore. It seemed to work as he kissed me again and his hands caressed me. With encouragement from me (I said I wasn't going home unless he did) he made love to me again, holding me much tighter, lasting much longer this time and I felt like this was the start of something new and so very beautiful between us.
Healing

The days I could spend with Katniss when she started to recover from her illness were some of the happiest I have had. Partly it was relief because I knew that I could have lost her and also because I had time to spend on the small things - cutting fresh flowers for her from the garden, making her her favourite food, just simple things. And I realised then that all of these things were nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with the games which had scarred us both for so long. I didn't have to look after her, heal her, love her because of those awful times. I did all things but just because I wanted to, she needed me to, like people anywhere may do for each other. It was nothing to do with Snow, Coin, war or pain. It was just me and Katniss.

I was concerned that Katniss did not look like her self, but she was determined and pushed herself to get better. I think she knew I was anxious and as she got better I made an effort to give her more space as I know she likes her independence. I saw Haymitch helping her to walk round The Village when I had to make an unexpected return home from the bakery and I asked him how she was getting on. Luckily I seemed to have redeemed myself in his eyes since my foolish trip to the city, and we are on friendly terms again. He told me that Katniss wanted to surprise me with her improvements, so we kept it between ourselves. And sure enough we found we did have world enough and time for her to to get better, and for us to come together again.

I put thoughts of having children behind me. I meant what I said to Katniss. I had carried an idea of self sacrifice with me for too long, it had nearly driven us apart. I regretted ever keeping that barrier between us. I think it was something I kept buried from all those years ago when I loved her and she did not love me. When she didn't want to be manipulated by Snow, when she had feelings for Gale. I thought that if we had a child together it would be a sign to her, to me, to everyone that we were equals, that we had made that special commitment to each other. It only took a short time apart from Katniss to make me realise that we were already committed, that I loved Katniss and she loved me. I could only regret that in the previous months I could have caused her any pain at all.

When Katniss suggested we venture into the forest together I was pleased - I didn't know how much she could manage, but just being there would make her stronger. The forest is part of her identity, and we have spent many deep and intimate and quiet and peaceful times there which in the months before my trip to The Capitol I had tried to forget. She used to take me there to learn more about the world she knew: the sounds, scents and sights of the forest where she could retreat from the pain that lingered within her.

Years ago we used to go on walks and explore further than we intended. Knowing we could not get back in daylight we would find or make shelter as best we could - delighting in being irresponsible, vivacious, free. She would make love to me then as if she was some dryad, born of the forest. It was her realm and I was her willing captive and every touch had magic in it.

Then when work increased at the bakery I would sometimes have to set the first batch of dough to prove in the still hours of the day, when everyone else was sleeping. It meant catching a few hours rest, then waking and going to the bakery before handing over to Jenna or Lilo and coming home. To keep me company, and so that we were both on similar waking and sleeping patterns, Katniss would often come with me. She'd mess around in the bakery and make shapes with the dough which, in order not to offend my customers, I could never bake - just to amuse me and help us stay awake. We used to laugh together a lot then. At the darkest part of the day, my work done, we would take a detour before returning home so we could stop in the forest. Katniss would ask me to be rough with her then in the dark, and I would drive into her with as much force as I could, as much force as she wanted, against a tree or as she knelt on the ground in front of me. We were in
a different world, just us, we had no fears as long as we were together. The only sounds then were the words we said to each other, our gasps and cries. The only scents were the sweet secretions of our bodies and the only sights were our curves and lines in the moonlight as we became one. If there was anything else - animals watching us from their dark leafy sanctuary - we were oblivious to them.

Some days we would just walk together quietly, we would take picnics, books, paint and simply enjoy the fact that we could do so. We appreciated the sun, the frost, the rain - the tranquility of nature in all its forms - anything that suggested we were here, from one season to the next, together. Then in the months leading up to my misguided trip to The Capitol I put aside everything that the forest meant to us. I had begun to seek out friends in town rather than spend time with Katniss. I began to think of the forest as a rival for Katniss' time and affection, when the only obstacle was me. I turned down her attempts to spend time together on camping trips or walks through it. I forgot all that we had done, all that we had said to each other in the forest in the past.

But now I had a chance to put that behind me, to help Katniss reclaim her part in the forest and to show her that it was part of my life too. I thought that Katniss would probably only manage a couple of hours walking, and only at a slow pace, but I packed a picnic all the same. Clearly her support from Haymitch had helped, and when she told me there was somewhere specific she wanted to go she walked at a steady pace that made me think she was stronger than I anticipated. But I soon realised she was just trying to get the hardest part over. She showed me the place that she had kept hidden from me - where she had found the little children and I felt I had let her down by not finding that in her. Everything I knew that hurt her - the deaths of our friends, her sister, the betrayal of Coin, the persecution by Snow - I could help her with. This place was unknown to me, so I could not help. But then I saw that through the regeneration of the area, the grass, the flowers that maybe it was now all over - Katniss had healed herself.

The quarry was beautiful, and that is where we stopped for lunch because, though we walked slowly, Katniss was managing the exercise well, renewed by the beauty of nature around her. I knew the high cliffs of the quarry echoed and as I watched her I was tempted to ask her to sing for me so I could hear her beautiful voice repeated as if in a stadium, but it would be just for me. But I didn't ask because I knew she had sung a song here before, and all of that was behind us now.

We reached the hottest part of the day so I knew it was wise for Katniss to rest before we walked back home so I laid a blanket down for her. I didn't know that Katniss was ready to renew our intimacy together, and I told her we should not. But I could see she doubted herself and lacked confidence, she said it was because her body looked too thin and weak, she did not recognise it. I wondered though if I had damaged her self esteem because I had confessed to her that I had - foolishly - tried to leave. So I let her skin touch mine, put my lips to hers. I told her again and again that I loved her, that she made me feel alive and she told me the same and that she had felt her heart break when she feared she was losing me, but it was mended now. I made love to her with such intensity in my mind and with my body that it was all over far too quickly. Even so I thought nothing could or would match that ecstatic feeling I had of finding each other again. But when Katniss told me she wanted us to have a child together I realised there was even more.

I knew at once that Katniss truly meant what she said. It wasn't a suggestion. It wasn't 'not yet', it would really happen. But I knew she wasn't ready now. I was angry with myself that I did not think of any consequences in the few moments previously when I had taken Katniss into my arms. But Katniss told me it would be all right. She had such conviction in her voice and continued to talk to me of what our future would hold - a future I had wanted for so long. So I didn't take much persuading when she said she wanted me to make love to her again. This time I took everything slowly, I made every move count. I knew it was not the right time for Katniss to have a baby, and I did not doubt the sincerity of her words that we would have a child one day, but in my mind I imagined that the intimacy I was sharing with Katniss right then, in that special place, could lead
to us creating a new life that we both wanted. And that was perfect.
Love's Philosophy

It was nearly three months since I had returned from The Capitol. Nearly three months since I came as close to losing Katniss as I ever had. Only this time it would have been my fault. I had tried to leave her and she had known it. She wouldn't have made her trip into the forest being when she was ill if I hadn't gone. But although I still couldn't quite forgive my stupidity, Katniss had. No, it was more than that, she even lifted me up with the amount of love she had shown me, and she had promised to give me that which I had always wanted since the first time I made love to her, to have a child together.

But she was surprised that it was her, not me, who was in a hurry to start trying to conceive. She thought her body might be damaged after all by the injuries she suffered in the games and in the war, and that somehow she might be punished for delaying so long, which I told her was wrong. But for me, it was as if everything that had burdened me in recent years had fallen away. I had complete faith, once Katniss told me that she wanted a child with me, that it would be so. So it was I who had to tell Katniss, no, we needed to wait. I had waited countless years for this so a few more weeks or months to me made no difference to me at all. In fact I think I liked the anticipation, the idea that one day Katniss really would be carrying our child inside her. But mainly I needed Katniss to be well, to be healthy again. I knew things were emotionally going to be more difficult for her because of her past, and I didn't want the physical effects of her recent illness to compound this. I had already confirmed to myself that I needed Katniss more than I needed a child, and wasn't prepared for her to take any risks.

Once Katniss has an idea in her head though, she can't let go, so time and time again just weeks after her illness she would say she had stopped taking her pills, so that night we could make love in the hope of creating a baby. I was grateful she told me, I think she understood I needed to know - but until I thought she was well enough, I wouldn't agree. I could not resist making love to her, but I would come outside of her, which she finds frustrating as much as I do even if I managed to reach her mouth in time. So she would go back to taking her pills until the next time she tried to convince me she was ready.

So in the time since Katniss had made her decision, there was something of a turnaround from our former stances and she became frustrated with my reluctance. I was still at 'not yet' whereas she was at 'now'. It was September. The days still lingered warmly into the evening, and Katniss had bathed alone and came to join me in our bed. She wore just a white shirt, her hair was loosely tied back. She brought with her a glass of water and demonstrably banged it down on the table next to our bed where I had placed my book of Shelley's verse that I had been reading while I waited for her.

'I haven't taken any pills today, but if you want me to, they are in the drawer. If you want me to take it I will.'

I nodded, and she took that as a sign that I would make her take them again.

'Peeta, don't, I can't keep waiting, I need to do this,' she cried plaintively. She slipped under the covers and stroked my body, trying to arouse me.

'Tell me about your day.' I said trying to ignore her words, and her hands.

'Why? Don't avoid it Peeta, why are you doing this to me, so I know how it feels to wait?'

'Katniss...don't...You know how long I have wanted this...' I said, taking hold of her, and kissing her.

'I'm sorry Peeta, I shouldn't have said that,' she replied, looking guilty. 'It's just because I know the pain I caused you that I want to do this now. Let me do this. What if I have left it too late, what if things don't work as they should?'

'You will be ok...you're young enough still to have lots of babies - if we want to. Relax. Tell me about your day.'

'Peeta,' she complained, thinking I wanted to distract her

'Tell me..' I insisted, for I just wanted to know if she was coping, if she was back to her normal,
active self.

'I took a group into the woods, 8 year olds,' she explained.
'Did they enjoy it?'
'Yes, they built shelters.'
'Anything else?'
'Yes, we went pond dipping, they paddled in the water, we had lunch there.'
'Was it hot?'
'Yes, but we stayed in the shade.'
'Did you walk far? I was trying to assess her strength.
'No, just a couple of miles.'
'Is that all?'
'No, maybe more?' I could see Katniss was trying to work out what answer I wanted to hear.
'How many more?'
'I don't know 4? 6? 10?' I could see she was getting desperate, and I quite enjoyed having the upper hand.
'Katniss..' I said, I knew I wasn't going to get anything else truthful from her now.
'What do you want me to say...I am careful, I don't do too much, but I'm fine.. I'm strong again. I'm ready,'
'Are you?'
'Yes I'm good.'
'Well, you look good,' I replied. That much was true. He face was bright, her body recovered. She looked healthy and athletic. I preferred her slightly softer, rounder, curvier, but I was just pleased that the woman I loved was well again
'You think so?' she sounded pleased
'I know it. But...' I reached for the glass of water - maybe I was enjoying being in charge too much..

'Oh Peeta, I don't want to...' Katniss looked completely dejected, and I didn't want to make her feel like that.
I put the glass to my lips and drank all the water and pushed it away. She smiled at me, knowing what that signified.
'You're sure you want to do this?'
'Of course.'
'Really sure for you, not just for me?'
'Yes for me, for you, for us.'
'Because I don't want you to have a child for me, one you couldn't love...' Now I had spoken out of turn - I was thinking of myself and my mother.
'Peeta that's not fair, you know I always told you I would love any child I had with you...how could I not?' She closed her eyes and she kissed me and I ran my hands under her shirt, her body was warmer from her bath. Her skin was silky soft...

'You know it was just I was scared for how the world could be.. But I know now it's good.' It was true, over the years Katniss had told me that she worried for the fate of our child, any child, if peace was not secure, not that she couldn't love one. I just had to make sure of this so that Katniss knew in herself that she wanted this child, not just while she was carrying it, but when it arrived. I needed to know for sure that this baby was wanted not just by me, but by Katniss too. I had made her wait so that she had time to recognise and acknowledge this to herself. And I was convinced by what Katniss said and did that this was so.

'Ok then,' I said, downplaying what was probably the most significant point of my life, our life. I undid the remaining buttons on her shirt and caressed her breasts. I guess making love now was going to be more symbolic than anything. I doubted whether it was even likely that Katniss would fall pregnant tonight. But I wanted to really be aware that this was special, had meaning. So I was conscious of everything I did to Katniss before I made love to her. She sat astride me but I did not enter her yet. I let one side of her shirt fall down and kissed her shoulder. I did the same to the other side and Katniss discarded the shirt. I helped her slip out of her underwear but still though I
was ready for her, I waited. I took my hands to her breasts, and fondled them. They were beautiful and soft and warm.

She leaned into me and I took her breast into my mouth. I sucked gently and closed my eyes. I could feel her resting on my thigh and I needed her. I needed to touch her. I moved my lips to hers and used my hands over her body. Katniss edged me inside of her as though she couldn't wait any longer, but I rolled her to the side until I was on top of her and inside of her. I had waited so long for this. I pushed her legs wide apart so I could go as deep into her as possible. I couldn't help but think that finally I had won. If I could have told the boy in the cave or the lonely victor or the victim recovering from his high jacking or the man who doted on Haymitch's children as if they were his own, that this moment would happen what a lot of pain would have never have come to pass. I thrust into Katniss powerfully. But not because I had some hidden anger left inside of me or resentment because I had waited so long, nothing like that remained. I was just so eager, so desperate to come inside her, I for once forgot to excite katniss with my hands or my lips. But I think she understood, she did not ask me to do anything for her. So I knew I wasn't doing anything like enough to make her come, but still she arched her back, moved her hands across her body so I could sense it meant something to her too. I don't think she was trying to fake it for me, but I know that sometimes Katniss ironically likes it when I don't touch her, then she touches herself and closes her eyes and fantasises I'm someone else - which is fine. Was she doing that now? I wished right then that she wasn't...

'Katniss? Katniss? Are you ok?' I asked as I moved more slowly inside her

She opened her eyes, 'Yes,' she said, 'yes.' Not as if on the cusp of ecstasy but I thought, without needing to ask her, because she loved me, loved what we were doing together, what making love tonight, like this, meant for us. She drew me to her kissing me, our tongues meeting, while our bodies remained as one. Like the forest meets the sky, the sky meets the moon, and the moon shines on the water. Mingling together as one as we do so often, but with a different meaning for us tonight. Not just love, lust or the joy of the physical sensations, but all of those things together plus something else...hope.

'I was just thinking,' said Katniss. So I had been right? 'I was just thinking, I wish I had been able to express myself better to you, even after you threw me the bread and I watched you at school, I never thanked you, I never saw you watching me...'

'It's ok Katniss, that was long ago...' I was still thrusting into her.

'You were special to me even then...when no words had been spoken between us. I didn't know it..but you did'

I kissed her again

'I wish I had understood better what I felt for you in the cave...I hurt you so many times because I didn't know what to do, what to say'

' Katniss, it's ok, I know now.' I stopped thrusting into her, though remained inside her body.

'But I wish I had told you...even on the beach when I said I needed you, it was more than that..I wish as I had left with Joanna when you kissed me for that last time, I wish I had said I loved you, that we would be together...'

'I think I knew how you felt then. I could see it in your eyes.' I replied trying to comfort her.

'But if I had said it... Maybe the hijacking would not have been so bad, you would have had something to hold onto...' she protested.

'I did have something..noone else ever came back from that like I have done.'

'But that's just you, because of who you are..' 

'No you pulled me back...' That was true.

'But I didn't do enough...I have made you wait so long. I wish I had known years ago that I would feel like this now.'

'How do you feel?'

'That this is the only thing that is real.' I resumed thrusting into her, long and slow.

'I picture you all those times you were so special to me in the games. I don't think of the pain anymore. I think about when you would hold me, when you protected me. And I wonder what
you would have said, what you would have done if I had said 'I love you'...'
'Say it to me now, Katniss ....' I withdrew myself from her but we kept our bodies close.
She kept her beautiful gray eyes steady on mine, like she knows I like. She put her hand on me
and drew me back inside her.
'Peeta, I love you, I love you so much, I always will.' Her body moved in time with mine. A few
more thrusts into her is all it took and I poured myself into her waiting body.
'I love you too,' I said, taking her into my arms, caressing her, kissing her. 'I always have.' Our
sweet work was done.
Getting closer

My strength improved over the next few days and Peeta returned to work. I started to work from home a little. I rescheduled some of my camping trips I had planned in the next 6 weeks and wrote up some field notes. But it was going to take some time before I was back to my normal self physically. My appetite was still not good, but Peeta seemed to be adding extra sugar to my food and making me my favourite meals every day so it would not take too long for me to build up my strength. I went out into the forest on my own frequently, just short trips to get my confidence back. Sometimes I would stop by the bakery on my return and Peeta would either ask one of his partners if it was all right to leave early with me, or send them home early instead. I don't know if there's any other District quite like 12 - everyone is so relaxed yet considerate towards each other. Maybe it's because we are small - about 4,000 people now - there is a great community spirit and I wouldn't live anywhere else. I like to watch Peeta at work, even though when I visit he's usually just clearing up. I breathe in the bitter smell of the yeast and the smokey kindling, and the lingering scent of sweet baked bread. Even at the end of the day it can still be very hot in the bake house, and when Peeta heaves the 150lbs sacks of flour casually, I can see the sweat rising across his brow and through his shirt. He knows I'm watching him, and he likes it.

The one area where I was getting plenty of physical exercise was sex, as since we had been apart it felt like we were discovering each other again. Peeta was very considerate – perhaps too cautious at first - I had to show him I could do more. He always checked I was taking my birth control pills and when I argued after a month or so that I could think about stopping them he actually refused to make love to me until he had seen me pop the pill in my mouth, because he didn't think I was fully recovered to try for a baby yet. He's very aware that I know exactly what to do to control him when he's deep inside of me so didn't trust himself to stop in time.

His concerns for my health stemmed from the medical risks that any mother used to face giving birth in District 12, and he was anxious about me. There had always been a higher mortality rate for mothers and babies in the poorer Districts, due to our limited diet and inadequate housing and Peeta remembered this – everyone in those days knew of a mother who died after a difficult birth or a baby that did not arrive. Nearly 15 years after the war, diets had definitely improved, though we were still dependent on seasonal produce from 11, and a few years ago when there was crop failure things were harder. So Peeta stood his ground, saying that he wanted to be a father of a baby with me, not without me, so he wanted to be sure I was back to my normal strength and fitness. He teased me saying at the moment I was the most precious thing in the world to him and had all his love. It was only when the baby arrived that I'd have to share, so I best make the most of it now. But anyway, I wanted a child with him now as much as he wanted one with me and I knew our love would never cease.

So we waited another month before we started trying for a baby. The first time I told Peeta that I was ready, he still asked if I was sure about it, but the arguments I put forward before, about whether peace was tenuous, whether governments would fail, just didn't seem to be true anymore. Maybe we were a bit closed off from things in 12, but we were happy and that seemed to be enough now. Besides, once I had started to consider the idea all I could think about was holding our little baby in my arms. I had begun to think whether we would have a boy or girl: would she have my eyes or Peeta's, would he have blonde hair or brown. I just wanted a baby with Peeta so much, 9 months seemed too far away. Luckily Peeta was as committed to our plans as I was. At first he seemed quite serious about it, as if any failure to conceive would be his fault, but I told him he just had to enjoy it all like normal and we surely would deserve to have a child born out of our love for each other. So we just did what we wanted with each other, tasting, touching, holding each other's bodies with the love and knowledge of each other that only our shared years and our physical longing could bring but we both knew there was something even more special about
making love now, and I treasured that feeling. I was quite persistent. If Peeta ever came home tired from the bakery and fell asleep before I came to bed I would wake him up and plead with him to make love to me just in case this was the day that mattered. Unsurprisingly, Peeta never complained.

I soon noticed a change in Peeta. When I was recovering I noticed that Peeta was sometimes wistful - I might see a look of guilt or anxiety when he was watching me or when he turned away - as if he blamed himself for my illness. which I would tell him was not true. But now he was not just back to the old Peeta, who used to see goodness all around him. No, he seemed to be aware at last of the goodness in himself, as if planning to have a baby gave him a sense of purpose. He had tried to separate himself from Haymitch's family in those unquiet months before he went away, but now the real Peeta was back. At my insistence Haymitch had forgiven Peeta his absence from me, and we were a large extended family again. The Abernathy door was always open - how they keep track of all their children I don't know - but it means popping round to see Haymitch, Columbine and the children is always easy and welcomed. So Peeta went back to visiting them, and would take one of the youngest ones - Lettie, Penn or Mitchum (there were now 6 Abernathys) onto his lap as he chatted with which ever parent had a moment to sit and talk. But what was different was I would go too, even on my own, and I would play with one of the pretty little things and sing to them and make them laugh. Because I knew it wasn't unfair for Peeta to see me enjoying their company anymore, it just showed him what our life would be like, too.

I think Haymitch noticed something was different between us. Peeta had passed baby Mitchum to me to hold and I knew we were both thinking the same thing - we were going to have one of these precious babies of our own. He smiled that smile he does, just for me, but Haymitch was observant.

'You two are like little fawns in the forest, such big eyes for each other. Is there anything you want to tell me?' He asked.

'No,' I said - protectively - and turned to Peeta.

He looked lovingly at me and told Haymitch: 'Not yet.'

But then I returned the smile to Peeta and spoke to him, though Haymitch could hear me: 'But soon...' and I leaned in to kiss the man I love.

'About time,' chimed in Haymitch, changing the mood. 'There aren't enough children round here. At last I can have my babies back.'

Haymitch picked up his son Penn and spun him around before letting him go and sitting himself in between Peeta and me, with a grin on his face.
I fell pregnant more quickly than I anticipated I would - I thought my age and the ravages that my body had been through would have had more of a negative effect. But barely three months had passed before I could tell Peeta the wonderful news. We both wept tears of relief, joy and happiness. I don't think Peeta thought till then it would ever be true. I was feeling fine so had to check with the clinic that I was right. They confirmed using my dates that I should be about 6 weeks pregnant, so I was very pleased that I had no sickness, no nightmares - nothing. I felt perfectly normal - only happier. Peeta couldn't keep the news to himself - I asked him to try, just for a little longer, but I soon realised it was too much for him to contain it. Within a couple of days Haymitch was at our door with a bunch of flowers

'For the mother to be!' He beamed proudly. 'I knew you'd make a granddaddy out of me eventually! Peeta tells me you are feeling good. I'm glad your hormones aren't messing with you yet. Columbine used to get hers all jittery...Especially when carrying our boys. I was a real martyr to keep going like I did.'

I thanked him for the flowers but I quickly moved on to what I wanted to say. 'You know I may not have said it but you have been like a father to me.' Maybe my pregnancy hormones were making me emotional, but there was truth in what I said.

'Well thank you for saying so,' he replied, and I thought beneath his stubble he may be blushing. 'Wandered what else I had to do to make you say that.'

I ignored that complaint. 'Peeta's the good one and you are the wayward one in the family,' he added. 'Well, that's what I used to think....' I didn't want him to start remembering about Peeta's trip to the Capitol and so I interrupted his train of thought.

'But are you sure you want to call yourself granddaddy?' It was an honest question.

'I am absolutely going to call myself granddaddy when the baby arrives so you best get used to it. Or maybe I could compromise if you call a boy Haymitch? Columbine never would let me call one of our sons that. She said one Haymitch was enough.' He looked philosophical.

'I agree with Columbine,' I said. 'Granddaddy it is then'. Haymitch pulled me into his arms and kissed my forehead. Families take all shapes and forms. They change and grow. I could honestly say right then that I was so lucky to have mine. Besides I really didn't mind what Haymitch wanted to be called. Perhaps it was my roundabout way of acknowledging how I felt about him 'Thank you, sweetheart' said Haymitch - and I wasn't sure if he meant the baby, or something else. As if reading my thoughts he added, 'for everything.'

It turned out my first weeks of pregnancy were the easiest. It was if just by knowing I was pregnant my body and mind rebelled. At first I just had nightmares, though the images were severe, at least Peeta was always there to hold me. I saw the arena again, and I saw all the deaths of people I loved repeated. But then as the weeks advanced the visions worsened. I began to see those same people Rue, Finnick, Prim die but in different ways, in different places - in our forest, by the schoolhouse, in The Village. But worse was to come. Just as my belly began to show more roundness and I could feel the baby ripple inside me then the visions became more intense - even when I was in a half sleep. I would see myself holding my baby running away from mutts who hounded me. Once I woke up in the morning having seen those beasts in the night. I was frightened and ran out of the house to escape them, they seemed so real. There was only a half light, Peeta had left for work, no one else was up, it was so quiet - normally that is something I like but this time I felt an eeriness about it that chilled me. I felt like I was in The Capitol again, crawling round the city, avoiding the pods. I looked around for Peeta, Finnick, Cressida, anyone, but could not see them. I saw something move by the fence and heard a gurgling and snorting sound coming from behind it. I collapsed by a wall in a heap my arms around my belly protecting
my unborn child. I closed my eyes and could see a mass of sewer mutts surrounding me - they were just about to rip my baby from my womb. I wailed and sobbed and screamed a mixture of sounds I could not control. I heard a door slam, and footsteps running behind me, Haymitch had found me. Peeta too was running back along the path - he must have left for work just moments before I rose. He reached me just moments after Haymitch.

'So, I have to find her, again?' Haymitch yelled at Peeta.

'I'm here, I'm here' he said desperately, to me, to Haymitch

'You mustn't leave her alone...you wanted this baby,' continued Haymitch

'But...'

'You know what she's been through,' he kept shouting.

Luckily the noise brought me back. 'Haymitch, it's not his fault' I said, my voice was exhausted.

'Sweetheart...' Haymitch was gentle to me.

'It's ok, Haymitch, just let me be with Peeta.' I needed him now.

Haymitch took his hand off my shoulders and composed himself.

'I'm sorry, I spoke out of turn,' said Haymitch and I think we both knew he was sincere. He never spoke about his games, but we both knew he was familiar with screams and had no way back then of helping his friend and ally, Maysilee.

'It's alright, Haymitch' said Peeta extending his hand in reconciliation, which was taken warmly. 'I will take Katniss home and come and see you later.' he suggested.

'Sure, I know, you need each other now. I'm sorry,' Haymitch mumbled, but I managed to grab his hand and squeeze it in thanks before he headed home. Peeta took me in his arms and lifted me up, and I felt safe again.

The nightmares remained. I'd had them occasionally as a child, even bad ones, monsters in the dark, my father disappearing down a dark hole, these were probably common occurrences for children growing up somewhere like The Seam. But the nightmares that come when you have seen the horrors that I have seen make those former dark dreams seem like sweet, sweet lullabies. I would be violently sick or shake in a cold sweat for hours. My moods were erratic and all my fears for the future came back. We tried different things to help me. At first Peeta agreed with Haymitch, that from now on I should never be alone, but that just made me nervous, as if I was only waiting for something to happen, so I told Haymitch and Columbine who had kept me company many times not to worry, I would be all right in the day. I actually felt empowered making that decision and so my confidence grew a little. However I continued to be so upset during so many nights that Peeta worried that we had made the wrong decision and that I was having the baby for him. Every time, after I managed to recover, I told him that was not so. I loved the baby that was growing inside me - I wouldn't want to change anything, I would, with Peeta's help get through this. Then I would take Peeta's hand to my belly so that he could feel the baby move, so that in a way by reassuring him I made myself feel better too.

It also helped that Peeta treated me absolutely like I was a goddess when he made love to me. Every one of my pleasure points was more sensitive and he knew how to use them, and me. In fact what really helped me was when I discovered that if he helped me climax more than once before I slept, the euphoria that followed made me have a much more peaceful sleep, which seemed like an incredible win-win for me. So Peeta was very patient and tender with me, just feeling his lips on my neck made me tingle and curl my toes now, so when he traced down along the curves of my body with his kisses the pressure rose within me unbearably, so I had to let go. I remember the very first time we made love he had asked my permission to kiss me there, to explore me there with his tongue and I was naive so did not even really understand what he meant, now it was almost all I wanted. Before I went to sleep Peeta would watch over me and choose some poems for me if he thought they would help. So he would lie naked next to me and read the poems by lamplight. He found a sensual one from long ago about a lover who has to be coaxed by Love itself to understand that he deserves love - both emotionally and physically. The last two lines were very appropriate for us right then:

"You must sit down," says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
So I did sit and eat."
I slept very well that night.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 23 The poem Peeta reads is Love by George Herbert. Early 17th century
New beginnings

It was a little over a year of since we started trying that our baby, a beautiful healthy little girl arrived. We named her Aurora, for the dawn, as her father has always been like the sun to me, watching over me, keeping me warm. Holding her for the first time I was instantly able to put all the mental anguish I had suffered behind me.

The birth was difficult and Peeta was angry that he hadn't arranged for special pain relief to be on hand. But I had determined that I would receive no more special treatment than any other expectant mother in the District, and I wasn't afraid of this kind of pain anyway. When Peeta took our baby in his arms and tenderly wrapped her up so I could hold her it was his face I watched. I used to think I could be his world, that I could be everything for him. But looking at him then I saw that was not true. Only now was he complete, only now was he the man he always wanted to be, a father. We were a family now and I was so happy.

Peeta was of course wonderful with Aurora, and he changed his work at the bakery so he could spend more time with her. It wasn't that I wanted to look after her any less than he, but that he was such a complete natural with her. He had lots of practice with our family next door, after all. Besides, I knew how long he had waited, how he had been prepared to give up everything for me. At first I was disappointed with myself for ever hurting him so, but the love we shared for Aurora made even that fade. Peeta had been right, for us children made everything better.

Effie comes and visits us more often now. She still works in The Capitol but has branched out from presenting people to information presentation. This has given her more free time in her schedule to visit those she loves, she says. She still thinks District 12 is very quaint but has come to appreciate it for that very thing. She works on the board of the Heavensbee Museum, which preserves and presents the history of the Hunger Games, the war and its aftermath. It was quite a diversion for her, but I recognised many years ago that there was much more to her than I originally thought. The Capitol had stifled their own by dumbing them down much as they stifled everyone else with its oppression. But now with access to books and information, freedom of movement and so much more hope everyone can aspire to be more, do more, if that is what they want.

Effie also says she visits more nowadays because our baby is so much better behaved than the Abernathy babies ever were. I always thought Effie took things quite literally, but when she said this I think she was joking. There are lots of different kinds of love which people are more free to express now: as lovers, family and friends. I know in truth she thinks of Haymitch as family nearly as much as we do. I sometimes wish Effie had found a partner herself after all these years, but she made the choice to stay single - work was always a priority - and as long as she is happy, that's good too. I was surprised though when she first held Aurora in her arms: she said it was a beautiful name but she had hoped at least one of us would name a little girl after her, and Columbine said that her family, with 6 children, is complete, so it's down to me. She looked genuinely disappointed, so at that moment I agreed: if we had another daughter, I would call her Effie. She was very pleased, and said that Trinket would be pretty too. I didn't tell Peeta, but I had a feeling that Effie will hold me to that promise.

Peeta and Haymitch often sit in the garden surrounded sometimes by six or seven children and talk about baby matters as if they were experts, like you wouldn't believe. Though he dotes on Aurora, Peeta is attentive as ever, if not more, to me. If I thought making love to him was exciting before, it is even better now. It's as if both our bodies have more power, more love for each other because we were able to create a new life. Now that the District has more than trebled in size since the end of the war Peeta sometimes has to go to the bakery at midnight to get the dough ready for its first
prove so that he can keep up with demand. So occasionally I get Ariane to stay over, or we take Aurora with us so that I can go along with Peeta to keep him company. I love the town at night - the lanterns glow and there's music in the wind from the trees that have re-grown and from all the little chimes that decorate the streets. Peeta says if I want he could build a house for us in Sylvania. He told me he has found a plot at the southern end - the garden could run straight into the forest, no boundary at all. I was tempted - but our home in The Village has good memories now, they have chased away the bad. I like being next door to Haymitch and Columbine too, so I think I will let Peeta decide. I'm sure he would build a perfect home for us and I would love for my children to be able to think of the forest as their home.

Peeta told me that he wanted another child quite soon after Aurora was born. When I told him I wanted to wait a little longer because I knew my mind would turn against me in pregnancy again and bring back all my worst fears he understood. But I didn't want to wait too long either. Next time proved to be a little easier: before Aurora reached two years old we welcomed a little boy, Aster. I chose his name because it derives from the family name of the group of plants the dandelion belongs to - and nothing is a more enduring sign of hope to me than that simple flower. The birth was easier too. I had something special in mind - I wanted to give birth in the forest as that is the place which made me strong, made me into a hunter, a survivor, a victor, a lover and now a mother. All different aspects of me and I owe it a debt for helping me to reach this point in my life. Luckily it all went to plan and our baby boy was born in the safety of the pristine green wilderness surrounded by birdsong and air that was heavy with the rich scent of honeysuckle on the soft breeze.

Peeta was overjoyed that we had our own little boy and girl. He said our family was complete, and that he didn't want our house to be over run like next door - six little Abernathys, even Haymitch concedes, is enough. However I know Peeta only says that because he worries so much each time I was pregnant. I know he likes being surrounded by children, and so do I. So next time it may be me who has to ask to have another child. The only area we disagree on is when, and how much, we should tell the children about the Hunger Games and our part in it. I think they should eventually know everything. Peeta of course wants to protect them from knowing their parent's past. But Peeta says I can decide. That will come later. For now they can enjoy doing all the things children should do and we take them nearly everyday to the meadow or the forest, where they play.
Katniss has given me so much. She has given me a lifetime of love, but though it seems impossible, there's even more. She has given me our children, Aurora and Aster, who have all that is good in the world within them. Aurora is just like her mother, strong willed and loves being outdoors. She has her mother's hair and my eyes. She likes playing with the animals at her grandfather's farm and she has a little pony that she shares. Aster is a gentle little boy who likes nothing better than nestling in his mother's arms. Katniss always keeps her babies close - she found it difficult to move each one out of our room and into their own, but she managed it in her own time when she felt secure. He loves to run barefoot through the meadow and he is just trying to learn to jump - by stretching up his arms he thinks he is going to manage it.

I seem to spend more time with the children at the moment but that's just because Katniss has to follow a more specific schedule with her work. I still cover a few shifts as needed at the Bakery, I think I always will, but I come back home directly, I don't help building houses anymore. The town is complete - if any new homes are needed now for new families they are built by people who are more skilled than me. There is one more home I would like to build though, for our family. I have drawn up some plans for a gable-fronted house. It's smaller than the house we have now, but even with the children there are rooms we don't use. It's simple in design with opportunities for me to add carvings round the porch and gables. Thom and Lilo said they would help me. Thom has been teaching me some of his ironmongery skills, and anything I can't do he will do for me. Sherwood Boulter, who was the head carpenter has mainly retired but he looked over my plans and he says he can gather a team to help me too. So I really think I can do this. Katniss was reluctant at first, I think she didn't want to go back what we used to call The Seam, but it's nothing like it was before: there's colour and laughter now. So I showed her the plans. She liked the oversized windows at the back, looking out across an extensive garden into the forest, where she could take me, where our children could play freely. I would plant primroses for her again, and I would build it with my hands for her. So she said to me, if that's what I want, she wants it too.

Long ago I remember thinking when I was reaped for the 74th Hunger Games that it was a piece of luck because I had at last the chance to be with Katniss, and perhaps try to save her. Nearly 20 years later, that's still true, only what I didn't know then was how my love could intensify, that she would return my love and save me in so many ways, even after the Games. But now we have our children it's a new chapter. When Katniss is pregnant I know she sees it all the darkness again, and it's all I can do to hold her close till it passes. But I think we can both say that the negative effects of that time on our day to day lives is over. And I am lucky for so many reasons now.

If there was any one more thing I could have it would be to marry Katniss. In my mind I think of her as my wife. Sometimes I have had to stop myself from introducing her to someone new in that way. We have talked about getting married from time to time - after we have attended friend's weddings such as Annie and Rafe's a few years ago, or when each of our children were born. We always agree that we feel committed as husband and wife to each other already, which is true. Since then Katniss may whisper in my ear when she makes love to me that I am her husband or she is my wife, which excites me. Or on a lazy evening when I gather her in my arms by the fire while we watch our children play I may use endearments such as that too, and Katniss will nestle closer into me. But Katniss is not keen on ceremony. I have wondered if perhaps we could have some small celebration - in the forest perhaps - in front of a few friends to acknowledge in public that it matters, we matter to each other and that our flame will last for ever. It's not an issue that divides us, it is just something that I think may be right for us one day. I still remember the time in
the Quarter Quell when I realised I wanted to spend every minute of the rest of my life with Katniss, because that hasn't changed. So I have faith that if something is meant to be in our relationship, it will be.
The Wedding

Today is the day that Peeta and I are getting married. It's something I never thought I would do, before. But now the District has changed. I have secretly envied those happy brides and grooms on their wedding days and thought it was something I was excluded from. But Peeta would have married me at any moment, it was only me who denied myself the chance to affirm our commitment to each other. For a while I have been calling myself his wife, or him my husband when we played together in our bed to see if I liked those labels, and I did, very much. Before I didn't want the authorities to intrude into our relationship as it reminded me of Snow's threats and persuasion. But that's all long ago - we have been together now for over 15 years and I do believe that there's a victory in that. Not just because Snow had so very nearly succeeded in separating us at the very start but because as our lives became ordinary ones we have had to overcome our own battles - the sorts of things that everyone has to do, just the things that take compromise, discussion and yes, confrontation so that we can truly say we know each other and love each other for it.

Things haven't always been perfect - we have frustrated each other, angered each other, even hurt each other. But I don't want perfect - that's not real. What Peeta and I have is real. I told him long ago that he was the greatest love I could ever have and it is true. I love my children because they are his too. We will raise them together, love them together and then let them go and find their way as strong people who can live in a world where they can make their own choices about whom they want to be, where they want to live and whom they want to love, for that is the world we are building. I look around the District now and see something I rarely saw when I was young: people growing old together. When I wake up in the morning and see Peeta sleeping next to me I love to look at the creases, the little wrinkles forming round his eyes. They tell stories of the smiles he has shared with me, and the changes in his face indicate all the happy, loving years we have had together. And my only hope is that we have so much more time to share too.

Since Aurora was born I have been remembering some of the small things that made life even in the old District 12 bearable, so that when I think of the past now, I can smile. My father singing for me, Prim and my mother...how he would pull my mother into his arms and tell us how marrying her was the best day in his life....telling Prim and me that he was the most precious things to him and he would never let us go until we found someone we could love with all our heart too. And then he said he was waiting for the next happy day, when he would take us to our weddings to start our own lives, which he hoped would be as happy and complete as his. He said this even though his work at the mine was dangerous, the fear of the reapings was looming and he was aware of all the other curses of the District at that time. He protected us from the reality of his life, and tried to lead us to find contentment in the world we had to live in. But at the same time I think even in those days it was true he could find happiness, because he looked for it in the love he shared with with my mother and in his children.

So I am getting married for Peeta, it's something I knew he wanted, for myself because it is a choice I can freely make, for my mother so she can see I have found the same love she did, long ago; and for my father, so that somehow he may know I have remembered his wish and found that happiest moment too. But I'm more fortunate than him and my mother because Peeta and I have the benefit of a new time: the threats and fears that my parents knew are gone. This moment will last for Peeta and me forever.

But having children and getting married is not the end of my story. Rather it is another beginning. Peeta's love and support has given me the confidence to be the woman I want to be. I have spent my life on the edge, keeping my distance - watching, observing, learning all I could about people. Plutarch always understood that and perhaps that's why through the years he kept me under his wing. He contacted me recently and said he was retiring. I never thought that time would come. He said it's time for some new ideas and he is leaving The Capitol to return to the District he was
born in - District 7. That's something I never knew. He says he wants to leave the trappings of The Capitol behind and walk once more in the pine forests there. I suppose I should have guessed - his last name was not typical of The Capitol, but his first name was, so I didn't think to ask. Perhaps we were more alike than I ever realised. He had all the sophistication and cunning of someone born and raised in The Capitol but in fact he confided to me at last that his high intelligence was spotted at a young age and he, like Columbine, was stolen so that he could serve the government. What an irony that he should prove to be instrumental in Snow's undoing. Like Columbine, he had his name changed, but has no intention of reclaiming his old one, Filip. He says his new one served him well enough and there is no one left who would remember the stolen boy anymore.

Governments have come and gone, as voting has taken place, but it is Plutarch who has remained consistent, easing their transitions. But before he goes, he asked if I would like to come back to The Capitol. He wants to train me in all the ins and outs of his administrative role which, knowing him, is obscure. He'd like me to advise his successors. No one, he says, would speak the truth like I would, and that's what the country needs. Though there could never be anyone like Plutarch and I could never match his intelligence, his foresight or his skill, his offer intrigued me. I am no longer cynical of authority, and if anything I know if you want things to succeed, you have to be involved. I spoke with Peeta because I wasn't certain if I would be good enough to do it and he of course encouraged me - Plutarch had already mentioned his plans for me to him and Peeta agreed that it was a perfect opportunity and I should do it. So I am going to try. It doesn't mean leaving home - that's what 12 will always be to me. I love the land, the forests, and the people. But every month I will take a trip to The Capitol and see if I can make a difference. I can be involved in making the country better for my own children, for children everywhere. I want to make sure that the stories are told, that things are learnt and history is not repeated.

My work in the medical facility is done and Peeta will look after the children, just as he does now. He is the loving, guiding, father he always wanted to be. I never doubted that would be so. My gift to him after our wedding is to tell him we have another baby on the way, which will please him as I didn't make him plead for this one. He's right, seeing the children grow and watching how they are delighted by the smallest things - leaves crunching under their feet, a rainbow in the sky, being held in our arms, does make me feel that the world is good. So this time I just let nature take its course.

I am nearly ready. Columbine has made me the most beautiful dress from shimmering fabric in blue and green and delicate lace that Effie has given me. I asked Columbine to sew a secret pocket on the hip, and it's here that I place my pin of the Mockingjay that I have kept all these years. I'm not afraid of it anymore. It's part of who I am. My mother has arranged flowers in my hair - I asked Peeta how he would like me to wear it and he said one plait to the side, so that's what I have done. Aurora wears a dress in fabric like mine and Aster wears a little suit to match his father.

Peeta has returned from taking the children to the meadow, and he tells me they are dancing barefoot as they wait for us there with a small group of friends who make the District a special place. Plus those people who are so important to us for very different reasons are there: Haymitch, Columbine, Annie, Effie, even Johanna accepted our invitation. Plutarch too has made the journey to join us on this important day as well. And though we won't see them, I know there will be others who we have never forgotten with us too.

So it's just Peeta and me in the house now. And as is the tradition he is going to take me to the meadow where we will marry before we parade as a group through the town: dancing and singing some of the old songs, with children trailing ribbons and musicians playing. As we leave the house he picks me up in his arms and kisses me.

'Peeta,' I remind him, 'you are meant to pick me up when we return, not now.'

'It doesn't matter,' he says, 'you are so beautiful I want to take you in my arms now - so I will.' He kisses me and I feel I could fade, fade away into his arms. 'Besides,' he adds, 'I don't know if we've ever done anything in the right order.'
We laugh together, and a Mockingjay who was sitting on our roof is startled and flies away into the forest. She can share our laughter and happiness, too.

Peeta read me a poem a long time ago about two people who live among the ruins of their city who start to make a new life together. And I thought that was like Peeta and me, although at the beginning we were in ruins ourselves as well. I never forgot the last line because Peeta showed me it's true: 'Love is best.' And, as we healed I knew too, it's the strongest.
Katniss was wearing a simple sheer cream slip. Perhaps something was meant to be worn underneath it or over it but from what I could see as she stood in a clearing in the forest with the last of the day's light shining on her she wore nothing else.

'Are you coming?' Katniss asked, as I had stopped just to look at her.

It had just reached the civil twilight of our wedding day. We had left the celebrations early and I had Katniss to myself. The children were staying with Katniss' mother at our house, though I expect they would be round at the Abernathy's most of the time in the next few days. We had an empty log house in the forest to ourselves. A marriage in our District was the only time anyone would have a break from their routine lives: usually families or friends would move in with another to make a property available for a few days, so we were lucky to have this in the middle of nowhere space. A few cabins had been built after the war through the forest and were mainly for shelter in bad weather, but now as the season headed for the heat of the high end of summer it was unused, hidden and alone. Just what we wanted.

We had probably left too late to reach it before dark after all. We were unencumbered except for one lamp between us but Haymitch had stocked the place up before hand, so once we arrived there we would find everything waiting for us. But though we needed to get to our destination I wanted to enjoy my new wife's body now.

Katniss was leading me, she knew this forest better than I.

'Come along. There's something I want to show you... ' she implored - but I interrupted her with my kisses.

She went to take me by the hand but I didn't let her.

'No I said I'm not moving. I want to make love to my wife,' I declared as I ran my hands over her warm body. The air was still heavy with the heat of the summer even at this time and our bodies matched it.

'But we are still near to town...' Katniss protested.

'But it's not late, more people could be around ... Because of the wedding...' she insisted.

'Then they can watch. I want you. Do you want me?' I said pulling Katniss into me so she could feel me. She put one hand on the back of my head and sucked on my bottom lip. She slipped her other hand into my trousers, touching me, I took that as a yes, and picked her up. She wrapped her legs round my waist.

'You should have known I couldn't wait to have you, wearing that dress,' I told her. I kissed her neck, felt the curve of her back. 'The lamplight makes you look like you are almost naked.' I added, honestly. It was true, the fabric glowed translucent. 'You don't even have anything on underneath it, do you?' I asked

'Do you want to find out?' she teased.

'Yes, that's what I have been asking for ....'

I put Katniss down next to a rock near to us, her back against it.

I gazed at her natural beauty. Her hair was still tied in one plait to the side as I had asked. We had about an hour of the daylight left and here in this clearing she drew all the light to her.

I pressed myself against her, lifted her slip and felt up her thighs and round her bottom. She had nothing on underneath. I parted her legs and explored her with my fingers. Katniss gasped when I reached the right spot.

We kissed as I kept my body pressed to hers. But the position was awkward, unseen thorns scratched at us.

'Come here with me,' I suggested, removing my fingers from her body and leading her to a fallen tree. She guessed what I wanted to do. So she came with me to the tree and turned her back to me as she bent down, lifting her slip a little for me. She turned he head to the side so I could kiss her
more easily as I lifted her slip higher to her waist and rubbed my hands over breasts and her backside pausing just to admire its wonderful curves. I parted her legs a little more for me and I stroked her body with one hand while I stimulated her with the other. I was ready for her and wanted to go deep inside her with the first thrust. I don't know if it was the emotions of our wedding, the evening light, or just the primal feeling of making love in the forest that made me long for her. With all the celebrations through the day I hadn't been able to take Katniss into my arms till now, so I thrusted desperately into her. It felt so good. Katniss was deliberately tightening herself around me teasing me. As I pushed into her she pushed back hard, dipping lower and circling her hips so she could control me inside her. She made murmuring sounds that excited me, and made me dig my fingers into her curvaceous behind.

'Oh Peeta....Oh' she cried. She was close to coming - but I couldn't do anything to stop myself from being first. I went as deep as I could, trying to make each final thrust last, then withdrew from her, covering her cheeks and hips. I felt that calming satisfaction you can only get after you have been waiting for it all day. But I knew it wouldn't last long. I knew today of all days that need would return to me time and time again.

'Thank you, I needed that,' I said, teasing her as I knew I had concentrated on my needs, not hers. 'Are you ok?' I wanted her to beg me to start again, taking care of her. Katniss just smiled at me. 'Soon,' she said, knowing what I wanted, 'soon.'
Are you coming in?’ asked Katniss, as she prepared to dive into the black waters of the quarry.

‘No I will wait here,’ I said

‘I won’t be long then, I will just clean myself off,’ she replied.

Moments before when we had approached the quarry I had seen lantern lights flickering through the trees. This is where Katniss had been trying to lead me earlier before our tryst in the clearing. What we found was a simple structure made out of branches - which had been covered in delicate lace and the ground covered with the softest sheets and pillows, and sheer fabrics of gold, blue and green that matched the dress my beautiful bride wore only hours before. Lanterns hung from its frame. Katniss explained that Columbine and Ariane had said they would put a tent up for us as a gift, but this was more of a little pavilion - or our own pleasure-dome - Haymitch may have been involved and the fabrics could only have come from the Capitol. A gift from Effie or Plutarch perhaps? Whoever was involved they had created a wonderful space for us for our first night as man and wife and I was grateful to have friends who cared about us so much. Katniss told me that she thought I would prefer to be outside and look at the sunset, the stars and sunrise, and she was right. Though we were too late for sunset tonight, it surely was an enchanted place.

So Katniss dived into the secretive waters of the quarry. It was only as beautiful as the sky it reflected. It could be a gorgeous inviting blue, a gloomy grey or as it was now a dark black pearl. Its depths were measureless to man. Neither was it possible to know what lay within its grasp. But though Katniss still to some degree feared for her children, and for the world, she was fearless for herself. She had, I knew so well, always been like that, so to dissuade her from swimming in the quarry in the simple light of the moon would be futile. So I didn't try. I watched her as she dived in to wash herself of her perspiration and my come and looked on as she disappeared from view. I waited for her to reappear, I started to count, 10,11. Was that too long? Had she been caught by something entangling her in the dark? Could she be in difficulty? I grabbed a lantern and shone it across the surface of the pool. No ripples. I threw it down and dived in. As I splashed in I saw Katniss surface somewhere in the middle, her slip clung to every part of her exposed skin so she looked like a mysterious naiad.

‘I thought you were never coming in,’ she laughed.

I swam after her but she was faster than me, I only caught her and held her in my arms in the water because she let me.

‘Why did you do that? To frighten me?’ I questioned.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Well it worked,’ I replied. I was annoyed but relieved she was all right. I should have guessed she would be.

‘So what are you going to do to me? Will you punish me?’ she asked.

‘I might have to,” I acknowledged as I kissed her and she wrapped her legs round my waist in the dark.

I released her from my grip and we floated on the water, looking at the stars.

‘I think that's the scorpion,' I told her, pointing out a constellation of stars that seemed to form a line with a hook at each end.

‘I think I see it,' replied Katniss. 'Tell me the story about it.'

‘Well, a man, Orion, flees the scorpion by swimming out from an island, and makes his way to his lover who is waiting for him on another,' I began.

‘And?’

‘His lover is the most famous hunter in the world. The goddess of hunting. Her weapon is a bow,' I continued.

‘You're making this up.'

‘No I'm not.'

‘Go on then,' Katniss urged.
'One of the gods wants to punish the lovers so he says to Artemis - that's the hunter - to try to beat him in a shooting challenge.'

'This isn't going to end well is it?'

'No I suppose not..,' I admitted. 'The challenge is to shoot an arrow at the black dot that approaches them in the water.'

'And Artemis wins?'

'She wins. Killing Orion,' I concluded.

'That's not a very good story, especially for today,' said Katniss, but she laughed at its inappropriateness.

'Well Orion's up there too, it looks like a man holding a bow, so maybe that's his happy ending,' I added.

'Can you see him?'

'No. I don't think so.'

'What about Artemis?'

'There aren't any stars named after her, I think.'

'That's not fair, if she was the famous hunter ... So there's her lover and even the scorpion, but not her.' she complained.

'It's not my fault..those are the names. I'm not actually sure if that really is the scorpion, I could be wrong..,' I said trying to pacify her.

'So you just wanted to tell me the story?'

'Well it seemed to fit, you dragging me into this pool... Besides,' I added, 'maybe the reason the great hunter isn't in the sky is because she's here, next to me in this pool.'

'Oh, Peeta... don't say things like that,' said Katniss softly.

'Why not? It's true. I guess that's why I was never interested in anyone else. We are all just mortals next to you.'

'Oh Peeta, don't..' she hushed. 'You always say such lovely things to me, but I can never say anything like it back. It would come out all wrong..'.

She was back in my arms now.

'So is there anything you want to say to me?' I asked.

'Only that I love you so very much and I am so glad that I will spend the rest of my life with you as my husband.'

'Mmm, that's not bad..' I teased.

'Peeta..' she cried, glaring at me.

So I made it up to her with a kiss.

'What you said - that's everything. I feel it too. You have made me so happy today. You always do.' It was me who was lost for words now, in Katniss' simple truth. We had each other. We loved each other. It was good.

'Are you pleased I got you into the pool after all?' asked Katniss, as I let her go. 'Do you like it?'

'Yes, Katniss, I like it here with you.'

We laced our fingers together as we lay on our backs and looked at the stars for a long time. Bats silently dipped across the surface of the water, so unconcerned about our presence I could almost feel them as they glided above me. I was glad I had come into the water. It was another world. You could lose yourself there. But anyone can spend too long looking at the stars in the great dark sky. In the end you wonder about your place in the universe too. At least, that seemed to be what happened to Katniss for she unexpectedly broke the tranquility.

'Don't you ever wish then that you had other lovers, apart from me?' she asked. I was surprised at such a question, but perhaps this day, this place, made her introspective.

I had long ago told Katniss of the assaults I had been through in The Capitol, but though I could not even be sure how many women I had been forced to have sex with I didn't count that as an anything at all, except abuse, and I had with Katniss' help been able to put that behind me. For me, Katniss was my first and only lover and she understood and did not refer to that now. 'I don't think that's something to talk about on our wedding day,' I replied.

'Why? Won't I like your answer?' she questioned.
'No...'
'No? I won't like your answer?' she asked again
'No - I mean that's not why we shouldn't talk about it now,' I clarified, but Katniss wasn't going to give up.
'Why?'
'Because there's nothing to talk about,' I replied
'So you have thought about it?' I thought she was goading me now.
'No.'
'That's a quick answer.'
'Ok then, let me think...No.'
'You aren't being serious,'
'Ok then what should I say? Yes?' I was getting vexed now, but I knew I had to answer carefully.
'No, you should just mean what you say,' replied Katniss. I could tell she was serious about her questions.
'I did. I said no. You wouldn't accept it.' Wasn't that clear enough?
'So tell me why it's 'no' then.'
I didn't hesitate. 'Because I love you and I have always loved you and I always will.'
'Ok. That's a good answer.'
'Good,' I said, relieved.
'But what about sex?' added Katniss.
'Jeez,' I couldn't imagine where this line of questioning was coming from. 'Is this a proper conversation to be having while we float in a quarry pool on our wedding night? Is this why you lured me in here? What will you do to me if I say the wrong thing?' I asked. I stopped floating now and pulled Katniss up too, gently treading water. I pulled her close to me and kissed her. She laughed as my hands caressed her and supported her in the water. But her serious demeanour returned.
'It's a proper question. If I can't ask you now, when can I? I want to know everything about you.'
'You already do.'
'Answer the question.'
'What's the question?' I had genuinely forgotten.
'What about sex?'
'What about it?'
'Do you like sex with me?'
'What do you think?'
She didn't answer.
'But do you wish you had sex with more women?'
'No.'
'Have you thought about it?'
'Is it wrong to think about it?'
'No.'
'That's ok then.'
'So have you, then?'
'Not in a way you would need to worry about,' I replied, trying to choose my words carefully.
'How do you know what I would worry about?' asked Katniss. I could tell she wasn't going to give up.
'I know. Give me a chance. Is there something you want to tell me? Is this about you?' Finally I decided to turn it back on her.
'These are my questions I'm not going to answer yours,' she said stubbornly.
'No Katniss you started this. Tell me do you wish you had other lovers?' I asked insistently.
'No,' she replied
'Ok that's good, so are we done?' I asked, relieved.
'Yes but..' 
'There's a but?' I couldn't believe this...
'Yes.'
'Ok you best tell me,' I said. There was a hesitancy in her voice but I wasn't worried that she was going to hurt me with some secret revelation, I could tell that wasn't what this was about.
'But I wonder if I am good enough for you,' she murmured.
'Are you serious?'
'Yes,' she nodded.
'After nearly 20 years?'
'Yes.'
I wasn't going to let that answer stand. "What is it, is it something I have said or done? Katniss, has there ever been any moment when you thought I didn't love every moment of having sex with you, making love to you?"
'No,' she replied.
'So where's this coming from?' I needed to know.
'It's just that all I know is what you taught me,' she said, quietly.
'No it's not. I taught you everything I knew in a couple of days. You knew what to do because you wanted to know.' It was true, we both had taken time to learn how our bodies responded to each other in the most intimate ways.

When Katniss emerged from the water her hair was drawn back. Her face seemed in the haziness of the moon and lamp light virtually untouched by time, like the young girl who volunteered at the reapings nearly twenty years ago. But her body was different. Her slip clung to her as if transparent, lying on her breasts and abdomen so I could see them clearly.

She glanced away from me.
'Here, come out of the water,' I said softly. Katniss acquiesced, following me.

She was an absolute goddess to me but something I had said or done - or not done - had made her feel like this today.

The day's heat lingered into the night. We didn't need to dry off. Katniss kept her wet slip on and it began to dry in the air on her body. I had removed my shirt before I dived into the water. I took off the rest of my clothes that were heavy with water and lay naked next to her in our little pavilion

'Do you like having sex with me?' It was my turn to be blunt.
'That's a stupid question,' Katniss replied, turning away from me.
'Is it?' I asked, pulling her back.
'You know I do,' she replied
'Why?'
'Because I like the way you make me feel, and I like to make you feel the same.' That seemed like a positive answer, maybe I could get to the truth.
'How does it make you feel?' I continued.
Katniss paused, but only briefly 'Like...like I'm really alive.' She looked into my eyes and I saw her vulnerability.
'Anything else?'
'That nothing else matters.'
'Nothing at all?'
'Nothing except that you love me.' she said, keeping eye contact with me.
'Katniss then surely that's everything. You know I feel the same. You know our love has always been very physical because of what we shared.' Katniss nodded.'No one else can give us that. Come here.' I invited her into my arms, and she responded. I helped her peel off her slip and took in the sight of her beautiful naked body. Sex had always been a great healer for us but I didn't want to rush things at all. We had world enough and time.

We lay on the bedding on the ground. Katniss parted her legs for me, as we kissed eagerly and my hands caressed her body. But I didn't want to start there. I circled her belly button with my tongue. Though her stomach was still taught I had seen it begin to gently round in recent weeks. I kissed it and I began to circle her abdomen with the palm of my hand. I could feel the outline of her uterus,
which if I pressed around the edges I could feel was changing. I knew my seed was growing inside her again, but Katniss hadn't told me yet. I guessed she was protecting herself - the nightmares had started when she carried our first child when her pregnancy was confirmed, carrying the second was easier but she didn't like anyone to make a fuss over her. But perhaps that is why her mood was low. Perhaps she wanted to hide this one as long as possible. But it was impossible to hide it from me as I worshipped at her body. I should have told her.. maybe I could have stopped her feeling like this. But now I couldn't help but look into her eyes as I continued to stroke her, very gently tracing a line across her abdomen.

'You know, don't you?' whispered Katniss, as she moved her body into me.

'Yes,' I replied drawing close to her as I continued to feel her, moving towards her inner thigh.

'How far along are you?' I asked, reaching inside of her so she gasped.

'Maybe 10 weeks.. I wanted you to prove to myself I was all right, then I thought I would surprise you today..'  

'Have you been feeling ok then?'

'I have not had any nightmares,' she replied.

'No, I haven't been sad. I have been so very happy. My life with you, my love for you, our children. I guess I just felt out of time in that pool, looking at the stars. I'm okay, really,' she replied earnestly. But I knew I had to keep an eye on her. I needed to make sure she really felt good about herself, and not just today.

'When did you guess?' she asked, returning to her pregnancy.

'Well, your breasts have been growing bigger for a while,' I said, 'but I wasn't going to complain...' I took one of her rounder fuller breasts into my mouth. Her nipples were always more sensitive when she was pregnant - in a good way, and I could hear from her breathing that she was enjoying me sucking and touching her now.

'So is it ok? she asked. 'Is it ok that we are having another baby?'

I paused from my task of sucking at her but kept my fingers inside her. 'You know I told you a long time ago whatever you want, I want.' I reached the right spot with my fingers. Her hips were swaying into me now. 'So you are happy? You are sure?' I asked.

'Yes,' she replied. 'I didn't want to make you ask for another child again. You give me so much I wanted to do this for you.'

'Then that's all I can want,' I said, pushing my fingers as deep as they could go. She gasped and squeezed her legs together.

'So what do you want me to do for you now?' I asked, taking my fingers out of her and rubbing one on her bottom lip, then kissing her.

'I want you inside me, I want you to come inside me,' she was insistent.

'If that's what you want... ' I replied

I sat up on my knees and lead Katniss onto my lap. I was ready for her. She played with me and we kissed deeply, our tongues caressing each other as I entered her. Katniss had her legs to the side of me so she could control me. Her hands were loosely round my neck and she tilted back to let me kiss her there as I rubbed her breasts. I helped lifting her up and down to control her energetic movements. She was moving side to side and up and down with vigour. She added little rotations with her hips to maximise the sensations, pleasuring us both.

She then leaned right back, to the ground, her body bent into a straight line in front of me. I could see the hills of her breasts. the lines of her ribs and the slight roundness of her abdomen stretched out just for me. We were still lovers to each other after all these years. And that was a fact. That was our gift to each other. I ran my hands along her sides, appreciating the softness of her skin and the curves of her body. I loved the way her body arched as I leaned into her. I was in control now. I watched her growing ecstasy and manoeuvred myself so I could drive into her. She drew her arm across her brow, she slid her other hand across her body and over her stomach, the fingers spread out rigidly. She raised her hips into me and her heavy breathing turned to quicker gasps. I watched her body react to mine, - her abdomen curving in and out as she pushed into me and I pushed into her. The danger was by watching her so intently I would be first.
'Oh Peeta! Oh!' she cried. This was it. 
She drew her hips up to me then down again and I felt her clench around me before becoming small ripples of pleasure. 
'Yes Peeta,' she murmured still in contentment, still catching her breath. 'That's what I wanted.' 
I needed just a few more thrusts inside her and climaxed into my wife for the first time. 
'Yes.' I said, 'you are all I want too.'
Katniss had awakened first, it must have been been a few hours after dawn. I watched her return to the water, she wore her slip again as she jumped in. I could sense she was peaceful. Whenever we had wakened in the night we had made love almost wordlessly, just murmurs of encouragement and endearments, but I felt she had told me the truth, her concern was just a fleeting emotion that we had addressed and was gone. But I would make sure she felt special today, and I knew a way I could do that. Swallows dipped over the water this time, and I marked their undulating flight. An eagle circled the sky above. Katniss emerged from the water.

I beckoned her to return to me, to our bed in the forest, wanting to feel her wet skin next to my own, but she just stood in front of me, loosening her hair so it fell more freely round her shoulders. I was already aware I was aroused by her glistening body. Thankfully, she came over to me then. 'Why did you put that slip on?' I asked

'In case any one saw me,' she replied

'But you might as well be naked, when it's wet.'

Katniss looked down at herself 'Yes you are probably right. Besides it's unlikely any would come this far into the forest so early. Do you want to go to the log cabin or stay here?'

'There's no hurry is there?'

'No..I have more clothes in the cabin though. '

'That can wait. Come here. I need you.' I extended my hand and she took it in hers.

She got in between the sheets with me and could see I was ready for her. She took off her wet slip and went to dry herself on the sheets.

'Don't do that,' I told her. 'I want to feel you like that.' She did as I asked and lay next to me. I rubbed my hand along her side starting at her waist, over her hips, into her thighs and back to her breasts. Her body was lovely, smooth and slippery...

'Is there anything left to drink?' I asked. We hadn't come prepared to stay here, though luckily Columbine had left a basket of food and drink for us.

'No it's all gone,' said Katniss glancing over to it. We hadn't touched the food, but I had drunk all the wine and Katniss the water.

'I will just have to sip on your honey dew then,' I said, pulling Katniss up and tickling her as I did so I didn't know if she was laughing at that or my words. It was probably both. I made her sit astride me. I was hungry for her.

'No,' she said,'not just me, let me turn around. I know that poem. I know what you are going to say next anyway. '

'What?' 

'That you want me to drink your milk of paradise..' It was true, I sometimes got carried away... 

'Well if that's what you want to call it, you can. But I want to take my time with you, is that ok?' I asked.

'You know it is' she replied as she prepared to pleasure me just as I repositioned the pillows under my shoulders so she could give her body to my lips at the same time. It was one of my very favourite things to do to her. She was always gets excited by my intimate exploration of her body too. I know what Katniss likes me to do best - but also know if I just did that it would be over too quickly and I like to make it last, to hear her groan made me throb too, so I needed to be careful so we could both enjoy more for longer. So I alternated what I did to her with my tongue, lips and fingers, keeping the pressure firm or soft as she needed, and though I had a plan how to do this for her, I listened to Katniss too - although I sometimes made her beg me to do something, just because I could. I just tried to focus on her, but when she did something to me at the right time, or in the right place, I had to pause to stop myself from coming, to make me stay on the cusp of ecstasy for as long as possible. So I asked Katniss to slow down her work on me. I wanted this to be more for her. Besides I couldn't help thinking about what Katniss said yesterday about having more lovers, though I know that wasn't the point of our conversation.The idea of her taking
another man into her excited me right then, and it made me angry. She could chose any man she wanted, someone perfect. But she had only chosen me. I imagined her doing everything she does for me to another man, riding him, sucking him, letting his hands touch her..... And as she groaned for me I imagined how she would moan for someone else. I couldn't help but move more vigorously, though I know she gets the best climax if I am gentle. I knew the right way to do this for her. She cried out and as she began to buckle I put my hands tightly round her. I didn't want her to have anyone else. I love to watch her body throb for me. Only I have seen that. Only I have made her feel that way. She paused what she was doing to me while she arched her back and I watched her body pulse. Then as soon as she finished crying out, saying my name, she started to take me into her again but that's not what I wanted now.

'No, let me do this,' I pleaded and I turned her onto her back, pinning one of her arms down while I used my other to push myself into her. It was easy. I moved with hard, quick thrusts. I pressed down as I kept sliding into her so that her body touched mine as much as possible. I released her thigh from my grip and her hips found my rhythm. Her chest was flushed pink from her climax from my tongue. But I wanted to make her come again from me inside her. It would take time but I knew I could do it. She looked at me hopefully, she always likes it when I'm rough with her. I had to pause for a moment to stop me from coming right away. I could tell she was liking this but I had to do more. I thrust back into her lifting her hips so she is tilted into me. We worked together changing our speeds and patterns of movement as one. She continued to hold onto me as I pulled and pushed myself into her as hard and as deep as I could. Then I saw her body tighten and I felt the genuine pattern of ripples as she groaned and called out my name. I was pleased how only I can control her body. My work done I poured myself into her and we lay down together. 'That was very....nice,' murmured Katniss, kissing me as she ran her fingers through my hair. 'Was that my wedding present?'

'Well, I was going to build us a new house, but maybe I have done enough already then?' I replied.

'I think I may want that house near the forest after all. But I wouldn't mind you doing that to me all over again. Do I have to choose?' she asked.

'No,' I replied. 'But you might have to wait a bit - and not just for the house.'

'I will be patient then. Have I worn you out at last?' she asked.

'I could only nod.

'You were so beautiful, you were so in control of me.' She sounded satisfied.

'Well, I can't control you any other way so I guess I just tried my best for you.' That was the honest truth.

'Tell me more about the house then,' she asked.

'Well, the plans are pretty much the same as when you saw them. There are four bedrooms. Is that enough now?' I queried, stroking her gently rounded belly, and kissing her upon it.

'I think so,' she replied, 'besides I don't know if everyone has to have their own room. I liked sharing a room with Prim, playing together, singing, telling stories.' The wistful look on her face was one of happy rememberance. 'Tell me more..' 'Downstairs, everything is open, so as we cook we can watch the children play. The windows will cover the whole of the back, as if the garden is part of the house'

'I like that,' she said, taking my hand in hers and pressing it to her lips.

'There's a study for you to...

'Not for you?'

'No I don't need that, my books could be in the living area. But there is a studio for me, with large windows and a pointed glass ceiling, nearly double height,' I explained. 'Is that ok?'

'Why wouldn't it be?'

'Because I don't know if I'll have any time to use it,' I replied as I kissed her stomach again and made my hand wander to her inner thigh.

'It's good for the children to know how talented their father is. These hands were not just made for making bread, or even for holding me...' she took both of my hands in hers now and for a moment we laced our fingers together I freed one of my hands and ran it through her hair.
'I don't know if that's entirely true,' I said. Katniss smiled at me and moved her body across mine, kissing me, then nibbling my ear. 'I know what your going to say.. That your hands are meant for making bagels' I shook my head, 'or cornbreads..?' I shook my head again. 'Never,' I laughed. Of course she knew me too well but I wasn't going to let her win this one. 'Or something else just to annoy me,' she said as she traced her hand down my chest towards my groin. I knew I had to answer carefully. 'No I wasn't going to say anything like that... I was going to tell you if I wasn't so tired, I could have shown you what these hands are for.' 'You know I don't believe you at all...' 'Well you will never know now will you...' I replied, smiling at her. I encouraged her to nestle in to my arms as we kissed. Her breasts were pressed into me, with one leg across me. It felt uplifting to be lying there losing track of time talking about nothing and everything. 'Tell me more about the house- it sounds wonderful,' Katniss asked me once she trusted that I wasn't going to whisper anything foolish in her ear 'Tell me about the garden..' 'Okay, well I will position the house so the garden faces south, to gather all the light and warmth from the sun,' I explained. 'The forest will protect us from a lot if the cold wind in winter and there will be plenty of open space for the children to play..' 'You have thought of everything, like always.' Her hands stroked me gently, I had been forgiven for teasing her. 'What do you think the children are doing right now?' 'They would have been up a while,' I said, checking the position of the sun in the sky. 'If your mother has them they will be making something, counting something or doing something else constructive..' 'And if they are next door with Haymitch?' 'Then we probably don't need to know.. They will be muddy and messy but very happy.' 'But I miss them already...you know how Aster likes to twist my hair when he's tired..' 'They will be fine, really. Aurora will look after her brother. They probably went to sleep together last night in the den I made for them upstairs before we left.' 'Did Aurora ask you to make it?' 'Yes, she did. She will be wanting to be camping outdoors soon. They will be having a lovely time.' I turned her face to mine, I could see her eyes beginning to fill with tears. 'I know you miss them, but they will be fine, trust me. I miss them too but we only have one more day here.' I said, and held her in my arms, drawing her close. 'I know you are right, I just don't like being away from them. Thank you for making me realise I had this love for them inside me.' She held me tightly. 'You always had it in you, Katniss, you just cared too much - you knew to much. We made our children together, we love them together. That's all they need. And tomorrow we will go back home. Will you be ok to do that?' I wiped away the one tear on her cheek that she had let fall, kissed her gently, and ran my hands along her body. At that point I could do nothing more for her, my energy had all been spent, but sometimes just being together was enough. 'Yes,' she replied, 'I know it's special to have this time together.' We were both tired and could have just lain there. The sky was blue and it was going to be another hot day, I could tell. The only sounds were the birds singing, the sheets rustling as we moved softly between them and our lips gently kissing. The time passed. We could have fallen asleep again together, but I heard an unfamiliar sound of bells ringing in the distance. 'Katniss? Can you hear that noise?' I asked. 'Don't worry,' she said, softly. 'It's only someone with bear bells. They don't need any here, we're fine.' 'It's not bears I'm worried about,' I replied. 'Do you think we should move to the cabin?' 'I think we could stay here a little longer don't you?' asked Katniss, leaning back into the pillows and bed covers. 'If you like,' I said kissing her. It was so special to be able to stay in bed with Katniss I was in no hurry to leave either.
'It's so peaceful here and these fabrics are so beautiful,' she murmured. Leaning back into the pillows and bed covers she was a vision of sensual beauty herself. I couldn't decide if I wanted to kiss her or paint her. I didn't have my paints with me though, so the choice was made for me. 'Yes,' I replied as I removed one of the sheer fabrics from her body and kissed her stomach.'Heaven's embroidered cloths, Enwrought with golden and silver light.' The right choice of poetry at the right time worked as an aphrodisiac on Katniss, not that she needed any help today. But I was feeling so tired I was very content to just lie there a little longer with Katniss in my arms. She gently kissed me and caressed me, and I felt that I was drifting back to sleep. I wondered if my dreams then could match the beauty of my reality in our own Xanadu.
The cabin

I think there is nothing I like better than simple slow sex. When I have come once already and I have no worries about finding that cusp again, then I can simply appreciate every strong thrust Peeta pushes into me, and each time he pulls out again I can watch him being received by me, slow and steady. If Peeta has come inside me a few times already - wherever - I know he can take his time. Yes, he will try to find that part inside of me that makes me gasp, and he may tilt my hips up to him and I will push back. But mainly it's just forward and back, like the rolling sea, moving as one together.

That's what I wanted when we finally reached the cabin. There was no bed there as it is just a forest shelter but it has a wooden bench and Haymitch had knowingly provided us with a large soft rug. We had some more provisions and spare clothes there too, just for today. I thought we might have gone walking together but in fact we had spent the whole of the day previously just having sex, as if we were teenagers again, and I could tell the rest of this day was going to be no different. Peeta seemed to want to tick off every position we had ever tried in these two days and I chided him for it. I was thirsty and helped myself to some water. I offered Peeta some wine, but he said it he had drunk too much yesterday, and it affected him last night.

'You seemed fine to me,' I told him, but he was adamant he had been hungover in the morning, at least that is why he had been so tired. So I poured out some water for him and he drank thirstily. He hadn't drunk any water since we left the wedding celebrations because he insisted I had to have it, because of the baby. I had opened the wine so I asked Peeta to have some anyway, but he wouldn't. But I like having sex with him when he is a little drunk - it's something to do with inhibitions - Peeta doesn't have any. It's more like he is such a considerate lover normally - he loves to always look after me first - but when he's drunk (which is very rare) I know he will more likely just think about himself, and that in itself excites me. I like to think he is just using my body for pleasure and I can help him find it.

So eventually Peeta lets me pour some wine into his mouth and what splashes down his body I lick off him. I also kiss him, so that I can taste the wine through him, though I'm not drinking any myself. We wasted a lot, but maybe he will just be drunk enough not to worry about me. Besides I can think of some positions to try which will help achieve that.

Peeta was disappointed that there was no bed, but the rug looked inviting, plus we could use the bench. I helped him to take off his remaining clothes and lead him to sit down there. I had made the walk to the cabin from the pavilion with just a sheet of golden cloth wrapped round me. Peeta said he would commit that image to memory and make a painting of me like that when we return home. But now I just let the cloth fall to the ground. I knelt at Peeta's feet. He had been tired back at the tent but I knew I could get more out of him now, even with the wine he's had. So I started to play with him. I kept my eyes steady on him, like he likes me to, but I also looked away as I like to make him ask me to do it. Today was no exception, and he soon became hard. Once he was ready to enter me we changed positions.

I stood up and put my finger to his lips gesturing to him not to speak, I was in control of him now. I sat astride him with my back towards him. He loves to pull and play with my hair, and he likes to feel the curve of my back and to reach around for my breasts. He is never passive. But I like to ride him, so I ease myself onto him, with my legs wide apart. He entered me easily. Peeta reached round to touch me, always, always thinking of me. I hold his hand there for a while, before I direct his hands to my breasts. He kissed my back, making me accentuate its curve as I continue to move up and down. He has remained silent, but when I slow down and clench him I hear him groan contentedly. I reached back to support my arms on his body as my legs begin to tire. He pulled me back to him and wraps his arms round me. I can smell the wine on his breath.

'Let me do it now, let me do it..' He finally breaks his silence urgently. I turned to him as he
moved my hair to one side to kiss my neck, I used my hand to release him from me.

"How do you want me?" I asked. I let him chose the position, but I still want to control him. Maybe that was a mistake.

He didn't speak but laid me carefully on the rug. He spread my legs out for him and I wrapped them round him. Slowly he entered me. It was delicious between my legs. I knew it would be. The feeling inside of me was like that first time when he awakened my body to his, when I found out what sexual pleasure actually was, even though I don't think I'm going to come, it is more in my mind and it is intense.

I think what I'm loving right now is that whole idea of him. I like it that he is confident enough in himself to accept me as I am. He Isn't challenged by the fact that I can hunt, or swim better than him. He finds my body sensual when I am pregnant, have had a baby or in between. I love that he thinks of sex as something that is absolutely essential for us, something that is beautiful and right, whatever we do to each other. And yet if ordinary life catches up with us, work, children, anything he will never let it affect us. He may get angry with me sometimes, and I with him, we have arguments like anyone but when it's done it's done. And yes I usually win, or maybe I just think I do. In fact one of my favourite fantasies is imagining him calling me names when we are having sex because in reality he won't do that. We will have rough sex when I want it or he wants it but he won't call me a whore or a bitch. He has got into a couple fights in town when he has defended a woman who is being verbally abused my a man or group of men. He says a woman's promiscuity should not be regarded as different to a man's, and he won't judge women for it. So he has taken lots of punches, even though I'm sure he's the stronger one. He says he'd rather take the beating than let the woman have it, whoever she may be. So even though I have asked him to call me a whore or a slut sometimes, he won't do it anymore, he's just can't take on that persona. I think to be honest it just makes me love him more anyway, to know he has such integrity. And he knows that just thinking about it usually helps to push me over the edge, without compromising him.

But I don't want to do that now anyway as I don't want to come. I want to keep feeling that desperation. I just want to keep feeling that burning inside until he is ready for me again, however long that takes. So I steady my hips and let Peeta move inside of me. We kiss slowly and deeply too, and I run my fingers through his hair.

I think Peeta has guessed what I'm trying to do, maybe he was surprised.

'Do you feel any different now we are married?' he asked, still thrusting rhythmically into me. I thought about it and replied 'Yes, yes I think I do, here," I said, indicating my heart.

Peeta kissed me again and ran his hand across my breasts and stomach.

'What about you? I asked. I couldn't help but sway my hips in time with him now.

'No I don't think so...' he said, smiling. He absolutely knew that's not what I wanted to hear.

He lifted my hips up to him as he thrusted deeply into me. He looked at me daring me to stop him, but I couldn't. Instead I asked him again.

'No tell me... really... do you feel any different?'

It was difficult for me to get that sentence out without pausing between words. Peeta of course noticed. He put a hand on my chest. I think he was trying to feel if my heart was beating faster. It was. I should have stopped him. This was my game, I wanted to control him, but he wasn't going to let me.

'No, I don't feel any different,' he said, pulling me just a little bit more towards him, lifting my hips just a little more, moving my hips up and pushing down, I knew he was trying to direct himself to stimulate me inside as much as possible. I looked at him, his eyes were smiling at me. How I love his eyes. I gave in, I moved with him. I couldn't speak, I could only gasp now. Peeta used such power that even in that position my body started to writhe.

Still he entered me slowly, but with perfect control, then when my gasps began to crescendo he moved faster. I managed to call his name just once as

I felt the release much deeper in my body this time. Then I was hardly aware that Peeta came inside of me again till he lay down beside me and I felt him pouring out of me.
'What were you trying to do?' he asked. 'I just wanted to make you come, I wanted to deny myself.' 'I thought so..sorry, I couldn't help it, you know I like a challenge, even if you try to get me drunk.' he stroked my body down to the parting of my legs. 'So did you mean what you said? Do you not feel any different now we are married?' I asked. He removed his hand from me and sat up to look at me. 'Could I ever find you more beautiful than I do already? No, I couldn't. You were the most beautiful thing I ever saw when we were at school, when I threw you the bread, when you volunteered for your sister, when you kissed me in the cave and on the beach. The first time you stood naked before me, can you ever be as beautiful as that? Yes you are beautiful every single day. Were you beautiful at our wedding? Of course no one can match you.' I let him continue. Why not... 'Can I love you anymore than I did all those times? Can I love you more than when you said you would have a child with me, than when you gave birth to our daughter and son - or when you give birth to this baby?' he said as he stopped to kiss my stomach.'No I cannot.' 'Can I desire you any more than I do already, each time I enter your body, here - ' he gestured to my lips 'or here - ' he gestured to between my legs.'No I could not, I lust after you now as much as I ever did. You are matchless to me.' 'But you wanted to get married, why?' 'I think I just want to possess you, to own you and for you to possess me. Is that ok? Do you understand?' he asked. 'Yes, I understand, I belong to you and you belong to me.' 'Yes - that is what I wanted ever since I first took you in my arms when we waited in The Capitol for our first games to begin.' 'Have you not felt it before?' 'Yes, maybe I have...but now we have celebrated that fact, so yes, I do feel different,' he confirmed.'Besides, getting married allowed us to have these days here together and that alone was worth it...' And he lay down and held me in his arms again.
The Future

It's been a little over a year since Katniss and I married, and many things have changed. Katniss has been visiting The Capitol to be trained in politics by Plutarch. At first she wanted to postpone it, because she told me on our wedding day that we were expecting our third child, but Plutarch was keen for her to start, he said it was his time to go. Besides Katniss was already over two months along and had no signs of the anguish she had before. It was as if having a sense of purpose helped her find peace. We waited a couple more months to confirm this was so, and apart from some mood swings and tiredness like any expectant mother may have she was well. Besides Effie cleared her schedule so that Katniss could stay with her in The Capitol. Katniss thought that in itself could be overwhelming, but I knew Effie would be the best person to look after her there - Katniss would certainly be kept occupied with Effie fussing over her. Then when the baby arrived Effie was delighted that we named our new baby daughter after her - although she couldn't have been surprised, she had made us both promise that we would. I asked Katniss if she wanted to name our newest daughter after Prim, but she said there was no need, she can see aspects of her sister - and my brothers - in each of our children, and she would rather let them look forward, not back. So we named the baby after Effie as she wished. She is very contented little baby and though we officially named her Effie we call her Trinket because she sparkles so - it also means we got to use up both names Effie wanted at once. For in some strange way she had brought us together - if her hand not reached into those bowls and pulled out our names on the day of the reaping our lives would have been very different - but not better.

Katniss' first trips to the Capitol just lasted a few days at a time - and the only thing she found difficult at first was leaving the children but she knows that they would be happy and safe with me. She enjoyed her work and gradually looked forward to her monthly trips. She met new people, attended high profile meetings, all things she didn't enjoy before. But she's not on her own, she's part of a team. She's not The Mockingjay any more, she is Katniss, Katniss Everlark.

This trip is different: Plutarch is no longer there to support her, and she will be gone for the whole week. So on the last day I will take the children on the train to The Capitol, so Katniss gets to see them straightaway. We will show them some of the sights we think they need to know about - Aurora can understand a little now. We will take them to the Heavensbee Museum, and point out our names in the narrative displays. But then we are going onwards together to District 4. We have never visited it as a family, and I want to spend some time there together, so that we can watch our children playing happily in the sand and the sea. I want them to know about every district, to know that each place has value and beauty, just like the people who live there. So as they grow up they will know the world doesn't belong to them, they belong to the world.

Then when we finish our trip we will return to our new home by the forest. So many people helped me to build it. The frame was built quickly. Roofers, tilers, plumbers - all friends - worked hard to get it finished. Flooring and cabinets were completed so that I was able to spend time on the details - carvings to the porch and making some new furniture - chairs and tables - out of fallen trees I had dragged out of the forest so that it could be inside with us. I retained the undulating forms of the trees as much as I could so it looks like dryads could live here with us. When we illuminate the rooms with chains of lights and candles it looks like somewhere out of time, - a midsummer night's dream throughout the year. And we are happy in the strange world we created.

Having three young children, and Katniss working away, we don't have so much time together on our own, but that just makes any opportunities more special and intense. We still look at each other with eager eyes and I embrace Katniss with them before our lips, hands and bodies touch. We still make sure we have time apart from the children. Haymitch or Columbine will come and look after them so we can spend some time outside together, alone. Haymitch said two, and then
three, is easier than six, though if he comes round in the day he will always bring some of his own children with him anyway. Then we have a chance to go to the meadow or the forest on our own and just lie down together looking at the sky and the clouds. At night, when the children are sleeping and the house is still we make love as we have always done, powerful yet tender, delighting in the fact that we can make each other find that intimate ecstasy together. Sometimes I wonder if we find such pleasure in each other's bodies because of what we lived through. That ecstasy exists just in that moment - no past - no future - just in the present. But I realise that we enjoy it for the simple reason that it is a sign of the love we feel for each other. We may have used sex at various times to comfort, satisfy, excite, dominate or submit to each other as well as to create our children but each time it is because of our love, and it is that which has made a difference to our lives.

Once, when we were sitting on the beach in the quarter quell I gave Katniss a black pearl I found in an oyster - she has kept it still. I told her a story Effie had told to me, that if you press coal hard enough, it turns into pearls. Finnick laughed, saying that was nonsense, but I wasn't so sure. Born in District 12 under Snow's oppression we were handed a life that was hard and held little promise. But together Katniss and I managed to forge a life together that has been filled with special moments and precious pearls. So I was right after all. And we enjoy the journey we take together, knowing we will stay together, always.

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