"He's your son." she said again, worrying her hands in front of her. Those four words were like a punch to the stomach. His son… He didn't look at the kid, he stared at her, studying her face and trying to catch the deceit that would surely flash in her eyes at some point.
Chapter 1

Haymitch restlessly paced the narrow back alley under Plutarch’s nervous gaze. Plutarch was standing next to the black car supposed to take them to the hovercraft and was checking his watch more and more often.

“I am sorry, Haymitch, but we can’t wait much longer.” the Head Gamemaker said.

“She’s coming,” he snapped. Fear was like a burning fist crushing his guts. Effie Trinket was never late and yet she should have been there almost fifteen minutes ago by then. Everything could have happened. She could have been arrested, she could have misunderstood the meeting point, she could have…

“If she betrayed us…” Plutarch argued.

“She didn’t.” Haymitch didn’t leave room for argument. “I trust her.”

And the moment he said that, he heard the hurried tell-tale clicking of her heels. He turned around just as she stepped around the curb of the alley.

“You’re late, sweetheart.” he accused right before he caught sight of her. Then he froze. “And I guess we’re about to be even more late. Who’s that?”

Plutarch was frowning and Haymitch couldn’t blame him. Effie had a little boy firmly latched on her hand, not more than a toddler really, ashen blond hair, grey eyes, a navy suit that looked out of place on a child and a purple backpack that clashed with the formal attire. The kid stared at him with wide eyes before grinning an almost terrifying smile that revealed a missing tooth. Haymitch was quick to look away but Effie wasn’t forthcoming with an explanation. She stopped walking a few feet from them, crouched to speak a few low words in the child’s ear and then approached Haymitch. There was an edginess about her he hated on sight. Whatever she was going to say, he wouldn’t like it.

“What’s going on?” he asked in a low voice. It was futile, though. Plutarch was nice enough to pretend he wasn’t listening but he was too close not to hear. “This wasn’t the plan, Effie.”

He had told her about the plan in the shower where he was sure there were no bugs and where the noise of running water would have covered their voices. He had said he would take her to Thirteen with him before it all went to shit and she had agreed. She had agreed. He had given her the meeting place and she should have showed up earlier with a small bag and ready to leave everything behind, not with a kid in tow. Was he her nephew? He couldn’t, for the life of him, remember if she had ever mentioned a nephew…

“I apologize.” she whispered. Her voice was flat, she was pale under her make-up and her eyes were too bright, as if she was fighting tears. “You are going to be very, very angry and I can’t apologize enough. Please, believe me, I never meant for you to find out about him like this.”

“What are you talking about?” He shook his head and grabbed her arm, trying to steer her to the car. “It doesn’t matter. Whatever it is, we don’t have time. We have to go.”

She resisted all attempts to be pushed to the car. “He’s your son.”

Plutarch’s surprised curse was masked into a fake cough but Haymitch was too stunned to even curse. He stared at Effie blankly. “What?”
“He’s your son.” she said again, worrying her hands in front of her.

Those four words were like a punch to the stomach. *His son…* He didn’t look at the kid, he stared at her, studying her face and trying to catch the deceit that would surely flash in her eyes at some point. Except it didn’t. She was composed albeit uncharacteristically nervous and obviously distressed.

“He is six.” she continued, low enough that the boy wouldn’t hear her. The kid was a blurred point in his peripheral field of vision, he was still looking at them, fingerling the strap of his backpack absentmindedly. “I am sure. If you ever trusted me, Haymitch…”

“How sure?” he asked.

“A hundred percent sure.” Her smile was soft but sad. “You only have to look at his eye. They’re the very same as yours. And he’s bright too. I couldn’t tell you. You know I…”

“Who’s the mother?” he interrupted, still not willing to look at anyone but her. He couldn’t. He couldn’t face reality yet.

Six years old… He tried to remember but his mind drew a blank. Six years ago had been a particularly bad year and he had been drowning his sorrow and his pathetic life in liquor even more than usual. He had slept around more than he usually did too. It was well before he and Effie had tacitly become exclusive, she had her own fair share of affairs at that point. She couldn’t be the mother however, he would have known. She was working full time when the Games were in session, she never called anyone, she never went anywhere that wasn’t a party or some sponsors related meetings… And she could never have hidden something like that. None of the escorts had a child or a husband. None. Getting pregnant was a sure way to get fired. Haymitch would have known.

One of Effie’s closest friends, perhaps. He was sure he had slept with at least three or four of them…

“The mother…” Effie frowned. Her eyes wandered to the child, when they got back to meet his, they were hard and resolute. “I can’t tell you right now. It’s probably best if you don’t know anyway… Just know I trust her and I am sure he is yours.”

“I’m terribly sorry to intrude but could you, perhaps, discuss this later?” Plutarch winced. “You realize we do have a rebellion on our hands, do you?”

“Yeah… Yeah…” Haymitch felt numb. Maybe he was in shock, maybe he was in full denial, he wasn’t quite sure but he still waved to the car. Katniss and Peeta, he forced himself to think. Katniss and Peeta had to come first, he could have a meltdown later. “Grab the kid and let’s go.”

“I’m not coming.” Effie said quietly and Haymitch could have sworn he heard Plutarch sighed in despair over the time they were wasting.

“Don’t be stupid, sweetheart.” he spat. “Of course, you’re coming. Now get the damn boy and let’s…”

“Haymitch, I am not coming with you.” She was serious and decided, he could tell. She was so damn stubborn, it would be a pain to change her mind. The best solution probably would have been to knock her off and forced her in that car but… “I have to protect my family. My mother and my sister, they… They will go after them if I leave with you, you know that. I will try to get us out of the Capitol, I will try to join you in Thirteen.”

Her blue eyes were begging him to understand and the worst thing was that he could.
“You won’t make it.” Plutarch argued. “Effie, you need to understand, your best chance is to hop on the hovercraft with us.”

She looked at him and then back at Haymitch with such sorrow his heart ached. “I have to try.”

“If you don’t come with us I can’t protect you.” Haymitch’s voice was flat. The fight was already lost. He wouldn’t keep her away from her family, she would hate him forever and she would never be able to live with herself if she abandoned them. He didn’t want her to know the same guilt he carried every day. “They suspect enough about us, Effie. If they catch you, they will torture you. I won’t be able to protect you.”

“I have to take my chances.” She forced herself to smile one of those bubbly fake smiles he hated so much. “Don’t concern yourself with me, I will be just fine. You already have Katniss and Peeta to worry about. Save them both.” Her joyful mask shattered then when she looked back at the boy patiently waiting a few feet away. “And you will have to take care of your son. I want you to swear it. I need you to keep him safe whatever happens. I need to be sure I can trust you with him.”

She meant to leave the kid with him, that wasn’t good. Not that he would have let her go anywhere in the Capitol with a child of his. If Snow ever got a hold on the boy… But if the mother had been clever enough to keep the kid away from him for so long, she probably had been clever enough to make sure nobody knew. It would be best to send him back to his mother and pretend nothing had happened at all…

“You can’t trust me with a kid.” he growled. “You…”

“I don’t have another choice.” Effie snapped. “And neither do you. You are bringing him with you and you are going to protect him. It isn’t up for debate.”

“Haymitch.” Plutarch warned, tapping on his watch.

Effie turned around before he could add anything else and gestured the child over. The boy ran straight to her and hugged her legs. He clung to her even when he lifted his head to look at Haymitch with grey eyes that were, indeed, identical to his. There was no trace of fear or curiosity on the boy’s face, though, it was like he knew perfectly well who Haymitch was.

Effie crouched again before Haymitch could ask any more questions. “Do you remember what Mommy explained, sweetie?” The boy nodded and Haymitch was taken aback by the tone of voice she was using, he had never heard her speak like that. It was soft and tender. A nasty suspicion rose its ugly head in his mind but he brushed it away. She couldn’t be the boy’s mother and if she was, she would have said as much. The time for secret had passed. How long had she known? He wanted to get angry, he wanted to be furious, but he could only feel numb. It didn’t make any sense. None of it did. “Alright,” she continued just as softly, brushing the blond hair out of the kid’s teary eyes. “There is nothing to be sad about. You are going with your Daddy on an adventure, isn’t that exciting?”

She grabbed Haymitch’s wrist without even looking and forced him to outstretch his hand so the kid could cling to him much like he had done with her. Having a child holding his hand was a very unsettling experience. Haymitch was painfully aware that if he held on too tight, he could crush the tiny fingers and it was more frightening than anything he had ever known.

“Remember your manners. Say please and thank you and you will have to explain to Daddy about your bedtime and all the other rules, alright?” she instructed. She didn’t wait for another nod before she hugged the boy tight and the kid hugged right back with obvious distress.
“Effie…” Haymitch tried. He felt like he was going to be sick. Not only was the fact of suddenly discovering he had a kid too much, but the nasty suspicion wouldn’t leave his head now. It was impossible, utterly impossible and yet…

She released the boy – who grabbed Haymitch’s fingers again like it was a lifeline – and placed a hand behind the victor’s neck before he could say anything else. Her eyes briefly darted to Plutarch but then she threw caution to the wind and kissed him hard on the mouth. They had kissed plenty of time in bitterness but never did it taste like this. It tasted like ashes and regret. It wasn’t goodbye, it was a farewell.

“I am so very sorry.” she whispered against his mouth. “Don’t hate me too much.”


She tore herself away from him and pressed a last kiss to the boy’s head before she hurried away as fast as her high heels would take her. She didn’t look back. Haymitch watched her disappear behind the corner and then turned to Plutarch.

“That was unexpected.” Plutarch said, his eyes fell on the boy and Haymitch could glimpse the calculating glint in there already. How to turn the whole story into a heartbreaking tale that would get them even more sympathies from the Districts…

“Don’t even think about it.” he snapped. He placed the boy in the back seat of the car, trying his best not to look, or acknowledge or anything that could make him accept that this was real and not one of his most elaborate nightmares, and then climbed in the front.

Plutarch started the engine and they were gone, no turning back. Effie hadn’t even glanced back. She hadn’t even…

“What’s your name, boy?” Plutarch asked, not unkindly.

Haymitch startled when something moved on the back seat. No, not something… His son. He wondered if the nausea that was quickly starting to become associated with those two words would ever disappear. He didn’t want a kid. He had never wanted a kid. Kids were breakable and demanding and if they were a victor’s child, they would most certainly die a bloody death in an arena. Any child of his would die for sure. Haymitch had never wanted children, never.

He looked over his shoulder anyway, fingers twitching for a bottle to hold. There was no alcohol though. His flask had been left behind. No liquor allowed in Thirteen, no point in bringing an empty flask. He had been slowing down his alcohol consumption for weeks because of that, so the withdrawal wouldn’t be too awful. Oh, it would be unbearable, he had no doubts about that, but it wouldn’t be as physically hard as it could have been.

He realized to his disgust that he hadn’t even thought about asking Effie for the child’s name. He didn’t even know his own child’s name.

The boy wasn’t wailing yet but his grey eyes were full of tears and his lips were wobbling. He was staring at Haymitch expectantly and when he failed to say anything, the child rummaged into the purple bag and pulled out a battered stuffed sheep. He hugged the sheep for dear life and then finally acknowledged Plutarch’s question. “Timotheo.”

Timotheo… How… Capitol-y.

“A good name.” Plutarch offered with fake enthusiasm. “And your last name?”

Undisguised attempt at finding out who the mother was.
Haymitch should be the one asking those questions. Effie shouldn’t have left without giving answers. She shouldn’t have left at all. It was all so… A surge of anger ran through his veins and turned around again to look at the road ahead before he could do something that would forever traumatize the child. He wanted to hit something, preferably Snow. He wanted to…

“Mommy calls me Theo.” the boy mumbled. Haymitch caught sight of him in the rear-view mirror. If he hugged that sheep any tighter, the stuffed head would pop. He was obviously frightened. And why shouldn’t he be? He had been abandoned in the care of two perfect strangers… Not entirely true, though. From the start, the boy had acted as if he knew Haymitch and he wasn’t surprised when Effie had referred to him as ‘Daddy’… His mother must have told him about him.

“And… How do people call Mommy?” Plutarch insisted.

The boy had secured the seat belt on his own – clever, Haymitch couldn’t help but think – but he still wriggled to the edge of the seat so he could get a hold on Haymitch’s shirt. The sheep stayed firmly pressed against his chest by his other arm. He was eyeing Plutarch with obvious distrust.

“It’s okay, kid.” Haymitch said, without even knowing why. “You don’t have to answer.”

He glared at Plutarch who only shrugged. They didn’t need to upset the boy. They didn’t need a crying child on their hands, it was miraculous enough that he hadn’t started weeping yet. What did either of them know about wailing children?

The boy seemed to calm down though. He kept hold of Haymitch’s shirt and on the sheep and he looked at the road ahead with wide eyes. They made it to the hovercraft without a single tear and Haymitch had never been more relieved in his life. All the more so when he saw Plutarch’s assistant hurrying toward them.

He lost no time in charging her of babysitting the kid. There were tears then. For whatever obscure reason since he had known him for a total of twenty minutes, the boy refused to be separated from Haymitch and started wailing and struggling in Fulvia’s arms, calling out “Daddy” as if he was being murdered.

Underneath the shock of being called “Daddy” for the first time, there was a somber pull Haymitch was surprised to feel : the primitive answering need to kill whoever was making his child cry that way.

“I need you to focus, Haymitch.” Plutarch snapped before grabbing his arm to get him away. “He’s on board, Fulvia is with him, he will be alright. There are more urgent matters right now.”

More urgent than a newly-discovered son he had never wanted in the first place calling him for help when Haymitch was so scared of losing anyone he cared about?

However, there were indeed more urgent matters. Out of sight, out of mind was, perhaps, a coward approach but it worked. Haymitch lost himself in the moment, helping Plutarch strategizing the rescue mission and making sure everything went as well as possible.

It didn’t.

Katniss’ arrow made the arena explode before they were ready to act.

They managed to retrieve her, Finnick and Beetee but despite Haymitch’s insistence and the rebels’ best efforts, they couldn’t get to Peeta. Johanna was lost too, so was Enobaria. And then, it all went to hell. The rebellion exploded in the Districts before they could even try to control it,
everyone was screaming in the hovercraft. Finnick was begging Plutarch to get Annie out, all the
time knowing it wouldn't be possible, when Katniss appeared armed with a syringe. It was so
stupid it almost made Haymitch laugh – a hysterical, exhausted kind of laugh – then, of course, he
had to tell her about Peeta and she tried to kill him but… That was to be expected, he supposed.

Things finally calmed down a bit when they were about thirty minutes from Thirteen. Plutarch
excused himself for a cup of coffee, Finnick left his bed to collapse on a chair waving away any
medical aid, and Haymitch would have loved to lounge on one of the chairs with a glass of
whiskey but that wasn’t meant to be.

First, there wasn’t any whiskey in that place.

Second, it was time to face reality.
Despite his commendable – in his opinion – resolution, it still felt surreal to step into the small waiting room where Fulvia had taken the boy. They had both become fast friends apparently in the last few hours because there were no more tears nor desperate hugging of the stuffed sheep. The boy – Theo, he should start using the child’s name at some point and there was no way he was going to call him by his full very Capitol name – was sprawled on his stomach and very busy drawing. His purple bag was open and some toys were spilling out of it: figurines, small cars… He could also glimpse some clothes.

“Daddy!” the boy exclaimed happily when he saw him.

Haymitch wasn’t prepared to be attacked so it came as a bit of a surprise when Theo launched himself at him. He caught him, though. Reflex, mostly. Carrying a kid was awkward and it was so very obvious he didn’t know what he was doing, Fulvia couldn’t hide a smile.

“You have a very clever boy, Haymitch. Allow me to offer my congratulations.” She ruffled the child’s hair and then handed the victor a thin folder on her way to the door. “It was in his bag. It contains his birth certificate and legal papers. I think you will want to have a look.”

He nodded, thanked her for her help and, once she was out, tried to figure out how you removed a child from your neck. He tried to let go of the kid but he just hang there, almost strangling him with his death grip, giggling all the while as if it was a game. Panic started to bubble in Haymitch’s stomach. He wasn’t equipped to deal with a child. He barely managed to deal with teenagers and Katniss and Peeta were both a handful.

“Okay, kid…” he grumbled. “Enough… hugging.” If that was hugging… What did he know?

Theo giggled some more and then let go, landing on his feet before going back to sit on the ground. “Do you want to see my pictures, Daddy?”

What Haymitch wanted was to study the papers in the folder but the boy was looking at him with so much hope – and a bit of uncertainty, he couldn’t help but notice, which made him wonder how much of his brave behavior was an act – that Haymitch found himself sitting cross-legged on the floor. He felt out of his depth and he figured it was better to follow the kid’s lead.

Drawing, he decided, wasn’t one of his son’s stronger skills.

“That’s you and that’s me.” Theo said helpfully, pointing to two stick figures on the right of the paper. “And that’s Mommy.” Mommy was wearing shocking pink and was completely on the left. He tried not to linger on the bright pink dress Effie had been wearing earlier. It was a coincidence, nothing more. Lots of women wore pink in the Capitol…

“And who are they?” he asked, putting his finger on a group of stick figures in the middle of the drawing, clearly separating Mommy from Theo and him.

The boy’s face fell. “The bad men.” He snatched the sheep from the floor and hugged it. “I wanted to draw Granny and Auntie with Mommy but… Are Granny and Auntie with Mommy?”

I have to protect my family. My mother and my sister, they… They will go after them if I leave with you, you know that. Effie’s word echoed in his mind but he chased them away. It simply couldn’t be.

“I don’t know.” he replied honestly. He didn’t need to be a child expert to see it distressed the
boy. “Do you want to play a game? I’m going to ask you stupid questions and you answer them anyway, okay?” Theo shrugged. Haymitch took that as a yes. “Who are the bad men?”

Grey eyes met grey eyes and Haymitch felt like he was being evaluated. The question was obviously deemed idiotic because Theo shrugged again. “The bad men. They want to hurt you and Mommy and Granny and Auntie so we can’t say you are my daddy or Mommy is my mommy. It’s a secret.” He placed a finger against his lips and shush.

It was cute.

And Haymitch had absolutely not thought of anything or anybody as cute…

“But you know I am your…” He swallowed hard and tried to detach himself from the situation. He needed to resolve the mystery. He needed to be sure. It would probably be easier to open the damn folder and get the answers but he didn’t think he was ready for that. It would be different if Effie was… It shouldn’t, but it would be. Haymitch would protect the kid either way but it would be different if he was the child of a total stranger or of a woman he knew, respected and had been sort of friends with for years – not to mention the not-so-casual-sex part of their relationship. “You know who I am.”

Theo nodded enthusiastically. “Mommy shows me when you’re on TV and on pictures! I watch the questions with Auntie when it’s Games time.” Interviews was probably what he meant but Haymitch didn’t interrupt. “Auntie says Mommy is too pretty and it’s a shame. Granny watches too but she doesn’t like you.”

“I bet.” Haymitch snorted. “So… You live with your Mommy or…”

“No, with Granny.” Theo frowned. “You know.”

It was a statement rather than a question and Haymitch almost threw the whole thing off and told him that, no, he didn’t know, that he hadn’t been aware he existed before Effie brought him to that alley and that he didn’t know what the hell he was supposed to do with a kid. He didn’t, though. It wasn’t fair.

“Yeah.” Haymitch rubbed his forehead, wondering why things always had to be so complicated. What divinity had he pissed off in a previous life to be stuck in that kind of troubles? “Stupid questions, remember? It’s a game.”

Theo tilted his head to the side, studying him. The stuffed toy was ruthlessly turned one way and then the other while the boy was thinking. “Like a test? To be sure you can take me on the super-secret adventure?”

“Sure…” A drink. What Haymitch wouldn’t have given for a single glass of whiskey… “So, you live with Granny… How’s that?”

The boy wrinkled his nose. “I like it better when Mommy is there but she can’t come all the time.” He looked down and pulled on a loose white thread hanging from the sheep’s ear. “It’s okay ‘cause I’m a big boy.” A bright smile lightened his face for no apparent reason all of a sudden and Haymitch briefly wondered if he shouldn’t have the kid examined by a doctor. Surely, it wasn’t normal… “I can come on the super-secret adventure! I can hide! I hide all the time when Granny invites friends. I’m the bestest at hiding!”

Haymitch overlooked the grammar problem for the moment. “Why do you hide?”

“Cause I’m secret.” Theo rolled his eyes. “You said I was a good boy! That I could keep secrets better than anyone in the whole world!”
The child was looking at him with so much faith and eagerness Haymitch felt his stomach churned. “You’re a very good boy.” he offered. That was the truth at least. He was sure most kids would have pitched a fit or would still be crying out for their mother. “You remember the last time I said that? When was it? Did Mommy told you for me?”

“Mommy said you said to tell me you loved me on the phone yesterday.” Theo explained rummaging through his backpack. “I told her to say it back. She did, right?”

“Yes.” Haymitch lied. He hated that, lying to a child. He had always refused to lie to his tributes all his years as a mentor and he had been lying too much to Katniss and Peeta lately. It left a bad taste in his mouth.

How long people had been lying to this kid?

He got the answer when Theo found a stack of envelopes in his bag and handed them over with one of his big, tooth-missing smile. “Do you have my pictures and my letters? Mommy says you keep them with you always.”

Haymitch swore he could feel what was left of his heart breaking in his chest and that was quite a feat. “I had to leave them behind.” He was angry again, more than angry in fact, but not against the kid and he did his best to keep his temper in check. He would screw up at some point and the child would hate him but it wouldn’t happen yet if he had anything to say about it.

“Because of the bad men?” It was so innocent a question.

“Yeah, because of the bad men.” he answered absentmindedly, already studying the stack of letters. They were obviously well-cherished and each one of them showed trace of having been folded time and time again, as if they had been read and re-read. The letters were a good imitation of what he could have said if he had been a less bitter man. The style, the vocabulary, the way the sentences were put together… The letters had obviously been written by someone who knew him well. The handwriting was painfully familiar too. He was too used to ignoring her schedule not to recognize Effie’s handwriting.

It didn’t prove anything though, apart from the fact that she had been keeping the boy secret from him for years.

“What else have you got in your bag?” he asked, giving the letters back. “Do you have a picture of Mommy?”

He could just have opened the damned folder...

Theo nodded and fished a necklace from under his shirt. No… Not a necklace, a locket. The same kind Effie had given Peeta, the very same he had spied around her neck from time to time when she wasn’t required to wear extravagant jewels.

He could have killed for some liquor. He was stunned again, angry and confused. It took almost five minutes before the boy managed to pry the locket open but Haymitch knew well before he saw the two pictures in it. Haymitch’s picture was from an official poster from a few years earlier. Effie’s… Effie’s was beautiful in its simplicity. No wig, no make-up, a simple blue dress that matched her eyes.

“Before there was me, here.” Theo explained, pointing to the picture of Effie. “But Mommy changed it when she gave it to me. I have to be very, very careful because it’s a grown-up locket but I can have it ‘cause I’m a big boy and I’m going on a super-secret adventure with you!”
Haymitch bolted to his feet as much as a forty-one years old man with tremors in his hands and a bad case of nausea could. He turned his back on the kid and walked to the hovercraft window, focusing on the clouds outside.

Six years ago, Effie had been pregnant with their child and she hadn’t told him. She had managed to hide her pregnancy from the public, probably with some help from her mother and her sister, she had given birth to their child and had kept him hidden from everyone including him so no one would ever find out who the father was. Effie wasn’t stupid, she probably had understood what fate a child of his would meet. She could have lied about the father’s identity, of course, but how long would it have taken Snow to figure everything out? Not very long.

Pieces of a puzzle he hadn’t been aware of were starting to slide back together. They had been casually sleeping together for almost eight years. In the beginning, it had always been the result of particularly nasty fights until it had reached a point where Haymitch had started to get irrationally jealous each time she spent too much time with another man. He had never said anything out loud but she was jealous too and they had stopped sleeping around without any grand speeches or declarations of any sort.

The point was, that five years ago, she had been distant and he could remember spending most of the Games watching from afar while she flirted with every man that stroke her fancy. He could remember a huge fight where he had called her nasty names that she had hastily countered with some of her own… He hadn’t touched another woman after that and he knew she had stopped having sex with anyone who wasn’t him. However, the important part was that she had been distant, angrier with him than usual, constantly trying to push him away - because of the baby she couldn’t tell him about.

Neither of them could publicly claim their child without the whole story coming out and that meant they would all have been in danger. She had chosen to keep the child hidden and she had lied to their son just like she had lied to him. She had made sure he knew who Haymitch was and how dangerous it was, she had invented letters and messages just so Theo would have a father, she had…

He was so furious he banged his fist against the wall. The pain brought him a short relief but the anger came back, the resentment too. He was so angry with Effie for putting him in that position, for not explaining…

Don’t hate me too much, she had said. How not to hate her when she should have been on that hovercraft with them instead of wherever she was? It was the reason she hadn’t told him she was the boy’s mother. Had he known that, he would have never let her go. He would have never let the mother of his child in danger, her family be damned. He should have forced her to climb in that car… Then she would be the one hating him but at least she would still be there to do it.

They would find out about the boy, now. They would investigate Effie’s life to make sure she had no connections to the rebels apart from him and they would find out about the boy and she would be branded a traitor and then… Then…

He banged his fist against the wall again. He was angry with Effie but he knew, deep down, that she had done the right thing by hiding the truth to him. He understood that. He truly did but still… He had a right to know. He had a right…

Everything was the “bad men”’s fault though. There wouldn’t have been any need for secrecy if it hadn’t been for Snow and his fucking Hunger Games…

“Daddy?” Theo’s voice was unsure and upset. The boy tugged on the hem of his shirt and stumbled back when Haymitch turned too quickly. The sheep was back against his chest, like a
shield. For a sickening second, he thought the boy would start crying in fear – something he instinctively knew would kill him – but the child only watched him with fretfulness. “I did the test wrong? You don’t want me on the super-secret adventure?”

“No.” Haymitch forced himself to sound calm. There was no point in getting angry right now when they was no other possible outlet to that anger than the child. Nothing would happen to this child if he had anything to say about it. It was Effie’s kid, his kid. Their kid. He had a child with Effie Trinket. He felt the need to sit down suddenly so he did, right where he was, sliding against the wall until he was at eye level with his son. His son. It would take some getting used to.

“You’re coming on the super-secret adventure with me.” Trust Effie to come up with ridiculous names.

The boy beamed but then he frowned and studied Haymitch with close attention before offering the stuffed animal. “You want to cuddle with Sheepy?” Ridiculous names, Haymitch thought.

“You look sad. Sheepy makes the sad go away, Mommy says so.”

“Everything your mother says isn’t true, just so you know.” he replied and regretted immediately after.

The boy didn’t seem to take it too badly, though. He sat right next to Haymitch and snuggled up to his side with a carelessness that was too forced to be true. He tapped the head of the sheep against his tiny knee until Haymitch placed a tentative arm around his shoulder, then he stilled and finally relaxed against his father with a deep sigh. “Mommy says I have to stay with you a while and she can’t visit because of the bad men.”

“Yeah.” He closed his eyes and tried his hardest not to let his imagination run rampant about Effie’s fate. It had been hours since they had left the Capitol, everything could have happened.

He’d need Plutarch to notify his contacts in the Capitol and to get her out if it wasn’t already too late.

“How long is a while?” Theo asked softly.

“I don’t know.” With their kind of luck… Probably long.

“Can we phone Mommy sometimes?” the boy insisted. “Or write a letter like for you?”

“I’m not sure.” Haymitch winced when the boy hugged his stuffed sheep a little closer with a disappointed “oh”. He was already doing a poor job at parenting. Effie should have come. She really should have… “Can you bring me the folder?”

The boy was happy to go and get the folder for him. He stayed right next to Haymitch and peered over his shoulder. “What’s that, Daddy?” he asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Birth certificates.” As Fulvia had promised, it was worth a look. There were two certificates, one was registered under Effie’s sister name without any father mentioned, that one named the child as Timotheo Trinket; the second, the real one he supposed, named the mother as Effie Trinket and Haymitch Abernathy as the father, the child’s name was Timotheo Abernathy. There was also a bunch of papers that were all very official looking that stipulated Haymitch got custody of her child if anything were to happen to her, the child medical history – nothing that was out of the ordinary – and, on the very last page, the last will and testament from Euphemia Trinket. He closed the folder as quickly as he could. “Boring grown-up things.”

Theo wrinkled his nose in distaste and then sat down. “Are we pirates, now?”

“Pirates…” Haymitch repeated, not quite following. “Why?”
“We’re going on an adventure.” The kid was shaking his feet like it was all too exciting to be true. He would get bored before long, Haymitch thought. He doubted District Thirteen was really kid-friendly. “Pirates go on adventures, Daddy. Is there going to be dragons?”

“No, no dragons. Well… Depends on what you call a dragon, I guess.” Haymitch snorted, thinking of what he had heard about Coin.

“Good.” Theo nodded to himself.

“You don’t like dragons?” Why was he asking stupid questions, again?

“Dragons eat sheep!” Theo exclaimed as if Haymitch should already have known that. “They would eat Sheepy and me too ‘cause I’m not bigger than a sheep.”

And now the boy was sulking. Wonderful.

“You don’t like dragons but you like sheep.” Haymitch summed up, wondering at what point it would be mandatory to mention he, personally, liked whiskey. “What’s so special about sheep?”

“They live in District Ten.” The sulk was gone, now Theo was practically bouncing in his hurry to tell him all about cattle. “One day Mommy is going to take me. Sheep make wool and it’s all soft like my baby blanket. Mommy said I couldn’t bring both my baby blanket and Sheepy because there wasn’t enough room in my bag but I took Sheepy because I’m not a baby anymore and maybe one day he will make wool and I can have another blanket.”

Haymitch couldn’t help but smirk. “Aren’t you a clever boy…”

The child nodded without any sort of humility. “Mommy says I am clever like you and Granny says you have two brains and you use the downstairs brain and never your head. Mommy is angry when Granny says that but Granny says Mommy has mush in the head when it’s about you. I don’t know what it means, they didn’t want to explain.” Well… Haymitch couldn’t wait to meet Granny. That promised to be interesting. “But I can count to nineteen. Granny taught me. It’s not hard, you just have to remember eleven and twelve.” He said the two words slowly as if he wasn’t quite sure but when Haymitch didn’t venture a correction he went on. “And after that you just put teen after the number. What’s after nineteen?”

“Twenty.” Haymitch allowed himself a second of relief. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad. Maybe he just needed to find something to keep the kid occupied.

“And then eleven-twenty and twelve-twenty?” he asked curiously.

“No, just twenty-one and twenty-two.” Haymitch corrected him.

Theo thought about that for a few seconds and then made a face. “That’s dumb.” He turned the sheep in his hands for a minute and Haymitch closed his eyes, mentally calculating how long it would be before they finally reached Thirteen and what he would need to do there. He would have brought the boy to the medical area for a DNA testing but that was before he knew Effie was the mother. Not only did he trust her word, but he would still be responsible for the child even if he wasn’t the father. Effie entrusted his care to him and he couldn’t just get rid of the boy, could he? Find someone to babysit the boy, that was what needed to be done. Fulvia perhaps, someone he knew and could trust. Then, he would need to check on Katniss and try to find out what had happened to Twelve… “Daddy?”

“Of all the things you could have taken after your mother, you had to be a chatterbox…” Haymitch sighed before opening his eyes to look at the boy. His son, it was still surreal.
“When the adventure’s over…” The sheep’s head would be severed before long if the kid continued to pull it like he was doing, so Haymitch placed his shaking hand on the kid’s. Bad move. The boy started playing with his fingers instead. “You come to live with Mommy and me and Granny?”

Fortunately for him, he didn’t have to answer that. The door slid open and closed behind Finnick who was in the middle of a rant. “… swear, Haymitch, I’m going to kill him if he doesn’t get me to Four. I need to…” The young victor stopped talking with a frown when he caught sight of the boy. His sea-green eyes darted from the child to Haymitch. “Found a friend your age?”

Haymitch was about to reply that there was no way anybody would take him to Four and that he should sit down before he fainted when Theo hopped to his feet and slammed his hand repeatedly on Haymitch’s shoulder. It took him a few seconds to realize the child was asking for his attention. His eyes were wide and shining, his mouth was open in disbelief and he looked like he would start jumping up and down soon. “It’s Finnick Odair! It’s Finnick Odair! It’s Finnick Odair!”

“Yeah, yeah…” Haymitch rolled his eyes with annoyance. “I know.”

“But it’s Finnick Odair!” Theo shrieked, bolting to his backpack and almost emptying the whole content before he found what he was looking for. A small figurine with a trident that he proudly showed Finnick. “You’re the bestest victor! And the nicest! And the prettiest! Mommy says so and Auntie wants to marry you and Granny says Mommy should have shagged you instead but I don’t know what that means. What does that mean?”

“Why, thank you.” Haymitch grumbled. Theo didn’t even spare him a glance. Apparently, the novelty of being with his father had worn off or didn’t compete with the fact that the great Finnick Odair was standing right in front of him. He was bouncing on his feet.

“Who’s your Mommy?” Finnick asked, confused and a bit overwhelmed by the child who was very much invading his personal space. “Fulvia?”

“Effie.” Haymitch sighed, rubbing his eyes. It would be a very long story.

Finnick did a double take at that. “Trinket?”

“Yeah.” he replied, lifting his eyebrows. “Also… My son.” He wondered where the small pride perceptible in the words came from.

Finnick opened and closed his mouth. “Since when?”

“A few hours.” Haymitch chuckled darkly.

“Good or bad?” Finnick asked, patting the boy’s head before sitting down against the opposite wall.

“Still trying to figure it out.” he snorted.

“Figure it out quicker, we will be there in ten minutes and I have a feeling Coin will have something to say about that.” Finnick advised, taking the figurine from the boy for closer inspection. “I will sign that later if you want.”

Theo was so happy by the prospect he came back to hit Haymitch’s shoulder some more. “Finnick Odair is going to sign my toy!”

“You can call me Finnick, you know.” Four’s victor offered. “I’m friends with your parents.”
Haymitch was suddenly afraid Theo’s eyes would bulge out of his head. He grabbed the boy’s hands before he could leave a bruise on his arm in his enthusiasm.

“Daddy is taking me on a super-secret adventure!” the boy told Finnick. “Are you coming with us?”

“Sure.” Finnick grinned. “If the super-secret adventure is in Four.”

Haymitch ignored his pointed glare. “You’re in no state to go there. Nobody will let you go. It’s too late, you know that.”

“I’m not leaving her out there without a fight!” Finnick snapped and then burrowed his face in his hands. “I can’t lose her… I can’t…”

Theo escaped him before Haymitch could try to hold him back. He tapped Finnick on the shoulder politely. “You’re sad? You want to hug Sheepy?”

Finnick looked dejected but forced a smile for the child’s sake.

“Yeah, Finnick…” Haymitch snorted. “According to Effie, the sheep magically takes the sadness away. Why don’t you try it?”

All he got in reply was a glare.
Chapter 3

As a matter of fact, there was no time to hug Sheepy, the hovercraft was already starting to land and their welcoming committee wasn’t very...welcoming. Theo clung to his hand, all excitement about the adventure forgotten when faced with rebels with very real guns pointed at him. Haymitch lifted him up instinctively, ready to shield him with his body if needed.

“Nice.” Finnick snorted next to him. “I feel right at home.”

A woman appeared and ordered the soldiers to lower their weapons. If she had wanted to look like a benevolent savior, it failed and Haymitch’s first impression of Alma Coin wasn’t good. Although she didn’t look much more impressed with them and the fact that Katniss was sedated and would probably need to be kept that way for a while didn’t do much to break the ice. Plutarch was the only one she was cordial to, perhaps because they already knew each other.

It didn’t take him more than five minutes to decide Thirteen - or rather Threeteen as Theo was calling it - would be difficult. They were given a tour, uniforms and assigned quarters. Haymitch’s cupboard was bigger than the room they gave him but he didn’t complain: the bed was a decent size, there was a cot for the kid and a small en-suite bathroom. The others’ living arrangements were better but Haymitch soon understood that Coin was holding a grudge about the missing escort she had been promised and that he had been apparently judged responsible for her absence. Not that their dear President ever mentioned it but he wasn’t an idiot and he could read between the lines. Perhaps Effie had made a good choice in staying in the Capitol, the rebels obviously weren’t as welcoming to her presence in Thirteen as Plutarch had let him think they were.

“I’m hungry.” Theo whined from his cot. He had quickly set on redecorating the room as soon as they had arrived. The backpack had been tucked under the bed, the clothes folded in the drawers and the toys placed on the dresser so they could be easily reached and yet look pretty in the meantime, Sheepy had been left on the bed. When he was done, Theo had outstretched a hand expectantly to Haymitch’s utter confusion. He wasn’t familiar with the concept of gold stars that Theo explained which resulted in a sulk and general crankiness from the child because when he did something right, he should get a gold star, that was the rule, and when he had ten golden stars, he could have a new small toy or a new storybook.

Haymitch glanced at his wrist and the newly temporary schedule inked there. There was no time to lose and the hour he had been allotted to get settled was almost up. He didn’t have time to get the kid to the cafeteria – even if he managed to find the cafeteria – he needed to be in the briefing room in less than fifteen minutes. And what would he do with the child then? He couldn’t bring him and he couldn’t leave him there alone either...

First thing first... “Get changed.” He threw the small grey uniform on the bed. It was ridiculous to put kids in uniforms but he would rather wait a little longer before starting to antagonize Coin. He had gotten properly dressed himself. He needed to find out what was happening with Katniss, they had ushered her to the medical bay before he could have a say. Finnick had been whisked away too.

“I can’t put pajamas before dinner.” Theo objected, wrinkling his nose. “And they aren’t pretty. I want my blue ones.”

“It’s not pajamas, it’s…” Haymitch rolled his eyes. Why did he even bother? “Just put it on.”

“It isn’t pretty.” Theo folded his small arms over his chest. “I want food.”
“You are so not throwing a tantrum right now…” Haymitch mumbled, turning around to glare at the kid. He knew it wasn’t entirely the child’s fault. It had been a very long day. Haymitch himself was exhausted and he wasn’t six years old. Theo had been behaving far longer than he had expected him to. “It’s a disguise.” That was the best Haymitch could come up with. “For the adventure. Look, I have one too.” He waved at what he was wearing, hoping it would work and there wouldn’t be any tears or hysteric crying. He wasn’t sure he would bear those. Not without a glass of whiskey at any rate.

“It’s not pretty on you either.” Theo sniffed.

Haymitch closed his eyes and counted to twelve. “Finnick will have one too.”

*That* did it. He was relieved to see the boy could mostly take care of himself. Bathroom, getting dressed… Everything was done with minimal help on his part. Perhaps the kid would survive his care for a short while.

“Now, food?” Theo asked hopefully, rubbing his eyes, while Haymitch did the last few buttons of the shirt for him.

The child had a point, those uniforms were terrible. They both looked like cellmates.

“Food.” he agreed, hoping there would be something to eat during the meeting, even if it was only a fruit.

The meeting, however, never happened. He was on his way there when a soldier told him to hurry to the hovercrafts landing soil to see to the Twelve’s bombing refugees who had been rescued and just arrived. Coin expected him to explain the rules, see to it that volunteer soldiers knew who to contact and that, more to the point, they didn’t make a nuisance of themselves. He arrived at the same time as the first hovercraft, Theo was a dead weight in his arms but the boy had simply refused to walk and Haymitch didn’t have time to argue.

The first person who walked out of the hovercraft was Gale Hawthorne and he was followed by his family as well as Katniss’ mother and sister. Haymitch didn’t know he had been holding his breath until he saw them all. The girl would never have forgiven him if something happened to any of them. He took charge since that was what was expected of him, spying familiar faces in the crowd of refugees. He didn’t see Peeta’s family.

“I’m glad to see you.” Hazelle offered when he finally had time to stop for a chat. He had directed the Everdeens to the medical area as well as those who were wounded, the others had been taken to a huge temporary room for the time required to find quarters for them all. Food had been brought too, there wasn’t much but there was enough and Theo had happily – albeit sleepily – let go of him to go and investigate. “We weren’t sure…”

“Still alive, still kicking.” Haymitch mumbled. “How bad was it?”

He hadn’t seen the footage yet and he wasn’t sure he wanted to. As much as he had hated his house, it was the only thing he could call home.

“The Seam took the worst of it.” Hazelle said sadly. “And the town… There isn’t much left.”

He was about to ask if she knew anything about the Mellarks when Theo came running back and latched himself to his hand again, clutching an apple in his chubby fingers. He was eying the crowd of strangers distrustfully and not without fear. “Daddy, who are they?”

He should have thought of that before. The kid had been hiding all his life, there were good reasons to suppose he would be weary of strangers.
“Daddy?” Hazelle gasped.

The kid she was carrying, her youngest, opened a sleepy eyes and peeked over her mother’s shoulder. “Hi!” the little girl waved at Theo who only looked at Haymitch in obvious confusion.

“Well, say hello.” Haymitch nudged him. “Your mother will have a fit if you become rude.” Of course, he would become rude eventually. Haymitch didn’t give it two days before he learned how to curse like a sailor.

“Hello.” Theo mumbled, cheeks flushing red. “I’m not rude. I’m a good boy.”

“Of course, you are.” Hazelle smiled. She placed her girl on the ground since she was awake now and then looked pointedly at Haymitch who feigned incomprehension until she placed her hands on her hips. “I’m pretty sure you weren’t hiding a boy in that house, Haymitch, I cleaned it enough times to know.”

Lying was of no use, too many people knew the real story already, so he explained the situation to Hazelle who declared it quite wonderful. He didn’t share that opinion at all but he didn’t voice his reserves. The child was too smart and he was afraid he would pick up on it.

“What’s your name?” Hazelle’s kid asked after a long staring contest.

“Theo.” the boy replied before glancing at his father and then bowing a little. “How do you do?”

“How do I do what?” the girl frowned before shrugging. “You talk weird. I’m Posy. You want to go and explore?”

“Oh, no, young lady.” Hazelle countered. “It’s time for bed, now. You will play with Theo tomorrow. I can babysit for you, if you want, Haymitch. It’s no trouble.” She ushered her children away after he had accepted her offer. It, at least, resolved the problem of what he was to do with Theo…

The boy outstretched his arms which, Haymitch had quickly learned, meant he wanted to be carried. He wasn’t expecting the child to snuggle up against his neck but what did he know about children? They liked hugs…

There was nothing left to do and he was rather exhausted so he swung by the medical bay to check on Katniss, Finnick and Beetee and headed back to his quarters. Well… their quarters, he supposed. Even though his young roommate was dead asleep and drooling on his shoulder.

The boy yawned and rubbed his face when he placed him on the bed. There was so much trust in his grey eyes, Haymitch wanted to run in the opposite direction as fast as he could. Trust was dangerous. Trust meant you were responsible for the people doing the trusting.

“Can I have my pajamas?” he asked.

Haymitch wasn’t sure the child was really awake. The boy seemed completely worn out. He helped him get into his blue pajamas – there wasn’t much in terms of clothes in the bags but it would have to do – and then helped him spat the toothpaste in the sink when he brushed his teeth, listening without hearing much to the sleepy rant about how his usual strawberry toothpaste was better and why Haymitch should try to find some first thing tomorrow as well as a little stool so he could brush his teeth by himself because he was a big boy and didn’t need to be carried all the time.

Many yawns and rants later, the boy was finally tucked in with Sheepy the sheep and yet still
awake.

“You have to sing the lullaby, Daddy.” the kid mumbled.

“I’m not singing.” Haymitch had to draw a line somewhere.

“But Granny always sing.” Theo insisted. “Or tell a story… Mommy tells stories sometimes. I’ve been good so you have to.”

“I don’t know any stories.” Haymitch sighed, getting more and more frustrated by the second. Wasn’t there an off switch to kids?

The boy didn’t seem fazed by his lack of knowledge. “Can I really play with Posy tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” And Haymitch couldn’t wait for Hazelle to relieve him of the over-enthusiastic child.

“I don’t know how to play… I’ve never played with other children.” Theo confessed, worrying the sheep’s ear between his fingers. “How do you play with girls?”

“Ask me that again in a few years, you’re a bit young for that now.” he snorted.

He expected more questions but when he glanced at the child, he saw that he was finally sleeping. Haymitch collapsed on his bed and breathed out slowly.

It felt as if ten years had passed in the space of one day.

He locked his knife in the drawer of the bedside table. He wouldn’t sleep well without it but it was probably safer that way. His hands were shaking badly, he had a headache and a foul taste in his mouth. He wanted alcohol to chase the fear and the anxiety away. There would be nightmares.

Except there wasn’t. Not that kind of nightmares anyway, he only dozed off, sleep eluded him. He couldn’t stop thinking about Effie, replaying the last six years in his mind and looking for clues he had missed, worrying about where she was now and how safe… And when he wasn’t thinking about Effie, he was thinking about Peeta and Johanna, easily imagining a thousand tortures they could use on them and that always brought him back to Effie because Effie would never be able to endure that much pain. Perhaps she was. What did he really know about her? He thought he knew her but, hey, she had been hiding his child from him for six years, so maybe it wasn’t the only thing she had been hiding…

He was up well before his schedule said he had to and when he couldn’t take it anymore, he grabbed the kid who miraculously didn’t wake up and went in search of Plutarch. The briefing room was in a frenzy when he arrived and he quickly put the child down on a couch before joining in. The Districts were in utter chaos and organizing took everything they had. He still managed to get out of Plutarch that Peeta and Johanna were still alive and that it was confirmed Annie Cresta had been arrested as well as every other victors they could find. Effie and her family had been caught as they attempted to get out of the Capitol, so far there was no news about them. Nobody cared about the sleeping little boy until Coin arrived, glanced at him and ordered Haymitch to find a more suitable place for the child.

By that point, it wasn’t too early to wake him up although waking a kid who wanted to sleep in, as Haymitch soon discovered, wasn’t pleasant. He made a quick job of getting him dressed and fed – deftly avoided a tantrum about the lack of his favorite cereals and the still not strawberry flavored toothpaste – and then dropped the child with Hazelle with a promise to come back later.

He was three steps away when Theo started to cry.
Real tears, too, not the frustrated ones that came with the acting out, real frightened tears.

“Go away.” Hazelle told Haymitch when he hesitated. “It’s just separation anxiety. He will get over it.”

She was the expert and he had a war to strategize so he did what she advised and he left but he made sure to promise the boy again he would come back. That didn’t make much of a difference, Theo kept crying and crying even when Hazelle hugged him and the sound of his wailing followed Haymitch long after he was out of hearing.

He spent the following three hours trying to focus on what he was doing and irrationally worrying about his son at the same time. He couldn’t help but think that everything could happen while he wasn’t looking. Theo could fall and hurt himself; he wasn’t used to be around so many people and Hazelle didn’t know that, he could get very afraid and she wouldn’t understand why so she wouldn’t be able to calm him; he could start to think both of his parents had abandoned him; Thirteen could get attacked and Haymitch wouldn’t be there to protect him… Somehow, every scenario he could come up with ended up with Theo dying because Haymitch wasn’t there to stop it. He was wallowing about that so much he even forgot to lament after the lack of alcohol.

He kept his growing fears in check for four hours and then he gave up and went in search of his son. He had convinced himself he would find Theo distressed and upset but the boy didn’t even seem to have missed him at all. He was too busy running around with Posy.

“It’s called hide and seek, Daddy!” Theo told him once Haymitch had thanked Hazelle and they were on their way back to the briefing room. The child was hopping all around him. “I’m very good at hiding, Posy didn’t find me once!” Posy, he had promptly informed Haymitch, was now his bestest friend. “Is it lunch yet?”

It was, not that Haymitch had realized. He doubled back to the cafeteria so the boy could eat something. He wasn’t really hungry but Theo chided him until his plate was empty: if the plate wasn’t empty, there wasn’t any dessert, that was the rule. Haymitch humored the child.

“Can we phone Granny?” he asked at some point and Haymitch pretended not to have heard.

Coin wasn’t thrilled to see the boy back in the briefing room but Haymitch didn’t listen to any of her objections. He made sure the kid had his toys and stayed in a corner where he could keep an eye on him and still focus on the rebellion. He didn’t cause any trouble, he was a sweet boy who was used to play by himself and obviously be quiet about it so Coin eventually forgot he was there.

They fell into a sort of routine over the next few weeks.

Haymitch kept Theo with him as much as he could, people were used to seeing the child jog in front of his father or dead asleep in his arms. He was a good kid, really, he never threw any tantrums except when he was cranky because he was tired or hungry. The rest of the time, he was happy to draw in a corner, play with his toys or sleep on a couch with his stuffed sheep. Effie would probably be horrified but that was the best Haymitch could do. He hated being separated with the child even if it was only for a few hours, he couldn’t get over this irrational fear of his that he would die if he wasn’t there to protect him.

Theo seemed quite content with his new life. He was responsible of reminding Haymitch when to eat – and if it matched with the time Posy, her brothers and her mother were in the cafeteria, it was better – a responsibility he took very seriously. He was quite popular with the people from Thirteen and from Twelve equally, he had become a sort of unofficial mascot. Finnick was still a big favorite of his, his second bestest friend in the whole world, and he often insisted on visiting
the victor because he was so sad about having lost Annie. Finnick loved to talk about Annie and Theo would have listened to Finnick talk for hours anyway so Haymitch left him with his friend when he really couldn’t do otherwise. He trusted Finnick to protect the child if need be.

Katniss, when she was finally ready to talk to Haymitch again, was flabbergasted by the whole story. Theo was a bit wary of her even though Prim and Buttercup were very popular, the cat wasn’t as good as a sheep but it came close.

The boy, Haymitch realized quickly, was very smart for his age no doubt thanks to the education Effie’s mother had given him. Coin almost had a stroke when the child managed to solve one of the wooden puzzles she kept on her desk, after that she kept hinting at Haymitch that such a bright mind should be carefully cultivated and that he would be better in school.

School didn’t sit well with Theo. He tried it for an afternoon and declared himself bored with the movies they showed every hour – propaganda, Haymitch found out later, designed to instruct the children the right thing to do was to help out the war effort. The child never went back to school but Haymitch found other ways to occupy him and to assuage his own fear for the boy at the same time. He started drawing maze on pieces of papers, more and more complicated as time went by, and told the kid to find the way out. For Theo, it was a game, for Haymitch, it was a way to be sure the child would know what to do if he ever got lost. He taught him random things that could always be helpful like where the sun rose and set, what kind of berries to look for in the wild and what to do to keep warm.

All in all, it was all going relatively well except for the nightmares. Every day Theo would fall asleep and wake up screaming. Whatever Haymitch said or did, it was never enough to calm the child down. He would ask for his mother, his grandmother or his aunt and cried himself to sleep again when they wouldn’t come; the regular bombings didn’t help. It was heartbreaking and, added to Haymitch’s own night terrors, terribly impractical.

Haymitch didn’t always wake up when the child had a nightmare, it was a bit hard to make the difference between the screams in his head and Theo’s. When that happened, the kid had taken to sneak into his bed, seeking comfort from his father. At first, Haymitch had been terrified to hurt him in his sleep but he had soon realized there was nothing to be concerned about. He seemed to be unconsciously aware that Theo was to be protected from harm at all cost and he had woken up more than once curled up around the child as if to shield him from his own nightmarish creations.

“Daddy?” Theo asked, one night, after having just sneaked into his bed with Sheepy. He was curled up on his side, against Haymitch’s stomach.

“Yeah?” Haymitch’s voice was gruff. He was exhausted, they were supposed to shoot more Mockingjay promotional spots the next day and he needed some sleep to deal with Katniss.

“The bad men got Mommy, Granny and Auntie, don’t they?” The boy sounded tired and sad.

Haymitch froze, suddenly wide awake. He had never told the boy were his mother and her family was and Theo had never really asked. The “super-secret adventure” was explanation enough for their absence or so he thought. Obviously the child had picked up on more than he let on. Too smart for his own good.

“Yes.” There was no point in hiding the truth when it would come out at some point. Theo knew very well “the bad men” had taken Annie prisoners, how long before someone confirmed Effie was with Finnick’s girlfriend? Theo would learn the truth eventually and it was probably better if it came from his father. “I will do my best to get them back, I promise.” It was a stupid promise he didn’t know he would ever be able to keep but what else could he say?
“You don’t lie much.” Theo observed, totally out of the blue. It wasn’t what Haymitch was expecting.

“Depends.” he offered, not understanding where the boy was going with that.

The stuff sheep’s ear was being painfully twisted one way and then the other so he knew the boy was upset but yet unwilling to show it. “Did Mommy ever give you my pictures and my letters?”

Haymitch remained silent for a minute, trying to figure out what would be more devastating for the boy: a little white lie or the truth? If he was asking, it meant he had already understood though and there was no point in trying to convince him otherwise. “Not really, no. I didn’t write the ones you have either.”

Theo nodded seemingly to himself. “Did you know you were my Daddy before the adventure?”

Haymitch closed his eyes and cursed Effie for not being there and explaining her own mess. “No, kid, I didn’t.”

“Mommy’s a liar.” There was so much bitterness in his son’s voice, Haymitch almost reached over to turn the lights on but in the end he couldn’t do it. He wasn’t brave enough.

“Mommy…” he started but then he stopped. How did you explain to a child that his mother was sort of a professional liar anyway?

“Maybe you’re not even my Daddy.” Theo spat, his tiny hands were clawing at the sheep now.

“I am your Daddy.” Haymitch swore. “Effie… Your mother wouldn’t lie about that.”

“But she’s a liar!” Theo shouted suddenly. “She said she would come back soon! She said… She said…” His voice broke a bit but he stubbornly refused to shed any tears. He scrambled up in a sitting position and grabbed his stuffed toy. “She said Sheepy takes the sad away and that’s a lie!”

The sheep was thrown at the other end of the room. “Sheepy is just a sheep and sheep are stupid anyway. I hate sheep.”

“You don’t hate sheep.” Haymitch sighed. He sat and finally switched the lights on. Theo’s lips were wobbling and his grey eyes were bright with tears.

“Yes, I do.” he sniffled, rubbing his nose on his sleeve. “And I hate Mommy too.”

“No, you don’t.” Haymitch wasn’t equipped to deal with real tears. Tantrum, he could manage but real sadness? “You miss her.” He shared the feeling truly. He missed her more than he missed alcohol and that was a lot.

“She says she loves me and she loves you and you love us.” the boy mumbled, his voice getting more and more high pitched by the second. “Maybe that’s a lie too and she doesn’t love me or you and maybe you don’t love us.”

“I…” He wasn’t able to finish that thought. Love… Love was a dangerous and treacherous thing. Yet… of course he loved the boy, he was his son. How could you not love your own son?

“You don’t love me?” Theo’s tiny body was rocking with huge sobs now and it was a lot more than Haymitch could take. He scooped him up and held him tight, hoping he was doing it right.

“Come on, now, stop this.” He kept his voice soft and rocked the child a bit but he had no clue how to actually comfort his son. “You know I do. And your Mommy loves you too.” He patted his back awkwardly. “You know how I know she loves you more than anything else?” He waited
until the sobs subsided and he felt the child shook his head against his shoulder before going on. “I know she loves you ‘cause she lied to you so you would be happy and that’s the biggest thing you can do for someone you love.”

And she had done the very same thing with him, Haymitch couldn’t help but think.

“Lying is wrong.” Theo’s broken whisper was indignant.

Maybe he had let the kid wander around Katniss too much.

“Sometimes you lie to protect the people you love. It makes you really unhappy but that doesn’t matter as long as they are safe.” Haymitch shrugged. “That’s how you know you really love someone, when you’re ready to give up everything for them because they’re the only thing that matters.” Theo remained unconvinced. “Your mother did everything for you.” Haymitch insisted. “And I would do it too.”

Probably not the cleverest thing to say right then, he was sure Thirteen was as bugged as the penthouse had been...

“I want Mommy.” Theo finally confessed before starting to sob again.

“Yeah, well… Me too, kid.” Haymitch sighed, “Me too.”
“Where’s Mommy?” Theo asked, bouncing up and down, clutching Haymitch’s hand in his tiny one.

“A very good question.” Haymitch mumbled, looking around. Finnick and Annie were locked in an embrace in the middle of the room, Johanna was being rolled away on a gurney, some of the rebels were getting their wounds bandaged and Katniss was looking for Peeta. However, there was no trace of Effie.

She should have been there.

They had confirmed on the hovercraft they had found her alongside the other victors. She should have been there.

When they had decided on a rescue mission, Haymitch had volunteered as much to help rescue Peeta as for the chance to sneak around for Effie but Boggs had taken one look at the boy asleep in his lap and had rejected his offer. He had promised to look for his escort though and he had come through.

“She’s with the doctors, you can’t see her for now.” Plutarch told him, appearing at his side suddenly. “I think there is a problem with Peeta.”

Saying there was a problem with Peeta was a bit of an understatement and the ‘problem’ with Peeta soon evolved into a problem with Katniss and a gigantic mess that fell on Haymitch’s shoulders. Nobody had a clue as to what was precisely going on with Peeta, if it was reversible or not, Haymitch wasn’t really optimistic and Theo, who was bored with the whole ‘Peeta problem’ and wanted his mother, didn’t help him focus properly. Then the announcement that Peeta’s stylist and prep team had been executed came and Haymitch almost collapsed in relief at the idea that Effie was safe.

At some point he simply left and went back to the infirmary. Annie had been released but Johanna was there, no trace of Effie. It was Prim who finally tracked her down for him, explaining she had been taken into isolation, three levels below. It was still a medical section but one designed for prisoners and Haymitch’s blood ran cold.

He managed to find her doctor – and it wasn’t a small feat – who told him she was physically as fine as could be expected: some broken ribs, her body would need time to recover from electroshocks, she was severely dehydrated and she had lost a lot of weight. When he asked to see her, he was faced with an embarrassed resistance. The doctor wasn’t unsympathetic, all the more so considering the little boy who was pleading to be allowed to wait by his mother’s bedside, but he had orders and Haymitch was denied access. Nevertheless, Haymitch found the room she was kept in and glared at the two soldiers in front of her door.

“I’m Haymitch Abernathy, I have clearance.” he told them without any attempts at playing nice.

The two men exchanged a glance and the older one winced. “I’m sorry, sir. You, specifically, are not allowed in. President Coin’s orders.”

“I want my Mommy!” Theo screamed before Haymitch could say anything else. The boy let go of his hand and walked to the closer soldier. “I want my Mommy now!”

Haymitch was torn between chiding him for acting like a spoiled brat and feeling proud of the
scowl on his son’s face. The child was clever, he knew his mother was on the other side of that
doors and Haymitch really felt sorry for whoever tried to stand in his way.

“I’m sorry, boy.” the soldier said. He looked sorry too, not that Haymitch cared much about that.

Theo’s scowl only deepened, his cheeks flushed red and the sheep dangling from his hand
suddenly became the most dangerous weapon.

“I’m not afraid of bad men!” Theo shouted, hitting the soldier with Sheepy. “I want my Mommy!
I want my Mommy! And my Daddy will hurt you so you better let me go see Mommy right now!”

Haymitch grabbed the kid after he kicked the man in the shin a bit violently, afraid they would
turn against the child. “Enough, Theo, I think they get the point.” he grumbled, glaring at the
soldiers some more. “Step aside.”

“I’m sorry, sir.” the soldier said again.

“Haymitch!” Plutarch was hurrying towards them.

“What’s going on?” he barked when his friend was close enough. “Why is she locked in like a
prisoner? We had a deal.”

He had bargained for Effie’s safe passage well before he even put a foot in Thirteen.

“President Coin wants to be sure Effie isn’t a danger to Thirteen.” Plutarch winced. “She’s to be
kept in isolation for a few days until she can be interrogated and the rebels are sure she’s not a
threat.”

“Bullshit.” Haymitch spat, ignoring Theo’s wrinkled nose at the profanity. Sometimes, the kid was
worse than his mother. “She wants to hold her over my head, she wants a better way to control
Katniss through me.”

Plutarch cringed but didn’t deny it. “Just humor her for a few days, Haymitch. It will be easier for
everyone involved.”

Theo’s little hand gripped his shirt, his grey eyes were bright with tears and he was hugging the
sheep with his other arm. No child should look that desperate. “We don’t see Mommy?”

“Like hell we don’t see Mommy!” Haymitch growled, turning back to Plutarch. “Effie is the
mother of my child, as far as I’m concerned, we’re as good as married. I don’t think it would be
particularly clever of Coin to keep a victor’s wife imprisoned, I might want to get in front of a
camera and talk. I will burn this District down before I let anything happen to my family. One
word from me and Katniss, Beetee, Finnick, Annie and Johanna won’t cooperate anymore. Tell
her whatever way you want but Coin better humor me.”

“Haymitch…” Plutarch sighed, he was looking a bit white.

“I give you ten minutes, then I’m paying Coin a visit myself.” he threatened in a low voice.

“Please, don’t.” his friend rubbed his forehead in agitation. “I will… I will try to convince her.”

He never knew what Plutarch told Coin in the end, but ten minutes after he left, the soldiers got a
phone call and Haymitch was granted access to Effie’s room. She was asleep on the hospital bed
and she looked awful. There were bruises on her face and on her arms, her cheeks were hollow,
her skin was so pale he could see the blue lines of her veins… He swallowed hard at the sight.
Theo’s happiness at the idea of being reunited with his mother didn’t last long. He stopped in his track, confused and unsure, and looked up at Haymitch.

“Mommy is really tired so we can’t wake her up.” he told the kid, instinctively reaching out to carry him. Theo immediately threw his arms around his neck and buried his face in his shoulder as if he didn’t want to look.

“Is she going to die?” the boy whispered.

“No.” Haymitch said at once. It was firm, almost an order and he wondered to whom he really was talking to. His son, himself or Effie? “She’s going to be alright. We just have to wait.”

He grabbed a chair and sat down next to her bed, the boy on his knees, curled up against his chest with his stuffed sheep. It wasn’t long before Theo fell asleep, worn over by the excitement of the day, and Haymitch started to doze off himself. He didn’t know how long he sat there, waiting, but when Effie’s hand started to twitch, he felt wide awake. He stood up and put the boy on the chair, careful not to wake him up, before going to sit on the bed. He placed his hand on Effie’s twitching fingers.

“Effie?” he whispered. It took several minutes before her eyes fluttered open, her breathing quickened as panic started to kick. “It’s okay, it’s okay.” he tried to soothe her, holding her arms down before she could attempt to bolt out of the bed and to the other side of the room. “You’re safe. Sweetheart, you’re safe.”

She didn’t calm down until the sweetheart, then she stopped struggling against him and finally looked around.

“Haymitch?” She sounded confused and unsure.

“Welcome back, sweetheart.” he smiled, letting go of her arms.

“Timotheo?” she asked immediately.

“He’s right here, look.” He waved at the chair. As soon as she saw him sleeping with his stuffed animal, silent tears started to run down her cheeks. “Do you want me to wake him up? He missed you a lot.”

“I missed him too.” she breathed out. “So very much.” She glanced back at him and wiped her tears away. “Don’t wake him yet, please. I don’t want him to see me crying.”

“Okay.” He brushed her hair out of her face. She seemed surprised. She had a right to be, it was uncharacteristic of him to be so gentle. He couldn’t help but touch her, however, just to reassure himself she was real.

“How are the others?” She wouldn’t look him in the eye. “Is everyone… Is everyone alive?”

There was so much to say about that…

“Portia, Cinna and Peeta’s prep team are dead.” There was no good way to deliver those news although she must have been expecting it because she didn’t flinch. She only closed her eyes and breathed in deeply before wincing a little and placing a hand on her ribs. “Katniss, Finnick and Beetee are alright. Johanna, Annie and Peeta had been rescued with you but… Peeta…”

“I know.” she cut him off. “I was there when they did it. I saw.”

That was good news, maybe she could help them trying to figure it out.
“Plutarch hasn’t been able to find your mother or your sister,” he went on. “But I put them on my list. When they’re found, they will be under my protection.” It hadn’t been a very difficult decision to make when Theo was waking up each night calling for his Granny or his Auntie when it wasn’t for Effie.

“Thank you but…” Her face hardened, yet he saw the pain underneath, the gnawing guilt… “They are both dead.”

He didn’t say he was sorry and he didn’t ask what happened. It was obvious and he doubted she wanted to talk about it right at this very second. There would be time later.

“Twelve was bombed.” he offered instead. “There’s nothing left except the victor village.”

“Your house.” She was hesitant.

“Yeah.” he shrugged. “Good thing. I figured there’s enough space in the backyard for a sheep. It’s a bit stupid but it’s something to look forward to, you know?”

Her blue eyes were shining with tears again. “How much do you hate me?”

“Hate you?” he scoffed. “Not much, sweetheart. I spent too much time missing you to hate you. Can’t say I was thrilled by your lies but I don’t hate you, no.”

Her hand clenched her blouse on her ribs when her whole body started to shake under the strength of her sobs. “I’m sorry.” she whimpered. “I never meant to keep him from you… I’m sorry…”

“Don’t cry.” he frowned but she didn’t stop. “You have three broken ribs, you’re going to make it worse. Stop crying, stop…” His voice softened, he leaned in to press a kiss on her forehead and then rested his forehead against hers, careful not to put any weight on her ribs, tangling a hand in her hair. He breathed her in and something finally uncoiled in his stomach. “Stop crying.”

“I thought you were going to be so angry with me, Haymitch…” she sobbed. “All this time I thought you were going to hate me.”

“Oh, I will be angry with you later, sweetheart.” he promised before kissing her lips. He kept it short and soft but she chased after his mouth so he gave in and kissed her properly. “As soon as everything’s over, we are going to have a fight about you hiding the kid from me and about you staying behind.”

“It sounds like it will be a huge fight.” she joked but her voice was still weary.

“It will be.” He kissed her again. “Best part will be the making up, though.”

She brushed a hand against his cheek. “You are aware that I got pregnant after the last fight this huge we had, aren’t you?”

“Let’s wait a few years before talking about that, yeah?” he snorted. “Theo’s a handful as it is.”

“He’s wonderful, isn’t he?” She smiled for the first time since she had opened her eyes and Haymitch realized with a pang how much he had missed it.

“He’s our kid, what else could he be?” Haymitch smirked but then he glanced at the boy and winced. “He kind of figured everything out though.”

“Does he hate me?” She looked so desperate… Exactly the same look that had flashed on their son’s face when the soldiers had tried to keep away from her.
“He can’t hate you.” He shook his head. “Neither of us can.”

Her lips wobbled a little but she kept herself composed. Her fingertips followed the line of his jaw and she forced a smile. “You need to shave. I can live with your stubble but certainly not with this sorry excuse of a beard.”

“You’ve been here five minutes and you already want to boss me around.” He rolled his eyes but his annoyance was mostly fake.

“Could you wake him up, now, please?” she asked, turning her head to look at their child.

Coaxing Theo awake wasn’t that difficult, Haymitch had a lot of practice with the exercise by now. When he realized Effie was awake, Theo beamed and almost jumped on her. Haymitch caught him just in time.

“Careful.” he chided the boy. “Mommy is hurt, remember?”

Neither Effie nor the child seemed to care much about that however. The second Haymitch let him go, she had the kid locked in a tight embrace. Theo was crying and saying how much he had missed her, Effie didn’t cry but it was a close call as she whispered sweet nothings in her son’s hair, repeating how much she loved him and promising never to leave him again. Haymitch was quite content to watch until Theo decided he shouldn’t be left out and pulled him in a collective hug.

“Now we stay together forever and ever!” Theo exclaimed happily. “Right, Mommy?”

Effie hesitated, obviously she didn’t want to make any promise she would have to break, her eyes found Haymitch’s. Your call, they seemed to say.

Was there anything to decide? Any other choice? Haymitch couldn’t imagine being separated from the boy now, nor from her for that matter.

“Right, kid.” Haymitch agreed for her, ruffling his hair. It made the boy huff in displeasure and pat his hair back into place. Haymitch had been told several times by the child that messy wasn’t a proper hairstyle. “Forever and ever.”

Forever didn’t exist in the world they lived in, it was too dangerous, too elusive a notion to even consider and yet, as he watched their child hug Effie, he swore to himself that he would do everything in his power to give Theo the forever he wanted. Effie and him were his family and he would make sure they were safe even if it was the last thing he’d do.

The End

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