You & Me
by herainab

Summary

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His breathing is even in the dark of the night. His arms holding her tightly, pressing her flushed to his naked skin. His body warming her bare flesh.

He seems so peaceful. Months of pain and heartache has taken a toll on him. Restless nights have made him almost unrecognisable. He’s lost weight. Not enough to be worried about but enough for her to notice his jeans becoming loose around the hips. Dark circles permanently painted under his eyes. He hasn’t slept in months. She knows this because she hasn’t slept either.

Tonight he sleeps like a baby. Free from nightmares and painful thoughts. Those restless months have caught up on him. She realised their coupling settled him.

They hadn’t been intimate in months and it had settled her too.

Still, she had that voice in her head telling her it wasn’t enough for her. It nags her at night, reminds her of how much of a mess he was. How much she needed a moment to breathe.

She hadn’t had a chance since they left the hospital months before, empty handed and broken in a million pieces. She’d been too focused on making sure he was fine. She spent nights picking him up from bars and putting him to bed like a small child. She had become his caretaker.

Enough was enough. She needed to deal with her grief and not chase after her husband all hours of the night making sure he hadn’t gotten behind the wheel of his car. She could no longer have the reoccurring nightmares of an officer knocking on her door at 4am telling her he had wrapped his car around a tree.

She had to be free.

She brushes his hair from his forehead, tangling her fingers through the locks, the tendrils of blonde hair silky smooth between her fingers. She slips her hand down to his cheek, brushing it slightly and slips out from his hold. He moves, pulling the pillow to his body and she pulls her discarded clothes on. They were sprawled all over the room when they carelessly undressed, wanting to feel that hunger again after months of barely touching.

She tiptoes quietly around the bedroom, gathering her things into a suitcase in a quick attempt of leaving without him waking. This wasn’t planned her leaving. She just knew she needed to go with the sudden urge and leave now or something would happen and they’d never be the same again.

She packs her important necessities and finds a piece of paper.

I can’t do it anymore. You need help and I can’t be that person anymore. I need some time. We both need some time. Tonight meant everything to me. It was beautiful and wonderful. It’s time for me to grieve.

I love you always.

She folds the note and sets it on his phone, takes him in one last time and moves to the door of the bedroom. She turns back and looks at him briefly before closing the door silently behind her.
She avoids looking at all their momentos and remembering all the good and painful memories. She feels her breathing getting harder and she steps out of the house. Closing the door behind her and climbing into her SUV. She stares at the house for a long while before putting the key in the ignition, turning the car on, putting it on reverse and backing out of the driveway before she suffocates or does something worse, like cry.

Though the minute she turns from the street, tears roll down her cheeks and she knows she regrets leaving but she knows she’ll regret going back.

So she just drives and finds herself on the highway headed to New York.

New York would be good. She’d be able to clear her head, take some time to think and breathe. Have her chance to really grieve and get away from his addictions.

She feels as if the weight on her shoulders is starting to lift the further she drives. The barriers are coming down and it’s her time.

Her time.

Months of built up emotions and tears fall and she sobs. Sobs heavy as she crosses the border and heads straight to the city. The tears roll down her cheeks and she doesn’t move to wipe them. She needed to feel this.

But she wants him more than anything to just hold her and tell her it’d all be alright but he was the one who pushed her to leave.

Her mind was a mess. Her heart was torn into two, misleading what she really needed instead of wanted. All she could think about was his warm body pressed against hers. The feeling of coming undone and those words they spoke in the dark of the night. She was conflicted.

She just keeps driving until she pulls up outside of her old friend’s house and knocks on her front door.

“Katniss. What are you doing here?” The friend asks, cradling her small baby to her chest.

She shrugs her shoulders at her friend, unable to speak a word.

And it’s like her friend knows all too well. “Come on inside then.”

She idles into the dark street. She had grown all too familiar with this street and found it awfully quiet. Parking the car across from the place she used to call home. Her first grown up home. Only one light is on. The room they had chosen for their future.

She misses this house like she misses sleep.

So many things had happened in this house. So many memories are associated with this house. Those incredible memories also drove her away. Too many painful memories were associated with the house.

The room with the light on, was one of them.

She wipes the lone tear from her cheek and wonders what he is doing. She knows he never left. She wonders what is inside that room now. She wonders if he still sleeps on the same sheets they
purchased together. She wonders if he shares the bed with another body. If that body warms the space between the sheets like she used to. She wonders if everything is still the same from the day she walked out the door. If the silly fridge magnets still spell out always. She wonders if the photos of the two of them are still held to the fridge by magnets. If the same frames are still on display showing the happy couple they once were. If the large canvas from their wedding day still greets him when he walks in through the front door. If her leather jacket she’s had since she was 19 still hangs in the hall closet beside his own leather jacket. She wonders if he still places his shoes next to the ones she left behind in her hasty getaway.

She wonders, does he still wear his wedding ring. Does he read her letter every night before bed and wonder where she is and why she left.

He’s smart enough to know why. She was never good at letting people comfort her. Only he knew how to comfort her but when she pulled away, things hit rock bottom and nothing could comfort her and the best thing she could do was run away from the problem.

She had hoped he found happiness but she still hoped he cried at night like she did. She had hoped a lot of things and coming back home, she didn’t know what to expect. She had wished every day to change the past but she knew you shouldn’t mess with the past. You learnt from the past but she didn’t understand why her past brought her back here, back to her home.

Maybe her guilty conscious.

She watches the curtains move and the light is enough to highlight him in the window.

Her best friend.

Her lover.

Her husband.

He looks pained and hurt. She knows she’s part of that pain and hurt. She feels uneasy staring at him after 15 months apart. But she wants nothing more than to take him into her arms, caress his face and softly kiss the pain away. She knew she had broken him and yet he had broken her.

They broke each other.

A stirring pulls her eyes away from the house, from him and to the backseat of her car.

Her child. Their child is waking, ready for a feed. She starts the car and turns back to the house, he is gone from the window and the rooms light is off. She exhales and feels the tears form in her eyes. She tried to remain positive and brave for their child but it hadn’t been easy. Nights when the baby cried, she cried harder. When the baby slept, she cried wishing he was here with them. She felt guilty when their baby reached her first milestones and he wasn’t here to see it.

The fussing becomes apparent, the baby can’t hold out for much longer but she still can’t seem to pull herself from the house. The baby’s whimpers and crying are the only thing that make her muster up the courage to leave.

She takes one last look at the house and knows she’ll have to see him even if it pains her.

“There you are.” Johanna says greeting them at the front door. “Get inside before you catch a cold.”

She takes the diaper bag from Katniss and holds the door open for her to carry the car seat inside and out of the cold. The sleet- ing was just starting the minute she pulled into the driveway.
Johanna takes her coat and moves off into the kitchen.

Johanna had been the only person she could turn to during her absence and the surprise pregnancy. While Katniss lived off in New York for those 15 months with her childhood best friend, Johanna made sure to visit Boston every spare chance she got. She’d call every day and make sure she was doing OK. She was the one person keeping an eye on him also and making sure he was doing alright. Never once did Johanna relay information about him to her. Katniss strictly asking her not to. It made the guilt worse knowing.

When Katniss arrived on her doorstep last night with her baby sound asleep in her arms, she didn’t question it. She accepted the mother and daughter with open arms and made room for Katniss and her six-month-old daughter despite intruding on her very social life.

Lila’s small cries make her mother take her from the car seat and she starts nursing her. She’s settled quickly with her lips pressed around her mother’s nipple and was at ease. Katniss brings the throw over her lap and stares at her daughter. Only she could make her feel at ease and calm her down when she was upset. Just like how she was her daughter’s comfort.

Johanna enters the room and sits down beside Katniss on the couch, covering herself with the blanket and rubbing Lila’s tiny foot.

“You did a drive by didn’t you?” Katniss just nods. “Did you see him?”

“Briefly.” She tells her. “He was in the nursery. Or what used to be the nursery.”

She offers her a small knowing smile and looks back at Lila who is completely content.

“Are you going to see him?”

“Yeah. I am.”

“Will you take Lila with you?”

“I think I need to see him alone, first. Tell him about where I’ve been and why I ran and then tell him. Showing up on his front step with the baby would push him over the edge.”

“I think tough love is what he needs. Drop the bombshell right away so he can be mad straight away rather than you gain his trust and then drop the huge bombshell.”

“I can’t do that to him.” She says swallowing the lump in her throat. “He said he never wanted any kids after what happened.”

“He was upset, I’m sure he didn’t mean it that way.”

“No, I knew he meant it.”

She shakes her head. “Katniss, you two went through a lot two years ago. You know he wasn’t himself then.”

“I know he wasn’t. It still hurt me to hear him say those words. He hurt me.”

“And you hurt him. You hurt each other and I think the grief is to blame for that. Especially for you running.”

“You know why I ran.”
“I do. I still don’t agree with your reasons but I understand.” She admits. “I think you should give it a couple of days before you see him. Settle in a bit. Go and visit Haymitch and talk to him and think through seeing him again.” Katniss nods. “Good, I’m off to bed, I’ve got an early start.”

Johanna kisses her temple and Lila’s hand before heading off upstairs to her room. She decides to make a move herself. Standing gently with Lila still nursing, she shuts the lights off as she heads upstairs and sinks into the chair by Lila’s crib and looks down at her nursing daughter in the darkened room.

“What am I going to do sweetheart?”

She wakes to Johanna moving around downstairs the next morning. Lila is asleep beside her mother. Their sleep separation technique hadn’t been as successful as Katniss had hoped and Katniss having found comfort in having her daughter beside her at night. She could nurse her easily and comfort her within the warmth of her bed. She could cuddle her, feel her and quickly feel at peace.

She peels herself away from Lila, wrapping a robe around her body and slipping her ugg boots onto her feet. She moves downstairs to see Johanna packing her laptop into her messenger bag.

She was an editor at the paper. She was a few years older than Katniss and had taken her under her wing the first week of Katniss’ working career. They bonded over Friday night drinks and morning coffees where she’d talk about the latest guy or the loud neighbours who lived above her in her old apartment with a bed that squeaked really loudly when they had sex and fought all the time when they weren’t having sex.

Johanna taught her the tricks she needed to know to make a path in the journalism career and get her first review published. This paved Katniss’ way into becoming a reviewer in the music section and become the best music journalist in the business. Katniss got to travel the country seeing concerts, interviewing musicians and their music and report on music topics. She had gotten the chance to follow bands and artists for a few months and report on their tours. She became the youngest and one of the most famous music journalists, running her own blog and being hired by magazines and newspapers to interview, review and travel.

“You’re awake.” Johanna says pouring coffee into a travel mug.

“Yeah. What time will you be home?”

“Hopefully by 6.” She says. “What are your plans for today?”

“I’m going to see Haymitch.”

“Do you think that’s a good idea dropping into the office like that?”

“When else will I see him? I know Monday nights are his squash nights and he works from sunup to sundown.”

“Maybe you should see him outside of the office. Meet him for lunch. I know everyone will love to see you but word will spread like wildfire. Everyone in the office will know you’re there before you even make it to Haymitch’s office.”

“I guess you’re right. I’ll call him and organise lunch.”

“Good girl.” She says picking up her car keys. “I’ve got to go. Ring me if you have any troubles today. I’ll come right home, you know that.”
“I don’t want to bother you.”

“You’re not a bother, you’re my best friend. I’ll be here in a heartbeat.”

Katniss nods and Johanna kisses her forehead as she leaves the house with her phone ringing. Katniss makes herself a cup of tea and prepare breakfast for herself and Lila.

She straps Lila into the car seat a couple of hours later and leaves the house. She locks Lila’s car seat into the base and drives downtown to the restaurant she’s meeting Haymitch at. He had been pleasantly surprised and thrilled to hear from her.

Katniss pulls up near the restaurant and sits, waiting for a moment, watching people pass by. It isn’t until she spots him that she sinks down, hiding herself from him as he nears her car. Her heart beats erratically in her chest and she lifts her head slightly so she can watch him and take a look at him after all this time apart.

He’s still so beautiful. Her heart aches at the sight of him. He had this effect on her and still after the hurt and pain, he still had the same effect on her.

He looks towards the car narrowing his eyes. She sinks further into the seat and prays that he doesn’t come near the car.

She holds her breath waiting.

A knock sounds at the window and it causes her to jump. She’s fearful to look out the window but when she does she sees Haymitch standing there wondering what she is doing.

He opens the door and is quick to embrace her. She looks over his shoulder and sees that he has gone. Disappeared, nowhere to be seen.

“It’s good to see you sweetheart.”

She falls into his warmth and suddenly feels safe.

She opens up the back and Haymitch is fast to greet Lila. A wide smile on his face.

“Hello Lila.” He coos and takes the car seat from the base, carrying his niece and beaming down at her.

Katniss follows behind with the diaper bag slung over her shoulder. Once they are seated, Haymitch is quick to unbuckle his niece from the car seat, holding the girl he hasn’t seen in months.

“She’s so beautiful Katniss, she’s grown a lot since I last saw her.”

“That was 4 months ago.” She reminds him. “But yes, she’s the most beautiful child I’ve ever seen.”

Lila is curious about Haymitch, touching his face and studying him with a quizzical expression, crinkling her eyebrows, just like her father does and relaxes in Haymitch’s hold, happily accepting the attention her uncle is giving her.

“So why were you hiding in your car?” He asks, shifting Lila to his other arm.

“I saw him. I saw Peeta.”
“You haven’t told him have you?”

“No. Have you mentioned it to him?”

“No.” He says shaking his head. “He’s a mess you know.” She nods. She understands Peeta and knows how he works. “Are you going to see him?”

“Yeah, I just don’t know when or how to do it.”

“You shouldn’t show up at his door unannounced. You should call him first and tell him your home. He’ll think he’s seeing a ghost.” He suggests. “And I think you should break it to him early about Lila. Probably if you plan to meet after the phone call, tell him about her at that meeting and give him some time to recover from the news of having a child he didn’t know about.”

Haymitch understood the reasons she took off better than anyone else but he still made her feel guilty for upping and leaving without warning. Haymitch had become close with Peeta once she introduced the two of them over ten years ago. Haymitch was Peeta’s and her boss at the paper and he developed a close bond with Peeta. They were known for their squash games and Sunday afternoon drinks. Haymitch, like Johanna was there for Peeta and Katniss but never said anything about the other to the other person. It wasn’t their job to mediate and they didn’t want to get between them. It was up to Peeta and Katniss to mend their relationship if they were to ever have one again.

All she knows about Peeta is he still lives at their house. He’s still at the paper and he’s gaining recognition for his art journalism. He too gets to travel the country to review exhibitions and attend art gallery openings. She sees his name in the paper occasionally just like Peeta sees hers.

“How is he?” She asks breaking the rule.

“He’s fine I guess.”

“He’s not seeing anyone?”

“You know I can’t answer that.”

“Does he know about Lila at all?”

“I don’t think so.” He tells her. “He misses you though.”

Her heart clenches. “I miss him too. So much.”

“I know you do.”

After lunch they take a walk. Lila sound asleep in the carrier on her mother’s chest. The air is cool, winter is fast approaching with December just a week away.

“Look, I’m having a Thanksgiving dinner on Thursday night at my house.” He tells her.

“You cooking?”

“No, Effie has some people coming in but it’d be nice for you to come and see everyone.”

“Will Peeta be there?”

“Yes. He’s family are doing their own thing.”
“I don’t know if it’d be a good idea. I mean, I haven’t see him yet and told him anything. I don’t think you want a terrible Thanksgiving. It’d be awkward and he’d be pissed to see me.”

“Or he’ll be thankful to have you in the same room again.”

“What about Lila. I can’t leave her alone for her first Thanksgiving.”

“I say talk to him, tonight. Arrange to see him tomorrow tell him tomorrow and then tell him he can meet her Thursday at dinner. I’ll talk to him if you want.”

“No. It has to be me that does it. I can’t hide anymore. Lila deserves to know her father and Peeta deserves to know about Lila whether he accepts her or not.”

Haymitch nods and wraps his arm around his niece’s shoulder. “I wish you had told me you were coming home.”

“It was an impromptu decision. I saw one of his reviews and knew I couldn’t run anymore. I had to see him. I packed some suitcases, made sure I had enough of Lila’s things and we were gone by the next morning. I might not be sticking around though depending on how things go here.”

“You shouldn’t let that dictate your decision. I know Effie and I would love to have you around more. Even Johanna seems like a changed woman with you home. I know you’re working from home anyway.”

“Yeah, it’s easier with Lila to do it that way.” She tells him.

“What are you doing now?” He asks.

“I was going to do some grocery shopping.”

“Come to the office.” She freezes. “No, it’s fine. I’ll bring you up through the back. I have some things I’d like to give you. Trust me Katniss, he won’t see the baby.”

“Ok. Let’s go.”

They walk to the office building. The place she worked at for close to 8 years. Including her summers interning and acting as Haymitch’s assistant. They walk up through the back entrance and into his office without detection. The blinds are drawn to the cubicles below where everyone works and the door shut behind us. Only Effie knew to enter the office when it was closed up like this.

Haymitch sets the diaper bag down on his desk and goes to his filing cabinets flicking through. The door opens and Effie steps inside.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were back.” She says looking at Haymitch before turning to Katniss. “Oh, darling. It’s you.”

Katniss is in her arms in seconds and she’s embracing her niece.

“It’s so good to see you again dear.” She announces holding her face with her hands and smiling. “Let me have a look at Lila.”

Katniss lifts the fabric away and show Lila to Effie who gushes over the sleeping baby.

“Katniss, she is precious.” She says touching her heart. “May I? if it’s not a hassle.”

“No, no hassle at all.” She says smiling and taking Lila from the carrier and passing her to Effie.
“There you go Lila, there’s your Aunt Effie.”

Effie holds Lila against her chest and settles her back into her snooze and takes a seat. Patting her back gently.

“I can’t believe how big she is now. We get your daily pictures and messages. She’s grown so quickly.”

“I know. Not the little baby anymore.”

“She’s just 6 months now, isn’t she?”

“Yep, on Sunday.”

“I can’t believe it’s been four months.” She says. “Why did we leave it so long?” She asks Haymitch.

“Because I have something called a job.”

“There is such thing as weekends and taking time off.”

“Not when you’re me. You could have caught the train or flew to New York to see her.”

“I’m not catching a train. They are just filled with germs.”

Katniss chuckles realising how much she has missed this.

“So, dear, will you come to dinner on Thursday?” She asks.

“Maybe. There’s a bit I’ve got to do.” She tells her and moves to the blinds, she looks directly to where she knew his cubicle was. There he was. In front of the screen, his back to her. From their first day they had a cubicle beside each other. Not a lot of work was done when they were together. But for her 8 years here, they shared a cubicle wall and lots of memories.

“I see.” She says. “Well, it’d be great to have you there.”

Katniss nods and turns away from the window. “Does he still have the same number?”


“Thanks.”

“Katniss, he’s thinking about filing for divorce. He’s in the process of talking to his lawyer. He wants to cut all ties with you officially. He’s going to serve you with them in three months’ time. Or he was if he didn’t see you.”

“He wants a divorce?”

“You technically are separated and have been for 15 months.” He says. “And he wanted me to send this to you when you first left him but I never did. I knew he’d regret sending it to you but I think you should read it.” He says handing over the thick envelope.

“What’s it about?”

“I think you should read it yourself.”

She flips the envelope over a few times and places it inside the diaper bag.
“I should probably get going. I’ve only validated my park for two hours.”

“I’ll walk you back.” Effie tells her. “Coffee?”

He nods. “If I’m to get through this afternoon’s meeting.”

“Anything else?”

“I’m fine dear.”

“Here Ef, I’ll put her back in here.”

Effie hands Lila back and Katniss carefully slips her daughter back inside the carrier. Lila whimpers for a few moments but a kiss to the top of her head settles her and she snuggles into the warmth and the sound of her mother’s beating heart.

“I’ll see you around sweetheart.” Haymitch says embracing Katniss. “Don’t be a stranger, we’re here to help you and this little one.”

“Thanks Haymitch.”

“Bye Lila, I’ll see you later beautiful.”

“Come on Katniss.” Effie says putting her coat on. “I’ll be back.”

“Go out the back way Effie.”

Effie nods and picks up the diaper bag, slinging it over her shoulder. She places her hand on Katniss’ back and leads her out of the room and to the back stairwell. Her high heels clicking on the concreted stairs.

“Effie, I don’t know what I should do.” She admits as they leave the building. “I’m really scared.”

“Dear, all the years I’ve known you, you’ve shown such strength and courage I’ve never doubted you. You face this with the strong soul I know you have. I know you’ve both made mistakes and have hurt each other but I know he’ll be pleased to see you. Even if it pains him at first, he’ll be glad to see you.”

“What about Lila?”

“It’s going to be tough but I don’t doubt the love he has for you and the love he’ll have for this little girl. Even after the things he said. I wouldn’t take those things to heart Katniss. You two went through something that was heartbreaking and traumatic and you both reacted so differently. You know he wasn’t himself after. I think some time apart was good for the both of you.”

“I’m scared that it was too much time though.”

“He loves you Katniss. He will love you until the day he dies. I know you love him. Time does heal. I just think you need to have an open mind about this. Read the letter and talk to him. It’s the least you could do.”

Katniss nods and kisses Lila’s beanie clad head. “How should I tell him about Lila?”

“Haymitch and I both discussed this and I’m sure he told you what he thought you should do. I think you should see him first, before you tell him about Lila.”
“And do you think Thanksgiving will be a good idea?”

“It’s up to you dear. You need to talk to Peeta first. Maybe you could see him before dinner and introduce him to Lila but if you don’t decide to come then that’s fine. You do what you feel comfortable with and Haymitch and I will support you all the way.”

“Do you think I’m a bad person for not telling him?”

“You had your reasons, I trust your reasons. I’m glad you’re back now while she’s still young rather than a few years down the track. He deserves to know her no matter what he says.”

“Effie, he told me he didn’t want another baby.”

“He was scared Katniss. He was scared the same thing would happen again. I know you were scared right to the second before she entered the world. It’s natural and I’m sure he didn’t mean those things.” She says. “Look, just hear him out, make sure he hears you out and your reasoning. I’m certain he will fall in love with Lila the minute he meets her. Just give him some time to come around to the idea. You’re going to be dropping a bombshell.”

“I know I am. I just hope he doesn’t do anything stupid. I’m scared that he’ll file for custody against her.”

“If he does, I’ll kick his arse so hard he’ll end up at the other side of the world if he does that. Believe me, he doesn’t get to do that to you and Lila.”

Katniss reaches her car and Effie stands beside her as she straps Lila into her car seat. Effie kisses Lila on the head and shuts the door before she embraces Katniss.

“Call me the minute you speak to him, OK?”

“OK.”

Effie looks at Katniss, holding her face between her hands. “It will be Ok. I know it feels like the hardest thing in the world but you’ll get through it my dear. You have that strong heart and a brave soul.” She tells her as she kisses her forehead. “I’ll see you later dear.”

“Bye Effie.” She says climbing into the car. “Thank you.”

She nods with a smile as she shuts the car door and starts the car and driving off to the grocery store with Lila starting to grizzle in the backseat.

“Hang on baby, we’re almost there.”

She pulls into the parking lot and changes Lila’s diaper and places her in the carrier to settle her down.

She walks the aisles, placing things inside the shopping cart. Her mind wanders as she walks, barely paying attention to the people around. She kisses the top of her daughter’s head every once in awhile and blocks out the other shoppers while she thinks about what she is going to say to him.

As she turns around the corner she recognises him as he reads the label of the box of cereal. She’s quick to back around the corner and hide. Her knees to turn to jelly and her heart begins racing.

She can’t do this. She’s not ready just yet.
The shopping list is abandoned and she pays for the few items in the cart. She needed to get out of there before she ran into someone else.

She realises she forgot the diapers when she reaches the car. And she contemplates whether she could duck back inside without him spotting her. She packs the items into the car and races back inside getting a pack of diapers and wipes and leaving quickly, not looking back. Lila is strapped back into the car seat and Katniss is pulling out from the parking lot headed home with her mind and heart racing.

She needed to speak to Peeta before someone let slip she was home.

She pulls into the driveway and shuts the engine off. Lila was sound asleep and Katniss didn’t want to move her just yet. She sat staring at the grey garage door.

Her phone buzzes in the diaper bag and she fishes inside for it, finding the letter from Peeta in there. She reads the text from Haymitch.

_The boy thinks your home. He just asked me. I lied to him telling him I didn’t know. It’s up to you sweetheart._

She locks the screen and tears open the letter.

_Why’d you leave me? I’m so sorry for the things I said and the way I’ve acted since his death. It was unexpected. There were no warning signs. I felt as if I was to blame. If you want someone to blame please let it be me. At least then you’d speak to me. Please, I know I fucked up big time. We all make mistakes but am I that heartless and uncaring? I love you, don’t you understand that? I won’t lie, leaving me was a pretty fucked up thing to do. You’re just a runner. You run from your problems. You ran from me when I became the problem, instead of trying to fix me. I thought we had something Katniss. We’re that couple. We promised to be there for each other through the highs and lows but once things got scary you were gone. We got each other through everything before. I stood beside you when you were grieving for your sister. I never turned my back or walked out on you. Then when our son dies and then my father dies you can’t stick around to help me through the lows. You just picked up your things and left me. What happened to that night we shared? The night filled with passion? That last night together where we come undone. I thought things were looking up then, obviously they weren’t. I woke the next morning and you were gone. Leaving nothing but a note._

_Well here’s a letter to you._

_Don’t ever think about coming back. I don’t think I could handle you being in my life again, especially if you’re only there to cause me pain. I’m feeling pained now and only one thing will fix it. Thanks for driving me to it._

_Yours sincerely,_

_Your husband or whatever I am to you._

Katniss’ heart aches as she reads the letter. Her stomach churning. She knows that wasn’t him really talking. It was the drugs and the alcohol and the grief. She’s glad Haymitch never sent her this because she thinks it would have made up her choice on whether she’d come back.

But that night of passion they shared, that night they reconnected after months apart resulted in Lila and she left him the next morning, running from the fact that he was using. She couldn’t handle his addiction anymore. She needed a chance to clear her head and think things through. She hadn’t had a moment to think since the death of their precious son.
Now that she had had 15 months to think, she had a lot to say to him. The way he chose to grieve was his choice. He chose addiction, she chose a new city filled with strangers. People who didn’t know her story. People reacted differently and she didn’t want to go down that path of using to get from sunup to sundown.

She takes out her phone, scrolling down to his name in her contacts and presses dial and waits, holding her breath.

After four rings the line connects.

“Katniss, is that you?”
September, 2004 – Dartmouth University

The loud shrill of an alarm clock wakes her. The same alarm clock that has been responsible for waking her at the crack of dawn since she arrived a month ago. It wasn’t even her alarm clock. The stupid person directly below her was the owner and had no sense of time or common courtesy for other people who didn’t have early classes. She buries her head under her pillow and waits for the shrill to cease.

The owner of the alarm didn’t seem to wake to it for close to three minutes. She knew this because she counted the amount of time it took for it to be shut off. The owner also seemed to enjoy hitting the snooze button because it always woke her 10 minutes later when she was sure she was drifting back to sleep.

4 times they hit snooze.

The didn’t even think to set their alarm for forty minutes later, enjoying the last moments of sleep like every other weary-eyed college student.

She kicks her sheets off of her body and gets out of bed groaning. She used to enjoy her uninterrupted sleep back home in Boston. Now she just found herself exhausted and barely managing the life of a college student.

So she blames the owner of the alarm clock for her exhaustion and wants to quit college and return home, just so she can have a decent sleep.

But today, she was changing things for the sanity of her herself and the sanity of the other students who weren’t ballsy enough to confront the owner.

She jumps down the flight of stairs to the floor below and finds the room responsible for the alarm clock, pounding on the door loudly. She didn’t care if she woke the other students.

She was fuming and prepares to lash out at the owner and hopefully smash the stupid clock in front of them and leave again.

But when the door swings open, her mouth goes wide and she’s lost the ability to speak or to even breathe.

The owner of the alarm clock is absolutely gorgeous.

He grins at her, leaning against the doorframe, crossing his arms across his very broad and very bare chest. He looks sleepy but absolutely delicious.

“Can I help you?” He asks. “It’s still a little early for visitors don’t you think?”

She has to put aside the fact that he was stunning and think about her sleep and sanity. “You obviously don’t think it’s early. I live above you and for the last month I’ve woken up to that stupid alarm of yours. I can hear the shrill. Turn the stupid thing down.”

“Sorry, do you hear it?” He asks bemused.
“Yes and I’d appreciate it if I could sleep an extra hour without waking to your stupid alarm clock. And you take the longest time ever to turn the thing off and you hit snooze a lot. What the fuck? Don’t you like sleep?” She asks. “Please for my sanity, get a quieter alarm.”

He studies her and she knows she must look amusing. Her hair is sticking up everywhere. She’s in a very worn and oversized sweatshirt and a pair of sleep shorts with mismatched bed socks on. There are big black circles under her eyes and most likely dried drool at the corner of her mouth. She has morning breath and is in desperate need of a shower.

He continues to smile that small smile and she suddenly feels self-conscious. She grips the hem of her sweatshirt and tugs it downwards.

“Seriously, can’t you speak?”

“No, I can. I’m just blown away at how beautiful you are, I didn’t actually catch what you were ranting about. Do you want to tell me over dinner?” He asks, his smile turning into a cocky grin.

“No, I don’t want to talk to you about it over dinner. I just want you to get an alarm clock that doesn’t wake me at the crack of fucking dawn.”

“Hey, I’m going to have to ask you not to swear at me.”

She scowls and looks at him. “Fine. Can you please get a new alarm clock that won’t wake me up every morning?”

His lips turn upwards again and he nods. “Alright Katniss.”

He knows her name?

“It was lovely chatting to you this morning.” He tells her and closes his door.

“Wait!” She calls. “How do you know my name?”

He doesn’t open the door but she swears she hears his deep laugh from behind the door.

She turns around confused and walks back to her room in a daze, falling back onto her bed and staring up at the ceiling.

*Her head was spinning.*

*He was gorgeous.*

*She recognised him from somewhere.*

*He asked her out on a date.*

*He knew her name.*

*How the heck did he know her name?*

His alarm clock woke her the next morning. She thought he was taunting her. But she was too tired to react today. She knew he was waiting for her next reaction and the chance to ask her out again. But she was holding her ground. She didn’t need to be tempted.

She sits on the common greens with Madge during their lunch, soaking up the late September sun.

“You look like shit.” Madge tells her.
“It’s that stupid guy from downstairs with his alarm clock.” She tells her. “And he knows my freaking name. I don’t even know his. And he asked me out on a date?”

“Did he?” She enquires. “Is he cute?”

“Yes but that’s not the point. He’s level of hotness has declined rapidly because of his alarm clock and I swear he’s teasing me now. I confronted him yesterday about it and he just stood there with his arms folded across his chest and smirked at me while I blew up about his alarm.”

“He likes you.” She states.

“I don’t even know him. He doesn’t even know me. How could he like me?”

“Love at first sight.”

“I’m not that person, I don’t believe in love at first sight.”

“Because you haven’t met the one. I’m sure you felt something for him. Were your panties soaked when you laid your eyes on him?”

“Madge.” She warns.

“What? It’s a natural response. There are a few guys around here who I would happily throw my panties at.”

Katniss rolls her eyes and checks her watch. “You have Gale. Keep your focus on your real boyfriend.” She tells her oldest friend. “Come on.” She says, kicking Madge’s foot as she stands up.

Madge and her move to the back of the lecture hall and find a seat. This class was always a fight for the back rows as the Lecturer was sweaty and rank. His breath smells of rotten lunch and he wore no shoes. He was boring and sent half the class to sleep. He was bitter over his divorce and having to pay child support payments to his wife he described as Satan. She was used an awful lot in examples.

The row fills with bodies and she doesn’t pay any attention to the guy who sits beside her. She hates socialising with people and hates how Madge encourages her to be social. Madge sees it as a good thing, being invited to parties and making connections so they could buy booze, pot and maybe find a guy to hook up with when she was lonely, bored and horny.

But she doesn’t want any of that, she just wants to survive her four years of college and get out in the real world.

Her attention goes to the stairs where two boys walk.

“No fucking way.” She mutters.

“What?” Madge asks, tearing her attention away from her phone.

“That’s alarm guy.” She whispers to her. The two boys make their way to the seats in front of Katniss and Madge, stopping quickly to have a conversation with two girls about a frat party.

Alarm guy meets Katniss’ eyes and smiles at her when he sits down.

“Well if it isn’t Katniss. How are we this morning? I was upset that you didn’t come pounding on my door this morning.” He flashes his pearly white teeth and she narrows her eyes.
“Hi.” She mumbles.

“How was your sleep?”

“Terrible, no thanks to that alarm of yours.”

“Well I’m more than happy to discuss it over dinner. It’s the least I could do for all this trouble I’ve caused.”

“No thanks. Keep that money for a new alarm clock.”

His friend chuckles and sinks into the chair beside him. Madge bites her lip and alarm guy smirks at her.

“I know what I’d rather spend it on.” He tells her winking before turning around

“Did you just wink at me?” She asks as the lecturer begins speaking.

He shrugs his shoulders and doesn’t dare turn back around. She sinks lower into her chair and folds her arms over her chest as Madge drops a piece of paper onto her desk.

_He is unbelievably, insanely hot. Let him take you out to dinner and take him back to your dorm and fuck his brains out._

Katniss scowls at her before writing back.

_No way in hell will I ever go out on a date with him. I just want my fucking sleep back._

Madge returns the note.

_Give him an ultimatum. He gets a new alarm, he can take you out to dinner. Come on, loosen up. He seems like a nice guy. And he’s quite nice to look at._

She groans and replies.

_No way. I’m not letting him get under my skin._

_I think he already is._

_You know what I mean, he’s purposely waiting for me to crack._

_Oh well, make sure you look hot as hell when you do so. It’ll make him go crazy. I bet he already thinks about you at night._

_Shut up. No boys like me like that._

_Bullshit. You don’t realise the effect you have on people. You don’t take notice of the world around you. I can count the number of times boys pined after you in high school. You never gave them the time of day._

_I don’t have time for those smelly high school boys. What I want to know is how he knows my name._

_He’s the one paying attention. Obviously. Besides he’s a hot college boy, he outranks all those high school boys. Just think about it._
Katniss tries her best to stay focused on the lecturer but the smell of someone’s cologne and cinnamon and spices assaults her nose and her head goes hazy. It reminds her of the old bakery back at home. Especially the cinnamon rolls she bought on trips home from school on the way to the office where she’d work for the afternoon acting as Haymitch’s assistant, filing papers and sorting through his notes and even learning the tricks of becoming a journalist. When he’d finish for the day they’d walk back down the street, stopping in at the bakery and buying bread for that night’s dinner and sharing a cheese bun on the train ride home without Effie knowing.

She smiles to herself recalling those times and begins to miss home.

The next week she’s woken every day to his alarm clock.

By Friday morning, she’s had enough.

“Fuck me.” She mutters as she races down the stairs. She marches towards his room and finds him already standing in the doorway with that smug look on his face and holding the alarm clock in his hand. He’s in nothing but his black boxer shorts.

Great, she’ll never get the sight of him out of her mind.

“I believe this is what you’re looking for.” He says holding it out for her. She scowls and reaches for it but he pulls it away like a juvenile middle schooler. “Not so fast tiger. You can have it but only if you go out to dinner with me.”

“That’s not entirely fair.” She tells him and he grins. “Why do you want to go out for dinner?”

“You intrigue me Miss Everdeen.”

“What if I don’t go for dinner with you?”

“Then prepare for a lot of early mornings.”

Anger boils in the pit of her stomach.

Just one date Katniss. Just one date and you’ll get your sleep back.

“So can I pick you up tonight at 7? I hope you like Mexican.”

“Fine but one date only.” He smiles and passes the alarm clock over to her. “I’ll be keeping this now, thank you.” She tells him and turns around leaving.

“Nice seeing you again Katniss.” He calls out after her.

After class last week she found out his name was Peeta. She liked the way it rolls off her tongue and how it sounds when she had screamed his name into her pillow one night when he was all she could think about. But she’d never tell Madge that. She was pretending to hate him ferociously and that the exact thought of him made her sick to her stomach but in fact, she liked the thought of him. Everything about him, even if she hardly knew a thing.

He sits in front of her during their shared lectures that day, she watches him curiously and notices the sketchbook he hides on his lap. His eyebrows crinkle as he concentrates on his sketching. She watches how his hand moves over the page. How his tongue pokes out from his mouth as he concentrates, studying hard. She watches lines take the shape of a person and she soon realises is her. He is sketching her from this morning.
Madge doesn’t seem to notice. She’s too busy writing a draft email to send to Gale who is currently in New York.

“Shall I meet you at your dorm Katniss?” He asks as they leave the lecture room.

She nods. “See you at 7.” She replies with a smile and she catches up to Madge.

She feels his eyes burn into her back and she knows he’s checking her out as she walks away.

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The slamming of the front door startles Katniss out of her snooze on the couch. She checks on Lila who is in the bouncer beside her. Katniss sits up just as Johanna appears in the living room, Lila crying from the slamming of the door.

“Shit sorry. I forgot there is a baby here.” Johanna apologises, bending down to the bouncer. “Sorry baby girl.” She coos to Lila, rubbing her cheek softly.

Katniss takes Lila from the bouncer and cuddles the baby to her chest, humming to her to soothe her.

“So, did you talk to him?” She calls out on her way to the kitchen.

Katniss swallows the lump in her throat and stands up with Lila, following Johanna to the kitchen where she has dinner.

“We seriously need to stop eating takeout.” Katniss tells her, patting Lila’s back as she spies the containers of take out.

“Yeah whatever.” She replies, taking out the containers of Thai. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Katniss exhales a deep breath. “No, I didn’t.” She tells her softly.

“Shit. I’m getting the wine. It’s going to be a long night.” She states, opening up the fridge for the bottle of red. “It’s for me mostly, you’re on Mom duty.” Katniss rolls her eyes and sets Lila in her booster seat, strapping her in. “Tell me everything that happened?” Johanna demands, pouring herself a good sized glass of wine.

“There’s nothing to say. I called him, he answered, I hung up.”

“Without saying anything?”

“Yes.”

“Why not?”

“I chickened out.” She tells her. “What would you say to the man you left 15 months ago. The man you promised to love and stick by for years to come. The same man that doesn’t know he has a child. What would you say to him? Hello, I’m back in Boston, I left you because you were an addict and said you didn’t want kids oh and by the way we have a daughter that we conceived the last night we were together. No, I couldn’t say anything because I choked and all these memories and pain came up.”

Johanna narrows her brows and sets down the container of boiled rice.

“You could have just told him you were home. One step at a time. He deserves to know you’re
You could have just told him you were home. One step at a time. He deserves to know you’re back, you’re staying with me and that you two need to talk in person. Don’t drag this out longer that it has to be. You’re 28, not 14. And this little high school game is hurting him even more Katniss. He’s already broken; he doesn’t need his wife he thought was missing for the last year to be stringing him along further. Be mature about this Brainless.”

Katniss scowls. She knows Johanna is right about not hurting Peeta further but Johanna hasn’t been through what the two of them have been through in their lives. She hasn’t dealt with the heartbreak they’ve faced.

But she needs to put that pain aside for the moment and focus on Lila. This was for Lila and for her mostly. Peeta deserved to know everything and Lila deserved to have her father in her life.

Johanna filled her in on her day while they ate dinner. Katniss told her about her day and then quickly deflected the conversation back to Johanna who told her about the sandwich guy down the street who asked her out on a date, the same guy she’s been playing hard to get since he started at the sandwich shop. They had plans to go for drinks on Saturday night when he got back to town after Thanksgiving.

“He sent me an ab shot this afternoon.” Johanna announces, shoving her phone across the table as Katniss wipes down Lila’s face.

Katniss laughs out loud at the photo. Everything about it was hilarious, from the pose, the lighting, the angle and the strategic positioning of his gym shorts that hang very low on his hips to show off the trail of hair that ran downwards and the V lines.

“Do you think he’s hung?” Johanna asks staring at the screen. “I don’t care, I was just curious, a lot of gym guys I’ve dated haven’t had a very good package. Everything else was big except for their dick. Their stamina was great but the sex just wasn’t good like you’d think it would be. They were more into getting their dicks wet then getting their partners to orgasm.”

“Stop corrupting my daughter, she’s only a baby. She doesn’t need to know about gym guys dicks and sex.”

“Because your Mommy is pure, I’ll make sure I answer all the questions you’ll have, I promise you Miss Lila.” Johanna tells the baby who crinkles her eyebrows.

“I’ll answer her questions.”

“Really? Cause you’re getting all embarrassed and such. You’re still so pure Katniss. You’d think over a decade of sex and childbirth would change that. Obviously some things can’t be changed.”

“Some people just don’t like to be open about some things.”

“Don’t worry, you still have a while before those questions start. If not, I’ll always be there to answer them for her. Bring all the where do babies come from and what’s a hard-on my way. I’ll even give her the condom on the banana demonstration. I’ll do all that if you don’t want to.”

“I’m her mother, I’m supposed to teach her about that stuff.”

“Well you can teach her about that stuff. Just know that I’ll always be there for her as well.”

“Thanks, we appreciate it.” Katniss tells her. “But for now, let’s try and prolong any questions that’ll have the parents at the playground and school judging me.” Johanna agrees, nodding her head and saluting.

After dinner, Johanna takes Lila upstairs for her bath and leaves Katniss to call Peeta after she’s back, you’re staying with me and that you two need to talk in person. Don’t drag this out longer that it has to be. You’re 28, not 14. And this little high school game is hurting him even more Katniss. He’s already broken; he doesn’t need his wife he thought was missing for the last year to be stringing him along further. Be mature about this Brainless.”
tidied up after dinner.

“You better be calling him Everdeen!” Johanna shouts from the top of the stairs. She’s obviously finished bathing Lila. “Or I’ll drive you over there myself and make you talk to him!”

She rolls her eyes and touches the call button. “I’m doing it. Give me a break.” She inhales a deep breath and waits as it rings.

The line connects after three rings and she exhales her breath, speaking first. “It’s me Peeta.”

“Katniss.” He answers with relief in his voice. “You’re home?”

“I’m back. I’ve been back for a few days now.”

“Why didn’t you call me sooner?”

She bites her lip, “I was settling back in. I got in late on Friday night.” She tells him, eyeing Johanna and Lila as they enter the living room. Lila cuddling into Johanna with her towel wrapped around her body and pyjamas in Johanna’s hand. “I think we should meet. We have a lot to talk about.”

“I know we do, there’s a lot to be said.” He replies. “Are you going to Haymitch and Effie’s for Thanksgiving? Maybe we can talk then.”

“I think we should speak before then. There’s something really important I have to tell you. Can we meet tomorrow, possibly? The sooner the better.”

“Of course. Do you want to meet tomorrow for lunch?”

“Lunch sounds good.” She tells him. “Do you want to meet at work then we can go from there?”

“Sure Katniss.”

There’s silence for a long while.

It’s been months since she’s heard his voice. Months since they’ve contacted and spoken. Months since she’s seen his smile. Caressed his face and kissed his lips.

“I’ve missed you Katniss.” He tells her.

She can hear the pain in his voice. She chokes back her tears. “I know. I’ve missed you too.” She tells him. Lila lets out a long grizzle and demands to be with her mother. “Listen, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

“Of course. Bye Katniss. I’ll see you then.”

There’s a long pause before either of them end the call. She doesn’t want to end this call. It’s been too long since she last had a conversation with him.

He ends the call.

She takes her dressed baby from Johanna, kissing her cheeks and cuddling her to her body.

“He seems well.”

“He is well. You’ll be so proud of him.”
She feels her lips stretch upwards and kisses Lila’s head. “Do you think you can watch her tomorrow? If it’s too hard I can ask Effie.”

“I’d love to watch her. I’ll work half a day. I’ve done enough overtime to deserve an afternoon off. We’ll just meet at the office?”

Katniss nods with a thankful smile. “Thank you for doing this for me and Lila.” Johanna scoots closer to Katniss on the couch and leans her head on her shoulder. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“You are.”

“Then why do I feel like I’m about to become the worst person in the world after tomorrow?”

“Fear.” She replies. “But remember you made a choice based on what he said and how he acted. You chose to live your life this way and I don’t blame you. You had to put her first and you did. She’s a beautiful girl and you’ve done a great job raising her on your own. Peeta will see that.” She says. “This is going to be hard for the both of you. It hasn’t been easy these last few years and I hope you can both put your differences aside for this little one.” She touches the back of Lila’s hair softly and smiles at the baby who looks up at her. “You’ll get through this with that strength I know you have.”


“In some eyes, yes. In mine, you did what you thought was right. You were protecting Lila because you’re her mother. You were protecting yourself from getting hurt. I don’t doubt that your actions come from a place of consideration and kindness. We all know that. You make rash decisions but it’s in your nature to act before you think. And those who love you understand that.”

Johanna looks at Katniss. “I’m not one to judge because I haven’t lived your life, I don’t know what’s going on in your head but I understand Katniss Everdeen. She’s a warrior, she’s had a tough life but she keeps fighting to protect those she loves.” Johanna says. “And I think keeping Lila from Peeta was your way of protecting both of them. Peeta wasn’t ready to become a father. Lila was born into the world too early for her father. Now with a lot of time, I think they’re both ready to meet.”

Katniss stares down at her perfect daughter and feels the tears slide down her cheeks. Lila lets out a little yawn and gives her mother an escape.

“I think it’s bedtime for Miss Lila.” She announces and stands up, resting Lila on her hip. She turns to Johanna. “Please tell me this is going to be Ok.”

“Everything is going to be fine. And remember, I’m here if it all falls apart. I’ll always be here for you. Both of you.” She tells her smiling. “Night girls.”

She settles in the chair beside Lila’s bed and nurses her in the silence and darkness of the room.

“I love you and I know your daddy will love you. He wasn’t ready then but I know he’s ready now. You’re both ready.”

She slips into Johanna’s room after her shower. Lila is still sound asleep and sleeping peacefully. She crawls under the covers of her friends’ bed.

“What’s wrong?” She asks.

Katniss curls into her friends’ side and doesn’t say a word, just watches her scroll through her
Facebook newsfeed.

“I had a dream this afternoon before you came home.”

“About what?”

“When we first met in college.”

“Yeah? I bet it was a good dream.”

“It was. We were so untouched and young then. And he was as charming as ever.” She recalls. “I confiscated his alarm clock off of him. I wonder if he had a quieter alarm, would we actually meet.”

“No, you would have, not just that way. You would have come across each other in a class, at a party or in the quad. You two would have met.” Johanna explains. “I just think this way is a lot more romantic and sweet.”

Katniss finds herself smiling, remembering the boy from college who’d change her life without her even realising.

She enters her bedroom once she doesn’t feel so alone and she hears Lila’s soft breathing. She sits on the edge of her bed slowly and reaches for her phone. There’s a text from Peeta from over an hour ago and she opens it quickly.

Peeta – Haymitch told me he showed you the letter. Please disregard anything I said in that letter. You know I wasn’t myself then and I regret even putting those words on paper. I know we said we’ll talk tomorrow and we will. I just want to apologise for the man I was then. I’m ashamed at myself for turning into that monster and I don’t judge you for running from me. I know you were hurting and me being what I was then wasn’t helping you. I just wished you came home sooner. It’s been lonely without you here. I’ll see you tomorrow Katniss. I’ve missed you so much and I still love you like crazy. I’m glad you came home.

She wipes the tears from her cheek and re-reads the text over and over until the tears are falling harder down her face.

She contemplates what to reply with. Deleting everything that she’s drafted.

I’m glad I came home too. We’ll talk more tomorrow.

She sets her phone down on her bed and walks over to the suitcase she brought and digs through the packed clothes until she finds what she was looking for. She carries it over to her bed and sits down, admiring the little silver alarm clock.

The thing that brought Peeta and her together. She’s kept it after all of these years. It was a their history, just like all those movie stubs and silly seashells, she kept this one. Peeta doesn’t know that she’s kept it after all these years.

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Right on 7 a knock sounds on her dorm door. Madge squeals with excitement. She insisted to be there when he arrived and to approve of her outfit choice despite Katniss telling her he was only taking her to eat Mexican.

Katniss opens the door for him and sucks in a breath as she takes in the sight of him. No boy has ever had this effect on her. No boy has ever made her stop and notice them. She’s glad she’s
started to notice Peeta.


“Yeah, just let me grab my bag.” She says moving away from the door and revealing the room to him. She moves to the desk where Madge sits and warns Madge to not say a thing as she picks up her bag. “Lock my room when you’re finished.” She tells her.

She brushes her away with her hand as she digs into her Chinese and doesn’t peel her eyes away from the TV.

She shuts the door as they step into the hallway. They walk in silence to the car park where he leads her to an orange Jeep Wrangler. He opens the door for her, helping her into the car.

She thanks him and climbs up into the car, trying her best to not flash him with the dress she wore and the dress she realises Madge had picked out because of how short it was.

She was never letting Madge dress her again.

She watches him as he drives downtown to the Mexican restaurant. He opens the door for her when they arrive at the restaurant and helps her down from the car. He holds her chair out for her to sit down, tucking her chair in like a gentleman would. And she realises he did it not to impress her but because of the morals he’s grown up with.

They stare at the menu and he provides the conversation. He chats mostly about college. She listens to him and adds her own thoughts occasionally. They soon begin to laugh over their smelly lecturer and his life.

“Looks good.” He admits as their meals arrive, picking up his fork taste a bit of the chilli con carne he had ordered.

Katniss is fast to attack her nachos and hears Peeta begin to chuckle.

“What?” She asks with a mouthful of corn chips.

Peeta smiles and leans across the table with his napkin, wiping the sour cream off of her nose and the cheese from her chin. “You just had a little something.”

“Oh.” She apologises. “I need to remember to impress people with my eat habits not disgust them. I eat like a savage and if my aunt were here, she’d scold me for eating like this.”

He laughs at her and takes a sip of his drink. “Well, you don’t have to worry about your eating habits now.” He tells her with a soft smile. “I’m all for savage eating.”

She blushes and smiles at Peeta. She realises how much she likes Peeta, much more than she expected she would.

“So Peeta, where did you come from?”


“Really?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

“Boston.”
“Have you lived there all your life?”

“Mostly. I lived in New York until I was 5 and then moved to Boston. What about you?”

“Yep, my whole life. My whole family lives there. My aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins. It’s a big family affair.”

“You come from a big family?”

“I have two older brothers. Nothing too big, just a lot of relations outside of my immediate family.” He says. “What about you?”

“Not much family.” She replies quietly.

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.” She nods and take a sip of her water, clearing her throat. “What did you do for fun back home?”

“Archery. I was state champion a few years ago. I’m on the college archery squad.”

“Really? I suppose I better not mess with you.”

“What about you? I noticed you like to draw.”

“You saw me drawing?” He asks with his cheeks flushing.

“You’re amazing. Don’t be embarrassed.”

He smiles shyly. “I do like to draw and paint. I also wrestled during high school. That’s how I got into college.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t have gotten into this college without it.” He says. “I’m a pretty good wrestler also. Made a few rep teams and I’m on the college wrestling team too.”

“Well, I guess we better not mess with each other. I’m good with a bow and you’re good with your body strength. Don’t know who’d win that competition.” She grins as she sips from her glass.

He chuckles. “Me either. Depends on how quick you are.”

“Oh I’m quick. I’m sneaky also. So you better watch your back.” She teases.

“Oh I will be from now on.”

He takes a few more bites of his dinner before he speaks again, smiling softly. “All I know about you is that you’re stubborn and good with a bow.”

“That about sums me up.”

“I’m sure there’s more to it.” He says. “Like what’s your favourite colour?”

She looks down at her hands for a moment and looks back up at him. “Green. Yours?”

“Orange.”

“Orange?” She cringes remembering the bad hair dye her aunt had before she left for college.
“Not that type of orange. A sunset kind of orange. Soft.”

“I guess that explains the Jeep?” She smirks.

“Yeah, it does.” He laughs.

He has a way with words. He’s voice is soothing and soft. Something that stops a crowd. He expresses his view through words. He’d be the type of person who could stand on a podium and take people on a journey with just his silver tongue and the sound of his voice. He’d make a superb journalist.

“What type of journalism do you want to go into?” He asks her.

“Music I think. I’d love to follow bands and interview artists.”

“You like music?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” She shrugs. “What about you?”

“Being a photojournalist I think. I’d want to take a snapshot that leaves people breathless, that is so powerful, it changes the way society thinks. Something that inspires people. My grandfather was a war journalist and I’ve been inspired by his photographs he took on the frontline.” He explains with a proud smile.

“My Uncle is the editor at the Boston Globe.” She tells him. “That’s where my passion for journalism started.”

“Wow. Do you think you’ll have a job there when you’re finished?”

“I’d be grateful for anything. If I get a job there then I do. If I don’t then I wouldn’t mind going elsewhere and travelling but Boston is home you know.”

“I understand.” He agrees. “I’d be happy going anywhere.”

“Well a lot could happen in four years.”

“It certainly could.” He agrees with a smile.

“Want to go for a drive?” He asks her as they walk across the parking lot to his car.

He drives them around, stopping at a lookout. They climb onto the hood of his Wrangler and he lights a cigarette and offers her a drag.

“I don’t usually smoke.” He tells her. “It’s just a sometimes thing. And a bad habit.”

She takes a drag and blows out the smoke, passing him back the cigarette.

“Same. My Uncle would have cut my hands off if he caught me smoking.”

They stare at the night sky and she reaches into her purse as he takes a long drag.

“I bought you something today.” She tells him.

“You bought me something? I thought it was supposed to be the other way around. I was supposed to wine and dine you. Buy you expensive gifts and hope you’ll give me the time of day again.”
“Just take it.” She laughs and thrusting the small bag into his hands. She takes the cigarette off of him.

He pulls out the item inside the bag and chuckles. “Oh you didn’t have to.”

“I did. I confiscated your other one. So I thought I’d buy you one that wasn’t so loud. I made sure to test it. It won’t wake another soul in our dorm again.”

He laughs and grins. “Thank you.” He says. “And I’m so sorry for the last 5 weeks of early mornings and being a dick. I was being stubborn, wanting to go out on a date with you.”

“Apology accepted.” She accepts grinning. “Oh and I set it for 6:40 rather than 6. You like to hit the snooze button a lot.”

“I know.” He laughs. “You know, you were the only one who complained.”

“Really?”

“And the prettiest also.” Katniss finds herself blushing and a smile creeps onto her face. “I’m very much attracted to you Katniss and I hope that you’ll give me another night, even though you only agreed to one date.”

“I suppose I could.” She says. “Who else would I ask to come and watch Bridget Jones with me?”

He laughs. “I’ll watch any movie with you.” He tells her. “Would you have ever gone on a date with me if I didn’t leave it up to the ultimatum?”

“Maybe. Once you got rid of that alarm clock probably.”

“I should have done it sooner than.” He smirks.

“But then how else would you have seen me in my pyjamas at 6 am?”

He smirks and she bites her lip having just backed herself into a corner.

“I can think of scenarios.” He whispers to her.

“Really, do I get to know these?”

“Maybe one day. We’re still on our first date, remember? I don’t want you getting the wrong idea.”

He leans in towards her, placing his hand on her cheek. Running his thumb over her jaw and looking deep into her eyes.

“I feel something for you Katniss. Nothing I’ve ever felt before.”

“Me too.”

Their lips touch softly. His hand touching her cheek.

It’s soft and short but amazing. Katniss has never had a first kiss like this before.

On the walk back through the campus he fishes his keys from his pocket unlocking the door of the building. It’s just after midnight. Most of the students were awake until 2 in the morning studying late, walking the halls aimlessly or hanging in the common room playing video games in the dark. Some rooms were open as they pass the first floor head to the staircase. Peeta wraps his arm
around her shoulders as they walk. She presses herself into his side, feeling his warmth.

He walks her to his floor where they see Madge just leaving the bathroom, a small smirk on her face. She chose to not say anything and moves into her room to most likely press herself near their shared wall so she could hear them talk.

Katniss lets them into her room and Peeta shuts the door behind him. He looks around at her dorm and she moves to her drawer, pulling out a bottle of vodka she had taken from home.

She hands him the bottle of vodka as he studies her pictures on her wall and she sits down on her bed, letting him fall down beside her. He smiles widely at her and she leans down, kissing his lips softly. He tastes of ice cream and cigarettes and smells of fall and cinnamon.

And he mostly feels like home.

She wakes to a soft knocking on her door and looks at the time, realising its 6 am, she didn’t mind being woken at 6.

She climbs out of her bed and opens her door.

Peeta stands there with a smirk on his face.

“I wanted to see you in your pyjamas. It really is the highlight of my day. And considering my alarm clock hasn’t woken you up in three months now.”

He backs her into the room, shutting the door behind him and as the back of her legs hit the mattress she falls, pulling him down on top of her. The movement causes her bed to hit the wall and they look at each other fighting the laughter that threatens to erupt.

“Can you two not? It’s 6 in the fucking morning!” Madge yells from the other side of the wall, banging on the wall.

Katniss and Peeta erupt into laughter.

“Hey, you kept me awake until 2! It’s only fair!” She calls back as Peeta’s lips find hers for a brief kiss. “I love this alarm clock.”

“Best way to wake up I say.”

Chapter End Notes

I've finally gotten around to posting the next chapter of You & Me. Thank you for your kind words and interest in reading more of the story. There'll definitely be more to come, hopefully faster than this chapter.

Come and find me on Tumblr in the meantime- Herainab
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lila stares up at her mother, watching her with her big blue eyes. She crinkles her eyebrows and Katniss sighs, running her finger over her rosy cheek. Katniss sighs and forces a smile for her daughter.

“No matter what happens, I’ll love you forever sweet girl.”

Lila gives her mother a smile; a supportive smile and the lines she formed on her brow straighten out. The corners of her eyes crinkle as she smiles with her tongue poking out. Little dimples appear on her cheeks and Katniss finds herself smiling.

She was just like her father.

“You’re so much like your daddy sweet girl. He’ll be head over heels for you.”

She blows a raspberry on Lila’s bare stomach and listens to the giggles sound from her daughter. Contagious giggles that always fill Katniss with warmth and happiness.

She dresses Lila into a footed onesie and carries her downstairs, sitting her down on the floor and propping her up with a pillow and a toy to play with.

Lila brings it to her mouth immediately and Katniss knows another tooth is due to appear, evening up the single tooth that she has on her bottom row. The one tooth she’s had since she was almost five months old.

Katniss packs the dishwasher and makes herself a cup of tea before she joins Lila in the living room, pulling out her laptop to edit an interview she did on Friday morning with an up and coming artists. Her deadline is fast approaching and she knew she owed this artist the opportunity to make an impression on the world.

Katniss had enjoyed the company spent with the teenage artist. She had good morals and views. She wanted to do good with her music and rather see it used as anthems then have people grind to it in nightclubs. The artist fell in love with Lila during their interview, which stretched over four hours in a tiny café in downtown Manhattan. This was Katniss’ first face-to-face interview since she had Lila and the nerves were eased with the first handshake.

She sets Lila on her lap and types out her interview. She had become good at multitasking with a baby on her lap and in her arms. She had conquered nursing and working at a laptop. Even phone interviews with Lila asleep in her arms or nursing.

Her phone sounds and she checks the caller. “Oh, it’s Uncle Haymitch.” She coos to Lila and answers the call. “Hello Uncle Haymitch.”

“Sweetheart, how are we?”

“Good.”

“I hear your meeting Peeta today?”

“Yep at lunchtime.”
“You nervous?”

She looks down at her daughter and sighs, “A little. But it has to be done. He deserves to know.”

“He does but it is your choice sweetheart. You don’t have to tell him.”

“I’m doing this for Lila. She deserves to know who her father is. And even if Peeta and I can’t work our issues out… it’s for Lila. And for Peeta. I can’t keep lying anymore or keeping her hidden from the world. I have to tell him the truth, even if it kills him.”

“I know. You two have been through a lot sweetheart. I just wish you got to live an easier life for just a little while.”

“Me too.”

The phone call ends soon after, Katniss promising to let him know how it goes.

She’s too restless to focus on her interview and slips into her sneakers. She gets Lila into the carrier on her chest and bundles them up in her big jacket, or Peeta’s jacket she stole from him years ago. She pockets her phone and house key and they go for a walk down to the little parklands. No one is around today and she relishes in the quietness. Lila coos from the carrier as her mother walks them throughout the street. The coos help Katniss keep her composure.

Lila sleeps on the walk back. The cold air has picked up slightly and Katniss bundles her coat around Lila tighter.

“Katniss? Is that you?”

Katniss turns around at the sound of her name, turning around to see Sae.

Sae has been there since Katniss was a kid. She had been there through all the big moments in Katniss’ life. She worked as a paediatric and obstetric nurse, treating Katniss as a child and later during her pregnancy with Leo. Sae became someone Katniss looked up to as a child and later regarded her as a mentor and advisor.

She wraps her coat tighter around her front and smiles at the older lady. She was glad the fence separated the two of them.

“You’re back? How long have you been back for?”

“I got in Friday night.”

“How long are you staying for?” She asks with a warming smile.

“Um, I don’t know. A couple weeks.”

“Have you seen Peeta?” She asks.

“I’m meeting him for lunch today.”

She nods and smiles. Of course Sae knew why she ran. Nearly everyone knows she left him in the middle of the night and hasn’t returned back to him. They knew she was considered a missing person for a week before she contacted Haymitch and Effie, letting them know she was fine. Katniss knew the gossip would start when more people saw her. And when they saw a baby on her hip, she knew the gossip would start and rumors would run wild. She knew the worst would be said. She was prepared though.
Well, she thinks she is.

Sae peaks over the fence and looks up at Katniss smiling.

“How old is she?” Sae asks.

Katniss swallows the lump in her throat. “6 months.”

“What’s her name?”

“Lila Grace.”

“Dark haired beauty. It’s a beautiful name.” Sae tells Katniss with a heart-warming smile.

She knows Sae has more she wants to say but she keeps quiet. “We’ll have to meet up when you’re free. I’ll love to hear about your travels.”

**Travels. That’s a funny way of putting her running away.**

“Sure, it’ll be good.” Katniss agrees. “I’ve got to get moving, I’ve got a few errands to do.”

“Of course dear. I’ve got a few house calls to do. Have a great day.”

She smiles at Sae and walks up the path to the house. She strips out of her coat and boots and keeps Lila on her chest as she finishes the interview while Lila sleeps. Sending it off to her editor.

Once she’s sent the interview off she gets ready; taking her time, showering, doing her hair, picking out a nice outfit that doesn’t scream ‘Mommy’ and packs her bag.

She riffles through her suitcase for the journal and when her fingers touch the bounded leather she feels her stomach drop.

*She had to do this.*

She drives into the city with Lila wide-awake in the back. She tries to focus on the road and not seeing her estranged husband.

She finds a park close to the office and climbs into the back to nurse Lila who was getting fussy. This calmed Katniss down slightly and she focused on her daughter for those twenty minutes of nursing. Lila went down straight after her feeding and Katniss bundled her back into the car seat, buckling her in and covering the car seat with a thick blanket.

She carries the car seat to where Johanna and her agreed to meet and she shivers as she waits.

She shivers from nerves and that Peeta could possibly beat Johanna downstairs.

But he couldn’t. Johanna had to take Lila home and leave Katniss to reunite with her husband before she dropped the bomb.

“What are you Jo?” She mutters and looks up at the big clock on the building.

12:49pm.

She sees Johanna head towards them, rushing with her messenger bag over her shoulder and her
high heels clicking on the concrete.

“T’m here, sorry, I got bailed up in the elevator by Crane in the elevator. He seriously cannot take no as an answer.” She mutters and curses his name and Katniss manages to laugh. “Where’s my girl?”

“In here. She’s just gone to sleep. You should have an easy couple of hours.” Katniss tells her, handing over the car seat gently. “Alright, I’ll see you two later.”

Johanna gives her a reassuring smile and a nod and Katniss turns to leave.

“Car keys.”

“Right.” She breathes and fishes for her set of keys. The two exchange car keys and Katniss remains rooted on the spot. “Is it too late to cancel?”

“Don’t you dare. He’s up there, giddy like a schoolboy waiting for you. Don’t drag this out any longer than necessary!” She warns. “Go.”

She looks at the building and back to Johanna.

“Will you be fine with her?”

“We’ll be super. She’s a baby. I’ll make sure she’s fed, clean, warm, entertained and rested. It’ll only be a few hours. And I’ll ring you if I need you. Go.”

“There’s plenty of breast milk in the fridge. Just call if she baulks at the bottle. I’ll be home as soon as I can.”

“Katniss turn that fine arse of yours around and march into that building and see your god damn husband. Go now before I drag you up there.”

Katniss scowls. “I’m going, gosh.” She rubs Lila’s foot softly. “Bye bubby. I’ll see you later.”

Johanna walks away, leaving Katniss there. Katniss sucks in a deep breath and walks into the building, looking over her shoulder to see Johanna disappear into the car park. Katniss steps up the few steps and into the reception. She greets the receptionist who smiles back, recognising her. Katniss takes a seat and checks to see if Peeta has seen her text. With the message read she settles into the chair and opens the text thread with Madge.

She opens a text from Madge.

You’re doing the right thing Katniss. Even if it destroys him… just take a few deep breaths, remain calm. Remember how much you love this man. And how much you love Lila. He deserves to know about Lila. And even if it doesn’t go well, remember that you told him. You are brave for even doing this. And he will be thankful that he knows…. Deep breaths girl on fire.

“Katniss?”

She looks up and sees him standing there.

He looks like a schoolboy seeing his crush. His cheeks are tinged red, his mouths curves up into a small smile and he stares down at the ground.

He’s breathtaking.

She sucks in a deep breath and stands up, pocketing her phone and slowly moves towards him,
She sucks in a deep breath and stands up, pocketing her phone and slowly moves towards him, trying to figure out how to greet him.

Would a hug be too intimate? Would a kiss on the cheek be crossing the line? Would a handshake be too informal? What do other people do?

“Hi.” She says softly as she reaches him.

He leans in, kissing her cheek softly and she has the chance to inhale his intoxicating scent. His lips linger on her cheek for a second longer than he had planned to and it’s like they are transported to a decade before.

He finally steps back and takes her in. He admires her from head to toe, making sure she’s real and not some sort of fantasy.

“You look wonderful.” He breathes out.

“So do you.” And it was the truth.

He smiles, “I mean you chopped off all your hair.”

She touches her shoulder length hair and smiles. “I did. Change was good. It’s grown out a little though.”

“Its beautiful.” He tells her and she truly believes it.

Her lips curl up slowly and they are caught in a trance, just staring at each other, studying each other and trying to not wonder where it all went wrong.

“Shall we go?” He suggests, breaking their trance.

He leads her out of the building and they step out on to the footpath. “Where do you want to go? I’m starving.” She tells him.

“At Landslide?” He suggests.

“Our favourite place.”

He smiles like a thousand memories overcome him. “Yeah. I haven’t been there for a long time.” He tells her and she suddenly feels guilty.

They walk in silence as they head down the street. Katniss heart pounds inside her chest and she watches Peeta wringing his gloved hands together.

The waitress seats them by the open fireplace and Peeta relays their order, getting Katniss’ order right without having to ask. She smiles at him.

“And drinks? Would you like our wine menu?” The waitress asks.


“I’ll have the same.”

“You don’t have to.” Peeta tells her.

“No, it’s fine. I’ve gone off alcohol anyway.” She tells him and hopes he doesn’t ask why.

The waitress leaves the estranged couple in an awkward silence. Katniss admires the new
renovations and Peeta slowly taps his fingers on the table looking everywhere but at her.

“So, how was your trip back?” He asks.

Safe topics. He’s going for safe topics.

She swallows the lump in her throat, scared she blurt about Lila prematurely.

“Fine. I had an interview in Manhattan that morning which went a little later than expected, so I didn’t make it in until quite late.”

“When’d you get in?”

“Friday night.”

“You were in New York, right?” He asks and she nods. “Where were you staying? Sorry for the 20 questions, I just want to know the basics really, make sure you were safe while you were gone.”

She nods. “With Madge for the whole time. Gale had to gone back overseas to fight. He had been home for the birth of James and she’d been raising James alone. I bunked with her and helped her with James.”

“How is she?”

“She’s great. She’s doing really well. And she’s really happy in New York. She has real flexible hours and gets to work from home mostly. And she’s able to run her blog which has gone viral.”

Peeta smiles. “How old is James?”

“He’ll be two in February.” She tells him and Peeta’s smile fades. “Yeah, hard to believe isn’t it?” She admits and feels the sadness in her heart.

James and Leo were going to be best friends.

She looks up at Peeta and see’s the pain fill his eyes.

She sips her water quickly to clear the lump in her throat. “What have you been up to?” She asks, changing the subject.

“Just working a lot. I’ve been doing a bit of travelling also. It’s been great. I’ve been taking more photos and following my original goal.” He explains. “I haven’t seen your name around much?”

“I took a step back from being a groupie journalist.” She tells him and catches the smile. That was the nickname he gave her when she branched out, following bands and singers around town. “I’ve mostly just reviewed concerts in Jersey or New York. It’s been a lot of phone, Skype and email interviews. I’ve been freelancing mostly.” She says. “I heard Haymitch helped you once I left.”

He looks down at his hands and nods. “He did.”

There’s a silence for a little while before he speaks again.

“Katniss, I’m deeply sorry for the pain I caused you during that time. I wasn’t myself. I… I don’t know who I was either.”

“I wasn’t myself either.”
“I was running myself into the ground. I was barely functioning and the alcohol made it worse. Haymitch pretty much kicked me up the arse and made things pretty clear. It was get clean and hope for you to come home. Or stay on the path and never see you again. Hope got me into shape and made me get clean. He kicked me off of his couch, reminding me I had a house. If it wasn’t for him then I wouldn’t be here.”

“Did you go to AA’s?”

“No. It was all Haymitch and Effie. They became my sponsor. Haymitch took me backpacking for three months around Asia. We went cold turkey. And I got to see the world, take photos and immerse myself in all these cultures and traditions. I became inspired and met all these great people. I think I preferred that rather than AA’s and finding my spiritual path. I just created my own goals and we travelled. Haymitch left me after the three months and I continued on for another 3. He assigned work to do and I did it. I remained focused and disciplined.”

“How long have you been clean for?”

“360 days.” He tells her. “The plane ride over was when I quit.”

“Really? That’s amazing Peeta. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you.” He replies smiling. “It was really you who got me motivated.”

She smiles at him and reaches across the table to squeeze his hand. They share a moment. A moment 15 months in the making. They can feel the spark and the electricity that course throughout their bodies.

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_Boston, August 4th, 2014_

_He steps through the front door, his keys dropping on the table instead of the bowl that sits on the table. She sighs as she hears his heavy tread sounding through the downstairs as he tries to navigate the house._

_It’s only 7pm on a Monday night._

_He’s been drinking since he woke up this morning. He’s rarely without a drink in hand._

_His work has become sloppy, Haymitch giving him the time off to grieve for their son and his father._

_Two deaths in two months have really knocked him about._

_She was just glad she wasn’t called down to the bar to pick him up. That had become a common occurrence since January. Thresh would call her, telling her he was there and she’d tell Thresh she’d be right there. She’d find him slumped in the corner of the bar with an empty glass in hand. Some nights she’d find him causing a disturbance with patrons. Other times he’d be passed out. A few times she bypasses to the hospital and gets him stitches in his hand or his forehead from the broken glass or the nose-dives he’s taken, splitting his forehead on furniture or the ground outside._

_She knew Thresh hated calling her and he tried his hardest to reason with Peeta, getting him into a cab. Some nights Thresh would drop him home. Thresh thought it embarrassed Katniss but she was past the point of caring. She’d sling him over her shoulder and half carry half walk him to the_
She wouldn’t say anything to him, she’d just help him inside the house, strip him of his clothes and shoes and let him sleep it off on the couch.

She’d try to sleep while he slept downstairs but her thoughts kept her awake at night. She waited for him to return to her during the night and when he did she was somewhat calm, despite the smell of stale liquor on his breath, the snoring and the distance they kept in their shared bed.

Tonight he comes up the stairs on his own. He finds their bedroom, smiles at her from her place on the bed and moves to the bathroom, closing the door behind him. She hears the shower turn on and she returns to her show on Netflix.

He comes out of the shower, barely stumbling and he dresses into a pair of boxers.

She blushes because she hasn’t seen him nude for quite some time.

But he’s not healthy looking, strong and fit like she’s used to. His shirts that usually cling to his chest and muscles barely stretch and sit baggy over his frame and his jeans fall at his hips, belts needed to keep them up. His skin is no longer the healthy color it once had been and he looks sickly. His eyes have deep black circles underneath and his neat hair has grown out and curls in his eyes and over his ears, something she knows bothers him.

His hands are shaking tonight. Maybe he didn’t hit the bottle as hard as he usually does.

“What are we watching?” He asks, opening up the bedroom window and moving to the bed.

It had been a hot day today; above normal summer temperatures and she knew they’d have trouble sleeping… if they can even fall asleep. They’ve both become walking zombies.

“Sons of Anarchy.” She tells him.

He smiles and flips his light off, settling in to watch the show with her.

“When’s Haymitch’s birthday?” He asks.

“Friday night. They’re having a dinner at their house at 7.” She tells him. “You don’t have to come if you don’t want to.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

She startles herself awake from a dream. The same reoccurring dream of being told Peeta had wrapped his car around a tree. She’s been having it since she noticed the drinking.

She wakes up to find herself under the covers, the TV off and Peeta sound asleep. She seeks his comfort and slides closer to his body, wrapping her arm around his waist and resting her head on his pillow. His hand clutches hers and pulls her tighter to his body. She hears him sigh peacefully.

She’s begun running, morning and late afternoon. She runs until it hurts. She’s been letting all the anger out of her body by running because she can’t fall apart. She has to be there for Peeta and Peeta only.

Her body has returned to her pre-pregnancy body and is much more stronger. All that anger has led her to being stronger and healthier.

The dress she slips into for Haymitch’s birthday hugs all the new curves of her body. She hasn’t
worn this dress since the night of Leo’s conception. Peeta couldn’t keep his eyes off of her throughout that night and he all but dragged her out of the work dinner and in the car park they fooled around before he drove them home and they made love on the hallway floor. He ogled her and she felt beautiful. The dress hugged her body differently that night and she now had to admit to herself she felt beautiful.

It’s been a long time since she last felt beautiful.

Peeta finds her in their walk in wardrobe, running her hands over the green figure hugging dress and she sees his eyes go wide, like he’s just noticing her again.

“You look beautiful.” He whispers to her.

She presses a kiss to his cheek and links her arm through his as he escorts her down to the car. He drives, promising her he hasn’t had a drink today and she believes it as his hands shake slightly. She reaches out for the fist resting on his thigh, the one he tries to stop trembling and she holds it, squeezing it tightly and urging him to relax.

“You’re doing great.”

It’s been months since they’ve been romantic with each other. There have barely been kisses, embraces or touches at all. And there’s been no sex.

But there was once during the week they were in Bridgeport for his father’s funeral when she found him crying in his father’s study and he took her up against the bookcase. They both cried afterwards and haven’t been able to bring themselves to be intimate with each other again.

He pulls in front of the gates to Haymitch’s and Effie’s and her old childhood home. An attendant stands at the gate checking ID and he smiles when he sees them both.

“The Mellarks. How are we both?” Chaff asks with a toothy smile.

“Great Chaff.”

“Haven’t seen you two for a while? How’ve you been?”

“Alright. We’ve been busy, you know.”

“I do. Go on in. Have a nice evening.”

The gates are opened and Peeta slowly drives into the driveway and down towards the house. He parks behind Effie’s Range Rover and helps Katniss out of the car.

He keeps a firm arm around her hip, never leaving her side throughout the night and they manage to navigate the night together. They can see the sympathy in some of the guest’s eyes but no one says anything. They just tell them how great it is to see them both and ask how they’re both going. Katniss and Peeta know that they want to know more but they give them short replies and try to make their way through the guests.

Effie finds them and embraces them both, complimenting them on how beautiful they both look and leaves to check on the food.

Peeta doesn’t drink despite how much it’s killing him. Katniss tries to distract him but deep inside she’s hurting.

They eat dinner, stay silent, listen to the guests talk, eat dessert and slip out when Peeta’s close to
cracking. Effie sees them off, telling them she’ll be by tomorrow to visit them and they leave. He drives them home in silence and they step into the house.

“Did you want a drink?” He asks her.

She ponders. “Are you having something?”

“Only if you are.”

She sets her bag down on the side table. “Maybe a water.”

“Water sounds good.” He smiles and disappears into the kitchen.

She moves to their stereo and hits shuffle on her IPod with Burning Love coming on. This was the song the two of them first listened to as husband and wife after they eloped.

She remembers her father singing this to her mother as a small child. And when she told Peeta this story, he told her his parents danced to this at their wedding. It soon became their song.

Peeta appears in the living room with her glass of water. He smiles at her and sets their drinks down on the coffee table. He grabs her in his arms and dances her around the living room as they sing together.

‘Your kisses lift me higher
Like the sweet song of a choir
You light my morning sky
With burning love’

She laughs as he sings to her and for once she feels normal. She feels like it’s their wedding night and they haven’t endured all this pain. They haven’t lost a son. He hasn’t lost his father. Peeta isn’t hitting the bottle. She’s still happy.

They aren’t slipping apart.

He kisses her on the lips as the song finishes, going into a slower song. The song they slowed danced to in their hotel room the night after their celebratory elopement dinner. She remembers them slow dancing in just their underwear with the moonlight streaming in through their suite windows as the bathtub filled.

‘Settle down with me
Cover me up
Cuddle me in
Lie down with me
And hold me in your arms’

She looks up from his shoulder and into his eyes. They are bluer than she’s ever seen in a long time. He leans down, pressing his lips to hers in a slow kiss. The spark is there. She feels the electricity ignite her bones and stretch to her fingers and toes. She knows he feels it too after months and months apart.

He navigates their bodies to the couch and lies between her legs as they reconnect, becoming familiar with each other again. He strips her out of her curve hugging dress. She helps him out of
his dress pants and shirt.

And they look at each other for a long while before they continue.

After their coupling on the couch he takes them upstairs, handing her some pyjamas.

The stereo can still be heard from downstairs and he lies with his head on her chest. She feels the emotions build within her body and she tries to keep them at bay as they lay, tangled together in their bed.

She feels his warm mouth touch her bare chest, her collarbone and then her lips. She pulls him onto her body, letting him align his core with hers and she feels him harden and she moans against his mouth as his tongue seeks entrance into her mouth.

Their clothes are slowly shed as he makes his descent down her body, removing her pyjamas and exposing her hot skin to his hands and mouth. It’s familiar and comforting when they fall into that rhythm of love making.

But this time, it’s different. The connection is strong and the desire is stronger than earlier when it was more about that quick fulfillment.

And they loose themselves to each other as his hips slide between hers and he buries himself deep inside of her and stares into her eyes.

They eat their lunch and he fills her in on his backpacking trip. She listens, asks him questions and relays her wish to travel exactly like that.

He tells her there’s nothing stopping her. But there is.

He pays for their lunch once they are both full and he suggests a short walk to get their food digesting.

They walk through the park together, retracing the familiar walk they took when they worked together. The one they took through the rain, hail, sun and snow.

She links her arm through his offered arm and they cross the road to the park. Her phone sounds in her bag and she reaches into her bag to check it, her fingers touching the bounded leather of the journal and she remembers why she’s really here. She sees it as a text from Johanna asking how it’s going and telling her that Lila is fine.

They find the old rotunda they have shared many lunches and coffees at over the years and sit on the steps, facing each other. His lips distract her. Fuelling the warmth through her body at the thought of those lips on her body. She shudders remembering his lips on her most intimate places.

She takes a deep breath, pressing her knees and eyes together for a short moment.

She reaches into her handbag and pulls out the journal and sets it on her lap.

“I found the photo of our first Christmas together in Bridgeport.” He tells her with a nostalgic smile. “You had that knitted red beanie on, the one you loved so much. And I had that grey one on. We were out in the snow on Christmas Eve just so lost in the moment we didn’t realise my brother was taking a photo of us. I think that’s the moment everyone knew we’d be together forever.”
Katniss smiles remembering that day at his parents’ home, it was her first time meeting his family and they made her feel a part of the family. Everyone except his mother who had no time for his college girlfriend. They had only been dating for two and a half months but they both knew that their relationship was real. His brother’s teased him for doting on her so much; doing everything for her but Peeta didn’t care for his brother’s childish behaviour.

The very next year, Peeta teased his eldest brother, Jake for doting on his newborn daughter so much.

“She’s the second love of my life, Peet. Wait until you have your own children, you’ll understand that you want to do nothing but dote on this tiny thing you’ve created. And the love you feel for them, it’s overwhelming that you can love something so much so quickly.”

“I’ve fallen in love all over again.”

And she recalled Jake’s words when she had Leo; she had so much love for him even if she only got to have him briefly.

And then when Lila came, she fully understood that overwhelming love. She fell in love again, not thinking it was even possible.

“That was a great first Christmas together.” She tells him.

He reaches for her gloved hand and squeezes it. “I missed you last Christmas.”

“Where were you?” She asks him.

“Haymitch and I were in Nepal.”

“Sounds lovely.”

“It was.” He tells her, turning to face her. He notices the journal in her lap. “What’s this?”

She lets go of his hand and grabs the journal, holding it out in front of her.

“There’s an actual reason I’m back Peeta.” She begins. “I haven’t been completely honest with you either.”

“What is it Katniss?”

“You have to listen to me. Let me explain myself and try to show me the courtesy. I feel guilty enough having done this to you. But there was a reason I kept this from you.”

She clears her throat and opens the cover of the journal to a photo of Lila. A recent one with her smiling just like her father. Her big blue eyes shining brightly for the camera.

“This is your daughter Peeta.”

Peeta takes the journal, looking at Katniss confused and then back down at the journal studying the first page.

“Daughter?” He choking out. “But… but we haven’t been together for 15 months.”

“She’s six months old Peeta. We conceived her the night I left.” She tells him. “She was born the 12th of May this year.”
He’s silent and she tries to keep her breathing steady.

“I… how… you kept this from me.” He says, his voice filling with pain and anger.

“Let me explain, please.” She pleads, gripping his jacket sleeve. “I have to explain this to you, OK?” She reaches for his hand, wrapping hers over his much larger hand.

He nods and she squeezes it.

“I ran because of your addiction. It was getting too hard for me to handle. I was not together and I hadn’t had a chance to grieve for Leo or your father. I was putting all my energy into you. I was close to breaking. I left you and left for New York because I needed time away to be myself. I didn’t know how long I was going to be gone for. I just needed to have my chance to cry… I hardly got a chance to grieve because 7 weeks later I found out I was pregnant. I was scared and I retreated more. I was scared. I mean, I blame myself for Leo and I was scared I wouldn’t be able to protect the new baby from something happening. I considered an abortion but I knew I couldn’t do that…”

“You never told me.”

“I was going to. But I had my reasons and doubts.”

’’’You never told me.”

“You said you never wanted another child after Leo died. You stated he was your child and you didn’t want another one to replace him. That you could never love another. And that’s all I could hear. I didn’t want to burden you with the new baby and not run the risk of you not loving it when you were dearest against more children.” She explains. “And it hurt to know that, after we planned and dreamt of our own children that you never wanted anymore. So I decided to do it alone.”

“You could have called me.” He whispers.

“I did but I hung up each time. You weren’t well either, especially when I found out. I needed you to get better, to heal yourself. To not regret the things you said when you weren’t sober. Then Haymitch told me he was helping you get sober and I knew you needed to focus on that first rather than the baby.” She explains. “I know, I’m a horrible person for keeping this from you. I was hormonal, emotional, and irritable and I wasn’t thinking straight either. I was still grieving throughout the whole pregnancy and on edge, thinking I’d do something wrong to hurt her.”

“I was so focused on keeping her safe that I didn’t give you a thought. I knew you were healing, you were getting there, off adventuring overseas and I didn’t want to disrupt the goodness you had created.” She tells him. “When she was finally born and I finally accepted she was safe, I knew I had to tell you. I planned to do it sooner. I did. I drafted emails, texts and letters but you deserved something more than that. This was the only time I could get out here to you. So now, here I am and here I am telling you that we have a 6 month old daughter.”

He’s silent and she can see his chest heaving, struggling to get air into his lungs.

“You can call me all the names under the sun, but you have to know, I made those choices to protect her and myself. You weren’t ready then and you might only be ready now… but know, I did this to protect the both of you because I love you both so much.”

He’s silent as he stares the picture on the front page.

“I named her Lila Grace. Meaning dark-haired beauty.” She tells him flicking the page over for
him. “Remember how much we loved that name?” He nods and reads the journal and looks at the images. “Please, say something.”

He clears his throat and slams the journal closed. “I really need to get out of here.” He stammers. “I don’t want to say anything that could hurt you Katniss.”

“Just say it. I deserve it.”

“I’ve hurt you enough in the last year.” He tells her, standing up. “I… need… I’m slipping.” He mutters, gripping his hair. “I need to see Haymitch.”

She thrusts the journal into his hands and tries to look into his eyes. “Take it. I made it for you especially.” She tells him. “Call me when you’re ready, OK?”

He turns on his heel and takes off running with his fist clenched and muttering words. Onlookers’ turn to look at them both, trying to figure out what has happened and if they should intervene.

The tears threaten to spill and she feels her chest heave.

She needs a moment.

She takes her phone out of her bag and dials Haymitch.

“I’ve told him. He’s on his way to you. He’s slipping.” She ends the call and falls back onto the steps of the rotunda with hot tears falling down her cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the encouragement, the kudos, the comments and for subscribing, it’s making me really trying my best to give you all a good story. This being the reason the updates are a lot slower.

I hope you all enjoyed this instalment and I’ll try my best to get the next update out sooner for you all.

Come and find me on Tumblr - Herainab
Chapter 4

She slams the front door behind her and makes her way for the stairs, bypassing Johanna napping on the couch.

“Katniss!” She calls after her but Katniss doesn’t stop.

She sees Lila asleep in the cot and she quickly packs their things into the suitcases.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Johanna hisses.

Katniss throws the last of their things into the suitcase, zips them up and sets them on the floor. She lifts Lila out of the cot waking her from her sleep and tries to soothe her daughter as she cries from the sudden disturbance.

“Katniss, you’re not leaving.” Johanna says, stopping her from passing. “Not again.”

“Please let me go.” Katniss pleads, tears falling down her cheeks as she bounces Lila against her chest. “We shouldn’t have come back here.”

Johanna lets her go and Katniss picks up one of the suitcases and drags it behind her.

“Come on Lila, we’re going to go back home to Madge and James.” She tells her daughter, placing a kiss to her cheek.

Lila is strapped into her car seat, wailing loudly and Katniss bags as much of their other things that are strewn across the living room.

“What happened Katniss?” Johanna asks.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” She cries. “Can you please help me?”

Johanna exhales and nods her head, helping Katniss collect and gather their things.

“Hold on Lila.” Katniss tells the baby as she cries from the car seat. “Hang on.”

Johanna sets down the bouncer and goes for Lila in the car seat, lifting the baby out and comforting her.

“Put her back!”

Johanna shakes her head and pats the baby’s back and holds her against her chest.

“Katniss, you’re not thinking right.” Johanna whispers, hoping to calm both mother and daughter down. “Come sit down and tell me what happened.”

“No, we should get on the road now. The roads are going to get bad tonight.”

“Don’t you think you should just stay for another night? You’re putting yourself and Lila at risk.” Johanna reasons just as Lila begins to calm down.

“We’ll be in New York in a couple of hours. We should go before it gets too late.” Katniss plucks
Lila from Johanna and straps her back into the car seat, buckling her in as the crying begins again.

A knock sounds at the front door.

“I’m not answering it.” Katniss tells her flatly.

Johanna rolls her eyes and steps to the hallway, opening up the front door.

Katniss looks up from the packing to see Effie enter with Johanna behind her. Effie looks at Lila and her eyes droop. Her lips turn downwards and Effie shakes her head, reaching down to take Lila from the car seat.

“Don’t touch her. She’ll stop crying when we get in the car.”

“Katniss.”

“Don’t. Nothing you say will change my mind.” She tells her. “We’re going back to New York. We should have never left.”

“Katniss, you did the right thing.”

“No, I fucked up. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Katniss, I’m just going to take Lila to the kitchen.” Johanna says picking up the car seat and leaving the two of them alone.

She feels a headache coming on and she presses her temples and then resumes the packing.

“Katniss, Peeta deserved to know. You did the right thing.” Effie tells her. “How’d you think he’d react?” Katniss doesn’t say anything. “You knew he’d react like this, didn’t you?” Effie says. “If you knew he would act like this, was it in your plan to leave right after. Drop the bomb and go and disappear again?”

Katniss drops the baby clothes and falls onto the ground, cradling her face in her hands as she sobs.

Effie is there to comfort her quickly and she holds her niece in her arms.

“You did a good thing.” Effie whispers to her. “You did such a good thing, no matter how he reacted, he knows. Take comfort that he knows he has a daughter. Lila and Peeta both deserve to know about each other. It’s going to be a shock to Peeta and he needs some time to process this.” She squeezes her tighter. “And if he finds out you ran again, it’ll break him and he’s just slowly putting himself together again. Don’t leave until you speak to him again.”

Katniss nods and hears Lila’s cries cease. Katniss looks in the direction of the kitchen and then back to Effie.

“Is he alright?”

“He’s with Haymitch. Haymitch knows how to help him.”

“What should I do Effie?”

“Just give it some time. Time is all that can be done right now.” She offers. “It’s in his court now.”

Katniss nods and takes the offered handkerchief from Effie, wiping her eyes.
“I should probably check on Lila.”

Katniss walks to the kitchen and sees Johanna feeding Lila a bottle.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

“S’ok.” Johanna replies. “You’re scared, it’s natural.”

“Want me to take her?”

Johanna shakes her head. “We’re right. You go and spend some time with Effie.”

Katniss makes them cups of tea and they settle in the living room.

“You need to stop worrying.” Effie tells her. “You’ve told him, you should find some relief in that.”

“I’m just scared of what he’s going to do. How he’s going to take the news.”

“I know. Waiting is the hardest part.”

Effie leaves shortly after and hugs Katniss tightly goodbye.

“Stop your worrying sweetheart.” She whispers. “You focus on Lila for now and then whatever comes next.”

She falls down beside Johanna on the couch. Lila is in her bouncer asleep and Katniss has slowly unpacked everything again.

“Leo would be two this Sunday.” Katniss says aloud.

“I know.” Johanna says, gripping her friend’s hand and offering her supportive smile. “He’d be an incredible kid.”

“He would be.” Katniss agrees and chokes out a sob. She manages to smile at the thought of Leo.

They prepare dinner together. The first home cooked meal Katniss has had in a long while. They make the most of it. Playing music and mucking around just like old times sake. Lila soon makes her way into her mother’s arms and she giggles and smiles at the nonsense the two women have created.

“I can’t wait for you to be older so we have dance parties in the living room with our pj’s on.” Katniss whispers to Lila before kissing her cheek.

A knock sounds at the front door and Katniss moves to the front door with Lila on her hip.

She opens the front door and sees Peeta standing there. He goes to speak but stops when his eyes land on Lila.

“Hi.” Katniss offers.

“I should have called.” He claims. “I’m sorry. I’ll go.”

He turns on his heels.

“Peeta, wait!”
Johanna takes Lila and Katniss chases after him.

“Peeta!”

He braces his hands on the hood of his car and Katniss lingers, not wanting to startle him or crowd him.

“I should have called.” He claims.

“It’s Ok.” Katniss reassures him.

“After the way I left you this afternoon I should have called.” He says.

“I was expecting you. A call or visit.” She admits to him. “You have every right to visit.” She tells him. “Peeta, if you don’t want anything to do with us then I understand. I’ll go back to New York, I’ll disappear, and you’ll never have to see us again.”

“I don’t want that.” He admits to her, finally looking up at her.

“Then what do you want?”

He looks towards the house briefly and then back to Katniss.

“I think we should talk.”

“We should.” She agrees. “Do you want to come inside?”

“Um…”

“You can come in? Maybe meet Lila properly.”

He shakes his head. “Tomorrow I think will be better.”

“Ok.”

“I better be going. It’s dinner time.”

She nods and smiles at me. “Call me, will you?”

“Of course.” He smiles and moves to the driver’s side. “Thank you for telling me about her.”

“You deserved to know.”

He’s gone quickly and Katniss watches the road long after his taillights have disappeared.

“You’ll catch a cold.” Johanna scolds her, bringing out a coat and wrapping it around her shoulders. “Get inside.”

Dinner has been dished up and they dig into a bowlful of spaghetti. They both feed Lila together and Johanna asks about lunch, Katniss having not told her anything about yet.

Nothing else is said and Johanna urges Katniss to get Lila ready for bed while she does the dishes.

Katniss bathes Lila and the two of them get into their pyjamas. Katniss knowing she wouldn’t be too far behind Lila, today’s events having tired her out. She switches on the bedside lamp and climbs into bed, under the covers and brings Lila to her breast to nurse. Her phone buzzes and she reaches for it seeing a text from Peeta.
She unlocks her phone and opens the text.

P- I’m reading the journal. Thank you for creating it.

P- I can’t stop thinking about how beautiful she is. I saw her for thirty seconds and I’m blown away at how beautiful she is.

P – I know we said we’d talk tomorrow but I need to see you tonight. Only if you’re not busy.

She hesitates a reply, wondering if it’d be appropriate to see him for the night.

K – I’m just nursing Lila now. She should be down soon. We can maybe have a mug of hot chocolate?

P – I’ll make it for us. I’ll see you soon.

Lila goes down quickly after and Katniss gets her settled into her cot with a belly rub. She slips her feet onto her slippers and finds one of Peeta’s hoodies. She carries the baby monitor and her phone downstairs.

Johanna is in the study, catching up on some of her missed work.

“Peeta’s coming over.” Katniss tells her.

Johanna jumps and turns around touching her chest. “Geez, I forgot how quiet you are on your feet. You gave me a heart attack.”

“Sorry.”

“Why’s Peeta coming over?”

“He wanted to see me.”

“Want me to put Lila’s cot in my room?”

“What? Why?”

“It’s been 15 months. You two have undeniable chemistry. I remember when he used to go on overnight assignments and you two were close to jumping each other’s bones in the middle of the work floor. You two could hardly go three days without sex.”

“We’ve got other issues to deal with. It’d be irresponsible to jump into sex.”

“But you’d feel better. Release some of that pent up energy. 15 months is a long time, especially for someone who has had quite an active sex life.”

Katniss looks down at her slippers and avoids eye contact as her cheeks go red as a light knock sounds at the door.

“Like I said before, I can’t believe how shy you get when people talk about sex.” Johanna laughs. “Go talk to your husband.”

She walks quietly to the front door, opening it to Peeta. He looks tired. The type of tiredness that comes from crying, stress and wonder. She understands this type of tired.

“Come on in.” She tells him with a small smile.
He slips his shoes off and hangs his coat over the rack. Katniss leads him into the kitchen and he produces a thermos of hot chocolate. She pulls down two mugs and Peeta pours the sweet hot drink into their mugs.

“She asleep?” He asks.

“Yeah, went down like a light.” She tells him. “I think she’s due to teethe again.”

He doesn’t say anything and she reaches for the sugar pot. She drops half a teaspoon of raw sugar into her mug.

“I see you’ve cut back.” He laughs.

She smiles and stirs the spoon throughout her mug. “Yeah, too much sugar this time of night doesn’t help me or Lila sleep. I avoid it this time of night especially when she has her night feeds.”

“Well half a teaspoon is better than your regular 3.” He teases.

She blushes. “Living room?”

“Lead the way.”

They sit on the black couch, Peeta occupying one end and Katniss the other. She brings her feet under her body and watches him take in the living room that has been hit with the baby tornado. Something that is a strange sight, especially in Johanna’s living room. He picks up one of Lila’s blankets that hangs from over the back of the couch beside him and he picks it up, smiling and running his fingers over the cotton.

She watches him slowly bring it to his nose and he sniffs the blanket and slowly lowers it back down to his lap.

“It smells of her.” Katniss smiles. “I know, the smell is intoxicating.”

His chest heaves slightly and he nods trying to avoid the tears from spilling down his cheeks.

She reaches across and squeezes his hand. “I know. It gets me every time.” She reassures him. “You can take that blanket home with you, if you’d like.”

“No, she needs it.”

“She has plenty. I insist.”

He folds it up and holds it in his fist. “Thank you.”

They sip their hot chocolate in silence and she rests her head against the cushion, watching him.

“You look exhausted.” He says. “You should have gone to bed.”

“It’s fine. I wouldn’t have been able to sleep anyway.” She tells him.

“Is she a good sleeper?” He asks.

Katniss nods, smiling proudly. “Yeah, she is. She’ll wake once during the night for a feed and a change and I’ll bring her back to bed with me where she’ll sleep right through. If she has a fussy night she might want more feedings or such but she’s good. A great baby. Easy to take care of.”

He smiles and looks away from her and towards the stairs before he looks back at her.
“I thought I’d be strong enough and resist to see her but she’s been all I could think about.”

“I can take you upstairs, if you like.”

“No. I made a promise. Tomorrow.” He states. “Besides, we have some things we need to discuss first.”

“Of course.” She agrees. “Peeta, I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am.”

“Katniss, please stop saying you’re sorry.” He tells her. “OK? Please, stop being sorry.”

“But I didn’t even tell you.”

“I’m upset about that. Upset that I didn’t know. But we were both going through a lot and I understand why you left. But I’m starting to understand why you kept her a secret from me. Why everyone else kept her a secret from me. It was to protect our daughter and me. Haymitch helped me realise why this happened. And I still remember how vulnerable and emotional you were when you were pregnant with Leo. I’ve put that into perspective and the fact that you were grieving and still are.” He says.

“Are you mad at me?” She asks him.

He shakes his head. “At myself actually. If I weren’t a mess then maybe I would have known sooner. If I hadn’t said those words to you, then maybe it might have been better.”

“We weren’t ourselves then Peeta.” She adds sadly. “We had planned this life… our future. We were becoming parents… we went into the hospital expecting something and came out without anything. And we both reacted so differently. We didn’t know how to live our lives without the life we had made together.”

“I told you I didn’t want any children. I scared you.”

“You weren’t yourself.” She reminds him.

He nods and looks down at the blanket in his lap. “I sometimes imagine what our lives would be like if Leo was here.” He admits to her quietly. “Do you?” He asks looking up.

“All the time.”

“Even with Lila here?” He questions.

“Yes.”

“If he was here, Lila wouldn’t be.”

Her heart clenches in her chest, she felt sick imagining Lila not being here. “Lila would be, she’d make an appearance eventually.”

“Has she helped you?”

“Very much so.” She says. “She’s helped me in more ways than I could imagine. Than therapists and grievance counsellors could. She’s become my therapy.”

“Do you think you’re over Leo’s death?”

“I don’t think I ever will be.” She tells him. “Lila hasn’t replaced him. No one will ever replace
“What about you?”

“It’s a strange thing losing a baby.”

“It is.” Katniss agrees.

“I don’t think the storm will ever pass.”

“I hope it does.” Katniss tells him. “Because Lila is the rainbow after the storm. The big bright rainbow that follows a storm and gives hope of things getting better.” She explains. “I’ve only just started to believe this. The storm has happened and nothing can change the experience. Storm-clouds still linger as we continue to cope with the loss but something colourful and bright has emerged from the darkness and misery.” She grips his hand. “I hope you find the rainbow Peeta.”

“Me too.”

They sip their drinks and she inches closer to him. “Are you going to tell your family?”

“I haven’t really thought about that yet.” He admits. “But they’ve pretty much abandoned me.”

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

“I was the one who fucked it up. Once Leo died and then dad, it put a wedge between us. The boys had their own families to focus on but we had nothing. They didn’t agree with my drinking and the disgrace I was becoming to the family. They didn’t want any toxicity and they all but blamed me for you leaving.” He tells her and she cringes. “They’re ashamed of me for turning into the family fuck up.”

“You’re not.”

“It’s true.” He says. “But I don’t need them in my life. I have my other family who make up for their absence.” He turns to her and swallows the lump in his throat. “Especially you. You’re my family. And now I suppose Lila is.”

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable with this. Do anything your uncomfortable with. You don’t have to be in her life if it’s too hard. I understand that. I just thought you deserved to know she exists and there is the spot to have a relationship with her.”

“And I want that.” He assures me. “I want to be in her life. I want to be in your life again.” He admits, scrubbing his hand across his face. “I know we have a long way to go and nearly two years of distance to get back but I know I want to be in her life, even if we’re not together.”

“Peeta…”

“It’s perfectly fine if you don’t want to be with me. I understand. I hurt you. It’ll hurt to be apart but I understand.”

“I’m committed to this Peeta. Us. I know there’s a lot we have to get over but I want this to work and for things to be right between us. Especially for Lila.”

“The heart of our relationship has to be strong for Lila.” He agrees.

“But I think for now we should be there for Lila before we focus on our relationship. I don’t want her being hurt if it doesn’t work out between us.”

He nods. “I just hope time hasn’t affected us too much and we can still love each other like we
have for the last decade.”

“We’ve faced a lot but we always come back stronger than before.” She reminds him. “There’s always hope. Especially when I have you.”

He smiles and then drops his gaze down to his mug. “Katniss.”

“Yeah?”

“Sunday.”

She nods, her heart becoming heavy, her stomach filling with dread.

“He’d be 2 on Sunday. It also marks a full year since I committed to getting myself sober. Haymitch has suggested a celebration of sorts to mark 365 days. I want you to be there, so I can show you my recovery and commitment to sobriety.”

“Of course I’ll be there. I’m proud of what you’ve done.”

“I also think we should take a couple of hours out to celebrate Leo. Maybe create a birthday we would have given him for his 2\textsuperscript{nd} birthday. I want to celebrate his life even if he’s not with us. And even if it’s just the two of us, we should do something for him.”

“Three.” She says wiping her eyes with the sleeve of his hoodie. “Lila as well. He’s her brother too. I want her to grow up knowing about him. I think we should go low key. Nothing too extreme.” She says.

He pulls her close to his body, wrapping his arm around her shoulder and kissing her temple.

“I miss him so much, it hurts.” He admits against her temple.

“All I can think of is his tiny hands and ears.”

“And his toes.”

“His toes especially.” She sniffles. “He had big feet.”

“Swimmers feet.” Peeta adds chuckling slightly. “I’ve reflected them a lot in my drawings.”

“You’ve been drawing?”

“It’s been good therapy.” He tells her and reaches into his pocket. “I brought a couple over for you. That’s partially why I wanted to see you.” He opens the two drawings, revealing charcoal drawings. “This one is Leo. And this one is Lila.” He says pointing out their children. “I copied the first picture in the journal and I can see a huge resemblance between the two of them.”

Katniss looks at the two drawings with tears in her eyes. The dark lines sketched onto the white paper were beautiful. She carefully tried to not smudge the drawings and looked between the two. “I haven’t thought to compare the two of them. They look like twins.”

He nods and inches closer to her. “Exactly what I thought.”

They sit in an almost complete silence for close to an hour with damp eyes and cheeks. They exchange a few words when needed but the familiar silence is comforting for them both. Johanna had long disappeared upstairs for bed, leaving the two of them alone.
A crackle over the baby monitor breaks them apart and she looks over to see Lila fussing in her cot.

“Oh, it’s late. I should be going.”

“Hang on. She does this sometimes.” Katniss tells him as she watches the monitor and Lila fuss about before she settles herself back to sleep. “She’s fine.”

He smiles and checks his watch. “I still should be getting home.”

“Ok.” She agrees and hands him the pictures. “You better take these.”

“You keep them.”

“Thank you.” She says with tears in her eyes.

He shakes his head with a soft smile. “Thank you for giving me two beautiful children.”

She smiles at him and they get lost in each other’s eyes for a few seconds too long before he clears his throat. They drop their mugs into the sink and she hands him his empty thermos. She follows him back to the foyer, switching off the lights.

“Come with me.” She holds out her hand for him and he takes it.

She takes him upstairs quietly and into her bedroom. The room is dark and Katniss places her finger to her lips to tell him to be quiet. They creep over to the corner where the port-a-cot is and look down at Lila who lies flat on her back with her hands up near her head balled into fists. Her eyebrows do the crinkly thing as she sleeps. As she dreams.

The same thing Peeta does.

She hears him gasp at the sight of their daughter and he pulls Katniss close to his side. He leans over and softly traces the balled up fist and then the hair on his daughter’s crown. He’s gentle and soft and retreats back slowly.

He kisses Katniss’ hair and squeezes her to his side for a moment while he watches his daughter sleep. He had seen his daughter this afternoon for a couple of seconds but now he truly admired her. Was more prepared. And the look on his face was beautiful.

He tears himself away ten minutes later. “I’ll be here all night if I don’t leave now.” He whispers. “I should get home and sleep before tomorrow.”

She nods understanding and they leave the room quietly and back downstairs. He slips into his shoes and his coat silently and then pulls Katniss in for an embrace. She melts into his warmth and embrace and doesn’t want to let him go.

“Thank you for seeing me tonight. It was nice.”

“It was.” She agrees. “I’ll see you tomorrow. I’ll make sure she’s on her best behaviour.”

He smiles and kisses her forehead. “Bye Katniss.”

“Bye Peeta.”

She watches him from the front porch and waves to him as he drives off. She locks up the house and heads upstairs. She sees the light still on in Johanna’s room and enters it. Johanna sits up in bed with her iPad and looks up at Katniss as she crosses to her bed and collapses down beside her.
Katniss buries her face into the pillow.

Johanna sets her iPad down and shuts off the bedside lamp, pulling the covers over Katniss.

In the darkness they lay there. Katniss having moved her face out from the pillow and looks over at Johanna.

“I almost kissed someone in New York.” She whispers. Johanna’s eyes shoot open. “I had found out I was pregnant and was feeling pretty shitty about myself. I was at a coffee shop late one evening. I don’t even know why, I think I was trying to go through the motions. I was about 10 weeks pregnant then and this guy started up a conversation with me. He too was going through some things. He enlightened me in these things but I kept it brief, told him I was new to town and felt lonely. I was missing Peeta a lot then too, especially as I knew I was carrying his baby. We leant in to kiss but the wait staff dropped a teapot and we jumped apart, realising how wrong it was. I felt sick and went green, he asked if I was Ok and I told him I was pregnant. He saw my wedding ring and then I saw his. We both apologised to each other and we stayed in that booth talking the whole night. Darius became my friend and eventually my editor.”

Johanna smiles at her. “I’m glad you found a friend.”

“He had found his wife cheating on him the weekend before. She didn’t know he knew and he was trying to figure out if he should approach her about it. I think he was looking to get back at her but knew it was all for the wrong reason.” The baby monitor sounds and she smiles. “Milk duty. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Katniss slips out from the covers and grabs the monitor.

“I’m here if you want to talk.” Johanna tells her.


She picks Lila up out of the cot and lies down in bed, getting her daughter situated beside her. Lila quickly attaches for her nurse and Katniss kisses Lila’s forehead and keeps her lips pressed to her daughter’s forehead.

Lila lets go of her mother soon after and Katniss lays her on her back gently. She rubs Lila’s belly softly and than reaches for her phone.

She scrolls through her camera roll and opens up onto a picture of Prim and her. She feels the tears spring to her eyes and dabs her sleeve at her eyes gently.

Dartmouth College, 6th of February, 2005

“My parents died in an accident.” She tells him late one evening under the comfort of her duvet, in the darkness of her dorm room. He strokes her face tenderly and offers her a look of sorrow. He’s been the first boy she has openly told this too, it had been easier to go along with the fact that Haymitch and Effie were her biological parents.

“It was when I was 5. Prim and I were with Effie and Haymitch at the family home in New York. They had been taking care of us while Mom and Dad went to my father’s school reunion. It had been a long winter and the roads were still icy and slippery. Dad was driving them home from upstate and it was late at night. A girl had broken down and Dad pulled over to help her out and try and get her car off of the road. A speeding car came around the bend, lost control and slammed into Dad’s car and then the girl’s. Dad was crushed between the cars and Mom was hit by the speeding car while pushing the girl out of the way.”
“I’m so sorry.” He says, kissing her forehead.

“It was a while ago now. I don’t really remember much of it. I just remember these two people I share a few memories with but they’re all but distant ones.” She recalls. “I just know they died heroes. The girl survived thanks to them.”

Peeta brushes her hair from her eyes. “Is that why you moved to Boston?”

She nods. “Haymitch and Effie were the only family we had left. Prim was only a baby and doesn’t remember Mom and Dad. Effie and Haymitch eventually became her parents as they were there for her. It was weird at first but they grew to the idea and loved us like their own.”

“Did they have any kids?”

“Effie had this condition called adenomyosis. It’s where the cells that normally form a lining on the inside of the uterus grow in the muscle wall of the uterus. It caused a lot of pain for her, pelvic pain, painful menstruation, heavy bleeding and things. She wasn’t well most of the time as the blood loss lead to anaemia. The doctors tried everything to stop it from contraception and a hormone that stopped ovulation. None of it worked and it made it worse. The only other option was a hysterectomy. It was a painful decision for her as she was only 28 then. The doctors tried to talk her out of it but it was for her quality of life really.”

“So she decided to end her fertility at 28?” Peeta asks.

“Yeah. It was a brave thing to do. And without a uterus she couldn’t conceive.”

“Did they take everything?”

“They did. She didn’t want them to harvest her eggs either. And even if she didn’t get a hysterectomy her chances of conceiving would be hard and carrying a child to full-term would be unlikely.”

“How soon after did she meet Haymitch?”

“A couple of months. She was able to get a job and work. She met Haymitch when he was still on the floor. She tells me it was a lot of playful banters before they finally went out. It was within a year that they moved in together and were engaged quite soon after.”

“How’d he take the news of her infertility?”

“Hard.” She tells him. “And he suggested surrogacy or adoption but they agreed it wasn’t for them. They were happy together.” She smiles. “But then we moved in with them and that hole they didn’t realise they had inside of their chests was filled and they got their family.”

“Was it hard for you though, living without your parents and being thrown into this new world?”

“At first but they did everything they could to make sure we were happy and loved. They were great parents to us and treated us like their own.” She smiles. “There’s nothing in the world that I’d be able to repay them with, for what they did for us.”

“I’m sure they don’t need any repayment. Seeing you happy and healthy would be the best gift anyone could ask for.” He tells her with a sad smile. “I didn’t grow up in a loving home.”

“You don’t have to tell me this.” She tells him.

“I do. You opened up to me, I opened up to you.” He claims with a small smile. “My relationship
with my mother was strained for as long as I can remember. I remember being young, maybe a
toddler and meeting her short fuse. She didn’t appreciate anything I did and would usually tell me
how wrong or terrible I was. It hurt, the love she didn’t give me, especially from such a young age
when I used to see my friends and their relationships with their mothers. I never knew why she
disliked me until I was 12. I ended up with a bruised cheek and the police stopping by the
bakery.”

“What happened?”

“I had a twin. She died a few days after birth.” He says. “She came out first in a brows up
condition. Instead of her chin being tucked to her chest, she was looking up with the largest part
of her head trying to fit through the cervix. It caused a massive brain haemorrhage. The doctors
should have performed a caesarean to get her out safely but it was too late by the time they
realised. Mom and Dad turned her life support off a few days later as she was brain dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I always felt like I was missing a piece of myself and when I found out it all made sense.”

“Why’d your mother hit you though?”

“I confronted her, asked her why I never knew. She blew up, said I didn’t deserve to know that I
killed my sister.”

“Peeta, you didn’t kill her.”

“I did believe for a while, believed I was the reason it happened.”

“It’s one of those things that happen in life. Unexplainable and unfortunate.”

“I know.” He replies.

“Was there any other physical abuse?”

“No. Just the once. The visit by the police was enough to stop the physical but it never stopped the
verbal and emotional.”

She stares at him, unable to fight the tears from falling. She kisses his lips softly, unable to use
words to speak her feelings.

He pulls her close to his chest and holds her in his strong arms.

“Did your father try to do anything?”

“He never knew. She did it when he wasn’t around.” He explains. “Mom and dad weren’t never
meant to be together but they remained together for the purpose of us boys.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It was a marriage of convenience. They both had their hearts set on someone else but it never
worked. I’ve learnt you shouldn’t fix something that is way beyond repair.”

“Peeta…”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t channel my emotions into wrestling. I’d never be in your bed if I
had nothing to be angry about. I’m sure I’ll find friends who’ll become my family and show me
that blood doesn’t mean anything. That there are friends who will do anything for each other no
that blood doesn’t mean anything. That there are friends who will do anything for each other no matter the situation. Some friends are better than family.”

She kisses his forehead and smiles at him. It was these moments, late at night when their bodies warmed each other and the clocked ticked past midnight when they shared their fears and ghosts. Where nothing was left unsaid. They were falling fast for each other and she knew she wanted to spend a lifetime laying in the darkness with Peeta sharing secrets and stories.

They fall asleep wrapped in each other’s arms. Their bare skin pressed together, their spoken words in the back of their minds.

“Katniss.”

“Hmm?”

“Your phone.” He mumbles to her.

She reaches across Peeta, fumbling for her phone. It’s 3am.

Haymitch’s name appears on the screen and she wonders why he is calling so late.

“Haymitch?”

“Prim’s been admitted to the hospital.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She hasn’t been well for a few weeks now. She had a fever all day today and woke up vomiting an hour ago. She’s been complaining of a headache. She had a seizure at home. A pretty bad one. The doctors are doing tests on her now.” He explains. “You should probably get here Katniss.”

“Is she going to be OK?”

He exhales and it’s silent before he replies. “It doesn’t look good Katniss.”

“I’m getting on the next bus. She needs me.” She tells him, sitting up and climbing out of bed. “If she’s sick, she needs me.”

“Stay calm Katniss.” Haymitch urges her. “Take a breath.”

“What’s going on Katniss?” Peeta asks, leaning up on his elbows.

“Prim’s in the hospital.”

He’s out of bed quickly, reaching for his clothes. “I’ll drive you. I’ll go grab a few things. We’ll be on the road in ten minutes.” He tells her.

“No, I can’t let you do that.”

“Katniss?” She hears Haymitch say.

“Grab your things. I’ll meet you here in ten minutes.” He tells her, zipping his jeans up. “I’m serious Kat.”

Peeta drives her to Boston in the early hour of the morning. The two of them hadn’t even been together all that long and he was driving her hours away to be with her sister. She knew this man would be the start of her second family. The family she’d call on when she was upset or in
trouble. The family that she’d love unconditionally. He’d stick by her side, pull her through the
tough times and comfort her when she felt alone.

He reaches across for her hand and holds it, never letting her go. She knew he’d never let her go,
even in the early stages of their relationship. He’d be there for years to come, holding her hand
because this was meant to happen.

She smiles at their joined hands and then up at him.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 5

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

28th of November 2014

He stares at the bottle of gin that sits on the kitchen bench. His hands shake and his heart pounds.

This is his last bottle. Everything else has been drunk. Every last drop is gone.

This is the last bottle he promises himself. He promises his son. He promises Katniss.

His last bottle.

He unscrews the lid and pours himself a glass. He’s slow to bring the glass to his lips and he takes a slow sip, tasting the alcohol on his tongue before he swallows it whole.

He’s quick to down the rest of the glass before he pours himself another.

He carries the bottle with him to his bedroom and sets the bottle down on the bedside table.

He stares at the picture in the frame. The glass is cracked and broken and he feels pangs in his stomach.

He broke it the night he found out his father had died. Katniss spoke to his brother on the phone and he tore the upstairs floor apart. Clearing tables, desks and walls of everything they housed.

And now the picture frame pokes fun at him, reminding him of how broken his life. Katniss is gone. His father is dead. His family have disowned him. His son is dead.

He sits down on the bed and picks up the frame, looking at the picture of Katniss and him from a few years before. It was during a short vacation to The Bahamas.

The two people in the frame though look like complete strangers. He doesn’t know who those people are anymore.

He takes the photo from the frame and places it beside his gear he is taking with him for three months. There’s one more picture he has added to his belongings but has asked Haymitch to keep it for the time being. He wasn’t ready to look at it just yet.

He takes a long sip as he feels the emotions building up and then packs his pack with everything he’ll need for three months.

Haymitch had suggested the trip when he bailed him out from jail. He had been done for drink driving and the officer thought a night behind bars would do him good instead of writing him up. He called Haymitch the next morning to come and get him and on the drive home Haymitch suggested they think about getting out of the country and travel.

“You mean run away from my problems?”

“No, experience the world.” He says. “I’ve always wanted to visit Asia, backpack throughout. Effie has never been interested. What do you say Peet? You’ve still got a valid passport don’t you?”
“Yes.”

“Then let’s go.”

It had taken a couple more weeks of convincing before Peeta finally agreed and he wished he didn’t.

He lies back on the mattress and stares up at the ceiling. It’s quite late. His bottle of gin half empty and his life is in tatters.

His eyes fill with tears and he bites his lip to stop them from flowing.

He reaches his hand inside of his pocket and feels the soft cotton of the item he stashed inside.

He pulls it out slowly and holds it in his hand. A blue baby cap. The cap their son wore for the whole time before they finally said goodbye. It was hardly on his head long enough to smell of him. Peeta brings it to his lips and holds it there while the tears fall down his cheeks.

“I’m doing this.” He says aloud. “For you. For your mother. For myself.”

“I’m going to do you proud Leo Thomas. So very proud.”

Effie picks him up early the next morning. He had poured the rest of the gin down the sink.

No more alcohol.

He throws his bags into the trunk and climbs into the back.

“Ready for your trip boys?” She asks but no one answers.

She hugs him goodbye and wishes him luck at the drop off. Peeta walks into the airport ahead of Haymitch and goes to check in. He was on a mission.


He had three months to change his life.

When they finally board the plane, taking their seats, he grips the armrests and tries to control the shaking of his hands and body.

He didn’t need a drink.

Haymitch touches the top of his hand and smiles.

“You’re doing great Peeta. Just tell me when you’re not feeling good, alright?”

Peeta nods and grips the armrests tighter as the plane finally takes off.

Today was the day Peeta Mellark quit alcohol and began to mend his life.

He smiles at himself as they land in Manila. 22 hours without a drink. He has almost made it a full day.

“Well done my boy.” Haymitch congratulates him as they leave Manila airport for their waiting taxi. “You think you can survive the next 3 months?”
“And some more.”

Haymitch pats his back and smiles at him. “That’s the way. Come on, the next 3 months await us.”

He wakes up holding onto the journal clutched to his chest. The journal that tells him every little thing about his daughter. The guide to her life. He smiles as he looks at the latest picture of Lila and feels his heart flutter.

He never thought he could love another child but during his travels as he met children in the villages, played soccer, drew them, learnt their language and culture, he knew he wanted another child to have the opportunity to love so unconditionally. He learnt very quickly on as he sobered up and travelled he wanted a child.

And he finally accepted that he was a father, even though his child wasn’t alive, he was a father and he always would be one. And now he wanted the opportunity to prove it to Katniss. To apologise for what he said and how he behaved during those 8 months after Leo’s death.

He finally understood early on in his trip how much Katniss was hurting and why she left him.

It was her time. Time for herself. Time to grieve. To cry. To breakdown and try her hardest to get her life back on track. He understood that and respected her for having the courage to leave him for her chance to grieve their son and his father.

And he has to remember; she wasn’t pregnant with Lila when she left.

And for Lila, not meeting her until now, he knows he is finally ready to be a father. He might not have been when he finally got home but now he feels as if he is ready, more than ready to embrace his family and focus purely on that.

And most importantly the healing they all have to do.

He grabs his laptop and emails Haymitch, requesting leave for the next few weeks so he can focus on his family rather than work.

He imports all his holiday’s images onto a hard drive to show Katniss his journey from being an alcoholic to his newfound sobriety.

And he knows how proud she’ll be of him.

He showers, eats breakfast and finishes up his piece to send off to his editor.

*K – Come over when you’re ready.*

He smiles.

*P – Ok. Just have a piece to finish and I’ll be there. Would you like me to grab some lunch?*

*K – If you don’t mind. If not, I can find something here to throw together.*

*P – I’ll see what I can do. See you soon.*

He feels butterflies fill his stomach when he hits send on his piece and packs up his laptop and
travel journals into his messenger bag. He slips into his shoes, puts his coat on and leaves the house.

He picks up some cheese buns from their local bakery and some salad from the deli next door and texts her to let her know he’s on his way over.

He pulls out the front twenty minutes later and walks up to the front door, gripping the bag that contains their lunch tightly and tries to suppress the nerves.

The door swings open and he watches her smile at him. She has her phone pressed to her ear and a sleeping baby strapped to her chest in a wrap. He kisses her cheek softly and she lets him inside, taking lunch from him to set in the kitchen. He takes off his coat and shoes and follows her to the kitchen.

“Sorry.” She mouths to him, pointing to the phone.

“It’s ok. Would you like a tea?”

She nods with a smile and he takes down two mugs and boils the kettle, dropping a teabag in each mug and taking out the milk from the refrigerator.

He slides the mug across the bench to her and she thanks him as she continues her phone conversation. He can’t help but admire his sleeping daughter, pressed against her mother’s chest sound asleep. He comes towards Katniss closer and peaks into the wrap. He reaches for his daughter’s hand and kisses her tiny knuckles gently.

“Ok Madge, I’ll talk to you later. Kiss James for us.” She says to the phone. “Take it easy as well. Bye.”

She sets her cell phone down on the bench and exhales.

“What’s wrong?” He asks her.

“Madge is pregnant.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“It is.” She says with uncertainty. “She hasn’t told Gale yet though, she can’t get into contact with him.”

“Hopefully she’ll be able to soon.”

“Hopefully.” She nods. “Are you ok?”

“Just nervous.”

“There’s nothing to be nervous about.” She reminds him. “You’re her father.”

He nods and touches Lila’s hand again. “How long she been asleep for?”

“She’s should be ready to wake up soon.” Katniss tells him, rubbing Lila’s back. “Do you want to go to the lounge room? It’s a little more comfy there.”

He carries her mug of tea and sets it down on the coffee table and helps her sit down on the couch where they sat together last night, communicating after 15 months apart.

But now, they sit in silence, as Peeta doesn’t know what to say or do.
“I brought my travel photos over if you’d like to have a look?”

“I’d love to. I saw some of Haymitch’s pictures but he didn’t have as many.” She smiles. “Besides, you take better photos than he does.”

“That is true.” He laughs and reaches into his bag, pulling out the journals and the hard drive.

He connects his hard drive to his laptop and lets her guide the photos. He watches the smile on her face as she goes through them all. She can see the happiness he had while exploring the world, experiencing cultures and countries he only had dreamt of exploring. How much he grew and changed in the space of those months away.

“You seem so happy.”

“I was. It did get lonely some days and I did miss you as well but I kept soldiering on because it was a new day and a new day meant another day to explore and heal.”

“I can’t believe from the moment you flew out to the day you flew back in I was pregnant with her. You got to travel the world and I housed our daughter.”

“You did something kind of amazing too.” He tells her.

“I was so terrified.” She admits.

“I know you were.” He says, squeezing her hand. “But look at the outcome, we have a daughter.”

“We have a daughter.”

He squeezes her hand and smiles at her, reaching out to wipe the lone tear that has fallen down her cheek.

“Thank you.”

He looks downwards towards Lila and smiles seeing her little eyes opened and familiarising herself with her surroundings.

“Katniss.” He says pointing down at Lila.

She looks down and smiles at her daughter.

“Hello sweetheart.” Katniss coos quietly to her. “Have a nice sleep?”

Lila blinks and then does the crinkly eye thing as she looks up at her mother. A small smile forms on her face and she reaches for her mother. Katniss takes her hand, kissing it softly.

“You need a diaper change.” Katniss announces. “I won’t be long.”

“Take all the time you need.”

Katniss heads off, kissing Lila’s sweet little face and heads upstairs. He turns to the baby monitor that sits on the coffee table and he smiles when he hears her voice.

“There we go sweetheart.” She coos. “I’ll change your diaper and then we can go downstairs and you can finally meet your daddy. How does that sound? I know he’s very excited to meet you.”
Lila gurgles in response, a long, happy gurgle.

“I know you are too. He’s a great guy, you’ll love him.”

He feels the butterflies fill his stomach and he smiles.

He has a daughter.

“Come on then sweetheart, daddy’s waiting for us.”

He sits back in the couch and listens to Katniss head back down the stairs. She ducks into the kitchen first before she comes back into the living room with Lila who sucks on her fingers.

Katniss gets down on the ground, laying Lila down on a blanket and playing a game of silly faces.

Peeta watches in awe over the way his daughter smiles and laughs easily at her mother. She kicks her feet, throws her head back as much as she can and squeezes her eyes together as she giggles and giggles.

He edges closer towards his wife and daughter to watch them more and he smiles at the way Katniss engages with Lila. How natural she is with her. He knew she’d always be a good mother.

Lila grows tired of the game and turns her head; realising there’s someone else in the room. She crinkles her eyebrows, as she looks at Peeta and he smiles back at her. Lila’s eyes go wide, almost like she’s star struck, unable to move, fascinated by the man.

“Hi Lila.” He greets her, moving down to the floor to be near her.

Lila rolls herself onto her belly and stares up at Peeta. Her face filled with curiosity and wonder.

“She’s very perceptive? Aren’t you Lila?” Katniss says running her hand over her daughter’s back. “She like’s studying people as well, like you do. I think she’ll be an artist.” Katniss smiles. “Talk to her some more, I think she recognises your voice from the videos I’ve shown her.”

He nods; his stomach filled with nerves and he moves to lie on his belly so he’s face to face with Lila.

“Hello Lila. You’re such a beautiful girl. The most beautiful girl I’ve ever laid my eyes on. Besides your mother, I think you got her beauty. You’re such a lucky girl to get her beauty.”

A smile creeps across Lila’s mouth and Peeta finds himself smiling at her, his world feeling completely whole again.

And his whole year of sobriety totally worth it as his daughter smiles at him for the first time

He looks up at Katniss who watches on with tear filled eyes and with the most beautiful smile he’s ever seen.

Lila commando crawls closer to Peeta, sitting up on her bottom and reaching out towards him to touch his face. Katniss scoots behind Lila and smiles at the two of them. Lila gently touches his face and Peeta can’t help but kiss her tiny fingers as they touch his mouth. Lila smiles at him and a giggle escapes her mouth.

Tears fill his eyes and Lila touches his nose, his cheek and his chin as she stares into his eyes.

Peeta sits up and Lila reaches for him. He looks at Katniss for permission and she nods her with a smile.
He picks Lila up, setting her in his lap, turning her to face him.

This is his daughter.

He is completely mesmerized by her and he thinks he is finding himself falling in love all over again.

He tries to wrap his mind around the fact that she is half of him. He made her. She has his ocean blue eyes, does the same crinkly eyebrow thing and has his perception.

“I am so in love with her already.” He admits to Katniss.

“She has that effect on people.” She says, scooting to sit beside him.

“Just like you.” He tells her, turning to look at her smiling. “She’s just like you. She’s perfect.”

She smiles at him, her eyes watering even more. She leans her head down on his shoulder and Peeta kisses her hair before looking at Lila who is watching both her mother and father.

He reaches into his bag and pulls out a gift he bought, handing it over to Katniss.

“You can open it.”

“You didn’t have to get her anything.”

“I did.”

She takes the gift bag and takes out the wrapped object inside. The object wrapped in yellow tissue paper. She tears the tissues paper away and finds a gold music box.

“Peeta this is beautiful.”

“I found it during my travels in a market, it was when I decided I wanted the chance to be a father and show you how committed I am to fatherhood. It would be the first gift I’d give you when we I got back.” He tells her. “Open it up and listen to it.”

She turns the key at the back and the music box opens, revealing a little black bird that spins with a musical tune playing. A musical tune she recognises immediately. The song she used to sing her sister when she had a nightmare as a child. The song she sang to her when she was dying. The song she sang to her stomach to calm their son at night. The song she sang to Leo as he lay lifeless in her arms.

He steps onto the quiet hospital floor. No other mom’s were in labor tonight. He avoided the nursery where the perfect tiny new babies lay. He avoided the rooms where the families were celebrating the new life that had come into the world. The new life that joined their families. He made that mistake earlier which left him breathless and breathing into a paper bag in the restrooms.

He hadn’t been back since she asked them to bring their son to them. He couldn’t bare to look at the boy who wouldn’t be coming home with them. He didn’t have the strength to seem him but she did. She had that inner strength.

He heard her voice before he saw her clutching their lifeless son.

“Deep in the meadow, under the willow
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes
And when again they open, the sun will rise”

Lila’s attention has been captured by the music box and a smile comes to her face as she reaches for the music box.

“I sing this to Lila.” Katniss tells him. “I sang it to her when she was inside of me, it calmed her like it did for Leo.” She explains. “This is how she recognises it. She loves this song.”

He feels his smile stretch across his face. “So do I.”

He becomes hands on, watching Katniss flutter around the kitchen; he washes the few dishes in the sink and keeps Lila perfectly entertained while Katniss heats up their lunch.

“What’s her favorite food so far?” He asks, as he plays peak-a-boo with Lila.

“She has seemed to like everything I’ve given her. She’s only really started in the last few weeks.” She tells him with a smile as she comes to sit beside the booster seat. She sets his plate down in front of him and a plate for Lila with a cheese bun on it. “Hopefully she likes cheese buns.”

He laughs, “She’s you’re daughter, of course she will.”

“I craved them so much when I was pregnant with her and I searched high and low for them. I found a little bakery twenty minutes from the house and was there nearly everyday. The owners started to have a dozen wrapped ready for me because I became such a regular. They joked that Lila would be part cheese bun.”

Peeta laughs and takes the forkful of salad into his mouth. Lila happily eats her cheese bun with a pleased smile on her face. She watches the adults with such happiness and Katniss snaps a photo of her.

“Smile. I’ll have to send this to Aunty Madge and show her that you love your cheese buns.”

Lila crinkles her eyebrows as she stares at the camera mid bite, cracking both her parents up.

“Oh baby girl.” Katniss laughs, setting her phone back down. “She’s too cute to handle some days.”

“She’s so beautiful. I always imagined if we had a girl she’d be beautiful but not this beautiful. Lila’s stunning.”

“She’s not allowed to date until she’s 30 though.”

“48.” He adds.

“Perfect. Lila no dating until you’re 48. You might break James’ heart though.”

“How is James?”

“He loves her so much. Very protective of her as well, has been since I brought her home from the hospital as this tiny little thing and he just somehow knew he had to watch over her.”

“He’s going to make a great big brother.”
“He is.” Katniss agrees.

She takes their plates to the sink once they’ve finished and refills their glasses of water. Katniss joins them in the living room where he sits with Lila, reading her a story. The story he planned to read to Leo. The first storybook he bought when he found out Katniss was pregnant.

Katniss curls beside her husband and daughter and watches him read to their daughter.

"I love you all the way down the lane as far as the river," cried Little Nutbrown Hare.

"I love you across the river and over the hills," said Big Nutbrown Hare.

That's very far, thought Little Nutbrown Hare. He was almost too sleepy to think any more. Then he looked beyond the thorn bushes, out into the big dark night. Nothing could be further than the sky.

"I love you right up to the MOON," he said, and closed his eyes.

"Oh, that's far," said Big Nutbrown Hare. "That is very, very far.”

Big Nutbrown Hare settled Little Nutbrown Hare into his bed of leaves. He leaned over and kissed him good night.

Then he lay down close by and whispered with a smile, "I love you right up to the moon - AND BACK."

He looked down into his lap and sees Lila’s little eyes dropping and opening again. He kisses the top of her head and positions her to lie in his arms, her head resting in the crook of his arm and leaning into his body.

“She’s so comfortable with you.” Katniss whispers to him.

He smiles as he rocks her gently and they both hum together, putting Lila to sleep.

They remain in silence for a long while, staring down at the perfect little baby for a long time. She rests her head on his shoulder and they wrap their arms around their daughter, creating a cocoon of safety and warmth while she snoozes.

Lila awakes shortly after, crying and Peeta panics as he tries to soothe her, rubbing her back and bouncing her.

“What’s wrong?” He asks.

“She wants to nurse.” Katniss tells him. “She struggles to sleep without any milk in her belly.”

He hands Lila over to Katniss who has already unbuttoned her flannelette shirt and her nursing bra. He tries to advert his eyes from her breasts but sees her bare breast briefly as she brings Lila to her breast.

He adverts his eyes, grips his jeans and feels ashamed at looking at his wife when they haven’t seen each other naked for over fifteen months.

“I’ll give you some privacy.” He tells her, standing up from the couch.

“You don’t have to.” She tells him. “She’ll only nurse for a few minutes.”
“It’s fine, I’ve got to use the bathroom anyway.”

She nods, smiling slightly and he exits the room, heading down the hallway to the toilet. He needed a moment to get himself together, to remember the real reason he is here. He is here to meet his daughter, focus on building a relationship with her while mending his relationship with Katniss, not thinking about her body or how nice it'd be to feel her warmth against his skin again.

He braces himself against the vanity and focuses on his breathing.

When he’s sure he is fine, he uses the toilet, flushing it before washing his hands and exiting the bathroom. He walks into the living room and finds Katniss patting Lila’s back gently. She smiles up at him and he smiles back as he come and sit back down on the couch.

Lila is laid down in her swing and Katniss tucks a blanket around her body, kissing her softly on her nose and backing away quietly to sit back on the couch.

She pulls him to lie down, resting his head on the pillow and she lies to face him. She slides her legs between his, entwining them and exhales a deep breath and draws closer to his body.

He studies her for a long while and he knows right away that she is distracted. He had known her long enough to read her.

But today had been perfect, he wondered what had brought upon the emotions.

“What’s wrong?” He asks her quietly, pushing her hair behind her ears.

She sniffs and shrugs her shoulders. “I honestly don’t know.”

He brushes his thumb beside the corner of her eye as he spots a lone tear.

He knows when to give her space. She usually told him things, usually spoke to him when she was down. But so much time had passed, he wondered if she knew she could still confined in him, her best friend.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?” He reminds her.

“I know. I just don’t feel like talking. Today has been perfect and that’s how I want to keep it.”

He nods, understanding completely and draws her body closer to his. He wants to feel her warmth. The warmth he’s grown familiar with within the last decade. The one he’s sought for under the sheets. The warmth that brings him happiness. He quickly began to crave her warmth when he first held her and once he felt her in his arms, he always felt like he was high. She brought him pure pleasure.

She reaches behind him and lays a throw over their bodies and curls perfectly against his chest and they don’t speak, they just hold each other. They always felt better when they just held each other without speaking.

He kisses the top of her head and holds her to his chest, silently promising her he’ll never let her go.

He knew they had so much to get through but for now this was what they both needed. They both needed to hold each other after 15 months and be reminded of what they had. They just needed to put their issues aside and forget about the real world for just a few moments. Just feel as if it was just the two of them and no one else in the cocoon they had created.
He rests his lips against her forehead and lets himself close his eyes.

He wakes to the sound of the front door. Katniss was still pressed to his chest. Lila was still asleep in her swing. Katniss stirs on his chest as the footsteps sound into the living room and he watches Johanna duck her head into the room.

“Hi.” She greets him quietly.

“How was it?” She asks with a soft grin.

A wide smile spreads across his face as he feels his heart flutter and his stomach fill with butterflies. “There’s no words to describe it. I think I fell in love again today and realised my sobriety was worth it, to see her… both of them. I wouldn’t be right here if I hadn’t changed.”

Johanna smiles. “They’re lucky to have you both.” She tells him and looks at Katniss smiling. “I’ll be in my office.”

He kisses Katniss’ forehead and her eyes flutter open. She smiles at him, an almost relieved smile and runs her hand over his face, pushing his unruly curls back off of his forehead.

“How’s our girl?”

“She’s fine.” He tells her. “Probably close to waking.”

She nods and stretches on his chest before curling back into his warmth, sighing a sigh of content.

“I applied for some leave.” He tells her. “I want to spend time with you and Lila and work isn’t somewhere I want to be right now. I want to have the two of you as my main focus.”

“How long?”

“I had a lot of time banked up and between work holidays and such, I’m off until the middle of January.”

“You shouldn’t use all your leave on us.”

“You two are worth it.” He tells her. “We have a lot to figure out.”

“I still have so much to tell you.”

“As do I.” He replies. “Haymitch was the one who suggested time off, so thank him.”

“He’s always loved you like son.”

“He has. He just saw how happy I made you. How great I was for you. I still think he wants to kick my arse though.”

“He still saw the good in you Peeta and he still does today.”

He smiles and Lila’s cries pull them apart. Katniss goes to move and he stops her, climbing out from underneath her and kneeling in front of the swing.
“Hi Lila.” He says softly, touching her belly to get her attention. Her crying ceases when she hears him and she flits her eyes to look at him. “Hi beautiful.” He smiles. “Did you have a nice sleep?”

A small smile appears on her face and she reaches for his finger, taking a hold of it and squeezing it. He feels a hand touch his shoulder and turns to Katniss to see her smiling at him with a sheen covering her eyes. He turns back to Lila and lifts her out of the swing, kissing her forehead and holding her to his chest.

“Daddy’s got you.” He whispers. “Daddy’s never letting you go Lila.”

He sits back beside Katniss, wrapping his arm around her as well. He presses a kiss to her cheek and rests his forehead against it.

“I’m not letting either of you go. I’m in this 100 per cent.”

Haneda Airport, Tokyo, Japan, 12th of May, 2015

He checks his watch, checking the time and then looks back to his journal. He’s filled three of these in the last five and a bit months.

Some days he would write page after page of the days events, his feelings and whatever else he happened to jot down.

Some days he barely wrote a word.

But he forced himself to write each day, even if it was one word. He’d have a recollection of his journey and every little thing he knew he’d forget.

Each day was a new day and he felt like a totally new person.

165 days he’s been sober and he’s happy to admit he doesn’t miss it one bit.

“Flight 138 to New York is now boarding.”

He packs his journal into his backpack and grabs his boarding documents before making his way to the gate. He feels the butterflies start to form in his stomach and he wonders how much has changed since he’s left.

He hands over his boarding pass to the attendant.

“Have a nice flight.” She says to him in perfect English and a wide smile.

“Thank you.”

He finds his seat and takes out his journal, IPod, book and phone. He sets his pack in the overhead compartment and settles in. Two young adults slide into the spare seats beside him. The boy smiles at Peeta as he buckles himself in. Peeta looks ahead and breathes in and out.

He’s going home.

By the time the plane lands in New York and he steps off, he feels overwhelmed.

A good overwhelmed he decides.
He finds Haymitch in the terminal when he finally goes through customs and embraces the man.

“Thank you.” Peeta says to the man who changed his life.

“No worries Peeta. Come on, Effie is waiting for us.”

Effie embraces him tightly, kissing his cheeks and squeezing them.

“It’s good to have you home.”

“It’s nice to be home.”

The drive across town is slow but Peeta relishes in the familiarity of New York and it’s traffic and chaos.

They arrive at the hotel, Peeta following the couple upstairs to their connecting rooms. Peeta throws his pack onto the bed and falls onto the mattress, looking upwards at the white ceiling.

He slides his hand into his pocket and removes the picture. The one image he refused to look at until he was ready.

And four months ago he was ready.

The lines and creases in the image remind him of who he was and where he’s come from. It reminds him of the amount of times he sought solace in the image of the thing that made him a father.

Leo.

It was before he was handed back to the nurses to be taken to the morgue, leaving his family for the final time. Their little boy, their little Leo lay in a bed of primroses, the flowers covering his tiny body. The soft yellow beautiful against his faint blue skin.

Their friend captured photographs of their son, more as a keepsake for Katniss and him when they were ready to truly remember their son.

But this photo was the most heartbreaking. It reminded Peeta of what he loved and can’t live without. And with the following months post Leo’s death, it further heightened the ‘can’t live without’ thing.

Leo was perfect. He was born perfect. He died perfect. His little soul was pure and untouched. He would become the shining lights of night.

Peeta liked to pick the biggest and brightest star at night and watch it for hours and he always felt comforted, feeling as if that was his son who was watching over him, guiding him through his sobriety and healing.

He kisses the photo and sets it beside him as he notices the afternoon soon shining into the room.

He moves to the balcony, looking down on the city.

And then something strange happens to him. A feeling of warmth overcomes him. A comforting warmth he got when he was with Katniss. The same warmth that overcame him when they said I love you, when they first made love, when he proposed to her, when they got married, when she told him she was pregnant.

He closes his eyes, feels the warmth of the afternoon sun beat down on him and smiles.
“I’m home Katniss.”

Chapter End Notes

The conversation is still yet to come, there’s just some other stuff the two of them have to get through first and this stuff will be a good tester to their relationship as well.

The book Peeta reads Lila is Guess how much I love you by Sam McBratney, and was one of my favourite books to read as a child. It brings this beautiful smile to my face every time I see it now and remember how beautiful the story is.

I'll hope to have an update before I head off on holidays. It's written but not quite ready.

Please let me know what you thought.
Come and find me on tumblr - herainab
A slight tug on her hair startles her awake. She feels another pull at her hair and turns to her side to be face to face with round cheeks and blue eyes. Lila grins at her, showing her mother her little tooth and pink gums. She has drool running down her chin and covering her fist and sleeve of her onesie.

“Morning Lila.”

Lila rolls onto her belly to be closer and Katniss pulls her to her chest, kissing her cheek. Lila touches her mother’s cheek gently and Katniss covers Lila’s hand.

It was these moments she was thankful for as a mother. Ones she’d cherish forever when she grows and doesn’t need her as much to comfort her.

“Happy Turkey Day.” She whispers to her. “You’re first Thanksgiving… I’m so thankful you get to have your daddy at your side for it.”

She nuzzles her face into her chest and Katniss cups the back of her head and kisses her hand. She sits up and lays her across her body to nurse as she checks her phone.

A text from Peeta greets her and she opens it first.

*Good morning and Happy Turkey Day to you and Miss Lila. I can’t wait to spend the day with you two, especially as it’s her first Thanksgiving. Thank you for giving me this day, it’ll be nice to celebrate it together and hopefully have a bit of fun. I’ll see you at 8 for breakfast. Hope you both slept well. X*

She smiles and sends back a quick reply telling him she’ll see him in an hour. She sends off a few more texts to friends and family and replies to those wishing her a happy Thanksgiving. She reads her emails, replying to them as Lila nurses.

She carries her into Johanna’s bedroom and they slip under the covers.

“Happy Turkey Day Aunty Jo.” She says as she places Lila onto Johanna’s side.

“Couldn’t you let me sleep in?” She mumbles from under the blankets.

“Not when it’s Turkey Day.” Katniss replies, touching Lila’s fist to Johanna’s cheek. “Come on, its Lila’s first Thanksgiving.” Katniss says. “Look how cute I am Aunty Jo in the onesie you bought me.”

Johanna peaks out from the covers and turns her head to look at Lila who sucks on her sleeve. Katniss holds her as Johanna rolls onto her back and grabs a hold of the baby, reading her onesie.

“Gobble til you wobble.” Johanna reads aloud and smiles. “That’s true my love.” She turns Lila around, holding her upwards and snickers. “This is too cute. She’s got a turkey tail on her butt.” Katniss snickers. “She’s too adorable.”

Johanna laughs and sits Lila back onto her stomach. “Happy Turkey Day Lila Grace.”
“I put her in this first.” Katniss explains. “I have another personalised outfit.”

“I understand, she’ll at least be in this for the morning.” Johanna says. “I kind of wish I bought her a turkey suit though. That would have been adorable.”

“Madge did that for James’ first Thanksgiving. Dressed him up as a Turkey and we couldn’t stop laughing for the whole day. We went out for dinner that night and kept him in the outfit and it brought a lot of joy to those who sat in the restaurant alone on Thanksgiving. They gushed over James as he sat in the highchair. People were even gushing over him as we caught the subway and walked through Central Park with him in the stroller. It was Madge’s first Thanksgiving alone from Gale as well so it was comforting to have me there to celebrate James’ first Turkey Day.”

“He’s missing out on this years as well isn’t he?”

“He is.”

“Where’s Madge headed?”

“To visit her family in Jersey. She was hoping he’d be home, especially since James is older but it couldn’t happen.”

“He was at least out for their anniversary.”

“That’s true.” She smiles. “I just hope she gets to speak to him, communication has been down for almost a week now.”

“She’s a saint for doing this all on her own.”

“She is.”

Johanna watches Lila while Katniss showers.

She takes her time and spends longer than three minutes under the water. She properly washes her hair and feels a thousand times better when she steps out. She’s used to getting in and getting out quickly after as Lila can’t wait. She plucks her eyebrows, tidying them up and actually moisturises her body. She wraps her hair in the towel on top of her head and puts on some jeans and a long sleeved shirt that are semi clean. Breakfast time was always a messy occasion with Lila and she didn’t want to risk her nice Thanksgiving outfit to her messy eating baby.

Lila and Johanna aren’t in the bedroom when she exits and she finds them in her bedroom, Johanna standing over Lila on the edge of the bed.

“I’ve got to say, after all the years I’ve known you, I never pictured you changing a diaper.”

“I know. Get all the photographic evidence you want.” Johanna says, fastening the tabs of the diaper around Lila’s round baby belly. “But I’m happy changing the occasional one and being a good aunty.”

Katniss smiles and sits down beside her daughter watching Johanna snap the onesie at the crotch. She slides some leggings over Lila’s legs to keep her warm. She tickles the foot that is missing a sock and smiles at Lila as she giggles.

“She’s all yours now Momma.” Johanna tells me, taking the dirty diaper with her as she leaves.

Katniss leans down, blowing a raspberry on Lila’s cheek and tickling her belly.
They make their way downstairs, turning up the heat on the heating and turning on the morning news. She sits Lila in her bouncer, strapping her in and goes to tidy up the kitchen.

Peeta had stayed for dinner last night and didn’t go home until quite late. Peeta helped Katniss do the dishes once Lila went down for the evening, letting Johanna catch up on work. They sat on the couch watching Netflix until they were both sleepy and he departed with a soft kiss to her forehead and a goodnight.

She packs away the dishes from the dishwasher and drying rack. The doorbell sounds when she wipes down the bench and Johanna beats her to answer the door.

“Happy Turkey Day.”

“Happy Turkey Day.” He replies back with happiness in his tone.

She rounds the corner to greet him and catches the wide smile he has on his face.

“Happy Thanksgiving.” He says with a smile.

“Happy Thanksgiving Peeta.” She walks into his chest for them to quickly embrace. He presses a kiss to her cheek and Johanna takes the bag filled with groceries from him to take to the kitchen.

“She’s just in here.”

Lila sits in her bouncer watching the morning news while playing with her owl rattle.

“Happy Thanksgiving Lila Grace.” Peeta whispers to his daughter as he kneels down to kiss her cheek. Lila turns to her father smiling widely at him and holds her arms up for him.

He lifts her from the bouncer, kissing her again and holding her to his chest.

Katniss can see how much Lila likes him already and she’s glad she’s taken to him so quickly and easily.

“Do you like her onesie?” Katniss asks him.

“I do. It’s very cute.”

“She has a turkey tail on her butt but it’s covered with her leggings.”

Peeta smiles and kisses Lila’s forehead again.

“Who wants some breakfast?”

“Me.” She replies. “I’m starving.”

Peeta heads into the kitchen where Johanna has laid out the ingredients for breakfast. Katniss and his tradition had always been baked eggs, chorizo, tomato and feta served with crusty bread on Thanksgiving morning. They had had it their first Thanksgiving together in a dingy looking diner while at college. It had been the best breakfast they had eaten in a long time and the next year while they went to Boston for Thanksgiving, he brought her this in bed and every Thanksgiving morning after.

He transfers Lila to Katniss as she sits in a stool across from the bench and Johanna sits down next to them having made a pot of tea. Peeta works efficiently, frying up the chorizo and tomato in a pan. He has the dishes prepped and ready and the oven heated.

Katniss was always fascinated by him and the way he worked in the kitchen. He was a natural,
Katniss was always fascinated by him and the way he worked in the kitchen. He was a natural, moving around and owning it like a pro. He had a knack being in the kitchen whether it be baking or cooking. Katniss eventually left him to do the cooking but she was no slacker, she could make a mean roast or create anything from the bare ingredients in the cupboard. They both found a joy in cooking and being in the kitchen together. Preparing meals together was their favorite pastime, creating something together and then sitting down to enjoy the meal together. They liked being each other’s taste tester and few times did the two of them end up in a tangled naked mess on the kitchen floor or island bench as the euphoria got the better of them and a rush of desire overtook their bodies.

But never once did they burn a meal while they quickly coupled. They usually enjoyed their meals half naked and curled on the breakfast bar love seat.

She smiles at him from behind her cup as the memories come to her and she meets his eyes for a brief second. He grins at her and then goes back to their breakfast. Johanna is oblivious to the whole thing, her eyes glued to her phone.

“What delicious delicacy are we having for dessert?” Johanna asks.

“Effie told me they had pumpkin pie already so I thought a strawberry and chocolate tart would go down well as well.”

“Gosh I’ve missed your baking.” Johanna says

And Katniss then realises he hasn’t baked in two years. “Me too.”

Peeta smiles at them both, his confidence rising.

He makes Lila’s breakfast and Johanna feeds the baby as she sits on her mother’s lap. Johanna offers conversation and Katniss feels as if it’s going to be a great day.

Her belly is full by the time she polishes off her breakfast and the other two are grinning from ear to ear as they rest their hands on their stomachs.

“I think I’m going to need a big walk after that.” Johanna claims. “That was so good Peeta.”

“Thank you. I might have to join you on that walk.”

“Why don’t we all go?” Katniss suggests. “We don’t have to be at Haymitch and Effie’s until 2. We’ve got plenty of time.”

“Sure, just let me slip some shoes on.”

Johanna leaves the kitchen and Peeta stacks their dishes into dishwashing along with everything else.

“Will you take the stroller?” Peeta asks.

Katniss nods as she reaches for Lila’s jacket. “She’ll hopefully fall asleep and I can leave her in that while we make this tart.”

He nods and slips his own shoes on. She slips her feet into her sneakers and places a beanie over her hair. She puts the jacket on Lila and buckles her into the car stroller, tucks a blanket over her body and attaches the boot cover and slips a beanie on her little head.

Johanna comes downstairs ready and the four of them leave the house. Peeta offering to push the stroller as they head around the neighborhood. They walk through the park and watch the kids moving around and owning it like a pro. He had a knack being in the kitchen whether it be baking or cooking. Katniss eventually left him to do the cooking but she was no slacker, she could make a mean roast or create anything from the bare ingredients in the cupboard. They both found a joy in cooking and being in the kitchen together. Preparing meals together was their favorite pastime, creating something together and then sitting down to enjoy the meal together. They liked being each other’s taste tester and few times did the two of them end up in a tangled naked mess on the kitchen floor or island bench as the euphoria got the better of them and a rush of desire overtook their bodies.

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Johanna comes downstairs ready and the four of them leave the house. Peeta offering to push the stroller as they head around the neighborhood. They walk through the park and watch the kids
play their own games of football or ride their scooters or bikes. Lila sleeps soundly in the stroller and Katniss walks closer to Peeta as she admires the sleeping baby. She places her gloved hand over the top of Peeta’s and helps him push the stroller.

They stop for coffee at the little corner coffee shop and sit in a booth. People come and go, wishing the workers a happy Thanksgiving before they rush off.

Peeta’s phone sounds and he frowns as he looks at the screen.

“Are you going to get that?” Katniss asks him as she sees Jake’s name on the screen.

“I probably should.” He sighs and accepts the call. “Hi Jake.”

He leaves the coffee shop, standing outside to speak to his brother. Katniss watches on, feeling sudden sadness for him. He’s hardly had contact with his family since last year, they all but abandoning him. He tells her only Jake has been the one to make a little bit of an effort. Nathan his other brother hasn’t spoken to him since the two of them fought at their father’s wake. Peeta beat his brother, leaving him with a broken nose and split lip. Nathan ended up needed surgery to fix his nose and Katniss and him were gone before Nathan even was sedated for his surgery.

He hasn’t even spoken to his brother since then.

Katniss though has had small communication with the boys. That stopped though before she had Lila.

“It’s good for him to make amends.” Johanna reminds Katniss, rocking the stroller.

“He didn’t leave things with his family all that well.”

“I know he didn’t.” Johanna sighs. “I know he’s said all he needs is us all but it’d be nice for him to have his brothers. Don’t you want Lila to know her other family?”

“I do but it’s up to Peeta not me. I want her to have a relationship with them but I don’t want her relationships to hurt her father.”

Johanna frowns slight before nodding. She sips her coffee and picks up her phone to read a text.

Peeta comes back into the coffee shop. He looks a little sad and Katniss squeezes his shoulder as he sits back down.

“What happened?” She asks softly.

“I’ll tell you later.”

She nods and drops her hand to his thigh. They finish their drinks in silence before leaving.

Johanna walks ahead of them with the stroller and the two of them hang back.

“I sent a text to Jake this morning, telling him how’ve I been, how I was getting my life back on track and how I had almost been sober for a year. We’ve always been close.” Peeta says. “I told him you were home in the text as well.”

“What’d he have to say?”

“His reply was the phone call.” He says as he swallows the lump in his throat. “But it wasn’t Jake, it was Nathan. Nathan had gotten a hold of his phone before he saw my text. He all but abused me on the phone.”
“I’m so sorry.”

“Told me I didn’t deserve you.”

“Peeta, don’t listen to him. He’s obviously hurting still.”

“He said I’m still the fuck up. No one wants anything to do with me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He didn’t even invite me to his wedding. He said it was next month and I wasn’t welcome. He
called me a few things and then hung up on me.”

“You should try and speak to Jake.” She urges him as she wraps her arm around his waist. “Jake
would be so proud of you. He might be able to talk Nathan round.”

“I shouldn’t be there if the family doesn’t like me. I don’t want to ruin Nathan or Laney’s day.”

“Even if you go before the wedding, try and make amends. You deserve to see your brother
marry.”

“He doesn’t want me there.”

She sighs and holds him close to her side. “We’ll figure something out. What if I spoke to him?”

“No, you don’t deserve to be dragged into this.”

“Ok.” She replies. “Nathan still should invite you even if you two aren’t speaking.”

“Just leave it. I don’t need them if they don’t need me. I have you all.”

Haymitch and Effie greet them at the front door with wide smiles and a whole lot of cheer.

“Happy Turkey Day.”

Lila sleeps in her car seat, having fallen asleep on the car ride over.

“She is happy to be celebrating.” Katniss assures them, motioning to the car seat. “She just has to
rest up before we celebrate.”

Effie smiles, taking the car seat from Katniss and leads them all inside. They strip out of their
outwear and head into the house. Haymitch takes the desserts Peeta made as well as the wine
Johanna brought.

They’d eat at 5pm along with the dozen other’s they had invited.

Peeta sets the booster seat down in the dining room and Katniss and he join Effie in the formal
living room. Lila sleeps in her car seat on the couch beside her Aunt. Haymitch and Johanna
discuss work by the fire with a glass of wine in their hands. Music plays softly and Katniss
reminisces on past Thanksgivings spent in this house.

She wore a nice black sweater dress with a scooped neck, long sleeves with ribbed cuffs. Paired
with some stockings and a pair of black ankle boots. She had left her shoulder length hair out.
Peeta unintentionally matched her, wearing a grey sweater over a grey button up and black trousers. His blue eyes shone with the grey of his sweater and she found herself getting lost in them when he had appeared out of the bathroom at Johanna’s.

She had dressed Lila in a customised white onesie saying *Lila’s 1st Gobble*, along with a tutu and lace orange headband. She was still to put the tutu on and knew it’d only be on for a short while before she’d slip on some spotty orange tights to keep Lila warm for the rest of the day. It was mostly for the photos they’d take to look back on for years to come.

Effie brought them by a glass of non-alcoholic cider each and she sat and spoke with them.

“And how are the two of you going?”

Katniss looks at Peeta and then at her aunt. “Good. Yesterday was great. I can’t speak for Peeta but it was wonderful.”

“It was. One of the best days of my life.”

“Lila’s lucky to have you as her father.” Effie says as she smiles down at the sleeping baby in the car seat. “I believe you two will make it. Make sure you’re honest with each other as well.”

Katniss swallows the lump in her throat and nods. Effie leaves them to check on dinner.

Peeta sips his cider and sits back in the lounge.

“We should probably set aside a few hours for just ourselves.” Katniss suggests. “There’s still stuff we probably need to discuss.”

Peeta nods. She knew he still had things he probably wanted to say but was still so caught up with having met Lila finally.

“What about on Saturday? We could leave Lila with Jo or maybe Effie and Haymitch and just spend a few hours together.” He says.

“Saturday would be good. We could maybe plan Leo’s birthday as well.” She says. “I’ll see if Haym and Effie want to look after her. They’ve been itching to babysit and it’ll give Jo a break.”

They organise it with Haymitch and Effie and they happily agree to babysit giving the estranged couple the day to recoup.

Peeta moves to the chessboard, playing a game against Haymitch. Katniss escapes to the study to speak to Madge, wishing her a Happy Thanksgiving.

But Madge doesn’t pick up.

“Happy Thanksgiving! I know you’re probably enjoying time with your family but I’m just ringing to wish James and you a happy turkey day from the three of us. Enjoy your family’s company and call me when you have a spare second. I’ll talk to you later. Ok. Bye.”

She re joins everyone else after a quick flick through Facebook. The house smells of turkey and everything else Thanksgiving smells of. More of their guests had arrived and Peeta had taken Lila to the living room to sleep more peacefully.

All of those guests were family friends, having seen Katniss grow up. They hadn’t seen Peeta and Katniss together since Haymitch’s birthday last year. At this point they knew the dramas they had been through, the loss and heartache. They also knew that Katniss took off the next day while
Peeta tail spined further as he drank more and more. Today would be a surprise for them all, as they didn’t know Katniss was home and that Katniss and Peeta had a daughter.

She skips passed the living room not yet ready to reveal herself and sits beside Peeta on the couch. He watches the game and scrolls through his phone casually.

“Hi. How’s Madge?”

“Couldn’t get a hold of her. She’s probably busy with her family.” She tells him, sitting down beside him.

“It’ll be nice to be with them all.”

She scoots closer to him on the couch, letting him rest his hand on her thigh as they watch the game together. The two of them loved escaping on Thanksgiving Day to watch the game together and spend some quality alone time together.

Lila eventually wakes and Effie comes looking for them.

“Come on, everyone’s waiting to see you all.”

Katniss kisses Lila’s cheeks and reaches into the diaper bag for the tutu. Peeta helps her slide the tutu up Lila’s chubby legs and rest it on her hips.

“Time to reveal ourselves.” Peeta says smirking. He kisses Katniss’ forehead. “Deep breaths, we can do this.”

She holds Lila in her arms tightly to her chest.

Everyone had gathered in the formal living room with drinks in hand and deep in conversation. Katniss, Peeta and Lila slip into the room and move to Johanna’s side as she spoke with Haymitch.

“You two will be fine.” Johanna whispers to them. “She looks adorable.”

“She does.”

“Come on, we’ll take a picture of the three of you together. You need a turkey day family photo.”

Johanna directs them towards the grand fireplace. The marble stone place is no longer used put serves as a beautiful backdrop for family photos. On the mantle sits a family photo of Effie, Haymitch, Katniss and Prim. Their last family photo before Prim passed away.

Katniss holds Lila in her arms and Peeta wraps his arm around Katniss’ waist. The attention of the other guests’ turn towards them and a look of shock register’s across their faces.

But Peeta squeezes Katniss’ hip, tells her to not worry about them and they pose as a family for their first Thanksgiving photo and their first family photo.

They stop posing soon after and turn their attention to Lila as she reaches up for her father. Katniss shifts her to face them both and Peeta kisses his daughter’s hand.

Johanna reviews them the photos once they finally move away from the fireplace and they realise how many beautiful and natural moments she has gotten of the three of them as a family.

“I think I should tell my family about her.” Peeta tells her. Lila has been passed to Effie as she shows off her niece. “They’re going to find out about her somehow.”
“How?”

“I’m just going to send Jake a message and a photo of her. It’s not ideal but it’s they best I can do.”

She sits beside him as he shakily types out a message.

*Hi Jake, Happy Turkey Day. I have some news. Katniss and I have a daughter. Her name is Lila Grace and she is 6 months old. She’s a mixture of Katniss and me and so beautiful. I hope one day you’ll get to meet her.*

He attaches a photo of Lila from just before in her Thanksgiving outfit, her smile big and her eyes wide. Katniss squeezes his hand after he presses send and tells him he’s done a good thing.

Lila fusses from the amount of people and is handed over to Katniss but Katniss can’t keep her still and she leans towards Peeta, wanting to go to him. Katniss passes her over and Lila hides against her father’s chest, gripping his sweater with her fist and bringing her thumb to her mouth.

“Guess who just got demoted.” Johanna says as she sits beside Katniss.

Katniss feels a little bit hurt that Lila wanted Peeta but deep inside she’s kind of happy that she feels safe with him.

“Sorry.” Peeta apologises.

“She likes you, that’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Peeta and Katniss’ phone lights up with texts quickly after from his family but they choose to ignore it. Jake tries to call Peeta but Peeta sends it straight to voicemail, he’ll deal with it later.

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Dinner is just what Katniss remembers, a whole lot of food, the house smelling wonderful and drunken men and women. This year she’s been placed at the end, with Haymitch sitting at the head of the table and Effie on the corner beside him. Johanna sits beside Effie and Peeta sits beside Katniss. Lila sits in her booster chair with her owl rattle. Katniss has changed Lila out of her tutu and put an oversized bib on the baby. Katniss hands Lila a sippie cup filled with water as the meals are placed in front of them and their glasses are filled, 5 was too early for Lila to eat her dinner and the sippie cup entertained Lila more than her actually drinking from it.

“Before we begin, just like every year we’re going to do the traditional thing of going around the table and saying what we’re thankful for but remember we can only use two words” Effie tells everyone with a wide smile. “Jude, we’ll start with you right down the end.”

Katniss listens as she watches Lila. They crisscross up the table quite quickly; most of the guests repeat the same things they are thankful for from previous years.

She feels butterflies fill her stomach as it fast approaches her.

It goes to Johanna next and she smiles at everyone.

“Returning friends.” She says aloud and smiles at Katniss. Katniss smiles back and turns to Peeta who coughs nervously and sits forward.
“Short and sweet.” He says to himself. “Sobriety support.”

He smiles at Katniss.

“Overwhelming happiness.” Effie announces with a wide smile.

Katniss shifts in her seat and looks to Effie’s side where Johanna sits, that’s where Prim used to sit when they were allowed at the grown-up table.

“Katniss.” Peeta whispers, nudging me with his elbow.

“Loved ones.” She says and looks at each and every one of her loved ones.

She turns her attention back to her daughter and looks at Haymitch, he could never keep it at two words and usually ended up rattling on but this year he surprises everyone.

“Lila.”

Katniss feels tears spring to her eyes and Haymitch smiles at her.

“Dig in everyone.” Effie announces, turning the attention away from the emotions that their end of the table were feeling.

Peeta kisses the back of Katniss’ hand, squeezing it briefly before he lets it go to turn to his meal. Lila entertains herself with her rattle and her silly Uncle Haymitch. Conversation hardly stops and Katniss is happy to sit in the silence surrounded by her loved ones and enjoy the meal. She thinks of her parents. She thinks of Prim.

She thinks of Leo.

But she knows he is being taken care of.

They’re close to bursting by the time they eat seconds. Everyone else begins to overindulge in expensive wine unable to move. Katniss holds Lila to her lap and barely moves as she lets her food digest. She knows she’s overeaten and curses herself for not eating a light lunch as she makes this mistake every year, skipping lunch to have more room for dinner.

“Next year I’ll eat lunch and not overindulge.” She says to Peeta who to was feeling a little bit sorry for himself.

They wait until their dinner settles before dessert is offered, the smell of warm pumpkin pie wafting through to the dining room. Everyone announces they have enough room for some dessert and the waiters disappear to prepare the dessert.

“I just need to change her.” Katniss tells Peeta.

“Let me do it.” He says, reaching for Lila.

He takes her and carries her out of the living room. She checks her watch noting the time and goes to prepare Lila’s dinner. She comes back the same time Peeta and Lila appear and he sets Lila back into the booster seat and offers to feed her. Katniss happily hands over the bowl and Haymitch lets Peeta sit in his seat as he takes up Peeta’s chair to speak to Mr Johnson his neighbor.

Lila happily eats her dinner without any protest and dessert is brought out. There’s a mixture of pumpkin pie, the chocolate and strawberry tart, shortcakes Peeta made and sticky date puddings.
Katniss takes a slice of the chocolate and strawberry tart and a small shortbread. She loves Peeta’s baking and had missed it so much. He smiles at her choice and she smiles as he had gotten the same. Obviously he had missed his own baking too.

She feeds Lila a strawberry from her shortcake and Lila smiles as she eats the sweat strawberry.

“I think she’s got a new favorite food.” Katniss coos, tickling Lila’s chin. She wipes it clean with the bib and kisses her daughter’s forehead.

She takes a bite of the last of her dessert and clutches her stomach; she was close to bursting again.

“Come on, let’s go and feel sorry for ourselves elsewhere.” Peeta says to her, holding out his hand for her.

She takes Lila from the booster and they retreat to the living room. The game has just finished and a movie is beginning. They sit on the couch with Lila between them.

Peeta reaches for his phone and reads his texts.

“They’re not happy?” She asks.

“From what I can gather, more shocked then anything.” He says. “It’ll wear off.”

“Are they asking if she’s biologically yours?”

“Yes.” He says. “There’s no denying she’s mine. The blues of her eyes are enough, she has the Mellark eyes.” He smiles looking at Lila. “They’ll realise once the shock wears off.”

“You know they’ll want to meet her.”

“I know they will, they’ll meet her when we’re ready.”

Katniss nods and picks up her own phone, quickly reading through the texts his family have sent her. She ignores them, respecting Peeta’s wishes of him telling them at his own pace.

He sinks down onto the floor, pulling a pillow with him and she cocks her eyebrows at him.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m so full.” He chuckles and then winces. “I just want to lie down here and feel sorry for myself.”

She laughs and sets Lila down on the ground. Lila’s onto her belly quickly and commando crawls towards her father, climbing over him. He cuddles her to his chest and Lila lies beside her father.

Katniss kicks off her boots and drops to the floor as well. She lays her head on Peeta’s back and looks up at the TV. Wet hands touch her arm shortly after and she looks down into her daughter’s eyes. She pulls Lila to her chest and settles her beside her. She feels her eyes grow heavy and the rise and fall of Peeta’s back is soothing enough to make her even more sleepy. She shifts Lila, watching her daughter let out a little yawn as well and Katniss lets her lie across her stomach, her head resting on her right breast, her feet touching the ground and an arm laying across her chest. She smiles down at Lila before her eyes close shut.

She feels a body shift on her chest. A tiny body that is in search of something. A soft grizzle
sounds as the find is unsuccessful and they try again. Proving to be unsuccessful again.

She cups the back of her daughter’s head and places her other hand underneath the baby’s body to support her as she sits up.

Peeta moves underneath her, cuddling the pillow and sighs. “You alright?” He asks quietly.

She nods and looks at his watch seeing it to be almost 8 o’clock. They had been asleep for close to an hour and a half.

“We should probably get going.” She says cradling Lila to her chest, Lila’s eyes drift closed again at the soft rocking motion. She knows it’ll be a late night tonight with Lila.

“Sure. Just give me a second.” He says.

She smiles at him before smiling down at Lila. He eventually moves, rolling onto his back and sitting up behind Katniss.

“Is she going to sleep tonight?” He asks, reaching around to touch Lila’s cheek.

“Probably not.” She replies with a smile.

He smiles and stands up before helping Katniss up. He helps her put her boots on and gather the baby gear that has miraculously been strewn across the room. She leads him out of the room and to the other living room where everyone has moved. Johanna meets their eyes and nods, understanding that they’re going to get going.

“Ef, we’re going to head on home.” Peeta says to Effie. “Get the little one to bed.”

She smiles and stands up. “I hope you had a lovely evening. Thank you for both coming and bringing this precious girl.”

“Thanks for having us.”

Effie kisses them both goodbye before staring down at Lila.

“Happy first turkey day beautiful.” Effie whispers. “We love you so much. Thank you.”

Katniss smiles as Effie places soft kisses to Lila’s cheek.

“Night princess.”

Haymitch offers to walk them out and they say their final goodbyes.

He hugs them all goodnight and just like Effie, places lots of kisses on Lila’s cheeks.

“See you round little one.”

Peeta drives them home in a comfortable silence. Johanna drunk in the back seat, Lila half asleep and Katniss and Peeta relishing in how good of a day it has been. A day they both won’t ever forget.

“Let me stay until she goes to bed.” He offers as he pulls into Johanna’s street.

“You don’t have to.”

“But I want to.”
Ok.

He carries Lila inside while Katniss helps Johanna up the stairs and into the house.

“Want me to take you up to bed?”

“Slow down there.” Johanna slurs. “I think you are insanely attractive but I like penises.”

“I know you do.” Katniss replies and meets Peeta’s eyes in the living room where he tries to suppress his laugh.

“I’m not saying I’ve never thought about it though.”

“Alright, time for bed. My daughter doesn’t need to hear this.” Katniss says leading her slowly up the stairs.

“You’re too pure, that’s what you are.”

“Need some help?” Peeta asks from the bottom of the steps.

“You a bit jealous there Peet? Jealous I’ll actually get with your wife?”

“No, not at all.” He calls.

“Sure sure. You wouldn’t be able to handle us anyway, we’d be too hot for you.”

“Whatever you say Mason, I’m going to take care of my daughter now.”

Katniss hikes Johanna up the last step and takes her to her bedroom. She flops Johanna down onto the bed and takes off her shoes and jackets. She tucks her feet in underneath the covers and pulls the duvet up over her body.

“Night Jo.”

Johanna grabs her hand and pulls her back.

“He still wants you. I can see it in his eyes.”

“We have Lila to worry about first not the thing that created her in the first place.”

“I’m just saying, he’s still crazy about you.” She says. “He loves you, anybody can see it. Everyone tonight could see it, especially the way you three were sleeping earlier, they had to question if there were any differences between you. He loves you and he always will.”

Katniss smiles. “Night Jo.”

“Night Katniss.”

She switches off the light and shuts the door closed behind her. She slips out of her clothes and into her sweats and a hoodie. She finds Peeta downstairs with Lila on his hip and packing away the items from the baby bag.

“Tea?” She offers.

“Yes please.”

She watches the way he tenderly carries Lila and places kisses on her forehead as he moves
around the kitchen and the living room. Lila is absolutely content with him and it makes Katniss’ heart swell from the bond the two of them have. It makes her think of her father and her. Haymitch always told her how much her father doted on her, how many times Haymitch found him just watching her sleep or blowing off plans to just be with her. Haymitch witnessed his best friend and brother-in-law fall in love again with Katniss.

And at this moment, that’s what Katniss was witnessing, Peeta fall in love all over again and it was spectacular.

She brings their cups to the living room where Peeta and Lila wait.

“Can I put her in her pyjamas?”

Katniss nods and Peeta plucks out a onesie and from the washing basket. He lays Lila on the floor, stripping her from her thanksgiving clothes and changing her diaper before slipping the baby’s limbs into the arm and leg holes. He buttons it up over her singlet and then drops a kiss to her button nose when he finishes. He sets Lila between them, Katniss’ legs blocking her from toppling forward and they settle in with the TV playing quietly in the background.

“Katniss, I just want to tell you that today was a perfect day. The most perfect I’ve had in probably two years.” He tells her.

“Me too.” She replies with a small smile. “I didn’t imagine today would be like this and I’m glad it was, mostly for Lila’s sake.”

“Happy Turkey Day baby girl.”

Lila is asleep not long after with a full belly and a lullaby from her Mom and Dad. Katniss lays her down in the cot and comes back down the stairs.

She sits on the couch, watching the TV as she waits for Peeta to finish up with some emails. He joins her quickly after and with his comfort and warmth, she finds herself sound asleep beside him.

He stirs as she gets up off of the couch.

“Stay the night. It’s late.” She whispers to him as she picks up the baby monitor. She switches off the TV and lays the blanket over his body.

“Where are you going?”

“Lila.”

“Thank you.” He says, gripping her hand. She smiles down at him and leans down to kiss his forehead before she wishes him goodnight.

Lila has her up before seven o’clock and she lies in bed with her daughter for a little while before she decides to move.

She can hear Peeta moving around from downstairs and she quickly changes Lila’s diaper and carries her downstairs. Peeta has his phone pressed to his ear as he boils the kettle and silently greets Katniss and Lila, kissing Lila on the nose and Katniss’ forehead. He had gotten into this habit when they were together and Katniss always loved the chaste kiss he gave her.
She motions to Peeta that she’ll be in the living room and takes Lila with her, setting her daughter down on the floor.

“There you go baby girl.”

Lila hardly wobbles as she sits up and Katniss hands her the rattle and she goes to the laundry grabbing the basket full of clothes before bringing it back to the lounge room as a breaking news banner fills the screen.

“We have breaking news coming in. Five US soldiers have been killed in Syria. The soldiers were believed to have been kidnapped and held hostage for a matter of days before they were killed.”

“Jake, I’ve got to call you back.” Peeta says. “Katniss needs me.”

The screen shows a screen grab of the five soldiers, tied up and in front of the camera with an enemy soldier standing beside them with a machete in hand. The soldier’s faces have been blurred but she could pick him out from anyone.

She feels her knees turn to jelly, the washing basket falling from her hands, and before she falls to the floor, his steady arms catch her, pulling her to his chest. His familiar warmth encases her and she feels tears stream down her face.

I’ll just leave this here.

You can find me on tumblr- Herainab

Chapter End Notes

I'll just leave this here.

You can find me on tumblr - Herainab
“Prim?” She whispers to her sister who lies on the hospital bed. She was now in hospice care.

In eight months her condition has deteriorated rapidly.

Eight months ago when Peeta drove her here seemed like a lifetime ago. Prim looked as if she was just dehydrated and ill.

But she seized. A terrible seizure that would make the doctors soon discover she had a tumour in her brain. An inoperable tumour and a shortened life expectancy. Prim wouldn’t see her 15th birthday.

Prim was dying. Katniss knew that but she liked to think she’d wake one morning and find this whole thing to just be a dream. Or that the doctors found a treatment and she’d walk out of here and have her 15th birthday. That she’d get to kiss her crush. Dance at prom. Get her licence. Finish high school and go to college.

But she wouldn’t.

She was on her last few days and deteriorating before her family’s eyes.

Her skin was a sickly grey colour. Bones protruded from her body everywhere. She looked almost alien like. Her body shrinking and the tumour spreading throughout her body, attacking every nerve and cell of her body and overtaking her body.

The tumour was quite large when the doctors discovered it and now had grown, making her completely paralysed as it fused to her spinal cord and spread to her legs and arms.

They were just making her comfortable, like they had been for the past few weeks and she hadn’t opened her eyes since her pain relief had been increased to the most legal amount the doctors could give her without killing her.

She touches Prim’s hands and then her cheeks. Her body is cold and she knows it’ll grow colder as death overtakes her.

Effie and Haymitch were out with the doctor now, finding out about her remaining days and the treatment plan.

“You’ll be free soon Prim.” She tells her. “You won’t be in pain. You’ll smile again. You’ll laugh. You’ll breathe without machines.” She swallows the lump in her throat. “You’ll be with Mom and Dad again.” She sniffs. “I wish there was something we could do to make this all go away and let you live the rest of your life.” She tells her. “But I’m staying right here, I’m not going anywhere.”

She kisses her sister’s knuckles and adjusts the beanie her sister wore to keep her head warm.
Prim hadn’t spoken in a week now. She hadn’t even mustered the strength to open her eyes in
days.

But Katniss remembers what Prim last told her. She had the late shift, staying over in the hospital
to be with her sister for a sleepover.

“You’re so lucky Katniss.” Prim told her weakly. There was a hint of a small smile on her face
though. “Don’t ever let him go.”

“I’m not planning to.”

“He’s been so good to you Katniss.”

He’d spend every weekend here with her since Prim was admitted. He spent almost all of summer
here. He did part time photography work during the summer earning quite a bit of cash. He never
left her side and even pondered on those Sunday afternoons when he had to return back to college
if he should just stay the week and be with the family.

“I know. I love him so much.”

“He loves you too.” Prim smiled. “You two will have a long and happy life.”

“We’ve only been together a year.”

“But I can sense it. A long and happy life. There will be pain but you two will soar through the
bad times and be incredible.” She tells her. “And you’ll have three children together and be
happy.” She coughs. “Don’t stuff it up and love as much as you can, you’ve got it inside of you.”

Prim didn’t wake up after that or speak again and Katniss held their conversation close to her
heart.

The door to the room opens and Effie enters, a saddened look on her face. Katniss knew what this
meant.

“They’re changing her medicine plan, giving her pain relief that will let her pass peacefully.”

She nods and looks back at her sister.

“Spoken to Peeta today?”

“He’s got an exam that he’s studying for on Thursday. I don’t want to disturb or worry him.”

Effie nods and takes out a book, she wouldn’t read it but liked the distraction. A nurse enters the
room with a doctor and Haymitch and they review her chart and her vitals. Katniss didn’t bother
moving for them as they were good at working around the family.

They change her IV drip, the nurse injecting a syringe into the bag of a medicine. It’s quick to
enter Prim’s body and the features on her sister’s face soften. She wasn’t in pain at the moment,
the medicine helping.

It’s a quiet afternoon for them. They sit around, taking turns at holding her hand and talking to her.
They don’t speak to each other.

The days go by slowly and Haymitch stays with Prim on the Wednesday night, urging Effie and
Katniss to head home for the night.

Effie wakes her early Thursday morning. “Haymitch called.” Effie tells her. “We’re needed at the
Effie wakes her early Thursday morning. “Haymitch called.” Effie tells her. “We’re needed at the hospital.”

Haymitch is outside of Prim’s room when they arrive, looking worst for wear.

“What happened?”

“Today’s the day.” He tells them. “The doctor is just in there with her at the moment. She had a seizure just before and pushed me out of the room. It lasted ten minutes.”

They set up vigil at her bedside and count down the hours. Prim’s heart rate slowly beginning to drop each hour and they know it’ll be soon.

The door to the room opens and Katniss looks up, seeing Peeta standing there.

“What are you doing here? You have college?”

“I’m not waiting there while you’re going through this.” He tells her. “I have to be here with you. I promised you I would and I’m not breaking it.”

“You have an exam…”

“Fuck it.” He exclaims. “I can’t be without you at this time.”

She wraps her arms around his neck, holding him tightly as tears stream down her face.

He doesn’t let her go. He holds her. Holds her hand. Keeps her stable. He remains at her side as Prim’s heartbeat drops further and she seizes again.

He holds her to his body as the doctor allows them back into the room and tells them it’s time.

He doesn’t leave her side for weeks later.

“You didn’t have to do this.” She tells him. Her sister is in the ground. The house is quiet.

“Yes I did.” He reminds her. “I needed to.” He smiles. “This is forever Katniss.”

“Katniss?”

She stares out the window, lost in the landscape and surrounds as the rain falls outside.

“Katniss?”

A soft gurgle sounds. The radio cuts out. The rain hits the windshield.

“Katniss.”

She turns to him as he touches her hand.

“Where were you?” He asks her.

“I don’t know.” She admits to him, shaking her head to try and clear the daze she was just in. “I just got a little distracted.”

“That’s alright.” He informs her. “We’re here.”

She looks up at the house. The perfect little family home where her best friend imagined growing
old in. Her friend’s hopes and dreams were poured into this house and as she stares at it, she’s unsure if her friend will ever love the home as much as she used to.

“We don’t have to go right in.”

“Madge needs us. I can’t keep sulking.” She says. “She needs us more than ever.”

He nods and looks up at the house and then back at her. “Well, let’s go.”

She leads them into the house, Peeta carrying the car seat with Lila half awake and sucking on her thumb.

“Madge?” She calls out.

Voices carry from the back room and Katniss motions for him to follow.

They kick off their shoes and take off their coats before they walk to the back room.

The blonde widow sits in a chair by the window with her toddler sitting on her lap, the two of them reading a book together. Madge’s mother sits on the couch across from her daughter while her father makes some phone calls in the study. An assigned army officer is in the kitchen.

Madge looks up at her friend and her friend offers her a supportive smile before moving quickly across the room and enveloping mother and son into her arms.

“I’m here.” She tells her. “I’m here for you both.”

Her parents take James to the park down the street to give Madge some space with Katniss and Peeta. Madge cradles Lila to her chest and sits before her friends with a cup of tea close by.

She had called them half an hour after the news story became public and Katniss didn’t hesitate in telling her they’d be there by the afternoon, Peeta offered his support and to drive Katniss as he knew she was in no shape to drive and to help out with Lila. He also wanted to be there for his wife’s best friend.

Madge had embraced Peeta for a long while once she managed to pull herself out of Katniss’ arms.

“It’s so good to see you again.” She told him and Peeta agreed quickly.

“I’ve missed you Madge.”

Katniss inches closer to Madge and grabs a hold of Lila’s hand.

“Have you spoken to his parents?”

She shakes her head. “I was his primary contact followed by his family as the secondary. They haven’t called me either.”

“Do you want me to phone them?” Katniss asks.

“No, it’s something I have to do.” Madge announces. “Gale wants to have his funeral down in San Antonio but wants to be cremated and for me to have his ashes. It hit a sore spot with his parents but they have to understand this is what he wanted.”

“Do you need us to organise anything?”
She shakes her head. “He’s ceremony will be at San Antonia at the army base, his first training camp before he moved north.”

“We’ll book a flight as well then.” Peeta tells her. “We want to be there for you.”

Katniss looks at Peeta and smiles slightly.

“Thank you.” Madge says, choking up slightly.

“When are you flying down?”

“He’s body won’t be flown in until Tuesday and his funeral will be Thursday. I’ve got a flight tomorrow morning though.”

She gets up, passing Lila back to Katniss and heads for the stairs. Katniss goes to follow but Peeta stops her.

“Give her a second.” Peeta says.

“I don’t think we should fly in until Monday.” Katniss says. “Give her some time to be with his family before we intrude.” She frowns. “We also have Leo’s birthday on Sunday.”

“We can head back home tomorrow and fly from Boston on Monday. We’ll still celebrate Leo’s birthday, Madge will understand.”

“Thank you for this.”

He smiles and takes Lila from her. “You have no reason to thank me. Now go and check on her.”

Katniss slowly heads up the stairs to look for her friend. She can see her through the bedroom door and she heads into the room, sitting down beside her friend who sobs on the bed. She cradles her stomach and mourns for everything she’s lost.


Katniss pulls her to her chest and like a small child comforts her.

And Katniss truly believes this is the first time she’s properly cried since she found out.

“We’re here for you Madge.” She tells her friend. “We’ll be here for you as long as you need.”

“Hi.”

“Hi.” He greets her. “How are you?”

“Ok. I’m thinking about Madge a whole lot.”

“We’ll see her again tomorrow.”

“We shouldn’t have let her go alone.”

“She’s not alone. She has her family and she insisted we come home today before we met her down in San Antonia. She knew we needed this day together.” He reminds her. “Are you OK? It is our first time together for his birthday.”
“I am. I’m glad we are together for this day. It’s a big day.”

“It is.”

“Are you heading over soon?” She asks him, fixing her nursing camisole as Lila finishes nursing.

“I am. Just grabbing a few things and I’ll be there. Have you had breakfast yet?”

“Lila has had half of hers.” She tells him. “But I haven’t.”

“Cheese buns?”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be seeing you two soon.”

He’s there an hour later with cheese buns, balloons and a cake.

“What’s this?” Johanna asks as she feeds Lila.

“Leo’s 2**nd** birthday.” He says with a small smile.

“And Peeta’s full year of sobriety.” Katniss adds with a proud smile, handing Peeta and Johanna their teas.

“A full year?” Johanna asks.

“Haymitch and I were boarding a plane to Manilla this time last year. I haven’t had a drop since this day last year.”

“I’m proud of you Peeta.” She says smiling. “And you as well Katniss.”

“Did you want to come with us today to celebrate Leo’s birthday?”

“I think the three of you should spend a few hours together to celebrate his birthday. We’ll have a toast for him tonight.” She tells them and takes a bite of a cheese bun. She grins down at Lila as she reaches for the cheese bun, more interested in that than the rice cereal. “Oh baby girl, you’ve got your yummy cereal to eat instead.”

Lila grizzlies and groans at the offered spoonful of rice cereal, turning her head away and frowning. Johanna shakes her head and tears a bit off for the baby and Lila snatches it from Johanna and greedily takes a bite.

“She’s your child.” Johanna says to Katniss. “Definitely your child. You’ve created a monster.”

“Well, daddy will make her cheese buns for the rest of her life if she really wants them.” Peeta tells them smiling. He kisses Lila and the baby smiles widely at him as if to say, thank you.

The balloons sway in the breeze. It’s cool, winter definitely making its presence known. The balloons are tied to the stroller, the cake sitting on the park bench.

They’ve come to the park closest to their house, the park where they had planned on bringing him to when he got a bit bigger.
Lila is in her mother’s arms, bundled in an extra blanket and sucking on her thumb.

Peeta stands beside her in a silence they’ve been in since they arrived. Words were too hard to think of right now and the silence was enough to make her teary.

She spent the whole day in bed last year thinking about Leo and cradling her stomach. Her belly was just noticeable, a slight swell, like she had too much for lunch. And she cried last year for her baby boy and the other baby that she was sure she wouldn’t be able to keep safe, to ever see her baby’s chest move as they breathed or open they’re eyes for the first time. The extra hormones didn’t help last year.

She was glad this year she had Peeta and Lila here to celebrate. And not only Leo’s second birthday but Peeta’s full year of sobriety.

She reaches out for his hand, squeezing it as the clock strikes to the time their son came into this world sleeping. Tears well in her eyes and then there’s Peeta’s warmth embracing her to his chest. Kissing her forehead gently and resting his lips there while the minutes go by.

And they decide from this day on to not mourn for their son but to celebrate.

To celebrate their son, their family, new life, love, opportunities and hope.

And most importantly, each other.

“All we have is our imagination of you, our minds to wander and think of who you’d be. Would you take after your mother more? Would you be like your father? Who would you be as you grew into your personality and took in the world around you, growing so quickly before our eyes, we’d do everything in our power to slow down time just so we could experience all these years with you longer. Then, as I met your sister, I imagined, how would you be as a brother? Would you just automatically know you had to protect her and love her to the day you die? I think you’d be like you mom; you’d protect those you loved with everything you had. You’d put their lives before yours. You’d be selfless and generous.”

He swallows the lump in his throat and sniffs.

“To this day, I still wonder why it had to happen to us, why after so many losses, we had to lose our hope. Was this a sign? Did we do something wrong? There are so many questions we have that will always be unanswered. But I do hope one day, the hole in our hearts will close. The guilt we carry will eventually disappear and we can accept the loss of you and feel comforted that you are watching over us. We love you Leo Thomas, we always will and will never stop thinking of you. Love Dad, Mom and Lila Grace.”

Katniss closes her eyes, feeling the tears slide down her cheeks and she moves closer to him, wrapping her arms around his waist and hiding her face into his chest. He wraps his arms around her body, holding her close to him as they lay on their bed together. Under the roof of their house they bought together and imagined a lifetime of happiness and joy.

“I love you.” He murmurs against her forehead.

“I love you too.”

The following days pass with a blur. Their flight to San Antonia landed after lunch and with an
unsettled baby they made their way through the airport, collecting their bags and getting into the shuttle to take them to the motel closest to Gale’s family home.

Peeta holds Lila as she grizzlies and he does his best to comfort her as Katniss checks them in.

“What brings you three to San Antonio?” The receptionist asks. She wasn’t put off by their saddened moods as she typed away at the computer.

“A funeral.” Katniss answers.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She replies and her cheeks redden and she keeps her attention on the screen. They collapse on the bed, Lila lying between them, fussing and crying.

“What’s wrong?” She asks her daughter, wrapping an arm around her body.

“Is she tired?” Peeta asks.

“She slept on the plane.”

“Diaper?”

She smells Lila’s bottom and shakes her head.

“Teeth?”

Katniss does her best to feel inside of Lila’s mouth for any incoming teeth but her daughter fights her off, clamping her mouth shut, pushing her mother’s hands away and crying.

Peeta is up on his feet, rummaging through the diaper bag and produces a bottle of medicine.

“Will this help?”

“She’s got a bit of a fever.” She tells him and brings Lila to her lap. Lila brings her own fist to her mouth and chews on it, drool running down her chin. “She’s teething.” She confirms and he helps her measure out the syringe with paracetamol. “I’ll hold her and you put it in her mouth, as far as you can. She’ll fight it but just do it.”

He nods and she cradles Lila in her arms, she holds Lila’s hands and tips her head back. Peeta holds the syringe outside of Lila’s mouth and they watch their daughter struggle and fight.

“Do it Peeta.”

He opens Lila’s mouth and pushes the syringe in as far as he can, before giving her her medicine. They both make sure it’s gone down her throat before they sit her up again and Katniss cuddles her daughter to her chest, Lila resting her face in the crook of her mother’s neck and crying.

“It’s Ok baby girl. It’s just to make you feel better.” Katniss coos and watches as Peeta sits down beside her, reaching out to rub Lila’s back.

“That was hard.” He tells her.

“I know. It doesn’t get easier when they’re sick and in pain but it’s for their best.”

Lila sighs softly and Peeta smiles. He kisses Katniss’ forehead and she smiles back at him.
Madge is on the front porch of her in-laws. Tears are streaming down her face. She can hear the cries and shouts sounding from inside of the house.

“What happened?” Katniss asks. Peeta and her had taken James and Lila for a walk. They hadn’t even been gone that long.

“Gale told us what he wanted for his funeral. His funeral was written out and I want to respect his wishes. We have no idea what he has chosen for music. We just know he has chosen to speak. Hazelle has been trying to interfere with the funeral director and those in charge of conducting servicemen and women’s funerals. I told her to but out and she riled up and started screaming at me. Posy started yelling and then the brothers and I had to get out of there.”

Katniss squeezes her friends’ hand and looks up at Peeta before looking at Madge again.

“You shouldn’t stay here if she’s going to keep making you upset.” Katniss tells her. “Come stay at the motel with us.”

“I can’t.”

“You can Madge. For your own wellbeing, come and stay at the motel with us.” Peeta tells her, parking James’ stroller and sitting down beside her. “You can’t be in this toxic environment, it’s not good for you or James. Or the baby.”

She looks at James in the stroller. He smiles widely at her and she manages to smile back. He still doesn’t understand that his daddy has died. Madge swallows the lump in her throat and smiles at her son.

“Okay, here we go.” Peeta says, opening the door to Madge’s motel room and holding it open for the girls. They follow in behind him with the kids; Peeta has her bags thrown over his shoulder and her suitcase beside him. “Look at this James, look at all the fun motel things you can play with.”

They had left the Hawthorne’s quickly after, Madge packing her things and informing them she’d be staying in a motel for the remainder of her visit. Hazelle didn’t like it one bit, accusing Madge of not loving Gale. Madge left the house before she truly burst and was now here in the motel with Peeta and Katniss.

The sun shines down on them brightly. It’s a beautiful day as the mourners gather to farewell a man who had tragically died. A man who died a hero and didn’t give up his fight until the very end, something that makes everyone proud of him.

Peeta stands beside her, their daughter in his arms. Those who have arrived for the funeral gather outside of the church on the army base. Army officers and officials stand in their official uniform outside the church, solemn and keeping a straight face on.
She reaches for his hand and he holds it as the black limos pull up. The widow appears out of the first car with her toddler on her hip, both dressed in yellow, at her late husband’s request.

An officer helps her to the doors of the church where the mourners greet her. Her mother and father appear and take James for her. Her mother remains at her side.

Then the family of the officer appear out of the next limo. His parents dressed in black, reflecting the color of mourning. His siblings in bright colors. They followed his wishes, as did all the other guests who have come in colors to celebrate the life of the lost officer.

Peeta shifts their daughter to his hip and they move towards Madge, kissing her cheek and hugging her before following the rest of the attendees into the church.

They sit closer to the front, Lila going into the small crèche for the service. Peeta holds Katniss’ hand and they stand for the family as they take their seats.

“I’d like to welcome Madge, Gale’s wife to say a few words.”

Madge stands up from the pew and makes her way to the front. She adjusts the microphone and looks out at everyone who has come to send off her husband and father of her son and unborn child.

“Everything I tried to write ended up in the bin. I couldn’t find the words to say to you that were right. Words that would sum up our time together over the last ten years. So as I went through our box of mementos I found your wedding speech, the one you told me you didn’t write and surprised me with during our reception. So, for all of you here, I want to read to you what my husband said on the night of our wedding.” She says and flicks to another piece of paper.

“Madge, today our life began together. Our life we spoke of and dreamt of from the minute we met. There was this connection from the very beginning and we knew right away what we wanted in our lives. I know I won’t always be there for you but it doesn’t mean I won’t stop thinking of you. I know I’ll make you cry. But I’ll always be the one to comfort you. I know I’ll always make you laugh and I’ll be laughing along with you. I know it’ll continue to be tough. I know I’ll always break those promises to you. I know I won’t be there for anniversaries, birthdays and Christmas’ but I’ll make sure everyday we get together; I’ll make the most of it.” She says. “My darling, life without you would not be worth living. I’m so glad I have found you to spend my life with and I hope we have a happy life together. My mind will never not be filled with you and your beauty. Continue to make me a proud man and I hope you’ll forever be proud of me. Madge, our life continues and even if I don’t make it home to you, know how much I love you and never stopped loving you.”

Katniss squeezes Madge’s shoulder and leans towards her. “You read it as good as he did.”

Madge turns and smiles at her friend. “Thank you.”

“He’ll always be proud of you.”

At the conclusion, three army officers and the three Hawthorne men stand at the coffin as the last song plays.

But Madge doesn’t cry. A wide smile creeps across her face as she hears the song play.

Their wedding song.

*I see your shadow on the street now*
*I hear you push through the rusty gate*
Click of your heels on the concrete
Waiting for a knock coming way too late
It seems like an age since I’ve seen you
Countdown as the weeks trickle into days

Madge stands up, following the casket out as the song plays, holding her head high and leading James out, holding onto his hand.

*My happiness is slowly creeping back*
Now you’re at home
If you ever starts sinking in
It must be when you pack up and go

“Do you think she’s alright?” She asks Peeta after she sets Lila down in the cot. The wake ended an hour earlier.

He nods his head. “She has us if she’s not.”

She falls down beside him on the bed and is glad to be heading home tomorrow. The cheap motel bed was driving her insane and Lila was barely sleeping from the change of environment. Her tooth finally broke through the night before.

She curls up beside him, letting him wrap an arm around her body and hold her tight to his body. She rests her hand on his chest and feels his heart beating under her hand.

She turns to him an hour later, looks him deep in the eyes and leans forward, touching her lips to his.

He kisses her back and cups her face in his hands.

She slowly moves her body, straddling his lap and settling her legs around his waist. He sits up and holds her hips.

She looks into his deep blue eyes and takes off his shirt.

She runs her hands down the panes of his chest and then looks back into his eyes. She kisses him and lets him slide his hands up her legs and the skirt of her dress. He bunches the skirt of her dress at her waist and kisses a trail down her jaw and her throat. She drops the straps of her dress down her arms and the dress falls slightly, exposing more of her chest.

She gives him silent permission to touch her.

But he hesitates.

She lifts his hands up over her waist and to her breasts and leaves them there.

She wanted him. Wanted to feel something that she felt she was missing. She wanted him to make her whole, even if it wasn’t forever.

“Please Peeta.”

He swallows the lump in his throat and darts his eyes to her lips and then to his hands on her breasts.
He squeezes them gently, knowing how sore and heavy they are of milk and kisses her lips.

She reaches for his pants, undoing his belt and his zipper and feels his length swelling at her touch.

She rids herself of her dress, leaving herself in her bra and panties and he drinks her in, taking in her curves and her body he hasn’t seen in almost 16 months.

Pregnancy changed her body, her hips widening and giving her more of an hourglass figure. She has stretch marks on her hips and belly from carrying their children. And she’s proud of them. Proud of her changed body.

He traces her sides and then the stretch marks on her hips and smiles. “You’re so beautiful.” He tells her.

And she believes it.

He rolls them, settling himself between her legs with his pants on the floor and in just his briefs.

She feels the wetness pool in her centre and she swallows as she feels his length brush against her covered centre as he leans down to kiss her.

“You have to be sure Katniss.” He whispers against her lips. “Because I’d never forgive myself if you regret this.”

She looks into his sad eyes and goes to reply when a knock sounds at the door.

“Katniss?” Madge says from outside the door.

Katniss looks into Peeta’s eyes and then down her body and it’s like she’s been living in a daydream when she realises where they are.

Her eyes go wide as Peeta moves off of her, guilt filling his eyes.

“I’m sorry Peeta. I don’t know…”

“Katniss?” Madge says again.

“Go see what she wants.” He tells her. “We’ll talk.”

She nods and reaches for her dress. She opens the door to Madge.

“What’s up?”

“I don’t feel too good.”

“Ok. Like sick in the stomach or headachy? Is it a pregnancy thing?”

“I don’t know. It’s in my belly I think. Can you take me to the hospital?”

Katniss waits outside in the quiet waiting room. Peeta was at the motel with James and Lila and waiting anxiously to find out what’s going on.

Katniss feels sick to her stomach for almost having sex with Peeta, using him to get over the pain from the past week. The two of them didn’t need to be having sex right now. They had other issues to resolve, things they still had to say to each other, a relationship to build back up again. Their daughter to think about.
She’d forever thank Madge for stopping them and their almost sex.

She fidgets in her seat, crossing her legs and looks down the corridor anxiously. She was really hoping Madge wasn’t miscarrying, it’d devastate her. Madge was looking forward to welcoming this child. Her last opportunity to have something that was half of Gale and of her. It was like a welcome gift and despite having James, she really wanted another child.

Katniss exhaled a deep breath and waited.

Thirty minutes later a nurse appeared.

“Katniss?”

“Yes?”

“Madge is asking for you.”

“Is she all right?”

“Come on.” The nurse replies and leads her down the hallway to the suite Madge is in.

Madge is propped up on the bed, her stomach exposed and a technician seated beside her. She looks well, a slight smile on her face.

“Is everything all right?” Katniss asks her friend.

“Everything is perfect.” Madge tells her with a wide smile. “Remember how Gale was out for three months between his last duty and his next?”

“Yes?”

“And how he left almost two months ago.”

“Yes.”

“I’m much further along in my pregnancy than I thought.”

“What?”

“It was the babies kicking.”

“What?”

“I’m having twins Katniss.”

Katniss looks at the screen and spots it immediately.

Two babies on the ultrasound.

“And they’re going to be identical.” Madge tells her, her smile stretching wide.

Katniss feels tears well in her eyes and leans down, embracing her friend. “I’m so happy for you. It’s such a beautiful gift you’ve been given.”

She helps Madge back to the motel, ultrasound pictures in hand and a small smile on her face.

Katniss enters the room quietly, promising Madge that Peeta and her will watch James for the rest
of the night and she finds Peeta still awake. Both kids are sound asleep in their cots.

“Hey.” He whispers.

“Hi.”

“Everything all right?” He asks.

She nods, smiling to him in the darkness and comes towards the bed, checking both her godson and daughter and sits down on the edge of the bed. “She’s having twins.” She turns to him.

“Really?”

She nods. “She’s almost 20 weeks pregnant as well.” She tells him. “They were kicking and because she’s never experienced a twin pregnancy before it felt so odd because she was being kicked in her ribs and her hip simultaneously. Everything is all good. They’re both healthy and strong and she should have a good run. Identical twins as well.”

“Does she know what sex?”

“No. She wants to keep it a surprise. It’s either two girls or two boys though.”

He smiles and she changes in the bathroom, before coming back to bed. It’s late, well after midnight and she knows she’ll be up just after 6 to feed her daughter and tend to James.

She lays her head on the pillow and looks at him. He smiles softly at her and reaches out to touch her cheek.

“I’m sorry about earlier.”

“I know. I am too. It’s been a confusing week.” He reminds her. “Get some sleep now. We’ll talk in the morning.”

She nods and sees him offer his arms to her. She rolls over, letting her back touch his chest and snuggles into his warmth and comfort. His arms have been there for here this whole week and she’s thankful. It might not be right but at this moment, they needed each other more than anything to get through the crap life had thrown them.

She falls asleep with a smile on her face and swears she feels him smile against her neck.

Chapter End Notes

The song used is called 'My Happiness' By Powderfinger.

Like most of you guessed, it was Gale but don't fret, Madge is strong enough and strong willed to carry on. As an army wife she was slightly prepared for her husband to not return to her. And she has two new lives to focus on as well as her son. She'll be fine.

I have the next chapter all finished but won't have it posted until I finish chapter 9. I don't have a certain number of chapters in mind for this story but it will not exceed 20. Despite how slowly they are progressing in their healing. Expect a few short time jumps. And at this point its not about just healing their relationship, it's also healing
the relationships with everyone else in their lives to amend their marriage and future.

You can find me on Tumblr - Herainab
Chapter 8

Lennox Hill Hospital, New York City, May 13th 2015

Afternoon sunlight streams in through the blinds, casting a soft shadow in the room. The sun started shining yesterday, her world becoming a little bit brighter.

Her eyes are pressed closed, her hands pressed in a fist, having escaped her swaddle and they rest beside her head.

She’s absolutely perfect.

There are no words to describe her at all.

And after 9 months of living in complete fear, she’s here, safe and sound. Unharmed and healthy as can be.

She traces the cheek of the day old baby, over the round cheek and down towards her rose-lips and dimpled chin.

The baby crinkles her eyebrows as she sleeps and tears fill her mother’s eyes.

She was just like her father.

She kisses the baby’s nose and round cheeks and settles her back down onto her lap, the baby undisturbed from the movement.

The two of them were alone for the first time. Madge hadn’t left her side since she went into labor two days ago and remained by her side until an hour ago when she was sent home to be with her son and relieve her sister-in-law. She didn’t leave without a long embrace and Katniss caught sight of the tears in her eyes.

Her best friend cried when the baby was finally born, showing off how loud she could be and proving to the scared mother and birth partner that she was healthy.

And now Katniss and her daughter were alone. And the new mother relished in the fact of having a healthy baby after the past pain of delivering a stillborn child.

Her phone buzzes beside her and she reluctantly picks it up. She hardly had announced the arrival of the baby after the past pain of delivering a stillborn child.

A soft knock sounds at the door and she pulls her eyes away from her precious bundle and looks at the doorway and smiles.

“Hi.”

“Can we come in?”

She nods and smiles wider as Effie and Haymitch enter the room donning a bouquet of flowers and a big gift bag.

“Congratulations.” Effie whispers in her ear as she embraces her niece tightly.
Katniss squeezes her eyes tightly together at the feel of her aunts’ warm embrace and hugs her a little longer before letting go.

Her uncle envelopes her in his arms next and she inhales his familiar cologne and relishes in his warmth.

“I’m so proud of you.”

He lets her go, setting the flowers at her bedside and Effie places the gift bag down on the floor. Both of her guardians look down at the newborn that snoozes on her lap and gush.

“Katniss, she is so beautiful.” Effie tells her, touching her heart. “So, so beautiful.”

“She’s breathtaking.” Haymitch chokes out and Katniss smiles, touching the corner of her eye. She’s never seen Haymitch this stoked before.

“Would you like to hold her?”

The couple both nod and Katniss carefully scoops the baby up off of her lap and hands her over to Effie first, tucking the blanket back over her daughter’s chest.

She watches the two people who raised her fall in love with the baby, and she hopes they’ll play more of a grandparent role, guiding her and showing her the unconditional love they showed Katniss for her entire life.

The couple dote on the baby and Katniss knows they’ve been waiting for this moment since she told them she was pregnant with Leo.

The baby is shifted into Haymitch’s arms shortly after and Effie comes and sits down beside her on the bed, handing her the gift bag.

“Here.”

“You didn’t have to get her anything.”

“Yes we did. Now open up the present.”

Katniss pulls the card from the top and opens it.

To our dear Katniss,

Congratulations on the birth of your beautiful second child and first daughter. We’re glad you’ve found some sunshine and happiness with the arrival of your baby girl. We’re here to help you in this journey of parenthood and will be happy to be there for you every step of the way. We hope you find motherhood to be everything you wished for and even through the challenging times we know you’ll survive it. We are so proud of you and we know when we leave you in the hospital, we’ll be grinning from ear to ear over how stunning you are as a mother. Enjoy the journey and remember it’s OK to cry at any point.

It’s time to enjoy it… the life of a mother.

Our unconditional love,

E & H

Katniss chokes back the tears and Effie’s arms are wrapped around her before she says a word.

“Thank you.” She mumbles into Effie’s ear.
“You deserve it.”

Baby outfits, picture books, a beautiful hand crafted baby book, hand crafted chocolates, a voucher for a day spa treatment and other bits and pieces.

Effie reaches into her handbag and hands her a box.

“I don’t need anything else.”

“This wouldn’t fit.” She explains. “Open it.”

Katniss opens the lid and finds a silver necklace staring back at her.

“Peeta bought this for you before you had Leo.” She tells Katniss. “He had it engraved sometime after Leo was born and gave it to us to give to you when we saw you next. We know he’d want you to have it.”

She looks back down at the necklace and smiles when she sees the two names side by side.

*Leo & Lila*

“How’d you know I named her Lila?”

“We had a feeling.” Effie tells her with a smile. “And she’s clearly a Lila.”

“Lila Grace.” Katniss confirms with a proud smile. “My daughter’s name is Lila Grace Mellark.”

Lila is handed back to her mother and Katniss cuddles her daughter to her chest.

“How is he?” She asks, breaking the silence.

“He’s good.” Effie confirms. “He looks so much better, a lot healthier. He’s sleeping off the jetlag though.”

“So he doesn’t know you’re here?”

Haymitch shakes his head. “We just told him we were going to visit some friends and let him rest up, he happily agreed and went off to bed.”

“He doesn’t know?”

“No. He has no idea.”

Effie and Haymitch leave when visiting hours end and Katniss is left alone with her daughter once again.

“No matter what happens Lila, I’ll be here for you.” She says. “But I promise you, you’ll meet your daddy very soon.”

A giggle wakes her up. A long drawn out giggle that is coming from someone she trusts more than anything in the world and thinks is the funniest person ever.

The giggling sounds again and she smiles to herself.
She gets out of bed, slipping her feet into her slippers and putting on a sweater.

She had been ill since they returned from San Antonio, the flu making her bed ridden for a couple of days and when she thought she was on the mend again, she found herself being reduced to her bed.

Peeta took care of her, nursing her, feeding her and providing her with plenty of fluids and medicines. He even took to being the hands on parent while she recovered. She was just glad Lila wasn’t as dependent on her at the moment and would happily go to her father.

“Hi sleepy head.”

“Hi.” She replies, smiling at Peeta and her daughter.

Lila was nude from the waist down and lying on a towel on the living floor of Johanna’s house. Lila loved being free from her diaper and after a severe diaper rash after missing out on no diaper from their travelling and moving about, it was a welcome relief to the baby who was happier than ever. She cut her tooth pretty quickly and they didn’t hear a remark or cry from her again.

“Feeling better?” He asks her as she sits down on the couch.

“A bit.”

He smiles and then narrows his eyes towards her.

“What?” She asks.

He touches his nose. “You’ve got a whole lot of snot.”

She touches her nose and frowns as he laughs.

“Peeta.”

“I’m just messing with you.” He tells her with a goofy grin. She smiles back at him and recalls his humor and the way he made her laugh throughout the years. “I was thinking if you’re up for it we might be able to get out of the house for a couple of hours? Maybe go to the mall and get a Santa photo?”

There had been a slight awkwardness from the morning they woke up after their almost sex. They hadn’t really broached it as there hadn’t been a real chance and they were dancing around each other pretending it didn’t happen. And with her becoming sick, they hadn’t really spoken at all.

“Sure. I can’t get over how quickly Christmas is coming around.”

Today would be a perfect day. It was a weekday and they’d only be competing against stay at home moms and grandparents.

“We could maybe do a bit of Christmas shopping too?” She suggests as she packs the diaper bag.

He nods and straps Lila into her car seat. She was sleepy, having just been fed by her mother.

He drives them to the mall and with a sleeping baby they wander the mall, window shopping mostly and remaining in complete silence. He pushes the stroller and she walks beside him. They’d covered the stroller with a blanket to keep out the winter germs and stickybeaks who liked to look in the stroller or reach in to touch the baby. Something Katniss hated.
They stop for coffee in a quiet café and she peaks into the stroller quickly before putting the cover back on. Peeta sips his coffee and Katniss adds a sachet of sugar to hers.

“I’ve decided I’m going to go to the wedding.” He announces.

“What?”

“I’ve been talking to Jake the last few days and he’s convinced me to come up. Even if I don’t get to the wedding at least come and see Nathan before. And the rest of my family.” He tells her.

“Right. Are you sure you can do this?”

“My road to sobriety was also about clearing my conscious and making amends with those I’ve hurt or repairing relationships. And if none of my family wants anything to do with me than that’s fine, I’ve at least tried, reached out to them, showed them my progress and that I am now sober. And I don’t want to miss out on my nieces and nephew’s growing up.” He says. “I need to at least try and if it fails then I know I’ve at least reached out and done my best.”

She nods and takes a sip from her coffee.

“Would Lila and you like to accompany me to Bridgeport?” He asks. “I want them to meet her at least once.”

She doesn’t think twice. “Of course we will come with you.”

Lila’s Santa photo proves to be the funniest the two of them have seen in their entire life. The look on their daughter’s face almost looks as of she’s been told she’s to endure a life of torture and soon after the shot is taken she’s screaming the place down.

The Santa takes it in his stride and laughs a belly laugh as he hands Lila to her mother.

Katniss consoles her daughter as Peeta pays for the photo and is handed the shot.

They laugh the whole way home, even hours after the photo has been taken with their baby sound asleep.

“That’ll be one for her 21st.” He jokes and she smiles at him.

Johanna laughs at the Santa photo and makes a copy of it to hang at work. “This will get me through the day, especially having to deal with those stupid interns.”

They tell her at dinner they’re to head to Bridgeport for the wedding and will be leaving on Tuesday, Katniss had an interview to do in New York on Wednesday and then they’d head to Bridgeport to see the Mellark family after the interview.

He’s at the house Tuesday morning with his bag and helps her pack her car with Lila’s and her luggage.

“We’re only going for a few days.” He tells her as he lifts her suitcase in.

“And you take three times as much stuff with you when you have a baby.” She laughs, tickling Lila’s side.

“That’s true I suppose. Come on, let’s hit the road.”

Lila sleeps for the first half of the trip and they sit with the radio playing.
“Katniss.”

“Yeah.”

“I think we should talk. We have a few hours ahead of us and still lots to tell each other.” He says.

She looks down at her left hand. She still wears her engagement ring and wedding ring on her hand and never once took it off. Only when she was in the later stages of her pregnancy and her hands swelled she wore them on a chain around her neck. She didn’t want to give up on this; she hadn’t from the moment she left him. And it was a reminder everyday of what she had.

“Ok.”

“Let me go first.” He tells her and coughs slightly. “There were those few months after you left when I was drunk. I woke up drunk and went to bed drunk. I wandered the streets drunk and stayed in bars until closing time or I was sent home in a cab. I don’t remember a lot of those few months and my actions, I can’t recall. It got worse when you left, the drinking and it was like a black spot has covered those months. Things are vague from those days I wasn’t as drunk but the memory is still foggy. I was faithful to you, I will tell you that.”

He swallows a lump in his throat. “I do recall a woman though, busty and she had a high pitched voice. She kept annoying me one night, you’d been gone a week by that stage. And she tried to force herself onto me. She groped me and kissed me and I pushed her off of me. She fell and I ran. Thresh followed me home and made sure I was all right. She tried to accuse me of assaulting her later on but it was quickly dismissed, Thresh and the other regulars around the bar acting as a witness and stating her as a pest. I wasn’t charged with anything but it shook me up a bit and that’s when I hit the bottle harder.”

He looks across at her. “I apologise for letting her touch me.”

She shakes her head and smiles at him. “It’s alright Peeta.” She assures him. “In New York, I almost kissed someone.” She says and hears his breathing pick up. “I was about ten weeks pregnant, my hormones were going crazy and I felt so alone and sad, I was missing you and your comfort. This guy started speaking to me, telling me the stuff he was going through and I just said I was new in town. We leant in but I felt sick and pulled away, confessed I was married and I was pregnant.”

“It’s Ok Katniss.”

“He had caught his wife cheating on him a week before and was trying to wrap his mind around what he’d do.” She tells him. “He later became my friend and my editor. I’d like for you to meet him when we get to New York. He’s a great guy and has helped me a lot.”

He nods and is silent for ten minutes before he speaks again.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Are you Ok Peeta?”

He nods and smiles at me. “We weren’t ourselves then. I think it’s alright that we lost our minds for a little bit because then when we come back to reality we realise what and who we need in our lives.”

Madge is waiting for them out the front of the house. She was allowing them to stay with her for the night. She had returned home from San Antonio the same day Katniss and Peeta did. She couldn’t remain there for a day longer, especially after the treatment by Gale’s mother. She did the
honourable thing, telling them she was pregnant, due in about 20 weeks with twins and then left them to deal with the news. She wanted to be home with her son and her growing babies.

Katniss embraces her on the front step and then follows her inside. Her belly has popped quite a lot in two weeks and it really looks like she’s pregnant now.

Peeta has gone to get the gear from the car as Katniss nurses Lila.

“He knows about Darius.” She tells Madge.

“Good. You two are slowly opening up to each other.”

It was slow. Their healing would be slow but it was for the best in the end when they felt they had healed as much as they could.

He takes the couch for the night.

But Katniss has an unsettled night. Lila sleeps soundly. Her breathing even and steady.

Katniss stares up at the ceiling and tries to stop her mind from racing.

She was having too many thoughts rush throughout her mind.

She throws the covers back and heads on downstairs, avoiding the creaking floorboards and stairs and sees Peeta lying on the couch.

But she knows him too well and knows he’s not sleeping.

“Hi.” He says, looking up at her from the couch.

She smiles and pads across the carpet to the couch. She sits down beside him, slipping under the covers and curling into his body.

“Can’t sleep?” She shakes her head. “Me either.”

Her minds goes back to earlier in the day when they revealed a little bit more about their separation.

Darius had come over for dinner, introducing himself to Peeta and she saw the two of them get along well. They shared common interests of art, writing and travel and Katniss felt the tension leave her body.

She heard Peeta thank him when he left that night for all the support he gave her and Darius smiled at him.

“You’ve got a wonderful woman Peeta. I know how much she loves you and when I met her I could tell. You two will be fine. Just stick together and don’t give up.”

“Peeta?”

“Yeah.”

“I want us to be together as well. I don’t want to have arrangements of who has Lila on the weekends or who takes her to ballet. I want her to have her two parents living together and an easy life where she has us both to kiss her goodnight. I want this to work out and us all to live together as a family. No resentment, bitterness or anything like that. I want peace.”
He smiles at her. “Me too.” He says. “We’ve got a long road ahead of us Katniss but I’m glad it’s you who’ll be beside me.”

“Where’s the interview?”

“In his apartment.” She tells Peeta. He was dropping her off even though she insisted she’d catch the subway. “Left here.”

She looks across at him and smiles. He had the biggest heart and a whole lot of kindness and was selfless. It was those traits that attracted her to him.

Her phone rings and she answers the call, seeing it to be the artist she’s interviewing.

“Hi, yeah I’m on my way. Had a bit of a crazy morning with my daughter and such.”

“Ok, just checking to make sure it was still on. How far away are you?”

“Five minutes.” She tells him. “Once Peeta finds a space to drop me off…”

“Park in the building. I’ll call security and clear you. Saves the hassle and fussing around. See you soon.” He says. “Oh, and please tell me you’re going to bring that cute daughter of yours?”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Bring her and your husband. See you soon Katniss.”

She sets her phone down and tells Peeta to head for the car park. The guy at the gate opens it up for them and they follow his directions to the spare space designated for the penthouse owner.

“You’re coming to.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. What else were you going to do?”

“Take Lila for a walk, explore the city a bit.”

“It’s cold out. I’m sure you can watch TV or something.”

She grabs her messenger bag, slinging it over her shoulder and grabs the car seat out. Peeta has the diaper bag and they head for the elevator. It brings them to the front door and the door opens.

“Welcome, welcome my girl.” The owner greets them with a big smile. “I can’t believe how long it’s been.”

She smiles at him and hugs him. He kisses both her cheeks and then looks down at the car seat.

“Hello Miss Lila. You’re Mommy has told me all about you. It’s so good to see you again baby girl.” He coos, tickling Lila’s foot. Katniss had interviewed him when her stomach was just starting to show and he congratulated her. He knew she had experienced the loss of her son month’s prior and spent quite a lot of time before the interview telling her how sorry he was. He understood the loss of a child and they bonded together, speaking and eventually laughing.

“Cinna, you remember Peeta?”

Cinna nods, his gold eyeliner shining. “Nice to see you again Peeta. You have a beautiful family.”
Peeta smiles, thanking him and Cinna lets them inside.

Katniss gets straight into interviewer mode. She had a different style; more rustic she was told and had this connection with people right away. Cinna was one of her favourites to interview and also her first as a nervous journalist year’s prior. Peeta and her were in Boston, not yet engaged and working at the Globe, having completed their internships. Cinna and Haymitch were friends and that was how he got her the interview.

She’d never stop thanking her uncle for the opportunities he’s given her, especially as it lead to a lot of doors being opened and her career as a music journalist taking off. She still remained at the Globe part time but earning a great reputation in the world of journalism.

Cinna has seen her grow from the nervous 22 year old to the now 28 year old.

“So, how’s the relationship going? Haymitch told me you headed back to Boston.” Cinna asks, sipping his coffee before settling Lila back into his lap.

Katniss looks at Peeta from across the room and catches him smile at her before he returns to the paper. He was out of earshot.

“That’s good.”

“That’s good. You two are my favorite couple in the whole entire world and I’d hate to see it fall apart.”

Katniss smiles at him and sips her tea. “We’re working on it. We’ve been through a lot…”

“I know, more than your fair share of people. Life can be a pain in the arse and test you time after time but you two will come back fighting harder.” He tells her. “And this beautiful girl will admire your strength. She’s going to grow up with such a beautiful soul because of her two parents.”

Lila sits in Cinna’s lap the entirety of the interview. Peeta watches on and Katniss has Cinna’s attention the whole time. Even when Lila fusses, Cinna is quick to comfort the baby and still remain focused. Katniss usually only has to ask a few questions before a conversation begins and it’s like they’re old friends catching up over lunch.

She’s found out almost everything she wants to know and his publicist wanted her to ask, as this was an exclusive interview, delving more into his private life than any other interview he’s had in his entire life.

They’re leaving the apartment after a long goodbye. Cinna didn’t want them to go but obliged and promised a catch up in the coming weeks.

“I’m starving.” She tells Peeta as they leave the penthouse and head for the elevator.

“Lunch? It’ll not take us long to get to Bridgeport and we can’t check in until 2 anyway.”

“Ok. There’s a nice Japanese restaurant close by.”

“Lead the way.”

They’re seated towards the back of the restaurant and she nurses Lila.

“I forgot how great he is.” Peeta says, looking up from his menu.

“He is. So fantastic and nice. He loves to remind me about how nervous I was when I first started
out and how I spilt my tea over him.”

He smiles. She had called him the minute she left the café they met and told him she had ruined her career. Peeta told her she hadn’t and that she’d encounter many of these obstacles along the way. She was relieved when Cinna called her later on to tell her how great she did and her train ride home was that bit better as she began writing, with a wide smile on her face and the courage to keep on going.

“You’re a great journalist Katniss. I knew you’d be going placed the minute I read your assignments back at college. So natural and carefree, yet so understanding and considerate, especially that assignment piece you did, creating stories of the students and teachers from Dartmouth College.”

She smiles remembering this. Peeta helped her take photographs of those she interviewed for her final assessment and she received full marks for it, her teacher telling her she was in tears reading the stories of those in the college. The last story, Katniss’ own pushed her teacher over the edge with two simple words underneath her picture.

_I survived._

And she has and continues to.

They fill up on sushi and tea and with a sleeping baby they decide to hit the road, beating the early rush hour traffic that was due to start with school ending for the day.

He’s quiet as they head to Bridgeport and she respects his need for silence and begins typing out her interview. She had a week deadline for the piece. She listens to the audio she took and types along.

She’s quite a way through when Peeta tells her they’re at the hotel.

She looks down at the last paragraphs she’s written.

_The two of us have something in common. Something he’s only agreed to speak about until now. Almost two decades ago he endured the worst heartache anyone could endure. Just two years ago, I endured the same heartache. He was an expectant father to a baby boy. A boy who he felt kicking inside of his partner’s stomach for months. Who he created a nursery for, a place he’d lay his son down to sleep in. He heard the heartbeat, saw his son on the screen and got excited as the days went by too slowly as his son was due to arrive. And one night, in the darkness of the night he drove his partner to the hospital, waited outside the examination room and prayed that everything would be alright._

_And just like me. I sat in that bed, holding my husbands hand and held my breath as I tried to hear the sound of my child’s heartbeat. And those words came too soon quickly and our worlds shattered underneath us._

_‘There’s no heartbeat. I’m so sorry.’_

_You don’t understand what it’s like to lose a child unless you have. Especially a stillborn. There’s not enough known or said. I had to deliver my son. Deliver the child that we couldn’t wait to meet. A son that could not cry or move. We have to give them a name and we leave that hospital not knowing what went wrong. We leave broken and unsure and with all these questions that we don’t have the answers to. We return home and shut the door to the nursery. We tell our family and our friends. And we live with this hole in our hearts because we’ve lost the thing that was supposed to fill it and now we have nothing._
And he still feels that emptiness today. His relationship broke down with his partner and he found a distraction in music and partying, trying to forget about the hole in his heart and the depression that was slowly taking over his body. He shrugged it off like it was nothing but he’d later realise he was ill when his tour was cancelled and he checked in to rehab.

She looks at Peeta and he leans over, wiping the moisture from below her eyes. She didn’t realise she had been crying until just then.

“You all right?” He asks.

“Just the interview.” She tells him. “He said so many personal things, opened up for the first time and for once I think he feels relived because no one really knows what he went through then because he’s kept it a secret and bottled it inside of him for years. Now they will hopefully understand what Cinna went through and why he reinvented himself after his rehab stint.”

“I hope people have as much compassion and admiration for him when they read this.” He tells her. “And out of all the people in the world, you’re the one who’ll be able to capture the emotion and understanding because you know what it’s like.”

She swallows the lump and he kisses her forehead. “You’ll do a great job at this Katniss, I don’t doubt it.”

He goes and checks them in and she gets Lila out. A bellboy comes out and takes their bags from the back, stacking them on a trolley and taking them to their room.

Peeta meets her up in the hotel room, his phone pressed in his hand.

“What’s wrong?”

“Jake wanted me to ring him when I arrived.” He tells her. “I didn’t tell him you were coming with me.”

She nods and stands up, walking towards him. “You can do this Peeta and if you don’t want Jake knowing Lila and I are here then we respect that. We’ll support you through whatever decisions you make.”

“I just want to protect her.” He admits.

“I know. That’s what I’ve done since the moment I found out about her. Now it’s your turn to be her father and make the decisions you think are right for her.” She squeezes his hand. “It’s your turn.”

She tells him she’s going to go for a walk and puts Lila into the carrier and heads on out into the winter air. Lila faces outwards, watching the world go by with curiosity. They were close to the main stretch and she familiarises herself with the city she’s visited few times over the last decade.

Katniss continues to walk, talking to Lila as they go and smiling as Lila waves to the passing people. She gazes into shop windows and stopping at a floral boutique. Beautiful, bright flowers are on display out the front and she stops to admire them.

“Would Lila like some pretty flowers?” She asks her daughter who gurgles. “They are aren’t they? I know daddy always wanted to by his daughter pretty flowers.”

She moves to the next lot of pots, looking into them and trying to decide which flowers to get her daughter.
“Katniss?”

She lifts her head and stands face to face with the owner of the voice.

“Hello Nathan.”

Bridgeport, April 20th 2014

She helps him up the stairs of his family home. He’s upset. The funeral service of his father stirring up a lot of emotions, especially those of their own son who they had lost just months before.

His eyes are red and puffy. He’s hardly stopped crying since they arrived a few days ago.

And she found him this morning crying. He had taken her up against the bookshelf the night before, the first time they had been intimate since they lost Leo. He saw the bruise on her back from the bookcase.

“I used you.” He cried out. “I fucking used you.”

She shakes her head, wrapping her arms around his body and burying her nose into his neck.

“Listen to me.” She tells him. “You didn’t. I wanted that as much as you did. It was painful but I liked it. It was beautiful. There are so many words that I can’t say and you know actions are better for me.” She whispers as tears well in her eyes. “Thank you Peeta.”

He kisses her softly and squeezes her tightly to his body. “I love you Katniss.”

They go upstairs to his old childhood bedroom for some time away from everyone before those arrived for the wake. His brothers were off helping their mother and aunt prepare the food.

Katniss lets Peeta cry into her chest for a short while before he leaves her.

“Time to face the crowd.”

People knew they lost their son. They had received nothing but sympathetic looks and questions.

It made her angry that she had to repeat herself so many times and put up with the same looks so many times.

She became sharp with those now and they seemed to understand to leave her alone.

But Peeta’s mother didn’t.

She made out the death of her husband to be the only thing Katniss and Peeta should be focusing on and that the death of their son should be pushed aside for the time being.

Leo hadn’t even been cremated for four months yet.

Katniss put on her brave face and was there for her husband but she knew deep inside he was hurting a whole lot. Two deaths in such a short amount of time was hard, especially those of two people who he loved so much.

She finds him with a beer in hand. The drinking started the day they picked up Leo’s ashes from the crematorium in the tiny baby booty shaped urn and he hadn’t been without a drink since that day.
Three beers have been drunk by the time the other mourners arrive and he’s on the way to getting drunk and the more his mother and brother’s pick at him, the worst he is going to break. It’s been a hard week of dealing with them, who tell him how he should be grieving and how they should be continuing on, considering thinking of having more children.

But Peeta doesn’t want any more. He told Katniss that shortly after they lost Leo, he told her no more. He couldn’t endure the pain of losing another thing he loves.

And it broke Katniss’ heart.

But maybe he might come around once the scars start to heal.

“Just leave us alone. We’re fine in here.” His mother screams and Peeta, Jake and Nathan all leave the kitchen like dogs, pouting and their tail between their legs from getting into trouble.

Peeta sits down beside Katniss, stumbling slightly. He smells of beer and whisky. He’s been in his father’s liquor collection.

Most of the mourners have left by after dinnertime and Katniss is glad because Peeta is close to being wasted. As are Jake and Nathan but they’re not as bad as their youngest brother.

“You need to get your fucking life in order Peeta.” Nathan tells him. “You’re a fucking mess.”

“Fuck off Nath, you don’t understand what it’s like to lose a child.” Peeta slurs back, clenching his fist.

“Grow up Peeta. It’s not always about you. You make it seem like it’s all about you but it’s not. Our dad died, show a little bit of sympathy for him and Mom.”

“I fucking am. I’m here aren’t I?”

“He’s not even cold in the ground and you’ve made you’re way through his liquor.”

“Nathan.” Jake warns.

“No, it’s the truth. He’s strutted in here moping, looking like a dog that’s been kicked to the kerb and says this is worse for him than anyone else. He’s playing the sympathy card like he has his whole life. Fucking grow up and get your life in order. The way you’re going you don’t deserve your wife. You’re treating her like she’s nothing. You fucked her last night in dad’s study and left her crying. No man would cause his woman to cry.”

Katniss looks down at Peeta and knows the anger is bubbling.

“So what, your son died and you act like no one else has experienced it. Newsflash, plenty of people have lost a child. Mom and Dad have too, they got over it.”


“He’s acting like the twelve year old.” Nathan bites. “When was the last time you looked at yourself in the mirror? You should take a hard look before you lose every single good thing in your life…”

Nathan is on his back, knocking everything over in Peeta’s path to tackle him onto the ground.
“Shut the fuck up Nathan. Leave me the fuck alone.”

The two wrestle, fighting for dominance but the adrenaline Peeta is experiencing overpowers the fight Nathan is giving. Everyone gasps and gathers in the room to witness the two Mellark brother’s fight.

“Stay out of my fucking life. You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

A crack sounds soon after and Jake pulls Peeta from Nathan. Blood spurts from Nathan’s nose and his lip.

“You’re a fucking maniac.”

“Nathan shut the fuck up.” Jake yells down at his brother. “Or I’ll let him beat you some more. Come on Peeta.”

Jake hauls Peeta off outside while everyone fusses over Nathan.

“You’ve fucked everything up!” Nathan screams out. “Hope you’re fucking happy!”

Katniss packs their suitcases quickly while Jake calms down his brother.

The house phone rings an hour later when she convinces Jake she’s got it from there.

“Come on. We’re going home.” She whispers to him, wrapping her arm around his waist and leading him to the front door.

“Running away like a coward.” His mother sneers from behind them. “He needs surgery thanks to you. Be glad he’s not pressing charges.” She tells them. “You won’t be welcome here for quite some time Peeta. Hope you enjoy alienating your family.”

“I have family.”

“Well, if you continue to act like this than I’m afraid you might not.” She tells him. “Take care Katniss and I hope my son realises what he has done will not be forgotten by us.”
He watches his family leave the hotel room. He had placed two big kisses on his daughter’s cheeks as she rested in the carrier, smiling widely as she faced the world in front of her. She was perceptive and he loved watching her discover the world and things for the first time.

He held his phone in his hand and reviewed the messages sent between him and his brother.

_Call us when you get in. Would love to see you mate._

_Have Katniss and Lila come? If not maybe we might come for a visit during Christmas break and finally meet your little girl._

_It’s a good thing you’re doing Peet and if Nathan doesn’t think it is, than you have my support. A full year of sobriety is brilliant and a big achievement, not many reach that goal. Katniss truly is a good goal and now your daughter an even better one._

He had told his brother that he wanted to make his daughter proud. Wanted her to be proud of the man he was and later become. How he changed his life for the good and got everything he wanted, even if he didn’t realise he wanted it until it fell in his lap.

Lila was one of the greatest things to happen to him.

And Katniss. He’d never stop thanking her for giving her to him, carrying her for nine months and giving life to her.

He mans up and hits the phone symbol on Jake’s message thread and waits for the calling screen to appear. He places his phone to his ear and listens to it ring two times.

_“Peeta? Hi. You in Bridgeport?”_

_“I am. Just got in.”_ He tells his brother, feeling relieved at the own relief in his own brother’s tone.

_“Great. Did you bring Katniss and Lila?”_

He pauses briefly. He didn’t want to lie to Jake, Jake wasn’t the one who treated him like shit in the last two years. He did his best even when the family told him to not contact him. It resumed when Peeta returned from his backpacking and has been casual but amends are slowly being made. And those amends want him to share Lila and Katniss with him.

_“I did. Katniss has just taken her for a walk. The long drive has them a bit unsettled.”_

_“That’s great. I can’t believe you’re here. We should do dinner tonight? Bring Katniss and Lila round.”_

_“Will that be a good idea?”_

_“It’ll just be Lisa and the kids, no one else will know. I promise.”_

_“Ok. We’ll be there. Want me to bring anything?”_

_“Just yourselves. We have so much to catch up on.”_

_“We do.”_
Peeta ends the call smiling slightly and decides he’ll go and catch up with Katniss. She couldn’t be too far away.

He leaves the hotel and heads down the street; hands pushed deep inside his jean pockets. The afternoon air is cool but he’s not complaining. It’s pleasant.

He rounds the corner and runs into someone who’s in a hurry.

“You all right mate?” He asks, holding out his hand for the man.

The man looks him in the eyes and he looks as if he’s looking in a mirror.

“What are you doing here?” Nathan asks him.

“Nathan…”

“No, just go back to Boston. I don’t want to see you. Take you and your perfect family back to Boston and don’t ever step foot here again. We don’t want you here.”

“You didn’t invite me here.” Peeta tells his brother. “Jake did.”

Nathan looks around the streets and than back at Peeta. He hesitates, trying to figure out what to say and is gone without another word.

Peeta watches him leave and exhales a deep breath before he heads off down the street.

He finds Katniss as she wanders the street aimlessly and pale.

“Katniss, what’s wrong?” He asks her, grabbing her hand and forcing her to look at him.

“Nathan.”

He pulls her to his chest and holds her. “I know. I just saw him as well.” He says. “Let’s head back to the hotel.”

She tells him that Nathan shared a few firm words with her, putting two and two together and realising Peeta was here to see him. He told her to leave as he didn’t want to have anything to do with him or her. He didn’t want them in his life and then left, telling her he’d keep their visit a secret if they were gone right away.

“Jake invited us to dinner tonight. We don’t have to go if you don’t want to.”

“No, we came here for a reason. We’re not leaving until we speak to him. We’ve got to try at least.”

He nods, kisses her softly on the lips thanking her.

He couldn’t do this without her.

Lisa greets them at the front door. She smiles widely at the family of three.

“It’s so good to see you all.” She says and holds her arms out, embracing Katniss and Peeta both. “Lila, it’s so good to meet you little girl.” Lila smiles at her aunt and Lisa smiles back. “Come on in.”

Zoe, Nate and Piper greet their aunt and uncle with hugs and kisses.
“Kids, we’d like you to meet you baby cousin.” Peeta says lifting Lila to his lap. “This is Lila.” Lila looks at her cousins curiously. Studying the three of them as they stare back at her.

Zoe is the first to speak. “Hi Lila, I’m Zoe and I’m 8 years old. You’re so cute.” Lila crinkles her eyebrows and then reaches out for Zoe. Zoe gives Lila her hand and Lila smiles at her oldest cousin.

“I think she likes you Zo.” Katniss says, smiling at her niece.

“I think she does to Aunt Kat.” Zoe beams and Peeta hands her over, sitting her on Zoe’s lap. Lila is in good spirits and smiles and giggles at Nate and Piper as well.

Jake appears in the doorway and motions for Peeta to follow him.

“Go, I’ll stay here.” Katniss tells him quietly and he squeezes her hand and leaves the room.

Jake sits down in his office with Peeta taking the spare chair.

“Nathan rang.” Jake says.

“Yeah. Ran into him in town.” Peeta tells him. “Saw Katniss first, told her we should leave in a not so friendly manner.”

“He’s upset.” Jake frowns. “But the two of you should talk.” He says. “He claims he is honourable and a good guy, he’d at least give you a moment of his day to speak to you.”

Peeta nods and scrubs at his jaw.

“It’s time he got off his high horse and got over what happened.”

Dinner goes off well. The time the family has been apart barely shows and it’s back to the old times.

“Why haven’t we seen you in so long?” Zoe asks Katniss and him. “Did something happen?”

Peeta looks up at his brother and sister-in-law and back down at Zoe.

“Katniss and I had a bit of a hard time after Leo and Grandpa died.”

“Were you both sad?”

“We were and we found it hard to come back here.” Peeta admits. “Aunt Katniss went to New York to work for a little while and I went off traveling trying to cheer up.”

“Did you two get a divorce?”

“No, just took a bit of a break.”

“And Lila? Why didn’t we know about her until Thanksgiving?”

Jake jumps in, helping out Peeta as he struggles to answer her. “Uncle Peeta didn’t know about Lila until just before us.”

“Why?”
“Remember how we weren’t together?” Katniss reminds her and she nods. “Uncle Peeta hadn’t been well for a while.”

“And Aunt Katniss made sure I was well and healthy before I met her. And she made a good decision because I didn’t want Lila seeing me sick. And now since I’m all better we can all be together.”

“So, will we see you both more now, especially since we have a cousin?”

“You will.” Jake promises her. “We’d love to have them around, wouldn’t we kids?”

The three kids respond with loud yesses and smiles and Peeta is glad he agreed to come back.

She looks up at him from beneath her lashes and swallows the lump in her throat.

“You ready for this?” She asks him quietly. Lila is asleep over her shoulder.

He nods and reaches up for the doorbell.

They wait.

And after what feels like forever the front door opens.

A stony faced woman greets them.

“What are you doing here?” She asks.

He swallows the lump in his throat.

“Mom, I’d like to introduce you to your granddaughter.” He says.

The woman looks at Katniss, narrowing her eyes and then to the baby that is asleep over her shoulder. Her face softens slightly but returns to the hardness it was before.

“I don’t want anything to do with you.” She announces.

“Mom, I’m better now. I want to apologise for what I did. I want to try and make amends and know that if I fails than I did try my best.” He pleads. “Mom, please. Can’t we just talk?”

She looks between the two of them and then out behind them to the street. The nosy neighbour from next door is trying to listen in on their conversation. Listen to the youngest Mellark boy beg for forgiveness. Of course the whole town knew, his mother was a gossiper and by the time Katniss and him would have left Bridgeport last year after his father’s funeral, the town would have known Peeta was fast on the track to becoming an alcoholic who just beat his brother and kicked out from the family.

“Get in from out of the cold.” She tells them, stepping aside to let them in.

Peeta lets Katniss in first and closes the door behind him.

He kicks off his shoes and takes off his coat before carefully taking Lila from Katniss, allowing her to take her shoes and jacket off. He settles his daughter against his chest, kissing the top of her head and following his mother into the living room. She switches off the television and takes a seat in the armchair by the fire.

“This is a bit of a surprise.” She states, looking down at Lila.
He nods but then smiles. “A good surprise.”

Katniss joins him, sitting down beside him and checking on Lila before looking at her mother-in-law.

“You sure she’s yours?”

“Mom, despite the 15 months we were apart, Lila is mine. Katniss is faithful. As am I.”

“I don’t appreciate you leaving him.” His mother says to Katniss.

“I know but I didn’t know what else to do.” She admits. “I was losing my mind and needed to go before I cracked it. Who would have known where we’d be if I didn’t leave?”

“She’s right Mom. I respect her for having the guts to leave. I’d hate myself if she resented me. If I resented her. She’s the woman I want to grow old with and I don’t know what I’d do if I lost that.”

“Why’d it take you so long to come back?” She asks Katniss.

“I believed Peeta and Lila were both ready to be in each other’s lives. He was ready.”

She narrows her eyes. “We’re not too fond on how both of you acted the last two years.”

“Mom, what we did, we did in private. We didn’t want the whole family involved in our time. We experienced a lot and are slowly learning and healing again.” Peeta says. “We lost our son.”

He sees his mother frown slightly. “I know. It’s a hard thing. And it doesn’t get easier.” She says. “When I lost your sister, I had you to focus on. I had your brothers. You two had nothing but each other. Than you lost your father soon after. Grief is a hard thing and it sometimes breaks a person to no return.”

“We lost our minds a little while.” He tells his mother.

“That’s totally fine.” She replies. “Now was better than down the track. Remember when you were five and I left you and your brothers for a month?”

“You went to go an take care of your sister.”

She shakes her head. “I had a mad month. I woke on random couches, drank until I could no longer stand, hoped on buses and trains and went to the next city. I needed to be out and not home where I felt like a failure.” She tells them. “And after my mad month of forgetting and trying to piece my mind back together I felt better. I could be in the house with you all and felt freer.”

She looks down at Lila in her son’s lap and smiles. “She’s beautiful. A mixture of you both.”

Peeta produces the book Katniss made him of Lila and lets his mother learn all about her granddaughter.

Despite her hesitance to have them back in her life, she’s accepting, understanding their decision and choices. She just had to sit with them and hear their story.

And this is what he’d do with Nathan. Get him in a room and just speak to him. Make him understand.

Because Nathan was spoilt. Never had to deal with anything. Hadn’t lost anything to make him
lose his mind. He was privileged in that way.

Peeta would make him understand that life could be total bullshit and unfair

Lila meets her grandmother when she wakes and tenderly touches her grandmother’s cheek with her hand.

“Welcome to the family Miss Lila.”

Lila lies between them, snoring as she has her afternoon nap. They left his mother’s house shortly after the meeting and came back to the hotel.

“Do you know when you’ll speak to Nathan?” She asks him.

He shakes his head and rolls over. She rolls over as well.

“Maybe tonight. He’s getting married in two days.”

“Want me to come with you?”

He shakes his head. “No, Jake said he would. Lisa offered to have you and Lila for the night. The kids want to spend some time with you and Lila.”

“I don’t want to get a call saying either of you are in the hospital.”

“I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

She smiles at him and he reaches out for her hand, kissing her knuckles gently.

They’ll be fine.

Jake drives to Nathan’s house. Katniss, Lisa and the kids were going to go out Christmas light looking.

“I don’t think this is a good idea.” He says to Jake.

Jake keeps his attention on the road as he drives. “He’s the stubborn middle child. He’s always been hard to understand and crack.”

“Katniss doesn’t want either of us in the hospital.” Peeta replies.

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.” Jake assures him and turns left onto a street. Christmas lights flicker and shine in the frosty night.

Jake pulls his car up outside of a house and Peeta looks out at the house.

“We’re here.” Jake announces. “Take all the time you want.”

They sit for five, ten, fifteen minutes before Peeta decides he is ready.

Jake leads him up the path and to the front door where he knocks.

“Just try and convince him to talk to you.”
The front door opens and Laney stands there.

“Hi Laney, Nath home?” Jake asks.

She nods and looks at Peeta carefully before letting the two men in. She goes to get him from the basement and they wait for him in the hallway.

Heavy footsteps trudge up the stairs and Nathan appears, fuming.

He has Peeta pinned up against the wall, his hands gripping his jacket tightly.

“You don’t want to do this Nathan.” Peeta tells him calmly.

“I told you to fuck off and go back to Boston.”

“I know you did.” Peeta replies. “But I can’t.”

Nathan was scarily just like their mother. He could be cold and mean when he wanted to. He was stubborn. And hardly ever smiled. It took a lot for him to shake a grudge and if you crossed his bad side, there was no way you’d ever be back on his good side. He was still mad at his high school friend for sleeping with his ex-girlfriend months after they broke up.

“Why can’t you just listen to me? I don’t want you here.” Nathan tells him.

“Just hear me out.” Peeta says. “Please Nathan.”

Nathan stares him down for a few more moments before letting go of his jacket. “You have five minutes.”

“No Laney, he has no place being here.”

Laney shoots him a look of hurt and sulks off down the hallway.

“Nathan, please know how sorry I am for what happened last year. I wasn’t myself. I’ve never experienced the death of something that I helped create. I haven’t really been exposed to the grief of a loved one either. It shook me hard when Leo died. I blamed myself for not protecting not only my son and Katniss. I still blame myself despite it not being either of our fault. Being told that these things happen and they are unpredictable; was a punch to the gut. He was my son and I couldn’t do anything. He was gone before I even had the chance to hold him while he was alive, feeling his chest move, look into his eyes and see him smile. I became a father and the father of a stillborn the second Leo finally came into the world.”

Nathan looks him in the eye, a flash of guilt crosses his face and he clears his throat. “Why don’t we take a seat?”

They sit in the lounge room, Nathan across from them with Laney sitting at his side.

“We’ve never spoken about this.” Nathan claims.

“You never asked and I wasn’t ready.” Peeta tells him. “It was too soon. I still woke up every day for the first year hoping it was all a dream, everything, and that Katniss was still beside me, Leo was in his crib awake and ready for the day. But if you want to know, I can tell you.”

Nathan shifts in his seat. Jake does the same. Laney wipes at her eye.
“Tell us about Leo.”

28th to the 29th of November, 2014

Katniss stretches in the front seat beside him, yawning and then resting her hands on top of her stomach. She smiles.

“I can’t believe next year there’ll be a baby at the table.” She exclaims. She was so excited to finally have our baby here.

“We’re so close.”

“So very close.”

He helps her into the house and she tells him she’s going to shower and get ready for bed. She was exhausted.

He sneaks into the shower with her and kisses her under the stream of the warm water. He carries her to bed, ravishes her body and lets her sink down onto him with a cry of pleasure.

He lets her take the lead, be in control. They could be in the delivery room tomorrow morning for all they know.

With cries of pleasure sung out into their bedroom, they roll onto their sides and Peeta spoons her from behind, kissing her shoulder.

“Sleep well my love.”

He expects to feel a movement or a kick from the baby but he doesn’t. Maybe the baby is in a position where its movements aren’t felt. Their doctor told them that that could be a possibility.

He snuggles deeper into his wife’s body and falls asleep with a smile on his face.

“Peeta.” He hears her voice before he sees her. She’s shaking him. “Peeta, wake up.”

He opens his eyes and looks into the eyes of his wife. She has tears filling them. Her cheeks are damp.

He notices its way before sunrise. The sky is still dark. Its only hours after they fell asleep.

“The baby’s not moving.” She whispers to him. “I haven’t felt the baby move for a while.”

He nods; trying to process the thing she is telling him.

But it seems so foreign. He’s not sure she’s really saying these things.

“I think we should go to the hospital.” She quietly says, sniffling.

He helps her out of bed, helps her into some clothes and then he dresses silently. She doesn’t speak a word. She rubs her belly, trying to will their son or daughter to move, to show some sign of movement, to show that they’ve just been playing a game and all is good.

He phones their OB and doesn’t even apologise for waking her.

“Is she in labor?” The doctor asks.

“No. We just need you to meet us at the hospital.”
“Is she bleeding?”

“No... it’s the... she...”

“Bring her in Peeta.”

The city is quiet as he drives them to the hospital.

“It’s going to be alright. It has to be alright.”

“What if it’s not?” She asks him at a red light.

He doesn’t want to even think about this. He looks at his wife and sees the tears streaming down his face.

He doesn’t even know what to say himself.

The doctor meets them in the emergency department and takes them through the hospital, up to the delivery ward. He helps Katniss change into a gown. He grips her hand, kisses the back of her hand and silently prays that everything is OK.

Their doctor steps into the room, sits at the side of Katniss’ bed and squirts the gel onto Katniss’ exposed stomach and takes the wand, pressing into her stomach.

Peeta holds his breath and waits. He can feel the blood in his ears and kisses Katniss’ hand again.

It feels like hours later when he finally sees the doctor’s hand still on Katniss’ belly. She hasn’t taken her eyes off of the monitor. He watches the disbelief cover her face as she can’t find any sign of life inside of his wife’s stomach.

And he knows he doesn’t want to hear the words she’s preparing herself to say to the expectant couple.

She exhales, sets the wand down and reaches for Katniss’ hand, gripping it tightly.

“No.” Katniss murmurs.

“I’m so sorry.” She begins to say. “There’s no heartbeat.”

And he feels his world come crashing down.

He doesn’t remember much of what follows but he goes numb. He doesn’t hear what the doctor is telling them. He can only hear Katniss’ cries fill the room. Loud strangled sobs. The same crying her heard years before at Prim’s bedside.

He manages to comfort her and he just holds her, buries her face into his shirt and lets her sob and clutch for him. Clutch to the hope that this is just a dream.

A face leans in towards Katniss, her doctor.

“If you like, we can take you down to a delivery room and break your membranes.”

Katniss doesn’t answer but he does for her, nodding at the doctor for her to prepare the room.

There’s a flurry of movement.
And he just follows behind as they wheel her to a room, hook her up to numerous machines. Doctor after doctor comes into the room. Nurse after nurse. Some offer their condolences. Other’s can’t bare the look on the couple’s faces and leave as quickly as they can.

Katniss’ waters are broken and her labor begins quite soon after.

An hour after Katniss’ water’s have broken and she’s quickly dilating, the doctor comes to see them, sitting beside Katniss. Katniss stares blankly at her, unable to say anything.

“The cord wrapped around the baby’s neck.” She explains. “It’s common. It happens quite a lot.”

“How long ago did the baby…?” He begins to ask.

“Recently. A day or two.”

“Was there anything to prevent it from happening?”

She shakes her head. “It’s something that happens. I only saw Katniss last week and everything was fine.” She tells them. “I’ll be back later.

“Don’t leave me.” Katniss whispers to him.

“I’m not going anywhere.” He tells her and slides into bed behind her, holding her tightly and doing the best thing he can to get her through this.

She’s 7 centimetres dilated by 10am and resting. He slips out of the room. He pulls out his phone and dials the only person he knows that can talk sense to him.

“Hey, we’ve been calling all morning. Where are you guys?” Haymitch asks

“At the hospital.”

“Is Katniss having the baby?”

Peeta breaks down to Haymitch, not able to say a word to the man.

“You have to be there for Katniss. You can’t leave her side. We’ll come by later. Keep us updated. Stay strong.” He says. “I’m so sorry Peeta.”

After lunch, the doctor deems her ready to deliver.

He props her body up with his. Tears cover both their cheeks. Their eyes red and bloodshot.

He had pictured this moment since she told him she was pregnant. He was overjoyed to be in the delivery room with her. Ready to meet their baby. He dreamed about this day but this day now became one he dreaded.

This was the worst day of his life.

And now, his wife had to deliver their lifeless baby, go through the pain for nothing but sorrow and heartache. To hold their lifeless child in their arms that will never open their eyes.

She sobs quietly and he kisses the side of her head.

He has to be here for her. Support her at his moment and then worry about everything else later on.
“I’ve got you.” He whispers into her ear. “We’ve got this and everything else that will be thrown our way.”

Leo Thomas Mellark enters the world sleeping at 2:32pm.

He embraces Katniss for the rest of the night. Sobbing quietly into her neck.

The pain and memories of that day left him hollow and saddened and he quickly left Nathan’s without an explanation. Jake drove him to the hotel and Peeta waited for Katniss to return with Lila.

Katniss got Lila to bed, showered after Peeta and then crawled beside him in bed.

“Please, can you just hold me?” He asked.

She held him and in the darkness of the hotel room they embraced each other.

“I think the day I realised I needed to change was the night I was put in jail.”

“What happened?” She asks.

“The officer on duty, she pulled me over and I was over the limit. As she drove me to the station she told me a story. Something I realised happened to her.”

“What happened?”

“A few years before a drunk driver crashed into their car, killing her three kids instantly. They were five, three and one. The driver got off with basically a year prison sentence and was out after good behaviour but she was given the life sentence of three dead children and the pain and guilt.”

He tells her. “I realised that night, after Haymitch dropped me home, that I didn’t want to be responsible for tearing apart the life of a family. I didn’t want to be on the news and in the newspapers for killing innocent lives due to my destructive habit. I didn’t want the alcohol to render me liable to such a thing and agreed to go on the trip with Haymitch soon after.”

She looks into his eyes and cups his cheek. “It would have eaten you alive if you found yourself guilty of that.”

He nods and lets her dry the tears from his cheeks.

“I met a guy while I was travelling as well. He had addiction to alcohol thirty odd years before. At this time, the laws weren’t as strict then either… He was drunk and picked his son up from school. He drove them to his son’s karate lesson, lost control before crashing into a tree. He killed his 8-year-old son and has never been able to move on. He told me he didn’t admit he was a drunk until years later. He sought help, travelled and couldn’t find himself leaving Bali. He found solace there and has only just begun forgiving himself.”

“I didn’t want that guilt either. I know what it feels like to have a child die but at least it wasn’t at my hands.” He says sadly. “I’m glad I got sober before I had to endure something like this.”

“We’re proud of who you are and what you’ve come from.” She reminds him.

She kisses him softly on the lips and holds him as they fall asleep.
He’s up well before sunrise.
Katniss and Lila are still sound asleep and he sneaks out of their hotel room.
He runs. He runs all around town and runs until the sun comes up.
He stops at the cemetery where his father is buried and stands before his gravesite.
“I thought I’d find you here.”
He turns around and sees Nathan standing behind him.
“I come here to think quite a lot.” Nathan tells his younger brother. “It just seems to help me.”
“This is the first time I’ve been here since we buried him.”
Nathan comes and stands beside Peeta and in silence they look down at where their father is buried.
They don’t speak or say anything for close to ten minutes.
“You walked out last night.”
Peeta nods and turns to look at him. “It just got to be all too much.”
“You should bring Lila and Katniss around today. I’d love to meet my niece and see Katniss again.”
“You better apologise to her.”
“I will.” He says. “Come by for lunch.”

Lila is winging by the time he arrives back.
“What’s wrong my girl?” Peeta asks her. She’s in the stroller, fussing about and throws her toy to the ground in frustration.
She holds out her arms for him and he takes her out of the stroller, bringing her to his chest to embrace her.
“Look at that dirty face. Did you have a good breakfast?”
He reaches for a wipe and cleans his daughter’s face.
“There you are.” Katniss says, leaving the bathroom. “We didn’t know where you went.”
“I went running.”
She smiles at him and picks up a diaper and the wipes. “Are you alright?”
He nods and lays Lila down on the bed, taking over the diaper change.
“We already ate.” She tells him, sitting down beside Lila.
“That’s alright. I’ll grab something quickly.”

She tickles Lila’s bare belly and smiles at her daughter.

“Good run?”

“It was. I did my usual trek.”

“You left early.”

“Couldn’t sleep too well.”

“You could have woken me if you wanted to talk.”

He shakes his head and snaps the crotch together of Lila’s onesie before pulling up her tights.

“I just wanted to run it out and it helped.”

She nods and leans down, pressing a kiss to Lila’s nose.

“Nathan invited us for lunch.” He tells her. “But only if you want to go.”

They arrive at Nathan and Laney’s doorstep just before lunchtime. Lila fusses in her car seat, ready for a feed and a sleep.

Laney answers the door and greets them, bringing them into the house and into the living room.

They officially meet their niece and fall in love with her.

“It’s so good to finally meet you Missy.” Nathan coos to his niece who whinges from her mother’s lap. “I know, you have your sleep and then we can have a play.”

Katniss excuses herself to feed Lila and disappears for some privacy.

“She’s beautiful.” Nathan tells him.

“She is. I’m so lucky. I’ve got two beautiful girls in my life.”

“She’s done a good job with her.”

“She has. She was always meant to be a mother.” He tells his brother with a wide smile.

He checks on Lila as she sleeps in the car seat. She’s been down for almost half an hour while her mother gets ready.

“You almost ready?” He calls to her through the bathroom door. “We’ve got to get going soon.”

“Hold your horses.” She tells him from the other side of the door and he smiles.

He makes sure the diaper bag is packed, slipping in extra diapers, wipes and clothes. He grabs his phone and wallet, placing them in his pocket before picking up his jacket.

He hears the door to the bathroom open and turns around just as Katniss steps out.

She’s in a silver dress that hugs every curve of her body. She looks amazing.

She smooths out the material and then looks up, smiling at him.
“You look sensational.”

She smiles at him wider. “Thanks. I’ve had this dress for a while.”

“You should wear it more often.” He tells her and watches as she blushes slightly. “Ready to get going?”

She nods and sits down on the bed, slipping into her shoes. He helps her into her coat and she sets her clutch into the diaper bag.

“Ready?” She asks him.

They sit in the church. In the front row after the rest of the family telling them to sit there. Lila sleeps in the car seat and they wait for the bride to arrive.

He looks up at his brother who looks nervous as he waits for his fiancé.

He feels saddened that he’s not standing there beside his brothers but he’s glad they let him and his family in on the day.

Katniss reaches across for his hand and he takes it in his, linking his fingers through hers.

Katniss settles their daughter outside of the reception room. The rest of the guests have arrived and are enjoying appetisers before the doors open.

Lila had been great throughout the ceremony. She slept and when she did wake it was all over and photos were being taken. She showed off to the guests and other family members who travelled for the wedding and met a lot more of her aunts, uncles and their families.

He helps Katniss into the reception room and they find their seats. Laney and Nathan told them they’d squeeze them in, they had a few who couldn’t make it so it wouldn’t off set their booked numbers.

The reception goes off with a bang. The happiness shared by the couple is felt the minute they enter the reception. Entrees are served, followed by dinner and speeches.

The cake is cut and then the first dance begins.

“We’d like to invite everyone else up onto the floor to dance.” The DJ says inviting the rest of the guests up to dance.

Peeta turns to Katniss and smiles shyly at her.

“Lead the way.” She tells him with a grin.

He leads her to the dance floor, leaving Lila with his mother, and stand where the other couples have gathered. A few children dance with their parents and smile widely.

He settles his hands on her hips and she links hers around his neck and they dance to the music.

So honey now
Take me into your loving arms
Kiss me under the light of a thousand stars
Place your head on my beating heart
I'm thinking out loud
"Maybe we found love right where we are"

She rests her head on his shoulder and they dance in a simple side-to-side motion.

“Thank you.” He tells her.

“For what?”

“Without you, I wouldn’t be here today, seeing my brother marry his best friend.” He says. “Without you, I wouldn’t be the man I am today. You’ve shaped me into who I am today and without you, who knows what I would have become.”

She looks up at him and he looks down at her, getting lost in her beautiful grey eyes that look like moonlight under the twinkling lights.

She smiles at him and slowly, he leans in, touching his lips to hers softly, encasing her in a kiss that lasts until the end of the song.

“Stay with me.” He murmurs against her lips.

“Always.”
Chapter 10

“Want to go for a walk?” He asks her, hovering in the doorway of the living room at Johanna’s place. “It’s beautiful outside, doesn’t even feel like winter at all.”

“Sure. Just let me get this little lady clean and we can go.”

They’d been back from Bridgeport for just over two weeks now. Christmas had come and gone and they made a huge fuss out of the day for their daughter who literally had no idea what was going on. Effie and Haymitch hosted dinner and it was a quiet affair with just their family. Lila was spoilt with an abundance of gifts and lots of attention.

Katniss returned to Peeta’s house that evening and stayed the night, slipping in beside him in bed and they held each other, recalling past Christmas’ and their future Christmas’. They even discussed the phone calls he received from all of his family, Nathan included.

They were on the path to making amends. There was still a sour spot there, despite the reaching out Peeta had done, Nathan especially was still hesitant and learning to accept his brother back into his life. Inviting them to the wedding was a big step but there were still a few hurdles to cross before there were no hurt or bad feelings.

His mother though had been a bit more welcoming and sent them all a Christmas gift, especially for her granddaughter who she’d taken to so well. She had asked to be more involved and Peeta promised her he wouldn’t deny her his granddaughter.

The night before, they had just celebrated New Years Eve the night before and Johanna was still upstairs nursing a hangover. She had kicked her midnight kiss out early this morning and Katniss had caught him sneaking out of the house while Lila and her sat in the living room together. Peeta ran into him as he arrived at the house for breakfast and Katniss and Peeta laughed about how embarrassed the poor guy looked.

They’d had a pretty lazy day so far. Peeta cooked them all breakfast, helped Katniss clean the house while Lila napped and then they ate a light lunch while they watched TV. It was these lazy days that meant so much to them.

She fastens Lila into the stroller and Peeta takes the lead, pushing their daughter. Katniss links her arm through his and they walk slowly throughout the neighbourhood.

“What time did Johanna end up going to bed?” He asks her.

“I went to bed when you left at 12:30. Lila had a restless night, up every couple of hours. I think it was 3am by the time Johanna finally called it a night and kicked the rest of the people out. Johanna didn’t end up going to bed until 4.”

“Really?”

“Her and her date did it on the couch for a while.” She grimaces.

“Which one? Please not be the one we were sitting on today?”

“I don’t know, I wish I did.” She tells him laughing. “I’m really just hoping they did it on the floor.”

“Why couldn’t they walk the few steps and actually utilise her bed?” He asks.
“You know what alcohol does to horny people, they do it wherever the hell they can and want to. They’re incoherent they don’t know what they’re doing half the time.”

“Jo was pretty wasted by the time I left.”

“She was wasted before everyone showed up.” She corrects him. “But she still managed to out drink everyone else.”

He smiles and they slow as they near the road, looking both ways before they cross.

“Did you sleep at all last night?”

“Not really. I just had hour bursts, waking when Lila was stirring and feeding her or changing her before I got her back down again. She spent a lot of time on the boob last night.”

“It’s her comfort. She was such a good girl last night though.”

“She was. She’s such a good girl, I can’t fault her on her restlessness last night.”

“You know you could have stayed back and slept and I could have taken her.” He tells her.

“I like the idea of fresh air and not missing out on any moments with you.”

He smiles at her and they continue on, passing children who ride their bikes and play games of tag on the footpaths. The children smile at them as they walk on, even smiling at Lila. Some stop them to talk to Lila who gurgles away to them all.

They enter the park and find a bench to sit down on with hot chocolate and a giant cookie to share. Lila sleeps in the stroller and her parents watch the world pass by.

“Katniss, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Yeah?”

“This might be a bit forward but it seems like the next best step for us.” He begins. “I was wondering if you might consider moving back in with me? You’re already spending so much time at the house, leaving late at night or staying the night? I thought it might be nice to finally be under the same roof again. That way I can be there all the time and we can both now be there for Lila. I feel like I’m missing so much when we’re not together and I don’t want to miss another moment in Lila’s life.”

She smiles at him.

“And it might help us in mending our relationship. At the moment I don’t think we know where we stand and this might help us.” He says. “And I know Johanna is ready to have her house back.” He chuckles. “So what do you say?”

She looks at her daughter for a few moments and thinks.

It couldn’t hurt moving back with him. She was ready to mend everything, to reacquaint themselves again and finally work on being a family. It’d take some work but she was ready to put in the effort.

“So, how would this work?” She asks.

He smiles. She had said the exact same thing to him back in college when he asked if she wanted
to move in with him and two others. She had asked the same thing when they graduated college and found a studio apartment right in the city that they moved into for the first 18 months of their working lives while they saved for their dream home. She then asked him the same thing when they went house hunting and found their dream home.

The next day they move the few belongings over to his house, vacating Johanna’s life and giving her back her space and privacy again. She told Katniss it was no hassles, that she didn’t mind them living with them but Katniss could sense somewhere that she wouldn’t mind the house back to herself again.

“I’ll miss having you both here.” Johanna tells Katniss as she straps Lila into her car seat.

“We’ll miss you too.” She tells her. “But we’re literally right around the corner and you’ll now enjoy the peace and quiet of not having a baby.”

“I didn’t actually mind having a baby in the house. It was nice to wake up to those smiles and have those baby cuddles.”

“You can come and visit whenever you want.” Katniss reminds her. “And you can now return to your sex life.”

Johanna smiles and embraces her friend. “Make this work Katniss.”

“I will.”

Johanna lets her go and smiles before moving to Lila, leaning down to kiss the baby softly on the cheek.

“Bye Miss Lila. Be a good girl and I’ll see you round. I might come and visit tomorrow after work.”

“We’d like that, won’t we miss Lila?”

Lila gurgles, kicks her legs and smiles.

“Bye beautiful, go be with your daddy.”

Katniss picks up the car seat off the table and smiles at her friend. “Thanks for everything these past 6 weeks, I really appreciate it.”

She nods. “If it doesn’t work you’ll always have a place here, both of you will.”

Katniss smiles, silently thanking her friend before she picks up her handbag.

Johanna follows the mother and daughter to the car and waves them off.

“Come on Missy, we’re going home.”

Peeta meets them on the doorstep, he had returned early to bring all of their gear to the house. There wasn’t a lot, most of it back with Madge in New York but it would be enough to get them by for a couple of months.

Katniss carries the car seat inside, Lila smiling as she sees her daddy.

“Welcome home my girls.”
The bedroom door opens slowly and she looks up to see Peeta peaking into the room.

He smiles at her from across the room, seeing that he has been sprung and steps into the room with Lila and a mug in his hand.

“T’m not very discrete am I?” He laughs, setting the mug of tea down on the bedside and handing over his daughter who squirms to be with her mother.

“No.” She replies, laughing. “But I was awake anyway.”

She sits up, letting Lila sit on her lap and bounce slightly.

She was now 8 months old and a bundle of energy. Thriving in all of her development and milestones. She was finding the strength in her legs to stand longer and preferred to stand than sit.

Unless she was being fed.

She loved her food and they found it as a means of getting her settled or quiet.

It had been two weeks since they moved back into the house officially with Peeta.

It felt right.

Peeta comes and sits beside her on the bed and they admire their daughter who is grinning from ear to ear.

The house was not yet set up with all of their things but that didn’t bother Katniss. They both fit into the house, filling the space they were destined to fill and were starting to play the role of a family.

He offered to pull all the nursery items from the attic but she told him it was fine. Lila could remain in the portable cot and they didn’t really need the change table or anything else. They had set Lila up in their bedroom and had her living out of a suitcase. Katniss had grown use to her daughter being in her bedroom and Peeta let Katniss continue this routine as they found Lila slept better just being in their room.

They had trialled a night apart but both mother and daughter were in tears and at midnight Peeta dragged the cot back into their bedroom and they had a peaceful nights sleep.

After that night, they accepted Lila staying with them and she was now sleeping right through the night. 10 to 11 hours straight.

Peeta was back to work, working only part time hours and Katniss was working from home, finding that groove and routine she was beginning to form before she came back to Boston. Her flexible hours and job catered to Lila’s routine and she felt blessed from the support she received from everyone.

And the two of them found themselves in an easy routine. He’d leave for work early. She’d look after Lila and casually work. He’d come home early, take over looking after Lila while giving Katniss the chance to answer emails and work while he prepared dinner and spent time with his daughter.

Together they’d get Lila fed and ready for bed, taking turns reading her stories and into her pyjamas. Katniss would nurse her daughter while Peeta did a bit of work and then Katniss would
join him downstairs.

They’d forgo work and spend those few hours they had alone, discussing their days, watching a movie or television show and talking before they’d head to bed.

It was like the times before.

“Are you sure you’ll be right today?” She asks him. Lila has demanded a feed and Katniss has her situated across her lap feeding.

“We’ll be fine. We’ve got a fridge full of breast milk, a whole lot of diapers, wipes and if worse comes to worse I’ve got Google to help me.” She smiles at him. “Besides, you’re only twenty minutes away.”

“I’m hoping it doesn’t go too late.”

“Do you have any idea what the meeting could be about?”

“No idea. Work related apparently. A few of the head bosses requested to meet with me once they found out I’d be in attendance today.”

“Okay.” He says and smiles. “Would my ladies like some breakfast?”

“Yes please.”

She follows him downstairs once Lila has finished nursing. Peeta has breakfast cooking and two cups of tea made. Katniss places Lila into the booster seat, strapping her in before she takes her seat at the breakfast bench, sipping her tea, listening to the music and reading the newspaper.

Peeta sets a plate in front of her and sits in front of her with his own.

“You need a hearty breakfast if you’ve got workshops to run.” He tells her with a smile. He feeds Lila her breakfast while he eats his own.

“Smells good.” She tells him and turns the page of the newspaper. She smiles at Lila before taking a bite of her omelette. “Madge asked me to add an entry to her blog.”

“Yeah? Is there a theme?”

“No, she just wants me to be a guest entrant. She’s been asking me for a while now to add an entry but I never wanted to or I was too scared to. Now I feel ready.”

“Any idea what you’re going to write about?”

“Not yet but I’m thinking about it.”

She goes and showers and gets dressed, putting on clothes that aren’t covered in spit up or milk. Clothes that don’t have a smell about them or are her sweatpants. It feels good to be in business attire and actually do her hair.

She kisses Lila goodbye and meets Peeta in the hallway, kissing him softly goodbye.

“Call me if she’s unsettled or anything happens.”

“Relax, we’ll be fine.” He assures her. “Won’t we Lila?” Lila smiles from her walker, reiterating her father’s words. “See.” He smiles.
She rolls her eyes and kisses him again. “Bye.” She smiles and he pulls her back for another kiss.

“I’ll text you every ten minutes.”

“Hey, I haven’t left her for a whole day.” She tells him. “It’s a big step.”

“It is and you have to turn around and take that step, we’ll be fine. Lila and I are a team.” He tells her. “Go, we’ll see you when you get home this afternoon and you can tell me all about your day of kicking butt.”

She smiles and goes and kisses Lila again and then slips her jacket on.

“Move that arse of yours, get in your car and go to this meeting.” He chuckles handing her her keys.

She smiles and says goodbye to them before getting in her car. She drives to Harvard and parks in the visitors’ car park closets to where she was attending the day dedicated to those 2nd year journalism students. There’d be workshops, mentoring sessions and she had a few meetings scheduled with a few of the speakers and attendees. One of them, a respected journalist had requested he’d meet with her while other big bosses of media outlets also requested to meet with her. She was certain most of them were trying to recruit her as she was finally back in the business of fulltime writing since having Lila.

But she wasn’t sure what she wanted. She was happy freelancing for magazines, newspapers and websites as it gave her the freedom and flexibility with Lila. She was on a good income and didn’t want to think about a 9 to 5 job where she’d be paid probably less than what she was already earning. It’d be something she’d have to talk to Peeta about if she was asked.

Her phone beeps and she opens the text from Peeta as she enters the main building.

_We’re fine Mommy, Daddy is about to take me for a walk to the park._

Accompanying the text is a picture of her rugged up and strapped into her stroller with the widest smile on her face.

_Kick butt today!_

She smiles and locks her phone as a lady in a suit approaches her.

“Katniss Mellark?”

“Yes.” Katniss answers.

“Welcome to Harvard University if you follow me, I’ll take you into the auditorium where they’re meeting first.” She tells her. “Here’s a timetable for the day and a map. You’re scheduled meetings are noted to take place in a private study room in the library. Lunch will be served at 12:30 and if you’d like tea or coffee don’t hesitate to ask.” She says leading her through the main building and towards the auditorium. “Would you like a coffee now?”

“I’m fine thanks.” She tells hers. “I haven’t really had coffee since I was pregnant. More a tea drinker now but I’m fine.”

“Great.”

She’s sat on the stage of the auditorium next to other respected journalists and looks out amongst the sea of college students. She’s nervous to say the least but she remembers Peeta telling her
she’ll kill it and the nerves start to disappear.

University lectures speak to them all and one of the journalists, a veteran war journalist and now television personality. He captures the attention of them all for half an hour before they’re sent off to their workshops. Katniss was undertaking an entertainment workshop for those interested in anything other than sport or current affairs. She had a small group of students, close to thirty and she stood before them in a lecture room.

Peeta had helped her present a presentation the days leading up, listened to her give the presentation and gave her feedback.

She had wished it was him giving the presentation and not her as he had a way of words better than she did.

But he reminded her that she had knowledge in this field, she’d been a journalist for quite a few years now and had enough experience to give a presentation. She was also wiser than all these students who haven’t even stepped into the world of journalism.

She gives her presentation, capturing the attention of the students and really selling entertainment journalism. She’s personal and tells them lots about her career so far interviewing musicians, bands and following them all on tours.

“I read the interview you did for Cinna.” A student says once she’s finished her presentation and has asked for questions or to open up a dialogue of discussion. “I just wanted to say how sorry I am for your loss.” The boy says. “I was wondering, my lecturers say I’m too personal in my writing, that I put too much of me into them and that I should reconsider a career in storytelling. I was wondering what your thoughts are on making stories personal.”

She smiles. “My husband had the same problem and he still does.” She tells them. “But it’s who he is, his that type of person who moves you with just a few words and his early pieces really moved me. He’s the newspaper cartoonist and art critic. It might take a few years to find your footing and where you belong as a journalist. You’ll learn to remove yourself from pieces but never lose your ability to put yourself into a piece. The best journalists can move a person with just a few hundred words. Remember that.”

After lunch, a phone call with Peeta who assures her that Lila is still breathing and is fast asleep. She joins in with the other mentors and speakers, discussing their work life and anything else to make them seem better than the others.

Her first meeting begins with an LA based magazine owner. He’s interested in her journalism work and offers her fulltime work with them out in LA, expanding into interviewing actors, models and musicians for a big name magazine. She’s already free-lanced and had a couple of her interviews featured in the magazine and despite the experience, she didn’t want to be tied down to just a magazine. She wanted the ability to freelance and be flexible. If she wasn’t a mother she’d consider the paycheque and moving out to LA but with her family, any decision she made affected them all. He gave her the option to think about it as she was summoned to her next meeting.

It was the same thing, a New York based website director. A popular social media page that employed freelancing bloggers and journalists to report on the ‘real issues’. It wouldn’t require a move to New York but it was long hours of research, interviewing and a lesser paycheque for more work.
The third meeting was exactly the same as the others. A new location, this time overseas, less work hours and more pay. She thanked her and told her she’d get back to them.

She’d done this a few times in her life and Haymitch always taught her to be polite, ask for a couple of days to think about the offer, even if she knew she didn’t want to take it and then politely decline the offer, thanking them for considering her and tell them she’s not looking at what they’re offering or it wouldn’t work out at that present moment.

None of these offers jumped at her and she wasn’t ready to relocated hers and Peeta’s life just for her career. She had a family to think about and it was a two way street. If they both agreed to a scenery change and a new city then they’d do it but she wasn’t ready to relocate to a new city. She was finally back home.

“Hey Katniss, we’re all going for a drink if you’d like to come.” One of the guests tells her.

“It’s fine, I’ve got to get home anyway.”

“Well it was nice meeting you.”

“You too.”

It was late afternoon by the time she finally managed to get away, stopping in for a few groceries on the way home.

As she steps into the house, it was quiet and dark. It was just after 5 and she wondered where Peeta and Lila both were.

She sets the groceries in the kitchen, takes off her coat and kicks off her shoes and goes on a search throughout the house.

Upstairs in their room is Peeta and Lila sound asleep. Lila across his chest, clutching his shirt in her little fist. Peeta has his arm wrapped protectively around her and they both look so comfortable and peaceful.

She slips in beside him as carefully as she can and kisses him on the cheek and then Lila on her nose before she settles in beside them, cuddling into Peeta’s arm and letting him wrap his free arm around her body. He kisses her forehead and nuzzles his nose against her face.

They remain in silence for a few minutes before he speaks.

“How’d today go?”

“Good.” She tells him softly, reaching out to stroke Lila’s hand. “I got three job offers.”

“Really?”

“Yeah but I’m not going to take them. It’s not what I want.”

“What do you want?”

She sighs and looks at Lila for a long while before turning in her husband’s arms and looking at him.

“You and me together. Lila, you and I together as a family. I don’t care about the money or the other benefits of the job, I just want to be where you two will be.”
“If you really wanted a career change then I’ll support you. You know that.”

“But it shouldn’t be just about me, it should be about you and what you want.”

“I want you and Lila in my life and that’s all I want. Nothing more, nothing less.” He tells her. “I want you two to come home to of an afternoon. To spend Sunday mornings wrapped up in bed with, eating breakfast and soaking in as much time together as we can. If you wanted to move to Mars than I’ll follow you. I don’t care Katniss where we end up. Home is where your heart is. My heart is with you two.”

Lila stirs, ceasing any other conversation as she notices her mother and crawls across her father’s chest to be in her mother’s arms. Katniss cuddles her, kisses her and holds her.

Lila doesn’t want to leave her side for the rest of the evening and it gives Peeta time to do some work. Katniss does the bedtime routine and gets Lila down at quarter to 8. She finds Peeta down in the office and comes and sits on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Remember in college, we were just a few months away from graduating and we were looking at where we’d send job applications to.” She begins and he nods. “And you told me exactly the same thing you told me earlier, you’d follow me wherever I wanted to go. It didn’t bother you to leave Bridgeport and your family because you were finding your own family with me. Finding a home. And you assured me from that night after our huge argument that you’re happy to go anywhere I go. I want to turn that around right now.”

“Katniss you don’t-”

“Peeta, it’s your turn. After everything, I want you to decide what we do. If you want to move for a new job then we’ll put our house up for sale and move tomorrow if you say so.” She tells him. “What do you want Peeta?”

He shrugs his shoulders. “I’m happy as we are for now. I don’t have any offers and we have a comfortable life. A blessed life. For now, let’s just stay here in Boston, raise our beautiful daughter and continue to heal as we have been. We can live a quiet life, work our jobs and come home to each other and our daughter.” He smiles. “That’s only if you want to.”

“Hey, we’re in this together. We go where you go.”

“And I go where you go.”

She cups his face in her hands and leans towards him, touching her lips to his gently. He kisses her back with more passion and ferocity and she keels against his body and grips his shirt tightly, pulling him tighter to her body. She shifts in his lap, leaning backwards and trails her hands down his chest before settling them on his hips and waist. He groans against her lips and she dips her hand inside of his pants and eventually his boxers searching for his heated flesh.

He stills his lips against hers and she wraps her hand around him and kisses him, seeking entrance into his mouth. He allows her and she runs her hand along his thick flesh.

She does it for him mostly, wanting to show him she means it; she means what she just told him. Promise him the rest of their lives, even if they were still broken and still figuring out what it all meant, she’d want the rest of her life to try her best to figure it out with him by her side.

He comes a few minutes later and thanks her softly as he kisses her.

He returns the favour when they go to bed, his fingers finding her heat, bringing her over the edge and causing her to see stars.
She hadn’t seen stars since the night of Lila’s conception.

She sits on the couch, laptop sitting on her lap as she reads some of the previous blog entries on Madge’s blog. Entries from guest bloggers who have spoken about a wide range of topics and their personal lives.

Madge got her break as a Mom blogger, beginning a blog about other mom’s and being queens, being empowered to take on the world and their lives. To support other Moms and hopefully create networks for those who were struggling and needed a lift in their role as mother and wife.

It spread like wildfire when Madge had James and posted a photo of her, holding James in her underwear and showing off her postpartum body, six months after having James. It was to basically say a big fuck you to all those other ‘perfect mothers’ who shamed her for carrying a little bit of baby weight. And ever since then, her popularity has skyrocketed and has become the most popular mom blog. And since becoming a war widow she’s gained a new following of people as she’s talked about her grief, raising James and being pregnant with twins, twins that her husband will never meet. It’s moving and a beautiful snapshot into her life.

And she had finally convinced Katniss to make a contribution to her blog after two years of persuasion. Katniss didn’t want to open up in such a big and personal way but she felt as if now she was ready to take a plunge and speak about her life and she had already sent her entry to Madge and was waiting for it to be posted onto her blog.

“Katniss?”

“In here!” She calls to him. She checks her watch and then shuts the lid of her laptop, setting it onto the coffee table. Lila was still down for her afternoon nap.

Peeta bursts into the living room smiling from ear to ear.

“What is it?”

“I had an email today from a friend today. It came as a surprise.”

“Yes.”

“He’s given me an offer?”

“Really? That’s great. What is it?”

“Freelance stuff mostly. He wants to give me the opportunity to finally express myself and blog.”

“Really?”

“And I’d be earning good money doing it. I mean, I’d still work at the paper but do this as more of a hobby and see where it takes me.”

“Wow, that’s great.”

“I told him I’d think about it but I think I’m ready for change. Ready for something else, something I can really sink my teeth into and I have a lot to say.”

She smiles at him. “If you want to do it then, do it. It’s time for you to do something you want.”
They eat dinner; he bathes Lila and gets her ready for bed before bringing her to Katniss for her feed. He disappears down to the study and Katniss gets Lila fed and tucked into bed. She pads into the study and sees the screen has captured Peeta’s attention.

“What is it?”

“You’re post has gone viral.”

“Really?”

“It was posted twenty minutes ago and already 4,000 likes, lots of shares and comments. People are loving it.”

She comes and sits in his lap and he reads it aloud.

“I was asked to interview Cinna, a musician, just last month. We’ve built a friendship over the past couple of years and I’ve come to known him as a mentor and friend. The latest interview was an exclusive, one he didn’t want published or told by anyone but me because he knew I’d capture every emotion he wanted to portray. He personally asked me and I knew I couldn’t say no. I went to his apartment in New York with my husband and daughter and let him speak about the most tragic moment of his life. The moment when he learnt his unborn son would never open his eyes. The moment he became the father to a stillborn.”

“We both understand what this feels like and I compared my experience to his in this interview, giving the readers a view into what it did to Cinna, as the father and what it did to me as a mother of a stillborn. I compared our experiences and our actions after. This interview was so well received; I’ve been receiving emails daily from those of you who are passing on their condolences or those who are thanking me for bringing to light a topic that is so rarely discussed. It’s a conversation that I think needs to be had as I feel not a lot of people understand what we go through, what our family goes through when we lose a child.”

Peeta kisses her long and hard after they finish reading the rest of it. She sends Madge a text to thank her for the opportunity and they retreat to the couch. They lay under a blanket and he wraps his arms around her body pulling her close to him.

There are tears in their eyes but they don’t mind crying in front of each other. They knew speaking of their son would bring up emotions they wish they didn’t feel but these emotions were slowly turning into happiness.

1st of December 2013

“Here you go.” He tells her softly, helping her down onto the couch.

Here they were, home from the hospital without their son.

And they were meant to continue their lives without really knowing what to do.

Were they supposed to go back to the lives they were living before they were expecting? Were they just supposed to forget and get on with their lives?

A nurse at the hospital insinuated they do that. Just forget it ever happened and try again for another baby.

She felt it was her fault she lost Leo. She felt shamed by this nurse that she couldn’t bring her son into the world.
A psychiatrist didn’t even bother spending more than five minutes with her. Signed her off to be of sound mind and that her recovery would be best undertaken from home.

A place where they prepared for their son, where they created a bedroom for him to sleep in, painted the walls and made it homey and hopefully a haven for him.

And now, he was laying in the hospital somewhere waiting to be released to the funeral home where he’d be cremated and his ashes returned to his parents in a tiny urn.

“Can I get you anything?” Peeta asks.

She shakes her head and cuddles a pillow to her swollen stomach. Her body was aching from head to toe. Her breasts felt like marble as her milk was coming in. Her uterus was contracting slowly back to it’s pre-pregnancy size.

She got all the post-delivery side effects but not her son.

Why couldn’t she have her son?

Peeta disappears somewhere into the house and she sits on the couch, staring at the wall for hours.

When it’s dark she finally moves from the couch.

She slowly trudges through the house and up the stairs, taking them one at a time and as slowly as possible. She supports her hurting body against the wall and slowly searches for Peeta.

She hears his sobs from the nursery and after taking a few minutes to compose her emotions; she opens the door and steps inside.

Peeta is sitting on the middle of the nursery floor staring at the crib. She can tell he’s been here for hours crying as he stares at the crib where their son was supposed to sleep in. She had made the crib up a few days before Thanksgiving. She had a feeling it’d be soon and she wanted everything to be ready for their son.

She touches his shoulder, squeezing it as she feels him tense at her touch.

He exhales the deep breath he’s been holding in and wipes his eyes.

“I can’t do it.”

“What?” She replies.

“I just can’t.” He splutters out.

She feels the tears well in her own eyes. “What can’t you do?” She asks, her voice cracking.

“He was our son. He was our baby. I don’t want another baby. Leo was our son and we lost him. I can’t do it again. I can’t go through the pain of all this hope, just to have it destroyed with another loss.” He cries. “Leo was our baby. I can’t do that again.”

She squeezes her eyes together tightly. “Peeta…”

“No.”

“You’re upset Peeta, you don’t mean that.”
“I do Katniss. I don’t want to go through that all again.” He tells her. “Do you want to experience that all again? Can you bring yourself to carry another child after we’ve just lost him?” He asks her.

She doesn’t reply and sinks down onto the floor beside him, crying into his shirt.

Two weeks later, he starts drinking. Leo’s ashes sit on the kitchen table and Peeta sits at the table, the whisky in the bottle slowly disappearing as the day wears on. She packs up the nursery, folding tiny baby clothes into bags and storing them up in the attic.

He asks her why she is keeping the clothes and baby furniture.

“I can’t let them go just yet.”

He shrugs and brushes past her to the bedroom.

And she wills herself not to cry as she feels a flood of emotions and doubt setting inside of her stomach.

She fears her marriage is falling apart before her eyes.
“Peeta.” She whispers.

It’s still dark and well before 2am. He mumbles something before rolling towards her. “Hmm?”

“Lila’s got a fever.”

“Ok.” He mumbles in response and buries back down underneath the warmth of the covers.

“Peeta.”

“What?”

“Lila’s got a fever.” She repeats.

He stirs, opens his eyes and looks to her.

She’s got Lila in her arms, the baby murmuring and whimpering. She bounces her slightly and kisses her burning forehead. He sits up and moves closer to them, reaching out to feel Lila’s forehead and he frowns.

“She doesn’t feel good.”

She looks him in the eyes absolutely terrified and then down to Lila. “She’s had a runny nose and cough for a few days now but she’s developed a fever.” She tells him. “It might just be her body fighting the illness.”

“Ok.” He nods. “What do you want me to do?”

“I’m not sure.”

He smiles at her. “Ok. Has she had a fever before?”

“No, mostly just colds.”

Lila whimpers into her mother’s chest and reaches to tug her own ear.

“What’s wrong baby girl?”

Lila cries in response, almost like she doesn’t know what’s wrong.

“I wish you could tell me baby girl.”

Peeta kisses Lila’s cheek. “Do we want the baby paracetamol?”

Katniss nods and Peeta heads off in the direction of where they store the medicine.

She gets Lila changed into a lighter onesie and drapes a muslin wrap around her body. Lila grizzles and fights the wrap and Katniss watches on, trying to figure out what to do.

Peeta comes back with the medicine and a bottle filled with water for Lila.
“I didn’t know if you wanted to give her some water as well, or if you’ll maybe breastfeed her.”

“We’ll give her the medicine and I’ll try and feed her right after.”

“We try to keep her hydrated right?”

She nods and smiles at him.

It’s a team effort to get the syringe into Lila’s mouth and the medicine down her throat. She screams out in protest, flails her hands and feet and cries loudly. Katniss holds her to her chest and tries her best to calm her down.

“It’s to make you feel better. We’re just trying to help you.”

Peeta joins her in bed and she offers Lila her breast.

She latches on, seeking that comfort but pulls away, her face contorted in pain.

“What is it?”

“She latched on fine.” Peeta notes. “She seemed like she wanted it. Has she hurt her jaw? Is she teething maybe?”

“She hasn’t hurt her jaw. It might be her mouth.” She says as Lila cries. She roots again for a feed, latches on for a few seconds and begins drinking before she pulls away again crying. “Bubba what’s wrong?”

Lila tugs at her ear and cries as she buries her head into her mother’s chest. Katniss wraps her arms around her daughter, drapes the muslin wrap over her body and kisses her forehead softly.

Within a few minutes Lila settles slightly and nurses for ten minutes before she falls asleep over her mother’s chest. Peeta wraps a protective arm around his girls and they try their best to get some sleep while their daughter sleeps.

“I think we should take her to the doctor.”

They didn’t sleep much last night. She thinks they got about an hour in all together. Lila kept them up most of the time, crying and whimpering. Nothing they did seemed to help her.

“Oh. I’ve told Haymitch I’m not coming in. I’ll give Dr Odair a call and see if she can fit us in today.”

Lila is quiet, sitting beside her mother on the couch as they watch the morning news. She too was exhausted and Katniss knew they’d be in for a long day with her.

“She can fit us in at 9.” Peeta tells Katniss, entering the living room. “It’s almost 8 now.”

“She’s a saint.”

“Go and have a shower, I’ll try and give her some breakfast.”
The drive to the doctor’s office is a battle. The traffic is crazy and Lila hasn’t stopped crying since the minute she was put in the car. The mid-February day was proving to be freezing and snow was threatening to fall today. They were predicting an above average snowfall.

It’s a welcome relief by the time Peeta pulls into the car park at the doctor’s office and Lila’s cries seem to cease slightly.

Dr Odair brings them into the consulting room right away and lays Lila down on the bed.

“It’s Ok baby girl. What’s all this silly crying about?” Dr Odair coos to Lila as she tries her best to examine her. Peeta helps hold her down while Katniss watches on. “Shh, it’s alright bubbly, I’m just trying to help you.”

Lila whimpers and cries, trying her best to wiggle her body away from the arms holding her down.

Dr Odair tells Peeta he can pick her up as she notes down in Lila’s chart.

“She’s got an ear infection. Not too bad but it’s worse for babies. You said she’s had a runny nose and cold for a few days?” She asks Katniss.

“Yeah she did, the fever just spiked last night.”

“It’s very common for ear infections to develop. The mucus that you develop when you get a cold just builds up in their ears and since their ear canals are so small, the pressure and build-up causes the infection. Most babies will have an ear infection in the first twelve months of their lives.”

“How can we treat it?” Peeta asks, doing his best to comfort Lila.

“I’ll get you a prescription of antibiotics. They should last for 5 days and will help clear the infection faster. Just try your best to keep up her feedings and solids. She might not have a lot but offer her smaller portions more frequently.” She tells them. “You’re breastfeeding her?”

“Yes.”

“That should also help, the antibodies in your milk will act like antibiotics as well. She’s a healthy 9 month old and hopefully she’ll return to her usual self in a day or two.”

“Thanks Annie.”

“No problems Peeta.” She smiles. “Now get her home to the warmth. Remember for both of you to keep your strength up and to rest as much as you can.”

Peeta goes and gets the prescription while Katniss waits in the car. He drives them home, dropping them off before he heads off to pick up some groceries for them.

Katniss gives Lila her first dose of antibiotics and nurses her. Lila sleeps for two hours straight and Katniss and Peeta together lie on the couch and sleep for the whole time Lila sleeps.

Katniss, you awake?”

His voice is a soft whisper in the quiet of the night. And it sends shivers down her spine.

She nods and rolls over to face him. Lila is in the cot beside them sound asleep. The antibiotics and medicine were doing wonders on her.
“Can’t sleep?” He asks.

She smiles and shakes her head. “I just can’t seem to bring myself to fall asleep. I just can’t keep thinking of Lila and how much pain she must be in.”

“She’s tough like you.” He tells her with a smile. “She’ll be fine.”

“I know she will be. It’s just, she’s only little.”

“Babies are resilient. She’s tough and you saw how she was today. She was crawling around and her usual self.”

She nods and he pulls her closer to his body. There was that familiar silence in the air. The silence of snowfall and winter. The silence of love and beauty.

Everything in the world seemed to stop on these kind of nights.

Or she liked to hope everything stopped and nothing happened.

But deep inside she did know that unfortunate things did happen.

“Are you alright?” He asks her.

She shakes her head against his chest as he knows what she’s thinking about.

She’s thinking about her parents and how on a night very similar to this that they were in the accident. How Prim and her in an instant became orphans and were relocated to Boston.

She remembers the early knock on the front door that woke her. Prim’s whimpering in the cot beside her bed. Effie’s cries and Haymitch’s gasps. She remembers seeing the policemen when she snuck out of her bed. Hearing the words he was speaking to her aunt and uncle. Hearing how they were deceased on arrival to the hospital. How they did everything they could but there was too much damage.

And in 23 years, she still remembers that moment clear as day.

Peeta kisses her forehead softly and tries his best to console her and she’s thankful she has him here to hold her in his arms and bid away the thoughts and memories.

“Thank you.” She mumbles into his chest.

“Always.”

“Thank god, I was starting to lose my mind.” Johanna exclaims as Katniss arrives at the table in the café they’re meeting at. She has Lila in the stroller all bundled up from the slight chill and sleepy from the stroll over from the doctors. “All this snow and three days off from work…”

“You’re a workaholic.” Katniss adds laughing as she embraces Johanna.

“That I am and I’m proud of it.” She smiles. “Hi Miss Lila. You feeling better?”

“Much better.” Katniss tells her. “We had a visit with the doctor just before and the infection is clearing up and Lila is returning to her normal self.”

“And Mommy and Daddy are getting a full nights rest now?”
“That they are.” She says and takes a seat. “Ordered yet?”

“No, I just got in before you.”

They order and catch up on what they’ve missed.

“Who was Peeta meeting with this morning?” Johanna asks once their drinks have arrived.

“I didn’t know he was meeting with someone.”

“Well this guy was kind of hipster but stylish. I’d certainly do him.”

“Jo.”

Johanna smirks and licks the froth from her spoon. “Anyway, they went into one of the private meeting rooms and were in there for well over an hour. They shook hands and hipster guy left and so did Peeta.”

“It might have been a work thing. An article maybe.”

“Has he been scouting new jobs?”

“Not really, he did get offered a position last month. It was blogging part-time. He turned it down though.”

“So he hasn’t said anything?”

“No.”

“Ok. Well, maybe it’s nothing at all.”

Katniss frowns and takes a sip of her tea and breaks off a bit of banana bread for Lila.

Johanna fills her in on everything, from work, to her family and to her dating life and her planned European vacation in June.

“I better be getting back to work.” Johanna tells Katniss as she checks her watch. “And it’s probably almost her nap time.”

“Yep booby time and then nap time.” Katniss confirms grinning. “Thanks for the catch up.”

“Anytime my love.” She smiles. “This is on me.”

“No it’s fine.”

“Don’t fight me on this Mellark.” She teases and hugs Katniss. “Nice seeing you. We should have a girl’s night one night. I’m sure Peeta can watch Lila.”

“Sounds nice. I’ll talk to you later.”

Johanna kisses Lila goodbye and goes to pay. Katniss packs up Lila’s bag and heads on out.

There’s a missed call on her phone from Peeta but no message left. She sends him a quick text to ask if he’s all right and then she heads on her way to get Lila home.

She has a crying baby when she pulls up in the driveway and frowns when she sees an unfamiliar car sitting out the front of the house.
A car with Connecticut number plates.

“I think we have a visitor Lila.” Katniss mutters under her breath and looks in the rear-view mirror.

Peeta’s car is parked beside hers in the driveway and she assumes he’s let the guest inside.

She carries Lila who cries softly in her mother’s arms as they head inside. She juggles getting her coat off as well as Lila’s.

“Peeta?” She calls out.

“The kitchen.”

She heads for the kitchen and finds Peeta sitting at the island bench, his mother on the other side nursing a mug. She looks up at Katniss and Lila but doesn’t smile nor frown. Katniss swallows the lump in her throat and hands Lila over to Peeta.

“Hi Katniss.”

“Hi.” She replies.

“All good with the doctor’s?” Peeta asks.

Katniss nods. “All good.” She tells Peeta. “She’s ready for a nap.”

“Let me get her…”

“She hasn’t had her feed yet.”

“Ok.” Peeta says smiling. “Come down when you’re finished.”

Katniss kicks off her shoes and slips her feet into her slippers and carries Lila up to the bedroom. She takes Lila’s shoes and beanie off and nurses Lila. She’s down quicker than Katniss wishes and Katniss gets her settled in her cot and carefully tiptoes around, as she’s fully aware the baby monitor is sitting down in the kitchen.

Peeta meets her on her way downstairs and pulls her into the bathroom.

“I’m sorry, she just showed up here.” He tells her.

“I can tell she did.” She sighs.

“She doesn’t know we’re living with each other.”

“She’s going to find out.” She tells him. “The house is covered in everything of mine.” She frowns. “What will she think when she finds out we’re sleeping in the same bed?”

“I don’t know. She hasn’t asked though, just assumes Lila is spending more time here. That both of you are.”

“I walked in like I owned the place, like I used to walk into this house.” She reminds him. “Why haven’t you told her?”

“She’ll think it’s too soon.”

“Peeta.”
“Sorry.”

She scowls at him and he tries to hide his smirk.

“What?”

“You’re cute when you scowl.”

“Ha ha you’re so funny.”

“Come on, she’s expecting you down there.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me.”

They head down the stairs and enter the kitchen. He has a cup of tea made for Katniss.

“She went down well?”

“Very well.” Katniss tells her mother-in-law.

“She’s gotten so big.”

“I know, she’ll be a year old soon in a few short months.”

“They grow too quick.”

Katniss sips her tea and takes a seat beside Peeta. He keeps the conversation flowing and Katniss adds what she feels is necessary every once in a while.

“So Mom, why the visit?”

“I thought I’d head down and pay you three a visit, see how you are going.”

“Mom?”

“I’ve met someone Peeta.”

Peeta’s mouth drops open. “Oh.”

“He’s based here in Boston and I’ve come to visit him for the week.”

“I didn’t need to know that.”

“I’ve been seeing him for six weeks now. We’ve known each other for quite some time, I met him when I had my mad month 23 years ago and we’ve kept in occasional contact.”

“Ok.”

“I’m happy Peeta, you should be happy that I’ve found someone I can laugh with. I loved your father dearly and will until the day I die. But I don’t want to sit around, live out the rest of my life lonely and grieving over your father. I want to have some fun, travel a bit and spend dinners with a man and go and see shows and concerts together. I want to remember your father and smile at all the things we shared and not wallow in grief. I want to be happy and I know your father would want me to be.”
Peeta nods, trying to accept what his mother is telling him.

“I know this might seem quick and will take some time to process but I wanted you to know first hand and not from your brothers.”

“Do they know?”

“No. I haven’t told them. I just said I was coming to visit you and a couple of friends for the week.”

The baby monitor cackles beside them and they look over, seeing Lila awake. Katniss checks her watch and sees they’ve been talking for close to two hours.

“I’ve got her.” Peeta says. Katniss could sense he wanted his time alone to try and process the news.

He leaves Katniss alone in the kitchen and she wonders what she should say.

“Another tea?”

“Yes please.”

She boils the kettle and waits beside the kettle, wishing the water would boil quicker or Peeta would appear with Lila to break the awkward silence they’ve fallen into.

“How long have you and Peeta been living together?” She asks and Katniss misses the mug, spilling water on the bench.

“Shit.” She curses, reaching for a cloth. “Um, why do you think that?”

“I can see that all of your things are here.” She says.

“Not all of them. We’ve…”

“Don’t you think it’s too soon? I mean, you were gone for over a year. You left him, took yourself off to New York and came back with your daughter, telling him he was a father. You don’t think that the pain and hurt that you’ve both endured should warrant such a quick move in?”

“We’ve been together for ten years. We’re married and we have a family together. For all the hurt and pain to slowly disappear we have to work at it and moving in was the next step to healing, to growing back together.”

“It won’t work Katniss.”

“It’s working. We’re making it work. We’re raising our daughter together and growing back together. We’re a family and we want to be a family. I know Peeta doesn’t want to miss out on a thing in Lila’s life and being here when she wakes up has been the best thing. He gets to kiss her, cuddle her and hold her and do the dad thing. He’s there to help me as well. He wants us here and he was the one who suggested it. It wasn’t some grand scheme you think I came up with, some way of tugging at his heart.” She tells her. “It was him and his way of telling us he loves us and wants us to be together, to heal and grow and be a family. Be the family he always dreamt of having.”

“He’s always been way too invested in you. You’ve got him under your spell and now he’s not seeing things the way he should be. It’s too fast and it’ll crack before too long.”
“We love each other and we’re determined to make it work. We’re making it work and fighting for each other. I’m not just going to hang around for a few months and then take off again. I’m here to raise my family. I’m not going anywhere because I love him and I promised him a lifetime. I promised Lila her father. I promised Leo we’d honor him with our love. I’m not playing a game.”

She huffs and rolls her eyes. “I’ve never liked you Katniss from the day I met you. I’ve always found you to be like poison. You’ve ruined him.”

“I didn’t ruin him, you did when you disowned him. He had no one to turn to when his father died. When I left. He had no one. You all let him down. I left to find myself before I did something reckless; I left to save my marriage. You left him because it was easy to dismiss him, just like you did when his sister died. You never wanted him; you never loved him from the day his twin died. You had no patience or time and he grew up not knowing what it was like to be loved by his own mother. You ruined him but I showed him love. I’ve always shown him love and life that life can be good.”

“You left him.”

“You judge me like that’s a bad thing but I came back. You never did. From the minute he was born you pulled away and was a shadow, not his mother, just the shadow of what should be a mother.” Katniss tells her. “I lost my son but I came back. I came back for my husband and my daughter. We both know what it’s like to lose a child but you never found the strength to carry on, you gave up and that was that. I didn’t, I fought and I’m still fighting. I’ll continue to fight until I take my last breath on this earth. I want my children to know I’ve fought my whole life to be with them and to remember how much I loved them, despite the tragedy I’ve faced in my life. I’m still standing. What can you say about yourself?”

Peeta steps around the corner and into the kitchen with Lila on his hip. He looks between Katniss and his mother. Katniss knows he heard everything.

“She thinks she has some business calling me out on my life-” His mother begins to say.

“Mom.”

“Tell her she’s wrong, tell her she has no business telling me these things. She’s wretched and wrong.”

“She’s not. She’s my wife, my family. She’s been there for me and shown me what it’s like to have a family who loves you. I’m not dismissing her, telling her she’s wrong when she’s right.” He says. “I’m sorry Mother but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“What?”

“Please, you’ve offended my wife and I want you to leave.”

“She offended me.”

“Please get your things. I’ll walk you to your car.”

He hands Lila to Katniss and escorts his mother out.

She hears the front door close and Peeta’s footsteps. She looks up at him as she feeds Lila her lunch.

“Peeta, I’m sorry…”
“You have nothing to apologise for. She offended us both in the way we’ve chose to heal. You defended us and our choices to her. You have nothing to apologise for.” He wraps her in his arms, pressing her to his chest and kisses her lips. “She has no right calling you out on leaving. You did it to save our marriage.”

“Are you sure you’re OK with that?”

“Katniss, stop doubting what you did. It was brave.” He reminds her. “If you didn’t do it, we wouldn’t be here today.”

She nods against his chest and he presses a kiss to the top of her head.

“I’ve probably ruined it for us, the developments we’ve made in reconnecting with your family.”

“You haven’t ruined anything. They’re fools if they believe every world Mom says. They know they were raised differently to me. They know what I copped from her. They were lucky, they weren’t looked at like they were failures. I was.”

She looks up into his eyes. “How can someone who’s been through so much like you, still be the most kindest and loving person I’ve ever met?”

“I don’t know. I guess life never broke that part of me. It made it stronger.”

“Ma!”

They turn to see Lila in her highchair. Katniss had made the mistake of leaving her lunch in reach of the 9-month-old and she’s covered in pureed vegetables.

“Lila Grace, look at what you’ve done!” Peeta exclaims laughing loudly as he reaches down. “I think we might have to take a photo of you just so we remember how funny you are when you get older.”

Peeta takes his phone out and captures a photo of Lila. Lila gives him her best cheeky grin.

It makes everything in the world feel right.

“You should make sure your mother still knows we appreciate her and that she has the right to see Lila.” Katniss tells him as they make work of cleaning up their daughter.

“There’s a but in there isn’t there?”

“I just don’t think I can have a lot to do with your mother anymore.”

“That’s understandable.”

“I just can’t forgive her for what she did to you as a child and how she’s treating us now. You can maintain the relationship and I’ll put on a smile and happy face when need be but that’ll be it.”

“I understand. I respect your honesty.” He says. “You’ve dealt with your fair share from her, it’s time you stand up for yourself.”

She kisses him softly on the lips, thanking him.

“We’re going out tonight.” He tells her as she steps away.

“What?”
“I asked Effie and Haymitch if they’d watch Lila for us. Effie was more than willing to watch her and told us we deserved a night away from Lila.”

“Lila is still sick.”

“I told Effie this and she said it’s nothing she can’t handle. They said they’d watch her at their house. It’s a big step leaving her for the night but she’s big enough and she loves Effie and Haymitch. Effie has had many successful babysitting experiences with her and she’s continued to pester and ask if they can watch her for the night. She’s offered us a night together, a date night. It’s been a while since we’ve been out on a date.”

“It has been.”

“So, will you go out on a date with me?”

“Of course.”

“There’s my pretty girl!” Effie exclaims as she sees Lila sitting up by herself in the living room. Lila screeches and smiles, crawling towards Effie and motions to be picked up. Effie swoops down, picks her up off the ground and greets her. “Hi Lila.”

“So, I’ve packed everything in here. Diapers, breast milk, clothes, toys and everything else. There should be a solution in this bag.” Katniss tells Effie. “Hopefully she behaves well for you and goes to sleep on time.”

“We’ll be fine us too.”

“If you have any trouble…”

“We won’t. We’ll be fine, won’t we Little Lila?”

Lila smiles at her mother and Katniss smiles back.

“You and Peeta have a fantastic night together, enjoy the peace and quiet of not having a baby to worry about and eat a meal interruption free.”

“She is recovering from an ear infection.”

“I know. Katniss stop your worrying dear.” Effie tells her. “Haymitch and I were thrown into raising Prim and you. We did fine. And besides, I want the opportunity to give you and Peeta the chance to go out for dinner or places without having to worry about Lila. You know Haymitch and I promised to be in your life and to raise Lila like a granddaughter. We’ll be her grandparents and love her endlessly.”

Katniss thanks her aunt and calls Peeta to say goodbye to Lila.

“Be good little one. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“This is beautiful.” Katniss says as they enter the Greek restaurant.

“It is. I’ve never eaten here so forgive me if it’s not at nice as it looks.”

She smiles at him and they’re lead to their table. The waitress asks what they want to drink and
they both tell her water is fine.

Peeta is a recovering addict. Katniss is breastfeeding.

“Are you sure, we’ve got a beautiful white wine that is too die for.” She tells them, handing over their menus.

“We’re not drinkers.” Peeta tells her with a smile. “Water is fine for us both.”

“Ok. I’ll have them brought to you.”

She leaves them and over the low lighting they read the menu and decide on what they’re eating.

“Everything looks beautiful.” Katniss says as she reads the menu.

“It sure does.” He agrees. “What are you going to have?”

“Can we do what we used to do?”

“We pick something each and share?” He asks with a wide smile and she nods. “I was going to suggest that. Will we get an entrée to share though?”

“Yes please.”

They order their meals and sit together, most of the discussion is about Lila and worrying if she’s all right.

“Remember, no news is good news. Effie and Haymitch have it under control. It’s Lila’s bedtime now and they’ll have an easy night.”

Right on schedule her phone beeps with a text from Effie.

Night Mommy and Daddy. I’m so tired I fell asleep in Pa Haymitch’s lap as he gave me a bottle and read Guess how much I love you. I’m in my cot now fast asleep. No need to worry about me now.

Two photos are attached of their passed out daughter in Haymitch’s lap and then her asleep in her cot.

“See, they’re fine.” Peeta reassures her smiling. “We don’t need to worry.”

Katniss places her phone into her purse and focuses on Peeta.

They enjoy the quietness of the restaurant, the music that plays softly and the low lighting. The atmosphere reminds her of their first dates ten years before and she enjoys the feeling. The nerves that she feels inside of her stomach and the wonder of where the night will lead them.

They eat, they reminisce on past memories and they laugh and smile.

Peeta pulls her up to dance along with the other guests as the chef turns the music up and pulls his wife to dance. The few other patrons in the restaurant dance too and the atmosphere lifts and everyone is smiling and laughing together as they dance along to the Greek music.

Katniss feels alive.

They gather at the counter and everyone eats their dessert together and listens to the Chef tell stories of nonsense that has everyone chuckling along. The restaurant fills with the rest of his
family who join in, the tables and chairs are stacked up and the floor cleared for a dance floor. They dance long into the evening with the rest of the Greeks.

“When we lived in New York, we lived next door to a big Greek family and I can always remember the fun they had. We always went over for feasts and always had such a great time.” They walk to the car and stop, leaning against the hood.

“You’ve never told me this.” He says.

“I know.” She replies. “Just tonight, it reminded me so much of all the fun we had. I can recall Mom and Dad always so happy during the parties. Mom was always smiling as she spoke with the women and Dad’s laughing as he stood with the men cooking the meat on the spit and talking about the latest sport score or anything else. I always played with the kids that were running around the house. I remember the women fussing over Mom’s growing stomach when she was pregnant with Prim and I remember all the food they gave us when Prim was born. We were eating Greek meals for months.” She laughs.

“They were such a strong community and we were part of it. I missed it a lot when we moved here to Boston. I missed the men who told me jokes, the women who squeezed my cheeks and told me how skinny I was and wished for me to find a loving and caring man. I miss the kids who were my first friends and protectors. One of the boys wished I’d marry him, thought I was the most beautiful girl he’d ever seen and said he’d marry me when we were old enough.”

Peeta wraps an arm around her, kisses her temple and wipes the tears from underneath her eyes.

“It’s so stupid.”

“It’s not. It’s nostalgia and you seem fond of the sense of place you had with these people. It’s fine to be a bit upset over what you lost.”

“Effie and Haymitch gave me my next sense of place.” She says. “And now you, you’ve given me a home that makes sense. I got the man the Greek women wished I’d find.” She smiles. “I ran into them when I was in New York. They still lived in the same house and they welcomed me with open arms, knew who I was right away. I told them about you and they smiled as they could see how happy I was. Lila absolutely loved them and they loved Lila. Madge and I went over for a few feasts and it was just like I remembered.”

They get in the car and drive on home.

“Are you happy Peeta?” She asks him.

“Why do you ask?”

“I just want to know if you’re happy with the way your life is turning out?”

“I am.”

“Would you change it?”

“Never.” He says, reaching across for her hand. “Never in a million years would I change it.”

He leans over to her after his parked the car. He mounts the centre console to get as close as possible to her, to kiss her in a frenzied attack.
She kisses him back, moves as close to him as she can to feel his body against hers. To feel the warmth of his body against her own body.

She pulls him out of the car and into the house, they stumble and trip as they kiss and navigate their way to their bedroom. They’ve taken this path many times before and she remembers where to step like she knows the back of her hand. He helps guide her up the stairs and once on the landing, she pulls his body flush against hers, pulling his hips tightly against hers.

She moans. He moans.

It’s like coming home.

Their clothes gradually disappear as they get closer to the bedroom and by the time they lay on the bed, they’re in just their underwear. Their bare skin touching, electricity shooting throughout their bodies, goose bumps covering their skin.

She can feel his heart beating underneath her fingertips and she feels his fingers deep inside of her.

18 months and they’ve never lost what they had. The chemistry and the connection they have. The way they read each other’s bodies and minds.

She looks deep into his eyes as she sinks down onto him, takes him whole, and smiles slightly at the feeling of him. He looks into her eyes. He smiles.

They laugh.

They love.

They reconnect and reunite.

They come home together.

In the early hours of the morning, they lay awake together. Their hearts beating steadily inside of their chests. Their breaths steady and even. They come in and out of consciousness many times. They can feel the electricity in the room. The love. The hope. The reunion they’ve made tonight.

His fingers draw lazy circles over her skin and she listens to his heart beating inside of his chest.

“Katniss, you said Lila and you would go where I go.”

“Yes.”

“I met with someone who offered me the opportunity of a lifetime.”

“What is it?”

“The company will contract you and me out to do six months of backpacking around the world.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He replies. “I’d blog the whole trip. They’d let you do the same.”

“What did you say to him?”

“Told him I’d think about it.”
“Do you want to take it?”

“I don’t know.” He admits to her. “I had so much fun backpacking last year and I knew I’d love to do it again or at least a little bit of travelling.”

“So what are you going to do?” She asks him, turning to rest her chin on his chest and look him in the eyes. “We go wherever you go, know that.”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on tumblr as Herainab

There is only two possibly three chapters left of You & Me. As much as it saddens me to say but the two of them are finding their way back together and their journey is slowly coming to an end.

I should have an update up in the next week or so, depending on how easy it is to write the last couple of chapters.
There’s a soft knock at the front door the next morning. Haymitch and Effie stand on the other side of the door with Lila.

“Hi baby girl.” Haymitch hands Lila to her mother and Katniss embraces her, kisses her cheeks and nose. “I missed you.”

“She missed you too.” Haymitch tells her. “But she was a good girl. She enjoyed her sleepover with Nanny and Pa.”

“That’s good then.” She replies with a small smile. “Coffee?”

“Sure.”

She lets Lila crawl around the kitchen while she makes two coffees and a tea.

“You and Peeta have a good night?”

“We did.” She answers and smiles. “We went to that Greek restaurant a few blocks over. The meal was fantastic. The company was wonderful. They had us all up and dancing together. It reminded me of our Greek neighbors in New York.”

“They were the life of the party.” Effie laughs.

“I didn’t realise I didn’t tell Peeta about them. We sat out at the car and I started to talk about the feasts and parties we used to go along to and he told me he never knew that about me.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

“I’m sure I did. The time probably never came up and I didn’t find it relevant or anything reminded me of those few years of spit roasts, the Greek women wishing me a happy and blessed life and the boys chasing me round the yard and house, trying to kiss me.”

“They were lovely people.”

“I saw them when I was in New York.”

“You did?”

She nods. “Went and visited them a few times, Madge and I took the kids along for a few parties and such. They were very welcoming and not much had changed, just the kids I remember playing with were now married with their own children running around. It was kind of neat seeing that.”

She brings the cups over to the bench and sits Lila onto her lap.

“Where is Peeta?” Haymitch asks.

“Grabbing a few groceries.” She tells them both.

“Did the rest of the evening go well?” Effie asks.
Katniss knew she was fishing for more details. She keeps her eyes down on Lila, fiddling with her daughter’s sleeve. “Yeah… it went well.”

Effie gasps and Katniss looks up, seeing Haymitch grinning from ear to ear and a slight smile on Effie’s face.

“You two did it.”

“I don’t really want to answer that.”

“Sweetheart, we can see it. You’re whole face is screaming sex and there’s a bloody skip in your step. Once the boy comes home, I’ll see if he has that same skip and look on his face.”

Katniss blushes.

“Don’t be embarrassed girlie, we’re happy for you.”

“We truly are.” Effie states with a proud smile. “As long as both of you are happy.”

“We are.”

“Then why do you look nervous?”

“No reason.”

“You can tell us.”

“I should probably wait for Peeta to get here. It’s not really my news to share.”

They wait for Peeta to return and Effie provides the conversation, telling them all about Lila’s sleepover.

When Peeta arrives, entering the kitchen, Haymitch bursts out laughing and Effie bites her lip as she tries to hide a smirk.

“You’ve got that same look on your face, the one you always had when Katniss and you visited us.” Haymitch laughs. “You could be a bit more discrete about it boy, just like I told you those years before. Effie and I could hear the two of you.”

“The whole neighborhood could.” Effie adds laughing.

Peeta nods sheepishly and kisses Lila’s forehead. Katniss goes crimson. They never told them this and it all started to make sense to Katniss now, especially all the strange looks she got from the neighbors when she passed them in the street.

“As long as you two are both happy and comfortable at where you are both going.”

“We are.”

“Good. Now Katniss mentioned you had something to tell us.” Haymitch says, changing the subject quickly. “What is it?”

Peeta nods, takes a seat beside Katniss and Lila and clears his throat.

“I’ve been given an offer.”
“Yes.”

“It’s an opportunity of a lifetime. Contracted out as a travel blogger. I have the possibility of working abroad for six to twelve months.”

“Where?”

“Well, nowhere has been set in stone but ultimately I’ll be backpacking around the world. Blogging about it as I travelled. This company saw my blog from my trip last year and they like my style and want me to pursue it full time. The pay would be generous and would support myself for the whole time.”

“What about Katniss and Lila?” Effie asks.

“They said they could offer Katniss a spot as a blogger. They’ve seen her work, her contributions to other blogs and they like her work.”

“I assume they know you both have a daughter.”

“Yes.”

“Would it work? I know people travel with their children but backpacking? That’s a whole other set of tasks and challenges alone. Have you both considered all of these?” Effie asks.

“I’ve only just been given the offer. There’s a lot we’d have to consider but the company would help us out in figuring out these challenges.”

“Plenty of people have backpacked with a baby, Effie.” Katniss says. “It’s common, not as known but there’s starting to be quite a lot of info and people taking this step and beginning a new experience.”

“Would it work?”

“We’re still talking about it ourselves.” Peeta tells them both. “But we’re considering it.”

“We just got you back.” Effie frowns looking at Katniss and Lila.

Katniss nods. She knew too well how this would affect their families and the involvement they’ve begun with them all. The mending they’re beginning to make.

“Well, you two have a big decision to make.” Haymitch states. “But what it’s worth, you’ll make great memories and experience so much all together. Don’t think of us when you make the decision, think of yourselves.”

Lila fights her afternoon nap that afternoon and Katniss and Peeta give up on trying to get her to sleep. She crawls and shuffles around the living room, trying her best to get into everything that she’s not allowed.

“We’re going to have to start baby proofing the house.” I tell Peeta. “She’s getting too clever.”

Lila stands, pulling herself upwards to stand against the TV unit. She does her best to reach for the photo frame that sits far back on the unit and groans when she can’t reach it.

“Ma!”

“The TV is bolted to the wall right?”
“It is.” Peeta replies. “Jake told me that when we first found out about Leo. He said the number one thing we should do in baby proofing is bolting the TV to the wall because that was becoming the number one accident in the home, toddlers pulling the TV down onto themselves.”

“Ok.”

“And nothing else should hurt her if she pulls it down. It’ll give her a little fright but she will hopefully learn to not do it again.”

“Hopefully.” Katniss chuckles and watches Lila try to navigate herself around the unit to reach the frame. She’s still too small and her little arms not long enough to reach the frame.

“Dada!”

“Do you think it’s doable?”

“The backpacking?” She asks and he nods. “Yes. Plenty of people do it. Plenty of parents are taking their children and young babies along on backpacking holidays. It’s doable and manageable. There’s plenty of research we can do and we can find out the best way to travel.”

“Do you want to do it?”

She chews on her lip for a moment. “I do. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime and we might never get the chance to do this again. If we don’t take it, I fear we’ll regret our decision later on down the track.” She smiles and looks over at Lila before looking back at her husband. “We’re going wherever you go.”

“Are you sure? This is a big step?”

“Call Castor, we’re taking this job.”

Peeta suggests a dinner the following Friday night, offering to cook for Haymitch, Effie and Johanna.

They had big news to tell them and wanted them to know at the same time.

They arrive after work, asking to freshen up before they appear again and Haymitch, Effie and Johanna share a bottle of red wine as they all sit in the living room. Lila goes between them all, trying her best to snatch their glasses of wine and investigate what’s inside of the glass.

Dinner is cooking nicely and Katniss and Peeta join the others, Katniss setting Lila on her lap, and listening to them all chat.

“So, are we jumping the ship?” Johanna asks as they sit down for dinner. “I don’t mind if you do, it’s just, I’ll be losing a great talent.”

Peeta turns to Katniss and smiles at her. Katniss smiles at Lila as she sits beside her mother and Effie chewing on her piece of garlic bread.

“I’d hope we’d get a little further into the meal before this was brought up.”

“Just tell us.” Johanna tells him.

“Yes, I’m jumping ship.” He announces. “We’re hopping on a plane and heading somewhere on an adventure.”
“He’s going to show me all the places he travelled to last year and we’re going to discover places together as a family.”

“Are you sure this is the right thing?” Johanna asks.

Katniss turns to Peeta and smiles at him before turning back to her friend.

“We’ve never been so sure about something in our entire life.” She tells them all, a wide smile forming on her face.

“Well then, let’s have a toast to the Mellark’s and their adventure of a lifetime.”

They clink their glasses, toasting to their new adventure and decision they’ve made together as a family.

“Sweetheart, fancy seeing you here.”

Katniss smiles at Haymitch as she enters with Lila. They were here to meet Peeta for lunch and since they were early she wanted to speak to Haymitch.

“We’re just meeting Peeta for lunch.” She tells him. “Thought we’d stop by and say hello.”

“Come here princess.” He says, reaching out across his desk for Lila. Katniss passes her over, allowing Lila to walk across the mahogany surface into Haymitch’s arms. “I think you’ve grown since I saw you a week ago.”

“She’s growing like a weed.” Katniss chuckles and takes a seat across from Haymitch and smiles as Lila plays with his tie, bringing it to her mouth and sucking on it.

“That’ll make an impression on the guys in my meeting.”

“Sorry.”

“Like I care. Prim used to do this to me all the time.” He tells her. “It never bothered me one bit.” He smiles down at Lila, runs his hand over the hair she’s quickly growing and then looks up at Katniss. “I can assume this drop in has a purpose?”

“It does.”

“Spill then.”

“I was looking for some advice mostly. The trip is coming up quickly and we need to make some quick decisions about our house, organising our affairs and other little things.”

He nods, listens to her and gives her his advice, offers her solutions to her problems and the best way to go about ensuring things are still standing here in Boston while they travel the world.

He even offers to begin arranging things for her and tell her to not stress at all.

“Just get that house packed up and the three of you on that plane. Effie and I will take care of the rest. You, Peeta and Lila enjoy yourself and don’t worry about a thing back here.”

“Thank you so much.”

“It’s the least I can do.”
Katniss smiles at him. “We better get going. Peeta will be expecting us.”

“I’ll see you for dinner tomorrow?”

“You will. I can’t believe there’s going to be only three more dinners together before we fly out.”

“You sure you’re not rushing the flight out? You could leave it another few weeks.”

“It’s a good time for us. The sooner we go, the sooner we’ll be home.”

“Well if you put it like that, than that sounds like a great idea.” He smiles and hands Lila to Katniss, allowing her to put Lila into the carrier. “Oh and Katniss, Effie and I will be there to help you and Peeta these next few weeks. And the months you’re all away.”

“Thanks.” She smiles. “We appreciate it a lot.”

“Hey, we might even make a special trip to see you guys wherever you might be in the world.” He tells her with a wide smile. “I’m so proud of you.”

She leaves the office, heading downstairs with Lila. They find Peeta at his desk, finishing up a story.

“Hi my girls.”

“Hi.”

“Ready for lunch?”

Katniss nods and he hits send on his computer before putting it to sleep. He gathers his phone and wallet from the desk and they head on out of the office together.

“I just spoke to Haymitch. He’s going to help us sort out everything for our trip.”

“Good that’s one less worry we have to deal with. All of this travel stuff is overwhelming especially trying to figure it out for two other people.”

“It’ll be worth it.”

“It will be.” He agrees. “I’m more excited than nervous I think.”

“Me too.” She tells him. “I just think I’m more nervous at how Lila is going to go.”

“She’ll love it. She’s going to meet so many people, experience so many places and cultures, she’s going to grow this patience and understanding that’ll make her a more settled child in the future. And besides, who wouldn’t want to hangout in a carrier while they’re carried all around the world?”

She laughs and kisses the top of Lila’s head. “That’s true.”

“And won’t it be beautiful when we tell our family and friends where she took her first steps? Where she visited that day? That she met village kids and was fussed over by the village mothers who cuddled her constantly and gave her gifts. She’s going to have all these pictures and stories we tell her when she’s older. She’s going to make the kids she goes to school with very jealous.” He smiles. “Lila will have the most fun out of all of us.”
Lila crawls quickly towards her mother. Her attention being caught by what she is doing. She sits on her bottom and then crawls up onto the mattress.

“Hi baby girl.” Katniss smiles down at her daughter.

“Mama.”

“Yes?”

She reaches one hand out for her mother and she helps her up onto the bed. She gets up on her knees and investigates the items on the bed before riffling through the piles of clothes.

“Hurricane Lila has struck.” Katniss sighs, shaking her head slightly. “You’re not helping very much sweetheart.”

Lila looks up at her mother with a toothy grin and crawls through the items, knocking the piles down.

“You’re a little terror.” She laughs and lifts Lila to her lap and blows a raspberry on the baby’s stomach. Lila giggles loudly and Katniss blows another raspberry again, causing her to squirm in her hold.

She peppers thousands of kisses onto her daughter and finally lets her go, smiling at her daughter who smiles widely and still giggles slightly.

“I love you Lila Grace.”

“Ma.” Lila replies softly, reaching out to touch her mother’s cheeks.

Katniss kisses her and smooths back her hair. Lila stares into her eyes, her baby blues much like her father’s. Those eyes she fell in love with 10 years ago. And those eyes she hoped she’d fall in love with again when they had children.

Lila leans forwards and tries to kiss her mother, slobbering on her mother’s chin.

“That was beautiful.” She tells Lila, wiping her chin with her sleeve. “I loved that a whole lot.” She tells her with a slight chuckle. “Let’s find you something to play with while Mommy finishes packing.”

She gets up off of the mattress and carries Lila downstairs in search of Peeta.

“Peeta?” She calls out.

“Out here.”

Lila happily goes to her father who is distracted from his task of packing up the study. He has photo albums spread across the floor of the study and is flicking through the pages of photos.

“I can see we’re busy packing.” Katniss chuckles once she’s passed Lila to him.

“I got a little distracted.”

“I can see.” She smiles. “What you find?” She asks, stepping across the albums and sitting in the spot beside him.

“Photos from our early college days.” He tells her. “Look Lila, there’s your handsome father and your beautiful mother on the hood of his car.”
“Your father was naughty and used to smoke during college.” She tells her daughter. “But it made him look like a rebel. It made him look real cool.”

The ten years, it’s hard to believe what they’ve been through. What they’ve experienced and come back from.

It’s funny staring back at these two teenagers who had the world at their feet and no idea what they’d go through together to be where they are today.

“It seems like a lifetime ago.” He whispers as he turns his attention to the next page.

Lila’s own attention has been capture by the photographs and her parents tell her a little about the pictures. She listens on and carefully views the pages with her perceptive little eye.

“We should pick out some photos to take with us. The photos that mean the most to us and that define who we are together. Some that we can show the people we meet during our travels and share a part of ourselves with them.” He suggests.

“I like that idea.”

Together they pick out 10 photos to carry with them. The ones that mean the most and could tell the story of the family with 10 simple pictures.

She kisses him once they have their pictures selected and he wipes the tears from beneath her eyes and smiles at her.

“Be happy my love.”

“I am.”

“Good.”

She knocks softly on the door and waits.

Her friend sits in the hospital bed with the late spring sun filtering through the blinds.

She looks radiant.

“You made it?”

“We did.” She tells her with a smile. “I told you I’d be here.” She embraces Madge tightly. “I’m so glad you had the babies before we went away.”

“Me too.”

“So, how are they?”

“Just down in the nursery at the moment. The nurses were letting me have a rest for a bit. Having twins takes it out of you.”

She laughs. “I bet it does.”

Lila climbs up the bed and towards Madge, settling on her lap.

“Hi my girl. I’ve missed you so much.” She tells Lila, brushing her hand over her head and
kissing the top of her head. “Look how big you are.”

“She’ll be one in 7 weeks.”

“Stop growing.”

Lila happily sits on Madge’s lap, soaking up the attention from her.

“How was it?”

“Good.” She replies, wiping her eye. “It was hard but so worth it.”

“I bet it was.” Katniss replies softly, reaching across the bed for her friend’s hand. “You’re the strongest person I know Madge. I knew you could do this.”

She shakes her head. “You’re the strongest person there is.”

“Can we just admit that each other is the strongest?”

Madge nods and laughs slightly, sniffling and wiping under her nose with her hand.

“So, girls or boys?”

“Two girls.” Madge smiles. “James is so in love with them.”

“Is he? I thought he’d hate the idea of two sisters.”

“Me too but when he met them, he just was so smitten. He wanted to hold them and he just embraced them, giving them lots of kisses. He’s going to be such a wonderful brother to them.”

“You’ve done a great job with him.”

“So have you.” She says. “You helped me raise him too.” She smiles. “He’s so much like he’s father though, it hurts.”

“Is the hurt good?”

“So good.”

Two bassinets are wheeled in shortly after. Two bundles swaddled in blankets with their caps on.

“This is Charlotte Maree.” Madge announces, pointing out the purple-capped baby. “And this is Sadie Claire.” She says, pointing out the pink-capped baby girl.

“They are so beautiful.” Katniss tells her, sniffling slightly and then kissing her friend’s cheek. “Gale would be so proud.”

Lila examines the babies carefully and smiles from ear to ear.

“I think someone likes them.” Madge laughs.


“I think someone is ready to be a big sister.” Madge tells Katniss as they hold the babies. Katniss has Sadie in her arms and Lila sitting beside her on the chair.

Katniss smiles, looks down at her daughter. She’d love for Lila to be a big sister. And she’d love
to have another baby.

“Maybe one day.”

“You want another right?”

She nods. “Of course I do.”

“It’ll happen.”

Katniss smiles at her friend, trying her best to not shed a tear and looks back down at little Sadie.

One day soon. She silently tells herself.

Peeta meets them at the hotel that night, having flown in after them.

“How are the babies?” He asks after he embraces his wife and daughter.

“Great. Healthy as well. They’ll be ready to go home in a couple of days.”

“Really, that soon?”

“Yep.”

“So, they were identical, two boys or two girls?” He asks.

“Charlotte and Sadie.” She tells him showing him a photo she took of them on her phone.

“They are gorgeous. So beautiful.” He exclaims.

“They are so sweet.” She tells him, slipping out of her shoes and sitting down on the edge of the bed.

Later that night, once they’ve gotten Lila down to sleep, he turns to her.

“Do you want another?”

She rolls onto her side, looks him in the eyes.

“Because I know when we first started talking you wanted 3.” He smiles. “Do you?”

“I do.” She tells him. “And seeing the twins today, I knew I wanted to do it all over again. I wanted to have you beside me, holding my hand as I delivered our son or daughter. I want to do it again.”

He’s silent for a short while, staring up at the ceiling.

“What about you?”

After a few minutes of silence. Of beating hearts and long thinking he answers her.

“I do.”

The remaining weeks before their trip, they do all they can to get Lila used to the trip. They pack away her port-a-cot and get her used to sleeping under a mosquito net and in their bed. They introduce a bedtime teddy, something that is familiar and will help her sleep. They forego using
the stroller and carry Lila around in the carrier on their outings out and about. They figure out Lila’s three most favourite toys and get her used to playing with them. They get her immunised and vaccinated and everything else they can think of to protect and help Lila’s transition into the next six months.

And the two of them get themselves organised. They go on long walks on weekends, breaking in their shoes. They pack and repack their packs. They read as much info as they can on the net regarding travelling with children. They get themselves used to sleeping with Lila right beside them. They get themselves vaccinated and have their final doctor check-ups. They ready themselves for their trip.

“Now Katniss, have you resumed sex with Peeta?” Her OB asks her.

“Yes.” She replies.

“And I see you’re not on the pill. What form of contraception are you two using?”

“Condoms.”

“And are their plans for more children? Condoms seem to be the middleman. The form used when the woman goes off the pill and is transitioning, ready to start trying for a child. You and Peeta did this when you were trying for Leo.”

“We did but there’s no plans for any more children just yet. We’re going off backpacking for 6 months.” She tells her. “And Lila is not even 11 months old yet. I think we’re happy with just Lila.”

“Are you happy using condoms?”

She nods. “I know there’s risks with every form of contraception but we’re both comfortable using them and he doesn’t want me to go on the pill. I haven’t been on it for several years now.”

“Have you spoken about your contraception for the trip?”

“Peeta has bought a supply of them. We’ll stock up as we go. We’ll be fine Doctor Hart.”

“I know you both will be.” She smiles. “I just want you three to be happy and enjoy your trip.”

“And we will.” Katniss tells her. “We’ll be fine. We’re going on a lifetime of an adventure, being paid to do it and get to holiday as a family. We’re more than ready to take the next step into the world.” She smiles. “And I’m sure Peeta and I will talk about more children when we feel ready. It might be in a month it might be in a year. We’re adults and we will communicate the best that we can. And if we get pregnant then I don’t think either of us will be upset.”

The last night in their marriage home, they all sleep together on a camp mattress. Lila in the middle of her mother and father. She sleeps soundly, her chest rising and falling in a steady motion as she dreams.

Her parents on the other hand don’t sleep.

“Are you nervous?”

“A little.” She tells him.

“Me too but it’s good to be nervous.”
“Were you nervous before your trip with Haymitch?”

“I was but I had the time of my life.”

“Will you show me all the places you visited? Show me all the places you started to find your peace and your mind again? Where you truly started to believe in yourself?”

“I’ll show you everything. I’ll tell Lila of all the special places that brought the two of us together finally. If it wasn’t for that trip than I’m sure we wouldn’t be together.”

She kisses him gently and lays her head down onto her pillow. She stares at him and finally finds herself drifting off to sleep.

In the morning, they do their best to keep the morning as close to their routine as possible. Peeta packs away the camp mattress, pillows and blankets they had borrowed from Effie and Haymitch. Peeta buys cheese buns as a celebration for their final breakfast in Boston. Katniss ensures the house is in top shape, ready for the new tenants to move in and hopefully love the house as much as they did.

All the little bits and pieces that made it her home were gone and it was a weird feeling not seeing their wedding portrait up on the wall as you entered the house. Or her leather jacket hanging up in the coat closet by the door besides Peeta’s jacket. All of their shoes are no longer at the bottom of the closet where they used to sit side by side, kicked off after a long day. It was weird to not see Lila’s things like her little coat hanging by the front door and her toys. All of Lila’s things that eventually made this place a home. That alerted people when they visited that they had a child. A child they loved who lived in this house.

The fridge is clear of its magnets and photos. The magnets packed away and no longer saying *always* as it held a photo of the three of them to the front.

As they eat their cheese buns she notices his wedding band and smiles.

He never took off his wedding ring even when she left him. He kept it on as it reminded him of hope and the eventual path of reconciliation he’d go on.

Now it symbolises everything they’ve been through together. She smiles down at her own engagement, eternity and wedding ring and knows that those words he said when he gave her all these rings meant forever. Even if there were a few bumps in the road. He meant it.

And just like that night a few months before when she sat out the front of this house and wondered if he found happiness. If he still cried at night like did. Where she was unsure what to expect on arrival home. She learnt a lot. He did find happiness. He found that happiness again when she walked into his life. When he met his daughter. When they came together to raise their daughter like they had always hoped to.

And they no longer cry at night.

They now just laugh and smile.

He offers to clean up, taking the rubbish to the trash and keeping an eye on Lila while Katniss finishes getting ready.

She comes back downstairs and slowly approaches the living room where Peeta and Lila are playing amongst the pillows and blankets. They play a game of chase and Lila is giggling in delight.
Katniss stands back and watches them.

Her best friend.

Her lover.

Her husband.

Her daughter.

Her hope.

Her greatest love.

He no longer looks pained or hurt. She’s no longer part of that pain and hurt. She no longer feels uneasy staring at him. He’s a beautiful sight to be looking at, especially as he chases around his daughter. A child he swore he’d never love.

Lila has taken her father’s heart and soul. She has taken away that pain and has begun to mend the broken pieces.

She mended her mother’s heart and soul. She put her mother back together.

She brought her parents back together.

Lila laughs from inside the living room as her father blows a raspberry on her neck. Peeta smiles a wide smile as he listens to his daughter laugh and it’s like music to his ears.

She decides to give herself in and steps into the living room, kneeling down beside her husband and daughter. She tickles Lila and laughs along with them both.

He might have missed her earliest milestones but he’d witness her biggest in the months and years to come.

The doorbell sounds and they look between each other smiling. Lila’s laughter dies down and she results to smiling and reaching for her father.

Effie and Haymitch enter the house, smiling at the family. Smiling at the new adventure they’d be embarking on.

“Ready?” Haymitch asks them.

They were travelling with one backpack between the three for the next 6 months. Lila had a few more possessions than her parents but they didn’t mind. They had each other and a big adventure to be had.

Haymitch takes their pack to the car and Effie follows, telling them they’ll be in the car waiting.

They stand in the hallway looking around at their home.

This was it.

But they can’t seem to muster up the courage to leave just yet.

“Just a few more minutes.” She tells him.
And he agrees.

Haymitch beeps the horn a few minutes later and they turn and look at each other.

“Together?” She asks.

“Together.”

He passes her Lila and she settles Lila on her hip as he follows them out of the house, locking it up. Lila gurgles as Peeta takes the key out of the lock.

“Let’s go get on that plane.” He coos to Lila who coos back.

Lila sits in between her parents in her car seat and the drive to the airport is filled with music from the radio. No one speaks the whole journey but it’s a comfortable silence. An encouraging silence. It makes Katniss determined to do this. To make memories and continue on the healing and the growing back together Peeta and her had to do.

Haymitch pulls into the drop off lane at the airport and Effie and him jump out of the car. Peeta grabs the pack and Katniss gets Lila out of her car seat and slings their carryon bag over her back.

Haymitch and Effie get teary eyed as they say goodbye to them all.

“Don’t grow too much little one.” Effie tells Lila as she kisses her cheeks. “We’ll see you when we see you. Who knows, you’ll probably be walking and talking by then.”

“Bye Effie, thanks for everything.”

“My pleasure dear. You enjoy your time traveling and if you need anything don’t hesitate to call us.”

“Will do.”

She embraces Effie and then lets go.

She stands in front of her uncle who smiles at her. He kisses Lila goodbye first, tickling her cheek and wishing her fun.

He doesn’t say anything to Katniss. Just slips her a letter to read once they’ve arrived in Venezuela. He embraces her for a long while before he finally lets her go.

“Have fun.”

“We will.”

They wave goodbye to Effie and Haymitch and enter the airport.

The lady at the gate smiles at them as they approach.

“Family holiday?” She asks as she takes their tickets.

“Yes. First family holiday.” Peeta replies with a smile.

“How long are you going for?”

“So far 6 months.”
“Wow, lucky girl you are.” She says, smiling at Lila who smiles back.

“She’s a very lucky girl.”

She hands back their tickets, tags their pack that is a little over the limit but she lets it slide with a friendly smile and wishes them a safe journey.

They board the plane, finding their seats at the front. The flight was only a short one to Houston but would cut into Lila’s naptime. The steward makes them feel comfortable, tells them she’ll bring them a bassinet once the plane has taken off and attend to anything else they’ll need to make it a smooth trip for Lila.

Peeta touches the top of her hand and smiles at her.

“You ready?” He asks her.

She nods, smiling back at him. “More than ready.”

Today was the day Katniss, Peeta and Lila Mellark began their adventure. Continued their journey of growing back together. Experienced the world together as a family and made the best memories.

Today was the day that Katniss felt would define their lives.

It’s early in Caracas when they land. The sun is starting to rise and promises a beautiful day. It gives them hope that the next 6 months are going to be wonderful.

They leave the airport for the waiting shuttle bus and sit as close together as they can. Peeta wraps his arm around her shoulders and kisses her temple. Lila tries her best to sleep against her mother’s chest.

“So, you ready for the next 6 months?” He asks her.

She turns to him and smiles. “More than ready.”

The bus driver climbs into the front seat as the bus is filled with others and he leaves the airport for their accommodation.

“That’s the way.” He tells her, kissing her lips softly. “Our journey awaits us.”

Katniss,

By now you’ve just arrived in Venezuela. It marks your first day of the next six months of your wild backpacking adventure. You’ve never been one to say no to a challenge, even since you were a little girl. Go into this with open arms and embrace every minute of it. It will change you. It will challenge you. But it will make you more patient, understanding, bolder and braver.

Don’t be afraid to take a wrong turn or cheat and stay in a posh hotel room when you’re feeling your sanity slip. You’re allowed to spoil yourself along the way. The three of you deserve so much. Maybe hire a nanny for the day and allow Peeta and yourself the chance to go out together. Get a massage, go to dinner or see a show. It doesn’t have to be all about Lila.

I’ll miss you all terribly but know it won’t be for too long. We’ll see each other in Thailand in July. Don’t let little Miss grow too quickly, kiss her every day for us.

Mostly importantly, love the growing back together. You three deserve it.
All my love, support and laughter,

Haymitch.

Chapter End Notes

It's almost the end, that's why I think it's taken me so long to get this chapter out to you guys. I really don't want it to end.
There will be two more after this. I'm in the process of writing the next chapter which takes place about a month after the end of this. I hope to get it out to you guys soon.

In the meantime you can come and find me on Tumblr - Herainab
“Katniss. We’re about to land.” He whispers to her, shaking her awake from her nap.

She slowly opens her eyes, yawns and stretches slightly, careful to not jostle the sleeping baby on her lap.

She caresses her daughter’s cheek gently and turns to him to smile. He leans down; kissing her lips softly and smiles at her.

“Ready?”

“One month down, five to go.” She replies with a slight smile. “I’ve had so much fun already. I don’t want it to end.”

“Me either.”

The lovely custom officers, allow them to the front of the line as they see them standing with Lila who fusses and whines in Peeta’s arms.

They’ve experienced this at most checkpoints. They seem to feel sorry for the traveling couple holding the fussing baby and fast track them through.

Maybe it’s for the sake of the other passengers who endured the flight with the baby or they’re really sympathetic.

“How long will you be in Barcelona for?” The lady asks.

“6 days. We wanted the chance to adjust and take our time. We’ve had such a full on month.”

“I can imagine. Argentina, Columbia, Chile, Bolivia, Uruguay, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana and Swaziland.” She chuckles. “What one lucky little girl.”

He smiles back at her and Katniss shifts Lila to her other hip smiling.

“How a wonderful time in Spain and wonderful remainder of your trip.”

They find their pack, Peeta putting it over his shoulders and allow the security to call them a cab to take them to their hotel. They had been on two planes already today and were ready to drop in their hotel room and sleep for the remainder of the day.

But they learnt the best way to maintain the jetlag was to not fall victim to the exhaustion right away but to try and fight it, stretch it as long as they could before falling asleep.

But they didn’t seem to work with a baby.

But she was a trooper.

She was a natural traveller and loved every minute of it.
With Lila strapped to Katniss’ back, they set off from the hotel and down into the streets of Barcelona. The streets are bustling with locals and tourists enjoying the sunny Saturday afternoon. Since they have a few days in Barcelona, they take their time exploring the city and just get lost. With a jetlagged baby, they don’t venture too far from their hotel.

They take hundreds of pictures and pick up brochures and guides along the way, speaking terrible Spanish and engaging in conversation with those who stop them.

“Beautiful girl.” An older lady says, stopping them in the street. She’s got her own grandson with her on his trike. “How old?”

“She’ll be one on Thursday.” Peeta tells her with a proud smile. “She’s growing too quickly.”

“You’ll be saying that when they’re having their own babies.” She smiles. “How long are you in Barcelona for?”

“Friday we leave.”

“Enjoy your stay, maybe hop on the train and head to Madrid if you’re not planning on going there. Or to Valencia.” She smiles. “Not too long on the train either. Both beautiful spots as well.”

“Thanks. We were going to do maybe a couple of day trips since we’re only in Spain for the week. We might do that.”

“It’s well worth it.” She smiles. “Have a nice time.”

“Gracias.” Peeta says to her with a smile and they watch her walk off with her grandson.

“I’d love to go to Valencia.”

“We can. We’ve got until Thursday remember.”

“We’re in Madrid for a day before we head to France, why not?”

“We’re backpacking remember?” He laughs. “We can do what we chose, as long as we’re at the airport on the days we’ve booked flights.”

He wraps his arm around her shoulder and kisses her. “Let’s go and get some dinner.”

They find a Spanish restaurant, avoiding a place with an English menu and take a seat. Lila is placed in a high chair, fussed over by the staff constantly as they walk past her. She’s nearly taken out of highchair each time for a cuddle.

They eat a meal of tapas, not wanting anything too heavy and feed Lila up with as much food as they can. They’ve discovered she’s quite willing to eat anything they place in front of her, which has been a relief for them, especially when they were in places where there was no supermarkets or other options.

“What do you want to do tonight?” He asks Katniss.

“Watch the sunset and sleep.”

“We can do that.” He tells her. “You ready?”

She nods and he goes and pays. She wipes down Lila’s face and hands and carries her towards the counter to let her say goodbye to all the staff.
Peeta carries Lila out of the restaurant and hand in hand they head on back to the hotel.

Peeta gets Lila bathed; jumping under the shower with her while Katniss unpacks some of their clothes, searching for Lila’s pyjamas. Peeta appears with a towel wrapped around his waist and Lila in his arms wrapped in a towel.

“Mama.”

“Hi sweet girl.” Katniss coos to her, kissing her on the mouth. “Have a nice shower?”

Lila smiles and is taken by her mother from Peeta to let him get changed. She dries Lila, rubs her down in some lotion before putting her in a diaper and a short onesie. It’s not long before she is nursing and sound asleep in her cot.

Peeta and Katniss sit on the balcony outside of their room and watch the sunset.

Katniss lets out a big yawn and Peeta drags her inside where they crash on their bed, wrapped in each other’s arms.

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“What time is it?” Katniss asks as Lila wakes them.

“6.” He replies, letting out a yawn.

Katniss brings her to their bed, letting her nurse.

“Happy birthday.” He whispers to her.

“Thank you.” She mumbles back.

“And happy Mother’s Day too.”

She smiles slightly and he leans down to kiss her. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

He takes Lila for a walk, letting Katniss sleep in for a little while longer.

He dresses Lila and gets her in the carrier before they set out for a walk. One to get Katniss some flowers and a gift for her birthday and mother’s day.

He hadn’t been able to find the perfect gift for her and she told him she didn’t want anything. The three of them together was as good as anything in the entire world.

But he didn’t want to slack on giving her a gift.

Locals stop them to have a chat, Lila engaging them in a conversation from her place on his chest in the carrier. Her sparkling blue eyes and big smile seemed to become an icebreaker and locals seemed to flock to them and help them out more since they had a baby. A lot of the village women in Africa were especially drawn to Lila. She opened up a dialogue for her parents and loved the attention. She gurgled and giggled to everyone and they went head over heels to help them.

“We’re looking for a bakery to get some nice treats.” He says to the woman who speaks English to them. She was originally from Canada and has lived here for the past 15 years.
“Just round the block, there’s a little side alley bakery. Best pastries are made there.”

“They don’t happen to make cheese buns?” He asks.

She frowns and shakes her head. “No I don’t think so. You might have to ask them. They might be able to make them for you. I assume it’s for your wife?”

He nods. “It’s her birthday today and also mother’s day. Just wanted to do something special.”

“You’re a wonderful man.” She tells him with a sincere smile. “They might do something similar. All you have to do is ask.”

He nods and thanks her. She says goodbye to Lila and heads on off, catching up with her husband who walks their German Shepherd.

“Come on, we’ve got a mission to find breakfast.”

He finds the bakery and on arrival is taken back to the bakery back in Boston. He inhales the beautiful scent of fresh bread and cooking pastry and can’t wait to be in Paris. Late Paris in Spring seemed to be the most beautiful time of year. And he wanted to share that with his two girls.

He orders a selection of pastries and treats for their breakfast and morning tea.

“Do you know where there is a gift shop?” He asks the cashier.

She smiles and nods. “Next door. Beautiful gifts.”

“Can I come back for these?”

“Of course. We’ll keep them for you.”

“Thank you. I won’t be long.”

He enters the store, greeting the cashier and straight away finds what he will give to Katniss. It’s wrapped for him and he buys a few cards and a bunch of bright red carnations.

He writes in the cards and places them in the bag, thanking the cashier and wishing her a great day. He collects his pastries and heads on back to the hotel trying his best to keep Lila from eating the flowers.

Katniss opens the door and smiles widely.

“Happy birthday and Mother’s Day.” He exclaims, handing over the bunch of flowers and leaning into to kiss her.

Katniss takes the carnations. She frowns slightly but he watches her lips turn upwards, smiling at the flowers before smiling back up at him.

“My heart aches for you too.” She tells him with tears welling in her eyes as she smiles.

Carnations were the first flowers he bought her after Prim’s death. He always surprised her with the flowers throughout the years, especially on those days that he felt so in love with her or the days that he felt she was travelling rough, especially early on after Prim’s death.

And on the day they eloped, she wore a head crown of flowers, red carnations dominated the crown mostly.
He hadn’t bought her carnations since just after Leo’s death, he remembered watching the flowers die as they sat in a vase on their coffee table. They wilted and died as his heart ached more and more. And he couldn’t face looking at another carnation.

Until today. Today, it felt right to finally give her them again.

On the bed, they eat the pastries and Katniss opens her cards and gift.

“I know it’s not the same without Leo but he’s smiling. He’s smiling so much.” Peeta tells her as she reads the Mother’s day card he signed off with Leo and Lila’s name. “He’s not forgotten. He’ll never be forgotten by anyone.”

Katniss sniffs and sobs and wipes her nose.

“Sorry for making you cry.”

She shakes her head. “No, it’s fine.” She tells him. “Leo made me a Mother. He’s never forgotten on this day. He might not be here with us but he’s always there.” She sniffs. “For the rest of my life, I’ll always thank him for making me a mother. It’s ok to be sad on this day.”

He leans over, kisses her long and hard before she pulls away.

“I didn’t become a mother without your help either.” She reminds him.

“And I didn’t become a father without you.” He reminds her with a smile. “Thank you.”

This trip hasn’t been without some tears shed. In a village in Namibia, a woman placed her hand over Katniss’ heart and asked why there was sadness in her heart.

Katniss brought out her pictures, telling this woman her story, how she lost her parents when she was 5. Lost her sister to cancer when she was 19. Then lost her baby, two and a half years ago. How she almost lost her husband too.

The woman held her, told her that she was a survivor and that the sadness in her heart made her strong. It made her human. It made her a fighter.

The woman asked Katniss about Leo and as Katniss cried, she told the woman, who had lost her own baby shortly after birth, about Leo. Katniss and the woman cried while they sat around the campfire, under the African stars and wept for their babies.

Peeta disappeared when Katniss said Leo’s name, going to their tent where he wept. Katniss found him after, wrapped him in her small arms and held him to her chest, kissing the pain away.

They made love, connecting and trying their best to let the pain go away. It did during but after they still wept after.

And then in Uruguay, two weeks into their trip, they blew up. After a long night of no sleep and a restless, teething baby, they fought.

Peeta deemed this to be a stupid idea bringing Lila on a trip when she was so young and vulnerable. He demanded Katniss pack as they were leaving, going back to Boston where they’d be safe.

Katniss talked him down and found out the real reason he snapped.

“Laney had a miscarriage.”
They cried, mourned for their niece or nephew and connected once Lila was asleep. They felt that urge to be as close to each other. To take the pain away and find that deep connection they found when they made love.

He spoke to Nathan on the phone the next chance he got and Nathan finally understood what it felt to lose a child. He apologised to Peeta for everything and together the brother’s mourned together.

There’s been a few other times when there’s been a few tears shed but nothing that pushed them like those two occasions.

And they’re not stupid. There will be more and more tears shed along the way. This was a big step in their relationship. In their journey to mending and healing. This was the next chapter of their life and they knew it would push their limits.

“Peeta, this is beautiful.” Katniss exclaims as she looks at the necklace. A beautiful pearl necklace. One that reminded him of the one her father had given her as a child that she lost. The minute Peeta saw it; he knew Katniss would love it.

“Here, let me.” He tells her.

He clips it around her neck and places a soft kiss to the base of her neck.

“Thank you so much.”

He finds her, throughout the day constantly fiddling with it. She doesn’t realise she’s doing it but he finds it’s wonderful to see the gift so appreciated and loved.

They sightsee. Walk around the city and take public transport when their feet won’t carry them anymore. They picnic at the beach, having a long, drawn out lunch eating fruit, cheese and crackers.

Lila laughs and giggles at her parents as she picks from the platter of snacks. She’s in a yellow bodysuit, the color of sunflowers, with her hair in a ponytail. Her hair is now just long enough to tie off with a band and she has one of her mother’s carnations tucked into the band.

Her mother also wears one tucked into her own braid. Her smile is as wide as the sun and she shines in the beautiful sundress she wears.

And they watch Lila take her first steps there on the beach.

It brings Katniss over the edge with tears falling down her cheeks as she gets up to catch Lila. She throws her daughter up in the air before she catches her in her arms, covering her face in kisses.

“I love you so much Lila Grace.”

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Siem Reap, Cambodia
12th of August 2016

“It’s so early still.” She whispers, letting out a big yawn as the alarm they set is turned off.

“You wanted to do this.” He reminds her with a slight smile.
“I know I did.” She replies, throwing him his shorts. “I think it’s just the jetlag and all the walking we’ve been doing the last couple of days. Lila isn’t as light as she used to be.”

“She’s 15 months old today.”

Katniss nods and he sees the small scowl she’s trying to hide.

“She’s grown up so much in the last couple of months.” He reminds her with a soft smile. He cups her face with his hands and kisses her forehead. “Come on, we don’t want to miss it.”

They dress, leave Lila in her pyjamas and do their best to not disturb her as they get her strapped into her carrier. She barely bats an eyelid and the parents smile a relieved smile at each other, mentally high-fiving each other for the smooth transfer from bed to carrier.

It’s pitch black outside when they leave their shared villa and head on out. There is a Tuk Tuk waiting for them outside and they climb on board, showing the driver where they wish to go on the map and he smiles at them and drives them the short distance to their destination.

When they were in Bangkok they found these Tuk Tuk’s to be the best in getting around. It kept them shaded while they did sightseeing and saved their legs. The drivers had extensive knowledge and showed them places they didn’t even know about. They saw many beautiful sunrises and sunsets from places that seemed untouched by tourists and marvelled in the peacefulness.

This driver took them out yesterday morning to see another sunrise at one of the temples, recommended a place to get a nice breakfast and marked out on their map other places to go and promised to pick them up before lunch to head back to town.

Lila snores against her mother’s chest and Katniss smiles down at her daughter.

“I was looking a photos of her last night from when we first left to yesterday and I’ve got to say, she’s grown so much in the last 4 months. Gone from this little thing who couldn’t quite walk and could only say a few words to being able to walk and talk.” He tells her, wrapping his arm tighter around her shoulders. “She’s so mature and patient, we’ve done a good job.”

The Tuk Tuk stops at the bottom of a hill and the driver points to the path they need to take.

Peeta hands over some money to pay and the driver indicates that he’ll wait for them here.

It’s still quite dark when they climb out of the Tuk Tuk and they look up the hill they have to navigate.

“You right to carry her?” He asks.

“Yeah, we’ve done plenty of trekking up steep hills.” She reminds him. “Let’s go.”

They follow the torch light from his phone and he keeps her steady as they walk up the hill. It was just a short ten-minute walk and they were told the top was spectacular.

Along the way, they hear the monkeys and other animals nearby. He sees her smiling, a surreal look in her eyes but a wide smile on her mouth, noting how cool this is.

They climb to a roof top of Phnom Bakheng Temple and overlook the beautiful pinnacle structures of the other temples as the sun starts to crack open the horizon and rise for another day.

Lila wakes just as the sun begins to ascend higher into the sky and her little eyes watch in amazement as the world lights up in front of her and the animals move about and talk in the
And even with the many sunrises they’ve seen during their travels, there’s something surreal about witnessing the sun rise in so many countries.

They traverse back down the hill, going a less stepper way towards the little market stalls that were scattered near the temples for the tourists to get a drink or some food.

Lila kicks her legs as she spots the stall and points at the ripe green coconut. This has become her favorite and they found the cold coconut drank out of a straw kept her quiet and happy.

“Come on, let’s go and wake Uncle Haymitch and Aunt Effie up.”

Haymitch and Effie were tagging along with them for a few more weeks. They had plans to just visit them in Thailand before heading off to Europe for a month but decided to can their Europe trip to explore more of South East Asia together. Haymitch from the start wanted to travel Asia but Effie turned her nose up. She had heard too many horror stories and wanted to spend her time in the Greek Isles and Italy.

But she changed her tune the minute she touched down in Thailand, falling in love with the culture and persuaded Haymitch to tag along for the next month. He happily obliged and they backpacked together.

Just, they saw this as more of a relaxing holiday and slept in most mornings while Katniss, Peeta and Lila were up early and heading to bed late after long and full days of exploring.

It was nice to have Haymitch and Effie there with them. They were enjoying the company, the adult conversation and the two of them jumped at the chance to watch Lila when they wished to go out exploring some more.

Haymitch is sitting out of the front of their Villa when they arrive back. He has been for a swim and is eating fresh fruit.

“There’s my girl.” Haymitch greets Lila as she runs towards him. He lifts her up to his lap, kissing her and cuddling her.

“Hi Haymitch, nice to see you too.” Peeta replies with a grin.

“You know this cutie gets my attention before you two.” He chuckles back, pulling faces with Lila.

Lila imitates a monkey, pulling a goofy face and tickling underneath her armpits.

“Tell Uncle Haymitch you heard monkey’s Lila.”

“Wow, what a lucky girl you are.” He coos to her. “What sound does a monkey make?”

Lila does a monkey sound that brings a proud smile to Haymitch’s face.

“You’re such a clever girl.”

Effie appears with a dressing gown wrapped tied at her waist and smiles at them all. She kisses Lila good morning and takes a seat opposite Haymitch who still holds Lila. Lila picks at his plate of fruit while they plan out their day.

Katniss and Peeta change their clothes, do a quick load of washing and leave it to hang in hopes it
will dry. They change Lila into some harem pants and a t-shirt and pack their day pack. Effie and Haymitch join them and they head on downtown.

They explore the markets, find something quick to eat and do a bit of shopping. Katniss nurses Lila in private while they snack on some more fruit.

Lila had no intentions of cutting out her feeds and still proved to Katniss that she was still interested. Katniss in a way didn’t want the nursing to end, as it was their time to bond with each other. Look into each other’s eyes, hold each other and smile. And with them still on the road, Katniss was more than happy to still be providing Lila with those antibodies to protect her as they travelled.

Lila sleeps in the carrier as they continue on walking and they come across a body and soul massage place.

“Let’s go in.” Peeta says smiling. “We deserve some relaxation and rejuvenation.”

They take seats in the massage chairs and have their feet and legs rubbed down.

The masseurs points and smiles at Lila who sleeps soundly.

“She have massage.” The lady rubbing Katniss’ feet says.

It turns out it was a family friendly massage place, offering baby and kid massages.

Lila gets a little massage when she wakes. She co-operates perfectly and loves the attention she is given.

They leave for lunch afterwards and feel relaxed, re-energised and happy.

“Peet, remember the place we ate at when we stopped here?”

“Oh man, that Khmer was amazing.”

“Keen to show these lovely ladies?”

“You two will love this place.” He tells them with a smile. “Come on.”

They have a quite night in. They have an early dinner and once Lila is put to bed after a quick swim and a shower, they sit out on the porch of their villa and overlook the night sky. They view the sky with thousands of stars and the moon that is bright and wide tonight.

They drink fresh juices, snack of crackers and cheese and spend the night talking, telling stories and laughing late into the evening.

He catches Katniss yawning beside him and he smiles at her.

“Go to bed, it’s been a long day.” She stands up and kisses his cheek. “I’ll be in soon.” He tells her.

She kisses Haymitch and Effie good night and heads on inside.

“You two seem like you are doing great.”

“We are.” Peeta replies after a few moments of silence. “This has been the best thing we’ve done to renew our relationship.” He smiles. “And I’m making up for all the lost time. Those 15 months without Katniss and Lila’s first six months of her life. I really feel like we’re a family and I know,
when we get back, nothing will get in our way.”

“You two have built this strength not a lot of couples find.” Effie smiles. “You two will live the rest of your lives with great happiness and will let the little things slide. Backing packing with a baby for 6 months is a big accomplishment and you’ve survived this far.”

“There has been some tears shed.”

“And you two seem stronger than ever.” She adds with a proud smile. “You’ll be fine.”

He says goodnight to them shortly after and heads on inside. He washes up first, brushes his teeth and splashes his face with cold water before he quietly navigates the bedroom, stripping out of his clothes and sliding in beside Katniss. Lila is sound asleep in her cot and Katniss despite being in bed for a while, she’s not quite asleep.

“Have I told you how much I love you?”

“Yes.” He replies, pulling her body to his. He feels her naked skin against his own and despite how much he wants her. He’s absolutely exhausted. He can see it in her eyes too.

“Well I love you.” She whispers to him. “I feel like I haven’t told you this enough.”

“You don’t have to tell me you love me. I know you do.”

“I still feel the need to tell you. To shout it off the rooftops.” She smiles. “Thank you for everything you’ve given us.”

“Thank you for giving me this life. Our beautiful daughter too.”

She smiles, bites her lip and looks down at his lips briefly.

“I want another baby.” She tells him, looking back up at him.

“Are you sure?”

She nods and he feels happiness spread throughout his body, reaching every inch of his body, spreading all the way to his fingertips and toes.

It’s the same feeling her got when she told him she was ready to start trying, ready to bring someone that was half her, half him into the world, just over four years ago.

And now, she’s telling him this again, telling him she’s ready to give him a third baby. She’s ready to carry and grow another baby inside her own stomach and bring new life to the world. To give Lila another sibling.

“I want one too.”

They share a long, passionate kiss but don’t move further. Tonight wasn’t the night they tried for a baby. They were exhausted and wanted to sleep on the fact that they had agreed to expand their family.

“You make me the happiest man in the world my love.” He whispers to her as she cuddles into his chest. “You, Lila and Leo. I love you three with all my heart.”

She smiles and it’s not long before she’s drifted off to sleep. He kisses her forehead and studies her appearance for a long while before he falls asleep too.
“So, are we really doing this?” She asks him. Lila is on the floor occupied with some toys. Katniss and Peeta are getting ready to head out for the day.

“Well we said we were going to do something big on our last day together.” He reminds her with a smile. “We’re doing this. Don’t think about it. Surprise yourself.

A knock sounds at the door and Peeta gets up to answer it.

A woman in her early 30’s stands on the other side with a big smile.

“Hi, I’m Leah, I’m from Little Frogs.”

“Of course, come in.” He tells her, letting her enter their hotel room.

It has beautiful views of the Lake Wakatipu and the town. Situated on a hill that they had walked up plenty of times.

They’re glad they chose to spend their last few days in Queenstown to finish off their trip. Even Lila seemed mesmerised by the beauty of the place and the many friendly people who said hello to her.

Now today was a chance for the two of them to go out and do the adrenaline junkie thing while Lila remained behind with the nanny.

Leah smiles at Lila as she enters the room.

“Hello beautiful girl!”

Lila makes her way to Leah and greets her, handing over her plastic cups she had been playing with.

And her parents were at ease that their daughter trusted Leah so much already.

“I wrote out just a little cheat sheet for you.” Katniss tells Leah, handing over the sheet. “Just a few things for you to know about Lila. We used to stick to a schedule as much as we could with all this travelling and have tried to keep to it as close as we can but you’ve had experience and you know what babies are like. She’s quite easy-going so you should have an easy time with her.”

“I’m sure we’ll be fine.” Leah tells Katniss with a confident smile. “We might go and feed the duckies? How does that sound?”

“Sounds good. We should be back just after 3ish. If you have any issues here is the number of the company we’re heading out with for the day.”

Peeta throws the pack over his shoulder once they’re sure they are ready and they say a quick goodbye to Lila.

“See you soon baby girl.”

They walk to town to meet the shuttle bus that will take them to the plane. It’s a short forty-minute
drive through the winding outskirts to the edge of a small village town called Glenorchy. It’s just the two of them this morning and the shuttle driver gets them in the bus. He gives them a guided tour as he drives them. The scenery is beautiful and he stops along the way, giving them the opportunity to look around and take photos.

“Are you two fans of the Lord of the Rings series?”

“Peeta is quite the fan.” Katniss tells the driver.

“You’ll see a lot of the places they shot. The instructor will point them all out for you.” He says. “And I know this is my job but I’ve travelled quite a lot and this scenery is some of the best.” He tells them. “I suppose you two have been backpacking?”

“For six months with our baby.” Peeta replies. “We’ve seen a lot.”

“I assure you, this can’t be beaten.”

The driver pulls up at the home base and they read the words, reminding themselves of what they are doing.

Skydive Paradise

“Don’t think about. Just do it.” He whispers to Katniss. “Surprise yourself.”

“We’re doing this.” She replies, dragging him to the cabin.

They’re suited up in their jumpsuits and goggles. Explained what will happen, how they will exit the aircraft and when they fall. They’re going tandem with an instructor and the nerves are eased quite a bit.

“We ready?” The pilot asks.

They both nod and follow the pilot to the aircraft with their instructors following behind. They pack themselves into the plane and the pilot begins the plane, getting it up into the air.

Peeta was jumping first, followed by Katniss and then another solo jumper who was jumping at 15,000 feet. They were jumping at 12,500 feet. Peeta reaches out for Katniss’ hand and they take off up into the air. The scenery is beautiful, the water so blue and the alpine mountains covered in snow and the grasslands so green.

At 8,000 they begin to get ready for the jump. The instructors begin to attach themselves to the harnesses, getting ready for the jump. He goes over what will happen again and as they get closer to 12,500 they make a move.

Peeta and his instructor waddle to the door that they open. He places his hands across his chest and gives all his faith to the instructor to get him back to the ground safely. The instructor peaks out a few times down at the ground, seeing when the best time to jump is.

“Oh, ready?” He asks Peeta.

Peeta nods, turns his head slightly to see Katniss and smiles at her.

“Don’t think about it.” He tells her and turns back to look out as the pilot gives a signal they are at the drop zone.

“Surprise yourself Peeta.” Katniss tells just as the instructor flips them out of the plane.
They free fall at 120 mph, and only have a parachute to bring them to earth safely. He gets a peak at the plane and the feeling of flying overcomes him.

He can hardly hear anything but the whoosh of air and manages to catch sight of Katniss jumping from the plane with a wide smile and a look of holy shit on her face.

And he free falls for 45 seconds, doing his best to take it all in. Take the scenery, the moment and the fact that he is skydiving, tying up the end of their 6 months of backpacking.

184 days of crisscrossing the world. 184 days of waking up in new countries, cities and places. 184 sunrises and sunsets. 184 days of being with his beautiful wife and daughter and making memories for them all. 184 days worth of memories. 184 days of just being together. 184 days of growing back together.

The parachute is deployed at about 5,500 feet and the jerk upwards snaps him into the now. Snaps him to look at the clouds, the bright blue sky and the beaming sun.

He feels the warmth hit his face as they sail back to earth and he finds himself smiling as he holds the toggles, driving the parachute. He feels a smile boring into his back and he knows that it is Katniss. He can even hear her laughing as she parachutes back down to earth.

And he laughs too.

Because for so long he was falling so fast, head first into the unknown. Into the darkness and destructiveness of his own life. He was destroying everything as he fell faster and knew that by the time he reached the bottom, there’d be no one there to catch him. He didn’t feel no joy or that rush of adrenaline as he fell. He just felt the darkness overtake him.

He thought for such a long time it’d just be him for the rest of his life and he wished for an early death to overtake him. He didn’t deserve life. He was a failure. A fuck up. A waste of space. He didn’t want to live in a world where his son wasn’t breathing and was willing to be without his son.

Until she came back. They both came back.

He was already climbing back out of that darkness, had started to change his life, take a hold of it but he never felt like he was back where he was until they came back and brought him back to earth. Back to the steadiness and the stability he craved.

Back to his family.

She brought him home.

He touches down on the ground after a few minutes and watches as Katniss lands as well. They are detached from their instructors and run to each other, tears streaming down their faces.

They hold each other, laughing and crying on the landing strip for a long time. Remembering this moment. The moment that ended their backpacking adventure. Their time of remembrance, healing and growing back together as a family.

“We did it.” She exclaims.

“And he was watching us every step of the way.” He tells her, wiping the tears from her cheeks. He stares at her, studies her beautiful grey eyes that are so wide and shiny. He doesn’t want to forget this moment for the rest of his life.
There will be an epilogue to come as a follow up. They have finished their adventure of a lifetime and this was just a short snapshot into some of the many places they visited. I kind of wish it was me travelling for 6 months.
I will tell you this, Queenstown is just spectacular. I spent a few days there 8 years ago and it was just breathtakingly beautiful. I want to go back again.

I shall hopefully have the epilogue up in soon. It's written but I'm going to keep it close to me for as close as possible. I really don't want this to end.

In the meantime you can find me on tumblr as herainab. Come and share your thoughts, comments and anything else with me.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

8 months after their backpacking adventure, Katniss and Peeta welcome their new son.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“It’s a boy. You have a boy!” The doctor beams, holding up the screaming newborn for the expectant parents to see. “A very healthy boy.”

Katniss can see how ecstatic the doctor is, tears of joy filling her eyes at the excitement of the healthy baby boy she just delivered. It was in stark contrast to a few years prior when she was tasked with delivering their sleeping son.

The baby is quickly placed on his mother’s chest, still whimpering and crying. Katniss wraps her arms around her son, kissing his forehead and crying tears of joy.

There were some tears and anxiety before they arrived at the hospital. She could sense Peeta’s anxiety, which she fully understood. The last time he was accompanying her to the hospital for a birth, they didn’t return home with their baby. But this time, he’d get to watch his baby be born. Hear it’s first cries and every other moment that comes with the birth of a new baby.

And she feels guilty he wasn’t there to see Lila enter the world two years before.

“Hi my boy.” She coos, kissing him again and again, trying her best to calm him down.

She feels Peeta shift beside her, coming to sit down on the bed to get a better view of the baby. Katniss could feel him release a deep breath he’d been holding on to throughout the labor. A relieved exhale as he saw him for the first time. Heard his cries and felt his warming skin. Felt the baby’s heart beat inside of his chest.

She looks to her husband, taking her eyes from her son and she smiles at him. It’s a smile that speaks million words. It’s everything that she can’t think to say right now. To say to him right in this moment.

And Peeta obviously must be feeling the same way because all he can do is kiss her, murmuring a thank you against her lips before they turn their attention back to their son.

Anything could happen in this universe. The universe could have truly screwed them over again, delivered them the same awful fate. Teased and harassed them.

But obviously, the universe was in their favor today.

“We’re so happy to meet you.” She tells him, kissing the newborn’s fingers as he begins to settle. “We’ve been waiting a long time for you.”

Their son looks nothing like Leo or Lila. He’s fair in complexion and looks exactly like his father did when he was a baby. He has his father’s blonde hair and fair skin. He also has light blue eyes
where Lila had deep ocean blues.

He’s taken from them for a few minutes and Peeta stands watch, watching the nurses tend to the baby. Watching them weigh him, measure him; check his heart and his breathing.

Its all systems go and he’s handed back to his mother and they try their best to get him nursing and things start to calm down and they’re allowed their moment as parents of a new baby. Allowed their privacy as they count every finger and toe. As they share their own words between each other of joy and utter happiness. As they share kisses and embraces and decide on what they’ll name the baby.

The pregnancy came as a bit of a surprise but nothing that blew them away too dramatically. They decided from the end of their trip they’d begin to try for another baby, not really thinking too much of it or actively trying round the clock.

They soon realised they were expecting to welcome their newest family member in May, 8 months after their trip and they couldn’t be happier.

Despite the fear and anxiety that came with the impending arrival, they were still very hopeful and excited.

And he is everything they wanted to complete their family.

A few hours later as the sun starts to set and the days events begin to catch up on them is when they find the words to speak again. Words that have been so hard to come by as they stare and gaze at this tiny little thing they created. As they soak in this moment because they know how quickly they grow. His big sister had just turned 2, four days ago and was now becoming her own little person as each day passed.

“He needs a name.” She says to Peeta. Peeta shifts the baby in his arms gently. Careful to not disturb him from his sleep. “I don’t think any of the names we chose suits him at all.” She admits, running her finger softly over the baby’s cheek.

“I don’t think so either.” Peeta agrees, keeping his eyes focused on his son. “So what do you think?”

She sighs. “We have Leo which means Lion. Lila that means dark-haired beauty. Something that contrasts either of those names.” She smiles.

“What about Lucas?” He suggests. “It means light-giving. We have our dark-haired beauty, we need our light.”

Katniss smiles at him and then down at their boy. “Hi Lucas. Is your name Lucas?” The baby hardly budges or moves but lets out a soft exhale. “I think we have a winner.” She laughs. “Why didn’t you suggest Lucas before?”

“I had a dream last night just before you woke me to tell me your waters had broke.” He begins. “It was Lila at the meadow by the house. We were watching her play. Watching her run through the grass that was getting too long and the dandelions that were starting to overtake the field. The sun was shining down on her. It looked as if she was wearing a halo. Lila was chasing a butterfly, laughing and smiling as she did her best to catch it. She stopped and turned to us and calling out to the toddler who sat on your lap. He was this chubby little thing with blonde curls and grey eyes.”

“And you said to him, ‘go on Lucas, go and play amongst the dandelions’.” He repeats. “You gave him a slight nudge and he ran off, Lila coming to his aid, to keep him steady as they ran amongst the dandelions.” He smiles. “But it just wasn’t us watching them, it was everyone else we
loved were also there. Haymitch, Effie, Johanna and my family. And there was also those we
have lost. My father, you parents and Prim.” He sniffs. “And Leo. Our beautiful son was sitting
with his grandparents, watching his siblings play amongst the dandelions. He got up eventually
and went and joined them, playing with his brother and sister in the meadow.” He tells her. “And I
just knew, this little one would be a boy. And Lucas just felt so right.”

“And it fits our ‘L’ theme.” She smiles, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Welcome to the world
Lucas Flynn Mellark.”

Lucas at only 5 hours old, was already the love of his parents’ and sister’s lives.

Lucas sighs against his mother’s chest as they step out into the late spring sunshine. Lila was in
her trike, her father pushing her along the footpath outside of their home.

Baby Lucas was just 10 days old and it was too nice of a day too waste inside. So they decided on
a walk around their neighbourhood and then to the park.

The moment they stepped off the plane 8 months before, they were back to their old lives again.

But they didn’t want to live in the past; they chose to live in the present.

They bought a house that was in dire needs of repairs but they found a certain charm to it. A
homely feeling overcame them when they stepped into the house and they knew this would be the
home they’d raise their family in.

At that point, they still didn’t know about Lucas and were still recovering from jetlag. Katniss
even thought she was still experiencing a delayed bout of jetlag – turned out to be she was
pregnant with Lucas. It didn’t click until she went for a doctor’s visit, wanting something to help
with the jetlag. They asked if she could possibly be pregnant and it clicked that she most likely
was.

Effie and Haymitch were nice enough to extend an invitation for them to stay with them while
they did up the house. Peeta did most of the house himself with Haymitch helping him out on the
weekends and after work. They were in the house when the snow started to melt and the
dandelion started to bloom in the meadow.

Peeta didn’t return back to work, finding himself immersed into a life of blogging and freelancing
and Katniss had found herself freelancing like before, commissioned to write pieces for print
media and some parenting blogs. They were still finishing up their pieces from the backpacking
holiday and the same company that helped them fund it were helping them create a book for those
aspiring backpacking families.

Katniss still smiles at the feedback and comments they receive from all those across the world who
dared dream about leaping into the world of traveling with their own children. She told them to
surprise themselves, like she told herself every single day of the 184 days of travelling they
undertook last year.

They cross the road to the park and Peeta parks the trike near a bench underneath the shade and
helps Lila out.

“Go on sweetie.” He tells her, after planting a big kiss on her cheek.

Lila is such a confident two year old. She’s patient and understanding and seems to be entertained
by the little things in life. She still wonders why everyone doesn’t stop to say hello to her or 
squeeze her cheeks but she found herself waving and greeting everyone out and about.

And it brought a smile to most of these people’s days.

She quickly finds a friend to play with and Peeta sits down beside Katniss on the bench and they 
watch their daughter play, something they found to bring so much happiness to them.

“How are you feeling?” Peeta asks her, looking at Lucas for a long, loving moment before 
looking into her eyes.

“So great.” She tells him. “He’s just awesome.”

He agrees with her and kisses the top of Lucas’ head gently.

Peeta was a doting father. It showed in the way the little crinkles formed at the side of his eyes as 
he smiled when he spoke about his children or were near them. She saw the big smile on his face 
when he first saw them of a morning, when Lila told him she loved him and gave him a kiss and a 
cuddle. And now when he took Lucas from his bassinet of a morning, holding him tightly in his 
arms and showering him in kisses. He beamed with so much happiness when he was near his 
family, it was so beautiful to see.

And the first time he held Lucas, Katniss fell in love all over again. Seeing the man she fell in love 
with melt at the sight of his new son, how he cried tears of relief and happiness and smiled widely 
and still in so much shock that his son was finally here. He melted with happiness and love all in 
an instant.

She had found the greatest man to spend her life with. To create a family with. To raise her family 
with.

“I feel complete.” Peeta tells her. “I don’t know why but Lucas has completed our family.”

Katniss finds herself smiling and she spots Lila going down the slide. She goes a bit too fast, 
falling off at the bottom but she gets herself back up and continues playing. Nothing upset Lila. 
She was a trooper. She hardly cried or worried about a thing. If she fell over, she got straight back 
up and went about what she was doing.

“Prim told me I’d have three children.” She recalls with a small smile. “And we do. Leo, Lila and 
Lucas. We have three perfect children.”

“I finally think the universe is in our favor.” He shifts slightly in the bench. “I couldn’t ask for a 
better life.”

“Me either.” She replies, cuddling into his side.

They watch Lila play for a long time in complete silence.

“So I’ve thought of a title for our book.” He announces.

“Oh?” She asks, not bothering to look at him, too immersed at counting the blonde hairs on top 
of Lucas’ head.

“Surprise Yourself.”

“Really?”
He nods against her head. “I think it’s perfect. We surprised ourselves every single day. I want to
inspire people to surprise themselves and step out of their comfort zone.”

They had made a deal with each other that once a year they’d do something out of the
extraordinary. Something they were too scared to do before. They wanted to live a full life, make
life mean something for themselves and their children. They wanted to inspire their children to be
bold and brave in a world that was sometimes scary and full of so much adventure.

This year, Peeta had already done his crazy thing. He got it done the day after Lucas was born.
Haymitch accompanied him to the parlour and he had three thumbprints inked above his heart.
They were Leo’s, Lila’s and Lucas’ first thumbprints inked in black with their names. It was his
second tattoo, the two of them had both gotten a lion to represent their lion, Leo, while
backpacking. Peeta getting his on his right forearm while Katniss got hers on her right wrist. They
both got the same design with his birth and death date in his mane of hair. It gave them strength,
especially during the days when they were feeling low.

And together, they were still planning on getting more. Katniss liking the idea of getting their
children’s thumbprints also inked on her skin, possibly in the shape of a tree on the back of her
neck. A tree to mostly represent the roots they had planted together. The roots being their beautiful
children.

Katniss also had another tattoo one she got after Prim’s death. One to represent those who she had
lost. She had ‘Always’ inked on the inside of her left wrist with three little birds in flight to
represent her parents and her sister. It’s something that she feels keeps her connected to her family
and Peeta was the one who helped her design it.

But for now, Katniss still hadn’t decided what she’d do as her crazy thing. Peeta had given her a
pass though considering she had just had Lucas and a trip to the tattoo parlour or jumping out of a
plane seemed way out of the question.

They’d do something together next year.

Peeta was hinting at bungee jumping but Katniss liked the idea of another backpacking trip. This
time with Lila and Lucas in tow for a whole year or maybe even longer.

Lila comes for them, running in full force and Peeta catches her and sets her down onto his lap.
Katniss smiles at her daughter who beams so brightly and is always so happy and hopeful.

“I like it.” She tells him after kissing Lila.

“Yeah?”

She nods and finds herself smiling. “I really do.”

“Me too.” He exhales, kissing the top of Lila’s head.

His breathing is even in the dark of the night. He doesn’t hold her tonight due to Lila being right
between them but they are still close enough to feel each other. To feel at ease from the little
worries in life.

And just like every other night he seems at ease. Seems so much more peaceful. Late nights and
early morning have taken a toll on him but he’s still the same Peeta and he beams with happiness.
He’s healthy and happy.
They are all healthy and happy.

Tonight she can’t seem to sleep. Despite how tired she is. How much she wants to sleep those few hours Lucas will allow her, she can’t bring herself to fall asleep.

She looks over at Peeta and smiles at herself.

_He was more than enough for her._

She reaches over her daughter and brushes his hair from his forehead, tangling her fingers through the tendrils of blonde hair. Hair that is so silky between her fingers. Her hand falls to his cheek, brushing it slightly. She admires him, something she tends to do a lot and runs her hand over Lila’s hair and her soft cheek before she slips out of bed. She finds her dressing gown and slips it over her arms.

She takes a peak at Lucas who is sound asleep in the bassinet beside their bed. His breathing is even and calm and so peaceful. He looks as peaceful as his father. He even sleeps like his father. She traces his cheek before she tiptoes across the room to their walk-in-robe in an attempt to not wake either of them.

It’s in stark contrast to years before when she slipped out in the dead of the night after making love to her husband. After pouring all of her pain into the passion of that evening and bringing herself to the point of shattering into a million pieces. That was the night she needed to find herself, to take a break from the person she was becoming and from reality, especially as her husband was falling further away from her.

That was the night they conceived Lila, a night of passion that brought them their beautiful girl who eventually brought them back together as a family.

She stretches up onto her toes to reach the top shelf and pulls the box down quietly. She sneaks out of the bedroom, headed downstairs to the lounge room, setting the blue box on the coffee table in front of her. She stares at the box for a long time.

Overtime, she found the strength to look inside the blue box full of once painful memories.

Now, it’s filled with the things that helped her find the strength to carry on in life, despite the great pain she felt for a long time.

She slides the lid off quietly and looks into the box. Photos, journals, his baby book, clothes and a soft teddy rest inside of the box. There is also his hospital blanket, tag and the cap he wore.

It’s for Leo. A box full of mementos and keepsakes.

His ashes sit on the bedside table in their bedroom on Katniss’ side. They found the strength to look at the urn just recently and knew that hiding it in the study wasn’t a way to honor him or to show they were proud of him. Now they can look at him everyday and say hello to him every morning and goodnight before they go to bed. They sometimes find Lila sitting on the bed, chatting away to her brother who she’s slowly learning about overtime. They knew they wanted their children to know of their brother and this was the best way for them to learn all about him. To talk to him as if he was right by their side.

But maybe one day when the kids truly knew who he was, they’d find a place to spread his ashes and honor him in a special place for their family. They’d do it when Lila and Lucas are old enough they can all do it together somewhere they believe Leo would love to be.
She picks up the pile of photographs and sonograms and flicks through them all. Most of them were just belly shots of Leo growing inside of her. There were only a few of him after he was born. There was a USB stick full of shots they had a photographer take for them in the hospital but they weren’t ready to see the rest of them just yet.

The baby book Effie bought her wasn’t filled in but she couldn’t bear use it for the other two when it was bought purely for Leo. It had the basics in it and that was about it.

She pulls out the journal she wrote throughout her pregnancy with him, one that she wrote a few words in each day. Moments she recorded like kicks, hiccups and movements. She wrote another journal the year after his birth, which towards the end mentioned the new pregnancy and how scared she felt that the universe would not be in her favor again.

The other one was what she wrote in when she thought about him, or moments she just wrote to get it out of her system.

She hardly could say his name, ashamed of the fact that he wasn’t here.

Now, she spoke his name loud and proud. Cherished the fact that she was graced with a beautiful son who flew before he lived. Given the opportunity to house him in her womb and get to feel his kicks, cherishing his movements he made inside of, letting her know how safe or upset he felt. Even given the opportunity to be his mother.

Even if he wasn’t here.

Footfalls sound down the stairs and into the hallway and Peeta appears with Lucas in his arms.

“What are you doing down here?” He asks her, stifling a yawn.

“I couldn’t sleep.” She tells him.

He notices the box and pads across the floorboards to her. Lucas is fussing slightly against his father’s chest, getting agitated his father doesn’t have milk to feed him with.

“I’ve changed him. He’s hungry.” Peeta tells her, handing him over to Katniss.

“Hi my beautiful man.” She greets Lucas as she takes him into her arms. She quickly gets him nursing and settled and against her breast.

“Are you ok?” Peeta asks her.

“I’m fine.” She tells him. “I just wanted to have a look at his things.”

Peeta smiles at her and looks at the photos of Leo.

She knows how different their lives are compared to almost four years ago when they lost Leo. When they were so lost and unsure of what life meant. How emotional and angry they both were. How she was almost at breaking point.

Now, everything was clear. Their hearts no longer broken in two and their worlds no longer shaky and close to shattering.

Quiet footsteps sound down the hallway and Lila peaks her head into the living room. She has her teddy tucked under her arm. Her hair is a mess and her pyjama shorts are twisted at her waist.

She tiptoes to the couch and climbs between her parents. Cuddling into her father.
“Did you have a bad dream?” He asks her.

She shakes her. “Good.”

“Yeah, what was in this dream?” Katniss asks her daughter, pushing her curls from her face.

“You, daddy, L and me.” She tells us.

“What were we doing?”

“Laughing.”

“We were laughing?” She nods again. “What about?”

“Happy.”

“I bet we were.”

Lila is sound asleep soon after, cuddling into her father with her teddy close by. Peeta too has drifted off, leaning on Katniss’ shoulder, snoring slightly.

She takes one look around at her family and knows that the universe takes them on a crazy journey sometimes. A journey that is sometimes so heartbreaking and earth shattering to them. Then to bring them to a life that is full of pure joy and happiness. One that challenges them everyday. One that makes them gracious for life itself.

She has a good feeling, after all the shit they’ve been through, this will be all they have to look forward to for now on.

“It used to me just you and me for a long while.” She whispers, pushing Peeta’s curls from his forehead. “But now it’s you and me and Lila and Lucas.”

Lucas grizzles and Katniss shushes him, patting his back to calm him down. She finds herself singing, singing the same song she used to sing to him and Lila when they were in her stomach. One that calmed them when the rumbled and roared inside of her stomach.

“They say everything it happens for a reason
You can be flawed enough, but perfect for a person
Someone who will be there for you when you fall apart
Guiding your direction when you’re riding through the dark”

Katniss pauses for a few moments, studies her family. Her husband and daughter who are tucked tight in an embrace with each other, sleeping soundly after such a long day. She looks back at Peeta and smiles. They were all flawed. They had a history of bad choices and mistakes. They weren’t perfect for the world but they were perfect for each other. For their daughter. For their two sons. Everything happens for a reason, they believed that. They believed that after what they’ve been through. They believed the universe had a big plan for them, even when it felt so fucked up and unforgiving. They believed everything happened for a reason.

And it did.

Peeta’s lips twitch into a smile. He tells her he loves what they have. That he never imagined he’d have or have done the things he has and knows this is the universes way of guiding them through life. Of giving them a break and letting them enjoy the things right in front of them.

She leans over and kisses his cheek softly before taking in her family. She gets a rush of all these
emotions, the same emotions she gets every time she looks at her family and realizes how lucky she is.

She lays Lucas in her arms, staring down at him. He’s awake and settled. And in that moment Lucas smiles for the first time then and there. A smile meant for just his mother. A smile of happiness and love.

She kisses his cheeky, inhales the addictive baby smell he has and cradles him in her arms and sings the last line for all of her family.

“That's you and me”

Chapter End Notes

Here it is. The end of You & Me. I can't believe it is all over. I've had the best time writing this, challenging myself to create this for you all to read. It's be a thrill. I apologise for the long wait in this final piece. I think I was in a bit of denial that it was the end and wanted to hold onto it for a bit longer. I'm happy I finally finished it, leaving them all with some hope and lots of big plans for their future.

I thank everyone of you who all read it and stayed with me on this journey. Let me know what you all thought and subscribe for some more stories that I hope to start posting in the next few months.

You can also come and find me over on Tumblr - Herainab

Thank you all so so much!!

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