### The Long Road

by **Prilly_N1**

**Summary**

They say the path to love never runs smooth and the road to recovery is long. For Peeta and Katniss, their journey is filled with obstacles and hardships. Can the Mockingjay and The Boy with the Bread repair the damage done to them by the Capitol? A ‘grow back together’ fic. Post-MJ, PeetaxKatniss NOMINATED FOR THE 2015 ENERGIZE W.I.P AWARDS.
Chapter 1

After breakfast, Greasy Sae does the dishes and leaves but she comes back up at dinnertime to make me eat again. I don’t know if she’s just being neighbourly or if she’s on the government’s payroll, but she shows up twice every day. She cooks, I consume. I try to figure out my next move. There’s no obstacle now to taking my life. But I seem to be waiting for something.

I’m cold. The fire in the kitchen has burnt out again. Part of me, a very small part of me, considers leaving my chair and lighting the embers once more but exhaustion wins again and I pull the shawl around my shoulders a little tighter as a shiver runs through me. Pale light is peaking in through the window so I know that Greasy Sae will be here soon, her granddaughter in tow. She’ll light the fire. How long has she been limping into my kitchen to cook my meals? A couple of weeks maybe? A month? I hardly know. Time has melted, each day blending with the next. I haven’t left the kitchen since my return to 12 except to use the bathroom. I’m wearing the same clothes I left the Capitol in. My body feels stiff and sore from sitting in the wooden rocker day after day but nothing makes me want to move to a more comfortable spot. I don’t deserve comfort.

I don’t hear Greasy Sae come in but when I blink she’s suddenly there, limping around the kitchen like she owns the place.

“Fire’s out again, girl,” She says, poking at the burnt out wood.

I watch her throw on some fresh logs and light them up before she turns and heads into the pantry, returning with a couple of eggs.

“You’re outta bread too,” She says.

As I watch her heat a saucepan and scramble the eggs I suddenly become aware that she’s come alone today. No granddaughter.

“Where is she?” I ask. My throat hurts and my voice cracks. I realise I haven’t uttered a single word in about three days.

Greasy Sae turns to look at me. “Little Daisy? She’s at home with her Momma. Came down with a fever only last night.”

She spoons the eggs onto a clean plate and places it on the table. For a moment I simply stare at it from across the room until Sae puts her hand on her hip. I have no desire to eat but reluctantly I stand up from the rocker and take a seat at the table. She watches me until I’ve eaten everything on the plate then she hands me a glass of milk and 2 small pills, my medication. I force myself the gulp it down. Everything tastes like ash now. Sae takes back the glass and the plate along with the saucepan and begins to wash up. My chair groans as I push back from the table and take the three strides to my rocker.

“Spring’s in the air today. You ought to get out.” Sae says. “Maybe go hunting. The fresh air will do you good.”

The last thing I want to do is go outside. “I don’t have a bow,” I say.

Greasy Sae place the crockery back in the cupboard and makes for the door. She studies my face and I hear her sigh softly.

“Check down the hall,” she says. Then she’s gone.
I consider doing as she says but quickly rule it out. I can’t hunt. I won’t hunt. I used to hunt to survive. I don’t want to survive anymore. My old bow will forever be tainted with memories of death and murder. Perhaps I should destroy it. Burn it in the fire.

Before I realise it, I’m half way down the hall staring at the door to the study, where I had my tea with President Snow. I feel my heart begin to race and scold myself for being so foolish. Ghosts don’t exist.

The door creaks as I nudge it open with my foot. There on the table is a box. I realise that whoever lit my fire on my first night back must have put it here. Lying on top is my father’s hunting jacket. I touch the soft leather and pull it to my chest as I peer at the rest of the contents. My plant book, my parent’s wedding photo, the spile Haymitch sent in the Quarter Quell and the locket Peeta gave me. My bow and a sheath of arrows Gale rescued on the night of the firebombing lie next to the box. Suddenly the bow no longer matters. I shrug on the hunting jacket and leave the rest of the stuff untouched. My feet carry me to the formal living room at the front of the house and I sink down onto the large sofa. My hand comes up to touch my face and I’m surprised to find my cheeks moistened with tears. I wipe them away roughly with the back of my hand and catch the scent of my father’s jacket. I pull it tightly around me and put my head down against the arm of the chair. I must have fallen asleep because a terrible nightmare now engulfs me. I’m lying at the bottom of a deep grave. I look up at the sky above and strangle a cry as I see the faces of every dead person I knew. They look at me accusingly as each one throws a shovel full of ashes on top of me. I gag as the ashes fill my mouth and nose. I can’t get up. I can’t breathe. I begin to choke, tears pouring from my eyes but still the shovel scrapes on and on…

I wake with a start, gasping for air. I shield my eyes from the sunlight streaming in through the shutters. Why can I still hear the shovel? Am I still in this nightmare? It’s coming from outside. Running down the hall I burst out of the front door and around the side of the house. I stop dead in my tracks. I see him. His face is flushed from digging up the ground under the windows.

“You’re back?” I say, sounding more like a question than a statement.

Peeta looks up at me, completely unfazed by my sudden presence. “Dr Aurelius wouldn’t let me leave the Capitol until yesterday” he says, wiping the sweat from his face with his forearm. “By the way, he said to tell you he can’t keep pretending he’s treating you forever. You have to pick up the phone.”

I barely register the words coming out of his mouth. I just stare. He looks well. He’s thin and covered with burn scars like me, but his eyes have lost that clouded, tortured look. When I notice him frowning at me I make a half-hearted effort to push my hair out of my face and realise it’s matted into clumps. I haven’t touched a hairbrush in weeks. Suddenly I feel defensive.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I went to the woods this morning and dug these up,” he says, gesturing to the five scraggly bushes in his wheelbarrow. “For her.” He adds.

I look closely at the bushes and catch my breath. Roses? No, not roses. Evening primrose. The flower my sister was named after. It sparks a memory in me. My mouth opens and closes a couple of times but no sound escapes. Peeta makes a move towards me but I back away and run into the house, locking the door behind me. Anxiety builds within me as I recall the evil thing lurking in my bedroom. I take the stairs two at a time but my foot catches on the last one and I tumble to the floor. I force myself to rise and enter my room. It’s here, that faint smell of rose. I find it shrivelled amongst the dead flowers. I grab the whole vase, stumble down to the kitchen and throw its contents into the smouldering embers. A burst of blue flame envelops the rose and devours it. I smash the vase on the floor for good measure.
I head back upstairs and open the bedroom windows but I can still smell the stench on my clothes. As I strip I feel my delicate skin crack and flake. I ignore the sting and step into the shower, vigorously scrubbing the scent from my hair, my body my mouth. I pat myself dry and come back into the bedroom just in time to hear Greasy Sae unlock the front door. When she notices I’m missing from the kitchen I hear her uneven footfall on the stairs. I’m perched on the end of my bed, wrapped in a towel when she enters the room. Wordlessly she picks up the hairbrush from my dresser and starts to detangle my tresses.

“I’m not good at braids,” she says quietly and parts my hair in the middle, letting it drop down over my shoulders.

She opens the wardrobe and pulls out a pair of clean trousers and a blouse and instructs me to dress while she prepares breakfast.

“Where did Gale go?” I ask when I meet her down in the kitchen.

She hands me my plate of eggs and the usual pills. “District Two,” she replies. “Got some fancy job there. I see him now and again on the television.”

After a long pause Sae clears her throat and shuffles nervously. “I see the boy has come back.”

I ignore her and shovel my breakfast into my mouth. Apparently my appetite has returned.

“I’m going hunting today,” I say, taking my plate to the sink.

“Well, I wouldn’t mind some fresh game,” Sae says, watching me with cautiously as I wash and dry up.

I breeze past her, down the hallway and into the study. I arm myself with a bow and some of the arrows and head out the front door. I look straight ahead so as not to notice if Peeta is still outside my house. I intend to pass through town and exit 12 by the Meadow like I used to. I stomp purposefully out of Victors Village but as I near the square I notice the teams of masked, gloved people sifting through the wreckage of the bombing. I recognise Thom, Gale’s old crewmate, standing outside the Mayor’s building. He spots me and waves a hand. I tentatively step towards him.

“Did they find anyone in there?” I ask.

Thom nods solemnly. “Whole family,” he replies.

I think of Madge. The girl who gave me her pin. I swallow hard and walk away, continuing down the road that travels through the centre of District 12. As I near where my old house used to be I begin to the see the edge of the meadow. It’s not a meadow anymore. A deep pit has been dug out. A mass grave. I fight back the urge to gag, skirt round the huge hole and slip into the woods. It’s the old Katniss’s favourite kind of day. Early spring. The woods feel alive but I feel my energy slipping. Before long I’m panting and have to sit down on a rock. I don’t know how long I sit there but the light is beginning to fade by the time I make it back to the fence line, a sheath full of arrows and no game. Maybe I’ll actually hunt next time. I feel sick and dizzy as I walk back into town. Thom is still working in the rubble. I must look bad because he approaches me and offers me a ride home. He helps me to the sofa in the living room and lingers in the doorway.

“I’ll be fine,” I tell him, willing him to leave. He obliges and pulls the front door closed but a moment later I hear it ping open again. It must have been on the latch. I haul myself up and make for the door but do a double take when I see a small ginger creature slink through the gap. He
hisses as I approach. I take in his appearance, the claw marks on his face, the limp of his back foot, his ribs protruding even through his fur. He must have come on foot, all the way from 13. What a pathetic creature.

“She not here,” I tell him. Buttercup hisses again.

“She’s not coming back! She’s never ever coming back!” I feel the tears begin to pour down my cheeks and clutch my arms around my middle, as if trying to hold myself together. “She’s dead, you stupid cat. She’s dead.” I fall to the floor and call out in despair. Buttercup begins to wail as well. He circles me, just out of reach as wave after wave of sobs racks my body until eventually I fall unconscious.

When I come to hours later he’s there, crouched beside me, guarding me from the night. I rub my sore eyes before tentatively stretching my hand towards him. He nudges my hand with his head. He’s brave as I clean the cuts on his face and remove the thorn from his back paw. I whisper words of comfort and lift him into my arms. Climbing the stairs, I crawl into bed with Buttercup curled up beside me.
I get a glimpse of the blonde plait down her back. Then, as she yanks off her coat to cover a wailing child, I notice the duck tail formed by her untucked shirt. I have the same reaction I did the day Effie Trinket called her name at the reaping. I am pushing through the crowd, just as I did before. Trying to shout her name above the roar. For a moment she catches sight of me, her lips form my name. And that’s when the rest of the parachutes go off.

I am woken by my screams. It’s pretty standard these days to wake up screaming, tangled in the sheets, beads of sweat on my forehead. Buttercup is growling, poised for action by my feet. I must have frightened him with all the noise. I switch on the small lamp by my bed and hide my face in my hands as I try to regain control of my breathing. Was I cursed to relive that same moment over and over in my nightmares? Never reaching her in time, forced to watch her burn. I shake my head vigorously to rid myself of the images.

I swing my legs out of bed and touch down on the cool wooden floor boards. I pad softly to the window and partially pull back one of the curtains. It’s still dark but the faint light of dawn is beginning to peak over the horizon. I allow myself a brief glance in the direction of Peeta’s house. If I didn’t know any better I would assume it was still empty. Haymitch’s house too looks completely vacant. I haven’t seen or heard from my mentor since we first arrived in 12. Drunk bastard.

There’s a niggling feeling in the back of my mind. On our return journey Haymitch had handed me a letter from my mother. At the time I couldn’t bring myself to read her lame excuse for abandoning me and so the letter lay untouched on the small circular table next to my rocker in the kitchen. But with the fresh memory of Prim in mind, I now feel a strong desire to read it.

Buttercup jumps from the bed and follows closely behind me as I make my way downstairs. He weaves in between my legs and mews at me. I have nothing to feed him. Ignoring his cries of hunger I cross the kitchen and begin to sift through the pile of unopened mail. Of course my mother’s letter is at the bottom. I hold it tightly in both hands and sit in my rocker.

“Just do it,” I command myself and hook my thumb into the fold at the back of the envelope to tear it open. I’ve barely read the first sentence and I can feel a tightening in my chest.

My darling Katniss,

You’ll think me a coward for not telling you in person that I have chosen to stay behind.

I won’t ask you to forgive me, I simply ask for you to understand that I can’t go on living with the ghosts of the past. I don’t want to see the ashes and the dust and be reminded of your father. I can’t be near the town square and think of you and Primrose at the reaping. I need a fresh start. District 4 has built a new hospital and they’ve asked me to share my knowledge on herbal medicine. They are in great need of volunteers with medical experience. I know I can help them. I want to help them.

I need you to know how proud I am of you, Katniss. You have risen to every challenge and faced them with great bravery. These trials have only served to make you stronger and you have grown into an incredible young woman. Please call me as soon as you can. I need to know you’re safe. Haymitch has the number for the hospital, you can reach me there. Please call, Katniss.

I will always love you,
Mom

Xxx

I reread the letter half a dozen times and search my emotions. Hurt, anxiety, sadness. Overwhelming sadness, not for me, but for her. I know my mother has always been a delicate person. When my father died it almost killed her. She shut herself away, refused food and didn’t speak to anyone, even Prim. I felt such anger towards her then. I couldn’t understand how she could cut herself off emotionally from us both, leaving us to fend for ourselves. I had to take on the roll as parent and provider. But now, now that I too have experienced terrible loss, I understand why she can’t come back here. I wouldn’t have come back if I’d been offered a choice.

But damn her for leaving her contact number with Haymitch. I had hoped to avoid him for all eternity. Perhaps mother knew that I would shut myself away from humanity and this was her way to ensure that I made contact with at least one person. She couldn’t have known that Greasy Sae would take it upon herself to visit twice a day every day.

Right on queue, I hear the front door open and listen to the thump of her feet on the wooden floor. Too much thumping for just one person. Perhaps Daisy has recovered quickly from her fever. But the sound is too heavy for such a small child. I look quizzically at Sae when she enters the kitchen and she looks back at me with surprise. She looks over her shoulder briefly and makes a ‘stay’ motion with her hand.

“You should get dressed,” she says, looking me up and down.

I’m still in my nightdress. It’s old and tatty and far too big. It falls off one shoulder and the hem is down to my calves. Still, Sae has seen me in much worse condition than this. I rise from my rocker and place mother’s letter back on the round table.

“Who’s here?” I ask, not meaning for my voice to sound so harsh.

Sae steps further into the kitchen and places a basket of groceries by the stove.

“It were only decent to invite him for breakfast,” she says defensively, motioning again to whoever is standing in the hall. “He’s alone too, you know.”

I look back to see Peeta appear in the doorway holding a package wrapped in brown paper. “I baked,” he says sheepishly.

I feel a flush rise in my cheeks, partly from anger at Sae for daring to invite someone without my permission, but mainly because I’m standing in front of Peeta in a threadbare nightdress. As quick as a flash I push past him and bolt up the stairs, slamming my bedroom door loudly.

After a brief battle with myself over whether to stay locked up in my bedroom or return downstairs, I dig out a plain smock top from the dresser and a pair of dark trousers. The mirror on the bedroom wall catches the sunlight as it streams in through the large window and I allow myself a fleeting glance at my reflection. I look clean but far from healthy. My clothes hang loosely off my body and my face is gaunt and pale. I rake my fingers through my wild hair to try and tame it. I don’t have much success. My patchwork skin is still tinged with pink and flakes at the touch of a hand. I think about the ample supply of ointments, creams and lotions the Capitol supplied me with before I left 12, all unopened and stacked on a high shelf in the bathroom. Perhaps I should start using them.
Suddenly I’m cross at myself for caring about my appearance. I didn’t ask for company. Besides, who am I trying to impress? I huff at my own rhetorical question and head downstairs. I can hear light conversation taking place between Greasy Sae and Peeta. I rarely make conversation with Sae and she knows not to ask me questions.

A delightful aroma drifts from the kitchen. It doesn’t smell like Sae’s usual breakfast of eggs or porridge. I enter silently and fetch a glass from the cabinet, fill it with water from the tap and take a seat at the table all the while trying to avoid eye contact with Peeta. I can feel his gaze upon me. I focus on counting the knots in the wooden dining table.

“What smells so good?” I ask no one in particular.

“Train arrived this morning carrying goods from the Capitol,” says Sae. “I got us some bacon. Bit of animal fat outta help bring your strength up.”

I nod politely but keep my eyes down. Sae must have heard about my failed hunting trip.

“And I baked some cheese buns,” Peeta adds.

This forces me to look up. In the centre of the table is a plate loaded with my favourite baked treat. I instantly feel my mouth begin to water. Peeta is sat across from me at the table and leans forward on his arms.

“I remembered how much you liked them,” he says.

I’m struck dumb for a moment as I stare back into his blue eyes. There’s no cloudiness in them. He looks like the old Peeta but for some reason that causes me pain.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “Thank you for remembering.”

Peeta leans back in his chair and smiles contentedly to himself just as Greasy Sae places a plate full of bacon in front of each of us. I reach out tentatively towards the cheese buns and nearly jump out of my skin when Peeta leans forward again and pushes the whole plate towards me. He winks and I drop my eyes to the floor again but I can’t help the small twitch in my lip that pulls the corners upward. I quickly stuff a bun in my mouth to hide my almost-smile. Peeta and Greasy Sae continue their conversation about the recovery and rebuilding work taking place in town. I don’t even pretend to pay attention as I make my way through cheese bun after cheese bun. I feel Buttercup rubbing against my legs beneath the table. When I think Sae isn’t watching I grab a fistful of bacon off my plate and drop it onto the floor, wiping the grease on my trousers. Buttercup wastes no time in wolfing it down and cries for more. I roll my eyes and give him the rest of my plate.

“Well I better be off,” Peeta says as he stands up. “Thank you for breakfast, Sae.”

“No trouble at all,” Sae replies, stacking our dirty plates by the sink.

“Katniss,” I peek at him through my eyelashes when he calls my name. He seems to hesitate before finishing with “See you around.”

I half expect to see him again when Greasy Sae comes back at dinnertime but I’m wrong. However he does appear again for breakfast the next morning, and the morning after that, and several mornings after that. Each time he brings either a fresh loaf of bread or a dozen cheese buns and each time he stands to leave I feel a dull ache in my chest. I barely utter a word when he’s around and yet for some reason I hate to see him go.
Sae gives me a telling off one morning after Peeta has left. She tells me I’m rude for not joining in the conversations and that Peeta must think I don’t want him around. Every morning afterwards I make a point of asking him one question.

“Do you bake for anyone else?” I ask one morning.

Peeta smiles. “A few folks from town found out I was back in 12 and asked if I would bake some bread for them a couple of times a week. They offered to pay me but I’d rather do it as a favour. I don’t need their money.”

I nod thoughtfully and cast a quick look at Greasy Sae as if to say ‘my conversation for the morning is over and done with. Happy now?’. She rolls her eyes back at me. There’s no pleasing some people I guess.

“I took a fruit loaf to Haymitch the day before yesterday,” Peeta continues and I snap my gaze back to him.

“You’ve been spending time with Haymitch?” I ask? Damn, there’s question number two.

“I wouldn’t call it ‘spending time’,” Peeta replies. “He’s either passed out in a chair or staggering around the living room yelling curse words at me. I just check in on him sometimes, make sure he’s not face down on the floor in a puddle of his own vomit.”


Peeta and I stay silent. We both know that Haymitch has been through too much and is beyond help.

“I gotta go,” Peeta announces and I feel that stab in my chest again. “Oh but Katniss, Dr Aurelius asked me to remind you again that he really needs you to answer his calls. He can help, Katniss.”

Something in his tone of voice makes me promise to call the doctor. And so a few hours later I muster the courage to pick up the phone. It rings for much longer than I expect and I think about hanging up just as a voice comes on the other end of the line.

“Dr Aurelius’s office. How many I help?”

“My name is Katniss Everdeen. Can I please speak with Dr Aurelius?”

I’m put on hold for only a few seconds before I hear the familiar sound of his voice.

“Katniss!” Dr Aurelius greets me. “I’m so pleased you called.”

“I got your message,” I say simply.

He chuckles lightly. “Yes, well you didn’t answer any of my calls so quite naturally I became concerned. I had to reach you somehow,” He clears his throat loudly. “I must conclude that you’ve seen Peeta.”

“Let’s start with something a little less complicated, ok Doc?” I don’t want to talk about Peeta just yet.

“Of course of course,” he replies and pauses for a while as if deciding what to ask next. “How is your general health? Are you eating? Getting enough sleep?”

I tell him about Greasy Sae’s visits at morning and night but leave out the bit about Peeta bringing
me bread.

“My sleep is...disturbed,” I say.

“Nightmares?” He asks tentatively and I grunt in response. “How frequent are they?”

“At least one every night, sometimes more.” I hear him scribbling notes as I talk.

“Did you want to discuss what happens in these nightmares?” He asks.

“Not today,” I reply quickly. I don’t want to think about, let alone talk about the dead people that haunt my dreams.

“That’s ok, Katniss. Whenever you’re ready.” He clears his throat again. “What about your menstrual cycle. Has that returned to normal?”

After my first games I went 4 months without a period. They started again but only briefly before I was flung back into the area for the Quarter Quell. I haven’t had a single one since then.

“Should I be worried?” I ask.

“It wouldn’t be considered abnormal when you look at what you’ve been through. You’re body has been under excessive stress for some time. Take into consideration how physically active you were before and during the games and your low body weight, I’m not surprise they’ve gone AWOL. My advice is to try and gain a little bit of weight each week. And try to get yourself into some form of routine.”

“What kind of routine?”

“Getting up at the same time each day and going to bed at the same time each night. Eating regular meals. It’s important for your recovery to try and go through the motions of normal daily life. Go hunting, take walks into town, visit…people.”

Our conversation ends with me lying about using the medicated creams for my skin and half-heartedly agreeing to call again in 2 weeks.

Forming a routine proves to be exceptionally hard. I try to take the doctors advice and set myself a time to get up each morning. Greasy Sae’s visits already form part of a routine but it’s in the hours in between breakfast and dinner I find hardest to fill. I don’t feel strong enough, mentally or physically, to go hunting every day or to visit town. As for visiting people, well my choices aren’t that great. Instead I wander from room to room in my big empty house, only avoiding one room in particular. I can’t bring myself to enter Prim’s bedroom with its soft pastel coloured walls and the collection of stuffed animal toys I had purchased for her when I won the money after the first games.

I methodically work through each room, opening the windows and giving the place a good airing. I dust the mantles over each fireplace and plump the sofa cushions in the living room. I return to the box in the study and my hand reaches for the plant book. I flick through the pages, glancing at the scribbled notes in the margins. It’s then that the idea comes to me. My father and I had created this book to record all those details we couldn’t commit to memory. Couldn’t I do the same thing again but this time record everything I wanted to remember about the people I had lost? A memory book.

I tuck the book under one arm and stride purposefully towards the front door. It’s time I made an important phone call.
Chapter 3

I know that something is wrong when my hand reaches for the brass door knob. It feels like my heart is in my mouth and the room suddenly shrinks around me. I tumble backwards and land at the bottom of the staircase. There’s a ringing in my ears and for a moment I think I might pass out. Each breath comes out so short and fast it hurts my chest.

I think of the ridiculousness of the situation. I have survived two hunger games and a war and now I’m about to be done in by something as ordinary as a heart attack.

Panic sets in. I need to call for help. Standing on shaky legs I stagger into the formal sitting room, leaning on the furniture for support. I reach the phone just as my legs give way beneath me. My fingers hover over the buttons. Who can I call? At this time of day Greasy Sae will be selling in the market place. Haymitch will be drunk.

My subconscious recalls a number I haven’t dialled in months. I press the buttons and hold the phone to my ear. It rings. Someone answers.

“Hello?”

“Peeta. Help.”

I’m unsure if I actually do pass out or if Peeta moves at superhuman speed because it feels like only seconds have past before I hear him in the hallway.

“Katniss?” He calls out.

He finds me on the floor in the living room. He crashes to his knees beside me and I watch his eyes scan me for injury. He looks fearful.

“Katniss, what’s wrong?”

I claw at my chest. “I can’t….I can’t breath.”

Some of the fear dissolves from his eyes. He takes hold of my hands and couches in front of me.

“Look at me, Katniss,” He demands. I try to focus my eyes on him but there’s a blackness creeping into my vision.

“You need to control your breathing,” He tells me. “It’s too fast.”

He instructs me to take deep breaths through my nose and blow out slowly through my mouth. Each time I inhale he presses his thumbs into the palms of my hands and then releases them when I exhale. He utters soft words of encouragement and slowly I feel my heartbeat start to return to normal.

Peeta pulls me to my feet and helps me to the sofa. In an instant I burst into tears. It’s so sudden I surprise myself and try to hide my face in my hands out of embarrassment.

“Katniss, it’s ok,” Peeta says softly, pulling me to his chest. “You’re ok now. It was an anxiety attack but it’s over now.”

My sobs subside to hiccups but I remain awkwardly pressed against Peeta’s chest. His hands move in soft circles on my back but he stops suddenly. As I sit up I expect to see a faint flush in
his cheeks but instead his brows are knit together. The sofa shifts when he stands abruptly.

“Dr Aurelius can prescribe something to help control the attacks. You should call him.” His voice seems void of emotion and he turns to leave.

“Peeta,” I whisper.

He freezes in the doorway, shoulders tensed. “I left something in the oven. I have to go.”

And with that he’s gone.

Later that day I call Dr Aurelius like Peeta suggested.

“It came out of nowhere, doc!” I tell him. “One minute I was fine, the next I thought I was going to die.”

“Fear and anxiety is different for each individual,” Dr Aurelius explains. “You could be a lion tamer but still have a fear of spiders.”

“Yeah and I’m the Mockingjay but I’m afraid to leave my house.” I laugh bitterly. “This didn’t happen when I went out hunting the other week. Why now?”

“I never said it was rational,” Aurelius replies. “I’ll prescribe some anti-anxiety medication and have it sent on the next train. It may take several weeks before you feel it working.”

I fiddle with the phone cord as I listen to Dr Aurelius scribbling notes. “I had an idea,” I blurt out.

“I want to make a memory book,” I explain. “A book where I can keep a record of things I’m frightened I’ll forget. I could put them all in there, Finnick, Boggs…Prim.”

“I think that is a wonderful idea, Katniss,” Aurelius replies.

When Greasy Sae arrives the next morning she drops a large package in front of me. Inside is a 6 months supply of medication along with a something wrapped in brown paper. I tear it open to reveal an A4 leather-bound book and a note.

May their memories live on through the pages of this book. – Dr. A

Peeta doesn’t show up for breakfast. I know it probably has something to do with what happened yesterday but I refuse to let it bother me. When Sae is done with the dishes I sheepishly ask if I can walk with her out of the house. She raises an eyebrow curiously but asks nothing. She opens the front door and gestures for me to go first. I eye the threshold nervously and start the breathing technique Peeta taught me.

Breathe in through the nose, blow out through the mouth. In, out. In, out.

I take a tentative step forward, then another until I’m standing in the middle of the front porch. Sae pats me on the shoulder and smiles as she hobbles down the steps and across the green of Victors Village. I watch her until she disappears through the gate.

Victors Village is laid out with twelve grey stone houses facing a landscaped green. Six on one side and six on the other. All identical, but one. Haymitch’s house, with its brown patchy front lawn and litter-strew porch stands out from the rest. I take a deep breath before striding across the green. The rotten garbage wreaks and I fight down the bile rising in my throat as I step over a
dead mouse on the porch. Using my fist I pound loudly on the front door. When no response comes I test the handle and find the door unlocked. The smell is so much worse inside. Empty bottles lie on the floor in every room. I step carefully so as not to trip, or wake the sleeping drunk. I cover my nose with my sleeve and peer cautiously into the kitchen. Every counter is covered with half empty glasses and used plates. Some are dotted with green spots of mould.

I’m alerted by a groan coming from another room. It doesn’t take me long to find Haymitch slumped in a chair by the fireplace in the study. His shirt is stained, probably with his own vomit, and he’s unshaven. His hair is longer than ever before. He’s a mess.

“Visiting hours are between five and six,” he slurs, catching me off guard.

“I’m not here for a social,” I say, eying the stack of paperwork on the desk that has been pushed to one side of the room.

“Well you haven’t changed one bit, have you sweetheart,” he mocks.

“Neither have you,” I bite back as he swigs from a bottle of liquor. “When was the last time you took a bath?”

He looks me up and down and smirks. “I could ask you the same question.”

I blush beet red and turn away.

“ Heard you’d gone crazy,” He sniggers. “Sat in the same chair day in, day out, not eating, not bathing…”

I clench my fists. “Yeah well I’m better now. Thanks for checking up on me. Listen Haymitch,” I say, changing the subject abruptly. “I want the telephone number for hospital in 4. I know my mom gave it to you.”

Haymitch scratches his beard like he’s pretending to think deeply. “Hmmm, yeah…now if only I could remember…”

I huff in aggravation and turn to leave. “Look, just…give it to me when you remember where it is, ok?”

“Same old Katniss,” he mutters. “No chit-chat, strictly business. You got somewhere important to be?”

I hesitate in the doorway.

“Didn’t think so,” he says. “Stay and have a drink with your old mentor.”

My shoulders slump and I roll my eyes before taking the seat across from him. He offers me the liquor bottle but I turn up my nose. It smells like cleaning chemicals.

“How about some bread then?” He asks, pointing to the half-eating fruit loaf on the desk. I hadn’t noticed it earlier.

“Peeta’s been here,” I say. It’s not a question. I know he’s been visiting Haymitch.

“Boy comes twice a week with a fruit loaf the size of my arm,” Haymitch replies, holding his arm up to demonstrate.

“He’s a good person,” I say absentmindedly, staring at the floor.
“A hell of a lot nicer than you,” Haymitch adds.

Neither of us speak again for what feels like a really long time, the only sound coming from the moving hands of the clock sat on the mantle piece. It’s Haymitch that breaks the silence.

“You’re a good person too sweetheart,” he says softly. “You just have some…personality issues.” I smile and look up at him. “Just not as good as Peeta, eh?”

I’m surprised when Haymitch frowns and leans forward in his chair. I worry that he might fall out of it.

“I take back what I said,” he tells me seriously and I raise my eyebrow in confusion. “About you not deserving Peeta. I take it back.”

I scoff in embarrassment. “You were right, though. I didn’t deserve him.” I fidget uncomfortably. “But it’s not like that any more though so…. It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“Don’t push him away again, Katniss,” He urges. “He may be damaged after what the Capitol did to him but I can assure you he still feels for you!”

I push myself out of the chair, anger rising from some unknown place within me. “You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I hiss.

“It’s ok to be scared, Katniss,” he says.

“I’m not scared!” I yell, panting with rage. “Things happened. I can’t….things can’t go back to the way they were. We’re different. We’re….not good for each other.”

Haymitch sits back in his chair and takes another swig from his bottle. “Same old Katniss,” he says for the second time. “Can’t see what’s right in front of her.”

I turn and run, trying to block out the sound of Haymitch laughing. I sprint across the green and burst into my own house, slamming the front door loudly. I’m angry but I don’t understand why. In frustration I grab a glass vase from the windowsill and throw it to the ground. It shatters into a million tiny pieces. I consider leaving the mess for Sae to clean up but then I think of Buttercup getting glass in his paws and it makes me think twice. I’ve gone soft for that mangy cat. I sweep the glass fragments into a dustpan and empty it into the bin. The anger has drained from me, leaving me exhausted. It’s barely past midday but I find myself climbing into bed. Buttercup, who had previously been lying in the warm sunshine by the window, now jumps onto the bed and curls up next to me. I run my fingers through his fur, my mind helplessly mulling over what Haymitch had said.

I dread the nightmares that await me tonight.
I wiggle my hands in the damp sand enjoying the feel of it between my fingers. The humidity hits like a wave, the only relief coming from a light breeze that floats off the water. The tide laps gentle on the beach and there is a low humming coming from the insects in the jungle behind me. A strange calmness creeps over me. I feel like I know this place. A hand begins to caress my hair and I sigh unashamedly as I lay my head on Peeta’s shoulder.

“Katniss,” he says softly, “it’s no use pretending we don’t know what the other one is trying to do.”

My subconscious knows something is off but with the sensation of Peeta gently massaging my scalp I can barely think straight. Something about this place seems so familiar and yet so foreign.

“I don’t know what kind of deal you think you’ve made with Haymitch, but you should know he made me promises as well.”

Like a key turning in a lock, my memories are suddenly released. Before I even realise it, I’m speaking as if reciting from a script. “So I think we can assume he was lying to one of us.”

The hand in my hair suddenly pulls tight and I wince. “Peeta, what are you…”

My head is pulled back sharply and I cry out in protest. I reach up to try and free myself but my hands are suddenly locked in Peeta’s tight grip. He leans in close and I can see his eyes are as black as night.

“Nobody needs you,” he whispers in my ear. “Not your family. Not Gale. Not me.”

He releases me so suddenly that I’m thrown back onto the sand. I try to scramble away as Peeta stands up and towers over me. Yanking a chain from around his neck, he throws a small golden trinket into my lap. A locket. With shaky fingers I open the clasp and heave out a dry sob. It’s empty.


I scream and kick and cry as Peeta’s fingers close around my neck.

But then suddenly I’m no longer on the beach. I touch my neck tentatively but find no swelling or bruising. I’m in a white room that is so blindingly bright I have to squint to let my eyes adjust. The room is bare besides a viewing window in one of the walls.

A spine-chilling, guttural scream echoes around the room. I don’t want to look but my legs move of their own accord and drive me forward until I’m peering through the window. The room on the other side of the window is not white like my room. It’s red, blood red. Two faceless figures dressed entirely in black circle a body that lies crippled on the floor. One of the dark figures kicks the body hard in the abdomen and it to rolls over.

I feel sick to my stomach when I see the face of the battered body, those blue eyes, that golden hair. I shriek his name and pound my fists on the glass until there are bloody but still the dark figures continue to assault Peeta. A voice whispers all around. “

She left you in that arena.” Punch.

“You’re here because of her.” Kick.
“Katniss Everdeen is a mutt. She must be destroyed!”

“No!” I scream into the air, searching wildly for the source of the voice. “No, it’s not my fault!”

“Miss Everdeen,” the voice says from behind me. I feel myself shake with fear and rage as I turn to face my most hated enemy. Snow smiles wickedly. “I thought we agreed never to lie to each other.”

I’m screaming so much I can taste blood in the back of my throat. My body is drenched in sweat and the sheets are tangled like chains around my legs.

“Katniss,” A voice calls.

I’m trapped somewhere between my nightmare and reality. When I feel someone pinning my arms down I flail and scream and claw at whoever is trying to restrain me, desperate to get away.

“Katniss, wake up!” The voice urges.

I force myself to open my eyes. It’s still dark in my bedroom save for the small bedside lamp. In the faint light I can just make out a familiar figure kneeling beside me.

“Peeta?” I rasp. My throat is burning from all the screaming. I swallow painfully.

He notices my discomfort and hands me a glass of water. I gulp it down, ignoring the taste of my own blood.

“Are you ok?” he asks, concern carved on his face.

I don’t know how to answer. My mouth open and closes like a gaping fish but no sound escapes. Reality lands with a bang and suddenly I’m all too aware that I’m clothed only in a nightdress that has most likely turned transparent with sweat. I drag the bed sheets to my chest and huddle against the headboard.

“What are you doing here?” I ask. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“I heard you screaming,” he says. “I hear you most nights. Sound carries pretty well in Victors Village. But…I’ve never heard you scream like that before. I couldn’t ignore it any longer.” His gaze is heavy on me. “Must have been some nightmare.”

I look away quickly so he won’t see my tears. I’m fed up of crying in front of people.

“You were hurting yourself,” he says quietly as he cautiously takes hold of my arm and looks at the fresh scratches etched into my delicate skin. I try to pull way but he holds firm.

“It happens sometimes,” I say with a shrug. “I don’t know I’m doing it until I wake up with bloody sheets.”

Peeta continues to examine my injuries. I hazard a glance at him and see his jaw is clenched and his lips are pressed into a thin line. For a second I’m frightened I might still be in my nightmare but I’m relieved to see his eyes are still blue, not cloudy or dark.

“You need to clean these,” He says, pulling me from my bed. The sheets drop to the floor around my ankles and I blush but Peeta is obviously to my appearance. He guides me to the en-suite bathroom and has me perch on the edge of the bath before rummaging through my bathroom cabinet and collecting together an assortment of first aid supplies. He inspects the unopened pots of medicated creams for my skin but thankfully spares me the lecture. In silence he kneels before
me and cleans my cuts with saline solution. It stings something awful but I keep a brave face. His hand dips into one of the pots of cream and he applies a liberal amount, gentle massaging it into the damaged skin. It smells like mint and cucumber and has an instant soothing effect. My eyelids droop and I almost sigh in spite of myself, wondering why I haven’t used the creams until now. Peeta finishes by wrapping a thin gauze bandage around each arm.

“And here I thought I was the doctor,” I joke lightly earning a small smile from Peeta.

“Yeah, well I always did have a better bedside manner,” he replies, looking up at me. I try to hold his gaze but as always I’m the first to turn away. I think I hear him sigh.

“You should try to get some rest,” He says. “There’s still a few more hours before dawn.”

The fact he doesn’t say ‘get some sleep’ only serves to remind me that he too has suffered from the nightmares that make you too scared to close your eyes. He leads me back to the bedroom and hovers awkwardly behind me as I gather the sheets from the floor and crawl back onto the bed.

“Goodnight, Katniss,” he says and turns to leave. I don’t mean to but in a panic my hand reaches out to grab hold of his wrist.

“Wait,” I stutter, too embarrassed to look at him but too afraid to let him go. It hits me just how familiar this scenario is. I realise that once again I’m asking Peeta for something he was always so ready to give but I was rarely able to reciprocate; affection. Haymitch really was right; I could never deserve this boy. I’m drawn out of my thoughts when the mattress moves beside me. I look at Peeta with wide eyes.

“Scoot over then,” he says. I didn’t even need to speak, he knows what I need. I comply without a word and he slides in next to me, propping himself up against the headboard like he always used to do. He looks at me expectantly before I gingerly lean into him, unsure of where to place my hand on his chest. I settle for the safe place just above his naval. Sharing a bed had never been a sexual thing for us; it was purely for comfort and companionship. Neither of us liked sleeping alone. But for the first time I feel nervous and excited about being pressed against him so intimately. His strong arms encircle me and I relax. Listening to the rhythmic beat of his heart I feel my eyelids become heavy. The world fades out. As I drift into a peaceful slumber I let the words I’ve been holding in for weeks slip from my lips.

“I’ve missed you.”

When I wake it’s not due to some horrific memory of arenas or bombed children. Sunlight is flooding in through the open curtains warming everything it touches. I hear the soft rumble of Buttercup purring at my feet where the band of light is creeping slowly up towards me. It’s been a long time since I’ve woken naturally from sleep feeling well rested. I yawn and stretch out fully, drawing my arms up above my head. When I catch sight of the bandages I’m transported back to the events of last night. I feel a strange fluttering inside me, like a bird desperate to escape. I turn over to find the space beside me empty and touch the sheets just to make sure. They’re cold. Peeta must have left a while ago. This fact alone makes me curl back up, pulling the sheets over my head. Perhaps I could stay here all day.

“I made breakfast,” a voice says from the doorway. My head turns abruptly to check I’m not hearing things. There he stands, apron tied around his waist, a boyish grin on his face. “I told Greasy Sae not to come over today.” He throws my bathrobe at me. “Why don’t you meet me downstairs. I’ve made cheese buns.”

That does it for me. I grin ear to ear and nod enthusiastically. Peeta chuckles and heads back to the
kitchen. I slide out of bed and throw the robe over my night dress. I pause before reaching for the hairbrush and drag it through my knotted tresses. I chance a brief look in the mirror, surprised to find the grin firmly planted on my features. This is a good day.

I bounce down the staircase listening to the clatter of pots and pans and taking in the smell of baked goods wafting from the kitchen. I feel like a kid as I jump from the second to last step, landing with a thud in the hallway. A sharp pain in my foot knocks the joy right out of me and I curse out loud. Hopping back to sit on the step I lift my foot for inspection. A shard of glass has imbedded itself in my heel and blood has already started to seep from the wound. I curse again. Why did I throw that damn vase yesterday?

“Katniss, are you alright?” I hear Peeta call from the kitchen. I hiss in pain as I prise the glass from my foot.

“I’m fine,” I shout back, glaring at the offensive object that dare to ruin my morning. “Just a little cut. Think I might need a band aid though.”

It’s quiet all of a sudden. The noises from the kitchen have stopped.

“Peeta?” I call. When I look up I see him standing a few feet away. But something is wrong. His arms are braced against the walls and his shoulders are tensed up around his ears.

“Peeta…” I say again, standing up on my good foot. I take one step forward and his head snaps up. I freeze. His eyes have taken on that familiar darkness I sometimes see in my nightmares. His eyes, first trained on me, now flit to stare at the shard of glass clasped in my right hand. It glints in the light. Realisation dawns on me and I drop the thing as if it had burned me. It falls to the floor and shatters into even smaller pieces. I hear Peeta breathing heavily. No one told me he was still having episodes.

“Get away from me,” he says in a low voice, grinding his teeth together.

“Peeta, it’s alright,” I say in my most calm voice and raise my palms to show I mean no harm. My eyes briefly scan the room for escape options. “You’re at my house in 12. We were about to have breakfast, remember?”

“Remember?” He growls and lurches forward. “I remember how you tricked me. You’re a Capitol Mutt!”

“No Peeta, that’s not true,” I say weakly. “It’s not real, Peeta. Whatever you are seeing right now it’s not real!”

The darkness from his eyes fades ever so slightly and he shakes his head furiously. “Not real?” He repeats.

I walk forward cautiously, keeping my arms raised. “That’s right Peeta. It’s not real.”

The darkness in his eyes is then replaced with genuine fear, like a rabbit caught in a trap.

“Katniss?” He whispers. His legs give out and he lands heavily on the floor. He looks torn between running from me and running to me. I slowly close the distance between us.

“Stop,” He says, his voice trembling. He huddles defensively. “I…I don’t want to hurt you.”

He shies away from me as I drop to my knees and gently cup his face in my hands. The darkness has almost completely gone.
“You won’t hurt me,” I tell him. “Just come back to me, Peeta.”

He pants and with a heavy sigh he falls into me. “I’m sorry,” he cries.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders and rest my chin atop his head. He smells like bread and spices.

“It’s ok,” I chant over and over, proving it as much to myself as I am to Peeta. I know how bad that situation could have become.

“It’s not ok,” He says and pulls back from my embrace. He seems to hesitate over his words. “I haven’t been completely honest with you.”

I give him a questioning look and mimic his movements as he leans back against the wall. I sit next to him and raise my legs to allow my chin to rest on my knees.

“Katniss, I’m not…” He screws up his face before letting out an exasperated groan. “I’m not myself,” he continues. “I mean, I am myself but… I’m not the person I was before.” He glances at me sideways. “Remember how I told you that I could tell which memories were the fake ones the Capitol put in my head?”

I nod. “You said they were sort of shiny.”

“Right. They have this quality about them, little details that aren’t quite correct. I can tell they aren’t real. But my real memories… they sometimes seem fake too.” His brows knit together and he fiddles with the fabric of his apron. “It feels like I’m living someone else’s life. I remember things, but it’s like remembering scenes from a movie. And you…” He turns to face me and I shiver under his intense stare. “I remember so much about you Katniss. I know what scares you, I know how much you love cheese buns, I know your favourite colour is green because it reminds you of the forest. I’ve been told over and over again how we used to be madly in love and I have these images in my head of us together but…” He swallows nervously and I hold my breath. “I don’t remember how to feel that way about you anymore.”

My heart comes to a stop, misses a beat and the gallops frantically to catch up. My mind replays the events of the past few weeks. Peeta smiling at me, bringing me cheese buns, pulling me out of my anxiety attack… sharing my bed. They weren’t acts of love. I feel myself wilt. Peeta is watching me with apologetic eyes, waiting for my reaction. I want to cry. I want to break things and scream that it’s not fair. My boy with the bread who doted on me for so long while I took him for granted…. no longer loves me. I squeeze my eyes shut to stop the tears that threaten to fall.

“Katniss,” Peeta whispers and touches my hand lightly. “This doesn’t mean we can’t be… friends.”

Friends. I toss the word around in my mind. Could we be friends? We used to be so much more; fiancés, lovers, victors, all for the entertainment of others. Our lives have been scripted for so long. Perhaps this is an opportunity to start again, for real this time. I look up at Peeta from under my eyelashes and give his hand a gentle squeeze.

I smile shyly. “Friends.”
Hi people! Just a quick note to say thanks for the kudos and comments. I'm new to archiveofourown so thanks for making me feel welcome. Please enjoy the rest of the story!

In the days and weeks that follow, Peeta and I stumble through the early phases of our new ‘friendship’. Greasy Sae no longer cooks breakfast but still comes for dinner. Instead, Peeta works tirelessly to provide an abundant amount of fresh bread and delicate pastries. He experiments regularly with his recipes and insists I be his chief taster, observing me closely as I nibble on oat cookies and tear off chunks of walnut bread. Each creation earns a nod of approval and Peeta grins with self-satisfaction.

I finally obtain the number for the hospital in 4 and call my mother. She cries loudly down the phone at the sound of my voice and I feel myself tear up as well. I won’t admit it but I have missed her. She asks about a hundred questions in the space of 10 minutes. Am I eating enough? Am I taking my medication and speaking with Dr Aurelius? How is Peeta? I give her the basics and leave out the unsavoury details about my nightmares and Peeta’s feelings for me, or lack of. It would only upset her. She tells me again how proud she is of me and that people stop her in the street to ask if she’s the Mockingjay’s mother. This disturbs me a little. We don’t talk about Prim but I know that during every pause in conversation we are both thinking of her. She tells me she loves me and asks me to call or write to her. I tell her yes but I know I probably won’t. At least not for a while.

On days when I wake up feeling almost like my normal self I venture into the woods. In the early morning light I set traps and collect my spoils from the snares. On one occasion I bring home enough rabbit to make a decent stew. Sae seems happy that I’m providing her with fresh game again. For now I leave my bow at home. It pains me to do so as my bow has for so long been my only mean of surviving. But he snapping sound of an arrow being released brings forth wicked hallucinations of death in the arena.

At night, Peeta and I return to sleeping alone in our own beds. I stare at the ceiling for hours fighting off sleep that threatens to take me captive. Some nights I am suffocated by an overwhelming urge to look out the window. When I do I always see a light coming from an upstairs room in Peeta’s house. I wonder if he is there, just behind the curtains, looking back at me.

One morning after breakfast I tell him about my idea for a memory book and he pleads with me to let him help.

“I can sketch pictures of the people you don’t have a photograph of,” He tells me.

I pretend to think about his offer when really I had already planned to ask for his assistance. Sprawled out on the living room floor amongst pillows and sheets of paper we set straight to work, writing a list of people we want to include. My father, Rue, Finnick, Cinna, Boggs, Darius, Lavinia. The list grows longer with every passing day. Although I can’t bring myself to add Prim just yet.
The memory book turns out to be good therapy for Peeta. Occasionally he initiates a game of ‘real or not real’ in an attempt to fit together the broken pieces of his memory. Most of the time he already knows the answer to his question, but it’s as if he needs my confirmation to set it in stone.

“I want to add one of my brothers,” He announces suddenly one afternoon.

I stop writing mid sentence. I remembered Peeta’s oldest brother, having seen him once or twice as I let Prim peak through the window of the Mellark bakery to catch a glimpse of the fancy decorated cakes we would never afford. I remember he had blonde hair like Peeta but his faced lacked the softness that graced Peeta’s features. I never met the Mellark’s second son.

“Will you tell me about him?” I ask Peeta.

“His name was Benjamin but my father nicknamed him Rye because his blonde hair was flecked with brown like the bread we used to eat at supper.” This memory makes him smile. “He was a good guy. Always did his chores, completed his homework on time, bowed and scraped for my mother. Nothing was ever good enough for her though. She favoured my oldest brother, Mason, out of all of us. Although being the favourite didn’t spare him from getting a beating from time to time. She only stopped when he got big enough to fight back which meant more beatings for us. When he turned 18 my parents let him move into the apartment above the bakery so Rye and I turned his old bedroom into a den.”

Peeta continues to tell me about the mischief he and his little brother got up to, and the subsequent beatings that followed. “He learned to joke it off. Said he told the girls at school he got into a fight with a wolf and won,” he laughs sadly. “I knew deep down he was hurting, and so was I. I had such a strong desire to protect him.”

I reach out and touch Peeta’s arm comfortingly. “He would have been so proud of you when you came back from the first games.”

Peeta sniffs and wipes his eyes with the back of his sleeve. He smiles at me gratefully. Our eyes meet and for once I don’t let me gaze drop. I’m lost in those two pools of blue. I’m close enough to count every freckle on his nose and to notice that his breath hitches slightly when I run my tongue over my bottom lip.

A loud crash wrenches us apart just as Haymitch stumbles through the door. The smell of stale alcohol fills the room immediately and I wrinkle my nose, stifling a giggle when I see Peeta do the same.

“Hey kids,” He slurs, leaning on the door frame. He glances at the array of paper, pens and photographs on the floor. “What is this, an arts and crafts therapy session?”


He grins like a lunatic and throws himself down onto my sofa. He goes to kick off his boots but I point my finger at him sharply.

“Don’t even think about it.” I say.

“Hospitality,” He says. “Look it up in a dictionary, sweetheart.”

I grind my teeth irritably. This man knows how to push all my buttons.

“We’re creating a book of memories for the friends we lost” Peeta says, answering Haymitch’s earlier question. “We choose a person, Katniss writes down everything and anything that either of
us remembers or loved about them. Then we add a photo, or sometimes I draw a sketch.”

Haymitch chews thoughtfully on his fingernails. “How many pages have you done so far?” He asks curiously.

I’m reluctant to tell him anything but Peeta goes right ahead and reads him our list.

“You’re gonna need a bigger book,” Haymitch tells us plainly. “23 years of being a mentor and sending kids to their deaths. I got plenty of names.”

Over the next several hours Haymitch tells Peeta and I about all 46 of the tributes he was forced to mentor. I’m more than surprised that he knows them all by name and even more shocked when he successfully describes many of them to allow Peeta to sketch a rough portrait. He tells us of a 14 year old girl called Maisey, a tribute from his 3rd year as mentor. She was the oldest of 4 girls. Her mother sold cloth at the Hob to provide for the family while her father spent much of their money on prostitutes. She didn’t cry at the reaping. She worked as hard as the careers during the week of training in the Capitol and even scored a promising 7 from the judges. But the games that year were set in a harsh, icy wilderness. Maisey froze to death during a blizzard on her third day in the arena.

“She was such a feisty kid,” Haymitch says. “I actually thought she might have a shot at winning…”

Peeta hands him a scrap of paper on which he has drawn a portrait of Maisey from the description Haymitch gave. A pretty girl, with wild red hair and dimples in her cheeks. Haymitch lets his eyes travel over the image before thrusting it back into Peeta’s hands. He hoists himself up from the sofa with a groan and makes for the door.

“That’s enough for tonight,” he says, his voice taking on an unusual softness.

“He’s lonely,” Peeta says when he’s gone. “We have each other but he has no one.”

I ponder on Peeta’s words and think of how I would have coped if I had been the sole victor of the 74th games. I would have had no one to share my experiences with. No one who could have truly understood the horrors of the arena. The thought of then having to mentor future tributes, perhaps one day even my own sister, is enough to make me shudder. I feel a compassion for Haymitch like I’ve never known before. He is a rude, drunken idiot, true. But life handed him a raw deal, a really raw deal. Perhaps I should cut him some slack.

“We could invite him for dinner some time,” I find myself saying, although I’m not sure if Haymitch eats much solid food.

I turn to see Peeta sticking the picture of Maisey into a page of the book above the notes I’ve written. He gathers up the rest of the papers and puts them into a neat pile on the table. I know he’s about to leave and I do my best to ignore the burning pain in my chest.

“So I’ll see you tomorrow then?” I say, almost but not quite succeeding in keeping the sadness from my voice.

“Actually,” Peeta scratches the back of his neck and shifts his weight from one foot to the other. “I’m kinda busy tomorrow.”

I look at him dumbfounded as if it were impossible for him to have any plans outside of our usual routine. “Oh,” I simply say, my lips remain parted in an ‘O’ shape.

“I was going to tell you about it earlier,” Peeta begins to explain. “I’m sort of…looking at opening
the bakery again.”

“But the bakery was destroyed.” I say.

“It was. But there’s a plot in town that hasn’t been developed yet. I spoke with Thom; he’s been heading up the rebuilding operation, and he said I could take it if I wanted it.” He smiles effortlessly. “I really want to do this, Katniss.”

His smile is contagious and I feel the corners of my mouth twitch. I ignore the part of my brain that wonders when Peeta had time to sneak off into town to discuss such things with Thom. ‘He’s allowed other interests besides the book’, I tell myself although I sense an evil thing, that feels like jealousy, creep in. I lock it away hastily. I realise I’ve said nothing and Peeta is looking at me.

“That’s great, Peeta.” I say somewhat genuinely. “Maybe you could show me sometime?”

He grins that boyish grin I have come to adore and nods in response. I walk him to the front door and wave as he crosses the green and climbs the steps to his own house. He looks back at me briefly before stepping inside and disappearing from view. I close the door and let out the breath I didn’t realise I had been holding. I scold myself for being a jealous fool and make my way up to bed.

I absolutely hate cooking my own breakfast. I have become so accustomed to the culinary skills of Sae or Peeta that my bowl of lumpy, overcooked porridge just doesn’t cut it. It’s a miracle I even made it downstairs. Knowing that Peeta wouldn’t be coming over today gave me absolutely no motivation to leave the comfort of my bed. In fact, I had resolved to stay firmly put under the covers until tomorrow but Buttercup had other ideas. He mewed pathetically and continuously, begging to be fed, and nipped at my toes to attract my attention. And so with a groan I had given in to his pleas.

I twist the spoon through my bowl of slop and force down two or three mouthfuls. What I wouldn’t give for some cheese buns. I dump the uneaten remains of breakfast in the bin and rinse out my bowl, which proves a bit of a struggle as the porridge sticks to the bottom like glue. I decide to leave it to soak, otherwise known as leaving it for a time when I can be bothered to care.

My eyes flit about the kitchen as my arms swing aimlessly by my side. I feel without purpose today. I could go hunting, but it’s already quite late in the morning and it would mean having to push through the market crowds in town to get to the fence at the edge of the forest.

A light bulb sparks to life in my brain. *Peeta is in town.* Where was the harm in me casually passing him by on the way to check my snares? A little voice in the back of my mind laughs and calls me pathetic but I tell it to shut up as I reach for my father’s hunting jacket. I tug on my boots, swing my satchel over my shoulder and head on out the door.

Town is busy just as I had expected. The population in 12 is obviously much lower than before the war but in the past few months many of the refugees, as well as a few inhabitants from 13, have moved back in. The clear up operation took weeks. I had been too unstable at the time to offer any sort of assistance but Sae would give me updates on the progress each morning at breakfast. Then came the rebuilding. The houses, the stores, the school. Everything new, and yet everything so painfully familiar.

The Hob has yet to be rebuilt and so the market traders line their stalls either side of the main pedestrian road that runs through the town. Some of the traders recognise me as I pass and call out in greeting. I smile back politely but carry on walking. My step falters when I realise I don’t even know where Peeta is planning to put his bakery. I hazard a guess and redirect myself towards the
place where the old one had once stood.

This part of town is still deep in rubble from the bombings. Men, who I vaguely recognise from the mines, now load their carts with broken bricks instead of coal. Even under the weak heat of the spring sunshine they mop sweat from their brows. A small band of women, wives and daughters, hands out cool glasses of water to the workers.

I turn a corner and stop in my tracks when I spot Peeta, and Thom, standing before a plot of land. It looks recently cleared of debris. I hadn’t been wrong after all. This place is only 2 streets away from the location of the old bakery. They hunch over a large piece of paper that I perceive to be blueprints. I don’t mean to spy but I convince myself they are deep in conversation and I decide it best not to approach. So I find myself tucked behind a freestanding wall, observing from a far. I watch Peeta gesture animatedly over the plot and smile when Thom claps him on the shoulder and extends a hand. Peeta shakes it enthusiastically and I assume he has landed the deal. I feel so utterly proud of him in that moment that I can’t help the smile creeping up onto my face. Yet that smile falters only moments later as I watch a young blonde women approach with two glasses of water. She hands one to Thom and then to Peeta before tossing her blonde curls over one shoulder. I feel myself craning to try and hear their conversation. I know I should turn around and leave but something in the way she smiles at Peeta holds me to the spot, eyes wide, mouth slightly agape. They continue to converse as a threesome until suddenly Thom walks away, leaving Peeta and the girl alone. He says something and she laughs theatrically before resting her hand on his upper arm. He smiles a toothy grin down at her. I clench my fists so tight that I can feel my finger nails dig into my palms but I still can’t turn away. I gulp down the taste of jealousy, feeling it simmer in the pit of my abdomen.

“Katniss?” A voice says from behind me and I jolt and spin around in surprise. Looking up at me with big, star-struck eyes is a girl about the age of 6. I’m astounded that my hunter’s ear didn’t alert me to her approach. Her mousey brown hair is separated into two braids and for a moment I’m reminded of my sister. The little girl grins and bounces on the spot. “You are Katniss Everdeen, aren’t you,” She says. It doesn’t seem like a question but I nod my head anyway.

“Mom!” She squeals excitedly to one of the women with the water. “Mom, look! It’s Katniss!” I cringe. The little girl’s exclamation has alerted most of the street to my presence. I peek over my shoulder to confirm my fear. It seems Peeta has heard also and now he and the blonde women are looking right at me. I feel my cheeks burn and a wave of nausea hits me.

“I’m so sorry, Miss Everdeen,” Another voice apologises. I assume is is the mother of the small girl. “Grace can get a little over excited. You’re her biggest hero.”

Another wave of nausea hits but for a completely different reason. I’m not a role model for little girls! I look over my shoulder again and see Peeta heading this way. I force what I hope is a smile and not a grimace onto my face.

“Nice to meet you, kid,” I say as I pat Grace on the head. “But I gotta run.”

I take off, ignoring the sound of my name being called. I weave through the streets until I reach that point in the perimeter fence that allows me freedom into the woods. I don’t stop running until the only thing I see around me is trees. My leg muscles burn from such exertion. I squat on a large rock and let my head fall into my hands. The little voice in my mind from earlier this morning is back. ‘Pathetic’ it says and laughs cruelly at me as I hang my head in shame.
Chapter 6

Quite a number of hours pass before I convince myself to return home. My feet drag as I trudge out of the tree line to meet the meadow. The mass grave has since been covered over but I am still careful to walk only around the edge. As I draw near to the break in the boundary fence my eyes catch sight of a lone figure. I don’t have to come much closer to know exactly who is it. Peeta is waiting for me. He sits on the stump of an old tree with his back to me, but he turns just as I slip under the fence.

“Hey,” he greets casually.

I duck my head to avoid his gaze. “How long have you been here?” I ask.

He shrugs. “About an hour, maybe a little longer. Have you been hunting?” His eyes fall to my satchel. It hangs empty by my side so I tuck it hurriedly under one arm and begin to stalk up the hilly path leading home. He follows a few paces behind. We continue silently for a while, the only sound coming from the crunch of our boots on the gravel path.

“I saw you in town today,” He says suddenly.

I clench and unclench my jaw. “Did you?” I respond nonchalantly, quickening my step. I desperately want to be away from this situation. Despite his artificial leg he strides alongside me.

“You looked right at me, Katniss,” he says humorously, twisting his body to try and catch my eye. “What were you doing?” I blush in spite of myself and curse my body for its weakness.

“I was heading to the forest,” I try to sound cool but there is an edge to my voice, an edge I know Peeta will pick up on. He hums thoughtfully by my side, scratching at his chin in a comical fashion.

“I didn’t think that street lead to the forest,” he muses. “Don’t you normally take the main road?”

Hearing his mocking tone I blush deeper. Leaving his question unanswered I press on, ignoring the strain in my leg muscles. After only a few minutes our fast paced walking has gotten us almost to the top of town. I can see the curve in the road that leads on to Victors Village. Thank goodness because Peeta’s heavy footsteps are beginning to grate on my last nerve.

“Katniss…” He calls in a sing-song sort of tone. That does it. I grind to a halt and whirl around to face him.

“What?!” I bellow.

Initially he looks shocked but the expression on his face turns to one of amusement. “I just want to know what you were up to.” He says innocently.

I drag a palm across my face and groan. “I came to see you, ok?” I say defeatedly. “I couldn’t go one morning on my own without going shit-crazy so I came to see your bakery.”

I cringe when I see the satisfied smirk on his face, as if he has just uncovered my darkest secret. He barks out a good-natured laugh and nudges my shoulder. “Well you could have at least said hello.”

“You were busy,” I say bitterly, scuffing the toe of my boot on the ground.
“It was only Thom,” he replies.

‘Unbelievable’ I think to myself. I huff and stalk off up the road.

“Katniss, wait,” Peeta calls, matching my stride. I can feel the words bubbling in my throat and no matter how hard I bite my cheek I just can’t stop them from tumbling out of my mouth. “There was a girl,” I blurt out. I steal a sideways glance at Peeta. He looks confused.

“A girl…?” He begins to say. And then it dawns on him. “Katniss, were you…jealous?” He asks, the last word uttered in a slightly higher pitch than normal.

For the second time today I break out into a run with Peeta calling my name behind me. I pass under the iron gateway to Victors Village, my boots pounding the earth.

“Katniss!” He calls loudly, and I know he is following close behind.

“Leave it alone, Peeta! I don’t want to talk!” I shout, grateful when I reach the front steps to my house. I leap over the threshold and briefly catch sight of Peeta’s utterly bewildered expression before I slam the door in his face. For the first time since my return to 12 I consider turning the lock. I can feel Peeta’s presence behind the door and it pulls me like a paperclip to a magnet. My hand hesitates over the bolt but I withdraw when I hear the sound of Peeta’s defeated footsteps as he walks away.

Adrenaline courses through me and I tremble as I walk into the kitchen. My dishes from breakfast are still soaking in sink but I can not bring myself to care. I’m too pent up. I am furious and embarrassed, confused and ashamed all at once. Why do I have such a knee-jerk reaction to emotions? Why do I clam up and run the moment things get the least bit uncomfortable? One might think that my exposure to war and death would have forced me to mature prematurely but in this moment I am overwhelmingly aware of how young I still am.

When Greasy Sae appears at dinner I have nervously chewed off every jagged fingernail. She observes my pitiful form, anxiously rocking in my old chair, hand in mouth and eyes fixed on thin air. I haven’t removed my boots or my jacket from earlier.

“Bad day, child?” she enquires delicately, setting her basket on the table. She pulls out a crockpot wrapped in cloths and lifts the lid allowing an alluring smell to escape into the room. My mouth waters instantly and I am reminded that I skipped lunch yet again. I take my place at the top of the table as Sae spoons 3 large ladleful’s of stew into my awaiting bowl. I dig in immediately. She looks around as if she has lost something and then turns back to me with an eyebrow raised.

“No bread?” She asks, the question baring a significant amount of weight.

I chew on my mouthful for much longer than necessary as she awaits my response. “Peeta won’t be coming today,” I mumble and shovel another spoonful into my mouth.

Sae places a hand on her hip and taps her toe impatiently. Apparently that wasn’t a good enough answer. I swear this woman thinks she is my adoptive mother…or grandmother. I drop my spoon into my bowl with a loud clang.

“I reeeaallly don’t want to talk about it,” I whine.

Sae sighs and slips into the chair diagonally opposite me. “I thought you kids were getting along better now,” she says, her gentle demeanour returning.

“We were. We are,” I correct quickly. “It’s just… I didn’t something stupid today.” I rub my fingers in small circles around my temples, feeling the beginnings of a headache pinch inside my
skull. I tell Sae how Peeta and I have spent much time together over the recent weeks, working hard on our memory book. I tell her of Peeta’s plans to reopen the bakery, surprised to learn that he has already told her. Speaking of the inner battle I faced this morning with the voice in my head is slightly cringe worthy, but not so humiliating as explaining my actions towards Peeta.

“Why did you hide?” She asks me.

“I honestly don’t know,” I sigh and smile at her bashfully. “Pretty stupid, huh?”

She touches my hand and pats it affectionately. “Stupid is not a word I tend to associate with you, dear. Naïve, maybe…”

I groan and bury my face in the crook of my arm atop the table.

“Katniss, you saw Peeta with a girl and felt jealous,” she says matter-of-factly. “That is a normal reaction.”

“But the hijacking! The Capitol,” I argue. “They changed him; his memories. He told me himself he doesn’t remember how to love me.” My voice breaks and a single tear escapes.

“Then you must be patient,” Sae tells me. “Just as he was always patient with you. That’s what it takes when you truly care about someone.”

I sigh remorsefully. “I just wish I could have figured out my feelings earlier. Like, years ago.”

“You are not the first fool in love,” Sae says knowingly. “And you won’t be the last.” She stands and replaces the lid on the crockpot. “Now, take this over to the boy and see if you can patch things up again.”

I wipe my eyes roughly with the back of my hand and smile gratefully at Sae. I take the pot from her hands and head out into the night. With my eyes fixed firmly on Peeta’s house I cross the green with determination and hop up the stairs of his porch. My hands are occupied with the stew so I awkwardly tap my elbow against the door. I feel the nerves creeping in like tiny insects but before I can command myself to stay calm the door swings open. Peeta blinks in surprise and I stare back silently. I’m captivated by the way his figure glows in the light of his hallway. He looks almost celestial, other worldly.

“Dinner…” I offer weakly. “I brought you some dinner.”

Peeta, apparently lost for words, merely steps sideways in the doorframe. I take this as permission to enter and step over the threshold into the hall but go no further. I’m struck with the thought of how few times I have actually been inside Peeta’s house. Even after the first games it was Peeta
who usually came to visit me, not visa versa. His house, although identical to my own, has a
certain warmth that mine severely lacks. There are no ghosts here. It’s not just a house; it feels like
home.

Peeta has yet to say a single word and I shift awkwardly, feeling the stew slop around inside the
pot. I kick myself for not thinking of something to say before coming over here.

“I…I wanted to apologise…” I begin to say but Peeta cuts me off.

“It’s ok, Katniss,” he interjects. His voice sounds strained; bristly. “You really don’t need to
apologise.”

You were right; I was jealous. But I shouldn’t have taken it out on you. I’m sorry.”

“Well then I accept your apology,” he replies curtly, staring at the floor. “Although there really
was nothing to forgive.”

I sigh in frustration. “Look, Peeta, you can tell me if you’re mad at me. It’s ok. Just be honest!”

“I’m not mad,” he says firmly. “I just…I wasn’t expecting you to come over. I’m sort of…” he
stammers and takes a half step backwards. “I was sort of in the middle of something.” A flush of
pink tints his cheeks. “I really do forgive you.”

In my haste to get my apology out I hadn’t really observed the scene before me, nor had I taken a
proper look at Peeta. He wrings his hands nervously and I see they are dyed right up to his elbows
in various shades. The light from the ceiling illuminates the multi-coloured flecks in his hair.

“You’re painting again,” I say with surprise.

Peeta nods but looks at me in a funny way. And then I notice it. The way he is standing
protectively in front of a door that is slightly ajar; the door to the study. I take a step forward and
Peeta flinches.

“Katniss,” he says in a warning tone, a hint of panic washing over his features. It only increases
my curiosity. I thrust the pot of stew into his colourful hands and duck past him. I push the door
with a little too much force and it hits the wall with a bang that continues to echo as I stare silently
into the room. I’m taken aback by how dark it is. The thick curtains have been pulled right across.
I imagine this room being as dark during the day as it is as night. It is void of all furniture that
would have you believe this was once a study. No bookcase, no desk. In their place are dozens of
hand-painted canvases. Some are leant against the wall and covered with white sheets while others
are mounted on easels. My chest constricts painfully before I’ve even fully understood what I am
looking at. The unfinished painting in the middle of the room depicts a scene that I am familiar
with and I feel myself gasping for air as I draw closer to it. I recognise Peeta in the picture
instantly. He is standing by a road, Victors Village looming in the background. He appears to be
arguing with a figure; a girl with a braid who bears a striking resemblance to me. Only this is no
ordinary girl. Her lips are curled back in a snarl revealing razor sharp fangs. Her hand is raised
with malicious intent. Her finger nails, protruding like animal claws, are stained with blood.

“Is that…me?” I ask, the words escaping from me in a barely audible whisper.

“Katniss,” I hear Peeta cry out from behind me. “Katniss, I…”

I lift a shaky hand to touch the depiction of myself and find that the paint is still wet. It leaves a
sticky red mark on my finger.
“This is why,” I rasp out, unable to control my tremors. “This is why you can’t love me.” I whirl around to face him.

“Katniss,” he croaks, his pain-filled eyes imploring me.

“You think I’m a monster?” I ask. Tears run in rivers down my cheeks and drip off my chin. I make no move to wipe them away. He shakes his head wordlessly, tears beginning to spring from his own eyes.

“You were never meant to see,” he says. “They are just paintings.”

I suck in a sharp breath and look around the room. “They?” I stammer, seizing hold of the corner of a white sheet to reveal another canvas. I step back in horror. My face appears again in this painting only my eyes are blood red and I’m standing on top of burning bodies in the bombed ruins of District 12. I choke on a sob and let out a pained howl. Peeta steps forward and reaches for me but I shove him away. I rip the covering from another canvas.

“This is how you see me!” I scream, gripping my head in my hands.

“Katniss, stop!” Peeta shouts, trying desperately to stop me from revealing the images from his nightmares. I feel something building inside of me, something more than just pain and sadness. I feel anger; pure unadulterated rage. I snatch the first canvas from off the easel and hurl it against the wall. I tear it to pieces with my bare hands before Peeta can restrain me. I fight to release myself from his grasp and pound him wildly with my fists but he wrestles me to the ground.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry,” he wails, repeating himself over and over as I sob uncontrollably on the floor. Exhaustion hits me like a train and I feel myself slipping into oblivion.

I wake up disoriented. My eyes are so sore and inflamed from crying that I can barely open them. I know am no longer on the hardwood floor in the study. What I’m laying on now is soft. My fingers smooth over the fabric beneath me and I recognise immediately that I must be on the sofa in Peeta’s living room. My heads feels heavy as I lift it up to look around. My blurry vision starts to clear and I see Peeta perching on the arm of the sofa watching me like a hawk.

“Katniss!” He pleads, kneeling in front of me. “Of course I care!” He takes a deep breath and lets his arms drop to his side. “I don’t even know how I start to explain what you saw last night. The paintings…you remember I began painting right after the first games?”

I nod mutely, recalling the train journey during the Victory Tour. Peeta had shown me his paintings then; paintings of the arena. I hadn’t liked the subject matter but I couldn’t deny his talent.

“I used painting as a way to deal with my trauma. In 13, Dr Aurelius discovered that if I painted immediately after a nightmare or an episode I was able to see more clearly for myself what was real and what was fake.”
“I’m in so many of them,” I whisper, willing myself not to think of fangs and claws.

“You’ve always featured heavily in my dreams, Katniss,” Peeta tells me honestly, dipping his gaze. “But the Capitol has…tainted them.”

“They’re still winning;” I say monotonously. Peeta drags his eyes back to meet mine. “The Capitol. Snow and Coin. They may be dead but they’ve won. They haven’t just tainted your dreams, Peeta. They’ve tainted me.” A stray tear slips from the corner of my eye.

“They haven’t won, Katniss,” Peeta responds. He seems to hesitate over his next words. “I need to show you something.”

I shake my head and try to stand again but Peeta blocks my way. He implores me with his eyes. “Please?” he begs. He must take my silence as permission because he leaves the room momentarily before returning with a canvas. The artwork is turned away from me but I feel my anxiety levels shoot up.

“No,” I exhale, expecting the worst. “No I don’t want to see!”

Peeta turns the canvas around before I can make my escape. But the painting before me is not one of death or nightmares. The colours are so different from the images I saw last night. There are no harsh reds or dark shadows. No fangs or claws. One thing is still the same though; the subject of the painting. Peeta has painted me, but not as a monster. I’m not exactly pretty to look at. All my flaws are there in raw form. This painting is real.

“I painted this after I saw you the day I planted those primrose bushes in your garden,” Peeta says, watching for my reaction. “This is how I see you.”

I look at the painting more closely. I struggle to see anything past my own imperfections. I’m sullen and gaunt. I’m empty. I’m scarred…

“I’m broken,” I say, my voice cracking with emotion.

Peeta’s hand slips under my chin as he brings my gaze to him. His thumb delicately wipes away the lingering tear drop on my cheek. “But you’re mending,” he says softly. “I’m mending…thanks to you.”

“I don’t understand,” I lament. “How have I helped? I’m so stubborn and selfish. I…” My words are cut short as Peeta leans forward and presses his lips firmly to mine. I squeak in surprise and my eyes widen. After a few short moments that feel like millennia, Peeta pulls back. He looks shocked by his own actions.

“What was that?” I squawk, ignoring the tingling sensation on my mouth. What was this boy thinking?!

“I…I needed to make you see,” he says in a breathy voice.

“See what?” I demand. I blush when he leans in close to me again.

“Being near you makes me feel whole,” he says, his voice no higher than a whisper. “I feel like I’m healing when I’m in your presence. You frighten me and excite me at the same time. You remind me what it’s like to be me; to be the old me.”

“So, what…what are you saying?” I stutter, my eyes darting to his lips and back up to his eyes.
He smiles. “I don’t remember what we had before. Maybe those memories will come back, maybe they won’t.” He paused to brush a stray hair from my eye and tucks it behind my ear. “But I don’t need those memories, Katniss. I guess what I’m trying to say is…that I think I’m falling for you…again.”

My brain works overtime to try to understand the words coming out of Peeta’s mouth. He regards me intently, looking for proof that I actually heard him and didn’t phase out. I laugh giddily and squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my forehead against his.

“You’re…falling…for me?” I repeat back questioningly, unable to contain the drunken smile that has spread across my face. Peeta grins.

“They haven’t won, Katniss,” he reassures. “The games have finished, the war has ended. We played our part. We don’t need to fight anymore. This is the time to start over. We can finally start living.”
This chapter is written from Peeta's POV.
This story is also on fanfiction.net under the same name. :)

“I guess what I’m trying to say is…that I think I’m falling for you…again.”

There, the words are out. No going back now. I feel my palms start to sweat as I watch for her reaction. Any kind of reaction will do. It would be better than the blank stare she is currently giving me. I feel the beginnings of an apology forming on my tongue and my lips part in expectation of it. But before I can utter a single word I see it; the smile. It starts small. The corners of her mouth twitch, pulling her lips up in a delicate curve. A laugh escapes from her and I’m captivated by the way her face is transformed. Her grey eyes are suddenly brighter; a little colour floods her cheeks removing that sickly look. Her smile widens exponentially. It’s contagious and I feel a grin form on my own face as Katniss leans in to press her forehead to mine. I breathe her in. Her scent is familiar and comforting and makes me feel warm all over.

“You’re…falling…for me?” She asks in disbelief. I see her trying hard to maintain her usually calm composure. She fails and it makes me smile even more. I had been told countless times by doctors, by friends, that I was in love with Katniss Everdeen. Most of my true memories returned to me before I left the Capitol to come back to 12. But the emotions that once accompanied those memories were gone. All I had was images. Those images compelled me to seek out Katniss’s company. I had to know if I still felt something…anything. At first there was nothing although I tried to resume what I believed to be ‘normal’ Peeta behaviour. I baked for her and ate with her. Our conversations were light and superficial. The first feeling to resurface was an overwhelming urge to protect. When Katniss experienced her first anxiety attack I dropped everything to run to her aid. The feeling was strange and unfamiliar. I had, for so long, been programmed to want to hurt her. Now the thought of her in danger made me sick to my stomach. Then came compassion. Her screams in the night had me running across the green in bare feet. I restrained her as she thrashed against me, knowing all too well who and what she fought against in her mind. I wouldn’t wish those nightmares on anyone. With the memory book came admiration. I was inspired by her determination not to let the death of our friends be forgotten. Various other emotions and feelings returned to me, like lost pieces of a puzzle. Each day I spent with her I felt the cracks in my mind start to mend. Snow never intended for me to recover from the hijacking and Coin hadn’t expected me to survive the war. But here I am, almost whole again, and staring into the eyes of a beautiful woman. Maybe the odds are finally in my favour?

“They haven’t won, Katniss,” I insist. “The games have finished, the war has ended. We played our part. We don’t need to fight anymore. This is the time to start over. We can finally start living.”

She giggles but it’s accompanied by a small half sob. Her eyes grow misty as she tentatively touches my cheek with her hand. I lean into her touch and smile reassuringly.

“But the paintings…” She says, dropping her gaze. “I’m so confused…”

I sigh and move to sit next to her on the sofa. I take both her hands in mine, subconsciously
smoothing the calluses that have formed on her fingers. I know she can’t move on without a satisfying explanation. I wrack my brains for some sort on analogy.

“Katniss, did Dr Aurelius ever give you advice on how to deal with your nightmares?”

She nods. “He told me I should talk about them.” Her eyes roll subtly betraying her obvious disagreement with the good doctor. I squeeze her hand, trying to convey my empathy.

“Why do you think he made that suggestion?” I ask, hoping her smart mind will follow my leading question.

“He said that talking about them out loud would help me to rationalise them.”

“He gave me the same advice,” I tell her. “When you talk about the nightmare out loud you can start to see how illogical it is. Things start to make more sense when you identify the strangeness of it all; those little things that make you realise it was a dream, not reality. My paintings are just like that. If I have a nightmare or experience an episode I find it helps to paint it immediately. It becomes clear to me just how untrue all those fake memories are.”

I splay her hands out flat against mine and trace her fingernails with my thumb. “I know you’re not a monster, Katniss. Those paintings were meant to be private and I’m sorry you had to see them. But I can’t control what I dream about.”

She pulls my hands to chest and presses her lips against my knuckles. This small gesture causes a tingle to spread out from my fingers right down to my toes.

“I understand,” she says softly, a smile returning to her face. I smile back in relief. “So where do we go from here?” she asks timidly.

I rise and pull her to her feet. “Well, breakfast seems like the logical next step,” I say humorously, earning a small chuckle from Katniss. “Why don’t we go over to your house? You can shower and I’ll get started on some pancakes.”

My suggestion seems to please her greatly as she leans in to place the lightest of kisses against my cheek. She tugs on my hand and leads me out across the green.

I whisk the ingredients together in a bowl, cursing the light tremble in my hands. I’m nervous, which is ridiculous because we’ve had breakfast together many times. Ok, so maybe things are a little different now. And maybe the faint smell of lavender soap coming from upstairs is causing me to have indecent thoughts about Katniss in the shower.

“Stop it,” I command myself. “You’ve only just told her how you feel. Get a grip!”

Buttercup winds himself around my ankles and I scratch his head affectionately before busying myself with the pancake batter, pouring even circles onto the hot pan. They sizzle softly and begin to bubble on top. I slide the spatula under each one and flip them over in turn. After only a few minutes a generous stack is starting to build. I divide the pancakes between two plates and pour over the sticky sugar syrup. I rummage in Katniss’s fridge searching for fruit and find a handful of strawberries that look a little past their best. I slice off the bad bits and take care to assemble the rest on Katniss’s plate.

“Edible art?” She jokes as she enters the kitchen. Her damp hair hangs heavy over one shoulder revealing a large scar on her neck. She touches it self consciously and pulls her hair over to hide it.

“You don’t need to hide your scars from me,” I tell her, pulling my sleeves up to expose the criss-
cross of scars covering my arms. “We’re the same.”

She hums thoughtfully and takes a seat at the table. I hand over her plate of pancakes and sit in the chair to her right. We eat in comfortable silence, sharing shy glances and sweet smiles. I realise this is the first I’ve seen Katniss look...unguarded. She always had a protective wall around her; during the first games, especially during the Victory Tour. She let it down once or twice during the Quarter Quell but it was quickly rebuilt after the rebellion. Today she doesn’t look like Katniss the Tribute, Katniss the Victor, the Rebel, the Mockingjay. Today she looks...innocent.

I’m pulled out of my thoughts by the sound of a car horn and loud cursing. Katniss and I exchange confused looks before running to the large kitchen window to investigate. A small truck is parked outside Haymitch’s house. The scene that unfolds before us is so bizarre that I force myself to blink several times to make sure I’m seeing things right. Haymitch appears from behind the van, wielding a staff in one hand. He shouts and curses as a small flock of geese that pay him no heed.

“Get a move on, you stupid birds,” Haymitch shouts, waving the staff at the geese. Which ever way he asks them to go they waddle in completely the opposite direction. A laugh escapes from Katniss and I can’t help but smile. Pushing open the window I call out to our old mentor.

“Having some trouble, Haymitch?” I ask, trying to sound genuine. I chuckle when he swears at me and makes an obscene gesture with his hand.

“What the hell are you doing?” Katniss calls.

Haymitch tries one more time to wave the birds towards a poorly built enclosure in his yard but gives in and throws down his staff. He lumbers towards the window and points accusingly at Katniss.

“You haven’t killed a bird in months. I’m sick of rabbit and squirrel or whatever it is that woman puts in her stew. So I bought me some geese.”

Katniss rolls her eyes. “You bought them for meat?” She asks incredulously.

Haymitch shrugs his shoulders lazily. “For meat. And eggs. I’ll let ‘em breed and then I’ll kill and cook the old birds.”

Katniss snorts. “You can’t cook! You’ll poison yourself.”

Haymitch glares. “Shut it, sweetheart. You just keep that cat of yours away from my birds.” He turns on his heel and resumes wildly waving his arms at his oblivious geese.

I turn to Katniss and observe the grin that has spread across her face. She giggles as she watches Haymitch’s failed attempts at geese-wrangling. Her smile is so beautiful. She is so beautiful. She catches me staring and a faint blush rises in her cheeks.

“You’re happy. Real or not real,” I ask.

She chews her lip thoughtfully. “I’m...getting there,” she answers honestly, moving away from the window.

I sigh. It’s enough....for now.
Chapter 8

Overnight it feels as if spring has given way to summer. The heat has returned to the sun’s rays, pleasing Buttercup immensely. He spends hours curled up under the window soaking up the warmth. Thanks to his geese, Haymitch now spends a good deal of time outdoors. He sits on his porch and drinks and curses at the birds but it’s still an improvement from his ‘cave dwelling’ days. The primrose bushes Peeta planted by my house are in bloom and the dainty yellow flowers stand out proudly against the green foliage. The sight of them still pulls my heart into a vice-like grip but nevertheless I tend to them dutifully.

Peeta has insisted on courting me properly. He brings me wild flowers and bakes pretty little pastries in the shape of a heart. The cynical part of me always wants to roll her eyes at such over the top displays of affection but I thank Peeta regardless with a chaste kiss to his cheek.

The building work for his bakery begins without delay. He pays Thom and his team generously using his ‘Games money’, but on Wednesdays he heads into town to help out with the labour. I notice shamefully how the work is already changing his appearance. He has slowly regained weight since his return to 12 and the muscles in his arms seem more defined than ever. I had never really been one to take notice of people’s looks but I can’t deny it…Peeta is pleasing to the eye. He spends a lot of time at my house, cooking and helping with the memory book. He only returns to his own home to wash and sleep and sometimes paint. I always miss him then.

We make good progress with the book although some pages are still left deliberately blank. I know I can’t put them off forever. Some days Peeta delicately enquires if I’m ready.

“Do you want to talk about her today?” he will ask. I always shake my head stiffly and change the subject. Dr Aurelius says that I will need to come to terms with this sooner or later but for now I am happy to procrastinate. ‘Why do today what can be done tomorrow’ becomes my new motto. Of course, tomorrow never really comes.

This morning, like most mornings, I wait somewhat impatiently in the kitchen. Peeta tends to appear some time after 8am and today he doesn’t disappoint. He no longer knocks but strides through the hallway straight into the kitchen. I smile when he throws an arm around me and places a kiss on top of my head. His other arm holds a brown paper bag containing bread, and a stack of letters. I eye them curiously.

“Mail,” he says, answering my unspoken question. “Some arrived with yesterday’s train but the rest was piled up in the station master’s office. He said it had been there a while.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “I told Sae not to pick it up anymore. I have enough unopened mail to contend with.”

Peeta purses his lips. He does this when I say something he doesn’t agree with. My eyes dare him to talk and he stares back defiantly. I’ve come to realise that sometimes he can be as stubborn as I am.

“You really should think about opening them,” he says, sinking into a chair and flicking through the envelopes. He pulls one out of the stack and examines it. “Some of these look important.”

I snatch the envelope from his hand and throw it carelessly over my shoulder. He looks at me dumbfounded and opens his mouth to speak but something bubbles up inside of me and I grab a fistful of the envelopes from him and stand up, holding them tauntingly above my head.
An amused smirk appears of Peeta’s face. “Katniss…” he warns, inching forward.

I fling an envelope in his direction and it hits him on the thigh. He rises out of the chair and advances towards me like a hunter stalking prey. I throw another letter but he sidesteps it before ducking for another. I grin like a fool as I back away from Peeta but I realise I’m running out of envelope ammunition. My eyes dart to the left and I feel my muscles coil like springs as I consider bolting but Peeta notices my expression and leaps forward, catching me in the doorway. I shriek playfully when he grabs me around the waist and tears the remaining envelopes out of my hand. He tosses them onto the table and shakes his head at me before letting out a chuckle. His breath feels warm on my face and I’m suddenly aware of our close proximity. One of hands still rests just above my hip generating a heat I feel unaccustomed to. Adrenaline is pumping in my veins from our little game and I feel my heart thump away in my chest. My grey eyes meet his blue and for a moment the rest of the world fades away. His name escapes from me without my permission and I watch as his expression intensifies. His fingers flex against my hip and his other hand comes up to cup my face. His thumb lightly traces my bottom lip and I fear I might faint from shallow breathing. When he leans in to press his lips against mine I feel the blood pounding in my ears. His kiss is tentative and gentle but it makes me tingle from my head to my toes. I let out a sigh and Peeta draws me closer, holding our bodies flush against one another. I melt into him, enjoying the feeling of his fingers woven into my hair. My hands snake up his chest allowing my arms to curl around his neck…

“There goes my appetite,” a voice says from the hallway. Peeta and I wrench apart from each other so abruptly that our lips create a loud ‘pop’ sound. I pant heavily, feeling my face heat up with embarrassment. Haymitch is standing by the front door, a mixed expression of disgust and amusement spread across his prematurely aged face.

“Learn to knock!” I shriek, smoothing out the wrinkles in my clothes. I glance at Peeta who appears to be equally as embarrassed. He tilts his pelvis away awkwardly to hide the evidence of his arousal. I blush harder.

Haymitch barks out a laugh and slaps his knee. “I wish you could see the look on your faces!” He mocks. He laughs louder when I scowl hatefully at him. Pushing past me, enters the kitchen and tears a chunk out of the fresh bread on the table. He chews loudly and waves at Peeta. “This is good,” he says, spitting crumbs everywhere.

Peeta raises a half smile in thanks before looking cautiously in my direction. He knows I’m fuming. “Haymitch,” he says, dragging a hand through his blonde hair. “Don’t you think it would polite to knock in future? This is Katniss’s home and she…”

“Oh give it a break, Mellark,” Haymitch interrupts, leaning back in a chair. “I couldn’t give a rat’s arse what the two of you get up to all day in this big empty house. I’m not your father or your keeper. But I guess I was your mentor once and old habits die heard so here’s my advice…” He takes another bite of bread and points a finger at us both. “Use protection.”

I groan and hide my face in my hands. This is so utterly humiliating.

“Alright, alright!” Haymitch exclaims, holding his palms up in a sign of peace. “I promise to knock, ok!”

I peek between my fingers and see Peeta pinching the bridge of his nose. “Did you come over for a particular reason?” he asks in exasperation.

Haymitch nods, pulls a hipflask from his trouser pocket and takes a long swig. “Came to talk to you about the ceremony,” he drawls.
Peeta and I look at each other before returning to Haymitch with blank expressions.

“The memorial ceremony…?” he prompts. “Didn’t you get the letter?”

“As you can see, Katniss doesn’t open her mail,” Peeta says, gesturing to the unopened letters strewn all over the kitchen. “And I haven’t received anything about a ceremony.”

Haymitch sighs dramatically. “Well then…this is gonna be a nice surprise for you both.” He leans forward, resting his arms on the table. “President Paylor has declared a new national holiday to celebrate the abolishment of the Hunger Games. In honour of said holiday she has proposed that monuments be erected in each district. She wants you, Katniss, to speak at the ceremony.”

My eyes widen in shock and my mouth gapes like a fish out of water. “When?” I whisper.

Haymitch studies me seriously. “Reaping day.”

The room is spinning. I stumble backwards, clutching at the kitchen worktop for support. My chest heaves as I try to force air into my lungs but the feeling of suffocation only gets worse. Peeta reaches me just as my knees buckle and he helps me down onto the floor. His thumbs press into my palms as he reminds me of my breathing exercises. I want to tell him that this isn’t an anxiety attack. I’m definitely dying this time; the pain in my chest is too much. I can’t hear anything above the pounding in my ears. But, sure enough, it gradually subsides and my breathing regulates. Peeta’s voice sounds muffled, like he is talking underwater.

“You can’t just spring that sort of stuff on her,” he admonishes.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t know she was still all crazy,” Haymitch retorts, circling his fingers in the air either side of his head.

“Don’t call her that!” Peeta shouts in my defence. “She wasn’t prepared.”

All their shouting is giving me a massive headache which in turn makes me feel sick. I moan and Peeta instantly turns his full attention back to me. He sweeps my hair from my sweaty forehead and rubs my arm comfortingly.

“It’s ok, Katniss,” he tells me softly. “No one is going to make you do anything you don’t want to do.”

Haymitch clears his throat nervously. “You er…might want to check that with Paylor before you starting making her promises you can’t keep.” Peeta shoots him a scathing look and he backs away. “I’m just trying to make sure she ain’t surprised like this again.”

Peeta sighs and helps me to my feet. I wobble and lean against his solid frame for support.

“Why can’t they just leave us in peace?” I whisper miserably. Nobody has the answer.

That afternoon Peeta helps me to sort through my mail. We easily identify the 4 unopened letters from President Paylor. Panem’s new official seal is printed boldly in gold across the back of the envelope. The first letter is lengthy, almost as if it were written by a close friend. Paylor enquires after my health and extends her greetings to Peeta. She makes brief reference to her suggestion of a national holiday. The second letter starts out much like the first only this time the aforementioned holiday is no longer a suggestion. The motion has been passed by her new government and a date agreed. Paylor invites my comments on a sketch of the memorial monument for District 12 and asks me to consider making a speech at the unveiling ceremony. The third and fourth letters urgently request that I give some form of reply. I can’t stop myself from reading and rereading the
Plutarch will be in touch to make arrangements.

I fight off another anxiety attack and focus on the sketch Paylor has sent me. I show it to Peeta and he studies it carefully. The proposed monument is simple in its design. Twelve stainless steel pillars of differing heights baring the names of 12’s fallen tributes and the family names of those who died in the fire bombings. A separate plaque is shown with the names of the District 12 citizens who played a part in the rebellion with the strap line ‘We won’t forget’.

I hang my head sadly, letting the sketch fall from my hand. “I want to forget,” I tell Peeta as he rubs my back. “I don’t want to be reminded every day of all the people I’ve lost.”

“Maybe it’s not such a bad thing,” he replies, his fingers tracing the curve in my spine. “Sure, it’ll be painful for a while. But future generations need to know and understand what we fought for. All those sacrifices…we can’t let them be in vain.”

I hum absentmindedly and pluck a random envelope from the mountainous pile before me. The stamp shows it has come from District 9. I wonder briefly who I might know from this District as I tear open the seal and pull out the contents. It’s a child’s drawing, colourfully displayed on the back of a tesserae application slip. The scribbled image depicts two children, a girl and a boy, proudly holding hands with a tall dark-haired woman with black wings. I feel a lump form in my throat as I read the words at the bottom of the picture.

*Thank you Mockingjay. We’re not scared of the reaping any more.*

“Katniss…?” Peeta says cautiously.

I throw myself against him and cry huge tears into his chest. Over several hours Peeta and I open and read each letter individually. There are dozens of what Peeta calls ‘fan mail’ letters. Many are from children; others are from eternally grateful parents. Never again will they have to send their kids to the reaping. I place these letters in a neat pile and make a mental note to write back as soon as possible.

There are a few more official letters regarding the arrangement for the payment of Hunger Games victors. Ultimately Paylor has agreed that the victors must be allowed to keep their monthly allowance and their houses. She details plans to let out the vacant houses in each Victor’s Village to families who can not afford to build or buy a house of their own.

“Guess we’ll have some new neighbours,” Peeta says brightly.

I smile wickedly. “Haymitch will hate it.” We both laugh.

To my surprise there are letters from Johanna and from Annie. Joanna is back in District 7 but is still undergoing therapy. Her sarcasm translates even on paper and I can’t help but chuckle when she describes her physician as a ‘fat blob of a woman with halitosis and no respect for personal space’. She promises to visit as soon as she’s signed off as ‘mentally fit’.

Annie’s letter comes as more of a shock. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry when she writes she is expecting a child; Finnick’s child. Accompanying the letter is a black and white sonogram image. I feel an unexplained stab in my chest when I notice Peeta welling up as he traces the outline of the foetus with his little finger. Annie, too, says that she would like to visit once her morning sickness wears off.

Greasy Sae arrives a little after 19:30. She serves up a light supper of spicy bean soup and some of Peeta’s leftover bread. It reminds me that I need to get out and hunt. I haven’t bothered to check
the snares for a few days. Maybe I should try to use my bow…”

Sae comments on how fat Haymitch’s geese are getting and Peeta jokes that he thinks the man is getting too attached to them. Conversation drifts to the warmer weather and the progress being made at Peeta’s bakery. Before long Sae is packing up and Peeta see’s her to the door.

“Do you think we should tell her not to come any more?” I ask when he returns to the kitchen. “I feel as if I’m taking advantage. She looks so tired these days.”

Peeta leans his hip against the kitchen counter and dries up the last few utensils that Sae left to drain by the sink. “We manage alright at breakfast,” he replies. “I think we could make do at dinner time too. I’ll speak to Sae when I visit town in the morning.”

“I can cook,” I say timidly. “I used to cook all the time when....before…”

Peeta approaches, pulls me to my feet and silences me with a soft kiss. He smooth’s out the crease between my brows with his finger tips and places another kiss there. I’m suddenly reminded of our encounter in the kitchen this morning and the thought makes me blush.

“What is it?” Peeta asks, observing me with a concerned expression. Unable to find the words to explain, I reach up and touch my lips against his. I pull back and search his blue eyes for understanding. His face rushes through a range of emotions; curiosity, desire, fear, affection. It finally settles on confusion.

“Katniss, did we…” He blows out a breath as if he had been subconsciously holding it in. I coax him to continue. “Before the Quarter Quell, we used to…sometimes…share a bed.”

He doesn’t pose it as a question but I know what he’s asking. “We only ever slept. There was nothing more,” I tell him. “We both found it kept the nightmares at bay.”

He seems relieved and I’m not sure if I feel hurt by it. Nevertheless I keep a reassuring smile plastered on my face.

“H-how are your nightmares now?” he asks cautiously, dropping his gaze in uncharacteristic fashion. I frown. He knows I still have nightmares.

“Worse than ever,” I tell him plainly.

His eyes travel back up to meet me. “Mine too,” he says.

Realisation dawns on me and I feel a fire ignite in my bones. It takes all my strength not to drop my jaw to the floor.

“Do…do you want to stay tonight?” I ask shyly, picking anxiously at the dry skin on my hands. He nods mutely. For a moment we stand still and silent as statues. I can almost hear the cogs turning in his head as he figures out his next move. I take a deep breath and command myself to be brave as I reach for his hand. I tug his arm gently and lead him down the hall and up the staircase. Peeta follows like a little lamb. As we reach the door to my bedroom I’m suddenly thankful that I bothered to change my sheets this week and make the bed this morning.

Upon entering the room I abruptly let go of Peeta and bring my hand up to my mouth to chew on the skin around my fingernails. My mind journeys back to a night only weeks ago when Peeta woke me from my nightmare and all those nights we spent on the train and I wonder why it was never awkward then. Perhaps it’s because I’ve always been the one to ask him to stay, not the other way around.
“Katniss, we don’t have to…” Peeta starts but I place a finger on his lips to silence him. I smile in a way that I hope looks calm and collected.

“Peeta, it’s fine,” I say and turn around to pull out a pair of pyjamas from my dresser. “I’ll get changed in the bathroom.”

Once inside, I find myself sliding down the door and melting into a puddle of anxiety on the bathroom floor. My heart beats fast like hummingbird wings. It feels like it might fly up and out of my mouth. Was this even a good idea? I pull myself up and peer at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. The incandescent lighting is harsh on my pale skin, illuminating each pink scar. Thanks to Greasy Sae’s cooking and Peeta’s bread I have managed to gain some weight back but I’m still thin and my collarbone protrudes sharply. My hip bones do the same. I make up my mind that I really am not very pretty. Even my hair, the thing I once liked most about myself, is dull and frizzy and damaged from being burnt. I tuck it behind my ears irritably and scowl at myself. This is getting me nowhere.

With a flash decision I strip off my clothes and throw on my pyjamas. They’re old and faded but at least they’re clean. I brush my teeth and splash water on my face before swallowing my nerves and exiting the bathroom. I pad softly into the bedroom, noticing that Peeta has turned off the bright overhead light and switched on the lamp by the bed. His clothes as folded neatly on the chair in the corner and I gulp when I allow myself to think about what he’s wearing now. I glance over to see him propped up against the headboard, one arm behind his head. He’s still wearing his t-shirt, for which I am thankful. It takes me a moment to realise that his prosthetic leg is resting by his side of the bed. He smiles at me and as I smile back I realise that he is probably nervous too. I slide onto the other side of the bed and wrestle with the sheet and the pillows until I’m vaguely comfortable.

But something isn’t right.

I throw the covers off again and stride over to the window, shoving it open as wide as it will go. “You like to sleep with the windows open,” I say shyly, returning to my side of the bed.

Out of the corner of my eye I can see Peeta smiling. He flicks off the bedside lamp.

“Goodnight,” he says softly, his voice resonating in the darkness.

“Goodnight,” I reply stiffly.

I’m sure that no more than 5 minutes pass by before I huff loudly and roll across the bed. I take Peeta’s arm and wrap it around myself before settling my head against his chest. Although he doesn’t say I word I swear I can sense the smile that has crept onto his face.
Chapter 9

My eyes open instinctively at dawn. My body clock still works on a hunter’s schedule and every day without fail it wakes me just as the sun is breaking on the horizon. At some point in the night I must have rolled back onto my side and Peeta must have followed. His left arm is hooked under the pillow beneath my head while the other is draped protectively over my waist. My right hand is held softly in one of his own. I am well and truly trapped, but escaping is the furthest thing from my mind right now. A contented sigh escapes my lips as I snuggle deeper into Peeta’s embrace. His breath tickles my shoulder. The sensation makes me smile. I make a silent wish to stay like this all day but no sooner do I think it do I feel Peeta begin to stir.

“Five more minutes,” he mumbles into my hair. His grip on me tightens ever so slightly before he stretches out his limbs.

“You can have has long as you want,” I say, drowsiness making me bolder than usual.

“I take it you slept well,” he says, rolling away from me. The loss of contact makes me feel cold and I bite back the urge to whine in protest. Instead I turn onto my other side to face him. I smirk at the sleep lines that are imprinted on his face.

“No nightmares,” I say triumphantly, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. “How about you?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” he replies. I frown. I never heard him in the night. He notices the expression on my face and pulls me over to rest on his chest. “Don’t worry about it,” he tells me.

The early rising sun bathes my room in soft pink light. Peeta’s body exudes warmth and soon I find myself dozing again somewhere between dreamland and reality. I feel peaceful. I’m not sure how much time lapses before Peeta starts to speak again.

“What will you do about Paylor?” he asks and just like that the feeling of peace is gone. I want to shout at him for ruining such a blissful moment but I know he’s only trying to help. Sleep didn’t come for me immediately last night and while I lay awake listen to Peeta’s steady breathing, I thought about Paylor and her request. Reaping day is a little over two months away. There isn’t much time for me to weigh up the options.

“I need to speak with Plutarch,” I say, trying not to grit my teeth. That man no doubt has huge plans for the Mockingjay’s return. The last time we spoke he asked me to perform on a singing television show. Thankfully he hadn’t pressed the matter further.

“I can be there when you call him, if you like,” Peeta offers, dropping a kiss on the crown of my head. This seems to be his new signature sign of affection. I like it.

“No,” I say. “I think I should do this by myself. Besides, it’s Wednesday. You need to shift your lazy butt and get down to the bakery.”

“But I’m so comfortable,” Peeta whines childishly, wriggling under the covers. I snort and shove him playfully in the chest. “You’re so bossy,” he jests.

He reattaches his prosthetic leg before stepping over to collect his clothes from the chair. For I brief moment I catch him standing only in a t-shirt and boxer shorts. I blush in spite of myself and turn my face into the pillow. I hear Peeta chuckle and mutter something about being pure. I wonder if he remembers saying that to me before. He can’t know that the thoughts in my head are anything but pure. The mattress shifts as he perches on the edge of the bed. His hand strokes my
hair and he coaxes me to look at him.

“It’s too early to start work on the bakery,” he says. “I’m going to head home and knock up a few quick loaves. I’ll drop one by later, ok?”

I nod and try not to look disappointed as he stands to leave. He pauses suddenly in the doorway and glances at me over his shoulder.

“Can we do this again?” He asks tentatively. My wide grin gives him his answer and I listen to heavy footsteps fade out on the stairs followed by the soft click as he closes the front door behind him.

I don’t lie there for long. The house is silent and empty again and it pushes me to get dressed and head out into the forest. The woods are quiet too but at least here I know there is life. It hides in the trees and bushes and under rocks. There is no life in my house no matter where I search for it. It’s a figurative mausoleum.

I collect the spoils from my snares; 3 rabbits. Haymitch was right, rabbit is getting old. I decide to visit the lake. The waters have been left alone for far too long. I let down a net and almost immediately catch a smallmouth bass. It struggles fervently as I drag it from the water but I end it’s suffering quickly. Baked fish for dinner sounds like a rich man’s delicacy after months of broth and stew.

Its late morning by the time I return to Victors Village. My satchel weighs heavy across my shoulder. Haymitch calls to me from his porch. His geese are grazing on the main green; the grass already looks shorter.

“Was that Mellark I saw sneaking outta your house before sun up?” He asks with a sly grin.

“Mind your own damn business,” I bark, letting my hair fall forward to cover the pink tint in my cheeks. I stalk into the backyard to skin the rabbits and gut the fish. Afterwards I shower; washing away the dirt and the smell from my morning’s activities. I notice that Peeta must have stopped by while I was out. In the kitchen a fresh raisin loaf, along with a note, sits proudly on the table. It’s still warm to touch. I tear off a chunk and read the note.

Be back for dinner – Peeta

I can’t help but sigh. I hate Wednesdays. I distract myself by replying to some of my ‘fan mail’ but after an hour or so my wrist begins to ache from writing. Reluctantly I pick up the phone and dial the number from President Paylor’s letter. At the mere mention of my name I am hastily put through to the Department for Media and Communications. Plutarch’s gravelly voice greets me.

“Congratulations on your new job,” I say half-hearted. I actually couldn’t care less but Plutarch rambles on about his new responsibility as Secretary of Communications and how he hopes to revolutionise the airwaves. None of it makes any sense to me but I make the right noises to sound as if I’m following along.

“You must be phoning about the memorial ceremony,” he says after a pause. “President Paylor was concerned when you didn’t respond to her letters.”

“I’ve been busy,” I lie.

“Yes, I’m sure you have,” Plutarch says sceptically. “A Mockingjay’s work is never done, eh?”

I grit my teeth. “I just want to know the plans, Plutarch,” I grind out. Maybe I should have done this with Peeta around.
The plans, yes! Well President Paylor, as you know, is introducing a new National Holiday; a grand way to unite the Districts to mark the end of The Hunger Games. Our proposal is to unveil a memorial statue unique to each District. These monuments will honour the dead and serve as a reminder to future generations of the great sacrifice that was made to bring about peace in Panem…”

“Yes, I know all that,” I interrupt irritably. Everything this man says sounds like he’s reading a script from one of his propos. “I want to know what you expect me to do.”

“Miss Everdeen,” he replies condescendingly. “We do not expect you to do anything. This government is no longer under the influence of a dictator. You will not be forced to do anything you do not wish to do.” He pauses as if to let that information sink in. “President Paylor and I would like you to give a brief speech at the memorial ceremony in District 12. Each District will have its own speaker; either a Victor or key figure from the rebellion. The speeches will be staggered throughout the day and televised live.”

The idea of being filmed makes my stomach churn. Peeta has always been better at public speaking. Why did they have to ask me?

“I’m afraid we will need your answer fairly soon,” Plutarch presses. “We have only two months to prepare. We would need to organise a rehearsal and get a prep team sent out to you…”

“No!” I shout, hearing my own voice bounce back through the receiver. I’m certain to have deafened Plutarch. “Sorry. I just mean…If I do this…I don’t want to be preened and painted and made into something I’m not. No prep team.”

“Alright,” Plutarch says slowly.

“And I’d want to write my own speech,” I add quickly. Plutarch is silent for a while. I remember Prim once saying that I didn’t understand my own importance; that I could demand pretty much anything and it would have to be granted. I wonder if that still applies now that the war is over.

“Are you agreeing to speak?” Plutarch asks cautiously.

“If you can agree to my terms,” I tell him.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he replies curtly.

As our conversation ends I’m left feeling that I will come to regret getting involved.

Dinner is an absolute triumph, even if I do say so myself. I bake the fish with fresh herbs and serve it with boiled potatoes and ramps, a type of wild onion, cooked in bacon fat.

“You’ve outdone yourself, Katniss.” Peeta praises, smacking his lips together noisily.

I smile modestly. “I did say I can cook.”

Peeta fills me in on his day of work. The bakery, now fully constructed, is ready to be decorated. He has ordered new paint from the Capitol along with furnishings and the all important bread ovens. The new Town Hall, the replacement for the Justice Building, is also in it’s final stages of construction. The building committee is apparently on a tight schedule to prepare District 12 for the upcoming memorial ceremony. I take the opportunity to tell Peeta about my conversation with Plutarch.
“I’m really proud of you, Katniss,” he tells me sincerely as he helps me to clear away the dishes. “What made you decide to do it?”

“Firstly,” I reply, waving a dish cloth animatedly. Little droplets of water spatter across Peeta’s nose. He scrunches up his face in a way that is so adorable, I can’t help but grin. “I haven’t actually decided on anything. And secondly, there’s no guarantee that Paylor and Plutarch will agree to my conditions.”

Unfortunately for me, two days later Plutarch calls to confirm that Paylor is happy for me to write my own speech. He tells me a crew will arrive in District 12 a week before the scheduled ceremony.

Damn it. Why couldn’t I just say no?

A clap of thunder jolts me from sleep. For a moment I’m back in the bunker of District 13, huddled together with my mother and sister, as the Capitol does it’s best to bury us alive. Lightning crackles and illuminates the room in one quick flash, pulling me from my waking nightmare.

“My name is Katniss Everdeen,” I hear myself whisper. I haven’t used this coping technique in so long, the memory is almost forgotten. But my list goes on. “I am seventeen years old. I was in the Hunger Games. Twice. I was the symbol of the rebellion. There was a war. The Capitol was defeated. I’m at home in District 12. This is just a thunderstorm. Peeta…”

My list ends abruptly. Thunder booms again, rattling my bones as rain begins to hammer hard against the open window. My windowsill is flooded in mere seconds and I know I should hurry to pull the window shut but I can’t shake the feeling that something is wrong and it freezes me to the spot. I turn to the side as another flash of lightening exposes the empty space beside me. I force myself to breath slowly and stay calm. This isn’t the first time I’ve woken to find Peeta gone. Some nights when he is restless and sleep evades him, he leaves to bake or paint. But this feels different. My sensitive huntress ears pick up on a sound.

I untangle myself from the sheets and pad slowly around the bed, tugging the window closed on my way past. Droplets of rain water cling to the hairs on my forearm and I shake them off. With the window shut I can hear the sound more clearly; the sound of a running shower. I tread softly as I approach the door to my ensuite bathroom. The sound of a single sob echoing off the walls causes my breath to catch in my throat.

“Peeta…?” I call, swallowing thickly. My hand hovers over the door handle waiting for a response that doesn’t come. I hesitate but another roll of thunder and a strangled cry from the bathroom launches me forward. I swing open the door and flick the light switch. My heart plummets into my stomach. Hunched in the corner of my shower is Peeta. His knees are raised to his chest. His hands are firmly fixed either side of his head, his hair fisted in his palms. The shower has drenched him through and through and yet he hardly seems to notice.

“Oh Peeta,” I say, my voice barely louder than a whisper. I rush to turn off the shower and shriek when the icy cold water touches my skin.

“Peeta, this water is freezing! What are you doing?” I question him. I crouch down and touch his arm; only then does he acknowledge my presence. He releases his head from his hands.

“Katniss…?” His voice sounds so far away. The dark circles under his eyes look like bruises. Surely they couldn’t have appeared in just one night. I yelp as Peeta suddenly pulls me off balance and crushes me to his chest. His whole body shakes but I can’t tell if it’s from his nightmare or
from the cold shower. I ignore the dampness seeping into my pyjamas.

“I thought I lost you,” he breathe. “The lightening hit and you were gone. I lost you. Please don’t
leave me again!”

I should have known that a storm would bring back memories of the Quarter Quell. I shudder as I
recall the moment my arrow hit the force field. If I had known what I was doing, what I was about
to start, would I have made a different choice? Would it have made a difference anyway?

I pull back to look Peeta in the eye. “I’m never going to leave you,” I tell him firmly, cupping his
face in my hands.

His lips tremble and a tear escapes as he closes his eyes. I pull him gently to his feet and guide him
out of the shower. My fingers grasp hold of the hem of his soaked t-shirt and Peeta raises his arms
so I can tug it up over his head. It drops to the floor in a puddle. I grab the largest towel I own and
throw it around his shoulders before leading him back to the bedroom. The storm has subsided but
the rain continues to tap on the window in a strangely calming rhythm. After some time I take
Peeta’s hands in my own.

“Why don’t you wake me when you have nightmares?” I ask quietly, stroking the back of his
hands with my thumbs. Ever since we started sharing a bed again Peeta has had to calm me down
from numerous nightmares. He whispers soothing things in my ear and strokes my hair and holds
me until the terrible images vanish from my sight. I know he has nightmares too. His body aches
the next morning from tensing his muscles and mouth ulcers appear where he has bitten the inside
of his cheeks.

“I’m not myself when I wake up,” he replies with a scratchy voice. “I don’t always know what
I’m doing. I’m…I’m afraid.”

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of his cheeks.

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I’m doing. I’m…I’m afraid.”

“What are you afraid of?” I ask, supressing a gasp when Peeta’s blue eyes suddenly connect with
mine. In the dark they seem to have a light of their own.

“I’m afraid of hurting you,” he tells me honestly. “Sometimes I can almost sense when I’m going
to have a bad episode so I force myself to stay awake. I’ll bake or paint or read; anything to keep it
at bay. But that only works for so long.”

I suddenly understand the dark circles under his eyes and the surplus of bread in my larder. He’s
been fighting this off for a few nights now and I’ve been oblivious to his suffering.

“You should have told me,” I admonish. Guilt whispers in my ear telling me that I should have
known; a good friend would have seen the signs.

“I didn’t want you to worry,” he answers, hanging his head. “This is my burden to bear.”

I frown at him. “Hey, look at me,” I demand, pulling his gaze back to me. I poke him firmly in the
chest. “I don’t ever want to hear you say that again. Do you understand?”

He sighs sadly. “Katniss, I’m sor…”

“Stop apologising,” I interrupt firmly, once again taking his face in my hands. “You are not alone
in this, Peeta Mellark. We will help each other get through this. Because that’s what we do…”

Recognition flashes in his eyes and he smiles weakly. “We protect each other.”

I launch myself forward and throw my arms around his body, ignoring the fact that the towel has
slipped from his shoulders, exposing his upper body. Peeta hugs me fiercely and places kisses in
my hair as he leans back against the headboard.

“Close your eyes,” I whisper into his neck, stroking the blonde curls at the base of his skull. “I’ll keep you safe.”

Peeta’s breathing slows to an even rhythm as he relinquishes control and allows sleep to take him. I make a silent vow to do anything within my power to help him fight his demons but I know I’m going to need help. As sleep pulls me under I make a mental note to call Dr Aurelius first thing tomorrow.
Chapter 10

Its a bright morning in early June when the trucks start arriving in Victors Village bringing with them five new families, some from 12, some from various other districts. We had been expecting it for a few days. President Paylor sent in a team from the Department for Housing and Community Development to see to it that the remaining Victor’s houses were in good order and ready to be inhabited. The houses had never been lived in so with a thorough clean and a lick of paint they were as good as new. That is, all but one; Peeta’s house. He’d sprung the suggestion a few days after the storm incident; after our conversation with Dr Aurelius.

“What do you think?” Peeta asks tentatively when I don’t respond straight away.

“You want to move in?” I ask incredulously. Even as I say it I feel my face distort with confusion. Sure, Peeta spends most days with me in my house. He eats here, he sleeps here, he practically lives here, I mean….wait, what was the question again?

Peeta smirks at my expression and places a kiss on the crease between my brows. It has an instant calming effect. “I’m just saying it makes no sense to keep both houses. They’re too big for just one person. My house has three bedrooms and I haven’t slept in a single one of them for over a month. I spend all my time here with you or at the bakery. That house could be given to a family that really needs it.”

He makes a convincing argument, I must say. But even so, I still feel like my stomach is tied in knots.

“But Peeta, living together….it’s so…it just feels so…grown up,” I finish lamely, earning a throaty laugh from Peeta.

“Katniss, we’re both 18 now. I’d say we are pretty grown up.”

My birthday had come and gone without recognition last month. Birthdays weren’t really celebrated in the seam prior to the war, especially during the years you were eligible for reaping, but Peeta had been mortified when he found out. He apologised profusely even though I told him it didn’t bother me. I’d never had a birthday party or a cake; my family just couldn’t afford such luxuries. My birthday felt just like any other day to me. That night Peeta had snuck out of bed and in the morning presented me with a fully frosted chocolate cake, complete with candles.

“Look, Katniss,” Peeta says. “If you’re uncomfortable with this, I completely understand. I won’t beg you to let me move in.”

His blue eyes bore into mine. He wouldn’t need to beg, his eyes do all the work for him. I smile. “Ask me again,” I say. Peeta cocks an eyebrow in confusion. “Go on, ask me again.”

He levels with me and takes my hand. “Katniss…will you allow me to move in with you?”

I ‘hmm’ dramatically and dodge the pillow that Peeta swings at my head. Things escalate very quickly into a full blown pillow battle. Peeta is at a disadvantage without his prosthetic leg so it doesn’t take me long to pin him. Our manic laughter subsides, hearts beating wildly as I stare down at him. He reaches up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear and the word tumbles out of my mouth.

“Yes.”

I’m pulled from my thoughts by someone tugging on the end of my braid.
“No one likes a nosy neighbour, Katniss,” Peeta teases, sitting opposite me in the bay window.

“I’m not being nosy,” I argue. My gaze drifts back to the dozen or so strangers carrying boxes into their new homes. “I’m just…curious. Don’t you want to know who’s going to be living there?”

Peeta smiles and pulls me to my feet. “Let’s go and find out, shall we?”

He takes my hand and leads me down the porch steps and across the green. I shy away from the blatant stares of my new neighbours but Peeta, in true Peeta Mellark style, waves and greets them with a friendly nod. He directs us towards a woman standing in his old front yard. Her poker straight hair hangs like curtains either side of her pale, angular face. She smiles sweetly as we approach and Peeta stretches out his arm to shake her hand.

“Great day for moving in,” he says cheerily. “I’m Peeta. I live across the green.”

“I’m Lorraine,” the woman replies. She points to a young boy carrying a box through the front door. “That’s my son, Milo. And this,” She says, gesturing to a little girl half hidden behind her leg. “This little shadow is my daughter, Nora.”

Something about her choice of words and the way the little girl peers up at me cautiously with eyes the colour of hot chocolate makes me breathe in sharply. For a moment all I see is Rue. My gasp draws worried expressions from both Lorraine and Peeta but he squeezes my hand comfortably and steers the attention away from me. He asks Lorraine about her journey and her home district but I don’t hear much of their conversation. I blink rapidly and slowly my hallucination dissolves. Nora studies me with a little too much concern for such a young child. I raise a half smile and drop down to her level but she huddles closer to her mother’s leg.

“Hi, Nora. I’m Katniss,” I say softly. She blinks back at me. “How old are you?”

“Oh honey, I’m sorry. I should have mentioned,” Lorraine interrupts, patting Nora on the head. “Nora is deaf. She can lip read pretty well but it takes her a little while to learn the way your mouth moves.”

Nora tugs on her mother’s skirt and articulates something with her tiny hands, to which Lorraine responds with complicated gestures of her own. I recognise it as a form of sign language. I recall Caster and Pollux communicating in a similar way.

The busy but peaceful ambiance in Victor’s Village is suddenly disturbed by the shrieks and giggles of several new neighbour children running out from behind the house of an original resident.

“Stay away from my birds, you little brats,” Haymitch’s harsh tone echoes around the village as he stumbles out onto his porch, waving a fist in the air. He stops abruptly upon seeing the crowd of new families. He sways a little on the spot before turning on his heel and returning to his house, muttering incoherently.

“What a pleasant man,” Lorraine drawls sarcastically. I snort and she blushes, realising she spoke louder than intended.

“That’s Haymitch Abernathy; victor of the 50th Hunger Games,” Peeta explains. “He’s a little…rough round the edges.” I snort again and Peeta nudges me. “But he’s harmless,” he assures.

Peeta, charming as ever, is quick to establish friendships with our new neighbours. He bakes ‘welcome baskets’ full of sweet pastries and granary loaves and offers his assistance helping the
families settle in. Much to Haymitch’s displeasure, Victor’s Village becomes home to fifteen children, all of whom idolise Peeta. The first time they call him ‘Uncle Pete’ he grins from ear to ear. He really is good with kids. I watch from the porch steps as he teaches the young ones how to play hop-scotch and giggle when the Carmichael’s 13 year old twin daughters bat their eyelashes and invite him to a tea party in their backyard. The eerie silence that once permeated this solitary corner of District 12 has now been replaced with laughter and animated conversation. It feels good to be around people again but I still struggle with my age old habit of antisocialism. I choose to observe from the safety of my bay window. At least this way I don’t have to suffer the pitying looks and unanswerable questions when the sight of a blonde braid or blue eyes makes me choke on thin air.

I’ve decided that is why I like Lorraine; she doesn’t ask me any uncomfortable questions. She seems to understand my need for privacy. Instead she talks about her life; raised in District 13, married at 18 and sadly widowed at 22 by the pox epidemic. She hands me a mug of sweet tea and takes the seat next to me at the kitchen table.

“The epidemic claimed a lot of lives. So many children died.” She grips her mug tightly in both hands before glancing over at her own children. “I was lucky, I guess. Losing Warren was terrible. But if I’d lost my kids…” She tails off weakly and I follow her gaze.

Milo is lying on the floor at the other end of the kitchen. He has surrounded himself with coloured pencils. His tongue pokes out the corner of his mouth as he concentrates on his drawing. Nora is helping Peeta to measure out ingredients for a cupcake recipe; standing on a chair in order to reach the kitchen counter. She watches Peeta’s face closely as he slowly mouths the number of cups of flour she needs. She carefully empties 3 cups into the bowl and turns back to Peeta who signs ‘well done’ with his hands. He’d asked Lorraine to teach him a few basic signs in order to communicate with the little girl he has become so fond of.

“Nora has a little crush on him,” Lorraine says quietly.

“So does every other girl in the village,” I say with a snigger.

“It’s because he spends time with them. Children love attention.” She purses her lips and turns to look at me. “Do you think you’ll ever have kids?”

My heart seizes and I try to ignore the little half glance that Peeta throws in my direction. He continues to stir the cake batter with Nora but I know he’s listening. This is the first time Lorraine has asked me something even remotely personal and I’m unprepared. My face betrays my emotions and she quickly stutters out an apology, laying her hand on my tightly clenched fist.

“Its fine,” I say a little too quickly, feeling Peeta watch me from the corner of his eye. I push back from the table and excuse myself. As I stumble out of the kitchen I hear him hushing more of Lorraine’s apologies.

“She just needs a minute,” I hear him say.

My legs feels like dead weights as I climb the stairs but instead of turning right into my bedroom my feet carry me left across the landing and down the hall, coming to a stop outside a closed door. I listen. I can no longer hear voices from downstairs. There is only silence. Once upon a time I would have heard the sweet melody of a young girl spilling her secrets to her cat behind this door. Once upon a time that young girl had looked up to me as her protector and provider. My whole body trembles and my throat burns hot with choked emotions as tears sting in my eyes. I lift a shaky hand to rest on the door handle but pull it away sharply. It’s ice cold to touch. I stuff the hand in my mouth to muffle the sound of the sob that rips from my chest as I crumble to the floor.
I don’t know how many seconds, minutes or hours pass before Peeta is there at my side. He scoops his arm under my knees and lifts me up, holding me tightly against his chest as he carries me to the bedroom and lays me down gently on top of the sheets. I instantly curl into foetal position but feel him tuck himself behind me. His fingers weave delicately through my hair as my sobs dry out and reduce to whimpers.

“Tell me why you’re upset,” he asks after a long period of silence.

“Prim wasn’t just my sister, she was my baby,” My voice cracks as a fresh wave of tears rolls down my cheeks. Peeta knows my story. I was 11 and Prim was 7 when Dad died and Mom’s depression chained her to her bed. He knows I stepped into the role of mother

“You took such good care of her, Katniss,” he whispers in my ear but I shake my head violently. “I failed her,” I hiss, curling into myself more tightly. “I was meant to protect her. I tried…” I wail pitifully as I become buried under a suffocating blanket of grief. Peeta tries to soothe me with words and caresses but I cry harder. He only knows half the reason for my tears. I made a vow years ago, before the war, even before my first games. Losing Prim had strengthened my resolve to keep that vow.

“I don’t want children,” I say with a surprisingly steady voice. Peeta’s caresses cease and I force myself to turn and face him.

“Katniss I…,” He trips over his words, unsure of how to respond. “We haven’t…I didn’t ask…”

“I see the way you look at Milo and Nora,” I cut him off abruptly. “Everyone can see that you’re a natural with kids.”

He frowns. “I like spending time with them, Katniss. That doesn’t mean I want a kid right now.”

I worry my bottom lip between my teeth. “But you’ll want them eventually? One day?” I ask.

He looks thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe, one day. I don’t know.”

I close my eyes briefly before pinning Peeta with a serious look. “Peeta, I need you to know that I will never change my mind. I don’t want children now, or in the future.”

He stares back at me silently, his expression unreadable. Finally he pulls me close and places a kiss on my forehead.

“Rest now, Katniss,” he instructs me gently. “It’s been a long day.”

I settle into his embrace, trying to shake the feeling that this conversation is far from over.

Memorial week arrives suddenly in mid-July. The building anxiety over my speech combined with the dusty, humid air makes me irritable and poor Peeta is too often at the sharp end of my frustrations. Plutarch calls for the seventh time to check on the progress of my speech and confirm arrangements for the camera crew. My anxiety lifts slightly upon learning that Cressida, along with Pollux, has requested to be assigned to District 12. I will never feel comfortable in front of a camera but at least with Cressida there will be a sense of familiarity.

On the morning of their arrival Thom lets us borrow his flatbed truck. I enjoy the cool rush of wind that blows in through the open window as we drive past newly contrasted houses and businesses on our way to the train station. Peeta taps his fingers against the steering wheel in time to a cheerful folk song playing on the radio. Thankfully the airwaves are no longer dominated by
high-pitched, repetitive Capitol pop music.

He pulls the truck into a parking bay and jogs round to my side of the vehicle to open my door. I take his hand with a grateful smile and follow him towards the platform just in time to spot our guests disembarking.

“It’s good to see you, Katniss,” Cressida says, as we approach. “You’re looking well.”

I offer a small smile. “Thank you. I’m...doing much better.”

Peeta shakes Pollux’s hand and gestures to the 2 large bags by his feet. “Is this all your film gear? We brought the truck so there shouldn’t be a problem fitting it all in.”

“This is all we brought,” Cressida confirms. “But I can’t speak for the others.”

Peeta and I exchange confused glances. “Others...?” I ask.

“The security team,” Cressida continues. “Plutarch did tell you...didn’t he?”

I frown and shake my head. “Tell me what?”

The sight of 3 men exiting the next train carriage all dressed in military uniform catches my attention. I recognise the tall, dark haired man in the middle immediately and glance cautiously at Peeta, noticing his jaw clenched tightly. His hands ball into fists but he relaxes a little when I touch his arm.

The dark haired man sets his eyes on me. A hundred different emotions run through me; a hundred different things I could say.

“Hey, Catnip,” he greets.

My face remains expressionless. I steel myself and take a breath. “Hello, Gale.”
Chapter 11

The journey back to Victors Village is tense to say the least. Cressida rides up front with me and Peeta while Pollux, Gale and his crew take the benches in the back with the luggage. I keep my head down and practise deep breathing. There’s no way I’m going to lose it in front of everyone.

President Paylor kept one Victor’s house vacant so the film crew would have somewhere to day for Memorial Week. Of course, it had to be the one next to mine. Our neighbours watch curiously as we pile out of the truck. Lorraine waves to us from her front yard and Haymitch glares from his porch as he swigs back a bottle of white liquor. Begrudgingly I lead our visitors into the house with Peeta trailing at the back of the group. I keep a wide berth between myself and Gale. His eyes follow my every move as I show them the kitchen appliances, the bathrooms and eventually the upstairs bedrooms.

“Are you going to be ok sharing a house with these guys?” I ask Cressida, wrinkling my nose. “There’s a spare room at my place.”

She smiles. “Katniss, I’ll be fine. There are 3 bedrooms here and I’m sure none of the guys would object to me taking one for myself.” She pins them with a look that dares them to challenge her before winking at me. “No need to worry about me. I can hold my own.”

The men pair off and take the remaining two bedrooms. Gale glances back at me but I avert my eyes quickly. I force myself to pay attention as Cressida explains the plans for the week and asks permission to read my speech. I hesitate to tell her that it’s not actually written down.

“It’s all up here,” I mumble, pointing to my skull. “That’s ok,” She replies. “I assumed as much. Perhaps after dinner tonight you could give me a brief overview?”

I agree and linger for a few seconds before turning to leave.

“Katniss,” A voice calls to me. Gale. “Can I…”

“Not now, Gale,” I hiss, heading for the stairs. I can’t do this right now. I can’t. I feel his hand touch my shoulder and I open my mouth, a string of curse words lined up on my tongue. But I don’t get the chance. Peeta grabs hold of Gale’s wrist, forcing him to let go of me. I’m stunned. Peeta has been so quiet I had forgotten he was there. He narrows his eyes at Gale who stares back in mild shock. A form of non-verbal communication passes between them. I hold my breath. Suddenly Peeta releases his grip on Gale and descends down the stairs.

“Maybe later then,” Gale mutters in defeat.

I nod mutely before chasing after Peeta, catching up with him just as he reaches our front door. I follow him into the hallway.

“Are you ok?” He asks frantically, rounding on me so suddenly that I jump back. His hands hover over my arms as if he wants to touch me but they shake furiously so he pulls back and hides them in his pockets. I take a step towards him.

“I’m fine,” I tell him calmly. “Are you ok?”

He chews nervously on his lip and wanders into the living room. I follow closely and sit by him on the sofa. “I’m sorry about…what happened,” he mumbles. “I don’t know what came over me.
I guess I haven’t really figured out how I feel about him.”

I scoff. “That makes two of us then.” The words are out before I have time to think about how it must sound. Hurt flickers only briefly in Peeta’s expression but I catch it and grab hold of one of his shaking hands.

“I don’t mean it that way,” I say quickly. “Gale and I…it was never like that. And now,” I feel my chest restrict. “When I think of him all I see is exploding parachutes and dying children.”

Peeta looks at me sorrowfully. “You don’t know for sure that the bombs were his.”

I shake my head. “I don’t need to be sure. I know he helped designed them. That means he was capable of it.”

Peeta sighs and rakes a hand through his blonde hair. It’s gotten long and it curls a little at the end now. I like it that way. “I don’t understand why Plutarch needed to send a security team anyway.”

I frown. He’s right. Why did Plutarch send a security team? District 12 was always a mostly peaceful district. The only threat here is from wild animals. Could there be something that Plutarch isn’t telling me? I make a mental note to ask Cressida after dinner. We agreed to all eat together tonight; something I’m sincerely dreading. I realise that we now have three extra mouths to feed too.

“I’ll rustle something up,” Peeta says when I tell him of our dilemma. “Cooking might help to calm me down anyway.”

He places a lingering kiss to my forehead before heading to the kitchen. I’m left to ponder anxiously about Gale’s intentions and whatever else Plutarch is hiding from me.

I bounce my leg nervously under the table, trying my hardest to breathe normally. I’m usually a huge fan of silence but tonight I feel suffocated by it. I feel the tension washing off of Peeta in waves as he stares hard at Gale across the table. Gale’s companions, brothers from District 2 who introduced themselves as Hadley and Hanson, seem oblivious to the silent conflict occurring right under their noses while Cressida watches us all intently. She clears her throat and leans forward at the table.

“Dinner is delicious, Peeta. Thank you.” She comments.

I have to agree with her. Pasta is a fairly new commodity in District 12. Peeta had been eager to experiment with the new ingredients when they first arrived on a train from the Capitol. Tonight he has prepared spaghetti with a rich tomato sauce that leaves a zing in my mouth.

“Thank you,” Peeta replies, his face softening slightly. “I’m glad you liked it.”

“Do you still bake?” She asks, doing her best to keep the conversation light. I really do need to thank her for it later.

“I do,” he replies, twirling spaghetti around his fork. His voice becomes less terse. I notice he’s always happiest when he’s talking about food. ‘I’m about to open my own bakery actually. But I enjoy cooking just as much. Katniss and I were thinking of planting a vegetable garden out back.” He turns to me with a smile and I smile back.

“Why would you plant it in her backyard if you’re the one that does all the cooking?” Gale asks abruptly. “Don’t you have your own garden?”
I gulp loudly. Clearly Gale didn’t notice the new family living in Peeta’s old house. I clench my hands so tightly that my fingernails dig into my palms. This is not a conversation I planned on having tonight. Peeta sits up tall, his expression impassive.

“I live with Katniss now,” he says plainly. “The backyard is as much mine as it is hers.”

Gale emits an odd strangled noise and pushes back from the table, his chair screeching across the tiled floor. He stands and Peeta rises up to meet him. Hadley and Hanson watch on with a look that I can only interpret as amusement but this confuses me. This situation is far from amusing.

“Katniss,” Cressida says suddenly. “Let’s go have a chat in the living room.”

I open my mouth to object but she reaches for my hand and pulls me from the kitchen. I find my voice once we’re shut in the living room.

"We can’t leave them in there together!” I exclaim. “They looked like they were ready to pull each other to pieces!”

Cressida places a hand on my shoulder and guides me to the sofa. “Leave them to it” she tells me. “I promise things will be better once they’ve battled it out.”

I frown and fidget nervously. “Peeta isn’t usually like this.”

“Its caveman instinct,” Cressida says. “They feel a need to defend their territory. Once an Alpha has been appointed all the showing off and sparring will coming to an end.”

“Sounds like you’re describing a pack of wild dogs, not a bunch of grown men,” I grumble. “What is Gale doing here anyway? Why didn’t Plutarch tell me?”

Cressida frowns. “I’ve been asking myself the same question. I’ll give him hell when I see him.”

She releases a sigh and takes my hand. “Gale is here because he volunteered to come. President Paylor insisted that each District be assigned a security team to keep an eye on things during Memorial week. Gale wanted to come back to 12.”

This doesn’t sit right with me. My brows knit together in confusion. “Keep an eye on things?” I ask. “Is the President expecting some sort of trouble?”

Cressida shrugs. “I honestly don’t know. They wouldn’t tell me anything. My guess would be that not everyone is thrilled about government money being spent on memorial monuments when many of the Districts are still struggling to rebuild.”

That could be true. Initially I hadn’t warmed to the idea either. Still, I can’t let go of the feeling that something is not right. Cressida shakes me from my thoughts with a gentle nudge.

“Forget about that for now,” she says. “Let’s talk about your speech. I know Plutarch agreed to let you come up with something on your own. So let’s hear what you’ve got so far.”

I bite my lip. “I don’t know where to start. I know what I want to say but I can’t put the words in order.”

She reaches into one of the pockets in her cargo trousers and pulls out a scrap of paper and a pencil. She flattens it out against her thigh and hands it to me. “Write down any words that come to mind when you think of what this memorial will symbolise.”

I chew thoughtfully on the end of the pencil and start to write.
Cressida was right. After that night something changed between Peeta and Gale. Peeta wouldn’t tell me what went on after I left the kitchen but from the look of Gale’s black eye and Peeta’s bloody nose I was left in no doubt that things had gotten physical. Strangely though, the tension between the two of them had all but disappeared. They greeted each other civilly, even bantered over dinner. Peeta assured me they had come to some sort of understanding but I still felt wildly unsettled by the whole thing.

“You should talk to him,” he said one evening as he untangled my hair from its braid.

“I can barely look him in the eye,” I had scoffed. “Why would I want to talk to him?”

“You’ll regret it if you don’t settle things with him,” he told me simple.

I knew he was right. The note I left for Gale this morning could have left him in not doubt of where I wanted to meet. Our usual spot; the rock ledge overlooking the valley.

I lean against the trunk of a tree and roll a ripened berry between my fingers, becoming trapped in my thoughts until I hear the sound of earth being crushed underfoot. I turn to see Gale dressed in full uniform. He points accusingly to his boots.

“It’s impossible to tread lightly in these,” he grumbles. “I knew you’d hear me from a mile away.”

I nod mutely and look back at berry in my hand. I squeeze it between my fingers and the sticky purple juices stain my skin. I let it drop to the ground before plucking another from the nearby bush and starting the process all over again. Gale brushes past me and perches at the end of the rock ledge.

“I’ve missed this view,” he says, looking out over the valley of lush green trees. He sighs. “I think about that day all the time.”

I know what day he means; the day of the reaping. The day my life changed forever. We’d sat in this very spot, eating bread and cheese and blackberries and fantasising about a life in the woods. How naive we were.

“Why did you call me out here, Katniss?” He asks. Hearing him speak my real name instead of my nickname reminds me of just how far apart we’ve drifted.

“Peeta thought it would be good if we talked,” I respond, willing my voice to stop quivering.

Gale clucks his tongue. “Peeta,” He touches the fading bruise under his right eye. “I underestimated that kid.”

I frown at the word ‘kid’. Gale has always viewed himself as being that much older when in reality he’s only two years ahead of me and Peeta.

“Why did you volunteer to come here?” I ask frostily.

“12 is still my home, Katniss,” Gale replies just icy. “I don’t need your permission to visit.”

This was a bad idea. I shouldn’t have let Peeta talk me into this. I push myself away from the tree trunk and turn to leave.

“Katniss, wait. “Gale calls desperately. I stop in my tracks and look back at him. “I wanted to see you,” he says softly. “I’m sorry. I know it was wrong of me to surprise you like that. I just… I needed to make sure you were ok and I knew you would tell me not to come if I asked.”
“Well I’m fine,” I mumble, kicking the dirt with the toe of my boots. “I’m doing much better thanks to Peeta.”

Gale smiles weakly. “I can see that.” He pauses and takes a step towards me. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you.”

I feel tears stinging in my eyes and I blink them back. “I didn’t want you around,” I tell him honestly. “Not after…”

Gale hangs his head sorrowfully and sits back against a rock. “I know there is nothing I can do or say to make up for what happened,” he croaks. “I wish I could go back and…”

“Well you can’t!” I snap. Gale has always been one for ‘what if’ and ‘if only but I prefer to live in the real world. I see not point in wishing you could change something that has already happened. I take a deep breath and step towards Gale.

“Gale, I know you didn’t kill Prim,” Her name still sends a stab of pain through me. “It doesn’t matter to me if it was the Capitol or the Rebels who dropped those bombs. What matters to me is that you created them in the first place. You didn’t intend to kill my sister, but those bombs would have killed someone…someone else’s sister or brother or mother. You intended to cause maximum casualties with those things and that’s something I can’t move past!”

Gale stands and closes the distance between us. His eyes are wet with unshed tears. “I lost my way, Katniss,” he whispers. “I hate myself for what I’ve done. I hate what it’s done to us…” He touches my face softly and I feel it burn my skin but I don’t pull away. “I loved you, you know.”

I close my eyes and the tears leak out. “I know.” I take holds of Gale’s hand and place it back at his side. He wilts miserably before my eyes. “I heard you say once that I would choose someone I couldn’t survive without.” Gale blanches, clearly realising that I had overheard his conversation with Peeta all those months ago. “I have been ‘surviving’ my whole life, Gale. I could have survived easily without you or Peeta. But I don’t just want to survive anymore. I want to live.”

Gale drags his hand roughly across his face and sniffs back his tears. “So Peeta makes you feel alive…”

I nod, fighting the small smile that plays on my lips. “We’ve been through so much together. We were both so broken after the war but we’re starting to heal…together. He’s good for me, Gale.”

“Do you…do you think we’ll ever be able to be friends again?” he asks weakly.

I sigh. “In time…maybe.”

I know it’s not the answer he’s looking for but truthfully I can’t say that I’ll ever be able to look at him the same way. I only hope that time will heal this wound like it has begun to heal all the others.
high for all to see. It seems rather reminiscent of the way the Hunger Games were shown, with families forced from their houses to watch the atrocities. And on a day like today, the day that used to be called Reaping Day, I don’t think I can be blamed for feeling apprehensive. But Peeta reminds me that no one is being forced to watch today. The people have gathered in the public square by choice. The memorial monument was brought to the district earlier on in the week but has since been concealed by a large tarp nailed into the ground. All will be revealed this afternoon.

As promised, Plutarch doesn’t send in a prep team to primp and polish me and dress me in sequins. But as I stare into my wardrobe I suddenly wish I had just a little bit of help. All the clothes I own are years old and no longer fit my shape. Many are hand-me-downs from my mother. I’m still slim but my hips have widened in the last year and my bust has grown a fraction. I eye some of the clothes Cinna designed for the Victory Tour, touching the fabrics and swallowing the lump in my throat. God, I miss that man.

“The green one,” a voice says from behind me. I whip around to look into a pair of blue eyes. Peeta smiles softly and reaches behind me into the wardrobe. He pulls out a mossy green dress on a hanger and holds it against me. “I remember thinking you looked beautiful in this.”

The dress has a square neckline with cap sleeves. It’s ruched and fitted under the bust with a row a silk buttons running all the way down to the waist. A silk sash ties in a neat bow at the side and the pleated skirt falls delicately to the knee. It was once of my favourite dresses on the tour, not just because of its colour. I didn’t wear this dress for any public occasion. Cinna had made it just for me. I wore it one evening on the train while we were somewhere between District 2 and 3. Peeta blushed three shades of red when he saw how the ruching accentuated my small bust. Initially I felt self conscious but after I while I began to enjoy feeling pretty for a change.

Peeta kisses me quickly on the cheek and it draws me back from my memories. I smile and pull the dress from the hanger. Peeta smiles softly and reaches behind me into the wardrobe. He pulls out a mossy green dress on a hanger and holds it against me. “I remember thinking you looked beautiful in this.”

Peeta kisses me quickly on the cheek and it draws me back from my memories. I smile and pull the dress from the hanger. He averts his eyes as I unbutton my blouse and kick off my trousers. I slip the dress over my head and glance at myself in the mirror. It fits perfectly. The empire shape allows the fabric to skim nicely over my hips. Peeta smooths his hands over them as if in agreement.

“See,” he whispers in my ear. “You’re beautiful.”

I shudder as his breath tickles my neck. A familiar sensation stirs inside me but now is not the time act on it. I push Peeta away playfully and instruct him to get dressed. I have less than 2 hours before my speech. Cressida and Pollux have already made their way to the public square to film the crowds arriving and interview some of the locals. Hadley and Hanson went with them leaving Gale to put up Haymitch who decided to grace us with his presence late this morning. I twist my hair into my usual braid and drape it over my shoulder before heading downstairs. Haymitch whistles as I enter into the living room.

“Well look at you all dolled up,” he drawls. “You know sweetheart, you don’t look half bad when you’re not dressed like a boy.”

I could bite back but I decided to accept his backhanded compliment and move on. I catch Gale staring at me and he quickly looks down at the floor. Apparently Peeta isn’t the only one who likes me in this dress. The TV is still on but the sound has been turned right down. The memorial in District 10 has just been revealed a speech is being delivered by someone I don’t recognise. I had recognised some of the speakers throughout the day. Enobaria in District 2, Beetee in District 3, a very pregnant Annie in District 4 and surprisingly Johanna in District 7. I didn’t realise she was back at home.

“I have something for you,” Haymitch says, staggering to his feet. It was unreasonable for me to expect him to remain sober today. I feel like I could use a drink right now. He digs in his back
pocket and holds out a small, black drawstring pouch, stuffing it in my palm. The object I pull from the pouch feels familiar in my hand. It catches the sunlight and shines brilliantly. My Mockingjay pin. I thought it had been lost forever. I look questioningly at Haymitch.

“How did you…?”

“It’s not the original,” he interrupts. “That disappeared sometime after you shot Coin. But I pulled in some favours and had this replica made for you.”

I’m speechless for a moment. I never believed Haymitch to be capable of such thoughtfulness. Before I know what I’m doing I throw my arms around his waist and bury my face in his chest. The smell of alcohol makes me slightly heady. Haymitch stumbles a little but after a moment I feel him awkwardly pat my back.

“Don’t get all emotional on me, sweetheart,” he says, pushing me back. I wipe a few tears away with the back of my hand and look back at the pin nestled in my palm. Haymitch takes it from me and attaches it to my dress just below my left shoulder. “There,” he says, holding me at arms length. “Ready for one more show?”

When Peeta is dressed, Gale escorts us all to a black vehicle just outside the gates of Victor’s Village. It reminds me of the car Peeta and I rode in after our first reaping. It’s upsetting that so many things about today remind me of that dreadful time. Gale drives us through town. We pass many families who are making their way to the public square on foot. I’m relieved to see children skipping and laughing and waving flags. A far cry from what this day could have been like if the war never happened. Gale pulls the car around the back of the Town Hall, away from the crowds. We’re met by Hanson, Hadley and Cressida.

“District 11 has just finished their speech,” she tells me. “So we have 10 minutes before the President will introduce you.” She leads us to the right hand side of the building. I crane my neck and see the crowds gathered around the concealed monument. Cressida points to a short set of stairs in front of the building. “Those stairs lead up to the stage. Pollux and I will be right up front with the camera. Try not to look directly at us. Look out at the people and speak to them, not to us. Gale and the guys will be either side of the stage. Peeta, you can stand there too if you like.”

I nod along with her instructions, clenching and unclenching my fists with nerves. Peeta touches my shoulder lightly.

“You’re going to do just fine,” he says with a smile. I try to smile back but my I feel my lips quiver. I just want this to be over with.

Cressida leaves to take her place with Pollux while Hadley and Hanson move around to the left hand side of the stage. Peeta and Gale guide me to the bottom of the steps. The crowds fall silent as President Paylor appears on the large television screens.

“District 12 suffered much under the persecution of the Capitol,” she says. Her voice commands attentions. “But from the rubble and the ashes, a strong people have risen to usher in a new age. The monument about to be unveiled will be introduced by a young lady you are all familiar with. Please welcome, Miss Katniss Everdeen.”

The crowd erupts into cheers and applause that deafens me. I feel Gale push me gently towards the stairs and Peeta letting go of my hand. I look back at him anxiously but he smiles and claps and urges me on. My legs feel heavy as I make my way onto the stage. A single microphone stands in the centre. I notice Pollux and Cressida standing in front of the crowd and quickly remember not to look directly at them. I gulp when I see my face displayed on the television screens. I look as green as my dress. I do my best to smile. I look out at the crowd and relax
slightly when I see a sea of smiling faces. The clapping has stopped but the noise still rings in my ears. I lean forward to the microphone.

“Hello,” my voice, although amplified, still sounds small. I take a deep breath to steady my nerves and remember what I had planned to say. “My name is Katniss Everdeen. But I have been known by many other names. Tribute, Victor, Rebel, Assassin, Mockingjay. These titles have always set me apart from everyone else but they did not protect me from the cruelty of the Capitol or the hardships of war. I have suffered, just like you. But today, we celebrate the end of such suffering.”

I look over at the men standing by the covered monument. With a swift nod of my head they pull back the tarp to reveal the twelve steel pillars inscribed with the names of the fallen. They glint in the sunlight. The crowd cheers vehemently.

“This monument represents many things,” I continue. “It brings honour to those who fought bravely on our behalf; those who sacrificed themselves to safeguard our future. It will serve as a reminder to us and to the next generation and the one after that we will never again tolerate oppression, persecution or cruelty at the hands of a government or an individual.”

The crowd shout loudly in agreement.

“Today we remember those who can no longer be with us. I remember my friends. I remember my sister.” I kiss the three middle fingers on my left hand and hold them high. The crowd goes silent as each individual copies my salute. I gaze out at a field of extended arms and swallow back my tears. “Their deaths should not be in vain. We must vow to create a better Panem.”

A stirring occurs in the middle of the crowd and from the corner of my eye I see Gale take two steps forward. As I wrap up my speech the people erupt in applause again. Cressida signals for me to stay put and smile so I comply but behind her I see the crowd break apart. A single individual steps forward, waving his fist furiously. The sun reflects off the object in his hand just moments before I recognise its shape. He fires the first shot into the air and people scream as they stampede away from the gunman. He stalks closer to the stage and my eyes widen in fright as he lowers to gun to aim at me. I’m an easy target standing alone on this stage. Even if I turned and ran I would probably still get hit. I’m frozen to the spot. My heart beat pounds in my ears. My last thought is of Peeta as I cross my arms in front of my face. I hear the gun fire and a force knocks all the wind out of me. I land painfully on my side and everything goes black.
I am woken by the sound of voices and the familiar scent of home. I lie still trying to understand why my head is pounding and piece together how I got from the public square to my own bed. I finally crack open one eye and let out a groan. I can see that it’s dark outside but the bright overhead lights burn my eyes. The voices hush and I struggle to make out the identity of the blurry figure looming over me.

“Take it easy, sweetheart.”

I blink and make another sound of protest when the room refuses to keep from spinning. I try to push myself up but yelp at the sharp stab of pain that shoots across my chest.

“Don’t try to get up,” Haymitch commands, laying a firm hand on my shoulder to keep me still. “You may have cracked a couple of ribs. Here, drink some of this.” He brings a bottle to my lips and I screw up my face in disgust as I swallow the fowl tasting liquid.

“What the hell is that?” I croak, wincing again when I cough and feel my chest burn. I spot Cressida standing in the doorway. Her concerned expression worries me.

Haymitch brings the bottle to his own mouth and takes a long swig. “Alcohol,” he replies. “It’ll help with the pain.”

“Right, and why am I in pain?” I demand irritably. Why don’t I remember anything?

Cressida steps forward and glances briefly at Haymitch before turning back to me with her brows knit together. “You don’t remember?” She asks.

“She could have concussion,” Haymitch offers.

I frown and touch my head lightly. “Concussion…?” The word escapes my mouth and suddenly I am thrown into a flashback. My speech at the memorial ceremony, the screams, the gunman, the terrible fear and the shock of being knocked off my feet. I begin to hyperventilate despite the agony tearing across my right side. Cressida kneels by the bed and grabs my hand. She strokes my hair in a way that feels slightly awkward, as if she’s never really had to take care of anyone before, but I feel myself calming down nonetheless.

“What…happened…?” I say between gasps.

Haymitch takes another sip of liquor and sits back in the chair that has been placed at my bedside. “Some lunatic crashed the memorial ceremony. You’d have been in a lot worse condition right now if it weren’t for…” He pauses, and I can see him debating whether I can handle the information I’m about to be given.

“If it weren’t for what?” I press, looking at Haymitch and then at Cressida and deciding that whatever they are about to tell me can’t be good.

“If it weren’t for Gale,” Cressida says softly. “He knocked you out of the path of the bullet. That’s how you got your injuries. He tackled you on stage and you hit your head when you landed.”

I gulp, almost too afraid to ask the next question on my mind. “Is he…?”

“He’s alive,” Haymitch says and I blow out a breath of relief. “The bullet punctured his arm just below the shoulder. District 12 doesn’t have a medical facility or medical staff capable of
performing surgery so he’s being taken to District 4.”

“What about Peeta?” I ask. I frown when an answer is not immediately given to me and I pin my ex-mentor with a serious expression. “Haymitch, where is he?”

Haymitch drags his fingers through his unkempt hair and leans forward on his knees. “The stress of the shooting triggered an episode. I can’t say for sure if he was going after you or Gale but I knew I had to get him out of there. I hauled him back to the village and he’s been recovering at my place since then.”

“And you left him alone?!” I shriek, fighting through the pain to sit myself up. I make it but the room seems to spin faster and I have to swallow down the bile that rises in my throat. Haymitch rolls his eyes at my stubborn behaviour.

“Give me some credit, sweetheart.” He scorns. “I didn’t wanna leave him like that. But when he managed to bring himself round for a couple of minutes he made me promise not to leave your side until you woke up.”

I lower my eyes and pout childishly. “Well I’m awake now, so…”

Haymitch snorts. “Yeah, I’m thrilled.” He stands from his chair and makes for the door. “I’ll go and check on the boy. But you really should get some rest.”

Cressida helps me lay down again, positioning my pillows to support my injured side before standing with Haymitch. “He’s right. Get some sleep. We’ll have plenty to talk about in the morning.”

I nod reluctantly. They turn out the lights and I listen to the sound of their footsteps as they descend downstairs. Exhaustion overwhelms me and I’m certain that I fall asleep before they even reach the bottom step.

When I wake again it’s because I’m too hot. I blink to clear the sleep from my eyes and adjust to the soft morning light coming in through the bedroom window. The pounding in my head has gone but my chest is still uncomfortable and it hurts to take deep breaths. I feel weighed down, but when I look across I realise it’s because of the arm that’s draped over my torso. Peeta is stretched out along the length of my body with his face towards me. His blonde hair has fallen into his eyes and I can’t resist reaching out to brush it away. As I do so his eyes flutter open and he smiles peacefully. I’m relieved to see his eyes are completely unclouded. He must have fully come round from his episode.

“Hey,” he whispers. I smile back and rest my hand against his cheek. He leans into my touch. “How are you feeling?” He asks.

“I’ve had worse,” I reply with a wink, trying to turn over. I’m hindered by the pain in my side and I fight the grimace that tugs on my features. Peeta blanches and hovers his hand tentatively over my ribcage.

“I’m fine!” I say quickly, not wanting him to worry but I know that it’s too late. He strokes my hair as I breathe through the pain.

“Katniss,” he says when it’s over. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be there for you last night.”

I can tell he is unconvinced as he stares down at the bed sheets with a frown. He experiences such guilt over his episodes. I touch his cheek again and lift his eyes to look back at me.

“You’re here now. That’s what matters.”

“Cressida was still here when I come over. It was really late so I told her to use your mother’s old room. Haymitch is probably asleep on the couch downstairs.” He pauses. “They have some information about the gunman. They want to talk to us both.”

I nod and throw the bed sheets off me. “Ok. Let’s not keep them waiting then.” I frown at Peeta when his eyes widen. “What?”

“You…may want to shower first,” he replies, swallowing loudly.

I look down at myself and suck in a gasp. I’m still dressed in my clothes from the ceremony but my green dress is now spattered with blood. I hadn’t noticed the dried, red stains on my arms either. From what Cressida told me last night, it leaves me in no doubt that it has to be Gale’s blood. I choke back a sob and Peeta cradles my face in his hands.

“Hey, it’s ok,” he croons. “Gale’s going to be ok. He’s on his way to District 4. They’ll take good care of him, Katniss. Come on.”

I let Peeta help me out of bed and walk me towards the bathroom. He steps ahead of me to turn on the water in my large double shower and almost immediately the room is filled with steam. I lean against the sink for support and hiss with pain when I try to lift my dress up over my head. Peeta rushes back to my side.

“I think I’m going to need help,” I tell him bashfully, watching as he develops a blush to match my own.

“Ok…I can get Cressida if you…”

“No,” I interrupt. “Please Peeta. I trust you.”

He chews his lip nervously before nodding and reaching hesitantly for the buttons that run down the length of my dress. He undoes them carefully and gently pushes the fabric off my shoulders. The dress pools at my feet, leaving me only in my underwear but all of Peeta’s embarrassment disappears when he catches sight of the ugly, purple bruise that under my bra that covers most of my right side. He reaches out to touch it, looking to me for reassurance in case he should hurt me. I suck in a breath when his fingers graze my skin but it’s not from pain. I turn my back to him slowly and cough nervously.

“Can you…?” I pause and gesture to my bra. “I can’t reach the clasp without hurting myself.”

I can almost hear the thud of Peeta’s heart when he unhooks the clasp and I let the bra join my dress on the floor. I hold my arms across my chest and step into the shower, deciding it best to keep my underwear on. I look back at Peeta and he quickly discards his t-shirt and trousers, joining me in the shower in just his boxers. I keep my back to him as he takes hold of the shower head and directs the flow onto me. The dried blood quickly washes away and I sigh as the heated water soothes my aching body. Peeta wets my hair and reaches for the shampoo bottle. He squirts a small amount into his palm and begins to lather it in my hair. The feeling of his fingers massaging my scalp is divine and I let out a contented sound. He rinses the out the shampoo I tilt my upper body slightly so as to rest my back against his chest. I’m startled but not surprised when my hip brushes up against something firm and Peeta jolts backwards.

“Shit,” he mumbles and twists his body away from mine. “Sorry.”
I turn around, covering my chest with one arm, and reaching for Peeta with the other. “It’s ok,” I assure him. “There’s no need to be embarrassed.”

I can tell he is cross with himself by the way his frown deepens. “You’re hurt, Katniss. I should be helping you not perving over you!” He curses again under his breath and looks away. “Damn hormones.”

I grab hold of his chin and pull his gaze back as I offer a reassuring smile. “You are helping me. Besides, I’m flattered that you…uh…that you would want….” I lose all confidence and feel myself blush as I finish my sentence. “That you would…want me…like that.”

Peeta gawks at me momentarily. “Want you?” He repeats, pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation. “Katniss, I…I’d have to blind or dead in order to not get turned on by you.” He drags his eyes up and down my body and traces the one of my scars with the pad of his finger. “You’re beautiful.”

My cheeks grow hotter and I feel heat start to pool in other areas too. “You’re also half naked,” Peeta continues with a chuckle. “As am I. So I think I better get out of here before…”

He turns to exit the shower and I reach out with both arms to prevent him from leaving. He stops midsentence when his eyes fall on my exposed chest but I’m suddenly feeling bold and I make no attempt to cover myself. Maybe it’s because of my recent near-death experience or perhaps I’m simply giving in to my youthful, hormonal tendencies, but I suddenly feel consumed by feelings for Peeta and I want to be as close to him as possible.

His eyes darken with desire but I can see he is at war with himself. I lick my lips deliberately and place a single kiss to one corner of his mouth and then again to the other corner. I pull back a little, feeling his breath tickle my face. When I look up at him from under my eyelashes his lips descend on mine in an instant. We step back under the flow of water and I twist my arms up around his shoulders, bringing my breasts into contact with his bare chest. We both gasp at the skin-on-skin contact and Peeta kisses me more fervently, sucking gentle on my bottom lip. He cradles me in his strong arms, being careful not to cause pain to my damaged ribs. The heat within me burns fiercely when his tongue slides against my own. I moan into his mouth, too far gone to be embarrassed by such noises. Peeta breaks the kiss and rests his forehead against mine. He pants softly.

“We should stop,” he says, his voice deep and gravelly. “I need to stop.”

To make a point he nudges me softly with his growing arousal. Now I’m embarrassed. I’ve allowed things to get out of hand. I’m not usually this carefree. I bite my lip and nod, allowing Peeta to step backwards out of the shower. He takes a clean, fresh towel from the shelf and drapes it over my shoulders. I pull it around my body tightly as he takes another towel, dries himself and then ties it around his waist. His gaze flits back to me and he smiles softly as he takes me back in his arms.

“Don’t overthink it,” he tells me.

Typical Peeta, reading my thoughts from a single expression. I’m already beating myself up for being too forward, too presumptuous, too caught up in the way my body felt pressed against his to think clearly. I open my mouth to say sorry but he silences me with a finger to my lips.

“Please don’t apologise for this,” he whispers. “I really, really liked it. I only stopped because… because I care about you deeply, Katniss. I want to do this right. I want us to be completely ready before our relationship gets too physical.”
“And what if I said I was ready now?” I reply flippantly, tilting my chin to angle my lips just below his. His hands tighten ever so slightly around my forearms and he smirks down at me.

“Don’t test me, Everdeen,” he warns, pecking my lips so fast I barely have chance to register the feel of them. “We both need a little more time. I’m still not 100%...myself. And you just narrowly escaped being shot.” I sigh and lean forward to rest my head against his chest.

“Trust you to be so noble,” I mumble as Peeta drops a kiss on the crown of my head. Although to be honest I’m thankful for his sensibleness. He is right, I’m not ready to take that step in our relationship despite the way my body seems to react.

When we finally make an appearance downstairs Haymitch and Cressida are talking in hushed tones in the kitchen. Its mid morning but I see that every window on the ground floor still has the curtains pulled across. Cressida greets us politely while Haymitch throws us an accusatory glance.

“Thanks for joining us finally,” he drawls as I lower myself into a seat at the kitchen table. Peeta pours two cups of tea from the recently boiled kettle and hands one to me. He rolls his eyes at Haymitch.

”Katniss is injured,” he says, taking the seat next to me. “She needed to rest.”

Haymitch snorts. “Rest….right.” I dip my head and fight the blush threatening to creep into my cheeks. “Well while you’ve both been resting, Cressida and I have been battling with the journalists camped out in the front yard.”

My head snaps up at this. “Journalists?”

Peeta takes my hand and I grip it tightly. He gives it a gentle squeeze in return.

“The memorial ceremony was being televised live,” Cressida begins to explain. “The whole nation saw you being shot at but the programme was cut almost immediately after. Apparently rumours of your death have already begun to circulate. It’s not just journalists out there. Your neighbours are quite concerned.”

That explains the curtain; to keep prying eyes out. However I think of out friend Lorraine and her children. They’ll surely be worried. Then I think of someone else.

“My mother!” I exclaim, ignoring the ache in my side. Haymitch holds his hands up to calm me.

“We arranged to get a message to her. She knows your safe.”

I blow out a breath and mumble my thanks. Peeta releases my hand and leans forward on his elbows.

“What happened to the guy that shot at Katniss?” He asks sternly.

“Hadley and Hanson apprehended him at the ceremony,” Cressida replies, taking a slow sip from her coffee mug. “He was questioned overnight and is now on his way to the Capitol to stand trial.”

I lean forward too. “Did he happen to mention why he wanted to kill me?”

“He’s a member of a renegade group of Alma Coin supporters,” Haymitch says carefully. “Obviously they weren’t happy about you shooting an arrow through their beloved President so they’ve been plotting to assassinate you.”
"It appears that was the reason President Paylor sent in a security team," Cressida adds. "She wanted to keep you safe."

Of course, it all makes sense now. I scowl. I hate being lied to. "Did you know?" I ask, addressing them both with a fierce look. Cressida swiftly shakes her head.

"I wouldn’t have agreed to do this if I knew," she responds. "And I certainly wouldn’t have kept you in the dark about it."


We all jump in our seats when Peeta slams his fist down on the table. He pushes his chair back to stand up and points a finger at Haymitch. "You knew?" He roars. "You knew, and you put her in danger anyway?"

"Calm down, boy. Don’t hurt yourself," Haymitch retorts, pulling himself up to full height. "The Department for National Security received a tip-off that someone planned to pull a stunt at the ceremony but President Paylor felt that the information lacked credibility."

"Are you kidding me?" Peeta yells. "Paylor wouldn’t even be President if it weren’t for Katniss. Any threat on her life needs to be taken seriously…"

"And that’s exactly why I asked for her to send in her best men to act as bodyguards," Haymitch interrupts. Peeta’s mouth hangs open slightly as he is cut off mid-argument. The room falls silent as the two men back down from each other. Peeta clenches his jaw together and returns to sit by my side.

"You asked for Gale’s team to be sent here?" I ask after a rather long pause. Haymitch sighs and drops back into his chair. He looks at me apologetically.

"Sorry sweetheart. They made me promise not to tell you about the tip-off and truthfully it didn’t seem fair to worry you unnecessarily. But I wasn’t about to leave you unprotected should the worse happen."

Haymitch and I have developed a strange relationship over the years. It can’t quite be described as friendship. We don’t do things in order to please the other person. Rather our relationship is based solely on protecting each other. This is how I have to come understand and trust the decisions he makes. Despite his seemingly apathetic attitude I know deep down he really cares.

"This brings me to my next surprise," Haymitch continues, lowering his voice as if he is afraid the journalists outside will hear him if he speaks any louder. "The assassination attempt failed which leads us to believe that this group will try to attack again, probably soon. It’s been decided that you’re not safe here. President Paylor has agreed to lift your confinement order and granted permission for you to travel outside of District 12."

I blink in surprise. I had expected to be exiled to 12 for the foreseeable future. It was one of the conditions for my release after I shot Coin and underwent trial as a crazed lunatic. "Where?" I ask, hoping to God that they don’t send me back to 13 or worse, the Capitol.

"It’s already been decided," Haymitch replies. "District 4 seemed like the logical choice. Your mother is there. And Annie Cresta has offered for you to stay with her."

I’m relieved. Peeta and I visited 4 briefly during the Victory Tour. I had been mesmerised by its coastline.
“What about Peeta?” I ask, suddenly panicked that I’ll be separated from him. He grabs my hand under the table and I realise that he won’t let me go alone anyway.

“I’ll be escorting you both to 4,” Cressida assures with a smile. I relax and hear Peeta sigh with relief. “We’ll be leaving tomorrow morning on the 7 o’clock train so you might want to start packing soon rather than later.”

Haymitch leans forward again and pins us with a serious look. “It’s really important that you don’t tell anyone where you’re going.” He says sternly. “You don’t want the press following you and we especially don’t want these Alma supporters causing you any more trouble.”

Peeta and I nod silently in understanding. It’s not until we excuse ourselves and return to the bedroom to being packing that the situation really starts to sink in. I peek cautiously out the window and down at the lawn. It’s as if the journalists had been waiting for that exact moment because they are looking straight back at me. I hear them call my name and a camera flashes. I stumble back from the window and Peeta pulls me into a comforting embrace.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” he promises and I instantly feel safe. We’ve faced the games and a war. Now we’ll deal with this new threat just as we have always done; together.
On the morning of our departure Haymitch makes a spectacle of himself outside his house in order to distract the half a dozen or so journalists still waiting for a glimpse of me and hoping for an interview. Cressida, Peeta and I successfully make our escape hidden under hats and cloaks. Thom, perhaps the only person in town that I completely trust, waits for us just outside the village with his truck and drives us quickly to the station. We arrive in good time and, being only 06:30 in the morning, the train platform is thankfully deserted. We keep our heads low and board the train in haste when it pulls in. The Panem train system runs on one seamless track through all the districts, ending finally in the Capitol. There are no diversions or shortcuts, therefore anyone that does happen to see us board the train can not logically predict which district we will choose to disembark at.

The journey to District 4 from 12 takes approximately three and a half days. President Paylor is generous enough to pay for an entire carriage to ensure we are not seen by other passengers. This train does not match the opulence and grandeur of the one Peeta and I travelled in during our previous trips to the Capitol however our carriage is large and more than adequate for the three of us. It has two sleeping compartments, each with its own bathroom, and combined dining and living quarters. The very minute the train sets in motion we are served hot pastries and tea by a man who introduces himself as Tanner. He observes Cressida eyeing him suspiciously and reveals a badge hidden on the inside of his jacket.

“I am here by order of President Paylor,” he says to us all. “To ensure your safe passage to District 4 and to make your journey as comfortable as possible.”

He excuses himself without another word and we tuck into our complimentary breakfast. As I take a bite out of a chocolate pastry twist I can’t resist leaning across to Peeta.

“Yours are so much better,” I whisper into his ear and he beams proudly.

Our first night aboard the train brings nightmares for both myself and Peeta. The history of this familiar journey coupled with the events of the last few days keeps us from enjoying any more than just a few hours of sleep. One moment I’m being shaken awake by Peeta as I scream in the dark, the next I’m holding him tightly in my arms and rocking him as his body seizes up with terror from visions that I can’t see. We disturb Cressida more than once but she is better prepared for it by the second night. Tanner also realises he doesn’t need to come running, expecting to take on some vicious attacker. He learns that the only enemies on this train are in our minds.

The train stops briefly to refuel in District 6 but we’re instructed by Tanner to stay on board. The windows of our carriage are tinted to prevent outsiders looking. We can still look out but to be honest there isn’t much of a view from inside the train terminal. It’s not until we get moving again that the scenery changes from forests and fields to cliff faces and coastlines. It inspires Peeta and he passes the time for the reminder of our journey by sketching the new landscape. Watching him draw makes me calm so thankfully our last night is slightly more restful.

We arrive in District 4 early in the afternoon. The sun shines brilliantly and the heat hits us the instant as we step out of the train. But unlike the stifling heat in District 12, here there is some relief from the salty breeze that blows all the way inland from the sea. Cressida helps us with our bags before we exchange goodbyes. She is headed back to the Capitol, back to Pollux and her job. It’s not an emotional farewell, Cressida isn’t one for tears, but I don’t miss the hint of melancholy in her eyes as we wave to her from the platform. Tanner too will be travelling back to the Capitol but before the train departs he leads us to a car waiting outside the station. The driver, a man named Brig, tips his hat and welcomes us to the District. Our bags are packed into the
trunk, we thank Tanner for his kind service, and the car pulls away.

Victors Village is another 40 minutes from the train station via the coastal road. Brig doesn’t talk much and I find myself fighting to stay awake. Peeta pulls me against him in the back seat and I rest my head on his shoulder. The next time I open my eyes is when he gently shakes me from my nap. I sit up and yawn, peering out the car window just as we drive through the gate to 4’s Victors Village. Unlike our village back at home, the houses here are laid out next to each other in one long row that bends round in a crescent to fit the shape of the coastline. They are painted white with sky blue shutters at the windows. A decedent fountain in placed in the centre with sculptures of dolphins. Water shoots up and out of their blow holes in high arches and returns to the large basin at the bottom. I wonder what it would feel like to dip my feet in the cool waters.

Our car comes to a stop outside the house near the end of the row. Brig gives a little toot of the car horn before helping to unload our bags from the trunk. He shakes Peeta’s hand and smiles at me before waving us towards the house just. The door opens and when Annie Cresta appears on the porch my bag slips from my shoulder and lands with a thud on the sandy path. I hadn’t forgotten about Annie’s pregnancy but I hadn’t expected her to look that…well…pregnant! She smiles and beckons us towards her. She throws one arm around me and the other around Peeta and hugs us tightly. Up close her belly looks enormous and I’m frightened to hug back in case I do any damage.

“I’m so pleased you’re here,” she says in that voice that always sounds so far away. “Come, come inside!”

We follow behind her as she waddles through the front door. I can’t help but gape at the interior of her house. It’s open plan with lightly coloured walls and floor to ceiling windows. Instead of a garden, the rear of the house opens out onto a deck that leads directly onto the beach. In fact the back wall is made entirely of bi-fold glass doors that open up completely, giving the impression that the beach is just part of the room.

“Annie,” I gasp. “This place is amazing!”

She smiles back at me as Peeta and I follow her up a winding staircase. She opens the door to a generous sized bedroom, larger than my own back home. The huge four-poster bed is surrounded by billowy, white, voile curtains that sway in the breeze as it drifts in from the open windows. The view from which is even more breath-taking than the one downstairs.

“I thought you might like to freshen up after your journey,” Annie says softly. “There are fresh towels in the bathroom and there is plenty of cupboard space for your belongings.”

Peeta deposits our bags at the foot of the bed and surprises me when he pulls Annie into a gentle embrace. She squeaks a little before patting his back.

“Thank you,” I hear Peeta whisper and I see the faint blush tint Annie’s cheeks. She tells us to take our time and come downstairs whenever we are ready and closes the door behind her when she leaves.

Peeta glances at me sheepishly. “Sorry,” he mutters. “I just had to…I hope you didn’t…I only wanted to…”

I roll my eyes and punch his arm playfully. “I wasn’t jealous, if that’s what you’re worried about.” His face relaxes and I chuckle at his sigh of relief. “I just wasn’t expecting it.”

“Me neither,” he replies, drawing his eyebrows together. “I guess I still feel…protective over her.”
I take Peeta’s hand and guide him to sit beside my on the edge of the bed. I pull his hands into my lap and run my thumbs over the backs of them soothingly. “You and Annie share a common experience. It’s natural for you to feel connected to her.” I realise as I say this that I don’t know much of what Annie went through while she was held captive in the Capitol, or Peeta’s experiences besides the hijacking treatment. Peeta, as always, can read my expression as if he were reading my very thoughts. He takes a steadying breath.

“Snow knew that Annie was clueless about the revolution,” he says in a measured tone. “His purpose for taking her wasn’t for the extraction of information. Her capture was intended to lure Finnick into making some sort of bargain to betray the rebels in exchange for her safety.” He sucks in another shaky breath before continuing and I prepare myself from something awful. “The peacekeepers left her alone most of the time. Our cells had no walls, only bars, so she saw everything that happened to Johanna and me and the peacekeepers were content to allow her suffering to come only from watching them torture us. After a couple of days she retreated into herself. She stopped screaming when they beat us, it’s as if she could no longer see or hear any of it. The peacekeepers got bored.”

I feel him shaking and I tell him not to continue but he insists. “The first time they laid a hand on her I went berserk and broke the neck of the guard outside my cell. They knocked me out after that. They had no reason to torture her. She had no information! She was so fragile, like a bird with a broken wing. Johanna and I, we had some fight in us, but Annie…. The peacekeepers didn’t touch her again when she failed to react. She was quiet, locked inside her own head. Even now I’m not sure if she was aware of what was going on... I hope she wasn’t.”

I brush the tears away from Peeta’s eyes with the pads of my fingers and pull him into a fierce hug. His arms encircle me although he still takes care with my damaged ribs.

“I dream about it often,” he whispers into my hair. “Sometimes it’s Annie, but other times…I see you. I’m powerless to protect you from them.”

I hush him and kiss the side of his face tenderly. We stayed locked in our embrace for what feels like an eternity. We only break apart for a moment to pull ourselves up towards to head of the bed but quickly tangle our limbs together again as we lay back against the pillows. The gentle sound of waves lapping against the sand on the beach outside lulls us both into a peaceful slumber that turns out to be the best afternoon nap and good nights sleep we’ve had in months.

Annie assures us that our early night last night caused her no alarm or inconvenience.

“I assumed you would be tired from your journey,” she says as she carries a basket of bread to the round table outside on the deck.

The large parasol provides us with some shade from the sun that is already sending the temperature soaring even this early in the morning. Having missed dinner, Peeta and I were famished when we woke. Thankfully Annie was already preparing quite a feast for our breakfast. Grilled fish and avocado served with the seaweed bread Peeta and I had eaten on the beach in the Quarter Quell. A bowl of brightly coloured fruit sits beautifully in the centre of the table and I give up trying to name each variety, some of which I have never seen before.

Peeta pulls out a chair for Annie and she eases herself down into it. Her proud belly touches the edge of the table even when she leans back and I watch as she smooths her hand over it in rhythmic circles. Peeta too seems fascinated but unlike me he doesn’t hesitate to ask questions.

“When are you due?” His eyes shine with interest.
“Soon,” Annie replies dreamily. “At the end of August.”

I find myself mentally counting the weeks. Six, maybe seven weeks from now. This terrifies me. She could go into labour at any moment! I’m ready to voice this fear but Peeta speaks first.

“Do you know what you’re having?” He asks and my heart is pained by his excited tone.

Annie’s eyes brighten and it becomes evident that at this moment she is completely out in the world, not locked in a daydream. Perhaps talking about the baby helps her to think clearly. “It is a boy,” she says proudly and even I can’t help but smile. “You’re mother has been quite helpful during my pregnancy, Katniss.”

Her words startle me. “You’ve seen my mother?” I ask with a mouth full of bread. I swallow it painfully and feel it lodge somewhere in my throat. I have to gulp several mouthfuls of water to help ease it down as Peeta pats me firmly between the shoulders.

Annie seems unaffected by my little choking episode. “I asked her to be my midwife,” she replies. “I prefer to have someone who is used to dealing in traditional methods opposed to a Capitol-trained nurse.”

My mother helped many pregnant women back in 12. She was well known for her healing abilities and vast herbal medicine supplies. When we lived in the Seam, quite a few babies had been born by her hands in our kitchen. She let me help once or twice but I didn’t have the stomach for it back then, or now even. Prim took after my mother in that respect. She was born to be a healer. She would have been a great mother one day too.

“Your mother speaks of you often,” Annie says, pulling me back from the dangerous place in my mind that only causes me pain. “The hospital isn’t far away. Perhaps you will visit her while you are here?”

I nod quietly and Peeta says that he would like to go too. I remember that Gale must be at the hospital also, having undergone surgery after being shot. I would like the opportunity to thank him for saving my life, he deserves that much. Annie tells us that Brig, our driver from yesterday, will gladly offer his services again to take us there. Apparently he drives her to all her midwife appointments. He was a friend of Finnick’s and he and his wife pledged to support Annie the moment she returned to District 4.

At the mention of Finnick the clarity disappears from Annie’s eyes and her hand stills on her belly. It’s Peeta that has the common sense to change the subject.

“We can’t thank you enough for inviting us to stay with you,” he says gently, coaxing her to look up at him. She does smile but it’s clear that part of her has once again taken refuge inside her mind.

“I saw what happened on the television,” she says and reaches across the table to grasp my hand. “When Haymitch called I knew I could help. You’re both welcome here as long as you please. It’s nice to have company.”

She lets go of my hand and begins humming an unfamiliar tune. I wonder if she realises the risk she has taken by allowing us to hide here. A band of terrorists still want me dead and although Haymitch assures me that we will be safe in 4 I know better than to let my guard down.

We remember to warn Annie about our frequent night terrors but surprisingly the next few nights pass by nightmare free. Annie says it’s because of the salty, sea air. She says it calms some people.
Honestly I couldn’t care about the reason; I just choose to enjoy it while it lasts.

Peeta and I aren’t under any instruction to stay hidden while in District 4 but we decide to keep a low profile anyway. The village here is still unoccupied, save for Annie, so there’s no neighbours to worry about. By the end of the week I agree to let Brig drive us up to the hospital. It’s a relatively short journey; not long enough for me to quell the anxiety bubbling away in my gut. I’ve spoken to my mother twice since the end of the revolution but haven’t seen her in person for months. I gnaw on the skin around my thumb nail until Peeta snags my hand in his. He kisses my knuckles and smiles at me reassuringly. It helps…a little.

The hospital is larger than I expected and apparently doubles up as a medical training school. Brig tells us he has a nephew who is training to be a doctor and thankfully he seems to know his way around the myriad of white, sterile corridors. It’s a far cry from the makeshift infirmaries many of the districts put up with so many years. He points out the various wards as if we are on some bizarre hospital tour. I touch one of the scars on my arm as we pass the burns unit, silently thanking the medical team that literally patched me up. Peeta takes interest in the physiotherapy department and I notice him shifting weight from his prosthetic leg.

The work the Capitol doctors did for Peeta was nothing short of miraculous. He never needed a single day of rehabilitation; his leg was as good as new from the moment he came round from surgery. He doesn’t like me to see it up close but from what he’s told me it sort of…plugs in to the stump just about where his knee used to be. The advanced bio mechatronics of the artificial limb connects with the nerves in his upper thigh, providing him with full control over his movements. Of course, not everyone is that lucky.

The maternity ward is located on the fourth floor of the hospital. Brig points us in the direction of the nurse’s station and says he’ll meet us back at the car in an hour. I don’t tell him that I’m hoping to be out of here long before an hour is up. A plump nurse regards us curiously as we approach. If her purple hair doesn’t betray her instantly as Capitol then her affected accent certainly does.

“May I help you?” She asks and Peeta nudges me forward.

“Yes,” I squeak and cough to clear my throat. “I’m looking for Harriet Everdeen…”

“Katniss?” I whirl around and come face to face with my mother. She grips the clipboard in her hands tightly and takes a step towards me. “What are you doing here?”

I know Haymitch had gotten word to her to let her know I was safe after the shooting. I presumed he had also told her about my coming to District 4 but from the clear look of confusion on her face I see I presumed wrong. And then I see her eyes flit to my abdomen and I instantly know what she must be thinking.

“Are you…?”

“No!” I exclaim loudly, wincing when my voice echoes off the walls. The nurse from before looks at me disapprovingly and I mutter an apology. “No. I…we’re…visiting.”

She looks over my shoulder at Peeta, only just noticing his presence. “Come,” she says coolly, waving towards a corridor. “We can talk in my office.”

She leads us to a room that holds very little furniture except for a desk and chair, a small couch and a bookcase loaded with medical textbooks. Once the door is shut she allows her emotions to leak out. She throws her arms around me and pulls me into the warmest embrace I think I ever recall receiving from her.
“I watched the whole thing!” She cries. “When I saw that… that wicked man fire those shots at you I thought I’d lost you forever!”

“I’m alright, mom.” I whisper as I try to console her. “I was really lucky. Just had a headache for a couple of days and a few bruises.”

She sniffs and holds me back at arms length. “Where?” She asks, scanning my body with her eyes.

I hesitantly lift my shirt up, exposing the angry marks on my ribs. She darts to her desk, pulls open a drawer and takes out a bottle that I know contains some sort of herbal ointment. She massages it gently into my skin and it cools and soothes the ache instantly. She looks across at Peeta who is beginning to shift uncomfortably in the corner.

“Hello Peeta,” she greets softly, beckoning him closer before placing a motherly kiss on his forehead. “How are you?”

“Hello Mrs Everdeen,” he replies, blushing a little at the overly familiar gesture. “I’m well thank you ma’am.”

She invites us to sit on the couch and we fill her in on the events that took place in 12 after the shooting and what led to us to travel to District 4.

“It’s good you’re staying with Annie,” She says, bobbing her head. “The poor dear gets terribly lonely and my tiny apartment is barely big enough for me. I couldn’t have the two of you sharing my pull-out couch now, could I?”

I know she means it as a joke. She couldn’t possibly know that Peeta and I have been sharing a bed, sharing a home, for quite some time. And I thought I had a pretty good poker face until I see her jaw slacken a little and her eyes dart between Peeta and me. Apparently there is nothing a daughter can hide from her mother.

“Peeta, would you mind giving Katniss and me a moment alone?” She asks sweetly. “There’s a patient’s kitchen just down the hall. Help yourself to anything in the cupboards.”

Peeta catches my gaze briefly before ducking out of the room. I want to jump up and make a run for it or dive out that fourth storey window, anything to avoid having this conversation. But I’m frozen in place by my mother’s unreadable expression. We’re both silent for what feels like a really long time until she decides to speak.

“You’ve always been a reliable and sensible child, Katniss. But is this… relationship… really a good idea?”

Maybe it’s because she calls me ‘child’ or perhaps it’s because she has instantly concluded that I’m in a sexual relationship with Peeta. Either way her sentence only serves to severely piss me off.

“Save me the parental lecture,” I bark. “I’ve managed to survive for years without your motherly guidance so I think I’ll be alright now.”

This hurts her and I want to scream at myself for being so insensitive and cruel but there is nothing to be done. Her bottom lip wobbles and I inwardly curse myself.

“I… understand how hard it must have been on you back when I…” She cuts herself off and blinks back the tears threatening to pour from her eyes. “I don’t doubt your ability to take care of yourself Katniss and perhaps after all this time I may have lost the right to know the in’s and out’s
of your private life. But I’m still your mother and I care for you a great deal. I won’t stand idly by if I think you may be making a mistake…”

“Mom,” I interject. “Peeta and I…we’re not…we haven’t been…intimate.”

I cringe. I hate that word. And I know it isn’t the absolute honest truth if what we did in the shower the other day is taken into account. But I need to put my mother’s mind at ease about the possibility of her becoming a very young grandmother. It seems to do the trick because her shoulders come down from around her ears and she audibly sighs but I can see the lingering confusion in her eyes.

“So you two aren’t…together?”

I bite my lip as I try to figure out the best way to explain my situation. How does one tell their mother that they are living with the guy that once tried to throttle the life out of them and still has occasionally violent episodes?

“We are together,” I correct. It’s a good place to start. “It’s been…complicated. Peeta doesn’t have all his memories back and for a time he wasn’t sure if he even still liked me. But we started spending time together and after a while I guess the feelings came back because we’ve been…courting, I guess you could say, for a few months. And he sort of…lives at my place now.” I squint at my mother and prepare myself for whatever is about to come. “We both feel safer when we’re together!” I add for good measure.

She hums thoughtfully and leans towards me. “But you two haven’t…”

“No,” I say firmly.

“But you will eventually…”

“Mom!” I blush from root to tip and hide my face in my hands. Why won’t she leave it alone!

“I’m only thinking that if you two are alone in that house and you feel that strongly about each other then things are bound to…”

“Please,” I beg, peaking through the cracks in my fingers. “Please don’t think about it.” Knowing my mother is thinking about any future intimacy between me and Peeta is utterly mortifying. It’s worse than when Haymitch makes a crude comment. She pulls my hands away from my face and tucks a lock of loose hair behind my ear.

“Katniss,” she says commandingly and I force myself to look up. “I have been a healer for many years. I’ve seen my fair share of young women who have gotten themselves in trouble after just one momentary lapse in judgement. You are my daughter and I trust you to make good choices but I also know that love is a powerful emotion that can make even the wisest of us act foolishly.”

She walks back to her desk and take out another item from the drawer that looks suspiciously like the contraption used to implant a tracking device in my arm before both Hunger Games. I cast a nervous glance at her as she moves to stand in front of me.

“Now I’ll stop talking about things that make you feel uncomfortable if you’ll allow me to give you this birth control shot.”

My chin must hit the floor because she chuckles softly and strokes my cheek with her free hand. “It will sting a little but it will protect you from any unwanted pregnancies for at least the next three years.”
I gulp and nod slowly before offering up my left arm. The shot goes in just above my elbow and I rub it fiercely to take the sting away. My mother pulls me into another embrace and I allow myself to relax into it. It feels nice to be taken care of by her.

“I want to see Gale while I’m here,” I say, pulling back and wiping away the stray tear on my cheek. “He saved my life and I need him to know that I…I just want to thank him.”

My mother’s face falls sadly and my heart stops. “I-Is he…?” I stutter out, feeling the blood drain away from my face.

“The surgery went well,” She says quickly and I gasp when my heart kicks starts again. “The doctors think he’ll regain full mobility in his shoulder before the year is out. But Katniss, he’s not here anymore.”

“What?” I croak.

“He was discharged and Rory came to take him home. He’s gone back to District 2. I’m so sorry, sweetie.”

I shrug her off with a half smile and tell her everything is fine. I’m fine. We exchange goodbyes and she walks me back to find Peeta who allows us to walk back to Brig’s car in silence. It’s only after the hospital is out of view that I allow myself to fall against Peeta and sob. He comforts me with gentle caresses and whispered words. I cry for my mother who, for the first time since I was 11, seems to finally be capable of caring for her child. I cry for Peeta, who is too damned selfless to ask any prying questions. But mostly I cry for myself. Because now I have no idea if and when I’ll ever see my best friend again.
Chapter 14

I knew the nightmares had to return at some point. No amount of sun or sea can keep them away forever. Thankfully my thrashing has not woken Peeta this time. The sound of him snoring softly beside me is enough to tether me to reality and push the evil dreams from my mind but I’m hesitant to close my eyes again. I untangle myself from the sheets, slip silently from the room and pad softly down the spiral staircase, guided by the moonlight that shines in through the large windows. I’m surprised to see a figure out on the deck this late. I thought I had good hearing but Annie is apparently gifted in that respect too as she turns around even before I’ve made a step towards her.

“Are you ok?” I ask, coming to stand beside her on the deck. She strokes her bump through her long, flowing nightgown and smiles serenely as she looks out at the gentle waves of the sea.

“This baby is nocturnal,” She replies with a little laugh. “Or at least he has been the past few weeks. Your mother seems to think he may come early.”

I try not to look nervous as I allow my eyes to travel down to her swollen belly. I’m definitely not keen on the idea of being involved in any birthing action. “Does it hurt?” I ask cautiously.

She looks over at me and reaches for my hand, placing it directly onto her bump. I’m about to protest when I feel it; a nudge. My eyes widen and I jump when I feel it again.

“That’s…incredible,” I breathe. Never had I felt something so bizarre and yet so calming. Something inside me aches but I can’t figure out what or where.

“He’s learning to swim,” Annie says matter-of-factly as she lowers herself into a deck chair. “He can sense the ocean, you see.”

I sit down also and nod, although I’m not too sure if I understand. I know children from District 4 can often swim before they can walk. It was her ability to swim that saved Annie during her games when the arena flooded.

“Are you well, Katniss?” Annie asks with a curious expression. Perhaps I was frowning again. I seem to do that when my mind wanders.

“It’s been a tough day,” I say quietly. “My mother and I…well, our relationship isn’t exactly conventional. Our conversation at the hospital was uncomfortable to say the least.”

“She was worried about you and Peeta,” Annie says, sounding more like a statement than a question.

“Yeah, worried that I’ll end up in the same way as you,” I scoff, waving my hand at her belly before rubbing the little bruise on my arm from the shot my mother had given me. “She, of all people, should know that having a kid is the last thing I’d want.”

Something flashes in Annie’s eyes and she glances down at her hands. “I didn’t want children… before,” She says softly.

My jaw slackens and my mouth forms a little O shape. This information definitely surprises me. I had assumed that Finnick and Annie were keen to start a family right away. “What made you change your mind?” I ask.

“Nothing,” She replies sadly. “This pregnancy wasn’t planned, Katniss. Finnick and I thought we
were being careful and taking all the right precautions. I didn’t even know I was with child until I returned home. I didn’t have any of the normal symptoms...” Annie trails off and looks up at the full moon overhead. I’ve seen this far away look in her eyes several times and I wonder where she goes at times like these. I wonder if she is simply remembering or if she’s created a whole new world inside her mind. I’ve heard that some people do that to lock out the really bad memories. I barely have time to ponder over it though as she suddenly returns her gaze to me.

“I will be honest with you, Katniss.” She says, her voice sounding stronger. “I thought about terminating the pregnancy. My mental stability was questionable at best and the thought of raising a child alone filled me with such dread that I shut myself off for weeks. I didn’t move or talk or eat. The doctors told me that I was...the foetus would die if I carried on for much longer. I’m ashamed to say that even then I still refused to listen. But it was something your mother said to me that finally pulled me round.”

“What did she say?” I ask, curious to hear about the new woman my mother seems to have become.

“She told me that this baby was a gift from Finnick. She said that, even though he is gone, Finnick has left behind a small part of himself. Something more than just a memory of the special love we shared and that, even though it might be painful at first, soon I would come to treasure this gift. And Katniss, she was right! The first time I felt him move inside me I knew that this baby really was a blessing and not a curse.”

“Are you still afraid?” I ask with a frown and she laughs musically.

“Terrified,” she replies humorously. “But I wouldn’t change my situation for anything.”

“Finnick would be proud of you,” I tell her sincerely and she offers me a wobbly smile. Without a second thought I lean forward and hug her. “You’re going to be an amazing mom.”

I swallow down my self-loathing when she returns the sentiment and make my way back to bed. Peeta is still asleep when I tuck myself back into his embrace. The nightmares don’t return again that night. Instead I dream of a child with wavy dark hair and piercing blue eyes.

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I glare viciously at the blank sheet of paper before me as if the inanimate thing had offended me personally. I press my fingers into my forehead to release the pressure of an impending headache and tap my pen against the table. It’s hot and despite the parasol Peeta has erected for me on the deck the shade gives little relief from the summer heat. Annie’s house is air conditioned but she’s in the kitchen cooking up a storm, even though we only ate breakfast a little over 2 hours ago. The smell of food was driving me to distraction. All these things, however, are only excuses when it comes down to why I can’t seem to write one damn sentence, let alone a whole letter. Peeta has convinced me that writing to Gale will be a good way to express myself in the hopes of gaining back my friend. I agreed with him at the time but now it appears that my letter writing skills are about as good as my actual conversational skills.

I blow out a puff of frustration and look across the deck at Peeta. He is sat cross-legged with his tongue peeking out the corner of his mouth and his forehead creased with concentration. His attempt at putting together the last of Annie’s flat-packed baby furniture is both adorable and hilarious.

“Is it meant to look like that?” I ask, biting back a chuckle when he shoots me a dark look. He screws up his face at the little instruction leaflet.

“I’ve connected item A to item B, but item B doesn’t seem to fit to item C...and I have no item
D!” He throws the leaflet over his shoulder in frustration and attempts to make the strange wooden contraption stand up. “One baby rocker,” he announces as it topples over. “Ta da!”

I throw back my head and laugh unashamedly and Peeta smiles wide. “I never said I was any good at furniture assembly,” he says, getting to his feet and coming to stand beside me. I try to cover up the blank page on the table but it’s too late; he’s seen it.

“Not even a ‘Dear Gale’?” He asks and dodges the pen I throw at him. He holds his hands up in surrender. “I’m sorry, Katniss. I shouldn’t joke. I know this is hard for you to do.”

“Everything I want to say is all inside my head,” I say with a sigh. “I just don’t know how to…get it out. I messed up when I spoke to him back in 12 and I didn’t even get a chance to thank him for saving my life. He must think I hate him.”

Peeta is about to respond when we hear Annie calling to us. We head inside to find her with the telephone pressed to her ear as she waddles around her kitchen.

“Oh, they’re here now!” She says happily, thrusting the phone towards me and mouthing ‘It’s Haymitch’.

I take Peeta’s hand and lead us to the couch before switching the phone to loud speaker.

“Hello? Is anyone even there?” His gravelly voice echoes. I haven’t been away from 12 for long but I almost feel like I miss that voice.

“We’re here,” I call out. “What is it?” “I’m fine, thanks for asking sweetheart,” He responds, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “Straight down to business, as always. I thought a nice holiday in the sun would have lightened you up a little. Guess I thought wrong.”

I resist the urge to shout back that this is not a holiday, that I’m not here by choice I’m only running from some crazed terrorist group that wants to kill me. But Annie is right round the corner and I wouldn’t want her to think I don’t like staying here because truth be told, I really do. Haymitch doesn’t need to know that though.

“Haymitch…” Peeta starts, clearly noticing my death glare. Haymitch cuts him off almost immediately.

“Alright, alright. I’ll keep this brief so you can get back to…whatever it was you were doing in the first place. Please don’t tell me, I have delicate ears.”

Peeta snorts but I roll my eyes. I’ve had just about enough of his crass comments regarding our relationship.

“You can come home,” he says in such a nonchalant fashion that I don’t respond right away and nor does Peeta. “Did you hear what I said?” He asks irritably after a long pause. “You can come back to 12 whenever you’re ready. It’s safe here now.”

“Are you sure?” Peeta asks and I feel him squeeze my hand nervously.

“Damn sure,” Haymitch responds almost too enthusiastically. “The lunatic that tried to blow your girlfriend’s head off cracked under interrogation and revealed the location of a rebel camp out in the forest between District 12 and District 13. President Paylor sent the best soldiers in the military to round them up. Turns out there was only a handful of ‘em anyway and they didn’t put up much of a fight so…”

I furrow my brow. Haymitch isn’t one to waste his energies on talking or explaining and right
now he’s rambling. Something he only does when he’s nervous or trying to wrangle his way out of a situation. Peeta doesn’t notice it but I do. Something isn’t right. “Haymitch…what’s going on?”

He groans and seems to understand the implication in my words. We always have been good at understanding each other. He mutters ‘damn it’ under his breath while Peeta quirks his eyebrow curiously.

“Before they were arrested, the rebels made a radio transmission that was intercepted by the military’s intelligence.” He says reluctantly.

“Who were they contacting?” Peeta asks. We both lean closer to the telephone.

Haymitch sighs again. “It’s not known who exactly they were contacting but they traced the receiver signal…it came from 12.”

Peeta’s eyes widen and he looks at me in shock. I gnaw my lip anxiously. Someone from my own District? A neighbour? How could that be?

“It seems the individual knew about you being in 4 too,” Haymitch continues. “They were planning to ambush you.”

“How did they know?” Peeta exclaims. “No one knew! We didn’t tell anyone. Do you think someone from 4…”

“Anything you want to tell us, Sweetheart?” Haymitch interrupts. My lack of a suitable reaction has clearly given me away. I wince under Peeta’s questioning stare. I had promised Haymitch I wouldn’t tell a soul about our coming to District 4 the morning after the shooting. I intended to keep that promise but later that day as I sat in the garden behind my house, away from the prying eyes of the press, I hadn’t expected a young boy to come sneaking under the fence. He was terribly upset. He’d been in the square with his mother and younger sister and had witnessed the shooting. He was so shaken and so worried. I couldn’t bear it.

“Milo,” I whisper sadly. “I told Milo that we were going away somewhere warm and by the sea.”

“Milo?” Peeta asks incredulously and I nod. “Lorraine’s son?”

“That would explain why I haven’t seen them for a few days,” Haymitch says thoughtfully. “And I doubt the boy is capable of plotting to murder so that must mean…”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” I spit. “It can’t be Lorraine. She’s my friend! It’s far more likely that someone overheard me or…or convinced Milo to give us away.”

“Katniss is right.” Peeta interjects. “We’ve spent plenty of time with Lorraine and her kids. She lives opposite us! If she wanted to kill Katniss, don’t you think she would have had enough opportunities?”

“Then why am I staring into her empty house right now?” Haymitch shoots back. “Innocent people don’t make a run for it. You two need to get back to 12 right away.”

“Enough!” I exclaim, jumping up from the sofa. I push my hair away from my face. “Haymitch you can’t promise us that 12 is any safer than 4 right now. I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again; you’ll never be able to guarantee my safety. I’ll leave 4 when I’m good and ready. I won’t have my hand forced because of some lone terrorist.”

“I’ll need to tell military intelligence about you blabbing to the boy,” Haymitch grumbles. “It’s the
only lead we have.”

I nod curtly. “Fine. If they can track down Lorraine and her kids maybe they’ll be able to find out who Milo spoke to.”

We exchange gruff goodbyes and hang up, turning the room into heavy silence. Peeta looks up at me with worry filled eyes. He wets his lips.

“You don’t think that…”

I shake my head fiercely. “No. I don’t think that at all.”

My lack of conviction doesn’t go unnoticed. But really how can I say anything with 100 percent confidence? We’ve been mislead by people we trusted in the past. I just hope my experiences have made me a better judge of character or else we could be in pretty serious trouble.

“Is everything ok?” Annie calls from behind her kitchen island. She wears a faint blush that tells me she heard quite a lot of the telephone conversation. I’m not annoyed though. I take a deep breath and grasps Peeta’s hand, pulling him to his feet.

“Everything is fine, Annie.” I reply. Because for now, at least, it is.

My conversation with Haymitch rattles me for a few days and I find the nightmares are worse than ever. But shortly afterwards I start to enjoy life at Annie’s again. It actually begins to feel like a real holiday. The only holiday I’ve ever been on. Peeta and I take care not to expose our damaged bodies to the sun too much but my skin still starts to darken while Peeta grows three new freckles on his face every day and his hair becomes even more blonde.

We swim together in the sea. Well, I swim and Peeta paddles in the shallows. My attempts to teach him to doggy paddle ended up in him swallowing a great deal of salt water and accusing me of trying to drown him. Annie had laughed hysterically. At 36 weeks pregnant she can still swim as gracefully as a dolphin while Peeta splashes about like a beached whale.

“You two should visit the sea cave,” She says to us one afternoon as we sit in the shade eating flavoured ice pops. “It’s not far from here and it’s so naturally beautiful. You can’t go home without seeing it.”

It doesn’t take much convincing. I had started to miss the freedom of home and being able to explore the forest whenever I felt so inclined. A little adventure would do me good. The very next day Peeta and I set out along the coast; our backpacks filled with fresh cheese buns and left overs from dinner. Annie had instructed us to follow the shoreline until we reach a small cove. The tide goes out at midday allowing for safe passage into the natural cave. It doesn’t take us long. The sun is not yet at full strength and we make it to the cove in under an hour.

“There it is!” Peeta exclaims, pointing to an area where the rocks jut out into the sea. The tide has already started to recede revealing a sandy trail under the shallow water.

“First one there gets all the cheese buns,” I shout with a playful grin before I take off running. I hear Peeta curse and turn to see him chasing after me. I laugh musically and splash into the shallows, steadying myself against the rock face as I follow the underwater pathway that leads us a little way out before coming round the side of the cliff. I gasp at the sight before me. At high tide this place must be completely flooded, but now the waters have receded to reveal a beautiful private beach inside the cliffs. I wander further in and come to a stand still beside a stunning rock pool full of crystal clear blue water. A natural waterfall cascades down into it from out of the rocks
and daylight creeps in through cracks in the cave walls. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life!

“Wow,” Peeta breathes, coming to stand beside me. I nod mutely. I don’t think my vocabulary is colourful enough to do this place justice.

I drop my backpack off my shoulder and it lands with a thud on the sand. I hook my fingers under my shirt and lift it over my head revealing my bathing suite. Annie convinced me to leave my one-piece behind and borrow one of her bikinis. It isn’t half as bad as I was expecting although I still feel a little uncomfortable bearing so much of my skin…so many of my scars.

“What you doing?” Peeta asks as I step out of my shorts. I feel his eyes on me and try not to blush.

“Going swimming,” I respond with a grin as I lower myself into the rock pool. The water only just comes up to my chest. “It’s not deep.”

Peeta sheds him clothes quickly and I try not to stare at his toned torso, tanned from a few weeks in the sun. I duck my head under the water to cool the heat in my cheeks and resurface to find Peeta standing in front of me.

“Katniss Everdeen, were you ogling?” He asks with a smirk.

I try to scowl but fail miserably so instead I cup my hands in the water and splash Peeta in the face. “I do not ogle.” I say tersely although it’s hard to keep the smile off my face.

“Well,” Peeta says, launching forward and catching me around the waist. “I hope you don’t mind that I do, in fact, ogle.” His gaze drops down the triangular bits of fabric covering my breasts. Now I really do blush. “You are beautiful.”

I shove his bare chest playfully, feeling my heart thud so hard in my chest that I’m sure Peeta can hear it. I feel weak in the knees when he says things like that. His brows knit together briefly and I wonder what’s got him thinking.

“We…kissed in a cave a long time ago. Real or not real?”

“Real,” I whisper hoarsely and let my eyes flicker to his lips which curve upwards into a smile.

We crash together. I’m able to easily wrap my legs around his hips as the water makes me almost totally weightless. Peeta’s hands glide across my wet skin and I gasp when they settle on top of my little bikini bottoms. The flimsy material doesn’t create much of a barrier and I feel his fingers lightly clench my buttocks. He tastes salty from the sea water I splashed at him and little droplets fall from his blonde curls onto my cheeks. We part after what feels like an eternity, lips swollen and chests heaving from our exertions. I reach up to capture his lips again but he turns his head slightly so that I just brush the corner of his mouth. I make an indignant sound and he chuckles, resting his forehead against mine.

“Those cheese bun won’t eat themselves,” he says huskily and at that moment I am genuinely torn between my favourite baked treat and the feeling of my boyfriends hands on my body. My mental confliction must be reflected in my expression because Peeta laughs and pulls me to the edge of the rock pool. “Eat first, play later,” he tells me with a wink.

I lay our towels side by side to make a sort of picnic blanket while Peeta digs in our backpacks for the food and the flask of water we left in the freezer overnight. Most of the ice melted during our journey, leaving behind perfectly chilled water. He tosses it to me and freezing little drops of condensation fly off and land on my hot skin making me shriek. We feed each other the buns and tuck into a salad of leftover crab meat and the prawns from last nights supper. Seafood is fast becoming a new favourite of mine. It’s much lighter to eat than game and is perfect for the
summer. I decide that I’ll need to order some to be delivered to District 12. After lunch we explore the rest of the cave and Peeta finds a way to crawl onto a ledge behind the waterfall. We were already alone in the cave but for some reason it feels even more private behind such an incredible wall of water. I can’t resist kissing Peeta again and he presses his body tightly to mine as our hands explore each other. We return to the rock pool and I convince Peeta to give me a second chance at swimming lessons. He learns easier in the still waters without the waves to contend with and after about half an hour he can swim from one side of the pool to the other without much help from me.

“I can carry on teaching you at home,” I say as we pull ourselves out onto the sand and start to dry off. “I learnt to swim in the lake in the woods. I could take you there.”

Peeta opens his mouth to reply but something catches my attention and I hold my hand up to hush him. He tilts his head questioningly as I turn my Capitol-repaired ear to the mouth of the cave.

“I thought I heard something,” I whisper. Over the sound of the waterfall it’s hard to believe I could hear anything else at all but the Capitol did too good a job in repairing the damage done after my first games.

“I don’t hear anything,” Peeta says after a moment’s silence. I can see him straining to listen to whatever has gotten me spooked. He starts drying himself again but then suddenly turns back around with wide eyes. He’s heard it too. A sort of consistent splashing noise coming from outside the cave. Its like…footsteps in water.

The late afternoon sun has created a hazy atmosphere and I have to squint to let my eyes adjust. But I definitely see something now; a lone figure. Peeta grabs hold of my wrist and pulls me protectively to his side. For some reason we both sense the threat in this situation.

“Who are you?” Peeta asks, and I can tell from his voice he is trying to sound calm yet authoritative. He wants this person to know that he means no harm unless provoked.

A distinctly female laugh bounces off the cave walls. “Don’t you recognise me at all, Peeta?”

The figure draws closer and Peeta gasps long before I make the connection. I take in her shadowy appearance; I see her poker straight hair and angular jaw and suddenly my brain catches up.

Lorraine.

I want to scream and I want to cry. Why didn’t I listen to Haymitch? All the evidence was there and I chose to ignore it. I chose to put myself and Peeta in danger. This woman; my neighbour and so-called friend, had deceived me. And now I’m pretty sure she’s here to kill me.
Chapter 15

Of all the times I have stared death in the face, never once has it felt so personal. In the games, even during the war, the people who fought against me did so to save their own skins. I didn’t know them and although they knew the Mockingjay, the symbol of the rebellion, they didn’t know me, Katniss Everdeen.

But this...this is different. I gape in astonishment as Lorraine presses ever closer into the cave. Her eyes, once alight with motherly kindness and compassion, are now so clearly filled with rage and hatred. I feel Peeta’s grip tighten around my wrist and I gulp nervously. The last thing we need right now is for the stress of this situation to cause him to have an episode. His pupils look normal but I can see the anxiety building within him and he frowns deeply at Lorraine.

“What are you doing here?” His stunned question echoes around the whole cave. “How did you find us?”

Lorraine stands a short distance from us and smiles in an eerily calm way. “I asked your friend,” she replies and I feel the blood drain from my face.

Annie. Was she hurt? Was Lorraine capable of such a thing? I hear Peeta make a pained noise deep in his chest and I know he is wondering the same.

“What do you want?” He demands, his voice low and gruff.

Lorraine doesn’t answer. Instead she pulls a gun from her back pocket and Peeta stiffens by my side. Her lip curls viciously but there is no mistaking the slight tremble in her hands. I frown deeply. A trained assassin she clear is not.

“Why?” I ask simply. I can think of nothing I could have done to deserve such hatred from this woman. Hadn’t I welcomed her into my District, my village, my home? Didn’t Peeta and I form an attachment to her children? I had confided in her and trusted her. Had she really been planning my demise all along?

“Because you’re a murderer,” Lorraine spits as she takes a threatening step towards us.

“That’s a little hypocritical,” Peeta retorts. “Considering what you appear to have in store for us.”

Lorraine narrows her eyes and I silently curse his quick tongue. There must be a rule somewhere about not pissing off the person holding a gun to your head and he’s just gone and broken it.

“Lorraine,” I say calmly, holding my hands up as a sign of peace. “This doesn’t have to happen. We can talk…”

“That’s not a privilege you gave to Alma Coin before you shot her through with an arrow!” She shrieks. Something tells me that Lorraine is not just an angry political support. Coin meant something more to her, I can see it in her eyes. But regardless of her connection to Alma, she is obviously in the dark about that woman’s true nature.

“Alma Coin talked a lot actually,” I respond with a scowl. “I never liked much of what came out of her mouth. Did you know that she wanted to keep the Hungers Games running for one final death match between Capitol children?” I watch as Lorraine’s stony exterior falters momentarily and the hand holding the gun droops ever so slightly. Words continue to spill out of my mouth. “Did you also know that she tried to have me killed because she was worried that I might prove to be a threat to her political career? Or that she ordered an attack outside the Presidential Mansion
that resulted in dozens of innocent children being blown to bits, including my own little sister?!!"

“You’re lying!” Lorraine screams, raising her arm up again and aiming straight at my head. “You Victors…you think the world owes you because you won some twisted competition by lying and cheating a killing your way to success. You killed in those arenas and then you killed Alma Coin in cold blood. But instead of paying the price for your crimes you get to live out the rest of your days in your fancy Victors house with a monthly salary paid for by the good people of Panem while everyone else struggles to survive in the aftermath of a rebellion that you started!”

“It’s not like that!” I insist although by now I see it is too late to try and convince her of my innocence. There can be no reasoning with something this emotionally charged.

I flinch at the sound of her cocking the gun although I notice the slight hesitation in her actions. I feel Peeta beside me tightening up like a coil and before Lorraine has time to think about firing Peeta shoves me aside, lunging forward with a roar. He tackles Lorraine round the waist and forces her arm up causing her to fire her shot into the air. The sound jars me but I find myself frozen to the spot as Lorraine and Peeta tumble to the ground. He pins her beneath him and shouts out to me for help, bringing me back to myself. I run to my backpack and search frantically for anything that might be used to restrain her but I find nothing.

My heart stops at the sound of Peeta’s pained groan and my neck snaps up in time for me to see Lorraine bash him hard in the side of the head with butt of her gun. It dazes him just long enough for her to gain the upper hand and to throw him off and roll out from under him. I choke on a gasp as she raises her gun again and shoots Peeta in the leg, her previous apprehension wiped away. He yowls in pain and the sound cuts through me to the very bone. Without so much as a second thought I grab hold of the picnic knife from lunch and throw it as hard as I can. It stinks itself into Lorraine’s shoulder and she drops the weapon as she stumbles backwards into shallow water. I hadn’t even noticed the tide starting to return. I don’t have a single second to waste. I scramble to my feet and launch myself at her before she can recover. However I greatly underestimate her strength and I cry out when his fist connects with my cheek. She rolls us and I kick wildly when she forces my face into the water. The salt stings my eyes and water shoots up my nose and burns down the back of my throat as I splutter.

Lorraine rips the knife from her shoulder with one hand and pins me down with the other. She raises the knife above me and I squeeze my eyes shut and think of Prim. If I am to die I can at least take comfort in knowing that I will soon be reunited with my sister. I wait for the blade to fall but it doesn’t come. Instead a single shot rings out and Lorraine pitches forward on top of me. I catch a glimpse of the life fading from her eyes as blood seeps from a wound in her chest. My body shakes with adrenaline as I throw her limp form off of me and gasp for air. I hear my name being called over the sound of my own heart beat thumping in my ears and I stumble on my hands and knees towards Peeta. He is lying on his side against the cave wall. I prise the gun from his tightly clenched fist and force his wide eyes to look at me as I cradle his pale face in my hands.

“Peeta,” I sob and it’s enough to tear him out of his shock.

“I’m ok,” He whispers over and over, clearly trying to convince himself as much as me.

“But your leg,” I exclaim, scanning him for injury.

“She shot the wrong one,” He says with a pained smile and tugs on his pant leg to expose his artificial limb and the damage caused by the bullet. There is no doubt that he’ll need a new one.

“It’s still connected to my nervous system,” Peeta explains with a grimace. “Hurts like hell!”

I immediately push his pant leg up further and set about removing the limb. Peeta has never let me
see his leg up close before let alone touch it so I’m not at all sure of what I’m doing. I fumble awkwardly until my fingers run over a raised bump at the back of his knee. I press it cautiously and Peeta groans in relief as the mechanical limb comes loose. I slide it away and tie up the end of Peeta’s pant leg under his stump.

“We need to get out of here,” I say, glancing back at Lorraine’s body lying face down in the water. The tide is coming in fast and with only one leg, Peeta is going to struggle to make it over the rocks. “Can you stand?” I ask.

He nods and I offer my hand to help him but within moments of sitting upright his eyes roll into the back of his head and he falls. I grunt as I try to support his weight and lower him back down gently. That’s when I see the blood on the rocks behind him and I reach out to touch the back of his head. My hand comes away wet, sticky and warm with fresh blood.

“Peeta!” I screech, shaking him violently. He must have hit his head when Lorraine threw him off her and unconsciousness is a bad sign when it comes to head injuries. I know he needs medical help fast. My shaking finally succeeds in rousing him.

“Hurt my head,” he mumbles. Every word slurs into the next.

“Please, you have to get up,” I plead, tugging on his arms. “We need to get out of this cave!”

“I’ll try,” He responds with a far away voice and I bite my lip to try and keep myself from panicking. He makes it to his feet and I sling his arm over my shoulder but he still wobbles dangerously on his good leg. His weight makes each step an uphill struggle and we both stumble as we wade into the shallows.

“Just leave me,” He says with a laboured breath. Sea water drips from his curls and the resigned expression on his face makes me want to cry. But I won’t. I need to be strong just long enough to get us out of here.

“I will not leave you,” I hiss and as I try to get us back up on our feet. “Don’t you know by now that I can’t live without you? If you die, I die. So God damn it Peeta, help me!”

My outburst clearly shocks him but it has the desired effect. He sets his jaw determinedly and with my help he manages to get back up. The tide has already come in so far. The route we took to get into the cave is now submerged under waist high water. It’s too dangerous to wade that close to the cliffside. The waves will knock us off balance and throw us against the rocks.

“We need to swim,” I decide. Peeta pales even more than before.

“You know I can’t…” He trails off, leaning heavily against my side. I know he can’t swim, but we have to try or else we’ll be stranded.

“It’s the only way,” I say, pulling us into deeper water. Then I get an idea. “Turn onto your back,” I instruct him. “I’m a pretty strong swimmer. If you can float, I can pull us ashore. The tide should help to push us inland anyway.”

I don’t give Peeta much time to argue. I help him to float onto his back and slip one of my arms around his chest while I use to other to start paddling us backwards. My father taught me how to swim in the lake when I was very young. When Prim was old enough to start learning too Father taught me how to rescue someone from the water. It was just a precaution in case Prim ever got into difficulty but I have never been more thankful for that training until now. Nonetheless, it’s not as easy in practise as it is in theory. The tide is strong, and although it does seem to be pushing us in the right direction, the waves nearest the shore break early and I find myself gulping back
seawater in an attempt to keep Peeta above water. I cough and splutter but finally I can feel the sandy seabed beneath me. I drag Peeta the rest of the way and collapse at the waters edge, vomiting the salty water and heaving in great big lungful’s of air.

“We made it,” I gasp, rising up onto my hands and knees and wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. There is no response from Peeta for he is once again unconscious. I lower my ear to his chest and heave a sigh of relief when I hear the gentle beat of his heart. He’s breathing, but he’s still losing blood. I look frantically around the beach. It’s utterly deserted and completely exposed. I scroll through the options in my head. Either I go and find help, or I wait for help to arrive. Either way the odds are stacked against Peeta. There is no way he can make it back to Victors Village on one leg but leaving him behind is out of the question. This isn’t the arena. There will be no parachutes, no feasts. We are on our own. I feel panic rising in my chest.

“Help!” I scream into the air. I don’t know who I’m calling for. Only Annie knew we were coming to the cave and for all I know she might be…Lorraine might have… I choke on a sob and call out again.

“Don’t think anyone’s coming,” Peeta slurs and I snap my gaze back to his hooded blue eyes. He looks dangerously out of it. I touch his cheek tenderly.

“Peeta,” I whimper. “I don’t know what to do.”

He smiles weakly and opens his arms to offer me an embrace. “Come here,” He says and I blink back my tears as I lean into him. We lay in each others arms as the tide laps gently around our ankles. The setting could possibly be described as romantic if it weren’t for the fact that Peeta is once again staring death in the face. But I push that from my mind and force myself to focus on the rhythmic sound of his heart beating against my cheek. My head snaps up suddenly and Peeta observes me with curiosity.

“What is it?” He asks. For the second time today my sensitive ear has picked up on a sound that Peeta can not hear. It sounds like distant thunder but there isn’t a single cloud in the sky. I tilt my head towards the sound and it becomes louder. Peeta hears it now too. Whatever it is, it’s coming closer. That’s when I recognise the sound and as I raise my head up I catch sight of a hovercraft emerging over the cliffs. The roar of the engines shakes the ground but this hovercraft smaller than the ones I remember from the war and painted on its underside is a large red cross. It whips up the sand as it begins to lower onto the beach and I crouch over Peeta to protect him as he drifts in and out of consciousness. I hear my name being called and I squint my eyes at the lone figure waving from the hovercraft ramp.

“Brig!” I call out and the man runs down the ramp and across the beach, followed by two other figures dressed in medical attire and carrying some sort of stretcher.

“Katniss!” He calls back and slides onto his knees beside me. He looks grave when he notices Peeta’s condition.

“How did you find us?” I ask, barely able to hold back my tears.

“Annie,” He replies quickly and waves at the medics to quicken their pace. “Get him up!” He commands. “He needs to get to the hospital.”

The medics and Brig ease Peeta onto the stretcher as I hover anxiously beside them, grasping one of Peeta’s hands tightly in my own. He groans when they lift him.

“It’s ok,” I say soothingly, almost jogging to keep up with the pace of the medics as they transport him onto the hovercraft. They immediately hook him up to monitoring equipment and I find
myself being jostled out of the way as they check his vital signs and insert an IV-line into his hand. Peeta doesn’t seem to be awake but he flinches all the same. A firm hand rests on my shoulder and I turn to face another medic who must have been waiting on board.

“Miss Everdeen,” She says gently. “We need you to step aside.”

I nod hesitantly and Brig guides me to the front of the hovercraft away from the medical team and away from Peeta. I lurch slightly as the hovercraft lifts into the air and Brig helps fasten me into a seat before covering my shoulders with his jacket. I hadn’t paid much attention to the fact that I’m dressed only in my shorts and a bikini top. I had to leave the rest of my belongings in the cave.

“4 has some of the best doctors outside of the Capitol,” Brig says comfortably, taking the seat beside me. “We’ll be at the hospital in a little over 10 minutes. Peeta will be just fine.”

“Is Annie ok?” I ask frantically. I heave a huge sigh of relief when Brig nods his head.

“She wasn’t injured but that woman shook her up and she went into premature labour. Her phone line was cut but somehow she managed to make it all the way to my house. I got her to the hospital and that’s when she told me I had to find you.”

“The baby?” I whisper. If anything happened to Annie or her child…

“Hadn’t yet been born when I left,” Brig responds. “Your mother is doing everything she can to help.”

The journey to the hospital feels like the longest journey I have ever taken. I wring my hands anxiously and bite my cheeks until I can taste blood. When we finally land on the hospital roof I watch helplessly as Peeta is wheeled away from me. They say he needs surgery. Something about possible swelling of his brain due to the head injury. I barely understand a word of the medical jargon but it’s enough to throw me into a deep panic. Even the technique Peeta taught me seems to have no effect on my erratic breathing and Brig is forced to pick me up and carry me down a flight of stairs as I sob. I don’t take much notice of where we are going until he sets me down on a soft couch and hands me a cup of cold water.

“Where are we?” I hiccup, trying to hold my hands still long enough to take a sip.

“The waiting lounge,” Brig replies softly. “You can stay and rest here until Peeta is out of surgery. Then I’ll take you straight to him.”

I don’t want to rest but my limbs suddenly feel like dead weights and my eyelids start to droop. I raise the cup towards my nose and sniff. It smells sweet, not like water.

“It’s just a little sleep syrup,” Brig says with a guilty expression and he catches me as I fall sideways. “Just enough to help you rest for a few hours.”

Don’t make me sleep! I say, although I’m pretty sure not a single word comes out of my mouth. Sleeping at a time like this will surely induce some horrific nightmares and I’ll be trapped there under the influence of sleep syrup. I battle to keep my eyes open but I’m powerless to overcome the effects of the drug and I slip away into oblivion.
Chapter 16

I sense the presence of another person before I’ve even fully roused myself. My body feels as heavy as a brick and but I manage to crack open one eye and find the wrinkle-edged eyes of my ex-mentor staring back at me. He’s close enough for me to smell the faint whiff of alcohol that seems to secrete from his pores even when he’s not been drinking.

“You’re here,” I croak. My mouth is as dry as an old boot; a side effect from the sleep syrup. Haymitch hands me a glass of water that he seems to have ready and waiting and I accept it eagerly, gulping it back noisily.

“Of course I’m here, Sweetheart,” He replies as softly as his gruff voice will allow. “Brig had the sense to call me and the President agreed to fly me out here. Got here ‘bout 20 minutes ago.”

“Peeta? Is he…?”

“Still in surgery,” Haymitch explains. “He fractured part of his skull. Doctors were worried about damage to his brain but they say he’s outta the woods now.”

I must look absolutely petrified because Haymitch leans forward to pull me tight against his chest. He strokes my hair softly as I weep pitifully into his shirt. “The boy is going to be fine, Katniss,” He whispers. “He’ll make a full recovery.”

I pull away and wipe my tears with the back of my hand. “It’s not that,” I whisper bitterly. “I put him in danger again, Haymitch. And Annie too! I should have listened to you, I should have known…”

Haymitch tugs on my chin and forces me to look at him. “You listen here,” He commands. “That woman was a psychopath but she was very good at hiding who she really was. So none of this is your fault, you hear me?”

I nod mutely as I fight to control the wobble in my lower lip. Haymitch pinches it gently between two fingers before leaning back. “You didn’t put Peeta in danger,” He assures me. “You will always be at risk because of your status but that boy would follow you into the pits of Hell if it meant keeping you safe.”

I know that much is true but it doesn’t make me feel any less guilty. I chew the inside of my cheek and stare down at my hands. Only then do I become aware that I’m still draped in Brigg’s jacket with not much else on underneath. I gasp and blush full crimson but Haymitch tosses a backpack into my lap. I dig inside and pull out a cotton t-shirt, smiling appreciatively at Haymitch as I tug over my head.

“Annie is fine too,” Haymitch continues as I fish around inside the bag, finding more items of clothing belonging to me and to Peeta.

“Has she had the baby?” I ask, slipping my bare feet into a pair of worn pumps. The small twitch of a smile on Haymitch’s face settles my anxiety and I sigh in relief. “I want to go and see her,” I say urgently, jumping up from the couch. Haymitch grabs hold of my wrist before I can run off.

“They found Lorraine’s body,” He says with grim satisfaction. “President Paylor has ordered a full investigation into who the terrorist group really were and how they gave the slip to her security guys.”

I begin to gnaw on my lip. “Do you know what happened to Lorraine’s two kids?”
Haymitch shakes his head. “There’s been no sign of them,” He replies. “Paylor has a team searching for them as we speak.”

“They’re just children,” I insist. ‘And I murdered their mother,’ My mind whispers.

“I know,” Haymitch says, resting his hand on my shoulder. “And they will be found.”

The maternity ward inside the hospital has the most unusual smell. It’s not unpleasant. It’s like freshly laundered bed sheets and something else; something sweet. I find myself drawing the scent deep into my nostrils as Haymitch guides me along a narrow corridor towards the post-natal suite. Its way past midnight but the gentle mutterings of new mothers and the responding coos and whimpers of their babies tells me that there are few who are actually asleep. We turn a corner and I catch sight of Brig seated outside of a closed door. He tilts his head up when he hears our approaching footsteps and his eyes flit to me. He smiles apologetically; clearly feeling guilty about drugging me earlier. I nod my head subtly to signify my forgiveness and Haymitch claps him on the shoulder before shaking his hand.

“How is she doing?” He asks, taking the words right out of my mouth.

“Tired,” Brig responds flatly, obviously feeling exhausted himself. “She’ll be happy to see you though,” He says to me and gestures to the door behind him.

I hesitate momentarily before twisting the handle and pushing the door open. It groans a little on its hinges and I flinch at the offending noise. The room inside is softly lit but it’s not difficult for me to make out the auburn coloured hair of my friend and fellow Victor, propped up against and surrounded by a mass of pillows in a hospital bed. She smiles weakly and waves me closer with a flick of her small hand. I cross the room towards her and as I get closer and my eyes adjust to the dim lighting. I then notice that the pillow pressed tightly against her chest is not a pillow at all. I gasp but quickly cover my mouth with my hand to stifle the sound. Annie smiles again, wider this time, before her eyes settle back on the tiny new born infant swaddled in her arms.

“I let me backpack slide off my shoulder and drop down into the chair next to her bedside. My eyes are wide and my jaw is slack. I can’t tear my gaze away from the little plump, pink face peeking out of a blue blanket. I mesmerised by the blonde wisps of hair atop of his head and the little spattering of freckles under his closed eyes.

“Annie,” I whisper in wonderment. “He’s…beautiful.”

“He’s his daddy’s boy,” Annie says with more clarity in her eyes than I think I’ve ever seen as she places a delicate kiss on her son’s forehead.

“Does he have a name yet?” I ask.

“His name is Finlay” She replies softly. “It means ‘fair-haired hero’.”

“It’s perfect,” I say, feeling the sting of fresh tears in my eyes. Finlay. A nod to his late father yet with a meaning so fitting and personal. Annie’s little hero. He saved her from insanity.

“Would you like to hold him?” Annie asks, catching me off guard. I’ve been around children before, of course, but never one as young as Finlay. Did I even know how to hold him?

“It’s easy,” Annie says, reading my thoughts. “Position your arms like a cradle. That’s it.” She instructs me to lift one elbow slightly higher before leaning forward and gently depositing her blanket-wrapped child into the crook of my arm. “See, his head is supported by this arm and use
your other hand to support his body. You can just pat his bottom or rock him gently if he gets fidgety but he’s already had a feed so he’ll probably stay fast asleep for now.”

Suddenly the unusual scent of the ward makes sense to me. It’s the smell of babies. I drop my nose to the crown of Finlay’s head and smile. His fragrance is so warm and comforting and utterly intoxicating. I trace the shape of his feathery blonde eyebrows with my little finger and feel of tug of desire deep within me when his eyelids flutter and open to reveal emerald eyes, identical to both his mother and father.

“I knew you’d be a natural,” Annie comments as she reclines back against the pillows. “Which is why I’d like to ask you to be Finlay’s godmother...If you want to, of course.”

My head snaps up and I stare incredulously at Annie’s hopeful expression. “You want me... Annie, I’m not... I mean I don’t know what to say... Me?!”

Annie locks her eyes on mine with a look of pure conviction. “Finlay doesn’t have any living relatives. No grandparents. No aunts, uncles or cousins. No siblings. Finnick spoke so highly of you and I know he would want you to be in his son’s life,” She reaches over and rests a hand on my knee. “Please say yes.”

My mouth gapes like a fish out of water and I gulp down the lump forming in my throat. I look down at Finlay and then back at Annie’s pleading green orbs. How could I say no?

“Yes,” I croak. “I would be honoured.”

Annie beams a thousand watt smile and squeezes my knee. “I want to ask Peeta too,” She says. “To be Finlay’s godfather.”

I smile weakly. “He’ll be thrilled,” I respond. Annie picks up on my emotions and the smile drops from her face to be replaced with a look of serious concern.

“He’s ok, isn’t he?” She asks. “Brig told me he was injured.”

Little Finlay whimpers in my arms and I pat him gently as Annie had instructed me to do. “He’s in surgery now,” I reply. “Haymitch says the doctors are sure he’ll make a full recovery.”

“I’m so sorry,” Annie says with a sniffle. I look up to see fresh tears on her cheeks. “I should have never told that woman where you were...I should have been braver, like Peeta was in the Capitol but...”

“Hey,” I say sternly. “You don’t need to apologise. It’s me who should be apologising to you! You were only in danger because of me. If anything had happened to you...or to Finlay because of me I would have never been able to forgive myself.”

“She never actually hurt me,” Annie says. “Finlay could have been ready to be born without all that commotion for all I know. Besides, we’re both fine. And Peeta will be fine too.”

Finlay whimpers again, louder this time and Annie opens her arms to take him back. I stand up and gently place him in her embrace, shaking my arms a little to get the blood flowing again. I try not to stare as she pulls down her hospital gown to expose her left breast and coaxes Finlay to latch on.

“Will you stay with me?” She asks. “Just for a little while.”

“Yes,” I say and settle back into the chair, my eyes glued to the sight of Finlay suckling from his mother. I should be embarrassed but instead I am simply in awe. Annie has taken to motherhood
like a duck to water but really I never had any doubts that she would. I find my eyelids becoming heavy once more. I lean my head back against the chair and let sleep take me in its hold.

It’s not easy to sleep in a hospital. The lights are never completely switched off and the noise from other patients travels easily through the bare corridors. It felt like only minutes had past since I shut my eyes when a midwife entered Annie’s room to check her blood pressure and her temperature. She took a sleeping Finlay from her arms and tucked him into a little cot on wheels that was placed next to her bed. Finlay woke again a couple of hours later for another feed and shortly after that came a second visit from a different midwife. By the time morning came I had counted a least 5 interruptions to my sleep.

I wake stiff and fuzzy-headed from sleeping in a chair all night. Annie looks pale from exhaustion but a smile still plays on her lips. Little Finlay sleeps soundly beside her in his cot, the blanket still wrapped tightly around his tiny body. I raise my arms up to stretch out my back before grabbing my backpack and treading quietly across the room, out into the corridor. Brig has gone, no doubt back to his own house and his wife. I spot a ladies toilet across the hall and splash my face with cool water from the sink. I find a toothbrush and tooth paste in my backpack along with a deodorant can. Haymitch only packed me one t-shirt so it’ll have to do for now. I freshen up as best I can before wandering back into the corridor. I have no idea how to find Haymitch or, more importantly, Peeta. Surely he must be recovering from surgery by now.

“Excuse me,” I call to a passing nurse. She barely looks up from the chart in her hands and hurries past me without a word. I huff indignantly and realise I will have to find my own way. I follow the labyrinth of corridors through the hospital, finally coming across a sign pointing towards the post-op ward.

“I’m looking for Peeta Mellark,” I say to a grey-headed doctor in scrubs. “Is he here?”

He eyes me warily. “I’m sorry young lady. Visiting hours aren’t until 10am.”

“I just need to know if he’s ok!” I insist.


“Can I see him?” I ask frantically. Haymitch’s expression makes me more than a little uneasy.

“He’s a little…dazed,” He says cautiously in a low voice. He circles his arm around my shoulders and steers me along another series of corridors. “He came round from the anaesthetic not knowing where he was or what had happened to him. The doctors are unsure what effect this injury may have had on top of the trauma caused by his hijacking.”

“I don’t understand,” I stutter. “You said he was ok! He’s going to be ok, isn’t he?”

Haymitch hushes me as two nurses scurry pas and cast us suspicious looks. “They don’t want you near him in case it sets off one of his episodes,” He whispers.

“That’s bullshit!” I exclaim, drawing attention from several patients. “They can’t keep me away from him, Haymitch! I need to be with him!”

“Keep it down!” Haymitch hisses and pulls me round a corner out of sight. “I never said I agreed with that plan. Why do you think I’m trying to sneak you in? I know you need Peeta as much as he needs you. I’m not about to separate the two of you.”
I sigh in relief and fall into step behind him as he leads me through an unmarked door into a ward that feels less like a hospital and more like a laboratory. There are no members of staff to be seen but I can hear the faint sound of voices. Haymitch puts his finger to his lips to command me to keep quiet as we continue along. The voices become louder and suddenly aware of whom one of the voices belongs to.

“I remember.” I hear him say. His voice is cracked a weak. “I remember.”

“What do you remember, Peeta?” Another voice. One I don’t recognise.

“I remember!” Peeta responds irritably.

“He’s been saying it over and over since he woke up after surgery,” Haymitch says quietly, answering my silent question. We pause outside the room from which the voices are coming from. There is a circular window in the door that I am desperate to peer through but Haymitch holds me back.

“What does he mean?” I ask, my brow furrowing with concern.

Haymitch shrugs lazily. “We don’t know. Maybe he remembers Lorraine and the accident. Maybe he remembers leaving 12 and coming to 4. Or maybe…what he thinks he remembers if actually the false memories put in his head by the Capitol.”

I gulp nervously. Could Peeta’s head injury have caused him to relapse so far that now he once again believed all those hideous, fabricated memories implanted into his mind during his hijacking? If that were true, he could be as dangerous and volatile as he was after his initial rescue. All those walls that we fought hard to tear down between us could have been rebuilt, stronger and higher than ever. What if he doesn’t remember me? Or worse, he remembers me as a Capitol mutt?

“You have to go in,” Haymitch says urgently, drawing me from my thoughts. “That idiot of a doctor has been with Peeta for hours and he hasn’t made the slightest progress.”

“But…but what if he…?”

“Let’s face it,” He interrupts. “Whether he recites a romantic poem or lunges for your throat at least it’ll be some sort of improvement on this.” He stabs his finger at the door from which behind Peeta is muttering the same sentence over and over again. “Go,” He urges and actually takes me hand and places it on the door handle.

I fight to control the tremor in my muscles and squeeze the handle tightly in my palm. I count to three in my head, turn the handle and step into the room.

“What…! Who are you?” A fair-haired doctor inquires of me. “You can’t be in here.”

I barely acknowledge him for my eyes solely on Peeta. He tired and sickly, propped up ever so slightly in a hospital bed. He has a drip attached to one arm and his head is encased in bandages.

“Peeta,” His name escapes from me as a whisper but to my surprise he hears me and his lips tug upwards into a tiny smile.

“I…I remember,” He croaks, and I find myself drawing closer to him. His eyes hold no malice, no confusion. Only…

“Young lady, I am asking you to please leave!” The doctor barks and I am vaguely aware of him calling for assistance. “I will not allow you to interfere with my patient.”
I hear a commotion out in the corridor, a spattering of curse words from a familiar gruff voice and then hands grabbing onto my clothes and my arms.

“Get your hands off her!” Haymitch bellows as I am man-handled towards the door. “She has every right to be here!”

“Peeta!” I cry, thrashing against the two security guards who dare to pull me away from him. He groans mournfully and tries to lift his hand towards me.

“I remember! I remember!” He continues to rant even as I am dragged out into the hallway where Haymitch too is being held tightly by uniformed men.

“Let me go!” I shriek.

The fair-haired doctor approaches me with his hands raised as a sign of no aggression. “Miss Everdeen,” He says calmly. “I’m sorry, I didn’t recognise you before.”

“Please,” I beg. “Let me stay with him.”

“I can’t allow that right now,” He replies. “My patient is recovering from major surgery. He is weak and confused and we need to allow for a period of observation to ensure there have been no…complications.”

“He needs me!” I insist.

“Miss Everdeen, I very much doubt he even knows who you are right now.”

I open my mouth to shout, curse, spit, anything…but a faint sound travels to my ears and I pause. The doctor must here it too because his eyes widen in disbelief.

“Katniss…” Peeta voice is soft and quiet but he speaks with clarity. “Katniss…”

I feel the grip on my arms loosen ever so slightly and move quick to free myself from the security guards. I shove the doctor aside and launch back into the room. Peeta stares at me with a look I can only describe as childlike wonderment. A beautiful smile emerges on his face and I fall down at his bedside, taking his hand in my and holding it to my cheek.

“Katniss,” He whispers like a prayer, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Katniss, I remember.”

“What do you remember?”

He pauses for a moment and his eyes glaze over a little, as if he were replaying a memory. Then his smile widens.

“I remember…everything.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Hi guys. Another chapter from Peeta's POV.
Thanks for your support so far!

They say anaesthetic can do strange things to your mind. Some people experience dizziness, mental confusion, even temporary memory loss. The doctors didn’t have time to consider the possible effects anaesthetic could have on a mind such a mine; a mind damaged and traumatised by Capitol hijacking. They predicted that I would relapse, perhaps regressing back to when I was first freed from captivity and brought to District 13. They expected me to be confused and were prepared in case I turned violent. However what really happened was quite remarkable. I recall the anaesthesiologist, a sliver of a woman with greying hair, holding my hand and counting backwards from 10 as I slipped into unconsciousness. It wasn’t dark like I had expected. Instead my mind flooded with colour and vivid images and sounds. I thought they were dreams, pleasant dreams, not like the nightmares I had become accustomed to. Until I realised that they weren’t dreams at all. They were memories and happy ones at that. They weren’t the memories that I had been forced to relearn as part of my rehabilitation. These memories were of things only I could have known and up until now I had all but forgotten.

“Come now, Peeta. Let me see,” Says the soothing voice of my father. I am 8 years old and today I’m working my first real shift at the bakery. I’ve been learning alongside my parents and brothers since I was old enough to cream butter and sugar together but for the first time my mother has entrusted me with the responsibility of making a batch of butter cookies by myself. And I’ve blown it!

“She’s gonna be mad,” I whimper, cradling my burnt hand close to my chest. I had been so eager for this batch to be perfect, to see my Mom smile and praise me for my work that I had foolishly allowed myself to drift off into a daydream. The smell of scorched sugar shook me from my memories of happier times; times when the lines on my mother’s face came from laughter and not from scowling. In my haste to remove the cookies from the oven I forgot my heat-proof glove and proceeded to singe my little fingertips on the metal tray, scattering the cookies across the kitchen floor in the process. Oh yes, Mom will be mad indeed.

“She won’t be mad,” My father insists, gentling pulling me towards him and inspecting my burns with a wince. “She won’t be back for a least another hour. Plenty of time to dispose of the evidence and make a new batch.” He winks at me playfully and guides me over to the sink, running my hand under a stream of cool water.

“I’ll never be as good a baker as you,” I say forlornly, flinching as my fingers sting in the cold water.

“Peeta,” My father says seriously. “Why would you say such a thing?” He crouches beside me and tilts my chin up. “You’re a born and bred baker. A natural. You’ll be just as good as me, maybe even better! And one day, when you’re older and you’re married to some beautiful woman with…grey eyes and a dark braid….” He pauses to smirk at the blush forming in my cheeks. “You’ll be running this bakery and carrying on our family traditions.”
I sniffle and stare up at my father with love and admiration. “Really, Dad? You really think I could be in charge of the bakery? What about Mason?”

“Your brother,” Father sighs. “He’s a skilled baker but he hasn’t got a passion for it like you have. And without passion a baker’s bread just doesn’t taste as good.”

Together we gather the ingredients to start the butter cookies from scratch and Dad tosses the ruined batch into the bin.

“It’ll be you, Peeta.” He says softly. “Mellark’s bakery will belong to you.”

“So are you excited about history class today?” A sweet voice asks me and I realise I’ve been daydreaming...again. A lifetime habit it would seem. I tug on the strap of my backpack and glance sideways at my companion. Delly Cartwright; my childhood friend. She smiles innocently and tucks a blonde curl behind her ear.

“What’s so special about history class?” I ask nonchalantly, kicking at the gravel path as I trudge towards the school yard. The toe of my shoes turns grey with dust and I inwardly curse. Mom will flip if I come home with scuffed shoes. I make a mental note to polish them up before she has a chance to notice.

“You’ll ruin the leather,” Delly says with a knowing smirk. The shoes came from her father’s shop two doors down from the bakery on Merchant’s Street. “And quit pretending that you don’t know what I’m talking about!”

I do know what she’s talking about. This term our history has been focused on learning about the Dark Days and today we get paired up to work on our final project. I’ve been in a tiz about it all week but I’m not about to let Delly know that. “It’s not a big deal, Delly.” I huff. “Mr. Keller will be in charge of pairing us up so it’s not like we even get a choice.”

We wave to a few of our pals as we enter through the large gates and into the main school building.


“Cut it out,” I hiss, peering behind me to see if anyone has been eavesdropping. Delly is one of the very few people who know about my secret crush. I never actually told her, she just seemed to guess one day. She’s been a real support to me in all honesty but that doesn’t stop her from teasing me from time to time. I’m not ashamed of my feelings but Delly knows why I like to keep them private.

“Maybe you’ll get paired with her anyway,” She says when we reach our neighbouring lockers.

“Doubt it,” I scoff as I empty the contents of my backpack into the narrow cabinet. “The faculty never pair Seam kids with Merchant kids.”

The main reason for secrecy; Katniss and I are from different sides of the District. The class divide in 12 is a sensitive subject. Merchant children marry into other merchant families and those from the Seam keep to themselves. Intermarriage is rare and frowned upon by both sides. The Capitol does it’s best to keep us apart, and although we attend the same schools the void between us is blatantly obvious. Delly and I share equal opinions on such prejudices but we’re both careful to keep our opinions quiet. She fears punishment from the peacekeepers, I fear wrath from my mother.

“I see her looking at you sometimes,” Delly whispers as we walk side by side down the corridor
that leads to our class, ducking and weaving through the sea of students.

“Oh really?” I ask sceptically. I’ve been watching Katniss for years but Katniss barely notices me. “When do you see her looking at me?”

“She’s subtle,” Delly admits. “But I see her looking at you from the corner of her eye. She knows when you’re staring at her.”

“I don’t stare,” I argue but the truth is I do. I’ve been staring for 8 years, ever since I first caught sight of her. Back then I stared because I was in awe of her beauty and her voice, these days I stare to check if her cheek bones are too pointy or her clothes are more baggy than usual. Ever since the day I saw her huddled under the tree at the back of the bakery looking emaciated and weak; the day I tossed her that burnt loaf of bread, I felt I had to take care of her. I can’t offer her much. Mom would wallop me if she knew I was stealing from the bakery even though I only take what’s left over and hasn’t sold. But when the weather is too harsh for hunting or I see her looking ill I sneak a parcel of stale bread into her little sister’s locker. It’s the best I can do.

As we enter the classroom Delly starts to chat happily with the other merchant girls. I take my seat near the back of the room and flick aimlessly through the textbook on my desk. Other students file in and Mr. Keller calls for quiet as they all land in their seats. My eyes twitch of their own accord and my gaze is drawn to the desk 3 spaces in front of me and to my right. Her familiar dark braid is draped over one scrawny shoulder and she is already hunched over her textbook. Her tattered backpack rests against the table leg and I notice the zip is undone, perhaps broken. Then I see it; the crinkled paper bag I secretly gave to her sister yesterday. Mom nearly caught me pocketing the stale bread instead of giving it to the pigs. It would have been worth the beating though.

As if sensing my gaze, Katniss suddenly turns her head and looks straight at me. I blink stupidly, every word from Mr. Keller sounding muffled and far away as blood pumps in my ears. She follows my line of sight and drops her eyes to her bag before looking back up at me. I gulp nervously and she must see because the smallest smile tugs at her lips before she whips her head back around to face the front of the class.

The entire history lesson is a blur to me. I don’t even hear the name of the person I’m paired with for my assignment.

She smiled at me. That’s all that matters.

Katniss’s smile lingers in my mind even as I come round from surgery. My head feels too heavy whereas my body feels like its floating. I don’t know if it’s day or night and despite only just waking up I already feel tired. I try to swallow but my mouth is dry so I end up coughing weakly. Something touches my mouth and I flinch.

“Drink,” A voice says gently and pushes a straw past my lips. I sip slowly, allowing the water to lubricate my scratchy throat.

“How are you feeling?” The familiar voice asks me and I crack open one eye to take a look. I blink a few times as I try to focus on the blurry person before me. I know her. It’s Mrs. Everdeen. I open my mouth to speak but frown when no words come out.

“Don’t try to talk,” Mrs. Everdeen says softly as she places her hand comfortingly on my shoulder. “You still have anaesthetic in your system and the doctors have you on morphling for
your pain so you may feel a little strange.” She looks over her shoulder suddenly as if hearing a sound before turning back to me. “I’m not supposed to be in here right now,” She whispers. “But I wanted you to know that you’re safe and the surgery went well.”

I open my mouth again, determined to ask the only question burning in my mind but again I find I can’t speak the words.

“Katniss is alright,” Mrs. Everdeen tells me as if reading my thoughts. “She’s sleeping right now but I know she’ll come straight here when she wakes.”

Knowing that she is ok is enough to relax me and I feel myself drifting once more. Mrs. Everdeen says something else but I can no longer hear her. I allow myself to be pulled under with the hope that I’ll dream of Katniss again.

When I come to, however many hours later, I am startled to find a man sitting at the end of my bed. His fair hair is combed neatly and he looks to be in his mid to late 30’s. His white lab coat tells me he must be a doctor but his stare unsettles me for some reason.

“Good morning young man,” He chirps. “My name is Dr. Corwell. I am the Lead Neuropsychologist at this hospital. Can you tell me your name?”

‘Peeta Mellark’ I say….or at least I try to say. My brain says it but no words escape my mouth. I frown. I thought this might have worn off by now.

“Don’t worry, Peeta,” Dr. Corwell says with a smile. “It’s not uncommon for head injury patients to struggle with speech after surgery. I’m confident that your voice will return.”

I nod slowly in acknowledgement, feeling my head bandages rubs again the pillow.

“I have a few questions I’d like to ask to check your cognitive function.” The doctor continues, his eyes scanning a folder I didn’t notice before. “For now you can just blink once to answer ‘yes’ and twice to answer ‘no’. Do you understand?”

I nod again, frowning at the doctors patronising tone. I may not be able to talk but I’m certainly not stupid.

“Is your name Peeta Mellark?”

I blink once.

“You are 18 years of age?”

I blink again and he drones on with the rest of his questions. I answer them all easily until…

“Do you remember what happened to you?”

I purse my lips and Dr. Corwell looks at me expectantly. “Peeta, do you remember?” He asks me again.

I blink once followed by a little half blink. Dr. Corwell leans forward. “Was that a yes or a no?” He questions.

My lips part of their own accord. “I…” The single syllable sounds like a squeak and I cough a little. “I remember,” I slur, the words feeling foreign on my tongue but their meaning hitting me with full force.
I remember.

Not just what happened in the cave with Lorraine, but everything! My childhood, my family, the games…Katniss.

“Impressive,” The doctor mumbles as he scribbles something in the folder. “Can you tell me what you remember?”

“I remember,” I say again with a little more enthusiasm. I want to say more but for some reason I don’t remember how to form the words. Dr. Corwell sighs and scribbles some more. He pauses when a knock sounds at the door and stands to open it. From where I am lying I can’t see who my visitor is but I definitely recognise their voice.

“Now is not a good time, Mr Abernathy,” I hear the doctor say in a hushed tone.

“I just want to see him, doc,” Haymitch says in reply and I crane my neck to try and get a look at him. He sounds tired.

“It is my professional recommendation that visitors be kept away at this time,” The doctor says sternly. “At least until I can ascertain his psychological state. We do not know what effect this injury may have had on him.”

I whine in protest. They can’t keep me locked up in here like some lab rat. I want to see Haymitch. I want to see Katniss! I cry out to object but of course I only seem to know how to say 2 words at this point.

“I remember!” I shout frantically, drawing attention from Dr. Corwell. He looks at me from behind he door with a frown.

“What’s he sayin’?” Haymitch asks insistently. “Is he ok?”

“My patient is confused and suffering from impaired speech,” Dr. Corwell answers briskly. “It’s quite a common side effect of brain injury and I assure you I am doing all I can. Now if you would kindly leave us…”

‘Confused?’ I think. I’m not confused at all. I answered all of his questions without hesitation. I know where I am, I know what happened to me and for the first time in a long time I actually feel like me; like the old Peeta.

I jolt at the sound of the door slamming shutting. Dr. Corwell observes me with keen interest and I scowl at him.

“Now now, Mr. Mellark,” He says like a parent to a petulant child. “I understand you are frustrated but there is no need to look at me like that. I’m here to help you.”

He resumes his questioning almost immediately and I comply with a slump of my shoulders. Maybe If I can just show that I’m cooperative he will let me see Haymitch or Katniss. It feels like he interrogates me for hours and I find myself getting more and more exhausted. The questions become harder to answer with just a simple yes or no and although I can formulate an adequate response in my head I still struggle to put my thoughts into words.

“Are you angry with your situation?” Dr. Corwell asks.

I am annoyed with how pathetic I feel. I chew my lip before blinking once. Something flashes in the doctor’s eyes and he quickly writes something down in his folder.
“Are you angry with anyone?” He asks cautiously and I frown. What’s he getting at? Who would I be angry with? Lorraine? Yes, maybe. If it weren’t for her then I wouldn’t be in this situation.

Sensing my hesitation, the doctor presses on. “Are you angry with Katniss?”

I physically recoil at his question and blink twice in an exaggerated way. He eyes me with a hint of scepticism.

“Do you have feels of vengefulness or aggression towards anyone?”

Again I blink twice. Now I understand. He thinks I could be suffering from a relapse of my hijacking but if he would only just let me explain…

I sigh miserably. I can’t explain. I can barely talk!

“I remember,” I say defeatedly, feeling tears of frustration stinging in my eyes.

“What do you remember?” Dr. Corwell asks me again and this time it tips me over the edge.

“I remember!” I shout.

Suddenly the door swings wide open. It bangs loudly against the wall and Dr. Corwell jumps from his seat. He says something to the unexpected visitor but I don’t hear what it is. My eyes fixate on the face of the girl I have been longing to see.

‘Katniss.’

She stares back at me and my name falls from her lips so quietly that I can barely hear it. My lips lift into a small smile and I see relief flood her expression. But our sweet reunion is shattered when uniformed men grab hold of her at Dr Corwell’s command and haul her out of the room. I moan mournfully and reach my hand out to her, feeling a tug from the drip in my arm. She shrieks and calls to me but I am helpless.

“I remember!” I cry out as I am left alone. I strain to hear what is said in the corridor outside my room. I hear Katniss over everyone else and I focus on the strength her voice gives me. If only I could just…

“I doubt he even knows who you are?” I hear the doctor say with little concern.

I’m infuriated. Of course I know who she is! She’s…she’s…

“Katniss.” What was meant to be a shout comes out just a little louder than a whisper. I try again. “Katniss!”

This time she hears me and return to my side at a sprint. Her wild eyes hold my gaze and she reaches for my hand.

“Oh Peeta,” She murmurs as a tear slides down her flushed cheeks. She kisses the knuckles on my hand and smiles.

“Katniss,” I say, feeling tears in my own eyes. “I remember.”

She touches my face lightly beneath my bandages. “What do you remember?”

My smile widens and I tell her everything.
Peeta’s hospital bed is narrow and not designed for more than one person but that hasn’t stopped me from sharing it with him every night for the last 5 days. I haven’t left his side since the morning I barged into the room and upset the arrogant Dr. Corwell. The man had no choice but to back down when Peeta’s speech suddenly improved in my presence and he was asked to leave. Haymitch had smirked at the doctor’s retreating form before excusing himself to find coffee, giving Peeta and me some much needed privacy.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Peeta says with wonderment when we are finally alone.

“Of course I’m here,” I reply. “I was so worried about you.”

Peeta smiles deliriously and gives my hand a quick squeeze. “Katniss Everdeen is worried about me.”

I cock my brow in confusion despite the smile pulling at my lips. “Peeta, what’s going on?” I ask, bewildered. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply.

“I’m back, Katniss,” He says simply.


He laughs light heartedly and turns his blue eyes back to me, pinning me with such an intense stare that I feel almost faint. “I don’t think I ever went anywhere. I think I was always here, just...suppressed by the other guy.”

I frown at his cryptic response. “You’re not making any sense,” I say, touching his forehead with concern to feel for a fever. “Maybe I should get a nurse...”

“Katniss,” Peeta urges. “I’m fine. In fact, I haven’t felt this good in a long time...apart from my head,” He touches his bandages tentatively. “But I think a bump on the head has actually done me some good.”

He reaches for both my hands. He seems to be in awe of me as his eyes rake over my features. “I remember everything, Katniss,” He says softly. “I remember the first time I saw you. I remember the song you sang in front of the whole class on our first day of school. I remember watching you get thinner and thinner during that harsh winter after your father died. I remember tossing you that bread...” He pauses to collect himself. “And I remember how I felt.”

“How you felt?” I echo, trying to let this new information sink in. What does this even mean? Peeta sighs deeply.

“I feel like I’ve woken up from a really long dream,” He tells me and moves to touch my cheek. “But I’ve just found out that my dream is real.”

I blush at his words and squirm a little under the intensity of his gaze. “Peeta, I don’t really understand...”

“I love you, Katniss!” He exclaims, cutting me short. “Not just as part of some act or because I’ve been told that’s how I’m meant to feel. I genuinely love you...I’ve always loved you.”

I smile and touch my lips as I recall the kiss we shared that day. It had been so tender and filled with emotion that even the memory of it makes my heart do a little gallop. I glance at Peeta...
snoring softly beside me to make sure he hasn’t caught me in a rare moment of girly giddiness. His bandages were removed yesterday revealing the angry, stitched up scar on the back of his head and a bald patch where the doctors had shaved his scalp before surgery. The rest of his hair is getting so long that it almost hides it completely but Peeta had grumbled about looking silly.

The week has been tough and our emotional ‘reunion’ has exhausted him. The doctors assure me its normal for him to sleep more while he recovers but that doesn’t stop me from worrying. Haymitch wisely contacted Dr. Aurelius who insisted on travelling over from the Capitol to check on Peeta himself. I feel more comfortable in Dr. Aurelius’ presence compared to Dr. Corwell and hold much more confidence in his ability to assess Peeta’s mental health. He had been truly astonished by Peeta’s seemingly miraculous hijacking recovering but warned us both that his episodes may not necessarily be gone for good.

“My suspicion,” Dr Aurelius says after bombarding Peeta with numerous questions about his memories. “It that you could be suffering from a condition known as Dissociative Identity Disorder.”

“What’s that?” I ask with a frown, holding tightly to Peeta’s hand.

“Multiple personalities…” He mumbles beside me.

“It would appear that you meet much of the criteria,” Dr. Aurelius continues. “You could have been suffering from this all along but the symptoms can be hard to tell apart from other mental health disorders. I will need to assess you again more thoroughly to be sure.”

Peeta chews his lip anxiously. “And what if…what if I do have this condition? What does that mean for me?”

“Each case is different,” Aurelius replies. “There could me more than just one other personality state present within you. There is no telling when they might surface. ‘Switching’, as its known, can be triggered by anything from stress to environment.”

“So I could potentially turn back into that monster who wanted to hurt Katniss…” Peeta says fiercely, his eyes wide with panic.

“Not necessarily,” Aurelius interjects quickly. “Some personality states only surface once as a way of helping you cope with certain situations and then never surface again. Now lets not get carried away with the ‘ifs’ and ‘buts’. I’ll arrange to take you through a proper assessment in a few days time and then we’ll know for sure what we’re dealing with.”

“Why are you awake?” Peeta asks groggily, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Can’t sleep,” I reply simply, shifting onto my side. “I could ask you the same question.”

“I need to use the bathroom,” He groans.

Peeta’s artificial leg was shot through in the cave and since then he has needed help with much of his routine activities, including trips to the bathroom. I smile sympathetically at his frustration and slide out of bed to reach for his wheelchair. I wheel it alongside the bed and Peeta eyes it with distaste before hoisting himself down into the seat. For the first few days he was so exhausted he needed to be pushed but now he is able to wheel himself a short distance.

“I hate this chair,” He grumbles as he wheels himself across the room and disappears into the ensuite bathroom. He emerges a few moments later looking relieved but just as irritated.

“It’s only for a short while,” I say as I help him back up into bed. “The Capitol doctors are
working on a new leg for you; an even better one than before.”

He huffs and I stifle a giggle. I’m not used to Peeta being anything less than bright and optimistic and a small part of my mind recalls what Dr. Aurelius said about potential alter-personalities. I push the thought away hurriedly.

“Sorry,” He mumbles. “I guess I’m getting a little bit of cabin fever. I really want to see Annie and meet Finlay.”

News of Peeta’s hospitalisation and Annie’s son had reached the ears of Panem’s media and now scores of reporters had set up camp outside the hospital. Annie and Peeta had been advised to stay put in their respective hospital wards to avoid any unwanted attention.

“I’m sure Finlay is just as eager to meet his Godfather,” I say, earning a smile from Peeta. When I told him that Annie had named us as Finlay’s godparents, he had all but cried which in turn had brought tears to my eyes. Annie had given Peeta something that I wasn’t sure I could give him but seeing the joy on his face both comforted and unsettled me.

“Sorry if you’re getting bored of my company” I say with a smirk. Peeta growls playfully and drags me down under the covers with him.

“Bored of your company?” He scoffs. “Katniss, the day I say I’m bored with your company is the day they may as well declare me officially insane.” He places a kiss on the end of my nose and tugs lightly on my braid. “I’ve been waiting for you nearly my whole life. I’m not ready to let you go just yet.”

I smile bashfully. “Good. Because I’m not going anywhere.”

Another week passes and Peeta makes incredible progress. He meets with Dr. Aurelius daily to undergo ‘trigger testing’; a form of therapy designed by Aurelius himself to determine if Peeta is fit to return home without fear of suffering a hijacking relapse. So far the results look promising and no alternative personalities have made themselves known.

Peeta’s new leg arrives from the Capitol and doesn’t fail to impress. It works in much the same way as his old leg bit the new one is covered with a form of artificial skin. Peeta is eager to get back on his feet and within hours of his new leg being fitted the doctors allow him to use the physiotherapy gym. Two weeks of bed rest have left his muscles weak but he manages to cycle a mile on a static bicycle on his first try and each day his stamina improves.

His head wound heals nicely and his hair grows quickly so that even the raised, pink scar on the back of his head is almost completely hidden.

“I think it’s time we sent you home,” Dr. Aurelius says with a smile one afternoon. Peeta and I hurriedly agree and 2 days later we are pushing through the crowd of cameras and reporters, Haymitch leading the way, to a car at the front of the hospital.

I grip Peeta’s hand tightly, trying to ignore the prying questions of the media.

“Peeta, are you sick?”

“Katniss, are you and Peeta trying for another baby?”

“Peeta, are the rumours about you dying true?”

We bundle into the car, Brig at the wheel as always, and pull away quickly from the harassing
crowd.

“Well that was unpleasant,” I mumble, allowing myself to let go of the breath I had been holding in. “Do they really think we’d stop and answer all their stupid questions?”

Haymitch chuckles from the front passenger seat and turns around to face us. “The Capitol is still the Capitol. They still want to know everything there is to know about District 12’s ‘Star-crossed lovers’.”

“Is it too much to ask for a little privacy?” I ask irritably. “Surely we’ve earned that much.”

“I’ve spoken to Plutarch about releasing a statement,” Haymitch replies. “Just a little something to put the rumours to rest and keep the media happy for the time being. Nothing personal I promise.”

I nod reluctantly and look across at Peeta who has kept quiet. His face is ashen and he tugs absentmindedly on the hat he put on to cover his scar. “Are you ok?” I whisper softly, stoking the back of his hand with my thumb.

“Just a bit overwhelmed,” He responds with a shaky smile and scoots closer to me. “But I’m ok.”

Brig drives us all back to Victor’s Village to collect our belongings from Annie’s house. She was discharged a few days before Peeta and, according to Brig, has been adjusting well to life at home with a new baby. Peeta is the only one among us who hasn’t had a chance to meet Annie’s son and I can feel him shake with anticipation as we cross over the threshold into her beachside house. I note with a smile that the place already smells like babies.

Annie is sat on her couch with the television playing quietly when she sees us. She smiles wide and is quick to throw her arms around Peeta. Unlike the last time I watched them embrace, this time I’m prepared.

“Are you ok?” She asks him in a distinctly mothering tone as she places her hands on either side of his face. He smiles back at her like I’d imagine he’d smile at a sibling and nods in response.

Annie turns to me next and hugs me tightly. It seems strange to see her without her prominent baby bump. I can tell it’s not completely gone, but her baggy t-shirt hides any evidence that she was heavily pregnant only a few days ago.

“Annie,” Peeta calls, stepping tentatively towards a bassinet beside the couch. “Is…is he…”

Finlay mews suddenly from within the bassinet as if he knows he was being spoken about. Annie reacts instantly and gently lifts her son into her arms as Peeta watches with amazement. She doesn’t ask if he’d like to hold him like she did with me. Instead she effortlessly places Finlay into Peeta’s waiting arms and steps away, placing her hands against the small of her back. Finlay wiggles and whimpers but it’s no surprise to me that Peeta seems to know what to do.

He sets himself down on the couch and gentle maneuvers Finlay so that his back is propped against his knees. He supports his head and shoulders with one hand and uses the other to rub gentle circles on Finlay’s tummy. The baby calms instantly and looks up at Peeta with wide, green eyes.

“Hey little guy,” Peeta whispers and I have to bit my lip when I notice his eyes glisten with unshed tears.

“Annie,” Peeta breathes. “He’s incredible.”

Brig and Haymitch murmur in agreement from across the room and Annie smiles proudly. She
offers to make tea and Brig follows her into the kitchen to help.

“Kid has good genes,” I say as I move to sit next to Peeta on the couch. Finlay’s attention turns to me briefly and he waves his chubby baby arms around before his mouth opens into a huge yawn.

“Are you tired, little one?” Peeta coos and moves to cradle Finlay in the crook of his arm. He nuzzles against Peeta’s chest and his eyes droop before finally closing.

“Guess we know who the designated babysitter will be,” Haymitch sniggers and winks at us both. “Better start baby-proofing your house.”

Annie returns with a tray of tea and looks warmly at the sight of Finlay sleeping peacefully in Peeta’s arms.

“It’s a shame you have to go home,” She muses and I nod. I really will be sad to say goodbye to Annie and Finlay so soon and by the looks of things, so will Peeta. But the threat of danger in 12 has gone and Dr. Aurelius feels that Peeta will finish recovering much quicker at home. Nevertheless, when the time comes for us to return to the train station there are tears.

“Please visit again soon,” Annie pleads as she places a sisterly kiss on my cheek. I hug her one more time and trace my finger across Finlay’s cheek before sliding into the backseat of Brig’s car with Peeta while Haymitch takes the front passenger seat once more.

“You’ll make sure she’s alright?” I ask Brig as our journey draws to a close. Brig smiles reassuringly into his rear view mirror.

“My wife and I think of Annie as our family,” He says, sharing a knowing look with Haymitch. “And I owe it to Finnick to take care of her and his son.”

“You and Finnick were friends,” Peeta says, remember what Annie had told us on our first morning in 4.

“More than friends,” Brig says warmly and sighs deeply. “More like brothers. My mother was Margaret Cohen…but you would have known her as Mags…”

I gasp and Peeta’s jaw slackens in surprise. Suddenly I can see the resemblance; the pointed chin and rounded cheeks, the gentle eyes.

“You’re Mags’s son…” I say with understanding. I remember in the Quarter Quell when Johanna explained Mags was half of Finnick’s family. She was his mentor but also like an adoptive brother. Perhaps he and Brig and spent a lot of time together as young lads. And of course Mags volunteered for Annie has the reaping. She was protecting her and now Brig was doing the same to honour both the mother and brother he lost.

We arrive at the station and Brig helps us to lift our bags out of the truck. “Annie and Finlay will always be taken care of,” He says as he walks us towards our train platform.

Peeta and Haymitch takes turns to shake his hand firmly and I blush a little as I offer a shy kiss to his cheek, thanking him not just for Annie, but for Peeta too.

We exchange goodbyes and board our train compartment. Within moments we are in motion and from the window we watch the landscape of District 4 fade into the distance. When Haymitch disappears in search of a bar I feel Peeta grasp my hand and weave his fingers through mine. I smile and lean against his shoulder. I’m relieved to be traveling home to District 12 at last but my mind can’t help but wonder what waits for us when we get there. There are still unanswered questions about Lorraine and her two children, not to mention Peeta’s health. Dr. Aurelius still
wants to make regular phone appointments to check on his progress.

Will return to 12 be different for him now that all his memories have returned? Where does that leave us and our relationship?

I squeak when I feel a light pinch to my upper arm and turn to look a Peeta questioningly.

“Stop worrying,” He tells me with a knowing smirk before placing a kiss to place where he pinched. I roll my eyes but settle back against his shoulder. I hear him sigh contentedly.

“We’re going home.”
Chapter 19

Returning to 12 should be easy. But it’s not. Peeta’s memories come thick and fast as we drive through town from the train station towards Victors Village. Of course it’s not the first time he’s seen the devastating effect the fire bombs had on our home but now, with his all his memories returned, the sight of it impacts him that much more. Thom, who offered to pick us up, talks enthusiastically of the rebuild and I can see from the car window just how much progress has been made in our absence. Many of the houses are complete and already being occupied and some of the merchant shops are open for business. I watch Peeta carefully as we drive through town near to where his family bakery once stood. His face is impassive but every few seconds he balls his hands into tight fists before releasing them.

As we pass by the main square I notice the Memorial statue gleaming in the late afternoon sun. I inhale sharply at the memory of my last being in this place and touch my ribs subconsciously. I can’t help but think of Gale. I still have had no reply to the letter I sent. This square holds more than one nightmarish memory for me though. The statue stands right in the centre, the exact same place where Gale was tied to the whipping post and flogged within an inch of his life. I can still hear the sickening crack of the whip if I think about it for too long. I’m not sure there will ever be a time when I don’t associate the square with pain and terror.

A pang of anxiety hits me as we drive through the gate to Victor’s Village. It looks no different than before we left. Our neighbours are out enjoying the mid-summer weather, children playing happily on the green. Some of them wave at Thom and then wave again with more fervour when they recognise the 3 Victors with him. They don’t approach us as we slide out of the vehicle and I’m thankful for their respect although I notice the odd stare and whispered words behind cupped hands.

“Thanks for the ride,” Haymitch says as he claps Thom on the shoulder. He nods his head at Peeta and me before walking across to his house.

“Yeah thanks,” Peeta echoes, offering his hand for Thom to shake.

“No problem,” Thom replies with a genuine smile. “Good to have you guys back.”

He hops back in his truck and Peeta and I wave once more as he leaves the village. My eye is drawn to Peeta’s empty Victors house across the green but I try not to think too much about Lorraine or about her children who haven’t been seen or heard of in weeks.

“Let’s go inside,” I say quickly to Peeta and turn to walk up the steps of our porch. That’s when I notice them.

The primrose bushes.

I gasp sharply and drop to my knees before them. The summer heat must have been strong these past few weeks and with no one around to tend to them the poor plants have been scorched. I touch one of the withered, brown flower heads with shaky fingers and it falls to the ground.
without a sound.

“Katniss,” Peeta calls delicately from behind me. He kneels in the dirt beside me and captures my wobbling chin in his palm. “Katniss, it’s ok. The flowers will come back.”

He pulls me gently to my feet and guides me inside the house to sit at the kitchen table. He leaves momentarily to collect our bags before returning to place a kiss against the crease between my eyes.

“I’ll make us some tea,” He says, setting a kettle on the stove and opening various cupboards as if he can’t quite remember where the tea is kept.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper when he places a steaming cup of camomile in front of me. “I should be happy today; happy that we’re home and that you’re ok.”

“You don’t need to apologise for feeling sad about your sister,” Peeta tells me firmly but lovingly as he pushes a lock of hair away from my eyes. “You never have to pretend with me.” His hand lingers on my cheek for a moment before he drops it into his lap with a faint blush. Instinctively I reach out to grab that hand and pull it up to my lips to place a kiss against his knuckles.

“I’m not pretending,” I assure him. “I am happy that you’re here…with me.”

He smiles wide and I find myself doing the same. I feel the sadness ebbing away as we sip our tea in companionable silence.

“So what do we do now?” I ask, swilling the dregs of my tea around the bottom of the cup.

Peeta sits back and chews his lip thoughtfully. “Well I still have to finish the bakery,” He replies. “Hopefully I’ll be able to open in a few weeks time. Of course I’ll need to order fresh ingredients and fine-tune a few of my recipes. I might put out an advert asking for kitchen staff…”

I listen to him prattle on for a few moments with mild amusement before leaning forward and pressing my index finger to his lips. They pucker midsentence and he stares at me questioningly.

“I didn’t mean ‘what do we do now that we’re back in 12’,” I say with a small chuckle. “I mean… what do we do now?”

His Adams apple wavers as he gulps. “Oh, er…well…what do you want to?”

His sudden awkwardness is endearing. “I’m kind of tired from all the travelling,” I tell him with a shy smile. I watch his expression change as he tries to read my face for hidden meaning. It’s only late afternoon after all; although I’ve never been one for conventional bedtimes.

“Oh,” He says, his voice cracking a little. “I am too…a little. Did you…want to go upstairs?”

I nod wordlessly and hold out my hand to him. He takes it and leads me upstairs towards the bedroom. It looks no different to how we left it all those weeks ago but it smells a little musty. I push open the windows wide to allow the summer air in, remembering too that Peeta likes to sleep with them open. He clears his throat suddenly.

“I’m gonna just…use the bathroom first,” He stutters and disappears into our en-suite.

I quickly set to shaking out our crumpled duvet and plumping the pillows, pausing only to kick off my shoes and socks before throwing myself onto the bed fully clothed. I curl myself around Peeta’s pillow and breathe deeply. It smells just like him; like cinnamon and flour and something else, something musky. I hear his footsteps beside the bed and look up sharply, as if being caught
in the act of doing something naughty. He chuckles lightly.

“Couldn’t wait for me, huh?” He asks with a burst of confidence before reaching to scratch the back of his neck. He looks shy, unsure and utterly adorable.

I move aside and he climbs into the space beside me. I snuggle against his chest, bringing my hand up to rest on his shoulder. He chuckles again and I twist my neck to look up at him.

“What’s so funny?”

His fingertips trace small circles on my upper arm and his eyes flit to mine briefly. “Nothing,” He replies nonchalantly. “Just...can’t believe I’m lying next to Katniss Everdeen.”

I snort and roll my eyes. “Peeta, we’ve been sharing a bed for months.” Not just in District 12, but also at Annie’s, in the hospital and during the 3 day train journey home.

“I know,” He says, stilling his movements. “But I haven’t really been myself for a while. And now that I’m...me again, I guess it just means that much more to me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, rolling slightly so that my upper body is resting on top of Peeta’s chest. His cheeks redden a little.

“You know what I mean,” He says, tugging playfully on the end of the braid draped over my shoulder. “You know how I feel about you...how I’ve felt about you, for years. I’ve loved you literally since I was 5 years old but I never thought...for one second...that you would ever, ever return those feelings...”

He pauses to bite his lip and search my face with his shining blue orbs. I melt under his intense gaze and find that I can’t look away.

“...but now you do.” He finishes softly.

I want to say it. I want to use those three words that seem to come so easily for other people. You’d think that after all that Peeta and I have been through it wouldn’t be so hard for me to come clean and admit my feelings. I will myself to form the words and even part my mouth to help ease them out but they seem to be stuck in the back of my throat. Not because I feel any doubt or because I’m scared of the commitment. But for some reason, that phrase just doesn’t seem to do my feelings justice.

I inch forward and touch my lips to his in a gentle kiss. I feel his eyelashes flutter against my cheek and I pull back to read his expression. His eyes have darkened, not in a frightening way, but with desire. It ignites something within me and I surge forward again, this time fiercely mashing our lips together. I feel his arms circle around me as my hands creep up his chest and come to rest just below his jaw line. He pulls me flush against him and his lips move against mine more fervently; nipping, licking, tasting. I sigh and he takes advantage of my parted lips to touch his tongue to mine. A jolt of excitement spreads out from my chest and morphs into a tingle that comes to rest between my thighs. I creep my hands up further to tangle my fingers in his blonde curls, to hold him closer, but I come into contact with the new scar at the back of his head. Peeta shudders beneath me and I pull away quickly.

“Did I hurt you?” I ask frantically panting for breath.

Peeta shakes his head, no. I take in the sight of his flushed face and swollen lips and I realise with a hint of embarrassment that I must look fairly similar. My lips are tingling and yet I yearn to be connected to Peeta again. But he stops me when I reach for him and suddenly it’s as if the magic has gone.
“Katniss,” Peeta murmurs. I fight through my humiliation to look him in the eye. He seems conflicted. “This is…really nice. But…

But. There it is. The word that has the power to put out my flames and send the more confident part of myself crawling back into hiding. I shift uncomfortably and try to roll away from Peeta but his arms tighten around me.

“Wait!” He yelps. “I didn’t mean…..,” He curses himself quietly and implores me with his eyes. “Katniss, I don’t want to stop. I like kissing you, a lot.” We wear matching blushes. “I don’t want to push you beyond what you’re comfortable with so if kissing is where this has to end, I need to stop before I…before it gets too much.”

My heart stutters as my mind comprehends the meaning behind Peeta’s words. His admission reignites the flame within me and brings me to a startling realisation. I want more.

“We don’t have to stop,” I whisper, looking up at him through hooded eyes. I am no seductress but my words seem to have the desired effect on Peeta. I feel his body turn rigid beneath me and he licks his lips nervously.

“Really?” He coughs to disguise the squeak in his voice. “Do you want…have you ever…shall I…”

My golden-tongued boy seems at a loss for words and I can’t help but laugh mirthfully. Somehow his anxiety calms my own nerves. I silence him with a quick peck to the corner of his lips.

“Lets not overthink this,” I say, touching my hand to one of his hot cheeks. He nods silently in agreement and I feel his fingers flex against the skin on my back. “We can just…take things slow and…and…”

My words are cut off by Peeta capturing my lips in his once more. His kiss if gentle but hungry and within mere moments his tongue has swept across my lower lip and sought entry into my mouth. I detect the mild flavour of camomile tea and it makes me feel instantly heady, as if the mere taste of him has gotten me drunk. He pulls me in tighter and swiftly rolls us so that I lay beneath him as he props himself up on his forearms so as not to put his full weight onto my petite frame. He trails a line of wet kisses along my jaw before fastening his lips against the throbbing pulse point on my neck. The sensation of him lightly sucking on my skin forces a foreign sound out of my mouth that draws his attention. I blush furiously but his gaze intensifies and he continues his ministrations along my neck and the slope of my shoulder. His hand slides delicately along the curve of my hip and moves upwards, dragging the hem of my blouse with it, until he comes to rest just below my breast. His eyes are drawn to the newly exposed skin and I choke on a gasp when he leans down to press a kiss to the scar on my abdomen; the scar resulting from the surgery to remove my ruptured spleen after being shot at in District 2. My hips move of their own accord and come into contact with the growing bulge in the front of Peeta’s jeans. He groans but quickly tilts away from me.

“Sorry,” He mumbles, pressing his forehead against my shoulder to steady himself. “I don’t want you to think I’m some horny teenager who can’t handle a bit of heavy petting.”

I can’t help it. I laugh. Peeta raises his eyebrows at me.

“Peeta,” I say between little bursts of laughter. “You are a teenager, and you are horny right now.”

Peeta stares at me as if I’ve suddenly grown another head but then he relaxes and lets out a
chuckle of his own. He rolls to the side and I turn over to face him, trying to keep as much contact between our bodies as possible.

“I guess you’re right.” He chortles. “Therefore, as a horny teenager I should probably tell you that I’m not going to be able to control myself much longer…so we should probably slow down.”

I drop my gaze a down to his chest and place my hand lightly over the place I know if heart is beating. “Peeta,” I whisper, pausing only to bite my lip. “I already told you, we don’t have to stop…”

I hear him gulp noisily and it draws my attention back up to his eyes. His lips stutter as he hesitates to reply.

“Y-You mean you want to….” I nod swiftly to answer his unfinished question. His hands reach out to cup my face. “Katniss, are you entirely sure about this?” He asks seriously.

“Don’t you want to?” I ask shyly, feeling an air of panic creep in.

He titters deliriously. “Of course I do. I’ve want to for…for a very long time. But…”

All arguments die on his lips when I take hold of his hand and place his palm against my left breast. I shudder a little at the contact and the look in Peeta’s eyes sets me aflame.

“I want to,” I tell him firmly. “We’re in our home; in our bed. We’re safe again and you’re recovering,” I take in a shaky breath. “I want to show you just how much I care; how important you are to me.”

He doesn’t react instantly but when I tilt my chin up to slant my lips over his I feel his hand lightly squeeze my breast and suddenly there is no stopping us.

I’m nervous, of course. I’ve never been intimate with anyone, besides the odd kiss I shared with Gale. But those kisses pale into insignificance when compared to the fierce battle of lips between Peeta and me. His kisses make my toes curl and my head spin.

Very quickly kissing turns to touching and when Peeta silently asks me with his expression I allow him to strip me of my blouse and wiggle my hips out of my capris. His eyes rove over my nearly naked body making me hot with a mix of embarrassment and excitement.

“You are the most beautiful person I have ever seen,” He murmurs against my skin.

More clothes are discarded and the room feels hot and humid despite the open windows. When we are finally pressed skin to skin I can’t help letting my eyes wander down to the space between us where Peeta’s arousal has been firmly pressed against my hip. I muffle a squeak and snap my eyes shut but Peeta peppers soft kisses across my eyelids, coaxing me to look at him once more.

“I’ll go slow,” He promises with a voice hoarse from desire. Still he waits for my signal to proceed.

It’s not what I expected. I’d heard the horror stories from girls in the locker room at school; heard of the pain and the blood. True, it does sting a little but the discomfort quickly gives way to something else; something unlike anything I’ve ever felt.

It’s awkward, of course. There’s a lot of stop start, and mumbled apologies and mismatched rhythms. Peeta questions me constantly.

“Is this ok?”
“Does that feel alright?”

“There? Is that it?”

I’m unable to formulate any real words in answer to his questions but he seems to intuitively know what I mean when I gasp or hiss or stifle a moan.

When Peeta grunts suddenly and topples forward I know it’s over. He pants wildly against my breast as I gently run my hands over the expanse of his broad back. My legs ache from being spread to accommodate his hips but I don’t want to move just yet. I feel like I’m soaring; the sort of rush you get when you push yourself just that little bit higher on the swing set and it feels, just for a moment, like you’re weightless.

“Katniss,” I hear Peeta whisper in my ear. His breathing has returned to almost normal and he props himself up to look into my eyes. He looks…disappointed. “Katniss, I’m sorry…you didn’t…I just couldn’t hold on…”

I hush him and swipe away the blonde curls from his damp forehead. I kiss the bridge of his nose delicately. “It doesn’t matter,” I say softly and my lips curve up into a smile. “I…enjoyed it.”

He smiles in return and leans down to touch his forehead to mine.

“You love me. Real or not real?” He whispers as he holds my gaze.

I tell him, “Real.”
Chapter 20

I’ve woken up next to Peeta plenty of times. After months of sharing a bed I am used to the sound of his light snores, how often he turns over in the night and the warmth of his body lying next to mine. But now as I stir and I become aware of my naked back pressed tightly against his bare chest, our legs tangled under the sheets and his muscular arms circled around me, I realise that this morning is very, very different. My mind begins an instant reply of last night’s events and I can’t fight the heat that rises within me.

“Good morning.”

His breath tickles my neck and I feel goose bumps break out all over my body. I let out a yawn to try and disguise the smile that hasn’t left my face since last night and twist in his arms so that we are nose to nose. His eyes are bright. Obviously he’s been awake for a while.

“Morning,” I reply shyly, peeking through my eyelashes.

“Did you sleep ok?” He asks as his hand slides gently over the curve of my hip. I nod mutely. “Do you…feel ok?”

My lips purse at his question and mentally I give myself a quick full body check up. I’m a little tired, there’s a definite throbbing between my legs but nothing I think I need to be worried about. All in all, I feel…great.

“I’m a little sore,” I tell him honestly and at that point my stomach decides to growl loudly. I blush. “And hungry.”

He laughs in amusement and leans forward to peck me quickly on the lips. “I better make us some breakfast then!”

I want to protest when he rolls out of bed but the sight of his naked backside sends my head spinning and I can’t stop myself from staring until he slips into the pair of boxers that we threw on the floor last night. He glances at me from over his shoulder and I blush deeply as I watch him exit the room. When I think he might be out of earshot I let out a girlish squeal and throw myself back against the pillows, bringing the sheets up to cover my whole face. Damn my mother for predicting this would happen!

I must lapse into some sort of day dream because the next thing I know I am hearing Peeta’s footsteps on the stairs.

“Breakfast is served,” He calls in his best Effie voice. I pull back the sheets just enough to uncover my eyes and find him standing beside the bed, bare chested and carrying a tray.

“Our cupboards are totally bare” He says with a chuckle, climbing on top of the bed. “So we’re going to have to make do with tea and water biscuits for now.”

I prop myself up as he hands me a mug. I take a long sip and savour the warmth trickling down my throat.

“12 has been without its sole baker for over two weeks,” I say with a glint in my eye. “You better start baking or else there’ll be riots.”

Peeta grins in response and slurps his own tea. “You just want me to make cheese buns,” He replies, setting his mug aside and leaning over the side of the bed. I eye him curiously when he
reappears holding his sketch pad.

“The District can wait. I have other plans for my morning.”

“What’s that for?” I ask warily as he opens the pad onto a fresh page.

“I want to draw you,” He says simply. “I want to capture how you looked when you first woke up.”

I snort. “You don’t want a picture of me drooling into my pillow.”

“You weren’t drooling,” He replies seriously, selecting a pencil from his case. “You looked beautiful. Your hair was all fanned out, your lips were puckered and your left shoulder was exposed…” He catches my eye and I blush.

“Lie back down,” He commands gently, rearranging the pillows and pulling on the sheets. “We’ll recreate that moment.”

I scowl and tug them up around my neck. “No!” I exclaimed a little too harshly. “I just…it’s embarrassing!”

Peeta pauses in his actions, seemingly unfazed by my outburst. “I’ll just draw from memory then,” He says with a grin and begins marking the clean, white page with pencil strokes.

“Peeta,” I protest. “I don’t like myself in pictures.”

His eyes stay trained on the paper. “Katniss, I’m not a caricaturist. I won’t make you look silly. I promise the drawing will look just like you.”

“That’s why I don’t want you to do it!” I exclaim, thumping my hands down against the mattress. Peeta’s hand stills and he looks up at me with furrowed brows. I hang my head in embarrassment and slide further under the sheets. I feel foolish making such a scene.

“Katniss, what’s going on?” Peeta asks softly, dropping his sketch pad and pencil onto the bed.

I gnaw my bottom lip and taste the tang of blood when I pull too hard on the dry skin. “I don’t want you to see my scars,” I mumble, pulling my hair down to cover my face. Peeta is silent for a moment.

“I’ve seen your scars before,” He says gently. “And last night…you didn’t mind me seeing them then…”

Last night. Last night my mind was clouded with desire and excitement. There was barely any room for fear or embarrassment and I was slightly more focused on Peeta seeing other areas of my body which, up until that point, had always been covered. But now, in the harsh light of day, I am reminded of my own insecurities; my loathing of my new skin and the scars that litter most of my body. I’ve healed well over the months. The angry red burns have faded leaving a criss-cross of pink lines that I’m sure will eventually turn white. I’ve never been a vain person but I miss the dark tan colour of my skin, the identifying mark of a Seam girl. Now my skin is a patchwork of creamy white and baby pink dotted with the occasional purple bruise. I feel like I have started to lose my identity.

I flinch when Peeta’s hand touches my cheek but I allow him to tilt my chin up.

“Don’t hide,” He whispers. “You may hate your scars, but I love them.”
I frown. “Why?”

He shuffles closer and draws me against his chest. He intertwines his finger with mine. “Because they remind me what kind of person you are; why I love you. These scars are evidence of your selflessness, your compassion, your strength. They don’t make you any less beautiful.”

“I think they’re ugly,” I say, holding back the tears that threaten to fall.

Peeta tuts and strokes his hand up and down my arm. “I have an idea,” He says suddenly. “I’m going to paint you.”

I sniff and raise an eyebrow. “Peeta, how is that any different from drawing me?”

He hops out of bed and I squeak in surprise when he draws me up into his arms, the sheet wrapped tightly around my body. “You’ll see,” He says, carrying me out across the landing. He kicks open the door to my mother’s old bedroom, the room he has slowly been turning into an art studio, and sets me down on a stool.

“Stay put,” He commands with a wink, spinning around to collecting up a variety of pots and brushes. I watch him with a bemused expression as he plops himself down onto the floor and pulls me into his lap. I shift uncomfortably before he stretches out his new prosthetic limb, finding a comfortable position.

“Peeta, what are you…?”

“He grins and dips his brush back into the pot. “I’m painting you,” He replies impishly and begins to create a pattern of swirls across my skin.

I watch carefully as he follows the jagged trails of my skin grafts along my arms and across my shoulders. I let him pull away the bed sheet to allow him access to my back. The skin there is still sensitive and I shiver at the sensation of his paint brush gliding along my skin. I take a brush for myself and bite my lip playful when I dollop a large blob of green paint onto Peeta’s nose.

Over the course of the morning we transform our scars into colourful works of art. My artistic skills are obviously lacking and Peeta laughs mirthfully when I paint a smiley face around his navel, using his belly button as the nose. My body, however, is adomed with perfectly depicted flowers, birds in flight and decorative swirls.

“See,” Peeta says, standing behind me as we peer into the floor length mirror in the bathroom. “You’re beautiful.”

Our hard work is ruined within moments as our bodies collide and we stumble into the shower. We don’t make love again but having Peeta wash the paint from my naked body is almost as
erotic. And I’m surprised to find that our art session has made me a little less self-conscious.

When we finally make it downstairs it’s a little after noon. I search the kitchen cupboards and the refrigerator only to come to the same conclusion as Peeta; they are indeed bare. I wonder if Sae let herself in during our absence the clear the place of any perishable goods. My fingers swipe the worktops and come away dust free. She must have cleaned too. I smile and head to the backdoor.

“I’m going to the woods,” I declare to Peeta, slipping into my old boots. It’s hot outside so I forgo my father’s hunting jacket.

“I’ll walk with you,” He says as he leans down to tie his shoes. “When we drove through town yesterday I noticed that the grocers store has been reopened. I can pick up a few things.”

I nod and reach for my game bag hanging by the door. My hand freezes when I notice my bow and a quiver full of arrows hung beside it. I certainly didn’t leave it here before going to District 4. I assume once again that Greasy Sae must be responsible. I haven’t used my bow in months but perhaps now is the right time.

“Everything ok?” Peeta asks cautiously as my hand slides over the curved limbs of the bow. I take it firmly in my grasp and feel the familiarity of its weight and balance. I glance over my shoulder at Peeta and smile.

“I’m fine,” I say genuinely, and sling my equipment over my shoulder.

We exit the house together and follow the path out of Victors Village. When Peeta reaches for my hand I don’t pull back. Our pace is a little slow. Peeta is still adjusting to the feel of his new leg although I hardly notice his limp. We part ways with a kiss at the junction where the old merchant quarter ends and where the Seam began. I practically skip the rest of the way until I reach the meadow, slowing my step in respect for those buried beneath the newly sprouted grass. After such a long time away from 12 I can almost hear my woods calling to me. I answer that call eagerly and inhale the rich smell of earth and pine as I meander through the trees. All the beauty of District 4’s beaches can not compare to this place; the smells, the sounds, the colours. My eyes catch the movement in the branches above me and I find myself stringing my bow without hesitation. I tread carefully until I am in position and take my aim. I take a deep breath to steady myself before letting my arrow fly. The unsuspecting squirrel falls from the tree and lands with a thud on the forest floor. I collect my kill, unable to hide my smile at finding my arrow shot straight through the eye. I haven’t lost my touch despite the months of inactivity. I had been so concerned that using my bow would bring on an onslaught of flashbacks and fear but I’m relieved to feel nothing but joy and a sense of freedom I haven’t experience in so long.

I follow my familiar route, resetting all of my old snares and shooting a total of 5 squirrels, depositing each one into my game bag. The solitude of the forest allows me to reflect on the previous evenings events. The mere memory of it rouses the butterflies in my stomach and stretches a grin across my face. I’m not embarrassed to admit that I’m eager to experience such intimacy with him again; to feel his skin on mine and hear his whisper words of love in my ear as we move together under the sheets. I blush despite there being no one around to catch me fantasising. I suddenly realise that I’ve been humming an old District 12 love song softly to myself. I’m not even sure how I know it. Perhaps my father used to sing it to my mother.

In the midst of my day dreaming I have travelled much further into the woods than I would normally venture. This part of the forest is densely populated by great trees that have been growing for centuries, untouched by man. The deeper parts of the forest are home to more dangerous creatures such as wolves and wild cats so I know to be on my guard. It’s not unfamiliar territory for me. My father and I used to spend whole days in the wood together, tracking animals.
and foraging. On odd occasions we would even stay out here overnight if the weather turned suddenly stormy or if we lost track of time and the evening came upon us. Trekking through the woods was not advisable at night. My father learnt to hunt from his grandfather and together they had built a small cabin hidden by foliage. I haven’t been there since my father died several years ago but the memory of its location is not lost to me. My feet carry me past the old rotten oak tree with the hollowed out trunk and by the bushes covering in wild blackberries I remember picking with my father. I reach down and pluck one of the plump, black fruits, savouring the taste in my mouth. Taking a cloth napkin from my game bag, I pile over two dozen strawberries in the middle before bundling them up and tying a knot in the top. Perhaps Peeta could make jam.

I follow the unmarked path from memory feeling a combination of excitement and melancholy when the wood shack comes into view. The cabin looks exactly like I remember….but that’s the problem. It’s exactly like I remember. The place has been abandoned for seven years. I expected it to look a little worse for wear, overcome by nature. Instead it looks almost…lived in. No extra foliage growing over the windows or blocking the door, no cobwebs draped from the corners of the overhanging roof.

Then I notice the footprints.

A shiver runs down my spine and I am quick to take my bow into my hands, readying an arrow. I crouch low behind a bush and listen carefully, staring intently at the door of the cabin. I wasn’t exactly quiet upon my approach. Whoever is inside could have heard me coming but clearly they’re not in a hurry to come out and meet me. I run though a list of possibilities. Weren’t Lorraine’s rebels living in the woods? But Paylor said they’d all been caught and arrested. And Lorraine was…dead. Could it perhaps be someone from 12? It’s not unlikely that since the end of the war, and the collapse of the electric fence surrounding our District, others may have taken to hunting in the woods. They may have stumbled upon my cabin by accident and counted themselves mighty lucky. But I realise no amount of educated guess is going to do me any good right now.

I tread silently, taking tentative steps towards the front of the cabin and tuning my ears to pick up any sounds from within. There are no noises, only a repulsive stench. With my bow in hand I carefully manipulate the door handle with my elbow and count to three in my head before throwing all my weight inside. The door swings wide open and bangs loudly against the wood frame, groaning on its ancient hinges.

I gasp.

Crouched in the far corner and hidden behind a solid wooden chair are two figures I certainly didn’t expect to see.

Milo and Nora.

I lower my bow abruptly and take another step into the cabin.

“Stay away!” Milo commands with a shaky voice, doing his best to keep Nora behind him in a protective position. She lets out a chesty cough that has me concerned.

“Milo,” I stutter out in shock. “It’s me. It’s Katniss.”

The young boy’s face screws up furiously. “I know who you are,” He yells. “Mother said you…you are dangerous. She said to stay away from you.”

My jaw drops a little and I find myself stunned into silence but when Nora coughs again and it draws me to my sense.
“How long have you been out here?” I ask, scanning the small space quickly and finding the source of the smell; a mound of rotten garbage.

“What’s it to you?” Milo spits.

“People have been worried about you,” I reply. “Peeta and I were worried. Nobody knew where you were.”

“Mother said we’d be safe here,” Milo says, his voice betraying a degree of uncertainty. “She said she’d come back for us…”

I gulp and open my mouth to form some sort of explanation or apology when Nora starts another coughing fit. The poor girl is doubled over and heaving by the time it stops.

“Your sister is sick,” I say gently, trying to adjust my posture to make myself look as unthreatening as possible. I result to crouching on my heels. Milo bites his lip and glances nervously back at his little sister.

“I-It’s just a cough,” He stutters fretfully before looking at me with an icy glare. “I can take care of her.”

I am overcome with sudden sadness. It’s like watching history repeat itself. A young child at the tender age of 11, abandoned by their mother and having to take care of their younger sibling. Only this child is unaware of his mother’s abandonment. I swallow back my emotion and try to balance my tone of voice somewhere between authoritative and compassionate.

“I’ll give you a piggy back ride,” I say lightly, making sure to speak slowly so she can read my lips. Despite her ill health she grins excitedly and I turn around so she can hop onto my back. She’s light as a feather but even so I know I can’t carry everything. I hold out my bow to Milo.

“How long has she been coughing?” I ask Milo as he tries to keep up with my pace. He’s short for 11 and for every stride I take he has to take two.

“About a week,” He mumbles, glancing sideways at his sister who clings tightly to my shoulders. “She has asthma…but her medicine ran out.”

How a mother could leave her two children to fend for themselves in the woods while she
travelled across several districts to commit some sort of revenge killing is beyond me. I thought Lorraine doted on her children! Then again, if she hadn’t died she most likely would have been back here weeks ago.

By the time we reach Victor’s Village my back is killing me and Nora is barely awake. Milo, who had been dragging his feet, is alert as we pass the house he once lived in.

“That don’t look like game,” Haymitch calls from his front porch, geese flapping about his feet.

“Tell Paylor to call off the search for Lorraine’s kids,” I yell back, taking the steps to my house two at a time. I kick open the door and walk straight to the kitchen. Peeta turns to greet me with a smile but his mouth hangs open when he sees the two children. I let Nora slide off my back and lift into one of the chairs by the table before rushing to open the cupboard I know holds many of my mother’s old herbs. Milo loiters uncomfortably in the doorway.

“Found them out in the woods,” I say to Peeta before he has chance to ask. My voice is muffled as I route around inside the cupboard. “Nora’s sick. Can you ask her how she’s feeling?”

Peeta crouches before the little girl and begins to communicate with his hands. Nora coughs in response but makes a few gestures too. He strokes her cheek comfortingly.

“She says she feels tired and her chest hurts and I think she’s a little feverish.”

I fumble with the various jars of herbs; scanning the labels for the thing I know will help. Finally I find what I’m looking for.

“What is that?” Peeta asks as he observes me take a dried root from the jar and begin to bash it with a rolling pin.

“Can you boil the kettle?” I ask him, placing some of the beaten up plant into a cup. “It’s butterfly weed. The root is good for clearing congestion in the lungs.”

Prim used to get a chest infection nearly every year. Father taught me how to find the butterfly weed and dig up its roots and mother would grind it into a powder that would last Prim through the harsh winters. It’s something I’ve never forgotten.

Peeta boils the kettle and fills the cup with water just as Haymitch comes bursting in. It’s obvious he’s been drinking by the way he sways on his feet. Milo shrinks away from him.

“What’s going on?” He asks slowly. “Where’d you find the kids?”

“In the woods,” I say for the second time, helping Nora to take small sips of the herbal concoction. She grimaces at the taste and turns her head away but Peeta signs that it will make her feel better.

“What are you gonna do with them?” Haymitch asks, eyeing Milo with curiosity.

I huff. “I don’t know Haymitch! I haven’t really had a lot of time to think about it!”

“They can stay with us,” Peeta suggests.

“Mother won’t like that,” Milo pipes up, drawing stares from all of us. “She said to stay away from you all.”

“Kid,” Haymitch scoffs tactlessly. “You don’t got a lot of options right now.”

“We just want to make your sister better,” Peeta says gently, rubbing Nora’s bag in small circles
when she chokes a little on her tea.

Milo stomps his foot. “But mother will be back soon. She can take care of Nora.”

Haymitch turns to me with raised eyebrows. I shake my head fiercely.

“No, Haymitch.” I say firmly. He throws his arms up in outrage.

“The kid deserves to know!” He exclaims, making Nora flinch and Milo frown. “Someone has to tell him.”

“Tell me what?!” Milo demands, his eyes flit between the three of us. I bite my lip. How do I even begin to tell this boy that he no longer has a mother?

I don’t have to. Peeta steps forward. “Milo, your Mom,” He starts gently. “She won’t be coming back here.”

Milo gulps and drops my bow. It clatters against the tiled floor. “Why…why not?” He asks, no longer an angry pre-teen but a frightened young child.

Peeta kneels in front of him and rests a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Something bad happened and your mom got hurt. She…she died.”

Milo stares blankly at Peeta for a moment but when the words finally sink in his face contorts into furious snarl. He turns to me.

“Did you…?” He growls, pointing at me and my eyes widen in shock at the accusation. Lorraine must have painted quite a picture of me to her kids.

“No!” Peeta interjects, pulling the fuming young boy’s attention back to him. “No it’s wasn’t Katniss… It’s was me…”

Milo’s mouth drops open a little and I see his anger wiped away and replaced with another emotion; heartbreak. He pulls away sharply from Peeta’s touch and drops to his knees, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. The room is so silent until a spine-chilling cry fills the air and Milo breaks down into sobs.
Chapter Notes

To make up for the weeks you've waiting, I've posted both the final chapter and the epilogue at once. Yes, I'm afraid to say that this is the end! Well...the end of The Long Road. But never fear, I have a sequel in the making. :) If you're looking for a sneak peek of what is to come for Katniss and Peeta please read my new oneshot "In Loving Memory".

Enjoy!

Milo's immediate response to learning of his mother's death is to break down into floods of tears; a natural reaction for anyone hearing such terrible news. His sobs seem to bounce off the tiled floor of the kitchen and the sound cuts through me like a knife. I lost a parent once; I know the agony.

Peeta's attempts at consoling the boy simply result in him lashing out violently. He beats his small fists against Peeta's chest, unleashing a string of curse words that no 11 year old should be familiar with. Haymitch, who had so far been an inactive bystander, eventually stepped in to help. Peeta would have been perfectly capable of handling the situation under normal circumstances but he seemed to be in a state of shock perhaps from guilt.

Haymitch folded his arms around Milo from behind, effectively immobilising him. Milo screamed and spat but Haymitch continued to hold him still.

Beside me Nora began to cry. Seeing her brother in such distress clearly upset her, although she was unaware of the reason for his outburst. Taking away her cup of herb tea and I lifted her into my arms and carried her away from the drama and into the front room. We sat together on the sofa and I tried my best to soothe her but failed miserably. Unlike Peeta, I hadn't learned much sign language besides 'hello', 'how are you?' and 'thank you'. In hindsight I should have probably learnt to sign 'I'm sorry'.

Buttercup, who had been sunning himself by the window, perked up at our presence. He trotted quietly across the carpet before jumping into Nora's lap, purring appreciatively when she petted him. That seemed to calm her down almost immediately. Her coughing had become less severe. The butterfly weed tea was already doing its job.

The ruckus from the kitchen quietened down after not too long but I continued to entertain Nora with the cat until she got bored, at which point I pulled out some paper and pencils for drawing. Content with her latest distraction, Nora occupied herself with colours pictures while I slumped against the sofa cushions, dragging a hand across my tired face and waiting.

Peeta emerges from the kitchen about half an hour later looking bedraggled. I cross the room quickly and pull him into a brief but tender embrace before questioning him with my eyes.

"He's sleeping," He says heavily and tells me how Haymitch had simply held Milo until he wore himself out from crying. I fleetingly remember the times I cried myself to sleep after father died.
"Peeta, what are we going to do with them?" I ask quietly, glancing at Nora who is oblivious to her situation.

Peeta sighs and rakes his fingers through his hair. "Haymitch called the Capitol. The President is sending someone to make arrangements for them. I expect they'll be here in a couple of hours if they're traveling by hovercraft."

"What kind of arrangements?" I question.

"Well they can't stay with us," Peeta responds as if it should be obvious.

I frown. "Why not?" I'll be damned if I let down another helpless child. "Where else would they go, Peeta? We're all they have!"

"Katniss, I shot their mother!" Peeta exclaims before looking quickly at Nora. He sighs heavily when he realises that she wouldn't have heard him. She continues happily with her drawing.

"Milo hates me," He continues, his voice softer. "And he thinks you're dangerous. Even if he had a choice I doubt he would choose to stay with us. And we're not exactly in a position to be able to take care of two children."

I know he's right. We're only 18, barely out of childhood ourselves. We're both still recovering from the effects of the war and the events of the past few months. We'd hardly be able to provide a stable environment for Milo and Nora. But I feel a sense of responsibility towards the two of them. Peeta and I are, in part, responsible for their mother's death even if it was in self defence. Surely we owed them something.

Peeta must be reading my mind because he pulls me close once more and presses a kiss into my hair. "We're not abandoning them, Katniss. But we have to consider what's best for them in the long run."

As expected, a Capitol hovercraft lands in an open space just outside of Victors Village later that evening. The sound of its engines shakes the walls of our house and I'm more than surprised that it doesn't wake Milo. Haymitch moved him from the kitchen to the sofa in the living room where Nora had curled up beside him and fallen asleep not long afterwards.

The two visitors who come to knock on our front door are in stark contrast to each other. The man, dressed in military uniform, is tall and well built and introduces himself as Officer Belgrave. He shakes Peeta's hand but merely nods at me. I take an instant disliking to him.

"I'm with the Department for National Security," He says in a loose southern accent. "I'm part of the team dealing with the terror activities involving Lorraine Shaw. President Paylor specifically requested that I come down here and speak with you about the recent developments." When Peeta and I say nothing in response he gestures to the woman beside him.

"May I also introduce Sabine Selters. She is here to discuss arrangements for the two minors you currently have in your care."

Sabine's serene and friendly expression falters a little at Officer Belgrave's impersonal mention of Lorraine's two children but she quickly recovers and offers to shake both our hands. She is a small woman and appears to be no older than 30. Her red hair is pulled back into a neat bun that sits on top of her head exposing a small, golden tattoo below her left ear. It's nothing extravagant but it's enough to reveal her Capitol background.

"Haymitch is watching the kids in the living room," Peeta explains. "They are both asleep. Come through to the kitchen. We can talk in there."
The four of us take seats at the large dining table in our kitchen. I reach for Peeta's hand underneath it and he squeezes back comfortingly.

"So…where do we start?" He asks.

"We have some new information," Belgrave begins, clasping his hands together and leaning forward on the table towards me. "About why Lorraine Shaw may have targeted you, Miss Everdeen."

I blink impassively. "What do you know?"

He clears his throat loudly. "Some days ago we were approached by a man who claims he worked as a doctor in District 13 during the pox epidemic some years ago. He says that Lorraine, who was pregnant with her second child at the time, was a patient of his along with her husband and son."

"Lorraine told us herself that her husband died in that epidemic," Peeta adds. Belgrave nods.

"That is correct, Mr Mellark," He responds. "This doctor confirms that he was present when Mr Shaw died. He said that Lorraine too was very sick. It was a miracle she survived, as well as the child. Although I am aware that she has…health problems."

"What does this have to do with anything?" I ask irritably.

Belgrave clears his throat again and shifts in his seat. "The doctor also claims that Alma Coin was a regular visitor to Lorraine Shaw’s sick bed. She wasn't President in District 13 at the time. She actually was voted in after the epidemic was over. But the doctor says he overheard conversations between the two women that would imply there were related in some way."

"Is there any truth in that?" I question.

"DNA samples were taken during the autopsy procedures for Alma Coin and Lorraine Shaw and I can confirm that they were indeed related," Belgrave replies seriously. "The match wasn't 100% so we believe they may have been half-sisters but it is clear that this was not public knowledge in District 13."

"So, Lorraine wanted revenge on Katniss for the death of her half-sister…?" Peeta says, furrowing his brow.

"That is the most likely explanation," Belgrave replies with a curt nod. "The doctor mentioned that, while Lorraine recovered from her illness, the grief of losing her husband changed her. He went so far as to say that she was…mentally unstable. She became aggressive and fiercely protective of her two children to the point of near violence. It was suggested that she be sectioned for a short while but apparently Alma Coin herself, acting as President, stepped in and assigned new living quarters for Lorraine and her children away from everyone. According to our sources no one ever really saw them again. That is, until the day Alma Coin died."

"So she saw...what I did," I say slowly, carefully. The general belief is that I was suffering from post-traumatic shock when I shot Coin. Dr. Aurelius painted me as confused and unstable during my trial. I never would have killed her if I had been in my "right state of mind"...or so I let people think.

"Now obviously both Alma Coin and Lorraine Shaw are dead," Officer Belgrave continues bluntly. "Therefore this information really has no impact on what happens for here on out, but President Paylor felt that you should be informed of our findings. The remaining members of Lorraine’s terrorist group have all been tried and sentenced. If and when they are ever released..."
from prison they will be under severe restrictions. They will not pose a threat to either of you.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. When will people learn that my safety can never be guaranteed?

"What about Milo and Nora?" I ask.

"That is why I am here," Sabine responds, her sharp Capitol accent in stark contrast to Belgrave's southern twang. She has remained silent for much of the conversation, waiting her turn patiently.

"Are you taking them away?" I ask tersely, ignoring Peeta's reprimanding stare.

Sabine only smiles. "I understand that you have a close bond with the children," She says gently. "However, it would be unwise for them to remain in your care considering your relationship to their mother…and, it would seem, their aunt as well."

It's almost word for word what Peeta said early today. And they are both right. But I fear what will become of those kids.

"Where would you suggest they stay if not with us?" I ask. "Don't say the Capitol."

"No, not the Capitol," Sabine replies. "The war resulted in many orphaned children, Miss Everdeen. Both Capitol and District children lost parents and family members. To help care for these ones a children's care centre has been set up in District 1 with approval from President Paylor. I work there as a care provider and grief councillor. Where possible we try to pair children with new families who can give them a home. In other cases children remain with us for as long as necessary. They are provided with lodgings and food, an education and access to Capitol healthcare."

"Katniss," Peeta nudges me gently. "Doesn't that sound great?"

I purse my lips defiantly. "What about Nora? She's deaf…"

"I am aware," Sabine says calmly. "District 1 has welcomed a number of Avox's seeking refuge outside the Capitol. They have formed quite a community there. As a result many of us have taken to learning sign language. I, myself, am now fluent. Nora will be well looked after, I assure you."

By now I have anxiously chewed the inside of my mouth to the point of tasting blood. I can't deny that this children's centre sounds like a decent place but still I feel a sense of reservation.

"So what happens now?" Peeta asks after a short moment of silence.

"Well," Sabine replies slowly. "There really is not point in delaying. Two beds have already been reserved for Milo and Nora at the Centre. With your…cooperation…we would like to settle them in tonight."

I raise my eyebrows at the term 'cooperation'. Sabine isn't asking for our permission because really we are not being given a choice in the matter. The children will leave with her tonight whether I like it or not.

"Katniss…"Peeta prompts delicately. I peer up at him sadly and nod my head in resignation. If Peeta thinks this is a good idea then I have no option but to go along. I trust his decisions.

"Can we say goodbye?" I ask, fighting back the emotion in my voice. Sabine nods and smiles brightly.

"Of course."
Peeta leads me by the hand from the kitchen to the front living room. Haymitch peers at us from over the top of his newspaper and motions with his eyes to where Milo is sitting on the sofa, his sister still sleeping beside him. His eyes are red and puffy from all the crying earlier but now he suddenly looks ten years older.

"I heard what that man was saying…about my mom," He says, not lifting his head to look at either of us. "I-Is…is it true?"

"Is what true, buddy?" Peeta asks, kneeling before the boy. Milo fiddles anxiously with his hands.

"Is it true that she…she wanted to hurt Katniss?"

Peeta sighs and places a hand on Milo's shoulder. He doesn't flinch at the contact like earlier, instead he looks up, eyes filled with tears once more.

"Yes," Peeta says slowly. "Yes that is true. Milo, sometimes people do bad things when they think they are protecting the ones they love. Your mom loved you and your sister so much but she made a bad choice and bad choices have consequences."

Milo nods sadly and wipes at his eyes. "Are you sending us away?"

"We don't want to," I blurt, dropping to my knees beside Peeta. "But we need to do what's best for you and your sister."

Peeta calmly explains the arrangements and tells Milo about the children's centre in District 1. He gently wakes Nora and calls for Sabine to come and meet her and her brother. Nora half hides herself behind her brother, her big brown eyes staring anxiously at this new stranger. But her face lights up the moment Sabine begins to sign.

Sabine takes the children across the green to their old house to collect a few belongings and within the hour they are packed and ready to go. Together we walk out of the village towards the hovercraft. Officer Belgrave offers a curt goodbye, shaking Peeta's hand again and pausing before shaking mine too. Milo and Nora wave to us as Sabine escorts them inside the craft. She turns back to us with a smile.

"You are welcome to visit us in 1," She says and we thank her before stepping away from the hovercraft as it prepared to take off. Peeta shields us both as its thrusters kick up the dusty earth and lifts into the air. It disappears into the night sky, leaving us standing alone in the dark.

"Come on," Peeta says gently, guiding me back to the house. Haymitch is already stumbling across the green to his own home. He stops and waves a salute at us.

"You did the right thing," He says before continuing along his path.

"Did we?" I ask Peeta once we are inside. "Did we do the right thing?"

"I believe so," Peeta responds with a confident tone before kissing my forehead tenderly. "You mustn't feel guilty over this, Katniss."

I nod. Of course he's right but guilt seems to be my default emotion these days. It just feels like everyone who has ever gotten to know me has suffered harm. Milo and Nora would still have a living mother if I hadn't shot Coin. District 12 would have remained untouched had I not shot my arrow at the force field in the Quarter Quell. Peeta would have never been hijacked if I hadn't pulled out those berries in my very first games. Prim…Prim might have still been alive if we had just away, disappeared into the forest like I use to talk about with Gale.
Suddenly I'm very tired and I tell Peeta so. He nods in understanding and together we climb the stairs to our bedroom. Wordlessly we undress and slip under the covers and Peeta's arms are instantly around me, guarding me from the nightmares he knows are lurking in the dark.

But the nightmares don't come.

I wake the next morning feeling surprisingly refreshed. I remember my father always telling me that 'things would seem better in the morning'. He couldn't have been more right.

The warm summer air drifts in through our open window and the sound of bird song tickles my ears. Peeta's arms are still locked tightly around me but as I turn my head I see that he too looks well rested. His face is serenely peaceful as he continues to sleep.

I turn back to stare up at the ceiling. Something is different and only now am I beginning to understand what it is. Today is the first day I have woken up since my return to 12 and not had some sort of anxiety weighing upon me. Peeta is with me and he is almost recovered. There are no enemies out to get me; Snow and Coin are dead and Lorraine is gone. Her lost children have been found and taken some place safe.

Sure, if I allow myself to think too hard there will be things that worry or concern me. Life is far from perfect. But for now I'm content to believe that things really are good….or better at least.

"You look happy," Peeta hoarse morning voice interrupts my thoughts. I reach up to touch my face and feel the smile playing on my lips.

"I am," I reply, snuggling closer into his chest. By now both of us would normally be up and out of bed but today I have other ideas.

"Can we stay here?" I ask, touching my nose to Peeta's and counting the many shades of blue in his eyes. "All day?"

He quirks an eyebrow and props himself up on one elbow. "All day?" He echoes, his voicing hinting at something that makes me blush.

"For once I have nowhere to be and nothing to do," I explain. "I don't have to hunt. You don't have work on the bakery. No one is looking for us or expecting anything from us…" I can see that he is starting to understand. "The day is ours."

Peeta hums thoughtfully and brings his hand up to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear. His fingertips linger on my skin, trailing down over my shoulder and arm. "And what would we do…all day…in bed?" He asks devilishly.

With a mischievous smile I lean closer and whisper in his ear exactly what we could do.

Chapter End Notes

The mystery of Lorraine is finally solved! I actually have a whole background story in my head regarding this. I thought about writing a little side-story but I haven't really had the time. In short Alma Coin's father was sent on an undercover mission to the Capitol to report back information to District 13. Alma was a toddler at the time
and remained in 13 with her mother. While her father was on his mission he met a young and impressionable Capitolite woman, had an affair with her and ultimately she became pregnant...with Lorraine. He smuggled his mistress and her child into District 13 but Alma and Lorraine don't mind out about being sisters until their father reveals it to them on his death bed.

...or something like that. I may still write it...who knows!

Anyway, this is the final chapter of The Long Road. Just the Epilogue to go now. Read on and enjoy!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

I can't believe it's finally over! Thank you so much to everyone who has read, followed, favourited and reviewed this story. It has been a pleasure to share my imagination with you.

As mentioned in the last chapter, The Long Road may be over but I still plan to continue with the sequel. In the mean time you can get a sneak peek of Peeta and Katniss's future by reading my oneshot 'In Loving Memory'.

This epilogue is short but hopefully it's satisfying to read. I hope you enjoy it. Thank you again for all your support.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sometimes you have to look back to see how far you've come.

When I count back one, two, three years ago to the end of the war it's hard to picture myself as that burnt out girl who'd given up on living. That period in my life feels like one huge nightmare, and trust me, I'm used to nightmares.

Things are better now in comparison, not just for Peeta and me but for Panem as a whole. Paylor's government has made many changes to improve living conditions in the Districts. People are free to enjoy the fruits of their labour instead of handing everything over to a corrupt and greedy Capitol. The coal mines in District 12 were shut in favour of more sustainable energy sources. As a way of creating more job opportunities a new medicine factory was built; its focus being on herbal remedies due to 12's abundant plant life. My mother, now a fully trained nurse in District 4, is called up frequently to lend her expertise as a healer. She visits at least once a year.

Inter-District travel is common now. Reformed Capitolites were keen to see for themselves the golden sandy shorelines of District 4 and the mysterious forests of District 12. Some in 12 have started new businesses, opening guest houses and small restaurants serving 'local' cuisine. It seems odd to me that our once poverty-stricken district is now considered a holiday destination; a place to get away from the hustle and bustle of the larger cities.

The President held local elections and appointed Representatives in each District along with a small team of law enforcement officers. I hadn't been shocked to hear that Peeta's name had made its way onto the Representative Candidates list. People in 12 adore him. However the position was granted to Thom Quarrie due to his extensive involvement in the clean up and rebuilding work. He took the job reluctantly but has so far proved more than capable of fulfilling his role.

Peeta' health has improved remarkably. He hasn't had a single episode in three years and once again Dr Aurelius has begun to question the accuracy of his diagnosis. He is hesitant to suggest a full recovery but for now Peeta is enjoying the peace that comes from having a clear head and complete memory.

His bakery finally opened and acquired huge interest immediately. The District people were thrilled to have a Mellark providing bread for them once more and word spread across Panem that The Boy with the Bread was back in business. The bakery has become quite a tourist attraction.
As for me, I suppose I'm still the same girl. You'll see me most days in my boots and hunting jacket, bow slung over one shoulder and my braid draped across the other. Only these days I hunt less out of necessity and more for self-sufficiency. I smile more despite the ever-present reminders that I once lost someone very dear to me. The sight of the primrose bushes by my house still pulls at my heart but it's less painful than before. I still have nightmares and days where getting out of bed seems like too great a task. But with Peeta at my side I no longer feel like giving up.

When I overheard him practising a speech in the backroom of the bakery I told myself to be patient and try to act surprised when the time finally came. There were several moments thereafter when I thought he was preparing to get down on one knee or pull a little box out of his trouser pocket. Our eyes would meet and the seconds seemed to drag as my heart skipped a beat but then the moment would end and I'd be left blinking in confusion. We carried on like this for almost two weeks until one night I turned to him in bed.

"I promise I'll say yes. So just ask me already!"

My impatient outburst had Peeta laughing and shaking his head as if he had predicted things to happen this way. He didn't ask how I knew; he simply rolled onto his side, smoothed the frown from my forehead with a gentle kiss…and asked me.

We married that autumn, Peeta's favourite time of year. There was no big ceremony like the one planned for our original wedding. We filled in the marriage licence forms at the Town Hall in the afternoon and that very evening we toasted bread by the open fire in the living room before making love for the first time as husband and wife.

"You love me. Real or not real" He asked, initiating a game we no longer had to play.

"You know I do," I replied with a roll of my eyes. He smiled and kissed my nose.

"Indulge me," He insisted, rolling me onto my back and pinning his bare chest against mine. He kissed me with such tenderness that tears sprang to my eyes.

"You love me." He said again, his blue eyes staring deep down into my very soul.

"Real," I breathed. "I love you."

Chapter End Notes

The end. Fin. Complete!

I hope you have enjoyed reading this as much as I have enjoyed writing it. Remember to follow me as the sequel will hopefully be posted soon.

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