Decay

by ScorpioPhoenix

Summary

After the war, Katniss went home, but now what? Peeta comes home and plants primrose in her garden. Can they get past his violent episodes and their trust issues to actually have a real relationship? Not if Gale has anything to say about it. A deeper look at how Katniss and Peeta finally found each other.

Notes

This is my first attempt at a Hunger Games story. I’d read the books ages ago and saw the movies, which I enjoyed. But after I saw this last movie, I was totally moved by the scene in which Peeta was having a meltdown and Katniss kissed him, making him focus on her. I don’t know why I never really paid much attention to the love triangle in the books, but now I’m hooked on it. I re-read the books, watched the movies again and I realized that I’m not happy with how the story just ended in Mockingjay. I feel like more happened between pages 382-388. So this is my story about what happened with Katniss and Peeta.

The title of the story is the last stage of a fire. Characterized as the longest stage, but this is when the fire can die. However, there are 2 common dangers that happen in this stage: a new fire can start or a backdraft which is the re-lighting of an old fire. Both are equally dangerous. Each chapter is named after a fire stage.

Hope you like it!
I see him with those scraggly plants, kneeling in the dirt. Evening Primrose, he had said. Prim. Gone. Never to come back. I had stepped up to volunteer to save her from the Games and she’s gone anyway. The joke’s on me. My mother, lost to us for all those years after my father died. And now, I’m just as lost. Now I understand. I understand wanting to just disappear inside your own head, your own body and never come out. To never come back. Part of me wants to apologize to her. Tell her that I understand now.

Peeta is standing up, brushing the dirt from his pants. He seems calm, peaceful even, despite everything that’s happened. He looks at me, his blue eyes no longer clouded or confused.

“Katniss. When was the last time you ate?” He’s looking at me closely, frown lines beginning to appear on his thin face.

I don’t want him to look at me that way.

“I don’t…yesterday,” I correct, knowing that’s probably not true, but at least it’s an answer.

It doesn’t fool him at all.

“You should eat something. Do you have anything in your house?”

I’m angry. He’s only been back two seconds and I’m already being treated like a child.

“I’ve been here for months, Peeta! Of course I have food in my house.” I cross my arms in front of me, and I wince when I can feel my ribs through my blouse. The blouse that I’ve had on for probably two weeks at this point. Come to think of it, I probably look a horrid sight. When was the last time I took a shower, brushed my teeth or even touched my hair? I feel my hand creeping upward to feel it. It’s clumped together, knotted, dirty. A mess, just like me. I’m now uncomfortably aware that I’ve been wearing the same underwear for going on two weeks as well. I’m mortified at the thought.

“Well that’s great that you have food, but you’re supposed to eat it,” Peeta says with a smile.

I open my mouth to comment on his own thin body frame, but then I decide I don’t want to pick a fight. I haven’t seen Peeta in months and it hits me how much I’ve missed him. So I simply say, “Greasy Sae will be by soon. She’ll cook something.” I hesitate and then add, “You should eat too.”

Peeta nods. “Okay.”
I turn and run inside the house. Upstairs in my bathroom, I stare at the girl in the mirror. That girl that was on fire, literally. Blown up in the Capitol by the same bomb that killed Prim. I don’t even recognize myself. And even though Greasy Sae and Haymitch have been the only ones who’ve seen me these last months, I’m embarrassed. Haymitch has seen me looking worse than this, but those were war wounds, not these which have been brought on by my own hand. This? This is me. I did this to me. I can’t look anymore.

The shower feels like salvation. Washing away my crimes. The clothes I’d taken off reek of the unwashed. Not even when we were starving back in The Seam, was I ever this dirty. My mother would be so ashamed. Prim would…no. Prim doesn’t have the ability to be embarrassed. I can’t sink back into those thoughts.

Peeta’s back.

Once I’m finally clean and my hair has been washed and detangled, I find some clean clothes. The closet and drawers are full of them. Funny. It seems like I hadn’t noticed them at all. I decide to trash the old clothes. Burn them to cinders.

By the time I get downstairs I hear Greasy Sae in the kitchen, banging around. She turns when she sees me and then lets out a snort.

“He must be back.” She turns back to the skillet she’s already placed on the stove. There’s a pile of meat next to her and some eggs.

I flush at her words. “He’s coming for breakfast.”

She looks at me and nods.

“Good.”

Sae didn’t stay for breakfast. As soon as she finished her preparation, she wiped her hands on her apron, nodded at me and walked out. I was going to be alone with Peeta. For the first time in months…well really the last time we were alone was in Thirteen, when he was still full on hijacked. How long ago was that? I didn’t have time to really think about before there was a knock at the door and Peeta was entering.

“Katniss?” He was carrying something in his hands. It smelled delicious. Cheese buns?

“Yeah, come in.” I went about getting plates out of the cabinets to set the table.

It was cheese buns. I couldn’t help smiling as he set them in the middle of the table. My appetite returned with a vengeance, and before I knew it, I was gobbling the food down. Peeta watched me with a smirk, but then he too starting eating with gusto. We didn’t talk, just ate the good food in a companionable silence. It felt almost normal. But what was normal anymore? Surely nothing would ever be normal again for a former Mockingjay and her tortured fake fiancée.
Peeta sat back and groaned while rubbing his stomach. “That was pretty good. Even though I’ve been eating Capitol food, this still makes me feel at home.”

“So…how are you? I mean, you must be better if they let you leave.” I really didn’t want to bring up his torture or the hijackings. That would definitely kill the mood.

Peeta gave me a look I couldn’t quite read. “I’m better. But, I still have to talk with Dr. Aurelius on a regular basis. Go back to the Capitol for follow-ups, that kind of thing.”

“Oh,” was all I managed to say. God, even after all this time I still can’t get words out like I want.

Peeta fiddled with his fork and then asked, “How about you? What have you been doing?”

“I think you saw me earlier. That’s what I’ve been doing.” I get up to begin to clear the table, but Peeta reaches out to touch my hand. I stare down at his fingers, those beautiful hands that can create such beautiful art and cakes.

“Are you going to do that again?” He asked quietly.

I hesitate for just a second. “No.”

The light that shines from Peeta’s eyes makes me bite my lip and I hastily pick up a plate.

HG

I decide I want to go hunting. I hadn’t thought about it in so long. Peeta wants to walk with me into town. He hasn’t been here, hasn’t really seen what happened to Twelve. The memories are still hazy and distorted, but he at least believes the true version about the fire bombs that destroyed our home.

We head into town. There’s rubble and burnt out buildings everywhere. The square is full of people on body retrieval. All of those people who were killed in the bombings are still here. Under the snow. I watch as Peeta stops dead in the middle of the street and stares around. Then he moves quickly towards one of the burnt buildings and stands there staring. His hands clench into fists.

I look at the building he’s fixated on and I realize what this is. The Mellark Bakery. His family’s business. Only it’s gone. Nothing left but a shell of a building, with burnt walls and shattered glass. Peeta walks slowly up to the husk of his legacy and tentatively moves through the non-existent door. I follow behind him and stand in the open archway. The place is littered with twisted and melted metal, smears of pastries and cakes along the walls and floors, blackened loaves of bread and destroyed shelves and cabinets.

“You know there was a time that I didn’t want to do this. This family business thing. I mean, I had two older brothers. They could handle it. I just wanted out from under my mother’s thumb.” The
bitterness in Peeta’s voice surprises me. I’d never known he hadn’t wanted to be a baker. Peeta reached down and picked up a charred piece of bread, burnt to rock hardness. He stared at it.

“I burned that bread on purpose. The bread for you. I would’ve burned down this whole bakery for you, Katniss.” He looks at me and laughs, which sounds weird and I frown. He shakes the bread at me. “Guess I got my wish. It all burned down. It all burned for you. Like you said, if you burn, we all burn with you.”

I’m growing alarmed. Peeta is still shaking the bread. No, his hands are shaking.

“Peeta? Are you okay?”

Peeta laughs again, high and shrill and I back up a step. “Am I okay? I’m standing in the middle of my dead family’s dead bakery and I don’t know what to do! What do I do, Katniss? What should I do? You did this! You ended the war, but you started it too! It’s on you! This is your fault! My family is dead, Katniss! They’re dead and you killed them!”

I’m frozen.

Peeta is still hijacked. I didn’t see this coming. But I guess I should have. I’ve had months to deal with the death of Prim, which I still haven’t recovered from. I haven’t even recovered from my father’s death and that’s been more than ten years now. Peeta’s whole family was killed in one fell swoop and this is the first time he’s seeing the remains of his former life. Has he even had a moment to process their deaths?

Peeta is coming towards me and I need to pay attention to the real danger before me. I have my bow, but I don’t want to have to shoot him.

“Peeta! It’s me! I’m not a Mutt! I didn’t do this!” I raise my hands to show I have nothing in them to hurt him. I haven’t drawn my bow. “Stay with me, Peeta!”

Peeta falters a bit, frowning. “Katniss?”

“Yes, Peeta. It’s me.” I step towards him slowly, not wanting to make sudden moves. “We’re in Twelve. The Capitol bombed our home. Snow did this, remember?” I’ve reached him now and his blue eyes are almost swallowed up by black. I touch him carefully. “Stay with me, Peeta.”

Peeta grabs my hand and holds it tight. He slams his eyes shut and takes deep breaths. “Always. Always for Katniss. My name is Peeta Mellark. I’m from District Twelve…”

“That’s good, Peeta. Everything’s okay.”
Peeta takes one more long breath and opens his eyes. I’m relieved to see that the blackness has receded and they look normal again. He blinks a few times and then immediately lets go of my hand. He looks down at the burned bread and he quickly chucks it away. It hits the last hanging piece of jagged glass and shatters it, littering the floor with its shards. Peeta bites his lip.

“Katniss, I’m sorry! Did I hurt you?” He goes to grab my hand again.

“I’m fine, Peeta. Nothing happened, okay. You were able to control it. You did good.” I try to give him a reassuring smile. I don’t know if I succeeded or not. Peeta looks miserable.

“I’ve been back a day and I’ve already lost it!” He kicks at the broken counter angrily. “Can we kill Snow again?”

For a moment I just stare at him. And then I burst out laughing. I don’t know why. It shouldn’t be funny but it is. Peeta cracks a grin and then he starts laughing too. By the time we’re done, several people have come to stare at us, wondering what’s so funny. We’re standing in the ruins of our district, with the corpses of most of its citizens still laying around town, like some sort of bizarre human blanket made of charred bones, covering everything. Standing in Peeta’s dead family’s bakery and we’re laughing like two loons.

I can’t remember the last time I laughed like that. God, we’re both crazy.

We see Thom, an old crewmate of Gale’s, standing in front of Mayor Undersee’s house. None of them made it out. I didn’t see them in Thirteen at all, but for some reason I had simply assumed that someone had made it. Poor Madge. She’s really the mastermind behind the Mockingjay; her and her pin. No, Maysilee Donner was the real Mockingjay. Now they’re no more. All gone.

I leave Peeta with Thom and head out towards the woods.

I just want to feel the air on my face. After all of these weeks locked inside my house, locked inside my mind, it feels good to be outside. I head to the lake and sit on my rock, just watching the sun rise in the sky. That is the only constant. That no matter how much has been lost, the sun will always come back. So much loss. Prim, Cinna, Finnick, Rue, Boggs, Castor, Jackson. I hurriedly push those thoughts away. I’ve been dwelling on that for months…years if you count Rue. I can’t anymore. It’s time to start living.

HG

By the time I return to the Victor’s Village, it’s close to dinnertime. I have five squirrels, two turkeys and a fat rabbit in my bag. The lights are on in my house and I find Greasy Sae and Peeta in the kitchen talking. Sae’s eyes light up when she sees the full bag and Peeta smiles.

“Good haul, eh?” Peeta asks, peeking into the bag, but Sae grabs it up and hauls it onto the counter. “Leave that to someone who knows what they’re doing,” she says gruffly, but there’s a
hint of amusement in her voice. “You stick to those ovens.”

Peeta laughs good naturedly, then says to me. “Thom says that after they finish…cleaning…they’re planning on rebuilding the square and eventually everything else. The Capitol is going to send in builders and everything. President Paylor is making sure the Capitol foots the bill for everything.” Peeta looks excited at the prospect. I’m excited too. Hope creeps back into my spirit.

“Rebuild Twelve. Maybe people will want to come here now. But then again, who wants to work in the mines? Will they pay more for workers now?” I ask. Peeta shrugs at that. “I don’t know. But the mines are still closed for now. Maybe we can do something else.” He gives me a sweet smile. “This is the home of the Girl on Fire.”

“The Boy on Fire lives here too. We’ve done some impossible things. Maybe we can do the impossible for home too. Make this the most popular district in Panem.”

Peeta blinks at me and the love in his eyes is drowning and all encompassing. I feel heat glow deep inside me and I can actually feel myself start to blush.

“I’d like that,” Peeta says quietly. “I like that there’s a we.” He starts to move towards me, but Greasy Sae coughs loudly.

“Don’t do nothing on that table!” She says fiercely, “I know how you young people are. Just like rabbits. Not here in this kitchen!” She waves her knife at us and we both have to hold back our laughs. I reach for Peeta’s hand and he takes it. We stand quietly for a moment, letting Sae work the game I brought back. We both end up helping make dinner; Peeta making a delicious pastry and me cutting up some vegetables. It’ll never match the Capitol’s meals, but it’s still good.

After dinner, Sae leaves and Peeta and I sit down in the living room. I haven’t turned on the television since I’ve been back, but maybe now it’s time. After fiddling with the channels, a Capitol program comes on and I see President Paylor had given a news conference. In it, she highlights the rebuilding of the districts, particularly Twelve and Eight and a restructuring of what the districts will be responsible for. It is of interest that Twelve will no longer be doing coal, but will be in charge of making medicine and research. I think of my mother, wondering if this will be enough to bring her back here.

Peeta is making a comment about the new factory that will be coming, when he says, “Oh…it’s Gale.” I immediately look back to the television. Gale is standing near President Paylor and I can see Beetee with them. Gale looks taller and even more confident than the last time I saw him. In President Snow’s house. When he couldn’t look me in the face and tell me that he didn’t kill my sister.

Gale is moving forward to the microphone and I am tempted to turn off the television. But Peeta is leaning forward, intent on hearing whatever it is that Gale is going to say. I really don’t want to hear it. But then he’s talking and it’s about rebuilding the districts, and about making sure this doesn’t happen again and that the districts need to have training in how to defend themselves. He’ll be leading in that effort and that District 2 needs support and will eventually it will spread to
the others.

After the interviews, Peeta sits back and looks thoughtful. I’m trying not to grind my teeth. Gale looked and sounded great up there, a real leader in this new era in Panem. But would he be that confident if he faced me again? Would he admit that he had a hand in Prim’s death? Or would he go away again because he doesn’t want to face it either.

I yawn then and Peeta suppresses his own.

“It’s late,” Peeta says as he stands up and stretches. I can’t help but notice the smooth skin that is revealed by the action. More heat blooms. I bite my lip and I stand up also. He turns to me, ready to tell me good night. But my look stops whatever he was going to say.

“Stay with me.”

Upstairs, Peeta strips down to his boxers and I’m trying to remain calm and collected. I see his prosthetic leg, something that I’d never really looked closely at. He sees me staring at it.

“Do you think I should get a new one?”

I jerk my eyes away and turn red. “I’m sorry, Peeta…I…didn’t mean to stare.” **Way to go, Katniss.**

He smiles. “It’s fine, Katniss. You can stare all you want. I love for you to look at me.”

Now I’m turning red for other reasons.

He lies down on the bed and I lean over to inspect his leg. Other than a few metal and plastic pieces and joints, it’s not hideous. I’d seen people with missing limbs because of the mine accidents and what those stumps can look like. Peeta was very lucky.

I lie down next to him and curl up on his chest, the way we used to. It’s been so long since I’ve touched another person like this. It feels like a lifetime ago, but it’s so comfortable and needed. I give a sigh and scoot even closer to him, like I’m trying to burrow my way into his chest. He holds me closer in his arms and my eyes droop.

We don’t have any nightmares that night.

HG

Life slowly returns to our district. Life slowly returns to me. I start hunting again on a regular basis. Not every day, but a few times a week I go out to keep myself sharp and to bring something
back for Greasy Sae to use. We still get our money and food from the Capitol accounts. Even
more now, as “restitution” for the Capitol’s crimes against us for making us participate in the
Games. The type of money I’m getting means I’d never have to work, but then neither would my
children’s children, nor theirs. Not that I’d ever have to worry about that. I’m never having
children.

Work in the square is coming along. All bodies have been removed from the district and the
remains and ashes have been buried in the meadow. My beautiful meadow now is home for the
dead of Twelve. It’s beautiful for them now. The Justice Building is almost finished and The Hob
will be replaced as a new open air market. Nothing is illegal anymore.

Peeta has been busy overseeing the rebuilding of the bakery. He’s there every day, cleaning,
painting, ordering new ovens and supplies. I go there to help too. I get to see Peeta is in element.
Even though he said he hadn’t wanted to stay in his family’s business, I can see that’s no longer
true. Peeta’s sleeves are rolled up and dust and paint are on his cheeks, but he’s smiling and joking
with some of the other workers. I can see that he’s excited about getting this place up and running
again. Peeta’s alive.

And as much as I love helping him see his vision coming alive, I still don’t know what this means
for me. I’ve never had any skills other than hunting. Peeta can bake, can paint and can inspire
others. He’s good with people. Me? We all know how limited I am in any area that doesn’t require
a bow and arrow. I need to find out what I’m good at, if anything. I’m not excited about that
prospect.

And then there’s Haymitch. He’s taken to raising geese. No one quite understands that, but who
are we to argue? He still drinks heavily, which I’m still very concerned about. Haymitch has spent
a lifetime in a bottle. And it became clear that my own nightmares about what I endured in the
games and after have nothing on Haymitch’s guilt. I finally see why Haymitch gave up. When
Rue died in the arena, I was devastated. And I hardly knew her. I couldn’t save her. And her
death still bothers me.

But Haymitch? Not only did he have to fight in a Quarter Quell, but there were 48 of them,
double our 24. 47 other Tributes died around him, including Maysilee, who was a friend and ally,
until they weren’t. Then his family and girlfriend were killed by Snow, for surviving the Games
by using their own technology against them. Then for 23 additional years, Haymitch lost two kids
annually; killed in every Games. He would come home and have to look at those families every
year, and not bring their kids home. All of who died brutally and unnecessarily in those battles. He
was a child himself when he became a lone Mentor. And he never grew up.

Haymitch had grown numb, his drinking killing any feeling about it. But when Peeta and I won,
that’s what broke him. He had to feel again. There was someone else now. Two someone else’s.
And I know it just about killed him when we had to go back in the Quarter Quell. Peeta and I
represented all of the children he couldn’t save. And to watch what war did to us, to me, Peeta…
everyone. Haymitch is afraid. He drinks because he’s afraid now. Afraid that if he tries to care for
me, for us again, it’ll all get taken away, just like with the Quarter Quell.

I want to help Haymitch, but I don’t know how. Maybe I can enlist Peeta’s help in getting him to
stop drinking. I decide to ask him when he gets home today.

Home.

Peeta has been staying at my house. He goes to his own occasionally to get clothes and other things, but he usually eats with me and then spends the night. We’ve talked about things, watched television together. There’s this horrible soap opera that airs from the Capitol, but we’ve become addicted to watching it. Only so we can make fun of the awful acting and ridiculous plot.

Tonight Peeta’s grumpy. The final set of ovens was delayed because of a mistake in the order, so he’s off schedule. He’s picking at his food and I’ve nothing really to say to cheer him up. Asking him to help me with Haymitch seems a bit intense for someone who’s had a bad day at work, so I leave it alone. Another night then.

When I get up to clear the table, I run my hand across his shoulders to give him some comfort. He shivers and grabs my hand, turning to look at me. Those eyes. So, so blue. Heat again. He kisses my hand, my fingers and the heat blossoms into a fire. He stands up and faces me. My heart is pounding and I lean in and kiss him. He responds in kind. But we don’t stop. He pulls me closer and I feel it then. A hardness against me. I suck in a breath.

“Katniss,” he whispers.

I know he wants something more from me. I want to give it to him. I grab his hand and we go upstairs. Once inside the room, he’s kissing me again and I’m responding eagerly. We land on the bed and he’s leaning over me. He takes off his shirt and I run my hands over his stomach, feeling his skin.

“Take off your shirt,” he says to me. I’m nervous, but I do it. I feel shy and embarrassed, mostly because there’s not much going on in my bra and by the scars that I have. I’m not beautiful.

“So beautiful,” Peeta whispers, as if he’s reading my thoughts. He kisses me again and his hands touch me tentatively. It feels good and I smile encouragement. He grows bolder, kissing down my neck and gently removing my bra. I lie down all the way on the bed and he kisses down my chest, stopping at my almost non-existent breasts. The thing he does with his tongue across my nipples makes me squeal, and I clap my hands over my mouth in horror.

Peeta chuckles and continues what he’s doing until I’m sighing softly. Heat is blooming everywhere now and I’m feeling antsy, like I want or need something more. I rub my hands over Peeta’s shoulders and glance down. He’s still wearing his pants, but I can clearly see his excitement. I’m excited too. I press my hands against him, putting an end to his nipple fascination. He gives me a questioning look.

I reach down to unbutton my pants. He immediately helps me slide them off, including my underwear. He takes his pants off too and gets back on the bed. He starts to touch me again and I discover I’m ticklish in places and I giggle like a school girl. But then his hand is in a place that no
one has ever touched before and it feels like a bomb has just went off inside of me.

I’m embarrassed because I want more and the noise that I make sounds like a dying animal. My legs seem to have a mind of their own and they spread wider. Peeta certainly seems to know what he’s doing, which makes me wonder how that is possible. But I don’t have time to think too much about it because he has removed his hand and he’s replaced it with something much bigger than a finger. Much bigger. I’m watching him and this thing that’s supposed to go inside me and I’m like…that’s never going to fit.

“Relax, Katniss,” Peeta says and his voice is low and husky sounding and my stomach is doing all kinds of flip flops now. He’s brushing himself between my legs and I start moving against him, creating more friction.

“Oh,” I say and Peeta presses in and down…or is it up? It hurts, a lot. But it’s not unbearable. Peeta is going so slow and his breathing sounds like he’s in pain. But I know he’s not. At least not like I am. And then he’s all the way and he moves again, very slowly. It burns, but not so much anymore. He starts kissing me again and I concentrate on his lips, which is nice. But then things start to change a bit down below and it’s not so bad anymore. In fact, it actually feels nice. I wrap my arms around Peeta as he continues to move and he’s moaning softly.

“Oh Katniss,” he groans and my heart pounds hearing that.

“Peeta,” I say, but it’s all breathy and I feel my head slowly start to spin. Everything is rocking and the feeling is building, something is happening. I don’t know what, but I don’t want it to stop. Peeta is panting above me, still doing this slow rocking movement. I start moving against him, speeding up my hips because it feels good and then it gets even better.

And then I squeeze myself down there, squeeze around him and it feels amazing and then a wave of something just hits me. I cry out, practically digging my fingers in his shoulders. I know it has to hurt, but I can’t stop.

Peeta groans loudly and he speeds up, and then he gives a deep shudder. His groans mix with mine and I know we sound ridiculous, but I can’t really care about that. And then it seems to end and Peeta collapses on top of me.

I can’t catch my breath either. I’ve just had sex for the first time. And it feels like it for sure. I feel messy and sweaty. And there’s definitely a dull ache and burn going on somewhere below my stomach. But I don’t want to move. I just want to hold Peeta. So I do.

HG

Sex changes everything. It definitely changed me. For starters, we start having it all the time. And we start doing different things. When I was in school, I’d hear the gossip about the fast girls who went to the slag heap and the things they would do and what the boys would do to them. Peeta did something with his mouth between my legs that made my eyes pop out of my head. I’m still seeing stars. I tried the same for him and even though I wasn’t perfect, his reaction was well worth
it. The taste wasn’t great, but I’d do it again. I felt like I’d do anything for him.

I would watch him when he fell asleep, when he would eat his breakfast, when he left the house for the bakery. I couldn’t stop staring at him. I couldn’t look away. After my hunts, I would go by the bakery and just stare at him some more, under the guise of helping out. He would laugh and my heart would swell. He’d pull some delicious creation out of the oven, sneak a bit to me for a taste and it would be all I could do to keep from riding him there on the counter.

I was never a domestic. I was the hunter. But here I was making sure his dinner was ready when he got home. That he had clean clothes. I surprised him with some new paint and canvas for his art work. I touched him constantly and he always reciprocated just as eagerly, his eyes sparkling with delight. I didn’t know what was happening to me, but I didn’t fight it. It was better than sitting in my own filth and crying about Prim and everything that had gone wrong since my volunteer Reaping. I was happy, both Peeta and I were getting healthier by the day, the district was growing and rebuilding and the bakery was taking off again.

And then everything went to hell.
Growth (Flashover)

Chapter Summary

Things go horribly wrong for Katniss.

Chapter Notes

I put a lot into this chapter and it ended up being so much longer than I anticipated. Still hope it's enjoyable though.

Dr. Aurelius treated both Peeta and I with our head cases. Peeta’s case was obviously more severe than mine; his hijacking recovery program unprecedented. Peeta was expected to return to the Capitol every six months for checkups or more frequently if he was having problems. In the time since he’d returned after the end of the war, Peeta had only a handful of episodes. And they were fairly minor. He would usually just grab onto something and talk himself through it and then he’d be okay. We had it beat.

I wanted to go with him. I don’t know why I felt so strongly about it, but I didn’t want to let him out of my sight. Maybe I didn’t trust the Capitol all that much, even though the war was over. But Peeta was still an extremely high profile target. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost him again. There was no way I was letting him go to the Capitol without me.

There was the small problem of whether or not I was allowed to go. I had assassinated a President, even if that was a welcome thing for the people of Panem. Coin wasn’t going to be any better than Snow, but I was supposed to execute him, not her. The word “exile” hadn’t exactly been brought up, but I think it was strongly encouraged that I stay in Twelve.

I went to Haymitch to plead my case.

“Look, can’t you tell them that I need to see Dr. Aurelius too? Or that I want to make a good faith effort with the new government? I like President Paylor. Tell her that. She likes me, right? Plutarch?”

Haymitch glared at me over the top of his bottle, but he made a phone call. After some wrangling, I was allowed a “special pass” to accompany Peeta to the Capitol for his medical appointments. He did need an escort after all.

The train ride was uneventful. We arrived at the Capitol with little fanfare, but President Paylor did send a car for us. The Tribute Center had been converted to living quarters for former Victor’s or their families if they wanted to stay there. The building was mostly empty, except for some Victors from Districts 1 and 2. The upper floors were empty. Peeta and I stayed there, despite the bad memories this place could create. How many Victors had come through these doors and never returned? Too many to count. Luckily, the ghosts of the penthouse were quiet and Peeta and I did fine staying there. Dr. Aurelius had positive feedback for Peeta, as in there wasn’t any further neurological damage, which pleased us both.
Paylor invited us to dinner while we were there. She was living in Snow’s old mansion, but she had removed the rose garden. I noticed that there were still Avoxes working there, but they didn’t seem fearful anymore.

Paylor noticed me noticing them.

“They have been set free. But a lot of them don’t have anywhere to go. Their families were killed in their districts. They are paid for their work now, just like any other citizen. And they have their own homes.”

That made me feel better, even though it was too late for Darius and Lavinia. Pollux was doing okay, as far as I knew. Suddenly wanted to see him. But Paylor kept talking. “There’s a lot of work to be done for Panem. I hope that you two will find your place in it.” Peeta was nodding and told her about rebuilding his family’s bakery. Paylor smiled at that. Then she looked at me.

“And you, Mockingjay?”

I was ashamed that I had no answer to that. “There’s not much I can do. You all don’t need another rebellion, do you?”

Paylor gave me a tight smile. “No. We surely don’t. This one was very costly. In both lives and resources. But necessary.” She looked hard at me and said, “But you are a fighter, Katniss. That much is obvious. There is a lot you can contribute, especially in Two. Beetee is very fond of you, as you know. His work with Gale is extraordinary. They could use you there. The districts need a lot of training and support.”

At her mention of Gale, my throat closed up and Peeta was looking at me with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m not a soldier,” I say weakly and Paylor just looks at me.

“You passed Thirteen’s tests, when you were already injured and malnourished. You and Johanna were inspirations to those there working with you. It was a shame about her not being able to complete her tests, but she is doing exceptional work as well. She’s here in the Capitol.” Paylor reached across and touched my hand. “Think about it, Katniss. There’s no rush. No pressure. It’s not like it was before. You’ve certainly earned your rest and time to heal.” She looked at Peeta. “So have you, Peeta. But there will always be places for both of you here in the new Panem. You both are really why there is a new Panem. Whatever you want or need.”

We leave to go back to the Tribute Center. Peeta’s quiet on the ride back.

“What’s wrong, Peeta?”

“Would you want to go to District Two? Work with Beetee and Gale? When was the last time you saw him, anyway? You never talk about him.”

I’m instantly on guard. “There’s nothing to say about him, Peeta. He killed Prim.”

Peeta’s mouth drops open in shock. “Katniss! Is that what you think? That he killed Prim? You know he’d never hurt Prim! How could you think that?”

“It was his bombs, Peeta! I was there when they came up with the strategy of the double bombings. He might as well of shoved the thing down her dress!”

Peeta’s face contorts. “He didn’t drop those bombs, Katniss! Coin allowed that to happen. Gale may have designed the strategy like you say, but Coin did it. And she paid the price for it! Not the best price, she should have suffered more for what she did, for sending me out with 451 and
almost getting us all killed. But Gale didn’t do that! That was Coin!”

I don’t want to talk about it anymore, so I turn away from him and stare out the window. It’s easier to hate Gale, so I don’t have to think about any of what happened. Coin is dead, but I had so much anger and hatred it needed another target. Gale fit that bill. So does my mother, for letting Prim become a healer and letting her help people.

But I know that’s not fair to blame Prim for her natural gift or for my mother’s influence on her to help heal people. I just can’t deal with Gale. And the idea of going to Two. It was an interesting idea. I’m certainly not doing anything at home really. But Peeta is home. And I’m not going anywhere without him. Would he want to go to Two?

“I want to go see my mother,” I blurt out suddenly and Peeta gapes at me.

“Now?” He asks as we pull up to the Tribute Center. “We’re on our way home tomorrow.”

“We can catch a different train, right? You heard Paylor. Whatever we want.”

Peeta looked troubled for a moment and then said, “Okay. Let’s go see your mom.” He gave me a smile and took my hand. Relief flooded through me. I just knew he would say no, but what was I thinking? Peeta was also so agreeable with most things.

It was no trouble to switch schedules and catch a train to District Four. About halfway there, my excitement at seeing my mother increased. It had been way too long. We had talked on the phone and both had cried about Prim, but I wanted to see her face, see how she was doing. See what she was doing.

District Four was water and more water. And it was beautiful. And why wouldn’t it be? Finnick was beautiful and Mags was such a beautiful spirit. And Annie. Annie! I had almost forgotten about her being here. We could see Annie.

Since we hadn’t really had a chance to call ahead, we had to take a transport to my mother’s home. She lived in a very nice low-lying house that had strange looking sprouting trees in front of it. It was also very hot in Four. We knocked on her door and we could hear her calling, “Coming!”

The look on her face to see both of us was well worth the surprise trip.

“Katniss? Peeta?” She broke into a huge smile and reached to hug me. “Oh, Katniss!” I hugged her back hard and was surprised to feel tears threatening to fall. When we finally let go of each other, she turned and gave Peeta a big hug as well. “Come in, come in!”

My mother was doing well. She was working at the new hospital. And she seemed happy. We didn’t talk about Prim, which made the visit better. I asked about Annie and my mother brightened. Annie didn’t live very far away and suggested we go and visit her.

Annie lived in their equivalent Victor’s Village. She was happy to see us, but I could tell that she lived with perpetual sadness. Finnick’s picture was all over the house and Annie kept looking at them while she talked to us. She then went to go get the baby up from his nap so we could see him and everything changed. For Peeta.

“This is Liam,” Annie said, smiling at the baby. She was bouncing him up and down. “Do you want to hold him?” Peeta immediately said yes and reached for him excitedly. I watched the way his face transformed as he cuddled this small bundle of joy. Liam gurgled and cooed at Peeta and he just laughed as if this was the best thing he’d ever seen.

My heart sank at the sight.
I still didn’t want to have children.

My mother was looking at me with a curious expression, but I didn’t say anything at all. Peeta finally turned to me to hand me the baby. I flinched, terrified to hold him. I’d held Prim as a baby and even Posy while at Gale’s house, but this was different. I was too young to even consider a baby back then. There was no real expectation of motherhood in that. But this? And the way that Peeta was looking at me, he had the expectation. He wanted children.

I reluctantly took Liam, who started crying the instant I touched him. I flinched again and almost threw him back to Peeta. Peeta looked stricken for a moment and then took him from me.

“Sorry,” I whisper, mortified that Annie may have seen me try to throw her son across the room. “Babies don’t like me.”

Peeta frowned at me, but Annie just laughed. “It does take some getting used to. I didn’t think Liam liked me very much either. Fi-Finnick was the one who was great with the kids.” Annie looked like she was about to cry and I couldn’t sit through her tears.

We decided it was best to let Annie get some rest, but she didn’t want us to go just yet. “You were the last ones with him,” she said. “His spirit was there with you. It’s here with you now.” Peeta looked miserable after she said that, no doubt remembering his role in the awfulness of that last mission. His trying to kill me, killing Mitchell and then witnessing the awful deaths of Messalla, Jackson, Castorr…the whole Squad really. But Annie let him hold Liam again and he perked right up.

I had to get out of there. I walked to the back yard of the house. Annie’s house had a swimming pool! No wonder they were such good swimmers. My mother came out to join me.

“Katniss, are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Mom. I’m sorry to see that Annie is so sad.”

My mother nodded. “She has her good days and bad. But Liam keeps her focused. Babies are wonderful like that.”

I nod mechanically, but I know I’m not fooling her.

“You’re happy with him, aren’t you? I can see that you are, Katniss. And things have… progressed with you and him?”

I blush crimson, which was enough of an answer for her. She smiles. “It’s natural, honey. And you’re a woman now. It’s okay to be with a man, especially one that you love and he loves you. You’ll want a family too.”

At this I turn to her and say, “No Mom. I don’t! I don’t want kids. How can I do that? The Games, the war…I can’t bring a child into this.”

“The war is over, Katniss. We won. It’s a new Panem now. We don’t have to send kids to be Reaped anymore. They’re free.” She looks confused that I don’t seem to know this.

“That’s right now! But what about tomorrow? Or next year? Or when the next Snow decides he wants the Games back. I can’t take that risk. I won’t send my child to any more Hunger Games! I won’t let my child go hungry! And what happens if something happens to Peeta? And I can’t function like you couldn’t after Dad? No Mom! I can’t do that to an innocent baby! Annie looks like she’s two seconds from jumping out of a window. Who’ll take care of Liam then? No.”

My mother’s hands are going to her mouth. She looks shocked…no more like disappointed.
“Have you talked to Peeta about this?”

“No! And I hope I won’t have to.” I realize I need her help. “Mom, you have access to medicines, right? I heard that in the Capitol there were ways to not get pregnant. Can you get me something like that? Please?”

My mother’s eyes widen.

“Mom, please! I can’t get pregnant! Peeta…I know he wants kids, even though we haven’t talked about it. I can see how he’s acting with Liam. Please help me!” I know I must look desperate. She has to understand how important this is. The medicine will prevent me from getting pregnant, but Peeta would never have to know about it. He’ll just think that I can’t. Yes, he’ll be disappointed, but in the end it’ll just have to be. We’ll get through that.

“Okay, Katniss. I’ll get you some medicine.” She looks defeated, but I give her a giant hug. She hugs me back but says, “Katniss, you should be honest with Peeta. It won’t be fair to him if you lie about this.”

How do I tell her that I think Peeta will eventually not want to be with me anymore if I refuse to have children? I’m already broken and defective, what’s this one more thing to be broken about? Peeta loves me with the defects, but refusing to do this will make him leave.

“I will, Mom. I’ll tell him soon.”

We stay a few more days with her and we had back to Twelve. She gave me a year’s supply of the medication with another warning about honesty and side effects. I halfway listen and Peeta asks me on the train ride home about what I thought about Liam.

“He’s cute. Looks like Finnick.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to have our own baby?”

I look into his hopeful blue eyes and I give a slight smile and a shrug. “Something to think about, one day,” I say carefully. That seems to satisfy him and we spend the rest of the train ride home in bed.

HG

Things were fine once we got back home. At least for about a week. I had safely hidden the medicine so Peeta wouldn’t accidently come across it. He was busy with the bakery anyway and I was back to hunting again, even though Paylor’s words about finding my place in the new Panem was definitely haunting me.

About a week after we got back, I stopped by the bakery to see Peeta. He wasn’t out front, but his new assistant was. Roald was from Thirteen and had seen Peeta make the cake for Finnick and Annie’s wedding and had been intrigued ever since with baking. Now that people were free to go where they wanted, he had come here and went to work for Peeta.

“Peeta’s in the back,” Roald said cheerfully. “With Delly.”

I nod and head to the back of the shop. Peeta was probably in the office. I hear low voices and then an odd sounding laugh. My hackles are raised. I push my way into the office and sure enough, Peeta is sitting at his desk with a pile of orders in front of him. He’s smiling and Delly Cartwright is laughing at what he’s saying. Only it’s the way she’s laughing that has me glaring.
And how she looks.

Delly has been friends with Peeta for years. She was a fat, chunky thing, always happy and smiling. Never a threat, always nice. But her stint in Thirteen’s strict regimen of food has improved Delly in a number of ways. She’s now svelte with an incredible amount of curves in all the right places and where my breasts are empty pockets of nothing, Delly’s looks like twin Nut mountains from District Two. Her blonde hair is wavy now and looks really nice. When did Delly start looking like this? And why is she hanging all over Peeta?

They both turn when they see me.

“Oh hi, Katniss!” Delly says brightly and her green eyes sparkle like emeralds. “Peeta was just telling me about your trip to the Capitol.” She seems genuinely happy to see me, but right now, I’m beyond furious. And I have no idea why.

Peeta is smiling at me too. “How was your day, Katniss? Did you hunt something up good? Delly is re-opening the shoe store soon. She’s been just as busy as I have with the bakery.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” I manage to say through gritted teeth. Delly blinks at me and then she slides off the desk. She’s giving me a strange look.

“You should come by the store, Katniss. We can get a better selection now. And after all the fancy stuff you have from the Capitol, you can get new shoes too.” She turns back to Peeta. “And I meant what I said, Peeta. You’re welcome anytime. I want us to catch up.” She reaches out and touches his hand. “I’m glad that you’re better.”

Peeta squeezes her hand back. “Thanks, Delly. I’ll come by.”

She nods at me and walks out. Peeta stands up and comes over to me and leans in to give me a kiss, but I pull back. He looks confused.

“What?”

“Nothing!” I snap, feeling stupid for not knowing why I’m angry. “You and Delly were awful cozy!”

Peeta actually laughs. “You’re jealous of Delly? Katniss! Come on! It’s Delly!”

I’m not amused. “That wasn’t Delly, Peeta! The Delly we know is fat with pig tails! That girl was practically breastfeeding you!”

Peeta’s mouth drops open and he reaches for me. “Katniss, no! Delly wasn’t doing that. We’re
friends! I’ve known her for years… it’s not like that.”

“Oh… just like how I said that about me and Gale?”

Peeta frowns at me and I immediately regret the statement. Oh boy.

“So you were with Gale! I knew it! There’s no way you two were just “best friends”. All that time out in the woods together!” He looks betrayed and I feel awful that I’ve just hurt him like that.

“Peeta, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. Nothing happened like that between us. Not like with us. I swear!”

“I don’t believe you! Delly tried to tell me that you were a good person, but look how you just betrayed her! And you’ve been lying to me, Katniss! They told me that you would always lie to me! You’re a liar, Katniss! Liar! Liar!”

And just like that, Peeta is gone.

I know I’m in trouble. This came on too quickly and Peeta is way too close to me. I try to back up, but he’s lunging and he slams me against the back wall. My ears are ringing and Peeta’s arm is up against my neck, crushing my wind pipe.

I can’t breathe.

My mind switches to Hunger Games mode and I know I’m fighting for my life. I bring my knee up and slam it right into Peeta’s maleness. He screams, and his arm falters slightly, giving me enough of an edge for me to kick him hard in his prosthetic leg. He buckles immediately and I feel him slide away. I’m gasping, trying to catch my breath, when both Roald and Delly come running into the back.

Roald heads straight for Peeta and grabs him while Delly pulls me out of the office.

“Katniss! Are you all right?” Delly cries out in panic. “What happened? He was fine a minute ago!”

I can’t talk, but I have to get to Peeta. Pull him back. I push past Delly and I can hear Peeta screaming. I burst into the room and Roald is struggling with Peeta, who’s wild and crazed.

“Peeta! Peeta!! Stay with me, Peeta!! Who are you? Where are you?” I shout at him. Peeta’s head jerks at the sound of my voice.

“I’m Peeta Mellark. I’m from District Twelve. I am a Victor in the Hunger Games. The war is
over…” Peeta beats his head rapidly and starts chanting the phrase again. Roald is still holding him, but Peeta’s not struggling like he was. After several minutes, he finally calms down and Roald releases him slowly. Peeta blinks and shakes his head. He then takes in Roald, who’s standing beside him and me, staring at him. Delly hovers in the background.

“Oh my God,” Peeta whispers as realization sinks in on what’s happened. He backs away from all of us. “I’m sorry! Did I hurt anyone?” He looks at me and sees my neck. I’m pretty sure there must be red bruises from the way his eyes widen.

“Katniss?” He sounds so broken and confused. I hate seeing him like this.

“It’s okay, Peeta. I’m not hurt. I was able to get away.” I try to sound reassuring, but I fail miserably. Peeta is not mollified at all.

“But I did hurt you! I can see your neck!” He’s wringing his hands now, still very agitated. Roald moves a bit closer.

“Don’t try to touch me again!” Peeta calls out to him. “I don’t want to set it off again. I’m okay.”

I start towards him to hug him, but he raises his hand. “Go home, Katniss.”

I freeze and gape at him. “Peeta! No, I’m not leaving. We’ll go home together.”

He shakes his head at me. “I have work to finish here,” he says quietly. “I’ll see you in a bit, okay? Please, Katniss. Just please go.”

I want to argue with him, but I know that can’t be helpful. Especially since our argument was what probably brought this whole episode on. Delly is beside me and says, “I can stay here if you want me too, Katniss. He’ll get home okay.”

I want to feel reassured by Delly’s words, but I’m even more upset by them. Why am I so upset by Delly? She’s just trying to help.

I struggle to get the words out to them. “Okay… I’ll go home. Everything’s fine, Peeta, right? We’re all okay.”

Peeta nods at me and Roald gives me a look that says he’ll watch him. Roald saw Peeta in Thirteen and knew about his condition.

Peeta doesn’t come home that night. I know because I didn’t get a wink of sleep. I heard him when he went to his own house and never came back out to mine. I jumped out of bed when I heard his front door close and I sat by the window and waited. Lights turned on and off and then nothing.

I don’t see him for three days. My nightmares have returned by then.
He shows up for breakfast on the fourth morning, just as Greasy Sae is finishing up. She hadn’t commented yet on Peeta’s absence, probably not needing to, as seeing how awful I’ve looked every morning. My neck is bruised and Sae knows. She also knows that I’m a wreck.

She just watches him when he hesitantly approaches the table, not looking at either of us. His guilt is wearing him like a suit of armor. He sits down and stares at his plate. The room is totally silent. Even that wretched Buttercup hasn’t yowled at him yet. He likes Peeta.

Sae brings over a plate of sausage and smacks it down on the table. She glances at me and I bite my lip. She sighs.

“Look here, Peeta. I’ve known plenty a girl who show up with black eyes, looking like raccoons, got bruises, broken ribs, wrists, you name it. Beat on by a boy, mostly on that white liquor or just plain mean. But that’s not you. I know’d your mama….now she was mean. She had Seam blood in her, but she didn’t like that. But she had watched her uncle beat on some girls, probably where she got it, beating on you like that.”

Both Peeta and I are staring at Sae with our mouths open. Peeta’s mother had family members in The Seam?

“Anyway, Peeta. You don’t got that meanness in you. You got a problem, but it’s not your fault. That Snow tried to make you mean, but it don’t take well. Not who you are.”

Sae finishes her little speech, pats Peeta on the shoulder and walks out. Neither of us says anything for a while.

“Katniss, I’m…I’m so sorry. I just couldn’t come here, not after I hurt you like that.” Peeta is finally looking at me. “I couldn’t face you.”

I’m up and moving over to him, sitting down next to him. “No, I’m sorry! I shouldn’t have brought up that whole stupid thing about Delly. This was my fault!” I touch his hand. “Are you okay?”

Peeta nods. “I had to call Dr. Aurelius, of course. He’ll be calling you soon. He’s going to send me some sedatives. Well, send them to you, I should say.”

“He wants me to knock you out?”

“If you have to.”

I pull him into a hug and he strokes my hair. I sigh and kiss his cheek. The sausage gets cold.

Two mornings later, we hear Haymitch shout. Peeta jumps straight up and bolts for the door, I’m right behind him. We sprint to his house and run in. He’s standing there, staring at the floor. At
Hazelle Hawthorne.

“Haymitch?” Peeta starts and Haymitch looks up. “What happened?”

Haymitch begins to pace. “She woke me up! I told her not to do that! I think, I think I hit her or something!”

Hazelle is out cold on the floor, her leg twisted in an odd angle.

There’s a new doctor in the district, now that my mother has gone to Four. Hazelle has a concussion and a broken hip. Haymitch is beside himself with guilt. It’s time for me to put my plan in action to get him off his white liquor problem.

I first cut off his supply. I visit every single person who sells white liquor and bribe, cajole and even threaten them into not selling to Haymitch. Next, I visit the mail steward and bribe him into informing me whenever Haymitch gets packages from the Capitol. Haymitch is resourceful and as soon as he figures out that people will no longer sell to him, he will resort to ordering from the Capitol. Peeta and I then go to Haymitch’s house to find his stash. That takes an entire day.

Haymitch had bottles in the usual places, like closets, drawers and the like. He’d also hidden them under floor boards, inside an old radio, taped to the back of a toilet in an unused bathroom, behind books, taped under coffee tables, buried in the yard. It was endless. I was almost in tears at the level of addiction that has plagued this man for all of these years.

He’s screaming at us the whole time, as each bottle is unearthed and emptied. More than once he tried to grab at us or at the bottles, but we’re quicker and more determined. He finally collapses and his eyes are full of tears. He never meant to hurt Hazelle. She was only trying to help him and keep his life somewhat in order. He needs to go to a facility. Maybe we can send him back to Thirteen.

The day after the clean and purge of the house, Haymitch is sick. He’s vomiting, shaking and sweating. He’s going through withdrawal. Badly. And I realize that he needs a doctor for this to work. I’m afraid to leave him. Am almost tempted to give him something to drink to make it better. I call Plutarch, who immediately sets it up where Haymitch can go back to Thirteen for help. The transport will be there to pick him by the end of the day. I’m relieved.

Peeta went to the bakery and I’m sitting in Haymitch’s kitchen. Haymitch is curled up on the couch, shaking and moaning. I’ve covered him with a blanket, willing him to hang in there. There’s a loud knocking at the door and I rush to answer it. The transport team is all business. But it’s not them. As I pull open the door, I’m staring at Gale Hawthorne.

HG

Gale looks pissed. But then his face changes as he sees me standing there.
“Katniss?” He then shakes his head. “Where’s the bastard?”

“Gale? What are you doing here?”

Gale pushes past me and into the house. “Haymitch hits my mother and almost kills her! She’s laid up, Katniss! I’m here to make sure she’s okay and to deal with this asshole, once and for all!”

I grab Gale by the shirt as he attempts to march into Haymitch’s living room.

“Gale, calm down! Haymitch isn’t good. Yes, he’s a bastard, but he’s sick. He’s on his way back to Thirteen to get help. For good. He’s going through withdrawal. And he’s sorry about your Mom. It was an accident! He’d never hurt Hazelle on purpose!”

Gale twists around and just looks at me. “That’s funny, that you’ll defend him but condemn me for the same reason.”

I glare at him and shout, “Prim’s dead, Gale! Your mother isn’t!! It’s not the same thing at all!”

Gale looks exhausted all of a sudden, his self-righteous fury flowing out of him like a popped balloon. “I’d never hurt her. You have to know that, Katniss. I didn’t know Prim was even there. She shouldn’t have been there! I’ve been asking why and how! But I didn’t kill her, Katniss. I was with you! I didn’t know that was their plan to do it like that, right there and then. To do that to children! It wasn’t me.” He hangs his head. “I know I went overboard with my hatred of the Capitol and what they did to you, to our district. I hated every single one of them! I wanted them all to suffer, kill them all! But kids? Katniss, my brothers and sister are kids. I don’t condone that. You know how I felt about the Reapings.”

I can actually see tears in his eyes. My anger at Gale seems to have fled my body. I know that Gale didn’t literally kill Prim. His stupid strategy did, which Coin used for her own benefit to win the war. I know I’ve unfairly blamed him, just like Peeta told me not too long ago.

“Gale, I know that. I know you wouldn’t hurt Prim. You took care of them because I couldn’t. I’ve been trying to get past it, but it hasn’t been easy.” I look at him. “But it’s good to see you. How are you?”

Gale stares at me, probably in shock that I haven’t lashed out at him again. “I’m good. Doing work with Beetee in Two. Some good plans are coming soon.”


“What about you?”
I shrug. “Not much. Stuff is being rebuilt. Peeta got the bakery rebuilt and it’s doing good.”

At the mention of Peeta, Gale stiffens. But a second later his face is impassive. “Yeah, I saw that the square is coming along. Heard about making The Hob a market. Sounds great.”

Haymitch moans then and Gale startles at the sound. We’d completely forgotten he was there. Gale makes a face as he peers into the living room and sees the bundle on the couch twitching uncontrollably.

“He’s still a bastard,” Gale mutters, “but I know he means a lot to you. I wasn’t going to hurt him too bad. He was helping Mom out by giving her this job.”

“I just want him to get better. Haymitch has gone through…so much. So much we didn’t know about. But he needs to start living again.”

“That’s just like you, Catnip. Always saving everyone.” He looks at me and I’m surprised to see that there’s a longing there. Still. After all of this time. He steps forward a bit. “I’ve missed you. A lot. I wanted to write or call, but I knew you didn’t want to talk to me. I didn’t know what to say anyway. Other than I’m sorry. But I know you don’t want to hear that anymore.”

I had missed Gale too. My oldest and dearest friend. Someone I had some kind of feelings for. I don’t know what they are now either. I’m just trying to accept that maybe I can forgive him for Prim.

I smile at him and he comes all the way over to me and he reaches out to touch my hair. I lean in and give him a hug. He hugs me back, his arms encircling me tightly. I give a sigh and another void that’s been in my life is now filling up.

“Oh!”

I turn towards the door and Peeta is standing there. Delly is beside him. Why is Delly with him now?
I pull away from Gale and he turns to address the audience.

“Peeta. Delly. Hi.”

“Gale!” Delly says excitedly. “I heard you were in town. Sorry to hear about your mother.”

Peeta nods at Gale. “Hey Gale. Good to see you. How are you?” Peeta steps further into the house. He hasn’t really looked at me at all.
“I’m good. Here to make sure Mom is okay.” He jerked a thumb towards Haymitch. “Wanted to pay him a visit. Let him know what I thought about what he did.”

Peeta snorts, but Delly looks shocked. “Did you hurt him, Gale? He didn’t mean it!”

It’s time for me to end this. “I stopped him, of course. The transport team is coming for him.” I turn to Peeta. “Plutarch got him a place in Thirteen for rehab. He’s going to be there for a long time.”

Peeta looks relieved. “Thank God. Let’s hope it sticks this time.” He goes to sit down at the table. I can tell his leg is bothering him today. I want to go to him, but there’s something about the look on his face that’s telling me he might not want me too. I’m also feeling a bit annoyed about Delly again.

“Well, I guess I’ll go. Got to head back to check on them.” Gale says as he casually looks at me.

Before I can respond, Peeta says, “Delly and I will wait here for the transport team and watch Haymitch, Katniss. Go with Gale.”

I feel dismissed and I’m suddenly angry at Peeta for assuming that I wouldn’t want to stay with him. Why can’t Delly go with Gale? It’s ridiculous, I know. Peeta had always thought my being mad at Gale was stupid. And he’d always respected our friendship. But now that stupid argument is hanging over our heads; dropped now because of Peeta’s episode. Does he even remember what I slipped up and said? Does he remember what I said about him and Delly?

Gale is heading towards the door and I can’t very well stand there and look stupid. So I turn and follow Gale outside. We walk in silence for a while until we’re almost out of Victor’s Village.

“So, you and him, finally?”

How did he know?

“What do you mean?”

Gale scoffs. “You and him, Katniss. You’re sleeping with him, aren’t you?”

“Gale!” But I’ve told him everything with that one word.

Gale tries to laugh, but it sounds painful. “Not surprised. I can see it on you. You’re different. When he came in, it was obvious.”

I’m blushing all colors of red. I can’t believe that Gale is telling me about my sex life with Peeta. And how is it obvious?
“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” I sound defensive as hell, which I’m sure isn’t helping my case. But I’m so flustered that Gale picked up on it so quickly.

Gale stops walking, forcing me to do the same. He looks hard at me and then takes my hand.

“Katniss. I’ve been around you for years. We’ve done so much together. I know you. From the top of your head to the bottoms of your feet. You don’t think I’d notice that you’re having sex? Especially someone that’s not me? Even if I didn’t want to believe how you felt about him, I know now.” He plays with my fingers for a minute and then lets them go.

“Gale-“

“Gale-“

“It’s okay, Catnip. As long as you’re happy. Are you happy?”

I can’t help the smile that crosses my face when I think about him. “Yes,” I whisper, hoping that the softer I say it won’t hurt Gale as much. I am happy with Peeta, even though things lately have been hard. His most recent episode, my suspicions about Delly, my feelings about having kids; all hanging in the air. But I’m happy.

Gale closes his eyes for a second, takes a breath and then smiles. “Well then, I’m happy for you.”

HG

Gale and I start hunting together again. He doesn’t get a chance to do it as often in Two and the game is different there anyway. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed Gale, but he was a huge part of my life. Him gone had left a big hole in me, but now I’m feeling complete, more like myself again. Only better.

Gale fills me on the happenings with Two and the plans for Panem. It all sounds amazing. He also asks me what I plan on doing in the future. I’m eighteen years old with a long life ahead of me. Am I just going to go out and shoot game and give it to Greasy Sae for the rest of my life? Peeta has the bakery and his art, at least for now. What do I have? I mention that Paylor offered me a job in Two, which definitely peaked Gale’s interest. He agreed that I would be a great fit and that there are a lot of opportunities. But I can’t imagine leaving Peeta right now. Especially with Delly hanging around.

Gale found this amusing.

“Well, Delly has certainly changed. She had a few interested people in Thirteen. She dated a few of the soldiers.”

That news didn’t make me feel any better at all. So not only does she have the body of a goddess, but she’s experienced as well. I’m doing better at pleasing Peeta, but I still lack confidence on things that I’m doing. He hasn’t complained, but I feel the need to make sure that I’m the best.
Now I need to know how he learned the things that he knew.

“She spent a lot of time with Peeta in Thirteen. You were training with Johanna and everything. She sat with him a lot, ate lunch with him.”

I didn’t know this, which makes me angrier. “What else did she do?” I say gruffly. Gale is trying to hold back a smile. He’s enjoying this immensely.

“I don’t know, Catnip. They go way back, just like we do. Would you be that surprised if they were kissing or even more, like we were?”

I don’t want to hear any more about them. I’m ready to go fire an arrow into Delly’s big stupid boobs and toss her off the Tribute Center. Without the force field on.

Gale is snickering beside me and I’m furious. “That’s not funny, Gale!” I can’t believe that I’m feeling like I want to cry. I know that Peeta loves me, he would give his life for me! But why do I feel so insecure about him and Delly? Is it because she’s prettier than me or what?

“Come on, Katniss. Delly might be pretty now and all that, but she can’t hold a candle to you. At least not in his eyes. Peeta told the whole world he loved you, over and over again.” Gale looks frustrated for a minute. “He did what I should’ve done. I told you I should’ve volunteered for him. He even overcame being hijacked to warn you about the attack on Thirteen. On national television.” Gale snorts. “None of us can hold a candle to Peeta in your eyes, either!”

“Haymitch says I don’t deserve him. He’s right on the money.”

Gale frowns. “Why does he think that?”

“Come on, Gale! You said it yourself. Look at everything Peeta’s done for me. Kept us alive and interesting with that lover story, ready to sacrifice himself for me at every turn, volunteered to go back to the Games, tortured…and what have I done for him? Give him a little bit of sex, that he probably can get better from Delly Cartwright? I can barely help him in the bakery! Won’t give him kids, lie about it…” I mutter.

Gale raises his eyebrows at that. “You still don’t want children? And you haven’t told him?”

“Not only have I not told him, I’m taking medicine to prevent it from happening. I haven’t told him that either.”

Gale stares at me. “Why haven’t you told him? Don’t you think he deserves to know that? Hell, you were quick to tell me that!”
I look down at my hands in shame. “I’m going to tell him. I just haven’t yet, okay? I’m not going
to lie to him forever.”

A look of realization crosses over Gale’s features then. “You think he’ll leave if he knows. That
because he wants kids, he’ll find someone that will want them.”

“You should’ve seen him with Annie’s baby, with Liam. He wanted me to give birth right there at
the table! How can I break his heart like that? I just don’t know how to tell him.”

“Well, if he loves you, he’ll accept it.”

But that’s what scares me. Maybe his love won’t extend this far.

HG

A month has passed since Gale returned to Twelve. Hazelle is getting better and is up and moving
about. A new school has been opened and the kids have started going back. Haymitch is still in
rehab in Thirteen. Plutarch calls with updates saying its slow going, but Haymitch is trying. The
bakery is flourishing and even Delly’s shoe store is back in business.

Things are strained between Peeta and I and I don’t know how to fix it. He doesn’t say anything
about my going out with Gale and I don’t say anything about how Delly hangs on to every word
he says. We still have sex, often and vigorously, but oftentimes I lay there in bed, not with
afterglow, but with afterburn. I feel like I’m in competition with something. Instead of focusing
just on him, I’m worried about who he’s done this with. Is he even thinking of me? Or does he
wish I had a better body? I’m flat-chested, scarred and I’m Seam. I don’t even have a career. Even
Delly has a store. I have nothing.

I find I’m pulling away from him again. My heart is aching, but I don’t know how to explain
things. Explain how I’m feeling. Scared to admit I don’t know what I’m doing now that there’s no
war to battle, no Games to win. Gale isn’t helping matters either. His presence reminds me that he
also has a new life and career. And he makes me feel inadequate as well. His hints that there’s a
place for me in Two; that Peeta is basically a saint and I’ve brought him down; that Gale still loves
me, and loved me at my very worst.

I start pulling away from him too. I can’t deal with Gale and his emotions. I never really could.
Gale was like a big brother and you’re not supposed to fall in love with your sister. His
developing feelings made me have to examine mine and I resented him for that. And while Peeta’s
love was innocent and childlike in the beginning, Gale’s love was all man. I was scared of the
man. Now Peeta is the man, the innocence gone. He’s killed people, both in and out of the arena
and has experienced unspeakable horrors. Gale wants to turn back the hands of time and fix what
he didn’t do. He’s not living in the present at all.

We’re at his mother’s new home. Since so many people died from the fire bombings, the district is
just one big place now, no more division. No more Seam. There were some homes that were left
standing, so those who returned from Thirteen took residence in these places. Seam and merchant living next door to one another. No one cares anymore, there’s so few of us left.

I’m walking ahead of Gale, but then he stops me.

“Katniss, I’m going to be leaving soon. Probably in another couple of weeks. It’s been good to be home. See it rebuilding. But I have to finish my work.”

I know he’s asking me to watch out for his family.

“Of course, I’ll watch out for them Gale. You don’t have to ask.”

But Gale is shaking his head. “That’s not what I’m saying, Katniss. I want you to come back to Two with me. Leave here, find some purpose again. I’m thinking of getting my family to come there too.”

I’m stunned into silence. Leave Twelve? With him?

“I-I can’t leave. What about Peeta?”

Gale shrugs. “Bring him with you if you have to. We were going to do that when we planned to run away all those years ago.” He says that, but I know that’s not what he wants.

“He’s not going to want to go. He just got the bakery going again. It’s his legacy.”

“So you’ll be happy to sit here and watch him bake bread for the rest of your life? What about what you want? Is he selfish?”

I’m angry. “No! Peeta’s not selfish at all!”

“Then tell him you want to go to Two. See what he says.”

I bite my lip. I don’t want to tell him that. Because I know what’ll happen. Peeta will unselfishly tell me to go. But he won’t come with me. I want us to be together. But I don’t want to sit here for the rest of my life and do nothing. Gale knows that. He’s put me in a horrible spot.

“That’s not fair, Gale! He’d either have to give up the bakery or give up me. And I’d have to give up a new life or give him up.” None of that is good at all.

Gale steps forward and takes my hand. “But you wouldn’t have to do that with me, Katniss. You can have a new life…with me.”
I stare at him in shock. “What are you saying?”

“You know I love you, Katniss. And I’m willing to wait until you can get over him. I know that won’t be easy for you. But if you have a new life, things will make more sense. But you can start over with me. In Two. I already know you don’t want kids, and I’m okay with that. I don’t want kids either. I can make you happy if you just give me a chance to. Say you’ll think about it.”

Leave Peeta for a life with Gale in Two? Leave Peeta?? I don’t want to leave Peeta. I love Peeta. There, I said it. Only in my head, but I know it’s the truth. I want to make a life with him, in Twelve or Two, it doesn’t really matter. I want to fix our problems and be happy again. I can’t leave with Gale.

“Gale, I can’t do that. I-“

“Just think about it, please. That’s all I ask. Just know that I love you. I’ve never stopped. You don’t know how hard this has been, being apart from you, knowing you hated me. And now being here and seeing you, seeing you with him. It should’ve been me, Katniss! I know it’s not your fault, it’s mine! For not stepping up and telling you sooner and not running away when you asked me too. I kick myself every day for that. But just don’t close the door on me all the way. If nothing else, just think about coming to Two, to work.”

I don’t have the heart to tell Gale no outright. But not because of his offer of being with him but of finding a purpose in Two. Would Peeta really not come? He could open a bakery in Two. And everyone loved his cake in Thirteen, didn’t they? He’d have business there; they would come just because he is who he is. We could both go to Two, bring Haymitch with us so he could find work too.

So I nod my head at Gale. “Yes, I’ll think about it.” Gale smiles brightly and he leans forward and kisses me, right on the lips. It takes me a few seconds to process what’s happening, but when I do I pull away.

“I’m sorry, Katniss. I couldn’t help it. I’ve wanted to do that since I’ve been here.”

I hear a cough and I look up. Delly Cartwright is standing in the street, watching us.

“Delly,” I hiss and she frowns at me. Gale looks at her and then back at me. Delly hurries away, heading towards the square. Towards the bakery. Towards Peeta. She’s going to tell Peeta!

“She’s going to tell Peeta!” I wail. “She saw us, saw you kissing me!” I bolt from the front of Gale’s house, but he grabs my arm.

“Katniss! Slow down! What are you going to do? Beat her up?”
“Let me go, Gale! She can’t tell him that! He won’t understand! He’ll have another episode!” I’m panicked now, struggling against Gale’s unyielding hand.

“He’s having episodes? He’s tried to kill you again?” Gale asks in disbelief. “And you’re still defending him?”

“It’s not his fault, Gale! You know that! Certain things can set him off and this will!” I yank my arm out of his grasp and race down the street, trying to head Delly off. I know I’m faster than her. She’s done nothing but sit on her fat ass her whole life, while I’ve been hunting and have been in two Games and a war. Just ahead I see Delly, moving quickly across the square and she is heading for the bakery. I knew it! I put on an extra burst of speed and I catch her just before she reaches the building.

“Delly!” I grab her arm and she lets out a squeal. I put my hand over her mouth and pull her away from the shop. I can hear Peeta’s voice talking to a customer. I drag her down the sidewalk and towards the Justice Building. There are a few people out, but not many. Hopefully they won’t notice us.

“What is it, Katniss?” Delly sounds disdainful. “Why were you kissing Gale?”

“He was kissing me, Delly! I didn’t know he was going to do that! You can’t tell Peeta, okay?”

Delly crossed her arms in front of her. “You shouldn’t hide something like that from him, Katniss. Peeta’s been through enough.”

“I know! That’s why you can’t tell him! Please, Delly!” I hated having to beg her, but if it prevented Peeta from finding out, then I’d do it again. On my knees if I had to.

Delly looked uncertain for a moment. “Do you love him, Katniss? Like really love him? He loves you so much.” I could hear the wistfulness in her voice and for a moment I want to punch her in the face.

“Yes, I do. Let me handle this, okay?” I can see Delly waver and I pray that I don’t have to knock her out. But I will.

Finally she nods. “Okay, Katniss. I’ll let you deal with it. But I won’t let you keep hurting Peeta! He needs someone who can love him back. Someone who can’t keep hurting him.”

“Someone like you?” I can’t help sneering.

Delly stands a bit taller. “Yes, someone like me! I’ve listened to Peeta talk about you our entire lives and you never even noticed him. He loved you in the Games and you just pretended! He’s
almost died for you and you still keep hurting him. You can’t love him, not while Gale is still in your life.”

I feel like Delly has slapped me across the face. The wind has been completely knocked out of me. I hate her so much right now. But at least she confirmed what I believed. Delly is in love with Peeta. Has been her whole life. But like the good friend she is, she’s sat by and tolerated his pining after another girl. A girl from The Seam.

I’m too busy trying to process this latest piece of information, when I hear a shout coming from the bakery. Delly turns with me and we both rush back across the square to see what’s going on.

I head inside, with Delly right on my heels. And then I’m gaping.

Gale.

I’d been so busy trying to stop Delly from getting to the bakery, I had completely not thought about Gale going to the bakery.

Peeta’s face is ashen and he turns to me, hurt coursing all up and down his body. “Katniss? Is this true? You’re thinking about going to Two? Why wouldn’t you tell me that?”

I glare at Gale so hard that I hope his face melts off! But there’s no point in lying about it now.

“I just started thinking about it. Ever since Paylor mentioned it. I just didn’t think it was a good time to bring it up.”

“So you bring it up with him?” He jerks his thumb at Gale, who sneers back at him.

“No, he brought it up! I just admitted I’d been thinking about it some. But it’s not something that I was going to do, not without talking to you first.”

“Just like you’re telling him about not wanting to have kids?” Gale says in a loud voice and Delly gasps.

Peeta stares at me. “What? What does he mean? You don’t want to have kids?”

I truly hate Gale in this moment. How could he do this to me?

“Peeta, now’s not the time to talk about this. Let’s talk at home.”

Now it’s Delly’s turn to take a crack at me. “Katniss, you have a lot of secrets. This isn’t good at
all. You need to be honest with Peeta. Get it out in the open now. Gale’s here and you might as well tell the whole truth.”

I whip around to stare at Delly and I decide I’ve had enough of her. I still have my bow and I yank it off my back, but both Peeta and Gale intervene. Peeta grabs the bow and Gale pulls the arrows, to stop me from loading it.

I’m so angry that I can’t see straight. I feel so betrayed right now. I turn around and I shove Gale. He doesn’t go very far, but I’m furious.

“Well? Why did you do this?” I can feel myself getting ready to cry.

“I knew that you wouldn’t. You’re blinded, Katniss. He deserves to know the truth.”

I turn around towards Peeta to try and explain all of this, but Peeta is right in my face, his eyes black and he’s snarling. He hits his head with his hand and starts talking to himself. I fall back and I remember that I have a syringe that I carry with me, just in case there’s an emergency. Dr. Aurelius sent them after Peeta’s last episode.

“Oh no you don’t!” Gale yelled and he grabs Peeta.

Big mistake.

Peeta goes absolutely crazy.

Everything happens so fast that I can barely tell what’s going on. Gale is a blur grabbing Peeta, but Peeta is no slouch either. He twists out of Gale’s hands, somehow grabs Gale’s arm and tosses him over his shoulder. Gale lands hard on the floor and Delly screams.

Peeta is coming for me and I dodge out of the way, but just barely. I’m digging into my jacket inner pocket trying to find the syringe, but Peeta is on me, pulling my hair, trying to choke me. I yell and suddenly Peeta disappears. Gale has gotten to his feet and he’s pulling Peeta away, pinning his arms above his head. I’m frantically digging for the syringe and Delly is screaming at Gale to not hurt Peeta.

By the time I find the syringe, both Peeta and Gale are on the floor. Peeta is a wrestling champion and Gale is struggling to get a hold of him. Peeta is screaming all sorts of stuff and a crowd is gathering in front of the bakery, alerted by the noise.

I race over to them, but they are flopping all over the place and I can’t get the syringe close enough to Peeta.
“Help me, Delly!” I scream at her. I get an elbow in the gut from Peeta and I let out a woof! I manage to keep a hold of the syringe and Delly finally drops to her knees next to me.

“Hold him!!” Gale has managed to get him in some type of hold, but it’s slipping. Peeta is wailing like a lunatic, sounding like he’s dying. Delly grabs his shoulder and tries to push him closer to Gale, so he can hold him better. I stab him in the back with the syringe and press down hard. Peeta lets out one more wounded sound and goes limp. Gale collapses on the floor and Delly’s eyes are so wide that I’m surprised her eyes haven’t fallen out of their sockets.

I think I’m gasping for air, but it really turns out to be gasping sobs. My shoulders shake as I reach for Peeta, lying face down on the floor. I turn him over and I see blood coming from his mouth and nose. I glance at Gale and he’s bleeding too. Gale’s friend Thom comes in as does Roald. Roald’s face is grim as he takes in the scene.

“We’ll get him home, Katniss.” Thom says as he eyes Gale. No doubt that Thom knows Gale’s feelings for me. A few other men come and help pick him up. They leave with him and Delly stands there, fidgeting. When I don’t say anything, she leaves with the others. No doubt going to Peeta’s house. Gale is sitting on the floor leaning against the counter, just watching me.

“Katniss,” Gale begins but I hold up my hand.

“No,” he says, “how often does this happen? These episodes? And you have to carry syringes? He’s dangerous, Katniss! How many times has he tried to hurt you?”

I turn my tear streaked face to him. “You made this one happen, Gale! You pushed him! You just had to tell him this!”

“Yeah, I did! And I’m not sorry! I mean, I’m sorry he tried to hurt you and all that and I’m sorry that they did that to him, but I’m not sorry that I’m trying to get you to see that you lying to him doesn’t show that you love him or that you’re happy. You feel guilty, Katniss! Guilty that you don’t love him the way that you should! After all he’s done for you. And it’s not fair to him! Nor me! I know that you love me or you would, if you would just let him go! Let him go, Katniss!”

Every word is another dagger in my heart, my soul and what’s left of my spirit.

“That’s not true, Gale! Don’t say that!”

“Catnip, it is true! You want to make up for everything that you did. You want to save him because he’s in pain, just like I was when you tried to kiss me all of those times. You think everything is your fault. But it’s not your fault that Peeta fell in love with you, you didn’t even know! It’s not your fault that you don’t love him back, it’s just the truth. Just like Delly’s hurt because she loves Peeta and he’s never looked at her that way. Does that make him a bad person? No. Just like it didn’t make you one.”
I give another sob and Gale is pulling me into a hug. I sob into his shirt. I’m so upset that I can’t even think. None of that is true. It can’t be true! So why have I been lying to Peeta all this time? But I can’t solve that sitting on the floor of the bakery shop. I pull away from Gale and stand up. The place is a mess, but I’m not in the mood to clean up. I’ll do it tomorrow.

Gale stands up too. “Peeta’s got a nice swing.” He’s rubbing his face. “He should definitely think about training in hand to hand combat.”

I stare at him in disgust and Gale sighs. “Okay, I’m sorry. Do you want me to walk you home?”

I shake my head no, because I’m too tired to speak.

“Oh, I’ll go.” He stops at the door. “I love you, Katniss. I’ll wait for you, as long as it takes.” And then he’s gone.

HG

I can’t face Peeta.

It’s more than a week and I’ve not seen nor heard a peep from him. I avoid the bakery like it’s full of contagion. I avoid Delly’s shoe store. I avoid Gale.

In fact, I’m back to hiding in my house. I badly need to talk to someone, but there’s no one available. Finnick was the only other person who understood loving someone who was damaged, but he’s long dead. Haymitch still isn’t back and I don’t want to go to Thirteen. Especially not after I killed their leader. My mother?

What happened to the Girl on Fire? The one who was so courageous? I can do all of these things in battle, but I can’t talk to the one person who I say I love? I’m terrified of Peeta. But not because of the episodes. I’m terrified of what he can do to my soul. He can rip it out and toss it away like old chicken bones and I’d wither and die. His episodes I can handle better. It’s physical, it’s combat, that I can do. Emotions? Psychological stuff? I can’t do a thing with those. I can’t even talk about my own issues.

It’s going into week two and I miss Peeta so much I feel physically ill. I have to talk to him, to see what’s going on.

So I brave leaving my house and I head across the way to his. I knock and part of me prays that he’s not there, but of course I’m not going to get that wish. It’s Delly who answers the door and the sight of her makes me clench my fists.
“Is he here?” I ask, getting straight to the point.

“Yes, but I don’t think he wants to talk to you right now.”

“Oh?” I say, getting ready to push her out of the way, but decide that won’t help my cause with Peeta. That will only make him upset and I don’t want that.

“Who is it, Delly?” I hear Peeta call. It sounds like he’s in the kitchen. My heart aches at his voice.

“Ummm…it’s Katniss.”

There’s a long silence. And then I hear his footsteps coming to the door. Delly steps aside as Peeta appears in the doorway.

“Peeta-“

“What do you want?”

“Peeta, please…let me explain.”

“Explain what, Katniss? That you’re planning a completely different life without me? That you don’t want any children with me? Or that you’ve been kissing Gale?”

“Just let me explain!”

“No.” And he closes the door in my face.

I bang on the door. “Peeta! Peeta!! Please don’t do this!! Peeta!!”

I sink down on the front step and hug my knees to my chest. Peeta hates me, just like he did when he first got back from Snow. And that was the hijacking. This time it’s for real.

I don’t know how long I sat there, but the door eventually opens again and Delly is coming outside. She skirts past me and walks down the steps. At the bottom she stops and turns around.

“I told him he should at least hear you out. That’s the right thing to do at least.” She takes a deep breath and says, “I don’t think you’re a bad person, Katniss. What you did for Prim was the most amazing thing I’d ever seen. And what you did for Panem is more than anyone else had done, ever. You could have anyone and anything you want. Please let him go.”
And she walked away.

I’m shaken by her words. That’s the second person who told me to let Peeta go. Now both individuals had their own personal agendas on the line, but it doesn’t mean they’re wrong. Can I let him go?

“Katniss.”

I jump because I didn’t hear Peeta coming to the door. I stand up and face him.

“Peeta?”

He turns and goes back inside, but doesn’t close the close the door. I follow behind him and he goes and sits in the living room. I hesitantly sit down and I watch his face. He’s not looking at me but when he does, I want to go over and kiss him. But I don’t dare.

“Peeta, I know I messed up. I know you’re mad at me for not talking to you about having kids or about Two. But I swear it’ll never happen again! We can fix that! We can talk about it, I won’t keep anything back, okay?”

“But you can’t fix this thing with Gale, can you?” Peeta isn’t looking at me. “You still love him.”

“No! It’s not like that, Peeta! And Gale’s leaving. He’s going back. He won’t bother us anymore.”

“But you want to go to Two! You want to go with him!”

“Not with him, Peeta! I want us to go! I don’t have any skills here, I never learned to do anything but hunt. Paylor’s right, there’s more opportunity in Two then here.”

“But he’ll be there, Katniss. Gale’s never going to leave you alone. You know that. He’ll always be in your head. And you’re always going to love him. I can’t compete with that anymore.”

“You’re not competing with him, Peeta! Yes, Gale is…was a huge part of my life and I want to stay friends with him, but if it means losing you, then no. I hope I don’t have to make that decision, but I will if you want me too.”

“I’m not going to make you, Katniss. Gale was there before I was. I don’t know if I can trust you with him. Or more him with you. And I don’t want to hate him. He means too much to you. And now, I don’t even know if I can trust myself around you. I’ve hurt you more than once and I’d rather die than to do that again. I’m not safe to be around! And others can get hurt too. Look at what happened with Gale! Delly could’ve been hurt too. I don’t want to hurt anyone else, Katniss.” Peeta sounded so tired. But the look on his face was one of such sorrow and heartbreak.
that I fell back a step.

“What are you saying, Peeta?”

“I love you, Katniss. More than anything. And I don’t want to hurt you. But you’re making me crazy. Gale, going to Two, no kids. You’re not happy and I don’t know how to make you happy. You’re always going to resent me if I don’t go to Two. You know I want kids, but you don’t. What if neither one of us changes our minds about that? And what if one day I have an episode and you can’t get the syringe in time. What if I kill you? I can’t risk that, Katniss. Until I get myself under control, I can’t be with you anymore. And you need to figure out what you want to do.”

“No, Peeta! We can fix this. Give me a chance to fix it. Don’t give up on us. Please!” I go to him and kneel down in front of him and take his hands. “We can get help for the episodes. We can get a doctor here, close by. Someone from Thirteen! We can take it slow, okay? Build the trust back up.”

Peeta is shaking his head. “I can’t! I can’t keep doing this. I don’t know what’s real or not. I want to believe you, but I can’t. I know you love Gale, but you say you don’t, but then you kiss him! No, Katniss. You’re going to make me do something bad and I don’t want to hurt you. I’d rather not have you at all, then for that to keep happening.”

I make a confused noise. What is he saying? “Peeta?”

Peeta’s face is mirroring my agony. “I don’t want to hurt you. I want you to be happy. I can’t make you happy, Katniss. I thought I could, but…please.” He starts muttering to himself and I know this isn’t going to end well.

I grab his face and I kiss him, slow and passionately. “Peeta, you’re going to be okay,” I say, but I won’t be. I don’t want to be here anymore. Peeta’s staring at me, trying to focus on my words. I don’t want him to have an episode. I need to get out of there. Let him pull it back together without me being in his face. I hastily back away from him and I all but run out of the door. But I don’t go home, I just keep running. Away from Victor’s Village, away from the square. Just away.

I finally stop somewhere in the woods. I sit there and I start to cry. Great heaving hacks of air. I’ve ruined Peeta. Again. But my wailing isn’t all for him. Something inside me feels broken, obliterated. It hurts. The pain ranks up there with both my father and Prim’s deaths. Not the same, but somewhere in that level of agony. Peeta doesn’t want to be with me anymore. His love for me has ended. I’ve lost his trust. I think that’s the worst part. The sun has gone down by the time I feel that I can stand up. I’m halfway out of the woods when I hear my name.

“Hey Catnip.”
“Why are you out here so late?”

“I’ve been looking for you.”

“Well, you found me.” I start walking past him, but he stops me.

“I’m sorry.”

I start screaming at him. Hitting him, clawing at him. He just stands there and takes it. It’s not long, because I’m already exhausted. Now I’m bone dry. I have nothing left in me. I sink to the ground again. Gale sits down with me. His lip is bleeding from where I hit him. I feel guilty now. I reach out to wipe away the blood and he lets me.

“I shouldn’t have hit you. I’m sorry, Gale.”

“It’s okay. I deserved it.” He lowers his head. “Delly came to see me. Told me that Peeta ended your relationship. He’s afraid of hurting you again.”

“Bet she couldn’t wait to tell you that,” I say bitterly.

“She does love Peeta, but she knows that he isn’t ready for anything. He’s a mess, she said. She’s worried about him. She asked me to stay out his way for a while. You too.”

I want Delly Cartwright to die.

“Well that should be easy for you, since you’re going back to Two.”

“Yeah,” he says, but he’s not looking at me when he says it.

HG

A month later Gale’s still here.

And Delly Cartwright has become a fixture at Peeta’s house.

I haven’t completely stopped bathing yet and I do manage to change clothes every few days, but I’m finding it harder and harder to get out of bed in the mornings. I find that I have no problem steering clear of Peeta. I can’t bear to look at him. The few times that I have seen him made my insides feel like they’d been caught in one of the Capitol’s pods. Chewed up. Blown up. Poisoned.
Gale’s presence has helped though. I think I would’ve died if I’d had to face this alone. He goes hunting with me every morning, just like we used to. We don’t talk much on those trips. And I haven’t asked him why he hasn’t gone back to Two. Hazelle is doing better and her hip is well on the mend. And with Haymitch still gone, she hasn’t had to do any cleaning. There’s no reason for him to still be here.

Except there is.

I know he’s still here because of me. I’m free game now. But I know he has to see that I’m barely keeping it together. I’ve lapsed back into brooding, sullen Katniss, but then again that was always who I was. At least that’s who Gale knows. I was only sparkling happy Katniss when I was with Peeta those months. No one knows that Katniss. Only Peeta knows her.

Johanna comes to Twelve looking for Gale. She’s been living in the Capitol, but will temporarily relocate to Two, get some training and will return to Seven to start up some programs. She takes one look at me and says,

“What the fuck’s the matter with you?”

She talks to Gale about Two.

She sees Peeta and the witch named Delly.

“What the fuck’s the matter with that blonde girl? Is she made of syrup or what?”

She talks to me.

“He still loves you. You don’t get over it that easily.” Tell me about it. “You don’t know how hard he fought in the Capitol, when he was tortured. To remember you. But you have this other guy stupidly waiting for you. Peeta has syrup girl for now. Why can’t you have tall, dark and delicious?” She gives me a wicked grin. “Or I’ll take him if you don’t.”

Johanna and Gale? They’d take out armies together. Just the two of them.

But she has a point. Peeta has syrup girl. He’s moved on. What am I still doing here?

So the next time Gale and I go hunting, I smile at him. He smiles back. He hesitantly takes my hand. And I let him.
Consuming

Chapter Notes

A/N: This is the last chapter of Decay. I enjoyed writing this. I'll definitely visit this world again. This was my first attempt in the Hunger Games world. I mostly write Harry Potter. But this was fun. I hope you enjoyed it and thank you for your reviews.

It only takes two weeks after our hand holding moment for me to allow Gale into my bed. Two weeks. I feel like one of the Capitol whores that Snow made some of the Victors become.

And it's not Gale's fault. It was mine. I initiated it. I initiated it because I was angry. And hurt. And I wanted to hurt Peeta. Which was stupid because he wouldn't even know about this night. But let him assume. I wanted him to hear us. I hope he did. He sleeps with the windows open, so maybe he did.

I'd seen Peeta in town that day. Saw him with Delly. The Hob had a grand opening. The "Appalachia Market" it was now called. Appalachia? What kind of name was that? But anyway, it was a big day in Twelve. Vendors could sell their wares legally. New people from other districts came to the event, bringing their merchandise, bringing new things. It was a festival of sorts.

Gale had been helping the workers with the rebuilding of the Hob. He'd certainly made good use of his time since he was here. So we went to the opening together. I wasn't really thinking it was a date or anything. But then Gale bought me something called ice cream. I'd never heard of it, but he said they had it in Two. One of the vendors had brought some here to Twelve.

At first, I didn't know how to eat it, but Gale showed me the proper way to lick it. It was running down my hands, so I was rushing to try and finish it before it completely melted. We were both laughing by the end because I was a sticky mess and I had ice cream on my nose. Gale got some napkins to clean me up. As he was wiping me off I heard a familiar giggle. I looked over and it was Delly. And Peeta.

She reached for his hand as I looked at them. He took it.

"What are you eating?" Delly asked as she stepped towards us. "That looks good." She gave us a big smile. I could tell she was really trying hard to keep everything nice.

My words were stuck in my throat; my eyes were stuck on their clasped hands.

Gale saved me. "It's ice cream. It's delicious. You should try some." He nodded at Peeta, who was looking as if he wanted to be elsewhere. But even he managed a nice big smile.

"They had ice cream in the Capitol. I meant to try some while I was there. I think I will now." He nodded at me. "Katniss."

I croaked out a greeting, but I know I sounded as fake as Effie's laugh used to be. I was afraid I was going to vomit up that ice cream. If I did, I hoped it was on Delly's face.

Delly was pulling Peeta by the hand. "Let's try some, Peeta!" She chirped out and Peeta followed behind her. He turned and looked back at me with an unreadable expression, but then kept going.
My name is Katniss Everdeen. I'm from District Twelve.

Gale was in front of me, looking concerned. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Gale. Really. He's happy, so I'm happy for him. Let's go." I start walking away and Gale jogs to catch up with me. He reaches for my hand and I let him.

I kissed Gale that night after dinner. He responded eagerly and when I took him upstairs he followed without question. But when he realized what was going to happen, he hesitated.

"Are you sure, Catnip? We don't have to do this."

I kissed him even harder for my answer.

Gale was different from Peeta in a lot of ways. He was rougher than Peeta was and it was clear he had much more experience. That wasn't a bad thing though. Gale also knew what to do with his mouth. I wondered if that was a requirement that boys just knew how to do that. I didn't do that to him though. I wasn't ready to do something like that. I did that for Peeta because…well because I loved him. I didn't really know what I felt for Gale. It was some kind of love, but it didn't feel the same as how I felt about Peeta.

But it was good and Gale made me see stars. When he had finished he groaned out, "I love you, Katniss."

I felt horrible.

But I didn't want to hurt Gale so I whispered, "I love you too." It was sort of true.

Gale looked at me with such tenderness, I wanted to cry.

"I've waited so long to hear you say that," he whispered back. I then saw his eyes were glistening. Gale was close to tears. I did cry then. He pulled me close and just held me.

I am the worst person in Panem.

I saw Peeta again in the square. He wasn't with Delly this time. I think I did well being polite and cordial. Faking it. Just like for the Capitol cameras. Then Peeta does the unthinkable.

"Katniss, I really hope that one day we can be friends again. And that you and Delly can be friends."

That's never going to happen.

"Of course, Peeta. No hard feelings. You did what you had to. For you to be safe and stay okay. I understand." I want to walk away because if I stand here any longer I won't be responsible for my actions. I want to punch him. I want to kiss him.

"Delly feels really bad about this, Katniss. She thinks you hate her." I do. "But you don't, right? She really wants to be your friend."

"I don't hate Delly, Peeta. But I'm not going to be her friend. She was your friend, not mine. She has you, she doesn't need my friendship." I can hear the bitterness creep into my tone, so I know I need to hurry up and end this conversation.

Peeta looks sad. "This wasn't her fault. She was a friend who really helped me when I needed it. She's a good person, Katniss."
That did it. "And I'm not, right? Is that what this is about, Peeta? What do you want from me? I know I make you want to kill me! So it's better that we go our separate ways. You have Delly now, so what difference does it make if I'm friends with her? Leave me alone, Peeta! Go back to your good girl!" I'm yelling by the end of all that.

He's giving me an evil look and I don't want to hear a lecture about how I'm not being fair to her or whatever. I turn and stomp away and Peeta shouts at me.

"That's right, Katniss! Always thinking of just yourself!"

I force myself not to turn around and scream at him. I just keep walking, barely keeping myself from running. I've got to get out of here.

When I see Gale later that night I say, "Let's go to Two."

Gale pulls me into a tight hug. "Thank you, Katniss."

Fuck you, Peeta Mellark!

HG

Greasy Sae nods when I tell her I'm going to Two.

"Surprised you stayed this long." She gives me a short hug. "I'll watch out for him."

When I open my mouth to refute that, she shakes her head at me. "You don't fool me, Katniss. I like Gale and you done what you done to try and move on with your life. Ain't nothing wrong with needing someone. But I saw what you had with Peeta. It ain't the same." She shook her head. "It ain't the same, but it'll do. Peeta...he's trying to do the right thing. But you leaving? He's gonna need someone to look out for him. And that Delly Cartwright ain't gonna be the one to bring him out of it."

I don't know what to say to all of that. But I know that I have to put some distance between myself and Peeta. And do what everyone has been saying. Find myself a purpose.

I wish I could see Haymitch before I go. I had to talk to Plutarch to make arrangements for me to leave Twelve and he told me that Haymitch still has several more months of rehab to work through. Now that there's no war, the doctors can take their time with him. Have him talk with a head doctor, like Dr. Aurelius. Haymitch's problems weren't just the white liquor. His problems were much deeper than that. His drinking just masked them. A few weeks of rehab weren't going to be able to undo almost thirty years of guilt and agony.

I don't know if I should say something to Peeta. He wanted us to be friends again, but is that really necessary now? I'm leaving and I may never see him again. I could at least tell him goodbye. That's the right thing to do. I can't leave without at least saying goodbye. I've packed my bags and they're waiting in the kitchen. I'm sitting there trying to work up the courage to walk across the path to say goodbye. Gale's with his family, saying his goodbyes. There's a knock at the door.

I open it to see Peeta standing on the steps. He just stares at me, his face impassive. When he speaks, his voice is low. Angry.

"So you're leaving? Going to Two?"

I'm defensive. "Yeah, I am. Nothing for me here."

He winces, but recovers. "So you weren't even going to say goodbye? You were just going to
go?" Now he sounds hurt.

I soften at the sight of his eyes looking hurt and defenseless. "I was going to say goodbye. I was actually on my way over when you knocked." He looks skeptical, but I nod at him. "It's true, Peeta. I was going to come and say goodbye. No matter what's happened, we've been through too much for me to not say goodbye." I sincerely meant that.

He seems to believe me, which is good. "Would you like to come in?" I pull the door open wider. He smiles and steps inside. He spots my bags on the floor and his smile disappears.

"I can't believe that you're really going. I had kind of hoped it was just a rumor." He's staring at me with pleading eyes and I feel something flutter in my chest. I ruthlessly crush it.

"It's time for me to do something. Everyone else has something to help with the rebuilding. I've got to be of some use. I'll go crazy if I don't. Even my mother has a purpose. You have a purpose too."

Peeta watches me with sad eyes. "I'd hoped that you'd find your place here. That you'd help with the rebuilding. Or help me with the bakery."

I give a snort. "I can't bake for shit, you know that. And I'm awful with the customers. Everyone hates me."

Peeta steps forward and takes my hand. "No one hates you, Katniss. Everyone...they all love you."

My heart skips a beat. I know Peeta isn't just talking about the town. But so what if he is talking about some out of place feelings. He's...moved on. I pull my hands away.

"Well, you have other help now. I know she won't let you fail." I try hard not to sound overly sarcastic with my words.

"Katniss. I don't want you to go. I know I'm asking a lot, but are you sure this is what you want? Are you doing this for you or for him?" My head snaps up at the bitterness that is coating Peeta's words. What does he have to be bitter about? He ended us, it wasn't me. I wanted to be with him, even with his episodes.

"I'm going for me. Gale hasn't pressured me into this. I make my own decisions."

Peeta gives me an incredulous stare. "Gale is always pressuring you, Katniss! You don't see that? Whenever he's around, you change! We were fine until he came back! Then all of a sudden, you don't want kids and you're talking about going to Two. None of that was an issue until Gale came! How can you say that he doesn't pressure you into doing and saying things!"

"That wasn't Gale's fault, Peeta! That was mine! I just hadn't had a chance to talk to you about any of that yet! Don't blame Gale for that, blame me! I should've told you how I felt sooner, but I wasn't ready!"

Peeta smacks his hand down on the table. "And he conveniently gets you to talk to him about how you really feel? Wonderful friend he is, isn't he? What happened to you hating him because he killed Prim? That ended rather quickly, didn't it?"

I gasp. And Peeta's eyes widen as if he can't believe he just said that. "Katniss...I didn't mean that! I'm sorry."

"Please leave, Peeta." I say coldly. "Take care of yourself."
"Katniss-

"Get out!"

Peeta looks at me with uncertainty, but then he sighs. He turns and walks out the door, never looking back. I refuse to cry this time. Peeta Mellark can go…can go stick his head in an oven!

By the time Gale shows up, I'm more than ready to go. I grab him and give him a big kiss. He looks at me in surprise.

"What's got into you, Catnip?"

"Just ready to get out of this place!"

Gale smirks. "Well, that I can do. You won't be disappointed."

After the past few weeks I'm glad, because I sorely need a new emotion to feel.

HG

District Two is a buzz of activity, just like it was during the rebellion. I see The Nut in the distance and a flurry of activity surrounds it as well. They are probably trying to unearth it, after the avalanches we dropped on it made it inaccessible. I have mixed feelings about being here. I got shot here and watching the Nut destroyed the way it was, smacked too much of how my father had died. But it's a means to an end and I'm determined enough.

I'm feeling a bit out of my depth again, seeing all of the people, former rebels, peacekeepers and civilians. They all see me and stare. I'm not Katniss to these people, I'm the Mockingjay, I'm the Girl on Fire, I'm the menace to the Capitol. Gale is comfortable amongst them, speaking to everyone, nodding and smiling. He pulls me along behind him and I go willingly.

Gale has a nice house in Two, close to the Administration Building. He takes me there and I unpack my things. We go to a restaurant, something that we didn't have in Twelve. A place where people go to eat together. Like the cafeteria in Thirteen. The food is good and I manage to relax a bit. We are just finishing up when I see Beetee. He's sitting in his chair by the window, talking to Cressida.

I go over to them and as I approach, Cressida is patting Beetee's hand.

"Beetee! Cressida!" I exclaim, happy to see them both.

"Katniss! Good to see you. Welcome to Two." Beetee smiles at me and I squeeze his shoulder. I have a lot of respect for Beetee.

"Katniss, you finally made it!" Cressida says, as she eyes me. She has an interesting expression on her face.

Gale sidles over and nods at them both. "We'll be reporting to you in the morning, Beetee." He nods and Cressida gives Gale a similar once over.

"Glad to have you back, Gale. You're going to like the new stuff. And Katniss, we'll find you a place."

"Thank you."

HG
The place that is found for me in Two turns out to be weapons training. Specifically, the bow and arrow. What a surprise.

It would seem that there is no end to volunteers who want to take up the bow as their weapon of choice. I learned to use it out of necessity for survival, not as a weapon in battle. Still, it is what I know so I train them.

It is Paylor's goal that the districts become self-reliant, able to feed, clothe and defend themselves to a certain degree. Under the previous system, each district provided a certain commodity to the Capitol and was left to figure out the rest by themselves. With no resources to do so. Paylor wants the districts to be able to continue to specialize in certain things, but still be able to take care of their own, without the Capitol's interference. The Capitol would pay a fair price for the commodities.

So I train citizens on how to use the bow and arrow, not just for defense, but also for hunting. If there's one thing that Games taught us, it's that so many were not prepared for basic survival. In districts that were starving, it would have been advantageous if people knew how to hunt for their food. The fences and the Peacekeepers kept that non-existent, but now people want to learn.

I find that I enjoy training others. People are eager to learn, so they try hard. Some have a natural aptitude, while others are basically hopeless to hit anything. But it's fun and it really doesn't feel like work to me. I work in a state of the art training center that used to be the academy for the Career Tributes.

I've run into Enobaria, one of Two's last Victors. And we ended up in a very public argument about the unfair advantage her district had over the others. It made them as culpable as the Capitol in my opinion. Enobaria didn't share that view at all.

"You won your Games, so clearly you weren't at a disadvantage," she snarls at me. "And not only that, two Victors! Not even my district can claim such an honor!"

"An honor? You still think it's honorable what we did in the Games? Killing a bunch of kids? You're nothing but a savage murderer! You and all the other Victors from this place! Capitol puppets and slaves! Cato and Clove were nothing but vicious sadistic dogs, that you and your mentoring created!"

Enobaria roars at me, her filed fangs sparkling white. We're in the middle of the training center, with several trainees staring at us in shock and some in amusement.

"I'd have ripped your throat out if I'd caught you! You're nothing without that bow!"

Before I know it, I'm primed and ready to let an arrow fly right into her face. "Let's see how nothing I am," I say.

Other trainers have to pull us apart. I don't like her very much. Gale is upset with me for creating a problem with her.

"She's from this district, Katniss! They were the last holdouts, you know that! We need them to make this work. Yes, their view of the Hunger Games is not like the rest of ours, but we have to take it slow with them. You can't go around threatening to shoot their Victor!"

"She threatened me first, Gale! Said she wished she could rip my throat out!"

"You're better than that, Katniss. Don't let her get to you!"
I'm pissed at Gale for defending her. If anything, he should be defending me. But I let the situation go. Gale is all gung-ho about his life in Two. I quickly find out how popular he is and how he's thriving here. It really surprises me that he stayed as long as he did in Twelve. I know it was about his mother, but she had gotten better. He stayed there for me. Now I see how much he was giving up to wait for me. I still don't know how to really feel about that.

Gale has a lot of new friends, both male and female. That's not so different. He was popular at home too, but now he's a war hero, so he's doubly so. He goes out to the local clubs and bars with them a lot and always brings me along. Gale lavishes plenty of attention on me, which makes me somewhat uncomfortable. I'm not one for the spotlight, even though I was the Mockingjay. That wasn't by choice.

What's different is that Gale drinks now. A lot. Not as much as Haymitch, but enough that I'm looking at him like he's crazy. We all saw what drink did to Haymitch and Gale never drank at home. So this change in him is strange and disconcerting. He also talks a lot about how things are going to be different now. Life is going to be better. No one is going to be hungry ever again. He continues to rant about the unfairness of the old ways, like he can't let it go. And his eyes get this crazy looking madness in them that actually makes me a bit afraid of him.

The other major thing that bothers me in Two is the staring and the quiet murmurs whenever I do appear with Gale. I know what they are saying.

People want to know what happened to Peeta, my Star-Crossed Lover.

Our entire Hunger Game experience was based on our supposed love affair. My pulling the berries out at the end. Our engagement and wedding. The baby. Rescuing him from the Capitol. The whole story is legend now; our love legendary.

But now I'm parading around in Two with my supposed cousin, Gale.

Gale quickly put an end to that story. He explained that Snow had concocted that storyline in order to confuse the Capitol and the Districts regarding me. He didn't go so far as to tell everyone that the whole romance was faked, but he did play along with the miscarriage story that I came up with when I first came to Two during the rebellion. He also told people that after all the stress of the war and everything that happened, Peeta and I grew apart. Which opened the door for him and that all was well.

Not everyone believed him though. Because quite a few people looked upon me with something akin to distaste. And I knew it was because of Peeta. Or more specifically because there was no Peeta. When I first arrived in Two, a number of people asked me about him, asked me where he was, asked me why he wasn't here with me. No one doubted how much Peeta had loved me. They saw it at the Games, at the interviews with Caesar Flickerman, they saw it after the Capitol had captured him. I was the one who looked faithless and loveless. Peeta was the true darling of Panem, not me.

I wanted to talk to Peeta, see how he was doing. If I couldn't do that, I wanted to at least write to him. But I couldn't get the words down. What could I possibly say to him? I hadn't heard from him either, which meant that he was probably doing just fine with his bread and pastries and his syrup girl. He was probably doing great in fact. With my absence, he wouldn't be having any episodes and he wouldn't have to see me or Gale. Delly was undoubtedly waiting on him hand and foot. She was probably already pregnant with little Peeta babies. That thought gnawed at my insides until I was sure I was full of holes.

After about six months in Two, I started withdrawing again. Training was going fine, but I didn't want to go to the bars and clubs anymore with Gale. I was already tired of his drinking and his
plans for Panem. Wasn't there more to life than just Panem and what was going to happen? I was tired of the side looks from people and the whispers about "where's Peeta?" whenever we were in public. I was starting to wonder that myself.

But Gale insisted. He wanted to be around me. But it was never just really me. It was his friends from the weapons division or some soldiers from Thirteen. Or some new citizens arriving that he had meant in front of a random door. Gale was the resident Welcome Committee of District Two. He suddenly became the loud, funny life of the pub guy that was a complete stranger to me. The Gale I remembered was never this outgoing.

So I'd been begging off, telling Gale I was tired or not feeling well or any excuse I could think of to avoid the party circuit. I would feign sleep when he would get in late, mainly because I didn't want to smell the liquor on him or the smoke. I didn't want to look at him and then see Peeta's disappointed eyes. Gale understood at first, but after the fourth time I'd made an excuse, he got angry.

"What's the problem now, Katniss? Who don't you like this week?" Gale asked sarcastically. "Let me guess. Vonner. Because he agrees that bombing is a more effective weapon than poisoning the water supply."

"I don't like Vonner because he's an arrogant ass. And his views just go along with that." I say, annoyed. "But I don't want to go because I just don't want to go, Gale. Can we just stay at home tonight, please? Maybe watch television?"

Gale rolled his eyes. "You always hated television! Now you want to sit at home all night and watch it? I work long hours, Katniss. This helps me to unwind. Live a little. We had no fun in Twelve, remember? It was all work, hiding from the peacekeepers, illegal sales. Now we can enjoy ourselves. Don't you want that?"

"We had fun in Twelve, Gale. Just not quite like this. So now Twelve isn't good enough for you anymore? You're from District Two, now?" I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Too embarrassed to admit you're from The Seam?"

"Oh come on, Katniss! I don't mean it like that. Twelve will always be home. And yeah, we're from The Seam. It's just now there's so much more out there. We're changing the world. Making Panem better than it ever was under Snow. We can finally be free! And people won't be forced to be from places like The Seam anymore!"

"Well then, I'm free to say no. I don't want to go out to the bar tonight. I want to do something else for a change. Something that doesn't need alcohol or your loud friends or their judging eyes!" I didn't mean to bring that up, but it's out there now.

"Judging? About what? No one's judging you! You're the Mockingjay!"

"I'm not the Mockingjay anymore, Gale! I'm Katniss! And people don't see that!"

Gale throws up his hands. "Katniss, that's all in your head. No one is judging you and you're always going to be the Mockingjay, at least to some. You're a hero, Katniss. Just accept that."

"You know I never wanted to be that! This place just keeps reminding me of that role. And you're not helping either."

Gale looked angry for a moment and then said, "Fine, Katniss! Don't go. But I'm going out. Stay here for all I care." And he walked out, slamming the door.

I stood there staring at the door in disbelief. Gale just stormed out of the house. Just like the old
drunk couples we knew back in The Seam. We used to laugh at their antics when we weren't too hungry to notice other things.

When he comes back later that night, he tries to snuggle next to me. I don't return the sentiment.

"Catnip, Catnip...I'm sorry," he whispers, rubbing my hair. "Don't be mad. I love you. Please." I keep my back turned to him. "I'll make it up to you. Promise. Just a quiet dinner. At your favorite place. That café you like. Just the two of us. Please."

I feel myself soften against his pleas. I sigh and he snuggles closer. "I promise." He reaches for me, trying to get me to unwind my arms. I put up a bit of resistance, but then I let him win. He smiles down at me and he begins to place kisses against my neck.

We have sex and Gale is especially tender and loving. But after he goes to sleep, I stare at the ceiling. I feel lost and alone and I don't know why. We just had sex and I should feel closer to him, not further away.

It takes Gale almost a week to take me out to the dinner and by the time we get there, the tables are full of people from his job. They keep yelling over to Gale, who engages them in conversation. A quiet dinner is out of the question. But when I quietly ask Gale to leave, he says he doesn't want to be rude to them. I sit there and stare at him. He doesn't want to be rude to them, but its okay to not honor his word to me?

"Come on, Katniss. Just eat your dinner. We'll go somewhere else for dessert."

I'm not hungry for my meal, let alone dessert. I'm just ready to go.

"Gale, I just wanted it to be us tonight. I'm ready to go."

"Well if you wanted a quiet dinner, then you should have cooked something at home."

I glare at him. What has happened to Gale? He's turned into a complete ass. The Gale I knew from Twelve would never have said something like that.

"Fine," I snap as I stand up. "Have fun with your friends! That's all you want to do anyway."

I walk out of the restaurant, but Gale is right behind me. He hurries to block my path.

"Katniss! What are you doing? Why are you acting like this? You're acting like one of those Capitol freaks whining about everything! So some people were here tonight! It's a public place; you think that I can just make people stay away so you can have some privacy? Anything for the Mockingjay, right?"

I can't believe that Gale is saying these things to me. It feels exactly how I felt when Peeta said those horrible things to me after he was hijacked. Gale may as well have slapped me across the face with a shovel.

But instead I lunge at him, ready to tear his head off. He grabs my hands and pulls me close to him, while I struggle.

"Calm down! Katniss!"

"You asshole!" I scream at him and several people turn to look. I don't even care about that. That the Mockingjay is fighting her fake cousin boyfriend in public.

"Gale, let her go! Stop it, Katniss!" A female voice calls out and I see Cressida has emerged from
out of nowhere. Pollux is with her and he grabs Gale's arm. Gale immediately lets go of me and I lunge at him again. Only Cressida steps in front of me and blocks my hand from grabbing him.

"That's enough!" Cressida grabs my hand and tugs me away from Gale. Pollux stands tall in front of him and Gale holds up his hands, indicating he won't do anything else. Cressida leads me away from the café and we walk to a nearby park. She sits down on a bench and watches me while I pace, furious at what just happened.

"Katniss," Cressida says quietly, "where's Peeta?"

I whip around to face her. "What?"

"Peeta. Where is Peeta?"

"He's at home. Where else would he be?"

"He should be here with you. That's where he should be. Why are you here with Gale and not with him?"

I gape at Cressida. What does that have to do with Gale humiliating me tonight?

"What? What are you talking about? I'm with Gale because...because I am!"

"That's not an answer, Katniss. Do you love Gale?"

Right now, no. "Yeah."

"Peeta got married today, Katniss. I'm surprised you didn't see the broadcast."

I reach for the bench because I'm not going to be able to stand up anymore. I completely miss it and land hard on the ground. I don't even feel it. Peeta. Married? To Delly? Oh God…

I can't breathe and I start gasping for air. I can feel tears start to well up and I can't breathe.

"Katniss!" Cressida is by my side and she's helping me to stand up. "It's okay, I'm joking. It's not real. I just said that to get you to pay attention."

That's a horrible trick to play and I hate her with everything in my being. But instead of telling her that, which I fully intended to do, the tears come anyway. And the next thing I know, I'm sobbing. When did I turn into such a crybaby?

Cressida is comforting me, patting my hair. "It's okay, Katniss. Just cry it out."

When I'm finally able to draw in a breath, Cressida's shirt is soaking wet. She hands me some tissue for my face.

"I'm sorry I had to do that to you. But I had to wake you up. I know that you love Peeta. I don't know what happened, but I can guess. But it's obvious to anyone who knows you that you love Peeta and that you shouldn't be here with Gale."

"But I do love Gale," I croak out.

"You may love him, but you're not in love with him. You're in love with Peeta, Katniss. We all saw it. I saw it during your Games, especially after Peeta hit the force field. Finnick said the same thing. I saw you in Thirteen, when he was captured. Your face after each of his broadcasts. When Snow dropped the roses. When Coin finally realized that you weren't going to be able to do anything until Peeta was brought back, everyone knew then that this wasn't just some faked
Cressida leans in and looks me in the eyes.

"And during the run on the Capitol. There was no way you were going to let anyone kill Peeta. You'd have killed them first before they would've got anywhere near him! I know love when I see it, Katniss. You love Peeta Mellark and you're slowly dying on the inside."

"Peeta…Peeta doesn't love me anymore. He's with someone else now."

Cressida waved her hand in dismissal. "And I'm sure he's as miserable as you are, if not more. Who is she?"

"Delly. You met her in Thirteen. She helped with his treatment."

Cressida made a face. "That blonde girl, who smiled all the time? Oh, Katniss. Peeta doesn't love her. No way."

"But he ended it with me. Told me that I made him have episodes. That he doesn't trust me because of Gale. I didn't tell him the truth about kids. I ruined everything, Cressida!"

"Well then you have to fix it. If you want Peeta, then you're going to have to go and get him. Fight for him. Show him that you can be trusted. You can't do that when you're in Two living with Gale."

"But what about Gale? I…I'd hurt him by leaving. I don't want to hurt him."

"Katniss, you're already hurting him. By loving someone else more than him. It's not fair to him. He'll be hurt, but you need to let him go. He deserves to be loved by someone who can be devoted to him and just him. Don't you think so?"

I lower my head in shame. Cressida is right. It's not fair to Gale. I was trying hard to love him the same way I loved Peeta, but it just wasn't the same. And Gale's life in Two is different than how I remember him. Gale has changed and it's not someone I like as much. I never should have come here. But I did and now I have to figure out what to do.

"Cressida, what should I do? How do I fix this?"

"Well, you have to decide what it is you really want. If you want to stay in Two or go home? You can stay here and not be in a relationship with Gale. Or if you want to go home, you have to decide what you're going to do back there. Or try to get Peeta to come here. But you're going to have to talk to both of them eventually. But you need to deal with Gale first, no matter what."

I'm suddenly curious about something.

"Cressida, you and Gale…?"

Cressida just smiles at me. "No, Katniss. Never. Gale loved you, I didn't stand a chance. But I won't lie. He's very handsome. I'm too old for him, I'm sure. Gale will get over it one day. And he'll also realize that he's not the best for you. He's changed too much. The war changed everyone. Gale's not the same boy you grew up with. He's a different man now, Katniss. Either you have to accept him for his changes or let him go."

I nod my head slowly and then I look up at her. "Why are you helping me? I mean, you don't owe me anything. I got…I got your friends killed! Messalla and Castor! I know it was war, but…my lie got so many people killed! I said I was sorry before…but you…" I can feel the tears threaten
again. Will this nightmare ever end?

"We knew the risks. That's why we left the Capitol. We wanted to follow you. The Mockingjay. You didn't kill anyone, Katniss. The Capitol and their pods did. We were as much a target as you, because we were traitors to our own. At least according to Snow." Cressida laid a hand on my shoulder. "You blame yourself for things that weren't your doing. All you wanted to do was save Prim from the Games. Snow's regime made the districts angry and desperate. You didn't do that. You were a victim just like everyone else. You wanted to save Peeta. Panem made you the Mockingjay, you didn't ask for that. None of this is your fault, Katniss."

I blink at her.

"But to answer your question, I'm helping you because I care about you. And Gale. And Peeta. You all deserve to be happy. You fought this battle even though you didn't ask for it. Now it's time to reap a bit of the rewards that go with the spoils of war."

I didn't go back back to Gale's that night. I stayed with Cressida. I didn't sleep though, just sat on her balcony and watched the lights of the city. In the distance, I could see the Capitol, its own lights twinkling brightly. What did I really want to do?

The next morning, I cancelled my training class and went to the Capitol. I wanted to talk to Plutarch. I wanted to know what else I could do for Panem.

I didn't get back to Two until late the following day. Gale was beside himself with worry.

"Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you! I thought something had happened to you!"

I sat down at the table. "I'm fine, Gale. I just had to take care of some things, that's all."

Gale didn't look mollified at all. "Why didn't you let me know you were okay? I was worried." He ran his hands through his hair. "Look, I'm sorry about the other night. It was stupid. I should've left when you wanted. I'm sorry, Katniss."

I smile at him. My wonderful friend Gale. Who's so brave and courageous. Who took care of my family for me. Who ran out to rescue Peeta, knowing how I felt about him. Gale is truly a remarkable man. Any woman would be lucky to have him. I was lucky to have him. But I can't make him happy. He can't make me happy either.

"Gale. I went to the Capitol to talk to Plutarch. They are going to be setting up a new factory in Twelve for researching and making new medicine. They're not going to open the mines back up. They need someone to help set that up. Someone to be the mayor. Plutarch thinks that I can do that."

Gale stares at me. "Mayor? You? You hate people, Katniss! How are you going to be the mayor?"

I laugh. "I don't hate people, Gale. I just wasn't the great with talking to them. But since I've been here, training people it's gotten easier. And I want to help Twelve. I've learned a lot here and I think I can take it back to Twelve. Paylor says Twelve needs to grow more and with me there, people may be tempted to move there and help build it."

Gale frowns at that and sits down at the table. "But…what about us? I don't want to go back to Twelve."

"I know. And I would never ask you to. Your place is here, Gale. I can see that now. You'd never
fit in Twelve again. Not like it is."

"But...you want to go. What about me? We'd never see each other." Gale's eyes widen. "You
don't want to be with me anymore? Because of the other night? I said I was sorry for that, Katniss!I won't let my friends get between us like that ever again!"

"No, Gale. It's not just that." I sigh. "We've changed too much. Your life is here. You've becomeDistrict Two now. I do love you, but not enough to want to be here anymore. And I don't thinkthat you...love me the same either."

Gale jumped up, almost knocking over his chair. "That's crazy! I love you, more than you'll everknow! I've always loved you, I just didn't know how to tell you! Don't punish me for that, Catnip!I'm trying hard to show you that I love you and I want a life with you."

"Gale, I'm not saying you don't. I'm saying it's not the same anymore. Do you honestly think youfeel the same way about me that you did before the war ended? You called me a Capitol baby theother night. You don't see me the same way anymore. You want this big life and I still want thequiet of The Seam. We don't match up anymore. We've both changed. We love each other, but...it's not enough."

Gale gripped the back of his chair and lowered his head. When he raised his eyes back up to me, Ican see that he was fighting back tears. I got up and went to him, pulling him into a hug. "Gale, Ilove you. I do. But it's time to let it go."

Gale hugs me back tight and I can feel his body shudder a bit. "Katniss. I don't know how to letyou go. You've been there for so long and I've wanted this for a long time. I don't think I can letyou go. I tried after...after Prim...but I was so miserable and guilty. Now that we've been together...I don't know if I can do this."

"I'm not sure either. You're my closest friend in the world." Now I'm crying. "But I don't want us to end up hating each other. Not again. But we're going to if we stay like this."

We hold each other for a long time.

HG

I'm packed and headed back to Twelve two weeks later. I stayed with Cressida during that time. Itwas too painful for Gale for me to remain in his house and I have to admit I was relieved. It feltlike a weight had been lifted from me. He did see me off at the train station though. He looked likehe hadn't slept in all of that time. My heart went out to him when he gave me a hug.

"Take care, Catnip. Maybe one day we'll see each other again."

I grab his arm. "I'd like that, Gale. Take care of yourself."

My house is clean and sparkling when I get back. Apparently Greasy Sae had been taking care ofthe place. I'd been gone almost a year, but it felt like I'd only been gone a day. I need to go totown to restock the house, so after I unpack and get things situated, I leave out. That's when I seeHazelle leaving Haymitch's house.

Haymitch!

I hurry over to her and she nods when she sees me. "Katniss. You're back."

I suddenly feel shy around her. Which is ridiculous. I've known this woman for years. But I didjust break her son's heart. Again.
"Yes, I'm back. Just now." I nod at the house. "Haymitch?"

"Yes, the old grumpy bastard is back. Go on in." She limps away with her cane, but still moves with grace.

I go inside and I'm shocked to see Haymitch sitting in his living room, reading a book. He looks up when I walk in. "What'd you forget, Haz-" The words died in his mouth.

"Haymitch," I say quietly.

Haymitch closes the book. "Well, Sweetheart, looks like you've had an experience. Can't be worse than what I just went through."

Haymitch has lost weight, but he looks younger, healthier. He's cut his hair and his eyes are no longer bloodshot. He looks a bit tan, like he's been outside working. His clothes are clean and neat.

I rush over to him and throw my arms around him. No matter how angry Haymitch has made me, he's the closest thing that I have to a father these days. I hold him tight and he hesitantly puts his arms around me, no doubt confused as to what has brought this on.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart? It can't be something I did, can it?"

I laugh into his shirt and pull back. "No. I'm just…so happy to see you. I missed you!"

Haymitch grunts. "Well, you wouldn't have missed me if you hadn't sent me off to that prison in Thirteen! Criminal what they do to people there!"

Haymitch then enlightens me to the horrors of rehab and therapy courtesy of District Thirteen. He had spent a total of eight months in the facility. He'd only been home about a month. But he's remained sober for all that time. I could tell that he was proud of himself.

I then tell him about my time in Two and the things that have been in development there. He listens with interest, saying that he saw Plutarch a few times who had regaled him with the tales of change. I carefully avoid mentioning too much about Gale and I, focusing only on his work with Beetee and the others.

I then tell him about what the plans are for Twelve and my role in it. Haymitch blinks at me and then says, "And I'm supposed to stay sober while you're Mayor of Twelve?"

The door bangs open and I hear the voice, "Haymitch! Here's your bread, I can't stay like I wanted, a shipment just came in from the train."

The blond hair appears around the side of the wall and it's him. Peeta. I was so glad I was already sitting down because I would've probably fallen over. I wasn't ready to deal with Peeta just yet. I'd wanted a day or two to compose myself before I talked to him. Or at least said hello. Guess I have to revise that plan.

Peeta freezes when he sees me on the couch. "Katniss." He shakes his head like he's seeing a hallucination. God, I hope not. "You're back."

I manage to stand up and smile. "Hi Peeta. Yes, I got in today. Just catching up with Haymitch."

Peeta is still staring at me, but then he slowly snaps out of it. "Yeah, Haymitch. He's doing good. Let's keep it that way." He goes to put the bread on the kitchen counter and comes back. "I gotta go sign for the shipment." But he just stands there for a few seconds. Haymitch looks between us
for a minute.

"Well go and get the shipment, Peeta. Dinner later, right?" Haymitch says.

Peeta jumps like someone poked him with a stick. "Yeah…right. Later." He looks at me again and then hurries out. I frown at Haymitch.

"What the hell was that?"

Haymitch rolls his eyes. "Ummm…you've been gone for a while, Sweetheart. Living off in Two with Gale, remember? Then suddenly you're here in my living room. He kinda wasn't expecting that today."

I sink back down on the couch. "So you know about that then?"

Haymitch looks at me like I'm the dumbest thing since Effie's colored wigs. "His mother cleans my house, Katniss. Like she didn't mention it a time or two. As if Peeta hasn't camped out here since I've been back and plotted to storm Two to get you back." Haymitch reaches for a bottle of water on the table next to him. "And then you all expect me not to drink."

I can't care about Haymitch's complaining. "He wanted to come to Two to get me back," I whisper, full of excitement. "What happened to Delly?"

Haymitch glares at me. "You were actually jealous of that bubble head? Really, Katniss? I thought I taught you better than that."

I huff and cross my arms over my chest. "So, what happened to her?"

"She's still around. Peeta isn't good with letting people down easy. She's taken it upon herself to be there for him. I mean, it's been good for Peeta to have company from what I understand. He didn't do too well after you left."

"What do you mean?"

"Depression. He let the bakery go for a while there. Others were running it for him. Hazelle and Sae had to have some Seam boys to break into his house a couple of times to make sure he was still alive in there. Delly was pretty upset about that. Hazelle said he talked to himself a few times out in town too. Some episodes. Bang his head on stuff, say your name a lot. Folks just let him be."

I gasp. "They just let him wander around like that? No one tried to help him!"

"Hazelle said it was better to let him alone. At first, people did try to stop him, but it made it worse. He would really hurt himself. So if they left him alone, he would snap out of it himself."

It takes me some time to process this information. Peeta was obviously impacted by my leaving. But I'm disturbed to know that he still had episodes even though I wasn't around to trigger them. So that means that they can happen whenever. I'm not the direct cause of them. I guess I should feel a bit better by that news.

I go into town to meet with some officials regarding the new building and the protocols for the new research facility. They are all excited that I'm going to be working on this project. I'm nervous about it, but I'm confident that I can do some things right. I'm given an office in the new Justice Building. I even have my name on the door.

After my meeting, I decide to head home. I've only been back a couple of days and it's taking me
a minute to adjust to the continued changes in Twelve. More people have shown up and the square is filling up with new stores and shops. I definitely want a restaurant to be part of the new Twelve. I smell something delicious and I decide to follow my nose. I should've known that it would take me to the front of Mellark's Bakery.

I hover outside for a moment. Oh, why not? Why pretend that this wasn't a big part of the reason I came back? I enter the store, which is crowded with customers. I smile at that, happy that there is such a big business for him. I wait patiently in line, nodding as people turn and recognize me. I get a few cries of "welcome back", from some customers. Finally, I get to the front and I'm face to face with Roald. He smiles happily when he sees me.

"Katniss! You're back!" He hurries around the counter and gives me a hug. I hug him back. It feels good to be missed.

"Peeta's in the back."

"Oh well, I don't want to bother him. What do you have today? Something smells delicious!" Roald proudly points to some pastries on the table. "Something new Peeta's trying out."

I go over to select some while Roald disappears behind the counter again. I've picked out several when I feel a presence near my shoulder. I look up and Peeta is standing in front of me, wiping his hands on his flour covered apron. He's smiling at me.

"Katniss. Good to see you."

I give him a warm smile back. "Good to be back, Peeta. These smell delicious! I can't wait to try one."

Peeta nods proudly and then he hands me a large package of goodies. "I made these for you. I know how much you like these too." By the scent, I can tell they're cheese buns.

"Thanks, Peeta. I love your cheese buns." I take the bag from him and he starts wrapping up the pastries I selected. "How'd you know I'd be by today?"

Peeta blushes slightly. "I was going to bring them by your house actually. But when Roald said you were here, I just wrapped them up for you."

"Oh," I say quietly. "Well thank you again." I pay my money, but Peeta looks like he's going to shoo it away. I don't wait to see if he does, so I hurry out of the shop. I get to the door and then I stop, turn around and say, "You can still come by the house, if you want."

Peeta comes by that night and I tell him about my new job and the things going on in Two and around Panem. He tells me about some of the things that's happened in Twelve and about Haymitch's return. He worries that if Haymitch doesn't have anything to do, he'll go back to drinking. I immediately come up with the idea of Haymitch working on the new facility too. There's plenty of work to be done.

Neither one of us mentions Gale. Or Delly.

It took a week to coax Haymitch out of the house and down to the building to figure out what his new job will be. He ends up supervising a new crew of workers who have arrived to start the layout of the facility. He complains a lot, but I know he loves being able to boss other people around again. And no one's going to die this time.

I stop by the bakery on my way in or home from work a couple of days a week. The bakery is right next to my office. I can look out and see the square when I feel like it. One day I see Delly
crossing the street heading to the bakery. I'm immediately jealous, but then I remember what everyone has told me. That there's no way that Peeta is in love with her. She's just a friend who's been helping him out.

Still, I'm curious, so I hurry from office and scuttle over to the bakery. I try to plant myself as close to the entrance as possible, so that I can maybe hear a snippet of conversation. I know I look crazy, but hopefully no one will pay much attention to me. I pretend to be looking in the window of the next store.

Sure enough, I hear voices.

"Peeta, you know you I haven't seen you. You haven't come by the store the last few days. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, Delly. Everything's fine. Just been busy."

"Oh…well. I heard the craziest thing. I heard that Katniss is back in town. Have you seen her?"

I lean closer to the door.

"Yes, I saw her. At Haymitch's. And she's been by the shop a few times also. She works right near here."

"How convenient," Delly says snidely and I'm surprised by the level of hostility in her voice. Delly has always been so sweet.

"Delly…" Peeta says, sounding exasperated. "We've been over this."

"So how's Gale doing? When will he be here?"

Peeta doesn't say anything and I'm holding myself back from going in there and throttling her.

"I don't know how he's doing," Peeta finally responds. "We haven't talked about him."

"Well you should make sure you know this time, before she runs off again and breaks your heart! So I'm left to put you back together again! And you don't even appreciate it!" I hear her give a big sniff and then a sob. I sigh. I know that emotion well.

And sure enough, Delly runs out of the shop crying. I hurriedly turn back towards the window so she doesn't see me, but I needn't have bothered. Delly has been sucked into her own world of misery and unrequited love; she won't see anything for a while. I see movement out of the corner of my eye and it's Peeta. He's standing in the doorway of his store, watching Delly run away in tears. He looks sad, but he isn't running after her.

For the first time, I feel bad for Delly. I can sympathize with her and how she's feeling. I know that I've been unfair to her, when all she was doing was trying to be a good friend to Peeta. She loved him, but he didn't love her back; at least not in the way that she probably deserves. Cressida's words make even more sense now. And once again, Peeta is the better person than me. I don't know all of the details, but it sounds like he tried to let Delly down easy; where I ran off with Gale and used him because I was angry and lonely. Peeta deserves someone much better than me.

I don't stop by the bakery that night or the next one either. In fact, I don't go by there at all. I'm feeling really ashamed of myself and how I acted. Towards Gale, Delly…Peeta. All of them deserve happiness that doesn't include me in their lives.
A week later I'm in my office poring over some papers. I'm starving, but I'm about halfway through and I don't want to stop. There's a knock at my door.

"Yeah," I call out irritably. It's probably Haymitch coming to complain again. I'll send him away quickly.

"You sound busy. I just thought you might be hungry."

My head pops up and I'm staring at Peeta. He's standing there in his apron, smiling at me. He's holding some goodies on a plate.

"Oh, I love you!" I say and then I immediately blush crimson. I can't believe I just said that!

Peeta's grin could light up the night sky. "Well that's good to know."

I'm beyond embarrassed and he laughs. "Come on, Katniss. Fair's fair. I told the entire country how I felt. You can at least tell me in your office."

I chuckle slightly, but I'm nervous as hell. Why am I so nervous? It's not like I've never seen him before. It's not like we haven't been close before either. And at that thought, I can feel myself heating up and it's not just my face. Cressida's words hit me like a high speed train. "The love is not the same. You love Gale, but you're in love with Peeta."

That's exactly it. I never felt like this with Gale. Gale didn't make the butterflies that are now twittering around in my stomach. My hands feel sweaty and my heart feels like it's pounding like the Tribute Parade drums. I've had sex with both of them, and while Gale was wonderful, it wasn't the same as it was with Peeta. It was my emotions that were different afterwards. Gale was fire, but Peeta made me float like we could anywhere. I always felt complete with Peeta. Gale…it felt like something was missing.

Peeta puts the plate down on my desk and steps back. "I'll let you get back to work."

"No!" I shout and then I cover my mouth when Peeta stares at me after my loud outburst. "I mean, stay. Stay with me and have lunch."

He stays.

It turns into a routine. He would come by the office bringing goodies and I started going back to the bakery. A whole month goes by before I get up the nerve to invite him over to dinner. I actually went out hunting for a change, something that I haven't had much time to do since I started working. If felt good to be out in the woods again, but I don't carve it like I used to. I hunted out of necessity before and to keep myself from going insane. I don't feel insane anymore.

Dinner is nice. Just me and him. We manage to talk about old funny stories about The Seam and Merchant kids and the stories about the slag heap. It's comfortable and familiar. Just like before.

Peeta is looking at me over his glass. "Katniss, why'd you come back?"

My plate is suddenly very interesting. "I'd done enough in Two. It was time to do something different."

"What happened with Gale?" he asked quietly, not looking at me.

I feel myself getting defensive. Why does he want to know that? I don't want to talk about him, but then Cressida's words come to me. "Prove you can be trusted again."
"We weren't right for each other anymore. Actually, we never were. I was just too stupid to see that."

Peeta frowns and says, "So he broke up with you? He ended it?" He sounds disappointed.

I look at him. "No, I did. I only left with him because…well…because I was mad. At you. I did want to do different things but I let what happened between us get to me and I let Gale in. I shouldn't have done that. I hurt him, but he had changed. He's not the same Gale. His life is Two now. We weren't getting along very well."

Peeta nods with what looks like understanding. "I did the same thing with Delly. I…I took advantage of her kindness and her sweetness. I let her believe something that wasn't really true. I cared about her, but more like a sister than anything. We'd been friends for so long. I let her get close and then I regretted it immediately after. I tried to tell her the truth, that I didn't love her like that, but she didn't want to believe that I would use her like I did. I've hurt her badly and I don't know how to fix it."

I reach out and touch his hand. "We've both done some awful things to people, Peeta. We both deserve to be miserable."

"I have been. Miserable. Without you, Katniss. I was pissed about Gale coming back and you just going along with him. And then I could feel the hijackings coming back, every time I thought about you and him. Then Delly told me about the kiss and I lost it. I was so afraid to lose you and then I ended up leaving you anyway. I wanted to leave you before you left me."

"I didn't want to leave you, Peeta. I just wish things didn't go the way they did."

Peeta nods and stares at his plate some more. I stand up to clear away the dishes and he rises to help. After everything is put away he says, "Thanks for dinner. My turn next time."

"Okay."

Peeta starts heading towards the door and I know I'm taking a risk and I call out, "Peeta, will you stay with me?"

Peeta cracks a shy smile. "Always."

HG

In the stillness of the night, there's only the soft cries of pleasure coming from my bedroom.

Peeta holds me close to him as I lay on his chest.

"I love you," I whisper, and I realize this is the first time I've said it to him like this. Nothing held back, no doubt, no fear.

"You love me? Real or not real?"

"Real," I say, the intensity in my voice so strong that Peeta turns so he can see my face. "Real."

Peeta kisses me deeply then, so much so that I lose my breath.

"I've wanted to hear you say that for so long." The passion in his voice is intense and the heat is blossoming again. I miss him. I miss his touch.

"Will you stay with me, forever?"
"Always."

Fin

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